



EVERYONE DESERVES
HAPPINESS, YOU JUST HAVE
TO TAKE THE LEAP.

disregarded
HEART

LISA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHELBY

DISREGARDED HEART

LISA SHELBY

LISA SHELBY BOOKS, LLC

Disregarded Heart

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This book is for my readers.

Thank you for your patience.

Thank you for your support.

Thank you for taking another leap with me.

Thank you, thank you, thank you,

Lisa

S,

*Ten books later and you still inspire me to write about finding
love and happily every afters. Thank you for being my muse.*

Love you more, L

CHAPTER ONE

YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS

Abby

“You hit me! How is this my fault?” I ask the large brooding grump who just rear-ended *me*, yet has been blaming me for our fender bender since he hopped out of the cab of his truck.

“Clearly, you weren’t paying attention. You were probably on your phone,” he says dismissively as he walks around the back of my car, checking for damage.

“Listen, I’m sorry if you were in a rush, but the light was yellow, and I was slowly and safely coming to a stop rather than trying to beat the red. If you ask me, you’re the one who wasn’t paying attention.”

“Just give me your information, and let’s get this over with. I have somewhere to be.”

“Well, imagine that. I do too.” I pull out my phone to open my electronic insurance card. “Here, will this work?” I ask, holding my phone up to him.

“Sweet Jesus, really, no hard copy?”

“It’s all the same. You can take a picture of this just as easily as a piece of paper.”

“Just take my number and send it to me.”

“I don’t know you, but a bit of advice.” He lifts an eyebrow in interest. “If rear-ending women to get their digits

is the end goal, you may want to be kinder after you ruin their afternoon,” I say with a smile in my voice.

He stares at me like I have three heads or I’m an alien from another planet. “You can’t be serious?”

“Just trying to lighten the mood. You seem a bit wound up.”

“You were just in a car accident, and you want to *lighten* the mood.”

“C’mon, it’s just a little fender bender. It could have been much worse. Oh, and I’m fine. Thank you for not asking.”

“You are something else, lady. Just give me your number so I can move on with my life.”

I give him my info, and my phone pings with an electronic version of his insurance card. “What, no paper copy?”

He doesn’t reply, and I don’t need to look up to know he rolled his eyes in response.

He’s already rolled his eyes more than once at me, and I’m sure my smart-ass comment has earned me another. Instead, I send him my insurance information and snap pictures of both vehicles. Sighing loudly, just in case I wasn’t aware he didn’t have time for this, he does the same.

Besides some rubbed-off paint, there is minor damage to my CR-V, considering the size of his truck. It’s white and enormous with Shockley Construction embossed on the doors. I’ve seen the name before, so they must be a pretty big company. I’m sure his boss won’t be too happy about this. Getting in a fender bender on the clock sucks, which somewhat explains his less-than-stellar attitude. I guess.

“I’ve got what I need. You?”

“All set here.”

“Great,” he says, with his back to me, already walking back to his truck.

It’s too bad he’s such a jerk because he *is* handsome.

Scratch that.

He's freaking hot.

His tall frame wears his jeans and his tight, but not too tight, black Henley well. With his sleeves pushed up just below the elbows, I'm allowed a glimpse of his forearms covered in a light dusting of dark hair matching the color of the short haircut on his head. He has one of those classic chiseled jawlines you see on all those models on social media. But I couldn't tell you what color his eyes are. With all his glaring at me and squinting against the afternoon sun, there was no way to tell. His manly work boots complete his sexy ensemble, but his personality leaves much to be desired.

Leave it to me to get a hot guy's number and not be even remotely interested in him.

Oh well. There isn't really time for a suburban meet cute today. I am currently covered in purple paint and have just over an hour before I have to be showered, dressed and on the road to my best friend's wedding rehearsal. The maid of honor showing up late isn't really the best way to kick off a weekend of festivities.

I reach for my car door and can't resist a look back at the disgruntled driver. His driver's side door is open, but he's just standing there, continuing to glare at me.

What is his deal?

"Have a nice day," I yell to end the unpleasant encounter.

"You gonna leave or what?" His gruff voice carries over the roadside noise.

"Why? Afraid I'll go find an eyewitness who will side with me?"

"Listen, I don't have time for this," he yells over the midday traffic. "I'm very late and need to go, but I will not leave you on the side of the road on your own. So could you please get in your car and go wherever it is you're going?"

"If you weren't so rude, I would say that is very chivalrous of you," I yell back.

He looks up at the sky as if begging for help.

I decide to end his torture and get in my car, pulling away and into the left turn lane.

He pulls out right behind me, and it looks like whoever he was praying to must have answered his prayer when the light turns green as soon as we pull into the lane. I pull into the intersection so he can get on with his day, but I can't seem to leave my curiosity on the side of the road and glance at him in my rearview mirror for the next couple of blocks before he takes a right turn and drives out of view.

Well, that was pleasant.

Not.

Checking the clock on my dashboard, I run through the mental checklist of everything I need to do in the next hour and three minutes.

I rub the grasshopper stamped into the small round pendant on my necklace for luck. Here's hoping today's incident isn't a sign to come for the rest of this weekend.

CHAPTER TWO

NOBODY IS LAUGHING

Abby

“Elyse, you look nervous. You doin’ okay?”

The bride is fit to be tied but looks beautiful in her ivory lace shift dress. It’s not even the big day yet, and she is the picture-perfect bride.

The wedding ceremony should be outside under a beautiful arch of white and light-pink peonies. However, the forecast is now calling for a drizzle. So they have moved our rehearsal to one of the beautiful ballrooms inside the hotel where the wedding will take place. Leave it to the Oregon weather to be hot and in the upper eighties today but with an almost certainty of showers tomorrow. Not even August is a safe bet in the Pacific Northwest.

They have moved the flowers inside, and the venue is gorgeous. It’s not what she dreamed of, but it will still be a beautiful day. The reception space will still be outside under the cover of a tent, but tenting the wedding ceremony isn’t an option. Fingers crossed, we’ll get to have the ceremony outside in the end, but the wedding coordinator is playing it safe.

Now, if only the best man and the flower girl were here.

“I just can’t believe he isn’t here,” Elyse hisses under her breath so the groom doesn’t hear how upset she is.

“He texted Greg and said he was on his way. He’ll be here. It’s all good, and look how beautiful this room is. Tomorrow is going to be great, sweetie. Don’t stress.”

“It’s not like him. He’s a lot of things, but late isn’t one of them.”

“Oh, do tell.”

“Girl, Logan is—”

The doors slam open, and thankfully, Elyse’s body sags in relief, but mine stiffens at the sound of the voice bellowing through the room as little feet rush down the aisle.

“Sorry, I got in a fender bender with an idiot driver on the way to daycare. I mean, this woman was something else. I just don’t know what’s wrong with people these days. But the most beautiful flower girl in the world is here and ready to do her thing.”

This. Cannot. Be. Happening.

What are the odds?

Elyse leaves me to stand on my own as she greets Logan. The same Logan who rear-ended me today is apparently also Greg’s Logan. His childhood best friend, whom the other bridesmaids and I have never met in the two years Greg and Elyse have been together. I hadn’t even heard of him until they announced the wedding party. The bride and groom just moved back to town about a month ago, and things have been busy with planning the wedding and moving into their new house.

“Abby, I’d like you to meet my oldest friend,” Greg says from a few feet behind me.

Crap!

Hesitantly, I turn around, plastering a smile on my face.

“Shit.”

“Daddy.” An adorable little girl with big blue eyes whispers loudly to the now finely dressed man in dire need of an anger management class.

“Sorry, cupcake,” he whispers back.

“Abby, this is Logan. We’ve been friends even longer than you and Elyse. And this is his daughter, Ila.”

I hold my hand out to the little princess instead of her father. “Hi, Ila. It’s nice to meet you. I love your name, and your dress is beautiful. Unicorns have always been one of my favorites.”

She gasps with glee. My compliment lights her up as she shakes my hand with the sweetest smile.

She is absolutely the most stylish little girl I have ever met. Her dress has a white bodice, and layers of buttery-soft pastel colors cover her little cap sleeves and the skirt of her tea-length dress. Subtle unicorns adorn the bottom of the skirt, while little star appliques adorn the bodice. She has on white shoes, and a white bow pins one side of her light-brown waves back.

But her best accessory is her smile.

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you. Your dress is really pretty too,” she says, looking over the flowy lilac halter dress I changed into after my run-in with her father. “Purple is my favorite color.”

“Why, thank you. Purple is my favorite color too. I hear you’re our flower girl. Are you excited?”

“So excited! I can’t wait to show everyone my dress tomorrow. It’s so fancy!”

“Well, you’ll have to hang out with all of us girls tomorrow, and we can help each other get ready for the big day. If it’s okay with your dad.”

I finally chance a glance at Logan. His face is blank. Uninterested. And clearly still not over our incident from earlier today, as he rudely ignores my question.

“Hello again, Logan. Cat got your tongue?”

“Again?” Elyse asks, confused. “How do you know Logan? I’ve only met him twice, and you weren’t there either time.”

“I’m the idiot driver who made him late. However, truth be told, he rear-ended me. So he may want to reconsider who the idiot driver is. Also, do we still use that word?”

As he did on the side of the road, he looks up to the heavens, exasperated and still mute.

And frustratingly, still hot.

Replacing his jeans and Henley is a perfectly tailored light-gray suit with a white button-down shirt underneath. It’s quite the contrast to what he was wearing just an hour ago, and to be honest, I’m not sure which I prefer because he pulls off both looks rather well.

I offer my hand, hoping he’ll see it as a peace offering of some sort. “It’s nice to *officially* meet you, Logan. I’m Abby, the maid of honor. Looks like you’ll get the pleasure of walking me down the aisle tomorrow.”

“Great,” he grunts, but he does take my hand and gives it a slow shake.

Whoa.

Something about the enormous size of his hand encompassing mine halts my breath for the briefest of moments. But when his eyes lock with mine, I glimpse something other than disdain, which is odd, as he doesn’t seem to know anything else when it comes to me.

A giggle escapes Elyse, ending the confusing moment and snagging my attention as I release his hand. My traitorous best friend is hiding her face in Greg’s shoulder while he looks at us with wide eyes and a lift to his lips.

“So should we get things started?” I ask the bride, who seems to have forgotten how stressed she was two minutes ago.

Glad I could bring a smile to her face, even if it was at my expense.

Logan didn't speak to me anymore during the rehearsal. Though he most certainly glared at me. The jerk didn't even offer me his arm when we practiced our walk up and down the aisle. Instead, he walked with his hands in his pockets and barely acknowledged my presence.

Now, here we are an hour later at the rehearsal dinner, and wouldn't you know it, I've been lucky enough to be seated next to Logan and his lovely daughter. I do mean that last part. Ila Shockley is the sweetest girl I've ever met, and she made a beeline for me as soon as she saw me, then begged me to sit at her table. Too bad that means the grumpiest dad around will also be at our table. He's a real mood killer.

At the moment, all the adults are conversing while my new bestie, Princess Ila, and I play a rousing game of tic-tac-toe on the white paper laid over the tablecloths.

"So Ira, where did you get your name? Ira isn't a very common name for little kids these days."

"It's Ila, not Ira, silly."

"Oh, Ida. That's a bit better."

"No, Ila, with an L! I, then L, then A!"

I can't help but giggle. It's just as easy to get under her skin as it is her dad's.

"I know, sweetie. I was simply distracting you, so you didn't notice that I just won!" I push my seat back and stand to do a victory dance.

"Aw, man! Good one, Abby. You're sneaky."

"And you're a good sport!"

We high-five just as the rest of the wedding party takes their seats. Logan taking his place on the other side of Ila.

"What are you two doin' over here?" He directs to his daughter.

"Playing tic-tac-toe. Wanna play the winner?"

"No, thanks." He throws a side-eyed glare at me.

“You sure?” I ask, already knowing he’s more than sure.

“Yep.”

“That’s okay, Girls only, then.”

Ila beams her adorable smile up at me. “Girls only!”

We play two more rounds. I let her win the first one, but she won the second one fair and square. She’s adorable, sweet, sassy, *and* smart. I guess it shows you aren’t always a product of your environment.

The sound of a fork clinking on the side of a glass quiets the attendees in the private room of the posh Portland hotel restaurant reserved for tonight’s dinner.

Elyse stands looking the part of the blushing bride next to her handsome ginger bearded fiancé. I can’t remember ever seeing her this happy. Her career as a pediatrician is blossoming, and she couldn’t be more in love. The first time I saw the two of them together, I knew they were perfect for each other. Now here they are on the precipice of building a family. I know they want kids, but for now, it’s their three dogs and their beautiful new custom-built home they moved into a few weeks ago.

“Greg and I want to thank each one of you for being a part of our special day. This weekend wouldn’t be the same without all of you. From our adorable ring bearer and flower girl to Uncle Conrad, who will preside over the ceremony. You all mean the world to us, and thank you so much for being here.” She lifts her glass. “Cheers!”

Everyone lifts their glasses to the bride and groom just as dinner arrives. The room quiets as we all dive in. To say I’m impressed by the little girl next to me would be an understatement. There was no special meal of chicken strips prepared for Ila. She’s eating the same lobster ravioli I am. Not to mention, she has excellent manners for a six-year-old. Her father is quiet but very attentive, even catching her napkin just before it hits the floor.

“How’s your ravioli, sweetheart?”

“It’s yummy. Me and Abby got the same thing.” She smiles my way before turning back to her daddy. “Abby said she’d teach me the Cha Cha Slide tomorrow night at the wedding party.”

“Oh, yeah?” he says, looking over her head at me with a blank expression.

“If it’s alright with you?” I chime in.

“We’ll see. She won’t be staying too late. I booked a room for her and her babysitter.”

“Smart. Daddy and his date will have a room all to themselves.”

His blank expression darkens subtly, not wanting to let me know he’s bothered.

I don’t know why I said that. It’s not like I care if he has a date, but deep down, I am desperate to know.

“Date? You have a date?” Ila asks him, confused.

“No, I don’t have a date. Your new friend is making a joke.”

“Oh,” she says. “But you didn’t laugh.”

His focus returns to his plate as he cuts a bite of steak with no reply.

“So how’s your steak?” I ask, trying to play nice.

“Fine.” He grunts.

“The wine is nice.”

“Yep.”

“Ila, is your daddy always this talkative?”

“Huh?”

“She’s trying to be funny again.”

“Oh.”

She puts her fork down, turning her body in my direction, tapping my arm to get my attention since, unbeknownst to me, I’m still watching Logan. Then quietly, thinking only I can

hear her, she speaks to me only the way a bestie can...by telling me the cold, hard truth.

“Abby, you need to practice your jokes.” Then landing the final blow, she whispers loudly, “Nobody is laughing.”

Logan nearly spits out his wine but manages to swallow it down. He chuckles and smiles with pride.

“Thank you for your honesty, Ila.”

“Welcome.”

She turns back to her plate, looking as satisfied as her father.

“Oh, Logan. Don’t forget, you only have seventy-two hours to report a car accident to the DMV.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

“Daddy got in an accident with a bad driver today. He was so mad.”

“That’s what I heard. Sounds like he had a bad day.”

He glares at me over her head yet again.

“I heard he was so mad because it was his fault, but he doesn’t want anyone to know,” I say to her while glaring back at him.

“No way. He’s the best driver.” She is ever so confident in her daddy. It’s cute.

“Hmm...”

He lifts an eyebrow in my direction.

“Maybe he got distracted because the driver was so pretty.”

He rolls his eyes and turns to speak to Greg’s dad sitting on the other side of him.

This earns me a laugh from my favorite little princess. “That was much funnier, Abby. Good one.”

“Thanks, sweetie.”

After dinner, cocktails are wrapping up, leaving only a handful of us in the bar. The kids went upstairs to their babysitter, and without Ila as our buffer, Logan kept to the other end of the room. So I haven't had to endure any more stunted conversations.

“Well, this bride needs to get her beauty sleep. You girls ready?”

“Ready when you are,” Sara chirps.

“Yes! I've got everything laid out and ready for our bridesmaid sleepover!” Cate screeches.

She's not kidding. Cate had cream silk robes with our names on them made to go with our matching cream slippers. She has also supplied face masks, champagne, and snacks. Usually, the maid of honor takes care of these little details, but when she asked if she could put the bridal suite together for tonight, I just couldn't say no. She was too excited. She's even got everything we need for mimosas in the morning.

“Let's do this!” I agree.

Elyse gives Greg a long, sweltering kiss. After our encouraging catcalls end, we head to the elevators, leaving the men to their own devices.

Once we get to the room, we change into the matching silk pajamas Elyse surprised us with. And wouldn't you know it, they are the perfect match to Cate's robes. Once we're all dressed, the phones come out to document the evening. I reach into my purse for mine, only to find it missing. I search my overnight bag and every nook and cranny in the room and come up short.

Crap.

“Ladies, I'll be back. I must have left my phone down at the bar.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“Thanks, Sara, but I’ll be quick.”

“Well, you’ll be the hottest one there.” She giggles.

I take a bow and drag my hands down the cream silk robe covering the light-blue silk pajama set underneath. I’m braless but fully covered. With my hair piled on top of my head in a bun, and my makeup already washed off well, it’s definitely a look.

“Maybe I’ll find myself a husband.” I laugh because the thought is ridiculous. “Be right back.”

“If you aren’t back in ten minutes, we’ll assume you found that husband of yours and not come looking for you.” Elyse winks.

“*This* is why we’re friends.” I blow her a kiss. “Be right back.”

I rush down the hall to the elevator, eager to get back to the bar, feeling itchy without my phone. The elevator pings, and when the doors open, Greg and his groomsmen practically fall out. It’s clear they’ve had a few more drinks with the way they stagger past me.

“Abs, whatcha doing out here?”

“Hey, Greg. I forgot my phone at the bar. I’m gonna run down to get it.”

“Want me to go with you?”

“Nope, I don’t need a chaperone, but thanks. You go on ahead, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

A rush of heat washes over me when a low, somber voice I now know, without a doubt, comes from behind me. “I’ll take her.” Of course, he sounds put out, because when doesn’t he?

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

Logan’s hand holds the elevator open. “No offense, but you *do* need a chaperone if you’re going down to the bar dressed like that.”

“What? I’m fully clothed.” I huff, indignant.

“Yeah, okay.”

I don't miss how his eyes flicker to my breasts, and on instinct, I cross my arms over my chest, regretting the decision to leave the room without a bra.

Shit.

“Just get in,” he demands.

“Ugh. Fine.” I huff. “Let's get this over with.”

I shuffle past him in my slippers, fleeing to the far right corner. Pushing my back against the wall, wishing I could melt into it and disappear.

The doors close, and he casually presses the button to take us to the second floor where the bar is located, seeming to be deep in thought. My fingers play with my necklace, moving it around my neck until they land on the circular pendant. Rubbing it usually calms me, and I could certainly use the serenity at this moment if I'm going to survive this elevator ride.

Logan doesn't speak a word. He doesn't look in my direction. He simply watches the twenty-one floors go by painstakingly slowly, and I couldn't be more grateful once the elevator ping tells me we're finally on the second floor.

But as soon as the door starts to open, he pushes the close-door button and finally looks at me.

“Um, excuse me, but what exactly do you think you're doing? I need to get out and get my phone. Thank you very much.”

He simply pushes the button for the twenty-third floor, and we start our ascent back up to where we just came from.

I'm about to give him a piece of my mind when he pulls my phone out of his pants pocket.

“Why the hell do you have my phone?” I thrust my hand out, insisting he hand it over. He ever so coolly places it in my hand. The feel of it is warm from being near his body.

“Normally, a person would say thank you.”

“Thank you? For taking my phone?”

“I didn’t take your phone, Abby. You left it on the bar, and I took it knowing full well I would bring it to you.”

“How did you even know this is my phone?”

“Besides the fact that it’s bright purple and screams, *you?*”

I stick my tongue out at him.

“I saw you taking pictures with Ila at dinner, and I recognized it. I guess I could’ve just left it on the bar for some stranger to take and sell online.”

“Why didn’t you just give it to me when you saw me outside the elevator? Why go through this whole act of being a gentleman and taking me down to the bar to get it?”

He’s leaning casually against the wall behind him, placing one foot over the other and not answering my question. He simply stares at me for a beat before his eyes begin to wander.

They trail over my body, pausing ever so briefly on my chest. They then go down to my bare legs and back up again, taking in every inch of me. My heart beats so loudly it’s all I can hear. When his eyes meet mine again, they’re intense, dark, and tell me nothing. It seems his perusal of me has left him unaffected, yet I’m unable to breathe and more turned on than I’ve been since I don’t know when.

Finally, his eyes leave mine, and he looks up, checking to see how close we are to our floor. But I can’t take my eyes off him.

This man disdains me but manufactures time alone with me in an elevator. He’s gruff and rude, but there’s no denying he exudes sex and before these past couple of minutes in this elevator, I would have said he had no clue how dang sexy he was, but now I’m not so sure.

I think he knows exactly what he’s doing.

The elevator comes to a stop, and the doors open. He holds out his hand, allowing me to exit first. I walk past him and take a left toward Elyse’s room but can’t stop myself from looking over my shoulder. To my surprise, he’s standing in the

middle of the hallway with his hands in his pockets, watching me. Turning to match him, I stop and watch him back. Just staring. Neither of us flinching.

Our standoff ends when a door opens, and Barry, one of the groomsmen and official party boy of the group, comes out holding an ice bucket.

“There you are. We didn’t think you were coming back. Thought maybe you two might have gotten busy in the elevator or had rented your own room for the night.”

“I think you’ve had too much to drink, Barry. I was gone less than five minutes.”

Logan puts his arm around the drunk groomsman, turning to walk Barry in the other direction, leaving me in the middle of the hallway in my silk pajamas, feeling like an idiot.

“Nah, we’re just getting started. In fact, after I get some ice, we can keep this party going,” I hear Barry say as I watch their retreating backs. Logan does not look over his shoulder to see if I’m still standing here. As egotistical as he is, I’m pretty sure he knows I am and is getting off on it.

With that thought in mind, I turn and walk toward the bridal suite, feeling confused and dejected.

CHAPTER THREE

TELL THAT TO YOUR FACE

LOGAN

My knee bounces at a high rate of speed while I impatiently wait outside the room where the bride and the other ladies are getting ready.

Abby came and whisked Ila away with her dress and bag of accessories two hours ago, and I can't help but worry. I know she's in excellent hands, but they're all going to be so busy and distracted getting themselves ready and taking care of the bride. I hope they don't forget to take care of my little girl too.

It's been the two of us for the past six and a half years. Ila is my sole focus. My entire life. Everything I do is for her. To ensure she has the best life imaginable. She deserves nothing less.

During my brief elevator ride last night, I had these thoughts playing in my head. I don't have time for women in my life, especially not one like Abby Glen.

Abby is one of those women you don't have for just one night.

She's different.

Special.

No matter how mad I was on the side of the road after our little fender bender, there was still no denying how attractive she was. Even dressed down in her paint-stained T-shirt, cutoff

jean shorts, and simple pair of flip-flops with her hair in a messy knot of some sort on the top of her head, her beauty was undeniable.

But when I saw her in that light-purple dress at the rehearsal, all sense left my brain, and I couldn't find my words.

She was stunning.

Then when Ila took to her so easily, and the two of them seemed to become best friends on the spot, her beauty intensified, and I had to force myself not to engage. And well, this made everything awkward.

I made everything awkward.

When I should have offered her my arm to practice walking her up and down the aisle, I rudely stuffed my hands in my pockets and looked straight ahead, not taking any risks.

No conversation.

No getting to know her.

And certainly, no touching.

I won't get off so easily today. Today, I have to act like a grown man and play my part to make sure my best friend's big day goes off without a hitch. No more replaying our minutes in the elevator on a loop like I did last night as I struggled to find sleep.

Thank God I had found her phone because the two thin layers of silk she was wearing were far from enough to hide the fact that she didn't have a bra on. Nobody else needed to see that.

It really pissed me off how much it bothered me that Greg and the other guys saw her in her little getup.

Thoughts of pebbled nipples, long tan legs, and crystal-blue eyes run round and round in my head until the door to the bridal suite opens.

Samantha, Stephanie, and Elyse's mom are the first through the door, looking lovely in their light-blue dresses.

Behind them, Elyse follows, looking absolutely beautiful, as I knew she would. Greg is a lucky man, and once he sets his eyes on her, I know he'll be knocked silly. Just like he has been since the day he met her. Her simple dress is form-fitting without the long train I imagined would trail her. But she doesn't need it. She looks perfect.

"You look beautiful, Elyse."

"You think he'll like my dress?"

"You're going to bring the man to his knees." I wink.

I lean in to give her a little kiss on the cheek, and over her shoulder, past Sara and Cate, I see my darling little girl in her fancy white flower girl dress, a crown of flowers around her head, holding the hand of the most breathtaking woman I've ever seen.

"Daddy!" She waves at me, smiling ear to ear, and I step to the side to let the bride and the others go by.

"Cupcake, you are beautiful."

"Do you like my dress?" With her free hand, she holds the skirt of the white lace-covered dress out.

"I love your dress and your flowers. You look like a fairy princess."

Her little hand touches the top of her head and her crown of flowers. She couldn't look happier. "Did you see Elyse? Isn't she bootiful?"

"Yes, she is. But not as beautiful as you," I whisper, winking at her.

Uncharacteristically, Ila seems shy. "Thank you. You look nice too. So does Abby. Don't you think Abby's dress is pretty too? She's the maid of honor and has a special dress just like me."

Looking over at Abby, who is still holding Ila's hand, there is no denying what Ila said is true. Abby does look nice. More than nice. She has the sides of her honey-colored hair pulled back, putting her soft features front and center. Her light-blue strapless dress is the same shape as Elyse's, hugging her

curves perfectly and igniting the sapphire in her eyes. I know it should be impossible, but she looks even better than the bride.

It's going to be a long-ass day.

Doing my best to keep my eyes on her face and not ogling her in front of my daughter, I quickly reply, "Yes, she looks nice too."

"Thank you," Abby says, her cheeks flushing. "But we need to get going so Elyse isn't late for her first look with Greg."

"Sure. I totally get it." Clearing my throat, I ask, "Did you want me to take Ila with me?"

"No, we're fine. Right, Ila?"

"Daddy, can I please stay with the girls?"

"Only if you promise not to be a bother and do what Abby and the other girls say."

"I promise."

I look at Abby to make sure she's really okay with it, and she gives me a little nod that says it's fine, but with the faint hint of blush still on her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes, it takes her shy smile to appear before I realize I'm staring at her again, and she's caught me.

Shit.

I pull on my shirt sleeves, distracting myself while I try to come to my senses that are scrambled and chaotic when Abby is around. "Just let me know if you need me to take her."

"Will do."

"Okay, baby girl." I bend down to her level and give her a kiss on the cheek. "Be good, and I'll see you in a bit. Love you."

Her little arms wrap around my neck, and she gives me a hug and my own kiss on the cheek. "Love you too, Daddy." It's all I need to bring my focus back to the only thing that matters in my world.

Her.

“Okay, okay. I need everyone lined up!”

The wedding planner is straight out of a movie. Headset on, iPad clutched to her chest, giving demands like a not-so-demure drill sergeant. “If you’ve got gum in your mouth, spit it out now.”

She walks past each of us, holding out her tissue-clad hand for gum to be spat. Fortunately, we all listened to her warnings last night, and there is no gum to be rid of.

Ila turns to me with a nervous smile as the ring bearer balances his pillow like a basketball he’s trying to spin on one finger.

“You’ve got this. You’re gonna be the best flower girl ever.” I give her a wink, and she turns around, standing a little taller.

I can hear Abby behind me whispering words of encouragement to Elyse, but as soon as we get the countdown to the doors opening, she takes her place on my left side, and unlike last night, I offer her my arm. However, before she takes it, she steps forward, gives Ila’s sleeves a little fluff, and whispers something in her ear.

She steps back to my side and, with a sweet smile, takes my arm and whispers, “She’s a wonderful little girl. You’ve done an excellent job, Dad.”

Abby has no idea how her words affect me because if she did, she would have known better than to say them right before we walk down the aisle. She wouldn’t say the words that validate my role in Ila’s life. As a single dad, I’m always afraid I’m doing it all wrong and that I am going to cause her years of therapy. She wouldn’t say it if she knew that her words, the smell of her perfume, and the brief brush of her breast against my triceps as she placed her arm in mine were enough to knock a man like me off my feet.

I may be touching her, but just like yesterday, I do not engage her with small talk as we wait to take our walk down the aisle. Instead, I quietly look straight ahead.

Just as I do while the ceremony takes place.

Doing everything in my power not to engage.

The only time I catch her eye is when I step up to give the rings to Greg's uncle and when I take my place next to the other groomsmen once again, my eyes flash in her direction. She doesn't hide the fact that she is staring right at me, but I waste no time looking away and turn my focus on the back of Greg's head.

Elyse's uncle declares the happy couple husband and wife, and unfortunately, this means it's time to walk back up the aisle. I offer my arm again but look over her head and not directly at her. Once we're out in the hallway, I focus my energy and attention on Ila. We posed for a million pictures while guests waited for us, and now the wedding planner has us all paired up once again and in line, waiting to enter the tent set up for the reception.

The DJ announces Abby and me, and although we have to enter together, we aren't arm in arm. Instead, she bops along to the song playing us into the room as we find our places at the head table. I don't show it on the outside, but watching her dance along with her sassy smile plastered on her face does something to me. I'm grateful when the bride and groom take their places between us because it gives me a bit of relief.

It's surprising how exhausting it is to avoid someone. I could use the break.

The evening is running like a well-oiled machine, and we've barely taken our seats when dinner is served. I've had two bites of my chicken when Nadia, the wedding planner, comes up behind me to tell me it's time to give my toast. I've been preparing for weeks, but now that the moment is here, I wish it wasn't. Or maybe I wish Abby weren't here, throwing me off balance. Nerves start to eat away at me, and my palms instantly go sweaty the moment Nadia hands me the

microphone and pulls my chair out from underneath me, not giving me any option but to stand.

Here goes nothing.

“Hi, everyone. My name is Logan, and I’m the best man. I’ve known Greg since we were four, and I’ve seen him through all the different phases of his life. I could go on for hours telling embarrassing stories about him, but they spent a lot of money on today’s festivities so having it end in an annulment would be an incredible waste.”

This earns me a small laugh from the room, and I feel a little better.

“Instead, I thought I would say a few words I stole from the great James Bertolino.” I lower the mic to clear my throat before reciting the wedding toast I memorized for this very moment. Then taking a deep breath, I look at the happy couple and begin. “Greg and Elyse, may your love be firm, and may your dream of a life together be a river between two shores by day bathed in sunlight and by night illuminated from within. May the...”

For some uncontrollable reason, I shift my gaze to the bride’s left to be met with shining blue eyes filled with surprise and wonder, and I stumble over my words and have to start the last sentence again. Somehow, I manage to get through the rest of my toast, but only because I focus back on the newlyweds. I don’t remember the rest of what I said because I could only think about the way she was watching me. The surprise on her face and the delight in her eyes.

Once I’ve taken my seat, Abby stands for her turn, reaching for the necklace I noticed her playing with more than once yesterday. She must have forgotten she didn’t have it on tonight since she is wearing the same necklace all the bridesmaids are wearing.

