



EVERY TIME MY HEART  
**BREAKS**

AN FM DESCENDANTS NOVEL BY  
LINDA KAGE

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# LINDA KAGE



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# PROLOGUE



CHLOE

## ***[WELCOME TO THE PSYCHO STALKER'S BASEMENT]***

**W**ell, it was official.

My taste in men sucked ass.

I sent a glare to one of the handcuffs holding me prisoner; this one pinning my left wrist to the floor and forcing my arm out away from my side, and I blew at a bloody clump of hair that kept getting into my eyes. But movement like that caused pain to scream through my jaw because that's where Dax had hit me to knock me unconscious and bring me here in the first place.

I closed my eyes and sniffed in self-pity while a tear trickled down my cheek and dripped into my ear.

At least, I think it was a tear. Could've been blood. That eye felt pretty fucked up, so who really knew what was dripping from it.

Whatever it was, *now* I had a wet ear on top of everything else.

Didn't that just take the cake?

It beat focusing on the fact that I was chained, spread eagle and fully naked, to the freezing concrete basement floor of my psycho stalker ex-boyfriend's house, though, while I listened for approaching footsteps overhead and wondered when he might return for more...*cleansing*...as he had called it.

I hadn't even gotten any wetness in my ears when he'd turned the hose on me, although plenty had gone up my nose and into my mouth, which I had to admit, was way worse.

Ugh, okay. Fine...

The wet ear was nothing compared to everything else.

But everything else was too big to deal with right now.

Lucy and the baby seriously better be okay, or I was going to...

Damn. The panic returned from just thinking about them. A sob tore its way up my raw, dry throat, burning and clawing the whole way. I was going to start hyperventilating any moment if I didn't get my shit together. And that was going to help absolutely nothing. The only things I could control right now were my emotions, and I couldn't even seem to do that.

*Come on, Chloe*, I gave myself the mental pep talk I knew I needed. *Get it together. You're doing okay. You're alive, not currently being tortured, and at least he hasn't raped—*

The floorboards above me creaked.

Oh God.

My entire body jolted in fear, knowing all the positive bullet points I'd just listed could be destroyed at any moment.

I swallowed harshly and held my breath, my muscles tensing as I peered up at the ceiling, praying that Dax wouldn't return.

The top step creaked, and I whimpered.

Dammit, I'd told myself I wasn't going to cry, no matter what happened. I wasn't going to break.

But the footsteps started to move faster down the stairs as if he were jogging. Dread flooded my system so fast that I went into distress. My skin prickled with cold fear, and my heart beat hard enough to make my vision blur.

He called something through the door—my name, I think, as if he were looking for me, even though *that* made no sense; he was the monster who'd trapped me here in the first place—but I couldn't be completely sure what he actually said over the terror pounding through my ears and fogging my brain.

Then, the knob twisted, and the door swung open.

# 1 CHLOE

## [14 YEARS EARLIER]

“Honey, I really don’t think this is going to...fit.” Mom gritted out an annoyed growl as she tugged on the back of my dress, nearly strangling my boobs as she attempted to draw the zipper up.

Holding my breath so I wouldn’t inhale and cause my rib cage to expand another millimeter, I met her cringe of apology in the mirror I was facing in my bathroom, and I knew she was giving up.

With a whimper of protest, I moaned, “No! No, no, no... Please.”

But she was done.

Closing my eyes so I could no longer see the excess pudge bulging under my arms around the top of my strapless dress, I buried my face in my hands, mortified. “This can’t be happening. It fit perfectly last month when we bought it.”

“I know.” Mom touched my shoulder and squeezed warmly. “But you must’ve hit another growth spurt since then. You’re a blossoming girl, Chlo.”

Blossoming? Right. In my *waistline* maybe. I hadn’t grown in height since last year.

Gah, this was so freaking embarrassing.

“I can’t believe I gained that much in a single month.”

“It’s probably just water retention from hormones,” Mom tried, stroking my hair this time. “You’re having your period, right?”

Dropping my hands, I spun to frown at her. “You’re not making it better.”

She appeared helpless for a moment before snapping her fingers. “Hey, what about that ice-blue dress you have? You

look super cute in that, and it's stretchy enough to fit a changing body.”

The aghast look I sent her was born from pure horror. “I can't wear something I wore in middle school.”

Was she kidding me? I'd be a laughing stock.

I was already the fourth-biggest girl in my ninth-grade class. I couldn't be the most immaturely dressed too. I had to have *something* going for me. And the trendy, fashionable cut of *this* dress was supposed to be it. I was going to be the girl with style.

How was Caine Spinnaker going to notice me otherwise?

“Are you *sure* you can't zip it up?” I asked Mom, turning up my begging eyes to maximum capacity.

She lifted her brow, not impressed by my lack of faith in her. But then my eye power must've kicked in because her shoulders collapsed, and she hissed out a deflated breath. “I mean, how much do you value breathing?”

“Tonight? Not at all. I *need* to get into this dress. Mom, please.”

Doubt filled her expression, but then she said, “Alright, fine. Turn around and suck it in, baby girl. This is going to get uncomfortable.”

“Screw comfort.” I gratefully showed her my back and grabbed onto the edge of the sink to brace myself while it felt like I was being squeezed through the eye of a needle.

My mother and I both let out a warrior cry as the zipper finally creaked into place, fully closed. “There.” The satisfaction in Mom's voice mirrored the leap in my chest.

It was done.

I exhaled my relief and glanced up, only to cry, “What the hell?! I look like a freaking sausage.”

Mom scowled. “You do *not*.”

“Whatever! My boobs are a hot second from falling out of this thing.”

“Well...” Her gaze dropped to them, and she winced before glancing up. “Okay, yeah, they do look like they’re trying to escape.” Nodding in encouragement, she asked, “So are you still a *no* on the blue dress?”

Ugh. I was going to have to re-wear my old middle school clothes, wasn’t I? But when I opened my mouth to give in, the doorbell rang from the front of the house.

“Oh, no,” I whispered. It was too late to back out now. “They’re here.”

Mom and I gaped at each other in dread.

“Hey, the twins are...” Dad appeared in the open door of the bathroom, only for his words to stall short as he took me in from head to toe. His frozen expression slid toward Mom. “When did she get boobs?”

“Apparently this month,” Mom muttered, her voice rye with amusement.

Dad glanced at me again but kept talking to her. “Well, they’re not going to get any bigger than that, are they? Because I’m going to have to invest in a shotgun for all the perverted little fuckers in her school who’re gonna ogle them inappropriately.”

I rolled my eyes. Leave it to Dad to make it sound like I was getting prettier or something. He always had a knack for making me feel better about myself, even though I knew I’d gained weight *everywhere*, not just in my chest.

“Hello? Chloe...?” I heard Bella call from the hallway. “You ready yet? It’s time to...wow.” She appeared next to Dad in the doorway, and her eyes immediately widened. “You look like you could pass for twenty-one.”

Dad jerked an incredulous glance toward Bella and promptly turned back to Mom. “This is just a practice dress, right? And she’s actually going to wear something *else* to the dance? *Right?* Please say yes.”

“Hell no,” Bella answered, reaching past him so she could grab my hand. “She looks hot. Let’s go, Chlo. Gracen’s double-parked at the curb.”

“I...uh...okay.”

I glanced helplessly back at my parents as I was dragged from the bathroom and down the hall.

Mom took Dad’s hand and waved at me. “Don’t worry. You look lovely and grown up,” she assured. “Just have fun, okay?”

“But not too much fun,” Dad warned.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of her,” Bella called back, to which my father sniffed.

“*That’s* what I’m worried about.”

“Hey!” Bella cried indignantly before she turned forward again and bumped her shoulder into mine while we made our way toward the front door. “What’s got *him* into such an overprotective dad mood?”

“Uh...” I made a face and then admitted, “My boobs, I think.”

She glanced at them and made a sound in the back of her throat before answering, “Well, I guess he has a reason, then.”

“Oh God,” I moaned, hugging my arms across my chest to cover them. “Do they look *that* bad?”

“No. They look that *good*,” she countered supportively as she forced me to uncross my arms so she could hook her elbow through mine and tug me from the house, barely giving me time to pause and collect my purse and jacket first. Pulling me toward a car idling in the dark on the street, she opened the back door and called over her shoulder, “Ten bucks says Caine’s going to try to *accidentally* run into your awesome new boobs at least once tonight.”

“Ugh,” I moaned and felt my face flame red hot as I crawled into the back seat. “He is not.”

Yeah, I never should’ve told her who I was crushing on.

“Is too,” she countered as she followed me in and then shut the door behind her. “No guy could resist those knockers.”



“Whose knockers?” Gray asked, glancing over his shoulder and into the back seat from where he sat behind the wheel. Frowning at Bella, he muttered, “Do you *both* have to sit back there? You’re going to make me feel like a freaking chauffeur.”

Gracen was Bella’s twin brother, and we were all in the same class together. We’d been raised more like triplets, though, always grouped together since our mothers were best friends and first cousins.

Except we didn’t *look* like triplets. Both Bella and Gracen had perfect physiques, the perfect statuesque height, and perfect dark hair, while I was a curvy, short blonde that stuck out like a sore thumb when I was around them.

But I loved them, anyway. They were my people.

Bella pulled me into a one-armed hug as she scowled at her brother. “I don’t want Chloe to feel all alone back here.”

“Then send her to the front with me, and *you* sit in the back,” Gray argued.

“Whatever,” Bella cried indignantly. “*I’m* not sitting in the back by myself.”

“Gah,” he grumbled. “You’re such a pain in the ass. *Fine*. Make me sit all alone in the front.”

He geared the car into drive, and we took off down the street.

“So whose boobs were we talking about again?” he asked. “Please say Malia Ross’s.”

“Why in the *world* would we talk about Malia Ross’s boobs?” Bella countered, blinking in confusion at the back of his head.

Gracen shrugged. “I mean, did you *see* the shirt she wore to school this week?”

We’d all seen what she’d worn, and it had made what I was currently wearing look conservative and damn near nun-like.

“You mean, the one that got her put into detention for violating the dress code?” Gracen’s twin guessed dryly. “Only after I pulled out a microscope to see that she was actually *wearing* a top. She looked like a freaking porn star.”

“Exactly.” Gracen nodded, his voice full of relish. “Beau heard some porn industry rep actually *did* contact her for a gig.”

“And you believe *Beau*?” his sister asked dryly.

“Well...” Doubt filled Gracen’s voice. “Maybe not. But it *could* be true.”

“She definitely has the body to be in one,” I decided. Unlike me, she was *only* big in the boobs.

The lucky bitch.

“Hell yeah, she does,” Gray agreed full-heartedly.

“Hey, I dare you to ask her to dance tonight,” Bella teased.

“As if!” Her twin snorted. “A senior goddess like her would turn down a dweeb freshman like me in a heartbeat.”

Laughing, Bella teased, “You said it, not me.”

“*You said it, not me*,” he mimicked, lifting his voice unnaturally high.

“Wow, so mature,” Bella shot back. “It truly perplexes me why you’ve never had a girlfriend.”

“Probably because they all take one look at my sister and run screaming.”

Bella snorted, and the two continued to bicker the rest of the way to the school.

I appreciated their constant back-and-forth, though. It helped me not think about all the jittery nerves I had running through my system.

I don’t even know why I cared so much about making a good impression at this dance. I’d been attending classes with all these people for three months now and gone to middle school with most of them and even grade school with a good

portion; I'd had plenty of time for my *mojo* to kick in if it was going to.

But tonight just felt...different.

The event was purely social; not just about classes and school work. And I wanted to feel accepted, not like the freak I usually felt.

All the anxiety surged, however, when we pulled into the school parking lot, and I caught a glimpse of the gymnasium rising above the other buildings. I could hear the thump of bass from the music inside, and all my insecurities mounted.

Turning toward Bella, I gripped her hand for comfort. "Are you sure I look okay?"

"Yeah. Why?" She sounded confused about why I would possibly question that, which helped. If she didn't see anything wrong, then that was good. But I still felt self-conscious and exposed.

I considered putting on my jacket, but it was such a warm night, and neither Bella nor Gray had one on, so I left mine in the car as well.

A warm breeze hit my bare shoulders, reminding me how much of myself I was showing off, however, and I squeezed my hands at my sides as I meekly followed the twins, growing more and more reluctant by the second.

"There's Beau," I heard Gray say as he steered us in a new direction.

Glancing up, I saw our fellow ninth grader sporting a black leather jacket and leaning against the side of the gymnasium alone with his hands shoved in his pockets.

"Yo, Gamble," Gracen called, and Beau glanced up, straightening away from the bricks to greet us.

I'd known him for as long as I'd known the twins. His parents were close friends of both the twins' parents as well as mine, so we'd been raised as if he could be another cousin, even though he wasn't. There were five of us, actually, who

belonged to our parents' group that had started high school together this year.

Beau skimmed a quick dismissive glance over the twins and me and frowned. "Didn't Bentley ride with you guys?"

"Her dad's going to drop her off," Bella answered.

"But she's still coming, right?" Beau persisted, looking hopeful.

A jealous hitch dipped in my stomach. But Beau was, like, stupid in love with the last person in our freshman group. He was always watching Bentley or looking for Bentley or asking about Bentley or teasing Bentley mercilessly whenever she was around, and it made me wonder if anyone would ever like me the way he obviously worshiped her.

I kind of didn't think so.

"So I guess we're still waiting to go in, then," Beau grumbled, leaning back against the building, his gaze straying restlessly toward the parking lot in search of the star in all of his fantasies.

I sighed and settled against the wall as well, finding a protective little nook between Bella and Gray as Bella grilled Beau about where he'd heard the Malia Ross porn-making rumor.

Meanwhile, other people were steadily filing past us, entering the gym to get to the dance.

When I spotted Caine amidst a group of other guys passing by, I shuddered in nervous excitement and huddled closer to Gray.

Caine hadn't come with a date either. I wondered if he was the type to ask girls to dance. I hoped so. I wanted to sway in his arms before the night was over.

"Cold?" Gracen asked, glancing down at me when I rubbed the sides of my arms with my hands.

"What?" I glanced up at him, blinking the Caine-dream from my eyes.

“Want me to run back to the car for your jacket?” he offered.

“Oh. Uh, no, thanks. I’m fine.”

I returned my gaze to the gym entrance, but Caine and his friends had already gone inside. A wistful sigh left my lungs. He was just so beautiful. I’d give anything for him to notice *me*.

If only I could—

A car with a loud engine pulled into the parking lot, stealing my attention from the now-empty front doors.

Turning, I watched a dark Chevy squeal its tires on asphalt doing a quick burnout before it raced to a place in the front row that wasn’t even a designated parking spot, and there, it finally jarred to a screaming halt.

As the motor stopped rumbling and the headlights went out, I rolled my eyes.

What a freaking show-off.

“And...Luke’s here,” Bella announced in a dry, unimpressed voice.

## 2 CHLOE

The driver's side door of the Chevy sprang open, and a tall, dark-headed guy unfolded himself from inside.

Only one other kid from our parents' group of friends currently attended high school with Beau, Bella, Bentley, Gray, and me.

And that was Luke Hamilton.

He was a twelfth grader, so we rarely saw him in the halls. Not that he was very supportive and mentor-ly when he *did* see us. He usually harassed us more than anyone.

I guess it just wasn't cool to befriend freshmen when you were a badass senior, especially if they were like family to you.

"Dude, did he bring a *date*?" Beau asked suddenly, perking to attention when Luke rounded the front hood of the car and started for the passenger-side door to open it.

"Holy shit, he did," Gracen murmured in awe. "I didn't even know he had a girlfriend."

"I don't think he does," Bella spoke up.

"Then who...?" Gray gasped when Luke reached down and helped a girl emerge. He blinked once, then strained forward, squinting. "Is that...?"

"Malia Ross," Beau finished for him when Gray couldn't seem to talk anymore. "Son of a bitch." He cracked off an amused laugh. "How the hell did he manage *that*?"

“It’s Luke,” Bella answered simply before she smacked her brother in the gut. “Hey, you think he’s going to have sex with her tonight?”

Beau snorted and answered for Bella’s brother. “Uh, hell yes, he is.”

“Damn...” was all Gracen could manage to murmur. I couldn’t tell if he was jealous or impressed. Probably a little of both.

The four of us watched in awe as Luke walked hand in hand with the high school porn star—er, *maybe* porn star—toward the entrance of the gym.

I didn’t think he was going to notice us at all, but just before entering, he glanced over and furrowed his brows in confusion before jerking to a stop.

“What’re you losers doing, hanging around out here? The dance is *inside*.”

“We’re waiting on Bentley,” I answered when the other three didn’t seem capable of speech in the presence of *Malia*.

“Bentley?” Luke echoed as if he had no clue who that was. Then he said, “Why didn’t Gamble bring her? He lives, like, five blocks from her house.”

Plus Beau had his own car, while Bentley did not.

“I—I didn’t...” Seemingly cornered, Beau glanced at the rest of us. “I thought she’d get a ride with you.”

When Gracen merely blinked at him as if that were a ridiculous assumption, Luke snorted. “God. What a bunch of dorks.” Then he slung his arm over Malia’s shoulders and disappeared inside with her. “Later, weirdos.”

“Was I *supposed* to bring her?” Beau asked, still concerned.

“I mean, you could’ve at least asked,” Bella told him, and he grew even more worried.

“But—”

“There,” I called, pointing when I spotted a familiar SUV pull up near the entrance. “Doesn’t matter now. She’s here.”

“Oh, thank God,” Beau said under his breath and immediately started toward her.

The rest of us naturally followed, Gracen elbowing me as we went. “Did you see Malia look at me? She totally looked, didn’t she? You think she knows who I am?”

“Well, she does now,” Bella answered, leaning past me to snicker at her twin. “You’re one of the loser dork ninth graders that Luke actually lowers himself to talk to.”

“Brat,” Gracen shot back, scowling at her before he leaned over to whisper to me, “She looked at me.”

I nodded conspiringly to make him feel better.

Meanwhile, Beau was beelining toward Bentley as she climbed from the SUV.

“Yeah, I have enough money to get in. Thanks. Love you too, Dad. Bye.” She shut the door, and her ride pulled away, leaving her alone with us.

“About time you showed,” Beau grouched, slowing to a stop.

Bentley whirled, her long red hair gleaming in the streetlamp lights as she faced us. “Sorry,” she said, sounding breathless and apologetic. “I couldn’t find my shoes. They were hidden under a pair of my brother’s sneakers.”

“No worries. You’re right on time,” I told her, springing forward to hook my arm through hers and turn us toward the sound of music filtering into the night when a couple in front of us opened the front doors and entered the gym. “Shall we?”

“We shall!” Bella announced, appearing at my other side and getting in on the arm link.

The three of us stepped forward, and Gracen appeared next to Bella as Beau hurried up to walk at Bentley’s side.

“What’s this?” Beau asked, sounding confused, as he reached up toward Bentley’s hair and tweaked the wing of a



silver butterfly nestled there.

“It’s a barrette,” she answered, annoyed, before batting away his hand. “Don’t touch it. You’ll make it crooked.”

“Since when did you start wearing *butterflies*?” he countered.

“I don’t know.” She sent him a frown as Gracen opened the door and held it for all of us to enter. “Since now. I thought it would make me look nice. *Okay?*”

She was starting to sound defensive, and Beau was beginning to look suspicious. A crease formed between his eyebrows. “Who’re you trying to look nice for?”

“I don’t know!” she cried, throwing up her hands in frustration. “It’s a dance. People tend to look nice for dances. Look at Chloe. She looks ready for the freaking *prom*.”

“Oh my God.” I immediately turned toward Bella. “Am I overdressed?”

“No, sweetie,” she answered, smoothing her hands down the sides of my arms before sending both Bentley and Beau a warning glance. Then she returned her attention to me. “You look perfect. Stop worrying.”

But my gut was already swirling, and my nerves were strung too tight. “I’m overdressed.”

“No. You’re fine, I swear,” Bentley insisted, hooking her arm through mine again. “You look great. Now let’s do this.”

As the five of us paused in the line that had formed in the foyer to get our entry tickets, I started to wring my hands. “Maybe I should go back to the car for my jacket.”

“No. Okay, here.” Sighing heavily, Bella forced me to face her. “Repeat after me,” she instructed. “I’m a sexy, confident beast. Any guy would be lucky to dance with me tonight.”

I groaned. “Yeah, I’m not saying that. I mean, *look* at me.” I spread my arms and looked down at myself. “Who would want to dance with all of this?”

“Beau and Gray will, for starters,” Bentley spoke up. “Right, guys?”

Both Beau and Gray looked distinctly put on the spot, but they must’ve known they couldn’t say no.

As they each grumbled their obligatory assent, I shook my head. “They don’t count. They’re like family.”

“That’s it,” Bella announced. “I bet you ten bucks Caine Spinnaker asks you to dance before the end of the night.”

I snorted and muttered, “Yeah, only after you pay him twenty.”

Bentley’s eyes widened as she glanced between me and Bella. “Caine Spinnaker, huh?” She shifted closer to ask me, “Is that who you like, Chloe? *Nice.*”

“You think *Spinnaker*’s cute?” Beau demanded in disbelief before wrinkling his nose in disgust. “Really?”

“What? He’d look cute with Chloe,” she argued.

“Guys...” Gracen nudged Bella’s arm. “We’re up.”

The five of us lifted our heads to see that we’d reached the front of the line, and it was time to enter our first high school formal.

Falling solemnly quiet, we each paid for a ticket and then filed inside the darkened interior that was lit only by colored strobes that circled the room from the deejay’s station.

From there, the five of us awkwardly shifted closer. Even Gray and Bella—the most socially adept members of our group—seemed intimidated.

“It’s loud,” Gray commented, lifting his voice above the music.

“And dark,” Bentley added.

“Should we dance?” Beau wondered.

“It’s the middle of a song,” Bella answered. “That’d be weird to join in now. We’ll catch the next one.”

I nodded, agreeing with her because I just felt so awkward and weird.

But as the current song ended, and a slow song took its place, the five of us winced at each other, not yet feeling the slow-song vibe.

Until Matt Sloan approached and asked Bella if she wanted to dance. She brightened and nodded before waving us goodbye and following him onto the floor. The four of us who remained tightened the gap she'd made with her departure and moved closer together.

"She's a good dancer," Bentley commented after a moment of watching Bella and Matt together.

"Well, she took dance classes with Chloe for, like, five years," Gracen reminded her. "So she better be."

"Why didn't *you* ever take any classes with them?" Beau wondered, nudging Bentley's arm.

"Me?" She looked up at him, her eyes widening. "Oh, I don't dance."

He looked a little crestfallen. "Ever?"

Gray snorted. "Then why did you come tonight?"

Bentley was looking cornered, and I could see Caine across the room with his friends.

Wanting to save her from further uncomfortable questions but also wanting to move closer to him—because if I was right there within his perimeters, it'd be easier for him to ask me to dance—I broke into the conversation, pointing. "Let's go over there."

"Uh...okay." Gracen shrugged and started that way, not questioning my suggestion. The rest of us followed him like ducklings who couldn't be separated from their brood.

We came up toward another part of the dance floor, almost directly behind Caine and his group. When Gracen glanced at me, his eyebrows lifted in question, I nodded my approval, and he stopped there.

Bentley leaned toward me and whispered, “OMG, he’s *right...there.*”

“I know. Shh,” I hissed at her from the side of my mouth, slapping at her to keep quiet.

She squeezed my arm and grinned encouragingly.

And the four of us inadvertently began to listen in on that group’s conversation as we continued to watch Bella dance with Matt.

“Did you see who Hamilton came with tonight?” one of the guys was saying. “Lucky bastard. You *know* he’s getting some tonight.”

Bentley and I glanced at each other to roll our eyes in unison as someone else snorted. “Forget that. Did you get a load of Chloe Ryan? Her dress is so tight it looks like someone had to roll her in butter first to get her into it.”

As my ears began to ring in utter embarrassment, Bentley grabbed my hand and squeezed hard. But I didn’t squeeze back. My face was burning flame hot, and I was trying not to expire on the spot.

Then, it happened. Caine Spinnaker snorted in amusement before he added, “Butter makes sense since it looks like she’s related to the Pillsbury Doughboy.”

As all his friends laughed, my heart freaking shattered.

It was one thing to overhear people slamming you; it was quite another to hear your ultimate crush leading the burn.

“Son of a bitch,” Gray breathed, glancing at my face in worry, just as Beau stepped toward the group of guys.

“What did you just say, motherfucker?” he demanded.

My band of mockers looked up in surprise. “Huh?” Caine sounded confused, probably because he hadn’t yet seen me standing right there behind them, even though one would *think* the Pillsbury Doughboy would be hard to miss.

“You don’t talk about Chloe like that,” Beau demanded threateningly. “Ever.”

Frowning, Caine lifted his hands and shifted backward, even as he snarled, “Hey, why don’t you mind your own business and get out of my face?”

“Sure,” Beau answered, only taking another step *into* his face. “As soon as you apologize to Chloe.” Then he nudged Caine in the chest, pushing him. “Right now.”

“Beau!” Bentley gasped in warning, but he was too busy getting surrounded by all of Caine’s pals.

As they squeezed in on him, Gracen popped forward to support his buddy.

The verbal argument continued until their puffed-up boy bravado ended with Beau swinging at Caine’s face, which started a full-fledged punching brawl.

Next to me, Bentley slapped her hands over her mouth in shock, while Bella appeared suddenly beside me before she leaped forward to push away one of the two guys that were swinging at her brother.

I shook my head, unable to believe what was happening.

They were defending my honor. Beau was getting punched in the face right now. Gracen caught a fist to the stomach. And Bella was jumping on Jeremiah Tanner’s back and pulling his hair.

Because of me.

I knew I should feel flattered and touched by the love and support. But I just felt so mortified and awful.

So I spun around and rushed off.

The worst thing about panicked, blind running, however, was that you couldn’t exactly see where you were going. I think I knocked over at least half a dozen people in my desperation to escape the gymnasium, ticking almost all of them off.

Choruses of, “Hey!” and, “Watch where you’re going!” and, “Fatso,” followed me to the door.

“What the...” one familiar voice had said before a confused “Chloe?” followed it, but I didn’t stick around long enough to see who it was.

As soon as I plowed my way into the hall, I sprinted as fast as a person in high heels and a tight skirt could. But when I reached the nearest bathroom—tears already filling my eyes—a trio of girls was exiting, blocking my path, and I could hear more voices inside.

Nothing would make my humiliation more complete than if I had *witnesses* to the meltdown I was about to experience, so I wheeled away and entered a different hall until I found a back bathroom that I knew no one would be using.

It was blessedly quiet and dark inside.

Exhaling in relief, I entered, and the motion sensors tripped the lights, flipping on what looked like a room full of mirrors.

I slowed to a stop and took in my tear-streaked face with mascara smudged everywhere, then lowered my gaze to the body that had caused all these problems.

“What was I thinking?” I demanded, wondering why in the world I had thought putting *this* on display would make it prettier.

Gah, I was such an idiot. Clomping toward a vinyl-padded bench that was pushed against the wall, I slumped down and buried my face in my hands before releasing the flood.

The tears came hot and heavy, and I didn’t even attempt to stop them.

I have no idea how long I cried, but my eyes were stinging, and my nose was sore from how many times I had blown it when the door opened and an accusing yet relieved male voice said, “*There you are.*”

I looked up and blinked in confusion when I found *Luke* of all people stepping into the girls’ restroom and letting the door swing shut behind him.

### 3 CHLOE

“**W**ha-what’re *you* doing here?” I demanded, frowning and shaking my head in confusion as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing. Because Luke in a girls’ bathroom was just *all* out of place.

“What?” He lifted his hands as if *my* question was the craziest part in all of this. “I had to take a piss.” Then he rolled his eyes and dropped his arms as he strolled toward me, not at all intimidated by his surroundings. “I’m looking for you; what do you think?”

“But...” I shook my head. “You can’t just walk into a girls’ bathroom.”

“Really?” he countered with raised eyebrows. “Because it looks like I just did.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. Luke could be so aggravating. I swear, he had to argue with just about *everything* a person said.

“But why did *you* come?” I pressed.

Bella or Bentley, I would’ve expected. Maybe even Gracen, and less likely Beau. But Luke? Never. He wasn’t the type to care about a person’s feelings enough to seek them out and check on them.

At least, I didn’t *think* he was.

“Because *apparently*,” he answered, sounding put out that he had to be here as he paused in front of me and sternly set his hands on his hips. “I’m the only one left who *can*. All the

other members in your little band of misfits got into a fight in the middle of the fucking dance floor—go figure—so I had to wade in and save the damn day. Only to find out it all started because of you, except *you* were nowhere to be found. So they all freaked out, worried as hell about you, although none of them can actually look for you, since they're currently banned from the dance and are right now prowling the parking lot in concern. Which left it up to *me* to leave my date and come find you."

I snorted and wiped my eyes the rest of the way dry. "Well, I'm *so* sorry I'm such a troublemaker that made you leave your date at the dance. You can go back now and tell everyone I'm fine; I'll be out in a minute."

"Yeah, fuck that." His grumpy scowl turned into a grin as he plopped down next to me so he could press his back to the wall. Then he sighed in relief. "I'm going to hide in here with *you* for a minute. I've been praying for a good reason to shed Malia all damn night." Rolling his head along the wall to glance my way, he whispered, "She smells like body odor, and it's so rank... I can't breathe around her. I'm not even lying."

I snorted out a laugh, trying to imagine what Gracen's expression would've looked like if he'd gotten to dance with Malia, after all, only to take a big whiff of her and wrinkle his nose in disgust.

Luke leaned toward me, sniffing noisily. "At least you don't stink," he added, only to pause as he started to pull away again. His brow furrowed, and he leaned back in. "Actually, you smell really good. Damn, what the hell *is* that?"

"Japanese Cherry Blossom," I answered, holding my wrist up for him to smell more, even though he could obviously smell me just fine already. "Your brother bought it for me, actually."

When Luke paused from taking my arm and lifting it to his nose so he could send me a curious glance, I added, "He drew my name for the Christmas exchange last year."

"Ah." He nodded at the explanation, then closed his eyes as he inhaled, keeping my wrist firmly in place under his nose.



“Yes. God bless Big J. He’s always had a nose for the finer things.”

“It’s my favorite scent,” I said, watching the way his long, dark lashes rested on the tops of his cheeks and his wide shoulders lifted as he inhaled some more.

“I can see why,” he murmured, his voice going a notch deeper. Then he opened his eyes, and piercing blue captured me completely. “And that’s why I’m just going to sit here for a quick break and fill my nose with this heaven before I have to go back out there to the stink queen.”

I grinned, despite the fact that he wasn’t saying very nice stuff about poor Malia. It was all to my benefit, at least, so a very vain and smug pride filled me like a soothing balm for my bruised ego.

“Help yourself,” I told him, my gaze straying to his dark hair as he bent his face over my arm again, making a ridiculous production of sniffing me.

“Thank you,” he said, looking up to grin.

He had such an open, magnetic smile, all rascally and mischievous as if he were sharing a dirty secret with me. But as he gazed around my face, his lips settled, and his brows drew together in concern.

Jerking up his chin in my direction, he finally said, “So what gives with the sob fest you got going on?”

I deflated, remembering *that* again.

For a moment there, with Luke smelling my arm and looking up at me with that smile and those eyes, I’d completely forgotten *why* I was sitting here alone with him in the first place.

And then I had to wonder if I’d ever *been* alone with him before.

I’d known this boy my entire life, and I don’t think we’d ever once shared a one-on-one conversation together, where no one else was around to butt in or participate.

It was...strange.

Almost like I was sitting next to a stranger.

A very handsome, thrilling stranger.

Multiple shivers raced over my skin, up the back of my neck, between my toes, around my chest, and up the insides of my thighs.

I studied him a bit harder, wondering if he'd always had that speck of gold in the irises of his eyes before. It was captivating as hell.

Luke squinted at me. "Chlo?" he prompted, reminding me that we were in the middle of a conversation, and it was my turn to talk.

"What? Sorry." I blinked and glanced away, hugging myself. "Right, so we overheard Caine Spinnaker and his friends making fun of me, calling me the Pillsbury Doughboy who needed to be rolled in butter and stuff like that."

Luke's mouth gaped, and he stared blankly at me for a moment as if he couldn't decide if he believed me or not. Then he demanded in a hard voice, "Are you fucking serious?"

I rolled my eyes and sighed. "Why would I lie about that?"

He released a harsh breath, then slowly shook his head. "Well, thank God Gamble and the Lowes already pounded on him for me because I would've put the douche nozzle in a coma. Gah..." He gritted his teeth and snarled, "I never did like that little dipshit."

I flushed hotly and glanced away.

"What?" Luke asked.

I swung back and frowned at him, repeating, "What?"

His brow furrowed. "You blushed and looked away like..." One eyebrow arched in censure. Then he winced. "Ah, hell no. You didn't actually have a crush on that dirtball, did you? *Chloe!*"

"What?" I cried defensively. "I'm sorry. I thought he was cute."

“Cute?” He snorted in disgust. “Christ.” After ripping a hand through his hair, he shook his head and sighed. “We need to work on your taste in boys. Seriously.”

“And what’s worse,” I went on because I’d already humiliated myself this far. “I was hoping he’d ask me to dance tonight. I picked this dress, thinking I’d look *sexy* and would impress him. Ugh. I’m such an idiot.”

When I bumped my head back against the wall and frowned up at the ceiling, I could see Luke from the corner of my eye, still looking at me.

“Well...” he said a moment later. “An idiot, you are not. A little challenged in your taste in guys? Definitely. But you nailed the sexy part at least. Your boobs look, like, *enormous* in that thing. A dude would have to be dead not to notice them.”

I lifted my head from the wall to scowl at him. “*All* of me looks enormous in this thing,” I countered.

“Meh. Not really,” he argued. “The boobs stand out so much that the rest of you is just kind of like a nice, pleasant, and curvy backdrop.” Lifting his hands, he formed a rectangle so he could look at my chest through the makeshift frame. And then, with a nod, he murmured, “Yeah. You have a grade-A rack, Ryan. Very nice.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I scowled. “Can we *not* talk about my breasts, please?”

“Sure. I guess.” He dropped his hands. “But you brought them up.”

Snorting, I came away from the wall to glare even harder at him. “No, I didn’t!”

“You didn’t?” Scratching his head in confusion, he thought that through before lifting his brows and shrugging. “Well, okay, then. I’m still fine with talking about them if you are.”

“I’m not!” I nearly shouted.

“Jesus. Alright.” He pulled back defensively. “We don’t have to talk about how they’re right there, all up in my face,

ready to spill out any moment, and it'd probably take me, like, five extra hands to catch everything so I could help you tuck them back away again if they *did* take a tumble."

"Oh my God," I groaned, slapping a hand to my forehead as my annoyance for him shriveled with amusement. "You are such a dork." Then, because I couldn't help it, I blurted out a laugh.

I'd just never had a conversation like this with anyone before.

Luke merely shrugged. "You sound surprised. Why're you saying that with such shock as if the thought had never occurred to you before?"

"Because it *hadn't*," I admitted honestly and hissed out another laugh.

Tipping his head, Luke eyed me oddly. "Really?" he said with interest. "And here I thought I was a pretty obvious dork."

"*What?*" My mouth fell open. "How can you *say* that? You're like...the cool senior. The top dog. You swagger down the halls at school as if you don't give a hoot what anyone else thinks about you."

His brows lifted. "A hoot?" he repeated with his lips tightening as if he was trying to hold in a laugh at my expense. "Did you seriously just say a *hoot*?"

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "A shit, then," I said, revising my sentence to keep him from laughing. "Like you don't give a shit what anyone else thinks."

"That's because I don't," he reported, frowning in confusion. "I fail to see how that keeps me from being a dork."

"Because..." I blustered, not sure how to answer. "I don't know! It makes you look all self-confident and *chill* and just... and... God! How can you *not* care what anyone else thinks?" I demanded, only to roll my eyes and rage, "That's just so... Ugh! Maybe if I had a perfect body as *you* do, I could just stop myself from caring, too."

“Chloe!” he berated harshly as he gently touched my arm.

I whirled toward him to rail some more, just upset with the entire world. But he cupped my face in his hands, stunning me quiet before his thumbs came up and brushed away some tears from the corners of my eyes that I hadn’t even realized had fallen.

“Stop,” he said, shaking his head. “I still care what people think, okay? I’m just selective about who I give that right to. Only important people, like you, get my hoots. Got it?”

“But how do I keep from caring about the rest of them?” I asked, more tears flooding my eyes. Leaning forward, I pressed my forehead to his.

Luke released a breath as he pressed back “Well, for starters,” he said, finally pulling away to straighten the hair around my face with his fingers. “We gotta teach you not to form crushes on dipshits like Caine Spinnaker.” Sniffing bitterly, he shook his head as if he still needed a moment to adjust to that one. “I mean, Caine *Spinnaker*...”

The way he so ridiculously lifted his voice and stressed the Ns made me giggle.

“Don’t say it like that,” I ordered. “You make it sound stupid.”

“He *is* stupid,” Luke countered.

I laughed again, only to end it with a sob. Luke wiped more tears off my cheeks. I squeezed my eyes shut. “I *feel* stupid.”

“No,” he assured as he tugged me against him to enfold me in a hug. As we sat there and swayed slowly back and forth on the bench in the bathroom, he added, “You’re not stupid. Not at all. We all mess up every once in a while and give more importance to some people than we should. Hell, look at me. I thought Malia would make a good date for this damn dance. Now, I still have to take her home tonight. I’m going to have to air my car out for a fucking week after this. But mistake learned, right?”

I laughed and shook my head, only to scold, “That’s mean. What if she can’t help how she smells?”

“Like what?” He sent me a questioning glance. “She doesn’t own a shower?”

I shrugged. “Like, I don’t know...maybe she has some medical problem that produces excessive body odor.”

He sighed sadly. “Then I’m a dork *and* a jerk.”

I nodded. Only to look up at him. “I don’t think any of the others know yet,” I said, for some reason, hoping to cheer him up. “That you’re a dork, I mean. Beau, Gracen, Bentley, and Bella. They all still think you’re too cool to hang out with us.”

“Seriously?” Luke threw his head back and laughed. Then he swayed us hard in one direction, saying, “Don’t worry. They’ll figure it out soon enough.”

“Or they won’t,” I said since he didn’t seem dorky to me at all. He was kind of dreamy, actually.

Relaxing my body against his, I couldn’t help but concentrate on how utterly nice he felt. We fit together just right, and he didn’t seem to mind my pudgy parts at all.

“Oh, they will,” he assured, brushing some of my hair out of my face again with his fingers and tucking it behind my ear. “For instance, I’m a mama’s boy. Like a huge, raging *mother* lover. I can’t get a paper cut without telling my mom about it. She’s my everything.” With a shrug, he sighed. “A guy just can’t keep that hidden for long, you know.”

I smiled, thinking that was a sweet quality, not a dorky one. “I like your mom,” I said.

“*Right?* She’s the best,” he agreed with a wistful note in his voice. “Which is why I should probably do her proud right about now, huh?”

As he let go of me to push to his feet, I straightened and blinked at him. “Wha...?”

“Chloe Ryan,” he said, holding a hand down to me. “Will you do me the honor of giving me this dance?”

I sank back toward the wall, instantly wary. “Oh...no,” I assured him, waving my hands insistently. “Trust me, I don’t want to dance anymore. I’m not going back into that gymnasium ever again.”

“Yes, the fuck you are,” he argued sternly. “You came here, wanting to dance tonight, remember?”

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts,” he insisted, refusing to let me deny him. His eyebrows lifted severely as he pointed at me. “If you came here, wanting to dance, you’re going to dance. You’re *my* people, and over my dorky dead body am I letting a dipshit like Spinnaker or his asshat friends take your dream away from you. You got that?”

My chin trembled. “Seriously, Luke. I don’t know if I can go back in there.”

“Well, you *are*,” he assured me steadily, refusing to drop the hand he continued to hold out to me. “Because I’m going to be with you the entire time, and I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you. Trust me. Okay?”

I hesitated, wanting to believe him. “You swear you won’t leave me?”

“Consider me glue,” he promised.

When he looked at me with that serious glint in his blue, blue eyes, I *did* trust him.

And before I knew quite what I was doing, I lifted my hand and clasped his fingers as I heaved out a deep breath. “Alright.”

Here went nothing.

His chest swelled and shoulders rose with pride as he smiled and tightened his grip, then hauled me upright, off the bench, and onto my feet. “That’s my girl,” he encouraged before murmuring, “I got you. You’re going to be just fine.”

I nodded and glanced warily toward the bathroom exit. But Luke was true to his word. He kept hold of my hand the entire way to the gym and talked to me the whole time, being more

attentive to me than anyone I'd ever talked to before. And when he smiled at me, I think he branded a piece of my heart with his name on it.

My fingers tightened around his when we stepped into the loud, booming room where everyone else was gathered. I swear, half the crowd turned to gape at us, no doubt having seen the fight and heard all the gossip by now.

Panicking, I jarred to a halt, ready to retreat, but Luke glanced at me, shaking his head. "We can do this. Just follow me."

I looked up into his eyes, exhaled a harsh breath, and then nodded.

He nodded too, giving me that proud smile again.

When we turned toward the dance floor, the people parted naturally to let us through. We'd almost reached our destination when Malia popped in front of us, blocking our path.

I yelped out my surprise, and Luke pulled up short, hissing a curse under his breath as he blinked at her.

"There you are," she said, stepping close enough to bring a whiff of her rankness with her. "I've been looking all over for you."

Dear Lord, she really did need to invest in some strong deodorant.

Luke pulled himself up straighter, and I could tell he was holding his breath as he offered her a stiff smile. "Sorry about that," he said. "I had a...a thing. But I'll get back to you in a minute, okay? I just have to dance with my girl here for this song..." He motioned to me by lifting the hands we were still holding. "And then I'll get back to you. Alright?"

"Uh..." Malia wrinkled her nose and looked me up and down. "Okay," she finally said slowly. "I guess."

Luke grinned. "Thanks." He patted her arm companionably and then stepped around her, drawing me along with him.



And finally, we'd made it to the dance floor.

It was a fast song, but that didn't seem to matter to Luke.

"Let's show these people just how much we don't care what they think of us," he shouted into my ear.

And then he started to dance. Dorky, insane, arm-waving movements that made me blink at him and then laugh.

"Come on," he encouraged, taking my hand again. "Dive in."

"You look crazy," I told him, shaking my head.

"Then show me how it's done right," he countered goofily and spun me away from him before he danced his way back up to me again.

I laughed and started to dance too, making it through the whole song and not able to pay attention to anyone but him.

When the music ended, blending into a slow-paced number, I paused and blinked, realizing I'd been able to *not* care about anyone else the entire time.

Wow.

Luke pulled me up close against him and wrapped a hand around my waist.

"One more," he said into my hair.

His warm breath on my neck made me shiver in delight. I nodded and shifted closer, moving with him as he began to sway us around the floor through other couples.

His face lowered over my shoulder, and he inhaled. "Not fair. You still smell good after a sweaty, fast song."

My stomach tightened, and a lightning strike of sensations raced through the lower portion of my stomach. "So do you," I told him as I breathed in his clean, fresh soap scent.

"Your boobs are a lot softer than Malia's too," he noticed.

My breasts tingled at the compliment.

When I glanced up, Luke lifted his brows. "Not that we're talking about them," he added. "I just thought you'd like to

know. They're officially my favorite set in the whole damn room."

I rolled my eyes but then grinned. "Thank you."

He nodded. "And if you wanted to move them some more to—you know—*really* rub them against me, that'd be fine, too. Just saying."

With a laugh, I found myself leaning in just a little bit more and pressing my chest harder against his.

Luke groaned and rested his cheek on my hair. "Good Lord," he breathed. "You're a saint. Saint fucking Chloe."

I could only smile and drift in his arms until the song came to an end. When Malia appeared at the edge of the crowd, watching us with a scowl and her arms folded moodily over her chest, Luke seemed to mope.

"Playtime's over, isn't it?" he asked, sending me a puppy-dog frown.

"We can dance one more song, if you want," I offered.

His eyes lit up over the idea, but then he frowned and pulled his phone from his pocket. The screen was displaying an incoming call from Bella.

He glanced at me and sighed before answering with a moody, "What?" Then, after a moment, he snapped, "*Of course* I found her. Yes, she's fine. Yeah, I'll bring her out in a second. Just hold your damn horses, will you?"

Disconnecting, he stuffed the phone back into his pocket and rolled his eyes. "Your groupies are getting restless," he said. "I should probably get you back to them, huh?"

I nodded. "Yeah, probably."

I could walk out by myself; he didn't need to escort me. But I couldn't seem to tell him that as he started away with me. I wanted just a little bit longer with him like this.

He held my hand again, keeping a firm hold as if he were unwilling to let me go. And when we made it outside and saw

Bella, Bentley, Beau, and Gracen hovering not so far away, he loosened his grip yet made me be the one to pull away.

I did slowly, looking up at him. “Thank you,” I said.

He nodded and bowed his head respectfully. “And thank *you*,” he countered. “You saved me from at least twenty minutes of Malia.”

“Any time.” With a smile, I turned and started off, heading toward the others who were hurrying our way.

But then Luke called, “Hey, Chloe.”

I turned back. He grasped my hand and tugged me against him until my face landed smooshed against his shoulder. Then he hugged me briefly and tightly, kissing my temple with a hard smack of the lips before he murmured in my ear, “Size doesn’t mean shit. Small or extra-large, you’re fucking beautiful. Inside *and* out. Don’t ever forget that.”

When he stepped back, releasing me, he looked deeply into my eyes before murmuring, “Okay?”

I nodded dumbly, staring back at him with wide, surprised eyes. “O-okay,” I said, bobbing my head up and down.

At that moment, I truly, honestly believed him.

He smiled a private smile that seemed designated for me alone, then he winked and turned away, striding back toward the gymnasium so he could return to his malodorous date.

I was still watching the doors he’d disappeared through when the others reached me.

“Chloe! Oh my God. Are you alright?” Bella asked, gripping my arm and turning me so I could see the concern darkening her eyes.

I nodded. “I...yeah,” I said, my voice going breathless and high. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Except I wasn’t. I wasn’t fine at all.

In the span of half an hour, I had fallen flat in love with Luke Hamilton.

I wasn't sure if I'd ever be fine again.

## 4 CHLOE

A week after I signed my heart over to Luke, the family had a get-together, to celebrate my cousin Rory's tenth birthday.

Since my dad owned a nightclub with an enormous back room that was often rented out as an event center, we had the party there on a Saturday afternoon, hours before the bar opened.

Uncle Asher had Rory's favorite meal catered in and a live band set to play, while Aunt Remy had a cake made for her that was three tiers high.

My dad's brother and his wife had just retired the year before from their music band they'd played in together, and they were kind of mega-rich now, plus this was basically the first year they'd been truly *home* for any of their kids' birthdays, so they had gone all out.

There was supposed to be a wall full of carnival-type booths there too, and that was what I was most excited about.

Because that's where I knew *he'd* be.

I wore my cutest pair of jeans with the bedazzled back pockets and my favorite top, then I caked on the makeup and did my hair just right. One good thing I could admit about myself was that I had awesome hair. It was pale, bouncy, glossy-soft, and easy to manipulate any way I wanted it to go.

Today, I put it up into a high ponytail and curled dozens of pieces into small ringlets that fell down my back.

I'd just coiled the last piece of hair around my curling iron and was humming under my breath as I waited for it to heat when a knock came from the bathroom entrance.

"How much longer are you going to take?" my little brother asked from the doorway where he leaned against the frame with his arms crossed over his chest, impatiently waiting for me to finish. "Other people have to use this bathroom too, you know. And by other people, I mean me. *I'm* other people."

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "There are two other bathrooms in this house, you know."

"But I have to take a shower," he argued. "And all my soap and shampoos are in *here*. So why don't *you* go to one of the other bathrooms? Hell, why do you need a bathroom for hair curling at all?"

"Oh my God, *fine!*" I muttered and jerked impatiently on the cord to unplug the iron from the wall. "I'll go to my room." Holding the cord in one hand and the iron still curled around a chunk of hair in the other, I spun toward Trick and glowered. "You want to get out of my way or not?"

Trick frowned at me but shifted to the side. "Who're you getting all dressed up for, anyway? You got a crush on someone in the family or something?"

"No, dweeb," I said as I stepped past him to start down the hall toward my room. "We're going to a party. People dress up for parties."

"Not you," he called after me. "You dress up for *boys*. And from all the family gossip I heard, Caine Spinnaker was out, so someone *else* must be in."

Mouth dropping open, I jarred to a halt and spun to gape at him. "Family gossip? What family gossip?"

And how did *he* hear family gossip, anyway? He was a freaking seventh grader.

Trick shrugged, looking smug as he continued to lean against the doorframe. "Hey, I'm not deaf. I hear things."

With a sigh, I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling and demanded, “Like what?” as I gently began to pull my hair free of the curling iron before I burned the locks clean off my head.

“Like the fact that Beau got his black eye from stepping in and defending you after a bunch of bullies called you fat.”

My mouth dropped open. “Who—?”

“So it’s Beau, isn’t it?” Trick guessed. “You’re all lovey-dovey for Beau now?”

I cringed. “What? *No*. Beau likes Bentley.”

Trick snorted. “Well, *that’s* obvious. But I thought you might try to steal him away from her since he’s your hero now.”

“Beau is not my hero,” I groused. “He’s...Beau. He would’ve stood up for *Gracen* or any one of us if he’d heard someone bad-mouthing us. That doesn’t mean I have to form some huge, raging crush on him.”

Except that was exactly what I’d done. Just not for Beau.

My brother shrugged and sent me a look that told me just how much he didn’t believe me. “If you say so,” he murmured as he turned away and entered the bathroom, shutting himself inside. “But I know better.”

Unease cramped my stomach. “Hey! Don’t you go spreading around a lie like that. *Trick!*” I hurried back to the bathroom door and pounded on it. “Patrick Mason Ryan! Did you hear me? It’s not true. It’s *not!*”

“The whole house can hear you, baby girl,” my dad sang from way back in his and Mom’s bedroom.

Mom popped her head into the hallway, her eyes bright with curiosity. “And what’s not true, anyway?” she asked.

I groaned and dropped my hand from the bathroom door. “Nothing,” I mumbled. “Your youngest is just pathetically misinformed about his facts, that’s all.”

“Am not!” I heard Trick’s muffled answer through the door.

“Are too!” I shouted back before I stormed to my room and set down the curling iron on my dresser before going to my full-length mirror and biting my lip as I studied myself.

I didn’t only dress up for boys, did I? That made me sound...

Kind of like a loser.

Self-consciously, I sat on my bed and pressed a hand to my abdomen. It wasn’t wrong to try to look nice. *Or* to want a boyfriend. I was only being stupid for letting my annoying, twelve-year-old brother get into my head.

Today was going to be a good day, and I wasn’t going to let anyone else get in the way of it. Especially Trick.

There. Once more resolved to my plan, I pushed back to my feet with a new determination and finished my hair before slipping on a fancy pair of bedazzled sandals and some bracelets and rings, then a necklace and fun pom-pom earrings. By the time I was finished and had hooked the strap of my purse over my shoulder before making my way to the front of the house, Mom, Dad, and even Trick were already there, waiting for me.

“How is it...?” Trick asked, lifting his brows at me. “That you can start getting ready an hour before me, and I wait until the very last minute, but we’re *still* always waiting on you when it’s time to go?”

“Trick, hush,” Mom warned with a nudge to his arm. “Girls have a lot more to put on than boys.”

“Like what?” my brother complained. “Bras?”

I sighed. “Like makeup, and hair products. Jewelry, perfume, deodorant...” Wrinkling my nose at him, I lifted my brows. “Please tell me you didn’t forget to put deodorant on, did you?”

“I put on deodorant,” he argued with a frown. “And brushed my teeth. Did *you* brush your teeth?”

“Yes, I—”



“Children,” Dad cut in, laughing and lifting his hands. “I’m sure everyone followed their proper hygiene regimen. Now, can we go? The party’s already started without us.”

“Amen,” Mom added, leading the way out the door. “Let’s party.”

Trick snickered at me and followed her.

I turned to Dad, instantly apologizing. “I’m sorry I took so long.”

But he just smiled and caught my hand before bringing it to his mouth and kissing the backs of my knuckles. “Never apologize for pampering yourself, Chloe Girl.” Then he winked at me and kissed my hair. “It was worth the wait. You look lovely.”

As I hugged him back, he chuckled and slipped an arm around my waist, escorting me outside after Mom and Trick.

I burrowed close and snuggled against him all the way to the car. But seriously, he was, like, the perfect father ever. I loved my dad so much.

If there was any reason that I wanted a boyfriend for myself, it was probably because of him. Because not only was he a stellar dad, but he made my mom deliriously happy. I mean, the way he doted on her and made her smile and just made her the queen of our house...

I wanted a person like that in my life someday too. Someone who smiled and lit up around me and loved me the way my dad loved my mom.

Remembering how Luke had held my hand at the dance and then how he’d looked so sad when our song was over, I drew in a deep, encouraged breath as I climbed into the back of the family SUV next to Trick.

I fidgeted in the car until we reached the party, where a smirking Trick leaned toward me and whispered, “I think Bentley likes him back. Aren’t you even worried about breaking her heart if you steal him?”

Widening my eyes at him to get him to shut up, I reached out and pinched his arm as I mouthed the words, “I do not like Beau!”

“Do too,” he hissed knowingly.

I sighed and rolled my eyes, then turned to stare out the side window, effectively ignoring him as Dad found a parking spot.

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I REALLY MUST’VE KEPT the family waiting because the party was in full swing by the time we walked in. Even my oldest brother, Julian, had made it before us, and he’d had to drive a couple of hours to get here.

He had his fiancée, Nia, with him, and they came over to greet us first as the four of us shuffled inside. The only one missing was my sister, Skylar, who was still away at her college and hadn’t been able to make it back this weekend.

“Oh my goodness, look at you,” Nia squealed, taking my hands and spreading them so she could give me a once-over. “You’re growing up so much lately.”

“She’s growing *too* fast,” Julian grumbled, reaching out to shake my shoulder in greeting. “We’re going to have to put a brick on your head, kiddo.”

I didn’t tell *him* that I’d stopped growing *up* over a year ago and he should therefore probably put the brick on my boobs or waistline instead; I just grinned at him because I could never *not*-grin whenever Julian paid attention to me. I absolutely worshiped my oldest sibling. And I couldn’t remember a time when he’d ever been mean or picked on me...

Like *Trick* constantly did.

It was probably just the larger age gap that had kept us from any sibling arguments, but I adored Julian anyway.

I didn't get much time to talk to him, however, before Bentley and Bella, along with Beau's younger sister, Lucy, appeared and grabbed my arms to drag me over to take pictures with them in the photo booth.

My eyes widened as I stumbled along behind them. "There's a photo booth here, too? Wow."

"I know! Isn't it awesome?" Lucy shook my arm excitedly. "I've taken about a gazillion pictures already with Rory and Haven and anyone else I can drag in there with me."

Lucy was a year below Trick in school but infinitely more mature.

As I squeezed back on her arm, telling her I had my work cut out for me, then, if I wanted to catch up, my gaze wandered around the room until I spotted him.

There...

His back was to us, but I could tell it was him. Standing shoulder to shoulder with Teagan, he was playing a basketball toss game with her, rushing to gather miniature basketballs and make more shots than she currently was.

Teagan was thirteen, about half a year younger than me, and still in middle school. She wasn't related to Luke, but she'd always followed along behind the Hamilton brothers as if she were their little sister. So I wasn't particularly worried about her spending time with him.

Actually, her presence with Luke was going to give me a good excuse to go over there and talk to him myself.

After I posed for about fifty shots with Bentley, Bella, and Lucy, I meandered my way across the room toward the basketball game, bumping into the birthday girl along the way.

But Rory was so overwhelmed and busy with everything and everyone that she barely had a chance to give me a hug before she was ripped away by someone else.

And I was once again free to make my way to the game wall.

Luke and Teagan had just finished a round when I finally approached, and Luke must've won because he was pounding his arms into the air in victory and shouting his war cry.

"That's what I'm talking about," he crowed into Teagan's face. "Beat *that*, Tenning."

Scowling back, Teagan set her hands on her hips and sniffed. "Wow. Big tough senior beat an eighth grader. You should be *so* proud."

"Hey, you're a savage competitor, T," I told her. "I think an NBA player would be hard-pressed to beat you."

"*Thank* you, Ryan," Luke answered, splaying a hand toward me in gratitude as he continued to face off with Teagan and lift an eyebrow at her.

Teagan, however, glanced my way. "He's still too cocky of a winner," she complained, only for her gaze to fill with surprise as she took me in. "Wow, Chloe. You look amazing."

Luke finally tore his gaze from the thirteen-year-old to look at me.

My entire body flushed under his perusal.

But this was it. This was the moment I'd prepared for all morning. For *him* to see every little detail I had painstakingly gone through to look nice for him.

Except he didn't say anything about how I looked. He didn't agree with Teagan or even disagree with her. He just looked, and then looked away again, scanning the crowd as if seeking something better to gain his attention.

And I faltered, not sure how to react. "Uh...thanks." I turned to Teagan blindly, trying to concentrate on her and not the crack forming in my heart.

She reached forward to play with one of the springy curls in my ponytail and asked, "Can you do this to my hair sometime? It's super cute."

"S-sure," I told her, my gaze shifting back toward Luke. "No problem. Hey, you guys need a new contender in your game?"

And, *yes*, his gaze finally veered back to me. “Seriously?” he asked, lighting up. “God, you’re a lifesaver, Chlo. Pipsqueak here’s been wearing me out.” He set his hand on my waist, his fingers curling almost possessively around my hip before he insistently guided me forward, toward the game. “She could use new blood to compete with. Thanks.”

And then he walked off, leaving me to play basketball with Teagan.

*Teagan.*

My mouth fell open as I watched him go. And I felt like a complete idiot. But honestly, why would he have assumed I’d meant that I wanted *him* when I’d asked to play. Ugh.

Now I was stuck playing with Teagan.

I wasn’t lying about her savage, competitive streak either. She annihilated me for three games straight until I gave up and snagged Gracen’s arm as he passed by, making him play with her instead.

It was harder for me to locate Luke after that. I think the number of people had doubled in the past ten minutes, and besides, he was no longer anywhere along the game wall, where I would’ve guessed he’d be.

As my gaze darted impatiently toward the food next, Trick appeared at my side, eating a snow cone.

“So, okay, I was obviously wrong about Beau,” he told me before lapping up a mouthful of red-and-blue-streaked ice. “You haven’t looked at him once since we got here.”

I rolled my eyes. “Gee, you think?” I mused distractedly, frowning when I still couldn’t spot Luke.

“But I was right too,” Trick spoke up, sounding smug. “Because you definitely have a new crush. And wowza, sis. You’ve got your work cut out with this one. He’s over there, by the way.”

Bumping his elbow into mine, Trick hitched his head to the left as soon as he got my attention, getting me to look that way.

And what do you know; there was Luke.

Talking to some girl I'd never seen before.

Not just talking though.

He was freaking *flirting*. I could tell he was trying to impress her, too, from the way he turned all his attention toward her and talked adamantly as if desperate to seek her approval.

And why wouldn't he? She was goddess-status beautiful.

My stomach hitched painfully as I watched him work.

"I'll give you one thing, Chlo," Trick murmured from next to me. "You definitely have weird and unexpected taste in boys."

Shit. I'd forgotten about Trick. Closing my eyes briefly because I already knew I couldn't convince him he was wrong, I finally turned and reopened my eyes to glare threateningly. "Tell anyone, and you are dead. Got me?"

"Hey..." He laughed and lifted his hands, making his snow cone drip in the process. "Why would I give up such juicy leverage against you that easily?" Smile turning calculating, he wagged his brows. "I own you now. You're going to do whatever I want from here on out, or your secret, embarrassing crush is going family-wide."

I sighed and deflated in utter loss. "Of course it is," I muttered, depressed, only to grow even more maudlin when I glanced over to watch Luke with the goddess.

Swallowing hard, I studied them together for a moment before asking, "Who is she, anyway?"

"Reeza," Trick answered immediately. "No last name. She's a singer. Uncle Ash and Aunt Remy are trying to land her a record label. And..." Trick waited until I glanced his way before he lifted his brows and dropped the last bomb. "She's nineteen."

An older girl.

Yeah. *That* I could not compete with.

“Sorry, Chlo,” my brother told me apologetically as he patted my back in sympathy. “But if you want to get into *her* league and gain his attention, you’re going to have to age about five years and lose the pom-pom earrings.”

Gasping, I reached up and protectively squeezed the colorful, fuzzy balls hanging from my ears. Then I scowled at my brother and grumbled, “Whatever. My pom-poms are cute.”

“Yeah.” Trick cringed. “Except Luke doesn’t want cute. He wants sexy.”

## 5 CHLOE

**S**exy.

I hated to admit it, but my brother had been right. It didn't take all that much observation to realize Luke had a certain taste when it came to girls. He usually preferred them taller—I couldn't do much about that—big boobed—Check! At least I was good there—older, pretty, well-dressed, stylish, and skinny.

Always skinny.

It sucked to watch him relentlessly chase thin girl after thin girl. But he never stayed with any of them long, so I had yet to worry about him actually growing *feelings* for someone else.

While he played, however, I bided my time, working on growing up and shedding pounds to turn...sexy.

Months and years passed. I worked my ass off—literally—to become the kind of girl that could gain Luke's notice. I exercised like a maniac, ate only the right foods, read every diet book I could get my hands on, and by the time I hit my senior year of high school, I had slimmed down enough to feel ready. I mean, I'd never be straight-up skinny, but now I thought I could finally meet his expectations.

But still, I waited, needing the perfect opportunity to make it all happen.

And for some reason, the night of the big graduation party that was thrown for us—us being me, Bentley, Beau, and the twins—at Gray and Bella's house seemed to be it. I'd heard



Luke say he'd stop by, and well... I was going to be ready for him.

I went shopping with Lucy that morning, and we picked out a dress to make any guy stand up and take notice.

Even Lucy had been like, "Wow, Chlo... Who the heck are you trying to catch with that thing? Because I think you're going to succeed."

I had preened and then had to play it off like it was all about me. I was proud of my hard work and wanted to flaunt it a little. That was all.

She had no idea who it was really for. No one did. Not even Trick. Thankfully, he'd given up thinking I still liked Luke a couple of years back.

I just didn't want to tell anyone about my crush, though. I didn't want it to look as if I had to pursue *him*.

No, I wanted *him* to see me like this and fall so madly in love that it would seem as if he'd been the one to fall first... that he was the one who had to come after *me*.

I was giddy about the chase I wanted to put him through, too, making him think he had to jump through all kinds of hoops to win me over. Luke enjoyed a good challenge, and gah, I absolutely could not wait to give him one.

"Chlo?" Trick called, bulldozing his way into my room as I was applying the final touches to myself by spritzing on a load of body spray because Luke liked a good-smelling girl.

"What?" I asked, turning to find him holding up two hangers.

"Which shirt should I wear tonight?"

He held one top up to his face before pulling it away to model himself with the other.

I blinked, still trying to get over how tall he'd gotten lately. At sixteen now, he was finishing his sophomore year and towered over me by almost a foot.

It wasn't fair at all.

“Who’re you trying to impress?” I asked, lifting my eyebrows since he usually didn’t care what he wore.

He lowered both shirts and sent me a dry look before sighing and giving in with, “Letisha Barone.”

My eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Nice,” I congratulated. Surprisingly, little brother had some good taste. “Go blue.”

He grinned. “Sweet. Thank you.”

Before he backed out of my room and left, however, he skimmed my outfit with his gaze and whistled. “You seriously think Mom and Dad are going to let you leave the house wearing that?”

Okay, so the dress was probably Malia Ross skimpy, and possessed the least amount of cloth out of any dress I’d ever owned before, my party dress from freshman year included. But to catch Luke’s attention, it had to look like this.

“I’m sure they wouldn’t,” I agreed with an accommodating smile. “But I seriously think you’re going to distract them so I can slip out without them noticing,” I countered, grinning hopefully as I grabbed a ten-dollar bill off the top of my dresser and flashed it at him.

Trick’s eyebrows rose. “Why, yes. Yes, I am,” he agreed and plucked the money from my fingers. “You’ll be ready in, what, ten...fifteen minutes?”

I nodded. “Sounds about right.”

“Alright. I *won’t* be seeing you then.” After holding out a fist for me to bump, he strolled from the room whistling cheerfully.

Yeah, he and I got along much better these days, trading in money and secrets to accomplish our different goals throughout the years.

And fifteen minutes later, he came through for me like clockwork, gathering both Mom and Dad to him so I could slip out the back door unnoticed.

It wasn’t like they didn’t know where I was going. They’d stop by later. I was just hoping I’d have plenty of time to woo

Luke with my new dress *before* they arrived and possibly made me go home to change.

Until then, I had the love of my life to catch.

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AT THE LOWE HOUSE, I was the first guest to arrive because Bella had asked me to come early so I could help set stuff up.

“Damn, Chloe,” she said as soon as she opened the door. “You’re determined to steal all the boys’ attention from me, aren’t you?”

I snorted and shook my head. I didn’t care about all the boys; I just wanted to catch Luke. And my opportunities had become limited lately. He worked late hours on a lot of odd days.

Luke had opted not to attend college. While his brother, JB, was beginning med school and following in their dad’s footsteps to become a doctor, Luke had never been the scholarly type. He was more active and physical. But he’d yet to decide what kind of occupation he *did* want, so my dad had hired him at the bar as soon as he’d turned twenty-one, and he’d happily been slinging drinks since then.

He hadn’t seemed all that interested in doing much of anything else, but I knew he’d find his path and figure out what he wanted to do with his life when he was ready. And when he did...watch out. Because once Luke put his mind to something, nothing got in his way.

Meanwhile, the Lowes kept me busy, making punch, and setting out cups and napkins and bowls full of pretzels, and by the time people started to arrive, I was starving.

I was stuffing an apple slice into my mouth and ready to down it with a cup of ice water when Bella sidled up next to me and hooked her arm through mine before resting her cheek on my hair.

Sighing wistfully, she announced, “I’m not settling for anything less than that someday, you know?”

“Less than what?” I asked, clueless. “What’re we talking about?”

“Them.” When she pointed, I glanced over to find that Beau and Bentley were the objects of her fascination. “I mean, look at him. He’s completely absorbed by everything she says and does. In his eyes, Bent can do no wrong.”

“Hmm,” I murmured, frowning slightly. Since Beau and Bentley had officially started dating earlier this year, they’d been overly affectionate with each other. It was almost a bit much if you asked me. But then my eyes widened, and I glanced up at Bella in shock as I swallowed my apple. “Wait. You don’t like...*Beau*. Do you?”

“What? *No!*” She blinked at me as if I were insane. “I’m just saying... I want someone to look at me the way he looks at Bentley. It’s like she’s the very air he breathes. The poor sap worships the ground she walks on. I honestly don’t think he could stop loving her if he *tried*.”

“Yeah.” That was true.

I glanced over, and my brow knit with envy as I took in the way Beau stood, his entire body attuned to Bentley, face tilted her way, eyes alive with wonder, and his lips slightly parted as if he were captivated by everything she had to say. Then he laughed and reached out to touch her arm before leaning in and briefly burying his nose in her hair.

The boy was truly and deeply besotted.

And Bentley had just recently gotten over a nasty cold too. Her hair looked flat and greasy as if it needed to be washed. Her clothes were wrinkled and loose, telling everyone she didn’t give a shit how she looked, and her face was blotchy and red. I’d honestly never seen her look so bad. But Beau gazed at her as if she’d never looked better.

My stomach tightened almost painfully.

Luke never looked at me that way. He never made a beeline toward me as soon as I walked in the door. And he certainly didn’t feel the need to touch me every five seconds.

I always had to be the one to seek him out and talk to him and try to get him to notice *me*.

But Bella was right.

As she moved away from me to approach Bentley and Beau, I remained rooted in place. Because a cold film of dread had captured my heart.

I wanted someone to fall for me the way Beau had fallen for Bentley, so hard and completely that nothing had been able to prevent it, that it practically consumed him, and he couldn't have stopped it if he wanted to, no matter how good or bad I appeared.

Except Luke had known me my entire life. And if he hadn't looked at me like that yet, then I couldn't imagine that any amount of weight loss or a magical makeover was going to turn his head now.

Uncertainty flared to life inside me.

Maybe my plan wasn't going to work after all. Maybe he...

Maybe he just plain *couldn't* feel that way toward me.

The knot in my stomach began to shift and move, swirling up a healthy dose of nausea.

But oh God. What if I couldn't tempt Luke to fall in love with me? What if I'd been working so hard all these years... for nothing?

And that was the moment that he decided to walk in.

All the air evacuated my lungs, and I thought I was going to pass out.

With his arm casually draped over the shoulders of another girl, I could only gape in disbelief as I took her in. Amber Galveston had been two years older than me in school. And about fifty pounds heavier.

I mean, what the hell was Luke doing here with not only a *date* but a date who was bigger than I'd ever been? I'd worked

and sweated and wept for three *years* to lose all these pounds for him. Because he'd only dated skinny girls before.

This just...

It didn't compute in my brain.

But my size had never been an issue. It had just been me *personally* he didn't want. *I* wasn't good enough.

The weight of reality settled hard on my shoulders.

Luke didn't want me; he'd *never* wanted me.

He *would* never want me. I'd worked so hard all those years for nothing.

As I stood there, staring at the two of them together, he leaned in toward Amber, pausing his face right next to hers so he could say something to make her smile. And things inside me broke as they'd never broken before.

I'm saying, my heart freaking shattered into dust particles as I stood there gaping at them. And it left me utterly lost, trying to figure out how to keep surviving from that point on.

But my world was crumbling, and I couldn't seem to stop falling apart on the inside, not even when he looked up and saw me.

He blinked and jerked to a stop, pausing Amber with him so he could gape at me with his mouth falling open. "Chloe?" he finally asked as if to make sure it was me. Then he lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "How the hell did you get Pick to let you leave the house in *that* thing?"

I swallowed down the knot in my throat and managed to say something about how Daddy hadn't even seen the dress.

"Well, that makes more sense," he answered with a snort before leaning his face over to lightly bump the side of his head into Amber's. "Hey, do you remember Chloe Ryan from school?"

"I *think* so," Amber answered, her gaze degrading and rude as she ran it over me. "She looks vaguely familiar, anyway."

"We had art together," I told her lamely.

“That’s right,” she answered. Then, she lifted an eyebrow and brutally told me, “Bulimia’s not healthy, you know.”

My mouth dropped open. “*Excuse me?*”

Amber turned to Luke, bluntly ignoring me. “Hey, I’m going to go get a heaping pile of nachos loaded with cheese and bacon over there. You want any?”

He grinned. “Sure. Thanks.” Then he swatted her on the ass as she walked away.

He was still leering after her with obvious lust when I completely lost my shit. “You...asshole,” I growled. And I threw the cup I was holding full of icy cold water right in his face.

With a gasp, he lifted his arms and bellowed, “What the *fuck!*”

When he turned to gape at me, his gaze growing livid, I spat, “Thanks a lot for *not* defending me.”

“Defending you from *what?*” he roared, wiping ice off his shoulders and then beads of water from his face.

“Oh, bulimia’s not healthy...” I mimicked and shoved him hard. “Bulimia is a serious disorder and not something to tease about. Besides, you know good and well I’m *not* bulimic. So why didn’t you say something?”

“Geez, Chloe, give her a break.” He stopped trying to dry himself as he narrowed his eyes and stepped close so he could quietly hiss, “She was just jealous because you’d done something *she* couldn’t. Seriously, how would you feel if she’d slimmed down and *you* hadn’t, then she showed up here, strutting around and shoving all her weight loss in *your* face with that skimpy little number?” His hand flailed dramatically as he lectured me, and all I could do was stare at him, devastated. “This is a graduation party, for God’s sake, not the Miss America pageant. Just what the hell are you trying to say with that outfit?”

My mouth fell open. I’d done all this for *him*, and he was acting as if I’d done something horrible instead.

