

SHAWNA RENAE



HEARTACHE & PLAYDATES

SINGLE DAD CEO

Heartache and Playdates

by Shawna Renae

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MADDOX

“CAN YOU *PLEASE* DO THE PLAYDATE ON TUESDAY?” LIZZY, my ex, gave me her best puppy dog eyes and completed the request by folding her hands in a prayer position as we stood next to one another and watched our daughter battle to the top of the rock-climbing wall like the gladiator she was.

It almost worked.

I was a sucker for puppy dog eyes. I had to give her an A for effort. When she wanted something from me, she knew where my weakness was.

“Adriana’s mom is only asking because she wants to hang out with *you*.” Lizzy gathered her long red curls up and secured them in a messy bun on top of her head as she sighed. “All the moms have crushes on you, and they use these playdates as excuses.”

“I put in my time this month. I took Hannah to the aquarium last week with Handsy Miller and her daughter Jessica.”

Lizzy grinned. “You mean Sandy Miller.”

“No. I mean *Handsy*. She was like an octopus. She had her tentacles all over me.” I was only half-joking. The woman really had taken every opportunity to touch me. “And the week before that it was ice cream with Gavin and his mom Knee Slapper Nicole.”

“Knee Slapper Nicole?”

“She threw her head back and slapped *my* knee at everything I said that was even remotely amusing. I mean, I know I’m funny but—”

“You’re not that funny,” Lizzy stated flatly.

“Are you watching?” Hannah looked over her shoulder causing her long blonde braids to swing from side to side across her back.

“Yes, Banana!” Lizzy called out.

“We’re watching, Peanut!” I gave her a thumb’s up.

Banana was the nickname most people used for Hannah, but I’d been calling her Peanut since the first ultrasound. I’ll never forget looking at the screen and seeing a tiny peanut-shaped blob. From that second on, she was my Peanut.

Once Hannah was sure that she had our attention, she continued Spider-Manning her way up the wall.

“She doesn’t need to go on playdates with other kids,” I argued. “She has Bella and Lexi.”

Alex and Nick, the two men I considered brothers, both had daughters Hannah’s age. The three girls were all born the same year and had grown up together. They went to the same school, had sleepovers once or twice a month and were inseparable.

“Lexi and Bella are like her sisters. She needs to have *friends*.”

Lizzy and I always tried to be on the same page with Hannah, and when we weren’t we talked it out until we came to a compromise. So, I came up with one.

“If you think she needs playdates, you go on them. I’m done. Every time I go on one, I have to take a shower because I feel violated.”

“Look, I’m just being devil’s advocate here, it’s not all the moms’ fault. You definitely share some of the blame for how they act.”

I'd never led a woman on in my life. If I was seeing someone, it was casual. No strings. No commitment. No future. Everyone who I had any interest in, knew the score up front. But I wasn't even interested in anything casual from the moms at Hannah's school.

"Me? What do I do?" I asked.

"You're...you." She waved her hand up and down.

"Thanks for clearing that up."

She nodded as if I wasn't being sarcastic. "I mean there's the obvious. The whole tall, dark, and handsome thing, being a dead ringer to Ryan Guzman, a genius, a millionaire, tech nerd, having a body that Zeus himself would envy, and your whole sexy bad boy with a heart of gold vibe." She sucked in her breath through her teeth as she shook her head back and forth slowly. "But it's not any of that. It's your eyes. Those suckers were what kept me coming back for more even though I knew this wasn't a serious relationship and it wasn't going anywhere."

"My eyes?" From the time I could remember women had commented on my eyes. They said they loved them, that they could stare into them forever, that they felt like they were the only person in the world when I looked at them, but I'd never understood the appeal. They were brown. You couldn't get more plain than brown eyes.

"Yes," Lizzy confirmed. "For most people they are the windows to the soul, but your eyes are liars. They make you believe that you are more interested and invested than you really are."

"How do they do that?"

"You actually listen and care."

"So, I shouldn't listen and care?"

"I'm just saying, that's where the problem is. Maybe wear sunglasses to your next playdate."

"There's not going to be a next playdate."

“We’ll see.” Lizzy shrugged as if my declaration meant nothing. “It also doesn’t help that you are such a great dad and that we have such a good relationship. Every time I mention a story about you and Hannah, or you and me, and the moms at school get wetter than a Slip ’N Slide.”

“Well then tell them I’m a bad dad and that I’m a dick to you. And how can I be a tech nerd and a bad boy?” I asked for clarification.

“Exactly!” she said, her arms flailing in the air. Lizzy talked with her hands a lot. “Those two things should be mutually exclusive and yet, you pull it off better than Will Hunting.”

Lizzy had always compared me to Matt Damon’s character in *Good Will Hunting*. I understood the comparison, we both had hard lives and intellectual gifts that were overlooked in our adolescence because no one paid attention to street kids.

“And you know, you could do worse than Adriana, or Sandy, or Nicole.”

I turned toward my ex, shooting her a look to communicate that she was out of her fucking mind. When I did, Lizzy’s sapphire eyes twinkled like stars in the sky as she leaned into me.

“All three women are smart. Divorced. Attractive and *age-appropriate*.”

“One time.” I lifted my pointer finger in the air. “I only went on one date with her.”

Clearly amused that she could push my buttons, Lizzy smiled and widened her eyes in faux innocence. “Was it to her prom?”

Even though I knew *exactly* what she was doing I still took the bait and explained the circumstances I’d explained at least a dozen times to her. “She was twenty. It was a blind date. I had no clue that Mrs. Johnson would set me up with her granddaughter who was a sophomore in college.”

My neighbor was well-meaning, but I seriously think she overestimated how much I, a thirty-four-year-old man at the

time, would have in common with someone barely out of their teens.

“Oh right, I forgot,” Lizzy teased, feigning ignorance.