“Well, I’m not sure how I can follow that.” The crowd laughs with her first line. “I mean, was that romantic or what? I had no idea the big brute had it in him.” She looks at me while everyone laughs again, giving me a wink.

I keep my mask on, giving her nothing in return. Still, she continues to look at me even though I can see her confidence visibly shaken when met with my icy exterior. I shudder inside, hating that I might have negatively affected her, but it's best this way. Her two-second pause ends, and she begins again. Unsteadily, she trips over her words just as I did after locking eyes with her during my speech. I think, in her case, her stumble is because I've made her feel uncomfortable—unlike me, who she left feeling unbalanced at the mere presence of her. Smiling and impressed.

The rest of her toast is sweet and sentimental, just like I imagine she is. I can attest to the sweet after watching her with Ila, but I have no intention of finding out if she's sentimental. That would entail getting to know her.

We've finished dinner, cut the cake, and the bride and groom have sipped champagne through interlocked arms. The new Mr. and Mrs. Holmes are dancing their first dance to Michael Bublé while the rest of us stand around the dance floor watching. My hands rest gently on Ila's shoulders as she sways back and forth in front of me in awe of the fairy tale unfolding before her very eyes. This being her first wedding, it all feels magical to her, as it should.

The song changes to *My Girl* by The Temptations, and Elyse's dad takes Greg's place to dance with his daughter. I wonder what it will be like one day to have the honor of dancing the father-daughter dance with Ila on her special day. But there's no rush for that day to get here because I cannot imagine just how hard it must be to hand your baby girl's heart over to another person.

It's too much to even consider when she looks up at me and asks, "Daddy, will you dance with me later?"

Be still my beating heart.

"It would be my honor, cupcake."

She gives a jump and a squeal in excitement and then settles back down to watch the pageantry before her.

Toward the end of the mother-son dance, the DJ announces, “The bride and groom would like the wedding party to join them on the dance floor for the next song.”

Shit.

Sara and Cate are married to Barry and Noel and Stephanie and Samantha brought dates, which leaves just Abby and me. However, I have the flower girl right here, and I would have to say she would count as a member of the wedding party. Right?

“Ila, shall we?”

“Daddy, no. You need to dance with Abby. Look, she’s all by herself.”

Sure enough, Abby is on the side of the dance floor trying to get the ring bearer to dance with her, but she’s having the same luck I am.

Without letting me reply, Ila takes me by the hand and pulls me toward Abby. I can see the worry on her face when she sees us coming her way.

“Ila, are you coming to dance with me?”

“No, silly.”

My six-year-old daughter takes Abby’s hand and places it in my hand that was holding hers.

I guess I’m dancing with Abby.

This is precisely what I had planned on avoiding all night.

Abby doesn’t look at me as we walk across the dance floor, allowing me to look at her perfect profile. Her slender neck and exposed collarbones, begging me to take a taste.

Once we make it to the center of the dance floor with the rest of the wedding party, we take our position. My hand rests on her hip, and her hand lightly lands on my shoulder. Our other hands meet, and I hold them out to the side. I can hear the Frank Sinatra song we’re dancing to, but I know I’m not dancing to the rhythm. The beat of my thundering heart is the only one I hear, and I’m using that rhythm to guide us slowly in a small circle.

“You really need to learn to hide your emotions, you know that?”

Her comment throws me off the beat, and my step stutters ever so slightly. Doesn't she know how hard it is for me to focus on moving us around the floor at the same time our skin has come in contact with each other? I swear, her dress is so thin I can almost feel her skin burning a hole through the material where my hand holds her hip. The last thing I need is to hear her voice.

This may be a simple wedding dance to her, but it's hell on earth for me.

“What?”

“Honestly, can't you just fake it for tonight?”

“Sorry, I have no clue what you're referring to.”

“Tell that to your face. You look repulsed.”

Well, you wanted to keep your distance. This ought to do the trick, asshole.

“Sorry about that. It's not you. I have a lot on my mind.”

Like the fact that you smell like a field of flowers on a sunny fucking day.

I have no idea what that smells like, but I'm pretty sure she's it.

“Well, you need to get out of your head and realize that not only is everyone here watching but so is your little girl. She is beaming with excitement to see her daddy dressed like Prince Charming and dancing with all the other fancy fairy-tale characters. Put a smile on that face, mister.”

I look over at Ila, and sure enough, she is beside herself with joy, watching me dance with Abby. She waves when she sees me notice her, and I smile back because how can I not when she's looking at me like that?

“There you go. I knew you had it in you.”

I look down at my dance partner; her sad eyes don't match her fiery attitude.

This makes me feel like shit.

“Anything for Ila.”

She stiffens in my arms. And, of course, I’ve messed up again. Unfortunately, it’s all I seem to do when it comes to this woman.

“If that was rude, I’m sorry. I…”

Following her gaze off the dance floor, I see a wedding guest in a gray suit with his arm around a young blonde in a red dress. When I say young, I mean young. They may want to check her ID at the bar to see if she’s legally allowed to drink the glass of champagne in her hand young. Her youth, long blond hair, and bright-red dress have caught the eye of many men in her vicinity, but the beautiful woman in my arms seems the most bothered by her presence.

I’m not sure if I should say something, but when the song ends, she releases me, fleeing in the opposite direction of the man in the gray suit and his date. She can’t get away fast enough. I can’t take my eyes off her retreating back, trying to ignore the pull I have to run after her and make sure she’s okay.

The DJ says something about getting the party started, and a familiar song starts playing, stopping Abby in her tracks. Her fisted hands open and close at her side, and her shoulders lift with a heavy breath. She spins around, plastering a smile on her face. Then walking past where I’m still standing, she makes a beeline for Ila and takes her by the hand, and my little girl’s face lights up like it’s Christmas morning.

I join the other guests on the edge of the dance floor as it fills with people. The music is too loud to hear Ila when she yells, “Watch, Daddy!” But I can read her lips and Abby’s eyes when they catch mine. A little of her light has reached them again, and one side of her mouth turns up, and I think she’s excited for me to watch too.

With the guests standing in lines, the Cha Cha Slide begins with the bride in the middle of the floor and the rest of the wedding guests surrounding her.

I watch in delight as Ila does the entire dance by heart.

How in the world did she learn this?

As she sidesteps, she looks up at Abby, who gives her a thumbs-up.

These two are quite the team. A team that I have no doubt could cause my heart severe damage.

I wouldn't stand a chance if the two of them formed an alliance of any kind.

As the dance turns them to face the other direction, my focus moves to the beauty in the light-blue strapless dress as her hips sway back and forth.

Fuck!

Abby disappeared after the Cha Cha Slide, and I danced several songs with Ila. She stood on my already uncomfortable tux shoes during the slow ones, and on the more upbeat ones, I twirled her around the dance floor. The delight she gets from watching her dress fluff out around her when she spins has rubbed off on me because her joy is my joy. There's no denying I've had a good time tonight. Well, except for those moments with Abby. Those were awkward and unnerving.

Ila and the ring bearer went up to the room with her babysitter about twenty minutes ago, and I'm taking a breather at an empty table when Sara and Cate join me, slipping their shoes off to take a break from the festivities.

"Hey, Logan. How ya doing over here?"

"All good, thanks, Cate."

"Ila sure looked like she had the time of her life. You should have seen her earlier today. She was so excited when Abby taught her how to line dance, and she listened to every word and picked it up so fast. She's a quick learner, Logan. You may want to think about getting her into some dance classes. I'd be happy to have her at the studio anytime."

“You think?”

“I do. I’ll email you the class schedule, and you just let me know, and I’ll make sure we find a space for her.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that.”

“Shit,” Sara says under her breath.

“What?” Cate asks, as curious as I am.

“Look. Levi has Abby trapped in the corner. He’s such a dick.”

Something in my gut clenches, and a feeling I’ve never felt before twists my insides.

“Who’s Levi?” I ask eagerly, not caring how much interest I’m reflecting in my question.

“Her ex-husband,” Cate replies coldly.

Well, doesn’t that bit of information send a nice little ice bath down my spine?

“Isn’t it enough that he showed up with his teenage tart? Can’t he just leave her alone?”

“She looks miserable. When is he going to stop torturing her?” Sara says, putting her shoes back on.

“What do you mean?” I have to ask. Already enraged with the situation.

“He’s just cruel. They seemed to be the perfect couple at first, but then he left her for a younger model. Not the one he brought tonight, of course. He’s had several since he left Abby. We call them his flavors of the month. He dragged out the divorce, and anytime he can dig his claws in and flaunt his many hoes in front of her, he does. He says he doesn’t want her back, but clearly, he can’t seem to let her get on with her life.”

Sara stands. “C’mon. Let’s go save our girl.”

Cate stands, slipping her shoes on, ready to go to war for her friend, but that won’t be necessary, because before I know

what I'm doing, my legs are carrying me over to the corner of the tent where her dickhead ex has her cornered.

I'm pissed.

I have no right to be, but I am.

She makes my daughter happy; therefore, it's my job to protect her. Right?

Whatever I need to tell myself, I guess.

Abby sees me headed in her direction, but her eyes are blank.

Defeated.

Hell no.

Abby Glenn is sunshine, and this just won't do. Not on my watch.

Without saying a word, my shoulder comes in contact with Levi's as I push past him. I grab Abby by the hand and pull her away without asking. To my relief, she comes willingly. I don't have a plan of any kind, so I head to the center of the tent.

The dance floor.

As luck would have it, a slow song begins to play just as our feet touch the wood floor. This time, I forego the formal dance position and wrap my hands around her waist as her hands land on my shoulders.

Her eyes search mine to make sense of my actions. "Logan ___"

"There's nothing to talk about."

"But I don't understand."

"Neither do I."

It's true. I have no idea what I'm doing or why.

What I do know is she's a good person who deserves to be treated like a damn queen. I'm not sure why I've made this my problem, but here we are.

She says nothing else as we sway along to Dan + Shay, and I make a point not to look at her.

She'll be the death of me.

I just know it.

It's no surprise I see Levi prowling around the edge of the dance floor, watching us intently.

On instinct, I pull her closer, pressing her body against mine. She gasps when I do, but she doesn't protest. Instead, her arms wrap around my neck, and the feel of her fingers trailing through the hair on the back of my neck fuels my protective need.

My hands have a mind of their own as they slide lower down her body. Leaving her hips, they graze the top of her ass, and when her eyes lock with mine, they continue their exploration and rest entirely on her ass cheeks. As I look down at her parted lips, the only thing that distracts me is the view of her breasts pressed against my chest. As close as we are, she's going to feel just what she does to me if I'm not careful.

I rip my gaze from hers and look at Levi, who is watching us. He's seething. There's no stopping the cocky lift of my eyebrow as my hands rub a slow circle over the satin material covering the most perfect ass I have ever had the pleasure of touching. Her gasp when I take two handfuls makes my dick twitch, and my eyes find hers looking up at me, confused by my actions. Avoiding her questioning look, I check the side of the dance floor to see how my wandering hands have affected him.

Jackpot!

My hands on her ass appear to have had their intended effect because Levi storms away, dragging his date behind him.

Once he's pushed through the crowd and out of the tent, I victoriously look back down at Abby. She's flushed, and those lips of hers are begging for something I have no business giving her. I need to get out of here before I fuck up even more than I already have.

Levi is gone.

My job here is done.

Releasing her, I walk away without looking back, heading to the bar, wondering if this night is ever going to be over.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIND YOUR WORDS

Abby

What the hell was that?

Humiliated and rejected, I stand in the middle of the dance floor watching the retreating back of the man who just possessively pulled me not only to the dance floor but also up against his body so tightly there wasn't much left to my imagination.

His touch left me burning and by the way he looked at me and the rise and fall of his chest against my own, I wasn't alone. So why did he walk away, leaving me confused and embarrassed?

Just like Dan and Shay, I am speechless, just not in the way I had been moments ago pressed against Logan's body. Mad at myself for feeling rejected when he's the one who pulled me away from Levi and who got all handsy, I take my leave of the other swaying couples and head to the bathroom to get away from the prying eyes I can feel watching me.

The bathroom is actually a beautiful lounge full of sofas and vanities, and with the wedding winding down, I have the space all to myself. This is the refuge I need right now. The moment the door closes and the sounds coming from the DJ become muted, I take my first deep breath since Logan took my hand and saved me from the torturous conversation with Levi.

I take in my reflection in the mirror. Splotches of red color my chest and neck, just like it always does when I get upset. There is, unfortunately, no way to hide my emotions when my body betrays me like it does. I never could lie to my friends and family and tell them I wasn't upset about something when the heat of my anger was right there on my face. I collapse into the chair in front of the mirror and stare at myself, trying to figure out what in the world I did to the asshole who keeps rejecting me at every turn.

I hope none of the girls saw any of that because I do not want to hear their feelings on the matter.

My hope floats away when the door to my tranquil hideout bursts open with the bride and two of her baby-blue bridesmaids rush through with looks of horror on their faces.

“Oh my gosh, Abby. What was that all about?”

“What? Did I miss something?” I spin in my chair wide-eyed, mouth agape, acting my butt off. “Tell me everything!”

I know this strategy won't work, but I'm going to play dumb and see where it gets me.

“Nice try!” Elyse's finger is maybe an inch from my face. “Don't think we didn't see the booty grab and the steam rising off your bodies on that dance floor. But why would he storm off and leave you standing there like that? What in the world did you do?”

Keeping up my lame act, I tilt my head, looking at her, confused.

“Knock it off. We watched it all go down,” Sara hisses, hands on hips. “He was sitting at the table with us when we saw you cornered by Levi. We'll get to that later. But when we mentioned what a dick your ex was, he wasted no time getting on his feet to get to you.”

This has me leaping out of my chair.

“What? Why?”

Cate continues for a guilty-looking Sara. “We were both getting ready to rescue you, but he stormed off without a word

and within seconds was dragging you to the dance floor.”

“So he was rescuing me?”

“Yes!” Sara and Cate exclaim in unison.

“And it looked like quite the rescue, if you ask me. What made him storm off like that?”

“I wish I knew. The moment I opened my mouth to speak, he cut me off, and then the next thing I knew, he was grabbing my ass and pushing me against parts of his body I wish I hadn’t felt.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to be pressed against a body like his?” Sara pleads.

“Because, from all accounts, he hates me. All I do is annoy him, and frankly, I don’t need to feel his hands or anything else, for that matter. The man is infuriating! If it weren’t for his little girl, I wouldn’t be able to find a single redeeming quality in him.”

“Oh, please! The man is freaking hot as hell, and you know it. Even on my wedding day, there is no denying it.”

“Whatever.”

Sara elbows Kate. “Uh-oh. I think somebody may have a crush.”

“Really? That’s what you got from my reply? You three are crazy!” I grab Elyse by the hand and pull her through the lounge. “Don’t you have a bouquet to toss?”

I ignore their protests and persevere, dragging my best friend behind me with the other girls hot on our heels.

“Crap, you’re right. I totally forgot about that. I need to wrap this party up and get my wedding night started!”

Thankfully I’m in the clear with this little reminder. I release her hand since she’s rushing back to the reception on her own accord now. But my relief fades quickly when she takes my hand back in hers, pulling me to a stop.

“We *will* talk about this later.” No-nonsense Elyse has emerged, and I know better than to argue with her.

“Yes, after your honeymoon, we will have a great big sit-down and discuss whatever you want.”

And If I'm lucky, you'll forget all about what just went down after your blissful ten days in the surf and sand.

“Yes, we will.”

With that, she headed toward the DJ booth to ask all the single men to meet her on the dance floor.

Garter flung. Check.

Bouquet tossed. Check.

Guests lined up to whisk the newlyweds out the door of the ballroom on their way to their honeymoon suite. Check.

And that concludes the evening's events, my friends. This frustrating night is finally over.

Being the maid of honor, I stick around to gather a couple of the items left behind. I find a sparkly cardigan at one table and a Hot Wheels car that a little one left behind. I hand them off to the wedding planner who has her own lost and found pile going. When it's down to just the two of us, she shoos me away.

Not wanting to drink alone in the bar, my stalling has ended, and it's time to call it a night. I walk at a snail's pace, my aching feet finally making their way toward the elevators that will take me to my sad, empty hotel room. Much to my relief, the elevator arrives right after I've touched the up button, and I am that much closer to getting out of my god-forsaken heels and tight dress. But my relief fades quickly when the doors open to reveal Lucifer himself.

Of course.

Why wouldn't Logan Shockley be in the elevator?

It's the perfect way to end this delightful day of asshole exes and strangers getting me all hot and bothered and then leaving me embarrassed and confused for the entire room to see. I should have expected nothing less from the universe. I'm surprised Levi isn't in the small space with him.

He seems utterly unaffected by my presence, simply moving to the side so his back is against the elevator wall. When I step in and reach in front of him to select my floor, I swear I can feel his heat behind me, and I hate that being this near to him affects me.

Frustrated anger bubbles inside me, but I cross the small space and mirror him by leaning my back against the wall across from him.

He looks like he just got laid in a coat closet with his dark mussed hair, loose tie, and the top two buttons of his tuxedo shirt undone. He looks...well, he looks delicious, and I hate him even more because I shouldn't want to know what the lips of a man who has treated me so poorly taste like.

His face is void of emotion but his eyes...there's an angry storm brewing behind them, and this pisses me off, too. Why is he pissed when he's the one who mortified me?

"What exactly is your problem?" I spit, done with the silent treatment.

His reply is to lift an eyebrow.

This infuriates me!

"You know, your silent treatment isn't as attractive as you think it is."

Both eyebrows lift. Other than that, he doesn't flinch.

"You're an asshole, you know that?" My disgruntled words are full of disgust, but I will not raise my voice and let him think he has the upper hand.

Still no reaction.

"I didn't need you to save me from Levi, if that's what you think you were doing? And I most certainly didn't ask you to grab my ass, not to mention being pushed so close to you I could feel your hard-on." I don't have to look at my reflection in the mirrored wall behind Logan. I know my anger has my chest and neck turning crimson. "But most of all, I didn't deserve to be manhandled and then left standing on the dance

floor alone with everyone watching. I'm not some toy you can play with and leave behind once you've tired of me."

"Manhandled?"

"That's what I said."

He takes two steps and is standing mere inches away. My body has never felt more alive. His proximity is intoxicating no matter how badly I want to fight it.

"Are you telling me you didn't want me to touch you?"

His hand now presses against the glass wall behind me as he completely invades my space.

"I would have liked to have had a say in the matter."

"Abby."

"What?"

"Do you want me to touch you again?"

I don't dare speak because he's got me right where he wants me. He knows the answer to his question. He can see my chest rising and falling the closer he gets.

He's an asshole, but he's not clueless.

"Abby, you need to find your words because I will not touch you again unless you tell me it's what you want."

"I hate you."

"That wasn't the question. Do you want me to touch you again, Abby?"

"Fuck you. You know I do. But—"

His mouth swallows the rest of my statement, and I let him because I have no willpower, and it's what I wanted before he walked away from me earlier tonight. He's casually leaning forward with his hand still braced on the wall next to my head, but his kiss feels anything but casual.

Rough.

Hungry.

Needy.

His free hand grabs my ass, pulling me up on my toes and closer to his body. My hand snakes around his neck, clinging to him with the same desperate need pulsing from him. His tongue asks for permission, and I grant it without a second thought.

He's right.

I did want him to touch me again.

I want him to devour me.

I've never wanted anything more.

Hearing the sounds of the elevator as it pings with every floor it passes adds to the desperation and wonder of what will come once the doors open. Will we get off on my floor and go to my room or take the two additional floors to his?

As if reading my mind, the elevator bounces ever so slightly and then comes to a smooth halt. The doors open, and as soon as they do, he pushes away from me and backs up to his spot on the opposite wall of the elevator, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

All I can do is stay rooted to the spot he had me pressed against two seconds ago. When the doors start to close, he leans forward, using his hand to stop them from closing.

"I believe this is your floor."

What an asshole.

"Done playing with your toy, are you?"

"Sleep well, Abby."

He doesn't deserve a reply.

Holding my head high, I exit the elevator without looking back, promising myself I will not fall for his torture again.

Though brunch is almost over, I haven't touched my plate of food. Scenes from last night's two-minute elevator ride to my

room are playing over and over in my head. I should focus on the lovely brunch Elyse and Greg have put together for the wedding party. Instead, my senses are still firing on all cylinders.

His gruff voice in my ear demanding I use my words, and the lingering taste of bourbon on his tongue haunts me.

I can feel his hand on my butt, and the smell of his cologne has imprinted on me.

The hottest experience of my life lasted as long as it took to get to the twenty-third floor and ended in rejection.

This morning, I tried to think of every reason I could not come to brunch, but in the end, I decided he didn't deserve the pleasure of having that kind of power over me. Fortunately, he hasn't shown up, and I haven't had to worry about him.

"Hey, are you feeling okay? You haven't touched your food."

Why does Elyse always notice everything?

"Yep, all good. I must have had too much champagne last night."

"Well, have some bacon or something on the greasy side. That might help."

"Thanks, I'll do that. But let's not worry about me. How was the wedding night?" I wag my eyebrows at her, trying to shift things to her sexy night and not how mine resulted in a sleepless, far from sexy night. I'm not sure I'll ever be ready to share the humiliation with her or anyone.

The corners of her mouth slowly lift as her shoulders do the same, and she swoons before me without saying a word.

"That good?"

"Yes! Everyone told me that we'd both be too tired, and it wouldn't happen or there wouldn't be anything to write home about, but Abby, it was freaking awesome."

Taking her hand in mine, I give her a squeeze. "I'm so happy for you. You get to have that for the rest of your life."

“I do,” she beams. “I am one lucky girl. You’re next! I just know it.”

“I wouldn’t count on that, but I sure would love to have what you and Greg have someday.”

“You will.” She winks as if she knows something I don’t.

“Well, since I haven’t even met him yet, I don’t think it will be happening anytime soon.”

“Morning, Abby!” Ila interrupts us.

“Hey, sweetie.”

I lean down to hug her, and she surprises me when she climbs onto my lap. I give her a squeeze, not minding at all that she’s taken to me so quickly.

“Did you sleep in this morning?”

“No. Daddy had to work.”

I learned on Friday night that the Shockley company name I saw on the side of Logan’s truck just happened to be the same as his last name. Logan *is* Logan Construction. How does he do his job from a hotel room on a Sunday? Interesting.

“Well, I’m glad I got to see you again. Thanks for being such a great dance partner.”

“I had so much fun. Maybe you can come over for a playdate?”

Oh, sweet girl. If you only knew what kind of playdate I would prefer at your house. Too bad your daddy has been a very bad boy because if I came over, he’d be in a time-out.

“That would be really nice,” I reply, not knowing what else to say to the six-year-old of the man who insists on humiliating me at every turn.

“Elyse, sorry we have to run. Something’s come up at the work site, and I’ve got to run and take care of it real quick before Ila and I pack up for your...”

“Don’t give it a second thought. I understand. You do what you have to do.”

I look at my best friend, shocked at how she so rudely just cut him off. That was a bit out of character for her. Seems he has a negative impact on more people than just me.

She stands, giving him a hug, and I hear him say. “Thanks for letting us be a part of your special day. It was beautiful, just like you. You set the bar pretty high for all other brides, Mrs. Holmes.”

“There’s no way we would have done it without you and Ila. Thank you for everything.”

She lets go of him and then bends down to hug the sweetest flower girl there ever was. “Thank you, Ila. I’ll send you the pictures of you in your dress just as soon as we have them.”

Ila gives her a kiss on the cheek and then turns her attention in my direction. “Bye, Abby,” she says sullenly.

I turn in my seat, opening my arms to her. “Don’t look so sad. Come here and give me a hug.”

She wraps her little arms around me and whispers in my ear so only I can hear her. “Daddy says he got your phone number when you made him get in his car accident. I promise to make him call you so you can come over to my house and I can show you my room.”

This little girl has unknowingly stolen my heart. I can’t help but feel a bit guilty. Over the past couple of days, I’ve formed a strong bond with her. I don’t know what role her mommy holds in her life, but she seems to be looking for maternal attention.

“That would be nice, Ila.”

“C’mon, cupcake. We have to get going,” Logan says, placing a hand on her shoulder.

I release her and look up at her daddy, who is looking straight ahead. Anywhere but at me.

“Bye,” she says with a wave, and I wave back.

They walk away without Logan acknowledging my existence.

Whatever.

“He’s a special man, that one,” Elyse comments as she watches them leave the room.

I choke on my mimosa at hearing her words.

“Excuse me?”

“Abby, you have no idea what that man has been through. I’m not sure he’ll ever be the same, but he lives for that little girl while running his successful business. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wait, what? I haven’t told you about...”

“Well, everyone, we can’t thank you all enough for being here, but my wife and I need to head to the airport so we can get ourselves to Bora Bora.”

Damn you, Greg!

Elyse looks torn. I can tell she wants to tell me Logan’s story, but she really does have to go.

It must be juicy if she’s debating being late to tell me.

“Go. We’ll catch up when you get back.”

“We will. You have the house key?”

“I have the house key.”

“Okay, I know we went over everything, but you know me. I made a list too. It’s on the kitchen island. Everything you need to know to take care of our little heathens. Thanks again, Abbs.”

“Happy to do it. Besides, the timing is perfect with my house renovation. And don’t think I won’t take advantage of your pool.”

“The hot tub instructions are there for you too.”

“I can’t wait. But you need to get out of here so my ten days of luxury can begin. Off you go.”

She laughs. “Love you, Abby.”

“Love you right back.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I CAN SEE YOUR BOTTOM

Abby

I could stand under the perfect water pressure of this perfect shower in this perfect house until the hot water runs out, but I do have to get out at some point. I have yet to find a flaw in Greg and Elyse's new house. Not only is it beautiful but it also has a pool and a hot tub. And did I mention the water pressure?

Forcing myself to turn off the water, I open the shower door, flooding the room with steam, evidence my shower may have been just a wee bit too long and too hot. Oops.

I hit the pool within minutes of arriving and had to be sure to get the chlorine out of my hair. A girl can never be too careful.

The timing of Elyse's honeymoon couldn't have been better. My house is being renovated, and this week they're laying the new floors, so all of my furniture had to be moved out. Luckily, I had agreed to dog sit for Greg and Elyse months ago. So while they're on their honeymoon, I have a place to stay.

When Greg's grandmother passed away a few months back, her three corgis—or heathens, as their parents refer to them—became theirs. Greg and Elyse are always too busy traveling to have dogs, but what were they supposed to say? When Grandma's last dying wish is that her favorite grandson takes her dogs well, he takes the dogs.

I don't mind; for heathens, they're pretty sweet.

With one towel wrapped around me, I'm drying my hair with another when said heathens start barking. Not just barking but going bonkers. I've only heard them do that when somebody knocks on the door or someone new comes into the house. So what the hell is going on?

Dropping the towel drying my hair, I search the bathroom for something I can use as a weapon and come up short. Panicking, I pick up the blow-dryer. I mean, it's shaped like a gun. I begin tiptoeing down the hall toward the ruckus in the front of the house. I'm only a few feet away from turning into the front room when the dogs fall silent, and I hear voices. Stopping, I'm hoping to hear what they're saying. Things fall silent for a brief second, only to be replaced by a high-pitched squeal.

Seriously, what the hell is going on?

Braving a look around the corner with my dryer held up in front of my face like they do in the movies, I can't quite see anything. So I enter the room, aiming my dryer ahead of me, yelling, "Who's here? What do you want? My boyfriend is at the neighbor's house and will be back any minute."

"Abby?" A sweet, familiar voice comes from the other side of the kitchen island.

"Ila?"

Crawling on her hands and knees, her sweet little head pops around the island with all three dogs licking her and begging for her attention.

"Abby! It is you!"

She tries to get to her feet as the dogs jump on her in an effort to keep her down on the floor with them. Her face is beaming, and I can only imagine how confused mine must look. She finally gets up and runs toward me just as the front door opens, and Logan enters, carrying a suitcase and a pink backpack. He looks as confused as I do.

I hold my blow-dryer out in front of me. "Why are you here?"

A heartbeat later, Ila plows into me, wrapping her arms around my middle. “Daddy, look! Abby’s here!”

As she lets go to face him, the towel covering me loosens, no longer tucked into itself, and begins to come apart slowly.

“I see that,” he says as one corner of his mouth lifts. “And it looks like she’s armed with a blow-dryer. Whatcha gonna do with that, Ms. Glen?”

The cool central air tickles my skin, and I know my towel has fallen, and my backside is now exposed.

I think I might die. Yep. Right here. Naked. Blow-dryer in hand.

“Uh, Abby. I can see your bottom,” Ila chirps from beside me, a giggle in her voice.

Holding the towel to my front with one hand and the damned blow-dryer in the other. I stay as calm as humanly possible, given the situation. “I know, honey, and I’m sorry about that. Why don’t you go stand with your daddy, and I’ll be right back? Then we can have a conversation about what exactly is happening here.”

“You want me to hold the dryer for you?” he asks with a smart-ass smile. “Or will your boyfriend take care of that when he returns from the neighbor’s house?”

“Don’t say another word, Shockley. And while you’re keeping quiet, how about you turn around until I’m out of the room.”

“She’s right, Daddy. Don’t look at her privates. Turn around.”

His face nearly splits in two from the enormous smile on his smug face, but he turns around as instructed. I quickly back my way out of the room and run back to the bathroom, slamming the door behind me.

Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I look worse than I expected. My skin, already bright red from the scalding shower, was only amplified by the fuel from my anger and embarrassment.

I don't understand why they're here or how they got into the house. I had just washed all of Logan's negative energy off me, and here he is.

Hasn't he had enough fun toying with my emotions?

Humiliated me enough?

I let the towel fall to the ground and rip my silk robe from the hook on the back of the door. I throw it on and tighten the belt, fluffing my wet hair while cursing under my breath.

Ripping the door open, I stop myself from storming down the hallway like a screaming banshee and take a moment to collect myself. I count to ten and walk with purpose down the hall and round the corner once again—minus the blow-dryer.

“Abby, look! They love me!” Her giggle is adorable.

She's surrounded by Larry, Moe, and Curly. That really is their names. She is their very own Snow White. The corgis crawl all over her, licking her face, and she loves every second of it.

“Of course, they do. Why wouldn't they?” I reply honestly, with a smile on my face.

But as soon as I turn toward her father, I lose my smile and fix him with a glare as I gesture for him to meet me in the kitchen. By the time I join him in Elyse's all-white dream kitchen, he's casually propped against the island, arms crossed and a rare smile on his still smug face.

I've only ever seen him smile when it's directed at Ila.

But he doesn't smile at her like this.

No, this smile is wicked.

Dangerous.

What is his damage?

“Nice robe.”

“Nice stalking.”

“Excuse me?”

“How did you get in here? And why are you here?”

“Greg gave me a key when he asked us to dog sit.”

“No, Elyse asked me to stay with the dogs.”

His cocky smile is gone, and the grumpy man I have come to know is back.

“He asked on Friday night. Said he needed someone to stay, and Ila freaked out at the thought of being here with the dogs.”

“Well, Elyse asked me two months ago. I planned to have my new floors put in this week, and if I don’t stay here, I’ll be homeless.”

His head nods in Ila’s direction. “And you expect me to break her heart?”

“Well...no. I...”

“Exactly.”

“Why don’t you two take the dogs to your place, and then I can stay here.”

“I offered that, but Greg said it wasn’t an option.”

“Why?”