I had guys asking me out weekly these days, appreciating my new looks. Why did he have to be the only one to think my transformation was a *bad* thing?

Numbers on a scale meant absolutely nothing when it came right down to it, didn't they? It was who I was on the inside that would never be good enough for him.

I felt like an absolute idiot. Heat infused my neck and cheeks so rapidly that I knew my entire face had to be turning a bright, flushed red. Then, a glassy hue covered my vision, warning me that I was going to burst into tears at any moment.

But I refused—absolutely, one hundred percent refused—to let him see me cry. Fisting my hands down at my sides, I vibrated with all the fury and loss I felt as I seethed the words from between my teeth, “I worked really hard to look like this.”

Luke's lips parted, and shock blanketed his features before he winced and reached for my elbow. “Chloe,” he murmured in a soft scolding sound. “I know that. I didn't—”

“Don't,” I growled, jerking my elbow away from him, and causing him to pull back in surprise. “Don't touch me. Don't talk to me. Don't even look at me. You are dead to me. I seriously don't think I've ever hated anyone the way I hate you right now.”

And at that moment, I meant it. He'd broken everything pure and beautiful and dreamy inside me. And he'd made me realize how truly stupid I was for thinking my appearance actually meant anything.

“I hope she gives you VD, and your dick falls off.”

Then, I turned away and stalked off.

But as one who never let someone else get the last word, he had to call after me. “Wow. Did you lose any actual weight, or was it just all your *sweetness* you shed?”

I flipped him off over my shoulder and kept walking.

I stormed outside and straight to my car. Without telling anyone goodbye, I climbed behind the wheel and drove home,



where I snuck into my room without my parents seeing me, and I stripped off the stupid dress, shoving it into the trash before pulling on an oversized and ratted old T-shirt and flannel pajama pants.

From there, I climbed into bed, tugged the covers over my head, and I cried for the rest of the night.

I hated him, I kept telling myself. I despised every breath of air in his stupid lungs. And I never wanted anything to do with him again.

It had taken me one conversation in a girl's high school bathroom to fall in love with Luke Hamilton, but nearly four long, miserable years of rejection and heartbreak and sweat to finally fall out again.

But, oh, once I got over him, it was definitely over.

## 6 LUKE

*[BACK TO THE PRESENT]*

*[AN HOUR BEFORE CHLOE'S  
TRIP TO THE PSYCHO STALKER'S  
BASEMENT]*

**M**y favorite time at the Forbidden Nightclub was just before opening when the bar was still quiet and pristine, ready for service, with all the chairs pulled off the tables and a handful of employees milling about and quietly setting up last-minute preparations. The air just seemed to vibrate with vitality as if it knew what it was about to house: thirsty people jonesing for alcohol, companionship, sex, and a little bit of excitement.

This place put a classy slant on the seedy nightlife that was out there, and I loved it. I kind of felt like its king, actually. And behind this bar was my throne.

Standing next to the cash register, I set my hand on the countertop and surveyed my kingdom, appreciating the clean surface under my palms that would no doubt become sticky and littered with spilled beer and rum before the end of my shift. God, I couldn't wait to slide a mug through the slosh and right into the hands of an eager recipient.

Glancing around, I looked for mistakes I could point out. But surprisingly, we were running a tidy ship tonight. I liked working with all these waiters and waitresses. They actually possessed some brains.

My complaining to Pick must've finally paid off, and he'd made sure to schedule me with the best.

I smirked, smug that I had the benefit of being damn near related to the owner, or at least the son of one of his closest friends. Though, I'm sure the fact that I was his best employee

and had worked here the longest played a part in it too. He'd already been talking about stepping down some and giving me more of a managerial position.

Soon, *I* might be the one making the schedules, ordering the stock, dealing with all the legal bullshit, and so forth.

God, I could only hope. I'm pretty sure I'd been born for nightclub life.

From the front, the doorman held open the entrance, admitting an early customer. But I figured it was probably just one of Pick's family members. His wife and four kids stopped by quite a bit to visit him.

And, yep, what do you know... As I focused my attention that way, a familiar, curvy figure pranced inside, wearing a short, tight jean skirt, cowboy boots, and a strapless black bustier that would make any man's mouth go dry in want.

I, however, grimaced and let out a moan of defeat.

But why did she have to stop by while *I* was working?

Pick's youngest daughter—second-to-youngest kid—had been a thorn in my side since she'd hit puberty.

Chloe had been the sweetest girl, I swear. She'd been one of my favorites in the whole friend pack that my parents had. But once she'd gotten breasts and dropped her baby fat, revealing a hot, banging body underneath, she'd turned into an absolute shrew.

I usually tried to avoid her, but since all her friends were *my* friends, and my family treated her family like...well, *our* family...then I was pretty much forced to see her constantly. And I'm talking holidays, special occasions, shooting-the-shit hang-out nights, pretty much everything. She was *always* there, and always ready to give me a hard time.

"Yes, your dad's in the back," I answered before she could ask or say anything to me, which would no doubt lead to a snide insult at my expense. Then I added, "No, I don't have change for a twenty. And Jesus, do you always gotta be so rude and nasty to me?"

Tipping her head at me, she sauntered straight to the bar and paused, setting her hand on my freshly cleaned countertop so her long nails—or more aptly, her *talons*—could tap irritatingly against the marble surface.

Her eyebrows lifted, and she smirked before murmuring, “Wow, Hamilton. I hope you didn’t practice that one in the mirror because, honestly, it could use some work.”

I shrugged and picked up a rag to purposely wipe down the spot she was touching as if she’d left smears. “And...refer to number three of my opening comments,” I lifted my finger to remind her that she was insulting me. Again.

But all she did was retort, “That was technically a *question*, not a comment. And to answer it: yes. I *do* have to be rude and nasty to you. Always.”

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “I figured.”

When she sat down at the bar instead of moving along to go see her dad in the back, I straightened in surprise.

“What’re you doing?” She couldn’t sit here. Her dad’s office was down the hall. *That* way. Why was she lingering in *my* space? *My* kingdom.

“I’m sitting,” she answered as if I was some kind of idiot who didn’t comprehend the concept. “Dad said he’d meet me out here.”

I frowned even harder. “Why?”

She blinked at me as if I was insane for asking such a question. “I don’t know,” she finally answered, shrugging offhandedly. “Because it’s *his* bar and he can do whatever he wants. What is your *problem*?”

My problem? My *problem*? Was she serious? My problem was that she was... “You’re *here*,” I muttered, waving my hand over her irritably. She was in my space, polluting my air.

“Aww, you poor thing.” She pressed a hand to her chest, right where her tight bustier met up with the bulge of large, luscious breasts spilling out the top. And of course, my attention veered straight to that hand, or more aptly what lay

beneath it because, unfortunately, she had the best breasts ever that always forced me to look at them. But then she managed to ruin the view, as she always did, by rolling her eyes and dryly muttering, “You’ll live. Now be a doll and make me an amaretto sour while I wait, would you?”

My jaw worked as I lifted my gaze to glare up at her face since there was no way I could glare at her breasts. The poor twins couldn’t help that they were attached to such a heartless viper. But her eyes... Ooh, her eyes hated me most, I think. The way they narrowed and judged and despised everything I did...yeah. I could scowl into her dark brown eyes with no problem.

The temptation to deny her demand and tell her to get her own damn drink was so heady that it crowded its way up my throat and physically burned my windpipe.

But she was Pick’s beloved baby girl. I couldn’t tell her no.

I mean, I *could*. And it’d be fun. Pick wouldn’t even fire me for it. But he’d hassle me for longer than I wanted to be hassled. So...

Turning away, I clenched my teeth in irritation and started on her fucking drink.

It would’ve served her right if I purposely mixed in the wrong ingredients and made it taste horrible, but bartending was my art, and I couldn’t purposely sabotage a drink. Not even for Chloe.

Plus—and this went no further than here—but secretly, I liked watching her take something of mine between her lips and swallow it all with satisfaction.

Once I was finished and turned back to her, however, that bustier she was wearing caught my gaze all over again.

Seriously, someone so rude and nasty should not be allowed to be that hot. And I mean, *all-over* gorgeous.

Along with her spectacular cleavage, she has these bare, toned, golden shoulders that begged a man’s hands to slip their way all over them.

Then there was her hair, which was pulled up tonight and styled, putting her neck on display. And I don't know what it was about me and necks, but exposed feminine throats always make me want to just *bite* them. Mmm.

And my mouth was starting to literally water, for just a taste of that lovely, tender—

*God*, it'd been way too long since I'd last had sex. Even Chloe Ryan's neck was starting to look good to me.

As were her lips.

I truly hated it when she put on bright lipstick like that; it made her mouth appear more kissable than it should. And it made me think of blowjobs.

Scowling into her brown eyes, I sniffed as I slapped down a napkin and then set her drink in front of her. "Hot date tonight?"

My gut burned as I asked. *Not* because I was jealous of the thought of that mouth going down on someone else but because her presence simply gave me indigestion. Yeah, that was why.

Glancing up, she said nothing, just glared into my eyes as she reached for the amaretto sour, pulled it toward her, and finally lifted it to her mouth, still looking hatefully at me as she wrapped her bright red lips around the straw and...sucked.

And fuck me, but I grew instant wood. Which pissed me the hell off.

"So you're getting *that* desperate, huh?" I snickered to hide the dreaded reaction my stupid body was having.

When Chloe merely shifted her face to the side as she set her drink back down, letting me know she didn't catch on to my meaning, I added, "You were in such a hurry to get ready for him, you only put on one earring."

Immediately, she lifted her hands to her ears and gasped when she slipped her fingers over the lobes, discovering that I wasn't lying.

As she rushed to remove the single earring that remained, I outright laughed in her face. “You know, you might as well just put a sign on your back that reads, *I’m the last of my friends who’s still single. Please don’t let me die an old maid.* You’d be less obvious.”

Her eyes narrowed and her expression frosted. But she sounded almost pleasant when she smiled at me and tucked the single earring away in the front pocket of her skirt before lifting the glass again. “Does it bother you that you peaked in high school and haven’t emotionally matured since?”

“Probably not as much as it bothers you that you can only attract absolute dirtballs.” And I smiled back, confident that my barb had gotten to her when she skipped the straw this time and drank deeply until she emptied the glass.

“Ooh...” She slapped the empty cup down and shivered before crossing her arms over her chest and sending me a dry scowl, her cleavage bubbling up higher and practically screaming *look at me!* “Great burn. I’d clap for you, but my hands are too comfortable where they are.”

I really didn’t blame them; my hands would be comfortable there too.

But I shrugged as if I didn’t care and smirked back. “Don’t worry,” I assured her. “I don’t need your applause.” Then I leaned toward her and whispered, “I got plenty last night.”

Alright, fine. So that one was an outright lie. No one had applauded or clapped for me for *anything* last night, certainly not for some outstanding sexual performance, as I was implying. But *Chloe* didn’t need to know that.

Straightening again, I folded my arms over my chest as well and smugly leered back when the move caused her attention to drop to the tight shirt I wore, revealing the bulges in *my* arms and pecs.

Yeah, two could play this game, sister.

Until she sniffed in disinterest and volleyed back, “Clapping for yourself because of your own hand...doesn’t count.”



Damn, but she had a vicious jab. That one was a direct hit. I had indeed been using my hand way too much lately. Stupid family gossip had probably gotten back to her that I'd been in a slump with the ladies.

Narrowing my eyes, I tipped up my chin. "Tell me. Does the date know you're not a true cowgirl, at least? You're not hoodwinking the poor sucker into thinking you're authentically country, are you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Believe it or not, but my dating life is none of your business."

"And thank God for that," I shot back happily. "Otherwise, I'd never get any sleep from all the worrying. I mean..." Spinning my finger in a circle, I asked, "It's just *one* psycho ex that you currently have a restraining order against, right? Or are there more now?"

With a scowl, she snapped, "Don't be an ass. That's not funny."

But I laughed, anyway. "You definitely know how to pick 'em, don't you? Jesus, I can only imagine what's wrong with tonight's douche."

I'd yet to meet a single man she'd dated that I could actually stomach. Every single one of them had irritated me for one reason or another.

And *not* because I was jealous of them. She just had really bad taste in men.

"Shut up," Chloe hissed, pushing off her stool to stand as she glared at me. "Just shut your—"

"Children!" her dad interrupted, finally appearing. "Back to your corners, please. That's enough for this round."

"Dad," Chloe sighed in relief and hurried over to wrap her arms around him. "Thank God you're here."

"Yeah, thank God," I echoed. "But did you seriously ask her to meet you out here? In *my* space? What the hell, Pick?"

Pick kissed Chloe's hair as he hugged her back and met my gaze over her shoulder. "I didn't want to make her walk all the

way back there to meet me.”

“But thank you for the stimulating conversation while I waited, Lucian,” Chloe added, gazing back to smirk at me. “It was a pleasure, as always.”

I sniffed at her, then returned my attention to her dad. “Can you just please hurry through *whatever* it is you need from her so she’ll go away again?”

Pick frowned at me, then looked down at Chloe.

Taking her arms in his hands, he smiled like a proud father. “Your mom and I wanted to do something special for you to help you celebrate your new promotion.”

New promotion?

I lifted my brows, not having heard about a promotion. News traveled fast among our friend group, and I typically heard about every facet of her life—along with everyone else’s lives—whether I wanted to or not. But *this* I hadn’t heard yet.

Chloe was a radio host for a local station and talked during a morning show with a group of three other people. Since I worked nights, I was rarely up early enough to listen to her, but on the few occasions I had, I’d enjoyed the program.

I was dying to ask if her show had been picked up by a bigger broadcast, but I’d chew off my own tongue before letting her know I was even remotely curious about any part of her life.

I’d hear all about it through the grapevine soon enough, anyway.

“*Dad*. Seriously, you didn’t have to do that.” Chloe’s face lit up with pleasure as if she’d never been given a gift before when her father handed her a thick envelope. “But thank you.”

Pick smiled fondly and cupped her face in his hands before kissing her brow. “We’re so proud of you and everything you’ve accomplished.”

Feeling like a creeper for just standing there, watching their father/daughter moment, I slunk back toward the back wall where the shelves full of hard liquor were set out on

display. Then, I turned away, remembering—shit—I had a bar to get ready for opening.

That was the thing about Chloe. She had a bad habit of dragging my head away from whatever I'd been preoccupied with and tempting me into forgetting everything around me but having a bickering match with *her*. It was annoying as hell.

When one of the waitresses appeared from the back hall, carrying a garnish tray loaded with olives and cherries, plus lemon, lime, orange, and pineapple wedges, and then tried to set it down, I whistled and snapped my fingers to get her attention. “Nope,” I called. “Not there.”

I strode over to physically shift it another five inches down the counter before I explained, “You’re going to bang your elbow on it all night if you have it that close to the waitress station.” Then I winked at her to ease the reprimand since she was looking at me as if I'd just smacked her knuckles with a ruler. “And your elbows are way too pretty to turn so black and blue.”

Just like that, her fear seemed to melt into a blushing smile. “Thanks, Luke,” she told me.

As she hurried off, Deacon, the other bartender who was working with me tonight, appeared, stepping behind the bar and struggling to lug a keg across the floor.

“Dude.” I shook my head and hurried toward him to assist. “Don’t hold that there. You carry it here.”

I took the keg from him easily, hefting it by its designated handle, and hauled it over toward the draft station. “See. Much easier, right?”

“Hey, yeah. Thanks, man,” Deacon said, dogging my heels as he followed me over. “Shit, but you make it look like you’re carrying around a bag of marshmallows.”

I sent him a raised-eyebrow glance. “Been doing this ten years,” I answered. “So do you remember how to install it?”

“Uh...” He winced and scratched the back of his neck uncertainly, which told me I probably needed to show him again.

As I knelt, pointing and instructing, a niggling sensation had me glancing up mid-sentence, to discover that Chloe was hugging Pick goodbye and preparing to leave. And as she wrapped her arms around him, she glanced over his shoulder and right at me so that our gazes met briefly.

We didn't even have time to narrow our eyes at each other as we usually did—she was pulling away from her dad too quickly and I went back to focusing on the shit I was pointing out to Deacon—but my gut tightened in that split moment of involuntary eye contact because I knew she was going to disappear now, and we were going to miss out on exchanging farewell barbs where I would've no doubt said something bad enough to make her storm off in a huff.

Not sure why *that* felt like such a must-not-skip event, but I found myself rushing through my instructions, anyway, so I could stand up faster. Except, by the time I did, she was already halfway to the exit. I watched her make it the rest of the way to the door to see if she would glance back.

She didn't.

And I exhaled, strangely disappointed.

Yeah, that was the most irritating aspect about Chloe, right there. No matter how much I avoided her and dreaded each encounter I was forced to suffer through with her, whenever she *did* appear in front of me, she always left this gaping hole when she was gone again, this void that needed to be filled and had me craving more of her specific brand of torture.

I swear, she got off on riling me up and preparing me for war, only to take off again as soon as I was ready to brawl and leave me hanging with no one to conquer.

“I think I'm going to take off too,” Pick announced, slapping the countertop lightly to get my attention.

I blinked in surprise and turned to find him still there.

Shit. That wasn't awkward at all that he'd just watched me stare after his daughter as she left. Nope.

But I didn't say anything about it since he didn't, and I nodded to him instead. “Sure thing, boss. We got this

handled.”

He smiled with a proud glint in his eyes and offered me a half nod. “I know you do, Luke.” Then he patted the bar top again, almost lovingly this time. “Take care of her for me.”

When he turned and strolled off down the back hall, I squinted after him suspiciously.

The thing about Pick was that he was perceptive as fuck. He saw things no one else saw and knew things from his keen sense of observation alone. And the way he’d just said *take care of her for me* after watching me watch Chloe kind of freaked me out.

I mean, I knew he was talking about the bar that he wanted me to take care of.

But...was he *really*?

I shook my head, refusing to think about that, and I checked the clock, only to realize...

“Shit. Two minutes ’til go time!” I called. “Hear that, people? We open in two.”

I spent the next few minutes concentrating on bar procedures until the first few customers started to trickle in. And then everything turned toward mixing that next drink, flirting with the pretty faces, joking with the sporty jocks, and commiserating with the downtrodden.

But barely twenty minutes into my shift, yet another Ryan decided to invade my life. My cell phone vibrated from my back pocket, and since there was a lull in traffic, I pulled it free, only to groan when I saw Trick’s name.

“Dude, I’m working,” I grumbled in answer. “*What?*”

“Then find a sub,” Trick spouted back cattily. “Because it’s single guys’ night. And you’re in.”

*Single guys’ night?* I made a face because that wasn’t a thing in our group.

“Uh, we’re the only two single guys left in the family,” I reminded him dryly. “So if you’re trying to ask me on a date,

bud, I gotta tell you; you're not my type."

But Chloe's little brother only sniffed in my ear. "Sugar, I'm everyone's type," he countered. "And besides, your math is wrong. There's Vaughn now, too, and he's single."

I wrinkled my nose in confusion. "Vaughn?"

"You know... Baby Uncle."

I sighed and closed my eyes briefly. "Yes... I know who Vaughn is, dipshit." He was the newest member of our big conglomerate of a family, joined through Lucy as her newborn daughter's uncle. I just wasn't sure how his name fit into the current conversation. "What about him?"

"Oh! Right," Trick said, finally catching on as to what I was asking. "Well... Lucy's all worried about him spending too much time alone, so she asked Beau to keep him company, but Beau's got plans to rail Bentley all night, so he's passing the buck along to me... And *I* am generously volunteering you to assist since I have a big, caring heart and was thoughtful enough to include you. So it's not so much going to be a *single* guys' night out as much as a babysit-Vaughn night."

I groaned. "No... No, no, no, no."

It wasn't that I disliked Vaughn. He was fine, and I was happy as shit that he was a part of all our weirdness now. I'd been seriously worried about Lucy raising her new kid all alone—hell, I'd even proposed marriage to her because I was so willing to step in and help if she needed it—but now that the brother of her baby's dead dad had shown up in her life, and he also wanted to help her, *plus* she seemed to have the major hots for him, I knew she was going to be fine.

The problem was Vaughn was still kind of fucked up from his brother dying and all. And I didn't know shit about cheering up grieving people. I always wanted to just *fix* them, except they weren't broken, you know; they were just suffering and carrying a heavy load that I couldn't help them carry. And that drove me batty.

Trick, the sly little fucker, however, said, "But he needs companionship. And Lucy asked. She wants our help. So..."

What do you say? For Lucy?” And I knew I couldn’t say no.

“I say, you suck, and I hate you,” I straight up told him before sighing out my defeat and muttering, “But fine. Whatever. Meet up here. I’ll see if I can get Tara or someone to come in and cover for me.”

“Great!” he cheered. “We’ll be there in five. You’re the best, buddy. You know that? The very best.”

“You’re damn right I am,” I agreed. “And you owe me so big for this.”

But Trick had already hung up on me.

I heaved out a sigh and then called my fill-in bartender to see if she could come in on such short notice.

These Ryans, I decided moodily, they were all going to be the death of me, I swear.

## 7 CHLOE

**A**s I pulled away from Dad's bar, heading toward the restaurant where I was supposed to meet...

Shoot. What was his name again?

Logan! Yes. Right. *Logan*.

As I went on my merry way to meet Logan, I scowled, still fuming from some of the things Luke had just said to me. "You might as well just put a sign on your back," I grumbled under my breath, imitating him. "God, he's so... He's just so freaking..."

Right.

Sadly, Luke had been absolutely right. And that was the worst thing about it. He hadn't even needed to lie. I *was* just about the only single female left in our group. There were my two cousins, Riley and Ayden, but they were only nineteen and seventeen, so they didn't count. And then there was Lucy, but Vaughn seemed to have staked his claim on her already, so...

Yeah, there was basically just me left. Lonely and pairless Chloe.

A single earring that had no mate.

I couldn't think of anything sadder than that.

My hand lifted moodily as I turned a corner at a green light, and I started to play with my bare earlobe before growling to myself and jerking my hand down.



But dammit, I was going to keep fiddling with my earringless ears all night and thinking about stupid Luke and his bothersome, asshole comments if I didn't do something and soon. Luke was the last thing I wanted on my mind while I was spending time with Logan, so I sent a glance to the time and gnashed my teeth.

This was going to make me so late. Then again, I never arrived on time for a date these days. That had become test number one on my list to see how a man handled tardiness. But I seriously didn't have time to turn back and go all the way home for new earrings, otherwise, my tardiness would extend too far and would make him think I'd straight up no-showed. And I had to have *something* on my ears, or Luke was going to ruin the whole night for me.

Hmm... Maybe if there was a department store near the restaurant or someone I knew who lived close by. Pulling up a mental map of where the restaurant was located, I realized that—yes!—Lucy lived just around the corner.

“Perfect,” I announced aloud and gave her a call to see if I could borrow some earrings from *her*.

Luckily, she was a new mother and was actually home on a Saturday night, so I was pulling up to the curb in front of her place moments later, determined to wipe Luke from my head so I could concentrate on my actual date and at least *try* to find some kind of connection with Lu—I mean, Logan.

*Logan.*

*You're going out with Logan, Chloe. Put that name in your memory banks and remember it!*

But dear Lord, I was hopeless. I just wanted to move on with my life and find someone to spend the rest of it with. I didn't want to be alone anymore.

Alone was just...lonely.

I wanted a *person*. My own person to share the rest of my years with. I was a simple girl with simple wants. I just wanted to meet someone, get married, and live happily ever after.

And since I'd realized ten years ago that my *person* definitely wasn't going to be Luke Hamilton, I'd been struggling and searching to find someone else to fill the role. Except no one was ever quite right, and I was beginning to lose hope.

I'm pretty sure I wasn't even looking for true love anymore. I just wanted *someone*, some halfway responsible, decent companion who was at least marginally suitable enough to keep me from always feeling so miserable and unwanted. That was all. I'd even lowered my standards and shed most of my pickiness.

Which might be why I now had a creepy ex I'd been forced to put a restraining order out against, but damn. There had to be a man out there somewhere that didn't require restraining orders, right?

So maybe Logan...

Logan wasn't a restraining order kind of guy at all. He'd actually helped me *get* my restraining order, and he was super nice. Logan should be promising.

Which was why I *should've* rushed through my visit with Lucy and picked out a pair of earrings already before hurrying on my way again to meet him, but... I just kept stalling.

Because Logan was freaking *boring*. He liked to build models of muscles cars, for God's sake, and tell me every little detail about them.

So instead of heading toward the restaurant where Logan was waiting, I teased Lucy about her budding relationship with Vaughn and even feigned interest in him until I heckled her into admitting that she did indeed want him for herself.

"I think it's going to be a happily ever after for us," she confessed, then blushed and rolled her eyes. "I hope so, anyway."

"Hell yes, it is," I encouraged, gratified for her while simultaneously sad for myself. Then I opened my mouth to claim the next kid she had as *my* godchild since she'd already

broken my heart when she'd named two *other* people as Ava Grace's godparents.

Instead of model cars, *I* liked to collect godchildren.

But someone rang her doorbell, interrupting me from speaking.

Lucy frowned and tipped her head curiously before moving toward the window of her bedroom where we were talking. "Huh. I wonder who that is. I wasn't expecting..."

I followed her over and looked out as well, only to discover a very distinct red Mitsubishi with white racing stripes and a blue underglow parked out on the street in front of her house...directly behind *my* car.

"Oh my God," I breathed in shock. "It's Dax."

My body went strangely numb as Lucy whirled to gape at me in horror.

"Dax?" she repeated, clutching her kid closer. "You mean, the guy you just got a freaking *restraining* order against?"

I winced and bobbed my head up and down stupidly.

I had gone out with Dax Freston maybe five different times, and two of those were merely meet-there coffees and a quick chat. But I hadn't even let him get past a goodnight-kiss-at-the-door phase before he turned a bit too autocratic and domineering for my taste.

The dude acted as if he owned me, getting all bent out of shape after I smiled at a freaking waiter for too long, and he'd made more than one disparaging comment about the clothes I wore.

So I had cut bait and run, ending things on a clear, clean break with no misconstruing my feelings or giving him any sense of false hope. I plainly let him know I was done and wasn't interested in anything else.

Except he hadn't left.

He kept calling, he kept coming over. He even showed up at work once. Thank God I had been on-air at the time, and

security hadn't let him in to see me. The guy just didn't know how to give up.

Sometimes, his messages were humble and apologetic, begging me to give him another chance, and sometimes they were rude and angry and nasty enough to make my eyebrows rise.

But he'd never been physically threatening or, you know, *violent*. Nothing like that.

At first, I assumed he'd get the point eventually and finally give up before moving on. But when he hadn't, I'd finally let the family persuade me to get a restraining order against him. I had thought that was over the top and unnecessary, but I'd gotten one anyway to make the fam happy. And I'd been informed that Dax had been served with said papers earlier today.

I'd been so sure that would finally bonk him over the head with a healthy dose of reality and get him to leave me alone once and for all. But gaping at his car idling at the curb behind mine made ice-cold dread shroud my brain.

"What do you think he's doing here?" I whispered to Lucy, not at all thinking right...

Because of the ice, you know.

Lucy rolled her eyes over my brain loss. "Gee, I don't know," she snarked back. "He parked right behind *your* car. Whatever could be his reason?"

"But how did he find me?" I hissed, still shaking my head and beginning to wring my hands.

"No clue," Lucy growled, looking irritable. "But he's breaking the law just being this close to you. Here..." She pushed her baby at me, forcing me to fumble to catch the three-month-old. "Stay back here with Ava and call the police if there's trouble. I'll get rid of him."

"If there's *trouble*?" I squawked, the ice in me beginning to make all my limbs tremble. "What do you think he's going to do?" He wasn't violent. He'd never been violent. He was

just an asshole who needed to learn how to give up on someone already.

The doorbell rang again, followed by a pounding fist. Both Lucy and I jumped.

Brow furrowing, Lucy snarled, “I don’t know, but he didn’t *follow* you here, otherwise he would have rung the bell a hell of a lot sooner. He’s tracked you somehow, on the very day you had a restraining order slapped on him. I don’t think he wants to deliver milk and cookies.”

“Oh God.” This was so wrong. I was starting to get really freaked out. “Maybe you shouldn’t go out there, either. We’ll just call for help and—”

A boom followed by a shout and breaking wood and plaster told us that Lucy’s front door had just been kicked in.

I screamed and clutched baby Ava hard against my chest.

“Stay!” Lucy shouted, pointing at me before she raced from the room.

“Stay?” I gasped, intent to storm after her and not about to let her deal with him alone, but then I realized—shit—I was supposed to be watching her baby.

I panicked for a moment, not sure what to do with Ava. I started to carry her to the bed so I could lay her down there on the mattress so she’d be safely out of the way, but then I had these visions of her rolling off the side and crashing to the floor and dying, so I couldn’t do that.

There was no crib or any kind of bassinet or swing back here that I felt right about leaving her in. So I kissed her peach fuzz head and paced with her, wondering what was happening out there. I could hear muted voices.

Dax didn’t sound happy. I heard him say my name and the word *bitch*.

Alright, enough of this. I shuffled Ava to one arm, clucking my tongue at her and jostling her lightly when she started to fuss, and I struggled to fish my phone from the back pocket of my blue jean skirt with my free hand. When I kept

holding her and had no success as I tried to dial my brother with the same hand I was holding the phone with, I growled.

Jeez, but who knew having kids would seriously limit your mobility so much?

“*Chloe!*” Dax shouted from the front room, making me jump and accidentally exit from the phone app altogether. Dammit. “Get your lousy, lying ass out here right now, you worthless whore!”

Lucy shouted something back at him, and Ava started to cry in earnest against my chest. Worried tears clouded my vision, preventing me from seeing shit. And I was shaking too hard to dial anything.

So I said, “Hey, Siri. Please call Trick on speakerphone.”

Trick lived the closest; he could get here the fastest. And thank God for digital assistance, the phone started ringing soon thereafter. Meanwhile, I was hearing a lot of *fuck yous* and even a *move, bitch* from the front room.

“Not now, sis,” Trick finally answered, sounding like he was in a crowded place, like a restaurant. “It’s guys’ ni—”

“Trick!” I screeched, so relieved to hear his voice that I just started blurting everything in a rush. “I need you. Dax found me. He’s here. *Hurry!*”

“Holy shit,” he cried, losing the lazy, relaxed tone he’d had when he answered. “Where are you?”

“Lucy’s,” I said as I listened to Lucy scream *Get out of my house.*

God, why had I called my *brother*? I should’ve just dialed 911. But I’d been in denial that this was actually a serious situation.

“I’m at Lucy’s,” I repeated, realizing how wrong I’d been. “And we need help.”

“Okay,” Trick was saying in my ear. “Just calm down. We’re—”

But the thumps and sounds of struggling from the front room as Dax yelled my name yet again had me jumping and dropping the phone.

Yeah, I couldn't stay back here anymore.

Wrapping both arms around Ava, I raced toward Lucy, needing to help. And what I saw when I skidded out from the opening of the hallway and into the front room was something nightmares were made of. The front door hung open, tilted slightly as if it'd been partially ripped from its hinges.

But the horror of all horror was that Dax—non-violent, non-physical Dax—had Lucy pinned to the wall by her *throat* with her feet dangling a few inches above the floor. She had blood trickling down the side of her lip as if he'd already hit her, her hair was askew, and her face was turning blue.

I was still trying to come to a stop in the opening of the front room and make sense of what I was really seeing when she linked her hands together and shoved them up between their bodies, giving him a swift uppercut up the bottom of his chin.

He oofed in surprise and stumbled back, away from her, finally losing his grip on her throat so that she had a moment to sink back to the floor and gasp for air.

“Lucy!” I screamed, so scared for her that I forgot about everything else until Dax caught his balance and jerked his head up, looking straight at me with hatred and madness.

Oh crap. I stumbled backward away from him, covering the back of Ava's head with my hands as I smooshed her against me, muffling her crying against my breasts.

But Dax moved so freaking fast. He didn't lumber or stumble, he freaking *flew*, winding back his arm as he raced toward me. My spine bumped into a chair, blocking my escape, and there was no time to dodge or duck; there was only enough time to lock my arms tight around the baby and turn my face in, squeezing my eyes shut.

The impact was big and massive, and I think I now knew what it felt like to get hit by a train. The good news was that it

happened so fast that I blacked out before I felt the actual pain.

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THE COLDNESS, creeping along the insides of my legs and getting all up in my business, is what initially infiltrated my consciousness again. But swiftly following that, it was the awareness of a frigid, hard, yet rough surface at my back, scratching my skin that told me I was lying on a concrete floor.

Naked.

I gasped and started to curl my limbs in toward my body, instinctively seeking warmth and modesty, but the move was cut abruptly short when freezing metal hands seemed to clamp around both my wrists and ankles and keep me spread and exposed.

I choked out a cry of surprise, my eyes springing open and pain pouring from all kinds of strange places on my body.

My surroundings were dark, dank, and cold enough to scream basement. There was no ceiling, just rafters, pipes, wires, and the floorboards of the level above. The only source of illumination was two dangling lightbulbs that showcased an empty room with only a furnace, water heater, and a rusted, metal kitchen table, which had been pushed against one wall and was crowded with junk on top.

Other than that, yeah, the space was vacant...as far as I could see, anyway.

About the time I realized the *hands* holding me down against the floor were actually manacles, I finally heard the footsteps. They vibrated into my ear telling me someone was walking closer.

I flipped my face the other way, my jaw lighting up with white-hot agony as I did, and I finally saw the shoes strolling forward in a calm, unhurried fashion.

A hoarse gasp crowded my throat. Already beginning to breathe raggedly as the panic struck, I lifted my attention up dark jeans to the man's face, only to find him holding a green



garden hose in his hand, with his thumb resting on the spray nozzle.

“Dax,” I rasped, shaking my head and trying to deny that this was actually happening. “Wha-what’re you doing? Where are we?”

He tsked, making a disappointed sound as he shook his head. “See...if you’d gone back to my place with me when I *offered* on our last date, you’d already know that answer, darling.”

I swallowed fearfully. So this must be the basement of his house. Not original but maybe it’d help people find me faster...like, about only three days after I was already dead, instead of a whole year.

God. With a shudder, I licked dry lips and tried to talk my way out of this. “Look, I can tell that you’re upset...”

Though, actually, he didn’t look mad at all. He looked gleefully demonic as if all his sick and twisted, serial killer dreams were finally about to come true. The shadows falling over parts of his typically handsome face really helped with his creepy factor, too.

“But if you could just uncuff me,” I tried, tugging experimentally at my restraints as I sent him a hopeful smile. “Then I’m sure we could talk—”

“No!” he roared, silencing me quite effectively. “You didn’t want to talk to me for *weeks*. So no talking now. Not anymore.”

My throat worked as I tried to swallow and keep my wits about me. I couldn’t lose it right now. I couldn’t.

Taking a big breath, he seemed to settle down, and in a calmer tone, he added, “It’s time to teach. I need to teach you that *no one* takes out a restraining order against me.”

“Okay, okay,” I told him, trying to sound reasonable. “I get it. And I’m sorry about that. My family made me do it. They were concerned, and I tried to tell them there was nothing to worry about...” Pausing to press my lips together because, *surprise*, my family had been freaking right. There’d actually

been *plenty* to worry about. Didn't *I* just look like the fool now? "I—I knew you'd never hurt me," I added with a shaking, trembling voice because, boy, had I been wrong about that, too.

So stupidly wrong.

Suddenly remembering how he hadn't just hurt *me* but how he'd been pinning Lucy against the wall and choking her, I gasped. "Lucy!"

And the baby. Oh God. I'd been holding the baby when he'd knocked me unconscious. What had happened to Ava Grace?

"W-where's my friend? And her daughter? Are they okay? What did you do to—"

Without answering, he pointed the nozzle of the hose at me and pulled the lever, dousing me right in the face with a stinging slap of cold, watery horror.

I screamed. Or, at least, I tried to. It came out sounding more like a drowned gurgle, to be honest.

For the longest moment, I couldn't breathe. I was sure this was going to kill me. I was going to drown to death. But then Dax moved the spray down, over my neck and chest, and along my arms and legs. Over my breasts.

"Stop!" I shrieked, only for him to get me right in the face again and steal my breath.

"Not until you're clean," he answered, his eyes glowing with relish as he aimed the water between my legs. "You need to be cleansed. Dirty slut. I can't have you myself until I get all the other men off you first."

"No! Dax, please..." But he was beyond listening to me.

"Shut up!" he roared as he kicked me in the ribs.

Lights danced in my vision as the pain took over. Then water. So much water.

I was forced to endure the water for another few minutes before he stopped spraying me, only to pick up a long-handled

car wash brush, the bristles looking like a million little teeth ready to bite right into my flesh.

After dunking it into a foam-topped bucket full of...soap—please, God, just be soap—he pulled it free and started to scrub. Roughly.

## 8 LUKE

Life was strange, you know.

One second, you're just shooting the shit, hanging with a couple of friends, and the next, Trick is shouting, "We gotta go. Dax broke his restraining order and found Chloe. They're at Lucy's."

I mean, what the fuck, right?

Chloe hadn't even acted concerned about this particular douchebag. She had steadfastly claimed he was all bark and no bite; he wasn't a physical danger to her at all. She'd actually thought the restraining order had been an unneeded way to scare him away from her completely.

He was never supposed to *break* the order.

Goddammit all to hell, I'd *teased* her about it.

As I felt my face drain of color, trying to come to terms with what her brother had just announced, Vaughn had a much quicker reaction.

"Lucy's?" he roared in outrage, lurching up from the stool he'd been sitting on and dropping the beer bottle he'd been lifting to his mouth so that it broke all over the countertop of the bar.

And that's when it finally struck me. I'd teased Chloe about something that wasn't even remotely funny, something that might well be threatening her very existence at this very moment.

What the hell had I done?

“Holy shit!” I cried and leaped over the counter to join Trick and Vaughn on the other side. “Well, let’s fucking go.” Forgetting that I was still waiting for Tara to make it in and take over working for me, I waved Trick and Vaughn after me as I started toward the hall that led out the rear exit of the nightclub. “I’m parked right out back.”

As I sprinted down the dim hall, dodging past people waiting in line at the bathrooms, and waitresses carrying chicken wings and hamburgers out from the kitchen, I dug the keys to my truck from my pocket. But as soon as the three of us pushed our way outside and I unlocked my ride, causing its headlights to flash, Vaughn plucked the keys from my hand to claim, “I’m driving.”

“Hey,” I muttered indignantly, hurrying after him. “I’m the one who hasn’t had a drink tonight.”

“Just go!” Trick ordered, shoving me from behind.

So I did. Chloe’s safety was more important than my need to drive my own damn truck. I piled into the passenger seat and Trick was still getting into the back as Vaughn gunned the engine and took off.

He didn’t go easy on my baby either. Never once hitting the brakes, he shot down the alley and jerked the wheel onto the street, nearly sending us onto two wheels and coming within about three feet of colliding with another car that honked and sent us a dirty hand gesture.

“Christ,” I muttered, reaching up to hang on for dear life. “Don’t get us killed before we even get there.”

See, *this* was why I should’ve driven.

“He’s doing great,” Trick announced from the back as he slugged Vaughn’s shoulder in encouragement. “Shit. Chloe’s not picking up.”

“Let me try,” I said, pulling out my own phone.

Trick snorted. “If she’s not picking up for me, why the hell would she pick up for *you*?”

That was a good point. But still...

“I don’t fucking know!” I shouted, stressed as I continued to try calling Chloe, anyway.

“What about Lucy?” Vaughn ordered. “Someone try Lucy’s phone.”

“On it,” Trick said, already dialing her next as I continued to listen to Chloe’s phone ring in my ear.

*Come on, come on*, I silently begged. *Just pick up and call me an asshole already.*

That was her favorite term for me, I swear. And at that moment, I don’t think anything would’ve sounded as good as her sultry voice saying, *what do you want now, asshole?* right into my ear.

But she didn’t answer.

On the road, we blew through a red light, and both Trick and I hollered in fear for our lives as we narrowly avoided being T-boned.

“No answer,” Trick reported a few moments later.

“Motherfucker.” Vaughn smacked the steering wheel, not seeming to care that he was abusing *my* vehicle. I mean, what had my truck done to *him*? She was handling his insane driving commands like a champ, I thought.

“I’m getting on the group chat,” Trick announced. “See if anyone else knows what’s going on.”

“They’re probably okay,” Vaughn said as if he needed to hear the positive vibes, even though he drove faster as he spoke. “I bet we’re just overreacting.”

It didn’t feel like we were overreacting though. Ever since Trick had said Chloe needed help, my gut instinct had been on high alert, shrieking *danger, danger.*

She was in trouble. And we needed to get to her. Now.

And as we approached Lucy’s place, the front door hanging open at an odd angle told us my gut had been right.

“That doesn’t look okay,” I noted in a grave voice, my breath catching in my throat.

“Oh my God,” Vaughn rasped.

Trick gripped my arm as if he needed to hold on to something to keep from panicking.

Jumping the curb, we pulled up right into the lawn and screeched the truck to a halt just a few yards from the front door.

“Lucy?” Vaughn roared as he dove from the idling truck and leaped toward the entrance. The dude could move, too. I was hauling ass, and he was already past the hood by the time I even got my door shoved open.

He had stopped frozen just inside the entrance by the time I reached him, however.

I shimmied past with Trick hot on my heels.

After a quick scan of the room, I saw Lucy kneeling on the floor, upright and alive, and the baby was with her, but there was no sign of Chloe...and no scumbag hanging around, breaking his restraining order.

Where the fuck was Chloe?

Without even pausing in the front room, Trick and I hurried into the hall, calling her name and dashing into rooms. I didn't pause until I came to the back bedroom and saw a cell phone lying on the center of the floor, covered with the same vintage-looking camera case that Chloe had on her phone.

“Fuck,” I breathed, slowing to a stop and gaping at it as a real bad feeling spread over me. When I bent to pick it up, Trick appeared in the doorway, gripping the frame.

“Anything?”

I turned with Chloe's phone in my hand, and when he met my gaze, he could see in my eyes that I was freaked out.

“What?” he demanded and finally lowered his gaze to see the phone for himself. “Oh God.” Stepping forward, he reached out and took it from me. When he looked up, he was already beginning to breathe hard. “Where the hell is my sister?”

I shook my head, trying to ignore the signs of peril that my body was screaming at me, like the way the hairs stood up on the back of my neck, how my skin prickled on my arms, and the icy grip of fear that coated my soul.

Pushing past Trick, I stormed back to the front room.

But as soon as I demanded, “Where’s Chloe?” I finally focused on Lucy’s face.

And damn.

Still sitting on her knees on the carpet with Vaughn kneeling next to her now, she had tears and blood streaming down her cheeks. Her lip and one of her eyes were slightly swollen, and her entire body was trembling with fear.

The worst part, however, was her child that was still lying on the carpet. It took me a moment of wondering why no one had picked her up yet before I realized—fuck on a stick—the baby was bleeding from the head and wasn’t moving, wasn’t crying, she wasn’t even awake.

My heart dropped.

But no... Lucy’s new baby couldn’t be—

“Jesus,” Trick croaked from behind me, gripping my arm as he peered over my shoulder to see.

Lucy looked up at Trick and me. Eyes filling with more tears, she bowed over herself as she held on to her own ribs in anguished defeat. “H-he took her,” she wept.

“Took her?” Trick echoed hollowly. “Took her *where*?”

“I—I don’t...” She shook her head, her voice so raw and broken it was barely audible. “I—I was fighting him off, but then Ava fell, and I had to check on her. He dragged Chloe out then. I don’t know where they went. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. But Ava was hurt.”

“Shh, hey...” Vaughn reached for her. “It’s okay.”

My vision wavered, and my knees went limp. Chloe better be fucking okay.



My last words to her couldn't have been my idiotic joking about her restraining order. I felt weak in the stomach, thinking about the stupid, insensitive shit I'd said. God, I was such an ass.

"Ma'am?" a woman's voice said from the floor, near Lucy, making me jump and look around until I realized Lucy had called someone, probably 911, and had them on speakerphone.

"You have others with you now, right?" the phone lady asked. "Do any of them happen to know the assailant's last name?"

"Trick?" Lucy asked, looking past me toward him.

"Freston," he immediately supplied. "Dax Freston. And I know exactly where the fucker lives."

I turned toward him, lifting my eyebrows in an, *Oh, really? You know where he lives, huh?* kind of way. And when he lifted his eyebrows right back—*Why, yes, I do. Road trip?*—I nodded.

Hell yeah, I was totally in.

"Let's go," I said, only to glance toward Vaughn, knowing he'd want in on a piece of the ass-kicking pie. "Uncle?"

But Vaughn glanced at Lucy before shaking his head. "I'm staying with them. Just go. Get that son of a bitch."

Worked for me.

Someone should probably stay with Lucy and the baby, anyway.

So Trick and I nodded and took off.

And this time, I made sure *I* was behind the wheel of my own vehicle. "Which way?" I demanded as I backed out of the driveway, also not waiting until Trick was fully inside the passenger seat with the door closed before I took off.

"Take Madison up here, and then head toward Eighth."

"Roger that." I watched the road intently as I drove, going through stop signs and lights if the intersection looked clear.

Next to me, Trick tapped his hands restlessly on the armrest of his door.

“You think Ava Grace is okay?” he finally asked, glancing toward me with worry in his eyes.

My stomach dipped, but I nodded. “Yeah. I’m sure. She’ll be fine. Kids are resilient, right?”

And babies weren’t supposed to die. It just wasn’t...done.

But Trick sounded worried when he said, “She looked dead.”

“*Patrick*,” I snapped, unable to think about Lucy’s daughter right now. We had to find Chloe. I couldn’t worry about multiple people at once. My brain couldn’t compute that much horror. “The baby’s going to be fine,” I growled.

He nodded and went back to looking out the side window and tapping his fingers until I kind of wanted to *break* his fingers.

“How do you know where this guy lives anyway?” I finally asked, needing noise and words to distract me from the restless tapping. And the worry. I didn’t like worrying so much. But seriously... “I didn’t realize Chloe had even dated this guy long enough for *her* to visit his place, much less members of her family.”

Trick sniffed. “She didn’t. But the motherfucker’s been harassing my sister. She put a damn restraining order out against him. Why would I *not* find out where he lives?”

Made sense.

I nodded, yet my chest still lurched with unease, and my fingers squeezed around the steering wheel as guilt sluiced through me.

*I* hadn’t made sure to find out where he lived.

“I made fun of her,” I admitted bleakly, swallowing down the bile that was threatening to rise. “After she got the restraining order. I made light of it and teased her. I fucking *teased* her.”

“Dude,” Trick said softly and squeezed my shoulder as I wheeled us around a corner onto Eighth Street. “*She* made light of it. What were you supposed to think?”

“I was supposed to think it was a fucking restraining order, and that’s serious shit. Her *life* was in danger. It *is* in danger, and I—”

“We *made* her file that restraining order,” Trick argued. “She was never that worried about him. She thought it was overkill. But we forced her hand, and it set him off. God. If we hadn’t pushed her into doing this, maybe he wouldn’t have reacted so—”

“If he was the type to react like *this*,” I cut in, “then he needed one, so you guys were right to persuade her.”

“Yeah, tell me that when we find her unharmed and okay.” He pointed through the front windshield. “There. That street. Windmill, I think it’s called. Take a right, and it’s the third house down.”

But I hadn’t actually needed any more instructions after *take a right*. When I saw a butt-ugly Mitsubishi sitting in the driveway of a small, single-story brick house, I knew where I was going. Trick had gone on and on about how much he’d hated this guy’s ride; he’d described it to a T.

Next to me, he snorted acerbically. “That stupid car. I knew the guy was a douche the moment I saw what kind of shit he did to his vehicles. *Dammit!* Why didn’t I just murder him the first moment I met him?”

I’d never even met the guy, just heard the rumors about him through the gossip mill, and I hadn’t liked the sounds of him *before* restraining orders were even brought up. He just hadn’t seemed like a good fit for Chloe. So why hadn’t *I* done anything to prevent this?

Pulling up to a stop directly behind the Mitsubishi and blocking it in so the fucker couldn’t escape, I killed the engine and hurried after Trick as he bolted from the truck and raced toward the front door.

I stumbled a step when I watched him kick the door open ahead of me, not pausing to knock or wait for anyone to answer or anything. Lifting my eyebrows, and impressed as shit, I hurried after him.

Inside, the house was strangely hot. I plucked at my shirt, immediately trying to circulate some air in the stale front room that was completely empty of everything but a reclining chair and a television. It was fucking eerie.

Watching Trick run one way, I decided to go the other, and I stepped cautiously into a hallway, belatedly wondering if I should've grabbed some kind of weapon for self-defense.

Too late now.

All the fucking doors along both walls were closed, which was just plain weird if you wanted my opinion. Unease skated up the back of my neck.

But I shrugged off the creepy crawlies and carried on, opening each door as I went. I found a closet first. Then a bathroom. After pushing aside coats and jackets, then shoving shower curtains out of my way, I went to the next set of doors set across from each other. The first was dark, but I found a light switch just inside it and flipped it on to reveal a set of narrow, steep steps going down, only to reveal yet another closed door at the bottom.

Great. A spooky basement. This looked promising.

“Chloe,” I called as I jogged down the steps, the temperature dropping steadily until it was downright chilly once I reached the bottom step. “You down here?”

There wasn't an answer, but I shoved the door open, anyway, only to freeze in place and gape openly at what lay inside.

Seriously, I couldn't even describe it. But on the floor before me, the girl I'd known since she was born was bare-ass naked with her legs spread apart and chained to the floor and her arms pinned down on either side of her with more restraints.

Bruises and cuts already coated her skin, half of them swelling, the rest oozing, and one of her eyes looked wild with fear and shock while the other was so full of blood I'd be surprised if she could see from it at all.

She gasped hoarsely and started to struggle against her bonds until she realized it was me. Then, her eyes widened in surprise and she tried to say my name.

“Lu...”

“Mother of God,” I breathed, still certain I was seeing this wrong because...it was just so wrong.

“Wha...what the hell are *you* doing here?” she finally managed to ask.

I wanted to turn away, give her some privacy, and then have a little breakdown for myself because I couldn't believe this had happened to her.

But Chloe needed me. And I needed to keep my shit together so I could help her.

“Oh, you know,” I murmured, forcing myself to be casual because I wanted to help put her at ease since she looked as if she was a hot second away from her own panic attack. “I was just in the neighborhood.” I stepped into the basement with her and swiftly shut the door at my back. “Thought I'd pop by and see what's up.”

Then I rolled my eyes at her to piss her off, hoping she'd rise to the bait and get mad back at me instead of thinking about the horrific situation she was currently stuck in.

“What the fuck do you think I'm doing here?” When she said nothing, I added, “I'm here to save you.”

A sob stuttered from her throat, and she shuddered once before sassy Chloe started to emerge. “Then, could you hurry it up,” she rasped. “I'm freezing my nipples off down here.”

“Trust me; I noticed.” Glancing around as I hurried to her side, I knelt next to her, touching her hand even as I squinted toward every dark corner. “You alone?”

“Yeah. He’s gone. I don’t know where Lucy is, though. I was at her house, and he knocked me unconscious. I don’t know if he has her somewhere too or—”

“She’s at home.” I dropped my gaze to her wrist. It was bloody and gouged from how much effort she had no doubt put into trying to pull her hands free.

“She is?” Chloe started breathing hard as if trying to contain a flood of relieved emotions. “Is she okay? And the baby? I was holding the baby when he hit me. I don’t...I don’t know what happened to the baby.”

I nodded and lifted my hand to calm her. “Just...it’s okay,” I murmured soothingly. “They’re both at home. And Luce was a little banged up, but she looked a hell of a lot better when I saw her than you do now.”

“Really? Oh God. Thank goodness. I—I didn’t know. And the baby? Ava Grace?”

That one, I couldn’t answer.

“We should get these things off you,” I said instead and ran my fingers over the cuffs, hoping to find some kind of safety release. But they looked like the real deal. I was going to have to find a damn key. Unless...

I grabbed the chains that seemed to be Tapconned to the floor, and then put both feet on either side of them before pulling with all my might. But the only thing I managed to break free was some skin off my palms.

“Son of a bitch,” I growled, and looked up at her face, freshly startled by all the naked flesh. Yeah, that was going to be a major distraction. “Where the hell are your clothes, anyway?”

She sent me a dry glower, her bloodshot eye still wiggling me out every time I looked at it. “Good question. I’d like to know that too. Are they on that table over there?”

I stood and peered over toward the table, but there was absolutely nothing that appeared as if it could even pass for cloth. It was littered with books and paperwork and office supply stuff.

“Nope.” Not wanting to accidentally cop another look at Chloe’s naked bits, I ripped off the black, Forbidden Nightclub T-shirt I wore and knelt beside her again before gently draping it over her like a blanket.

I mean, a mini blanket. It barely covered the tops of her thighs to her shoulders, but it gave her a smidgeon of modesty, at least.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, her lips trembling and eyes full of glossy trauma.

I nodded, not quite able to manage eye contact because I was still feeling pretty shitty about how much I’d seen already. But seriously, she damn near shaved it bare, and hell, it was the only thing I could think about for a second because the bruises and blood were too much for me to process.

Clearing my throat, I finally forced my gaze to her eyes and asked, “You got any wounds that need immediate attention before we work on breaking you loose?”

She shook her head. “No. Not that I know of.”

“Okay, good.” I reached out to touch her face in comfort, nodding at her to let her know everything was going to be okay now, then I tucked a clump of wet bloody hair behind her ear so she could see.

“Let’s get you out of these damn handcuffs, shall we?”

She nodded and her chin trembled. “I’d like that.”

I grinned. “Yeah, I figured you might.”

Then I stood and returned to the table, scouring it for something to pick the lock. “You didn’t, by chance, see the key for those locks anywhere, did you?”

“No. I...I was unconscious when he stripped and locked me up.”

My stomach tightened, and I glanced at her, aching to know if he’d...if he had raped her. But there was no way in hell I could actually ask. Besides, if she’d been unconscious for that long, would *she* even know?

Motherfucker.

I didn't like this.

When I couldn't find a key anywhere on the table, I slapped my palm down on it and cursed.

Chloe sucked in a startled breath, and I glanced over at her, wishing she didn't have to go through this.

"I can't find a key," I admitted, feeling like a failure. "I'm going to go upstairs and find one, okay?"

But she shook her head, her one good eye glassy with renewed fear. "No," she told me in no uncertain terms, her voice steady and commanding. "Don't you dare leave me."

And I almost lost it right there, bursting into tears and losing my shit completely.



## 9 CHLOE

Luke looked visibly shaken when he winced, and he swallowed as if he'd just ingested razor blades. But then he met my gaze from the table that he was still leaning on and pressing his hands against.

"I'm not leaving," he assured as he straightened. "I'm just going to go get help. Trick's up there. I'll be right back."

"No." I didn't care. He was here now, and I couldn't lose that. "Don't leave me," I repeated.

"Chloe," he growled sternly. "I can't stay here and help you. I need to go find something to help break you free."

"Someone *else* can break me free," I tried. "*You* stay. Don't leave me."

"I'll be right back," he swore.

But I screamed, "No!" at the top of my lungs. Then breathing hard, I added, "What if he comes back?"

Luke sounded way too reasonable when he shook his head and answered, "I won't be gone long enough for him to—"

And it was more than I could take.

"Lucian Michael Hamilton," I cut in harshly. "If you leave me right now, I will never forgive you. Do you hear me? I will hate you until my dying breath. *Don't*...leave me like this. Don't leave me. Please... Oh my God, you can't leave me. Please..."

“Fucking hell,” he growled. “I can’t help you if I stay here, Chloe. I need to help you.”

I shook my head. “*Please, no.*” I started to lose control of my erratic breathing, and I felt my grasp on my emotions slipping next. Tears filled my eyes.

“Christ.” Luke huffed out a breath, then lifted his hands in surrender. “Alright, fine. I’ll stay.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head. “Please don’t leave me,” I whispered, pretty sure I couldn’t stop repeating that phrase now if I wanted to.

“I won’t,” he said, and when I felt his fingers touch mine, I opened my eyes to find him sitting on his knees in a shallow puddle next to me. “Just...calm down,” he murmured, squeezing my hand in reassurance. “It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Please don’t leave me,” I answered, but in a tone that told him *thank you for staying*.

He nodded, looking into my eyes. “I’m right here.”

I blew out a breath, beginning to calm again until a tremble seized me. The tremor caused his shirt to slip and begin to slide off me. But Luke whipped out his hand and caught it before it could, and he promptly tugged it back into place. Before he pulled away again, the backs of his knuckles barely grazed the tattoo I had on my side, low on my ribs, of a blue and black butterfly.

“When’d you get the tat?” he asked, hitching his chin toward it conversationally. “It’s...nice.”

“Uh...” I couldn’t really concentrate enough to answer his question, so I just mumbled, “I don’t know.”

He nodded, flitting his gaze over me again. “I think your boobs are even bigger now than they were at fifteen,” he added.

I sniffed and shook my head. “Do we really have to talk about my naked body right now?”

He shrugged and glanced away from me. “I guess not. I was just trying to distract myself from your bruised jaw, the jacked-up eye, and the swelling and scratches all over you, plus the metal fucking handcuffs trapping you to the floor because that line of thinking makes me lose some sanity. And why the fuck are you all wet?”

“He had to decontaminate me,” I tried to explain.

Luke’s gaze swerved back to me. “*What?*”

“Dirty slut,” I mumbled, repeating the term Dax had used and closing my eyes briefly as my jaw ached with each word I spoke. “He said he had to wash all the other men off me before he could take me himself. He’s off looking for more cleaning supplies now.”

“Jesus H. Christ,” Luke snarled. “I can’t...I can’t take this.” Ripping his hands through his hair, he popped to his feet and began to pace the floor. “I can’t just sit here and do nothing. I have to do *something*. Chloe, Goddammit. I’m just going to run upstairs real quick and—”

“Luke,” I sobbed, knowing how much he wanted to leave right now. “You promised. Please... Don’t leave me.”

“Mother...fucker!” he roared, spinning to glare at me. His hand curled into claws. “You are the most aggravating, pain-in-the-ass woman I have ever met. I can’t handle seeing you like this.” His chin trembled and torment clouded his expression. “I have to...I have to *do* something.”

“You are,” I assured, my voice breaking and then trembling from the cold. “You’re keeping me from losing *my* shit all over this floor. I can’t keep it together without you. Please... Please don’t leave me. Luke...” Tears filled my eyes again and I began to sob. “Don’t leave me here like this. Please...”

“Okay...okay,” he rushed out, hurrying back to me and falling to his knees by my shoulder. “I told you I wouldn’t, and I won’t.”

I looked up at him but could barely see him through the fog of tears clouding my vision. “Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t,” he whispered, wiping my cheeks. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m sorry.”

But as soon as he spoke the words, we heard more footsteps pounding down the steps and a muffled voice yelling for both me and Luke.

Luke popped back to his feet.

“Thank fucking Christ,” he breathed, hurrying forward. “It’s Trick.”

“Trick?” I blinked. But *Trick* was about to see me...like this? “Don’t let him come in here,” I blurted, just as Luke reached the door and grasped the handle.

Pausing, he glanced back. “What?”

“Keep him out there,” I said. “Don’t let him see me like this.”

Luke shook his head and growled, “Lady, you make a lot of impossible demands. Do you know that?”

“It would haunt him forever to see me like this,” I said. “You know I’m right. Don’t you dare do that to my baby brother.”

“Fuck! *Fine*,” he rumbled.

Except the door started to open, anyway.

Luke dove forward and had to push his body against it, slamming it right back into Trick’s face.

“Hold up,” he called to my brother, putting all his weight against the portal when Trick kept trying to open it. “Don’t... Just stay out there, alright?”

“What? Why? What’s wrong? Is... Where’s Chloe? Is she with you? Is she okay?”

“She’s...” When Luke floundered too long and glanced back at me, wincing, Trick pushed on the door again, almost unseating him. “Dammit, I said stop,” he roared. “She’s okay. She’s good.”

“I’m right here, bubba,” I finally called from the floor, and Luke sent me a look that seemed to say, *took you long enough to reassure him*. “I’m okay.”

“Chloe!” Trick cried in relief. “Oh my God. Thank God. Get off the door, Hamilton, and let me in.”

“Jesus, I can’t, alright,” Luke muttered. “She...her body is literally blocking the door. You’ll hurt her if you open it right now.”

There was a pause, and then Trick asked, “Then how did *you* get in?”

Luke rolled his eyes, obviously irritated that my brother was smart enough to question him. “I...I had to hurt her. But *you* don’t have to.”

“You *hurt* her? I thought you said she was *okay!*”

“I mean, she’s *alive*,” Luke contended. “And conscious and all that shit. She’s just...you know... She’s seen better days.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Dude, did you find the fucking owner of this *Nightmare on Elm Street* house or not?”

“Yeah, he’s upstairs unconscious. Now, what’s wrong with my sister?”

“You knocked him unconscious?” Luke lifted his brows and nodded slowly as if impressed. “Sweet.”

“After what he did to Lucy and the baby, fuck yes, I knocked him unconscious. He’s tied up to his kitchen chair, not going anywhere until the authorities arrive. Are you going to tell me what he did to Chloe or not?”

“Probably not,” Luke answered bluntly. “So could you get us a couple of things while we wait for the cavalry to arrive?”

“You know, you’re not exactly reassuring me with your vague, non-answer answers,” Trick spat.

Luke sighed irritably. “Look. She’s hanging in there, okay? But it’d be real nice if you could fetch us a few things to make

her a little more comfortable.”

“Things like what? What is wrong with her?”

“Okay, first, we need handcuff keys. See if you can find any handcuff keys. And then—”

“Did you just say *handcuff* keys? She’s fucking handcuffed? To what?”

“And maybe a blanket or towel,” I went on ignoring his questions. “Or you know, if you could just find her clothes somewhere up there, that would be even better.”

“Oh Jesus.”

“Actually clothes and a towel *both* would be best. And—”

“Holy shit. Why isn’t she wearing her clothes? Where are her fucking clothes?”

When Trick tried to open the door again, Luke slapped it right back in his face.

“Why isn’t she wearing any clothes, Luke? What did he do to her?”

“Trick,” I called again. “It’s okay. I’m okay. He didn’t have time to do what you’re worried about, alright?”

Luke glanced back at me hopefully when I said that part as if he wanted to believe me but feared I was only saying this to keep my brother from freaking out.

“But I’m getting pretty tired of being stuck like this,” I kept talking. “So if you could find me a handcuff key and anything to cover up with, that would be awesome.”

“Okay, sis,” Trick called, and his voice sounded shakier than it had before. “Okay, I’ll be right back. You just sit tight. I love you.”

Tears filled my eyes. “I love you too.”

As his footsteps pounded back up the stairs, I narrowed my watery eyes at Luke. “Did you really have to tell him I was handcuffed and naked?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Luke spun around to glare. “Did you want to *stay* handcuffed and naked? Since you refuse to let me leave and don’t want him in here, he’s the only one of the three of us who can go find you shit. And why does that goddamn shirt keep sliding *off* you?”

He strode forward, scowling and clearly annoyed that one of my boobs and a hard, pointed nipple was showing again.

“I don’t know,” I muttered, “it’s *your* stupid shirt.”

“Right.” He knelt beside me and very carefully straightened the shirt again so that it was covering me better

My teeth chattered and my shivering persisted, making the shirt slip and begin to slide off me again.

“Seriously?” Luke muttered, catching the cloth before it exposed me again. Then he looked into my eyes. “You’re fucking freezing. Your lips are turning blue.”

My teeth chattered as I attempted to smile at him. “Dax really should’ve invested in some heated cement flooring, huh?”

“He better have invested in a fucking funeral plan.” His words were spoken with anger and hissing venom, but when he met my gaze, he looked worried and apologetic. “Do you want my pants too?”

“Good Lord, *no*,” I muttered, and I closed my eyes, turning my face away from him so I could stop seeing the worry and concern in his blue eyes. “I’m already being tortured enough, I don’t need to see you stripped down to your yellow-stained tighty-whities, too.”

“Ha-ha, funny,” he muttered, as he took hold of my arm and began to rub his fingers briskly up and down it. “And for your information, I don’t *own* tighty-whities, yellow-stained or otherwise.”

“Don’t care,” I mumbled, opening my eyes and glancing over at his hand which was actually causing enough friction to warm my arm. “What’re you doing?”

“Trying to keep you from freezing to death,” he answered, distracted as he let go of my arm to move his attention to my leg. But as soon as his palm moved up over my calf and above my knee, I jumped.

He immediately stopped, lifting his hands as he looked up. “Sorry. Did that hurt?”

“No,” I rasped. But the more I took in his concerned expression, the more I began to freak out. Because if *Luke* was worried about me, then all this started to feel serious and real. My chin trembled. “I’m fine.”

But I wasn’t. I was going to lose my sanity for real, any moment now, and he was going to witness my breakdown.

That was almost more horrifying than being kidnapped by a psycho ex and handcuffed naked in his basement. Luke Hamilton being present for my rock bottom was like breaking a sledgehammer through the rock floor and falling even lower. It had to be the worst thing to ever happen to me.

Gah, I was an idiot. Everything I’d done wrong tonight and with Dax in general and pretty much throughout my whole life seemed to crash down around me all at once.

I should’ve been firmer with Dax when I’d broken off the relationship. I should’ve set the baby down somewhere. I should’ve gone out to help Lucy from the beginning. I should’ve told Luke I loved him when I was fourteen. Maybe he would’ve— *Fuck*.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and this time, I knew for sure that the wetness dripping from both my eyes was tears.

But neither drip landed in either ear. Two warm fingers caught the twin trails and gently wiped them away. And that hurt my heart more than anything. I sobbed so hard that it made my chest burn.

Before I knew it, I was weeping loudly and uncontrollably.

“I’m sorry,” I blubbered. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry...”

Luke merely murmured, “Nothing to be sorry for. Just get it out, okay? Get it all out of you.” He didn’t try to shush me



or make a joke, or anything. He just kept wiping my eyes, and then my runny nose, keeping my face clear so that I could fill it again with more messiness.

“I wanna go home,” I sobbed, shaking my head back and forth. “I can’t do this anymore. I want my bed and my blankets and my pillows. I just...I wanna go home.”

“You will,” he swore. “Before the end of tonight, I promise you, you’ll be tucked into your own bed, safe and warm. Either at your house or your parents’, though I’m banking on your childhood bed because I seriously doubt Pick and Eva are going to let you go home alone after this.”

My parents. Yes. I wanted them too.

I blinked my eyes open, and they burned a little from crying so hard. Peering up at Luke, I stared at him a moment before saying, “Did you seriously just wipe my runny nose with your hand?”

“Yeah,” he whispered back, nodding solemnly as he wiped his palm on the hip of his jeans. “And you owe me one for that, by the way.”

I started to laugh, only to jerk in fear when I heard more footsteps on the stairs.

Luke lifted his face toward the door, then popped to his feet to go guard it. Putting his foot down to act as a doorstop, he pulled the entrance open about three inches and peered out through the crack, demanding, “You find anything?”

“I got the keys!” I heard Trick answer triumphantly. “And a towel. No clothes, though, sorry.”

“No. This is good. This will do. Hey! Keep your face back, perv.”

“Is she still okay? Chlo? You good?”

“I’m good,” I rasped, feeling a little drowsy and light-headed after crying so hard. It was hard to stay awake actually. “Ready to get out of here, but good.”

“She sounds worse,” Trick said to Luke. “Why does she sound so hoarse now?”

“Because her adrenaline’s dying down with the danger being over, and everything’s finally starting to hit her, okay? Just...give us a second,” Luke added before he shut the door firmly in my brother’s face.

Then, he turned back and waved the key at me in greeting. “You *sure* you’re ready to break free?” he asked, returning to me with the towel tucked under one arm. “Or do you need another minute to say goodbye to the place and all the fond memories you’ve had here?”

“Get me the fuck free,” I said, not even playing.

He chuckled lightly and knelt down next to one hand. “Yes, ma’am. I hear that one loud and clear.” As soon as the lock slipped free and the freezing metal grip on my wrist loosened, I sobbed out my relief. My arm immediately curled over my chest, seeking warmth and protection as I helped secure Luke’s shirt firmly over myself, hurting and burning as I bent it after it had been forced straight for so long.

Luke’s brow furrowed in concentration as he shifted down to my closest ankle and released the cuff there next.

I felt a bit like a Slinky who was no longer being forced to spread its coils. As soon as Luke freed a limb, it would curl back to the main portion of my body until he was done, and I was all wrapped up tightly on my side in the fetal position.

“There,” he murmured gently, touching my shoulder once he had all the handcuffs off me.

“Thank you,” I whimpered.

He nodded and silently took my shoulders in his hands to help me sit up. “Let’s slip the shirt over your head and then wrap the towel around you like a skirt, alright?”

I nodded and then tried to lift the shirt over my head to put it on myself, but my arms were too weak, and they shook so hard that it hurt to move.

“Here, let me,” Luke offered, taking the shirt from my hand with a kind gentleness I’d never seen from him before. “Just lift your arms out in front of you. Yeah...that’s it,” he murmured when I complied. He patiently slipped the arm

holes over my bloody wrists, and the big shirt slid its way up my arms until he was pulling warm cloth that smelled like Luke over my head. When he went as far as to slide my hair free of the collar for me, I lifted my gaze to his face.

He met my eyes and nodded. “Perfect. Now, let’s just wrap this towel around your waist and get the fuck out of here.”

I nodded. “It’s like...it’s like you can read my mind.”

He winked at me. “Just one of my many superpowers, darlin’.”

I sniffed and rolled my eyes, which made his grin bloom.

But then I sucked in an unexpected breath and winced when pain shot through my hurt ribs.

Luke gripped my arm. “Chloe?”

I nodded my bowed head, trying to reassure him. But I couldn’t stop shaking, even though sitting up off the floor and away from the freezing concrete, plus wearing his shirt made me a million times warmer than I’d been before.

My nerves were just plain shot.

“I’m okay,” I said, looking up.

Luke smiled encouragingly and hooked a hand under my elbow. “And we’re going up,” he instructed, trying to get me to follow the pressure of his tugging until I was up on two feet.

Except when I tried to stand, my knees gave out, and I started to go back down again while pain screamed through my side.

“Whoa, there.” Luke promptly caught me and helped me back down to the floor. “No problem,” he told me, blowing out a settled breath. “I’ll just carry you.”

When he looked at my face, silently asking for permission to pick me up, I nodded and lifted my arms to wrap them around his neck. He swept an arm under my knees, then braced a hand around my back, and I was finally off that damn wet concrete.

“Oh God,” I breathed in relief. “Thank you. Thank you...” I turned my face in to bury it in the crook of his neck, inhaling his warmth and familiar Luke scent, and he turned his face in toward me as well so he could press his cheek to the top of my head.

Silent tears streamed down my face.

“You’re okay now,” he whispered into my ear. “I’m not going to leave you. It’s okay now.”

A knock on the door broke into our moment.

“Hey,” Trick called through the wood. “Everything okay? You need anything?”

“Yeah,” Luke told him. “I need you to open the fucking door and get out of the way. We’re coming through.”

The door immediately sprang open. “Chloe!” Trick cried, rushing inside. “Are you okay?” He came straight to us, looking me over immediately and touching my arm and face to assure himself that I was really there.”

“I’m okay,” I assured him, just as Luke growled, “I told you to get out of the damn way.”

Trick reached for me. “Here. Give her to me.”

“I’ve got her,” Luke assured him testily and tightened his grip on me.

Trick glared. “She’s *my* sister.”

But Luke refused to let go. “I don’t know how well this towel will stay on her if we transfer her around too much. Just clear a path for me, and I’ll get her up the stairs.”

“Fine. Just don’t drop her.”

“And here, that was the first thing I planned to do.” Luke rolled his eyes, then glanced at me. “Head’s up. I may have to hurt your brother before the end of the night.”

Exhausted and finally feeling safe again for the first time in hours, I dropped my head onto his shoulder and tightened my arms around his neck, glad I could stay right where I was, warm and secure. “Just don’t do any permanent damage.”

“I think his brain’s *already* permanently damaged,” he muttered.

My eyelids fluttered. I think I could fall asleep right here. “Probably from hanging around you so much.”