“Ha ha ha,” I stated flatly. “Not everyone has what you and Ryan do.”

Lizzy and her husband Ryan, who also resembled Lizzy’s sole hall pass Ryan Guzman—Lizzy had a type—had been college sweethearts. He’d gone into the military after graduating and they’d broken up because the long distance had been too hard on them. But he’d resigned his commission five years ago and returned to San Francisco and the first thing he did was reach out to Lizzy.

The two met for coffee and have been together ever since. I could not be happier for my baby mama. In fact, I walked Lizzy down the aisle when she and Ryan said “I do” since her father was not in the picture.

I loved Lizzy, but I’d never been in love with her. She was the mother of my child. My baby mama. Together we’d made the best thing in my life. Hannah.

Our almost six-year-old daughter was my entire world. We’d been casually seeing each other for a few years when she found out she was pregnant. Lizzy had been upfront from the beginning and told me there was a fifty-fifty chance that Hannah was mine, and I took the odds. I’d gone to every doctor’s appointment and was at the birth. The other guy opted to wait to be involved until the paternity results came in.

Luckily for me, the results came back in my favor.

I’d always wanted to be a father. I’d never imagined it would happen with Lizzy; but it worked out for the best.

“I’m serious Mad Max, when are you going to think about settling down? You’re not getting any younger.”

“I’m thirty-five.”

“You’re going to be thirty-six very soon,” Lizzy pointed out. “And Hannah keeps asking for a baby sister or brother.” I glanced over at Lizzy and saw the hint of defeat in her

dropped shoulders. She and Ryan had been trying to conceive for a while; but it wasn't happening as easily as they'd hoped. She put her hands over her stomach and sighed. "You might be the only way she'll get one."

I wrapped my arm around Lizzy's shoulder and pulled her against me and kissed her on the top of the head. "It'll happen for you guys."

"Yeah. I know. Thanks." She looked up at me, sniffing back emotion as she nodded and patted my chest. "And I'm not trying to give you a hard time. I just worry about you. I really want you to have what Ryan and I do. It's the best and you deserve the best Maddox Anthony Cruz. You really do."

"I don't think that's in the cards for me."

There was only one woman in my life that I'd ever pictured marrying and having a family with. But we were teenagers when we knew each other, so I doubt it was real.

I'll never forget the first time I saw Peyton Russo.

It was a windy fall day, and I was sitting in calculus class, which I took in what would have technically been my sophomore year, but since I completed my freshman and sophomore credits my first year of high school, I was taking my junior and senior credits my second year to graduate early at age sixteen. I was staring out the window at the leaves rustling in the trees when I heard the door open. A gorgeous girl with long chestnut hair and huge green eyes walked into the classroom. She had the sort of presence that commanded attention.

It was like something out of a movie. Time stood still and my entire world narrowed to a pinpoint where only she and I existed. A glow surrounded her as the mid-morning sun shone through the window illuminating her in nature's spotlight. Her long brunette hair hung down to her waist and shimmered with strands of golden highlights weaved through. Her large green eyes surrounded by dark, thick lashes mesmerized me from across the room, pulling me under their spell.

She looked like a real-life angel.

“*Class this is Peyton Russo, she just transferred from Washington D.C.*” Mrs. Zolinski introduced her.

Then, in slow motion, her gaze dipped down to the ground, she brushed a hair that had fallen in her face behind her ear and when she looked back up her full cherry lips parted in a wide smile revealing the smile that haunted me to this day.

Peyton’s smile was the sort of smile that could cure the world’s pain. It wasn’t just a facial expression; it was a religious experience. Seeing Peyton smile was like seeing a window into the heavens.

That was it. The moment she smiled at me I was hers. All these years later, she still owned a part of me. Sadly, it was my heart—the part that I would need to be in a committed relationship with someone. Hence me being single for the past two decades.

Beside me, Lizzy cleared her throat. I glanced over and saw that her brow was lifted in passive accusation. “Wherever you just went, tells me it is *absolutely* in the cards for you. You were thinking about Totga, weren’t you?”

Damn. Lizzy was too perceptive. Totga was the clever name that Lizzy had given Peyton. It was an acronym for “The One That Got Away.”

Only a handful of people in my life knew about Peyton, Lizzy was one of them. She and my brothers, or the two men that I considered brothers Nick and Alex. The three of us met when we ended up in the same group home together in our adolescence.

I’d been nine at the time, Alex was eleven, and Nick was thirteen. We weren’t a likely trio, but we’d bonded over a love of video games, girls, sports, and ambition.

None of us had had an easy time growing up, we’d all been in the system basically our entire lives. But we were all determined to not let our circumstances define us. If anything, our humble beginnings drove us to be more successful, to prove everyone around us wrong. To show that we were

worthy, that we could make something out of our lives. We'd all ended up becoming successful in our own rights.

I was, as Lizzy pointed out, the tech nerd of The Three Musketeers. From the time I could remember I could disarm any security system I came across. I knew all the cheat codes for every video game and could hotwire cars. I'd carried that gift into my adulthood and developed a cybersecurity system that was used by the Pentagon. I'd been offered billions for the patent but turned it down. Money wasn't everything and my code in the hands of the wrong people could start wars.

At age sixteen, with my high school diploma in hand I was emancipated and got a full ride academic scholarship to Stanford. In four years, at age twenty, I graduated with a master's degree in computer science and electrical engineering.

Immediately after graduation I started my own company, TTT Security Systems. The company went public six years ago and the IPO was over seventy dollars per share. Since then, the stock value has skyrocketed.

Alex, who was two years my senior, had been the athlete in the group before he had to drop out of school to provide for his pregnant girlfriend. He worked his ass off in construction until he started his own business, Vaughn Holdings. He began by buying and renovating apartment complexes around the Bay Area but quickly the company went global. Within a few years he became a millionaire.