“Apparently, Moe is a runner and doesn’t come back when called, and if he runs, the other two follow. Also, Larry tends to mark his territory in unknown places, and I’m not about that. He pees in my house; he becomes a throw rug.”

I don’t miss the way his eyes give me a once-over and stop on my chest. Forcing me to cross my arms to cover my nipples that tightened at his perusal of my body.

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I’m sure you have somewhere else you can go.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You’re just going to have to find a way to break the news to Ila,” I hiss.

Furious at him.

Furious at Greg and Elyse, who likely did this on purpose.

Jerks.

A squeal of joy comes from the living room. “Daddy, I’m so excited. This is going to be the best ten days ever!”

Uncrossing his arms, he shrugs as he pushes off the island. “If you want to wipe that smile off her face, go right ahead.”

He breezes by me, leaving his musky scent to linger. His proximity and delicious scent remind me that I’m naked under my oh-so-thin silk robe as my nipples pebble even harder.

That old saying about cutting glass would most definitely apply to my current situation.

“Cupcake. Abby has something she has to tell you.”

Oh, he’s such a dick!

She looks up from her spot on the floor with her three furry friends. “What’s up?”

“Well, sweetheart, I think there was a mistake, and Elyse had asked me to stay with the dogs.”

“Yay! Even better!”

“No, sweetie. We don’t all need to stay here with the dogs. I need to stay here because my house is getting new floors, and I don’t have anywhere else to go, but you and your daddy don’t need to be here.”

“But Uncle Greg said I gotta stay here with the doggies. Why would he lie?”

“Uncle Greg didn’t lie, cupcake,” Logan growls out the back window, where he focuses on the growing grass.

“But Abby, it’s a big house. You can have your own room. Why can’t we stay here with you? It would be like the longest sleepover ever!”

“Oh, Ila, it would be fun. But grown-ups who aren’t friends don’t usually have sleepovers.”

“But I’m not a grown-up, and I thought we were friends.”

He’s still staring out the window, not helping at all whatsoever.

“Of course, you and I are great friends, but—”

“She’s right. It is a big house.”

The shock from hearing his gruff voice speak those simple seven words knocks me for a loop. I might have thought he actually wants me to stay, but when he turns around, his mouth is tense, and his brow furrowed, clearly not happy to side against me for once.

“See, Daddy thinks we should stay.”

Faking a smile, I grit my teeth. “What are you talking about, Logan?”

“Listen, you have nowhere else to go, and I will not break my daughter’s heart if I can help it.”

“Logan—”

“Sorry, Abby. Looks like you’ve lost this battle.”

This cannot be happening. I can’t spend a week and a half sharing a house with this man. I’ll take Ila any day, but ten days with her grump of a father, no thank you.

“What are you doing?”

Ignoring me, he opens the French doors to the backyard. “Come on, Ila. Let’s take the dogs outside.”

She runs past him; once she’s out of earshot, he lays his final blow. “I’m doing this for my daughter. Just try to stay out of our way.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“See ya later, roomie.”

I’ve spent the past four hours in the primary bedroom. I had already unpacked and had no intention of giving the room up for Logan. I’m nice and comfortable, and this is where I plan on hiding out from the twosome who’ve invaded my peaceful getaway as I avoid the chaos at my house.

Not that it’s a hardship to be trapped in luxury.

The room is the perfect mix of feminine and masculine, with light blue hues throughout. Luxurious white bedding with blue pillows and throw blankets as accents feels as good as it looks. There is an enormous rug in the middle of the floor that stops in front of an electric fireplace. I'm currently cuddled up in the big chair in the corner of the massive bedroom, reading Nina Patrick's latest book. It's her new small-town story with a charming hero who is kind and sexy and everything a girl could ask for. The exact opposite of the man I get to share a roof with for the next week and a half.

There's a small tap on the door, and a smile tugs at my lips when Ila's sweet voice says my name from the other side. Leaping to my feet, I'm surprised to find myself rushing to the door. I may be hiding from Logan, but there's no way I would turn her away. It's not her fault her daddy is a jerk, and that Greg didn't ask his wife if she already had the dog sitting handled.

When I pull open the door, Ila and all three dogs look up at me with faces nobody could say no to. "Hey, my favorite flower girl. What's up?"

"We got pizza. Want some? Daddy got enough for all of us."

Before I can answer, she takes my hand and pulls me down the hallway, the dogs running ahead of us.

"Got her, Daddy."

"Thanks for joining us, Abby." He sounds, dare I say, chipper?

He's not looking at me, but he hands me a plate.

What in the world is he trying to get away with? Ila is probably more intelligent than the two of us put together. If he thinks this kumbaya act will fool her, I have a feeling he's going to be very disappointed.

"I'll grab a slice, head back into my room, and get out of your way," I say, emphasizing the third part of my sentence.

"Eat with us," he grunts, sounding like he's in incredible pain by insisting I eat with them.

Ila's little hand pats the chair she's pulled out for me, and it looks like I'm eating with Ila and her daddy.

"Thank you," I mutter, reluctantly taking my chair.

"We have cheese for me and Hawaiian for Daddy. What kind do you want?"

For some reason, the thought of the cranky ogre sitting across from me liking pineapple on his pizza is funny. Or maybe surprising is more apt. Hawaiian is the bright and sunny flavor of pizza. I would think the meat lovers would be more his jam.

"I'll share some of your cheese if that's okay?"

"You don't like fruit on your pizza either?"

"No, I love pineapple on my pizza, but your daddy is a big guy, and I think we should let him have the entire half."

And I don't want to share anything with your dear old daddy. I'm already sharing a roof with him. That's plenty.

"You don't have to eat cheese, Abby."

This time, he looks at me. His frown firmly in place. His generosity a struggle.

"No, thanks. I'll have what she's having."

He shakes his head, and places two slices of cheese pizza on my plate.

"Thank you."

"No problem."

Halting what was sure to be a stunted conversation between the two adults at the table, Ila breaks in and repeats her earlier sentiment. "Oh, Abby, we are gonna have so much fun this week. I just know it's going to be the best ever!"

Her squeal is addictive, and I can't help but get caught up in her excitement. For the rest of the meal, my focus stays on her. We talk about school starting in a few weeks, and she gives me a rundown on all the kids at her daycare, using her hands when she talks and stopping every few sentences to take

a bite. We plan trips to the dog park and even talk about hitting up the awesome local paint studio she's always wanted to go to.

Besides Ila looking at him for approval for some of our activities, Logan isn't a part of the conversation, but I can feel him watching us.

As focused as I am on the little angel next to me, I would be a liar if I said I could completely shut her father out. His presence is impossible to ignore, but I haven't looked at him since he handed me my pizza.

I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

Finished with my dinner, I excuse myself and thank them for including me again, but Ila begs me to stay. As much as I would love to give her what she wants, ignoring her dad isn't as much fun as she'll find it to be when she's a teenager, and I've had enough for today. Before leaving the two of them for the night, I come up with a way to appease her.

"How about you and I make dinner together tomorrow night? Does that sound fun?"

"Yes! What should we make?"

"What do you like?"

"Daddy and I love noodles! Noodles and sauce! Right, Daddy?"

"Right, cupcake." He smiles back at her. Delighted by her enthusiasm, but as soon as his attention turns to me, his smile vanishes. "You don't have to cook for us, Abby."

"It's not for you. It's just a little project for Ila and me to do together."

"Either way, you don't have to."

"I know I don't, but I want to."

"Whatever," he says dismissively with a yawn, stretching his arms above his head. That causes his triceps to flex, making his T-shirt sleeves ride up so he has to pull them back

in place once he brings his arms down, which only brings attention to his biceps.

God, why does he have to be such a wet blanket wrapped up in such an appealing package?

“Ila, take your plate to the sink, and then it’s bath time.”

And why does his bossy dad voice make me all hot and bothered when I can’t stand the man?

“Okay, Daddy.”

Ila and I walk our plates to the kitchen, put them in the dishwasher, and then meet Logan in the family room, where he waits for her. His gaze catches mine. Time’s suspended somehow. He doesn’t show any emotion or say a word, but damn if I don’t feel something. And where I’m feeling things is somewhere I’ll never admit to him. Whether his look is one of hatred or desire, I really do not know. Either way, I’m affected. And I hate myself for it.

He breaks the spell first. “Cupcake, go get ready for your bath, and I’ll be right there.”

I ruffle the hair on the top of her head. “Sleep good, sweet girl.”

She wraps her arms around me and squeezes me tight, pressing her head into my stomach. “Night, Abby. I can’t wait to cook with you tomorrow.”

“Same here,” I say to her as Logan watches the two of us hugging each other good night. “I’m gonna let the dogs out and then hit the hay. Have a good night.”

His reply is a nod.

I take my time outside with the dogs, letting them run around and take care of their business. When I come back inside, the house is quiet; the pizza box is gone, and the sound of splashing water echoes from the bathroom down the hall. A pang of something hits me as I close the door to my room, blocking out the sounds of domestic life coming from the other end of the house. Rolling my shoulders to push the wave of melancholy away, I settle myself on the ultra-plush king-

sized bed with my book. Here's hoping I can escape the reality I didn't know I was missing until the sounds on the other side of the door hit me square in the heart.

Walking down the hall to get a glass of water, I pause when I hear Logan and Ila in the spare bedroom she's staying in this week.

“So the princess loved the prince because he rescued her?”

“I guess she did, but Ila, this is just a fairy tale. In real life, you don't have to love someone just because they rescue you. You wait until you find the person who treats you like a queen, and you never, ever settle. Any person who loves you should love you for you and nothing else. If you love them, they love you back, and you treat each other well; that's what's most important.”

Oh, be still my overly zealous beating heart.

I know I shouldn't be listening to their private conversation. It's wrong. But I can't step away. I'm frozen to the spot, wishing I could see his face as he delivers such heartfelt words to his little girl. I've seen how he softens around her, and I can only imagine her big eyes looking up at him as though he hung the moon.

“Daddy, have you ever loved someone who loves you for you and nothing else?”

My heartbeat, which had been the only other thing I could hear besides their sweet conversation, seems to have stopped beating altogether, doing its best not to drown out his answer.

“Cupcake, I have you. I don't need anyone else.”

“What about Abby? She's really pretty.”

“*Holy shit!*” I mouth to myself, squeezing my eyes shut as my hand presses against my heart, so the thudding of it coming back to life doesn't give me away.

Logan is silent for a beat, and as much as I know the right thing to do is walk away, there is no way in hell I am going to leave without hearing his reply.

“She is very pretty, but I don’t think she likes me like that. Besides, you and I are perfect just the way we are.”

And...that’s my cue to head to the kitchen where I should have been all along.

Once I have my water, I have to pass Ila’s room again to get back to mine. Frustrated with myself for the flutter of excitement I felt when he said I was *very* pretty and the stab of disappointment that jolted through my heart when he said they were perfect just the way they are.

I don’t even like him, so it makes no sense.

I need to take his advice and wait for a man who treats me like a queen because Logan Shockley is not that man.

CHAPTER SIX

FREE AS A BIRD

Logan

It's Monday night.

If I can get through tonight, I only have eight more torturous evenings under the same roof as Abby. The woman who continues to throw me off balance in a way I'm not used to. As a result, all of my guards are up.

Every. Single. One.

Yet no matter how many defenses I have at my disposal, the yearning to touch her is a constant burning in my chest.

When Ila and I walked into the house to find her in nothing but a towel, deftly armed with a hair-dryer, that yearning grew even stronger. That single moment was comical, hot as hell, and confusing, to say the least.

Wondering why she was standing there with wet hair and drops of water tickling her skin became a moot point when her towel slowly came undone and each of her hips came into view. Yes, her most important parts remained hidden, but I still went hard on the spot when the towel began its descent. And, when Ila declared she could see her bottom, there was no controlling my laughter.

Ila may have had a front row to Abby's backside, but the image of her barely covered, soaking wet, and pissed kept me semi-hard for the rest of the day.

I will never know what Greg was thinking when he asked me to dog sit with Ila standing right there. He knew there was no way I could say no to him at his wedding rehearsal in front of my daughter. I couldn't break her heart and tell her we had to leave once we discovered Abby was also dog sitting. Well, I could have, but I didn't. I can tell myself it was for Ila, but I'm not sure that was the only reason. And frankly, I'm not ready to think about why I decided to stay when we clearly didn't need to.

When she walked in tonight, arms filled with grocery bags, it was all a bit too much. Ila and the dogs rushed her before she could set it all down. Flashes of Abby walking through our front door with groceries and Ila rushing to greet her in our kitchen raced through my head, but instead of three corgis circling her feet, there was a black lab.

I was picturing a domestic life with Abby, down to the type of dog we would have.

What the actual fuck?

Ila offers to help her put the groceries away, and the two of them work together flawlessly. She asks her about daycare, and they chat so naturally you would have thought they had known each other for years. Abby gives her directions on where to put things and is patient with her while she struggles to reach most of the shelves, but she holds on to Ila as she reaches, keeping her safe but not doing it for her.

Ila is happy.

So happy.

It hurt to see them together.

To see what Ila is missing in her life.

It was too much, and I left them on their own, using the excuse of needing a shower to escape.

I've been standing under the scorching hot water, trying to burn away the happy family images I can't seem to keep at bay. They keep running through my head, and no matter how hot the water is or how powerful the spray is on my face, I cannot prevent the images from playing havoc with my heart.

It's not just a matter of seeing her with Ila and imagining her as a mother to my daughter. It's the impact Abby has had on both of us. I've never seen my little girl take to someone like she has to her. And for me, her smile takes my breath away, and her lush voice comforts me. I'm a miserable asshole with most people, but when it comes to Abby Glenn, I find myself wanting to shed the façade and let her light in.

But that's not an option.

Ila is my priority.

Between her and my business, I don't have room for anything else.

Besides, I made a promise.

A vow.

Nothing, not even the beautiful woman in the kitchen, could get in the way of me keeping the promise I made.

After leaving the steamy security of the bathroom, I put on gray sweats and a white T-shirt and call it good, not wanting to look like I'm making an effort of any kind. Not to mention, comfort is key for the dinner I'm about to subject myself to. History has proven that meals with Abby and Ila get me all tied up in knots accompanied by stomach pains or a headache. Who knows, maybe I'll get really lucky and both will be present by the time we leave the table.

Before I enter the room, I can hear them singing in the kitchen; the torture has already begun. Taking a calming breath, I put one foot in front of the other and brace myself for the evening to come.

The closer I get, the clearer the song they're singing gets, and of course, it's Taylor Swift. They're singing *Our Song* together at the top of their lungs. I know she's only six, soon to be seven, but Ila's obsession with Miss Swift is no joke. She devours her music and will actually watch an entire concert of hers without getting distracted and then always asks to start it over again as soon as it ends.

There's no preparing me for the scene I walk into when I leave the hallway and see them at the other end of the great

room in the kitchen eating area, setting the table and singing together. Their movements are in sync, and they're singing with abandon. They've finished their work just as the chorus kicks in again. Abby takes her by the hand and twirls her out in front of her as they finish the song, dancing and singing, oblivious to my prying eyes.

Fuck!

Way to go, Shockley.

Day two, and she's already attached.

How exactly do you plan on breaking it to your daughter that she will never see this woman again after this whole fiasco is over?

Their song ends, and I get their attention with a slow clap as I approach them. When Abby sees me, her eyes take a full tour of my body, and I realize this is the first time she's seen me dressed so casual. The past few days have been on the formal side, and I was still in the suit I had worn to the last-minute meeting I had yesterday before we came to the house. I would venture to say that she likes this casual look if the blush on her cheeks when she reaches my face is any indication.

Knowing I've caught her checking me out gives me a heady rush. I can't help the smirk that creeps onto my face, but I almost laugh out loud when she mouths, "*Shut up,*" when she sees how pleased I am with myself.

"Daddy, Abby loves Taylor Swift too!"

"So I heard."

"She even said she would watch the *1989* concert with me later!"

"Did she?"

"I did."

"Lucky me. I will gladly let you two have your girls' night, but you still have to be in bed by eight o'clock."

"Deal!"

Abby moves around the kitchen while Ila guides me to my seat, covering my lap with a napkin. I find I can't keep my eyes off her duet partner. She's graceful and effortless as she puts things together, but I don't miss the big breath she lets out before heading back to the table where I sit watching her.

I've affected her.

But how?

If only I could read her.

Is it irritation, or is she fighting the same need to touch me that I feel every time we're in the same room together?

Does she still taste me on her lips, the way I still taste her?

Plastering a smile on her face, like she tends to force herself to do in my proximity, she sets the food on the table. Then she turns back to get more, placing a salad and bread in the center of the round table.

"Dinner is served."

"Daddy, can I do your plate?"

"Sure, cupcake."

"We made noodles, red sauce, chicken, salad, and bread!"

"Sounds delicious. Thank you for all the work you two put into this."

"It's just jarred marinara, nothing fancy. Ila did most of the work, though. She's quite the helper."

"That's good to hear. I can't wait to dig in."

When I look up at Abby, I notice a splotch of green paint on her cheek and can't help but wonder where that came from. I noticed paint on her clothes Friday afternoon when she was walking around her car taking pictures of the damage from our fender bender.

Interesting.

"Let me fix your plate, Daddy."

She reaches for my plate, but her little hand can barely hold on to it. Before it clashes with the table, Abby steps in

and takes the other side, and actually does the scooping of the pasta and sauce, looking at me to stop her once she's put enough on my plate.

We work together seamlessly as well, while Ila is none the wiser.

From there, Ila fills my salad bowl with her hands. She says since she tossed the salad with her hands, it is perfectly fine to serve it the same way. I couldn't care less if she used her feet to serve me. Confidence shines in her eyes as she walks me through each step she and Abby took to make our meal. I'm always proud to say that my little girl is self-confident and independent, but tonight...tonight is different.

The conversation between the three of us flows, and much to my dismay, I'm enjoying myself. All talk is centered around Ila, making it easy.

Safe.

I've noticed that the round pendant necklace Abby reached for during her speech at the wedding is back on, and I notice it's a round gold pendant with a grasshopper stamped into it. I can't help but wonder if it represents something, yet I don't dare cross the line and ask.

There are still moments balancing the line of my self-imposed safety zone. When Ila says something wise beyond her years, Abby and I look at each other in wonder. In those nanoseconds, we may look at each other longer than is necessary but never longer than is *safe*. It's nice to have another adult to share these moments with.

To share Ila with.

Because she is a special little girl, and the world won't know what hit it once she takes it by storm.

Annoyance washes over me when my cell phone rings, disrupting dinner. But it's one of my biggest clients, so I have to take it.

I excuse myself to the back patio to take the call, but my focus never leaves the kitchen table as I watch them from outside.

Their conversation never stops, even as they pick up our dishes and take them to the kitchen. Abby moves a chair in front of the sink for Ila so she can rinse the dishes for her before she places them in the dishwasher.

The connection between the two of them is undeniable.

It's the way they behave as though they're best friends, yet Abby still finds a way to earn her respect. She is patient and kind, encouraging her to do things on her own, and Ila seems to thrive with her direction. I love that they've bonded, and as much as I know it's good for Ila to have more females in her life, I can't let Abby be that woman.

Maybe it would be easier to let her in if I didn't feel an attraction to her.

If only I knew how to be Ila's dad and also something to someone else, but I'm not sure I'm equipped for both.

Turning away to focus on my client, I walk around the pool while Mr. Walsh explains he has a great new business opportunity for me and would like to meet me for dinner tomorrow night. I agree to meet him and send a text to my usual nighttime babysitter as soon as our call ends.

He swears what he has to share at dinner will be a game changer for me, and I have to admit I'm intrigued. Not nearly as intrigued as I am with the image of the girls working and singing together in the kitchen. An image that is burning its way into my memory bank to torture myself with later.

Still standing in the dark near the pool, I take another moment to watch the domestic scene inside the house.

It's fucking depressing.

I want more than anything to give my daughter the family all kids should have, but it's not a possibility. Maybe once she's grown, I can explain it to her, but she's too young now. There's no way she would understand.

Shaking my head to rid my somber thoughts, I steady myself and join them in the house. As soon as Ila notices I'm back, she skips in my direction, grabbing my hand and pulling me back to the table while Abby disappears into the kitchen.

“Ready for dessert?”

Not giving me the option, she pulls my chair out once again, and I take my seat as directed.

“Can’t wait.”

“Muaah!” she says, kissing me on the cheek. “Be right back!”

A text message interrupts the sweet giggles and whispers floating through the house.

MICHAELA

So sorry, but I’m out of town until Friday.

Well, shit. Now what?

LOGAN

No problem. Safe travels.

Scrolling through my phone, I don’t notice the girls are back in the room until they’ve placed a bowl full of dark pink goodness in front of me.

“There you go. Strawberry gebato!” Abby leans down and whispers in her ear, eliciting a giggle. “Gelato!”

She turns to Abby, who gives her a thumbs-up and leans around Ila to hand me my spoon. “We thought we would keep with the Italian theme for this evening’s meal. We hope it’s to your liking, sir.”

They both bow their heads as if they are servers from a fancy restaurant and walk seriously back to the kitchen, where

they high-five and fill the house with laughter. All the while, Taylor Swift serenades us in the background.

A minute later, they join me at the table, each with their own bowl of gelato and smiles plastered on their faces.

“Did we give good service, Daddy?”

“The best, cupcake. And everything was delicious. Thank you.”

“Told you he’d like it.”

“You were right, sweetie. Good job.”

It strikes me as odd that Abby blushes at the mention of her worry over whether or not I would like tonight’s meal. But my thoughts about dinner flee the scene when the same woman puts her first spoonful of gelato in her mouth and slowly, savoring her bite, turns the spoon over in her mouth and pulls it out through her full pink lips.

I don’t realize I’m staring until she says, “What? Do I have some on my face?”

Real smooth, Shockley. Good luck getting yourself out of this one.

“Uh, no. Sorry, I was in my head thinking about a little babysitting issue I’ve got.”

That actually wasn’t a bad recovery. Hopefully, she believes you.

She dabs her mouth with her napkin anyway. “What kind of babysitting issue? Anything I can help with?”

“No, Abby. Just because we’re in this predicament doesn’t mean you have to play the role of built-in babysitter. I don’t need you to come to my rescue,” I say.

There’s a bite to my voice I hadn’t intended, but it seems to be my standard mode of operation with her.

“There’s the guy who rear-ended me on Friday. Nice to have you back.”

Yes, I sound like an asshole, but keeping my defenses up is necessary because of our current living situation.

“Sorry. Thank you for the offer, but I’m sure you’ve got enough on your plate.”

Actually, I don’t even know what she does for a living, but I’m certainly not going to ask now after biting her head off.

“I am free as a bird tomorrow afternoon and evening. And watching Ila isn’t a hardship, you know. I’m pretty partial to the kid,” she says with a wink to her partner in crime.

“Daddy, please?”

I really don’t have any other options.

Shit.

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Yay! Can Abby pick me up at school? I can show her my cubby and show her to Miss Cassie.”

“Cupcake, Abby doesn’t need to—”

“I’d love to see her cubby and meet Miss Cassie.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Well, if you’re sure, I’ll add you to the pickup list tomorrow morning and text you the address and details.”

“Sounds good. Don’t forget to leave her car seat.”

“I only need a booster seat now.”

“Sorry, don’t forget her booster seat,” Abby says, correcting her previous request.

“Thanks for the reminder. I’ll swing back by the house after I drop her off. I’ll leave it by the front door.”

“Sounds good.”

She takes another bite of her gelato, but I’m wise enough to look down at my bowl. I’m not sure what will happen if I

have to watch her take another bite, but I know it won't be PG,
so best not to tempt fate.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TWO LITTLE BIRDS

Abby

The pounding of the dogs' paws running back and forth in front of us, the chirping of the birds in the trees above, and the cool breeze blowing Ila's light-brown waves around her head have come together for a pretty perfect afternoon. Who knew the dog park with three hyperactive dogs could be so relaxing?

Besides our three stooges, there are only two other dogs in the park today. The other two are Weimaraners, who are playing catch with their owners, leaving our three fur babies to their own devices. For the most part, they've been walking the perimeter of the fence separating the dog area from the rest of Happy Valley Park, smelling all the smells.

My afternoon wrapped up early, allowing me to pick Ila up just after her lunch. I didn't dare pick her up early. She loves lunchtime with her friends.

When I first got to the daycare, I was up in the front. As I was showing them my ID and signing the check-out sheet, I got the opportunity to hang back and watch her for a few minutes before I went into her classroom.

Seeing her in her element with her friends and watching how she interacted with them was fascinating. One little boy's shoe had come untied, and she stopped him when he ran by, bending down to tie it for him. She's kind and smart and appears very maternal with the other kids. I know I'm biased,

but I swear she's on a level the other kids aren't. Almost like a mama bear to her classmates.

Her dad may be a manipulating grump, but he sure knows how to raise a kid. Because this little one is exceptional. And as much as I hate to admit it, much of that comes down to the man raising her. I still have no idea where her mom is, but from what I can tell, she isn't in the picture.

Logan seems to be doing fine on his own, but he is a bit of a Jekyll and Hyde. His eyes light up when he's with Ila, and his smile is nonstop. He communicates sweetly and calmly as though he's the happiest man on the planet. But take her out of the equation, and the light in his eyes becomes a dark, angry storm, and smiles are few and far between. Tormented is how I would describe him if I hadn't seen him with his daughter.

My little mama bear cub introduced me to Miss Cassie and showed me her cubby, where she keeps her backpack, just like she had planned before introducing me to all of her classmates. She introduced me as her new best friend. This warmed my heart but also broke it just a little. I don't think her daddy plans to let this budding friendship continue after our cohabitation ends.

When I told her we were going to the house to get the dogs so we could take them to the dog park, she couldn't get out of there fast enough. Her backpack was over her shoulders, and she was waiting for me by the exit door before I could say my goodbyes to Miss Cassie. I really think Logan needs to get her a puppy of her own. It's good for kids to have pets growing up, and she is clearly obsessed with canines.

As we got closer to the dog park, her little shoulders fell, and her face was crestfallen when she saw only two other dogs, but it's been a great opportunity for us to hang out and chat while the dogs do their thing.

We've talked about the kids at daycare—or school, as she refers to it—how cool the wedding was, and how pretty Elyse looked in her wedding dress. And now she's telling me all about her room at home. It sounds like she is very much a girly girl. Logan has let her paint her room mostly purple with

one light-pink wall. I'm envisioning unicorns everywhere the eye can see.

"Your room sounds fabulous. It was pretty nice of your dad to let you paint it pink and purple."

"Thank goodness. Otherwise, it would be gray. That's his favorite color."

"Are you sure his favorite color is gray? I don't think that's anyone's favorite color."

"But it is." Her eyes roll real hard, as though her dad's love for the color gray is just too much to take. "We have gray walls and a gray couch, and he only wears pink or purple sometimes if I beg him. He can be so boring."

I don't share just how good her daddy looks in his gray sweat or that I like gray furniture. As long as there are splashes of color to brighten things up. I also don't mention how adorable it is that he wears pink and purple for her when she begs him to. I have a sneaking suspicion he doesn't mind wearing color at all, and he likely gets a kick out of pushing her buttons.

"You don't really think your daddy's boring, do you? Seems to me like you're pretty lucky to have a dad like him," I say with sincerity.

"He's the best daddy. We have lots of fun, and he loves me lots. He's just sad bunches."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm sure that's not true. Why would he be sad?"

"He misses Daddy Lance and Daddy Justin."

"Who are Daddy Lance and Daddy Justin?"

"Those were my first daddies. When I was just a little tiny baby, they both went up to heaven, and Daddy Logan became my forever daddy. He was Daddy Lance's big brother. I don't remember my real dads, but I keep a picture of them in my room. I can show you if you come over sometime."

Oh. My. Heart.

My eyes begin to sting with the threat of tears. I look up at the sky, hoping gravity will keep them at bay, and it reminds me of Logan looking up at the sky on the side of the road the day he rear-ended me. I wonder if he was talking to his brother?

This also must be what Elyse meant when she said Logan had been through a lot. He lost his brother and became a father on the same day. My heart breaks for him, and certain aspects of his personality begin to come into focus.

“Well, I’d say you’re pretty lucky to have two daddies up in heaven watching over you and an awesome dad here to take care of you.”

“Yep, I’m the only one I know who has three daddies.”

“What about your grandma and grandpas?”

I know I shouldn’t be prying, but I’m desperate to learn more about their situation.

“Well, my dad’s mommy and daddy went to heaven before I was born. But I do sometimes see Daddy Justin’s Mommy and Daddy. They live all the way in Arizona, so I don’t get to see them much. But I FaceTime them sometimes.”

“How about aunts and uncles? Do you have any other family here in Oregon?”

“Nope, it’s just Daddy and me and sometimes his friends like Elyse and Greg.”

Oh, poor Logan. He’s not just a single dad, but he’s a single dad to his deceased brother’s child, with no parents or other family members around to help him. All while running his own business.

He must be exhausted.

“Well, now you can add me to your list of friends. If you or your daddy ever need anything at all, I’ll be right there.”

Ila has been giddy all night. She is simply beside herself with excitement for her father to see what we've done today.

After the park, we took the dogs home, and then I took her to my art studio. When she first walked into the space, her eyes were as big as saucers, and her mouth hung open in amazement. It was like she had found her nirvana and had no idea where to even start.

Abby's Place is my home base. I have two jobs. One is my art studio, and the other is my graphic design business that I run out of my office in the back of the studio. I can do my graphic design work from anywhere, but the studio is my happy place.

Proof that dreams can come true. As long as you're willing to work your butt off for it.

It wasn't easy to get it up and running. Out of school, I went to work as a graphic designer for one of the biggest athletic apparel companies in the world. I was successful and made a great living, but it didn't fill me creatively. So with Levi's support, I saved my pennies, took the leap, and started my company.

When I look back, it's obvious he was so supportive because I was working long hours, providing him with free time to do as he pleased with whoever he pleased. I was too busy to notice any signs that my husband was a cheater and my marriage was falling apart.

Working out of my home office kept expenses down. With my corporate connections, I had great referrals and lots of work coming in. I was miraculously making more on my own than I did in the corporate world. With no real overhead, I was able to save, and with the help of a business loan, I opened the studio. It wasn't easy, but it was worth all the work to keep one business running while starting another. I'm pretty dang proud of myself even if there were many sleepless nights.

Seeing customers light up like Ila did when she walked in today fills me with joy. At Abby's Place, you can paint to your heart's extent. Ceramics, canvas, glass, and wood are just a few of the items you can paint. In the summer, we have art

camps for kids. Year-round on the weekends and two evenings a week, we do paint and sip classes where adults come in, drink some wine, and with instruction, paint a beautiful picture they take home with them.

Many of my family and friends thought Levi was a raging jerk for insisting on a prenup, but it was the best decision I have ever made. The second best was keeping his name off both of my businesses. When we split up, I walked away with everything important to me. Glenn Graphic Designs, Abby's Place, and a fresh start. He could keep the house, the furniture, and whatever else he wanted as long as I got those three things.

Today, I painted something for Ila, and she painted something for her dad. I think he's going to love what she's done for him. It's a shame she had to go to bed before he got home, but her dad gave me strict rules for a weeknight, and I'm not about to break them. We've put the paintings on the kitchen table so he can see them when he gets home from his work dinner.

I don't let myself think about how late it is or give in to the thought that maybe it's not really a work dinner and it's a date kind of dinner with the adult kind of dessert after.