Luke tipped his face to the side, trying to see me. His glance was speculative as if he wanted to glare at me for my quip but also wanted to smile. What he saw in me must’ve told him that I was okay enough to crack a joke.

But instead of firing back, he murmured, “Yeah. Probably.”

I sighed and closed my eyes fully. “Wake me when it’s over, will you?”

He leaned his face over so he could briefly press his temple to my hair, even as he answered, “Will do. You just sleep tight. I got you.”

So I did. I slept hard and deep, comforted by Luke’s smell in my nose, his warmth on my skin, and his arms locked protectively around me.

## 10 LUKE

**T**rick and I had a small debate over what to do after we found Chloe.

I wanted to take her straight to the hospital to get checked out. He was determined to get justice and wanted to wait until the police showed up so that the bastard who'd kidnapped her wasn't left alone and given a chance to escape.

"Dude, I'm not keeping her in this house any longer than she needs to be here," I insisted.

He nodded as if he understood and took my arm as he led me to the door. "Fine. Go sit with her in the truck. I already called the police. They shouldn't be that long."

When he opened the front entrance for me, he paused to reach out and touch Chloe's cheek. I think she'd passed out on me before I'd even gotten her all the way up the stairs. But I could tell she was still breathing because I could feel every exhale against the side of my neck and her breasts swelling against my chest when she inhaled.

"She shouldn't have to be dealing with this," Trick murmured quietly, his gaze full of concern.

"No shit," I muttered and shifted past him, turning sideways to carry her through the doorway. "Come open the truck door for us, too, will you?"

Trick hurried to comply. And once I'd slid into the passenger seat with Chloe nestled securely in my lap, her brother peered in at us and asked, "Is there anything you need?"

I shook my head and focused on the top of her head. “I think we’re good here until the cops show.”

He nodded and said, “I’ll be back to check in every once in a while.” And he eased the door shut so as not to wake her.

I hissed out a breath and closed my eyes as I tipped my face to the side and rested my cheek on the top of Chloe’s head.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

The already-unconscious woman didn’t answer, so I enjoyed these few moments of quiet as I got to do nothing but hold her and reassure myself that she was okay and safe. When I buried my nose in her hair, however, I had to gnash my teeth from the scent of decaying basement that clung to her.

Recent visions of how I’d found her assaulted me, and I shook my head, forcing them from my brain. I took her hand gently and ran my thumb over her fingers before lightly tracing the bloody scabs she had forming on her wrists already. Chloe sighed in her sleep, and the sound filled me with this overwhelming sensation of privilege that even after what she’d just been through, she still trusted me enough to take care of her and keep her from harm so she could rest.

When I saw red and blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror, I groaned. I was going to have to wake her up now, and I already knew she was going to have to answer a bunch of awful questions, and I had a bad feeling I wasn’t going to get to keep holding her like this and getting the physical reassurance that she was okay.

And sure as shit, the first thing they did was separate Chloe from both me and Trick. They stuck her in the back of a cop car, where one officer took her report and called EMS, and the rest dealt with me and her brother.

When the ambulance arrived, they took over her care, and the police turned their full attention to questioning us men.

For a minute there, I was sure Trick and I were both going to go to jail. No one liked the fact that we’d basically broken

into the psycho's house to retrieve our family member...or that Trick might've gotten a little too forceful when he'd subdued the douche.

But our salvation seemed to come from the fact that half of them had already been to Lucy's house and seen what he'd done there to her and the baby, plus the two officers escorting Freston outside had trouble restraining him, and he tried to run, causing all the others to converge.

Trick and I just sat back and watched, glad Chloe had already been transported to the hospital at that point.

After taking our names and information and asking a shit ton of questions, it felt as if eons had passed. But finally, Trick and I climbed back into my truck so we could head toward the hospital, too.

"Chloe's okay and already there," Trick reported from the passenger seat, where he was scanning his phone and reading the group chat. Then he glanced up and added, "It says your dad's checking her over."

My brow furrowed. "My dad?" Dad was a heart surgeon, not a—

"Yeah," Trick answered, cutting into my thoughts. "I guess he'd just gotten out of surgery when the news went out, so he stuck around, and my dad asked him to be the one to look her over."

I nodded. "Good...good. What about Lucy and the baby?"

"Uh..." Trick squinted, scanning his phone again before he started nodding. "Yeah. Here. Ava Grace has a slight skull fracture but the doctor doesn't act like it's anything to be worried about. They'll keep her overnight for observation but that's it."

I nodded, glad to hear that. Poor kid had seriously looked dead earlier. It would've killed Lucy if anything bad had happened to her baby.

"And Luce?" I asked.



Trick shrugged. “Okay, I think. No one’s been worried about her in the chat for a while.”

I exhaled and nodded, glad I only had one person to worry about again.

As we neared the hospital, Trick instructed me where to go and which entrance the family would be waiting at. And he wasn’t lying.

Half a dozen people poured outside as soon as we parked. Trick’s dad and his siblings and their spouses crowded around him as they opened his door for him, looking him over and already asking questions as they drew him back into the hospital with them.

Pick glanced my way once and sent me a silent head bob of thanks when I alighted from the driver’s side, but he was too preoccupied with his kid to actually come over and talk. His oldest, however, paused to slug me companionably on the arm.

“Thanks, man,” Julian murmured. “For being there.”

I nodded and slipped my hands into my pockets, leaning against the back of my truck to watch the others file back inside again. “Yeah, no problem.”

Julian gave my bare chest a funny look and smirked. “D’you lose your shirt in the scuffle with that scumbag or what?”

With a sniff, I half-smiled back at him. “Something like that.”

His gaze changed, and he tipped his head as if realizing I was more shaken than he’d originally guessed. Then, he started backing toward the hospital as well, as if eager to return to the rest of his family. Or maybe he sensed I wanted a second alone. “You coming in?” he asked, motioning behind him.

After yet another incline of the head, I answered, “In a minute, yeah. I’ll be right there.”

Concern filled his eyes but all he did was nod solemnly and murmur, “See you in a bit, then.” And he turned away to jog off.

I exhaled harshly and slid down until I was sitting on the rear bumper of my truck, thinking I’d finally been left alone.

But then my brother appeared so suddenly in front of me that I jerked back roughly.

Quiet, sneaky fucker.

“Jesus,” I breathed, closing my eyes briefly and shaking my head.

He waited until I reopened my lashes and looked up at him warily, then he said, “Come on,” in his typical, big-brother, *I know what’s best for you* tone. And taking my arm, he hauled me upright, toward the hospital.

But I resisted. “What? Where?” Because I just needed a damn minute to catch my breath here.

“Somewhere *quiet*,” JB answered with a bit more force. “Where you can get cleaned up.”

And that didn’t sound half bad, so I decided to follow him into the hospital.

“So *you’re* not going to ask where my shirt is?” I practically sneered, figuring he would be one of the most likely people to demand an answer for that kind of thing.

Except all he said was, “I know where your shirt is. I saw her when she came in.”

And I shuddered, unable to stop thinking about the first moment I’d seen her too, trapped and scared and shivering.

“You have blood on you,” JB added softly, glancing over his shoulder at me as he steered me into a side hall.

I glanced down at my bare torso to spot smears on my abdomen. “It’s not mine. I’m fine. I swear.”

“I’m going to look you over, anyway,” he countered and opened a door before standing aside to let me go in first.

“You’re seriously a pain in the ass,” I muttered as I entered what looked like a locker room. “You know that?”

“A pain in the ass who probably has something for you to wear,” he countered and moved directly to one of the lockers before working on the combination to open it.

Okay, a shirt did sound nice right about now. And my jeans were still wet in places.

With a defeated exhale, I collapsed onto a bench between a row of lockers so I could grip my head and close my eyes for a moment of peace.

Until JB asked, “You want to shower before putting this on?”

I opened my eyes to find him holding a pair of scrubs out to me.

Snagging them, I pushed to my feet. “Yeah. A shower sounds good. Thanks.”

After he showed me the way, I was quick to strip and step under a scalding stream. I scrubbed myself clean in seconds, but then just stood there with steam clouding around me as water jetted against tense muscles. When I set my hand against the wall and bowed my head, closing my eyes, I felt my hand tremble.

Visions clumped in my brain, and for a moment I was plagued by flashes of images: Chloe’s bloodshot eye, the scrape on her lips, her manacled wrists, the blood on her ankles, the bruise on her hip, the cut on the side of her breast.

“Jesus,” I breathed, trying to erase it all but failing.

I just kept seeing body part after body part until her red face with tears streaming from her eyes as she wept blurred to the forefront and stuck.

Feeling weak and drained, I slammed off the water and reached for a towel. But I’d barely dried my face and was wiping down my chest when my brother appeared.

“Dude!” I cried, covering my junk. “Do you mind?”

“I told you I wanted to check you over to make sure you’re okay,” he answered, not even apologizing for invading my privacy.

I lifted my brows at him. “And I told you I was fine.”

He sniffed and shook his head. “You can’t tell me you got into an altercation with that guy and came away without even a scratch.”

“But I can tell you I didn’t get into an altercation with him *at all*,” I countered and then lifted my arms before turning in a circle to show him I was fine. “I didn’t even *see* the motherfucker. Trick found him first and dealt with him. I found Chloe and stayed with *her*. See.”

Finishing my circle, I started to lower my arms, but JB caught my wrist and turned my arm until he was looking at my palms that I’d scraped up when I’d tried to free her from the handcuffs.

“Then what’s this?”

I jerked my hand free so I could wrap the towel around my waist. “It’s nothing.”

“Sit,” my brother instructed, producing a small medical kit from who knew where. Probably from up his ass.

“I’m fine,” I said, snorting over his worries.

He arched his brows and repeated, “Sit.”

With a growl of annoyance, I sat just to get him to shut up. And then I let my brother dab at the cuts with antiseptic and patch a few Band-Aids on them.

When he finally nodded as if satisfied with my care, I scoffed at him as my asshole way of saying *thanks*, and I finished drying off. My mood didn’t encourage him to leave, though. Folding his arms over his chest, he leaned against the wall and stayed, studying me with those watchful eyes.

“How bad was it?” he finally asked.

Shaking my head, I blurted out a harsh laugh and muttered, “Oh, you know. Just bad enough to ensure that I’ll never sleep

right again without having fucking nightmares for the rest of my life. But other than that, yeah, it was a walk in the park.”

JB said nothing, just kept watching me as I yanked on the scrubs.

I wasn't going to tell him, I swore to myself. I wasn't going to say a damn thing, but as soon as I was fully clothed and shoving my way back into my shoes, it all just came tumbling out against my will.

Probably because of his stupid, big-brother superpowers or something. JB always had a way of making me confess all. Just by looking at me.

“He had her chained naked to the fucking floor of his basement,” I rasped, gripping my head and turning in a circle in an attempt to escape the memories.

“Shit,” JB breathed.

“I couldn't find her handcuff key, and she was just there, you know, on the floor, shivering, wet, and naked. And I—I —”

“Wet?” JB repeated in confusion. “Why was she wet?”

I waved dismissively. “She said he'd cleaned her off with a water hose or something. Like he wanted to get all the other men off her before he took her himself.”

JB's eyes flared with revulsion. “So he—”

“No.” I shook my head. “She swears he didn't get that far. He wasn't there when I found her because he was supposedly looking for more cleaners to use on her, so he hadn't... But fuck, man. He knocked her unconscious at *Lucy's*, and she didn't wake up again until she was already chained to the floor. What if he—you know—while she was out?”

JB nodded slowly, looking pale. “Dad's doing a rape kit on her, so we'll know for sure pretty soon.”

My mouth dropped open. “Seriously? A fucking rape kit? Hasn't she already been through enough?”

“I know,” my brother murmured in a calming voice. “She has. But the police requested it. And you know Dad. He’ll make it the least invasive procedure that he possibly can.”

“Least invasive?” I growled incredulously. “He has to go into her vagina and get samples. I mean, fuck!” I kicked at a row of lockers, losing my cool. “How is that not going to suck at all?”

“Luke—” JB started.

But I roared, “No! She shouldn’t have to do this. She went to the fucking police about this guy. How the hell did he get to her? I don’t—” Growling out my misery, I gripped my head and turned in a circle. “How can anyone *do* that to another person? He treated her worse than a wild animal. And all they did was take him to jail. The fucker’s a freak. A monster. He shouldn’t...” Leaning against the wall, I started to slide down until I was sitting on the floor. “He shouldn’t have gotten anywhere near her.”

JB didn’t reply, he just sat down beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders until he was pulling me close and tipping his head over so that our temples touched.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed back against him, letting him silently comfort me.

When I finally felt recovered enough to stop literally leaning on him, I straightened and gripped my forehead. “Be honest. Is she ever going to be able to recover from this?”

“Yes,” my brother told me without an ounce of doubt in his voice. “Over time, with help, she’ll get through and be able to move forward with her life again.”

I looked at him hopefully. “Will *I* recover?”

He nodded with the same steady assurance. “Over time,” he murmured again. “With help, yes, you will.”

## 11 LUKE

**W**hen JB walked us to the waiting area where everyone was milling about, I slowed to a stop, squinting at the numbers. Except it didn't look right. There should be more people here, more of them concerned about Chloe.

As if reading my thoughts, JB paused beside me. "The others are over in the pediatric ward with Lucy and the baby."

Right. That was right. I nodded, thinking that made sense. The Gamble clan did take up more than its fair share of the family. Of course, they'd be with Lucy right now.

My mom was here, though, sitting next to Eva and holding her hand as Eva's cousin Reese sat on her other side.

As my mom stood and came toward me, JB's cell phone rang. I could tell it was his wife by the way he answered and started to move away. It made sense for her not to be here, either; she'd no doubt stayed home with their daughter, who was only a year and a half.

"...No, I was just back with Luke, helping him get cleaned up and changed..."

He stepped out of hearing range, and Mom came in, hugging me warmly.

"My Lucian. Are you okay?"

I pulled my arms around her and tucked her in close, meeting JB's gaze over her head as I answered, "I will be."

Locking her tight in the hug, I held her a little longer than usual and soaked in her mom smell, so that she looked up in concern when I finally did let her loose. Then her hand lifted, and she touched my face.

“You look so much like your brother in these clothes.”

I sniffed and hooked a thumb around the cloth of the top. “Big J only *wishes* he could look this good in scrubs.”

“Oh! You...” Mom laughed, always tickled by my jokes, and she patted my arm warmly.

Grinning, I slung an arm over her shoulder and tucked her in close as I turned us toward the others.

Only to get a face full of a fuming Trick as he marched toward me.

Apparently, he’d had time to think, and the one conclusion he’d come to was, “She wasn’t blocking the door, was she?”

I pulled back and let go of my mom, shifting so that I was protecting her from Chloe’s irate brother.

“Why didn’t you let me in?” he demanded. “What the hell did you see in that room?” When he shoved me, causing me to stumble a step back, my mom gasped, and his dad jumped between us.

“Hey, hey. Cool it,” Pick murmured, keeping his back to me as he faced Trick and set a hand against his son’s chest. “Just breathe.”

But Trick gnashed his teeth as he glared past Pick, right at me. “What...did you see in that room?”

I exhaled and shook my head. “Chloe didn’t want you in there, so I kept you out. I’m sorry. But she *asked*, and I couldn’t tell her no.”

“Damn you,” he growled. “You had no right. She’s *my* sister.”

“And she didn’t want her little brother to see the shit that I saw!” I answered, lifting my voice. “Why the hell does this matter now? She’s safe and okay. Drop it.”



Tears filled his eyes as he clenched his teeth and shook his head. “Why did you make me go look for handcuff keys?” he pressed. “And where were her clothes?”

A collective gasp filled the waiting room, and Trick’s mother started to cry out in distress before covering her mouth and instantly weeping.

Reese pulled her close for a hug, and my mom hurried over toward her again, while Pick pushed a straining Trick back hard.

“Dammit, *enough*,” Pick hissed and pointed toward a chair. “Sit down and shut up before you send us all to an early grave with those kinds of horrifying images. Jesus. What the hell were you thinking, saying that shit aloud in front of your mother?”

Trick glanced around, beginning to look contrite. When he focused on Eva, he straight up cringed. “Mom, I’m sorry.”

She waved a hand, forgiving him, even as she leaned against Reese and let her hold her.

I shared a wary glance with Pick as he met my gaze. He shook his head, still looking irritated as if he still may strangle his youngest for his outburst, but then he reached out toward me and hooked a hand around the back of my neck before hauling me in against him, clashing our foreheads together and just holding me there.

“Thank you,” he said in a low, grateful tone.

I nodded and saw movement from the corner of my eye. When I looked over, I made eye contact with my father as he entered the waiting area. He inclined his head respectfully, then started for Eva to give his report.

“She’s doing well,” he waited to say until Pick had joined them. “No internal bleeding. There are a couple of bruised ribs, but her X-rays and CTs look good. The rest of her injuries are minor and superficial enough that she just needs some time to heal. I have the nurse helping her get discharged now.”

“Oh, thank God,” Pick breathed and pulled Eva to him so the two could hold each other through their relief.

“What about—?” Trick started to ask, only to pause abruptly when his dad looked at him sternly. Then he flushed and cringed before asking, “Do you know for sure if she was raped or not?”

My dad blinked at him once, then said, “She was not.”

The whole crowd gave a collective breath of reassurance.

“But she’s still very shaken from the trauma,” Dad went on. “So I would ask that only her parents come back with me to see her. She doesn’t seem to want to be around a lot of people at the moment. She just needs a bit of time to herself to recover first.”

As some protested, and Pick had to raise a hand to get them to see reason, I took a step back, exhaling roughly.

Antsy, impatient tendrils of disappointment swam through me.

For some reason, I’d really wanted to see her again. *Tonight.*

No, that wasn’t quite right. I *needed* to see her again, just to make sure she was really okay. It was a visceral thing that took over every instinct in my gut, and learning that I *couldn’t* get close to her made my nerves wrench uncomfortably.

A strange panic bloomed in my chest.

Spinning away, I began to stride off. Not sure where I was going or what I was doing, but I knew I needed to move. I needed to walk.

“Luke,” my dad’s voice called after me.

Grinding my teeth, I slowed to a stop and looked back. He’d left the group that Pick was still trying to wrangle back into order and was striding toward me.

When he came in close, setting a hand on my shoulder and looking into my eyes, I already knew what he was going to say.

“She told me,” he said softly. “Everything you did for her.” A half-sympathetic, half-proud smile flitted across his face.

“Are you okay?”

“I already made him talk about it,” JB answered for me, appearing at our side.

I sent my brother a dry scowl as he and Dad shared a silent, meaningful look, and then I rolled my eyes.

“Oh my God,” I muttered, glancing back and forth between the two worried men. “I’m fine.” Then I turned away again, announcing, “I’m going home now.”

“Call if you need anything,” JB commanded as I walked off.

I lifted my hand over my shoulder, giving him a thumbs-up. “Yep.”

But when I got home, I changed into my own clothes and then had no fucking idea what to do.

The world just felt different.

Sleep was completely off the table, so I paced for a while, then read everything people had written on the group chat while I’d been *busy*. When I realized there wasn’t any new information that I didn’t already know, I tossed my phone onto a side table and rubbed the back of my neck as I paced some more.

That’s it.

I was pretty sure she’d probably be at her parents’ place. They would’ve insisted that she go with them until she gave in and agreed.

To be safe, I drove past her house on the way. It was dark, so I continued on to Pick and Eva’s.

Lights were on everywhere there, so I found a place to park and started up the front walk.

The door opened before I even stepped onto the front porch. Trick sighed regretfully as he looked out at me. Then he shook his head and said, “Okay, so maybe I overreacted a touch at the hospital.”

“Yeah, you think?” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

Trick hissed out his apology. “I’m sorry. I was still wiggling out over what had happened.”

“Well, it was weird,” I said. “So don’t do it again. Usually, *I’m* the idiotic dipshit who says the *wrong* thing in any given situation.”

Trick smiled and shook his head. “Shut up,” he said affectionately and opened the door to let me in. I stepped inside to find that the front room was crowded. Chloe’s two older siblings were pacing and talking quietly on the phone with different people, while Gray and Bella’s parents were curled up on the couch, napping against each other.

But there was no Chloe.

“Where is she?”

“In her old room with Mom and Dad,” Trick answered. “We’re hanging out here, trying to give them *space*.” He made air quotes and rolled his eyes as he said that.

I nodded and glanced toward the opening of the hall that I knew led to her childhood room. “Mind if I peek in, just to reassure myself?”

Trick splayed out his hand. “Hey, if you want to risk the wrath of my parents, knock yourself out.”

I guess I didn’t care about the risk because I started for the opening of the hall without any more invitation than that. It was quiet as I approached the doorway to Chloe’s old room, so I slowed my steps to be as silent as possible, too. When I reached the open entrance and peered in, the light was off, but a muted lamp on the nightstand had been turned on.

Chloe lay cosseted on the bed with both her parents wrapped around her, her head resting on her dad’s shoulder and her mom spooned up behind her with an arm around her waist. All three of them were awake and staring sightlessly at the wall in front of them, Pick occasionally running his fingers over Chloe’s hair.

I watched them for a moment, my nerves settling a bit from seeing them together and knowing she was okay.

But once I returned to the front room and found a chair to camp out on, I just wanted to get right back up again so I could go look in on her one more time. The need was insistent and irritating, and I didn't like it. What's worse, I could only ignore it for about fifteen minutes at a time before it got the better of me, and I was pushing my way to my feet to head back there and peer into her room, only to see that absolutely nothing had changed. They were still awake, still staring, still cuddled together as one.

On my third trip back, when I saw that she was okay and I immediately started to turn away again, Chloe's voice finally mumbled from the bed, stopping me in my tracks.

"Would you please stop creeping and gawking at us like that?" she croaked in a hoarse voice. "We're not animals at a zoo."

I turned back to find that her eyes had shifted my way, so I stepped just inside the room. "You're not sleeping," I said, frowning about that. "Why aren't you sleeping?" Addressing her parents, I asked, "Shouldn't she be sleeping?"

"She refused the sleeping pills we offered her," Eva answered, her voice about as foggy and tired as Chloe's. Her eyes looked bruised and swollen from all her worrying.

*All* of us were exhausted.

"What the hell for?" I demanded, turning my scowl back to Chloe herself. "Take a damn pill already."

"I don't want to," she muttered back, returning the glare.

"Yeah, well, no one else in this house is going to get any rest until *you* do. Just look at your fucking parents. They're dead on their feet worried about you."

"Luke..." Pick scolded with a tired sigh.

But my worry about Chloe being unable to rest and get past this horror of a night pushed me to keep flapping my jaws and grumbling, "Just take something, so we can *all* get some sleep."

I knew my not-so-classy technique of making her feel guilty and selfish about not taking care of herself was a douchebag move, but I didn't particularly care.

Because it worked.

Chloe bit her lip in worry and glanced at her parents before muttering, "Okay, fine. I'll take a pill."

Pick straightened in surprise. We all knew he wanted her to do this as well, but he still asked, "Are you sure?" because he obviously hadn't wanted to force her into it in the merciless way I had.

She nodded, however, and murmured, "Yeah. It's fine. He's right. I wasn't thinking."

"*He* wasn't thinking," Pick growled as he sent me a short glower. But he kissed her forehead, anyway, his mouth tightening when she flinched briefly from his touch, and he pulled his arm from around her shoulders before shimmying off the bed and standing. "I'll be right back," he said softly, smoothing a hand over her hair, only to pull away again when she sucked in a startled breath from his touch.

Then he turned toward me, and his affectionate expression dropped into a glare. Pausing next to me on his way out of the room, he murmured for my ears alone, "Keep being a dick, and I'm kicking you out of my house, got it?"

I didn't respond, just turned my gaze to mother and daughter still on the bed as he strode from the room. Crossing my arms over my chest, I couldn't help but ask, "Anything else you're refusing to take? Are you even on any painkillers right now?"

Chloe rolled her eyes. "I'm sufficiently full of ibuprofen, thank you very much."

"Next dosage is in another three hours," Eva spoke up, touching Chloe's arm in comfort, which only caused Chloe to shrink back, and then realize what she was doing. And she stopped abruptly.

Her mother looked pained by the move, but neither of them mentioned it.

I shifted my gaze around Chloe's face and watched her chin tremble in regret. She knew she was hurting her parents every time she instinctively shied from their touch, but she couldn't seem to stop herself from doing it time and time again.

"Babe," Pick's voice called from down the hall. "Did we want to give her something from this white bottle or the brown one?"

"What?" Eva shook her head and sighed. "No. Where are you even looking?" Then she eased away from Chloe and slid off the bed as well. "Just wait right there. Don't touch anything. I'm coming."

She didn't scowl at me as she passed, the way her husband had, but patted my shoulder in a kind, motherly fashion.

And then finally... I was alone with Chloe.

I've been craving a moment to myself with her since I'd given her up to the police. Everyone kept saying she was okay, and I could see with my eyes that she was still pushing on, but...I don't know. I needed to touch her with my own hands to fully believe it, I think.

Stepping toward the bed, I eased down until I was sitting on the edge not far from her hip. "Your eye still looks freaky," I said.

"I know." She hissed out a breath and started to lift her fingers toward it, only to pause before making contact. "When I finally saw it in the mirror, it creeped me out too."

"You'd make a good horror movie victim," I agreed and held out a hand. "Now, what about your wrists?"

Chloe sighed and rolled her eyes, but ungraciously swung out her arm and flopped her hand into mine so I could inspect the damage.

I closed my fingers around hers lightly and then I ran my thumb over the tender bruised skin as I twisted her arm gently to check out both the front and back.

“Better,” I said, nodding to myself. “Not as swollen anymore, and the cuts aren’t nearly as bad as they looked with all the blood on them.”

Chloe said nothing, just held out her other arm so I could see that wrist too.

“Same,” I murmured, lightly tracing my finger over the scabbed cut lines there. Looking up, I asked, “Your ankles any different?”

She shook her head.

I exhaled harshly and leaned toward her, wishing I could just gather her into my arms and hold her safely there for the rest of forever, keeping everything bad and shitty from ever hurting her again.

She leaned into me as well until our brows were resting against each other. I lifted my hand to curl it around the back of her neck, my fingers tangling in her hair in the process, to keep her right where she was, and then my eyes drifted shut.

“I really don’t want to take any sleeping pills,” she finally said, and her voice shook a little as if she was afraid.

I opened my eyes and pulled back to look at her face, hating how awful her eye looked and how dented and dinged her mouth and cheek and eyebrows were. “You really need them.”

She shook her head, her lips beginning to quiver. “They’re just going to make me fuzzy-headed and groggy. But I need to be alert. I need to be ready in case he—”

“He’s not,” I whispered softly, taking her hand. “I swear. I saw him get arrested myself. He’s in jail. And you’re safe. No one is getting near you. Not without coming through me and your entire family first.”

When I squeezed her hand, she squeezed back, but the fear was still real and alive in her eyes.

“I know,” she answered. “Logically, I know that. But illogically...” She shook her head and shuddered out an unsteady breath. “I just can’t shake this feeling. I can’t



convince myself... I just need to keep my head clear, so I can be alert and ready. I'm sorry. I know—”

“No, it's okay,” I cut in, inclining my head to let her know I understood. “I get it. You don't have to...shit...” Hissing out a breath, I glanced toward the doorway of the room, not sure what was taking Pick and Eva so long to find a damn pill but grateful for the reprieve anyway.

“Alright, new plan,” I announced and slid onto the bed until I was sitting where Pick had been, right up against her. I toed off my shoes and kicked them over the side of the bed, onto the floor. “Curl up against me and close your eyes.” I slid my arm around her shoulders, encouraging her to turn in and rest her head on my chest. “When your parents come in, I'll tell them you don't need anything after all because you finally fell asleep. And with me here, they won't try to curl up next to you to discover you're really faking it.”

“You're delusional,” she mumbled, curling up to me anyway, her warmth soaking through my clothes and reassuring me that she was honestly alive and well. “They're going to figure it out in seconds.”

“Shh,” I hissed. “Just close your damn eyes.”

“Bully,” she whispered and nudged me weakly in the ribs with a knuckle. But I could feel her lashes move against my chest as she shut her eyes.

“Stubborn,” I tossed back affectionately as I kissed her hair and then rested my cheek against the spot where I'd just placed my mouth.

Exhaling, I relaxed against her and closed my eyes as well, glad I got to hold her again.

Keeping my lashes shut, I strained to hear footsteps in the hall so I could open my eyes again and report to Chloe's parents when they returned that she was asleep, but I never heard them because I accidentally passed out.

My relief from getting to hold her and assure myself that she was truly honestly okay simply gave way to my exhaustion.

I had no idea how long I slept, but it was one of those hard, deep sleeps that claimed a person's entire body and forced it to repair itself from any mental, physical, or emotional trauma it had just experienced.

I just knew I didn't wake up again until it was morning and light was streaming into the room, with people talking nearby.

That barely registered, though, what with the soft, warm body draped across my chest and a very feminine leg shifting past my aching, morning wood.

I didn't realize I had my hand on her bare hip, all five fingers imprinting themselves to glorious flesh, until they flexed, instinctively gripping her leg to keep her right where she was so the pressure of her knee could alleviate the throbbing in my erection.

She froze and inhaled, her breath washing across my chest.

The pleasure that spiked through me caused me to gasp and finally wake up enough to realize I was practically humping her leg...with witnesses in the doorway.

“Shit!”

## 12 CHLOE

■ didn't mean to pass out on Luke.

One minute, I'd been certain I was never going to sleep again. The next, I was dragged under, against his warmth and smell and...and Lukeness. Then bam, just like that, I was out.

And I didn't stir again until hushed muted voices across the room roused me.

Like a gnat flying around my head, they irritated me back to consciousness, and I woke with my brow furrowed into a frown.

"Aren't they just adorable? We came back to her room and found them both like this, burrowed against each other like baby bunnies and passed out cold."

Mom, I realized. She was at the door as she whispered to someone else. Not sure who.

When her companion answered, "I just want to take a picture of them like this together," it finally soaked in that they were talking about me, and that I wasn't in bed alone.

Another body lay against mine, limp and heavy as if it had been sleeping just as hard as I had. And the more awake I grew, the more I could feel a hard, masculine chest pillowed under my head, a large hand on my hip, a jean-clad leg tucked under mine, and a very distinct bulge under my knee that was bent across his lap.

Whoops. I started to shift my leg off him, only for the fingers on my hip to tighten, digging in slightly as if trying to keep my knee where it was against him. I paused, surprised by his unwillingness to let me go, only to hear him suck in a breath a moment later as if he were just *then* waking up. And then, he ripped his hand off my hip with a whispered curse.

I blinked my eyes open and peered across the surface of his chest where his shirt had become ruffled through the night.

“We can hear you, you know?” I finally mumbled lifting my head to send my mom and her friend, Caroline, a grumpy frown, all the while inconspicuously slipping my leg from over the top of Luke’s hip and off his erection.

Mom smiled at me proudly. “Morning, baby girl.”

Next to her, Caroline lifted her phone and took a picture. “So precious,” she murmured with an adoring grin.

“What the hell?” Scowling and squinting against the morning light, Luke lifted his hand to block their view. “Why are people taking pictures?”

“That’s a good question?” Caroline’s husband asked, his face appearing over her shoulder to peer in at Luke and me as well. Then he teasingly scolded, “Babe...” before kissing Caroline’s cheek and grinning. “If you were developing a voyeuristic fetish, *I* would’ve posed for you.”

Caroline groaned and rolled her eyes. “Don’t make it dirty,” she warned. “They just looked adorable together, like two kittens snuggled up in a pile of blankets.”

Luke leaned closer and whispered, “Should we tell her about the morning wood?”

I nudged him sharply in the ribs to shut him up, and he oofed, catching my mom’s attention. I don’t think she heard what he said, but she must’ve seen the strain on my face because she reached for Caroline’s arm and started to steer her out of the doorway. “Let’s give them a minute to wake up and meet us in the kitchen.”

Caroline nodded and lifted her gaze to me. “It’s nice to see you safe and okay, honey,” she said, lifting her thumbs encouragingly. “We were so worried.”

With a sleepy smile, I nodded. “Thank you.”

As she disappeared, her husband, Ten, lingered. He didn’t say anything for a moment, but I could see the emotion in his eyes. I had a feeling he was picturing his own daughter in my place, and it scared him. Then he offered me a watery smile and murmured, “Survivor princess.”

A smile bloomed across my face, and his gaze shifted to Luke, where his grin morphed into a scowl. “Dipshit,” he greeted. “You still owe me fifty bucks.”

“Whatever,” Luke called after Ten as he finally left too. “Her eyes could still change.”

I sighed. “Harper’s eighteen months old. I’d say there’s no chance of her eyes turning a pure Hamilton blue at this point.”

There was a well-known bet going on between Ten and Luke about which eye color baby Harper—Luke’s niece as well as Ten’s granddaughter—would have. Ten swore they were going to be Tenning hazel, while Luke maintained the steadfast belief that they’d turn as blue as his. Except Harper was already a year and a half old and the muddy brownish hue in her irises was a definite hazel.

Luke merely lifted an eyebrow toward me. “There’s always a chance,” he argued.

“Oh boy.” I rolled my eyes and pulled my sheets off me in order to climb out of bed. Unable to ignore strained muscles that screamed over every move I made, I gripped my sore ribs and winced even as I said, “You and your ego.”

But Luke cried, “Hey, hey!” as he grabbed after the sheets and yanked them back over his lap to preserve his decency. “Do you mind?”

I paused next to the bed to send him a dry look before shaking my head in disappointment. “I still cannot believe you did that in my childhood bed. My mattress is traumatized now; I hope you know.”

He only snickered. “I wonder what *my* childhood mattress is, then?”

“Lord.” I closed my eyes and squeezed the bridge of my nose, seeking patience for this man.

While he merely said, “*What?* It’s not like I can help it. It’s a dick. That’s what dicks do first thing when they wake.”

“Well, you didn’t have to mention it out loud,” I scolded, turning away to open the bag that someone had packed for me and brought over from my place. “I was going to be polite and just ignore it.”

“Ignore it?” Luke lifted his brows in clear disagreement. “It was gouging you in the thigh.”

“It was gouging my *knee*,” I corrected. “And you should’ve pretended you didn’t notice it either. That way, we could’ve avoided this entire conversation.”

He shrugged cluelessly. “What’s wrong with this conversation?”

I blinked at him once, then lifted my hand to block him from view, even though I could still clearly make him out on the bed where I’d spent most of my teen years dreaming about him.

Still in a shirt, jeans, and socks, he looked deliciously ruffled, especially with my blankets covering one of his legs, his lap area, and a bit of his torso. The rest was left on glorious display as he half sat up, propped against a mountain of pillows with one arm resting behind his head as he watched me from his relaxed sprawl.

The stupid teenager that was still trapped deep inside me perked to life, tingling in excitement at the sight, while the rest of me gave a tired, irritated sigh.

“Never mind,” I told him because if he didn’t understand how messed up our current topic of discussion was, then I had a feeling I couldn’t explain it to him in terms that he actually comprehended. “Just...be gone by the time I get back, huh?” Grabbing a handful of clothes from my overnight bag, I started

for the door, calling over my shoulder, “And don’t masturbate on my bed.”

“No promises,” he sang after me, causing me to pull up short and lean back to glare into my room at him.

He laughed and lifted his hands. “Kidding!”

I narrowed my eyes. “You better be.”

Still chuckling over his off-brand humor, he waved me away. “Go. Change. I’ll behave. I promise.”

Huffing out a breath, I shook my head and hurried to the closest bathroom, where I exhaled deeply as soon as I shut the door behind me, finally alone and away from his magnetic pull.

But then the mirror over the vanity caught my attention, and my lips parted in shock. Bruises and cuts dotted my face, and my eye was so bloodshot it was hard to even look at.

“Oh God,” I breathed, pressing a hand to my abdomen as the horrors from the night before came rushing back to me.

I’d forgotten for a minute there while I was in my room with Luke.

I mean, I knew why he was there, and I definitely felt the soreness. But I’d actually forgotten about all the traumatic parts when we’d been bickering as if nothing bad had happened at all. And suddenly, I wanted to blow back into that room with him and berate him some more for daring to get a hard-on in my bed. That had been real and normal and...and safe. This...

Air puffed at my lungs as I stared at my own reflection. A dull, surreal numbness spread through my limbs.

This didn’t even seem real.

But every inch of my body told a different story. I swear, I was just one big, sore bruise. Wincing as I lifted my arms to take off my nightshirt, I kept watching my reflection as I revealed more cuts, scrapes, and abrasions.

*Survivor princess*, Ten's new name for me echoed through my head. He'd said it like it was a badge of honor. But I didn't feel very honored at the moment. I felt pummeled and stiff, beaten down and barely able to move.

I debated on whether to take another shower, even though a shower was the last thing I'd done last night before climbing into bed. I bet steaming warm water could help loosen my knotted muscles more than anything. But knowing people were out there, waiting on me—people who loved and cared about me—I shook my head and just slipped into some fresh clothes instead.

By the time I was done and stepping into the hall again, Luke seemed to have recovered enough to leave my room. He was in the hall and had already passed the bathroom door when I opened it. I stared after him, focusing briefly on the wide cut of his shoulders as he walked before a little toddler appeared in the opening of the hallway at the other end, catching his attention.

“Hey there,” he greeted, his voice full of smiles. “I know you.”

Bending down, he snagged the girl and lifted her until their faces were even. When the child seemed to realize who'd just picked her up, she grinned and reached for his face, blowing raspberries at him.

Luke chuckled. “Yeah. You remember Uncle Fart Sounds, don't you?” And he started blowing raspberries back at her before he lifted her higher so he could blow some on her belly and make her scream with laughter.

Drawn toward the sound, I moved that way, needing to be in on this kind of joy.

“There's one of my god-babies,” I crooned, reaching out and attempting to steal Harper right out of Luke's arms. “Come to Chloe, my little precious.”

Luke lowered his niece to his shoulder and turned to face me, already beginning to hold her out for me to take the toddler. But Harper took one look at my fucked-up eye, and



her face contorted with terror before she shrieked out her fear and turned back to Luke for protection.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry,” I gushed, slapping my hand over my eye. “I didn’t even think.”

“It’s fine,” he assured, even as he kissed his niece’s hair before lifting her up and blowing raspberries at her some more. “The kid’s tough. She’ll be okay.”

And just like that, Harper stopped crying so she could grab his lips and start imitating him again.

“What’s wrong...?” her mother said as she blew around the corner, looking worried, only to stall to a stop and set her hands on her hips, glowering at Luke.

“Luke,” she scolded. “What did I tell you about teaching my daughter to make *fart* sounds?”

“Hey, it’s my lot in life to teach her all the naughty shit her parents won’t,” he argued. Then, he tickled Harper’s belly. “Isn’t that right, stinker? Pretty soon, we’ll be putting Kool-Aid in the toilet together and figuring out how to fake a fever so you can stay home from school, won’t we?”

As Harper grinned and patted his face with both hands, Teagan groaned and mumbled, “Do any of that, and I’m siccing your brother on you.”

“Harsh.” Luke settled Harper firmly on his hip and glanced at his sister-in-law, asking, “Is he here, by the way?”

“JB? No.” Teagan shook her head as she came forward to set a hand on her daughter’s back. “He’s already gone in to work for today. I came over with my parents.”

Then, she finally turned to look at me. “Hey, you,” she murmured, her voice softening and eyes filling with sympathy as she focused on my bad eye. “You gave us quite a scare last night. You doing okay?”

When she stepped forward, her arms open to pull me into a hug, I sucked in a startled breath and lurched back without meaning to.

“Oh God, I’m sorry,” Teagan gasped, immediately pulling away as well. “I... I didn’t think.”

“No, it’s fine,” I assured her, hugging myself and feeling like slime for making one of my best friends feel shitty about merely trying to hug me. I mean, Jesus. This was *Teagan*. I’d known her since forever. How could I shy away from Teagan? “*I’m* sorry. I...”

“Have all the reason in the world to be jumpy today,” Teagan assured me, reaching for my arm only to stop herself. “I should’ve considered that.”

No, she shouldn’t have. I had no reason to be jumpy around my family and friends. Hugging myself, I tried to get my emotions back under control, but I could already feel it slipping. My chin was already quivering. Any second I was going to burst into tears, and everyone was going to see me lose my shit, which only made me panic more.

But then my father’s voice murmured, “Chloe Girl?”

And I sucked in a startled breath before spinning to find him in the opening of the hall.

He nodded at me, his gaze grave but still alight with the promise that things would get better. “The Tennings brought some breakfast over if you’re hungry.”

Nodding, I set my hand over my stomach as it stirred. “I could definitely eat. I skipped supper last night.”

Supper.

Ah shit. I had no-showed at the restaurant where I was supposed to meet Logan. Now I was going to have to call him sometime and apologize. But God, the idea of calling anyone right now turned my stomach.

As Luke and Teagan filed out of the hallway to head toward the kitchen, Dad remained behind to send me a questioning glance. “You up for this? One word, and I can make them all go away.”

I shook my head. “No. It’s okay. I want to be surrounded by people I love.”

He watched me another second longer, then nodded. “Okay.” He reached out to take my arm, but when I flinched at the move, he inconspicuously dropped his fingers and settled for stepping back to let me go first.

“Fair warning: all your siblings and their families are still here along *with* the Tennings.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

I could do this. I could face the people I loved.

The closer we got to the kitchen, however, the louder the sound of talking and conversation grew. It didn’t really intimidate me until I stopped in the room, however, and everyone immediately stopped talking. I shrank back a step, only to run into Dad which made me gasp in surprise from the unexpected contact.

Damn, I was really messed up.

“There you are,” my sister-in-law, Nia, crooned as she came forward, her arms thrown open to hug me.

My eyes widened in dread, but then Teagan hollered, “No! Hugs are freaking her out today.”

Leave it to Teagan to blurt everything right out into the open.

Nia immediately froze and dropped her arms. “Oh God. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. I’m sure I’ll be good to go again and ready to hug everyone in a few days.”

“Of course you will,” Mom supplied, smiling sunnily my way as she waved me toward the table and an open box full of donuts. “Now come, sit. There’s a caramel-coated Long John over here calling your name.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Ooh.” Long Johns *were* my favorite. And if there was any day I could allow myself to splurge on donuts, it would be today. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Almost everyone was already eating. All the chairs except one—that seemed to be the seat of honor—had been taken,

while half a dozen more people were standing and leaning against cabinets and counters. My sister, Skylar, was sitting on the floor and feeding bite-sized pieces to Harper, her daughter—Kailee—and Julian’s little girl—Drea—as they milled around her, toddling and eating.

All three little girls were my goddaughters, I realized vaguely. I’d been hoping to collect more—since it had become a running family joke to strive to be the next godparent of every new baby that was born—but so far, it was just these three for me, and it made me smile to see them all in the same place at once.

After thanking Caroline and Ten for providing the food, I snagged the Long John and a napkin, then bypassed the chair that seemed to be reserved for me, and I backpedaled until I was leaning against the island counter next to where Luke was also leaning and eating an apple fritter with Trick on his other side, downing a glazed donut.

My arm brushed Luke’s, and he sent me a curious sidelong glance but then went back to eating.

“Does anyone know how Lucy and Ava Grace are today?” I asked before biting into my pastry.

“Yeah, we stopped by there on our way here,” Caroline spoke up. “And they’re doing well. They’re just fine.”

I nodded, grateful to hear that.

“You should’ve seen the way Vaughn was doting over both of them.” Teagan lifted her brows, eager to impart some juicy gossip. “I think those two are going to hook up before too long.”

I smiled sadly and looked down at my donut. “She told me she was in love with him,” I said. “Last night. Right before Dax showed up.” My chin trembled, and tears filled my eyes as I added, “And I dropped her baby.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mom scolded softly, coming forward to take my arm. “That is not on you. It—”

When I gasped and wrenched away from her touch, I bumped into Luke again, and he set a hand on the center of my

back to steady me. He said nothing, but his hand leveled out my emotions until I felt balanced enough not to have a panic attack in the middle of my parents' kitchen.

“I...I’m sorry,” I choked out, my eyes still welling. “Maybe I wasn’t ready for this after all.”

And I took off, racing from the kitchen.

Once I returned to my room, I spent the rest of the day in bed, and the only two people who bothered me were my parents when they brought food.

## 13 LUKE

**A**fter getting booted out of the Ryan house within thirty seconds of Chloe fleeing the kitchen in tears, I went home and tried to take a nap before I had to go back in to work later that night. But sleep was elusive.

Every time I would begin to drift off, I only jerked awake again, breathing hard and sitting up, looking around for Chloe to make sure she was okay. I tried to watch some television, but every show made me feel sick to my stomach. I tried to play a game on my phone, but then my heart would start to race for no good reason, and I'd have to get up and walk around.

There was plenty of chatter in the family group chat, and I read some of what they were saying, mostly about Dax Freston. Apparently, he was still in jail and waiting for a hearing first thing on Monday morning to go in front of a judge to either get his bail set or denied. A handful of the family planned on being present for that.

I tossed the phone down and paced some more, wishing Pick hadn't made everyone leave. I'd even sworn to him that I wouldn't bug her or talk to her; I'd just needed to stay close and look in at her every so often to convince myself she was fine. It was a compulsory need I couldn't seem to control. And it frazzled my nerves down to nubs that he wouldn't let me even do that.

What's worse, she never responded when I privately texted her, asking, *you doing okay?*

Pick did call early in the afternoon, but only to ask me to go in to work early and make sure the bar was ready for opening since he didn't plan on going in at all. I readily agreed and then tried to ask how Chloe was, but all he answered was, "She's working it out. Just give her some time."

That evasive response irritated me and told me nothing. So I stopped by Lucy's house on the way to work, to make sure at least *she* and her kid were okay.

There were a ton of people there.

Her brother, Beau, opened the door for me as I was walking up. We nodded silently to each other, and he stepped back to let me in. I scanned the new door and patches on the drywall as I did, remembering how it'd been hanging from one hinge the night before.

And just like that, I remembered the basement and the frightened look in Chloe's eyes again.

Shaking my head, I looked up and pulled back in surprise to find Lucy immediately coming in to hug me in greeting before I could even pull my hands from my pockets. "Thank you for finding her," she said into my ear before pulling away.

I nodded solemnly and glanced around at everyone talking in hushed voices so as not to aggravate the baby's head wound.

The conversation here wasn't much different from that in the group chat. They were all talking about ways to make sure Chloe's psycho ex paid for his crimes—some were legal ways, and some were not-so-legal.

I kind of preferred the not-so-legal suggestions myself, but those were just wishful thinking, so I turned toward Lucy's mom who was rocking with the bruised baby on her lap.

"Have you heard any word from Eva today about Chloe?"

Aspen glanced up and sent me a sad smile. "She said Chloe hadn't left her room since this morning. She'll eat when they force her to, but I can tell Eva's worried. It definitely hit her hard today."

I nodded, the itch in me to go see her only growing stronger. “Yeah, she was pretty skittish this morning.”

“You’re lucky you got in to see her before Pick put up the ban,” Lucy’s dad told me. “He’s not letting *anyone* visit now, not even her siblings.”

Fuck. This was not what I wanted to hear. If her dad was keeping people away, I would’ve liked to at least hear that she was getting up and moving around and eating.

When I finally left Lucy’s and went to work, the bar was quiet and dark. With a big exhale, I started in, turning on all the lights, opening locked doors that led into the kitchen and store room and bathrooms, and did all the usual things Pick did before any of his employees arrived.

But my head wasn’t in it, and I was distracted all evening, messing up orders, giving back wrong change, and basically pissing off all the customers along with my coworkers.

Then I was a stickler about people not walking to their cars alone at the end of their shift.

None of them had heard about what had happened with their boss’s daughter yet, and it wasn’t my place to tell them.

Unable to keep going like this, I sat in my truck outside the bar and ran my hands over my head a moment before giving in and texting Pick.

I typed: *U up?*

Not long later, he answered: *If this is a booty call, you have the wrong number, idiot.*

I snickered out a smile and shook my head before typing back: *Funny, boss. Just closed up the bar. I was hoping I could swing by there and check in on her.*

There was a pause, and I was sure he was going to deny me, but as soon as I gave up hope and geared my truck into *drive* to head home, my phone buzzed with an incoming message.

*Come to the back door when you get here.*



“Yes!” I hissed, fisting my hand and tapping it against the steering wheel in celebration.

My nerves which had been strung tight all day had already started to loosen by the time I pulled up to the Ryan house, just knowing I was going to get to see her again.

Pick was waiting for me when I approached the back door.

“After this morning, I wasn’t going to let anyone bother her for the rest of the day,” Pick told me as he let me in. “But she’s not sleeping again tonight, and I was hoping you could do whatever you did last night to help her with that.”

My stomach tightened with worry. She wasn’t sleeping?

Shaking my head, I said, “I didn’t do anything. I just sat with her.”

“Then sit with her again,” he said simply, only to lift a finger threateningly. “Just know that if anything sets her off and upsets her, you’re out. Got me?”

I nodded. “I got it.”

Pick exhaled a shaking breath and patted my back gratefully as he led me toward his daughter’s bedroom. “How’d everything go at the bar?”

“It sucked,” I answered bluntly. “I mean, it ran smoothly enough. But my head was just not in it, so fair warning: you’re probably going to hear a dozen complaints about everything I fucked up.”

“I don’t even care,” Pick answered, glancing back at me with a pleading look. “Just get my baby a couple of more hours of oblivion, and all will be forgiven.”

I swallowed, growing uncertain about the heaviness of the responsibility he was heaping on me, but then I nodded and said, “Will do, boss,” because the alternative was probably him kicking me out, and I couldn’t let that happen.

He nodded back and then paused at the open doorway. When I stepped up beside him, the scene was almost a replica of the night before, except it was missing Pick on the bed with his wife and daughter.

Eva glanced over at us, and her eyes narrowed when she saw me. Turning an accusing glance toward her husband, she started a silent argument with him with her eyes alone, demanding to know why I'd been allowed inside the house.

Pick shrugged helplessly at her, letting her know he was desperate and was willing to try anything at his point. So his still-unhappy wife sighed and relented, letting me stay.

Pick turned to me and wished me luck with only a pat on the shoulder, then he walked off.

Left alone in the doorway, I turned back toward Chloe and her mom just as Chloe finally decided to speak.

"You're back." Her voice was so lackluster I wondered if she was doped up on something strong.

"Yep," I agreed and stepped into the room. "Just like a bad penny."

As Chloe continued to stare straight ahead at the wall, I lifted my gaze to her mother. "Been a good day, huh?"

"It could've been better." Eva's voice was hoarse as if she'd been screaming for hours.

"Can you get my mother to go to bed?" Chloe asked, still staring at the wall. "She's dead on her feet."

I lifted my brows and transferred my gaze back to Eva, who was already shaking her head as if she wanted to object.

Being a smartass, I answered, "Doesn't look like she's on her feet at all to me."

Chloe sniffed bitterly but didn't reply.

Damn. She hadn't taken the bait and smarted off some scathing reply. She really *was* having an off day.

I met her mother's weary gaze and tipped my head toward the door as I kept walking to the bed. "Why don't you take a break? I can sit with her grumpy ass for a bit."

Chloe reached up without looking and gripped Eva's hand. "Please, Mom. Get some sleep."

Eva looked as if she wanted to cry, but she couldn't seem to say no to Chloe. Releasing a defeated breath, she kissed her daughter's hair, not stopping even when Chloe shuddered from the unexpected contact, and then she slid from the bed. "I'll try," she promised, smoothing her hand over the spot she'd just kissed. "You try too, baby girl."

Then she turned my way, and her soft smile dropped into a devastated, pleading stare. And she passed by, she touched my arm and leaned close. "If you can get her to rest again like you did last night, you'll be my favorite, I swear."

Grinning, I turned my face down and winked at her. "I was already your favorite."

Eva chuckled good-naturedly and patted my arm. "Get me if you need anything."

"Will do," I answered as I turned to watch her walk from the room.

After she was gone, I turned back and immediately started for the bed. Wagging my brows, I said, "I think your mom likes me."

"She's just delirious from lack of sleep," Chloe deadpanned without moving, without stopping her fixated stare at the wall, without changing her expression.

"Bet you ten bucks she has a dirty dream about me tonight," I challenged, trying yet again to get a rise from her as I toed off my shoes and crawled onto the mattress to take up the space where Eva had been lying.

Chloe made a sound in the back of her throat as if she didn't care either way.

I exhaled and then got comfortable next to her so I could stare at the same wall she was. But when I looked, I saw that the big oval mirror over her vanity set had been shattered.

My brow knit curiously. "Have a brawl with your mirror?" I asked.

"Didn't like how it was looking at me," she slurred lifelessly.

I laughed, only to immediately sober up. “Wait. Did you really break it? *Why?* You’ve had that mirror for as long as I can remember.”

“I just told you; I didn’t *like* what I saw,” was all she said.

“Christ, Chloe.” I turned to look at her face. “You seriously don’t look that bad.” Furrowing my brow in concern, I stroked a hand down her arm. “The bruises and scratches will fade. And the eye will heal.”

Finally, she tore her gaze away from the mirror. “It isn’t about the eye or bruises or scratches.”

“Then what is it about?” I asked. “Because if you think you’re ugly, you’re just fucking whack.”

She shook her head, but her eyes went moist and her nose went red as if she’d already been crying for an hour, even though she hadn’t even started.

Heaving out a breath, she looked up at the ceiling briefly before returning her gaze to me. “It’s because I’m an idiot, and I can’t seem to *stop* being one. I have obsessed over every little detail about how I’ve looked for *years*, freaking out and going on extreme diets and working out twice as long whenever I think my cheeks look too puffy or my arms have extra weight. All because of some stupid irrational fear that I’m just going to revert to the insecure, chubby teenager no one would pay attention to.”

When a single tear trailed down her cheek, I reached up and tenderly tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, unable to keep from touching her in some way and hoping to comfort her.

Her eyes lifted. “But it’s all bullshit, you know. Completely worthless. All the stressing and worrying and accessorizing... None of it matters. My physical looks have never fucking mattered. They’ve never caught the attention of people I’ve wanted them to, and the people who *have* liked them just chain me to their basement.” When her chin trembled, and tears filled her eyes, she gritted her teeth in

frustration. “Dammit. Why can’t I just stop caring what other people *think* already?”

When the tears actually fell, I murmured, “Hey, come here,” and pulled her into my arms where I held her against me. She rested her cheek on my heartbeat and sniffed miserably, and I stroked her hair. “It’s not other people that you’ve been worrying about, you know,” I finally told her. “It’s you. *You’re* the only person you’ve ever needed to impress. Because once you’re finally satisfied with how you look, other people are only going to see that self-love and confidence you have in yourself, and that’s all you really need to attract anyone else. Anyone else *important*, anyway. You get me?”

“God,” she moaned, burrowing against me. “I think you might be right.”

“I know I’m right,” I assured her with a smug smile. “I’m always right.”

That last sentence caused her to make a rude sound of disagreement, but when she looked up at me, I think it broke my heart. She looked so fucking sad. “How do I learn to like how I look, though?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered, shrugging. “Get better taste?” I guessed. “‘Cause I think you look perfect just the way you are.”

With a small grateful smile, she gave me a half roll of her eyes. “Thanks,” she said softly. “I’ll work on my taste.”

“Good idea,” I told her, lightly kissing her hair. “Feeling any better yet?”

“Strangely...yeah,” she said, and this time when she glanced up at me, she did seem better. “Thank you. And...” With a wince, she added, “Sorry I bothered you with my stupid self-confidence issues. That wasn’t something you wanted to do, I’m sure.”

“Meh, go ahead and bother me,” I said, shrugging. “Helps make me feel handy. You have no idea how much it sucks feeling useless and just watching you suffer.”

“I think that’s what he damaged the most, though,” she muttered. “He made me see how fragile and weak I was all the way to my core. And I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all.”

“Hey...” I waited until she lifted her gaze to me. And when she did, I swallowed uneasily. “You...you’re not feeling...*suicidal*, are you?”

She exhaled and didn’t immediately answer, which I didn’t like, but then she said, “No. I don’t wanna die. But I just don’t feel much like doing a lot of living at the moment either.”

“Give it some time,” I encouraged. “It’s only been a day.”

“Yet I’m already tired of this. I’m just so exhausted. And I can’t... I just can’t.”

“Then don’t,” I suggested with a careless shrug.

She glanced at me in surprise. “Don’t *what*? I don’t even know what it is that I can’t do.”

“Don’t *try*,” I said before leaning in to press my lips to her hair. “Don’t try to heal. Don’t try to care. Don’t try to sleep. Worrying and stressing about all the stuff you can’t do is wearing you the fuck out more than anything. So maybe you just need to be nothing for a while. Let it all fall apart.”

When Chloe blinked at me as if I were insane, I added, “Here. Close your eyes and concentrate on emptying your head. Can you hear my heartbeat from there?”

She was quiet for a moment, and then I felt her lashes move when she finally closed her eyes. A second later, she whispered, “Yes.”

“Good,” I murmured, cupping her hair in my hand. “Focus on that. Just that. Listen to the air going in and out of my lungs as I breathe. Try to time the next time I’m going to exhale. Because the only thing you gotta do right now is breathe. Nothing else matters.”

I fell quiet and concentrated on regulating my breathing with big, long, deep draws. Chloe set a hand on my abdomen, and I could tell she was focusing on my breathing as well when she started to inhale and exhale with me.

Not long after that, her hand on my stomach relaxed, and I could tell she'd fallen asleep.

Feeling eyes on me, I glanced up to find Pick leaning against the doorframe, watching us. He inclined his head to me respectfully and then walked away.

I wrapped a protective arm around Chloe's shoulders and passed out not too long later, finally feeling calm and not riddled with bumped-up anxiety for the first time since I'd last seen her.

## 14 LUKE

On Monday, thirty-one of us dressed in our finest digs and arrived at the county courthouse to watch Dax Freston appear before a judge.

Chloe didn't show up, and her mother stayed home with her, but Pick was there along with all of Chloe's siblings and their spouses, Lucy, Vaughn, and her family, plus more extended family and friends in our group.

I sat sandwiched between Trick and Chloe's youngest cousin, seventeen-year-old Ayden, wishing I hadn't. The two of them wouldn't shut up, talking to each other.

"So what exactly is happening here today?" Ayden leaned heavily against my right arm as she asked in a hushed voice. Except she wasn't talking to me.

On my left, Trick leaned in toward me as well, murmuring, "This is the first court appearance. It's going to be the bail hearing."

I made an annoyed face and pulled my face back so the two could continue their discussion around me, only to motion between them. "Would you two like to sit next to each other?"

"Nah. We're fine," Trick answered dismissively. "Besides, it'd do you good to hear this too. You see, the defendant..." he continued, pausing so Ayden could hiss in dislike over the mention of that guy, "is just going to meet with the judge, who's going to determine bail."

"Wait." Ayden waved a hand and shook her head. "What does that mean?"



“So bail is the amount this douche would have to pay to post bond and be released from custody before the trial, right,” Trick started.

“Released?” Ayden squawked, looking horrified. “You mean, he could be released? Today?”

Trick started to nod slowly. “Possibly... If he can pay the ten percent of his bond to get out. He could be free until his trial is over.”

My stomach dipped at that likelihood. And Bella, who’d been sitting in front of us, didn’t seem to be pleased by it either. Twisting around, she demanded, “But the judge is going to deny bond, right?”

Trick winced. “It’s hard to say. You have to have done something pretty bad to get your bond yanked.”

“He *did* do something pretty bad,” Ayden insisted.

“He nearly killed three people,” Bella reminded us.

“I know.” Trick lifted a hand to calm everyone, but he kept wincing in apology as he did. “But it’s a little trickier than that. He didn’t actually *do* all the things he probably would have, things that would’ve gotten his bond denied for sure. So right now, we’re going to just hope that the public safety exception falls in our favor since there *is* a likelihood he could try to do great bodily harm to others if he were free. And he was arrested under a no-bail bond, which is a good thing because at least he wasn’t able to bond out until he saw a judge first.”

“What if his bail *isn’t* denied, though?” Ayden insisted, needing answers.

Trick sighed and ran a hand over his hair. “Then we pray he’s too broke to bond out or too stupid to call a bondsman to help him.”

“Motherfucker,” I hissed, beginning to panic.

But imagining this guy who’d terrorized Chloe just walking free among us sent a shiver of pure dread racing up my spine. I began to tug at my tie, needing more oxygen.

Trick knocked into my arm. “Cut it out,” he hissed. “You’re going to look unprofessional.”

I turned my head slowly to glare at him. But before I could say anything, a door at the front of the room opened and a bailiff called, “All rise. Judge Watson presiding.”

When everyone around me immediately popped to their feet, I followed suit, glancing around until I spotted a tiny woman in black flowing robes climbing up behind the bench.

After we all sat again, a bunch of legal, mumbo jumbo words were tossed around until the judge motioned to the bailiff, saying, “Please let in the defense for case 38975.”

The uniformed man stepped forward to open another door, and two officers entered, escorting a man in an orange jumpsuit with his wrists handcuffed in front of him and a chain connected to his ankle cuffs.

As Dax Freston shuffled inside, I blinked at the guy who could’ve taken away three of my beloved people. And I just couldn’t picture it. I mean, there were some spooks out there that you shook your head over and said, *dude, something ain’t right with this guy. He’s a straight-up serial killer.*

But I didn’t get that vibe with Freston. I mean, he was clean-cut and respectable-looking. Chloe probably would’ve even classified him as handsome. He didn’t have any jumpy, drugged-up ticks that made you think he had insane, rage-inducing tendencies. No dead, soulless eyes.

He was just...normal.

And that freaked me out.

I couldn’t stop staring at him, remembering the bright purple bruises on Lucy’s neck, the way Chloe had wept, questioning her own worth as a human being, and Ava Grace’s cut on her head. I mean, she was three months old and she had *bruises* around both eyes.

And *this* monster, hiding under normal-looking-man skin had caused all that? He’d chained Chloe to that floor, ripped off all her clothes, took a hose to her, and stripped away a part

of her psyche that I had no idea if she'd even get back. It made no sense. It sickened me.

And then it pissed me the fuck off.

My hands balled into fists, and I bore a hole in the back of his head with my stare after he'd been seated.

At the front of the room, a clerk was listing off all of Freston's offenses. "...violation of a restraining order, kidnapping, three counts of assault—one on a minor under the age of one year, one a felony assault with the aim to commit rape—stalking, drug possession, and resisting arrest..." Her voice was monotone with no emotion as if she were reading off a grocery list.

All the while, I stared, unable to look away and imprinting the back of this asshole's normal head into my memory banks.

Once the charges were listed, the judge gave both sides a chance to speak, and the defense attorney pissed me off too, as soon as he started talking, babbling about all of Freston's *good* attributes. "He has a steady job, no prior involvement with the law."

At that one, the judge glanced up in surprise from the papers she was reading and said, "Did I not hear right that he violated a restraining order?"

The defense attorney took a moment to look as if he'd swallowed a watermelon before answering, "One could argue that's part of *this* case. He has roots in this community, Your Honor. He's not a flight risk."

Near the end of the row where I was sitting, Julian started to stand as he growled, "Oh, this is such bullshit." But Pick, who was sitting next to him, grabbed his arm and yanked him back down, silencing him.

At the front of the room, the county prosecutor thankfully spoke up. "But one could also argue," he repeated the defense's phrase cattily, "that the defendant *is* a risk to the three individuals he terrorized, one of them the very woman he broke his PFA against. He's still a very real threat to *them*."

The judge nodded, letting the prosecutor know she'd heard him, but she was too busy reading to answer.

A moment later, she lowered the paper and said, "Bail's set at two hundred and fifty thousand..." She went on to explain more to Freston specifically, but it all blurred in my head as a buzzing began between my ears.

But his bond hadn't been denied.

They hadn't fucking denied his bond.

Next to me, a confused Ayden was asking, "What does that mean? What just happened?"

"It means..." Trick shook his head sadly and took a moment to swallow. "If he paid twenty-five thousand dollars, he could get out of jail."

"Well, *is* he?" she demanded.

"I don't know," Trick admitted. "But I'm going to use whatever connections I have and keep my ear to the ground. Don't worry, I'll be the first to know if he does."

Hushed and furious, worried voices spread around me, but I just kept staring as the guards came forward and had Freston stand before they escorted him from the room.

Before he exited through the door, however, he finally glanced back at all of us, and I got one moment of eye contact with him. I'm not sure why he settled his gaze on me, but out of all thirty-one of us looking at him, he saw *me*.

So I layered all the hatred, disgust, and loathing I had for him into that one stare, and thankfully, he started to appear worried before he jerked a worried gaze over the rest of us and then turned away and was nudged from the room.

"Dude, he can't make that bond," Trick tried to tell me. "He can't afford it." I knew he was just trying to reassure himself, though, not me.

Because we both knew that if he wanted out of there badly enough, he'd afford it. He could sell his stupid, douchey car or put his house up for a mortgage, sell his soul to some bondsman. He could gather the funds.

The question was whether he *would*.

And it ate at me the entire day, all through my shift and until closing time. The group chat was lit up with speculations, but no one had actually learned anything new.

When my phone rang just before I was getting ready to leave for the night, I glanced at the screen, and fear skated across my abdomen when I saw that it was Pick.

“Hey,” I answered immediately, worried that Freston was free and he’d gone straight there to get Chloe. “Everything okay?”

“All good here,” Pick answered. “You just closing up?”

I frowned, wondering why he was calling if nothing was wrong. “Uh, yeah. We got about...” I glanced around the place. “Five minutes, tops, left here. What’s up?”

Chloe’s dad drew in a long breath, and I was sure I was going to hear that the monster was out and free. But all he said was, “I was just wondering if you were planning on stopping by again tonight?”

“I...”

Damn, a new worry emerged. He was going to tell me to stay away, wasn’t he? Instant sweat popped out on my brow. Panic made my heart race. How the fuck was I going to convince him to let me at least stop by and check on her?

Ever since her capture, this compulsive need to make sure she was okay had kept at me and not yet relented. My eight-hour shifts here, being forced away from her, were already driving me crazy enough. If Pick made me wait until morning, or God forbid, longer than that—

“I just wanted to say that if you *are* coming by again tonight, come to the back. Keys are under the mat. And just keep ’em, alright? I’m not going to drag my ass down there at three in the morning, every damn night, just to let you in.”

Instant relief swamped me. But as soon as I exhaled in gratitude, I grinned and had to say, “Hey, it was two forty-five last night.”

My boss chuckled. “Whatever. Just don’t wake my wife. This is the first night she fell asleep before one since it happened.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, finishing up my job of clearing the cash register. “When’d Chloe go down?”

Pick sighed. “She hasn’t yet.”

“I’ll be there soon,” I promised.

And that was how the next few days progressed.

Pick finally lifted his ban and started to allow others to visit again, but by the time I would get there after work, the place would be quiet and dark, and I’d slip back to Chloe’s childhood room, where she’d still be awake, unable to sleep, tossing and turning on her mattress.

She’d tell me about family gossip from all the visitors she’d gotten throughout the day, then complain about how her job had forced her to take a six-week leave of absence, and then I’d tell her about my day before we’d fall asleep against each other, holding hands.

And if I had a day off work, I came over to eat supper with the family, then hung out with all the Ryans before Chloe and I retired together for the night.

No one seemed to have a problem with me being her sleep companion and personal teddy bear. They didn’t say a single thing about it. Not until day ten, when Pick called me again at work.

“Hey,” he greeted casually. “Now that you won’t be coming over in the middle of the night after work anymore, why don’t you just leave the extra house key I gave you in my office desk there at the club, okay? In the top, center drawer will be fine.”

“Uh...” I fumbled a moment, my heart racing before I furrowed my brows and just came right out to say, “I won’t be coming over anymore?”

“Well...” Pick stalled, sounding a bit confused. “I figured you wouldn’t since Chloe decided to go home. But, I mean, if

you just *want* to keep sleeping over...”

There was a teasing quality in his voice, except I didn't feel like laughing.

“Chloe went *home*?” I burst out angrily. “As in, she's sleeping at *her* place tonight? Alone?”

My boss paused before uneasily saying, “Did she not mention that to you?”

“No!” I growled.

Why the fuck hadn't she told me? I'd slept beside her every single night since it had happened. By this point, it seemed like a common courtesy to let me know where she was going to be if she decided to suddenly up and transfer locations. Damn, it would've been polite of her to even tell me if she didn't want me around *at all*.

I mean, what the hell?

“Well...” Pick repeated, sounding even more unsettled than before.

“Oh, don't worry,” I assured him. “I'll find out why she failed to mention this.” And I hung up on him, fuming.

Clock-out time could not come soon enough.

## 15 CHLOE

It was a quarter after two in the morning, and my brain felt wired and alert to every noise I heard, while my body was absolutely exhausted.

I hadn't been ready to come home and stay alone at my place, but I refused to admit that now. I was tired of admitting my weaknesses, tired of *being* weak, just plain tired.

But I wanted my life back, and I wasn't going to get that until I started actually *living* it again. I couldn't do much about work, since they had literally refused to let me return after hearing what happened, but I *could* go home and sleep in my own bed and fix my own meals and stop leaning on my parents for every freaking thing I did.

I *needed* this.

Except I wasn't ready, and it was killing me to even admit that to myself. I couldn't sleep and could barely breathe from all the fear crowding my lungs. I was probably a hot second from having a full-blown panic attack, and I was just about to break down and call Mom and Dad—even if it was merely to hear their voices—when I received a text.

I scrambled to grab my phone, already feeling better just knowing that someone was out there, thinking about me and reaching out to contact me.

It didn't matter if it was spam, wanting to talk about my car insurance, I was grateful for the message. But my heart skipped a beat when I saw Luke's name instead.

He wrote: *Hey, I'm here. Let me in.*



I blinked, unreasonably relieved by those words.

Sure, I knew it had been crappy not to tell him that I wouldn't be staying at my parents' tonight, but telling him would've meant I expected him to come *here*, and I couldn't allow myself to expect that, even though he'd stayed with me every other night. Some refusals of expectations were just plain self-preservation.

And besides, if he really wanted to find me, he would.

Which apparently, he had.

A knock came on my front door.

Groaning, I flung the covers off me in an aggravated huff, determined to convince myself that I was *irritated* by his sudden appearance, not relieved because I definitely couldn't be relieved. Relief was way too closely related to expectant.

So yeah, I was indignant. He was acting as if he was *entitled* to get a spot in my bed.

I should go out there and let him know he had *no* rights to me. Except the scared little girl inside me was sobbing with joy that she wasn't going to have to be alone anymore.

It was too dangerous to let *her* out of her cage, though. She tended to fall for idiot men. Like Luke Hamilton. And he was being all heroic lately, as he'd been when I was fourteen, showing up just when I needed someone most. It would be so easy for that little girl to fall for him all over again.

So old, wise, haggard me had to stay around. Because *she* knew better.

Muttering a silent, *stuff it*, to the inner little-girl me, I stormed to the door, scowling as I flung it open. "What do you think you're—"

"Yeah, yeah. Save it," he grumbled, waving aside my complaints as he stepped inside without waiting for an invitation and entered my home, carrying what looked like an overnight bag over his shoulder.

"I really appreciate the call, telling me you came home, by the way. That was nice of you." Plopping down the bag on a

chair, he turned to send me a sour look. “Your mom and dad had an argument, you know. And Pick was banned from their room, so guess who I just crawled into bed with over there?”

My jaw dropped before I was able to collect myself and screech, “Seriously?”

He waited for a beat, but then burst out grinning. “Nah,” he finally relented, swiping out a hand. “But that would’ve made for a funny story, huh?”

I blinked. “So...my mom and dad *aren’t* fighting?”

“Nope,” he answered cheerfully as he started from my front room and headed toward the kitchen. “I mean, not that I know of. I guess they could be, though I doubt it. They get on strangely well together. But still... It would’ve been nice if *you* had told me you weren’t staying there anymore. If Pick hadn’t called and warned me, I’d be over there instead and completely freaking the fuck out right now, wondering where you were.”

I followed him to the refrigerator, where he opened the door and started browsing inside.