Nick, the eldest in our trio who was rounding the corner to forty, was the talker. He was a salesman, a showman. He was the true entrepreneur in the group. He'd built his media empire starting as an intern at a local radio station. Soon he was on the air. Within two short years, his radio show was not only number one in its area, it had been syndicated. Once he started making real money, he dabbled in the stock market and made a few bold investments that had paid off. When they did, he created Locke Media Group and bought the station that he'd interned at as well as two other local stations.

We'd all started from nothing and were now leaders in our field. Some people didn't understand my bond with Alex and Nick, or hell even with my ex, Lizzy and her husband. But I didn't have a family. I was in the system from the age of five and before that my life hadn't been easy. Hannah, Lizzy, Ryan, Alex and Nick...they were my family.

A loud bell rang out and we both looked up and saw that Hannah had reached the top. Lizzy and I began to cheer as our nimble five-year-old came down and immediately started another climb.

“So, what's the deal with Totga? Have you honestly *never* looked her up?” Lizzy asked. “In all these years?”

“She's not on social media.”

Her lips flattened to a straight line. “Oh, please. You could find out her phone number, address, social security number, credit score, medical history, her latest Amazon order and probably what she ate for breakfast in less than ten minutes.”

“Five minutes,” I corrected her.

“Exactly, sooo, have you?”

I sighed as I responded honestly. “No.”

“Why not?”

Because she left. She left me and didn't even say goodbye. And in all these years, she hadn't looked me up either. Or if she did, she wasn't interested enough to reach out. I had an Instagram account and was the CEO and founder of a billion-dollar company that had made headlines in several national and international publications.

I wasn't hard to find. If she wanted to find me, she could.

“Look, Maddox, you know I love you but it's time to shit or get off the pot.”

“Excuse me?”

“You need to go all in or fold.”

“You're really leaning into the metaphors today, huh?”

“Those are idioms not metaphors.”

Lizzy was a journalist, and the English language was her happy place.

“I haven’t talked to her in over two decades.” If that wasn’t folding or getting off the pot, I didn’t know what was.

“And?” Lizzy shrugged. “That torch you’re carrying is so bright it burned my retinas when we were dating. The reason why you never have anything serious is because there’s no room in your life for another person. Totga takes up too much real estate in your heart and you either need to find her and give her the deed or evict her.”

“Are you trying to reach a daily *idiom* quotient or something?”

“Yep.” She smiled as she lifted her hand and held up her middle finger. “One more to go.”

I chuckled as a text came through on my phone and I pulled it out. I was expecting to see a message from my assistant Samara. It was Friday but I’d snuck away for a brunch and rock-climbing adventure with Lizzy and Hannah because next year, I wouldn’t be able to do these weekday activities since Hannah would be in first grade and at school all day.

The message wasn’t from Samara, it was from Alex.

Alex: *U going to the reunion?*

Me: *No, I have Peanut this weekend.*

Not that I would have wanted to attend even if I didn’t. Other than meeting Peyton, my high school years hadn’t been the best. Also, I’d only been there two years as opposed to people who had gone for four. There was only one person I’d want to see and since I knew she wasn’t going I had no interest. When I got the invite for the reunion, which was going to include four different classes since COVID had fucked up other years having their twentieth, I declined the invitation.

I started to put my phone away, when I got another message. It was a highlighted screenshot of the attendees. Peyton Russo's name was in bright yellow.

Holy shit.

My heart slammed into my chest which was constricted tightly as I stared down at the screen. Peyton was going to the reunion? She'd only gone to the school for six months and as far as I knew hadn't kept in touch with anyone there.

"What? What is it? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Can you keep Peanut this weekend?"

"Why? What's going on? What's wrong?"

"I'm going to my reunion."

Her brow furrowed before her eyes widened to the size of silver dollars. "Is Totga going to be there?"

I didn't answer.

"She is?!"

I still didn't answer.

"Can I come?" Lizzy clapped her hands together. "As your date?"

"You want to come to my high school reunion as my date?"

She nodded as a wide smile spread on her face. "Yes!"

"I'm not bringing my baby mama to my reunion. Plus, you need to keep Hannah."

She cringed as she sucked air through her clenched teeth. "Well, I don't know. I had *a lot* of things planned this weekend. *But* I might be able to move things around if you agree to my terms."

"I'm not bringing you to the reunion."

"No, I was kidding about that." Her left shoulder lifted. "Sort of. I mean would I give my left arm to see that reunion? Hell yes. But did I actually think you would take me? Sadly, no."

“What are your terms?”

“Playdates.”

“How many?”

“Two per month for the next year.”

“This is one weekend. No.”

“Yes, one weekend which is forty-eight hours. Playdates are usually two hours, that’s four times twelve, forty-eight.” She smiled widely. “It’s simple math.”

I knew that she was playing me. I knew that she was taking advantage of me in a vulnerable time. And I also knew that I would pretty much agree to anything at this point.

“Deal.”

A wide smile spread on her face. “This is going to be so much fun.”

I wasn’t sure if she was talking about me going to the reunion or on the playdates, both had the potential for complete disaster.

I pulled up the information for the hotel where the reunion was taking place and noticed the time. 11:11. My heart caught in my throat. When we were dating, Peyton always used to make us stop everything and make a wish when it was 11:11. And I’d always wished for the same thing. To be with Peyton forever.

Obviously, my wish hadn’t come true.

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PEYTON

“I THINK SHE SET ME UP,” I RELAYED TO THE COMPUTER screen.

“Who?” Leo asked as he filed his nails.

Typically, this would be a conversation we’d have in person. But since I was in San Francisco checking on my grandma after she’d fallen and “thought” she broke her hip and Leo was back in New York at his brownstone in Brooklyn which was one block from my own, the crisis was being discussed via Facetime.

“Nonna, she’s fine. She’s not even walking with a limp,” I explained. “She has a *small* bruise on her left hip and I just found the paperwork for the ‘emergency room’ visit. It was just a regularly scheduled doctor’s appointment to get her blood pressure medication refilled.”