He *is* a single dad, after all, and he likely doesn't often have the opportunity to hook up. Why not take advantage of having a built-in babysitter?

Nope, I will not let my imagination get away from me because he and I are not a thing. I'm just someone he randomly made out with one time in an elevator, but we are not a thing. So with that in mind, I will sit here, read my book until he gets home, then escape to my bedroom.

The problem is, since I learned how Logan became a father, I haven't been able to get him off my mind. I have so many questions and an unhealthy need to comfort him. I felt a pull of attraction between us before, but knowing how truly dedicated he is to Ila has made him even more desirable.

My body betrays me when I hear the front door open. My stupid stomach flips with a mix of excitement and anxiety. I

slam my book shut and get up, busying myself by folding the blanket I had been under. Trying to make a quick escape while giving myself a mental reminder.

Abby, you may know the reason behind his asshole tendencies, but it doesn't make it right, and you will only get hurt if you go there.

Purposely, I put my back to him when he enters the room.

I'm not ready to look at him.

I'm afraid if I do, he'll know I know he's not Ila's birth father. That I know he lost his parents and his brother. That I know he's been through a significant amount of loss and has had to deal with it on his own. If he thinks I pity him for one second, he'll never speak to me again.

"Hey, how did it go?" he asks.

Well, that little defense mechanism sure didn't last long because as soon as I turn around, the pep talk I had just given myself flew right out the window.

Holy shit!

I knew facing him would be dangerous.

He looks amazing.

He's in a white button-down shirt, dark jeans, and it looks like he, or someone else, has been rubbing their hands through his hair because it's a mess.

And it's hot.

I have to clear my throat before answering him, afraid I've lost my voice. "It was great. She's a pretty special kid."

Whoa. He's all about the eye contact tonight. There's none of his usual avoidance or pretending I'm nothing more than an annoyance to him. He is deftly rolling up his sleeves without taking his eyes off me. It looks like he wants to tell me something but can't find the words.

Confusing.

As always.

“She is.”

He continues to stare at me from across the room but doesn't move an inch. It's awkward. It's rude. But most of all, it's intense.

I need to come up with a way to break our eye contact and figure telling him about our day is at least something. “We went to the dog park, and then I took her to my studio, and we painted.”

I break our connections by looking over at the kitchen table. When he sees the paintings, he strolls over to take a closer inspection. He flattens his hands on the table and leans forward to study them.

With his back to me, I take the opportunity to admire the way his jeans fit and how sinfully seductive the corded veins in his tan forearms are. How his broad shoulders test the strength of the seams in his shirt. But when he speaks, I instinctively squeeze my thighs tightly together to soothe the ache. An ache I'm experiencing more often these days.

Without turning around to look at me, his voice is low and rough when he says, “These are really good. She painted the golden retriever, right?”

“She did. I traced the outline of the picture onto the canvas and then gave her a set of instructions to follow. She's a natural. All she had me do was add the name to the dog tag and the two birds in the sky.”

His head drops, hanging between his shoulders, and I wonder if I shouldn't have mentioned the birds. “She asked you to add those?” His voice is coarse and low.

“Uh, she did. She said the dog looked like your favorite dog growing up, and she had me add Hank to the dog collar. I think she's trying everything she can to get you to change your mind about getting her a dog.”

He chuckles, his head back up, looking at the paintings once again.

“She said that whenever you see two birds flying in the sky together, you tell her it's her other two daddies watching over

her. So she wanted two little birds in the picture too.”

I’ve shocked myself with my boldness. I don’t know why I did it. The words just came out. But now he knows I know, and the ball is in his court. If he wants to talk about it, it’s up to him.

Finally, leaving the safety of the family room, I make my way to the table and stand beside him. We don’t talk for at least a minute, but when I glance at him, I see his Adam’s apple bob when he swallows. I’m not sure if he’s trying to decide if he wants to talk about it or if I’ve made him uncomfortable with my previous comment.

As per usual, I have no idea what he’s thinking.

“And you made this one?” he asks, pointing at the pink and purple painting of a cupcake with Ila’s name above it.”

“I did.”

“I like it.”

“I thought you might. She said her room is pink and purple, so I thought it would maybe look cute in her bedroom?”

“It will.”

He continues to look at the paintings, but the few words he’s spoken seem all he intends to share. I decide to take his silence as my cue to call it a night.

“Well, she brushed her teeth, had her story, and she and the dogs are sound asleep.”

Finally, turning away from the paintings, he faces me.

“Thank you.”

“No, thanks needed. I had a great day with her.”

“You own an art studio.”

“I do.”

“I guess I never asked what you did for a living.”

“Nope.”

“I guess that explains why I’ve noticed paint on you a time or two.”

I have to tamp down the thrill it gives me to hear him confess he’s noticed paint on me. Logan, noticing anything about me, excites me, but I can’t get too excited when it comes to him. His push and pull is exhausting, and I have a feeling if I get my hopes up, he’ll just send them crashing to the ground in the next second.

“You would be correct.”

“So you own an art studio?” He asks me about it again, pushing for more details.

“Well, that’s my passion, but I also have a graphic design business called Glenn Graphic Designs, and my office is at the studio. It’s called Abby’s Place. That’s where the real fun happens. It’s for all ages. We do camps for kids in the summer and paint nights for grown-ups only, where they can drink adult beverages while they paint. It’s a lot of fun.”

“You own two businesses?”

“I do.”

He nods his head ever so slightly.

I think this means he’s impressed?

Who really knows with Logan Shockley.

“Well, thanks again. I’m gonna head to bed.”

And that would be a wrap on what might have been our first genuine conversation.

“Me, too. Good night.”

My feet can’t move fast enough as I practically run to my bedroom and throw myself onto the bed to replay our conversation on a loop and overthink what just happened.

The eighty-degree water feels good on my skin. It's just what I needed to cleanse the confusion from my mind. After lying in bed for over an hour, I tiptoed to the pool and have been swimming lap after lap for the past thirty minutes. Clearing my mind and hopefully exhausting myself so I can finally fall asleep.

I've stopped swimming my laps and am floating on my back, letting the feel-good endorphins work their magic and chase away the unnecessary stress my interaction with Logan produced. My intention to stop thinking about him was well-intended but unrealistic. Every lap was a replay of a distinct memory with him. From the accident to the rehearsal and our trip in the elevator to find my phone. As I swam, our time on the dance floor and our kiss in the elevator replayed over and over, pushing me to swim faster and harder until I wore myself out.

The stars twinkle above me, but all I can think about is how he looked at me tonight. All I can see are the eyes that I now know are sometimes blue, sometimes green with blue around the edges, and sometimes simply hazel. But always intense.

Finally, feeling tired enough to fall asleep, I push the water with my hands so that I move to the shallow end. Once I see the four-foot mark on the side of the pool, I put my feet on the bottom. When I turn toward the house, my heart skips a beat, and my feet stop their progression.

Sitting on the edge of a lounge chair in a white T-shirt and gray sweats, forearms resting on his knees, is the man who has kept me from sleep and prompted my midnight swim.

As usual, he doesn't speak, but he continues watching me.

After a long beat, my feet find their purpose again, and I move in his direction.

How long has he been out here?

Did I wake him up?

Why is he staring at me as though I've done something wrong and I'm about to be scolded?

Suddenly, I'm unsure I want to get out of the water. Instead, I walk up to the side of the pool directly in front of where he sits, placing my arms on the edge and resting my chin on my hands, watching him right back. Not letting his glower penetrate too deep into my psyche.

A storm brews behind his eyes. I'd give anything to know what he's thinking. But instead of sharing his troubles, he looks at me, silently pleading with me, but for what, I have no idea.

Minutes go by, and he seems to be on the verge of saying something, but nothing ever comes out.

I have this intense desire to hold him in my arms and let him lay all his sorrow on me, if only for a minute. Knowing what little I know now about how he became a father and how alone he is, I want to help him. But I'm wise enough to know he isn't the kind of man who accepts help easily.

His chest lifts with a deep breath, but his stare doesn't waver, causing my stomach to flutter and my body to tremble. My teeth are starting to chatter, and it's not only from the cool late-night air on my wet skin but also from anxious nerves.

It's one thing to feel butterflies over the excitement you feel about a man, but when I feel this way because of Logan, it's always laced with confusion.

It's not fun like it should be, and as bad as I feel for him, it's not fair to me.

I've had enough of his little game, and I point at the towel on the chair next to him in the hopes he'll hand it to me. He glances in the towel's direction, then stands and walks away.

What the...?

You have got to be kidding me!

What a freaking jerk!

After sitting out here like a creeper, staring at me, he can't be bothered to hand me my towel?

He may have been through a terrible trauma, but I've never done anything to deserve his treatment of me.

Refusing to let him get the best of me, I begin to lift my body out of the pool as I watch him walk away, but just as my torso comes out of the water, I slide back in, caught off guard when he turns around and walks back to the chairs like he forgot something.

Like maybe his manners!

He picks up the towel but then changes his mind, dropping it back on the chair, pulling his shirt over his head, and in one swift move, he slides into the pool next to me. The water rocks me side to side from the waves created by his body.

What in the world?

I take a couple of steps away from him, but before I get a chance to move out of his grasp, the warmth of his large hands frame my face, and his lips crash into mine.

Unlike our rough kiss in the elevator, this one feels different. Still hungry, yet tender. His tongue traces my top lip gently, seeking permission I more than willingly grant. He deepens the kiss, and my body naturally leans against him, my hands now trembling for a different reason. Touching his bare skin for the first time as my hands land on his hips where the water has pulled his sweats down ever so slightly, and from the feel of him, I can only imagine the V going into the front of them. He may be a dad, but there is no dad bod or love handle to be found.

Sliding a hand down my neck, he leaves a scorching trail over the side of my breast, not stopping there but continuing to tour my body like a road he's traveled before, making certain he slowly but surely follows the path down my one-piece swimsuit. Instinctually, I widen my stance to grant him further access should he want it, but when his hand reaches my hip, he instead slips it around to my back and down over my ass until he has a handful of one of my cheeks and massages it with great force.

His hands are big, strong, and much sooner than I would have liked, his massage ends as his fingertips tickle the back of my thigh until he reaches the bend in my knee, lifting my leg until it's wrapped around his waist while his other hand

presses just enough on my lower back to push me against the raging hard-on he is clearly not trying to hide from me. Feeling what I'm doing to him pressed against my stomach has me yearning to get even closer as my hands come up to his shoulders and then around his neck, pulling him to me just as he pushes me into him. Neither of us is able to get enough of the other.

Our kiss slows until he is seductively torturing me. The way he holds me like he's afraid I'll float away and the possessiveness of his lips changes as they leave my mouth to nibble on my earlobe playfully, his hot breath melting me from the outside in. But when he drags his tongue down the side of my neck and on to my collarbone, it's all I can do not to come on the spot.

"Logan..." I breathe out in ecstasy.

His entire body freezes as though my voice has turned him to stone, and a second later, his mouth is no longer on me. As he releases the hand holding my leg, his warmth goes with it.

The cool night air hits me square in the chest when he steps away from me. He looks like a frightened animal fleeing as fast as he can when he pushes himself out of the pool, his water-laden sweats barely staying on and exposing the top of his ass before he pulls them up. He grabs his shirt and walks into the house without looking back as he's done to me before.

What the actual hell?

CHAPTER EIGHT

A LAPSE IN JUDGMENT

Abby

To say I didn't get much sleep last night would be an understatement.

When Logan left me in the pool, I didn't know what to think or how to feel. It's clear he's attracted to me, or he wouldn't continue to bombard me with unexpected kisses. But then why does he always go cold, leaving me feeling humiliated and confused?

What kept me up all night was the knowledge of all his losses. Not to mention the way he became a father. I empathize with this, and I understand he may have internal issues to deal with, but it shouldn't cause him to hurt people. By people, I mean me, the way he does. I have shown him and his daughter nothing but kindness, and I deserve to be treated better.

Even though I know I deserve better, it felt amazing to be kissed by him last night. To feel his solid body under my fingers. As hurt and confused as I was, I didn't miss the brief glimpse of his six-pack before he jumped into the pool. Or how sexy he looked with the water clinging to his broad shoulders and back and the weight of it pulling those gray sweats down enough to provide evidence he was going commando underneath was quite a sight. Even if he was walking away from me.

I see his many red flags and know I shouldn't give him a second thought, but it's impossible not to want him. The

thought of him leaves me excited and, honestly, horny. Even if he is bad for my health.

And dammit, it's clear there is more to his feelings for me if the way he looks at me so intensely and kisses me with such possessiveness is anything to go off of. At least I know an attraction is there because there was no hiding the hard-on I felt pressed against me.

It may have only been for a brief second, but he wanted me last night.

And I wanted him right back.

The brooding way he stared at me when he came back and jumped into the pool felt like he didn't just want me. He *needed* me in some strange way. He didn't speak a word, but something more than sex was on his mind. I could feel it in his kiss.

All of this played on repeat in my mind until I fell asleep what felt like minutes before my alarm went off.

I'm exhausted, but I'm going to focus on the positives and make today a great day. I am characteristically an upbeat person, after all.

Logan Shockley does not get to drag me down with confusion and angst.

To combat the funk I woke up in, I put on my favorite red floral maxi dress that makes me feel good in my own skin. Today, I wear it like armor as I make my way to the kitchen. The same kitchen where Logan is standing, drinking his coffee and scrolling through his phone.

Good God, does he fill out his yellow Shockley Construction T-shirt and a pair of jeans well.

I may have my armor on to protect my heart, but it doesn't mean my libido is going to snooze on the eye candy that is the DILF leaning against the kitchen island with his back to me.

God, look at his butt!

I certainly did myself a disservice by not taking a handful of that butt when I had the chance last night.

“Good morning,” I chirp, mustering pleasantness.

Nothing.

The man says nothing. Just keeps scrolling on his phone.

“Morning, Abby!” Ila says from her stool at the kitchen island where she’s eating her cereal.

“Good morning, sweetie. How did you sleep?”

“Okay. Did you sleep good?”

“Like a baby.” I lie through my teeth.

“How about you, Logan? Did you get a good night’s rest?”

He takes his eyes off his phone, looking in my direction for the blink of an eye before he’s back to his fake scrolling.

Come on, buddy. Give it a bit more effort than that. We’ve all used the scrolling on our phone tactic. You can do better.

“Daddy, tell her how much you love our paintings.”

Looking at his watch, another avoidance tactic, he ignores her request. “Cupcake, you almost finished? We need to leave in the next two minutes. Why don’t you take your bowl to the sink and go get your shoes on.”

“But Daddy—”

“C’mon. We gotta go, Ila. You spent too much time outside with the dogs, and now we’re running late.”

“Fine.”

Ila hops off her stool, puts her bowl in the sink, and leaves the room, following orders. Leaving Logan and me alone.

“Wow, real nice.” I huff, crossing my arms in front of me defensively.

Finally pocketing his phone, he leans one hip against the counter, crosses his arms in front of his chest, and stares at me.

“Enough with the staring, already!” I whisper-yell so Ila doesn’t hear me but to no avail. His eyes stay put.

“Listen, it’s clear there’s something about me you can’t stand, and you’re pissed that you’re attracted to me, or maybe

I'm just a horrible kisser, but you can show me some respect. Or, at the very least, fake it in front of Ila?"

I refuse to look back at him any longer and break his stare when I move to the counter to pour my coffee—which I will not thank him for making—into my travel mug and keep myself busy as I continue to speak my mind.

"Silly me. Here I thought maybe we were friends now. Not sure how I could be so confused when you keep randomly kissing me." Still yelling under my breath, I keep going since he still won't reply. "If my memory serves me correctly, I'm not the one who jumped into the pool, in my clothes no less, and kissed *you* senseless. No, I believe that was all you, buddy."

I step in front of him, locking eyes with him so I'm sure he hears this next part loud and clear, not missing the fact that his eyes did just dart down to my lips while his tongue snuck out to wet his.

"And it is you who insists on keeping me at a distance only to pull me in so close my head has no idea what's going on. I don't deserve whatever this game is you're playing with me. I deserve much better."

Slinging my purse over my shoulder, I push past him, and just when I think he's going to let me go without a single word, his giant hand engulfs mine, pulling me to a stop.

"Abby—"

"Daddy, I'm ready."

And just like that, our conversation, if you can call it that, is over.

He releases my hand, and I bend down to give Ila a hug and wish her a good day at school.

Then without looking back, I walk down the hall and out the front door. The late August breeze blows the soft fabric of my dress against my legs, reminding me of my armor and that I will not let this man ruin my day before it's even started.

“Cara, this is huge!”

My mouth hangs open, looking at my phone again to make sure I’ve disconnected the call.

“I really cannot believe it panned out.” She has a hand on her forehead, looking at me just as dumbfounded as I’m feeling. “I only mentioned Abby’s Place in passing, kind of kidding if I’m being honest. I didn’t think they would actually call you.”

Cara manages my studio and keeps it running like a well-oiled machine. We met in art school, and years later, when I finally opened Abby’s Place, I knew I wanted her to be a part of it. At first, she just taught a sip-and-paint class here and there, but as things progressed and she realized how much she loved being here, she quit her day job and started running the day-to-day business for me.

Except for maybe Elyse, nobody knows me better than Cara. We had an instant connection when we sat next to each other in our figure drawing class and were thrown into the deep end when our professor asked us to draw a much older man who appeared to still be very virile, if you know what I mean. When the gentleman disrobed, we looked at each other like, *what in the world are we doing here?* Drinks and discussion were an absolute must that night, and we’ve been throwing flotation devices at each other ever since.

“Cara, this one booking will make the entire month.”

“I know!” She’s pacing back and forth in front of my desk like she always does when she gets excited.

Her wild brown curls sit on the top of her head in her trademark messy bun, and she is adorable, as always, in her self-imposed uniform of denim overalls—today, she has a white men’s tank underneath—and Birkenstocks both covered in paint. Later in the day when the air-conditioning is at its peak, she’ll add an oversized chunky cardigan to her ensemble, thus making her look like the artist she is. She

hasn't changed since the day I met her, and I wouldn't want her any other way.

“And if word spreads...if other companies in town see what a great team retreat a day spent here can be, who freaking knows what could happen! Gah! This is amazing!”

My vibrating phone interrupts our celebration, and as soon as I see who it is, the excitement in my stomach doesn't know if it should double in size or wither away.

LOGAN

Sorry about the way I treated you this morning.

Maybe my little rant this morning got through to him? Biting my lip to hide the smile playing at the corner of my mouth as I think of a clever reply, my phone vibrates again before I can reply.

LOGAN

Last night was a lapse in judgment. A mistake that never should have happened. I'm sorry.

His words hit me like a punch to the gut.

A mistake.

Kissing me was a mistake.

A lapse in judgment.

I am nobody's mistake or lapse in judgment.

God! He is such an asshole!

I know I said I wasn't going to let him get through my red floral armor today, but he found the one penetrable spot and

took aim.

And just like that, my otherwise fantastic morning, the one that just had me soaring with happiness, blows up.

“What is it? Did they change their mind already?”

“No, it was Logan. It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Look at you. You’re bright red, and I just watched all the excitement drain from your body. What did the grumpy DILF do this time?”

I hold the phone up for her to read, not wanting to say it out loud.

“What a prick.”

Of course, I told her about last night. She has been riding the Shockley roller coaster right along with me and knows most of the details about what happened in the pool. I’m not usually one to gossip, but I’ve been so confused since the first day I met him, and I’ve had to share it with someone.

Her theory is that Greg and Elyse planned this entire forced-to-live-together-for-ten-days debacle, but I think she’s crazy.

“Whatever.” I toss the phone facedown on my desk. “If only my place wasn’t being worked on, I would just go home.”

“You know my couch is always available.”

“I know, and I appreciate the offer, but I can’t do that to you and David. You already have a full house. I’ll figure it out. I’m gonna stop by my place at lunch and see how it’s going. Who knows, maybe I’ll have some sort of crazy luck, and they will be at a point where I can move back in sooner than I was expecting?”

“Well, if you can’t go back home and you won’t come to my place, do not let this man get the best of you. It’s obvious he is crazy attracted to you. But it’s also obvious he has issues.”

“Ya think?”

“I do. And the next time he tries to kiss you, don’t let him. You are nobody’s mistake, Abby.”

“What would I do without you?”

“Well, for starters, you wouldn’t have just booked your biggest event in the history of Abby’s Place!”

I appreciate her getting my mind off Logan and back on our business milestone.

Walking around the desk, I take her in my arms and hug the shit out of her. “Thank you, beautiful.”

“Anytime, gorgeous.”

Okay, where is my swimsuit? Bathroom, that’s right.

I rush around, trying to get out of here before Ila and Logan get home, haphazardly throwing my things into my suitcase.

Cowardly?

Why, yes, it is.

But I don’t want to say goodbye to Ila, and I don’t want to see Logan. I don’t need to see his face when he realizes he’s had such an impact on my emotions that I couldn’t stay in the same house with him.

I went home today, and things are on schedule, which means, not ready to move furniture back in. It’s not ready for me to move back. Cara doesn’t have room, my parents live the condo life now that they spend half the year in Arizona, and my other option would be to stay with Elyse, but I’m already doing that, so I’m out of options. I’m going to find an affordable hotel or motel or whatever my budget will allow.

“Abby, whatcha’ doin’?”

I nearly jump out of my skin.

Shit.

The dogs are in the back yard and I missed their warning barks. Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Oh, hey, sunshine.”

Don't look at her adorable little face, Abby. Don't do it.

“Abby, why you packing?”

Her voice is crestfallen, and there's no way I can ice her out. She doesn't deserve it. I stop my manic packing and look her in the eye.

“Well, I'm gonna go so you and your daddy can have the doggies all to yourself.”

“Why? Where are you going? I thought your house was being remolded.”

“Remodeled.” I chuckle lightly. “And it is, but I think I'm gonna go stay at a motel instead.”

“No!” Her chin is wobbly. Her eyes are glossy.

My heart can't take it.

“Oh, sweet girl. Come here.” I open my arms to her.

“No!” She pushes me away. “You said we would swim tonight! You lied!”

“Ila, sometimes things don't go the way we had hoped, but I know I'll see you again.”

At least, I hope so.

To my surprise, my sweet little friend turns on her heels and runs out of the room.

I get it.

Ila's reaction is a prime example of why single parents don't tend to get into relationships so easily. Or at the very least, why they might not let their children meet the new person in their life until they know things are real. Ila has only known me a handful of days and has become attached to me, clearly in need of female energy in her life more than I could have guessed.

As much as it pains me, I may understand a part of the underlying reason Logan hasn't wanted to start anything. His little girl's heart is involved, too, and if he and I start something and it doesn't work out, we aren't the only ones who get hurt.

This just reiterates that I'm doing the right thing by leaving. Right?

My brain hurts from all the overthinking I've been doing today, but I continue packing. I clean out my bathroom, gathering my makeup bag and hair products, and walk back into the bedroom to find Logan standing next to my open suitcase on the bed.

Pushing past him, I dump my things in my duffel and keep quiet.

"Abby, what's going on? Why is Ila in tears? She said you're leaving."

"I'm going to go stay somewhere else."

"You're what?"

Why does he sound pissed?

I'm not sure if I'm glad he doesn't want me to leave or angry that he's so thickheaded he doesn't realize he's the reason.

"Where the hell are you going?"

I don't owe him an explanation.

"It's really none of your concern."

He crowds my space, not letting me pass by him. Mere inches between us, his musky scent invading my senses. I can feel his breath on my face as he growls under his breath so Ila doesn't hear him.

"Like hell it's not. My daughter is crying, and I make it a point to do whatever I can to prevent that from happening."

He's so tall I have to strain my neck back to look him in the eyes, but I make sure I do when I reply. Even if his face is

distracting as hell, and I want to feel his lips on me again. And when I say *on me*, I mean everywhere on me.

“Well, you can tell her I’m doing it for her daddy.”

“Doing what for me?”

“Getting out of your way so you don’t have any more lapses in judgment. Or wait, what was the other thing you called me? Oh, that’s right, a mistake.”

He doesn’t prevent me from passing by, my shoulder hitting his arm as he stands stunned. I think I’ve landed the final blow and am relieved he doesn’t say anything because I don’t want to hurt. I’m not exactly sure what I feel for him, but I know his text hurt a part of me I didn’t know was feeling as much as it was.

Still standing in the same spot, I move in front of him as I zip my duffel, throwing it over my shoulder and moving to put it near the door, but as I go past him this time, he gently grabs my wrist.

“Please stay.”

No apology.

“Logan, I’ve said it before. I am not something you can play with and just leave floating in the deep end of the pool when you’re done. It doesn’t feel good, and I don’t deserve to be treated this way.”

“Not for me. For her.”

“Logan...”

“I’ll leave you alone.”

What if I don’t want you to?

His fingers tickle the palm of my hand, rubbing a spot of dried paint a moment before his fingers entwine with mine. I glance up at him, and his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. He’s looking straight ahead, unable to look me in the eye.

He must feel me looking at him because his hand squeezes mine.

What the...

His words say he'll leave me alone while his actions beg me to stay.

Everything in my head says I have to leave, but as afraid as I am for my heart, a part of me wants to stay.

For her.

For him.

For me.

“Okay.”

CHAPTER NINE

SO RIGHT

Logan

Her words play over and over in my head.

“Oh, that’s right, a mistake.”

What I wouldn’t give to take it all back.

The kiss in the pool.

The text message.

I knew what I was doing with the text message. It was self-preservation. After that kiss, feeling her body pressed against me and her nails against my scalp as she pushed me closer. As if she couldn’t get close enough.

I’ve never wanted a woman as much as I want Abby Glenn. Everything about her calls to me.

Of course, she’s beautiful and sexy as hell without even trying, but it’s so much more than that. She’s pure sunshine and not in some bullshit Pollyanna type of way. Her happiness is powerful and threatens to rub off on everyone who comes in contact with her. Hell, I rear-ended her, was a complete dick to her, and she kept her cool, never letting her smile fade, and gave me, a total stranger, crap the entire time. Standing there on the side of the road, I thought how fucking cool it was that a woman like her existed.

She has no clue how powerful she is.

When Abby discreetly let me know Ila had told her I wasn't her birth father, I couldn't look at her for a long moment. Not wanting to see the pity I knew would be in her eyes, but there wasn't any. And there hasn't been for a single second since. I rarely share those details when a new person enters my life for fear of how they'll look at me once they know. Her lack of reaction only increased my attraction to her.

Letting her get too close when I can't give her what she deserves isn't an option. But I'll be damned if I'm going to pass up a single millisecond I could be within her orbit.

Seeing that open suitcase last night had my insides reeling with dread. My chest started tingling, my heart beating a thunderous cadence in my head. I honestly thought I was going to have a panic attack. I've never had one, but I'm pretty sure I've read somewhere that those are the signs of one. It was either that or a heart attack.

I've lost nearly everyone I love, and I don't recall ever feeling something like that before.

Never felt so desperate for another person.

Never been so confused.

When she said she'd stay, it felt like I was taking my first breath since entering the room. My body sagged in relief, only to go cold when she slipped her hand out of mine, went into her bathroom, and shut the door.

She swam with Ila as she promised and read to her before bed but spent the rest of her time behind her closed bedroom door. But she was here, under the same roof, and that mattered.

After another sleepless night of knowing she was just down the hall yet completely out of reach, I'm up early, drinking my coffee on the back patio while the dogs lie at my feet. Enjoying the early morning quiet before Ila gets up, using the time to clear my head.

Checking my watch, I inhale deeply because it's time to wake my sleeping beauty, which means Abby is likely up and getting ready for her day as well.

As soon as I open the sliding glass door, I hear their voices and rush toward Ila's room, thinking something's wrong. But her room is empty, and it sounds like they're in the bathroom chatting casually...about hair.

“What do you think about pulling your sides back into a little braid?”

“Ooh, that sounds cool. Yes!”

The dogs run toward the sound of their voices, and Ila shrieks with glee at their arrival.

Following their path, my heart melts into a puddle the moment I take in the vision that is Ila and Abby. Together. Smiling. Happy.

Abby looks maternal, standing behind Ila, braiding her hair as Ila talks to her through the mirror. Abby is in paint-splattered overalls with a light-blue T-shirt underneath. Her hair is in a ponytail, and her eyes are bluer than I've ever seen them. How had I not noticed before that she and Ila had the same color eyes and close to the same color hair?

Fuck.

They look so natural together.

So right.

I take a step back and lean against the wall in the hall. My fist comes to my chest, rubbing where my ridiculous heart yearns for the scene in the bathroom to be more than this passing moment of togetherness. Ila deserves this, but neither of us deserves the pain that comes with something this beautiful. Because I've made a vow to give Ila everything I have and I don't know how to do that with another person in our life. Because that opens up the door to losing that person and both of us getting hurt.

Curly comes out of the bathroom and barks at me, giving me away, so I poke my head in.

“Morning, Daddy! Abby's braiding my hair!”

I clear the longing from my throat. “I see that, cupcake.”

“Almost done,” Abby says, reaching around Ila to grab a hair tie off the counter.

“Perfect. Time for breakfast, and then we have to get you to daycare.”

Lifting her hands in the air like a contestant on a competition show who just ran out of time, Abby says, “Finished!”

Ila twists and turns, trying to get a view in the mirror. But Abby is quick on the draw and whips out her phone to take a picture for her.

“Oh, it’s bootiful. Thank you, Abby.”

Ila hands Abby back her phone and wraps her arms around her waist as Abby looks at me over her head.

We lock eyes, but I can’t read her. The light usually behind them seems to be reserved for Ila this morning. And I get it.

It’s probably for the best.

“Bye, cupcake.” I hug her a little tighter this morning. Wrapped in the guilt of not giving her the family she deserves. “Have a great day.”

“You too. Love you.”

“I love you too.”

Releasing her, I watch her put her lunch bag in her cubby and wait until I see her talking with another little girl before I leave. She is everything I need. Or everything I thought I needed before Abby turned around in that light-purple dress and took Ila’s hand in hers at the wedding rehearsal.

Nothing has felt like enough since then.

It pisses me off.

Ila and I are perfect, just as we are.

We don’t need any complications.

I've just jumped into my work truck when my phone pings.

BARRY

Get a sitter. Be at Sammy's before 6pm if you want happy hour, but no later than 7pm if you don't want me to drive to your place and pick you up.

LOGAN

What's the occasion?

BARRY

Just cause, man. You better be there. Won't look good if all the groomsmen show up except the best man.

The whole single-parent thing doesn't really lend itself to nights out at bars. Besides work, I don't really go too many places without Ila.

But if I stay home tonight and Abby continues to give me the cold shoulder or, even worse, I kiss her again, then what?

I don't make sound decisions where she's involved.

BARRY

It's Thursday. You know what that means. Ladies' night. Maybe you'll get lucky.

Fuck that. I have no desire to get lucky. I'd just be comparing them to the honey-haired woman sleeping at the end of the hall, but I will take the reprieve of getting out of the house.

LOGAN

See you there.

Once again, the woman with flecks of paint in her hair is making me do things I never do.

CHAPTER TEN

NEW TOPIC

Logan

“Hi,” a tall blonde yells over the ridiculously loud music as her eyes meet mine in the mirror behind the bar.

“Hi,” I reply without turning to look at her.

I could have pretended I didn't hear her, but she saw me look at her in the mirrored wall behind the shelves of booze. I'm a dick, but I have some decency.