“So my *dad* sent you over here?” I demanded, folding my arms moodily over my chest. “*Lovely.*”

I began to tap my bare toes on the floor as irritation grew inside me. Because, hip-hip-hooray, my own father didn’t think I was strong enough to sleep in my own home alone. Wasn’t that just—

Dammit!

“I don’t need some babysitter, you know,” I started in as Luke came up with a bottle of water in his hand.

“Uh-huh.” Completely unaffected by my raging, he unscrewed the cap and started to drink.

Scowling, I pointed toward the exit. “So you can just turn right back around and tell him I do *not* need his little lapdog to —”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Luke stopped drinking to wave me quiet. Then he lifted an eyebrow. “Lapdog?”

“Well, what else do you think you are?” I challenged. “Going where he tells you to go. Doing what he tells you to do. Fetching his slippers when he—”

“Okay, *one*,” Luke broke in again and lifted his index finger. “He didn’t *tell* me to come here. He mentioned it in passing when he was asking me to give the key to his place back.”

“You had a *key* to their house?” I blurted in surprise.

Luke lifted his brows. “How do you think I was able to get in every night that late?”

I blinked because I hadn’t even thought about that.

With a snort, Luke rolled his eyes. “And two... Thank God he *was* decent enough to mention that you weren’t staying there anymore—unlike you—because I’m not lying. It would’ve scared the fuck out of me if I hadn’t been able to find you.”

I heaved out a breath. “Seriously, how was I supposed to know you even wanted to come over again?”

He pulled back as if I’d just slapped him. “You mean, aside from the fact that I’ve shown up every fucking night since you were kidnapped? Gee, I wonder.”

“Well, I never *asked* you to come,” I muttered. “And you certainly never made reservations or gave me a schedule or made a verbal announcement on the matter. Can you blame me for naturally assuming it was a temporary situation and would peter off over time?”

“Over time,” he cried in agreement. “Yes. Not after only \_\_\_”

“Ten days,” I said. “It’s already been ten days. So I need to buck up and move on. It’s *time*.”

Luke’s jaw worked, and he stalled a moment by taking another drink of the water. Then, he lowered the bottle and shook his head at me before saying, “Well then, I guess you’re just going to have to move on with me still coming over every night.”

And he stalked out of the room, muttering, "I'm going to bed. Goodnight."

"Except I don't need you to stay anymore," I shouted after him.

"Then, *maybe* this isn't about you," he called back.

Squinting, I glanced around the empty kitchen and then asked aloud, "What?"

Who the hell else would this be about? Unless my dad was still freaked out and worried and had asked Luke to come.

Son of a bitch; that had to be it, wasn't it?

Groaning, I threw my head back and tapped a foot against the floor until I decided, okay, fine. If this gave my parents some peace of mind, I wouldn't fight it.

Because secretly, I didn't *want* to fight it.

I wanted someone here with me so bad that it scared me. But I absolutely could not show that. I had to be tough.

Blowing out a breath, I shook my head and started for my room, turning off the lights as I went because I knew that once I crawled under the covers with Luke, I'd be able to sleep within moments.

I mean, that was what I assumed after how the last ten days had gone. But when I reached the open door of my bedroom, I stalled short, gaping horribly.

Luke was there, by my bed. His shirt had already been ripped off and tossed aside, shoes toed off, and he was working open the front of his jeans.

"Wh-what do you think you're *doing*?" I was finally able to strangle out the question.

He wasn't supposed to do that. Especially not in my bedroom. My room would never recover. He'd just ruined my entire bedroom for me.

Now, I was never going to step through this doorway again without wishing I could see *this* every time.

Luke paused and glanced up as if startled by the question. “I’m getting ready for bed,” he said, frowning in confusion. “What does it look like?”

I flailed a helpless hand toward his bare—amazing—chest. “W-well, why are you taking your clothes off?”

“Because I don’t want to sleep in them,” he said as if that should be obvious. Then he splayed a hand over his bare torso, forcing me to take it all in again. “This is what I always wear to bed.”

“It’s not what you’ve worn for the past week and a half that *I’ve* slept beside you,” I argued with an incredulous sniff.

His eyebrows rose significantly. “Because your *parents* were right down the hall. Tonight, I want to be comfortable. And I always sleep in my boxers, so I’m going to sleep in my damn boxers. What’s the big deal? It’ll be like I’m in shorts.”

*Tight shorts*, I wanted to argue, because his boxers weren’t just boxers, they were boxer *briefs*. Unable to look away as he defiantly yanked his jeans down and stepped out of them, I gaped at the package bulging from the front of his tight boxer briefs.

Good Lord almighty. The way that dark, snug cloth cupped his masculine goods made my mouth water. I swear, I could almost feel his hard, hot length already pushing inside me.

Spinning away so he couldn’t see any of my needy, wanty little stares, I muttered, “Can’t you at least put a shirt on?”

“A *shirt*?” he asked. “Why?”

Because I wasn’t going to be able to keep my hands off him if he had all the beautiful male flesh on display. Except I couldn’t tell *him* that. So I whirled back and scowled, “Because *I’m* wearing one.”

He shrugged. “I don’t mind if you don’t.”

“Well, I do!” I countered. “Put on a damn shirt.”

“No,” he answered and walked to the bed before ripping down the covers and beginning to climb in.

“Hey, no! I wanted that side,” I said, hurrying forward to stop him.

He paused and glanced back at me, narrowing his eyes. “You’ve slept on *that* side...” He jabbed his fingers toward the other half. “For the entire ten days that I’ve slept with you. Why change now?”

“Because that was at my parents’ house,” I argued, feeling a little panicked.

At Mom and Dad’s, I was farther away from the door on this side, while here, I was farther away from the door on *that* side. Where a kidnapper would need to reach out another few feet to get to me.

Rationally, I knew that made no difference whatsoever. But to my irrational brain, those few feet were more reassuring than I could explain.

“*Here*, I like to sleep on this side,” was how I finished my explanation to Luke, however, not really explaining anything at all.

When he sniffed and flopped down, settling himself on the side I wanted, I took a moment to fist my hands at my side, seeking calm, only to cry, “Oh my God! Please, okay? *Please* let me sleep on this side. Just for tonight. If you end up hating it that much, we’ll revisit the situation again tomorrow. Alright? But couldn’t you at least *try* it? One time.”

He huffed out a breath, still scowling at me, but since I was reasonable with my request, he rolled his eyes and relented. “Fine. We’ll try it out and see how it fits.”

“Thank you,” I said meekly.

“Whatever,” he grumbled. After he rolled across the mattress and settled himself in on the other side, I just stood there, watching him make himself at home on my bed, under my sheets.

I was going to sleep with Luke. For, like, *real*.

No idea why it hadn’t felt real to me all the other nights at my parents’ house. Maybe *because* it had always been at my

parents', and now they weren't around. It was just the two of us here.

Or maybe it was because he was wearing a lot fewer clothes.

I just knew it definitely felt different.

I curled my bare toes under my feet and wrung my hands at my waist, suddenly too shy to walk toward him.

Which had seriously never happened to me before. Timidity was not my thing. It was weird. And embarrassing.

Especially when Luke noticed it.

Pausing, he sighed and said, "What now?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Uh...is there anything you need? A drink? Another pillow?"

He blinked. "You don't have to play hostess. I'm good."

I nodded. "Okay. Well then..." I squinted around the room, stalling. "I guess I'm ready to turn in too, then."

When I still didn't move, Luke cocked up one curious eyebrow. "Did you need an invitation?" he finally asked.

I scowled at him and huffed out a breath of irritation, even though that very irritation was what I'd needed to gain the courage to do this.

"Oh, shut up," I muttered and flipped off the light before scrambling onto the mattress with him.

Luke had the sheets lifted and ready to accept me. As soon as I slid in beside him, he re-covered us with the blankets and scooted close, already positioning us how we'd discovered we liked to sleep together most, his hand on my hip as he lay on his back with me rolled onto my side, using him like a giant body pillow. I settled my cheek on his bare chest, and his other arm folded around my back, tucking me in close.

The different bed was new. As were the sheets. But it was more than that. It was just so...intimate.

Why had it never felt this intimate before?

Ten seconds passed of us lying there tensely, just like that. Then, Luke burst out, “Okay, I can see why you insisted on the shirt now.”

I grinned and sat up to let him free as he tried to rise. “Told you so,” I was gleefully happy to crow.

He muttered to himself all the way through the dark as I listened to him tiptoe across the floor. Then the light came on. He was still complaining as he found his shirt draped over the arm of a side chair and ripped it back on.

After the lights went out and he returned to the bed, I curled up to him and closed my eyes, smiling.

“So much better,” I cooed in delight.

I mean, not really *better*. But it was definitely less intimate and nerve-wracking.

Against me, Luke muttered a moody, “Shut up,” and the words were such music to my ears that I fell asleep within minutes, grinning uncontrollably.

I didn’t sleep the entire night, though. At some point, before the dawn broke over the horizon, I woke with a full bladder.

Trying not to wake Luke, who was breathing deeply beside me, I inched out of bed and then tiptoed across the floor until I felt my way into the bathroom.

Once I had the door shut behind me, I finally turned on a light and did my business. I was washing my hands and waiting for the toilet to stop running before I was going to open the door again when a panicked shout came from the bedroom.

“*Chloe?*”

I don’t know if I’d ever heard anyone be that scared before. And knowing it was *Luke* in distress caused my heart to leap right into my throat.

I threw open the door and burst into the bedroom, ready to physically brawl with whatever was hurting him.



But as soon as I spilled into the room and the bathroom light spread a path across the floor all the way to my bed, I was startled to find no one else with him.

Luke was sitting upright in bed, alone, panting uncontrollably, his eyes wild with fright, and his face sheet white.

“What?” I demanded, looking around anyway. “What’s wrong?”

He blinked at me and stopped breathing for a second. Then he clutched his chest and fell back on the mattress as if trying to recover from his fright.

“Oh, fuck. Holy fuck,” he said, his voice shaky and breaths still coming too fast. He lifted his hands to his head, and gripped his hair, shaken to the core.

Confused, I went to the bed and blinked down at him. “Luke?”

He opened his eyes, blinked at me repeatedly, then tried to explain. “You weren’t here. I woke up, and you weren’t here. I didn’t know... I thought...”

“I just had to go to the bathroom,” I told him, pointing toward the lightened entrance.

He glanced over, heaved out a breath, and looked up at me again. “You weren’t here,” was all he could seem to say.

My lips parted. He’d been truly terrified. For *me*. He was still trembling and breathing hard. I slipped my gaze over him to find that his shirt was soaked and his hair was matted to his head with slick perspiration.

“You’re sweating like crazy,” I said. “Let me get a towel.”

After racing back to the bathroom, I snagged the first substantial piece of terrycloth I found and hurried back to him.

He was sitting up again and reached out to take the towel from me, but I ignored his hand and sat on the edge of the bed beside him so I could dab at a wet trail running down the side of his temple.

Luke dropped his hand back into his lap and let me dry him. He closed his eyes in relief as I ran the cloth over his hair and around his neck. When he exhaled his first calm breath, I said, “We need to get this shirt off you. It’s completely soaked through.”

After letting out a short laugh, he grabbed the hem and began to pull the cotton over his head. “One second, it’s *put your shirt on*, the next, it’s *take your shirt off*. You seriously need to make up your mind, woman.”

Pausing to look directly into his eyes, I said, “Take off your shirt, Lucian.”

One of his eyebrows perked in interest, and he tossed the shirt toward the floor.

I started to dry his torso, and he let me, watching me the whole time.

Finally, he glanced up toward the ceiling and confessed, “I told you it wasn’t all about you.” When I paused my ministrations to look at his face, he shrugged and lowered his gaze to me. “Whenever you’re not there,” he started quietly, “like, not physically *right* there...”

Shaking his head, he sent me an apologetic glance. “I can’t breathe right. My chest gets tight, all this nervous energy fills me, and I can’t stop checking the time until I can get off my shift or leave whatever I’m doing just so I can go see—with my own eyes—that you’re okay and haven’t been taken again. That basement fucked me up, Chlo. And maybe you’re okay now and don’t need me to come around anymore and keep you company, but *I’m* not. I’m not okay, and I just...I need to be able to keep coming back here and be with you each night to reassure myself that you’re still safe. I just need that for a little while longer, alright?”

Tossing the towel on the floor, I whispered, “Okay,” and I crawled up close to him, giving him a big hug. “You can keep coming over.”

When he hugged me back and coaxed us into lying down like that, I pressed my cheek to his chest and exhaled. “And

just for the record. I'm not alright either." Running my hand over his bare arm, I added, "I just really *wanted* to be, so I tried to convince myself I was."

"I figured," he murmured and kissed my hair. "It's hard, isn't it? Admitting you can't handle the weight of the world."

I sniffed and closed my eyes. "You're telling me."

He tightened his arm fractionally as if wanting to pull me closer, and for a minute, we were both quiet.

Then, just before I dropped off to sleep again, he slurred, "Just so you're aware... The way you told me to take my shirt off and called me Lucian was fucking hot, so I'm probably going to have a severe case of morning wood come daylight."

I smiled without opening my eyes and cuddled closer. "I'd be insulted if you didn't."

"Well, in that case..." He cleared his throat. "I may have started a little early. *Night* wood, if you will."

My eyes flashed open. When I saw a distinct lump in the blanket covering his lap area less than two feet in front of me, I lifted my head and looked up at his face.

All he did was shrug in a *hey, dicks will be dicks* kind of way.

He was so pragmatic about it. As if it were nothing.

If he'd reacted differently, made any kind of move toward me, or touched me in the slightest of sensual ways at that moment, I might've been a goner, sucked into the passion with him. But nope. He didn't seem into the idea of me alleviating his condition for him at all.

So I huffed out a sigh and laid my head back on his chest. "Go to bed, Lucian."

He chuckled and set a hand on my hair. "Altered words. Different tone. But still hot as hell."

And yet not hot enough for him to even consider pursuing me.

Telling myself I wasn't disappointed by that, I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

## 16 LUKE

○ n Saturday, I had the night off, but I went into the bar earlier that afternoon anyway, knowing I'd find my boss in his office.

The place was quiet and dark, and as I made my way through shadows of tables with chairs sitting upside down on them, I tapped my fingers restlessly against my thigh, eager to get this conversation started.

Down the hall, I paused at the manager's door that was open, and when I peered inside, I saw him sitting behind his wide, wooden desk, head bent as he jotted something on a notepad.

"Hey, Pick?" I called, knocking on the doorframe. "You got a minute?"

He looked up and grinned. "For you? Sure." Dropping his pen, he clasped his hands together and dropped them onto his abdomen as he sat back in his chair. "What's up?"

"I was wondering if I could alter my schedule a little," I started, bypassing the seat of the visitor's chair and instead perching on its armrest.

"Your schedule?" Pick repeated in surprise. "Your *work* schedule?"

"Yeah." Gripping my knees, I explained, "See, Chloe can't fall asleep until after I get off work and make it to her place, which, as you know, is always after two in the morning, but closer to three, and that's going to be hell on her when she

returns to *her* job and has to get up early again. I don't want to drag her down like that. She needs a full night's rest."

Chloe's dad blinked, then said, "But she doesn't have to return to work for another month."

I nodded. "I know."

"So... You think this sleeping arrangement between you two will continue that long?"

He didn't sound judgmental or concerned, simply curious.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. But I'm jerking her out of her regular sleep pattern with the way things are going *now*, and I don't want to mess that up. Besides, you mentioned something about maybe teaching me how to do inventory and work out schedules, and—I don't know—more managerial shit, so I figured this could be as good a time as any for all that."

Pick lifted his brows. "But basically, you want to rearrange your schedule to accommodate my baby girl?"

"Uh...yeah." I nodded, wondering why he had to repeat it as if he hadn't heard me right the first time. "Yes, I do."

"Done," he answered immediately. "You can come in from noon to eight. For the first half of the day, you can be my administrative assistant. The second half, you can help open the bar until the late shift comes in."

"Really?" Relief flooded my chest. "Great. Thanks, man. So I can start that way tomorrow, then?"

"Sounds fine by me," he murmured, bringing his clasped hands up to just below his chin and eyeing me carefully. "I'll get the schedule rearranged this afternoon."

"Thank you. I, uh, I guess, I'll see you tomorrow, then, bright and...noonish." I pushed up from the chair and started toward the door. "Thanks again for—"

"Luke, have another seat."

Fuck. He was going to raise concerns about how much I was staying over at Chloe's, wasn't he? Son of a bitch. This

wasn't going to end well. Because nothing was going to stop me from going over there every night if she let me. He could take my damn job if he had to. This was one thing I could *not* give up.

"Yeah?" I said cautiously, remaining on my feet as I turned back to face him.

He arched a single, stern eyebrow. "Sit."

With a defeated huff, I returned to the chair and moodily slumped down, landing on the cushion and letting my spine fall against the rest.

"So you're still going over every night?" he asked.

I glanced around, confused, because we'd literally just covered that topic. "Yeah." I nodded once, hoping I looked resolute and unbending about it.

But all he did was nod and murmur a vague, distracted, "Good. Good..."

*Good?*

I frowned, not following. "It is?"

"Hmm?" He glanced up as if surprised I was still there. "Oh! Yeah. I wanted to thank you for that, actually."

"Okay," I said slowly. "You're...welcome?"

He nodded some more. And just kept watching me.

I furrowed my brows deeper in question. "Was there something else?"

"Yes..." With a wince, he shifted in his seat and then asked, "So... You two... You and Chloe... You're...okay? With each other?"

I had no idea what the fuck that question meant. But my boss was being incredibly weird right now. He never stuttered around like a flustered teen boy in front of the girl he liked. So this was kind of freaking me out.

"Yeah," I said slowly and glanced around the room, searching for a clue as to what was happening right now.

“We’re good.”

“And your relationship together is...?”

“Oh!” My eyes widened when I finally caught on. “Oh, hell no. We’re not... You don’t have to worry about that, I swear.” I waved my hands in a dramatic negative motion to reassure him. “We’re not doing anything, you know, untoward. Not even a little.”

Untoward? Had I really just said the word *untoward*? Jesus, I had no idea what was wrong with me or when I’d turned into a ninety-year-old lady on her way to bible study, but now I was wiggling *myself* out.

“You’re not?” Pick said, frowning slightly. And honestly, he looked more unsettled by my reassurance than he did relieved. His shoulders deflated. Then he shook his head. “So you’re not feeling anything extra for her lately at all?”

Okay, this whole conversation was just whack. I didn’t know *what* the fuck was happening.

“Um...” Completely unsure how he wanted me to answer that one because he kind of made it sound as if he *wanted* me to feel attracted to his daughter, I just said, “Am I *supposed* to?”

“Yes!” he cried, throwing up his hands as if disgusted and irritated that it had taken me so long to figure that out. “Why the hell aren’t you falling for her yet?”

My mouth formed an O. “I...I...” I shook my head, stumped.

“Christ, kid,” he muttered. “I’m sorry, but I’m just going to be real blunt right now, okay?”

“Okay,” I answered, bobbing my head dumbly. “Thank you. Because I’m totally lost about what the fuck is happening.”

“Alright, here’s the deal. My daughter wants a man. A husband. A partner. Someone to fall in love with and then share her life with. I mean, it’d be fine if that *wasn’t* what she



wanted. But it is. Some people just like having someone. You know?”

He paused long enough to make me think he was waiting for an answer, but as soon as I opened my mouth to respond, he motioned my way. “What about you, Hamilton? Do you ever think about finding that special someone?”

“Uh... Yeah. I guess. I mean, *someday*. But right now, I’m —”

“See.” He jabbed a finger in my direction. “I knew you’d be that type too. The same type as Chlo. But she’s going to keep going after her dream, you see, and I... I’m done sitting back and watching her try and try and fucking *try* again with guy after guy, looking for that one special someone and possibly getting hurt again. I’m *done*, do you hear me? Chloe’s *not* getting hurt again.”

“I hear you,” I said, blinking rapidly and starting to grow a little worried.

“I mean, do *you* want to see her get hurt again? See her get entangled with another Freston?”

“Fuck no,” I answered, shaking my head.

“Fuck no,” he agreed, nodding me on as if congratulating me for answering correctly. “So it’s time for *us*”—he waved a hand between me and him—“to get her what she wants. And that is a fucking life mate. You hear me?”

I definitely heard *something*.

My mouth fell open, but I completely lost the ability to speak. Not that it mattered; Pick didn’t seem to want an answer from me anymore.

“Now, I don’t typically—like *ever*—intervene in my children’s love lives,” he raged on. “But no fucker is hurting my baby girl again. You got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Which means, I need *you* to step your ass up and be the man she needs to make her life fulfilled. Alright?”

“Uh...” I shook my head, once again lost. “What?”

A jump of adrenaline leaped through my chest. But no way could he honestly be asking me to...what? *Marry* Chloe? The entire idea was wild and preposterous and forbidden and just...scary as shit. And I was totally going to ignore the thrill that raced through my veins upon initially imagining it. Because *my* thoughts had gone straight toward sex, and I'm sure that was the complete opposite direction that Pick's thoughts were going. But I was equally sure *marriage* wasn't what he truly meant, either.

I mean, why the hell would he want dumbass *me* to marry his daughter?

Except it sounded like that's exactly what he was asking when he added, “She wants to be one half of a whole, ergo she needs another half. So are you going to be that half for her or not?”

“I...Jesus...” I ran a hand over my head and realized my fingers were beginning to shake. “What the hell are you asking me to do here, Pick?”

“You were willing with Lucy,” he said, watching me closely. “Remember when you asked Lucy to marry you after she had Ava Grace?”

I blinked and then cringed. “Shit. Does everyone know about that?”

“Yes, and I was impressed by it. Because you were honestly willing to step up and forsake every other woman for the rest of your life just so you could be whatever it was you needed to be to help a friend through a hard time. Weren't you?”

“I...I mean, yeah, but hell. *Trick* asked Lucy to marry him too. And if there'd been any other available guy left in the family, I bet they would've asked her too, out of obligation, you know. And duty.”

“Exactly.” Pick nodded his head slowly. “Obligation and duty. Except *Trick* only asked her because he knew she'd turn him down. And it would've been the same with any of the

others. But not you. *You* asked her, determined to make her say yes. Didn't you? Because it felt like your *duty*."

"Because I thought she needed help," I cried desperately. "I didn't realize Vaughn was already in the picture, more than willing to play parent number two."

Pick pointed at me, smirking proudly. "But you were there to help, anyway," he insisted, "thinking Lucy Olivia needed it. So why can't you be there for Chloe? To help *her*. Right now. In the same way."

I shook my head, utterly confused. "Because Chloe doesn't need anything the way Luce did. She's not raising a kid alone. She's going through a little trauma, sure, but before long, she's going to get past that and be just fine again."

"No... She's not," Pick insisted. "Because *you're* the one she wants."

I lifted a finger, once again lost. "Uh...what?"

"You heard me right," he said. "She's been in love with you since she was fourteen, and she's been looking for you in every guy she's ever dated, hoping to get over you and finally fall for someone else. But it hasn't happened. It's not *going* to happen. There is only one you. And I'm done watching her heart break time after time again when the man she really wants is right fucking here, available and already suitable enough to be everything she needs. I mean, Jesus, Luke. I've sat back for *years*, saying nothing in the hopes that you'd finally wake up and pull your head out of your ass already. But I'm done waiting. And now I'm *saying* it..." Lifting his arms to encompass the room, he finished his speech with, "Give my little girl what her heart wants most. *Please*. Give her...you."

When he was done talking, he slowly lowered his hand to the top of his desk, and lifted his eyebrows expectantly, awaiting my response.

Except, for the longest moment, I simply stared at him, slack-jawed.

"Dude," I finally said. "I think this whole situation has knocked a few screws loose in your hamster cage because

seriously... I'm the *last* thing your little girl wants. Chloe... *detests* me." I rolled my hand encouragingly, trying to get him to see reason. "Sure, she lets me stay over because she knows she can trust me, but Jesus. We bicker constantly. I can't remember the last time we had a normal conversation without breaking into a fight. Hell, maybe we *never* have. So I'm sorry, but you're wrong. You're just...wrong."

I mean, he *had* to be wrong.

"No," was all he said back. "I'm not. I might agree that she's been pissed at you for the last decade or more because you never reciprocated her feelings or noticed her the way she wanted you to; she lost hope that there could ever be anything between you. She truly, honestly believes you could never feel the same way about her that she does about you—the way she *needs* you to—but all that fire and passion and rage you get from her... It's not hate."

"That's ridiculous," I blurted, pushing my way to my feet to gape down at him. "I mean, this is absolutely fucking ridiculous. She does *too* hate me, and she tells me so. Frequently."

"Then why are you the one who stays with her every night? Why are you the only person who can touch her without making her flinch? Why are you the *singular* soul in the whole goddamn family she can be totally honest with and tell when she's not fine?"

"I..." I shook my head, stumped.

"Because I still can't go in for a hug without making her jump first. Neither can Eva. Or any of her siblings. Only you. It's only ever been you."

The breath left my lungs in a rush. I hadn't realized everyone else still made her flinch or that she put on a brave, *I'm okay* face for them.

But that didn't mean...

It couldn't.

I shook my head, refusing to believe that what he said was true.

“B-because I’m the one who found her,” I finally bumbled out. “I *saw* what she went through, and it’s... It affected me too. We have shared trauma from it. That’s all.” I shook my head stupidly, unable to allow any other explanation into my head.

Because any other explanation felt too big. And terrifying. And too secretly thrilling to hope was true.

Pick sent me a sad smile. “That’s not even close to being all, kid. Why do you think I hired you here in the first place all those years ago and took you under my wing, teaching you everything there was to know about this nightclub?”

“Uh... Because you...*liked* me?” I answered, making it sound more like a question since I was suddenly unsure of the answer.

“I *do* like you,” Pick assured, nodding solemnly. “Dumbass that you can be, I like you a lot. But half a dozen of you kids tended bar here for a short time, and I didn’t give *any* of the others the same responsibilities and consideration that I gave you. I didn’t *guide* them the way I did you.”

“Because none of the others got into the nightclub life the way I did,” I insisted, frowning.

“And thank God for that,” Pick said, nodding. “Because you’re the only one I can picture handing Forbidden over to someday.”

My lips parted. All oxygen vacated my lungs. “Say *what*, now?”

Pick hissed out a sigh. “None of my own kids are interested in running this place,” he told me quietly. When I cast him a sharp, surprised glance, he lifted his hands. “I’m just saying; it’d sure as hell look better and not like I was playing favorites if I could pass this place on to my *son-in-law* after I retired and not just one of the many kids of one of my many friends.”

Oh Jesus.

“What the fuck are you telling me?” I demanded, trying to catch my breath. “That you’ll give me the *bar* if I marry your

daughter?”

“What? *No!* That’s not what I’m saying at all.” Pick lifted his hands and waved them in a slashing, negative gesture. “I just figured you would like straight-up honesty here, so I’m telling you how *I* would like things to go. And that’s the perfect picture I have in my head of the future. You’re getting the bar no matter what. I’d just rather it be kept in the family, you know.” Then he shrugged and smiled wistfully. “Who knows, maybe one of my grandkids could then take over from you someday.”

My brows rose. “And by that, you mean, one of *my* kids... with Chloe?”

Pick lifted his shoulder again. “That’s *my* dream,” he agreed. “But we’ll see how it actually goes.”

“Okay, so...” I waved my hands and winced, trying to clear my head and think through this rationally. “Let me get this straight. You’re going to give me the nightclub someday, no matter what.”

Pick nodded slowly. “Correct.”

“Right,” I answered, still trying to wrap my head around *that* information bomb. “But completely unrelated to that, you would *also* like me to woo your daughter, get her to fall in love with me, and marry her so that no other psycho kidnapper can hurt her again.”

“No.” Pick tsked and shook his head, sighing as if extremely disappointed. “You haven’t been listening, have you?”

“I’ve been *trying!*” I cried. He just hadn’t been making any damn sense.

“You don’t have to woo her. She’s already in love with you. I’m just asking you to see if there’s any way *you*...could fall in love with...*her.*”

“You’re asking me to *fall in love* with your daughter?” I repeated blankly.

“Yes!”

My jaw dropped. Then I boomed, “How the fuck am I supposed to do that?”

Pick’s return grin was equal parts amused, equal parts sympathetic. “Well, now...” Sitting forward, he tapped his fingers against the desktop. “That’s the tricky part. Every person’s got to figure *that* out for themselves.”

I blew out a breath and then gave a harsh laugh. “This is absolutely insane, you know that, right? What you’re asking of me.”

“I know,” he said softly as if he understood and empathized. “But I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t think you could do it. Or if I didn’t think maybe you already have. You *do* care for her.”

“Yeah, but—”

He waved his hands, not letting me argue with him.

“And when she needs you, you’re there, willing to help. That foundation is what starts a good relationship. Plus, you have common interests—common friends—and you’re within acceptable age ranges. You share core values and morals and... So many things match. *And* you’re attracted to her in exactly the way a husband is supposed to be attracted to his wife.”

When I sent him a sharp, surprised glance, he rolled his eyes and dryly shot back, “Come on. I’ve seen you look.”

With a moody grunt, I shrugged and gave him that one.

“She’s going to dive back into the dating pool again,” Pick told me, looking pained about that prospect. “Whenever she heals from this, I know she will. Being with her person is her greatest wish in life. And even if you don’t believe me when I say this, she *wants* that person to be you. She’s just going to settle if it’s anyone else. Plus, I know I can trust you with her. Luke... You might be the *only* person I know I can one hundred percent trust her with. So come on...” He shook his head, and I swear I saw tears in his damn eyes. Then he croaked out the word, “Please.”

“Motherfucker,” I hissed, gaping back at him and feeling trapped...deep down in my soul. Because I knew the rest of my life was going to change from this moment forward. “You motherfucker.”

“Yeah.” He nodded sadly. “I am. I know I’m using every noble quality you possess against you because I know you’re not going to be able to tell me no. And I’m sorry for that. But I’m desperate, and this is my baby girl. I mean, if I didn’t go to you about this, then who? *Deacon?*”

I straightened and lifted my eyebrows. “I’m sorry; *what?*” He did not just suggest who I thought he just suggested. “Uh...no.”

Squinting, Pick studied me a moment, tapping his chin in thought. Then, he slowly started to nod. “You know... Maybe Deacon *would* be a better candidate than you.”

I snorted. “Over my fucking dead body.”

Co-bartender or not, I’d slaughter the son of a bitch before letting him near Chloe. God. Even the thought of her curling her soft curves around him each night as she did me... Nope. I could not allow that to happen.

Pick lifted his brows in surprise, then asked, “What? Were you thinking James, then?”

“*James?*” I cried in horror. That moron waiter would be an even worse candidate for Chloe than Deacon. “What the actual hell?” I demanded. “Why are you so determined to pair her off with one of your employees?”

“Oh, you think it should be someone *not* from the bar? Okay.” With an agreeing nod, he added, “Makes sense.” Then he shrugged. “I guess my dentist is—”

“No!” I cut in sternly, making a slashing motion with my hand. “Stop. Just stop now. No more. I want her, okay? Stop trying to piss me off by making me imagine her with someone else. *I* want her.”

Pick settled back in his chair with a single nod. Then his eyes glittered with triumph as he murmured a satisfied, “Alright, then. Go get her.”



“Fuck,” I muttered and wiped my face, finally realizing what I’d just done. “How the hell did you get me to admit that?”

Pick lifted a single shoulder. “Because it’s the truth,” he said. “You’ve wanted her for a while now.”

I groaned in frustration and scrubbed my face some more. “But I never thought I *should*.”

“Well then, now I’m telling you it’s okay. Because if it has to be someone, I’d honestly rather it be you than...” Making a face, he shook his head and added, “Basically anyone else.”

I gazed at him for a moment, finally realizing the gravity of what he was saying. It was no small deal that he trusted me with something so important. He trusted me with his daughter’s heart.

He really *must* like me.

But one problem was that... “This doesn’t mean I’m head over heels in love with her, though. Physical attraction is a hell of a long way from love. And that’s where you want me to be, right? In love.”

Pick nodded. “I do. But you’ll get there.” His eyes twinkled with a glint. “Or, like I said, maybe you’ll finally realize you’ve already been there for a while.”

I snorted out a hard laugh. “Yeah, right. Now, I really know you have problems. Because I am *not* in love with Chloe.”

Her father merely shrugged. “If you say so.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m *not*.”

My firm voice made him pause. Looking me dead in the eye, he said, “Fine. Then you’ll get there. I have faith.”

With a more strangled laugh this time, I shook my head. “Jesus.” Wiping a hand over my mouth, I pushed my way to my feet, needing to walk. But as soon as I was upright, my knees gave out and my legs sagged. “Dammit.”

I clutched the edge of his desk to catch myself and bowed my head, panting out a few unsteady breaths before I looked up into his seeking gaze.

“How am I supposed to do this?” I demanded. “I’ve never loved anyone—you know—like *that* before.” I shook my head stupidly. “I don’t know the first thing about it.”

Pick released a heavy breath, his brow furrowed in thought. Then, he fell back in his seat. “Well,” he murmured carefully. “For starters, you could *not* pop back with some idiotic, smartass comment every time she does or says something you don’t like.”

“Hey, she starts it,” I cried in self-defense.

But Pick just sent me a stern look and kept talking. “You could try being, I don’t know, *nice* to her. Compliment her a little, open up to her, do silly little thoughtful gestures for her. Let her be one of your closest confidantes. And I mean, tell her shit you wouldn’t tell anyone.”

I swallowed, thinking about the night she’d sponged me dry with the towel, where I’d confessed my secret anxieties to her. My stomach pitched as I wondered if that meant—

“You do all that,” Pick assured me, “and she’ll begin to drop the prickly outer shell she’s grown for you. Before you know it, she’ll let you in too, and then boom, game over. You won’t help but love her.” He nodded encouragingly. “She’s incredibly easy to love. You’ll see.”

I snorted and shook my head. “Right.” Then I blew out a breath, absolutely certain this was a task I would fail but also dead sure that I was going to try to accomplish it anyway, with everything I had.

Because Pick had asked, and he seemed convinced it was what Chloe needed. And he was never wrong.

Although...

“I’m still not convinced she’s in love with *me*, though. I mean, *Chloe*? No...man.” I waved my hands and shook my head. “No way.”

That one was the hardest part to digest out of all of this.

“Just watch,” Pick murmured, sending me a knowing nod that looked full of wisdom and certainty. “Pay attention. You’ll start to see it soon enough.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

He didn’t answer, just watched me for a moment before saying, “You’re really going to do this for me, aren’t you? You’ll honestly *try* to let her into your heart?”

Blowing out a breath, I shook my head. “I mean, yeah. I will try. And I won’t *stop* trying until I’ve exhausted every attempt there is to make.”

His face bloomed into a big smile before he paused to scowl threateningly and point at me. “And it goes without saying that she will never learn of his conversation.” He lifted one severe eyebrow. “Correct?”

I shrugged. “Sure. Whatever.” But I guess my blasé answer wasn’t good enough for him.

“I’m serious, Luke,” he warned. “There was a reason she never let you know how she felt about you. She wanted a partner who fell for her on his own accord, without her or anyone else trying to push him into it against his will. You have to make it look like you’re doing this on your own, without any prodding or suggestions from anyone else, or she won’t go for it. You get me?”

Looking him straight in the eye, I promised, “I *will* be doing this on my own. Genuinely. Push me all you like, I won’t fall until I’m good and ready. So don’t worry about it. I got this.”

## 17 CHLOE

Something was off with Luke.

He had texted me earlier, asking if I wanted to ride with him to the dinner we'd both be attending tonight with some of the others. That was weird all on its own. But after I told him that would be fine, he sent me a heart emoji.

*A freaking heart.*

Three hours later, I was still staring at that heart, wondering who'd stolen his phone and sent it to me from his number. Had to be someone in the family, messing with me.

My guess was Trick. Or maybe Gracen. Possibly Bella. Those three thought they were simply hilarious.

And yet I kept looking at that stupid, plain red heart, trying to figure out what it meant.

"Ugh, I'm an idiot," I mumbled to myself and shoved the phone into my purse just as a knock came on the door and it started to open.

Yelping out my surprise, I pressed a hand to my chest, closed my eyes briefly, and then glanced at my watch.

He was right on time.

Luke—who never did anything by anyone else's schedule but his own—was here, promptly at the time I'd told him to be here.

What in the world was happening?

I took a cautious step back, almost certain it wasn't him. But there he came...right through my doorway.

I mean, I thought it was Luke. I had to blink to be certain at first because the man stepping into the foyer was dressed up in a button-down shirt, nice, trendy jeans, brown loafers, smelling like cologne, and wearing freaking gel in his hair. Luke never dressed up for regular, old family get-togethers. His attire usually consisted of an old shirt with at least one smudge on it, worn jeans that looked as if they might sprout holes at any moment, tattered sneakers, and absolutely no extra products in his hair or any added smelly stuff.

My mouth fell open as I gaped at him, and he smiled when he noticed me.

“Oh hey!” he said in surprise, then he stopped short and lifted his brows. “Wow. You look nice.”

And that was it for me. I wasn't sure what was going on, but it ended now. Cocking my hip, I set a hand on it and arched a single eyebrow before demanding, “What the hell does *that* mean?”

“It...” He blinked and pulled his face back, looking cornered and panicky. “It means you look...nice?”

“Well, why do you sound so surprised, as if you think I usually look like shit?”

“I don't,” he rushed to assure me, waving his hands madly. “You always look good. You just... You look as if you put more effort into it tonight.”

I had. But so had he. Yet you didn't see me over here, fawning over how gorgeous he was. I mean, not out loud. Because we didn't *do* that.

Something was freaking *up* with him.

“More effort?” I repeated quietly, letting him know that was the exact *wrong* thing to say. “So I haven't put enough effort into my looks lately, huh? What with trying to recover from my recent kidnapping and torture, and all? Well, I am so sorry to be such a great big disappoint—”

“Oh my God!” he shouted, lifting his hands and ducking behind them. “I just meant you looked nice. It was supposed to be a compliment. But forget it. Just...forget it.”

I huffed out a breath, knowing I'd gone over the line, but I sensed something else at play here. Something I didn't like.

Rolling my eyes, I muttered, “Whatever. Let's just go.”

“Right,” he whispered as if sucking in a big, bolstering breath that he needed in order to keep dealing with me for the rest of the night.

Ignoring him, I stepped onto the porch and showed him my back as I locked the door. But when I turned around again, he was still, like, *right there*.

I yelped, startled, not liking how my pulse jumped at our close proximity or how amazing he smelled...and looked. The dude was playing havoc on my senses.

So I snapped, “Why are you just standing there?”

For a moment, he appeared to be frozen. “I really don't know,” he finally answered as if he too were trying to figure that one out for himself. Then he turned on his heel and stiffly stepped off the porch, walking away without me.

I sighed and rolled my eyes.

Up ahead of me, he slowed when he reached his truck. He even reached for the passenger side door as if he was going to open it for me. But then he paused, squeezed his hand into a fist, and said, “Nope,” to himself before he pulled his arm back and let me get the door on my own.

Then, once we were both seated and he had the engine running, he had the gall to ask, “Any music recommendations for the radio?”

I spun to blink at him before demanding, “What is wrong with you tonight?”

He glanced up in surprise, then squinted in confusion before he almost nervously returned his attention to the road as he pulled out into traffic. “What do you mean? Nothing.”

“You’re acting weird. It’s freaking me out.”

“I was *trying* to be a gentleman,” he gritted out. “*Really* trying,” he added under his breath

I shook my head. “Why?”

“I...” His mouth opened and he looked completely blank for a moment. Then he uttered, “I don’t know.”

My brows rose. “You don’t *know*?”

He laughed a little and shrugged. “I don’t fucking know,” he insisted, sticking with that story. “I guess, I just thought I’d try something new and be *nice* for a change.”

“Well, it’s freaky and weird,” I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest. “So cut it out.”

“Roger that,” he murmured stonily. The rest of the trip to Bella’s place was dead silent, and I started to feel really crappy as if I should apologize for overreacting and being a bitch.

But he was acting so *weird*. Something wasn’t right with him. And I was going to figure out what it was.

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A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, I was absolutely miserable, and I wanted to go home. My head throbbed with a headache, and everyone talking only made it worse.

I’d been sticking it out, anyway, because these were my people, and I usually loved to be around them. I hoped the headache would abate.

Except it didn’t.

It was also my first night out with the family again. I’d wanted so hard for it to feel normal and like old times that I would just naturally slip back into the role I usually played. But everything felt different. *I* felt different.

Tucked up on the end cushion of the couch with Lucy sitting next to me and idly rubbing my knee as if to comfort

me, I listened to Beau and Gray regale Vaughn with a story from our high school years.

“So Bella’s behind the wheel, supposedly waiting for us to tell her when to crank the engine,” Beau said, his hands motioning along with the story, only for Gracen to pop in with, “Supposedly.”

“But she starts it before we tell her to, right? And it electrocutes the shit out of both of us.”

Bentley started to giggle and cover her mouth. “You should’ve seen them twitching and howling around the school parking lot... Oh my God.”

“It was terrifying at the time,” Bella cut in dryly. “From a simple dead battery to thinking I killed my twin brother and friend...I was bawling like a baby.”

Tears started to run down Bentley’s face as her laughter only grew, and she waved her hand in front of her eyes to dry them. “You should’ve seen her screaming... It was awful then, but so hilarious now. Chloe was standing there, asking them how many fingers she was holding up as if they’d gone blind.”

“And then Luke strolls up,” Beau carried on with the story. “Big, bad senior at the time. And he—”

“Wait,” Vaughn cut in and waved his hand to ask Luke, “you’re *older* than them?”

When he pointed between Beau and Gray, Luke frowned as if offended. Then he glanced around the entire room before answering, “Sonny, I’m older than everyone here.”

Which was true. Everyone older than him had families and children that they’d decided to stay home with tonight.

“No way,” Gracen’s wife gasped in astonishment. “I was sure you were at least Trick’s age, if not younger.”

“Crazy, isn’t it?” I asked, before tipping the bottle of my wine cooler against my aching forehead. “It’s like he grows more and more immature the older he gets, not the other way around.”



Some of the others laughed in agreement, and Luke lifted his gaze to me, but he said nothing.

He didn't strike back with his usual need to argue. He didn't scold me for my rudeness. He just silently took my insult and then glanced away again.

And it left me feeling...shitty.

Like really, deep-in-my-bones shitty.

I drew in a breath and swallowed, already wishing I could take the words back. But everyone around me was already moving on with the story, Beau once again taking over the events of that day as if nothing had happened.

All the while, it felt as if my stomach had just dropped out of me. And my heart started to ache as if he'd broken it all over again.

But why hadn't he parried back, calling me out for my obnoxious behavior? He *always* fought back. Even when I'd been stripped naked and bleeding on that basement floor, he'd argued with me. His arguing was like the only thing in life I knew I could count on.

I hugged myself, not at all liking the self-loathing sensation that Luke had left in me by *not* being crude back to me.

Across the room, he idly spun his bottle on the counter he was leaning against, only to pick the glass container up and finally seem to notice it was empty. Then, he chucked it into a nearby trash can and turned away to wander toward the kitchen

"...Turns out, the battery wasn't even dead after all. Lowe just used the wrong damn key that went to the trunk the first time he tried it."

The room exploded with laughter, and I flinched in pain.

When I eased to my feet to escape, Lucy looked up in concern, but I flashed her a megawatt smile, and she smiled back before returning her attention to story time. From there, I was able to slip out unnoticed.

Luke was alone in the kitchen when I reached it. He had a new bottle in hand, but he was still browsing through the hordes of liquor that were on the counter as if he were trying to decide which one to sample *next*.

When I appeared in the doorway and paused, he glanced up. I didn't even have to speak. He was already setting the bottle in his hand back down as he said, "What's wrong?"

"You're my ride tonight," I told him without preamble.

His eyebrows twitched in confusion. "Yeah..."

"Well, I want to go home," I growled in a not-at-all-friendly tone. "Right now."

He stepped toward me, his eyes growing alert and concerned. "Are you okay?"

"No," I snapped. I was feeling shitty and small, and my head hurt. "I want to go home."

Reaching out to grip my elbow, he nodded and answered, "Alright. Let's go."

But we'd barely turned toward the opening of the kitchen when my nineteen-year-old cousin Riley appeared.

I sucked in a startled breath and pulled back, bumping into Luke. He gripped my elbow tighter, and Riley lifted her hand, laughing apologetically. "Sorry. Didn't mean to surprise you. I just wanted to... Well..."

She leaped forward and threw her arms around me, which caused me to lock up, and go frozen for a moment. But then I caught Luke watching my face over her shoulder, and I released a breath, forcing myself to relax and pat Riley's back in rigid gratitude.

"I'm just so sorry about what happened," she gushed, squeezing hard enough that I flinched and gnashed my teeth.

By the time she pulled away, however, I was able to offer her a gracious smile. "Thanks."

Except she kept hold of my hands, which made me feel vaguely trapped and gave me memories of my wrists being

handcuffed.

“So how’ve you been doing?”

I started nodding that I was fine before I could even summon the words since it took me a moment to find my voice and actually speak again. “Good. Lots better,” I assured her.

Over her shoulder, Luke lifted a single eyebrow, silently calling bullshit on my answer.

“Recovering more every day,” I ignored him and added so he’d stop looking at me like that.

Riley burst into a wide grin. “Great. I’m so relieved. You really scared the shit out of us, you know.”

I forced a vague smile. “It scared the shit out of me too.”

Laughing, Riley leaned in, making me tighten in panic. “I’ll bet. You know...” She shook my hands that she was still holding. “We just need to get you back out there again, doing your thing. Hey...” Her brows lifted as an idea hit her. “Tucker’s doing a show in town next weekend.”

Vibrating with energy, she literally bounced as she mentioned her sister Rory’s husband, Tucker Holt, who was an up-and-coming country singer.

“I could score us some backstage passes and we could hang out with Rory, sipping cocktails and gossiping all evening. What do you say? Want to pull out your fancy cowboy boots and join me?”

I’d already been opening my mouth to come up with a polite rejection when she mentioned the boots. But from that point on, everything just kind of went blank in my head.

I no longer saw anything. No longer felt anything. No longer breathed. All the heat drained from my face and my hands went ice cold.

But my boots...

I’d made such a big deal about buying those boots so I could show some support to my cousin’s country-singing

husband. They'd been ridiculously extravagant with all kinds of western designs stitched into them. And I had made sure to point them out to Tucker every time I saw him.

And now...

Now...

"I... We'll see," I think I answered Riley. At least I hope I did. It's possible I didn't even speak because the next thing I knew I was tugging my hands free from hers, making her pull back in surprise, and then I brushed past her and just walked out of the kitchen.

In the back of my mind, I think I wanted to stay and finish our conversation. Or at the very least tell her goodbye. But my body just seemed to take over, and I wandered away instead. Like I was in some kind of freaking trance.

I knew I was acting strange too when I heard Riley ask, "D-did I say something wrong?"

"She was wearing her boots that night," Luke's answer followed me down the hall, haunting me even more. "The boots are fucking gone."

## 18 LUKE

**S**o Pick's suggestion to woo Chloe with flattery and kindness had worked like utter shit.

She didn't seem to be impressed by my *niceness* at all.

After hugging Riley, who looked as if she was going to burst into tears all over the kitchen, I hurriedly reassured her that she'd done nothing wrong—it was just going to take Chloe more time to recover—I booked it out of there to track down the woman I was supposed to be falling in love with but could only seem to piss off instead.

Except when I reached the front room where a majority of the others were, she wasn't there.

My jaw hardened with irritation. Where the hell was she?

Fucking Pick. Out of all the women in this group, he'd chosen the absolute toughest case for me, I swear. This was never going to work.

Trick broke away from the others and sidled up beside me.

“What's wrong?” he asked, watching everyone but me and looking casual as if he wasn't concerned. Except his chill act let me know he cared a whole fucking lot.

“Did Chloe come back through here?” I asked, still scanning the room, though I don't know why. She obviously wasn't here.

“No.” Trick finally turned to look at me, lifting his brows in condemnation. “You better not have lost my sister. I swear

to God, Hamilton.”

“*Lost* her?” I echoed, scowling back. “She’s not a pair of reading glasses. Besides, she was just in the kitchen, like, two seconds ago. She’s got to be around here somewhere.” There was no need to call out the National Guard, even though Trick’s response was making me panic.

That damn basement flashed into my head all over again.

My skin went cold. My breath stuttered through my lungs.

Where the hell was she?

“She came with you,” Trick growled at me. “You’re responsible for her.”

I glared back, not liking his accusations, but liking the fear he’d ignited in me even less.

“I’ll *find* her,” I muttered and started to turn away. But he caught my arm, halting me.

“Well, when you do, make sure she takes some damn ibuprofen.” When I raised questioning eyebrows, he explained, “She’s got a headache; she keeps pressing cold bottles and shit against her face to relieve it.”

Oh. I nodded and pulled away, and this time, he let me go.

Bypassing the kitchen, I hurried toward the rear exit of the house. But when I exploded into the dark, quiet backyard, I already knew it was empty.

“Chloe?” I called, anyway.

When she didn’t answer, I muttered, “Son of a bitch,” and ripped a hand through my hair, turning in a harried circle.

There was a back bathroom inside. I probably should’ve checked that first. But I didn’t go back into the house. She’d been pale and skittish when she’d lit out of the kitchen; no way would she have been able to stay trapped indoors, cooped up with so many people in that state.

I made my way around to the front of the house, and when I spotted her under a streetlamp, waiting by the passenger side door of my truck, I jarred myself to a halt and exhaled roughly.

But Jesus, I'd been on the verge of a total meltdown. My knees went a little weak, and I took another second to collect myself.

My first response after that was to storm forward and yell at her for scaring the shit out of me, but then Pick's words flooded my head.

*You could not pop back with some idiotic, smartass comment every time she does or says something you don't like.*

So I swallowed all the idiotic comments swimming in my brain and pulled the key fob from my pocket to unlock the door for her instead. As soon as my truck lights flashed, Chloe yanked her door open, more than eager to leave, and she climbed inside. By the time I joined her in the truck, she'd already seat-belted herself secure and was ready to go.

I didn't say a word, just started the engine, and then lifted the center console lid before pulling out a pill bottle.

When I silently held it out to her, she looked over at me in surprise and then down at the bottle before she slowly took it from my hand.

"How did you know?" she asked quietly, unscrewing the cap.

"You kept pressing cold things against your head as if it were killing you," I said before shrugging and admitting, "Trick noticed."

Because I wasn't observant and perceptive like that. People had to fucking come right out and tell me shit if they needed something. Like love.

Which made me wonder if maybe it really was true that she'd actually loved me once upon a time, and I'd just never noticed. Because I probably *wouldn't* have.

Dammit. I'd be a shit husband for her. Pick didn't know how to choose a son-in-law worth a damn.

Chloe nodded, letting me know that Trick noticing her pain made more sense to her, and she tipped two capsules into her palm before handing the bottle back. "Thank you."

I grunted and returned the bottle to the console cubby, then pulled onto the road without another word.

On the other side of the truck, Chloe hugged herself and swayed slowly, just barely rocking.

“Is Riley okay?” she finally asked.

“She’s fucking fine,” I muttered, turning the truck right at an intersection. “And she should’ve known better than to keep pressing you like that until she hit a damn trigger.”

“No, she shouldn’t have. No one has to treat me like a fragile piece of spun glass that’s going to shatter the moment someone sneezes around me. I don’t *want* that.”

I simply snorted and shook my head. “You could be ten-inch thick, tempered, plate glass infused with beams of steel rebar. You just had the impact of gale-force winds slammed against you. And it left cracks, whether you like it or not. You’re not a hundred percent yet, and you need time to heal. So give yourself a damn break.”

When she didn’t answer, I exhaled and asked, “You’re still visiting that therapist every week, right?”

“Yes,” she snapped irritably.

With a sigh, I considered grabbing the pill bottle for myself. Today was definitely not a good one for her, and it was miserable enough to give me a headache too.

She remained quiet the rest of the way home until I reached her place.

And that’s when she finally mumbled a snide, “Maybe *you* should consider seeing a therapist.”

I glanced over as I put the truck into park and killed the engine. “Excuse me?”

“You weren’t exactly *yourself* tonight over there either, you know.”

I pulled back, shocked by that accusation. “I was fine,” I insisted.



But Chloe only snorted. “Yeah? Then why were you so quiet and off to the side the entire night, like you were simply a bystander? That’s not your usual M.O. And what the *hell* was that dead fish response you had when I made the crack about your maturity level? You said absolutely nothing and just left me hanging.”

“So...” I squinted, trying to make sense of what she was saying. “You’re mad at me for *not* insulting you?”

“I looked like a complete asshole when you didn’t strike back!” she cried. “So yeah, I’m mad.”

“But I...” I winced and scratched the back of my neck. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” She lifted her eyebrows and gaped at me as if I’d lost my mind.

I shrugged. “Next time, I’ll...Jesus.” Throwing up my hands, I scowled at her. “I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say here. What if I just didn’t feel like insulting you at that moment?”

Her mouth dropped open as she gaped at me. Then she shook her head and scowled, hissing, “What?” as if my explanation made no sense to her.

“I’ve had a bit of a revelation, okay?” I mumbled, irritable about having to explain it. “I say stupid shit. A lot. And I don’t necessarily *want* to be that way anymore. I mean, I was so inappropriate and wrong to you that night in the bar.” I shook my head and swallowed down the nasty taste that rose up my throat when I remembered what I’d done. “I made fun of your dating life and was completely dismissive of your restraining order. And then look at what happened, not even two hours later. God, it makes me feel sick to my stomach every time I think about it.”

“Luke...” Her voice softened sympathetically, and her eyes filled with pity. “Believe it or not, I *appreciate* it when you smart back to me. It lets me know that things are still normal in the world. And sometimes, your big-mouth cracks

are the only normal thing I feel like I can cling to. So honestly, I almost *need* you to be rude to me. Alright?”

I shook my head. “But what if I don’t feel like being rude sometimes?” When her brow furrowed in question, I tried to explain. “I want to be able to tell you that you look nice when I think you look nice and *not* have you immediately seek some ulterior motive from my words. Because you look fucking nice tonight, and now I’m freaked out, worried I’ll never be able to actually say *anything* nice to you. I mean, has it always been like this between us? Or did I break something somewhere over the years that’s prevented us from ever being *real* with each other?”

Chloe’s face paled and she started to shake her head. “N-no,” she said, frowning slightly. “This *is* real. It’s the most real thing I have right now.”

“*What* is? Insults and snippy comebacks?” I asked, lifting my eyebrows. “Honestly?”

She stared at me without speaking, and I swear tears filled her eyes, but it was dark in the truck and I couldn’t see all that well. I opened my mouth to ask if she was okay, but she rushed to cut me off before I could speak. “It’s late. I have a headache. I’m going to bed.”

And she shoved open her door, popping out of the truck before I could even respond.

I sighed as I watched her hurry up to the front door. Then I shook my head and slowly climbed out of the truck as well.

I could hear her moving around in the back when I came in the door. Closing it behind me, I locked up, then walked through the house, making sure everything else was shut up and put away for the night.

She was in the bathroom by the time I made it to her room, but she’d left the door open, so I strolled that way and slid a hand into my pocket to find that she’d already changed into sleep shorts and a tank top.

I leaned a shoulder against the doorframe as I watched her apply lotion to her arms and legs.

“What scent are we getting tonight?” I asked after a good ten seconds of her ignoring me.

She usually put on a different smell each night, and the variety was like a mystery revealed every time I crawled into bed with her.

“Warm Vanilla Sugar,” she answered coolly, not even bothering to glance my way.

I nodded. “It’s nice. That one gets a thumbs-up from me.”

“Swell,” she muttered dryly, letting me know she didn’t give a shit what I thought about the scent of lotion she wore.

I exhaled and lowered my gaze to her vanity countertop where I noticed a pharmacy checkout bag sitting. It was still unopened with a prescription receipt stapled to it.

“Holy shit!” I said, reaching out. “Did you actually get some sleeping pills?”

I lifted the medicine bag, to read the label as if I actually knew what any of the foreign words meant. But Chloe plopped her lotion down and ripped the sack from my hand.

“No!” Sniffing in irritation, she tossed the bag back down onto her sink counter and scowled at me. “Do you mind?”

Honestly? I didn’t mind at all.

Squinting at her, I guessed, “Anti-anxiety meds, then?”

She rolled her eyes. “Jeez, you are such a snoop. It’s birth control. Okay? Just birth control.”

I blinked, startled mute by that one. Then, I blurted, “Who are you planning on using *that* with?”

“No one.” Rolling her eyes, she picked up her lotion again. “That’s not the point.”

I shook my head, confused. “Then what’s the—”

“Oh my God!” she exploded impatiently. “I recently learned just how easy it was for a man to knock me unconscious, strip me naked, and chain me to his basement floor. Alright? Is not wanting to get pregnant from a rapist a

good enough reason for you?” she demanded. “I mean, he could’ve done all sorts of things to me if you hadn’t shown up when you did...”

I shuddered at the thought, and bile moved up my throat.

But Chloe just kept talking. “I don’t care if I never plan on having sex again. I’m going to take this shit every day until menopause or until I actually want a kid. To protect myself.”

I nodded and hoarsely said, “Yeah. Good idea.”

With a condescending scoff, she tossed her lotion bottle onto the counter without applying any more and brushed past me to reenter her bedroom. As warm vanilla floated up to greet my senses, I turned after her and watched her move to the dresser to take off her watch and put it on its charger.

“I think we should get married,” I said.

Out of freaking nowhere.

No idea why I said that. I hadn’t even been thinking about it at all. The words just tumbled out of me without any kind of prompting at all.

Chloe didn’t bother to glance over or even stop what she was doing. She gave a dry laugh and said, “Funny,” with her back still to me because, yes, I’d just proposed to a woman’s freaking back.

I drew in a breath and calmly answered, “I wasn’t joking.”

Finally, she turned and lifted an eyebrow. “So... No ring, huh? I mean, didn’t you at least offer Lucy JB’s old ring he bought for his first fiancée when you proposed to her? *And* you got down on one knee too, if the rumors are true. I think I’m offended that I don’t even rate a hand-me-down ring *or* a bended knee. Really. Thanks a lot, buddy.”

The fact that she completely blew off my suggestion made me frown. “I’m serious, Chloe.” When she merely turned to walk from the bedroom toward the hall, I hurried after her. “I practically live here already. We sleep in the same bed. You’re —”

“What is with you and wanting to marry everyone all of a sudden?” she cut in, plowing to a stop so she could turn and gape at me. “Are you having a midlife crisis or something? Is that it? I think you’re still a tad too young.”

“Jesus, will you stop with the jokes and just...*listen* to me?” I muttered.

She laughed harshly and turned away, storming further down the hall. “Um...*no!* I’m not going to listen to you. Especially when you’re being ridiculous like this.”

“How is it *ridiculous?*” I asked, following her. “If you’d stop for one damn second and just think about it, it sounds pretty fucking practical to me. I mean, we... We have the same family and friend base already. The same core values and basic beliefs.”

“Core *values?*” she repeated, stopping again and lifting her hands to shield herself from me as she spun back around. “Okay, just stop there. This is not coming from you. *Someone’s* been filling your head.”

I was so surprised by her discernment that I wavered, gaping at her for the longest second with nothing to say and unable to believe she’d been able to figure that out with, like, three compliments and a stupid term like *core values*.

And okay, maybe the marriage proposal hadn’t been the smartest move. Especially tonight of all nights, when she’d obviously seen better days.

But that had just come out; I hadn’t planned that one.

The woman was definitely her father’s daughter because she saw right through me.

Her hands fell limply to her sides and her mouth dropped open. “That’s it, isn’t it?” she guessed. “Someone put this idea into your head.”

Ignoring the yellow warning lights flashing inside my head that were screaming, *warning, warning! Approach cautiously*, I snorted and rolled my eyes. “No.”

“Right,” she countered. “Who was it?”

“Why is it so hard for you to believe I came up with this shit myself?”

Chloe squinted, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. “It must’ve been...” She shook her head, mentally filing through names until, bam, she snapped her gaze up. “My dad,” she said. “That’s the only likely possibility to explain this.”

“You know, I think I’m insulted,” I muttered, jabbing a finger into my chest. “Do you seriously think I can’t come up with my own damn ideas? And you even called it ridiculous. Doesn’t something ridiculous have *my* name written all over it? Not Pick’s.”

“Usually,” she murmured, frowning because I’d actually made a good point. Score! But then she gripped her head and leaned against the wall. “Except not this time,” she murmured. And from there, I basically watched her world drop into the pit of her stomach.

“Oh my God,” she breathed in doom before flopping down her hands to gape up at me. “He did, didn’t he? He asked you to marry me.” After blurting out a small, hysterical laugh, she shook her head, trying to deny it. “What was he *thinking*? I’m not—this is just— No.”

“Chloe,” I said softly and reached for her hand.

She startled me by looking up sharply and gripping my fingers.

“Don’t worry,” she assured gently. “I’ll fix this. He’s not in his right frame of mind right now. His daughter’s safety was jeopardized. It’s jostled his rationality. He’s thinking in extremes and trying to find the ultimate safeguard to protect me. But it’s only temporary. He’ll come back to himself again. Eventually.” With a wince, she added, “And I know you couldn’t tell him no. He’s your boss, a man you respect, and you’re one of those people that feel duty-driven to step up when you learn one of your people is in need. But I’m not in need. I’ll heal. And *I* will tell him no for you. Alright? It’s going to be okay. You’re not going to end up strapped with me for life, I swear.”

“Chloe,” I repeated softly, tightening my grip on her hand when she tried to pull away. She paused and looked up, her brow furrowing in question. “I don’t want you to tell him no for me,” I murmured. “If I hadn’t wanted this, I would’ve told him no myself.”

Chloe’s jaw dropped as she listened to me. Then she nodded. “Oh, okay. I get it now.” With a sigh, she rolled her eyes. “What does he have against you? It’s blackmail, right?”

When I exhaled and let go of her hands in frustration, her eyebrows lifted. “Or is it a bribe? Oh God, he’s going to give you something. Is it the bar? It’s the bar, isn’t it?”

I hissed out a breath and refused to answer that. “He loves you and is worried about you,” I said instead. “*I’m* worried about you. We just want you to be happy.”

Chloe sniffed. “And you two think *you* can fix that? Oh my God... Really?”

“Hey!” Offended, I scowled at her. “You can trust me a hell of a lot more than pretty much every douchebag you’ve ever dated. Especially—”

Pointing sternly, she glared. “Don’t you dare mention that name to me.”

I lifted my hands, relenting. “Okay, I’m not,” I swore softly. “But your dad asked me to at least *try* with you, so that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Oh, jeez. I wish you wouldn’t. It’s not worth the effort, Luke. I promise.”

“Worth the *effort*? Are you serious? Woman, no one’s worth more than you.”

Her lashes wavered uncertainly. Then she stiffened her spine. “This isn’t happening. End of story.”

Staring her straight in the eyes, I leaned in and murmured, “I bet you ten bucks you’re going to be Chloe Hamilton by the end of this year.”

“Ooh, ten bucks,” she repeated sarcastically, waving her hands and rolling her eyes. “You must be *so* sure you’re going

to succeed.”

“Fine. Ten *thousand*,” I immediately revised, not batting an eyelash.

She sighed, exhausted with me. “You are just so—”

I grinned and lifted a finger, taunting her. “Watch what you call me, honey. Because *you’re* the one who’s going to marry me. And what will that make you?”

“Wow,” she whispered, gazing at me as if she just couldn’t believe my immaturity. Then she pushed past me, shaking her head incredulously.

“I’m done talking about this,” she announced, lifting her hands and starting down the hall toward the kitchen, only to stop and whirl back. “Just seriously...” But she must not have had any more good arguments left in her. Or she decided it was useless to argue with someone she considered a fool.

That was probably more likely.

So she groaned, “Dear God,” and turned away again, walking off as if she wasn’t going to come back this time.

So I called after her. “I might not win you over today, but I am going to win you over. You just wait and see.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” she countered over her shoulder.

“Thank you!” I grinned. “I’ll take all the help I can get.”

“You’re an idiot,” her voice trailed back from the front of the house.

“Maybe,” I shouted. “But I’m *your* idiot now.”



## 19 CHLOE

If my phone wasn't currently in my bedroom, charging, I would've called my father right then and rained utter hell down on him.

I mean, what had he been thinking?

He had just ruined everything. Nothing between Luke and me was ever going to be normal again. And Dad needed to pay for orchestrating that.

But his punishment would have to wait.

For now, I had a man who didn't want me but was determined to marry me in my bedroom, and I had no idea what to do about him. The fact that I used to daydream about this very thing from this very person made it all even more traumatic.

Slipping into the back bathroom on the opposite end of my house as my bedroom, I quietly shut the door at my back and then sat on the closed seat of my toilet so I could grip my head between my hands and rest my elbows on my knees.

The tears came freely, sluicing down my cheeks in rivers, and I let myself have a good, long cry.

Because the problem with all this was that while Luke might have his issues—namely crude, inappropriate, clueless immaturity—he was still a good man. His parents were two of the sweetest, most dependable, loyal people I'd ever met. And Luke might think he was nothing like them. He was loud where they were quiet. He had always needed to move, while they could just sit...peacefully. He needed more of an active,

trade-type occupation, and they were more cerebral and academic. But he was still like them when it came to his basic morality. And he would obediently stay with me from this point on. No matter what.

Which would get to me. It was among the many reasons I'd fallen for him all those years ago, to begin with. And it was going to make this even harder for me to discourage him now.

Because now I was going to be fighting myself *and* him.

But if I didn't fight, it was going to break me. It was going to break me as I'd never been broken before. I just knew it.

And so, I had to resist everything he threw at me.

I probably wasted half an hour's worth of time, sitting in that bathroom, trying to steel my resolve against whatever wooing came next.

Luke gave me all the time I needed, not coming to find me or barging in, to demand...well, anything. It was all part of his plan, I swear. *Give her time and space.* To hang herself. And his consideration was working, dammit.

Wait. No, it wasn't.

I wasn't going to fall for his pretty smile again. Not this time. Not ever again.

Feeling good about the pep talk I'd given myself, I returned to my room where Luke was already in bed, asleep it looked like. And the damn man was lying on the side *I'd* asked him to. After the first night when I'd made a big deal about claiming the side I wanted, he'd never argued with me again. It was sweet and considerate of him, and—

Arg!

It wasn't going to sway me.

He'd left the lamp on, so I walked toward him, studying his bare, toned, golden shoulders in the soft glow because after the first night when he'd soaked his shirt with sweat, he hadn't worn one to bed since.

He was just so freaking beautiful. It hurt to look at him sometimes; my guts would literally ache with want.

But they weren't going to tonight. No, ma'am.

I grabbed the sheet and slipped in carefully so as not to wake him, then I turned on my side, facing away from him, and reached out to flip the light off.

As soon as darkness filled the room, a wide, warm hand curled around my hip until he had the flat of his palm against my abdomen. Then he tugged me back until my back hit his chest, and we were spooning.

With a satisfied groan, he fit one of his knees up behind mine, ran his hand up my rib cage and down my arm until he captured my hand and interlaced our fingers, and then he kissed the back of my neck.

It made my nipples harden, and lust sparked between my legs.

God, it would be so easy to press my bottom back against his lap and grind until his dick hardened. Then, I doubted his hand would be slipping so platonically up my arm to my hand anymore. He'd be pushing it down, past the waistline of my shorts, and into my panties.

I pressed my lips together tight and concentrated on breathing, and *not* on the need for sex that was rushing through me.

"Night, Mrs. Hamilton," he mumbled sleepily behind me. This dirty-minded boy who was actually thinking about innocent marriage right now, while I could only think of a filthy, hot fuck fest.

I sniffed out a smile, amused by it all, and clamped my thighs tighter together, refusing to think about my body's current cravings. "Goodnight, crazy, delusional idiot," I told him, almost affectionately.

He chuckled softly and shifted in just a little closer behind me.

I'm not sure how, but I fell asleep not long after that.

When I woke, it was daylight, and the bed was empty.

Splaying out a hand, I touched Luke's empty side. His absence left a noticeable dent as if waiting for him to return and refill his place.

Damn, even my blanket and pillows were already falling for his stupid pursuit.

When I became aware of the muffled sounds of cooking coming from the direction of the kitchen, I frowned for a moment before gasping and sitting upright.

Oh, he better not be trying to make me breakfast. Dammit. That wasn't even fair. Breakfast was my favorite freaking meal of the day!

I swung my legs over the side of the bed in a huff and padded my way out of the room. When I hit the hallway, I could already smell the bacon.

*Bacon.*

He was just playing plain dirty now.

I rarely ever—like at all—allowed myself to eat bacon anymore, not even on my cheat days. I think I could feel ten pounds crawling up my legs and straight to my thighs just thinking about it.

But oh God. Bacon. Just one little strip. I'd run three times my usual distance on the treadmill tonight, I swore. I wouldn't eat for the rest of the day.

Finally, I reached the kitchen and grabbed onto the frame as I peered inside. And fucking hell...

It was worse than I thought.

Standing there barefoot with his back to me as he held a spatula in one hand and stood at the oven, he wore nothing but his tight, black boxer briefs. And Lord have mercy, that cloth cupped his ass like a freaking glove. Every muscle on him was curved to perfection: his arms and thighs, and back muscles. Even his damn calves and ankles looked amazing.

Luke Hamilton was the ultimate showstopper.

I must've ogled him hard enough that he finally felt the violation because he glanced over his shoulder, revealing the shadow of a beard on his jaw and his mussed bangs that looked as if some woman had been running her hands through his hair all night. His blue eyes were tired around the edges but clear and alert enough to brighten when they saw me.

With a grin that melted my ovaries, he greeted, "Hey. Good morning." Then a pinch marred his sexy brows. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No..." I tried to say, but it came out as a sex-starved, hoarse croak of a sound. So I licked my lips and started again after clearing my throat. "Uh, no. I just couldn't sleep anymore."

Hearing just how dry I was, he lifted his brows. "Need a drink? I made a couple of mimosas."

Well, hell. Someone stick a fork in me because I was done. I'd had his mimosas before, and they were amazing enough to cut a bitch for.

As he set one on the bar, right in the place where I usually ate my breakfast, I cleared my throat again and started that way, unable to stay away. But I *did* have the willpower to say, "Thanks, but uh, I'm not really in the mood for alcohol this morning."

He lifted an eyebrow as if he knew better, then he shrugged and reached for the cup, removing it from my spot. "No problem. I'll just toss it."

When he started to carry it toward the sink as if to feed *my* drink to the drain, I panicked.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I called and reached out a hand. "Hey..."

Luke paused and glanced back, and I could just see it in his eyes, by the way they sparkled with mischief, even though he managed not to smirk, he knew exactly what he was doing. "Hmm?" he asked.

I shrugged and lowered my hand, trying not to look too desperate. "I mean, there's no reason to let good alcohol go to

waste. I can probably...gag it down.”

“You sure?” he asked, lifting the mimosa temptingly but not yet returning it to me. I think his aim was to get me to beg for it. And fuck, but I almost did.

*Stay strong, Chloe! Don't break.*

Losing my cool, I finally snapped, “Just give me the damn drink.”

With a laugh, Luke carried the mimosa back and set it in front of where I had seated myself. “Yes, ma'am,” he murmured, his expression alive with victory.

I rolled my eyes and lifted the drink, gulping deeply and fortifying my resolve.

He grinned as he watched.

And seriously, how the hell was I supposed to defend myself against that cheerful, adorable, steamy smile?

When he set a plate loaded with my favorites in front of me next, I almost whimpered, and my stomach did literally growl.

Dammit.

Clearing my throat to hopefully disguise the rumbling from my mid-section, I set my mimosa down and politely said, “I'm not hungry.”

Luke's grin only stretched wider. Leaning across the counter, he whispered, “Liar. You're always ravenous first thing in the morning.”

True.

And what was worse, I was ravenous for more than just food *this* morning.

“Well, today, I'm not,” I said primly.

“Just eat,” he commanded in a weary sigh, only to pause when I refused to move. “Or do you want me to threaten to throw the food away too?”

“No!” I screeched, darting forward to snag the plate before he could remove it. “Okay, fine. I’ll eat.”