After she’d called and said she’d had an accident and gone to the emergency room and needed me to come out here, I’d hopped on the next plane.

“Maybe she just missed you.” Leo suggested.

“Maybe, but she just told me that while I’m here I might as well go to my high school reunion. Which is ridiculous. I mean I didn’t even graduate from Union High. I only went for six months and during my junior year.” There was still no reaction from Leo so I continued. “I told her there was no way I was going, and she said that she’d already RSVP’d and booked my hotel room. The woman still writes checks for groceries and prescriptions, I didn’t even know she had a

credit card. When I told her I'd pay her back, she guilted me by saying that she never got to go to her high school reunion and that I shouldn't waste my opportunities."

Leo appeared wholly uninterested in my drama, which should have been my first clue that something was fishy, and it wasn't the bay. As my GBF he was required to be interested in all my drama.

"Leo!"

He shrugged, "What? She has a point. And it's a *party*! Who doesn't love a party?"

My jaw dropped. Leo was supposed to be on my side. He was always on my side. It was one of my most favorite things about him. Since he was not adequately outraged at my current dilemma, I knew just the thing to tip the scales in my favor. A fashion crisis.

"The reunion is tomorrow, and I don't have anything to wear."

A small grin tugged at the corners of Leo's mouth as he pointed his file toward the screen. "Check your bag."

"My bag?" I questioned out loud as I walked over to the chair my bag was sitting on. Leo had packed for me because the trip had been so last minute. I hadn't unpacked, because I never did. It was part of growing up an Army brat. I'd lived places for months and never unpacked my suitcases.

"The bottom of your bag," he clarified.

I dug to the bottom of my bag and that's when I saw it. I pulled out the red strapless thigh-high slit garment. "Were you in on this? Did you know about the reunion?"

"No, I did not," he denied his involvement, but I wasn't totally convinced. "I *always* pack an ICE ensemble, you know that."

I didn't know that, but it didn't surprise me. If anyone would think to pack an in-case-of-emergency cocktail dress, it was Leo. As much as I appreciated his effort, there was no way I was going to wear this dress.

“This was a Halloween costume. When I went as Jessica Rabbit, and you were Roger Rabbit ten years ago.”

“Oh, I know exactly what it was from. And your curves were pop, pop, poppin’! You made a gay man feel feelings.”

When Leo played the gay-man-feel-feelings card, I knew that I was screwed.

“It’s a high school reunion, not the prom or a costume party.”

I had no clue what people wore to high school reunions, but I doubted I’d be comfortable in a red strapless cocktail dress that showcased my curves in what my Nonna would consider a va-va-voom way.

Leo stopped doing his nails and stared directly into the screen. “Is The Elephant going to be there?”

“No.”

The Elephant was the nickname that Leo had given my high school boyfriend Maddox Cruz because he said he was always in the room with me and I never wanted to talk about him. He wasn’t wrong.

Maddox was not listed as one of the attendees, which was the only reason I was even entertaining the idea of going in the first place. There was no way that I could face him. Not after what I’d done. *But* there was a little voice in the back of my head that said if I did go maybe word would get back to him somehow that someone had seen me. Or maybe I’d be tagged in a picture he’d see and remember me.

I wondered, all the time, if he ever thought about me. And if he did, what he thought.

“No, The Elephant will not be going. If he was, I wouldn’t even be considering it.”

“Why not?! This is the perfect opportunity to show up and show out! It could be just like *The Notebook* when she drives up to the house. Maybe he wrote you a letter every day for a year and your mom has them.”

That was impossible. Maddox couldn't have written me every day for a year, because no one knew where we were living. Not even Nonna. My father worked as a "diplomat" which I later learned was code for spy, and there were times our location had to be kept private.

Cameron, Leo's husband, walked behind him on the screen.

"Cam! Tell Peyton she *has* to wear the red dress."

"The Jessica Rabbit dress?"

"Yep."

Cameron had been at the Halloween party that Leo and I had attended together. That was the night the two of them met. I didn't miss the irony that the only reason I'd suggested going as Roger and Jessica in the first place was because I'd been missing Maddox so much and it was his favorite movie.

The only keepsake I had of the time we spent together, besides photos and the best memories of my life, was the now vintage Roger Rabbit shirt that I'd 'borrowed' from him as I snuck out of his room the morning I left the country, never to see him again.

Cameron bent into frame, his chiseled, square jaw and blond hair that rivaled Zack Morris in the glory days of *Saved by the Bell* taking up the majority of the screen. "Wear. The. Dress."

When he stood back up, Leo's face appeared again, wearing an I-told-you-so expression complete with perfectly plucked raised eyebrows. "You need to have some fun. Go. Have. Fun."

I didn't have the energy to argue with him that it wouldn't be fun. I enjoyed being home. My going-out days were long behind me. I left them in my twenties. I was now half a decade into my thirties and my idea of a wild Friday or Saturday night was ordering from a new Sushi place.

"Farfallina!" Nonna called out the nickname meaning 'little butterfly' that she'd called me since I was born.

“Is that Miss Russo I hear?” Leo stretched his neck as if he’d be able to see her through the screen.

“Yes. I gotta go.”

“Take me with you. I want to say hi to Miss Russo.”

Leo and my grandmother had a very special relationship. The two of them bonded instantly the first time Nonna came to visit me in New York when Leo and I shared a basement one-bedroom in Queens.

I woke up to find them both missing on her first morning there. I texted Leo in a panic, and he told me not to worry she was in good hands. The duo sauntered back through the front door three hours later from the farmer’s market. Nonna whose hair was always worn in a low bun at the back of her neck and whose wardrobe consisted of black, navy, and gray my entire life was rocking a new pink, wide-brimmed hat, tortoise shell cat-eye glasses, red scarf, and a faux fur jacket, courtesy of my fashion-forward roomie, Leo.