Sammy's isn't a big place. During the day, it's your standard local bar with a menu full of pub food, sports on all the TVs mounted high on each wall, and old-timers keeping the stools at the bar warm. It's big enough for two pool tables, a designated space for darts, and a wall with a shuffleboard table. In the evening, it's pretty much the same, minus the old-timers and the lights. Throw in blaring music and the removal of a couple of tables to create a makeshift dance floor, and that pretty much sums up Sammy's.

Well, except for the full-to-capacity crowd looking to have some drinks with friends, get lucky, or, for many, both. Hence, the blonde standing next to me at the bar.

Moving closer until her arm presses against mine and the smell of her perfume sours the taste of my drink, she tries again. “Wanna buy me a drink?”

God, no!

“Sorry, not really here to meet anyone tonight.”

“Well, good thing I haven’t given you my name yet. Looks like we haven’t really met.”

Looking back up at the mirror, we lock eyes. I simply shake my head. Just as I read the *asshole* that crosses her lips, my gut clenches as any chance of a stress-free night walks in, joining Barry and the rest of the wedding party at our table.

I guess I was wrong when I assumed the wedding party meant the guys would be hanging out tonight. But it *is* ladies’ night, and besides Abby and me, the rest of the wedding party consists of couples. Childless couples. This means they don’t need babysitters, and they probably get together like this all the time.

For fuck’s sake.

She’s the entire reason I’m here.

To get away.

From her.

I texted Abby this afternoon, letting her know Ila and I would be out of the house tonight, and the place was hers since I had the sitter meet at our place to make it easier. Figuring I would be home after her bedtime and would just stay at home tonight. I thought I had lucked out when Miss Cassie gave me a list of babysitting options and one of Ila’s old teachers was on the list. Now, I’m wishing I hadn’t asked her for it. Then I would be safe and sound chilling with Ila and the dogs.

The relief I felt when I received her thumbs-up reply to my message was unexpected. I hadn’t realized how stressed I felt by just being in her presence. It’s like I’m in a constant state of not being able to fill my lungs with enough air when she’s in the room. Hell, if she’s even in the house.

Fighting the constant urge to touch her or to make her laugh simply so I can hear the sweet sound of her happiness is exhausting.

And I could really use a break.

Studying the ice in my glass of bourbon, I get comfortable at my place at the bar. I’m in no rush to join the others, but my

reprieve is short-lived.

Barry yells my name to get my attention. He holds up his beer and signals for me to bring two more back with me. He points at himself and then at Abby to tell me who they're for. She is too busy chatting with everyone to notice me at the bar.

Of course, I order the beers, bracing myself for the rest of the night to go to shit. Then put one foot in front of the other, back to the table.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks, man.” Barry takes his beer and then cups his hands around his mouth. “Abby!”

Her ponytail whips around her head as she throws her gaze over her shoulder at the sound of her name. A carefree smile paints her face. Fuck, if I don't want to smile right back. But I don't. Instead, my mouth goes dry as any and all words I might want to say get stuck in my throat.

Lame as ever. I hold the beer up a little higher, and she points at herself, asking if it's for her. I nod and walk in her direction. She meets me halfway a few feet away from everyone else.

“How did you know?” she asks. One eyebrow up in suspicion.

“Barry.”

“Is that right?”

I let out a sigh of relief. Relieved she's speaking to me. This morning, all of her attention was on Ila, and she only spared me the one glance in the bathroom. After that, she spoke only to Ila, making sure I knew she was the only reason she was still at the house.

“I believe the words you meant to say were thank you.”

“Thank you for the beer, Logan. But you can't blame me, can you? For being suspicious?” She rubs her grasshopper necklace between her fingers.

“Why would you have any reason to be suspicious? It’s a two-dollar beer. Remember, it’s ladies’ night.”

“I guess that makes more sense. I wouldn’t expect you to pay full price for a lapse in judgment.”

It would have hurt less if she had just slapped me across the face.

But not Abby.

She goes for the jugular, not letting me forget for even a second that I am, in fact, an asshole.

“Abby, I’m sorry. I think it just came across wrong via text.”

She throws her head back in a laugh. “Oh, is that all it was? Just a miscommunication via text.”

“Abby...”

“You sure are cute. It’s a shame you think I’d fall for your bullshit, though. Thanks for the beer. Have a good night. I’ll be sure to stay out of your way.”

Making it extremely clear where things stand between us, she turns on her three-inch heels and walks back to the other end of the table where the other women have apparently been watching our interaction and the way I’m watching her walk away in her tight jeans.

This is why I don’t go out.

“What was that all about?” Barry asks when I take my seat next to him at the head of the long table.

“Nothing,” I answer, wishing Abby wasn’t sitting directly in front of me at the other end of the table.

“Sure as hell didn’t look like nothing. C’mon, what gives?”

“Absolutely nothing. If you hadn’t noticed, she thinks I’m an asshole.”

“Well, have you done anything to prove to her otherwise?”

Fair point.

“I don’t need to prove shit to her.”

“Why so defensive?”

I can hear the smart-ass vibe in his comment.

“Hey, Barry.”

“Yes, Logan?”

“New topic.”

His fist shoots up in the air. “I freaking knew it!”

Shit.

“What are you going on about?” Cate yells from the other end of the table.

“Don’t do it, Barry.” I growl under my breath, “I’ll buy the next round, but for fuck’s sake, don’t start something you know nothing about.”

He waves off his wife. “Just excited that Shockley offered to buy the table a round.”

I take everyone’s drink request, grateful for a reason to escape to the bar. Since there is only one lone cocktail server, I told everyone it would be faster for me to place the order myself. I’d take any excuse to remove myself from the situation if only for the short time I’ll be away to order drinks.

Once I’m up at the bar, I place my drink order for seven instead of eight. No more for me. I have a hard enough time making sound decisions these days sober, let alone with alcohol on board. While I wait, I have the time to watch our table in the mirror. This means I see when a preppy blond dickhead pulls up a seat next to Abby. Spinning the chair around, he sits on it backward, straddling it as his arms casually rest on the back of the chair.

He says something, and her eyes shoot up, seeking mine in the mirror to see if I’ve noticed. I stare back, hoping my face doesn’t reflect that I care.

But fuck do I care!

Like, want to take the chair he's sitting in and break it over his head care.

When the song changes, she grabs Cate's hand, and all five of the girls leave the preppy douche sitting there looking like a fool as they migrate to the dance floor. Abby looks over her shoulder, making sure I'm watching.

I hadn't even realized I was clenching my jaw until it loosened at the sight of Abby walking away from another man.

Cracking my neck, I roll my shoulders and relax against the bar.

Nothing.

That's what I should feel.

But I'm a weak man because instead, I feel relief.

Relief that I don't have to watch her with another man even though she's not mine and never will be.

"Here you go. Want me to add it to your tab?" the bartender asks, snapping me out of my funk.

"Nope. Close it out, please. I won't be staying."

I need to get the fuck out of here.

He rings me up, and I sign the bill, shoving my card into my wallet. Thankfully, everyone ordered beers, so I'm able to grab the bottles by the neck and carry them all at once without making a second trip. The sooner I get out of here, the better.

But as I've learned in life, things don't always go according to plan.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JUST ONCE

Abby

Sara and Cate grab my hand, pulling me closer to them as the guy who approached me at the table tries to weasel his way into our dance space while Stephanie and Samantha try to maneuver themselves between him and me. Sure, the dance floor is small but get a clue. I'm not interested. If I get any closer to Cate, we'll be making out, and as much as I'm sure Barry would love that, girls aren't really my jam.

Things turn from simply awkward to downright uncomfortable when his fingers grip my hips as he tries to sway to the beat with his front to my back. He's freaking me out, and I've had just about enough.

Looking up at the girls, I push on his hands to get him off me, but he doesn't budge. Sara's and Cate's eyes go as round as saucers just as I swing around to give him a piece of my mind.

However, I need no words because Logan is there, and my creeper is no longer attached to me. That would be pretty hard since his feet are no longer on the ground; instead, they're up in the air after being thrown across the floor, landing on his back.

Looking up from the mess on the dance floor, I come face-to-face with Logan. It's no surprise his face reflects nothing, but when he grabs my hand, and I let him drag me through the

bar and out the exit doors, his body tells me much more than his poker face.

His chest is heaving as if he's just gotten off a treadmill. As soon as the night air hits us, he drops my hand like it's toxic. He takes two steps away from me, then turns and takes two more back in my direction before doing it all over again.

“What the hell—”

“Don't,” he snaps, interrupting me. “Do not say a fucking word.”

“Excuse me?”

“Just don't, Abby.”

“Why, you gonna kiss me again?” I ask with unexpected venom as he continues his back-and-forth pacing.

He spins around, chest still heaving. God, he's intense. And confusing.

“Do you want me to kiss you again?”

Two steps, and he's standing inches away.

“Yes, but not if you're just going to tell me it was a mistake later.”

The words are barely out of my mouth when his lips crash into mine, his hard body pressing me against the rough exterior of the bar. Just as he did in the elevator and the pool, he lifts my leg around his hip, pulling our bodies as close as possible right here on the sidewalk, fully dressed.

“I shouldn't do this,” he pants against my lips, never breaking the kiss. “I can't fucking do this.” He presses his hardness against me, spurring me on as my fingernails scratch the back of his head. “But I can't *not* have you at least once.” Stopping, he presses his forehead against mine, his hand burning a trail up my side until he cups my breast. “I need to know how good it feels to be inside you. To taste you. Everywhere.”

“Logan.”

“Just once.”

“That’s not really my thing.”

“I need to get you out of my system.”

His last statement a whispered plea on his lips.

“Where’s the guy who gives romantic speeches and talks of fairy tales of true love to his little girl?”

His lips find my collarbone and leisurely explore my neck until reaching my ear. “Those things don’t apply to me.”

I’m breathless, needing to do a better job of ignoring the need and lust pulsing through me and press on, standing firm. “Why?”

“I don’t have that luxury, Abby.”

The sound of my name on the early evening air would have my knees buckling if I didn’t have Logan and the wall behind me holding me up.

“I don’t do one-night stands.”

He pulls back and looks soul-deep into my eyes, and I wish I knew what he was thinking. Why can he only give me one night? But in a move I’m hardly expecting, he takes my face in both of his hands, one of his thumbs brushing over my bottom lip.

“I understand.”

He speaks words of understanding, but when he presses his lips to mine again as if to say goodbye, the hunger and lust are gone. Instead, I swear he’s worshiping me and burning the moment into his soul so he never forgets it.

“Okay.”

The word is out of my mouth before I realize I’ve said it.

His kiss continues as if he hasn’t heard me, but he releases his hold on my face a few moments later. “You only drink that one beer?”

“Only half of it.”

“Where did you park?”

I point at my car at the end of the block.

He takes my hand and pulls me down the street to my car. “I’ll meet you there. I don’t want to waste any time having to come back for it later.” I open the driver’s side door and take one last look at him before I get inside, worried I’m not making the right call. “Don’t you fucking change your mind, grasshopper.”

He kisses me senseless one more time.

“Get in the car, Abby.”

I get in the car in a lust-filled haze, ever so grateful I shaved my legs this morning and wondering why he called me grasshopper. The drive only takes five minutes, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried he’d change his mind during the short trip.

It’s a good sign he’s already at the house, leaning against the tailgate of his truck, waiting for me. Not sure how when I left before he did.

He doesn’t say a word when I approach him.

But he does take my hand, leading me to the front door. When we enter, the dogs are jumping in excitement at our arrival, but he silently ushers them out to the backyard, shutting the sliding glass door behind them.

He quickly gets his shoes and socks off, leaving them by the back door before striding over to me and throwing me over his shoulder like the rude caveman I’m used to. There’s no holding back the giggles that leave me from my upside-down position as we walk down the hall to the primary bedroom I’ve been staying in. When we get there, I’m prepared for him to throw me on the bed playfully if the shoulder slinging indicates how the evening might be going.

But he is anything but playful.

Serious as hell and focused on the task at hand? Without a doubt.

Playful? Not one little bit.

He lays me down gently on the luxurious white bedding, and I swear he inhales my scent as his face hovers over the

length of my body, but before he's standing at his full height, he's tugged his shirt over his head and thrown it on the floor. Then with his eyes only leaving mine for a quick glance at my lips, he unbuckles his jeans and discards them, leaving him completely nude. I have no idea if he took his underwear down with his pants or if he was simply going commando, but here he stands in all of his glory.

And, oh, how glorious he is. I push up on my elbows to take a nice long look, and he lets me.

He's proportioned to perfection. Tall with his muscular torso, complete with a dreamy six-pack and that infamous V that leads to the pièce de résistance of the most perfect penis I have ever seen. Long. Thick. Pink and veiny in all the right ways.

He stands unashamed, feral, as I continue looking him over with no shame myself. It's an effort to drag my eyes from his cock, but when I do, his strong thighs distract me next.

I've had enough looking.

I want to touch.

"God, Logan. You're beautiful," I say in all honesty.

There's no need to fake anything with him. I only get one night, and I intend to live it to the fullest. But when I reach for him, he shakes his head. Taking my foot in his hand, he removes one of my heels and then the other.

Wanting to feel his body against mine, I begin to unbutton my jeans, but his large hand covers mine, preventing me from undressing myself as he takes over the task for me. Popping the button, he dramatically pulls my zipper down, tormenting me as he takes his time, staring at me as he does, then pulling my pants inside out as he drags them off my legs, his hard length bouncing as he pulls them off my body and throws them to the ground.

When he sees me watching his body, a growl emanates from him as I lick my lips.

"Please, let me taste you?" I know I'm begging, but I don't care.

His reply is to rip my tank top in half, pulling it off me and leaving me in only my bra and underwear.

I watch as his eyes roam my body.

Hungry.

Untamed.

I've never felt so wanted, and my need to feel his body on mine is desperate.

Reaching behind me, I unclasp my bra, letting the straps slide off my shoulders, then throwing it to the side, exposing myself. His chest lifts up and down as his nostrils flare on deep inhaleds, giving me the last push I need to remove my panties, which I slowly push down my legs. When I have them hanging from one foot, I kick them at him. He catches them deftly and brings them to his face, inhaling my scent.

Wet for him, since he pushed me against the wall outside Sammy's, I'm not embarrassed. In fact, I couldn't be less. It's hot, and at any moment now, he'll find I'm a puddle of desire waiting for him after watching him strip down to nothing.

His eyes are laser-focused on taking stock of every inch of me.

“Fuck.”

It's the only word he's spoken since leaving me at my car, but its impact is powerful as he takes in every vulnerable bit of me. This act of foreplay is torturously sexy, and he hasn't really even touched me yet.

He takes hold of his erection, giving it one long stroke before releasing himself and gliding his hands up my legs. When he gets to the back of my knees, he tugs me to the edge of the bed, my ass barely on the mattress as he pushes my legs apart and drops to his knees.

Logan Shockley is on his knees.

The vision is enough to bring me to climax, but when his tongue slowly licks up my center, I quiver. I'm not sure if I've ever quivered before, but I also never thought I would see

Logan on his knees with his head between my legs, so here I am quivering.

“Fuck.”

“Yes, fuck indeed, Logan.”

He doesn't reply, and when I look down at him and find him staring at my lady bits in awe, as though they are a masterpiece on a museum wall, I wonder if he can see the throbbing pulse building there.

He takes his time, despite my desperation for more. Licking. Tasting. Teasing. Bringing me to the edge of orgasm only to slow things down and take it away over and over again. He finally pushes a finger inside me, and with his tongue doing magical things to my bundle of nerves above, he lets me fall all the way over the edge. Before it's over, he adds a second finger, sending me screaming his name as I ride his hand, his mouth, and my orgasm until my body grows limp from exhaustion.

His fingers drag through my dampness several times. When I look down and he locks his lust-filled gaze with mine, he stands, making a show of wiping my wetness from his mouth with the back of his hand and then sucking me from his fingers. One finger at a time. All the while, his other hand leisurely strokes his magnificent cock.

How is this my life?

After he licks his fingers clean, he holds the hand that had been stroking his erection out to me, pulling me up to stand, pressing our naked bodies together, kissing me like we have all the time in the world.

Like we can stay in this moment forever.

God, how I wish we could.

He releases me and begins tossing the throw pillows to and fro around the room before roughly pulling the bedding down so it's hanging off the foot of the bed. Apparently, we won't be needing it.

Did I mention he's doing all of this naked?

Well, he is.

And it's divine.

Not waiting for him to direct me to the bed, I crawl to the center on my hands and knees, seductively feeling his scorching gaze on my skin. His hand caresses my ass, down to my wetness, where his fingers once again penetrate me and give me four short pumps, causing me to tremble from the inside out and my nipples to pebble. When he removes his fingers, he joins me on the bed. I turn to face him, laying my head on a pillow, and give myself over to him.

His mouth goes to my nipple, and my back arches instinctively, needing to be as close to him as possible.

Needing more.

“Logan, please.”

With my nipple between his teeth, one side of his mouth curves up, clearly pleased with himself and the fact that he has me begging for him. He bites harder, and it stings so good.

“Asshole.”

The smile leaves his face, and he's back to the intense Logan he's been all night. And without a word, he covers his length in a condom I didn't know he had and, with one swift move, fills me.

“Fuck.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

FAIR QUESTION

LOGAN

Note to self: Hiding out in the shower to avoid seeing the woman you swore you would only sleep with once, but now that you've had her...tasted her...you know you need more of her is a stupid idea.

I've been in the shower so damn long, reliving last night that when I step out of the shower, the steam is so thick the walls are sweating, and it coats the mirror in a sheet of fog.

I've made some poor choices throughout my life, but last night was on top of the heap. As if it wasn't hard enough resisting her before I felt her come around my cock while the taste of her was still on my tongue, and her soft skin was covered in a slick sheen of sweat, sticking to mine. Now, how do I get through the remaining five nights under the same roof as her?

I'm telling myself out of sight, out of mind, but so far, that's not working so well.

After oversharing outside Sammy's, I told myself on the way back to the house that it wasn't time to share our thoughts and feelings just because we were doing this. I certainly didn't need to go into depth about all the reasons I can't be with her. She already thinks I'm an asshole, so I figured I could just fuck her in silence and be done with the whole thing. And for the most part, that's how the evening went.

If only I could say it was that winning-asshole attitude that kept me quiet. The truth of the matter is, she was even more than I ever could have imagined. I simply couldn't find any words that could have described what I was feeling.

My worst fear became a reality when I had proof that she was just as beautiful on the outside as she is on the inside. Every inch of her body seemed more perfect than the last.

The way she laid herself bare to me. Moaned in pleasure and screamed my name in ecstasy with each climax. And climax she did. Repeatedly. She came in my mouth, on my hand, and on my cock. She was insatiable.

It was clear she understood we only had this one night, and like me, she would enjoy every luscious moment.

Those moments ended when I glanced at the time and had to leave to pay the babysitter and pick up Ila.

I had originally intended to stay at my house last night. And even though Ila was fast asleep, the pull of Abby, naked in her bed, drew me back to her.

Two hours after Ila was back asleep at Greg's, I was anything but. Kept awake with a need for more. She was right down the hall, and even though I said only once, I had already been inside her several times tonight. Technically, the night wasn't over.

And I needed more.

When I ventured down the hall to her room, she was just as I had left her.

Passed out from the fatigue of multiple orgasms, she lay there naked, curled on her side, hugging a pillow. Her hair had fought its way loose from her ponytail earlier in the night, and it now fell over her face. I should have left her alone, but I didn't. Instead, I moved the hair from her face and, by the light from the bedside lamp, memorized every freckle, every eyelash, and the faint sound of her breathing.

My intention for coming to her room changed as I watched her sleep. Instead of waking her and taking more, I turned out the light, picked the discarded bedding up from the floor, and

covered her. I should have left it there, covered her and gone back to my room. But as always is the case where she is concerned, I had a lapse in judgment and crawled in, wrapping her in my arms.

With the addition of the blankets and my body draped around her, the added heat woke her, and in her sleepy state, she threw the covers off us before she realized I was still there. She turned in my arms on a tired yawn, forcing me to lie on my back. Then with a whisper of my name and a smile on her face, she lay her head on my chest, wrapped a leg around my waist, and fell back to sleep.

I stayed awake, replaying the night in my mind while running my hands through her hair, where I found a tiny spot of purple paint at the tip. I love that I never know when a spot of paint might pop up somewhere on Abby.

Hours later, when my alarm went off in my room at the other end of the house, I was wide awake, but it still scared the shit out of me. My heart beat like I had just run a marathon as the fear of the noise waking Ila and her finding me wrapped up in Abby smacked me upside the head. I had to get back down the hall and fast.

Kissing her head gently and peeling her off me, I slid out of bed clumsily, stubbing my toe on the footboard as I rounded the bed, rousing a “*Fuck*” out of me. And as I walked out of the room, I heard her say, “Fuck. I swear it’s the only word the man knows.”

This made me smile.

Hoping the scalding hot shower would wash away the feel of her fingertips on my skin and the smell of flowers and sunshine out of my head was to no avail.

“Daddy, are you almost done?”

Shit. She sounds upset.

“Yes, cupcake, just one second,” I shout, throwing on my T-shirt and boxer briefs.

My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach when I open the door to Ila, with her lower lip quivering and her sweet blue

eyes glistening with tears.

“What is it? What’s happened?”

Adrenaline shoots through my veins seeing her this emotional so early in the morning. This is not like her; my protective instincts are raging just under the surface, waiting to hear what has hurt my baby girl.

“She’s leaving.”

“Who’s leaving?” I ask her, confused.

“Abby!” Now she’s completely beside herself.

“She’s what?”

I heard her, but it’s not registering because a new kind of panic has taken over. And I wish I hadn’t gone back to her room, hadn’t lain awake memorizing the cadence of her heartbeat against my body or the feel of her breath on my chest as she slept.

One night with her in my arms and the news of her leaving the house earlier than expected has my blood pressure spiking and my chest tightening.

Why did I not trust my gut?

I knew one night wouldn’t be enough.

It would never be enough.

But it’s not about me at the moment. I do my best to push my feelings aside.

“Cupcake, it’s okay.” I pull her into my arms. She’s limp. Inconsolable. “Shh…”

I have never seen her like this.

“Daddy, you have to make her stay.”

“Ila, I can’t make her stay if she doesn’t want to.”

Exactly the reason I never wanted to let her in.

“Please, Daddy.” She sniffles.

“She hasn’t left yet?”

She shakes her head. “She’s packin’. Again.”

“Okay, cupcake. Let me put some pants on, and I’ll be out in a minute.”

I’m not dealing with this in my underwear. I have some dignity.

I’ve got my jeans on, and when I open the bedroom door, Ila is waiting for me. “She’s in her room.”

“Sweetie, please go to *your* room while I talk to Abby.”

She shakes her head, but when I point at her room, she does as I ask, but she doesn’t close her door. She’s watching me, making sure I follow through. If only she knew how badly I’m dreading this conversation.

Standing outside her door, I run my hand through my damp hair and look over my shoulder to find Ila with her head poking out of her room, watching and prompting me to knock on the door.

“Abby, got a sec?”

“Sure, come on in.”

Tentatively, I open the door to find her standing next to the bed where her open suitcase sits. But it’s her with her hair up on top of her head in a messy bun, wearing my white T-shirt from last night and a pair of leggings that stop halfway down her calf. Not a stitch of makeup on her face.

Stunning.

“Morning,” I say cautiously.

She stops packing to look at me while she plays with her necklace. “Hey, I’m so sorry I upset Ila.”

“It’s one of the reasons I knew last night shouldn’t have happened.” Her eyes go wide and fill with pain. “But, Abby, I wouldn’t take it back. Last night was great.”

Her shoulders sag in relief, and a shy smile replaces her fear. “It was.”

“But you’re leaving?”

“Well, we didn’t really get to *talk* much last night, so I didn’t get a chance to tell you they’ve actually gotten a lot done at my place. They should be done with the floors by early afternoon. My brother and some of his friends are gonna help me move my furniture back in tonight, and I can get out of your hair.”

Before I can think of something to say, Ila pushes past me.

“But you said we could go to the studio and to the dog park again this weekend.”

“Sweetie, we can still do those things.” She looks up at me. “If it’s okay with your daddy? He can come too if he wants?”

I told her I didn’t want anything more, and I meant it. So why is my stomach doing this strange cartwheel I don’t recall it doing before?

Why am I so damn happy that she isn’t leaving because of last night?

Because of me.

“Daddy. Please! Can we go with Abby this weekend?”

Abby shrugs at me, biting her bottom lip to prevent her smile from growing.

Against my better judgment, I say, “Fine.”

Her smile fades, and she goes back to her packing. “Nobody is twisting your arm.”

How do I manage to mess this up at every turn?

“Cupcake, I would love to see Abby’s studio and go to the dog park with the two of you. But you know that Abby still has to leave.”

“But what about the dogs?”

Oh, she’s stretching it now.

“Ila, I think you and I are very capable of taking care of the dogs until Greg and Elyse get back on Wednesday night.”

Abby bends down to Ila's level and takes her hands. "Honey, I'll see you tomorrow. There's no reason to be upset."

"Okay."

"Come on, we need to get you ready for drop-off and give Abby her space."

"Fine. Bye." She turns her back on Abby and leaves the room.

Abby looks at me again, and I mouth, "Sorry for that."

She shrugs again, but without the playfulness from before.

"Have a great day, Ila," she shouts after her. "I'll see you tomorrow. I'll text your daddy, and we'll figure out the time, okay?"

I turn to find her standing in the doorway watching us, and I give her a thumbs-up.

A thumbs-up? Really, Shockley?

The drive to daycare was too quiet for my liking. So when we arrive, I park the truck and unbuckle my seat belt, turning in my seat to look at the saddest little face.

"Ila, I don't understand why you're so upset. It's not like you're never going to see Abby again."

"You think we'll still be friends?"

"Of course. She will always be your friend. But it doesn't mean she has to stay in the house with us."

"Don't you like her, Daddy?"

"I do, but we're pretty good, just like we are, aren't we?" She nods her little head. "You and I are a two-person team, right?"

"But why can't we have a bigger team?"

Fair question.

How do I tell her I'm not only too scared to let anyone else in, but I have no clue how to love Ila and someone else? That I'm trying to protect us both. No matter how happy Abby makes us, it doesn't mean we won't lose her in the end when I'm unable to give her what she deserves, and my little girl's heart isn't worth the risk.

I made a vow to my brother six and a half years ago, and not even Abby Glenn will get me to break it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EVERYTHING I AM

LOGAN

Six and a half years ago...

“I sure do love when you finish a job.” Melissa sighs as her fingers draw figure eights through my chest hair.

“Why’s that?”

“Well, besides the fact that the sex is off the charts, you always seem more relaxed. At least until the next big job starts. If I’m being honest, you’re a real grump most of the time.”

“It doesn’t seem to keep you away.”

I’m aware I can be a pretty serious guy. I tend to get focused on one thing in my life, and I’m not really good at the whole work-life balance thing everyone is always talking about. My friends and family may have used the term *control freak* a time or two, and yes, I know I often come across in a way that some may find off-putting. It’s just who I am.

Melissa and I have been seeing each other for about a year now. I may be a man, but I’m not completely clueless. It’s more than obvious she’s much more invested in whatever this is between us than I am. I’m not seeing anyone else, but I also don’t think she’s *the one*.

It's shitty of me to keep her around when I know she's looking for forever. I had planned on talking to her tonight, but then as soon as she got here, she opened her trench coat and... Well, let's just say she wasn't in the mood for conversation.

"Nights like this tend to erase the bad moods from my memory."

"Listen, Melissa—"

A ringing phone interrupts me. It's ten thirty on a Thursday night, so I'm surprised to see Lance calling this late. Especially tonight. He and Justin are on their first night out since Ila was born.

"Lance, why are you calling me on date night?" I ask jokingly instead of saying hello.

"Logan." There's anguish in his voice.

Shit, something's wrong.

I push Melissa off my chest and rush out of the bed. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"It's Ila."

My stomach sours, and somehow, I know the answer I'm about to hear is going to have a devastating impact on my world.

"What?" I ask, keeping my voice as level as possible, but my heart is still in my stomach from the sound of him saying his little girl's name.

"Can you meet us at Emanuel?"

"Why? What's happened to Ila?"

"The babysitter just called. She had Ila in her bouncy seat up on the counter while she warmed a bottle, and when she turned her back, Ila must have moved and slid the seat toward the edge, and she fell and landed on her head."

"Okay, did she say anything else?" I ask, pulling my jeans on.

“She said that at first she cried, but then she went quiet, so she called 911, and they took her in an ambulance to Emanuel.”

Shit, that’s where they take critical cases, but I don’t say that to Lance.

“Good, Randall’s Children’s hospital is there. That’s the perfect place to take a baby.”

“Can you head that way? We were up at Timberline Lodge, and we’re still an hour out. We don’t want her to be alone.”

“Of course, I’ll head that way right now. Don’t worry, Lance. She’s going to be fine.”

Seeing me shove my keys in my pants pocket, Melissa gets up and starts dressing frantically.

“Thanks. We’ll be there as quickly as we can.”

“Just drive safe, and I’ll see you when you get there. She’s gonna be fine.”

Silence is all I hear on the other end of the line.

“You hear me, bro?”

“I hear you, but shit.”

“I know. But she’s a tough little thing. She’s got this.”

I’m not sure I believe a word coming out of my mouth because she is still so tiny. So precious and such a joy in all of our lives.

How will any of us recover if she isn’t okay?



When I get to the hospital, I’m running through the parking lot the second my truck door slams shut. It’s a gloomy March night, and that annoying drizzle that soaks you almost worse than a heavy rain is falling, but that’s not why I’m running. I’m running because I don’t want Ila to feel scared and alone.

The need to get to her is overwhelming, and I've been in such a frenzy to do just that, that I've already asked the man behind the desk where she is when Melissa comes through the automatic doors.

I had forgotten all about her.

When she finds me, she comes to my side sliding her fingers through mine, and I let her because right now, her hand in mine is the only thing grounding me. I appreciate her support as they push a button to open the door to the emergency room.

Lance, always thinking ahead, called the hospital to let them know I would be arriving soon, granting me permission to be in the room with Ila.

When they pull the curtain open, there she is.

So small.

So quiet.

She's absolutely precious.

Lying on her side, she chews on her fist, content as can be in the pediatric crib they've put her in. She seems unfazed.

Two nurses are tending to her. A brunette female nurse with her back to us who turns around at the sound of the privacy curtain opening while a dark-haired male nurse listens to Ila's heart with his stethoscope.

The brunette nurse blocks my path to my niece, causing Melissa to press herself as close to me as she can. "Are you her dad?"

"No, I'm her uncle. Her dads will be here soon."

"Are you Logan?"

A young blonde asks from the chair next to the small bed.

"I am. You the sitter?" I ask, with more bite in my voice than I intended.

For some reason, I pictured the babysitter as a freckle-faced teenager, but she must be in her mid-twenties. She's

wearing glasses and has her hair pulled back with a headband. Her face is red and tear-streaked.

“Yes,” she says, her voice trembling. “I’m Candace.”

She stands from her seat. Her eyes glossy with unshed tears. She’s shaking, barely holding it together.

“Lance told me you were on the way, and he talked to paramedics and let them know you were standing in for him and Justin. I’m so sorry, sir.” Her unleashed tears begin to flow down her face. “It was an accident.” She sobs. “I turned my back for a second and...and...”