And from there, I probably resembled a savage dog that hovered over its bowl and growled while it ate. I definitely kept one hand securely clamped around the edge of the plate while I shoveled spoonfuls of hash browns into my mouth.

When I realized Luke hadn’t moved, I glanced up and caught his amused gaze.

“Are you just going to stand there and watch me?” I asked after glancing around in confusion.

His eyebrows lifted. “Do you *want* me to eat with you?”

Well, damn. That was such a trick question. If I said yes, he’d think I wanted his company. If I said no, he’d just continue to stand there and give me his uncomfortable and undivided attention.

Huffing out a growl, I said, “Just eat.”

Luke chuckled and turned away to get his own food. By the time he was slipping into the tall chair at the bar next to me with his own plateful, I’d made a sizable dent in my meal, but not enough to straight up leave yet.

“Oh, I forgot to mention...” he said as he settled in and picked up a fork. “I went in to talk to Pick yesterday about rearranging my work schedule, so I should be clocking out by eight every evening now.”

I glanced over in surprise. “What did you do that for?”

With a shrug, he took a bite, chewed, and then explained, “Your dad’s been talking about teaching me the more administrative side of the nightclub for a while now, and I feel shitty about altering *your* sleeping patterns, so I figured now was as good a time as any to begin my training from him and also be home in time for you to get to bed at more of your regular time. It’ll be easier for you to adjust once you go back to work again.”

Okay, that explanation was actually incredibly considerate of him. It made my heart wrench with gratitude. But I couldn’t

let him know how touched I felt.

So I lifted a brow and asked, “Was this before or *after* you and he decided my future together and who I’d be marrying.”

“Before, actually,” he answered easily and sent me a big grin as he chewed. Then he scooped up more eggs and motioned to me with them. “But wasn’t it all husbandly of me and shit to give you a heads-up like this?”

“It was definitely *and shit*,” I muttered dryly.

Shrugging past my unimpressed reaction, Luke added, “Well, I think we’re starting this relationship out just fine.”

“Trust me, bud,” I shot back, finishing my meal in record time and sliding off my tall chair. “There is no relationship here.”

“If that’s what you gotta delude yourself into believing to get through the day, then you keep telling yourself that,” he countered with a smile. “Hey, just set that plate on the counter. I’ll get the dishes.”

I was starting to roll my eyes at the first half of his retort, but then his offer to clean up caught me off guard. I set the plate next to the sink and glanced over my shoulder at him.

He smiled brightly as he chewed.

Releasing a breath, I shook my head, still refusing to let him get to me. “I’m going to head out for a while,” I announced, wiping my hands on my thighs. “Lock up when you leave, alright?”

“Sure,” he answered, then asked, “You’re off to confront Pick, aren’t you?”

I shot him a dark scowl, not liking the mind-reading trick he was perfecting. “Don’t you dare warn him that I’m coming,” I charged, pointing a threatening finger his way.

Luke shook his head. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Gotta side with the wifey, right?”

“Oh, brother.” I rolled my eyes for real this time and started from the kitchen.



But he called after me. “He’s probably at the club already if you need help finding him.”

That actually did help me. After dressing for the day, I drove over to the Forbidden Nightclub. It was closed and locked up, but I used my key and entered through the back, where I walked down the dark hall until reaching an open door, where light spilled out.

Inside, my dad was already at his desk, looking absorbed in his work.

I had wanted to be furious with him. To rage and scream. But as I peered at the man who meant so much to me and I knew would move mountains for me, all my anger just kind of melted into sadness.

Lifting my hand, I knocked quietly on the doorframe, and Dad looked up immediately.

“Hey!” He greeted me with a big smile and immediately rose from his chair to come toward me. “This is a pleasant surprise. It’s nice to see you out and about.”

But I backed away, shaking my head. “What were you thinking?” I asked, my voice sounding way more devastated than I’d planned for it to sound. I’d been going for an accusative hiss. But then my vocal cords shook, and a freaking sob followed the question. Hugging myself, I bent slightly at the waist. “How could you do this to him?”

Dad slowed to a stop, and his smile faded. “Motherfucker,” he uttered. “He told you.”

“Oh...” I laughed harshly and shook my head. “He didn’t have to say a single word. His behavior alone was so freaking obvious it had *you* written all over it.”

“Damn,” he murmured with a wince and ran a hand over his hair. “I should’ve taken that into consideration. The kid’s got no tact at all.”

Another laugh burst from me. But this was funny. Hilarious. My father had tried to arrange a *marriage* for me, and now that I’d outed him, he wasn’t even bothering to hide it or apologize for what he’d done.

How had my life come to this?

Plopping down on the couch near me, I kept laughing until the laughter turned to sobs, and I started full-on crying.

“Oh, Chloe Girl,” Dad murmured, his voice full of sympathy. He started for me again, his arms reopening.

I pointed at him. “Don’t you dare come near me,” I warned. “I’m so mad at you right now, I can’t even...” But I had no idea how to finish the sentence, so I shook my head, pressed my lips together, and closed my eyes, visibly trembling all over.

Dad paused briefly, then came forward anyway. “I know,” he murmured and sat down next to me. I flinched when he pulled me into his arms, but he still didn’t let up, even then. He hugged me close and kissed my hair. “But trust your old man a little, will you? I would never do anything that would hurt you. You know that. This *will* work out.”

“No.” I bowed my head as every muscle in my body tensed. “This will ruin me. Because I know Luke. I *know* him. And he gets unwaveringly stubborn when he puts his mind to something. If he told you he was going to do this, then he’s not going to give up about it, not until he somehow charms me into going along with it too because, oh, I’m sure he will. Then he’s going to get saddled with a wife he doesn’t love, and he’s going to end up hating and resenting both you *and* me for the rest of our lives until all three of us die miserable deaths full of regret and heartbreak.”

“Or...” My dad murmured, stroking my hair and rocking with me. “This will become the greatest love story of both of your lives.”

I groaned. “I hereby banish you from your rose-colored glasses, and I’m throwing them in the trash. This is a train wreck, Dad. A *train wreck*.”

He merely chuckled. “Just give it a chance. Because you *are* wrong about one thing. He does love you. He’s always loved you. He wouldn’t be there for you every night if he didn’t.”

“That’s not the kind of love I’m talking about, and you know it. He sees me as a...a sister. And I want a man who fucking *loves* me, Dad. Don’t I deserve that?”

“You do,” he assured me. “But love is love, and the feelings he has for you now *can* be nurtured into something more. He’s just never *let* his feelings grow in that direction before because he didn’t see it as a path he was allowed to take. He kept the gate to that kind of love with you firmly closed. Out of respect. All I did was open the gate and point out the way, and now...I have every confidence that he’ll find the kind of love he needs and give *you* the kind of husband you want.” Smiling fondly at me, he cupped my face and gazed adoringly into my eyes. “He’s going to worship the ground you walk on. I know it.”

I sighed, envisioning the picture he drew. I even smiled over it. Then I shook my head sadly. “You make it sound like a fairy tale. Too bad your version *is* a fairy tale. It’s fake, Dad. It’s not real. You didn’t take *his* wants or needs into consideration at all. And I’m not what he wants. I’m not what he needs.”

“Chloe...” he started, his voice full of warning as I rose to my feet.

“The truth of the matter is,” I said. “He’s never looked at me that way. And he never will. So I’m going to do everything I possibly can to help him break this idiotic promise to you and get him out of this mess.”

“Jesus. Just give it a chance, Chloe,” my dad begged, rising to his feet. “All I asked him to do was try. That’s all he’s going to do. If you go in, determined to sabotage it, it’s just going to make you both miserable. But if you just...*let* him try...” He shook his head and heaved out a breath. “Then the worst thing that’ll happen is he gives you a couple of presents, takes you out a few times, and then you both go your separate ways.”

“No,” I disagreed, shaking my head. “The worst thing that’ll happen is that he’ll finally break me so completely that there will be nothing left for me to keep going on my own.

Because I *have* tried with him, Dad. Time after time again. And all he's ever done is break my heart." Walking to the door of his office, I paused and turned back. "I'm done trying. It's over."

"He didn't know then," my dad insisted. "He didn't know what was happening. But he does now. Just give him one more chance while he's aware of what's going on. For me."

I looked him in the eyes and realized how much I loved this man. He seriously would do anything for me. Pick Ryan was an amazing father.

So it broke my heart a little when I said, "No," and left his office, walking away.

There's no way I could give Luke a chance after this because no matter what happened from this point on, it'd never be genuine. My father had stained him. He might even convince himself that he *did* love me just because he would be determined enough to. But it'd never be real.

Luke Hamilton was simply incapable of loving me the way that I'd always loved him. And I was going to do everything in my power to get him what *he* wanted—a life without me in it.

## 20 LUKE

**A**fter Chloe left to confront her dad, I took my time straightening the kitchen and cleaning the mess I'd made. Then, I returned to her bedroom to shower and change into my clothes for the day. Once I was pulling on my shoes, however, I glanced over toward her closet at the shoes she had in there.

So I pushed to my feet and wandered inside to snoop around, browsing through her footwear until I got a decent bead on what size she wore. Then I locked up before heading out to my truck.

A good night's rest had left me feeling more resolute about my goals than before. She might be a little reticent over the whole thing and a hard nut to crack, but that just made her a bigger challenge. And one thing I loved to conquer was a good challenge.

So she could fight it and butt heads with me as much as she wanted to, I wasn't giving up.

I stopped at a shoe store first, and walked out twenty minutes later, with an enormous bag in hand. As soon as I climbed into my truck, tossed my purchase over into the passenger seat, and started the engine, I called my brother.

"Hey. You off work today?" I asked as soon as he answered.

"Yep." JB sounded harassed and winded. "First full day off in two weeks, and I gotta deal with a fucking leak in my master bathroom. What's up?"

“Just wondering if I could swing by for a while,” I said, already putting the truck into drive and turning that way. “Sponge some lunch off you, maybe. Shit like that.”

“Sure,” he said easily. “And you can help me rip out my bathtub and maybe a partition wall while you’re at it.”

So that’s what I found myself doing an hour later, crowbar in hand and fiberglass particles floating around my head. Pausing my task from ripping away a rotted two-by-four from the wall, I coughed into my armpit and blinked my vision clear.

JB glanced over from *his* crowbar that he had wedged into the other end of the plank of wood. “Will you just put on a mask and safety glasses already? You have no idea what this shit could do to your lungs.”

“You sound like such an overbearing, big-brother doctor right now. You know that? It’s adorable. Really.”

And I lifted the crowbar again to help him remove the wood.

“Teagan!” my brother merely shouted through the house before we both worked together to pry the sucker loose.

“Luke!” his wife shouted back. “I don’t know what he told you to do this time. But just do it! Do you want my daughter to grow up without a damn uncle?”

The board popped loose. And both JB and I skipped a step back as it fell to the floor to avoid all the exposed nails.

As the dust settled, I looked up at him. “How the hell do you two do that?”

“What?” JB asked, holding out a mask and glasses. “The marriage mind-reading trick?”

I rolled my eyes and accepted the handful. “Yeah,” I said, only to grumble as soon as I fit the mask on. “Man, we have, like two boards left. Is this really necessary?”

“Yes. Stop whining.”

I rolled my eyes and followed the rules. Once I had the crowbar back in hand, I helped him start on the next board.

“So do you get any other nifty perks like that with marriage?”

“Oh, all kinds,” JB answered with a grin and a suggestive waggle of the brows.

I cringed and lifted a hand. “I didn’t mean sex, you perv. That’s my sister-in-law you’re talking about.”

With a chuckle, JB set his crowbar into place, and we grunted and worked together to free the second-to-last piece of lumber.

“What were you talking about, then?” he asked after he got it good and loose.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. “I was just wondering if it was really worth all the trouble.”

“Uh... *Yeah*. It is,” JB answered without pausing as a goofy grin lit his face. “It really is.”

I shrugged, letting him know I’d just have to take his word on that one, and we finished stripping the bathroom of all the non-essential stud walls that had rotted.

We were still standing there, breathing hard in the empty place where his bathtub had been half an hour before when his wife appeared in the doorway with a toddler on her hip.

“Holy...shit...” Teagan breathed, gaping at the exposed walls and bare patch of floor. “How long did you say it was going to be like this?”

“I’ve already got a replacement on order,” JB promised as he went in to kiss her cheek, then took Harper from her arms. “So two or three weeks, I’d say. A month tops.”

“Or six months,” I teased from behind him.

Teagan peered around her husband to cringe at me. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Hey, have a little faith,” JB spat back, even as he rubbed his nose against his daughter’s and grinned at her. “I’ll get a

new one in here within the month.”

“Well, until then...” Teagan answered, setting her hand on Harper’s back. “I whipped up some sandwiches if you boys are hungry.”

“Oh thank God,” I said, starting forward. “I’m starving. And I’ve gotta get to work within the hour.”

“Why’re you going in so early?” JB asked as he started after me.

“I rearranged my schedule so I can be home by bedtime since Chloe hasn’t been able to get to sleep until I get there, and I don’t want to completely destroy her whole sleep pattern.”

My brother shot me a surprised glance. “Wait. You’re still going over there every night?”

“Yup,” I answered and grinned when my niece finally seemed to notice me. She pointed and started to blow raspberries. “Yes!” I cheered her on. “There’s my little stinker.”

As I plucked her from her father’s arms and vibrated my lips right back at her, JB sent me a dry glance.

“I seriously wish you hadn’t taught her that.”

“And that is seriously why I did,” I shot back as we entered the kitchen.

“Of course it is,” he answered dryly, only to notice how busy his wife was at the counter, pouring iced tea into some cups. “Let me help, babe,” he offered, completely forgetting me and going to Teagan.

In my arms, Harper smacked my cheeks happily.

“She can have some of those banana puffs in the can on the table there if you want to give her something to eat,” Teagan told me as she poured tea into a cup that JB had just filled with ice.

“Sure thing.” I carried the kid to the table, where I took a seat and plopped her diaper-padded bottom onto the surface.



She immediately started to bounce and wave her arms in excitement when I reached for the can, letting me know she approved.

“Jesus, not so much,” JB warned as I dumped half of the can out around the kid’s legs, and Harper instantly dove forward, snatching up two handfuls.

I merely shrugged and picked up a pale Cheeto-looking thing for myself. “I’ll just help her eat them, then.”

When I popped one into my mouth, I shrugged and made a sound of favor before snatching up another.

“And don’t eat all her food,” Teagan said, slapping a plate in front of me full of a sandwich and chips. “Here. Try this instead.”

“Jeez. You two really are one mind in two bodies,” I grumbled. “Is every married couple like that?” I’d never paused to pay attention to married people dynamics before.

“Maybe,” JB said as he grinned at Teagan and smacked her on the ass as he set a cup next to my plate. “If they’re as lucky as us.”

Teagan hummed deep in her throat and turned into him, grabbing his shirt and pulling him in for a kiss.

As the two sucked faces, Harper and I looked at each other. “That’s just gross,” I said.

She babbled out a sound and held up a puff for me to eat.

“My thoughts exactly,” I answered and swooped in, snagging it straight from her miniature fingers with my teeth.

She giggled.

“Why all the sudden questions about marriage, anyway?” JB asked, returning to the counter with Teagan to collect the rest of their meals. “You thinking about getting married or something?”

Since I knew he was completely joking, I went for shock value and said, “As a matter of fact, I am.”

Teagan laughed, however, not buying it as she sat at the table across from me. “Oh yeah? *When?*”

“Soon,” I countered. “Probably within the year, I’d imagine.”

Both my sister-in-law and brother blinked at each other before turning toward me in unison. “And do you have a *wife* picked out for this wedding you’re planning?” JB wondered.

With a nod, I answered, “I do, actually. I informed her of our future together just last night.”

“*Informed* her?” JB repeated in amusement as he grabbed his chin and studied me.

I shrugged and rephrased myself. “I planted the seed, anyway.”

“Are you saying you proposed *marriage* to someone? Last night?” Teagan finally demanded.

I shook my head. “Nope. Not proposed, though I might need some help from you for the actual proposal part once we get to that. I’d like it to be good.”

Teagan swiveled to gape at JB. “What is happening right now?”

“No idea,” he answered and turned to me, eyebrows lifted. “What is happening right now?”

“Pick’s worried about Chloe,” I started to explain. “She’s tired of being alone, and he thinks she might be getting too desperate. She could get herself into even worse trouble than she did this last time if she keeps lowering her standards as she has been. So he asked me to, you know, step up and do something about it.”

“Oh...for the love of God!” Teagan cried, throwing up her hands. “You’re just going to pull another Lucy, then?”

“A Lucy?” I asked, lifting my brows. “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“Apparently,” she muttered. “Since you’ve got some kind of white knight affliction stuck up your butt. You know, you

honestly *don't* need to step in and save every female in the family that goes through even a smidgeon of hardship.”

“Hey, I didn't step in and save *you* when you decided to saddle yourself with this loser.”

She sighed, not amused by the joke. “Chloe's going to get better. She'll get past this.”

“I know that,” I said, nodding solemnly.

“So what are you going to do then?” JB asked, continuing on with his wife's thought process. “When she heals and is back to herself, and you're still married to a woman you don't love?”

“See that's the thing,” I said, sitting forward and nudging Harper forward with me. “Pick didn't just ask me to marry her. He asked me to fall in love with her, too.”

“He...what?” Teagan uttered, her mouth gaping in confusion.

“Yeah,” I told her, letting her know she'd heard me correctly. “So how do I fall in love with someone?” I turned toward my brother. “How did you force yourself to fall in love with T?”

“How did I *what*?” he blustered, not understanding the question. “I *didn't* force myself to fall in love with Teagan. It just happened.”

“Oh, come on,” I insisted, certain I knew better. “Her dad chased you up a damn tree and threatened to kick your ass after catching you exiting a tent with her, carrying her bra in your hand. And you're telling me you two just conveniently fell in love together after that kind of metaphorical shotgun was pressed to your temple. Yeah, right.”

Teagan glanced over at her husband as if she agreed that I'd just made a damn fine point.

JB blinked at her helplessly before spinning back to me and narrowing his eyes. “I did *not* force myself to fall in love with her,” he reiterated.

“Then, how did it happen?” I demanded. “Because there sure as hell was never anything between you two *before* that.” I shook my head, confused before my eyes widened. “Wait. *Was* there?”

“No. Jesus.” Growling out his frustration, JB lifted his hands and waved them. “Okay...” He heaved out a breath. “There was always a special...potential there,” he admitted. “But we never did anything even remotely inappropriate. She was, you know...a do-not-go zone. And I respected that until she shattered that zone by crawling on top of me naked one night.”

Leaning toward T, I leered at her and huskily murmured, “You’re welcome for that, by the way.”

“Oh, shut up,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “You had nothing to do with it.”

“You mean, other than the fact that you thought it was *me* you were crawling on top of naked?” I reminded her.

She ground her teeth and stared straight at JB as if seeking patience from him. Then she glanced at me haughtily. “Yes, mistakes were made that night, but it’s all been straightened out in the correct order of things now. JB and I were *always* meant to happen.”

“But how do you *know* that?” I demanded.

“Because I always saw him as perfect. Irritatingly perfect. He could do no wrong in my eyes. He was just...you know...exalted, like with angel light from heaven constantly shining down on him and all that bullshit. And even though I knew each and every one of his faults, he was still too-good-to-be-true kind of awesome to me.”

“Bleh,” I answered, fake gagging over that answer. Then, turning toward my brother, I said, “Is that how *you* knew?”

“I...” He opened his mouth but looked too guilty to continue, especially when his face turned bright red. “Not...exactly,” he finally said.

“Then how?” I asked, and now, Teagan was looking at him curiously as well.

He glanced at her, then flushed deeper and turned back to me. “Okay, so you know how all the girls in our group are beautiful?”

“Sure,” I said, not following how this had anything to do with anything.

“They’re all beautiful in their own right,” JB went on. “And we were there when each of them hit puberty and turned into women.”

“Where in the hell is this going?” I asked, shaking my head in absolute confusion.

“Just shut up and listen,” JB growled. “The point is that it never phased me when one of them would start blooming and growing curves and breasts, you know. Not until Teagan did. It made me extremely uncomfortable when *she* did.”

I shrugged, unimpressed. “Well, that’s not helpful to me at all. They’ve all given me a woody at some point or another.” Batting my lashes at my sister-in-law, I murmured, “Even you.”

She cringed. “Eww.”

I turned back to my brother. “Is that all you got, then? A little sexual attraction made you fall in love with her?”

“No,” he growled, scowling at me. “I mean, it *helped*. It tipped the scales. But she was always the first I worried about when I heard one of them was in trouble. I was always just more emotionally tethered and attuned to her than anyone else...you know?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t.”

Even though, my gut lurched strangely as I spoke. I’d been way more worried about Chloe the night she’d been kidnapped than I had Lucy or her baby.

JB sighed in irritation. “Teagan’s my soul mate, okay? I don’t know how else to explain it. It just happened. It wasn’t something I had any control over.”

“No, I think that’s bullshit,” I said. “People fall in love every day because they just *want* to, and so will I.”

“Luke, you’re... I mean...” After letting out a strangled laugh, my brother shook his head helplessly. “Just... Don’t be insane. You *cannot* force yourself to fall in love with someone.”

I merely cocked an eyebrow in challenge. “Watch me.”

## 21 LUKE

I had to rush to get to work on time after my early lunch with Teagan and JB.

Being that this was my first day on my new schedule, I was kind of jazzed to learn the Pick side of things. I rubbed my hands together in anticipation as I strolled down the darkened back hall of the club and approached the open door to my boss's office.

I had been hoping I'd get to see Chloe, but it seemed that she was long gone from her visit...if she had indeed come to see her dad, which I'd bet money she had.

I'd definitely hear about it in about ten seconds, anyway.

I stepped into the doorway where Pick sat, talking on the phone to what sounded like a supplier. When he saw me, he immediately narrowed his eyes and shook his head before pointing and warning me not to take another step forward.

I jarred to a halt and playfully lifted my hands in surrender, while he murmured, "You too. Thanks again, Roger. Have a good day now." Then he hung up and rose to his feet, growling, "Nope. You're fucking fired. Get out of my club. Right now."

With a laugh, I came the rest of the way into the office. "Wow. You sure got your panties in a bunch today, boss." Plopping into the chair in front of his desk, I stretched out my legs and folded my hands behind my head. "Bad morning?"

"What the fuck part of don't tell Chloe about this conversation under any circumstances did you not understand?"

Jesus, you didn't even last a single day."

"You're the genius who told me to be *nice* to her." With a snort, I added, "If you think she didn't catch on to that shit immediately, you're delusional."

"Because you were way too obvious of an idiot about it," he accused. "Dammit, Luke. If you ruined your chance with her by doing this, I'm going to have your ass; you got me?"

"Hey, if I'm going to be her life partner like you want me to, then I'm not going to start off our relationship with a lie or deception or whatever you want to call it. At least this is open and honest." Unfolding my arms from behind my head, I spread them wide and shrugged. "I'm glad she knows."

The weird part of me was actually looking *forward* to the added challenge.

My boss groaned. "She's going to make it as impossible as she can for you now, butting heads with you and refusing to soften in the slightest."

I snorted. "She's *already* doing that."

"Well, it's about to get fifty times worse. She's not going to believe anything you say to her, convinced you're lying or forcing yourself to do something you don't want to do."

"Don't worry," I swore solemnly. "I'll make sure she sees that I'm in no way being forced and I'm sure as shit not pretending anything. Before long, she'll remember that I'm brutally honest Luke and therefore *incapable* of playing pretend with my emotions. I got this, boss. Just chill."

Pick released a breath and sat on the corner of his desk, clasping his hands as he studied me thoughtfully. I merely stared back, letting him see whatever it was that he was looking for.

And soon enough, he nodded—slow at first but then he gained some emphasis—and he seemed much calmer. "Okay, you're right," he said, lifting his hands in acceptance. "If you want to do this your way; you should do it your way. I've interfered enough. And I trust you."



It startled me how easily I'd pacified him. I even squinted suspiciously, searching for some ulterior motive from him. But all he did was slap his thighs as if that was settled, then he rose to walk back around behind his desk.

"So Nightclub Management 101..." he started, diving into business without another word about his daughter.

I blinked at the sudden switch, then shrugged and sat forward as he opened the books to explain how everything was entered.

Alright, then, I realized. I guess he really *did* want me to do this relationship thing with Chloe in my own way.

Sweet.

For some reason, that made me feel better about the whole situation.

Not that I'd been worried, to begin with.

I knew everyone who wasn't Pick thought it was a horrible idea, and I should feel as if my freedom was being stripped and I should hate and resent what was happening. But oddly enough, I was kind of *into* it.

I really had been okay with being a bachelor up until, well, Pick asked me not to be one. I hadn't felt an itching need to put down roots and find myself a life partner, but now that the seed had been planted, I was growing mightily curious about it all. Because trying it with *Chloe* made it sound...fun.

Marriage had never sounded fun to me before.

It was like a dad who'd just taken down the finest bottle of scotch off the top shelf to give his obedient ten-year-old their first sip. You never let yourself imagine what it would taste like until that amber-filled glass was being handed to you, and then it was all, bam, you felt as if you were suddenly a big shot who'd just been handed the keys to the kingdom.

I'd just never realized *Chloe* might be my kingdom. But now that I'd been handed an opportunity with her, I definitely wanted to see where this went because I had a strange feeling I was going to like the prize at the end.

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BY THE TIME I clocked out at eight, I was exhausted.

Like, more exhausted than I was after closing a bar at two and then cleaning up until three in the morning.

But the mental strain of administrative duties mixed with the physical rush of slinging drinks and dealing with customers had worn me down.

What was worse, Chloe's place was quiet and dark when I got there, which immediately freaked me out.

Pausing in the front entrance after opening the door, I peered around the dark and quiet front room, knowing immediately that she was gone. There was just an absence of Chloe in the air. And it made anxiety race up the back of my neck.

I'd been doing better with all that shit lately. And it had been nice.

But the way it spiked now made an almost-immediate tension headache crop up.

"Chloe?" I called as I walked the rooms, even though I knew she wouldn't answer. "Hello?"

Finally, I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed her number.

It took her three rings to answer, which was three too many for my taste. "Are you okay?" I demanded immediately. "Where are you?"

"Uh..." She seemed taken aback by the abrupt questions and was slow to answer, "I'm having supper with Julian and Nia. Why?"

"Oh." I sat on the edge of her bed and bowed my face as I rubbed at the aching point on my temples. "You weren't home. I freaked out."

“Why are you—oh! That’s right. You’re only working until eight these days,” she answered herself. “I forgot.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So I’m alone at your place now, and it’s getting more and more tempting by the second to start digging through your drawers and find out what you hide under your underwear.”

“Go through my drawers, and I slaughter you,” she warned.

“Shh,” I said, beginning to grin, and already feeling better from just hearing her voice and knowing she was okay. “Don’t worry. You’ll never know I was there.”

“Lord,” she groaned. “Why did I give you a key to my place again?”

“Because I wheedled and begged and didn’t shut up about it until you finally gave in,” I reminded her cheerfully. Kind of how I planned to get her to marry me, too. Then, I added, “Hey. You mind if I order myself a pizza?”

“Do I mind...?” she repeated slowly as if she was sure she’d misheard me. Then, “Did you seriously just ask for my permission to buy yourself a pizza?”

“No.” I frowned because when she said it that way, it sounded wrong. I could order myself a damn pizza if I wanted to. “I was just...” Shit. What *had* I been doing? “I have no idea what the fuck I was doing,” I muttered. “Bye.” And I hung up.

An hour later, I was kicked back in the recliner in Chloe’s front room with my feet up and a movie playing when the lock in the entrance clicked. A moment later, the door opened and Chloe entered.

She paused when she saw me.

I waved with the slice of pizza I was holding. “Hey! Welcome.”

Tipping her head slightly, she squinted and answered with a slow, “Hey... I didn’t realize you were going to eat your pizza *here*.”

“Yep,” was all I said, before taking a bite. Then, with my mouth full, I asked, “How was *your* supper, dear?”

Chloe grimaced at the question and stepped the rest of the way inside before closing the door behind her. “Nia’s been experimenting with kale lately,” she answered as she hung her purse on a hook where she usually left it.

“Bleh,” I said, wincing for her as I finished my slice.

Kale did not sound fun, especially since Nia was famous for making really good, fattening desserts.

I lifted my half-empty box when Chloe’s gaze drifted that way and temptation glittered in her eyes. “Want some of this?”

She took a moment to draw closer to it and salivate before slowly shaking her head. “No, I... I really can’t. I already used my cheat meal for the week with the bacon and mimosa and —”

“Cheat meal?” I cried. “Are you fucking kidding me? You’re not still extreme dieting, are you? Woman, your body is in prime condition. Eat some damn pizza.”

“I only look like this because I watch my weight, eat healthy, and exercise religiously,” she told me with a roll of her eyes.

“Oh, Jesus,” I muttered. Fed up with the direction of this conversation, I gripped her wrist and commanded, “Come here.”

“What—?” She started in confusion as I drew her forward, closer to where I lounged in the chair. Then she yelped out a startled scream as I jerked her off-balance and she went tumbling right into my lap. “Luke!”

I slapped a playful hand high onto her thigh as soon as she plopped onto my legs, and I gave it a squeeze.

“Oh, shit, yeah,” I told her, nodding. “You could definitely handle growing a little more cushion there for a guy to gain maximum gripping power. Being healthy’s nice, but I recommend extending your cheat day from one to *two* a week...at the very least.”

Chloe blinked at me.

I half expected her to jack me in the jaw for getting so fresh with her. With the hot-and-cold treatment she'd been giving me lately, it could clearly go either way.

But all she did was blink at me with a dry, unimpressed stare before lifting her eyebrows. "Is that your professional, medical opinion, then?"

"Sure," I answered with a cheeky nod, running my palm down her thigh toward her knee because it seemed as if she wouldn't make me stop touching her if my hand was in a more respectable place. "Dr. Luke knows best, and he says *eat*." I set the pizza box on her lap so we could both reach it.

"You are such a bad influence," she muttered grumpily and reached into the box before pulling out a slice for herself.

When she took a bite, I grinned and watched her haul her legs up over the side of the chair's armrest to get more comfortable where she was. Once settled how she wanted to be, she took a big bite from the end of her pizza and distractedly kicked off her shoes before swinging her feet happily and turning her attention to the movie.

"Oh God." She grimaced as her gaze focused on the screen. "Please don't tell me you're actually watching this."

"I was *trying* to," I said as I picked out a new slice for myself. "Can't seem to get into it, though. Why? Have you seen it?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

I sighed because that probably meant she was going to get up and leave soon, and I kind of liked her there, kicking back in my lap.

My fingers tightened fractionally on her knee, loath to let her go.

"Don't tell me," I said. "Let me guess. That guy there that she's on the date with is actually the murderer who's been stalking her, but *she's* going to end up killing him in the end."

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Like that was even hard to figure out.”

“Whatever,” I said, blowing her off because my movie plot-twisting skills were spot on, and they were entertaining as fuck, no matter how much she wanted to pretend they weren’t. “I bet she...” But my voice trailed off when they cut to another scene of the heroine relaxing in one of those classic, claw-footed old-timey bathtubs. “Hey, she’s got your bathtub.”

“Yeah.” Chloe sighed wistfully. “That tub is the very reason I bought this place, you know.”

I made a face. “Because it was like the one in this weird-ass, boring movie?”

“No.” She rolled her eyes and nudged my arm. “Because I wanted to take a bubble bath in it just like she is. You know, put on some soft music, light a few candles, pour a glass of wine, and just...soak all my problems away.”

“Huh,” I murmured, nodding my head. “Yeah, I could totally see you doing that. But wait...” I nudged her arm right back. “You haven’t done that since you came back from your parents’,” I realized. “Not that I’ve noticed, anyway. I bet you’re about due for a nice, long soak.”

She sniffed and shook her head. “Actually, I’ve never gotten around to using it for a bath yet.”

“*What?*” I gaped at her. “You gotta be fucking kidding me. Haven’t you lived here for, like, three or four years already?”

“Four and a half,” she answered. “But I...”

When her eyes went sad, I softly said, “You what?”

She rolled her eyes and flushed. “Nothing. It’s stupid.”

“Oh. Well, now you have to tell me.”

She hissed out an aggravated breath. “I don’t know. I just always pictured myself in there *with* someone, you know. It seems too lonely to take one by myself.”

My brow furrowed. “And you never tried it out with one of those guys you dated?”

Chloe scowled at me. “You make it sound as if there were hordes. I haven’t dated *that* many men.”

“Of course not,” I agreed easily. “And it wouldn’t matter if you had. But regardless... You should get to take your dream bubble bath.” I took the pizza box off her lap and set it on the side table before lowering the footrest. “So up you go,” I announced. “We’re breaking in that bathtub. Tonight.”

Chloe snorted. “Yeah, right. I am *not* getting naked with you.”

With a shrug, I said, “I mean, you’d be missing out on that count. I look damn fine naked. But if you insist; fine. Whatever. We can keep our underwear on. Or you could put on a bathing suit. Fuck... Wear that. I don’t care.”

“I’m not taking a bath with clothes on, either,” she cried, aghast.

“We’re not going to take a bath at all,” I argued with a grin. “We’re *soaking*. And relaxing. It’ll be like sitting in a hot tub. So come on... Save me from this movie already.”

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AND THAT’S HOW I talked Chloe into taking a bath with me.

She didn’t have any bubble bath soap, though.

So while she ran out to the corner store, I found some candles in the top drawer of one of her kitchen cabinets. She also had half a bottle of wine sitting in her fridge. I grabbed that too, plus a pair of wineglasses, and headed to her master bath, where her deep, claw-footed tub sat, waiting.

I had all the candles set out, the wine poured, and some soft classic rock playing on my phone when she returned. I was just lighting the last candle when she appeared in the doorway.

Stopping short, she blinked at me and said, “I didn’t think you were going to do *everything* I mentioned.”

I shrugged. “Why not? All this was the dream, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Then get those bubbles over here, and let’s do this.”

I turned on the water and slotted the plug in the drain.

When she remained standing at the bathroom entrance, I motioned for the soap. “Which scent did you get us?”

Chloe tossed the bottle to me underhanded, and after catching it, I turned over the container until the label was facing up. “Lavender?” I glanced up to blink at her. “I’m going to smell like fucking lavender?”

She shrugged, and the hint of an evilly gleeful grin poked through her sober expression. “It was either that, bubble gum, strawberry, grape, or rose.”

I took a moment to imagine the horror of smelling like any of the other scents, and then I nodded. “Lavender it is.”

After uncapping the bottle, I ungracefully dumped half the bubble bath in with the running water that was starting to steam up and fog the entire bathroom.

“Go ahead and get into your bubble bathing clothes,” I told Chloe, not even glancing over. “We’re almost ready here.”

She hesitated a moment, then turned away to disappear from the room.

As soon as she was gone, I glanced toward the spot where she’d been standing, wondering how I was getting her to agree to all this. The angry girl from yesterday never would’ve gone for it. Neither would the snide woman from before her kidnapping. But apparently, there was a fine line in there that I could balance on and get along with her. I just had to remember not to be too nice or she’d revolt and get mad at me. And I couldn’t be too rude or inconsiderate or she’d get pissed and yell at me.

But I had this now. I’d hit her sweet spot, and I was going to make the best of it while I was there.

Pulling off my shirt, I tossed it to the side and unzipped my jeans.



Once I shed the pants, I kicked them over with the shirt and glanced down at the black boxer briefs I was left wearing. I wanted to strip those off too. Getting into a bath with any kind of clothes on just felt weird to me, but I didn't want to freak Chloe out, so I stepped into the warm, bubbly water and hissed out a breath of pleasure as soothing liquid warmth immediately wrapped around my ankles and massaged my toes.

God, this was going to feel good, whether I was wearing underwear or not.

I sat and started groaning before my ass even settled in. "Oh, motherfucker," I sighed. "Yes... Now that hits the spot."

Resting my arms along the lip of the tub, I tilted my head back, closed my eyes, and released a long breath. Running water continued to pour out onto one of my shoulders and the rising level of bubbles bumped against my chest and brushed the bottom of my chin. I blew at it from the side of my mouth to keep it out of my face.

Yep, I could get used to this.

Sensing her watchful gaze on me, I opened my eyes to find her wearing what she usually wore to bed, shorty shorts and a tight tank top thing with spaghetti straps. The way she held her hands behind her back and timidly drew on the top of one foot with the big toe of the other made me send her a lazy smile. Only Chloe could make shy and adorable look sexy as hell.

"Yeah, this place was a good purchase," I said. "For the tub alone."

"You're wearing underwear, right?" she finally said.

My grin turned wolfish. "Why don't you come over here and find out?"

But Chloe only scowled. "Luke," her voice warned.

I sighed. "Yes. I'm wearing underwear. Did you want this end, or are you okay with that one?"

"I want this one," she said and finally came forward. "No faucet in my way down here."

I figured. That's why I had taken the end I was at.

As she lifted her foot to step into the tub with me, my gaze got caught on her bare toes. They were painted a light purple. But then they disappeared into bubbles, and I just kept moving my attention up, over her ankles, along shapely calves, to her thighs, and up until I came to the hem of her shorts.

From there, I looked straight up at her face and found her watching me right back. We kept eye contact until she was fully seated in the water on the opposite side of the tub as me. I moved to the side to give her room, but her hip still brushed against my foot and our legs slid past each other until her purple-painted toes were right up by my thigh.

I exhaled through my nose and was doubly glad for all the bubbles because they successfully hid just how aroused all this was making me.

"Nice, right?" I said and lifted my brows, seeking her approval.

Her expression turned stern as if she might frown, but she didn't quite manage it. All she did was say, "Shh..." and leaned her head back before closing her eyes. Thick lashes rested on the tops of porcelain cheeks, and her thin nostrils flared slightly, telling me she was breathing in the soothing lavender aroma.

When she released a breath and her lips parted slightly, my cock thickened painfully in my shorts. God, but the urge to slide my dick into that mouth mounted. My hands gripped the edge of the tub for moral support.

If her toes moved just another half a foot up into my lap, she'd know just how much I wanted her right now. I turned off the water since it was high enough, and the room fell quiet. The occasional lap of water against the sides of the tub only seemed to turn me on more. I shifted, trying to make more room in my shorts.

A moment later, Chloe's brow puckered. "Feels weird wearing clothes in the bath," she said, keeping her eyes shut without suspecting a thing about my current predicament.

“We can always take them off,” I offered playfully.

Chloe finally opened her eyes to scowl at me.

I scooped up a handful of bubbles and blew them at her. They only made it halfway across the tub and got nowhere near her, but she still batted at them to protect her face. “Behave.”

With a chuckle, I countered, “What’s the fun in that?” And I lifted my foot enough to disrupt the bubbles covering her chest.

As they heaved upward, she sputtered at them and shoved them away. “Luke!”

“What? I’m being playful.”

“We’re supposed to *relax*.” She scolded, even as she lifted her foot from the water and pinched my armpit hair between her toes.

“Hey!” With a laugh, I shifted my shoulder back and dropped my arm to protect myself. Then I lifted an impressed eyebrow her way. “How the hell did you do that, anyway?”

“I have awesome toe dexterity,” she said simply.

“Huh.” I lifted my foot from the water and tried to grab a piece of her hair off her shoulder with my second and big toe. But I had no such luck. As I plopped my ankle back into the suds with a huff, Chloe laughed at my failure.

I scowled at her and nudged her hip with my foot under the water. “Okay, I can’t just sit here,” I said before practically whining, “I need to *do* something.”

She groaned and lifted one of her toes above the water again. “Fine. Massage my feet.”

I don’t think she intended for me to actually comply because when I wrapped my hand around her ankle and then cupped her foot in my other hand, applying immediate pressure to her heel, she gasped, and her leg jerked.

“I know, right,” I said, waggling my brows and letting my voice go husky. “I give great foot massages, don’t I?”

Her throat worked as she swallowed, and I could see her cheek suck in when she bit the inside of her lip, trying to hide her reaction from me. But then her eyes rolled up and she let her head fall back again before a whimper slipped out.

I had to grind my teeth in restraint as I watched her. Fucking hell, though, I suddenly wanted to know what she looked like when she had a man inside her, stroking against the most intimate nerve endings in her body just the way she liked it most.

That's it. I needed to be closer.

So I abruptly asked, "Can I wash your hair?"

## 22 LUKE

Chloe's eyes flew open. Frowning slightly, she lifted her head and said, "What?"

I shrugged. "I'm curious what it's like. I've never had that much hair to wash before." I let my grin turn mischievous. "I gotta know if that's what *really* makes you take so long in the shower every morning, or if you just like to hog the water."

"It's my damn shower!" she cried defensively. "I pay the water bill. I should get to take as long as I want in there."

I chuckled and waved a hand at her. "Come on. Just let me experiment. Slide over here and turn around."

"Fine," she muttered in defiance. "Now you can learn just how much rinsing it actually takes to get all the soap out."

When she started to slide my way, I sat up straighter and held my breath, shifting my legs around so she could sit between my thighs.

Chloe turned and all kinds of her naked flesh brushed against all kinds of mine under the water. I mean, it was mostly knees and legs and feet, but still...I hissed out a breath, enjoying the contact.

Once she was situated with her knees up toward her chest and her back to me, she grabbed the glass of the wine I'd poured for her and took a slow drink. I swallowed, glad she was closer to me, but I was even more relieved that she couldn't see every expression I made now.

Grabbing a bottle of shampoo, I held it out in front of her. “This one?”

She nodded. “Mm-hmm,” she said and set the wineglass down before hugging her knees.

“Perfect,” I murmured. After setting the shampoo back down, I grabbed an empty pitcher sitting nearby. It was purely for display and had some long-stem fake flowers sitting in it, but I tipped them out, letting them spill to the floor beside the tub. Then I dipped the pitcher in the bubble bath and filled it with water before lifting it to pour carefully onto the back of Chloe’s hair.

As the blond locks became drenched and turned darker, I caught the wet strands between my fingers and slowly hand-combed the silken tresses.

I dipped the pitcher again, and murmured, “Tip your head back,” in a rough voice that I tried to keep polite, but it was full of too much sensual, heated lust to behave properly.

Stupid voice.

I cleared my throat as she obeyed, letting her head fall back under my command. But damn, damn, damn... I was already picturing her being this compliant and willing in bed, where we were both naked and panting.

My hand shook a little as I poured the water over her head, making sure it streamed down the back of her hair and didn’t get into her face. I followed it with my palm, petting her locks until I was satisfied. Then I reached for the shampoo and began to lather suds into the wet strands, massaging her scalp as I went.

Chloe straight up groaned, and I nearly came in my shorts.

“Like that?” I whispered, leaning forward to ask into her ear.

She shuddered from the puff of my breath on the side of her neck, then nodded.

I stayed that close behind her, wondering...

What if I made a move?

Would she rebuff me and kick me out of her house completely? Or would she accept it? I was torn and honestly too afraid to even try.

I couldn't remember ever wanting anyone as much as I wanted her right now, but... I needed to move carefully on this. If I made the slightest wrong action, I could fail and lose any chance to make future moves as well.

When I caught a glimpse of the front of her chest over her shoulder and saw that her nipples were hard and pressing against the wet cloth of her tank top, I swallowed. She definitely wasn't cold. It was fucking hot in here; sweat was beading along my brow. So the only explanation left for hard nipples was arousal.

Right?

God, I hoped so.

Closing my eyes after I grabbed the pitcher and filled it with more water, I took a breath to build up my nerve, then I opened my lashes and began to pour slowly, combing her hair with my fingers as I rinsed. Then I just kind of kept stroking my fingers down over her shoulder and along the side of her arm until they disappeared into the bubbles.

Leaning in closer and keeping my face directly behind hers, I tipped my head down just enough to rest my forehead on the back of her hair. My fingers gently sifted through a couple more wet strands before I murmured, "God, you smell good."

And that's what did it.

She jolted like a frightened colt and then rushed to stand up, water pouring off her in sheets.

"I think I'm done," she announced abruptly as I pulled back in surprise. Then, grabbing a towel, she wrapped it around her securely and stepped out of the tub, leaving me behind.

Mouthing the word *fuck*, I bowed my head and then gritted my teeth.

I'd gone too far.

*Stupid, idiot Luke*, I silently berated myself. I'd been getting so goddamn close, and then I just had to go and bungle it, didn't I?

I wanted to pound my forehead a couple of times against the edge of the tub in self-punishment.

Only an inconsiderate, horny jackass would try to get fresh with a woman who was still recovering from what Chloe was still recovering from. She had fully thought Freston was going to rape and then kill her. Sex had to be the *last* thing on her mind. And yet there I'd been, trying to push it on her like the idiot I was.

When I glanced up, Chloe was still in the room, poised in the opening and staring at me with narrowed eyes that saw too much.

I didn't even bother to apologize. She could see the regret on my face.

With a bitter sniff, she hardened her jaw and left.

"Stupid," I hissed to myself. I was stupid, stupid, stupid. Things had been going well. I'd found her sweet spot. All I'd needed to do was just fucking *stay* there. Why the hell had I pushed for more?

Savagely pulling the plug on the drain, I continued to sit in the tub as the water level lowered around me. Bubbles clung to my legs and the side of the cast iron, unable to let go of the fun time *they'd* been having.

But I told them, "It's over, fellas. Pack it up and move on." And then I started to rinse them away with cold water.

After cleaning the drained tub and blowing out the candles, I dried off and shucked my wet underwear before jerking on the jeans to go commando. Then, I yanked on the shirt with a couple of savage, bitter tugs, and I swooped up the wineglasses, draining them both with two hearty swallows.

I fully planned to return the empty glasses to the kitchen, but the moment I stepped from the bathroom, something huge



came flying at my head.

Okay, fine. It was probably aimed more at my chest, but from the corner of my eye, it felt a lot like it was going to take my damn noggin off.

“Whoa!” I dodged out of the way, barely missing getting hit by a boot box. It slapped against Chloe’s dresser instead and fell to the floor, where two brand-new, fancy boots spilled across the carpet toward my feet. I blinked at them a moment before looking up and across the room, where an irate Chloe was standing in the doorway to her closet, apparently just having discovered the new boots I’d stashed in there for her to find.

She slapped her hands onto her hips and hardened her jaw with accusation.

“What the fuck?” I roared, gaping at her.

“Did you buy me new boots?” she demanded as if I’d just killed her favorite pet or something.

“Yes, I bought you new boots,” I snapped back. “Why is that bad?”

She sniffed acerbically and shook her head. “Because I don’t *want* presents from you. Or special bubble baths to make me feel important. It’s fake. It’s all just...fake.”

“The fuck if it is,” I started, beginning to get pissed.

But she just kept railing. “This ends now.” Pointing toward the floor sternly, she growled, “You’re going to stop this stupid, insane mission of trying to marry me. Right now.”

I lifted my brows at her command, then met her gaze calmly and set the empty wineglasses on the dresser top beside me before saying, “No.”

Surprise glittered in her eyes, but then they just as quickly frosted. “Then get out of my house.” This time, she pointed toward the door. “Go! You are no longer welcome here.”

I merely sniffed and repeated, “No.”

Chloe growled and stomped her foot. “Get out. Right now. Or I’m calling the police and telling them I have a trespasser.”

My lips parted as the breath left my lungs. Then, I gritted my teeth and shook my head. “You are such an aggravating pain in the ass,” I told her bitterly. “So I bought you a pair of fucking boots. You lost yours; they meant a lot to you. How was that so fucking evil of me to want to replace them for you? Were they the wrong size or something?”

“No,” she snapped irritably. “They’re perfect. That’s not the point.”

“Then what’s the damn point?” I shouted. “Because I don’t understand any of this.”

“I don’t...want...*gifts*...from you,” she shouted back. “Do you understand *that*? I don’t want kind words or nice deeds. I don’t want anything. Nothing.”

“Fine. You don’t want anything from me. Then why are you letting me stay here *at all*?” I argued.

“I’m not! If you haven’t noticed, I’m trying to throw you out, right fucking now. So why aren’t you just *going*?”

“Because I’m *trying*!” I cried, beyond exasperated. “I’m trying to do everything right, but no matter what I do, you just keep slapping me back down. So what am I doing that’s so wrong?” Shoulders slumping and anger draining because this struggle to please her, but always failing, had worn me down. I whispered, “What did I do wrong?”

She blinked at me once, and then her eyes filled with immediate tears. Her chin started to tremble, she hugged herself, and the angry fire in her instantly cooled as this broken expression seized her.

“Nothing,” she finally rasped, right before a heavy sob captured her, making her entire chest seize. “That’s the problem,” she wept openly. “Everything you do is amazing, and I can’t handle it. I can’t go through this again. My heart just can’t take it. So I need you to stop. I...I...I just need it to stop, okay? *Please*... Stop.”

I pulled back, startled by her reaction.

Chloe's face turned red as she looked at me, her gaze pleading. Then she began to visibly tremble, and she backed away before her knees gave out.

Slipping to the floor, she landed on the carpet at the base of the bed and curled into herself, hugging her knees and burying her face between them as she sobbed openly.

"Not again. Please..." she begged.

It literally hurt to watch her like this.

"Chloe?" I asked cautiously, but she was beyond hearing me.

Not sure what the hell to do, I stepped forward and stopped. But she didn't even seem to notice I was there, so I went the rest of the way to her and sank to my knees beside her. Turning to press my back to the end of the bed until I was sitting next to her, I stayed there for a minute, simply letting her cry it out.

But I couldn't handle that for long, so I gently took her arm and coaxed her into turning toward me. "Hey. Come here." When she did without any resistance, I tugged her into my lap, and I wrapped my arms around her, absorbing every tremble and sob she had left in her.

I didn't release a breath until she gripped my forearm and held on tightly. Then I exhaled gratefully and rested my cheek against the top of her damp hair, and I just held her through the torrent.

Minutes passed, and she let her moment run its course. I waited until she went limp against me and was just lying there, no longer sniffing. Then I whispered, "I never meant to make you cry."

Chloe looked up at me, and it broke my damn heart to see her eyes so red and still damp, her lashes clogged from tears, her nose full-on Rudolph, and her expression packed with loss.

"You didn't," she swore. "This is all me. I just... I'm still struggling to get over this kidnapping thing right now," she tried to explain, her voice hoarse from the crying. "And I'm still terrified most of the time, but I'm making it through. I'm

getting better, but I'm not... I'm not fully healed. I just wish you hadn't heaped this on me, too, in the middle of all that?"

"So I..." Wincing at my ineptness, I guessed, "I pushed too fast?"

"You pushed...period," she said. "There could never be either too fast or too slow. Not from you. I don't want you trying. At all. *Ever.*"

I opened my mouth to reply, but then I realized I had no idea what to say to that. The words, *not from you*, kept echoing through my head, though. She made it sound as if this decree only applied to me. Like any other guy could try with her, but she couldn't stomach *me* trying.

I swallowed, a little hurt by that theory, so I decided to believe it was wrong, and instead, I quietly admitted, "I don't understand."

Chloe heaved out a heavy breath, letting me know there was a lot to explain but she didn't want to. Then she met my gaze, and her eyes were so sad that my stomach cramped with worry.

"You never knew this," she finally said and glanced away to wipe her face. "But I... I had a crush on you when I was younger."

My mouth opened, but words failed me, so I shut my trap and stayed quiet.

She glanced at me and furrowed her brow suspiciously. "You don't look surprised."

"Oh," I breathed, only to wince. "I, uh..." I shrugged a shoulder. "Well, your dad tried to tell me something along those lines when he talked me into this whole fiasco, but I... I don't know if I necessarily *believed* him."

"So you didn't know...back then?"

"Back then?" I snorted. "Fuck no."

"Well, I *did* like you," she admitted openly. "And it put every crush I'd ever had before that to shame." With a dry,

humorless laugh, she glanced up at the ceiling and whispered, “I thought I was freaking in love with you.”

My lips parted and then my eyebrows lifted because I hadn’t been expecting her to throw the *love* word out there. “Oh.”

Hearing it from her lips—in connection to me—hit me strangely. It made my skin buzz with awareness, and my breath stuttered from my lungs erratically. It just felt so heavy and big, as if I’d just been awarded something monumental, and I wasn’t sure if it was the ultimate gift of a lifetime or something that bore more responsibility than I could reasonably carry.

I just knew hearing the word *love* from Chloe’s mouth changed...everything.

“W-why did you never tell me?” I managed to ask in a raspy voice, hoping she didn’t hear it tremble.

“Because it was freaking embarrassing,” she mumbled, still looking away and wiping at her eyes again. “You didn’t look at me like that, and no matter what I did to try to get your attention, you never really saw me.”

“Well... You didn’t try crawling on top of me naked,” I tried teasing, giving her a lighthearted grin. “And as I recall, that worked pretty well for my brother and T.”

Chloe sent me a dry glower and sniffed. “I love Teagan, but honestly, what she did felt like entrapment to me. I always had this sense that JB never had a chance to turn her down, you know. After the family found them together, they were basically *stuck*. And I...I wasn’t like that. I wanted you to notice me because you just *noticed* me and *wanted* me. Not because you were forced into it. I *never* wanted you to be forced.”

“But I...” I shook my head and laughed nervously. “To be honest, I never thought I was *allowed* to look at any of the girls in our group that way. You were firmly placed in a do-not-go zone, as my brother calls it, and I respected and cared for you *far* too much to even consider crossing that line.”

“*Beau* didn’t feel that way,” she argued, her eyes big with sadness and still dewy and wet from crying. “He would’ve been in the same situation as you, but he couldn’t help but fall for Bentley, anyway, no matter how taboo he thought it was. So I thought I should get that too.”

I shook my head, not sure how to argue with her, even though I felt like I should.

Meanwhile, Chloe kept talking.

“I thought that if someone loved me, it’d be obvious. He would show it in everything he did. And you never looked at me the way he looked at her. You never sought me out in a crowd, never paid me special attention unless I made sure I was right there, in your face, where you couldn’t avoid me. I just was not *it* for you. And that’s okay. It’s not your fault. I know you have no control over who you fall in love with. But it helped show me more than anything that you just *cannot* love me back.”

I didn’t like hearing this, so I shook my head and muttered, “Bullshit.” Then I looked up into her eyes. “Fine, I’m not like Beau,” I reasoned. “But what about—”

“Luke,” she cut me off softly, her sympathetic expression making me stop talking immediately. Then she shook her head. “It’s fine,” she assured me. “I wanted to know without a shadow of a doubt, and now I do. You *don’t* love me. And that is why I’m not going to let you keep doing this. You’re just being forced into it, and even if I did agree and go along with it, you’d only grow to resent and hate me for it. So this ends, here and now. Alright? While we’re still friends.”

“No!” I insisted. “Because I’m not like Beau. I’m a fucking Hamilton. And we’re stupid, clueless men who don’t realize it’s okay to love a woman until there’s a glaring, neon light, pointing down at her head with sirens blaring to approve it. Don’t you understand? I thought you were *forbidden*. And I cared way too much about you to let myself even *consider* crossing a line with you. But now that I know I *can* and am allowed to and even fucking encouraged to, why won’t you at least let me consider it and explore the possibility?”

“Because you broke my fucking heart!” she cried.

I pulled back, startled, and immediately let go of her when she pushed against my chest, demanding freedom. Breathing erratically, she climbed off my lap and stood so she could pace her room.

I watched her walk and collect herself until she glanced at me irritably and finally said, “You just don’t get it. You *can’t* get it. You have no idea what it’s like. You’ve never been in love. You’ve never had your heart broken. And let me tell you, it doesn’t just break once. It breaks over and over and over again, in new and painful ways you never expect. Every time you see that person... Every time you think about that person... God, every time you *smell* something that reminds you of them or you hear someone laugh who laughs like them...the heartbreak... It just starts all over again, fresh from the beginning. And I’m sorry, but every time my heart has broken—like, truthfully been crushed to pieces by someone—it’s always been from *you*. And it’s the worst pain in the world.”

I stared at her, trying to absorb what she’d just told me, but I couldn’t seem to accept it. It just sounded wrong to my ears.

I’d never meant to hurt Chloe. So how in the hell had I managed to hand her the *worst pain in the world*?

“Well...” I murmured and tipped my head back against the bed so I could gaze up at her ceiling fan. “Fuck.”

I’d just been getting into the idea of pursuing her and falling for her and just...spending the rest of my life with her, too. I honestly could not conceive of doing that with anyone else. And *not* doing it at all suddenly seemed...lonely. And miserable.

“The only way I learned to deal with it,” Chloe explained, twisting the knife even deeper, “was to be as mean and nasty toward you as I could and convince myself that I hated you until eventually... I moved on. But I’m officially done where you’re concerned. I’m truly sorry, but no... I’m not going through that again. Never. Ever. Again. There is no future for us. At all.”

I opened my mouth. Then shut it. When I nodded to agree with her, my stomach felt sour, and I thought I might vomit. But I couldn't put her through that again, either.

She breathed out a sigh of relief and closed her eyes briefly, her shoulders falling an inch as she exhaled. "Thank you."

Then she opened her eyes. "And with that said, I think you should go home tonight."

"What?" Panic instantly filled my throat, and I surged to my feet to stand with her, already opening my mouth to object. "But—"

Chloe lifted a hand. "I'm doing better, and you haven't had a nightmare since the first time."

I lifted a finger to point out that I hadn't had any nightmares *because* I'd been sleeping next to her every night. Except, she shook her head. "I've gotten up numerous times during the night since then, and it's never woken you. You're getting better, too. We *can* sleep apart."

Okay, maybe we could. But now, I just didn't *want* to. I didn't want to be anywhere but next to her.

I knew I didn't have a case to argue my side, aside from the fact that I just *wanted* to stay, though, so I shut my mouth and looked at her, silently pleading for her to change her mind.

She suddenly looked worn out and tired. With a sigh, she rubbed her forehead and said, "Please, just... Go home, Lucian."

And that was the kill shot.

I couldn't argue with her anymore.

For a moment, I thought I was going to bawl like a big baby, but I managed to hold it together and nod. "Okay," I whispered. "Okay."

I had lost. I'd lost big. Honestly, it kind of felt as if I'd just lost everything.



It fucking sucked, too. In fact, I thought I might've even seen a glimmer of that *worst pain in the world* symptom that she'd spoken of.

But I agreed to go because I couldn't hurt her anymore.

## 23 CHLOE

I felt drained and lost after Luke left. He had kept glancing at me as he'd shoved his clothes in the overnight bag he'd been living out of for weeks. Then he paused and glanced slowly around the room after he hefted the strap over his shoulder as if he needed a moment to say goodbye to the place.

Finally, he strode to me and pulled me into his arms, hugging me hard.

"I know you won't call if you need anything," he said into my hair. "So I'm just going to keep checking in, okay? Don't get pissed at me. I just *need* to. I still get some anxiety when I think about you being safe. It doesn't have anything to do with this other shit. I just... I need to."

"Okay," I whispered. Then, against my own better judgment, I lifted my hand and touched his back. It wasn't a return hug, but it was something, and it caused him to shudder and suck in a hard breath.

"Bye," he mumbled, pulling away abruptly and keeping his face down so I wouldn't see his expression as he turned away and walked out of my bedroom.

With the absence of his warm, solid body against mine, I hugged myself and listened to his footsteps in the hall. It wasn't until I heard the front door shut that I was able to whisper, "Bye," back to him. Then I reversed until the backs of my knees hit the bed.

When I sank onto the mattress, I covered my mouth with my hands and started to cry all over again.

But this was all wrong. Pushing him away wasn't supposed to hurt. Dammit, I'd pushed him away so it *wouldn't* hurt. So why the hell did it hurt so much?

"I fucked up, didn't I?" I asked myself, only to nod, answering, *yes. Yes, I had.*

It took me a long time to fall asleep, and when I did, it was restless and unpleasant. When I finally passed out hard near dawn, it felt as if I barely had any sleep before a thud woke me.

Jerking awake with a gasp, I bolted upright on the bed and clutched my sheets to my chest. "H-hello?" I called in a hoarse voice.

"Sorry," I heard Luke call back from inside the bathroom. "It's just me. I didn't mean to wake you; I knocked over that damn water pitcher when I tried to put the flowers back in it. But don't worry; it's not broken."

"Luke?" I rasped in surprise as a flood of warm relief melted my fears.

He appeared in the doorway, dressed for the day and holding another bag, this one a plastic grocery sack. "Hmm? Yeah?" he asked, glancing at me curiously.

I shook my head slowly. "What're you *doing*? Did you come back and stay the night after all?"

He sniffed and frowned over that suggestion. "No," he muttered as if insulted. Then he rolled his eyes and lifted an item from the bag. "I left my soap and toothbrush here," he said, showing them both to me before dropping them back inside. "*And* my cereal. Plus, I have no milk at home. So I popped by for breakfast. And to check in."

Leaning his shoulder against the door, he watched me closely as he asked, "So how's it going? You sleep okay?"

"Uh..." When he'd told me he was going to check in, I hadn't quite counted on it being this soon. "Y-yeah," I finally

managed to answer, lying through my teeth. “I slept fine.”

Luke snorted and folded his arms over his chest as if he was going to call me out. But then he said, “Well, kudos to you because *I* didn’t. I probably had the shittiest sleep of my life. I think you’ve officially ruined me.”

I furrowed my brow in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“I used to love to sleep alone,” he explained. “I *preferred* it. Sure, sometimes a chick would talk me into staying over here or there, but I hated sleepovers. I always itched to get back home to my own bed. Alone. Where I could hog all the sheets and sleep in any direction or position I wanted to. Until *you* came along, with your soft, curvy body, and good smell, and...and your warm...warmth. Seriously! I don’t know what it is about your bed, or if it’s just because you’re in it, but my bed no longer feels right. So yeah. I slept like hell. Thanks.”

I opened my mouth, not sure how to respond to that. Except Luke waved a hand. “But it’s whatever,” he told me. “I’ll survive.” Then he started toward the doorway that led out of my room and into the hall as he mumbled, “See you around, Ryan.”

Only to fall to a stop and spin back to me.

“How the fuck am I the only person who’s broken your heart? You’ve dated a lot of guys over the years.”

I was still trying to wake up and process what he’d just said about his new sleeping habits. I couldn’t even think about other men I’d dated.

But Luke kept looking at me as if he needed an answer.

So I cleared my throat and rubbed at my tired eyes before admitting, “I don’t know. I never thought I loved any of them.”

His gaze went intense as he watched me. “But you *did* think you loved *me*?” he asked slowly.

I hissed out a tired sigh and fell back onto my pillows, closing my eyes and wishing I could just go back to sleep. “I was stupid and young,” I mumbled. “But yeah, I *thought* so. At the time.” But obviously, I’d been wrong.

“Was I the only one?”

I lifted my head and squinted my eyes back open. “What?”

“Was I the only one you thought you loved?” he clarified.

My lips parted. I wanted to lie. I wanted to evade the question. But he was watching me so steadily, my entire body flushed, and I had to wince before sitting up fully and confessing, “Yes.”

He didn’t answer. For a moment, I was sure he wasn’t going to. But then he murmured, “Wow,” looking almost traumatized as he said it. “How...?” He paused to clear his throat before rolling his hand as he added, “How long did you have the crush?”

I wrinkled my nose and shook my head. “What’s with all the questions? It’s over and done. In the past. Way...in the past. Why does it matter now?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, looking lost. “Because it’s not in the past for me. And I’m curious. I don’t think anyone’s ever actually loved me before. I mean, like *that*. I know my family loves me with, like, *family* love, you know. But women I’ve actually dated? No. I’ve always just been the fun-time guy. Good for a couple of nights, and then, that’s it. This is... It’s kind of cool.” He shrugged almost shyly as he made the admission. “It makes me feel...” He flailed out a helpless hand as if he didn’t know which word to use before he ended with, “Important.”

“Well, sorry.” I cringed apologetically and shrugged. “But I didn’t actually *love* you. I just thought I did. Ended up, it was only a crush.”

His brow lowered thoughtfully as he nodded. Then he asked, “But you said it was the biggest crush you ever had on anyone, right?”

I groaned and fiddled my hands impatiently in my lap before admitting, “I guess.”

“So how long?” he asked again.

“Ugh,” I growled at him. “You’re not going to give up on this, are you?”

“I just want to know,” he pressed. “What’s the big deal about me knowing now? You said it’s over and done. All in the past. Can’t I just have my curiosity appeased?”

“Okay, fine. It was from early my freshman year to basically all the way through high school until the end of my senior year. Happy now?” I muttered.

But Luke didn’t look happy. His mouth fell open as he gaped at me. “No shit?” he murmured in shock. “How the hell were you able to keep it not just from me, but from *everyone* for that long?”

“Well, Trick found out,” I admitted. “And he totally blackmailed me for his silence.”

Luke scowled. “That little bastard. I can’t believe *he* knew and never told me.”

I rolled my eyes. “He got paid too well to ever tell you.”

“Motherfucker.” Luke shook his head, trying to make sense of this. Then he snapped his fingers and pointed. “Wait a second. Wait a damn second. You couldn’t have had a crush on me your entire way through high school. I distinctly remember you having a crush on Caine Spinnaker. How could you have a crush on me if you were crushing on *him*?”

“Caine Spinnaker...” I said, lifting my eyebrows in amusement at hearing that name after so many years, “was a mild, *oh, I hope he asks me to dance*, fascination,” I deadpanned. “That was early on in my freshman year. He was absolutely nothing. And then he made fun of me for being fat, so I ran off crying to the bathroom, where this beautiful and much cooler older boy found me, dried my tears, cheered me up, and totally swept me off my feet. So I forgot all about Caine, the douche, Spinnaker from that point on.”

“Holy shit...” Luke breathed, his mouth falling open. “*That’s* when your crush on me started? *That* night? I remember that night.”

It was slightly uncomfortable to tell him all this. But he already knew most of it, and maybe it would be a cathartic way to finally find some healthy closure for my old crush if I just got it all out, so I nodded and murmured, “Mm-hmm. It started that night.”

“Oh, hell,” he breathed, clutching his head. “But I didn’t... I wasn’t very romantic. I remember talking about your boobs a lot and being utterly crude. I was just being...me.”

I smiled fondly. “You were funny and charming and completely gallant.”

“Well, damn...” He seemed overwhelmed for a minute. Then a wrinkle line formed between his brow, and he looked up. “Do you know what made the crush stop?”

My stomach tightened, and my smile died flat. For some reason, I didn’t want him to know anything else. Sure, there was a cathartic release. But then there was also utter humiliation, and I was going to totally do that to myself if I told him much more.

“Chloe...?” Luke said softly.

I glanced up at him. “The, uh, the graduation party that the twins threw,” I said, my voice cracking slightly. “I, uh...” Laughing lightly at myself, I glanced down at my hands to find them twisting pieces of my blankets nervously. “I was so sure that *that night* was going to be when it finally happened. I was going to make you notice me. I’d spent the last four years losing weight to impress you, and I bought a new dress I thought you’d like...”

Lifting my face cautiously to gauge his reaction, I wasn’t at all surprised to find him looking horrified.

“Mother of God, Chloe,” he rasped, starting to breathe hard. Setting a hand on his chest, he shook his head. “Please tell me you did not lose all that weight for me. Oh...fuck. You know, that wasn’t why I never—”

“Oh, I know,” I assured him firmly. “I one hundred percent know that. I found out that night, in fact. When you showed up with Amber Galveston.”

“Amber...?” he said in surprise and straightened from the doorframe. “Shit. I forgot about her.” His eyes flared a moment later and his gaze veered to me. “Oh hell,” he breathed. “I *was* with her that night. And I talked shit about your dress and made you feel bad about losing weight. And you threw a drink at me. Holy fuck...” Clutching his head, he gaped at me for the longest moment before uttering, “You should’ve kicked me in the junk too. God...dammit, Chloe. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I had no idea you—”

“I know,” I told him. “And you didn’t do anything wrong. You have *never* done anything wrong. *I’m* the one who put these silly, little-girl expectations on you, then kept them all a secret, and *then* turned hateful and mean toward you when you didn’t live up to them. There’s absolutely nothing to blame you for. If anything, I owe *you* a huge apology.”

“Don’t you even dare,” Luke warned before he huffed out a bitter laugh and ran a hand over his hair. Then he shook his head and glanced at me regretfully. “Want to hear something utterly fucked up?”

I shrugged. I couldn’t imagine anything being more fucked up than my behavior toward him all these years, but I said, “Sure.”

“I always saw you as the sweet and adorable little sister type. You were the nice one. It wasn’t until you turned bitter and hateful toward me that I began to see you as edgy and... desirable.” With another dry, unamused chuckle, he motioned toward me. “It’s ironic, isn’t it? I had to break your heart before I wanted you in the way you needed me to, and by then, it was too fucking late. You didn’t want me back.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that; I think my heart was too busy breaking all over again.

When I merely shrugged, too numb with pain to do anything else, Luke let out another dry, pain-filled laugh. “Oh...” Clutching his head, he turned away and walked a few paces into the hall before turning around again and stepping back toward the doorway. “Hell. I’m such a prick,” he



announced. “I’m such a big, fucking prick. How the hell can you stomach to even look at me?”

I blinked, thinking that was a bit dramatic. “I...” I shook my head, confused, before blubbering, “Because you never did anything wrong,” I repeated. “You didn’t know. You—”

“I broke your heart!” he cried, gaping at me as if I was insane. “I *hurt* you. How... How can you just... You’re...” He motioned toward me as words failed him. “God, I can’t do this.” Turning away, he ran a hand over his head, then turned back. “I’m going to go. I have to go.”

“O...” I nodded, squinting in concern because he looked as if he was possibly going to have a breakdown at any moment. “Okay,” I said. I wanted to ask if he was alright, but clearly, he wasn’t. So I gushed, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“No.” He lifted a finger in warning, letting me know he wouldn’t be accepting any apologies from me. “This isn’t on you. I’m the one who... Jesus. I just... *I’m* sorry, alright? I’m so...fucking sorry. I—”

His gaze snagged on something on my nightstand. “Right,” he rasped, shaking his head as if to change gears before he motioned toward my right. “I made you some breakfast. To apologize. It’s that healthy crap you like, nothing to make you have a cheat day. But that was before I knew—God. I’m so pathetic. I break your damn heart and then think yogurt, granola, and some *fruit* are going to fix it?” He barked out a laugh. “I’m such an idiot. I should go. I need to go. I need to think.”

“Luke?” I said softly, concern thick in my voice.

His eyes looked glassy and devastated as he met my gaze. “This just sucks,” he said. Then he shook his head and kept shaking it until he pointed at me. “No. You know what? No... I got you to fall for me once. Without even trying. So I can do it again, right?”

I blinked, not at all expecting him to say *that*. “W-what?”

“I *will* do it again,” he announced with more certainty. “I’m going to make this right. I’m going to fix what I fucked

up. You just... You just watch. Everything's going to be okay. I promise."

"But..." Panic filled my chest. "No," I told him. "You said you were going to stop. Last night. You'd said you'd stop trying with me."

"I..." He froze as he realized I was right. "I did, didn't I?" When I nodded encouragingly, he winced at me. "Sorry. I... Fuck, Chloe. I'm so sorry, but I can't. I can't stop. Not *now*."

When he sent me a pleading cringe as if begging me to understand, I gaped.

"*What?* Of course, you can."

"No, I really can't."

"Why *not*?"

"Because I have to fix this," he said as if that should be obvious.

"Fix what?" I cried. "There's nothing to fix. It's over. It's done."

"The fuck if it is," he countered incredulously. "Just look at you..." He waved a vague hand in my direction. "You're still recovering from a recent trauma. You're out of work because of it, *and*... On top of all that, you're alone. Those are all things you did *not* want for your life, am I right?"

"Yeah," I agreed with a confused frown. "But all those things are because of—"

"Dax Freston," he said boldly, making me flinch over the mere name. "Exactly. A man you never would've even met if you'd already been with me. All this time, you should've just been with me. And I... Fuck..." He ran a hand through his hair, looking regretful. "I'm an idiot. That's all there is to it. I..." He glanced at me, wincing again. "But I'm going to fix it," he promised. "I'm going to fix this."

And with that, he waved a farewell before turning away yet again. But this time, he didn't come back. He strode down the hall, and a moment later, I heard him shut the front door.