I’d asked why they didn’t wake me up but they both just stared at me like I was crazy.

I was not exactly a morning person. I didn’t start functioning at a normal level until at least ten in the morning. It didn’t matter what I tried: coffee, going to bed early, meditation, and working out—nothing seemed to jump-start my circadian rhythm.

Which, admittedly, made my choice of career a head scratcher. As a teacher not only was I expected to be at work before eight in the morning. I was responsible for other human beings. But I loved kids. Always had. And school had always been an escape for me growing up. My teachers had been my best role models. I’d looked up to them and always known that was what I wanted to do.

If I could just find a school to teach at where classes started after ten o’clock, it would be perfect.

“Peyton Anne Russo!” Nonna called out even louder this time.

“Oh honey.” Leo tsked. “She used your government name, that’s serious.”

“Coming!” I responded as I picked up my computer.

When I walked into the front room, computer in hand, I found my grandmother seated on her plastic covered floral print couch. All the furniture in Nonna’s house had plastic over it, including the dining room and kitchen table and chairs.

She was staring down at the new phone I’d just got her. She’d refused to have a cell phone for years, but on this trip, I’d made an executive decision and bought one for her. The landline was fine, but she needed something more portable. Plus, she liked to go play mahjong with friends and it always worried me when I couldn’t get a hold of her.

“It says I have a message, but won’t tell me what it is.”

“Hello, Miss Russo!” Leo spoke loudly, knowing that my grandmother was hard of hearing. That was something I added to the list of things I needed to address before I left. She needed a hearing aid.

“Leo!” My grandma put the phone up to her ear thinking that his voice was coming from there.

“He’s on the computer, Nonna.”

“I’m over here Miss Russo.” Leo waved and called out from the screen.

Nonna lifted her head and squinted before her entire face lifted up in a huge smile. “Oh, there’s my handsome boy! How are you?”

“I’m doin’ just great, beautiful! How are you?”

“Fine, fine.” She waved her hand dismissively. “But you know I had a fall.”

“I heard,” Leo nodded his head.

“And my Farfallina came out to take care of me. I told her not to fuss, but you know how she is.”

That’s not exactly how it had gone down, but there was no way I would be correcting her.

“I do,” Leo agreed.

“Hard headed,” Nonna clarified, just in case her insinuation wasn’t clear.

“Stubborn as a mule, that one,” Leo chimed in.

“As much as I enjoy you two ganging up on me, I have to go, Leo, we’ll talk soon.”

“Love you, ladies. Bye!”

“Love you!”

“Such a nice boy. So handsome. He looks just like Malcolm from my show.”

Nonna loved *The Young and the Restless* and Shemar Moore had played Malcolm on the popular soap. She was right. Leo was a doppelgänger for the actor. People stopped him all the time for an autograph and selfie. Leo, being Leo always took the photo and signed his own name.

“Why you not marry him?”

“Well, Nonna, for one thing, he’s gay.” She knew this, she’d met Cameron on dozens of occasions.

“Ahh,” she waved her hand dismissively. “Why does this matter? Marriage doesn’t have to be about that.”

“About what? Sex? It sort of does, Nonna.”

“How do you know this?” She threw her hands in the air. “Have you been married? No!”

I mean, she wasn’t wrong. I took a look at her phone and saw that the text was a reminder about her doctor’s appointment at noon. I also noticed the time. 11:11. When Maddox and I were together, we would always stop and make a wish whenever it was 11:11. It was sort of our thing. I’d always wish that we’d get married and have a family.

Now, I knew that wish was impossible.

“What’s wrong? What does it say?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” I cleared my throat. “We need to go. Your appointment is in less than an hour.”

I'd made an appointment with her primary care physician just so I could get the full picture of her medical condition. Nonna had a tendency to downplay serious situations and exaggerate things that were negligible.

Like the fall. Did I believe that she fell? Sure. Did I believe that she needed me to fly across the country to help her? No.

“I will only go to doctor if you go to reunion.”

If I was hardheaded or stubborn, hypothetically that is because I was certainly not admitting that was the case, the apple had not fallen far from the Nonna tree. Once Nonna decided something was going to happen, it was. My father was the same way, but he was cruel. Nonna was not. She always at least had my best interest at heart. And whatever her true intentions were, it seemed to mean a lot to her.

Plus, it was being held in Napa. And a night in Napa didn't sound so bad.

I sighed. “Fine. I'll go to the reunion.”

At least I had something to wear.

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MADDOX

THIS WAS A MISTAKE.

I'd known that I shouldn't have come to the reunion. This was a huge waste of time. And, in my life, time was precious. It was valuable. I could be spending it working or with people I actually gave a shit about. Not having the identical Groundhog's Day conversation with a hundred people I barely remembered.

I was seriously considering writing my stats on my nametag. It would be a ton easier than answering the same questions over and over again.

Single.

Never married.

One child.

Daughter.

Hannah.

Five years old.

Tech billionaire.

I wouldn't actually write the last one, and I hadn't actually said that to anyone. Although, I had a feeling most people knew that fact. They tried to act like they had no idea what I'd been doing the past twenty years, but I could tell that was not the case.

My eyes scanned the room for the hundredth time in the past two hours. The entire dance floor was packed thanks to the DJ playing 90s and early 00s R&B and Hip Hop. The music was nostalgic, and it had everyone shaking what their mama gave 'em. The bar was six people deep all waiting with drink vouchers in hand. The tables were half-occupied with people pretending to be interested in "catching up" while their eyes were scanning for someone more interesting to speak to.

Or maybe that was just my jaded take on the environment. Maybe everyone was having a great time and I was the only one searching for an emergency exit. The reality was the reunion was in full swing and the only person I'd come to see was nowhere to be found. I should have known that it wouldn't be as easy as showing up and her appearing. This wasn't a romantic comedy; this was real life.