“Shh...” Melissa says, dropping my hand and moving to Candace, wrapping her arm around her. “We know it was an accident.”

As Melissa comforts the sitter, I push past the nurse to get to my niece.

Bending down to look into her big blue eyes, I wince when I see the already bruising bump on her forehead. “Hey, cupcake. How ya doin’?”

She kicks her little legs, and I slip my thumb in the hand not currently shoved in her mouth, and she squeezes tightly.

“Sir, we need to take her for a scan, and we’d like to get her set up for an IV, just in case. Are you able to give that kind of permission?”

“Shit, I don’t have a clue, but I know her dads would want you to do everything you can to help her. Here, let me call them. But go ahead and get her ready. I know the answer is yes.”

I dial Lance, and it rings several times before going to voicemail.

My heart is racing. I don’t want to tell them the wrong thing, but I know both Lance and Justin will want all measures taken, and it’s just a scan and an IV, right?

I immediately dial again, and this time, the line picks up on the second ring. Only, it’s not my brother who answers.

“Hello, this is Officer Peabody, and I’m answering Lance Shockley’s phone. Who am I speaking to?”

“Wait. What? Who is this?” I pull my phone away from my ear to confirm I did, in fact, call Lance’s phone.

My mind isn’t computing what I’m hearing. Why isn’t Lance the person talking to me?

“Sir, this is Officer Peabody with the Portland Police Department. May I ask who I’m speaking to?”

My gut clenches, and on a shaky breath, I reply. “Logan. Logan Shockley, Lance’s brother.” I swallow the lump in my throat, not wanting the answer to my next question. “Why are you answering my brother’s phone?”

“Sir, there’s been an accident. Your brother and the person driving the car are being taken to the hospital. You can meet them there.”

“I’m already at the hospital; his daughter has had an accident. We’re at Emanuel.”

“That’s where we’ll head. I’ll call you once we’ve arrived.”

“Is my brother going to be okay? What about his husband? Is Justin okay?”

“Sir, I’ll call as soon as we reach the hospital.”

“Wait! Are they okay? Please!”

The line goes dead, and I stay frozen to the spot with the phone still pressed to my ear as I watch the sweet little cherub watching me right back.

“Sir, we’re going to take her to CT. Do you want to come with us?”

“Oh, um, yes. Of course. Yes.”

I follow the nurses as they wind through the halls of the hospital. Everything in my peripheral vision is a blur, the slow thumping of my heart pounding in my head, each step a struggle.

A nurse pushes a silver square on the wall, and the double doors begin to open. “Staff only from here, sir.”

The mention of letting Ila out of my sight pulls me to the here and now. “Over my dead body are you taking her anywhere without me.”

The nurse smiles. “You’ll have to wear a lead apron if you want to be in the room.”

“Not a problem.”

Thirty minutes later, with Ila in my arms, we’re back behind our little privacy curtain on the other side of the all-glass door to our room.

She’s finally calm.

The last half hour was excruciating. The sounds of the CT machine, along with having her little body strapped down to keep her still, scared her to death. She wailed and wailed. Her pain pierced my heart. All I wanted to do was pick her up and soothe her.

It was pure torture.

The moment they unstrapped her from the table, I picked her up, and she buried her screams into my neck. I rubbed her back as we traversed the halls back to the ER department, and by the time we reached our room, she had settled.

“Sir, if it’s alright, we’d like to get her IV set up while we wait for the doctor to return with the CT results.” The nurse, whom I now know as Jimmy, asks, holding his hands out for Ila.

At first, I just stare at him, the thought of letting her go doesn’t feel like an option, but when Melissa rubs my back and tells me to let them do their job, I know she’s right, so I carefully hand Ila to Jimmy.

I stand off to the side, keeping my niece in full view. I peel my eyes off her long enough to check my phone to make sure I

didn't miss a call from Logan or the police officer I spoke to.

No missed calls.

As I put my phone back in my pocket, raised voices from down the hall snag my attention. My heart drops to my stomach because, deep in my bones, I know what the commotion is about.

Lance.

“Melissa, don't leave her side. Can you do that for me?”

Her eyes grow large with concern, but she nods her head. “Of course.”

“Thank you.”

I take one more look at Ila just as they poke her delicate skin to put her IV in, and her scream guts me.

My need to stay and protect her wars with my fear of what is happening down the hall and the urge to run from the room in the hopes I'll discover my instinct is wrong.

Melissa pushes me out the door, assuring me she's got it, and as much as I hate to walk out of the room, I follow the voices down the hall.

Three doors down from Ila's, I look into the room that hasn't had the privacy curtain pulled, and lying on a table, an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose, broken and bloodied is my baby brother.

He may have been an inch taller than me, broader and stronger than me, but it didn't stop me from trying like hell to protect him from anything and everything life ever tried to throw at him. But he didn't need me to protect him. He always did just fine on his own.

Lance never let life get to him. He was a bright light who couldn't be dimmed no matter how hard some may have tried.

When Justin entered his life, watch out. The two of them together were a dynamic duo.

Two bright lights who were so damn dazzling it was honestly a thing of beauty.

So when I hear one of the doctors ask about the driver of the car and hear them say he died on impact, my pulse pounds in my head while the medical staff working on Lance appears to move in slow-motion, and the room begins to blur.

Justin is dead.

And from the look of things, my brother isn't doing so well.

In my shocked state, I've entered the room and am approaching the bed when someone on the staff blocks my path to Lance's side. I have no idea what they look like because all I see is my brother lying on that bed, covered in blood.

"Sir, can we help you?"

"My brother."

It's all that comes out.

"Sir, we're doing everything we can for him, but we will need you to leave and wait in the waiting room so we can do our jobs."

"No, I have to see him. I can't leave—"

Just then, Lance's eyes open, and he sees me. Lifting his hand to remove his oxygen mask, he speaks my name. "Logan."

I push past the person asking me to leave, rushing to my brother and taking his hand. His grip is weak, lacking the intensity in mine. I can't cling to him tightly enough.

"Lance, I'm here. I've got you."

"Ila."

Her name is a whisper from his parted lips as his eyes search mine for assurance that his baby girl is okay.

"She's right down the hall. She's awake and doing well. We're waiting for the results of her CT scan, but the doctors feel good about things so far."

With his eyes still on mine, his grip tightens as much as he can muster. “Love her with everything you are.”

“Stop talking like that. You know I already do, and you’re going to love her with everything *you* are just as soon as the doctors get you all fixed up.”

“Promise me.”

“Lance, I promise you, but—”

“Promise me.” He interrupts.

Because he knows.

It’s in his eyes.

He’s not going to make it, and he knows it. He wants to know if his baby girl will be taken care of.

It feels like an axe has come down on my sternum with ferocious velocity and split it in half. The pain is severe, and I’m barely able to stay on my feet, but I need to give this to him. I would do anything for him, and right now, what he needs is one last reassurance.

“I will love her with everything I am. I will live my life to provide for her and take care of her at every step. She will always know how much you and Justin loved her. I vow to protect her, brother. I will love her just as fiercely as you do.”

A tear falls down his bruised face.

“Thank you.”

Those are the last words I hear him speak as I hold his hand, and he takes his last breath.

My baby brother is gone.

The love of his life is gone.

A baby girl lay in the room three doors down, not knowing how the trajectory of her life has forever changed.

I’ve lost my parents, so I know what grief is. But I had Lance to help me through the dark waters of that loss.

But this loss of Lance and Justin is more than seems possible to endure.

How does a person get through something like this?

How does your soul survive when you've lost the person you're closest to in this world?

The nurses push me away from Lance's bed, and I don't fight them because there is no need.

He's gone.

I know this just like I know I will never be the same.

I am forever changed.

A nurse has both hands on my chest, pushing me out of the room as they try to bring him back, and I let him. But I don't take my eyes off my brother.

My best friend.

Once I'm out of the room and they've pulled the privacy curtain to block my view of Lance, I hear them yelling code blue, or is it red? I'm not sure, but I hear it, and I also hear them yell, "Clear," but I know they won't be bringing me back into the room to tell me they've saved him.

Because he's already gone to be with his husband.

To watch over Ila.

And because of this, I find the strength to walk away from my brother and toward the most precious little girl. The little girl who I have vowed to love with everything I am.

It's not a role I want, but it's one I am honored to fulfill.

Entering her room, I ignore everything and everyone and move toward her.

Picking Ila up from her bed cautiously because of the IV she's attached to. I cradle her in my arms and take a small step until my back presses against the wall, letting it take the weight I can barely carry at this moment.

I slide down the wall, pull her close to my chest, and sob.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

YOU KNOW WHERE TO FIND ME

Abby

“Cheers to the newlyweds for bringing us all back together so they could show off their tans and well-rested faces. Since the rest of us slugs who have been home living in the real world,” Barry, our usual self-appointed group representative, says, holding his glass up to the table where once again, the wedding party has all gathered to see Greg and Elyse now that they’re back from their honeymoon.

I swear I’ve seen these people more in the past few weeks than I have in the past two years.

When we ordered our drinks, I noticed that the quiet man at the far end of the table wasn’t drinking and held up a glass of water when we all lifted our glasses to toast the newlyweds.

It didn’t go unnoticed by me; he also sat as far away from me as possible.

He looks tired.

Disconnected.

I know the feeling.

A week ago was one of the best days I can remember having in a long time. The past seven days not so much.

My sleep has lessened, and my spirits have plummeted.

Last Saturday, Ila and Logan met me at my studio bright and early before we opened to the public. Ila walked him

around the space, showed him all the different creations she wanted to make, and took a good twenty minutes to decide what she wanted to paint. I assured her dad this was very common. It often overwhelms customers when they face the multitude of options we offer. You'd think it was the biggest decision of their life rather than a fun painting activity.

In the end, she selected a garden gnome statue. Not a unicorn or a butterfly. Nope, Ila went with a garden gnome that she couldn't wait for her dad to put in the front yard. Logan and I looked at each other, both surprised by her choice, but shrugged in unison and let her proceed. Whatever makes her happy.

While Ila painted with the colors I had set up for her, I gave him a tour. It was our first time alone since Thursday night. We hadn't really talked about what happened, but he made it clear on the sidewalk that night that it was only one night. I wasn't lying when I told him I wasn't a one-night kind of girl, but I followed my horny little libido and maybe even my heart and said yes. Now, I have to live with the consequences, whatever they may be.

I assumed he would be his usual standoffish self, but he was in a good mood and seemed genuinely interested in the business. His favorite part was the bar and the fact that we served alcoholic beverages on our adults-only nights and asked questions about the rooms in the back for meetings and camps.

As a business owner himself, when I shared our big news about booking the large corporate event, he was excited for me and knew that all it took was one big customer to change everything. His sincerity was pure, and it was nice to share with him. Levi never showed much interest.

This was when he told me about the dinner he had earlier in the week when I watched Ila. One of his commercial clients had offered him a contract for a development on the coast that entailed a full remodel of the outlet mall and building a new residential gated community.

He opened up and shared that his first love was apparently surfing but that planning and building houses had been his second.

The thought of him soaking wet, in nothing but board shorts surfing the waves of Southern California, where he apparently spent much of his youth, distracted me for a moment, but I didn't miss him explaining how his business had taken off and the commercial jobs paid a lot more. As a single parent, he went where the money was and had gotten away from doing what he really loved. This was an enormous opportunity for him financially and would give him a chance to get back to what he loves, but with that came a lot of logistics and possibly even a move to the coast. It was a lot to think about.

"Well, I certainly don't envy you. That would be hard to pass up. I mean, who hasn't dreamed of living on the coast? Of course, I get you have a whole life here and Ila is about to start school, so it's a big decision."

"Is that a dream of yours?" he questioned as we left the back rooms where birthday parties took place.

"What? Living at the beach?"

"Not the beach. But the beach in Oregon. It's not quite the same as Southern California or Hawaii."

"Very true, but there is something about a stormy winter day on the Oregon Coast. What I wouldn't give to have that as my view while I work. However, it does break my one rule about how far out of a decent-sized city I'll live."

"And what is that?"

"I have to be within a twenty-minute drive of a Target. It's just the way it is."

"You're serious?"

"I'm afraid so."

He looked at me like I was an anomaly and followed me into my office, still looking puzzled.

As soon as we entered the small space of my office, the atmosphere changed. His light mood darkened just around the edges.

“And this is my office,” I said, suddenly feeling a bit claustrophobic.

He said nothing. Instead, he shoved his hands in his pockets and took small steps around the room, stopping to examine every photo, certificate, painting, and even my grasshopper coffee mug. He didn’t ask questions, touched nothing, and just took it all in. Leaving me feeling more vulnerable than I had two nights ago as I lie naked with his face between my legs.

Once he had finished his perusal of my life history as reflected on the walls and shelves of my home away from home, he turned to me with his hands still shoved safely in his pockets. The gray of his T-shirt caused his ever-changing eyes to burn a dark-blue stare somewhere deep inside me, where I held a place for him. I know I shouldn’t since he’s made it perfectly clear that Thursday night was a one-off, but there’s nothing I can do. Logan has crawled deep into my soul in just over a week, much to my dismay, since it’s almost a guarantee this will only lead to a broken heart.

For a fleeting moment, his eyes slid to my desk and then ever so slowly back to me, as though he imagined me on top of it as he took me right then and there. Other than this, his eyes stayed on mine.

“So that’s it. Abby’s Place. You’ve seen it all.” I stuttered around the nerves fluttering in my stomach.

Still, he said nothing.

Just looked at me.

Searching.

For what? I had no clue.

He finally cleared his throat, about to speak, but as if on cue, Ila yelled for us from the main studio, asking where we were. Something washed over him at the sound of her voice,

and without saying whatever it was he was about to say to me, he turned and walked out of my office.

Leaving me overheated and overwhelmed with confusion and need.

I didn't rush after him, needing a moment to myself.

Why I was so hot and bothered, I have no clue. He didn't make a move. Hell, he didn't say a word. It's some sort of cause and effect where Logan is concerned. He looks at me. Intensely. And says nothing. And I, in turn, become wet, flustered, and confused.

It could be because his heated looks had previously resulted in kisses in an elevator, and then there was the pool. Other times, these actions resulted in simmering anger. No matter the incident, the reaction from my body was always the same.

Once I joined them at their table in the studio, it was as though I had imagined the intensity of the moment in the office. He was once again light and talkative. He even picked out his own gnome and was sitting next to Ila waiting for me to supply him with his paint. It was quite adorable.

While Ila and her daddy worked on their new lawn ornaments, I worked at my easel. I hid my secret project on the other side of the table. A little something came to me. A little something I thought I would make Ila for her birthday. They were both good about not peeking, and I hid it in my office when we finished.

Before we left for lunch, my staff had arrived, and the studio had opened for business. As was usual on Saturdays, a few families were waiting for the doors to open, excited to get to work on new art projects.

This was what I really loved about Abby's Place. Watching the joy on the faces of my customers and the sense of pride and accomplishment they took with them once they had finished their art pieces. No matter if it's a simple ceramic mug or a large canvas painting, it is rare that the artist doesn't have a smile on their face when they've finished.

In the short time it took Logan and Abby to follow Trish to where they would leave their gnomes to be sent for glazing, a good-sized birthday party had come in.

“Wow, Abby. I would say you have what my grandmother would call a growing concern on your hands. This place is crawling with customers.”

“Yep, we’re pretty lucky. Things have turned out okay.”

“I’d say more than okay. I also wouldn’t call it luck. Your heart is in this place, and it’s obvious. You should be proud of what you’ve done here. It’s impressive.”

Logan Shockley, impressed.

It felt good.

Real good.

I stood a little taller, and where I would usually display false modesty and tell him it was no big deal, I didn’t do that. Instead, I said thank you and let the confidence I felt from their visit and his opinion mask the ache of longing in my belly.

The rest of the day was easy. We went to the new pizza place in town for lunch and then took the dogs to the dog park. Most of our conversations revolved around Ila, but something had changed when we got to the park.

While we hung out with the dogs, the three of us played a game Logan and Ila called First Thing. It’s where someone says a word or asks a question, and you have to say the first thing that comes to mind. Not only did I learn a lot about the two of them, but it was fun.

Grumpy Logan was nowhere to be found.

When Ila would say something wise beyond her years, as she often did, Logan and I would share a glance, both of us dumbfounded by the little girl. And when an excited lab knocked her over, we both ran to her side to make sure she was okay.

Logan and I were in sync.

The three of us were in sync.

There was a connection not just between myself and Ila or myself and Logan, but between the three of us. As a unit. It was like we had known each other for years and could already finish each other's sentences. Such a stark contrast to our interactions in the house earlier in the week. And a vast difference compared to the way Logan ignores me in a group setting with friends. Well, unless he's pushing creepers aside and dragging me off dance floors.

We went to McCool's, the local family pub, for dinner and then went back to the house. It wasn't until we pulled into the driveway that I remembered I had left my car at the studio, but as soon as I mentioned it, Ila suddenly had to use the little girl's room, and we weren't able to stay in the car and just drive back to where we had met this morning.

Oh, she sure is a smart little girl.

I'm pretty sure she knew what she was doing because she took her sweet time and before long, it was bath time, and she was the one reminding us how late it was and that she needed to go to bed.

When her daddy stepped aside to take a work call, I helped her rinse her hair in the tub, surprised how comfortable she was with me. We talked about how fun our day was and all the silly things the dogs at the park did. She talked about how excited she was to see her gnome after it was back from the kiln and how she knew her daddy would eat all the leftover pizza for breakfast in the morning.

As it has been since the day I met her at Elyse's wedding rehearsal, taking care of her came naturally. Talking to her was easy. Comfortable.

Yet as easy as things were with her, I found it hard to stay present and not to think about how this was likely the last moment I was going to have like this with her.

After she was in her princess nightgown, I was towel drying her hair when she spun around and wrapped her arms

around my hips and hugged me as though she had the same thoughts on her mind.

My arms wrapped around her, and I rubbed calming circles on her back for her as much as they were for me. I didn't say anything. What was there to say? I think you and your dad are pretty great, but he's only into one-night stands.

"Abby, will you read me my story tonight?"

"Of course, I will."

Anything to drag out my time with you.

She and the dogs listened intently as I read chapter seven of The Chronicles of Narnia to them, and although she didn't fall asleep, she settled and didn't ask for more when I closed the book.

I wished her sweet dreams, and when I turned around to leave, Logan was leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed in front of him.

Watching.

But his face gave nothing away.

"I'll call a Lyft," I said after gently closing the door behind me.

"Stay and have a glass of wine with me. Unless you have somewhere you need to be?"

"Nope. No exciting Saturday night plans for me."

Gah! Do you know nothing! You're supposed to make yourself busy. Hard to get!

He smiled ever so slightly. "Perfect. It's been a good day, and I'm not quite ready for it to end. Meet me on the couch."

I told myself not to read too much into it.

He said he could only be with me once.

And we'd already had our once.

Well, we had many in one night.

Was that one night what he needed to get me out of his system?

Or did he want more?

Like I so desperately did.

Or is this just two friends having a glass of wine?

As always, I felt clueless about where things were going.

I was looking out at the pool when his reflection appeared in the window, wineglasses in hand, sending the butterflies that were waking in my stomach into a full-on dance when I turned around and took the glass he was holding out to me.

“Thanks for getting her to bed; you didn’t need to do that.”

I take a sip of my wine. “It was nice.”

“Well, thanks again. Usually, I’m juggling it all at once, so I appreciate the assist.”

He signaled for me to join him on the couch.

“How do you do it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “You do what you have to do for your kid. I guess you just figure it out.”

“Well, you make it look easy.”

He chuckled but changed the subject. “So why the grasshopper? Does your necklace mean something?”

The sound of his voice calling me grasshopper out in front of Sammy’s the other night comes back to me. Confused at the time, but now I get it. He noticed my necklace, which means he was paying close attention to it. To me. And here I thought he had been doing his best to ignore me all this time.

“Well, my dad says I fit the description of a grasshopper, and he bought me this on my birthday several years ago,” I say, pulling on my necklace.

“And what does it represent?”

“Here, you may not believe me, so let me pull it up so you know I’m not feeding you a line of crap.”

I do a quick search on my phone and then hand it to him.

“Says here, they are constantly on the move.” He looks up at me, a small smile on his lips. “I would say that’s true.” He looks back down at the phone. “If you come across one, it means you need to take a leap of faith because they are good luck and heralded for their good vibes.” I don’t miss the way his voice trailed off when he read the part about taking a leap of faith. “And lastly, it says, if you run into one, it is a sign that you’re conflicted and need to move forward with a decision.”

He handed my phone back to me. I closed the browser and turned it off, wondering if he had anything else to say on the matter.

He did not.

“So you have Abby’s Place, plus your graphic design business. How do you do it all?”

I shrugged, matching his previous reply. “Exceptional employees and a love for what I do.”

“Do you think you’ll always do both?”

“Not sure. The retail side of things can be pretty risky, and you never know when the other business might dry up. It’s nice to have the backup, just in case. As you already know, I would love to live on the coast, but I’m not sure a studio would do as well in a small town. The nice thing about Glenn Graphic Design is that I can do it from anywhere, so with that in my back pocket, I could be pretty free to move somewhere else if I wanted. But the storefront would keep me here as long as I want to keep it going.”

“You’re a very impressive person.”

There was no containing the grin or the blush his compliment evoked. It’s certainly not something I’m used to hearing from the men in my life. Well, okay, from Levi. He was never very complimentary when it came to me.

“Thank you. And thank you for saying I’m an impressive person and not an impressive woman. I’m so tired of people sharing how amazed they are that, as a woman, I can run two businesses. And I really love when they say how noble it is of

me to choose my work over having a family. First of all, it's not like I planned things this way. Second, even though things would slow down if I had a husband and children, it's not like you have to stay home and churn butter to have a family."

He smiled and then grew quiet, almost introspective, before asking, "Do you still want a family after everything you went through with your ex?"

His question had my heartbeat picking up speed, but I did my best not to overthink it.

"I do," I said with certainty.

"Your ex hasn't soured you on relationships?"

The conversation was going in a much different direction than I could have ever expected. It took me a moment to collect myself and answer.

"Nah. Did Levi turn out to be a jerk? Sure. But it's not like I was perfect. I was so focused on work that I wasn't exactly around as much as I should have been."

Logan lifted an eyebrow in disapproval.

"I'm not giving him a free pass or anything. I'm just taking responsibility for my part of the mess that became our marriage."

"Good."

His one-word reaction was intense, and his eye contact had latched on to me and wasn't letting go. He listened to every word I spoke. He was interested, not just making polite conversation.

"But I haven't really put myself out there. I've had a few first dates, but nobody was really worth a second. How about you?"

I thought he might dismiss my question, but surprisingly, he answered. He doesn't squirm or look uncomfortable. Just matter of fact.

"Well, the whole business owner and single dad combo doesn't really lend itself to the dating world. It's not a priority,

and I doubt many women out there are looking for a ready-made family.”

“Well, if you let them meet Ila, they’ll want to date you just to hang out with her. She would give most people without children the want to give it a go. I know I’ve said it before, but she really is a special kid.”

“That she is.”

At the mention of Ila, he ended the conversation. Without another word, he stood, taking my near-empty wineglass with him, and walked in the direction of the kitchen.

Okay, I guess we’re done here, I thought to myself.

Following his lead, I found my purse on the kitchen chair where I had left it and pulled out my phone, ready to order my Lyft.

“Is everything okay?”

“Uh, yeah. I thought I would call for a ride since you were done with your wine.”

It’s then I see the refilled glasses.

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Oh.”

He handed my glass back to me, but before I could bring it to my lips, he took it back and set it on the table with his. He took a step, closing the space between us.

“Abby, I—”

I didn’t want to hear why we shouldn’t have another night together. I just needed to feel his lips on mine again. So I took what I wanted.

And so did he.

We didn’t move an inch from where we stood, but we kissed and touched each other ever so lightly. It was different than the time before. Still needy but tender. We took our time. He held my face in his hands while I gently ran my fingers up and down his back.

Then much to my surprise, he pulled back, bending his knees to rest his forehead against mine, and said, “Stay.”

“Okay,” I answered without a second thought.

Holding my hand, he led me to the hall, where he checked on Ila to make sure she was asleep, and then the rest of the way to the primary bedroom, where he made love to me all night long.

He was gentle and giving.

Where our previous night together had been more frantic and urgent, he handled me with reverence and adoration this time.

He was the man who came back to bed and held me until the morning.

I didn't think about what came next.

He felt what I felt. The night meant something to him. I saw it in his eyes. Felt it in his fingertips as he traced the lines of my body, using his words this time to tell me how beautiful I was.

How was I to know that after I left the next morning, I wouldn't hear from him again?

Not a call.

Not a text.

Not an email.

And now here we sit at opposite ends of the table, acting like one of the most beautiful nights of my life never happened.

After we've eaten, the rest of the group is playing pool and throwing darts, so it's just Elyse and I at the table looking at pictures of their trip on her phone.

“Wow, it really looks like you two had the honeymoon of a lifetime.”

“We did, Abby. It was amazing. I'm so happy.”

She really is.

I can see it in the ease with which she moves. The comfort she feels in her own skin and the smile that seems permanently in place.

I take my hand in hers. "I'm so happy for you, sweetie."

"What about you?" She gives my hand a squeeze. "You seem a little distant tonight. Everything go okay with the house-sitting?"

"About that..."

"Sorry about the mixup." She smiles a smile that says it was in no way a mixup.

"Elyse!" I gasp, finally having confirmation of what I had not wanted to believe was true. "You didn't! You set that up on purpose?"

"Greg and I saw the sparks flying between the two of you, and it was his idea, I swear!" She holds her hands up as if hers aren't just as dirty as her husband's.

"Wow."

"Are you mad? I know he can be a bit surly at times, but he's a really great guy."

Am I mad?

"This will have to be a discussion for another time," I say in an attempt to stall the line of questioning I know will be coming.

"That good or that bad?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure."

"Speak of the devil." Her eyes glance behind me, and I feel anything but comfortable in my own skin. "Hey, Logan, you headed out?"

He's now standing next to Elyse, only inches from me while my heart trips all over itself, wondering if he'll ask to talk outside or, at the very least, say he's sorry for ghosting me.

“I’m afraid so. I have to relieve the sitter. Thanks for the invite.”

She stands to give him a hug while I sit at the table, not knowing what to say or do. “We’re about to wrap things up, too. You won’t miss much.”

“Nice to see you, Abby,” he says, looking down at me outwardly cold, but there’s pain revealing itself from deep behind his eyes.

“Nice to see you, too. Give Ila my best.”

“Will do.”

And just like that, he’s gone.

A heavy dull ache settles into my bones, and my eyes sting with the threat of tears.

Tears I refuse to shed.

How did I get here?

He promised me one night, and he gave me two.

This was already more than he originally offered.

He was upfront and told me he couldn’t give me anything more.

And I believed him the first night.

Believed he was trying to get me out of his system.

But the second night was different. It had followed a beautiful day. He was open and inquisitive. We got to know each other as friends, and then...well, that night was gentle. We shared a mutual admiration for each other. The experience bordered on beautiful.

Correction... It *was* beautiful.

It hurt when I didn’t hear from him. And as the week went on, I busied myself with work. I even went to the gym. Anything to distract me from the lack of communication, but nothing I tried has managed to take away the hollowness in my chest.

But tonight, an internal struggle shone through his eyes. It didn't lessen my want to know why he was shutting me out or erase the crack he put in my heart. But something in his eyes told me that whatever his reasons, it wasn't because of any fault of my own.

No, this is about him.

"You okay?" Elyse asks after he's out of earshot.

"You know, I'm tired, and I think I'm gonna head home."

"Abby, talk to me. What's going on between you two?"

"Nothing," I answer honestly.

"We're still having that conversation. Don't think you're getting out of it."

"Sure," I say lazily. I'm wiped of the energy it would take to fake joy.

Fortunately, the rest of the group joins us to gather their things, and we all say our goodbyes. Everyone leaves together, but I stop by the bathroom on my way out. When I get to the parking lot, the newlyweds are pulling out of the lot and wave as they go by. I go to open my car door, but out of the corner of my eye, on the far side of the parking lot, I see Logan's truck is still here.

He left the bar over ten minutes ago. Why is he still here?

Of course, I can't leave well enough alone, and before I've consciously decided to go check on him, my feet are already walking across the lot toward his truck. Cautiously, I approach the passenger side door.

After this past week and the ache he's caused in my heart, I can't help but feel a vise around it when I see the stoic man I've come to care about sitting alone in his truck with his arms and forehead resting on his steering wheel.

Reluctantly, I tap on the window, hoping I'm not making a huge mistake.

He startles, but when he sees it's me, he sags.

Despondent.

He's hurting.

My need to ease his pain is unbearable.

"Can I come in?" I ask through the window.

He stares at me.

"Please?"

"It's unlocked." I don't really hear him, but I can read the lips I know by heart.

The lips I yearn to feel on my body again.

I climb into the passenger seat and close the door. I sit with my body angled toward him as he sits looking out the windshield, making no effort to make eye contact with me now that I'm inside his private cocoon.

When he breaks through the silence, his heavy sigh sounds exhausted.

"You okay?"

"Not when you're this close."

Okay, that was not what I expected.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Yes. No. Fuck." He runs his hands through his dark hair. "I want you to stay. I always want you to stay. But, Abby, I know I can't give you the fairy tale, and you don't do just sex. I won't ask that of you again. I can't."

I've never heard his voice sound this strained. His jaw is twitching. His hands rub back and forth over his thighs.

"Hey, look at me."

"Abby, you don't understand."

"No, but I want to."

He shakes his head slowly but still won't look at me.

Enough.

I'm not sure how, but I manage to maneuver myself over the truck console and into his lap. He doesn't stop me. In fact,

his big hands take me by the hips and assist my progress as he places me between him and the steering wheel, face-to-face with my legs straddling him.

He can't hide from me here.

“Talk to me, Logan.”

My fingers run through his hair while I wait, watching the shadows from the dimly lit parking lot move across his face. After a couple of minutes, he leans into my hands, relenting to my touch that has turned into a head massage. His eyes finally open and search mine, and I let him search for whatever it is he is looking for. I continue rubbing his head, giving him the attention he seems to be craving. We're so close his breath tickles my face, but he's still not talking.

“You can share with me.” One of my hands leaves his head so my fingers can trace the lines of his beautiful face. “Why won't you allow yourself the fairy tale? Why is sex the only option for you?”

He closes his eyes, and I think he's going to continue to shut me out. Instead, he pulls me against his body, wrapping his muscular arms around me, causing my arms to lift, and I rest my elbows on his shoulders while I cradle his head. He buries his face in my neck, inhaling and exhaling several times. Then on one big exhale, he begins talking.

“I've lost a lot, Abby.”

His words muffled from where he seeks refuge in my neck, and the gentle warmth of his breath on my skin elicits a quick shiver, but I right myself, hoping he doesn't notice the goose bumps on my skin. He's finally talking, and I don't want to do anything to make him stop.

“I lost my dad to a car accident when I was twelve, and my mom lost her battle to cancer when I was eighteen, and my brother Lance was sixteen. I thought nothing could be worse than that. But of course, I was young and naïve.”

I kiss the side of his head, and he squeezes me even closer for a moment, but then loosens his hold, rubbing his hands up and down my back like he had been on his thighs minutes ago.

“My little brother, Lance, was everything. He was the light and love of our family. He made everyone around him smile, and he was just...good. You remind me of him in that way.”