“Ah, hell,” I muttered.

With a groan, I flopped back on the bed to stare up at my ceiling, not ready to go through this battle with him all over again.

Because this time, he might actually win. And he wouldn't be winning over teen-me, anymore, since *she* was clearly gone, cathartically exorcized away through my confessions last night. He'd be winning over *me-me*. Adult-Chloe.

Heaving out a breath, I sat up wearily and looked around my quiet bedroom, blinking for an overly long moment. Then I reached for the parfait he'd made me. Tears filled my eyes as I plucked the spoon from the yogurt and took a bite.

I didn't use to cry quite this much.

Before Dax had kidnapped me, I think the last time I'd all-out wept was when I'd been eighteen, and I had decided to shut my heart against Luke Hamilton.

But I'd been so raw and exposed since he'd found me in that basement. All a person had to do was look at me funny, and I was a sobbing mess. The trauma seemed to have broken open another old wound too.

Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Opening up about my childhood feelings *had* helped me flush them out. Where I could start fresh. The only problem was, now adult-me had adult-Luke to contend with. And adult-me seemed to crave adult-him as much as kid-me had craved kid-him. So *fresh* pretty much felt like an old rerun of the past.

God, what a mess.

Climbing off the bed as I continued to eat my beloved parfait, I walked barefoot to the pair of fallen boots that hadn't been touched since the night before when I'd heaved them at Luke's head.

Toeing them on, I looked down at how they appeared on me, and I kept eating my breakfast and walking around in my pajamas and new boots as I sobbed uncontrollably.

Because it had happened again.

I'd fallen for Luke Hamilton.

But this time, teen-Chloe was gone, and crushes were gone. And I was just straight up in love with him.

Except, idiot adult-him was going to try to be noble and selfless and give himself to me. But I wasn't going to allow him to settle for someone he didn't love. No matter what it took, I was going to make sure Luke got *his* happily ever after. Which was anything but me.

Which also meant I needed reinforcements.

Setting the parfait down, I plopped onto the edge of my bed and picked up my phone. After dialing a familiar number, I listened to the ring until my brother answered.

"Sup?" Trick said, already making me feel better. Stronger. More confident again.

"Hey, bubs," I greeted in a sweet, cajoling voice.

"Alright, stop right there," he cut in dryly. "I have no idea what you're going to ask for, but that tone usually means something I'm not going to like, so...no. Sorry."

"Trick..." I started with a sigh. "I just want you to take Luke out for a night. He's been driving me crazy with all this..."

Crap. That was when I remembered I hadn't told anyone about Luke's plans to marry me. And Dad wouldn't have said anything, so it was likely that Trick had no idea what I was even talking about.

"All this...what?" Trick asked, his voice taunting. "All this...*marriage* talk?"

Double crap.

"You heard."

"Oh, we've *all* heard. Luke confided to his brother about it...in front of Teagan."

I groaned. "So the whole family knows."

"Yep," my brother seemed all too happy to report.

“Right,” I concluded. “Well then...I need your help to stop Luke from pursuing this stupid mission with his usual stupid determination. I almost had him talked out of it—I was this freaking close—and then, bam, I swear he woke up this morning, more resolved than ever.”

“Uh...” Trick seemed stumped by my request before he said, “If you’re asking me to help him gain *smart* determination, I think that ship has sailed. He is what he is, sis. And stupid is just Luke’s *modus operandi*.”

“Really?” I muttered, narrowing my eyes as if I thought my brother could hear me do so through the phone. “This is not the time to be sarcastic. You know I’m asking you to make him stop his whole quest altogether.”

“But I’m thinking maybe you should just let it happen.”

“Oh my God!” I groaned. “Not you too. You sound like *Dad*.”

“And what’s wrong with that? Dad’s irritatingly wise and right about his instincts more often than what’s naturally normal. Besides, you could do a lot worse than Luke. You *have* done worse. He’s one of my best friends too, dingus that he is. I could actually *stomach* him as a brother-in-law. And it’s not like you’ve never had feelings for him in the past. Why don’t you just give the idea a little test drive; see how it rides?”

A test drive? I’m not certain what he meant by *that* phraseology, but I was definitely too afraid to ask.

“Those feelings...” I snapped, “were born from an immature, silly, self-conscious, overweight *girl*. And she’s grown up and gotten a brain since then.”

No way was I going to tell him that adult-Chloe had, in fact, not grown a brain at all, and she’d pretty much followed in teen-Chloe’s footsteps by falling for Luke too. That would detract too much from the mission here.

“So sorry, but that crush is long over.” Because it was straight-up *love* now. “Which means, I’m not giving *anyone* a test drive. Got it?”

“Alright, fine. Continue to deny it all you want. I won’t make you confess all your secret wants and dreams. But let me ask you this. Do you still want to get out there and date again? I mean, in general. Do you want to find that special person to spend the rest of your life with?”

I sighed in exhaustion. “Honestly, right now, dating is the last thing on my mind,” I admitted.

“But someday...” Trick persisted. “Do you plan to get back out there again, in the dating pool?”

“I mean, sure,” I admitted reluctantly. “I don’t want to end up alone. I’d like to have someone who could stomach being with me.”

“Then what makes Luke so unacceptable to be considered as that someone? Why isn’t he just like any other guy you’d be willing to date? You obviously find him safe and trustworthy enough to stay over with you each night. God knows none of the *rest* of us have earned that kind of security in your eyes.”

I blinked, taken aback by the tone in his voice. He sounded...jealous. “Trick,” I said softly.

“No, it’s okay,” he assured me with a dismissive-sounding sigh. “I mean, yeah, it hurts when I try to go in for a hug and your first instinct is to flinch away, but Luke can fucking hang all over you and unexpectedly bump into you, and you just melt even closer to him as if he’s your only safe place. I’m glad you have *someone* you can still feel secure with.”

“But that’s not...” I shook my head, utterly bewildered to hear this. My first thought was to repudiate it. “It’s not—”

“Don’t even try to deny it,” Trick instructed mildly. “It’s true. Mom and Dad can’t even get as close to you as Luke’s allowed to get.”

“B-because he was there,” I tried to reason it out. “He saw. He kind of went through it *with* me. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Yeah, he’s the only one who saw because you made him physically *bar* me from that room,” Trick snapped, and I could definitely detect jealousy in his voice this time.

“And it’s a good thing I did,” I shot back firmly. “Because it gives Luke nightmares. I had to freaking towel him dry once when he woke up drenched in sweat.”

“Which just gives my suggestion about allowing him a chance with you all the more credibility. Because no one is going to understand what’s happening to you when you go blank and distant and simply walk out of a room after they merely mention *boots*. Luke’s always going to have your back like that.”

“Oh, Jesus...” I cringed. “He told you about the boots thing?”

“Riley did,” Trick corrected. “She felt like hell for triggering you.”

“She didn’t—”

“She triggered you,” Trick said firmly.

I sighed. He knew me way too well. There was no faking or avoiding anything with Trick.

“He could hurt me,” I finally came right out and said. “He could hurt me worse than anyone ever has. And I’m not in a good place to deal with that right now. I...I can’t. I just can’t. My heart can’t take it.”

“The human heart beats up to a hundred thousand times a day and pumps two thousand gallons. It can take a lot more than you give it credit for.”

“Mine can’t.” My voice cracked as I spoke. “He has slept beside me every night since the kidnapping.” Except for last night, I didn’t add. “And never once did he try *anything* even remotely sexual. Because he doesn’t think of me that way.” And I was still refusing to believe he’d truly known what he’d been saying when he admitted to ever wanting me this morning.

*I had to break your heart before I desired you in the way you needed me to.*

His head had been in a bad place; he hadn’t really meant that. Because he *didn’t* want me. He couldn’t.

“He never has, never will,” I insisted. “And I’m not going to let him force himself into a relationship with me when I know he can’t truly, passionately love me like I was the air he breathed. I’m just not going to do that to him. So that’s why I need you to take him out and *remind* him why he likes being a single man. Because I know he wasn’t looking to set down roots with anyone when Dad put this stupid idea into his head. He’s most happy being a *bachelor*.”

“So you just...what? You want me to take him out and get him laid?”

“What? *No!*” The very idea of Luke with another woman made my stomach turn. “Just lead him along the path back to *himself*. Because this is not him. He doesn’t want me. Remind him what *is* him. Can you do that for me?”

My brother was silent for a moment, clearly contemplating my request. Then he released a breath and said, “Chloe, I would do anything for you, so yeah, I can do this.”

I exhaled in relief. “God, thank you, bubba. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“I still don’t like it, though,” he added. “Last time I was asked to take someone out for a guys’ night, bad things happened.”

“You’ll do fine,” I assured. “Everything will be fine. Besides, lightning never strikes in the same place twice. Right?”

“Actually—”

“Okay. Thanks,” I cut him off cheerfully before he could quote another statistic at me. “See you later. And love you, bye!”



## 24 LUKE

**T**hree nights.

It had been three long-ass, miserable nights that I'd slept in my own bed, and I still hated it as much as I had the first night I hadn't fallen asleep beside Chloe. I hadn't been lying in the slightest when I'd told her she had ruined me. I wanted back in her bed so bad I fucking ached.

The problem was I still hadn't come up with a plan of how to fix everything I'd broken. So I told myself, I was giving her some time. Except the *truth* was, I didn't know what to do to make everything right again. I'd never repeatedly broken someone's heart over and over for years before. I was completely out of my depths here.

And her brother calling me incessantly wasn't making it any better. I kept blowing him off every time he asked to do something with me. But then he started to irritate me enough that I finally gave in.

I didn't even want to go out. Honestly, what I wanted most was to stay in. With Chloe. We could eat pizza, and she could cuddle on my lap again, while we watched awful movies and made fun of them all night, or take another bubble bath together, or make love until dawn. Hell, I didn't care what we did. I just wanted to be with her. My heart freaking ached. I missed her, even though I talked on the phone with her half a dozen times a day. It just wasn't the same.

It was my day off, however, and I'd already stewed all afternoon, trying to come up with a brilliant plan to patch our

problems, and failing, so I guess I needed to take a break for a bit.

“Are you ever going to tell me what tonight’s really about?” I asked as I followed Trick into his dad’s bar.

I know; it was my night off, and what did he do? He took me back to fucking work. But that was Trick for you.

“What do you mean?” he asked evasively.

I rolled my eyes. “Really? You’ve been acting sketchy as fuck for the past three days until I finally agreed to this. So what’s the deal? Oh...” As an idea came to me, I gripped his arm and stopped both of us. “Shit,” I breathed, terror consuming me. “He bonded out, didn’t he? Freston’s out of jail.”

“What? No. Jesus, man. Do you really think *this* is how I’d tell you that? He’s still firmly behind bars, I assure you.”

I hissed out a relieved breath and clutched my chest, bending slightly at the waist. “Dude. Don’t ever scare me like that again.” As I straightened, I swung at him like I was going to punch him in the nuts. Only when he jerked back, clutching himself in defense, did I start to feel better again.

He scowled at me, and I laughed, slapping his shoulder. “Now, seriously... Why the fuck did you call me to hang out tonight?”

“Well, it’s certainly not because I just miss hanging out with your charming self. God...” He shook his head and blew out a breath, still trying to recover from the scare. “You’re fucked up, man. I see why Chloe begged me to take you off her hands for the evening.”

Slowing to a stop, I uttered, “Chloe?”

*She* had orchestrated this?

“Yeah. She—” He glanced over as he kept walking, only to realize I was no longer at his side. Glancing back, he sighed and reversed a few steps. “She’s tired of you trying to get her to marry you. So she asked me to take you out for a night and

remind you why you actually prefer bachelorhood over the old ball and chain.”

I blinked, unable to believe what I was hearing.

“So...she asked you to get me laid?” I surmised.

“No...” He frowned as if that suggestion were ludicrous. “Hell no. Nothing like that,” Trick denied yet again, only to wince and shrug. “Well, maybe. But she *said* it wasn’t like that.”

I barked out a harsh, disbelieving laugh and gripped the back of my neck. “Un-fucking-believable. I cannot fucking believe her. Well, I’m sorry to disappoint, but I’m not picking up some rando and having a stupid one-night stand or whatever it is Chloe thinks I should have. I made a commitment to try with your sister, and that’s what I’m going to fucking do. So you’re just going to have to tell her that you failed in your little mission to—”

“Oh, I already knew I was going to fail,” Trick agreed brightly, throwing an arm over my shoulders as he guided me into the hallway that led toward the back reception hall room. “I’m with Dad on this whole idea. I think you two should make a go for it and see how it plays out. So I already had other plans to do the very opposite of what Chloe asked.”

I squinted, trying to figure out what the opposite of getting laid was...

“I’m going to coop you up with a bunch of boring, old married men for the night.” Trick shook my shoulder before pausing to revise, “I mean, except for me...and Vaughn.”

I blinked, more confused than ever.

“You’re doing...what?”

Trick laughed and pushed open the door to the back room to reveal a horde of familiar faces already seated at two long tables pushed together, ordering drinks from a waitress.

“I got you your brothers from other mothers,” Trick explained.

“Uh...” I peered around the room in surprise but then pointed toward JB. “Yeah, except that one actually has the same mother as me.”

“Logistics,” Trick answered, waving the issue aside. “The point is that all these men here are on your side, and we’re going to help you.”

I turned to him, furrowing my brow. “You’re going to help me? With *what*?”

“With Chloe!” Patting my shoulder, Trick dragged me forward toward the rest of the guys. “If you want to win her over, then we got your back.”

“Wait, seriously?” First, my eyebrows lifted in surprise, and then a slow grin took over my face. But, hell yes. Maybe this was exactly what I needed: help from a bunch of boring, old married men.

The others seemed to notice us then, and Julian lifted a fist in greeting. “Hey! There’s the man of the hour. Get over here, Luke.” Glancing up at the waitress standing at his elbow, he pointed my way. “Get him the house draft. On me...”

“Thanks,” I said, surprised by his support. I would’ve thought Chloe’s older brother would be the least likely to go for this, but as he patted the empty seat next to him, I realized how wrong I’d been.

Until I actually sat next to him and he threw an arm around my shoulder and leaned in to slap a happy kiss on my cheek, only to pause and murmur into my ear. “Make her happy; that’s all you need to do. But hurt my baby sister, and I’ll make you wish you were never born.”

My eyebrows lifted, and I inadvertently met my brother’s eyes near the end of the table.

JB looked amused as he shook his head as if he knew exactly how my life was being threatened.

“Alright, alright, alright,” Trick called above all the talking as soon as the waitress left the room. “I hereby call to order the first and only meeting of Operation Help Luke.”

“Operation Help Luke?” Gracen repeated skeptically. “Are you sure helping him is actually *possible* in one meeting?”

“That’s gonna take one long-ass meeting,” someone else called out.

“Yeah, my wife’s due to have a baby in six months,” Beau spoke up. “Am I going to be able to see it born? Or will we still be stuck in this—”

“You guys are just hilarious,” I deadpanned, folding my arms over my chest and scowling at them. “Fuck you.”

And they threw a bunch of fake encouragement right back at me, someone literally throwing a wadded-up napkin at my face while the rest boomed or told me to eat shit and someone called, “We love you, Lukey.”

I flipped two handfuls of the middle finger at them.

“I’m just glad you finally woke up and are making an attempt with Chloe,” Trick said, patting my shoulder in approval as he sat next to me and reached for a glass of water. After taking a drink, he set the cup down and let out a quenched sigh before adding, “Guess this means I can stop pretending to cockblock you from every other woman out there now.”

I tilted my head and frowned at him, confused. “What do you mean, pretend?”

“Hmm?” He glanced toward me with raised eyebrows.

“I said...” My voice grew a little harder. “What the fuck do you mean by *pretend*? Have you *not* slept with all those women you said you have?”

Because it happened every couple of months...

I would mention my interest in someone, and Trick would say he’d already been with her, which would successfully make me lose said interest. And then...

Holy shit. He’d been lying all this time. He’d been lying to keep me from pursuing them instead.

“Dude...” he said, sending me a mistrustful glance. “Are you serious? That’s a lot of women. Of course, I didn’t sleep with any of them.”

“Wait. *None* of them?!” I cried, my mouth falling open. “Then why did you say you *had*?”

“Because it hurt my sister to watch you shuffle through date after date after date,” he told me as if I should already know this. “And I was tired of watching you break her heart time and time again.”

“So you knew?” I persisted. “All these years?”

Chloe had said he’d known at the beginning of her crush, but to think that he’d known for longer than just a couple of months or so... That got under my skin. It would’ve been one thing for him not to tell me if he thought she merely had a passing fancy that she’d gotten over, but to keep on keeping it from me after this long while he *still* assumed she had feelings... I felt betrayed.

“You *knew* how she felt about me for *years*?”

He rolled his eyes. “She’s been over the moon for you since high school. How could I not know?”

When he laughed and shrugged as if all this should be obvious to me, I saw red. Balling my hand into a fist, I wound my arm back and hit him as hard as I could.

Trick didn’t see it coming, and he went toppling out of his chair where he landed against Parker, who’d been sitting on the other side of him and reaching for a bowl of chips.

“You son of a bitch,” I roared, standing up so fast that I knocked my chair over backward behind me.

Everyone else exploded from their seats just as quickly, most of them shouting at me to stop.

So when I reached forward to drag a sprawled and dazed Trick off Parker, what felt like twenty pairs of hands caught me and jerked me back, preventing me from pulverizing him again.

“Easy,” Julian said in my ear, and then JB was at my side, dragging me even further away.

“What the hell, Luke?”

“Let me go,” I told them, struggling to break free. “I just want to kill him.”

“Yeah, we’ve all wanted to kill Trick at one point or another,” Julian commiserated. “But we don’t actually act on that. Now...*behave*.”

“Fine!” I snapped, shrugging them off. “Just let me the fuck go...”

They finally released their grips, and I didn’t surge forward to strangle Chloe’s little brother like I wanted to. I stood there, trying to get my labored breathing back under control as I watched him finally straighten and stand to wipe blood from a fresh cut on his lip.

“Christ, Luke,” he told me, shaking his head and orienting himself. “It wasn’t *that* big of a deal. You should be fucking thanking me.”

“*Thanking* you?” I exploded. “I should give you a damn black eye to go with that fat lip, you son of a bitch. You should’ve told me how she felt. Why didn’t you tell me? Why did no one fucking tell me?”

But when I glanced accusingly at the others, they glanced at each other and shrugged.

“We honestly thought she hated you, man,” Gray finally said.

Even Julian nodded, agreeing with that summation.

So I turned back to Trick and lifted an eyebrow, demanding an answer from him.

He sighed and finally stopped prodding his tender lip to scowl at me. “She wanted you to figure it out your own damn self. That’s how Chloe works. She just wanted someone to honestly fall in love with her.”

“Well, this is how *I* work,” I countered, pointing to the ground in front of me. “I need someone to tell me what the fuck is up, and I needed that person to be *you*. Don’t you understand, you fucking asshole? How many *years* could we have saved if I’d known? How many times could we have prevented her from getting hurt by some *other* dipshit guy she tried to date? How many basement floors could we have prevented her from getting handcuffed to *naked*?”

“Jesus,” someone rasped under his breath, while the other men winced, and Beau straight up said, “She was *what*, now?”

“Yeah,” I growled, looking around at all of them. “That’s how I found her. Spread-eagle on a grimy, concrete basement floor. Bruises and bleeding cuts all over her, her jaw swollen and...and pure fucking panic all over her face because she knew what he was going to do to her next.”

“Fucking hell,” Julian growled, bringing a fisted hand to his mouth.

“I couldn’t find her clothes. There was nothing to cover her with. I couldn’t find a key to unlock the cuffs. And I couldn’t go look for any because she was sobbing and begging me not to leave her side. I just had to *stay* there and watch her like that. I covered her with my shirt, but that barely did shit. She was still wet and bloody...and...”

“Wet?” someone asked, sounding confused.

“Oh yeah.” I didn’t realize I had tears in my eyes until I wiped them clear. “He soaked her down and scrubbed her raw with a garden hose and car-cleaning brush; told her he needed to clean all the other men off her before...before he—”

“Son of a bitch.” Looking sick, Gracen turned away and walked a few steps off. Vaughn had to set his hands on his hips and blow out some fresh air from his lungs, and Parker had closed his eyes and was shaking his head slowly as if trying to block all the mental images he was getting.

I glanced at Trick who was white as a sheet. “We could’ve prevented that,” I told him in a rough voice. “We could’ve kept her away from men like that *all these years* if she’d just



been with me. I know I'm no prince, but I sure as hell could've treated her better than that. So why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

"I..." Trick shook his head, visibly shaken.

"Don't ever keep shit like this from me again," I said.

He nodded and glanced at me, apology thick on his face.

I turned toward the others. "Now all you fuckers listen to me and listen good. I'm *going* to fall passionately in love with her, and then I'm going to marry her. She is too important for me not to. So are you going to help me figure out how to do that or not?"

From there, everything turned all business. About a million suggestions were thrown at me all at once, and most of them were things I could do to make Chloe love *me*, not the other way around.

We all returned to our seats, pitchers of beer arrived from two different staff, and meal orders went around. And the only thing I gained in the first five minutes was a damn headache.

Finally, I lifted my arms and waved them all quiet.

"Hey, hey, hey," I called. "This is getting me nowhere. How about going one at a time?" Pointing at Vaughn across the table from me, I said, "Uncle. You're the newest one here to fall in love. It should be the freshest in your mind. So how did Lucy snag your heart?"

Vaughn went blank and his mouth opened before he winced and admitted, "I... Honestly, I have no idea. I actually tried *not* to fall for her."

"Same with me for Bentley," Beau spoke up.

"I told you; it's not something you can consciously *make* yourself do," JB said. "It just..."

"Happens," all the others chimed in for him.

I sighed. "Jesus... You idiots are no help at all."

"I got it," Gracen said suddenly and pulled up his phone. "I'll google it."

“Dude...” Parker blinked at him in disbelief. “Are you serious right now?”

“What?” Gray shot back, still typing on his phone. “Do you have a better idea?”

“You just fell in love—what—a year ago?” I said. “Why don’t you already know this?”

“Because I didn’t stop to think about *how* it happened,” he grumbled, rolling his eyes. “It just...happened. Here...I found something. Okay...” He glanced up to address me directly, then looked back down to read his screen. “Do you feel euphoric and, like, amped up when she’s around?”

I blinked, startled by the question.

But admitting that I got a secret thrill out of arguing and bickering with Chloe was not something I was willing to tell these men who were like family to her. The way her barbs could turn me on was a deep dark, filthy, and incredibly sexy shame.

But Gray didn’t dwell on that question, thank God.

“Does your life seem exciting and new when she’s around?” he went on, asking next.

“Seeing as I’ve *known* her my whole life,” I deadpanned. “How would I be able to tell?”

Even though, yeah. Every time she had stopped by the bar when I was working, it was as if my antennae picked up and locked onto her, alert to everything she did. Everything else just faded into the background when Chloe was near.

And wow... Why had I never realized that before?

“Do you make special time for her?” Gray added.

Well, I *had* rearranged my whole work schedule for her, so that one felt like a check.

“Do you idealize her, make sacrifices for her, put her wants and needs ahead of your own...” Hell yes. I had put her wants ahead of my own—especially in that basement when I’d

wanted more than anything to go find a key, but she'd wanted me to stay.

"Are you always eager to see her again," Gracen started reading the list off faster now. "...Have great sex together, share your opinions with her, open up—"

"Go to a different website," I ordered suddenly. I already had too many items checked off this list; I needed something new that I *hadn't* done yet.

"Uh..." Gray glanced up in surprise, then shrugged before he returned his attention to the screen. "Okay. Let's see what else we have."

"Oh, Jesus," one of the other guys groaned. But Gracen and I ignored him.

"Alright..." Gray announced as if he'd found something good. "You gain romantic love by mixing attraction with social factors."

I squinted. "*Social* factors?"

"Yeah, you know..." He rolled his hand as he explained, "Like, you have similar beliefs and morals and backgrounds."

I shrugged. "We already have that."

"Ooh, wait!" Gracen held up a hand. "This one looks promising. First, you have to know what your natural defenses are, then work to shut those down so you're vulnerable around her."

"I have to do *what*?"

"Yeah." Gracen nodded as if he agreed with all that shit. "Then you have to accept problems about yourself that you don't like but can't change."

I blinked and started to panic. Black spots formed in my vision.

But what the fuck had Pick gotten me into? And what the hell had all these men surrounding me committed *themselves* to? These instructions felt like straight-up torture in the worst way ever.

“Don’t be afraid of getting rejected,” Gracen was reading on, making the cold sweat he’d already created just get worse as it dripped down the center of my spine. “Don’t play immature gimmicks, like, if she does this, then I’ll give in and do that.”

“Okay...*what?*” I asked, not breathing so well over here. “What does that even mean?”

“Jesus, *stop!*” Trick finally called, waving his hands to halt the entire conversation. “Just stop.” Glaring at Gray, he shook his head sadly. “Why the fuck are you people being so complicated and emotional? This is *Luke* we’re talking about here. Simple, straightforward, male Luke.”

“Yes. Thank you.” I liked where he was going with this. Simple and straightforward made so much more sense to me than whatever the fuck Gracen had been going on about. But I still had to sniff and frown at him—because he was Trick and I was pissed at him—before I demanded, “Then what do *you* suggest I do, only other person in this room who’s never been in romantic love before?”

“Hey, I’m *waiting* to fall in love until I meet that one special woman I’m going to marry and spend the rest of my life with,” Trick countered with a small scowl my way. “It’s still the one first of mine that I can save for her.”

“You are so weird,” I told him, while secretly jealous that he had deep thoughts like that.

“And you’re seriously overthinking this,” he spat back.

“Then what the fuck do you suggest?” Beau finally snapped.

Trick glanced at everyone and rolled his eyes before snorting and shaking his head. “No. *I* can’t be the one to suggest it; this is my *sister* we’re talking about. One of you morons needs to stop just glossing over it like it’s not even important.”

“Oh hell...” Julian groaned and pushed his seat back before standing. “I’m going out to the bar and getting another drink. Call me back when this conversation’s over.”

Some of the others chuckled and watched him go. I frowned after him and then glared at everyone else who remained because they all seemed to know what Trick was talking about. I was the only one who didn't.

"Are you people purposely talking in riddles just to piss me off?" I demanded.

Trick sighed and sent me an irritated frown. "Tell me... what was the most important aspect about dating when you were a teenager?"

"Huh?" I sent him a confused wince, wondering why this had anything to do with anything. "Getting laid. Why?"

Trick lifted his brows and spat, "Exactly."

I blinked. "What?"

"And what is the ultimate goal when you ask women out *these* days?" Trick pressed.

"I don't have any goals to ask any more women out," I told him through gritted teeth as I began to lose my patience. "Because I'm going to become monogamous. For Chloe."

He growled and rolled his eyes. "*Before* Chloe's kidnapping, then..." he revised.

"What was the goal when you asked a woman out?"

I frowned. Still confused. "Sex," I said simply.

"Right," he told me, nodding in encouragement as if trying to teach a child what two plus two equaled. Patronizing son of a bitch. "So what's changed since then?"

I lifted my eyebrows, not computing. "What?"

"*Nothing's* changed," he answered for me. "You still like sex, right?"

"Right," I said slowly, thinking this had to be a trick question.

"Dude," Trick answered calmly. "Open your damn eyes and realize that you're looking right over one of the biggest things that drives you. Not once have you or any of you idiots

in this room mentioned sex. Attraction. The *physical* aspect. And when you have, you skipped right over it as if it wasn't important. But you're Luke! Luke needs sex."

"No, I don't," I countered, scowling, only to pause and shrug. "I mean, I do. But I have a hand for that. I'm fine. What I *need* is to fall in love."

"Well, sex is the doorway to that emotion you're looking for."

"Whatever!" I muttered, shaking my head in denial. "I've had plenty of sex..." Way in the past. Lately, not so much. Which sucked. But that wasn't the point here. The point was... "And I've never fallen in love with anyone I had sex with before."

"Because it's just the *doorway*," Trick tried to explain. "And you were perfectly happy lounging around at the entrance and not going all the way in."

"Trust me," I said, with a sophomoric snort. "I went all the way in."

"Oh, for the love of God. That's not what I meant." Giving up on me, Trick sighed and fell back into his seat.

I turned to the others. "Do any of you understand what this dipshit is saying?"

"Well..." Beau cringed. "It kind of sounds like he's telling you to bang his sister."

I whirled to gape at Trick, who flushed guiltily and sank lower in his chair. Lifting his hands, he answered, "I, in no way, would've worded it like *that*."

"Seriously?" I cried.

Trick winced. "Why do you think Julian took off?"

I glanced toward the doorway to the room where Chloe's older brother had disappeared. "Oh," I said, as it finally sank in. Then, I turned back to Trick. "But I can't just sleep with her before I *know*."

He only snorted. “How do you think any of these motherfuckers sitting around you right now were sure *they* had fallen?” Trick motioned around the room before he stopped, his finger aimed at JB. “Look at your own brother, for God’s sake. Do you think J was flat, forever in love with Teagan—*our* Teagan—until he’d gotten a little forbidden taste first? Or that Parker was forever committed to Bella beforehand?”

I glanced at both men, only to see them duck their faces slightly in shame and discreetly clear their throats. Then I turned back to Trick. “But Beau was in love with Bentley before—”

“Beau’s a freak of nature,” Trick cut in. “Don’t look at Beau as an example for *anything*. And besides, I bet you a whole trunkful of money that he fell for her as hard as he did because he *wanted* to have sex with her more than he wanted his next breath.”

I glanced toward Beau. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to deny that, but then he shut his mouth, letting his silence be admission enough as he shrugged bashfully.

“Jesus,” I breathed, glancing around me. “You’re all just a bunch of horny jackasses.” Then I shook my head. “But I can’t do that to Chloe. What if it doesn’t work? It’d be a fucked-up mess beyond epic proportions. It would *hurt* her. I refuse to do anything that could potentially hurt her. I’m trying to fall in love here and give her something she actually needs. *Not* hurt her.”

“But you’re a man,” Trick answered almost sympathetically. “You’re Luke. You need sex to get to where you want to be with her. You need to go *through* the doorway.”

The others glanced away almost guiltily because they agreed with Trick.

“Are you serious?” I growled. “You pricks think he’s right?” When they said nothing, I shoved back my chair and stood, glaring at them. “You suck. Every single one of you sucks. Do you hear me? This is *Chloe*! I’m not going to use her like that.”

JB looked up at me finally. “It’s not using her. Sex isn’t just a good time; it’s *also* the ultimate, physical expression of love, and it’s vital for the kind of relationship you want with her.”

“Moreover,” Trick added. “It’s vital for what *Chloe* wants with *you*.”

“Just try it...” Gracen encouraged, wincing even as he said it. “And you’ll see what we mean.”

“You haven’t tried it with someone you’ve had an emotional connection with before,” Parker added. “Trust me. It’s different.”

“You do think you *can* be with Chloe, don’t you?” JB asked, honestly looking a little worried.

“Yes!” I spat, sending him a glare. “Of course, I *can*. She’s gorgeous and...” I flushed, not wanting to admit to these nosy motherfuckers how easily she could arouse me. “That’s...not the problem,” I finished moodily. “I just...I thought that—you know—*that* part of it would be more like getting dessert after I was a good boy and finished my supper and finally knew for certain I was in love. But you all are acting like it should be the main course.”

“Well...shouldn’t it?” Trick asked.

I lifted my brows because I *did* like the sound of sex being up there and important in a relationship.

I glanced at my guys. Then pointed a finger at them threateningly. “If this backfires, I’m blaming all you assholes. You got me?” Then I gripped my head as I realized, “Oh God. I’m going to seduce Chloe. Someone get me a damn drink.”

Trick scowled. “Hey! Why do you need to be *drunk* to seduce her?”

“That’s not why!” I glared at him for such a stupid thought. Then I sniffed. “I need to get drunk so I can forget the fact that you told me to bang your sister.”

“*I didn’t say that!*” Trick yelled, starting to look freaked. “I would never say that.”



The others laughed, someone put a drink in my hand, and the night continued, mostly with Trick denying that he ever suggested that I do anything *untoward* with Chloe while the rest of us got plowed together, making fun of him even more.

## 25 CHLOE

It was after two in the morning, and I couldn't sleep. It wasn't because I was scared, either.

Reaching across the bed toward the other side—his side—I grabbed his pillow and yanked it close, burying my nose in it until I caught a hint of his smell.

With a relieved sigh, I hugged the pillow to me tight, even as I told myself to stop because I was going to wipe his scent away, but I just couldn't help myself.

I missed Luke.

He hadn't lied about checking in on me. He called and texted daily. *Multiple* times a day. But I hadn't *seen* him in three days, and it was killing me.

Ugh. How had I let this happen again? I *knew* better. I was just going to end up with a broken heart and crushed dreams all over again.

Why hadn't I learned a single damn thing since I was fourteen years old?

When my phone buzzed with an incoming text, my heart rate accelerated.

God, what if it was Luke? What if he couldn't sleep either? And he begged me to let him come over right now because he missed me too? There was no way I'd be able to tell him no.

"Please don't be Luke," I chanted as I reached for my phone on the nightstand. "Please don't be Luke."

I looked at the screen. It said Trick's name.

All the hope that I'd secretly had, wishing it was Luke, crashed violently against the inside of my rib cage. And my heart broke all over again.

Dammit.

Wiping my face, I sat up and read the message from my brother.

***I'm here. About to knock on your door. Please don't freak out.***

"What?" I said aloud, blinking at the words just before a knock echoed through my house. "Oh..." He was here. "Shit."

I wiped at my eyes again, making sure they were dry—and thank God they were—then I scrambled off the bed, wondering what Trick was doing here in the middle of the freaking night. This had to be pretty serious.

What if someone was hurt or...I don't know. I couldn't think of a reason beyond that.

So when I jerked the door open and saw Trick standing there, physically struggling to hold up a haggard-looking Luke who was leaning on him heavily, I gasped, certain *Luke* was injured.

"Oh my God, what happened?" I demanded, stepping forward.

But then Luke lifted his head and offered me a big, sloppy smile. "Hey..." he greeted with a halfway intelligible slur.

I pulled up short, blinking at him, then turned to Trick. "Is he drunk?"

"Yeah, sorry," my brother gushed. "And he insisted on coming here. I mean, he *really* insisted. But I can take him to his place. I swear."

"No." I hissed out a sigh and rubbed at my tired face. "It's fine. Just...bring him in." Still trying to calm my racing heart, I stepped back to let them both inside.

“Oh, thank God. Where does he usually sleep?” Trick asked as he dragged the stumbling man over the threshold. “The couch?”

“I don’t sleep on the couch, bitch,” Luke garbled out, scowling at Trick, even as he leaned heavily against him.

“The couch is fine,” I said.

Luke gasped and sent me a betrayed glance.

“And don’t call my brother a bitch,” I scolded him mildly.

“But he’s being a little bitch,” Luke mumbled petulantly. “He didn’t want to bring me here. He was gonna keep me away from you.” Glancing up at me, he batted his lashes before he added, “Can you believe that shit? He wasn’t gonna let me see you.”

When Trick unwrapped Luke’s arm from around his shoulder and gave him a firm nudge, Luke went tumbling backward until he fell heavily onto the couch.

Then, Trick immediately turned to me. “You sure about this?” he asked. “Because I can take him home.”

“No. Seriously, it’s fine,” I said, touching his arm with a warm smile before frowning and saying, “Is your jaw bruised?” I squinted and leaned closer. “Your jaw is bruised. What the heck happened to you?”

Trick sniffed as he narrowed his eyes past me toward the couch. “Ask the drunk.”

I whirled toward Luke. “Did you hit my brother?”

He sent me a big, loopy smile and openly admitted, “As hard as I could.”

“What?! Why?” I sputtered.

Luke only shrugged as if he thought his reasoning should be obvious. “Because he kept me away from you for over a dozen years.”

I turned back to Trick, hoping for a better explanation than that, but he shrugged too.

“Oh, jeez,” I muttered and returned my attention to the new patient I’d be nursing until he passed out. With a sigh, I set my hands on my hips before shaking my head sadly. “Looks like you two had quite a night.”

Luke glanced up at me with another smile, only for it to furrow into a bleary scowl. “It sucked, actually,” he reported. “And your plan to show me how much I love being a bachelor *failed*, by the way. It failed spectacularly. I think I’m *more* resolved to settle down now than I ever have been before. I am *done* with the single life. No more. It’s...it’s just so pathetic. I wanna get married. I wanna marry *you*.”

“Maybe I should take him home,” Trick spoke up.

I glanced at him, and something in his expression told me he really didn’t want to deal with the drunk anymore—plus I secretly wanted Luke here, even if he was in this state—so I sighed and shook my head. “He’s pretty far gone. I bet he only has five more minutes left in him—if that—before he passes out cold. Go ahead and just leave him.”

Trick sent me a grateful smile. “Alright, then. You’re a better person than I.”

*Or a greedy one*, I didn’t say out loud.

Leaning over, I kissed my brother’s cheek. “Go home. Get some sleep. I got this.”

From the couch, Luke scowled at us. “Hey,” he grumbled. “Why does *he* get a kiss? He fucking kept me away from you. I want a kiss. Why can’t I get a kiss?”

Trick lifted his brows at me. “Yeah... Have fun with that.”

I rolled my eyes and shoved at his arm. “Drive safe.”

“Will do.” He started away and pointed at me, smiling. “Love you, sis. Call if you need anything.” When his brows lifted meaningfully, I rolled my eyes and snorted.

“Will do,” I repeated at him, then turned wearily toward Luke, wondering if I’d even be able to support his weight if I had to haul him to the bathroom to vomit.

Trick strolled out of the house, and as the door shut behind him, I sighed and set my hands on my hips, shaking my head as Luke just kept smiling up at me.

Well, I'd been missing him and wishing he were here. This wasn't quite what I'd had in mind, but beggars couldn't be choosers I supposed.

And hey, at least Trick hadn't gotten him laid as I was afraid he might.

My insides instantly brightened at that thought. "I'm going to get you some water and a trash can to puke in if you need it," I said and started to turn away.

But Luke gripped my hand. "Hey."

I paused and turned back, lifting my brows curiously. "Yes?"

"I forgive you," he said, nodding solemnly.

Shaking my head, I frowned in confusion. "You *forgive* me? For what?"

"I forgive you," he repeated before adding, "For trying to get me to have sex with someone else tonight."

"I didn't— *What?*" I blinked at him repeatedly, sure I was mishearing things. "That is not at all— Is that what Trick told you that I wanted?" I demanded.

"No..." Luke frowned as if he weren't sure he'd given the correct answer. Then he lifted a finger. "But it was pretty damn obvious after I got him to admit that *you* asked him to get me to hang out with him. It was like bam...she's trying to sabotage my mission. But you *failed*," he crowed drunkenly as he jabbed his finger in my direction. "You. Failed. The only person I want to have sex with is you. I didn't even *look* at another woman tonight. So, *ha*. I win. You lose."

"*You* want to have sex with *me*?" I asked, convinced he had no idea what he was saying.

"Yes," he answered, nodding big. "Only you. I want...you, Chloe Ryan Hamilton."

“Okay...” I muttered and let out a big sigh. “Now I *know* you’re way past your limit.”

“You’re right, I am,” he agreed adamantly as he tugged on my hand, trying to get me to sit on the couch with him, but I resisted. “I really am. My limit is, like, right here.” He lifted a hand in the air as if measuring the height of something. “But I’m here.” His hand went higher.

“I mean, I can’t do this much longer,” he insisted. “I can’t. I’ve been all nice and polite and done the *right* thing. I woke up every morning with your ass—your *perfect*, fucking, soft, and curvy ass—smashed against my aching, hard dick, and I didn’t do a damn thing about it because you were still recovering and shit, and it would’ve been all fucked up and wrong of me if I’d just ground back against you and slid my hand between your thighs. God. Resisting you was pure torture. I deserve a damn award for not physically mauling you every morning. But I can’t do it anymore. I just can’t. I’m over my limit of restraint.”

I squeezed his fingers as if sympathizing with him, then pulled them free as I assured him, “Well, you don’t have to worry about that now. Because we don’t *sleep* together anymore. Remember?”

He screwed up his face into a pout. “And that’s another thing. I want to come home. I don’t like my house anymore. It’s not home. This is my home. *You’re* my home. I wanna come back. And have sex with you. So much sex that you can’t walk right for a fucking week. No...for a month. So come on, please, Chloe...please. Stop pushing me away and let me come home.”

He reached for my hand again, but I skittered a step back and lifted my fingers out of his reach so that he couldn’t catch me.

With a moan, he fell face-first into my cushions.

I gaped at him, no longer feeling so dismissive about his drunken ramblings because he was being oddly specific about exactly how much he did want me, and it started to feel kind of real.

Oh God.

What if Luke really did want me?

That's where I'd be done. I could argue with just about anything he said, but if he tried something *physical* with me, like say—kissing me—I'd be down for the count. He'd have me right where he wanted me. I'd be putty in his hands.

“I jus' want sex...” he slurred sleepily and closed his eyes, twisting a bit on the couch to get comfortable.

I watched him lie there for a good thirty seconds before a soft snore emerged from him. Then I heaved out a breath.

“Thank God.”

I wasn't sure how much more sex talk I could honestly take.

Glad I didn't have to find out, I shook my head and leaned over to take off his shoes. Then I set his bare feet on the couch cushions, made sure the rest of him looked like it was in a comfortable enough position, and I covered him with a throw blanket I had draped over the back of the couch.

“I want to have sex with you too,” I promised him softly as I touched his hair. Then, I turned away and went back to my room.

From there, I was able to get to sleep a lot easier than I thought I should've been able to.

But simply knowing Luke and I were back under the same roof together was apparently all I needed.

Dammit. I had it bad.



## 26 CHLOE

**T**he next morning, I woke up more rested than I'd been in days. Feeling like it was Christmas morning, I popped out of bed and tiptoed through the house, hurrying toward the front room as if anxious to see how many presents had been left under the tree.

But instead of any shiny, wrapped gifts, I found a half-naked man passed out on my couch, one leg and one arm draped over the side and brushing the floor. He must've gotten hot at some point in the night and kicked his blanket off before removing his shirt because they both lay in a crumpled heap not far from his shoes, and his glorious, bare back was on full display.

My stomach tightened achingly, and I released a quiet breath before silently tiptoeing closer.

I'd spent so many mornings hoping I could wake up before him so I could watch him sleep next to me, and most of the time, he beat me awake. But not today. Holding my breath, I reached out and barely touched a piece of stubby dark hair that was sticking out at an odd angle from his scalp. He had a horrible case of bedhead.

And I absolutely loved it. My fingers ached to dive in and plow through every strand he had.

I crouched beside him until we were almost at eye level with each other. His face was tilted my way, and his eyes were closed with his mouth hanging open. I smiled affectionately and gave in to one more craving to barely brush one finger

over his eyebrow, and then I pulled my hand away, hugging it against my chest.

I really did love this man.

I had tried so hard not to. I'd spent years telling myself I hated him, over a decade determined to move on, fixated on finding love elsewhere, straight up denying how he always made me feel. But it hadn't worked.

No matter where I turned, what I did, or who I moved toward, *this* was the man I wanted.

And I'm not even sure why. He could be immature and crude. He lacked a lot of sophistication and barely had any smooth edges. He drove me to irrational anger more often than not and had said things that cut deep.

But under all that, he was a good man. He had a good heart. He was dependable and safe; he'd always be there for me if I needed him. He loved my family and was already one of them. He was my heart and soul, and I was more attuned to him whenever he walked into a room than I was to anything else in the world. Plus, he could be as entertaining as hell, and he made my lady parts tingle like no one else ever had.

He was the north to my compass.

I could fight that all I wanted, but it wouldn't change the truth.

I loved him. And I would never love anyone else the way I loved him.

Tears filled my eyes.

That was it, then. I was going to grow old all alone and never settle down with anyone, wasn't I? Because I loved a man who couldn't love me back, and I could no longer pretend to think I could find companionship from anyone else.

Loss filled me in a dizzying wave. My future felt doomed.

Covering my mouth, I silently pushed back to my feet and left him sleeping as I tried to make peace with loneliness.

Back in my room, I gathered some clothes for the day, walked into the bathroom, and shut the door behind me. There, I cried in the shower for a while, letting myself mourn the loss of everything I'd always wanted.

And then I pulled on my metaphorical big-girl panties and turned off the streaming water. I took extra care with my hair, curling and styling it just so. Then I put on some fancy jewelry and was going to apply my lotion and body spray before realizing the scent I wanted to wear was out in my room on my dresser. So I dressed and opened the door, only to yelp out a startled scream.

“Oh my God!” Clutching my heart, I blinked at the man sprawled on my bed, back propped up against the headboard and legs stretched out in front of him. “What are you *doing*?”

“Waiting for you to get out,” Luke answered easily. Then he grabbed a cup from the nightstand and lifted it in cheers. “Thanks for the water, by the way.”

“Mmm,” I answered and proceeded to ignore him as I went to the dresser to find the lotion I wanted.

“I have no idea how I got here last night,” he told me from the bed.

“Trick dropped you off,” I said, frowning when I could find every other scent but the one I wanted.

This was becoming my life motto, I swear. I was never going to get what I wanted most.

“Trick?” Luke repeated in surprise. “Your brother left a stumbling drunk guy with *you* to babysit? Nice,” he muttered sarcastically.

I shrugged, keeping my back to him. “Well, apparently, you *begged* until he finally gave in.”

He sniffed. “I bet I did.”

Not understanding the ironic tone in his voice, I glanced over my shoulder.

He sent me an apologetic wince. “I wasn't too obnoxious, was I?”

“Meh.” I shrugged dismissively. “It wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle.” Turning back, I finally spotted the lotion I’d been searching for. Plucking it from the others, I applied it to my arms. “You passed out in the first two minutes, so I honestly didn’t have to do much. How’s your head this morning?”

When I turned his way and lifted my brows curiously, he shrugged and ran his gaze over me. “It’s bearable. I found some painkillers in your kitchen. You going somewhere?”

“I was thinking about driving into work and asking my boss to cut my leave short. I’m going stir-crazy here and want to get back to the studio.”

I mean, if finding love and building a family with someone was no longer in my future, I might as well focus solely on my career, right?

“Hmm,” Luke murmured distractedly as he watched me lift my foot to set it on the end of the bed so I could apply lotion to my leg. “Hey, pass that bottle over here, will you?”

I paused and looked over. “You want...my lotion? Right now?”

Luke nodded. “Yeah.”

“Uh...” With a shrug, I tossed it across the room to him. “Okay.”

Luke caught it with one hand and smiled suggestively before he shimmed himself to the end of the bed and flipped open the cap as he sat with his thighs on either side of my foot. “Thanks.” Then he looked up at me, and my stomach dropped. “Think your boss will let you come back early?”

When he filled his palm with a droplet of white cream, my gaze fell to his fingers. I swallowed convulsively as I watched him rub his hands together as if to warm the lotion.

“I...I hope,” I murmured as my gaze lifted to his eyes, only to find him watching me right back. The intent look in his expression made my stomach drop. “I don’t plan on taking no for an answer,” I added, barely hearing myself speak.

Luke's lips quirked in approval. "Good. You should never take no for an answer when you *really* want something." And he snapped the cap closed on the lotion bottle before tossing it onto the rumpled blankets beside him.

"Wha...?" I licked my suddenly dry lips as he wrapped his slippery, creamed hands around my ankle. "What're you doing?"

Luke chuckled huskily. "Getting jealous because you were having all the fun applying this shit to your skin. I figured it was my turn." Lifting his hands to his nose, he inhaled briefly and closed his eyes. "Japanese Cherry Blossom," he murmured with a wistful sigh before skimming his way up my calf. "Your favorite."

I swallowed thickly and gaped down at the top of his head.

"So I was wondering..." he said conversationally as he stroked his way to my knee with a long, powerful glide.

"Mmhmm?" I asked, fisting my hands down at my sides to keep from reaching for all that thick, mussed hair he kept tempting me with and *not* letting my eyes roll up into my head. "What's that?"

"After your kidnapping..." he started, only to pause and glance up at my face when I flinched at the mention of the topic.

My gaze shot suspiciously to him, wondering what he was playing at here. "What about it?" I asked, my voice a little hard.

"Did it scare you away from sex?" he came right out and asked bluntly, making my body jump again, under his fingers. His hand tightened in reassurance around my leg, just above the knee as if to support me and remind me that I was safe. But then he persisted. "Like...does the idea of intimacy freak you out now?"

I definitely wasn't freaked out at the moment.

"I... No. I'm fine," I said.

Seriously, with his hands on me like this, sex seemed like the *last* thing I was scared of.

“Really? Good.” Luke smiled and turned his attention to my other leg, working his way up the calf, from ankle to knee. “So what *are* your thoughts about sex?” he asked conversationally. “In general.”

I blinked, confused by his businesslike questions under this almost-intimate physical treatment. “In general?” I echoed.

“Yeah.” He rolled out a hand before returning it to my leg just as he reached my knee. “Do you *generally* have positive or negative feelings about it?”

“You want to know if I like sex?” I asked bluntly.

He paused and glanced up. “Exactly.”

“Uh...” I shrugged. “Yeah. I guess I usually like it...” Then I felt like I should add, “*With* the right partner, of course.”

“Of course,” he agreed readily, only to nod. “That’s good. I’m glad he didn’t take that from you.” When his gaze dropped to my shirt, I realized my nipples were hard and poking out the front of my blouse.

I flushed, wishing I could hide what was happening. I wanted to cover my chest with my hands, but he’d already seen everything. There was no point now, and besides, I didn’t want him to know that I knew what he knew...

If that made any sense.

“I’m glad you like sex,” he added huskily just as his hand slid above my knee and up the outside of my thigh until it just barely disappeared under the hem of my dress.

Gasping, I slapped his hands down and lurched backward away from him. “What are you...? Are you still drunk?”

“Not even a little.” Luke sat back on his hands that he rested on the mattress just behind him. “I’m as sober as a really lame joke, and I have the headache to prove it.”

I shook my head. “Then what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He shrugged loosely. “I was just trying something.” Sending me an engaging smile, he asked, “Do you want to try something *with* me?”

“No!” I cried, backing up a few more feet to gain more space between us and patting down my skirt, even though it didn’t need to be smoothed out at all. “Don’t be crazy. If you just want sex—”

“Then I have a perfectly easy, uncomplicated hand to use,” he finished. “Yes, I know. What I’m saying here is that I want to have sex with *you*. Chloe...” His voice shook a little, which startled me. He took a moment to sit upright and bring his hands to his lap, which he looked down at briefly. When his fingers trembled, he balled them into a fist and lifted his face.

“I’m not taking this lightly, I swear,” he told me, his eyes imploring me to give him a chance. “And I’m as nervous as hell. I don’t want to do anything to hurt you. I’d rather cut my own throat than cause you any pain. I just...” He winced. “Do you even have any idea how important you are to me?”

I shook my head slowly, feeling strangely anxious as if something huge was about to happen.

“Well, you are,” he swore. “Hell, these days, you’re right up there with my mom. My *mom*, who’s been my number one since the day I was born. And that’s why I need to do this. So I’ll know... You know?” He lifted his eyebrows at me, hoping I could figure out what he wasn’t saying. Then he whispered, “Don’t you want to know?”

I swallowed and shook my head slightly. “Know what?”

“What’s happening between us,” he answered. “Because *something* has changed. When you decided I didn’t have to stay over anymore, that...” He released a long breath and shook his head as if he needed a moment to collect himself. Then he pressed a hand to his heart. “That really fucking hurt. I’ve been all lost and shit since then, and nothing feels right unless I...” Pressing his lips together, he didn’t say any more.

His throat worked as he swallowed. Then he added, “It honestly doesn’t even feel like my place over there, anymore. I just... Everything inside me says I belong *here*. With you. And I *want* to be here, like, all the time. So I’m really hoping you’ll be willing to try this with me.”

“God,” I groaned. “My dad really got into your—”

“Forget your dad,” he growled earnestly, still looking at me with those blue, blue eyes. “This has nothing to do with him or what he asked me to do. This is me. And I want to know what all this means. I *need* to know.”

“And you think *sex* is going to hold all the answers?” I challenged hotly.

He nodded once. “Yeah, maybe.” His eyes were wide with worry and fear mixed in with a bit of uncertainty. “I’m willing to try it, anyway, because the only thing I know for sure is that I want you. I want you so much it’s blocking out everything else.” Standing up slowly, he asked, “Do you want me back? Even a little?”

“I...”

Oh God. There was no way I could actually admit how much I wanted him back. But there was no way I could lie and say no, either.

His lips spread with a secret male knowledge as if he knew he had me right where he wanted me.

And just like that, all the shy uncertainty I’d seen in him moments before melted away. His eyes filled with sexual awareness. A predator latched on to his prey.

“Then, this is happening,” he said, slowly stalking toward me. “Because I’m not giving up until you say yes.”

Once he reached me, he stopped and hovered above me before leaning his lips down next to my ear. “Resisting it is pointless.”

I sucked in a shuddered breath and glanced up at him, my knees going weak and moisture gathering between my legs.



His teeth flashed with a wolfish smile. “Your nipples sure as hell aren’t telling me no.” He looked at them boldly and sucked his bottom lip in between his teeth. “Is today the day I finally get to taste them?”

“Luke...” I croaked, too scared to let him continue with his verbal seduction.

But more scared to make him stop. Because...what if this was the only chance I ever got to be with him?

I was already resolved to my fate of never getting to share my life with someone who truly loved me. Why couldn’t I just have this one time with Luke to help me through all my future lonely nights? He could be my favorite memory.

I swallowed, and his gaze lowered to my throat, reading my temptation.

He nodded and smiled almost sadly at me. “Take two,” he murmured. “Let’s try this again.”

And he slowly lowered himself onto his knees before me. We kept eye contact the entire way down until he was completely kneeling on the floor and looking up at me in a subordinate position that struck me as being more dominant than anything I’d ever experienced before.

I exhaled harshly, too nervous to move.

“I’m going to touch your ankle,” he warned me, never taking his eyes off mine as his hand extended blindly and found exactly what he was reaching for. His touch was gentle, his fingers warm and tender, and I still jumped the moment he made contact.

His gaze was intent and watchful, gauging every reaction I had.

“It’s okay,” he told me, running his thumbs over the invisible scars left there from Dax’s handcuffs. Then, he smoothed his healing touch up my calf.

I reached out and clutched the edge of my dresser that was nearby, already weak in the knees. My chest was heaving and my throat was working as I looked into Luke’s blue, blue eyes.

“Everything’s going to be just fine,” he said, his voice modulated and cautious, talking me through my anxiety.

I sent him a shaky nod, and the smile that bloomed across his face spread a fiery heat through my midsection. Then, he wrapped his arms around me completely, and he hugged my thighs, pressing his cheek against my stomach as he held me.

He kept me there for a minute until I hesitantly lifted my hand and touched his hair. But as I barely touched him, he looked up.

“Thank you,” he mouthed the words, and then he continued to watch me as his hands slid up the backs of my thighs, under my dress, where he cupped my ass through my panties. Hard.

I sucked in a startled breath.

His eyes held mine as he slowly worked his finger beneath the cotton to find bare skin. A half groan, half sob escaped my throat, and I clutched his shoulders, needing support.

With a smile full of victory, Luke began to slide my panties down my legs.

I simply watched him, trying to keep my breathing regulated and my knees from giving out completely.

Once he pulled the cloth around my ankles, I stepped out of them and then had to bite my lip when he lifted the cloth to his nose and inhaled.

“Damn, that smells like heaven.”

The next thing I knew, he was back at the hemline of my dress, but instead of sliding his hands back under it, he lifted the entire hem.

I whimpered.

No longer watching my expression, he turned his gaze to what he was exposing below. The moment he had the skirt of my dress out of his way, he paused and stared, surveying my pussy.

“Fucking beautiful,” he breathed and leaned in to press his mouth against me.

I jerked in surprise and then cried out when his tongue slipped out to press between my aching, wet folds.

“Oh God!” My fingers lifted from his shoulders to his head, where I gripped his hair. All the while, he licked and batted playfully at my sensitive, swollen flesh. “Luke...”

He growled out a hungry sound and worked his mouth harder against me, gripping the backs of my thighs, and then he thrust his tongue inside me.

“Uhn...” I panted and saw stars. My legs felt like noodles. I wasn’t going to make it, standing here while he...while he...

“Luke,” I panted, patting his shoulder urgently. “Luke, I can’t...I can’t...”

He broke away to look up at me, his lips glossy from my wetness.

“Bed?” I asked, breathing hard and pretty sure I couldn’t articulate another word if I had to.

He grinned big. “Yes, ma’am.” Having no trouble with *his* knees, he sprang upright and onto his feet before sweeping me into his arms and carrying me toward the bed. He placed me on my back, my head cushioned among my pillows. Then he crawled onto the mattress with me, hovering above me on his knees.

His gaze glittered with triumph and his lips couldn’t seem to stop smiling.

“Now, where were we?” Lifting one eyebrow, he caught the hem of my dress between two fingers and asked, “Here?”

I bit my lip again and nodded, my chest heaving with anticipation. Then, I grabbed handfuls of blankets under me and let my head arch back as he began to lift my dress once again.

Only for my phone to ring on my nightstand.

I exhaled in a rush and glanced toward it, silently begging it to shut up.

“It’s okay,” Luke told me. Since he was still kneeling and upright above me, it was easy for him to glance over and check to see who the caller was. “It’s just...”

I expected him to name some family member so then we could proceed to ignore it together, but when he paused and blinked blankly, I rasped, “What? Who is it?”

He glanced toward me with an incredulous glance. “Who the fuck is Logan?”

## 27 LUKE

“○ oh!”

Forgetting I existed, Chloe dove past me to snatch her phone off the nightstand before it could ring again.

“Hello?” she said breathlessly as she sat upright on the bed. “Hey...” Her smile looked completely genuine and welcoming and she hurriedly smoothed her free hand down her dress to cover herself again before reaching up to comb her fingers through her hair as if this guy were actually standing before her and she wanted to look nice for him.

“Yeah, no,” she told her caller—some person named Logan whom I’d never heard of before—with an amused laugh. “You didn’t interrupt anything. I can talk.”

My eyebrows shot sky-high, and I tilted my head at her, interested to hear how she thought that me trying to eat her out was nothing and worthy of interruption so she could talk to *Logan* instead.

But all Chloe did was send me a slightly irritated glance for openly listening in on her side of the conversation, and she crawled off the bed before hurrying toward the door so she could talk to Logan in the hallway. Away from me.

My mouth fell open.

Because motherfucker... Who *was* this guy?

Her voice went muffled as she spoke as if she was purposefully lowering her tone just so I couldn’t hear what she

was saying.

I continued to sit on the bed and watch the empty doorway, wondering why this Logan guy was worthy enough to abandon me for.

Like I didn't even matter.

A nasty taste rose up my throat. I was pretty sure it was straight-up jealousy, but I refused to admit that. From straining my ears, I was able to pick out the lines, "No, it's okay. I have..." and "thanks for calling," but that was it.

A moment later, Chloe appeared in the doorway again, phone down at her side and no longer next to her ear.

She seemed surprised to find me still sitting on her bed where she'd left me.

I lifted my eyebrows in curiosity.

But all she did was falter a step, clear her throat, and then lower her gaze before stepping forward again and walking to the nightstand to set her phone down.

Remaining on her feet next to the bed, she finally turned my way, where I waited expectantly.

"So that was, uh..." When she paused to run a hand through her hair and tuck it behind her ear, the jealousy tightened inside me even more.

But God, she couldn't even talk about this guy without playing with her hair. She *liked* him.

"Logan," I said for her, my voice hard and bitter. "Yeah, I got that part." What I *didn't* know was who the hell Logan was and why he was noteworthy.

When she said nothing, I scratched irritably behind my ear and gave in to temptation, asking, "So who exactly is Logan again?"

"Oh, he's just..." Chloe couldn't seem to come up with a good explanation, so she released a breath and glanced up to meet my eyes. "Actually, he's the guy I was supposed to meet for dinner the night I was kidnapped."

“Really?” My eyebrows lifted in surprise at that revelation.

Frankly, I’d forgotten that she’d been all dressed up to meet some other guy that night. I had assumed it had been a first date since I hadn’t heard anything through the family rumor mill yet. But maybe I’d been wrong.

Still... If I *had* been wrong, then where the hell had he been all this time *since* that night? Because he sure hadn’t been here to check in on her. Although...

Worry tightened my gut.

*I* hadn’t been here the last few nights either. What if she’d kicked me out so *he* could come over?

Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe so well.

Swallowing thickly and trying not to lose my shit—because it kind of felt like my entire life was falling apart around me—I nodded and asked, “And... Does he know *why* you had to stand him up that night? The real reason?”

Chloe hesitated, then nodded. “Actually, yes. Uh... ironically, he works for the police department. So he read the reports about me when he went back to work the next day. He’s the one who helped me get my restraining order set up, in fact. So yeah... He knows everything.”

For some reason, it hurt the most to hear that. *I* was supposed to be the one who knew everything, who she shared her trauma with. I was supposed to be the *one*.

But the only one I was, was the one who’d repeatedly broken her heart so hard over the years that she had to make herself hate me in order to even get over me.

I tried to swallow the hard lump in my throat; it didn’t budge.

“He’s been checking in every so often to make sure I’m okay,” she added lamely, fiddling with her hands as if she were nervous.

And I just kind of snapped, unable to control the irritation rising inside me. “No,” I barked. “*I* check in to make sure you’re okay.”

Chloe hooked up one eyebrow with an arch glance. “Yes. And so do my mother and father and all of my siblings, plus everyone else in the family. Why does it matter if one more person does as well?”

“You know...” I muttered stonily, feeling like an interloper in her life with Logan. “You’re right. I guess it doesn’t matter.”

But I also couldn’t sit here a moment longer because of him and his *check-ins* either.

Shaking my head, I hissed out a deflated breath and slid off the bed so I could start for the door, needing space and air.

“Wait. Where are you going?” Chloe called after me.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled, roughly wiping my hands over my hair.

I shot out of her room and was halfway down the hall before she said from behind me, “Well, I guess that answers *that* for me.”

I slowed to a stop and then turned to rest my back against one of the walls in the hallway before glancing over to find her standing in the doorway to her room, hugging herself as if *she’d* just been hurt.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She sniffed bitterly and motioned her arms around the hall. “You’ve been trying to prove all this time that you wanted to start something with me. But honestly, you just wanted to make my dad proud. You wanted to be the good guy who stepped up. You just didn’t want to *fail* at something you began. You don’t actually give a shit about being with me at all.”

I shook my head, completely lost. “What?”

“It’s just like with Lucy,” she ranted.

And it was my turn to snort. “This is nothing like Lucy.”

“You were all eager and fired up to step in and help her when you thought she needed it. But the moment you saw how



Vaughn was there for her, you dropped the whole idea like a hot potato and backed off without a backward glance. Just like you're doing now because someone *you don't even know* named Logan called my phone."

I laughed harshly. "That is not at all what is happening right now."

"And the funny part is that Logan and I are *nothing*. I never even went on one date with him, and we have no plans or promises to go on another. But that doesn't matter to you, does it? You can't get to the door fast enough right now because Chloe no longer needs you for every breath she takes."

"Bullshit," I seethed. "The only reason I'm in this hall right now and *not* in that room with my head up your skirt..." I said, lifting my voice louder than it needed to be. "Is to keep from saying some really shitty, unkind things after the shitty, unkind way *you* made me feel when you made it clear just how important it was to ditch what we were doing to talk to *him*. I mean, you're setting me up to fail, aren't you? You're purposely sabotaging everything I do so that I *don't* fall for you. Because you don't want me to. Why don't you just admit it? You don't want us to happen."

Chloe blurted out a harsh laugh. "I'm not setting you up for anything. I don't *have* to. I just *know* you're going to fail."

"No, I'm not!" I shouted back and pushed away from the wall to storm toward her.

She stepped out of her bedroom to meet me on level ground, her chin inching higher.

"I was fully into what was happening in there. *You're* the one who couldn't get away from *me* fast enough to answer his call and hurry into the hall so I couldn't hear what you said. You're the one that kept playing with your hair, primping for him, even though he couldn't fucking *see* you."

"Why are you acting like this?" she demanded, setting her hands on her hips and scowling. "You didn't pull out the jealous act when Vaughn swooped in and claimed Lucy."

“Because you’re *not* Lucy!” I roared. “I didn’t survive a traumatic event with her. I never spent a single night wrapped in her arms. I never tried to have sex with her. I was never fucking *in love* with Lucy!”

“What?” she rasped, falling a startled step back as if I’d just punched her in the solar plexus.

“I said...” I started loudly, still swollen with glorious anger, only to pause and blink at her, finally realizing what I’d just said. “Holy fuck.”

My face immediately went numb, and I had to wipe my hands over my mouth to make sure my lips were still there as I processed what had just happened. Then I repeated, “Holy fuck,” as I looked up at her, feeling utterly poleaxed. “I said I love you.”

But seriously, when the hell had that happened?

Chloe blinked at me with wide eyes. Then she sniffed and narrowed her gaze before shaking her head and harshly laughing out her disbelief. “Since *when*?”

Ignoring her snide tone, I shook my head, still riding all the shock. “I don’t know,” I uttered, turning to stare sightlessly into nothing and trying to figure out that answer for myself. All I knew with any certainty was that it was true. What I’d just spat out in the heat of the moment had come from the very core of my being. I’d freaking *vibrated* with its honesty.

“Whoa.”

The room went unfocused, and for a moment, I thought I might pass out. So I backed up a few steps until I ran into the wall, where I reached blindly behind me to support myself. For the longest time, that Sheetrock was the only thing keeping me upright. I swayed dazedly, blinking at the opposite wall in front of me.

After panting out a couple of calming breaths, I shook my head and glanced toward Chloe, amazed. “I thought it’d be different than this,” I admitted, still utterly astonished. “I thought I’d know the exact moment when it happened, but I have no clue when this happened. I just know it did, and it’s

*been* this way, like...” I frowned and shook my head, realizing, “For a while.”

Damn, her dad had been right when he’d suggested that I was already in love with her, hadn’t he?

“Luke.” Sighing out a harassed but exhausted breath, Chloe rubbed at the center of her forehead as if I were giving her a stress headache. “You’re not in love with me.”

I laughed harshly because, yeah, this would be my luck. I finally fall and tell the woman I love her, and she’s all like, *Nope. Not happening.*

It couldn’t just be easy, could it?

“You’re delusional and trying too hard and telling yourself things that aren’t true,” she muttered irritably as she turned away, but I leaned forward and snagged her arm, swinging her back around to face me, where she blinked wide, startled eyes.

“How about you *not* tell me how I do and don’t feel,” I suggested mildly but also with a bit of a bite. “Since, you know, *I’m* the one living in this body and experiencing these emotions; not you. I think I can determine what it does and doesn’t feel better than you can.”

“Except you’re not in love with me,” she countered, trying to pull her elbow free, but I tightened my grip and stepped closer, narrowing my eyes.

“Oh yeah?” I challenged softly. “Then why did I just blurt it out in anger when a person *always* spouts a bunch of honest shit they wouldn’t spill otherwise?”

“B-because—” she sputtered, not able to think up a good retort. When I raised my eyebrows, silently claiming, *See*, she glared and stepped closer. “Because you were trying to shock me into silence just so you can win this argument.”

“Except I’ve already won it,” I murmured, smiling wickedly as I stepped closer. “This *isn’t* another Lucy situation no matter how you slice it.”

Her eyes heated as she sucked in a breath, and instead of backing away as if intimidated, I swear she melted closer to

me. Lifting a finger, I turned my hand over and gently ran the back of my knuckles along her cheek.

The anger in her eyes wavered as her lashes fluttered in confusion.

“I love you,” I whispered. “And I can tell I do by the way I *still* want to pull a complete stranger’s spine out through his chest cavity after merely seeing his *name* show up on your phone. I know it because I was devastated when you no longer let me stay over anymore. I feel it when I’m lying in bed each night, unable to sleep because you’re not next to me. It’s obvious from the way you’ve become the first person I want to see when I wake up and the last I want near me before I shut my eyes. I can sense it here...”

I pressed my fisted hand against my abdomen adamantly. “Because I think of you as mine. You’re my friend, my obsession, my confidante. I’ve told you shit that I’ve never told *anyone*...because I trust you with those parts of me more than I trust anyone else alive. No one gets my heart rate up more than *you* do from simply walking into a room. And right now, I’d really rather *not* like you at all because you’re kind of pissing me off, but I still do anyway. Because I can’t seem to fucking help it.”

Tears gathered in her eyes as I spoke, but all she did when I finished talking was draw in a deep, shuddered breath and shake her head. “I don’t know what you’re feeling,” she told me, “but it’s not love.”

“Bullshit,” I hissed, scowling.

“You’re not in love with me,” she insisted, obstinately refusing to believe it.

“Christ, will you just stop arguing with me for half a second and listen to what I’m saying? I swear; you are the most maddening, stubborn woman ever!” I growled. “Sometimes, I just want to wring your damn neck!”

Eyes flashing with heat, she lifted her chin boldly, exposing said throat to me. “Oh really? Well, do your worst,” she dared. “I survived Dax Freston. I can survive you, too.”

And that's what pushed me over the edge. I lifted my hands at the challenge and actually curled all ten fingers around her neck, not actually touching any flesh, just caging her inside my grasp.

Her eyes flared in surprise while my fingers shook with emotion: with fury and anger, and pain and sorrow.

"Don't ever..." I rasped, my voice barely audible. "Compare me to that monster again. *He* wanted to possess and own you. I value you more than I do my own life."

Her lips parted, and she whispered my name.

A pained shudder wracked my frame. Wincing through it, I shifted my thumb, just barely skimming it over Chloe's windpipe. "I just want to worship you with everything I have."

She exhaled and her head came back as lust sparked in her gaze.

A hoarse groan escaped my throat, and I crushed my mouth to hers.

She whimpered and rose onto her toes, gripping fistfuls of my shirt and pulling me in. Our lips caught and clung while my hands made contact, cupping her face, and my tongue spiked deep.

Chloe kissed me back, violently. She ripped at my shirt and climbed me, grappling to wrap her legs around me.

I gripped her ass through her dress and lifted her before backing her into a wall. She gasped in surprise when she bumped into it, then she cried out when I thrust my hips forward, right between her legs where my erection stabbed her ruthlessly through my jeans.

"Oh God!" Her head fell against the wall, and my mouth took that opportunity to attack her exposed throat, where it licked and sucked...then bit.

She clutched the back of my head and writhed, her body eagerly absorbing every thrust I made until she demanded more. She began to rip at my shirt, gathering handfuls at the back of my shoulders and trying to tug it off.

I had to let go of her ass to accommodate her, but I used my hips to keep her pinned there and suspended against the wall, her thighs wrapped securely around my hips helping us along.

Once my shirt was removed and tossed down the hall, I tried to work on hers until I remembered it was a dress and the bunched fabric at her waist was trapped between our bodies. As she indulged my needs by tugging at her skirt to lift it out of our way, I gripped her ass again to help keep her from falling to the floor, but I'd also forgotten that I'd already taken off her panties in the bedroom, and I got two handfuls of bare flesh.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned and buried my face in her neck, trying not to come on the spot. “I need to be inside you. *Now.*”

When her fingers unbuttoned the top button on my jeans, I made another sound—this one probably a lot more like a praising rasp—and I bit a tendon on the side of her throat, licking as my teeth sank deeper.

She's the one who sucked in an impressed breath, however, when she unzipped me and tugged me out into her hand.

“Damn, I knew you'd be big. I fucking knew it.”

“Surprise,” I said into her ear, before nibbling on that as well.

With a tight squeeze, she began to stroke me roughly, and I grunted, jerking deeper into her fingers.

“Oh God,” she whimpered. “Please...” Though I'm not sure what she was begging for; *she* was the one with all the power and control at that moment, literally leading me around by my dick as she guided the head of it to her opening.

When I felt wet heaven, I pushed forward greedily, no finesse, just wild need, and I entered her, spiking deep and hard.