Yes, online she'd been on the list of people attending, but obviously that didn't matter. My name wasn't on the list, and I was here.

"Maddox Cruz!"

A man who looked vaguely familiar stumbled in my direction. His hairline looked like it was scared of his forehead, and he rocked a beer belly that rivaled Lizzy's belly right before she delivered Hannah.

I had to check his name tag to figure out who he was. When I read the name I did a double-take. Chris Porter was the epitome of the high school athlete. He was a triple threat playing basketball, football, and baseball. And he excelled at all of them.

After high school, he'd attended Notre Dame and started in the quarterback position as a freshman. His junior year of college, he went in the second round to the Cowboys. He played pro ball for a couple of years but never really made a name for himself in the game. I hadn't heard anything about him for the past decade.

"Porter, good to see you," I greeted him as his large paw landed on my shoulder.

“You too, man. Can you believe it’s been twenty years?!” Chris leaned into me and exhaled.

His dragon breath nearly knocked me over. The man needed to stay away from flammable objects otherwise, he’d be breathing fire.

“It’s crazy.” I took a step back to remove myself from the danger zone and his arm dropped from my shoulder.

“You look *gooood* man.” Chris grabbed my arm and squeezed my bicep. His hands were the size of baseball gloves. “You been hitting the weights?”

I nodded, unsure of what to reply. I wasn’t about to comment on his weight. He looked like a caricature of himself. Like he’d been stung by a million bees and had an allergic reaction.

“What have you been up to?” I took a sip of the beer that I’d been nursing for the past hour. Unlike Chris, I had no plans on getting wasted tonight. There was a good chance I’d be driving back to the city since the sole reason I was here hadn’t shown up.

“I’m in Sactown. I own a Chevy dealership. Got a wife, an ex-wife, and a girlfriend. Three kids and two baby mamas. What about you?”

“Still in the city. I have a daughter. Hannah. She’s five.”

“Married?” he asked then immediately belched.

“Nope.”

“Divorced?”

“No.”

“Never tied the knot?”

I shook my head.

“Smart.” He tapped his head with his pointer finger. “You always were a thinker. I remember cheating off of you in... well, every class I had with you.” He laughed and slapped me on the shoulder.

He wasn't the only one. And I charged for my services. Looking back, it wasn't my finest moment. But I was a kid who grew up in the system. After being removed from six foster families, I ended up in a group home at age nine and was there for the next seven years.

All my life, I'd been in survival mode. And my side hustle of writing people's papers and letting them cheat off of me had put food on the table and enabled me to hire a lawyer to get emancipated from the state at sixteen after I graduated high school.

"Oh shit, speaking of smart people! Have you seen Julianna Pierce? She is lookin' figgity-figgety fiiiinneee."

Julianna was always attractive. She just wasn't blonde with big tits. I had a feeling that this was going to be a *She's All That* or any other 90s movie where the girl takes off her glasses and suddenly the jocks all realize that she's gorgeous.

Porter gripped my shoulder as he rose up on his tip toes to search the room. I felt him wobble and his hold on me tightened. "There she is! In the green dress."

I turned my head in her direction and saw that my hypothesis was correct. She looked the same way she had when we were in high school, which was exactly like Rachel Bilson. Both the actress and Julianna had aged well.

"Speaking of *fiiinneee*, do you ever talk to Peyton Russo?" Porter asked as he slapped me on the back. "Remember her? You two were joined at the hip. Whatever happened to her?"

Before I had a chance to answer, he continued.

"I thought you two were gonna end up getting married. But then, poof, one day she was just gone. Did she go into witness protection, or something?"

She might as well have. Porter might be an annoying drunk, but he was right about Peyton. One day she was there, and the next, poof she was gone.

We'd been together for six months and everything had been going great. Then one night, she snuck into my room at the group home. The only advantage of being there as long as I

had was that I knew every inch of the building. When I was fourteen Alex and Nick, who had been my roommates, both left the group home. Nick aged out of the system and Alex quit school and started working because his girlfriend got pregnant. When Nick and Alex left, I moved my mattress down to an abandoned supply closet in the basement. The room was bleak with concrete walls, a single lightbulb that hung in the center and a mattress on the floor. It was freezing in the winters and hot in the summers, but it afforded me privacy so I could study and not be interrupted.

It also meant that I could have guests that didn't have to sign in or out. A few months after we started dating, Peyton began sneaking in my room and staying the night a few times a week. She lived with her grandmother, so she'd wait for her to go to bed and then she'd leave before she got up in the morning.

In all the months she'd been sneaking in and sleeping over, we never had sex. We did everything else, but never actual penetration. We were both virgins, but we achieved expert levels at foreplay. Then, the last night I saw her, she told me that she was ready. I must have asked forty times if she was sure, and the answer was always the same. Yes.

So, after months of foreplay we had sex, or for me, made love. I woke up the next morning and she was gone. I figured she'd just left early so she could get back home before her grandmother woke up. When she didn't show up for school, I started to worry. So, I went to her house and that's when her grandmother told me, she was gone. For good.

She moved out of the country with her parents. Her father was retired from the Army and worked for the government. To this day, I wasn't exactly sure what he did. Diplomat, I think. But whatever his role, it was serious enough that there were times Peyton would have a security detail. In fact, she'd had one the week before she left.

I asked her grandmother for her address or phone number, but she said she didn't have those. That she would get them after the family got settled. I went back every week for months and she still never had the information.

Nonna and I got close during that time. She'd invite me in, and we'd play Scrabble. Once I graduated and was emancipated, I started school at Stanford and left the city. When I came back after college, I thought about going to visit Nonna and asking about Peyton, but I never did.

I tried to close that chapter in my life. To put a period on that painful sentence. But the damn thing turned into a never-ending ellipsis.