My throat tightens, and my heartbeat stutters at the comparison.

“He and his husband, Justin, were quite the dynamic duo. They were so in love, Abby. Destined to be together. You could see it right from the start. They were best friends, husbands, and co-workers. They did everything together, including working on their non-profit for the LGBTQ+ community. Their organization worked with colleges to provide outreach for students. To provide them with a safe space while pursuing their education. I could go on and on about all the good Lance and Justin did, but the best thing they ever did was Ila.”

His cupcake.

“Every time she calls me *Daddy*, it hurts.” His whispered words land like a feather on my collarbone. “All I want is for her to know how good her actual dad was. Lance was the best of us. Raising her is an honor I am not worthy of.”

“Oh, Logan. That is not true at all. She loves you so much, and she knows you love her too. I believe her exact words were, ‘He’s the best daddy. We have lots of fun, and he loves me lots.’” I leave out the part where she said he was “*just sad bunches*.”

He gives me another one of his tight squeezes that take my breath away, and I feel the wet warmth of his tears on my neck.

Pressed between his seat and the door, my right leg hurts like a son of a bitch, but you couldn’t get me to move for anything right now. It’s nothing compared to the pain in this man’s fractured heart. He’s endured so much and given so much of himself, and he still doesn’t think he’s worthy of his little girl’s love.

Because that’s what she is.

His little girl.

He snuffles and takes some calming breaths. I pull back from him and kiss his tears. My lips kiss his salty cheeks and then his temples and his closed eyes. But I stay quiet, giving him the only kind of space I can when there isn't even an inch between us.

“Abby.”

He says my name with resignation, and I know in my bones what's coming next. All the reasons his past is dictating his present.

I steady myself for disappointment, but I am okay because he opened up to me. He let me in, even if it's not going to end the way I wish it would.

It's something.

“Thank you for sharing with me.” I press my lips to his, taking one last kiss before he lets me go. He kisses me back. No disguising his longing. His want.

Our movements are slow and searing as he takes my face in his hands. Our breaths mingle together, and his scent is hypnotic, pulling me into the moment, leaving everything else behind. Neither of our tongues seeks permission. It's not that kind of kiss.

This kiss is deep. Soul-searching. Tender. Reverent.

Kisses we're gifting ourselves at this moment as though the chance will never come again. The taste of him, the smell of him, the feel of our bodies melting into each other.

I want to absorb it all.

Bury it deep within me.

Time stops, and nothing and nobody else exists here in the dark cab of his truck.

I'm lost in his touch, allowing his lips to silence the thoughts in my head. The low moans from deep in his chest do their best to erase the knowledge that the crack already in my heart will be leaving this truck a little wider.

I'm letting instinct and need overrule logic.

But reminiscent of our brief collision in the pool, I whisper his name, and the sound of my voice breaks the spell we've both been under, causing him to come to his senses and pull away.

His hands still hold my face when he lightly presses his forehead to mine. All I can do is pray that I'm wrong. That the anguish already causing the nauseous feeling in my stomach is ill-founded, and what comes next won't be the end.

"I made a promise to my brother."

"And what was that?"

"Holding his hand, moments before he passed, Lance made me vow to love Ila with everything I had."

"And from what I've seen, you do."

"I do. She's my world. But I don't know how to give her everything and love another person. All my love is hers. I have no more to give."

"You're not even willing to try?"

"I'm not sure I have it in me."

"So you're just going to disregard your own heart until she's turned eighteen and is away at college?"

"Abby, you're all I think about."

He sounds as if the admission causes him physical pain.

"Glad it's not just me," I say, running my fingers through his hair.

"But how can I keep my promise to my brother and love her with everything I am if I fall for someone and have to share that love? I'm simply not willing to do it."

"And that's it. You won't even consider trying?"

"No."

And there it is.

His love for Ila is admirable, but he can't seem to see that there are different kinds of love. His love for his daughter

comes from a different place in his heart than the love he won't allow himself to feel for a partner in his life.

Not bothering to climb over the center console again, I reach to the passenger seat and grab my purse and then pull open the driver's side door handle, relieving the pain in my leg, wishing my heart would recover as easily. I not so deftly lift myself from his lap, and my feet find the dark pavement.

When I turn to look at him one last time, there is no hiding the torture he is choosing to put himself through. My heart breaks for him. It really does, but right here and now, I'm more focused on the pain in *my* chest as the fissure he's chiseled into it opens wide like a gaping wound. But I don't cry. I'm too mad for that.

"Well, if you ever figure it out, you know where to find me."

He doesn't try to stop me. Doesn't beg me to stay. Instead, he lets me walk away while he hides behind the steamed windows of his truck.

And for myself, that is exactly what I have to do.

Walk away.

He can't give me what I need.

What I deserve.

What he deserves.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

INSPIRED LILAC

Logan

“Look at her. When did she get so big?” Justin’s sister, Janelle, asks with her chin resting on my shoulder.

We’re watching Ila play with her friends as we wait for guests to arrive.

She’s seven today, and honestly, I’m not quite sure how we got here. My heart swells with pride as I watch how sweet she is with the other kids while taking control of their current activity. There was a different wind-up toy in each of her friend’s goody bags—yes, I made goody bags for the kids, and they’re damn good if I do say so myself—and Ila has organized a race between them.

She has them all lined up in a row and just yelled, “Wind your toys and on three, let go. One, two, three!”

“I ask myself that every single day.”

We both sigh, watching her.

She’s wearing her new lavender dress. Of course, it’s lavender. Janelle curled her hair this morning, so her usual light brown waves hang in big, bouncy curls.

She’s adorable.

“She looks so much like Lance,” Janelle says quietly.

“I know. I see him every time I look at her.”

“I can’t imagine how hard it must be.”

“As hard as it is, she’s worth it. I miss him so damn much, Janelle.”

“I know, sweetie. I know.”

She does know. We both lost our little brothers on the same day. We consoled each other in the days leading up to the funeral. She, her husband Russ, and their sons Connor and Ben came and stayed with me the night of the funeral. Janelle stayed for a week after while I adjusted to being a father.

I’m sure most people thought she and her husband would have been the natural choice to parent Ila, but Lance and Justin were insistent it be me. Before they had their will drawn up, they asked me if I would be Ila’s father if something were to happen to both of them, and of course, I said yes. Although, I never thought it would ever come to fruition. I mean, what were the chances?

Looking back at those first few months, I really didn’t think I was going to make it. But, standing here watching Ila, my daughter, with all of her friends, I wouldn’t want it any other way. If not Lance and Justin, I wouldn’t want anyone else to be her father. She has made me who I am today. This little girl has brought me challenges I could have never expected and more joy and laughter than I would have thought possible after losing both of her dads.

Until recently, I thought the love she filled my heart with was enough. Now, I can’t help but wonder if there isn’t room for someone else.

Not just for me but for Ila too.

A week ago, when Abby’s name appeared on my phone, I stared at her name for a solid minute, scared shitless to open her text. Yes, the week prior I had hand-delivered one of Ila’s party invitations—there was no way Ila was having a party without inviting her—and the instructions on the invites were for the RSVPs to be texted to me, and that is what she did. She simply RSVP’d.

ABBY

Please tell Ila I can't wait to attend her birthday party.

I had hoped that when Abby learned I had personally delivered her invitation, she would see the action for what it was. Me. Reaching out. Hoping to see her in person. Hoping to talk to her and tell her what an idiot I had been. When she didn't take my lame attempt at a not-so-grand gesture, I lost my nerve and hoped she would RSVP and hopefully say yes. I had also hoped—there had been a lot of hope on my part—she may ask for a gift idea, and then I would reply, and a conversation would start between us. It would be a way for the two of us to reconnect organically. I was hoping the invite would be the thing to open a door of communication because frankly, I've been too afraid to reach out to her after our interaction three weeks ago.

That night in my truck, she let me lay my shit on her, and she took it, letting me hold her while I cried.

I fucking cried.

That was a first for me since shortly after Lance died. I've tried to keep my shit together. To be strong for Ila and handle fatherhood and work and whatever else I manage to find time for. But after avoiding Abby in the restaurant, when all I wanted to do was grab her by the hand and take her somewhere, anywhere, where we could be alone the entire night, my emotions hovering just below the surface came bubbling up. No longer buried deep. As I told her about losing Lance and becoming Ila's one and only parent, I also heard myself denying all three of us the chance at something great.

And it hurt.

On so many levels.

But I didn't think there was any other way. I truly didn't.

Abby deserves more than what I thought I could give her.

I've done a lot of soul-searching since that night. I even confessed everything that had been going on in my head, and as much as I hated to admit it, my heart to Janelle, and she set me straight. She was honest with me, and as much as she respected how seriously I took the vow I made to Lance, she said I was taking it a bit too literally. She told me what a fool I had been and told me I better figure out how to fix it.

Greg also had no problem telling me how stubborn I was for missing out on a great person like Abby in daily text messages, reiterating the fact. After a couple of days, he simply resorted to memes letting The Rock, or Leonardo DiCaprio, tell me what a jerk I was. But the best was the one with Michael Scott from *The Office* that said, "Of all the absurd people, in all the absurd villages, in all the absurd worlds, you, stand alone, my friend."

Was he a dick about it? Sure.

Did I hear him loud and clear? I did.

I'm hoping after today's festivities are over, I can get some time alone with Abby to see if she really meant what she said. That if I ever found more love to give, I knew where to find her.

I just hope I'm not too late.

I've let a few weeks go by, and I'm sure she thinks I've moved on, but that couldn't be further from the truth. I think her not reaching out after I dropped off the invitation was a blessing in disguise. What I needed to say to Abby wasn't something I could rush. I really needed the time to get my head straight and catch it up to where my heart was.

Every bit of today's preparation has been with her in my mind.

Would she like the decorations inspired by her cupcake painting that holds a place of prominence above Ila's bed?

Would she like the giant cupcakes decorating the walls? Would she notice we've doused the house in different shades of purple, a color that will always remind me of Abby and Ila?

When I suggested it to Ila, I thought for sure she would want unicorns, but she loved the idea. Her only request was a unicorn cake. Cupcakes and purple everywhere else but a unicorn head for her cake.

If I'm being honest, we've gone a bit overboard, considering Abby will likely not even realize she is the inspiration.

Abby was on my mind when I got dressed. I'm just wearing a gray T-shirt and jeans, but I actually checked myself out from every angle my mirror would provide me. I'm a guy. I usually throw on my clothes, and I'm out the door. I know what a pair of jeans and a T-shirt look like on me, but today, it felt as though I was trying on a tuxedo and making sure it fit just right.

Greg showed up early to help me blow up balloons, and he said that Abby would be riding with Elyse. But they aren't here yet, so every time there's a knock on the door, I feel a little sick to my stomach and break out in a nervous sweat. I've actually had to step outside in the backyard a couple of times to cool off in the sweet late-September air.

I'm surprised when the door opens without a knock, and Elyse lets herself and Abby in.

Fuck, the woman is even more beautiful than any of the memories that have been playing like a movie marathon in my head these last weeks. I've never seen a woman wear a pair of jeans like Abby. Damn, if she doesn't wear them well. She's casual, with cream flats and a matching cream sweater hanging off one shoulder. Her hair hangs down her back in loose curls of a color that always reminds me of warm honey. She's not blond, and she's not brunette. She's perfect.

She's still in the entryway, yet I know exactly what she'll smell like if I get closer. Happiness.

Her crystal-blue eyes find me from across the room, but her lips thin in a small acknowledgment, not gifting me with an actual smile. A punch of regret hits me square in the gut, and I think I might be sick. I shouldn't have waited to reach out to her.

“Abby! You’re here!”

Ila sprints across the room, and Abby squats with her arms open for her to run into after setting down the very large gift bag in her hand.

“Happy Birthday, little lady! Thank you so much for inviting me,” I hear her say as I cross the room to greet her.

“I’m so excited you’re here. I want to show you my room.”

“Ila, what about your friends?” Abby asks, nodding her head in the direction of the kids in the middle of the room.

“They’ve already seen it,” she says. Her friends all but forgotten.

“Slow down, cupcake. Let Abby get through the door first,” I say, leaning in to give Elyse a hug hello.

Abby stands back up, and there are only inches separating us as she nervously plays with her necklace. She doesn’t trust which version of me she’s going to get. And there’s hurt in her eyes. After laying myself bare and literally crying on her shoulder, I rejected her that night in Sammy’s parking lot.

I let her walk away.

She has every right to be wary, given our history.

I hate that I’ve hurt her, and to be honest, the thought of letting her into our lives still scares the shit out of me, but I’m drawn to the woman. She is the flame, and I am the moth who can’t resist touching her. Now, with her here, in my home, I’m not going to resist touching her any longer.

Leaning forward to close the small bit of space between us, I take one of her hands in mine and kiss her cheek, whispering, “She’s been dying to show you her room. Her friends can wait.”

I pull back from her cheek but remain in her space.

Up close and personal.

Eye to eye.

Elyse's gasp doesn't slip past me, but I ignore her. I don't care if the entire party is watching us, not that there is an *us* yet, but I hope there will be by the end of the day.

I've been waiting three weeks for this day to come. There will be no more holding back.

Clearly surprised by what to her must seem like an intimate gesture coming from me, especially in front of a room full of people, she clears her throat and looks up at me with an ocean of emotion in her beautiful blue eyes.

"Okay," she says, still holding my hand but bending a bit to pick up Ila's present with her other. "Where should I put this?"

I give her hand a squeeze before letting go, and just as she had, I clear my own throat in order to find my voice again. Being in her orbit again has sparked the usual heat between us, but today, I am powerless against it. My walls have all come down, and I don't want to deny myself or her any longer. There will be no resisting or holding back.

"Here, I can take that for you."

She hands me the bag, and as soon as it's out of Abby's hand, Ila drags her to her room. And because I don't want to miss a moment, I follow them, avoiding eye contact with anyone else in the room. I can feel everyone looking at me. And I couldn't care less.

Just as my foot hits the first stair on the way to the second floor, Elyse takes the gift bag out of my hand. "Here, I'll take that, lover boy."

Shaking my head, I don't deny her accusation and follow the girls up to Ila's room. I'm a couple of steps away when I hear Abby's reaction.

"Oh, Ila. I love it! It's so you!"

Resting my shoulder against the door jam, I watch as Ila's face beams with pride and pure elation that Abby approves.

Ila climbs on her bed and jumps up and down in front of Abby's cupcake painting. "First thing, Abby! First thing!?"

Abby plays along and says, “You hung my painting above your bed.”

“Yep. Doesn’t it look great?” Ila says, still jumping and out of breath.

“It looks great. I think we did a pretty good job picking the color. It matches your bedding perfectly. And I love your paint colors. Very pretty.”

“The lavender is called Inspired Lilac,” I say, to be a part of the conversation.

“It’s very subtle. Good choice,” she says casually as she walks around the room, taking everything in.

“Thanks.”

We may be only talking about paint colors, but at least we’re talking.

I’ll take it.

Ila takes Abby by the hand and walks her around to the other side of her bed to her nightstand table and then picks up the framed picture of my brother and his husband and hands it to her new bestie.

“This is the picture I told you about.”

Abby sits on the purple bed adorned with unicorn pillows and the sweet handmade pink and purple blanket that Justin’s mom made for Ila when she was first born, as Ila climbs up next to her and points at the picture.

“This is Daddy’s little brother, Lance.”

“He’s very handsome.” Abby looks over her shoulder at me with watery eyes. “He looks just like your dad.”

She’s right, Lance was handsome, and he did look like me. Same eyes and nose and we wore our hair the same, but he had that special something about him. He was a heartbreaker.

She’s doing her best to keep her emotions in check because she knows the importance of Ila showing her this picture.

And so do I.

It shows me how much Abby means to my little girl. And my heart is warmed because it's more than obvious that Abby feels the significance of this gesture too.

“And this is his husband and my other daddy, Justin.” Ila is on her knees, leaning against Abby's side with her hand on her shoulder. “These are my two birdies.”

Hearing Ila talk so openly with Abby confirms everything that's been on my mind.

And in my heart.

Not only is Abby the one for me but I think the same goes for Ila.

“Thank you for sharing this with me, Ila. It means a lot,” she says, pulling her into a hug.

“Welcome. Wanna see my—”

“Ila! Where are you, birthday girl?”

“Grandma!”

She's off her bed and running out of the room and down the stairs to Justin's mom, who must have just arrived.

“Well, now that Grandma and Grandpa are here, I guess we can get this party started,” I say, suddenly clueless about what else to say to the woman I've been waiting to see all day.

She stands and sets the picture back on the bedside table. “She seems pretty excited to see them. It's sweet.”

“Almost as excited as she was to see you.”

The corners of her mouth lift ever so slightly, but she looks down as she walks out of the room, not looking at me, throwing me off-kilter because her usual sunshine has dimmed, and I'm pretty sure it's because of me. When I open my mouth to say I'd like to talk to her later, nothing comes out.

And just like that, I let her walk away.

Again.

For the past half hour, the kids have been playing games, and I've been playing the part of referee, judge, prize presenter, and proud father. I feel like I might have done some of this parenting thing right after all. It's not something I feel often. My cupcake is kind and funny. Helpful and fair. I can't help but watch her with my chest puffed out with pride and a smile plastered on my face.

Several times during especially adorable moments, I would look across the room and catch Abby smiling too. The connection between us had her finding me during those moments as well, and sharing them with her felt more than right. It was natural. There was nobody else I wanted to share the day with more.

Only her.

But we haven't talked again. Not because I've been too busy hosting, but because I'm scared shitless she's going to tell me I'm too late.

I'm in the kitchen strategically placing candles on a unicorn head, with Greg annoyingly hovering behind me, and I swat at his face in an attempt to shoo him away.

"What are you doing, man?" I ask as I feel his hot breath on my ear. "Why are you being a creeper?"

"Why aren't you talking to her?"

My stomach drops, and it's not because his nasty breath is on my ear once again, even though that is discomforting as fuck, but because I instantly know what he's talking about.

"Who?"

"Nice try."

He puts his hand in front of my face so I can see when he points into the dining room where Ila and Abby are talking up a storm. I don't know what about, but the smiles on their faces are better than oxygen.

I'm placing the seventh candle, doing my best to ignore him, when he creepily whispers again. "Don't let a good thing go because you're scared, Logan."

I wipe his sweaty breath off my ear. "That is really gross, and you don't know what you're talking about."

I light the first candle.

"You and Ila both deserve to be loved."

My throat goes dry, and nothing comes out in reply because he's right.

"Look how happy she is. You're going to deny yourself and Ila happiness like that because you've decided what your life will look like? Leaving no room for change or flexibility? Or most importantly, love."

"Wow, marriage has really done a number on you," I say, lighting the final candle on the unicorn's head.

"If only you could be as lucky as me, Logan. If I were you, I'd make a wish on these candles that you find the same luck."

My lucky grasshopper is in the other room, but I don't share that with him.

"Thanks for the advice, Love Guru, but it's time to sing."

I carry the cake, Greg walking beside me as we join the party in the dining room. When Ila notices, her face beams with delight. Everyone turns in our direction, including Abby, whose smiling face knocks the wind out of me. Still, I stay steady as I pass her, walking around the table to place the cake in front of my beautiful seven-year-old.

It's times like this when I usually feel like a fraud.

Playing the role of father, when deep down I know it shouldn't be me; it should be Lance and Justin. Today that usual feeling is missing. A weight has lifted.

Clearing my throat, I sing the first note of "Happy Birthday," but my voice fades, strangled with emotion, as the room joins in. Someone turns the lights down, so Ila's face glows with the flickering candlelight and glee dances in her

eyes. She doesn't feel the embarrassment most adults feel when all the attention is on them. She still has the youthful love of attention and is so far void of the insecurity that unfortunately grips many of us with age.

The song ends, and as she blows out her candles, I may or may not make my own wish, as Greg suggested, but I'll never tell.

The crowd erupts in cheers after the candles go out, and Elyse and Abby do me the favor of taking the cake to the kitchen to slice it up for our guests while I get the gifts ready for opening in the living room.

People filter into the living room with their cake, and adults find their seats while the kids eat at the dining room table. Just watching the adults eat in the room Ila and I rarely ever use is sending me into internal convulsions of panic. I feel the tension in my forehead as I watch people eat on my light gray couches. Turning my back on them, I pretend to busy myself with the gifts and force myself to relax my face.

"How ya doin', Dad?" Janelle says, rubbing a comforting circle on my back.

"Watching these people eat that cake covered in frosting with all the colors of the damn rainbow on it is a slow, painful torture. You know that?"

"Ah, still as uptight as ever. Glad to see some things never change."

"Shut up," I kid, bumping her shoulder with mine.

She wraps an arm around my waist, hugging me from the side. "I'm so glad you're here. These big days are the hardest," I whisper for her ears only.

"I know."

I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her in closer. She doesn't need to say anything else. Janelle understands as much as anyone could. She's the person I called in the middle of the night when Ila was teething and cried until morning. The one I would call on video to show her a diaper rash, or

more often, Ila's first words or steps or to watch us pull out her loose teeth.

I hear a little boy yell, "Presents!" and turn around to face my frosting-wielding guests. Much to my surprise, Abby stands in the middle of the room with a handful of empty plates and plastic forks, but her face...her face is crestfallen. The tension is back in my brow, and I can't help but wonder what's happened in the few minutes since I last saw her.

She rips her blue gaze from mine and leaves the room before I can ask. Ila takes her place in the ribbon-clad chair we've tied balloons to, and once again, my role as the host takes over. Instead of following Abby to see what's wrong, my duty takes priority because it's time to open presents.

Justin's mom is taking notes on who the gifts are from and what they were while Janelle and I push gifts her way and watch from the side. For a seven-year-old, she is gracious and appreciative, everything a parent could wish for. Between the revealing of gifts, I sneak glances at Abby, who still hasn't seemed to have recovered from whatever is bothering her.

Ila is politely and carefully opening gift number five when Janelle snakes her arm through mine and leans her head on my shoulder, taking in the little girl who has brought so much light into our lives. I rub my hand over hers, and we watch with mutual pride.

When I glance across the room at Abby, my heart stops, and the urge to hurdle over the kids on the floor to get to her is nearly impossible to tamper down. But when I see the pain on her face and her watery eyes, I feel crippled with the need to fix whatever's hurting her.

Her eyes flicker down to my hand on Janelle's, and I get it. I'm late to the party, but I see what's upset her. My stomach begins to turn with nausea, and dizziness spots my vision.

She thinks I've moved on with Janelle.

Found the more I wasn't willing to give her.

Panic.

It grips me.

Adrenaline races through my veins as Abby's eyes stay on mine, and I slowly and subtly shake my head, hoping she'll understand she's misreading the situation. As rude as it may be, I drop my hand from Janelle's and pull my arm from hers. Plowing through the kids to get to Abby isn't an option, but removing myself from Janelle's touch is.

Abby whispers something to Elyse and then quietly leaves the room just as Ila exclaims, "Daddy! Look at the painting Abby made of me! And puppies!"

Fighting the urge to run after her, I turn my focus to Ila, who has three small stuffed Corgis in her lap and is holding up what I am pretty sure is the painting Abby had started the day we spent at her studio that she wouldn't let us see.

Ila is sitting in the grass with Larry, Moe, and Curly sleeping next to her with the detail of a cupcake on her white T-shirt. To the side of her is a tall tree whose branches bloom with beautiful lavender flowers that extend over the top of the canvas and above Ila and the dogs. Sitting on one of the branches are two birds.

Justin and Lance watching over their little girl.

Always with her.

Never truly gone.

Ila searches the room for Abby to thank her, but she comes up short. I bend down in front of Ila and feel sick when I explain Abby had to leave. The vise around my heart squeezes tighter because I know the frown on Ila's face is because I wasn't wise enough to introduce Abby to Janelle. That I've been in my head too much all day, I haven't spoken to her since she walked out of Ila's bedroom. It's because of me she isn't here to see the happiness Ila felt when she opened her gift from her.

"We'll call and thank her later, okay?"

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Okay." She recovers and is on to the next present.

“I’m gonna move this out of the way so it doesn’t get damaged, okay?” I say, taking the picture with me as I stand. She nods her agreement, and as I study the painting closer, I notice a small grasshopper also watching over them on the grass near Ila and the dogs.

Abby.

It’s her way of telling Ila she’ll always be there for her, even if she isn’t in our life.

Fuck.

This woman is everything.

And she just left with tears in her eyes.

Because I’m a fool.

The party has cleared out, the kitchen is clean, and Ila is in bed with her stuffed versions of Greg’s three stooges tucked in beside her, while Janelle, Russ, and the boys are watching a movie in the family room. I’m glad they’re staying at our place for the weekend. Justin’s parents are staying at a hotel in Portland. It’s good for Ila to have her family around, even if it’s just for a couple of days.

“You ready?”

My phone sits in my hand with Abby’s contact pulled up. I’m scared shitless to make the call I promised Ila we would make.

“Yep.”

I press the call button and put the phone on speaker. It seems to ring forever when, in reality, it only rings three times before a defeated voice answers.

“Hey.”

The fact that she answered when she saw it was me calling gives my heart a glimmer of hope.

“Abby, it’s me, Ila, and my daddy.”

“Oh, hello, sweetheart.” Her voice perks up after hearing Ila’s. “How was the rest of your party? I’m so sorry I had to leave.”

“It was so much fun!”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. You sure know how to throw a fantastic party, kiddo.”

“Thanks! Didn’t Daddy do a good job with the balloons?”

“Hmm...”

“Thank you for my painting. It’s so pretty! I’m going to hang it in my room with my cupcake.”

“I’m so glad you like it.”

“Oh, I did, and the stuffies. I have them in bed with me right now. Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure, sweetie.”

“I’m so glad I got to show you my room.”

“Me too, Ila. It was really nice to see you again.”

“You sound sad.”

Leave it to a kid to keep it real and call an adult out. If only Ila didn’t look sad, too.

“No, no. Just tired. Thank you for calling.”

I can tell she wants to end the call, so I cut in, taking the phone off speaker. “Hey, Abby, just one sec.”

“Good night, birthday girl. I hope you had a good day and your birthday wish comes true. Love you.” I place a kiss on her forehead and step away toward her door.

“I love you too. Thank you for my purple party.”

“You’re welcome, cupcake.”

I turn off her light and walk down the dark hallway to my room, closing the door behind me, but I don’t turn the light on.

“Abby, you still there?”

“Yes.”

She doesn't sound like she wants to be.

“It was really great to see you today. Thanks for coming.”

“It was for Ila, not you.”

Shit, she's pissed.

“Hey, I just wanted to clear something up.”

Silence comes from the other end of the line,

“Abby, listen, can I come over? I'd like to talk if you have the time?”

There's a knocking sound in the background, and Abby says, “Hang on, there's someone at the door.”

The line is quiet, and then I hear the clank of her deadbolt unlocking, and then a whoosh of air leaves my lungs, and ice shoots through my veins when I hear Abby speak.

“Levi, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Can we talk?”

What the fuck?

“Logan, I have to go.”

Uh, hell no!

“Abby—”

The line clicks off, and she's gone.

What the actual fuck?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I CAN TAKE IT FROM HERE

Abby

“Levi, what are you doing here?”

“I left her.”

He steps inside without an invitation.

“Okay?”

“I was an idiot and didn’t realize how lucky I was to have you. I should have never let you go.”

Unease fills my belly when he closes the door behind him.

“But you did. And who said you could come in?”

“Can we just try to be friends again?”

“Friends?”

“Like we used to be. We can take it slow. Take our time getting back to what we were.”

“Did you recently suffer some kind of head injury?”

“Be nice.”

He reaches a hand out to me, but I pull it back in disgust and shock. He is the last person I want touching me.

What the hell is going on?

“You left me for another woman, and you want me to be nice?”

“I made a mistake. It was a lapse in judgment.”

A mistake. A lapse in judgment. Seems to be all I am to men these days.

I can see his lips continue to move, but all I hear is the pounding in my ears.

“Get out,” I order matter-of-factly.

He doesn't move, but I will not allow him to stay here. No more lapses in judgment on my part, either.

Done that.

Been there.

Not again.

Stepping around him, I throw open the door, and my heart stops.

“Hi.”

Logan stands on my front step, his short hair a mess from his hands that have been running through it on his way here.

I may stand speechless and in shock, but Levi has full function of his faculties as he steps in the doorway, blocking me from Logan's view. “Well, if it isn't the best man.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Logan's question shakes me out of my stunned state. Now I'm pissed at both of them.

Pushing Levi out of the entrance and onto the front step with Logan I take charge of the situation. “That's a good question, Logan. What exactly are you doing here?”

He takes Levi's place in the doorway. “Nice try, Abby. You know exactly why I'm here.”

“If only I did.”

“You told me to find you when—”

“Hey, asshole. I was here first.”

He's kidding. Right?

“Listen, you piece of shit. Abby doesn’t need you coming around and upsetting her. I can take it from here.”

He can take it from here? Am I in the Twilight Zone?

“Excuse me?” I chime in, but they’ve both forgotten I’m here as they square off with one another. Chests puffed up like peacocks to see who has the biggest plume of feathers.

Logan is several inches taller and much bulkier than Levi. He could take him in a heartbeat, but Levi isn’t backing down.

“You know what they say about first love. It never truly goes away. She’ll always be mine.”

“Sorry to tell you this, but she’s gotten over you and under me. On more than one occasion. I don’t think your theory really pans out, buddy.”

What the actual fuck?

Logan slams the door shut, locking the deadbolt. I take several steps back. He takes a breath before turning to face me.

I’m twitching with rage, opening and closing my fists in an effort to rein it in.

“Who do you think you are?”

I take a step closer.

“Actually, wait. First, what are you even doing here?”

“I’m a colossal fool.”

“No shit.”

“When I heard his voice on the other end of the line, I saw red, and I couldn’t get here fast enough. I’ve been waiting for a moment alone to talk to you all day.”

“Is this your not-so-romantic way of telling me you’ve found some love deep down in that teeny tiny heart of yours for someone else, but it’s just not me?”

“Abby...”

His hesitation is all I need to hear.

“No, you don’t get to do this again.” I point right at him and take another step toward him, my finger’s centimeters away from actually poking him in the chest. “The thought of me with another man sends you into a testosterone-filled rage, and now you want me? This is just like that night at the bar. I will not give myself to you only for you to change your mind.”

“I know it looks like that, but this is different. I—”

“No! You don’t get to come over here, pee on me, and stake your claim. You say that’s not what this is, but it sure feels like it. If you can’t have me, nobody can.”

“I do have it in me, Abby. I want us to give this a try. Let me prove it to you.”

His voice is resolute while his eyes plead for my mercy, but my head is a mess.

“Not tonight, Logan. I think you need to leave.”

“Please.”

“You know what? Today has been a lot. First, the whiplash you gave me with your warm welcome when I arrived at the party, then you kept your distance from me, and I thought maybe you were just busy, so I tried not to take it personally. That is, until it was all explained when I got the pleasure of seeing you with that blonde. What is it with men and bleach blondes?” I question aloud, but don’t want an actual answer. “Then Levi shows up to tell me that his leaving me for another woman was a mistake. No, wait, a lapse in judgment.”

His eyes widen at this.

“Then you show up to mark your territory. It’s all just too much, and I think it’s best you leave before I have my own lapse in judgment.”

“There is no blonde, Abby.”

“Listen, I really don’t want to play this game with you. I’m over it.” I pull open the door, and he obligingly steps through it but doesn’t walk away.