Chloe cried out in surprise and maybe pain. I couldn't be sure; I just knew the inner muscles that clamped around me felt so damn tight that I burrowed deeper, needing more, and I

went as far as I could manage to push. Then I paused, collecting my breath and finally realizing how rough I'd been.

“Shit,” I breathed and pulled my upper body back, just enough to see her face, while my cock remained lodged deep. “Are you okay?”

There were fucking tears on her cheeks while her head was arched back, her mouth frozen in an O. And I panicked.

Cupping her cheek in one hand, I slid my thumb across her chin to gently urge her face down so we were on the same level. “Chloe?”

Her lashes opened slowly, and when she met my eyes, they were red from crying. I sucked in a breath, prepared to apologize harder than I'd ever apologized for anything. But then her lips spread wide, and she blasted me with a smile so warm and bright that my cock flexed inside her, which caused her to mumble out a sound of surprise.

“God, that feels good,” she whimpered.

The next thing I knew, she was leaning forward to kiss me. Our mouths met, and her tongue immediately followed. I groaned and kissed her back, then jolted when her fingernails bit into my ass and pulled me even more snugly inside her, demanding that I move.

Somehow, I managed to laugh in pleasure and keep sucking on her tongue at the same time. From there, I retreated my hips, pulling out before pushing right back in again. Keeping my pace steady, I kept thrusting into her with an unceasing rhythm that drove her crazy.

She writhed and bucked against me, scoring my butt with delicious scratch marks, then my shoulders as she tried to get me to move faster. She pulled her lips from mine to arch her neck and cry out unintelligible words, and then she jerked taut, opening her mouth in a wordless scream. Her body bowed as she came; she was so rigid in my arms that it was hard to keep hold of her.

I watched the orgasm on her face in wonder until the squeezing of her pussy around my dick was more than I could

take. And with my teeth gnashing, I buried my face in her neck, pressed in tight, and pumped faster as I released myself.

Her body spasmed against mine while I jettied inside her, and she held me tucked against her, patting my hair gently until I finished. Then, a great groan tore from my lungs, and my limbs started to shake as my orgasm began to settle.

“Christ,” I breathed in her hair, pretty sure she could feel the jittering in my arms. But my legs weren’t any better. And the weight of holding us both up was quickly becoming more than I could bear.

“Fuck, we’re going down,” I warned as I guided us through the fall, letting her slide down the wall with me until I was on my knees on the carpet, and she was on her ass.

She yelped, startled by the descent, but then she threw her head back and laughed. I felt more like crying, though, because my dick slipped free of her, and it immediately wanted to nestle back into its favorite place ever.

Her laugh was so captivating and happy, though, that I couldn’t seem to care as I watched the joy on her face as she filled the hall with the most amazing sound ever.

Needing to taste that sound on my tongue, I leaned forward and kissed her.

The laugh died, and she kissed me back, touching my cheek as our tongues stroked each other languidly. When she pulled back to look up at me with dazed eyes, I smiled slowly. She smiled back, and I tilted my head toward hers to rest against her in the sweet aftermath.

My mind drifted for a minute as I enjoyed just being there. And when I remembered part of the conversation I’d had the night before, where basically every man I’d gotten drunk with had assured me that sex with someone you cared about was completely different than with just any woman, I snorted. “Those motherfuckers were actually right.”

Who’d have thunk it?

“What motherfuckers?” Chloe asked drowsily.



“Doesn’t matter,” I told her, turning to see her face. “Because that...was fucking awesome.”

She flushed through an embarrassed smile. And it was so charming that I had to reach up and run my fingers over the pink flesh. After marveling over how soft her cheeks were, I drew in a breath.

“Now... Let’s you and I get one thing clear,” I started. “I do too love you. You are everything I ever wanted. I’m just incredibly slow on the uptake of realizing that. But I know it now, and we’re not leaving this floor until you fucking know it too.”

Instead of scowling at my overbearing, caveman-like demand, she sent me a dreamy-eyed smile and ran her fingers up into my hair before gripping the locks and making her own silent demand for me to lower my head and kiss her again.

“I might need just a *little* more convincing if you don’t mind,” she rasped from dewy, moist lips and she arched and stretched under me.

I chuckled huskily. “Yes, ma’am,” I murmured, already dipping my face. “I aim to please.”

And I kissed her again.

## 28 CHLOE

“Do you think it’s possible...?” Luke murmured against my naked breasts where he’d been laying his head for the past fifteen minutes or so after our most recent round of lovemaking.

We were both naked and still camped out on the floor of the hallway because he’d been true to his word. He fully intended to keep me there until I agreed that he loved me. But I had yet to give in to such an admission, so he’d held me captive ever since.

I probably should’ve been freaked out, since the last time I’d been held captive, it hadn’t been so pleasant. But Luke made captivity fun, and I knew I wasn’t really being held there against my will, and if I did genuinely panic, he’d let me go in a heartbeat. But honestly, there was nowhere else I’d rather be than there in his arms. He filled our time waiting on me to give in and lose our competition with plenty of kissing, touching, licking, nibbling, and sex.

And God, the sex...

I *thought* I’d known what good sex was. But today had proven to me that I’d never had a clue. This—Luke—he was fantastic sex personified.

My body was already pulsing and thrumming with the need for more, even though I knew he couldn’t possibly be ready to go another round yet.

My hips gave a greedy little jerk, anyway, as I combed my fingers through Luke’s hair and asked, “Do I think *what* is

possible?”

“Hmm?” he asked as if he’d already forgotten about making the statement in the first place, even as his hand settled on my waist to steady it. “Oh right,” he slurred and began to massage my hip with his amazingly talented, perfect fingers. “Do you think it’s possible to blow a blood vessel in your head and give yourself an aneurysm from coming too hard? Because my head is pounding right now, and I strained harder than was humanly possible the last time I was inside you.”

“I think you have a headache from being *dehydrated*,” I answered, sucking in a breath when his fingers slid away from my hip and over my abdomen, shifting lower. “You did have a hangover this morning when you woke up, and it’s probably been long enough that your painkillers have worn off.”

“Has it really?” he asked in surprise. “Just how long have we been on this fucking floor?”

“Mmm,” I murmured, rolling my hip in delight when his fingers dipped between my legs and began to play with my clit. “Long time.”

“Yeah,” he agreed as his voice went rough. “Long enough for you to say it already, that’s for damn sure.”

My breath caught momentarily as he dipped a finger inside me. Then I shook my head and gripped his arm. “I’m not saying it.”

Because if I said it, this dream would end—because I *had* to be dreaming—and then I’d wake up, and this would be all over.

I wasn’t ready for it to be over yet.

“Oh, you’ll say it,” he assured as he lifted his head from my breast so he could grin cockily up at me. “And you’ll say it in the next five minutes.”

“Not going to happen,” I fired back, just as certain that I wouldn’t.

“Then prepare to eat your words,” he told me. “Right after I eat you.”

He finished the sentence by lowering his face and burying his mouth between my legs. I cried out and arched under him, humping the fingers he was sliding in and out of me.

Yeah, definitely had to be a dream. Or maybe I was in a coma. Maybe I was still in Dax's basement on the brink of death, and my brain was making me think I was really with Luke to help me deal with all the horror.

If so, then I never wanted to wake up.

"Oh God, oh God," I moaned, already feeling the sweet euphoria of yet another release fast approaching.

But Luke must've known just how close I was. His fingers paused, and he lifted his face, halting all tongue action.

"Say it," he whispered. "Or no orgasm."

"Luke," I whimpered, pleading and arching my back.

He only shook his head, his eyes glimmering with sexual intent. "Say it."

"No." I shook my head stubbornly.

And the fingers inside me curled slightly, making the sensitized nerve endings go haywire, yet not satisfying me enough to bring forth a full orgasm.

I gritted my teeth and groaned. "Bastard."

Luke only chuckled, enjoying his brand of torture way too much. "Say it," he coaxed slyly. "Come on. It's easy. Listen. Oh, Luke, you beautiful, amazing beast, you. I see it clearly now, and feel it all the way from the carpet burns on my ass to the bruised lips you kissed raw; you really do love me. You *love me*."

"I am not at all saying that," I stated firmly.

"Fine." He slid his fingers completely out of me.

"No! Wait." I grabbed his wrist and panted out my pleading. "Just wait. Maybe, possibly, I could admit that you *think* you could be in love with me."

He lifted one eyebrow. "Could be?"

“Okay, you think you’re *completely* in love with me.”

“Closer,” he allowed and slotted his fingers back inside me.

I sighed in relief and rode his hand. When he began to stroke just where I needed him, air hissed from my lungs. “Yes. Yes... You think you’re so completely...uhhn...”

“Keep going,” he encouraged right before his mouth returned to my clit, and his tongue went on the offense.

“Oh God,” I cried out. “Okay. You love me. You love me...” I chanted until I couldn’t say anything, I could just groan as waves from my orgasm rolled over me, consuming me fully.

I was half-conscious and barely able to think straight by the time he finished. Still lying there limply and attempting to recover, I slid my gaze his way as he appeared by my side, grinning triumphantly. Stretching out beside me, he rested his cheek on his hand. “There,” he said, sounding alert and refreshed. “That wasn’t so hard to admit, was it?”

I wrinkled my brow for a second until it struck me that I’d admitted everything exactly how he’d wanted me to in the midst of my passion.

With a huff, I rolled my eyes and mumbled, “You cheated. That’s evil.”

“Yeah...” Luke grinned and slid a finger up the hill of my breast until he reached the nipple where he batted at it playfully. “But you like my evil.”

I did. Except there was no way I could admit that out loud, so I sniffed bitterly and muttered, “My ass really is carpet burned, too, I hope you know.”

“Is it?” Sympathy filled his gaze, and he slid a hand around me to cup my bottom. When I gasped from the pleasure he stirred in me, he acted as if he’d found my injury instead. “You poor baby. Let me carry you to the bed and kiss it all better again.”

“The bed...” I groaned in delight, letting him do exactly what he said he would as he swept me into his arms and got to his feet before carrying me into the bedroom. “Yes, the bed sounds like heaven right now.”

“I’ll show you heaven,” he promised and laid me down before turning me onto my stomach and then sweeping his hands down my spine and over my butt. Then, he worked his way back up and massaged every sore muscle in my back along the way, making me groan and love every second of his attention.

He pressed his lips to the abraded section of flesh on my rear, then he nibbled lower. When I jumped in surprise, he chuckled and sat up so he could mount me from behind.

I grabbed onto the sheets and lifted my hips to receive him. And when he pressed inside me, I caught my breath and closed my eyes, pushing back to meet his thrust.

My body was getting a little sore from the excessive amount of sex we’d already had, but it still felt so good that I relished the sweet ache, and came before he did when he reached around to the front and pinched my clit lightly.

He came not long after that, kissing the back of my ear and whispering how much he adored me.

It was so perfect and amazing that I smiled and closed my eyes, feeling drugged into this euphoric moment against my will. I might’ve even mumbled that I loved him back, but I couldn’t be sure. I passed out before I could rethink what had just happened.

I’m not sure how long I snoozed, but I’m pretty sure that Luke lay down and slept a bit with me until—

“Shit!” His shout jerked me instantly awake with a gasp.

“What? What?” I blurted, bolting upright, dizzy from how deeply I’d been out to how abruptly I was awake. “What’s wrong? Is he here?”

“I’m going to be late for work,” he said, flying out of the bed, only to pause and squint at me. “Is *who* here?”

I blinked at him, still trying to gain my bearings. “What?”

He shook his head and went back to stressing about the time. “Jesus. How long were we going at it? I swear it was barely seven when I was sitting on your bed, waiting for you to get out of the shower.”

I gathered the blankets to my chest, immediate worry clouding my chest, as I watched him scramble to find his clothes and pick them up off the floor.

“So you have to work today?” I asked, my eyes big and breaths starting to come in uneven gasps.

“Yeah, I...” He finally glanced my way and paused. “Damn. You look so fucking sweet like that.” Trudging back to the bed, he climbed onto the mattress and sat on his knees as he reached for my hair to cup it in his hands, and he kissed the top of my head. “Give me eight and a half hours—nine tops—and I’ll be back. I swear. We can finish this then.”

I frowned slightly as he pulled away again. “Finish what?”

“Our...you know...” He rolled out his hand. “The whole love conversation. What this means to us now. Where our future is headed and—fuck, I don’t know. We can have that conversation anytime. Honestly, I’m most looking forward to coming back so we can finish the sex part.”

I sent him a flushing smile. “I think we finished that. Multiple times.”

“But there are at least a dozen more ways I want to take you before the day’s over,” he promised. “So I’m going to hop in the shower right now, head to work, get my shift in, and give your pussy some time to heal, then come back here, and —”

“My pussy is fine,” I assured him, grabbing his arm and tugging him off-balance so that he fell back onto the bed with me. “So why don’t you call in sick and just continue with those dozen different ways of taking me *now*?”

“But I...”

I muffled his words with a long, wet, open-mouthed kiss. He kissed me back and then lifted his hands to clutch my hair. When he pulled away, he did so with a breathless whimper as he kept his face close and pressed his brow to mine.

“God, you do not play fair at all.”

“No, not playing fair would be if I did this...” I told him as I reached for his dick. But he caught my wrist before I could touch him.

“Chloe,” he warned in exasperation. “I can’t call in sick. I’m trying to impress your dad and be the best employee ever right now. And this would *not*— Oh God. Don’t stop that.”

“Please,” I said, looking into his eyes. “Please don’t leave me.” When my voice shook a little, he pulled back slightly as if I’d slapped him.

I didn’t realize what I’d done until his face drained of color, and then I remembered.

Suddenly, we were both sucked back into that basement where I was begging him not to leave me alone, naked and handcuffed to a creepy, cold concrete floor.

“Oh God,” I said and set my hand on the side of Luke’s neck. “I’m sorry. I forgot. I didn’t—”

“No, it’s okay,” he assured, catching my fingers and drawing them from his neck to his mouth so he could kiss them. “It’s good that you forgot. That’s good.”

“I...I still didn’t mean to—”

“Shh,” he insisted with a soft smile before leaning in to softly kiss my mouth. “It’s okay.”

I swallowed, still feeling crappy, and my gaze kept apologizing to him.

He rolled his eyes as he leaned over to grab his phone off the bed stand. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to tell your dad about why I can’t come in, though. That I’ve only had you a half a dozen ways so far and still wanted to try a couple dozen more before the day’s over?”



As he dialed, I frowned. “Well, don’t tell him *that*.”

Luke grinned mischievously and waggled his eyebrows. “Oh, that is exactly what I’m telling him.”

“Luke!” I hissed in warning, but he lifted his hand to cover my face, blocking me out. “Hey. Pick?” he said into the phone. “Yeah, I, um...I’m not feeling so great today. I was wondering if I could come in a couple of hours later or...hmm?” His gaze flashed to me in surprise. Then he straightened and evasively added, “What makes you think I’m with Chloe?” I could hear my dad’s voice turn hard before Luke hissed out an aggravated breath and muttered, “Fine.”

He held the phone out toward me. “He wants to talk to you.”

I frowned in confusion and made a face, but Luke only shrugged. So I shrugged too and took the phone.

“Hi, Dad...” I answered cautiously. “Did you need something?”

“Hey, Chloe Girl,” he said easily. “Nope. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Okay...” I said slowly, wrinkling my brow at Luke, just as confused by my dad’s request to talk to me as Luke was.

“And I can hear it,” he added, which only made me tilt my head, even more baffled. “I can hear everything in your tone.”

“Hear *what*?” I asked, biting my lip and hoping he didn’t say that I sounded as if I’d just gotten laid.

“That it’s working,” he said, sounding a bit too self-satisfied for me to misconstrue his meaning. “Isn’t it?”

Pick Ryan wasn’t the type to say, *I told you so*, but this was as close as he’d ever gotten. I scowled and shook my head, irritated that he had to be right about something *yet again*.

Muttering, “Possibly,” I glanced Luke’s way as the naked man on the bed with me shook his head and asked with his eyes what was going on.

My dad laughed. “Yep,” he said. “That’s the best confirmation I’ll ever get from you. Just know that I’m happy for you, baby girl. And I love you.”

With that, I melted. “I love you too, Dad,” I said.

“Now put Luke back on.”

I nodded and held the phone out to Luke. Instead of taking it from my hand, he leaned in close to press his ear to the receiver so we could both be near enough to hear my dad when he said, “You’ve got the whole day off, but I expect you back tomorrow,” before he hung up on both of us.

I glanced at Luke, and he glanced at me, lifting his eyebrows expectantly.

Then I burst out grinning, happy I’d gotten my way. “Hear that, Hamilton?” I whispered. “You’re all mine now.”

And I dove at him, hugging him around the chest and tackling him back onto the bed. He laughed and caught my hips, holding on to me as I kissed around his face and along his neck.

“I’d ask what you planned to do with me,” he answered breathlessly. “But I think I already have an idea.”

I chuckled and caught both his wrists, tugging his hands from my waist. Then I brought them above his head and pinned them to the blankets. “Keep these here and don’t move.”

“Damn.” His eyebrows perked up. “Okay,” he added as his throat shifted through a swallow. “You have my attention.”

I pointed in warning. “You move, I stop.”

“I’m not moving,” he promised, his gaze filling with heat.

My smile returned, and I kissed him once on the lips in thanks, then I kissed my way along his jaw and down his chest, exploring and touching as I went lower and lower.

He started to straight up pant under me. “Chloe...” he rasped. “You about ready to let me use my hands again?”

“Nuh-uh,” I said, grinning evilly at him as I paused with my mouth hovering over his erection. “You’re not allowed to have your hands back until after you come.”

When he realized what I intended to do, his eyes flared. “Oh...*fuck!*” He shouted the last word as I wrapped my lips around his shaft and proceeded to suck and bob. When I massaged his testicles, his back arched off the bed, and he rambled out a litany of profanity before screeching, “Chloe... Chloe...I’m going to...”

I gripped the base of his cock and sucked harder, coaxing the orgasm the rest of the way out of him. And as his tangy warmth hit my tongue, I looked up at him to watch his mouth open in shock, and then his eyes rolled up into his head before he fell back onto the mattress, gasping loudly.

Pulling my lips off him, I sat upright and wiped at the corner of my mouth, smiling proudly.

He could only seem to gape and shake his head. “You... you...you’re a...swallower. Holy shit. That’s...that’s just...”

He shook his head, unable to verbalize what he thought of that. Then he wiped a hand over the sweat beading on his brow before he panted, “I now know why we weren’t destined to be together back when you *first* fell for me.” Nodding with a certain intuition, he explained, “I would’ve fucking overdosed on you. I would have literally overdosed on your sweet pussy and killed myself from having too many orgasms before I hit nineteen. Because, holy shit, as horny of a teen as I was, I would’ve become so addicted to you that I would’ve dropped out of high school and tied you to my bed until my dick just plumb gave out from the number of times it had to be inside you, and then I would’ve just dropped over dead, a very happy...satisfied boy.”

I smiled and touched his cheek. “That’s sweet.”

“Sweet?” he cried. “All I can think about right now is how long it’s going to take for my dick to be able to get hard again so I can fuck you in some new and creative way. And you think that’s sweet?”

Flashing out his hands to catch my waist, he made me gasp in surprise when he whirled me around and yanked me onto my back until he was lying on the bed next to him, and then he popped up above me until our positions were reversed.

“I’ll show you what’s sweet,” he warned, his eyes flashing with heated fire before he ducked his face and licked me between the legs.

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JUST AS LUKE HAD SUGGESTED, we spent the rest of the day trying different sexual positions together. When we got hungry, we moved to the kitchen where we whipped up some sandwiches together, and then we ate them as he hiked me onto the table, stepped between my thighs, and took me, wrapping an arm around my ass to keep me from falling off the table as he bit into his sandwich from his free hand.

Later, we showered together, where he stepped up behind me, lathered his hands, and slid them around me, before bending me slightly and sliding deep.

I just couldn’t get enough of him, and he didn’t seem inclined to deny me my insatiable needs.

It was frankly my dream come true.

I mean, I knew it wasn’t real—it *couldn’t* be—Luke couldn’t just fall for me because he wanted to. That’s not how life worked. But he was enjoying *this* with me; I could tell that. And I was going to live it up until the next sunrise.

This would be my day of heaven, I told myself, before reality returned in the morning, and I lost all this perfection.

It’d be that one amazing memory I took with me into my long, lonely old age.

By ten that night, I was exhausted and frankly full-up on sex. I probably wouldn’t need any more for another year or so, but I wasn’t ready for it all to end yet, either. So I decided to seduce him one last time, just to say goodbye.

I rested my head on his shoulder, and his hand idly stroked down my naked spine until I hooked a leg over one of his thighs.

“Hey,” I murmured drowsily.

“Mmph,” he grunted, sounding pretty worn out himself.

“Lift your right foot off the bed,” I said, nudging him lightly in the ribs with my finger.

Luke held up his leg above the blankets and glanced at me with wrinkled questioning eyebrows. “Why am I doing this?”

“Just watch,” I said. “Rotate your ankle clockwise.”

His lowered brows lifted. “Clockwise?”

“Yep.” I nodded and smiled at him.

“Okay...” He shook his head slightly but began to move his foot, making clockwise circles with his big toe.

“Now draw the number six in the air with your right hand.”

“You are so strange,” Luke murmured. “But okay.”

He held his hand above the bed anyway. And as soon as he tried to draw a six in the air, his pointer finger moving counterclockwise, his foot immediately turned directions and went counterclockwise as well.

“What the hell?” he muttered, scowling down at his misbehaving foot. “You’re not supposed to go that way.”

I cracked up laughing at his reaction and rolled off him to lie on my back, holding my stomach.

Mumbling moodily to himself, Luke started over, but every time he tried to keep moving his ankle clockwise, his foot would circle the other way as soon as his hand joined in with the six.

I could sympathize. Every time I had my heart firmly steered in one direction, all Luke had to do was walk into a room, and bam, my heart just flipped around and followed him. It was one of the great mysteries of life.

“Why won’t it just fucking go that way?” he finally demanded, which made me roar with more laughter.

Finally, he gave up and glanced at me sternly. “This is why you made me stay home from work today? To drive my hand and foot crazy?”

“No,” I told him with a big smile and rolled toward him, my fingers moving along his shoulders, then over his chest before reaching his abs. “I was thinking about a vastly different part of your anatomy when I asked you to stay home.”

“Damn, woman,” he said, grinning into my eyes as my fingers swirled lower. “Is sex all you can think about today?”

I arched my eyebrows. “When you’re lying there naked and looking all yummy and gorgeous like that? Yes. Yes, it is.”

I wrapped my hand around his cock to find that it was already hard and swollen, so I tightened my grip and began to stroke him slowly.

He hissed and gritted his teeth, letting his head fall back as he arched his back in ecstasy and locked his hands around the sheets under him. “Then, God bless your beautiful, perverted mind.”

I smiled smugly. But as I watched a vein in his neck strain, I blinked and stopped gripping him. “This is real, isn’t it?” I finally realized.

It wasn’t a dream after all. I wasn’t in a coma or somehow hiding in my own mind while I was trapped in Dax’s basement. I was really here with Luke. Right now.

Luke focused on my face and seemed to realize how serious I was. Cupping my hair in one hand, he held his other hand up in front of me. “How many fingers?” he asked.

I squinted in confusion. “What?”

“I’ve heard you always have the wrong number of fingers in your dreams. So count my fingers, and tell me if this is real or not.”

I looked into his eyes as I pressed my index finger to his, then I focused on my task and counted each of his digits, one at a time. When I made it to five, a tear slid down my cheek. “This is real,” I whispered. “It’s really real.” My gaze slid to his in amazement. “But how?”

His thumb swiped away the tear before he slid his hand gently over my hair and then down my back to my ass. “Not sure,” he whispered. “But I plan to enjoy it while it lasts.”

I nodded. “Good idea.” Climbing on top of him, I straddled his hips and kept eye contact as I lowered myself. When he started to press inside me, thick and warm and hard, my focus blurred a little, but Luke lifted his hand again, all five of his fingers spread to show me that it was still real.

Smiling, I pressed my own palm against his. Then, we laced our fingers together and held on to each other just like that, staring into each other’s eyes as I rode him into an emotion-filled oblivion. And it was the most-real experience of my life.

## 29 LUKE

I honestly have no idea how, but I woke up the next morning with a freaking hard-on. I think maybe my dick was officially broken, stuck in the swollen and upright position, because I *would've* thought that after the marathon rounds of sex I'd had with Chloe the day before, I wouldn't be able to even get aroused again until, like, my golden years or something.

But nope, there he was pressing up against her ass and wide awake before I was.

I muffled out a half whimper, half groan, not wanting to move because I was so comfortable right where I was spooned up behind the woman I loved with my arm around her waist and her steady breaths filling the room.

I patted her hip lovingly, and my cock flexed, trying to find a way through my underwear *and* hers until he could be where he wanted to be.

Damn freaking horny pecker. I hadn't wanted this much sex since I was a teen and learned how good it could make me feel. Though honestly, I hadn't even had a clue then. I hadn't truly learned *that* lesson until yesterday.

My conscience woke a little more as I began to remember everything Chloe and I had done together. And it didn't take long until the rest of my body was on board with my freaking woody.

I needed her again. Like *now*.



Smiling, I leaned in to bury my nose in her hair, where I kissed the back of her head. “Morning,” I greeted as my hand came up to cup one of her breasts through her tank top.

But all she did was grumble and take my hand, pulling it away from her as she added, “Ouch. My boobs feel sore and swollen. What the hell did you do to me?”

“Mmm,” I murmured, grinning over everything I’d done. “I’d be happy to give you a replay to help jog your memory.”

When I pressed my hips up to grind my erection against her bottom, she swatted her hand blindly back at me to get me to stop. “God, no. That’s sore too. My legs are sore. My ass muscles are sore, and my girl parts are so freaking sore that I don’t know if they’ll ever work right again. Holy fuck... Why did you let me have that much sex yesterday?”

“Hey,” I muttered, scowling slightly. “As I recall, *you’re* the one who instigated probably three-quarters of every encounter we had.”

She growled moodily and countered, “So why didn’t you tell me *no* one or two of those times?”

“You know what fixes every hangover,” I told her, waggling my brows, even though she couldn’t see me since she was still lying on her side with her back to me. “One more drink the next morning. Come on, what do you say? Have a little hair of the dog, and you’ll feel right as rain again.”

“That’s with alcohol,” she muttered against her pillow. “Not sex.”

“How do you know it’s not the same with sex unless you try it?” I argued playfully, dancing my fingers up her spine.

She shivered and sucked in a breath, letting me know she wasn’t completely unaffected. But then she said, “Naughty Chloe is officially closed for business this morning. Try back again later.”

“No,” I whined and pawed at her hip hopefully. “No... You can’t show me your sexually deprived, dirty, nasty-freak *nympho* side one day, and then just turn off the faucet the next

morning. I'm invested now. Send naughty Chloe back out to play. Come on, please..."

"She's hibernating," Chloe argued, trying to sound moody, but I detected a hint of a smile in her voice.

I grinned, enjoying myself a bit too much. "Oh, naughty, nasty, freak Chloe..." I sang into her ear. "Come out, come out, wherever you are..." Slipping my hand over her hip and between her legs, I barely brushed the crotch of her panties with one finger, making her arch into the touch and catch her breath. "I've got a thick, juicy cock waiting out here. Just for you..."

Her hand gripped the sheets by her face, and I heard her breathing go shallow.

"How thick?" she asked.

With a chuckle, I pressed up against her again and rolled my hips. "So thick..." I breathed into her ear. "In fact, I recall a couple of times yesterday that you found him to be thick enough to make you come with just...one...push...inside you."

"Oh God," she groaned and then pressed her bottom back against me. "Okay. Hurry. Before I change my mind."

I blinked, startled that I'd been able to talk her into this at all. Chloe never gave in easily to anything.

Except when it came to sex, apparently.

I had learned that yesterday. She hadn't said no to any position, to any place, to *anything* I had suggested. She'd wanted it as much as I had. The girl honestly liked a good tumble in the sheets.

God, why had I wasted all those years by not even attempting to get into her pants? I'd missed out on so much.

"Seriously?" I asked, just to make sure she was truly on board with this.

In answer, she unexpectedly flipped around to face me and kept rolling me, forcing me onto my back and landing with her on top, already straddling my hips.

“Whoa,” I said, gaping up at her in surprise.

She cocked up one eyebrow in challenge. “You’re the one who woke the beast. Now you must suffer the consequences.”

I laughed and grinned up at her, and she looked down at my chest as if deciding where she wanted to start her feast. Just when she started to dip her head, however, I reached up and tenderly cupped her cheek.

“God, I fucking love you.”

She sucked in a breath and blinked at me, clearly startled by the admission. I think it might’ve been the first time she actually believed me when I said it.

She was so busy gaping at me as if I’d just stolen the breath from her lungs that she didn’t see me coming when I gripped her waist and flipped us again until she was the one lying on her back and I was on top.

Grinning triumphantly, I watched her adjust to the switch, then I took a piece of her hair between my fingers and played with it. “It’s still weird for you to hear me say that, isn’t it?” I realized.

Chloe’s face flushed pink, and she gave an uncomfortable laugh, admitting, “Of course.”

“Strange,” I murmured. “Because it doesn’t feel weird to *say*. It just feels...natural. I love you.” I even felt a smile bloom when I said it. Glancing around her face, I added, “I love your eyes, and your nose and your mouth and your cheekbones. I love your hair. Your collarbone. And this little freckle on your shoulder, right here.”

When I leaned down to kiss it, I lingered by her neck and breathed her in. When she shuddered in appreciation, I dragged my nose from her shoulder back to her neck. “I love your smell. And how responsive you are to me.”

I dotted light kisses down her throat and toward her chest, shedding her tank top as I went. “I *really* love how responsive you are to me.” Licking my lips as I watched her nipples harden, I felt the need to lean in and lick them, one at a time.

She sucked in a breath and arched, gripping my hair as I feasted.

When I paused to peel off her shorts and panties, I grinned up at her. “I love that you seem to love sex with me as much as I love it with you.”

She reached out and caught the waistline of my underwear to tug them down.

Once they were out of our way, I pressed back between her thighs and looked up into her face. “I love the look on your face when I first enter you.” And as I started to do just that, I grinned at her expression. “Like you can’t get enough of me.” Then I leaned down and lightly kissed her lips. “And I love feeling connected to you. When you finally confessed your crush to me...” I shivered and began to move, slow and languidly. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt closer to anyone before. Never felt so...honored.”

“Luke,” she said, shaking her head. “You don’t have to—”

But I cut her off and kept talking. “I love how you’re tough and stubborn and make me work for it sometimes. Just as much as I love it when you let me take care of you too. I love your sass and your edges and all the soft, squishy parts in between. I just love you, Chloe Ryan, as you are now and whatever way you become later. Because you’re you.”

Tears glittered in her eyes as she looked up at me.

“And one of these days,” I finished. “I’m going to love you hard enough that you won’t be able to *help* but finally love me back.”

As I pushed a little deeper and moved a little faster, she sucked in a breath and looked pulled into the sensations before shaking her head and blinking up at me. “Damn you, Luke Hamilton. But I never *stopped* loving you. Not since I was fourteen, not even when I wanted to hate you.”

I kissed her and kissed her and kissed her. Our lips didn’t stop locking until we were both right there on the edge of coming, and only then did I break away to press my forehead to hers so I could say, “Thank you. Thank you for not giving

up on me completely. I swear to God, I'm going to make it worth your wait. I'll love you just the way you need."

And then we both tumbled over the edge, into passion together.

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"SO WHAT HAPPENS NOW?"

Chloe stretched against me as she asked the question, and her naked breasts stole my attention when they flattened against my chest. Glancing down at them, I reached for one and molded my fingers around it.

"I guess, whatever the hell we want to happen," I said, lifting and squeezing slightly, thoroughly entertained by the warm malleable flesh. "I need to head to work at noon, and you probably still want to try to talk to your boss, since you got a little distracted from that task yesterday."

Grinning as I remembered just *how* she'd been distracted, I waggled my brows and kept massaging that one boob with fixed determination.

"I meant relationship-wise," she gritted out before nudging my shoulder and raising an eyebrow when I finally lifted my attention from her breast. "Do you really have to do that?"

"Play with your boobs? Yes, I really do," I said and went back to watching my palm cup her. "And relationship-wise, we can be whatever you want us to be. Girlfriend, boyfriend, fiancé and fiancée, hell... We can run down to the courthouse right now and get married if you'd prefer. I just know what we have is exclusive and permanent. After that, you can call it whatever you'd like. But seriously, why would any chick bother with a stress ball when you have the ultimate anxiety reliever right here, sitting on the front of your chest? I can literally feel all my worries just drain away by doing this."

"Uh, because groping yourself in public is considered inappropriate," she said in a dry voice.

I snorted. “Fuck inappropriate. These things are the bomb. They’re just so damn soothing.” With a dreamy sigh, I laid my head on the pillow and smiled at her beautiful breasts as I continued to play with them. “I’d massage them all day long if I had my own.”

Chloe finally laughed and batted my hand away. “Oh my God. You’re too much. These stress balls are taking a shower now. So excuse us.”

“A shower?” I perked to attention and sat up when she did. “What a coincidence. I need to take a shower too. Maybe I should join you and supervise, make sure you clean my beautiful, bubbly stress balls *properly*.”

With a laugh, Chloe merely glanced over her shoulder at me as she slid off the mattress and started across the room. “You are so weird.”

Tumbling off the bed to hurry after her gorgeous, swaying backside, I shot back, “Well, you’re the one who’s been in love with me since you were fourteen. So apparently, you *like* my weird.”

She sent me a secretive smile, letting me know I wasn’t wrong, and then she stepped into the tub, where I hurried in after her and spent the majority of the shower paying attention to nothing but her breasts.

“That was kind of fun,” I announced as we were toweling off. “I think I’m going to focus solely on one body part every time we shower together. I wonder how long that would take me. I think your neck should be next. Or your pussy. Mmm, yeah... The pussy will have to be a repeat customer, maybe taking a turn every five showers or so...”

I was still talking about what order I wanted to go in as we dressed and moved to the kitchen to make some brunch together. I was so invested in my new project that I dug up a notepad and pen from one of her drawers and got to work.

Seated at the bar, I scowled at the list I wrote as I ate a bowl of cereal and Chloe blended one of her healthy, green morning drinks.

“No...” I said, shaking my head. “Behind the knees should definitely come before feet, don’t you think?” I glanced up for confirmation as she came to sit at the bar next to me.

“Dear Lord.” She blinked as she checked out what I had written. “You’re seriously making a list for this?”

“Hell yes,” I said. “This is important shit.”

“So when do *I* get to fawn over different parts of *your* body in the shower?”

I lifted my eyebrows in interest. “You want to take turns? We can take turns.”

With a bright smile, Chloe nodded. “I’d like that.”

Laughing, I nodded and drew a vertical line right down the center of the page. “You got it.” After scrawling in a title on my side, then hers, I put a number one at the top of her column. “Here, I’ll even write your first body part down for you.”

When I jotted in the word *dick* by the number one, I lifted my brows and glanced at her in question. She read the four capital letters and nodded before smiling at me. “Thank you.”

She plastered a grateful kiss to my cheek, and I couldn’t help myself; I wrapped an arm around her waist and hauled her into my lap so I could bury my face in her hair.

As Chloe hummed to herself and wrote a number two on her side of the list, naming the backs of my ears, I rested my cheek on her shoulder and decided that life was one bizarre ride. A month ago, I never would’ve imagined that I’d be sitting here in her kitchen with her, or that we’d actually be getting along and I’d feel more content and at peace than I’d ever felt in my life.

I mean, *Chloe*... Chloe Ryan.

Huh.

If Pick hadn’t metaphorically taken my head between his hands, pointed me in the right direction, and given me a big shove, I wasn’t sure if I ever would’ve allowed myself to even look at her in this way.

Alright, fine. Yes, I had *looked*. A lot. And imagined it, but I never would've thought it was a possibility that I could actually attempt to pursue.

I never would've known what the best, mind-blowing sex felt like. I never would've known the real Chloe. I never would've known how awesome true love was.

I would've been utterly clueless.

I tightened my arms around her and snuggled closer, grateful that her dad had given me the wallop I needed.

She reached up distractedly and stroked my cheek as she chewed on the end of her pen and squinted at our dual list. "Be honest; is the taint a no-go zone for you?"

For a moment, I could only smile uncontrollably because I knew this was my nirvana, right here. I'd found my happy place.



## 30 LUKE

**B**y eleven thirty, I was dressed for work and ready to head out when Chloe appeared in the front room, biting her lip almost nervously.

“You’re going to work now?” she asked.

“Just about,” I said as I pocketed my keys, wallet, and phone. “What about you?” She wasn’t dressed up like she’d been the day before to go talk to her boss. So I figured that her answer would be that she was just going to hang out around the house.

Except she said, “I think I’ll go visit Trick for a while. Mind if I walk out with you?”

“Not at all,” I answered, even as I glanced at her in surprise. “Did you change your mind about returning to work early?” I wasn’t sure what had altered between yesterday and today—other than the fact that we’d become sexually active together—that would cause her to hold off, and it was beginning to make me curious. *Had* the power of my penis really changed the course of her work goals?

“Hmm...?” She sent me a vague smile, then waved a hand. “Oh...I decided maybe I could just enjoy my break while it lasted.”

I frowned slightly. That didn’t really sound like her, but I shrugged and held a hand toward her. “Where’re you parked?”

She came forward, taking my fingers. “In the parking lot across the street.”

I was too, so I nodded, and we started toward the exit together. But as soon as we stepped outside her front door, she pulled her hand away abruptly.

I glanced at her in surprise.

At first, she didn't notice—she was too busy glancing around the neighborhood—but then she caught my expression and flushed. “Sorry; I need to lock up.” And she turned toward the door, making sure it was secured behind her.

I waited, and when she turned back, she hugged her purse to her as if she was trying to keep pickpockets away. It was... odd.

Tilting my head, I watched her for a moment, but she seemed more concerned with seeing who else was out and about than noticing my questioning glance.

Once we reached her car and she'd looked inside at her back seat, she seemed to relax. A smile finally lifted the corners of her lips, and she pressed her hand to the roof before glancing up at me. “Well...” she said, her throat working as she swallowed. “Have a good day.”

I lifted one eyebrow and sent her a strange smile. “Uh-huh...” I murmured before blurting, “What the hell is going on?”

Eyes flaring with guilt, she shook her head and rasped, “What do you mean?”

“You're acting weird.”

“I...” Shoulders squaring with irritation, she scowled at me and sniffed. “I am not—”

“Chloe?” a male voice called from behind me.

She screamed and dropped her purse, whirling in fear toward the voice.

I turned too and stepped in front of her protectively, scowling at the stranger who was approaching. He paused and lifted his hands submissively, showing that he came in peace.

“Sorry.” Letting out a little laugh, he leaned to the side so he could peer past me and make eye contact with Chloe. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Who the fuck are you?” I blurted, forcing him to stop looking at her like some kind of lovesick calf and turn back to me.

“Uh...” The other man blinked in surprise, obviously not used to being questioned. “Logan Chase,” he finally answered, nodding politely, even as his sharp gaze slid over me, scrutinizing and evaluating everything.

“The cop?” I asked bluntly, eyeing him right back.

My knowledge of who he was seemed to catch him off guard even more. He glanced toward Chloe, who was being strangely mute as she scrambled to pick up her purse and then step up to my side.

“That’s right,” he answered, holding out a hand toward me. “And you are?”

“Luke,” I said, shaking with him briefly.

“Of course,” he answered with a smart nod as if recognizing my name. “Luke Hamilton. Friend of the family. You work for Chloe’s dad at the nightclub, and you’re best friends with her younger brother, Patrick, Jr.”

Patrick, Jr.?

Wait. Best friends?

*That* was a bit of a stretch for Trick. But okay. “Sure...” I told him slowly.

He’d obviously learned all that information from reading the police report about Chloe’s incident. But for some reason, him knowing so much about me didn’t make me feel warm and fuzzy inside.

I sent Chloe a telling glance, silently demanding to know why he was here.

Her eyes widened slightly, replying that she didn’t have a clue.

She turned toward the off-duty cop. “What brings you by, Logan?” she asked, her tone more civil than mine would’ve been.

“Right.” Logan turned toward her and sent her a respectful nod. “Sorry about just showing up. I was actually only driving by and checking in on things,” he explained. “But then I saw you two come outside, and I thought I should stop and say something in case you spotted me and thought I was stalking you.”

“Which kind of makes you look like you’re stalking her, anyway,” I tossed out bluntly.

Logan glanced at me briefly, clearly not a fan of my remark, but he politely decided to ignore it.

“Anyway...” He turned back toward Chloe. “I’ve been periodically driving past Freston’s house since he bonded out yesterday, and his car wasn’t in his driveway just now, so I was just making sure he wasn’t anywhere near here.”

“What the hell?” I breathed, darting a glance around the neighborhood. “He’s free?” Then, I paused and whirled toward Chloe, realizing... “Son of a bitch. You already knew.”

She’d known when we’d come outside. She’d been looking for him. Fuck, she’d known *before* then, making sure to leave when I did, already planning to go to her brother’s where she wouldn’t be alone while I was at work.

“Son of a bitch!” I repeated, just gaping while I clutched my own hair.

“What? You didn’t know?” Logan asked, glancing at me in surprise. “I assumed that was why you were here.”

“No. That’s not why I’m here,” I snapped irritably, staring at Chloe the whole time I spoke to Logan.

She just stared back, growing paler and paler.

“So *this* is why he called you yesterday,” I realized. “To let you know the bastard was out of jail. God almighty, Chloe, why didn’t you say something? Were you worried I was going to go after him?”

Her bottom lip trembled as she shook her head slightly but otherwise she remained mute. When she glanced toward the cop, letting me know she didn't want to talk in front of him, I sent him a hard look.

"Yeah, thanks for stopping by, *Logan*," I snapped bitterly. "But you can go now."

"Luke, really..." Chloe sighed. "Don't be rude."

"Rude?" I exploded. "I just found out you've been hiding this from me for a full day. Sorry, but I'm fresh out of politeness. And I didn't want to be polite to him anyway."

"Hey, pal." Logan gripped my arm like a cop taking control of a situation that was beginning to escalate toward chaos. "Why don't you just take a step back and relax."

I sliced him with a hard glare, and lifted one eyebrow, letting him know he better take his hand off me, and soon. "Are you serious?" I asked before turning to Chloe, where my eyebrows lifted, asking her why his hand was on me. "Is he fucking serious?"

"Logan, it's fine," she assured the other man, stepping forward to physically remove his hand from me. "Luke is fine. I'm completely safe with him."

"You sure?" Logan asked, glancing skeptically toward me, which only made me frown more menacingly.

Chloe stepped close to me and set a calming hand on my arm. "I promise."

Grasping her fingers, I curled her protectively closer against my side, my arm secure around her, and I told the other man, "Buddy, I'd cut off my own nuts before hurting this woman. Now, if you don't mind, I'm getting her out of the open and taking her somewhere safe."

I guess I finally appeased his worries because he nodded and took a step back. "Fair enough," he murmured, and glanced toward Chloe, nodding at her in farewell. "See you around." Then, he turned away and walked off.

I hissed after him and then growled, “I think I hate that guy.” Gripping Chloe’s hand tighter, I pulled her away from her car completely and steered her toward my truck instead.

“Oh, you do not,” Chloe told me. “Logan’s a good man.”

“Exactly,” I muttered irritably. “Out of all the men you’ve ever agreed to go out with, me included, he’s probably the least douchey of them all. So I really, *really* cannot like him right now.”

Chloe bumped her shoulder into mine, and when I scowled at her, she grinned happily. “I kind of like seeing you get jealous over me.”

I snorted and opened the passenger side of the truck for her. “Get in.”

She finally glanced over at her car, then turned back to me. “I thought you were going to work.”

“Fuck work,” I muttered, picking her up by the waist and physically lifting her into the truck seat. “We’re having a family powwow because I have a feeling you haven’t told *anyone* about this yet, otherwise we would’ve been inundated with worried people yesterday.”

I shut the door in her face before she could answer, and then I stormed around to the driver’s side.

It wasn’t until I was behind the wheel, my fingers wrapped tightly around it, and had the engine started, that I finally had my anger under enough control to glance over and say, “*Now*, would you like to tell me why you didn’t say a fucking thing about this yesterday?”

Chloe cringed and sent me an apologetic look before admitting, “I didn’t think I’d get to have sex with you if I told you yesterday.”

I blinked at her in astonishment before shaking my head and crying, “What?”

“I really, really wanted to be with you,” she started. “And if you’d found out yesterday, then you would’ve freaked and called everyone else, and then, just like you’d said, we

would've been immediately swamped with wiggled-out family members, and we wouldn't have gotten a moment alone. And that wonderful, magical day we spent together never would've happened."

"Christ, woman," I laughed out a harsh, cynical sound, and put the truck into drive. "We have the rest of our lives together to have wonderful, magical sex together. Your safety comes first."

"Yeah, but it was such glorious sex," she argued, gripping my arm to get me to agree.

I couldn't help it, I grinned as we stopped at a red light. "Yeah, it was," I murmured fondly, only to scowl once more. "But how the hell could you have guessed it was going to be that good? For all you knew, it could've ended up being shitty, *boring* sex."

"It was sex with you," she answered dryly and blinked at me as if that should explain all. "No way in hell was it going to be shitty *or* boring."

"Jesus, stop!" I demanded, holding up a hand. "I'm trying to be pissed off at you right now. But I like everything you're saying too much. Dammit, you put yourself in danger."

"But did I really?" she countered, lifting her eyebrows at me. "I stayed inside locked doors the whole day and made sure I was never alone. And today, I had you walk me to my car where I was going to go straight to Trick's and finally tell someone about Dax."

"You were going to tell *Trick*?" I exploded. "Why couldn't you have at least told *me* this morning?"

"If I told you this morning, you were going to get mad at me for not saying anything sooner. I thought that if I went to Trick, we could play it off as if he'd just found out through his lawyer source, and you'd never be the wiser or have a reason to be mad at me at all."

"Wow. You really planned on duping me that completely, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said, her voice full of cringe. "I'm sorry."

I couldn't help it; I chuckled, strangely amused by her sudden honesty, and I shook my head. "I should be extremely pissed at you," I said.

"But you're not?" she asked hopefully.

I glanced at her and sighed, unable to summon a good, legitimate rage. "I mean, it was really good sex," I admitted.

She grinned and leaned across the truck to kiss my cheek. "It was the best sex *ever*."

"True." Grumbling when my cell phone rang, I fumbled to dig it from my pocket. "It's your dad," I said as soon as I saw the screen. "Go figure." Then I answered and pressed it to my ear. "Yeah?"

"You still with Chloe?" Pick asked.

"I am," I assured.

"Good. Bring her to the club now. We're having a family meeting. Trick just got a call and—"

"Freston's out," I finished for him and glanced over at Chloe. "Yep. We know."

Pick paused, then cursed fluidly. "He's been there?" he guessed.

"No," I assured him. "Her cop friend told her."

"Jesus, thank God. Just get my little girl to me, Luke. Get her here now. Get her here safe."

"Will do, boss," I said and hung up, already two minutes away from him.



## 31 CHLOE

“Oh my word,” I breathed in shock as Luke neared the nightclub.

The parking lot across the street should rightly be empty at this time of day since the bar was technically closed. But as I peered out the front windshield of the truck, I easily spotted two dozen vehicles, and all of them were familiar.

All of them were *family*.

“This is insanity,” I cried as Luke turned into the alley so he could pull around to the back. “You guys do *not* need to make such a big deal out of me. I’m not—”

“Zzt,” Luke broke in, silencing me. “Yes, we do. And yes, you are. So just shut it and deal.”

As he stopped in front of the exit of the club, he didn’t even need to call anyone; the door simply opened, and Trick stepped outside to meet us.

“Now get in there and let them all know you’re fine, despite the fact that you’re a great big liar who hides probably the *greatest* danger to her life from everyone. I’m going to park the truck, and I’ll be right in.”

I was amazed how he could forgive me so easily while also being so blasé about the fact that I’d lied to him, yet also be so open about how much he hadn’t liked it. That kind of made me fall in love with him even harder.

Despite all the affection roaring through me, I managed to scowl. “You’re going to leave me alone with *that*?” I demanded. My brother looked as if he was going to smother me with a horde of protective hugs. “You suck.”

“I do...” Luke agreed in a husky voice, grinning naughtily as he leaned across the center console toward me. “Plus, I lick and kiss, and if you ask real nice, I might even bite too.”

I snorted at his joke, then cupped his cheek gently and lovingly murmured, “You’re such a perv,” before I pressed my mouth to his.

He groaned in the back of his throat and kissed me back before retorting, “And now I’m *your* perv,” against my lips, just as my passenger door came open.

“Alright, alright,” Trick interrupted. “Enough face-sucking already. We need to get her out of the open and inside. Right now.”

I pulled away from Luke to turn and scowl at my little brother. “Oh my God. You make it sound like Dax is waiting at the window of some tall building right now, ready to take me out with a sniper rifle.”

“Well, maybe he is,” he muttered moodily as he hopped onto the truck’s step bar, bringing him and his bruised jaw right up in my business so he could reach across me to manually unlatch my seat belt for me. “Now, let’s go.” He took my arm and started to drag me from my seat.

“This is so ridiculous,” I said, only to glance back at Luke for help.

But he looked way too amused to help with anything as he waved at me. “Have fun.”

I narrowed my eyes, and Trick shut the door on his chuckle.

“So kissing Luke’s a thing now, huh?”

With a rueful cringe toward my brother, I shrugged. “I guess.”

His eyebrows lifted in question as he hustled me into the bar, wanting to know if I was okay with this development, but my blush must've appeased his curiosity because then he rolled his eyes and nudged my shoulder with his.

"Look at you," he murmured, making sure the door was securely shut and locked behind him. "Following my advice and giving him a test drive."

"Oh God," I groaned, my face growing even hotter. "That is not at all why..." Unable to discuss any of this with *him*, I broke in with, "I'm not talking about this with you."

He just chuckled. "Nor do I want you to. I just wanted to say you look happy. And that makes *me* happy."

I glanced up at him and melted. "Thank you," I said sincerely. "I *am* happy."

"Good." Squeezing my arm affectionately as he steered me left.

The meeting seemed to be held in the back reception area, and when Trick opened the door to lead the way inside, Dad's voice was rising above a cacophony of objections to say, "We are not stalking and harassing this man, end of story."

"And all I'm saying," Noel, Lucy's dad, shot right back, "is that there are enough of us to keep an eye on him and know where he is at all times. No one has to actually engage with him. That way, we'll know if he gets anywhere near Chloe, Lucy, or anyone else."

Dad ran a harassed hand over his hair, trying to seek patience. "For how long?" he finally asked.

"Until the fucker's finally behind bars for good," Noel boomed.

"Yeah, except it could be *years* before this goes to trial and is finally settled."

"This man hurt three of ours. We have to do *something*."

"Agreed." My dad nodded objectively and opened his mouth to say more, but my mom, who was sitting next to him,

lit up and cried, “Chloe!” before she popped to her feet and hurried my way.

As she dove against me, hugging me hard, she was already demanding, “Are you okay? Have you seen or heard from him at all? Do you need anything?”

“I’m fine,” I said, hugging her back. “I’m good. I haven’t seen or heard from him at all.”

“Oh, thank God.” She began to kiss my cheek gratefully, only to pause and pull back enough to send me a curious blink. “You didn’t flinch from me today. You really *are* healing.”

I smiled and nodded, then let her lead me to the chairs, where they had a round table of sorts set up, though it was more of a rectangle made from about a dozen tables. She seated me between her and Dad, and he immediately glanced over and smiled warmly, reaching for my hand and squeezing it as soon as I was beside him.

“I think Noel’s suggestion has merit,” Trick spoke up. “I mean, we’ve all driven by his house at least once already, am I right?” He lifted his brows and glanced around the room before settling his gaze on Dad. “Hmm?”

Next to me, Dad huffed out an exaggerated sound. “Fine. Okay, I drove by on the way here. And he was just getting home from somewhere; he was carrying a couple of grocery sacks inside.”

“See.” Trick motioned his way. “So what’s the problem with working out a schedule, since we’re all going to check on him anyway? This way, we won’t overlap with anyone else, and we can keep a better eye on him.”

“I’ll take the first watch,” Beau volunteered, lifting his hand. “That little prick’s not getting near my sister or niece again.”

“And I really don’t think I’m a target,” Lucy spoke up from beside Vaughn. “I was just in his way that night. Chloe’s the one we should be worrying about the most.”

“Which brings us to the topic of protection,” Julian spoke up. “We need to work out another schedule for who’s going to

stay with whom because I don't want either of these ladies left alone while he's free."

"I say we just blow the bastard's house up with a little C-4," Teagan's dad spoke up and spread his arms. "Problem solved."

Meanwhile, from the entrance of the room, Luke silently entered and found his dad and brother not far away, standing on the outer fringes of the conversation, not joining in the discussion but ready to do their part once the decision was made.

As he settled his back against the wall next to JB, JB leaned over and started whispering to him, probably catching him up to speed. Luke tipped his face closer to his brother's to listen, even as his gaze shifted around the room until he found me.

As soon as we made eye contact, he paused and lifted his eyebrows briefly in greeting. And then he just kept looking at me, his stare glittering with a possessive kind of warmth as if to say, *yeah, I know what your panties smell like right now.*

Speaking of which, my panties grew a little damp under his heated gaze.

I shifted in my chair and forced my attention back to the conversation as Teagan said, "Don't be ridiculous, Dad. Really. Where are we going to find any freaking C-4? We should just make one of those homemade bomb things. They show you how to do that shit online."

"We're not blowing anyone up," Dad stated firmly. "We're not breaking the law at all."

"Except the fact of the matter is," Bella's mom said. "That this guy wasn't afraid to break *his* restraining order. He has no qualms about hurting women. Or children. No law or moral code has kept him from attacking already, and he didn't reach his main objective the first time. So speaking from experience, I say... He's not going to stop."

I shuddered, remembering the look in Dax's eyes as he sprayed me down with that hose. No, he hadn't accomplished

what he'd set out to do that night. And it made me feel suddenly sick because...

"He's going to try to get to Chloe again."

I pushed my seat back as if I was going to stand, but all I did was set a shaking hand on my knee and press the back of my other hand to my mouth, trying not to fall apart on the spot.

"Chloe?" Mom said, reaching for me, but I flinched away from her, shaking my head.

A few chairs down, Skylar stood up and passed her daughter to her husband, Dominic, before hurrying to me. "How about we go into the bar and find you a drink? You don't need to listen to this."

"No!" I cried, lifting my voice a little too high. "I will not leave you all to decide this for me. It's *my* problem. I brought that man into our lives, and I already got Lucy hurt and Ava Grace damn near killed. No one else gets hurt because of me." My chin trembled and I jabbed my finger toward the floor. "No one."

The room was quiet for a moment, making sure I was done saying my piece, and then it exploded with ideas, everyone saying what they thought needed to get done. I threw up my hands, completely exasperated.

"Hello?" I called, unable to be heard above the commotion. "Did anyone even *listen* to me?"

"We all listened, Chloe Girl," Dad assured, patting my hand. "But it's too late. Everyone in this room loves you and is already invested. We're willing to take on any risk to keep you safe, just as *you* would if it were Skylar or Nia or your mother, or anyone else in this room. Wouldn't you?"

I made a face because he was right. If it were anyone else in my position, I wouldn't care about my own safety; I'd want to do my part to keep my loved ones safe.

"Baby, please, let Skylar take you out of here for some fresh air," my mom begged. "We're going to come up with a plan to help no matter how much you protest."

I sighed and rubbed my forehead before mumbling, “Okay. Fine.”

As soon as I pushed to my feet, my sister was there, taking my hand and squeezing it. She led me toward the door, where Luke was still leaning against the wall with his family. We made eye contact again, and he winked at me before reaching out to run the backs of his fingers along my arm as I passed by him.

Just as I stepped through the doorway, my dad called, “Luke. You haven’t said anything yet. What do you suggest?”

“Oh, I was in favor of blowing the bastard’s house up,” I heard him answer.

“Right?” Ten cheered jovially. “Now *that’s* what I’m talking about.”

Skylar sniffed and rolled her eyes. “God, I hope no one ever listens in on the insane suggestions that crop up during our discussions. Someone would think we were a freaking mob family.”

“They’re just being the comic relief they know we need during the intense stuff,” I said, exhaling gratefully, glad that I had Luke in my life to provide just the relief I needed when everything else was serious and scary.

“Speaking of which...” Skylar asked, lifting her brows and then wagging them at me. “Just what other *relief* has Mr. Hamilton been providing for you lately? Because I’ve been hearing rumors. And that look you two just gave each other... mm-hmm. You better spill, girl.”

“Oh God,” I groaned, covering my face and feeling my cheeks heat like crazy. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“Well, that blush is saying quite a bit,” Skylar answered, lifting her brows and shaking her head as we entered the main club area, where she stepped behind the bar. “But wow. You and *Luke*, huh? Are you sure this is really happening?”

“I mean...” I shrugged at her helplessly as I climbed onto a stool and watched her fix me an iced ginger ale. “I think so.”

Then I bit my lip and admitted, “I want it to. And so far, he says he does too.”

“Wow,” Skylar repeated, shaking her head in awe. “That’s just...amazing. And I’m glad for you, but wow... It’s going to take a bit for me to adjust to since I’m used to you guys fighting like cats and dogs.” Then she shrugged and smiled as she set the glass in front of me. “I guess what they say is true; that line between love and hate is thin as hell.”

“I guess,” I murmured vaguely as I reached for the drink, only to pause when my sister-in-law exited the hallway with her one-year-old whining on her hip and her phone pressed to her ear as she tried to talk to her caller.

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” Nia groaned in frustration as she dug into the diaper bag that was hanging from her other shoulder and pulled out a bottle. “It’s going to take *another* week? You’ve already had it for two. Where the hell are you ordering the part from? Australia?”

Hopping off my stool, I hurried over to reach for baby Drea with both hands and then took the bottle from Nia so she could continue to talk to whoever was on the other end of the line without any distractions.

My sister-in-law sent me a grateful glance and turned away, muttering, “And you have *no* loaner I can borrow while I wait, right?” only to add a snide, “Of course not,” a moment later.

Meanwhile, I was grinning at my niece and settling her back onto the stool with me so I could give her a drink. Drea latched her chubby little fingers around the bottle and immediately stopped whining so she could fill her belly.

Across the room, Nia ended her call, crying, “Dammit!”

“Problems?” Skylar asked, sounding amused as she mixed another drink—this one with a splash of vodka in it—before setting it on the counter for Nia.

“Oh my God, thank you,” Nia gushed, falling onto the seat next to me and plopping her diaper bag on the countertop before grabbing the glass gratefully. She gulped greedily and



then slapped the cup down and said, “I’ve been without a vehicle for two weeks now, and I can’t keep borrowing my mother’s car because she’s taking it on a trip out of state tomorrow, and there’s so much happening at work that I can’t take off, and Julian’s—”

“Hey. Here,” I cut in, digging into my purse and pulling out my own car keys. “Just take mine.” When I slid the keys her way, she blinked at them in astonishment.

“Really?”

I nodded and cuddled her baby closer to me. “Of course. I have a feeling I’m not going to be allowed to drive myself *anywhere* in the foreseeable future. So you should definitely take it.”

“God, *thank you*, Chlo,” Nia said, snagging the keys even as she deflated and shook her head. “You are the best, and now I feel like absolute crap because none of my problems are even remotely as bad as what you must be going through, and here I was, acting like it’s the end of the world over here.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Trust me; I know how shitty car problems are. I completely get it.”

Drea spotted her mom then and dove at her, making us gasp in shock and then laugh when we caught her safely and kept her from falling off the countertop. As Nia took control of the baby again, pulling her onto her lap, Luke appeared from the hallway.

“Hey,” I said in surprise, not expecting to see him.

“Hey,” he murmured in a bit more of an intimate tone as he joined us, climbing onto the seat next to me, on the other side of Nia. Grabbing the bar, he pulled back a bit and took a big breath before announcing, “So... As of right now, I am officially on paid leave from the nightclub.” Lifting his eyebrows flirtily at me, he added, “Meet your new twenty-four-hour bodyguard.”

“What? *No...*” I shrieked. “Dad can’t just take you away from your job. *Luke...* How long does everyone just expect you to do this?”

He shrugged as if he didn't care. "We plan to revisit our current arrangement every two weeks and make adjustments as needed."

"Oh God," I groaned. "This is... This can't work," I tried to argue. "They can't stick you with me for twenty-four hours a day. We'll kill each other!"

Luke shot me a wicked grin. "From sexual overdose maybe," he countered.

Nia spat the drink she was taking halfway across the bar and started to choke.

"Seriously," she cried, trying to catch her breath as she gaped at us and patted her chest for more air. "You can't just say stuff like that in front of me right when I take a drink. I had no idea you two were even..." Waving a hand in a circle around Luke and me, she finished with, "Oh my God."

Luke winced in apology and said, "Sorry. My bad," while Skylar tapped her hands on the counter and just grinned between him and me.

"I like it," she said, nodding in appreciation as her gaze met mine. "You're going to have fun with this one."

I sighed as if already overwhelmed, but Luke grinned back at her. "Hell yes, she is," he agreed before leaning into me and kissing my cheek soundly.

And that's how I got Luke as my personal bodyguard.

## 32 LUKE

A couple of days passed.

The family decided to have Chloe stay over at my place with me, which was probably safer for her, but I had to admit...it felt weird.

After the past few weeks, *her* house had started to feel more like home than my own, so it was an adjustment for both of us.

But we were steadily working our way through all the rooms, christening them, as we called it. Sex kept her mind off things for a while. Other times, she handled each day like a champ. But I could tell, the stress was wearing on her.

She wanted her life back. She wanted *not* to be worried about a possible stalker being after her. She wanted this to just be over with already.

To make matters worse, the police department called and asked her to come in for some follow-up questions about the incident so they could make a more detailed case against Freston.

It was supposed to be a videotaped interview, so it was decided—not by me—that *Trick* would take her in since he had a legal background. Not that I thought that would make any difference; he probably wasn't going to get to sit in while they talked to her anyway.

But I had a feeling she really didn't want me going with her because *Logan* would probably be at the station, and she knew that if I saw him, it would irritate my jealousy.

So I was instructed to sit this one out.

Which actually worked out okay for me because I kind of had a mission to complete that didn't involve her.

As soon as I kissed her goodbye at the door and then threatened her brother to within an inch of his life to keep her safe, I shut the door and immediately pulled out my phone, checking the Freston-watch schedule group chat.

Gracen was sitting in front of his house now, and the douchey red Mitsubishi was still in his drive. But Gray needed to leave at eleven and Bella wouldn't be able to take up her post after that until noon.

I didn't like that Chloe would be away from home for a full hour while her stalker wasn't being, well...stalked. But Trick said these interviews typically lasted a while and Bella should be at Freston's place before they finished. But even if she wasn't, Trick had already agreed not to leave the police department with Chloe until after Bella had checked in.

Feeling pretty secure about that, I called Teagan.

"Hey, sis," I greeted cheerfully when she answered.

But she wasn't fooled by my tone. Or maybe she was just enlightened by it. "What do you want?" she demanded. "You only call me *sis* when you want to wheedle something out of me."

"You know Chloe's tastes pretty well, right?"

"Uh..." Teagan sounded utterly confused before answering a hesitant, "Maybe. Why?"

"I want you to meet me at the jewelry store and help me pick out a ring for her."

"A ring? Like a friendship ring?"

I scowled. "An engagement ring."

"Oh my God," she shrieked in astonishment. "Are you serious? So the love thing—"

"Totally worked." I grinned proudly. "Yes."

“Wow. I mean, just...wow. That was fast. Are you sure—”

“Hell yes, I’m sure,” I snapped with a frown. “And it turns out, I’ve basically been in love with her for a while. I just needed a few people to point out *why*. And then, you know, the sex really cemented it for me. So...”

“Sex?” Teagan echoed in surprise. “You mean, you two—”

“Oh yeah.” I lowered my voice confidently to confess, “And it was amazing, *mind-blowing* sex, too. I’m talking, this is the absolute best, motherfucking sex of my life. That woman is my soul mate, hands down. You don’t even know, T. I mean—”

“Hey, shh. You’re not supposed to kiss and tell about the one you love, you moron.”

“Why not?” I countered. “Excellence like this should be shouted from the rooftops. I’m telling you, she can do this thing with her—”

“Oh my God,” my sister-in-law shrieked. “That’s okay. I *don’t* want to know. *Please.*”

I grinned, always happy to mortify Teagan. “Okay, fine. So you’ll meet me?” I pressed. “At the jewelry shop? In say, fifteen...twenty minutes?”

“Good God, Luke,” Teagan stumbled out. “I mean, not that I’m not happy for you. This is great. It’s the best. But are you sure this is a good time? With everything going on?”

“T,” I rasped, shaking my head. “I can’t think of a *better* time. She needs this right now. She needs a win. The whole thing with this dickhead being out of jail is taking over her life and stressing her out. She needs something good to look forward to, a future to help her see that this Freston shit isn’t going to last forever, that it *can’t*. So yeah... I want to do this *now.*”

“Well, damn...” Teagan sniffed as if I’d made her cry. “When you put it that way, yes! I’d be honored to help you out.” Then she blurted out a giddy laugh. “This is going to be fun. I’ll see you in a few.”

After she hung up, I blew out a steadying breath and glanced at myself in the mirror that hung in the entrance of my house.

“You’re getting married, big boy,” I told my reflection.

And the lucky bastard just grinned back at me with a smug, *Yes, I am* expression.

Whistling to myself, I whipped up a sandwich for a quick, early lunch, then started out the door and headed to my truck.

I didn’t think Freston would sneak out under Gray’s watch, but he’d been able to find Chloe before at Lucy’s, so I glanced around for his ugly red Mitsubishi as I jogged to my truck.

When I didn’t spot it, I climbed in and started the engine, wondering not for the first time how he had been able to locate her the night of her kidnapping. Vaughn had checked Chloe’s phone to make sure she hadn’t been sharing her location with him, so then maybe he’d followed her there. Except he hadn’t immediately approached the house; she’d been inside for quite a while before he’d busted in.

There was something that just felt...off about it all.

And even though I couldn’t figure out *what* was off, I knew for certain that if he found her again, we’d be ready for him.

I was busy picturing scenarios of physically getting to fight the guy when I pulled up to the strip mall where the jewelry store was located.

“What the...?” I gaped in astonishment as I recognized the faces of at least a dozen women gathered in front of the entrance.

Fucking Teagan had blabbed. To *everyone*, it appeared. I mean, I hadn’t told her to keep it a secret, but I hadn’t been prepared to face nearly every freaking female in the family either.

When I parked and cut the engine, my sister-in-law popped free from the group and hurried to where I was parked.

“Really?” I asked her with raised eyebrows as I climbed out and shut the door behind me.

“I panicked,” she started, wringing her hands in apology. “As soon as I hung up with you, I started to realize what a huge responsibility this was—that you just *heaped* onto my shoulders at the last minute, leaving me no time for preparation at all. And I began to wonder if I really *did* know Chloe’s tastes well enough to make this kind of monumental decision for her. So I called my mom as a reinforcement. That was it. But she called Chloe’s mom, who called Aunt Reese, who called—well, you get the point. Anyway... Tada!” She widened her hands and motioned toward the horde that was coming our way. “Look at the bright side, with help like this, we’re going to find you the most kick-ass ring ever.”

“Yikes,” I murmured in a small voice and swallowed thickly just as they reached me.

Chloe’s mom led the parade, opening her arms and grinning big.

“A new son,” she cheered and pulled me in for a hug, then gripped my face and forced me to bend down so she could kiss my cheek. “I’m so happy. From the way you two bickered, I always thought you and Chlo would make a cute couple.”

“Huh.” I smiled vaguely as the rest gathered around me hugging and kissing me in congratulations and just basically showing their support.

“So what kind of price limit are we working with?” someone asked, while someone else wondered, “Is there a certain cut you’re looking for?”

“Oh, Chloe’s a princess cut, all the way,” her sister, Skylar, swore.

“Really?” Nia, her sister-in-law, countered and wrinkled her nose. “I always saw her as more of a marquise kind of girl.”

“What about emerald cut?” someone else broke in. “That’s what Gray got me, and I just adore it.”

“How important is clarity to you, Luke?”

“What are your thoughts on other jewels besides diamonds?”

“Do you want the wedding band and engagement ring to wrap together as a set or be two separate bands?”

“Ooh, have you considered rose gold for the band? I really like rose gold.”

“Oh...my God,” I uttered, my gaze shifting toward Teagan so she would know I was going to make her suffer for putting me through this.

She offered me an apologetic cringe as the others grabbed my arms and dragged me into the jewelry store.

---

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I was hiding in the corner, slumped in a chair, and playing a game on my phone when someone sat next to me.

I glanced up, annoyed and pretty sure it was going to be Teagan or one of the others again with more brain-numbing questions about price limits and *whatever*. But it was actually my mom.

“Hey!” I said in surprise, straightening as an instant smile overtook my face. “I didn’t know you got dragged into this too.” Leaning forward, I pressed a warm kiss to her temple in greeting.

“Dragged?” she repeated in dismay. “I was *honored* to get to participate.”

“Well, hell,” I answered. “If I’d known that, I would’ve asked you instead of T. Maybe it wouldn’t have turned into such a circus.”

Mom laughed. “I adore the circus. I wish Chloe could see everyone arguing about what they think she’d like most. She’d get quite a kick out of it.”

“You know, you’re right. She would.” Sliding the screen of my phone out of the game app, I opened the camera and



started taking a video of the noise and commotion, pausing on Nia who was arguing with Skylar about something and using these big, flourishing hand gestures toward the glass counter in front of them. “I’ll show her this after the proposal.”

I spent a full minute panning the shop so Chloe would be able to see everyone who was involved and how they were grouped up in pairs and shopping in different areas, only to call someone over after a few seconds to see *this one*. They were truly invested in getting something Chloe would like.

“They’re offering us free champagne while we shop too,” Mom told me as soon as I stopped filming and lowered the phone. “I feel so posh and important right now.”

I laughed and glanced over at her. “Except you don’t drink,” I mentioned. I think I could count on one hand the number of times I’d seen my mother consume alcohol.

“*You* do, though,” she countered and lifted a tulip glass to me in offering.

“Oh, God bless you,” I breathed and snatched the champagne from her hand, only to gulp it down in one long drag.

Mom laughed as she watched. “You always make me laugh. I think that’s your special charm, you know. I don’t know what I’d do if you weren’t my happy boy anymore.” Reaching out to clutch my arm, her smile turned sad. “I love Chloe, you know. She’s like one of my own children. And nothing would thrill me more than to see you settle down with her, but are you *sure* you can be happy with this decision? I know Pick pushed you. And I will not approve of any marriage you enter into unless you genuinely think it’ll keep you as my bright, happy boy.”

“Jesus, Mom,” I grumbled with a sigh. “Not you too.”

“Me the most,” she assured. “Because I know the man you come from. And you have Quinn’s noble streak in you, whether you like it or not.”

I snorted because I was nothing like my father.

Dr. Quinn Hamilton was a brilliant renowned cardiovascular surgeon who saved lives on a daily basis. He was quiet and kind, compassionate, infinitely patient, and the most steady, reliable presence I'd ever known. He was basically the antithesis of me.

"Did you know," Mom spoke up when I didn't reply soon enough. "I was the one who helped your father pick out the first engagement ring he ever bought."

I sent her a sideways glance and kicked up one eyebrow. "He made you pick out your own ring?"

She gave a small laugh and shook her head. "No. This ring was for someone else."

Okay. Now *that* woke me up. "Say what now?" I demanded. "No fucking way. Dad was engaged to someone before you?"

"Actually," she murmured with a thoughtful wince. "No. He never did ask her to marry him. The night he was going to propose out of some silly noble obligation he felt toward her because she was the first girlfriend he'd ever had, he learned she was cheating on him."

"Oh, snap," I breathed, wincing in sympathy for past Dad. "That must've sucked for him."