Lizzy's fucking idioms were rubbing off on me.

"So what's up? Do you ever talk to her?" Porter asked.

"No, I haven't talked to her."

Porter stretched his neck as he scanned the room. "Well, word is, she's supposed to be here tonight."

Yep. That was the word. She was *supposed* to be here tonight. But with every minute that passed the reality of that actually happening seemed to be slipping farther and farther away.

PEYTON

DEEP BREATHS. THAT WAS WHAT I'D BEEN TAKING FOR THE past ten minutes. Slow, steady inhales and exhales to try and calm my racing heart and shaky knees.

Spoiler alert: *they were not helping!*

I stared at my reflection in the mirror and knew that just like the Jack Nicholson Helen Hunt rom-com this was as good as it gets.

This morning I'd treated myself to a Brazilian blowout before leaving the city and heading up to Napa. I'd spent an hour applying a perfect smokey-eye, which I was only able to pull off because Leo had forced me to watch online beauty tutorials to "up my game." My crimson lips were a shade deeper than my dress, which was one of the tricks I'd learned during my YouTube makeup education to compliment the color it shouldn't match exactly. I'd poured my body into my va-va-voom dress and I was wearing the six-inch Manolo Blahnik heels Leo had gifted me for Christmas.

"There's no one here to impress," I whispered beneath my breath as my hands ran down my stomach.

That might technically be true, but the reason my nerves were tap dancing on my bladder was very much due to a person I wanted to impress. I had zero clue if Maddox Cruz kept in touch with any of our classmates. The only information I had on him was what I'd read in articles and the bio on his company's website. But, if he did stay in contact with anyone here, I wanted whoever it was to tell him how amazing I

looked. Or, if he happened to see any pictures of the event online, I wanted him to be...impressed.

I wanted to be the one that got away, not the bullet he dodged. Or worse, the one he'd forgotten.

Was it ridiculous? Sure.

Was it insane? Probably.

Was it honest? Absolutely.

But still, the only way word could possibly get back to him of how amazing I looked tonight was if I actually went downstairs and joined the reunion. I grabbed my purse and when I dropped my phone into the clutch, I noticed my hands were trembling.

A chuckle fell from my mouth. I was this much of a basket case to be in the same room with people who might tell Maddox that they'd seen me or could possibly post a picture there was a slight chance he'd see. And Leo wondered why there was no way I could have come to this thing if he had RSVP'd.

I was a walking, shaking, hyperventilating cautionary tale as to why. I knew that Leo didn't understand. I knew that Nonna didn't understand. I knew that no one could understand.

Maddox was more than just my first crush, my first love, my first boyfriend, and my first time. He was my first everything.

I took a deep breath as I headed out of the room and tried to gain some perspective. It had been *twenty years* since I'd seen him. Since the night we took each other's virginities. There was a very good chance that I'd built up our connection, our relationship, our love into something that it wasn't.

As I stepped onto the elevator, my phone buzzed. I pulled it out and saw that it was from Trent.

Trent: *Didn't make the flight. I'll call you when I get home.*

Trent and I had been in a situationship for a decade. He was in Seattle on a work trip and when he heard that I was going to spend the weekend in Napa had said he would fly

down to attend this reunion with me. Now, apparently, that wasn't going to happen.

I stared at the message. I was used to him canceling things. After ten years, it didn't come as a surprise.

What did surprise me was how numb I was to it. For years I would feel disappointment, anger, sadness. I never said any of those things because I have always had trouble expressing myself and would rather have a root canal without anesthesia than have a confrontation. My therapist says it stemmed from growing up in a house where my opinion, my feelings, my emotions were not just ignored, they were punished. If my father thought I had an attitude or my face wasn't right, if I was lucky I was sent to my room, got a privilege taken away, or had to do extra chores. If I was unlucky, I was spanked, with a belt, a hand, or a spoon.

I learned at a very young age to keep my expression neutral, and my mouth shut.

When my phone buzzed in my hand I jumped in start, my mind was a million miles away. I looked down and saw that Leo was calling. I knew that he would want an update on all things reunion. Unfortunately, I didn't have one to give him since I hadn't even made it to the event.

Leo was one of a handful of people whose call I would never ignore. Tonight, he was going to voicemail. I didn't need him to lecture me on my anti-social behavior. I didn't even want to be here tonight.

Then why are you? I asked myself, even though I already knew the answer.

It wasn't because Nonna had guilt-tripped me and besides not being able to express myself and hating confrontation I was also an Olympic Gold Medal winning people pleaser. The reason I was here was because I wanted word to get back to Maddox. I wanted him to hear that I looked amazing. I wanted him to remember me.

Which was ridiculous considering nothing could ever happen between us. Ever. My actions had made certain of that.

And I wasn't just referring to slipping out of his bed and leaving the country without a goodbye. That he might be able to forgive. I was young.

But what happened after...he would never forgive me. He would hate me if he knew. Which was why there could never be anything between us.

My phone buzzed again, and I looked down to see a text from Leo.

Leo: *I hope that you are drunk, having wild reunion sex, and not still in your room.*

I sighed. He knew me too well.

I texted back.

Me: *Leaving now.*

I'd barely sent it when a message came through.

Leo: *I knew it!*

I stepped out of my room and headed toward the elevator. As I got on, a man who looked vaguely familiar stepped on as well. His balding head shined beneath the florescent lights and his cologne was so strong I choked on it.

Out of my peripheral vision I saw he did a double take and I stared straight ahead. I had no clue if he was one of my old classmates or just a middle-aged guy at the hotel, and I had no desire to find out.

“Are you...Peyton Russo?”

I turned my head and smiled. “I am.”

I stared into eyes, that like his appearance looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't pinpoint it.

“Johnny Wilson. Brett's brother.”