Facing me with his hands in the front pockets of his jeans, he says. “I’ll go, but I’m also going to prove to you that I want

you. I want there to be an us.”

I don't slam the door in his face, but I do slowly, purposely close it. I go through the steps of locking the deadbolt and the lock on the doorknob, but I don't have the energy to look through the peephole to see if he's still standing there.

Exhaustion has settled into my bones, and I shuffle my way to my room. Flicking the light switches on the various walls along the way, I douse the house into darkness.

I don't bother turning the light on in my room. Luckily, I'm already in leggings and a tank so I just fall into bed. But the room lights up with all the phone notifications on my phone.

Levi's name is on the screen, but I reject the call.

Once the screen clears, I see two text messages.

ELYSE

CALL ME!!!!

LOGAN

I'm ready to talk whenever you are. I'll wait.
However long it takes.

I'd be lying if I said Logan's message wasn't calling to me. That I didn't want to hear what he had to say. But I'm pissed and tired. I don't have it in me tonight.

For some reason, I knew in my gut that going to that party today was a bad idea. I knew it would do damage to my heart, but Ila was worth it.

I'm just about to call Elyse when more notifications come in.

LOGAN

There was always room for you. I was just scared.

This time, I reply.

ABBY

Were you scared when you left me on the dance floor?

ABBY

When you kissed me in the elevator and sent me on my way?

ABBY

When you kissed me in the pool?

ABBY

When you fucked me out of your senses?

Levi calls again, and of course, I continue to ignore him.

ELYSE

You okay?

I dial Elyse to see what's going on.

She answers on the first ring. “Hey. You okay? Is Logan still there?”

“What?”

“Logan called me on the way to your place.”

“He called you?”

“He did. He’s got it bad for you, girl. After you left the party, he and I chatted.”

“You what?”

“You heard me. He knows what a fool he’s been, and he had planned on having a serious conversation with you after the party today. But you bailed.”

“It was too hard. Seeing him with that woman.”

“What woman?”

“The woman with the short blond bob who was all over him.”

“Janelle?”

“Well, he didn’t exactly introduce me to her.”

“Abby, that was Justin’s sister. Ila’s aunt. Her husband and two teenage sons were also there. I’m sure it was a hard day for both of them. A big reminder of the little brothers they had lost.”

My hand covers my mouth as tears water my eyes.

“Shit, Elyse. I didn’t even think about that. I’m so selfish.”

“Nah, you’re just in love and confused.”

“Confused, yes. In love, not so sure. That’s a pretty big word.”

“Big and powerful.”

“You should have seen the two of them,” I say, changing the subject of the L-word and filling her in on what happened when Logan arrived.

All the while, Levi keeps calling. If he thinks I’m ever going to pick up, he is living in a fantasy land.

After our call, when I've promised Elyse to hear Logan out, I'm exhausted and silence my phone and leave it charging upside down, so the incessant glow from the screen doesn't haunt me while I sleep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THIS IS A LOT FOR A MONDAY MORNING

Abby

My alarm goes off at its regularly scheduled time, and after the restless night I had, there will be no bouncing out of bed like I usually do. On days like today, I'm glad I'm my own boss and can get to the office when I get there.

Doing my best to stretch myself awake, I roll onto my side, looking at my phone like it's alive and might bite me if I touch it. Already feeling annoyed that I know there will be missed calls from Levi and afraid there won't be any from Logan.

Unplugging the device, I take a deep breath and flip it over, and it's decidedly too early for the pain in my stomach to grip me as it does.

Twenty-one missed calls.

Twenty voicemails.

Nine text messages.

LEVI

Why won't you pick up?

LEVI

Seriously?

LEVI

Call me!

LOGAN

Yes.

In my morning stupor, I have to scroll back to see what Logan's "yes" is in reference to. When I reread my angry message and then scroll back to his simple yes, my mouth drops open, and my head whirls with confusion as my heart squeezes tight.

Yes? He is admitting getting too close to me scared him when he left me on the dance floor and kissed me in the elevator and in the pool. My hands shake as I continue to scroll through my messages.

LOGAN

Since you won't pick up, you leave me no choice but to leave voicemails.

LOGAN

Did you know you can leave up to three minutes per message?

LOGAN

Two messages left so far. Don't say I didn't warn you.

LOGAN

Abby, this is ridiculous. Please pick up.

LOGAN

Your breakfast is outside.

My breakfast is outside? This last message he left about ten minutes ago, and I can't resist checking to see if it's true. Not so gracefully, I roll myself out of bed, throw my favorite fuzzy gray sweater on over my tank and leggings, and stumble to the front door. Checking the peephole first to make sure the man himself isn't my breakfast, the coast appears to be clear.

Apprehensively, I open the door and find a small white box with a bouquet of sunflowers lying next to it.

Quickly, I pick up the gifts and close the door, fearful he's waiting for me to open the door so he can surprise me and try to talk.

I take the flowers and the box back to the sanctuary of my bedroom and crawl into bed, pulling the comforter around my waist. I open the box to find my favorite raspberry and white chocolate scone from Elka Bees, along with a small folded piece of paper.

*Please listen to my voicemails. Every
word is true.*

Love, Logan

Love.

Love?

First his yes, and now his love?

Am I still asleep?

Dreaming?

My shaking fingers go to my messages and stutter when the long list of eighteen voicemails with Logan's name attached pop onto my screen. There are three from Levi that I delete without opening. Then I scroll through all eighteen voicemails with Logan's name attached and start with the first one he left, putting the phone on speaker as the message begins to play. Logan speaks slowly. Almost as though he wants to be sure I hear every word clearly, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

“Abby, first things first. The blonde you saw me with at the party was Justin’s sister. Her husband and sons are staying with me, and I assure you there is nothing but family between us. She may live in Colorado, but she has been the person I lean on these last six and a half years. Please know there is no other woman in my life. Well, there hadn’t been until you and your poor driving skills caused our paths to collide. Since that moment, I’ve been consumed by—”

The message cuts off, and my thumb cannot move over the screen fast enough to get to the next message so I can hear him confess what or who consumes him.

“Well, three minutes goes faster than you’d think. All I can say is even though the entire situation pissed me off, and I was rude to you, something about you caught my attention on the side of the road that day.” He’s speaking much faster now. *“When I walked into that rehearsal, and you turned around in your lavender dress...do you remember I said, ‘shit’ and Ila scolded me? Maybe you don’t remember, but I remember everything when it comes to you, Abby. Anyway, I didn’t curse because I was unhappy to see you. It was because I had been cursing myself since you had pulled away an hour before thinking about how rude I had been to you. I was embarrassed.”*

I click on the next message like an addict needing her next fix.

“Anyway, the embarrassment was nothing compared to what I felt when I shook your hand. I don’t know about you, but I felt it then. That handshake scared the piss out of me. I knew touching you was off-limits because if a handshake did what it did to me, then there was no way I could chance anything more. Abby, my attraction to you was instant, but seeing the way Ila took to you scared me more than anything. She took to you the moment you complimented her dress. All I could picture was heartbreak for the both of us, and there was no way I was willing to put—”

My finger shakes as I hover over the button to listen to the next message, making sure I don’t accidentally delete any of them. I have a feeling I’m going to need to listen to these again.

“Honestly, if you don’t pick up soon, this is going to take all damn night. But you mentioned some instances I made you feel like shit, and Abby, that just won’t do. You deserve to know why I treated you the way I did. So let’s cut to you in the goddamn outfit you were wearing when you went to look for your phone. Abby, what the fuck were you thinking? Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror? I was so irrationally pissed at you. I hated that the other guys were seeing your nipples poking out through the thin silk you had on, and your legs were on full display, and well, fuck, I just wanted you out of their line of sight and getting you in that elevator was all I could come up with. Yes, I had your phone, and I could have just given it to you like I had planned on doing, but no, I treated you like shit to keep myself from touch—”

What the hell? Logan has wanted me since the first handshake, and he was a dick to me in the elevator because it pissed him off the other guys saw too much of me? I have to shrug my

sweater off because I'm getting all hot and bothered by his sexy confessions.

“I can't believe you're still not answering. You really are a cruel woman. On the day of the wedding, when Elyse walked out in her wedding dress, I thought she looked beautiful, but when I saw you and Ila holding hands in your dresses, you took my breath away. Yes, Ila looked adorable, but Abby, I would think you would know it's rude to outshine the bride on her special day. Because that's what you did. I had never seen anyone so beautiful, and I knew if I touched you or had to dance with you, I would want more. Well, isn't that just what happened? I had to walk you down the aisle, didn't I? Did you know that when you put your arm through mine, your breast grazed my arm, and you gave me a semi right before we had to walk down the aisle? I wasn't that sensitive to a female's touch when I was thirteen, but that's what you do to me. But dancing with you. Do you have any idea how good you smell? It's like —”

“Abby, answer your fucking phone!”

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't beaming ear to ear after listening to his frustration and maybe a little wet listening to him describe how badly he wanted to touch me.

“Okay, I've started this, and I finish what I start, so I guess I'll keep going. I don't remember where we left off, but let's skip to seeing you talking to your dickhead ex. After the girls told me how he treated you, I was out of my head. So much so that I dragged you onto the dance floor, and Abby, that whole situation really fucked me up. Touching you. How do I put this? Screw it, it can't get any more embarrassing than what I've already said. Abby, I was hard as a rock in front of hundreds of people. I was so close to kissing you right there in front of everyone. In front of Ila. So close that when I saw Levi

had left, and I had accomplished my mission of getting him away from you, I knew I had to save myself because I was going to maul you right—”

“No! It was just getting good!”

“Fuck!”

Oh, he’s mad.

“Abby, please answer your phone.”

None of this is funny, but I can’t help but giggle.

“You mentioned the elevator.” He goes quiet for a long spell before he continues. “I know I messed up. I do. And I know it sounds asinine, but I was trying to piss you off. Trying to push you away. I figured you hated me, so I never imagined you would say you had wanted me to touch you, but when you did, I couldn’t resist. I lost what little self-control I had left. I had to taste you. Feel you. And thank God those elevator doors opened when they did because I would have taken it way too far. Even if we both wanted—”

“Stupid voicemail! God, yes! I wanted it!” I scream at my phone.

“Why won’t she fucking pick up?”

“Sorry,” I say to the desperate man on the other end of the phone in my hand.

There’s a thirty-minute gap in time before the next message.

“The pool. I don’t really know what to say. I watched you swim a couple of laps. Then I continued watching you as you just floated there. I could tell you were watching the stars. You were so at peace. God, I was jealous. I haven’t felt at peace like that in so long, Abby. You are this happy ray of sunshine who always wears a smile and sees the bright side of things. Being around you makes me feel lighter. And even if I didn’t show it, happier. You really are a fucking grasshopper, nothing but good vibes. When you realized I was there, I told myself to get up and leave. Originally because I didn’t think I could handle watching you walk out of the pool in just your swimsuit, but as you relaxed against the pool and met my stare, it happened again. The need to touch you was so strong that I took what I needed from you. Until you said my name. Abby, you—”

I drop my phone and walk several circles around my room, unable to find the nerve to push the play button on the next message.

Whiplash.

That’s what this feels like.

I’m so used to the closed-off man. The grump. The asshole. Listening to him open up and share the way he feels has thrown me for a loop.

I’m sweaty.

Shaky.

Excited.

Scared.

And... So. Turned. On.

The feel of my hair on my neck is too much to take. I grab one of many random hair ties on my bedside table and throw my hair up into a messy bun in the hopes it helps cool me off and, in turn, helps me keep a cool head about everything Logan is saying.

Kneeling on the side of the bed, I hit play and put the phone on speaker once again.

“Honestly, Abby. You really know how to make a man work.”

If only I had intentionally known he was leaving all these messages. He’s giving me too much credit, but however we got here, it was worth it.

“Okay, back to the pool. When you said my name. Scratch that. When you moaned my name, Abby, it nearly undid me. I knew that if I didn’t let you go right then and there, I never would. Then well, the next morning, I was back to my usual dickhead ways, but the madder you got, the more I wanted to kiss you, and I was about to when—”

Gah! C’mon!

“Jesus. This is ridiculous! Okay, so if you haven’t figured it out by now, the moral of the story is that I’ve wanted you since the first day I met you. I’ve also tried to push you away and treated you poorly. It was self-preservation, Abby. I’ve lost too many people I love. The thought of loving a person as hard as I knew I could love you if I let you in was too fucking scary. Too much of a risk. If I loved you and you broke my heart, I would break my vow. Because there is no way I could love Ila with everything I am if you had walked away with my heart. The night at the bar when that asshole was touching you, I lost all sense once again. But that night, finally having you. Okay, I

know we had only known each other a matter of days, but those were some intense days, were they not? After—”

“Abby, I swear to God, if you delete these messages without listening to them...”

He releases a heavy breath, only to inhale and exhale again.

“Being with you was more than I could have imagined. But crawling back in bed with you later in the night. Being wrapped up in you. Abby, I knew right then I wanted more than a night with you. But when you started packing to go back to your place. My chest hurt.”

I can hear the pain in his voice as though he’s feeling it all over again. He means what he’s saying.

“I felt like I was drowning. The thought of you leaving had me all twisted up, just like I had feared it would. But that Saturday. The entire day and night were perfect. Then I ghosted you. God, Abby.”

This is all too much. I lay down on the floor, press play, and set the phone on my chest. The next voicemail begins, but heavy breathing is all I hear for the first twenty or thirty seconds. Well, that and the thunderous pounding of my heart. But when he starts talking again, his voice vibrates through my body with the phone on my chest like it is.

“That night in my truck. Abby, you let me lay my shit on you. You took it. You listened, and what did I do? I told you there wasn’t room for you in my life. I knew then I was hurting you,

and trust me, it killed me. The thing is, as much as I know it was a shitty thing to do, I'm glad I did it."

Is that so?

"Hear me out. It hurt me too. Having you in my arms and then letting you walk away didn't sit well with me. This time, it felt incredibly wrong. When I dropped off the birthday invitation to you a week later, I stayed glued to my phone, waiting for your RSVP. Hoping it would strike up a conversation. It didn't, but it did give me time to figure out what I wanted to say to you when I saw you next. Then there you were, and I freaked out a little, and then you—"

"Last one, Abby. It's after two, and you're likely going to ask for a restraining order in the morning at this rate. What I've been trying to say is I've been an ass. Even if for reasons that made sense in my brain at the time. I want you, Abby. I need you. And I know it's too soon to use "that" word, but I know that's what this is. But we aren't even speaking at the moment, and the last thing I want to do is scare you away. But I sure would like to talk about it. I miss you. I miss your laughter. I miss the way you smell. And the paint I find randomly in your hair, on your hands, and covering your clothes. And your grasshopper neck—"

"Abby, please call me."

Whoa.

I know I just woke up, but I'm emotionally exhausted and can't seem to make myself move from my spot on the floor.

If I'm not mistaken, Logan Shockley just told me he loves me. The realization causes me to giggle, stomp my feet, and smile so hard my face hurts.

It feels good, but it doesn't erase everything that's happened between us. It also doesn't erase the fact that what he said is true. If we try this and it doesn't work, it's not just the two of us involved. It's Ila's heart on the line as well.

It's nice not to be confused anymore, but it doesn't mean I'm not now scared to death at the prospect of having something with him. And Ila.

No sooner does the fear creep in does the reminder that he feels "that word" for me squeeze my heart, sending a bolt of energy through me.

All I want to do is listen to his messages on a loop. Even though I'm the boss, I have a meeting with a new client in an hour, and I have to get my butt in the shower and to the studio. I know the right thing to do is to return his calls, but I need the shower and the drive to work to let his confessions sink in.

To sort through my feelings.

If I were to call him back right now, I wouldn't say the right thing.

I want to be sure.

And more than anything else, I don't want to mess this up.

This is a lot for a Monday morning.

Cara walks into my office, arms full, carrying a basket. Her eyes are full of surprise, and her smile is huge. I point at my earbuds, letting her know I'm still on my call. My third conference call of the day. I glance at the time on my laptop. It's already noon. How did that happen?

"I think we've got some great ideas here, and I really like the direction you're going, Mr. Batiste. Let me put some mock-ups together, and I'll have those to you in the next forty-eight hours."

"What is that?" I mouth to her while my client says goodbye. She just shrugs her reply.

“Okay, thank you for trusting me with this project. I promise not to let you down. Have a great day.”

My finger hovers over the red button that will end our call, and as soon as I’m all clear, I hit the button, pull my earbuds out of my ears, and close my laptop. I stare at Cara as though she’s carrying a bomb or something.

“What is that?”

“I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure I know who it’s from.”

I filled her in on the events of the past twenty-four hours between calls. To say she is Team Logan would be an understatement. She went through all the same emotions I did listening to his messages. Only she doesn’t seem to have any of the fear. Just the excitement and enthusiasm.

I know it was wrong to let her listen to his messages, but there was no way I could do them justice, and I trust her.

She places the basket on my desk. “Card first, grasshopper.”

Heat rushes up my chest to my face at the sound of his nickname for me. When I reach for the card and see *Grasshopper* written across the front of the envelope, my free hand reaches for the circular charm on my necklace.

“Cara, what is happening?” I ask her, the card hanging from my shaking fingers.

“The man is in love with you, silly. Open the card, please.”

I peel open the envelope too slowly for Cara because she is groaning in frustration.

Abby,

I’ll wait as long as you need me to.

I haven't been able to get your sweet taste out of my system since that first kiss in the elevator. Thought I would return the favor.

Hope you like mint chocolate chip, Grasshopper.

Love, Logan

“Holy shit.”

“What? Give it to me!”

I know it's personal, but I can't deal with all of this on my own, so I hand the card to Cara and peel back the cellophane covering the basket. Inside is an assortment of green desserts. Brownies, cupcakes, cookies, cake pops. You name it, and there is a matching chocolate and green treat inside.

“Grasshopper. Like grasshopper pie. Oh, he's good.” His biggest cheerleader pipes in.

“That he is.”

“In more ways than one, if I remember your recollection of your time between the sheets correctly.”

I burst into a fit of giggles. “Shut up.”

“What?”

“Help me!”

“Help you what? Be happy because a wonderful man is wooing the hell out of you?”

“I know, but it's such a one-eighty from what I'm used to with him.”

“Isn't it what you wanted?”

“It is.”

“Then embrace it.”

She reaches in to take a brownie, but I stop her. “Wait.”

I snap a picture and send it in a text to Logan with a simple thank you, pressing send before I chicken out. Then toss the phone on the desk as though it's about to burn the skin off my hand.

It's not much of a response, considering everything he's put out there, but it's what I can give right now.

"Cara, what if he's the one?"

"I think he is."

"It would be an instant family."

"It would, but luckily you love his kid as much as you love him."

"I never said I loved him."

"You don't have to."

"This is big."

"It is. You might even say life-changing."

"Am I ready for this kind of change?"

"I don't know, are you?"

"You're a tremendous help, you know that?"

"You don't need my help with this one. This is all you, girl. You *will*, however, need my help with the back-to-back birthday parties coming in this afternoon. Now, can I have a brownie or what?"

It's already eight o'clock when I get home, and I am absolutely spent.

What a day. We had two people call in sick, which meant Cara and I ran everything in the studio. My brain is a mess from overthinking every word Logan said in his messages to his sexy card to the thought of the possibility of an instant family. While also thinking about my new graphic design

projects. I should stay up late to work on my proposals for Mr. Batiste, but I simply don't have the bandwidth in my brain.

Logan's simple replies to my thank-you text have been on my screen all day.

LOGAN

You're welcome.

LOGAN

I'm sorry for everything.

LOGAN

I miss you.

He didn't go overboard trying to woo me. He kept it simple. But, to me, it said more than all of his voicemails put together. But two hours later, when he sent another message with a link to the song Ila made us dance to at the wedding, it was clear he was upping his game again.

LOGAN

Our first dance. You smelled like flowers on a sunny day. Did I mention you are my new favorite scent?

What in the world was I supposed to say to that?

Nothing, because I didn't reply. However, my lack of communication didn't deter him.

Two hours later, he sent a link to the song playing when he left me on the dance floor.

LOGAN

The song that found you in my arms for the second time. I hope we get to dance to it again someday.

Dan + Shay sang about building our love from the ground up, and the simple words brought me to tears, but again, I didn't reply.

I stumble through the steps of washing my face, brushing my teeth, and changing into flannel pajama bottoms and a tank top, falling into bed. I'm turning off the ringer on my phone after setting my alarm when a text comes through.

LOGAN

Ila wanted to show you something.

My phone pings again, and there is a picture attached. It's of Ila tucked in bed, the stuffed animals I gave her under her arms, and the painting of her under her tree above her bed with the smaller cupcake painting next to it.

Her smile is genuine and touches me all the way to the bottom of my heart. And because it's Ila, I reply to her picture with a heart. I leave it there as I'm not ready to talk to her dad just yet. I want to be sure I have my wits about me and say exactly what I mean to say when we do finally talk.

Tomorrow.

LOGAN

Sleep well, Abby.

Impossible with the two of them on my mind.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT GRASSHOPPERS

LOGAN

“God, Lance. I think I may have messed up. First, I treat her like shit, and then I go in so hard she probably doesn’t know which way is up.”

Looking up at the ceiling to talk to my brother is not out of the ordinary. I do it at least once a day.

“Maybe I should back off a little?”

Lance obviously doesn’t reply, but I know what he would say. He would tell me not to give up on her but to slow my roll and to give her time.

“I’ll give her time, baby bro, but I will not stop. She’s the one. Not just for me but for Ila, too. She loves her as much as I do. I think you would approve. No, I know you would.”

Ila’s still in bed, and I’ve just finished putting her lunch and snacks together, but her backpack is nowhere to be found. Shit, I left it in the truck, which means whatever she didn’t eat yesterday will have sat in the truck all night. Great.

Grabbing my keys, I quietly step outside into the six o’clock morning light. Fluffy clouds spread across the light-pink sky. The moon is still visible, not wanting to let the night go.

I was up all night again, but at least I didn’t embarrass myself like I did the night before by calling Abby into the wee morning hours and leaving endless voicemails.

Calls she still hasn't returned. But she did hear the picture I sent of Ila last night, and there was a text with a picture of the grasshopper treats and her thank you. I told her I would give her whatever time she needed, and I have to honor that.

Pink unicorn backpack in hand, I gently close the door of my truck when something at the end of the driveway catches my attention.

I'm pretty sure the lack of sleep has thrown me into a state of delusion because I see Abby standing there. Hair in a messy bun, not a stitch of makeup, red flannel pajama pants, and a big gray hoodie covering her.

She has never looked more beautiful.

My heartbeat races with hope but her face. Her face doesn't look like she's here to profess her undying love as her heavy breaths circle around her tired face in white puffs. Nonetheless, I take two steps toward her before she lifts her hand, silently asking me to stop.

"Abby..."

"I need you to stop."

"Stop what?"

"Proving yourself."

I think I'm going to be sick. But I push through, ready for the fight of my life. Because I have a feeling without Abby in my life, I won't have much of one.

"Listen, I know I went in hard, and I promise I'll back off, but I'm not going to stop trying. I told you no matter how long it took, and I meant that."

"Logan..." My name is a cloud of white on the crisp morning air.

"You can't tell me you don't feel it. I know I pushed you away, and I'm not exactly an ooey, gooey, emotional guy, but Abby, I'm ready to let someone in. No, that's not true." I correct myself. "Not someone. You!"

"Are you going to let me speak?"

I nod, not speaking my answer. During my tirade, I've moved toward her, and I'm able to see the glistening tears in her eyes. It's time for me to let her have her say.

"Yesterday was a lot."

"I—"

She lifts an eyebrow when I interrupt, and I give her the universal sign of zipping my lips and shutting up.

"After the shit show that was Levi showing up on my doorstep and then you coming over to pee all over me, I was done. I turned my phone off and went to bed."

"I'm sorry about that, by the way." I can't help but interrupt.

"I'm talking now, remember?"

I huff in frustration, looking off into the distance away from her mesmerizing eyes to tamper down my need to fix the situation.

"That's the Logan I know and love."

My head whips back to her so fast my neck pops, and as serious as a heart attack, I question her last comment. "What did you say?" My question is clipped, and my tone sounds harsher than I intended. But I don't take that word lightly.

"Wait, what?" she asks, confused.

"You said the Logan I know and *love*."

"Can I finish?"

"Please do."

Clearly, her comment wasn't literal, like my desperate ass was hoping it was.

Could I be more pathetic?

Yes. Yes, I could.

And if her vibe is telling me anything, it's that I may just have to succumb to a level of pathetic I never have before.

“Seeing you and Ila at the party was hard. The feelings I have for both of you are so overwhelming that having to contain them feels impossible sometimes. When she walked me into her room, it was physically painful to be in her space. Your space. I was so mad at myself for wanting to be with a man who was so emotionally stunted and would never give me what I wanted. What I deserved.”

She can tell I want to speak, but she holds her hand up in protest.

“After that night in your truck, I knew you had it in you. That you could be vulnerable, but you pushed me away. And it hurt, Logan. But when I didn’t hear from you, I knew you were true to your word. You didn’t want me.”

My hand rips through my still damp hair, and my exhale is so big, the fleeting, misty cloud mixes in the same air where hers just disappeared. The sick feeling in my gut intensifies with each sentence she speaks, and I want to scream out in frustration.

“But then your voicemails happened.”

I stand by every word I left on her phone, even though there’s no stopping the self-conscious feeling crawling up my spine. I tear my gaze from her, looking over her head, steeling myself for what comes next.

“Logan, it was more than I could have ever hoped for. My mind was spinning all day. Your gift and the songs with your sweet messages. I didn’t get home from work until late, and I was tired and emotional and wasn’t ready to talk.” She’s rambling at the speed of light, but there is no way I would ask her to slow down. “I wanted to be sure of myself when I finally called you back. So I went to bed and passed out for a couple of hours. But then I was wide awake again. My brain and my heart wouldn’t calm down. I’ve been up all night, as I’m sure is obvious by my appearance.”

“You look perfect.”

“Like I said, you can stop with all that.”

My heart drops to my stomach, and I turn my body from her, looking away, trying to hide the pain on my face, but I'm sure she can hear it in my voice when I say, "It's been one day, and you're done? That's it?"

"Hey, look at me."

Slowly, as though she's walking me to the gallows and I'd do anything to prolong the ending I know is inevitable, I turn back to her, look her in the eyes, and wait for her to break my heart.

A beat later, her paint-stained fingers take my hand in hers. "Logan, you had my heart with your first voicemail."

"What?"

"If I'm being honest, you had my heart the first night at the house when I heard you reading to Ila, and you told her she should never settle. That whoever she loved should treat her like a queen. That they should love her for her and nothing else. I knew, as I eavesdropped in the hallway that night, it was more than a physical attraction. A piece of my heart belonged to you at that moment."

Stunned silent, words escape me, and it's probably for the best. I don't want to miss a word of what she has to say next.

"Logan, you're not the only one who's scared. I haven't been through anything remotely like you have, but I know what being humiliated feels like. I know what being left feels like. Hell, you've already done both to me. First on the dance floor, then in the...you know what? We already know what's happened in the past, and you've explained yourself in your voicemails. I haven't said it, but I do appreciate your messages. Every word. It's nice to know what was happening in that heart of yours, but I'm still scared. How do I know you won't shut me out again?"

"Shit, Abby. I am so sorry I've put so much doubt in your head. I'll admit, even with all my confessions, I'm still scared, but I'm not scared to love you. I'm scared shitless not to."

She sucks in a breath, and a tear escapes her watery eyes, falling down her cheek.

“I’ve felt more myself around you than I have anyone else in the past six years. I’m not sure how to prove to you I won’t shut down again, but I know I won’t. Every time I have, I’ve been miserable. My whole being wanted the opposite, but I sabotaged things, even though all I wanted was you.”

“You won’t shut me out?”

“Not sure I could if I tried. All I want to do is share every part of my day with you.”

“What about Ila?”

“What do you mean? She loves you.”

Her question confuses me. Is she not sure she wants everything that comes with a single dad?

Like a ready-made family?

“What do we tell her? Her heart is more important than either of ours.”

“I fucking love you.” There is nothing else to say after her perfect statement.

Dropping the backpack, I take her face in my hands and kiss her long and hard.

The salt of her tears on my tongue is a lifeline I needed more than she would ever know.

She pulls back, and her tear-filled eyes ask her question before her voice does.

“Did you mean that?”

“You better believe I did.”

“You love me?”

There are a few inches between us now, but my hands still hold her face, and I bend my knees to look her in the eye.

“Abby Glenn, I love the fuck out of you.”

My thumbs wipe away her endless stream of tears.

“I love you too. But...”

“But?”

I do my best to swallow down the lump of fear in my throat as she takes a step back so we're no longer touching.

"I don't want to risk my heart or hers. If we do this and it doesn't work...well, that isn't fair to Ila."

"Oh, this is gonna work, grasshopper."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I just know it." Lifting my fist to my chest, I hope she can see the confidence in my eyes. "In here. I've never been so sure."

"So we tell her?"

"Are you saying there's something to tell her?" I close the space between us again, wrapping my arms around her lower back and pulling her against me, her hands landing on my chest.

"Well, you seem so sure..." She smiles, and there's no hiding my elation as I place a gentle smiling kiss against her lips.

"And as for Ila..."

Her hands sneak up my chest to my neck, where her fingertips rub circles around the nape of my neck.

"Abby, she already told me I should marry you. She'll be over the moon."

Her body goes still, and her fingers freeze in my hair.

"What did you tell her?"

Her voice is shaking, and it isn't from the crisp fall morning.

"At the time, we weren't even speaking, so I didn't say anything. I think I changed the subject."

She nods her understanding.

"Abby, you're shaking. We don't need to have one of the most important conversations of our lives in the middle of the driveway. Let's go inside."

“No, I’m actually gonna go.” She steps away, and panic grips me, bringing back the nauseous feeling I had a few minutes ago.

“Why?”

“I need to give you time. Space. You need to think about this. This is fast, real fast. I know I love you and Ila, but you need to be sure you have enough love for the both of us without feeling as though you’re breaking your vow to your brother.”

“But I already know the answer to that question.”

My baby brother comes through for me as if on cue, causing Abby to gasp when two small sparrows fly a couple of feet from our heads and then land on a limb of the Japanese maple above our heads.

“No way,” she says on a shaky breath, followed by a huge smile.

“Thanks, bro. I had a feeling you would approve,” I say up to the sky.

She closes the distance between us in a flash and jumps into my arms. Her flannel-clad legs wrap around my waist, and I can feel the smile on her lips as she crashes her mouth to mine in an epic kiss that comes complete with a squeal of excitement, causing me to chuckle.

I pull back so I can see her face. “Does this mean you’re *not* going to give me space after all?”

“It does.”

With one hand under her ass, I bend my knees and pick up the pink backpack I had left in the middle of the driveway with my free hand. Then I carry her inside.

I know it’s fast, but you know what they say about grasshoppers... When one finds you, you take the leap.

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WHAT TO READ NEXT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Shelby is a USA Today bestselling contemporary romance author, a self-proclaimed love geek and cake-pop addict. Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, this is still where Lisa calls home with her husband and their dogs. When she isn't writing her next happily ever after, you can find Lisa with her husband traveling, listening to live music, and impatiently waiting for her next FaceTime call with her son, who is currently deployed with the United States Marine Corps.

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