"Well." Mom made a sound in her throat that didn't carry much sympathy. "It was great for me, though." When my eyebrows shot up in surprise, she laughed and patted my arm, adding, "I snatched him up for myself that very night."

I blurted out a chuckle and squeezed her fingers in congratulations. "Yes, queen," I cheered. "Slay..."

Mom giggled and leaned against me. "The point is..." she went on after she'd calmed down, "your father made the wrong decision to commit himself for life to someone he didn't truly love, all because he felt like he *should*. Loyalty and duty are strong in the Hamilton genes. Maybe a little *too* strong. It was a blessing in disguise when she broke his trust and cheated on him. He never would've even looked at me like that and gotten to learn what true love was if she hadn't.

And I don't want you to miss out on that either just because someone important to you needs help."

"She's not just important to me, Mom," I swore. "She's everything. She's the rest of my life and the mother of your future grandchildren. Whenever I try to picture my future without her being my number one, I start to panic. I truly, honestly love her. I swear it. She... Fuck, she makes me feel special. And alive."

When I realized how far down the cheesy road I'd just traveled, I flushed and groaned. "God. That sounds stupid."

"No, it doesn't. Not at all," Mom assured. A smile bloomed across her face as she squeezed my arm, looking happy and proud. "It sounds perfect," she promised me. "I'm so, so glad." Blowing out a relieved breath, she added, "Thank God."

Sighing out a pacified sound, she turned to face the rest of the room and watched the others search for Chloe's perfect ring with me. Then she tipped her face to the side and rested it on my shoulder. "Want to hear something ironic? I think it was actually Pick who went with your father when he picked out *my* ring."

I snorted. "No shit?"

That *did* feel ironic. It was as if Pick had already known, way back then, that he was orchestrating the existence of his future son-in-law by helping my parents get together.

Chuckling, I shook my head and then lifted my gaze as Teagan marched toward us, with all the others following her.

"We found it," she announced proudly. "We found Chloe's ring."

Stretching her arms forward in a grand gesture, she tipped the open ring box to show me what lay nestled inside.

I peered at the sparkling diamond and gold that glittered up at me. To me, it looked like any other ring, but when I glanced around at all the eager, expectant faces that were trying to gauge my thoughts, I knew it wasn't just any ring. Even Chloe's mom and sisters looked excited by it.

“And you all agree?” I asked in amazement.  
“Unanimously?”

They nodded, so I glanced over at my mom.

A grin burst across her face, joyous tears gathered in her eyes, and she nodded too. “It’s perfect.”

“Okay, then,” I said and extended my hand toward Teagan, with my credit card fit between two fingers. “Get it.”

The others screamed in cheers, and more Champagne was poured.

## 33 LUKE

**T**eagan made me stop by the hospital before heading home so I could show my brother Chloe's ring while he was at work.

He was with a patient when I arrived, so I hung out in one of their waiting rooms until he could see me. It'd been a while since I had last heard from Chloe, so I shot her a text, not really expecting an answer since I figured she was still being interviewed.

Being forced to remember all that shit and retell it was going to no doubt be taxing on her. I already planned on suggesting that we make today another cheat day, then veg out in front of the television together, safely behind locked doors while watching movies and eating junk food. Between rounds of sex, of course.

There would have to be lots of sex for the rest of the day. Chloe liked sex. It'd make her feel better.

I grinned over those plans and dug the ring box out of my pocket as I tucked my phone away.

Flipping the lid open, I peered down at the symbol of my love for her and drew in a long breath. I was so eager to get this on her finger and make it official that I kind of wanted to propose as soon as I saw her again. But then, I also wanted to wait for something special. Maybe Teagan had been right; becoming engaged during this drama with Freston wasn't the best idea.

But I wanted her to be happy. And if this put a smile on her face, it'd be worth it.

"Is that it?" my brother's voice asked from nearby.

I snapped my head up to discover that JB had arrived. Wearing a white lab coat over blue scrubs with a stethoscope draped over his neck and a badge clipped to his front pocket, he looked like the model doctor.

"This is it," I answered, popping to my feet and stepping forward to extend the ring box his way.

He took it carefully and peered down, saying nothing. I couldn't read his expression either, which kind of made me nervous.

After he looked up and quietly said, "Nice," he shut the lid and handed it back. "So..." Clearing his throat, he waited until I had the box tucked in my pocket before he added, "You're really doing this, huh?"

"Of course," I answered, surprised that he didn't seem happier, that he had any hesitancy for me at all. "Why?"

JB shrugged and sent me his best older-brother-knows-better look. "It's just that one minute you're telling us you plan to fall in love with her, then you're asking how to do that, and now, bam, you have a ring. I mean, don't you think this is all happening a bit *fast*?"

I frowned at him a moment before snapping, "Is *this* why Teagan sent me here to talk to you? You all don't want me to get married or something? Jesus, why'd she help me pick out a ring if—"

"This isn't T," JB broke in rationally. "She supports this completely and sent you here so you could ask me to be your best man. No, this is all me. *I'm* worried."

I pulled a step back. "You don't want me to get married?"

JB sighed wearily. "Of course, I want you to get married. Someday. And there's no one I'd want to see you end up with more than Chloe, either. I'm in full support of the idea *in general*. But I want *you* to want this. I want you to be ready.

And right now, it... I don't know. It kind of feels like you're only doing it to make everyone else happy."

"Oh Jesus," I muttered, rolling my eyes. Then I sliced him a hard scowl. "I didn't realize I needed to convince you that I'm being legit here. I *love* her, okay? I took Trick's idiot advice, and bam, what do you know... It actually worked."

JB's eyebrows shot up. "So you and Chloe... You..." He motioned his finger back and forth and widened his eyes in surprise.

"Fuck yes, we did," I announced before furrowing my brow. "I'm surprised your wife didn't mention that to you already."

"You told *Teagan*?" he asked in shock.

I shrugged. "What? Like it was some big secret?" Then, I paused to flick him sharply in the shoulder. "And why the hell didn't you tell me *sooner* how much more amazing it is when you're emotionally entangled with the chick? Jesus. Do you know how sore and overused I left poor Chlo after the number of times I had to—"

"Okay!" JB broke in, laughing uneasily and lifting his hands while shaking them aggressively to stop me. "TMI. I get it. I don't need to know—"

Leaning in and lowering my voice, I whispered, "Best... sex...ever. I'm just saying. She has yet to say no to *anything* I've wanted to do. I mean, I haven't gotten around to trying it all yet, but I've been making my way down the list, and let me tell you... So far, she likes everything *I* like. Can you believe that shit?"

"God." My brother closed his eyes and winced. "You *really* don't have to share this. I'm never going to be able to look at Chloe the same again."

"You shouldn't," I agreed wholeheartedly. "You should look at her like the fucking goddess she is. And that naughty little freak is *mine*." A big grin spread across my face as I nodded, appreciating the fact that she *was* mine. "I can give you some great pointers if you need any."

“I don’t,” my brother assured me. “I really don’t.”

“Hey, whatever.” I lifted both hands and sent him a *your-loss* glance. “Teagan’s going to miss out on some very fine times, but if you’re good...”

“We *are*,” JB answered firmly.

“Okay.” I laughed and surrendered. “I hear you.”

“But do you hear *me*?” JB said, frowning slightly. “I’m glad you two are...compatible. But there’s more than just sex that goes into a marriage.”

Scowling, I said, “I *know* that. But the sex is new, and I’ve already felt all the other elements for a while, so excuse me if I’m still gaga over the new stuff right now.”

“*What* other elements, though?” JB demanded. “Because when Gracen was listing off all those website tips to determine whether you were in love or not the other night, you didn’t seem to have experienced *any* other emotions toward her yet.”

“*Bullshit* if I haven’t,” I growled. “I had experienced *all* the other things with Chloe. And it freaked me the fuck out to realize how sunk I already was when Gray started reading his stupid lists out loud.”

When JB merely frowned at me as if he knew better, I scowled back. “Stop looking at me with those judgmental eyes. I fucking love her, *alright*?”

But all my brother did in return was blow out a long breath as if he were gearing up to give me one of his lectures.

I threw up my hands, stopping him before he could even get started. “That’s it. I’m done here.” I whirled around to stalk off, but his reaction irritated me too much to let it lie, so I found myself whirling back in the entrance of the waiting area and pointing accusingly at him.

I mean, how could he even question this? It seemed so blaring and obvious to me...now that I’d finally opened my eyes and realized it for myself.

How could he not see it too?



“You want to know why I *really* love her?” I demanded, wanting to shove it in his face how truly wrong he was. “Because she loved me first. She knows exactly what an inconsiderate, inappropriate dickwad I am. She knows all my faults and shortcomings, and yet she *still* accepts me as I am. No, she fucking *chose* me and prefers me because of the way I am. She doesn’t want me to change *a thing*, which isn’t something even *you* can claim.”

JB opened his mouth to disagree with me, I’m sure—not that he had a leg to stand on because I couldn’t count the infinite number of times he had ragged on me over the years about not going to college or getting a *real* job or...whatever—but I lifted a finger, stopping him.

“And she lets me take care of her, too, which feeds my need to help people. I mean, not so much that I get a big head and turn all codependent on her or anything. Sometimes, she’s got to be a stubborn pain in the ass to remind me that she’s still her own strong, independent woman and could live without me, but she lets me step in and pamper her just enough to make me feel special and worthwhile. And it encourages me to *want* to work harder and become this good person she seems to think I am, even though I know she’s completely satisfied with what she gets from me now. She’s hot and sassy—calling me out during my stupid moments—and yet my safe place all in one beautiful soul. And I’ve never felt as fulfilled as I do when she’s in my sphere. So you just go ahead and think you know me better than I do and that I don’t really love her. I don’t give a fuck if I don’t convince you or not. I’m *marrying* that girl before she gets away.”

With that, I spun around to stalk off. I was so intent to ignore him as he called after me, telling me to wait, that I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going and I ran right into a freaking uniformed police officer who’d been walking down the hall.

“Shit, sorry,” I said and stepped back to let him go first.

He lifted a hand in forgiveness. “No worries.”

As he started away, however, the radio on his belt started to squawk.

“...Ten twenty-eight on the first plate is current,” a voice announced mildly. “Registered to a Chloe Ryan out of Ellamore. Negative twenty-nine.”

My ears perked to immediate attention when I heard Chloe’s name, and I glanced back at JB to make sure he’d heard the same thing. When he blinked back at me in surprise, I leaped forward, racing after that cop.

“Wait...” I grabbed his arm, making him startle and whirl toward me. Jarring to a halt, I tore my hand off him and then lifted both, even as I demanded, “What...what’s that about? On your radio.” I waved toward his belt. “I heard them say Chloe Ryan, and she... She’s my fiancée,” I blurted, not sure what else to call her. “Is she okay? What’s going on?”

Meanwhile, the guy’s radio just kept spilling out more information. “Second vehicle,” the dispatcher was droning on. “Ten twenty-eight is expired. Registered to a Dexter Freston out of Pontiac. Negative twenty-nine.”

“Oh fuck...” I breathed when I heard *his* name. Cupping my head, I bent a little and started to back away from the officer, as stars popped into my vision. “*What* is happening?”

“Car accident,” the officer told me as a new voice on his radio called through static-filled feedback.

“Both drivers are in critical condition. What’s the ETA on EMS?”

The uniformed man in front of me said, “Sounds like she’s going to be heading this way soon enough, so you might as well just stay put. You can meet her here.” And with that, he walked off, leaving me to gape after him open-mouthed.

“Luke?” JB gripped my arm, forcing me to look at him.

“She...she was in an accident,” I said hollowly, still not registering it quite right in my head. “Critical condition.”

She was *hurt*.

“Motherfucker.” My knees started to buckle, but my brother tightened his grip on me and then led me to a nearby bench, where I wilted onto my ass and cupped my head between my hands.

But he’d found her. Son of a bitch, Freston had *found* her.

My world seemed to fall apart around me, and everything went blank. “No, no, no, no, no, no...”

All I could focus on was the word *critical*.

“Luke?”

“What does critical mean?” I asked, trying to look up at JB, but I couldn’t seem to see him through the black fog of panic. “How bad is that? It’s, like, life-threatening, isn’t it? Oh God.”

Life-threatening.

What was worse, Bella texted the Freston-watch group chat at that very moment, checking in for her duty, only to report that Freston’s car was *not* in his driveway.

And that was all the confirmation I needed. The bastard had gotten Chloe.

“JB...” I reached out in his direction, seeking support as my brain went absolutely blank. When I caught hold of his arm, I squeezed hard. A sob tore from my throat, and my entire body started to tremble. “I can’t breathe.”

But this couldn’t be happening. It just couldn’t. I’d barely woken my dumb ass up and realized how much I loved her. I couldn’t lose her *now*. That wasn’t fair. It wasn’t...

I went hot, then cold. My scalp prickled and dizziness assailed me. I was losing my shit. Big-time.

“Wait. Just... *Hey!*” JB clapped his hands in front of my face, startling me out of my terror-filled breakdown. “Let’s just think this through,” he commanded calmly, lifting his eyebrows and forcing me to stop and think rationally as well. “I thought she was with Trick right now.”

“She is...” I nodded, my voice broken and shaking. “They went to the station to answer some questions.”

“So they took *her* car?” JB asked, sounding confused by that idea.

“No.” I shook my head. “They...” Then, I straightened in surprise. “No, they didn’t. They took his. Son of a *bitch*...” My gaze lifted in hope as it finally clicked as to what he was saying. “Her *car* was in an accident. Not her. Oh, thank God.” I pressed a hand to my heart and tried to calm the fuck down.

But JB was still shaking his head, not understanding. “Then who’s in Chloe’s car?”

“Nia borrowed it to—oh fuck,” I realized, gripping my head and feeling shitty because I was still relieved to think that Chloe was okay. “Nia borrowed her car. I just saw her at the jewelry store, too. She took an early lunch break to help pick out Chloe’s ring. So she would’ve been driving back to— Oh... Oh no. *Nia*’s in critical condition?”

My eyes were wide as they met JB’s.

“Am I an ass if I say I’m still relieved it’s not Chloe?” I asked in a hoarse, shaking voice.

My brother gripped my arm. “No,” he said with all seriousness. “Because you’ve definitely convinced me that you really do love her. But maybe don’t mention any relief in front of Julian.”

I nodded and swallowed hard. “Right.”

“Speaking of...” JB slid a phone from his pocket. “I’m going to call him. See if he’s heard anything about Nia yet?”

“Good...” I nodded, my hands shaking for an entirely different reason. “Good idea. Shit... I should probably call Chloe.”

She was going to freak when she heard her sister-in-law had gotten into an accident with—

Wait a fucking second.

Why had *Nia* gotten into a wreck with Freston?

“Son of a bitch.” I whirled toward JB, who had his phone pressed to his ear but was waiting for an answer. “He’s got a tracker on Chloe’s car. That must be how he found her at Lucy’s.”

“Fuck,” my brother breathed, only to blink and snap his attention to the call. “Hello? Julian?” Turning away, he walked a couple of steps off, trying to inform Chloe’s brother of everything he knew.

Meanwhile, I yanked up my own phone and dialed Chloe.

She answered on the second ring. “Hey!” she said brightly, making me exhale with so much relief that I went momentarily dizzy. “I was actually in the middle of answering your text. We just got out of—”

“Where are you?” I broke in urgently. “Are you still at the station? Are you okay?”

“I... Yeah. Wha-what’s going on? Your voice is shaking.”

“Sorry.” I closed my eyes briefly and pressed a fistful hand to my head. “I’m just... I need you to come to me, okay? I need to see you with my own eyes to make sure you’re okay.”

“Luke, you’re freaking me out,” she warned sternly. “What is wrong?”

“I’m at the hospital,” I started.

Only for her to cut in with, “Oh my God. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I waved a dismissive hand. “I’m fine. I was just stopping by to see JB. But we heard your name come over a police scanner from some cop’s radio that was walking by in the hall.”

“My name?” she said in confusion.

“Yeah.” I took a breath and winced before admitting, “I think your car’s been in an accident.”

“Oh God. *Nia*?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted honestly. “I just know both drivers are being brought here to the hospital. JB’s calling Julian now.”

“What about Drea? Was Drea with her?”

I swallowed, only to remember again that I’d just seen Nia at the jewelry store. Fuck, that felt like eons ago. “I don’t think so,” I admitted. “She was going back to work from her lunch break. But, Chloe...”

“Don’t worry,” she assured. “Trick and I are headed there now. We’ll be there soon.”

“Chloe,” I said again, my voice going serious.

“Hey, I’m getting a call on the other line from Mom. I need to—”

“Chloe!” I said sharply. “The other car... The other car in the accident belonged to Dax Freston.”

## 34 LUKE

Silence answered me briefly before Chloe whimpered, “What? *No*... No, no, no, no...”

“I’m sorry,” was all I could think to say.

“If he hurt her...” she growled, only to sniff and begin to cry.

“I know,” I said. “Please. Just get here. I need to hold you. Right fucking now.”

“Okay,” she rasped. “I gotta go. Mom...”

“Yeah,” I told her. “I got it.”

When she disconnected, I turned toward JB, who seemed to be talking to Teagan now. “Yep. Will do. I love you too. Bye.”

He disconnected and glanced my way. “Julian hadn’t heard anything yet; he’s going to try to call Nia. Maybe we’re all just mistaken about everything.”

The bad feeling creeping up the back of my neck told me we weren’t mistaken, but I nodded anyway. “Yeah. Hopefully.”

JB opened his mouth to say more, but his pager went off. He glanced down and sucked in a breath. “We’ve got two ambulances coming into the ER with car accident trauma patients. That’s probably them. I gotta go.”

He was already backing away as I nodded and asked, “You’ll check back?”

“Yep. Just stay here so I know where to find you.”

Then he spun away and jogged off.

I sank into a nearby seat and just sat there. It didn't take long for the family group chat to light up, though. At first, they all just wanted to locate Nia. Julian couldn't reach her by her cell or at work. They acted as if she was merely missing.

But then he finally received the official call that she had indeed been in the accident. Yet no one still knew what her condition was.

Teagan was the first to arrive at the hospital. She had Harper on her hip and looked winded. “Anything?”

I shook my head and reached for the kid, hoping that a little bit of toddler would help settle my nerves. “Not yet. JB told me to wait here. I think he might be with her.”

Harper opened her arms, willing to let me hold her, and she immediately started in with the raspberries, making fart sounds.

I smiled and damn near started crying right then. Giving her some raspberries right back, I pressed my forehead to Harper's and breathed in her fresh, baby scent.

We entertained each other for about thirty seconds before she noticed her mother, and tried to dive back into Teagan's arms, who was busy texting in the group chat but managed to catch her kid and hold her again.

A couple of other people arrived. When a harried Julian blew into the hospital, a nurse immediately took him away, to fill out paperwork or something. I don't know. I just felt my nerves growing jumpier and jumpier with each person that arrived who wasn't Chloe.

I really, *really* needed to see her.

It was a nagging, persistent need that didn't let up until there she finally was, rushing through the doors with Trick on her heels.

“Thank God,” I breathed, surging forward. I didn't stop until I literally ran into her and scooped her up, gathering her



into my arms with a bear hug as tight as I'd ever given anyone.

"Thank God," I said again, burying my face in her neck and inhaling her Japanese Cherry Blossom scent. My arms trembled when she hugged me back. And then I couldn't help myself, I started to blurt out everything.

"I thought it was you. When I first heard your name and the word accident. For a full minute, I thought it was you. And my life fucking ended. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I definitely couldn't rationalize the fact that you weren't even with your car. Everything inside me shut down, and I just panicked. God. I don't think I can let you go. My arms are physically unable to release you."

"Luke," she whispered, cupping my face between her hands. "It's okay. I'm okay. I'm right here. Look at me."

I shook my head, my jaw locked because I was almost too afraid to look up and see someone else's face. But then I did look, and there was Chloe. The woman I loved.

"Oh, thank God." Tears filled my eyes. "Don't ever do that to me again," I rasped heatedly.

She sent me a watery-eyed smile and nodded. "Okay." Then she glanced past me toward our family that had already gathered and where Trick had already joined their crew. "What do we know?"

"Nothing," I said. "Absolutely nothing. As soon as Julian arrived, they took him away to God knows where, and we haven't heard anything at all."

Chloe nodded and pulled out of my arms as if to walk toward the others, and I took her hand, unable to stop touching her in some capacity.

Together, we started toward them, only for Chloe to jar to a halt and call, "Logan?"

I lifted my face to see the stalker cop she'd never gotten around to having dinner with. He was in uniform and had been hurrying down the hall past us, but when he heard his name, he glanced over and paused.

“Hey,” he said in surprise and changed directions to approach.

I tightened my grip on Chloe’s hand, and she shifted closer, patting my arm in reassurance.

“I take it you’re aware that your car’s been in an accident?” Logan asked.

“Yes.” She pressed closer to me. “My—my sister-in-law, Nia, was borrowing it. Is she... Do you know how she’s doing?”

He shook his head briefly. “No. Sorry. I was heading back there to find out right now, though.” He glanced over when Pick approached us to listen in.

Chloe shifted to include him in the conversation. “This is my dad,” she introduced. “Pick Ryan.”

“Sir.”

Logan stepped forward and shook with him as Chloe asked the cop, “Is it true that Dax was in the other car?”

The cop sent her a regretful glance. “I’m afraid so. Multiple witnesses saw him purposely sideswipe the vehicle and run her off the road.”

“Oh God.” Chloe covered her mouth and turned toward me, while Pick swore under his breath and ran a hand through his hair.

I pulled Chloe close and held her while Logan continued.

“The vehicle she was in—your car—ended up in a tree, and Freston also lost control of his Mitsubishi before he crashed into a culvert.”

“Is he...?” Pick paused, not asking the full question.

“He was still alive when the ambulance arrived,” Logan answered, looking apologetic. “But I don’t think either driver was doing very well.”

With a shudder, Chloe rested her hand on my shoulder, and I began to rub her back as I kissed her cheek.

“We checked your car and found a tracker. I don’t know how long he’s been keeping tabs on you. But we took it for evidence and can use it for the case against him. If he survives this, he’s not bonding out again.”

“Thank God,” I muttered.

Pick asked a few more questions, and Logan answered them to the best of his ability, but it was obvious he was in a hurry to get somewhere else, so Chloe’s dad thanked him for his time and all the information, and the cop nodded before glancing toward Chloe. As he took in the way she and I were wrapped up together, I could see in his eyes that he knew any chance he might’ve had with her was over.

Then his gaze met mine, and he nodded, conceding victory to me before he turned and hurried off again.

From there, I walked Chloe toward the others, where we sat and waited.

Within the hour, everyone had arrived, and all we’d learned about Nia by that point was that my dad had been called down from the cardiovascular wing to consult on her case.

“At least that means she’s still alive,” Chloe said from my side, where I had her tucked in as close as another human could get.

“Definitely,” I said. Alive was by far better than the alternative.

Chloe squeezed my fingers hard, and I kind of relished the pain that her unrelenting grip caused. It meant she was here, next to me and unharmed. I covered our clasped hands with my free one and soaked up the warmth and vitality of her skin under mine.

When I leaned in to kiss her temple, I noticed my brother appearing from down the hall.

I blinked as he made eye contact with me and tipped his head, requesting that I step aside to talk to him privately. I nodded and pressed my cheek to Chloe’s hair before murmuring, “I’ll be right back.”

She lifted her face in surprise but then seemed to notice that JB needed to talk to me, so she nodded. I ran my hand over her arm one last time, loath to move away from her, then stood and strode toward my brother, only to realize that Teagan had sidled up beside me, silently going with me to see her husband as well.

When we reached him—far enough away from the others that they couldn't hear us—JB reached for Teagan's hand and pulled her in to kiss her brow before turning to me.

“Nia?” I asked.

“I don't know,” he said, “Dad's with her, but I have to go into surgery.” The way his eyes glittered with worry made my brow furrow.

“Okay...” I answered slowly, wondering why he was acting so weird about it.

Until he widened his eyes and added, “On him.”

With a squint, I shook my head, not comprehending at first. But then Teagan gasped and slapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes full of horror, and it finally hit me.

I whirled to my brother. “No.”

JB's eyes filled with pleading and regret. “Luke—”

“You are not working on that motherfucker,” I hissed.

He shook his head, disagreeing. “I'm the only ER surgeon who's available.”

“I don't fucking care!” I nearly shouted, only to lower my tone and glance over my shoulder to make sure none of the others had heard me. “Surely there is someone else. They called Dad down from the heart wing. Why can't they call someone else?”

Chloe was watching us with a confused frown, but it was obvious she had no idea what we were discussing.

I whirled back to JB. “He wanted to kill Chloe today. That was his intent; you know that, right? The woman I love. Hell, he might *have* killed Nia. How can you—Jesus.”

“I took an oath,” he tried to explain, his gaze begging me to understand, to tell him it was okay.

But I shook my head. “If you save that man’s life, I will never forgive you.”

As JB’s eyes filled with crushing defeat, Teagan slapped my arm and growled, “No. You don’t get to say that to him.”

I blinked at her in shock. “Excuse me?”

“Take it back,” she demanded. “This is JB we’re talking about. JB! He wouldn’t be him if he didn’t do everything in his power to try to preserve as much life as he can, whether that person deserves it or not. And *we* wouldn’t love him as much as we do if he wasn’t exactly the way he is. Now take it back.”

“God, fine,” I grumbled, rolling my eyes. “I’ll take back the hating-you part. I know you’re going to do what you gotta do. *Whatever*. But I’m not going to pretend to be happy about it.”

JB nodded but still looked unsettled.

Teagan stepped in to give her husband a kiss. “You gotta go,” she reminded him. “I love you.”

Their lips held before he briefly pressed his brow to hers. Then, they both pulled apart and looked at me together, JB still appearing regretful and Teagan scowling in reprimand.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I love you too,” I grumbled obediently. “No matter what.”

He nodded and whispered, “I’m sorry.” Then he turned and hurried away.

I huffed out a breath, held up a hand to block Teagan who was still glaring at me, and I returned to Chloe.

But even as I sank down beside her, she was already asking, “What’s going on?”

I flinched and glanced toward Teagan, who was scooping Harper from her mother’s arms and talking to both her parents, probably about what JB was about to do.

The gossip would reach this side of the room fast enough, so I leaned toward Chloe and admitted, “JB has to operate on Freston.”

She exhaled but didn’t really respond to that. Instead, she glanced up at me with worried eyes. “You didn’t give him a hard time for it, did you?”

I frowned at her for even knowing that I had, but then I rolled my eyes and grumbled, “I mean, maybe for a second. But we worked it out.”

“Lucian,” she scolded softly. “It’s his job; it’s what he does, who he is. You can’t be mad at him for being him.”

“The fuck if I can’t,” I muttered moodily. “But like I said. We made up. It’s all good.” A second later, I sighed. “I should be more like him, shouldn’t I? One of those *good* fuckers who gives you hope that the world isn’t headed for complete ruin.”

Chloe’s lips spread into a grin as she looked up at me. “No. You should keep being you. You’re one of those entertaining fuckers who helps us enjoy the ride no matter *where* we’re going.”

When I sniffed, she smiled and leaned against me, whispering, “Don’t worry. I’d choose you over him any day.”

Mollified, I tipped my head toward her but then sighed. “I have a feeling today isn’t going to end pleasantly, no matter *what* I say or do to entertain you.”

“You merely being here is enough,” she assured, squeezing my arm.

I smiled gratefully at her just as I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. When I looked up and saw my dad approaching, I swallowed.

“Fuck,” I whispered.

“What?” Chloe turned and looked.

“That’s not his *good news* face,” I warned into her ear.

“How can you tell?” she asked, squinting slightly.

I sighed. “I just can.”

My dad was a pretty quiet, mellow guy that didn't show a lot of great emotions, but if you'd grown up in the same house as him, you'd be able to recognize the subtle differences that most people couldn't.

Chloe tightened her hand around mine and took a deep breath as my dad stopped before us and glanced around, pausing on me, my mother, Pick, and a few others. We all rose to our feet to take the news standing up.

“When Nia had her accident,” he started, his low voice a deep rumble. “She struck a tree, where a limb came through the front windshield and impaled her through the chest.”

Wincing, I turned my face in toward Chloe, while she gasped and covered her mouth with both hands. A couple of the others cried out in horror. Eva covered her face and had to sit back down.

Dad paused and nodded before continuing. “Emergency response was able to cut most of the branch away but there's still a portion inside her, and it's helping to stop a major artery from bleeding out. If we remove it, she'll die immediately.”

Some people started to cry right then, and Pick shook his head before speaking up, “So...what? You're just going to leave it in there?”

My father's eyes filled with infinite sympathy. “The obstruction can't stay. It's blocking a pathway to vital organs, which is killing her slowly. No matter what we do from this point, she's going to die.”

## 35 CHLOE

**A**fter Luke's dad said Nia wasn't going to make it, my ears started to ring, buzzing loudly through my head, and I lost track of what he was saying from that point on.

Glancing around me dazedly, I watched other members of the family break down completely. Skylar fell to her knees and clutched her head. Mom clung to Dad's hand from where she sat and wept bitterly against his arm, while Trick gripped his hair and turned away, hiding his emotions.

I just gaped at them, sure I wasn't actually awake and this wasn't actually happening.

But Luke wrapped his arms around me and held on tight, forcing a part of me to accept it was all real.

Still... For the longest second, I couldn't react.

Everything was simply numb.

Then I heard Dr. Hamilton's voice again. "Julian's with her now. She's awake and alert, even cracking a couple of jokes. We have enough painkillers in her that she's not feeling anything, and we're keeping her as comfortable as possible. But both of them have requested that anyone who wants to should be allowed to go back to say goodbye."

Mom immediately surged to her feet and raced down the hall to be with Nia and Julian. It took the others a moment to collect themselves, but once they did, they seemed to file after her, hurrying to be with Nia as well.



Dad paused at the end of the line, making sure everyone else went ahead of him. When just he, Luke, and I remained, he met Luke's gaze, and the two men nodded to each other. Then, Dad turned away and left as well.

Once everyone else was gone, I finally gathered the nerve to glance up at the man who'd stayed with me.

"I don't know if I can see her," I confessed, beginning to tremble uncontrollably.

Luke's eyes filled with sympathy. "Chloe..." he whispered.

I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut. "Do you think she knows it's my fault? Do you think she knows Dax is the one who—"

"Hey," he whispered and tipped my chin up. "Look at me."

I shuddered out a hoarse sob, then let my lashes flutter open.

Luke's thumb swiped across my cheek. "I get it," he assured me. "I feel like a guilty shit stain right now too. When I thought it was you in that accident, I wished so hard for it *not* to be that I think I wished it right onto someone else. And yet still, now, knowing what's going to happen to Nia, and Julian, and fuck...poor Drea...I'm still grateful it's not you, even though I feel like I caused this to happen by wishing for your safety so much."

"But you didn't—"

"No, I didn't," he agreed and stroked my hair kindly. "Just like you didn't. You didn't cause this to happen, no matter how much I know it feels to you like you did."

"But it was my—"

"I don't care," he cut in. "It wasn't your fault. You didn't press on the gas pedal in his car and steer the wheel to drive her off her road, and I promise no one else will think it's your fault, either. But they *will* notice if you don't go back there right now. Julian will notice, and he'll never forget it if you don't step up and say goodbye to his wife before it's too late."

I whimpered, and tears streamed down my cheeks.

“So you’re going to repress all this guilt,” Luke went on steadily. “Take my hand, and we’re going to go see Nia together. And then afterward, I’ll take you home, where you can fall apart on me for as long as you need to. Okay?”

I shuddered and nodded, the tears falling heavier. “Okay,” I said.

He held his hand out to me, and I took his fingers, not about to let go anytime soon.

When we reached the room, Mom was having the hardest time dealing.

“But I don’t understand,” she railed. “Look at her. She’s sitting upright and talking. She’s completely *lucid*. How can she be...?” She shook her head, and tears gushed down her cheeks. “She seems *fine*.”

“I can tell something’s wrong,” Nia spoke from the bed. She had a blanket covering her chest to hide the gore, and there was a lump under the sheet, but other than that, she looked a little sleepy, and that was it. “I can breathe okay and nothing hurts, but...” She shook her head and swayed as her voice trembled. “I think my body knows. And I’m starting to get a little scared.”

“Oh, baby,” Mom assured, gripping Nia’s knee through the sheet. “It’s okay. We’re going to be here with you the entire time. You’re not going to do this alone.”

“Thank you.” Nia smiled up at her fondly. “You’re seriously the best mother-in-law ever.”

Which got my mom to start in with the tears again.

Hovering just inside the doorway with Luke, I watched Nia glance up at my brother. “Drea?” she asked. “Is someone getting Drea from daycare? I want to be able to see my baby one last time.”

“I can get her,” Skylar spoke up, surging forward. “I’ll go get her right now.”

Since both Skylar and Nia's two daughters went to the same daycare, and they had picked up each other's children numerous times before, we already knew Skylar would be allowed to take Drea from there now.

Nia smiled at her gratefully. "Thank you."

Skylar nodded and took her hand, choking out the words, "I love you."

"Love you too, sis."

Once she was gone, Nia looked up at Julian again. He was plastered to her side and holding her hand. He looked haggard and drawn, barely able to hold himself together.

"My mom?" she asked next.

"I...I called," he answered with a rasp. "And she's starting back from her vacation now, but..." He shook his head.

Nia's expression fell. "She's not going to make it, is she?"

He sniffed and shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Nia shook her head as well, but then lifted her lips to smile at him in adoration. "It's okay," she assured. "I still have your family here. Your huge, wonderful, crazy family." Turning to us, she kept smiling as tears sparkled in her eyes. "I love you all so much, and I'm so grateful that you welcomed me into this group and shared Julian with me. He's been my rock for the past—God, how long have we been together, babe?—eighteen years?"

Julian nodded with a small smile of his own. "Since we were sixteen, yeah," he murmured fondly. "Married for the past twelve years."

Nia grinned big and then glanced around at the rest of us again. "I just need you guys to do me a favor, okay? I need you to help him through this. He's going to be a single dad now. He's going to need you more than ever."

"We'll help him," my mom promised. "Always."

Nia nodded gratefully, then looked up at Julian again. "And you..." she told him. "My beautiful, amazing husband."

My mother's going to want to take custody of Drea, but you don't have to let her. You can handle it. You can raise her. I know you can. You're going to have this huge network of people helping you, and you can do it. Don't let her convince you that you can't. Because you'll regret it if you do. And you need Drea. Okay? Plus, I don't want her to lose *both* her parents."

"Okay," he promised, his voice almost completely hoarse now as he nodded passionately. "I'll keep Drea with me. I swear."

"Good." She smiled dreamily and nodded before adding, "And I want you to move on and remarry. Be happy. I don't want you to carry on with some miserable, lonesome life. I need to know you'll be okay."

"Ni..." His voice cracked, and he shook his head insistently. "No. I... I can't even..." Tears filled his eyes. "Jesus, God. I can't think about that right now. *You're* the love of my life. I don't want anyone else."

"But time will pass," she assured him steadily. "And you'll get lonely. I don't want you to be lonely. Julian, promise me. You'll move on and find someone. You'll be happy."

"No." Weeping openly, he fell to his knees and pressed his face against her hand that he was gripping. "I can't. I...I can't do this. Nia, please. I'd do anything for you, but not this. Don't leave me. I don't want to go on without you. Don't leave me."

Next to me, Luke made a sound in his throat and turned toward me, seeking comfort. I could see the anguish in his eyes as he remembered me saying those very words in Dax Freston's basement to him.

*Don't leave me.*

I hugged him close, and we started to cry together.

I honestly don't think there was a dry eye in the room. Except maybe Nia's. She remained passive as she stroked Julian's bowed head and stuck firmly to her request.

“I want you to try anyway,” she insisted, her words starting to slur. “Find some happiness. For me. Okay?”

He lifted his face and wiped it with one hand. “I’ll try.”

His wife nodded. “Thank you.” She glanced at the rest of us again and her smile started to look weaker. “I feel like a queen right now, holding court.” Stretching out a hand toward Trick who was standing not far behind Julian, she said, “Like everyone is here to pay their homage.”

Trick sent her a watery grin and took her fingers, bowing over them before kissing the back of her hand. “Oh, we are, Your Majesty. You’ll always be our royal Nia.”

“You need to settle down and find a good woman too,” Nia told him. “Maybe you and Julian can look together.”

“I’ll be the best damn wingman he could ever have. You can count on me.”

“Good.” Nia preened and turned toward Beau and Bentley, who were standing next to him. “And you two, on your way to having another baby... I wish I could get to meet him.”

From there, she made her rounds, circling the room with everyone stepping forward, one after another when it was their turn for their one-on-one goodbye. When it came time for me and Luke to step up, I sucked in a worried breath, certain she was going to accuse me of killing her.

A million apologies filled my tongue, but the moment Nia saw me, she burst out smiling. “Little Chloe,” she greeted. “You were so young when we met. I feel honored to have watched you grow up and fall in love and find...”

When her eyes strayed toward Luke, they widened.

“Oh...” she murmured in surprise as if just remembering something. “I’m going to miss it.” Then her expression crinkled with concern. “I can’t believe I’m going to miss it. Do you...do you still have it on you?”

I glanced toward Luke in question, not sure what the heck Nia was talking about, but he nodded sadly. “I do.”

I frowned, wanting to ask just *what* he had on him.

But the hospital chaplain showed up to see Nia then, and his appearance effectively distracted everyone from the current topic.

We backed up to clear a path for him, and he went to her bedside, talking quietly with her and Julian, getting to know them, and asking if she needed anything.

“I...I think I’m doing okay,” Nia answered, nodding gratefully. “I mean, I...I feel strangely okay with it. Maybe that’s just the drugs talking, but honestly, I’ve lived a good life and shared it with a great man...” She smiled at Julian. “We have the perfect daughter. I really couldn’t have asked for anything more. Just more time, you know, and maybe...”

She looked toward me with aching regret. “My sister-in-law’s about to get engaged, and I’m going to miss it. I helped pick out her ring today.”

She’d done *what*, now?

I whipped a startled glance toward Luke, who met my gaze and offered me a sheepish smile.

I was still blinking in shock as Nia kept talking to the chaplain. “I’m going to miss so much, and I...well, if I could just see this one last thing, I think I could go in peace, you know. So... Do you think you could maybe marry them? Right now? So I could see the wedding.”

“I...” The chaplain looked toward us in surprise, and Luke and I exchanged puzzled unsuspecting glances. “Well...” The chaplain turned back to Nia. “We don’t have any legal paperwork or—”

“That’s okay,” Nia assured him. “It doesn’t have to be official. I just... I don’t want this to be one more thing I’ll miss.” Glancing toward me and Luke, her eyes pleaded. “Please. I want to see you as a bride. I want to go with a smile.”

“Y...” Luke glanced at me, already nodding before he turned back to Nia. “Yeah, sure,” he said. “Whatever you want.”

Then he glanced at me again for confirmation.

My mouth opened, but no words came. “I...” Dear God. But how could she want me to get married right here and now, even if it was a fake wedding? She was *dying*. I couldn’t...

It was hard to process anything past that.

But then Julian spoke up for me. “Of course, they will,” he assured, his gaze seeking mine. “Of course, you will.”

And that’s why I found myself nodding and agreeing too. “O-okay.”

Then I glanced toward Luke. He sent me a hopeful but concerned smile and took my fingers, squeezing them hard.

“So we’re going to have a wedding,” Pick said, clapping his hands.

“This is highly irregular,” was all the chaplain could answer before he shrugged. “But if this is what you want...”

“It is,” Nia assured. “The deathbed request girl always gets her way.”

She laughed at her own joke, but no one else joined in.

A bustle of activity followed, however, covering what probably would’ve been an awkward, stilted moment of silence.

My dad nudged Luke toward the chaplain, before dragging me backward toward the doorway of the room, and the others conformed themselves to stand in two groups like they were guests at a wedding with Nia’s bed as the focal point, and an empty lane in the middle to act as the aisle.

“Are my parents still here?” I heard Luke ask, and people nudged both Dr. Hamilton and Zoey up toward the front of the crowd so they were next to my mom.

“We’ll need two witnesses,” the chaplain said.

“Ooh,” Nia spoke up and lifted her hand. “Can I be the maid of honor?”

“Of course,” I told her.

“And you?” Luke was asked.

When he glanced around, I knew he was looking for his brother, but JB was still in surgery, trying to save the man who'd killed my sister-in-law. His face fell for a fraction of a moment before he reached out and grabbed Trick's arm, yanking him to his side.

Finally, everyone was in place, and Uncle Asher began to hum the wedding march, his wife and children joining in to help the music along.

Dad held out his arm to me, and I took his elbow, still trying to get used to the fact that this was actually happening.

As he walked me up the makeshift aisle toward Luke, I glanced at my *groom*, and suddenly this felt way too real.

He watched me as if he were watching a true bride walking toward him. Then he held out his own elbow as my father gave me away and placed my hand on Luke's arm.

My ears began to buzz again.

The chaplain started spouting off true wedding talk, and when he had Luke say his vows, Luke turned toward me and repeated them perfectly, watching me the whole time as if he meant every word he said.

But the most shocking part of all was when I repeated *my* vows back to him.

We were doing this; we were really freaking doing this.

I was marrying Luke.

When he pulled a ring from his pocket, my mouth dropped open as I got my first glimpse of the diamond inside.

My gaze lifted in disbelief to his face. He sent me a half cringe as if apologizing for how this was happening and a half-hopeful plea as if begging me to like what I saw and not reject him.

My hand trembled as I held it out to him, and I could only gape as he put the ring on my finger.

Moments later, we were married, and the chaplain was pronouncing us husband and wife.



“Yay,” Nia cheered...hoarsely, in a weakening voice...as Luke dipped his head to press his mouth to mine. “Oh, that was perfect. Thank you. Thank you, guys.”

She tried to hold both hands out to us but grew too tired to keep them lifted over a second.

Julian appeared at her side and touched her shoulder. “Babe?”

“I have her!” a breathless Skylar announced, appearing in the doorway of the room with a sleeping toddler passed out on her shoulder. “She fell asleep on the way here. But she’s here.”

“My baby,” Nia slurred, trying to lift her arm again. “My Drea.”

Skylar hurried her forward, and Julian reached out to take his daughter from her arms.

“Don’t wake her,” Nia instructed, her speech slowing dramatically. “She’s so precious when she sleeps. I just want to see her face.”

Julian held the napping Drea down so that her face could press against Nia’s, and Nia sighed in delight. “Thank you.”

She stayed that way for a moment, her eyes closed and a smile on her face. Then she whispered, “I love you, baby girl. I love you more than life itself. Take care of Daddy for me now.”

She let out a breath and seemed to nap against her sleeping child, while Drea dreamed on, completely unaware that she was losing her mother.

Luke’s dad stepped forward and checked her pulse. He shook his head slowly and glanced at Julian. “She won’t wake up again from here.”

Julian slowly pulled Drea to his chest and held her close, kissing her hair as he closed his eyes and let the tears silently stream down his face.

The rest of us wept bitterly, and Luke hugged me as I rested my face on his chest.

We were still trying to adjust to the loss of one of our own when JB found us.

Freezing worriedly in the doorway, he quietly said, “Dax Freston is dead.”

No one responded. No joy was gleaned from that news.

Luke merely glanced at his brother and answered, “So is Nia.”

## 36 LUKE

Chloe had closed down and barely talked to me or even *looked* at me since I'd brought her home from the hospital the day we lost her sister-in-law.

Everything about our relationship felt tainted by this. Chloe would never be able to see her ring now without thinking about the day Nia died. A real wedding between us seemed out of the question because it'd be like going against Nia's death wish. Hell, we'd only gotten together at all *because* Nia's murderer had terrorized Chloe first.

Seriously, if Freston hadn't kidnapped her, to begin with, I wouldn't have grown as close to her as I had, her dad wouldn't have pushed me at her, and she wouldn't be with me at all. So I felt as if I only had bad, traumatic memories written all over me, and I was just making everything worse by staying by her side through her grief, reminding her what horrors our relationship stemmed from.

I had no idea what to fucking do. I felt useless and inept, and watching her suffer killed me.

I loved this woman; I would do anything for her. And if removing myself from the equation could return peace to her, then...

Fuck, I'm not sure if I could do that. It was the one thing that gave me cold sweats. So I just prayed that my leaving *wasn't* what she needed most.

After glancing at the time, I sought her out and found her standing at her dresser, staring sightlessly at her assortment of

lotions and perfumes on top.

I approached without saying a word, and when I just stood there beside her for a moment, she finally said, “I don’t know which one to wear.”

I opened my mouth to tell her *Japanese Cherry Blossom*, of course, because she needed the soothing comfort of her favorite scent in her nose, but then I asked, “Which one was Nia’s favorite?”

She glanced at me in surprise as if she couldn’t believe I would dare say that name in her presence, but then she said, “Hibiscus Paradise,” and she reached for a bottle with that label on it.

“I can put it on,” I offered, scrapping for any reason to get to touch her.

But she shook her head. “I got it.” Then she slipped off her ring before filling her palm with lotion.

My heart stopped as I watched it settle on the dresser top. I found myself holding my breath every time she took it off...to shower, for bedtime, whenever. I kept thinking she’d never put it back on again. Except so far, she had, and it felt like a miracle each time.

She slathered her arms and hands and then set the bottle back.

“What time do we need to be there again?”

“In about fifteen minutes,” I answered quietly.

She nodded and started to turn away. “I just need to get some heels on, and I’ll be ready.”

“Chlo...?”

“Hmm?” She turned back, her eyebrows lifted in question.

I picked up the ring and held it out to her.

“Oh.” She looked slightly unsettled, then held out her fingers for me to slip it on. “Can’t forget that. Everyone would wonder where it was.”

I lifted my gaze to her as I slid it over her knuckle.

Was she *only* wearing it to make the rest of the family think everything was okay? Did she not want it otherwise? Did she not want *me*?

My stomach clenched in dread.

Why the hell had I agreed to get married at the side of her sister-in-law's hospital bed? The rest of the family thought it had been sweet to give Nia one last parting gift. But to Chloe, was it only going to be a horrible reminder of one of the worst days of her life?

It all scared the shit out of me, to be honest. I felt like I was bombing this. I was ruining our marriage before it had even started.

Too scared to ask if she even wanted to be with me anymore, I waited restlessly by the dresser as she disappeared into the closet and re-emerged with shoes on.

“Ready?” I asked roughly.

She nodded, and I set a hand on the small of her back as I followed her to the door. She didn't shy away from me, but she didn't sink toward me as she had before the car accident either.

It broke my heart, but I said nothing, not wanting to make an issue out of it and hurt her any more than she was already suffering.

---

AT THE FUNERAL HOME, almost everyone else had arrived before us. It was easy for Chloe to hang out at the back of the room, away from Julian and anyone else who was closest to Nia. There were so many people Chloe wasn't really missed.

But not as many showed up at the graveside service that followed, and when others glanced toward us, I shook my head, telling them not to bother her.

“Are we going to go up there and see Julian?” I leaned in to ask Chloe.

She shook her head and even sank a step back. “No. I...I... He’s already going through enough. I don’t want to shove the woman who’s responsible for all this in his face.”

I opened my mouth to once again tell her this wasn’t her fault. She’d done all the right things. She had tried to sever contact with Dax Freston immediately when he showed red flags. She’d gotten a restraining order against him. She’d been brave enough to talk about what he’d done to her to the police. And even if she hadn’t done everything right, she hadn’t *asked* him to go after her car, thinking she was in it. She hadn’t *forced* him to kill anyone. She’d been brutalized by him too. This wasn’t on her.

But I had no idea how to convince her of that.

So I stayed by her side and said, “I’ll just hang back here with you, then.”

When she sent me a grateful glance and reached out to take my hand, silently thanking me for not forcing her to do what she didn’t want to do, something clicked inside me.

And I realized I’d been blaming myself just as much as she was. I thought I was adding to her agony and was being a bitter reminder of everything bad that had happened to her; that was why she couldn’t bear to look at me anymore.

But from the single grateful glance she sent me now, it struck me that maybe I’d just been as blind as she was currently being.

She needed someone to open her eyes for her and give her a little nudge... Kind of how Pick had done for me, guiding me in the direction that he already knew my heart lay.

After the service finished, Bella and Gray gathered around us with their significant others. Thank goodness they didn’t try to talk about anything that had happened in the last month because I would’ve chased them off if they had.

Old high school stories cropped up, and they were actually able to somewhat pull Chloe into the conversation. But I kept

glancing to where Nia's mom was holding Drea and pointing at the floral arrangements, making Julian move them from one side of the casket to the other...even though the funeral was over and it was time to pack up and leave, not freaking rearrange shit.

When he struggled to lift the largest arrangement, I left Chloe's side and started that way.

"Here, let me help," I offered, taking hold of the other half of the plant.

"Hey, thanks," Julian said, his lips wavering into a grateful grin, even though he looked as if he'd rather burst into tears than smile. "How about here?" he asked his mother-in-law.

She tipped her head, frowning, before she said, "No. I think I liked it better over there."

So Julian and I lugged it back to the other side of the coffin, humoring her.

"Sweetie," Eva said, coming up to touch the mourning mother's shoulder. "Your arms must be tired; you've been holding Drea all day. How about I give you a break for a minute?"

"No, I..." Clutching the toddler closer, Julian's mother-in-law began to cry. "I—I just can't give her up yet. She's the only thing I have left of my baby girl. I—I can't..." And she hurried off in tears, taking Drea with her.

"Well, shit," Eva muttered and started after her, probably to apologize, but Julian sighed weakly.

"Just let her go, Mom. She'll be okay. Eventually. We all will be..." He glanced at the coffin and seemed to deflate. "It's just going to take a while."

Eva gripped my arm and leaned in to whisper, "I don't think Nia's mom is the only one who needs a moment."

I nodded and then slapped a quick but meaningful kiss on her cheek. "Message received."

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise, and she touched the spot where I had smooched her. "What was that for?"

“I just wanted to thank you for being an awesome mother-in-law and not—” When I lifted a meaningful glance toward the retreating back of Nia’s mom, Eva let out a breath and touched my arm.

“She just lost her child, Luke,” she scolded me for my judgment. “I’d be a complete train wreck right now if I were her.” Shuddering because of how close she *had* been to experiencing what Nia’s mom was, she then leaned closer and winked. “But you’re welcome.” After touching my arm, she moved away to give Julian one last minute with his wife.

I knew I was supposed to go too, but instead, I stepped forward.

He glanced at me wearily. “I think she’s done with the flowers,” he said to dismiss me.

I nodded and slid my hands into my pockets, turning slightly as if I was going to leave. I didn’t know how to talk to a widower. I sucked with polite platitudes and pleasant bullshit.

So when I veered back around to face him, I didn’t give any. Instead, I blurted, “Do you blame Chloe?”

Julian spun toward me and blinked. “What?”

“For Nia,” I said, wincing and hoping I hadn’t stepped into a whole hornet’s nest with my blunt question.

Julian furrowed his brow and gaped at me as if I’d lost my mind. “Of course not. She was just as much a victim as—fuck, Luke. *Seriously*. How could you even ask me that?”

I shrugged and squinted at him in apology. “I don’t know. She’s blaming herself pretty hard right now. She’s afraid to go anywhere near you because she’s convinced you must feel the same. She thinks that her even *being* in your presence will hurt you more and remind you that she’s the one who brought that fucker into our lives. And I know you’ve already got enough on your plate right now, but if you could just mention to her sometime that you *don’t* blame her...” I shrugged and shook my head, feeling like an inconsiderate asshole for doing this to him, especially on the day of his wife’s funeral...and right in



front of her casket, too. “I don’t know,” I mumbled, blundering through anyway. “I just think it’d go a long way in helping her to forgive herself.”

“Christ.” Julian blew out a breath and shook his head at me after he wiped a tired hand down his face. “I’ve been so steeped in my own shit to even notice what she must be going through. God, I’m an idiot. Of *course*, she blames herself. If I were her; I’m sure I’d blame myself, too.” Then he glanced around and asked, “Where is she?”

“She was over by the twins last time I saw her,” I said, motioning in the direction that I’d left her.

With a single nod, Julian started marching that way.

“Julian...” his mother-in-law called, returning again as if something else had occurred to her. “Do you think you could —”

“In a minute,” he cut her off in a hard voice and kept striding past. “I’ll be right back.”

She seemed startled and indignant by the brush-off, but he didn’t seem to notice. “Chloe!” he snapped when he finally caught sight of her.

She jumped as if she were in trouble and popped to her feet from the concrete bench she’d been sitting on with Bella, her eyes wide with worry.

“Come here,” he told her roughly.

Her face paled, but she stepped forward as if she were facing a firing squad and was prepared for him to fully reject her and accuse her of everything she’d done wrong. But instead, he pulled her into a hug and kissed her hair.

“I love you, little sister. That hasn’t stopped, and it wouldn’t, even if you *had* been responsible for this...which you are *not*. Do you hear me? This isn’t on you.”

She pulled away, shaking her head as tears of regret flooded her face. “But I—”

He grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to stop. “Then *I’m* just as responsible as you are. Why didn’t it occur to me that

he had a tracker on your car? It seems so obvious now. Why did I never even think to get that checked out?"

"But no one else—"

"Or Trick..." Julian cut in harshly. "He knew how much you liked Luke way back when you were younger. Why did he say nothing? Maybe you and Luke could've been together this entire time, in which case you never would've gotten involved with Freston at all, and Nia could still be alive today. Maybe this is all Trick's fault."

"No." Chloe shook her head emphatically. "That's ridiculous. How was Trick to know I'd bring a freaking murderer into the family and—"

"Yeah, it *is* ridiculous," Julian agreed. "Just as ridiculous as it is for *you* to think you should've known he was insane enough to drive your car off the road before even bothering to check if the driver was his blond-headed ex or not. I mean, who the fuck could've foreseen that? This is *not* on you. So you're going to have to get over this guilt or whatever the hell it is, and soon, because I will need you more than ever from this point on..." As he started to cry, Chloe sobbed and covered her mouth. "Your *goddaughter* is going to need you," he added. "So please don't stay away from us. We need you."

"I...I won't," she promised and lunged toward him for another hug. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm here for you, for whatever you need."

"Right now, I just need you *here*," he assured and kissed her hair just as his mother-in-law called his name yet again.

Julian broke off with a groan. "And maybe over there," he added with a wince. "Dealing with *that* for me."

Chloe gave him a tearful laugh. "Don't worry. I'm on it."

As she pulled away to immediately start toward Julian's mother-in-law, Julian and I fell into step behind her, following her back to Nia's casket.

Nudging my arm, Julian sent me a grateful glance. "Hey. Thanks, man," he said.

Chloe looked over her shoulder just in time to see me nod back to him. I knew she wanted to ask what that was about, but we'd already reached Nia's mother who wanted to know why they hadn't lowered the coffin and covered the grave yet.

So we were busy for nearly an hour helping to make her more satisfied with how everything was going.

As soon as we finished, however, the first thing Chloe asked me when we shut ourselves inside my truck to head home was, "Why did Julian thank you?"

I winced. "Because I was an ass and made him think about something other than his own pain at his wife's funeral."

"So *you* told him to talk to me?"

I shrugged and winced and started to scratch behind my ear nervously, just about certain I was going to get into some serious trouble for doing what I'd done.

"I...I knew he didn't blame you," I tried to explain. "And no one else was going to reach you but him. I mean, you're supposed to be *grieving* right now, but you can't even start because you're so flooded with guilt. Dammit. You were suffering, unnecessarily. And when my wife suffers, *I* suffer. I was tired of us fucking suffering. And I knew it was inappropriate to go to him about it, but I think it helped you, so I'm not going to fucking apologize. Alright?"

I had honestly intended to sound a lot more humble and apologetic, but the more I talked, the more indignant the words came out sounding. And now I was holding my breath, waiting for her to react because she was just sitting there, staring at me with absolutely no expression, and it was freaking me out.

Then she said, "Take me home."

I released a breath, certain I was in big trouble. "Chloe..." I started, my voice breaking.

But she hardened her voice and said, "Right now."

My heart sank. I nodded mutely and put the truck into gear.

"It was the right thing to do," I said, in one last attempt to defend myself. "Because it worked, didn't it?"

“Wait until we get home,” was all she said.

So I snapped my mouth shut, my jaw hard, and I remained quiet until we reached her front door. But as soon as she had it unlocked and opened, I started in again.

“I don’t care how pissed you are with me, I’m glad I did it,” I said, following her inside, where she slammed the door shut and whirled toward me in a fury. “You were miserable and—mph!”

The rest of my words were muffled against her mouth as she kissed me hard.

I groaned in surprise and then kissed her back, cupping her face, then her ass when she tried to climb me.

“Not that I’m complaining, even a little,” I said breathlessly when she started licking her way down my throat and gave my mouth a moment to talk. “But, uh...what is happening?”

“Take your pants off, and I’ll show you,” she demanded, ripping at my shirt and tugging it over my head so she could kiss my chest and slide her hands over me.

“God,” I gasped. Then, with a growl, I gripped her hips and set her on a nearby table so I could press my hips between her thighs. “I thought you were pissed at me,” I panted, enjoying every second of her attention.

“Pissed?” she repeated with a disagreeing snort before pulling off her own top. When her breasts bounced inside her bra, I cupped the cloth covering both and kissed her neck. “I’m flattered and honored and completely awed by what you did.” Gripping my hair, she arched her head back, enjoying the suction of my mouth as I made my way to her collarbone. “You either had to be the most inconsiderate ass on the face of the planet to talk to a grieving widower at his wife’s funeral about my issues or you really freaking love me. Seriously, you were like my voice for me when I couldn’t talk. So you... You really *do* love me, don’t you?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” I shot back as I slipped a bra strap off her shoulder and kissed my way down

the slope of one breast. “Does this mean you’re finally ready to forgive me for taking too fucking long to figure out how I feel?”

“Yes. Better late than never.” Chloe slid her fingers down the side of my throat. “Plus... You called me your wife.”

I paused and looked up at her in question. “You *are* my wife,” I said. “We said vows in front of a chaplain, and our family was there to prove it.”

“There’s no legal paperwork backing it up.”

“Fuck paperwork,” I growled, slipping my hand up her skirt and running my fingers along her thigh to find the edge of her panties. “I bet cavemen didn’t have paperwork when they got married.”

I tugged and ripped the cloth, freeing the undies from one leg and causing the cloth covering her most intimate parts to fall down and expose her fully to me.

“I bet cavemen didn’t even get married,” Chloe countered, reaching out to unzip my pants.

I hissed when she pulled me into her hand and stroked the turgid length. Then my head fell back as she pumped me a couple of times between her fingers. Once I couldn’t take it anymore, I latched my hands around the table on either side and looked into her eyes, letting her know with a single stare: I wanted to be inside her...immediately.

“They did if they had any brains,” I countered.

“Well, they were Neanderthals, so...” She started to guide me to her entrance.

Just as I felt her wetness against the head of my cock, I leaned in to whisper, “All they had to do was be able to say... *mine.*”

And I pushed inside her.

Chloe gasped and arched her head back. I started a steady rhythm of thrusting, and she shuddered with a sob. “God, I’d already forgotten just how good you feel in me.”

I smiled. “Happy to remind you.”

She looked into my face and rasped, “I love you.”

My eyes watered, and I cupped the back of her head before swooping down to kiss her heatedly until we both came. She squeezed her thighs around me, shuddering, while I groaned and filled her with my heat.

I waited until I had my breath back before I leaned by her ear to whisper, “I love you too, Chloe Hamilton.”

A faint smile drifted across her lips as she touched my face. “You know...earlier today, before we left for the funeral, I was thinking about leaving you.”

I caught my breath, unable to grasp any air for a moment, but then I nodded and confessed, “I was thinking about letting you.”

She zipped her gaze up to my eyes in surprise, and I cringed guiltily. “I thought my being with you was just a big glaring reminder of everything bad that’s happened to you lately. I thought merely looking at me hurt you, and I couldn’t stand to hurt you. I was damn near willing to do anything to help you feel better, even if that meant leaving.”

She blinked at me as if I was saying the most ridiculous thing ever. “But don’t you understand?” she said softly. “You were the very opposite of that. You weren’t what was bringing me down; you were the only thing holding me together and keeping me from falling into this black pit of nothingness. You were the only bright thing I saw at all, and I didn’t think I deserved that. I was *supposed* to be in that pit, I *wanted* to be in that pit. To punish myself. And the only way to get there was to either drag you down with me or cut you free so you still had a chance to be happy without me.”

She sniffed, and tears filled her eyes. “I didn’t want to hurt *you*.”

“God...” I breathed, cupping her cheek and pressing my brow to hers. “What a pair we make, huh? We were both convinced we were bad for each other when honestly, we’re *better* together.”

Chloe gripped my shoulder and held on tight. “I’m so sorry that our better or worse started out with worse.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said, stroking her hair. “It wasn’t your fault. Just think about it, though. If we can make it through *this*, we can make it through some pretty rough shit.”

“Except Nia’s still gone. God, I’m going to miss her. She had the most contagious laugh.”

I nodded slowly. “And she made the best strawberry cheesecake bites.”

Chloe sighed. “Drea has no mother. And Julian... Gah, I have no idea how he’s going to make it through this.”

“With the love and support of his family,” I promised her. “Because you can focus on him now. And you can finally begin to mourn the loss of your sister-in-law without so much crushing weight of guilt on top of all of it.”

“All because of my nosy, loud-mouthed husband,” she told me lovingly. “Who couldn’t just shut up and let me suffer in agony.”

“You’re damn right,” I told her before setting my mouth to hers. And I’d always speak up on her behalf, always champion her point of view, always love her beyond measure.

Chloe was my forever person, and I was going to ensure that I could get as much of that forever with her as I possibly could.

# EPILOGUE



## LUKE

“**A**lright, little man,” I said, fastening the Velcro strap on my son’s first pair of shoes.

We’d gotten them for him to wear when he’d started to walk a couple of months back, but he would only cry every time we put them on him, and he usually only tried to get *out* of them, not stand in them.

But in about an hour, a couple dozen guests were set to arrive for his first birthday party, and I was determined to get him used to them. Today.

“This is going to be just like walking without shoes...but with.”

Yeah, yeah, shut up. I know I wasn’t a goddamn inspirational speech giver.

But I wasn’t the type to give up either.

From the counter where I had Brooks sitting, he gummed at a toy and blabbered, “Mama, mama, mama...”

“Actually, it’s Dad,” I corrected him. “But we’ll work on that later. One thing at a time, right?”

“Mama, mama, mama,” Brooks agreed cheerfully.

“Right.” I picked him up, his diaper rustling against my arm where I perched him as I lowered him to the floor. “So here we go. Nice and easy. No need to panic, okay? We’re just going to stand. You can stand with no worries. Right?”

I settled him gently on the floor, and his brow furrowed as if he noticed the difference, but he was too content to chew on his toy to get upset just yet. He didn't attempt to walk, however, and then he bent his knees as if to sit, but I pointed in warning.

"No, no, no. Just give it a chance. Keep standing."

And as if he understood me, Brooks straightened again, standing upright in his shoes without screaming bloody murder.

After five seconds of him standing there without moving or sitting or crying, I felt as if I'd just discovered the cure for cancer.

"Holy shit. You're doing it." I was so fucking proud of my kid for facing his fear I could've burst.

"Chloe!" I shouted through the house, unable to take my eyes off my perfect little boy. "Come quick! *Hurry!*"

A second later, I heard her racing down the hall until she exploded into the room, panting breathlessly. "What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" I cheered. "Just *look.*"

When I motioned toward Brooks, she spread her arms cluelessly and blinked down at him as he stood there looking right back up at her.

"What am I looking at?" she finally asked.

"Shoes!" I practically shouted, jabbing my hand toward them.

"Oh!" she gasped in surprise, finally catching on. "Oh my God! You got him to stand in his shoes. Way to go, Brooksie!" She cheered, crouching down to his height and opening her arms wide. "Mama's so proud of you. Yes..."

Our son grinned big at her, slobber dripping from his gums.

"Mama," he cooed, waving his arm excitedly and making the toy in his hand rattle like crazy. "Mama, mama..."

Tempted by the sweet lure of his mother's arms, he took his first wobbling step in his shoes and started toward her.

"There he goes," I encouraged. "He's walking in them. You actually got him to walk in them!"

She looked at me and smiled.

Meanwhile, from the front of the house, a familiar voice called, "Hello? Knock-knock."

"Hey. Come on in," I called in greeting. "We're back here."

"Okay." As footsteps approached, the woman started talking. "I cannot wait until you guys see this cake. I think it is seriously my best work yet." And then she appeared in the doorway. "So what do you think? Don't lie."

"Wow," I said, my eyebrows perking up. "That looks way too pretty to eat."

The baker frowned irritably. "After all the work I put into this sucker, you better eat every fucking bite."

"Damn," I murmured, lifting my eyebrows at her for such sass. "You kiss my brother-in-law with that filthy mouth, little girl?"

She laughed and winked at me. "The dirtier I talk, the more he likes it."

While I chuckled in appreciation, Chloe finally straightened from the floor with Brooks on her hip. "I want to see," she said as she stepped around me.

Trick's newly wedded bride turned to show off her masterpiece to my wife.

"Oh my God, Kennedy." Chloe sucked in a shocked breath. "Just when I think you can't make anything more spectacular, you surprise me again."

Her sister-in-law blushed at the praise. "Thank you. I thought it turned out pretty good too."

"That's not pretty good; it's amazing," I assured.

It looked exactly like a Dr. Seuss hat with red and white stripes. The frosting had this fabric-like texture that made it look as if it were made of felt. There were even *seams* with little red stitches in them.

I was tempted to reach out and touch it just to be sure, but I thought that might get me into trouble, so I managed to refrain.

“So where do you want me to set it?” Kennedy asked.

“Oh, right in here on the head table would be great, thanks,” Chloe said, showing her into the room that we’d already decorated with red and white balloons and streamers.

“Wow. This place looks amazing,” Kennedy praised after she set down her realistic-looking cake and started to gape at the decorations. “I can’t wait for the party. I just love little kid birthday parties.”

I exchanged a glance with Chloe, and I knew exactly what she was thinking. My bleeding-heart wife just wanted to hug the other woman since we were well aware that Kennedy hadn’t gotten a lot of birthday parties thrown for her when she was growing up.

“So Trick didn’t come with you?” Chloe asked, changing the subject because I could tell she was going to get emotional and sympathetic if she didn’t. Motherhood had softened her emotions *a lot*. When she thought someone was in pain these days, I swear she felt it *with* them.

And it had turned her into one of the most attentive, generous, loving moms I’d ever seen. Just like I was, my boy was destined to be a huge, raging mother lover when he grew up. And I couldn’t blame him one bit.

“Hmm?” Kennedy asked, tearing her attention away from the balloon arch and adding, “Oh! No, he had to stop by Julian’s and help him move some appliance or another, but he’s on his way now. And ooh...!” Her eyes brightened with excitement as she clapped her hands eagerly. “Guess what? Trick thinks Julian’s finally met someone.”

“*What?!*” Chloe shrieked in surprise and rushed forward, her eyes wide. “No way! Why does he think that?”

“Well...” Kennedy flushed and cringed before admitting, “Julian was acting...different, and when Trick guessed that he’d recently had sex, Julian didn’t exactly deny it.”

“Way to go, Julian,” I cheered. “It’s about damn time he moved forward.”

“Oh wow...” Chloe murmured, setting a hand over her mouth. “I hope it’s true. It’s been four, long miserable years for him. He could use someone to make him happy.”

“Trick seems to think *whoever* she is, she must be pretty important to Julian because he’s being all quiet and protective about her. And, I mean, you know how perceptive Trick is about these things, so he’s probably right.”

“It’s fucking irritating how spot on he usually is,” I agreed with a grumble.

To which Kennedy laughed and agreed, “Right?” When her phone rang, she glanced at it and lit up happily. “And there he is,” she said. “He probably knew I was talking about him. Hey...” she answered, immediately forgetting about Chloe, Brooks, and me as she walked into the other room to talk to her husband.

“God, she is so gone for him,” Chloe murmured, shaking her head. “It’s freaking adorable.”

“It’s freaking weird,” I countered. “I mean, anyone who’s *that* crazy in love with Trick probably needs her head examined.”

Chloe glanced at me. “He’s good for her,” she murmured softly.

I sighed and stepped forward to wrap both her and my son in my arms. “I know,” I said. “I keep forgetting what she came from and crack stupid, inappropriate jokes. Sorry.”

“You’re fine.” Chloe leaned up and kissed my cheek. “Your inappropriate joking is one of the many reasons I love you.”

“Mmm.” I leaned in to kiss her mouth, but Brooks bonked me in the eye with his toy, effectively cockblocking me.

“Oww,” I muttered and pulled my face away.

Chloe only laughed, however, and kissed his chubby cheek. “He’s protective of his mama.”

Brooks grinned at her and drooled happily.

“He better cut it out,” I warned playfully. “Or I’m never going to get close enough to you to give him a brother or sister.”

Chloe ignored that and kept kissing our son. “My little protector,” she told him, resting her cheek on the top of his head before her gaze lifted to me. “Do you really think Julian might’ve finally found someone new?”

The hope in her eyes almost broke my heart.

I knew a part of her still felt responsible for Nia, and that probably wouldn’t go away until she felt her brother had found peace again.

“It certainly sounds like it,” I said, grabbing my son’s arm and pinning it to his side so he couldn’t hit me when I went in to kiss her again.

“God, I hope so,” she breathed, pressing her forehead to mine. “I want him to be as happy as we are.”

“I doubt anyone can find that kind of happiness,” I answered with a wink. “But yeah, it’d be nice if we could worry about him less.”

She looked up at me and whispered, “Thank you.”

I frowned slightly. “For what?”

“For making me deliriously content, even when I didn’t think I deserved it, and for forcing me to accept it when I didn’t think it was even possible for you to love me as much as I love you. Thanks for just being you.”

“Well, thank you for giving me one more chance after I’d continuously broken your heart for years. That is honestly the greatest gift anyone has ever given me.”

Thinking he needed to be involved in our husband-wife praising, Brooks leaned in and pressed his face against both

Chloe's and mine.

We laughed at his demand for attention, and at that moment, I couldn't imagine that my life could get any better.

So I sent a prayer out to Caine Spinnaker, wherever he might be, thanking *him* for being a fucking asshole. Otherwise, he wouldn't have sent Chloe crying into the school bathrooms that fateful night and forced me to go in after her, which caused her to fall in love with me in the first place.

I really owed that douchebag one.

I think my life would've sucked without him.

THE END

# ALSO BY LINDA KAGE

## THE FORBIDDEN MEN SERIES

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To Professor, With Love  
Be My Hero  
With Every Heartbeat  
A Perfect Ten  
Worth It  
The Girl's Got Secrets  
Priceless  
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## THE FM DESCENDANTS

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Once Upon a Canoe Trip (*novella*)  
Playing to Win (*novella*)  
The Revenge Plan  
Beware of Maverick (*novella*)  
Secrets That We Keep  
Insta-Family



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda writes romance fiction from YA to adult, contemporary to fantasy. Published since 2010. Went through a 2-year writing correspondence class in children's literature from The Institute of Children's Literature. Then graduated with a Bachelor of Arts, English with an emphasis in creative fiction writing from Pittsburg State University.

Now she lives with her hubby, two daughters, cat Holly, and nine cuckoo clocks in southeast Kansas, USA. Farm girl. Parents were dairy farmers. Was youngest of eight. Big family. Day job as a cataloging library assistant.

Harry Potter House Gryffindor, Patronus White Stallion, character match Hagrid. Supernatural Team Dean. Game of Thrones Team Jon Snow and Tyrion Lannister. The Walking Dead Team Daryl. Outlander Team Jamie Fraser. Teen Wolf Team Stiles. Avenger Team Thor...or Hulk (can't decide). Justice League Team Flash. Arrow Team Stephen Amell. Stranger Things obsessed. Heard Laurel, not Yanny.

Started out reading with the Baby-Sitters Club. Then moved to Sandra Brown, Linda Howard, Julie Garwood, and LaVyrle Spencer in high school. Now all over the place with her romance reading tastes.

FIND HER ONLINE AT [WWW.LINDAKAGE.COM](http://WWW.LINDAKAGE.COM)