“Brett Wilson.” That was a name I hadn't heard in a long time. The Wilsons had lived next door to Nonna, and Brett was my age. Growing up, I spent summers with her before I moved in with her for what was supposed to be my junior and senior years, but what ended up being only six months of my

junior year. And the last summer before I moved in with her, Brett and I hung out. Even kissed once.

He was a nice guy. Forgettable, but nice.

“How is Brett?”

“He’s good. He’s here, actually. I’m his date. He and his wife just split. What about you? Are you married?”

This was why I hadn’t wanted to come to this thing. The questions.

Are you married?

Do you have kids?

Those were two very sensitive subjects for me.

Five years ago, I’d been sure I’d be able to answer yes to one of those. I thought that I’d have a ring on my finger. Now, now I didn’t know if I ever would.

I’d wasted my “good years” on Trent, who I was just starting to see would never change. We weren’t even exclusive, yet I’d been sure he was going to get down on one knee. He talked about it, a lot. But he was a lawyer, he was good at talking.

“Nope.” I responded as the elevator doors opened, and we got off.

Johnny made a left and headed for the ballroom where the reunion was being held. I made a sharp right toward the bar I’d seen when I’d checked in earlier across from the lobby. I could hear that Johnny was still talking but he’d figure out I wasn’t beside him eventually.

If I was going to have more conversations like that one, I needed something to take the edge off.

The bar was only about half full and I easily found a seat. When the bartender came over, he introduced himself as Micah.

He was at least six two, if not taller, with a dark complexion, manicured beard and green eyes that stood out against lashes so thick I was jealous. His shoulders were broad

and the black button-down shirt he wore was rolled up on his forearms revealing several tattoos.

“What can I get you?”

“Vodka soda.”

“You here for the reunion?” he made small talk as he poured my drink.

“Yep.”

“How’s it going?”

“I haven’t actually gone in.”

“Fashionably late, huh?”

“Something like that.”

He placed the drink in front of me. “Let me guess, there’s an ex you’re nervous to see.”

“No, actually. He isn’t coming. If he was, I wouldn’t be here. No, this is just run of the mill social anxiety.”

I’d suffered from it since I was young. A therapist in college said that it was due to me moving so much when my dad was in the military, and even when he retired and went into the private sector, we still moved every few months.

“Interesting. Most people want to run into their exes at reunions.”

“Not me.” I took what was supposed to be a little drink but ended up draining half the glass. When I set it down, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “But I was sort of hoping that word, even pictures, might get back to him that I was here,” I admitted sheepishly.

“Is this a Revenge Body situation? Show him what he could have had if he hadn’t blown it?”

“No, not like that.” I shook my head. “He didn’t blow anything. He was...is probably...perfect.”

“Perfect, huh? That’s not what most people say about their exes.”

“Then they didn’t date my ex.” I finished my drink. “Can I get another one?”

The left corner of his mouth pulled up in a grin as he poured me another drink and set it in front of me. “Liquid courage?”

“Yep. Liquid courage.” I took a sip and told myself that after I finished this drink I was definitely going into the reunion.

Yep. Right after one more drink.

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MADDOX

THREE HOURS. THAT'S HOW LONG I'D BEEN WAITING FOR HER to arrive.

She's not coming. The realization sunk in slowly, then all at once. Disappointment enveloped me like fog rolling in from the bay. It surrounded me and clouded everything I saw.

I'd zoned out on what Craig Dixon, Marcus Reinhold, and Chris Porter had been talking about an hour ago. They were all drunk and reminiscing about the good ol' days. The best part of high school for me was Peyton. And since she wasn't going to be here, there was no reason for me to be either.

I stood and set the beer I had been nursing down on the table.

"Good catching up," I lied as I walked away.

My eyes were pointed down as I stared at the ground. I wanted to make a clean getaway. Irish goodbyes had always been my style, even with people I liked. This was a room of people I didn't even know.

High school hadn't been a social experience for me. It had been a means to an end. I'd known that the best chance of getting emancipated from the state was to have a diploma and a full-ride scholarship to an Ivy League school.

That had been my goal, and when I set my mind to something, I have blinders on.

The only "family" I'd had was Alex and Nick. Nick aged out of the system and Alex had left high school at sixteen

when he found out he was going to be a dad. They had both started their lives and I was still in that fucking group home.

In the span of a few months, I went from rooming with my brothers, to being alone. It took me exactly one week to realize that there was no way I could survive four more years in the system. I came up with a game plan. I would graduate early and get emancipated. I would figure out how to make money to hire a lawyer, even though I was too young to get a work permit and couldn't do anything seriously illegal that would threaten my chances at reaching my two goals.

So that's what I did. From the moment I woke up in the morning until I went to bed at night, I was working toward my goal. The year between Alex and Nick moving out of the group home and meeting Peyton was the loneliest and most focused in my life.

Nothing distracted me from my goals, until *she* walked into Mrs. Zolinski's class. I watched her the entire class but didn't speak to her until lunch.

I officially met her three hours and five minutes after the first time I saw her. She was sitting at a table in the cafeteria all alone. I walked in, saw her and also noted the sharks circling. Mark Campton, captain of the varsity basketball team, Jarod Lee who rode the fine line between being an athletic and academic standout and had just been crowned Homecoming King, and Chris Porter all had her in their sights.

The trio of Cro-Magnon idiots were all drooling as they walked straight toward her. I picked up the pace and the four of us all converged at the table at the same time, so I sat down and said, "Thanks for saving me a seat."

She turned her head, surprised, "I didn't."

I winked at her and said, "Yes, you did."

She smiled and that was it. From that day on, we were inseparable. We spent every waking moment we could together. Our first kiss was a week later. We kept things PG for a month before we moved to PG-13. Another month before things got R rated. And an additional four weeks before we got

to NC-17 territory. But we never got X-rated until the last night we spent together.

For six months we'd done everything but actually have sex. Then we did, and she was gone. For a kid who already had abandonment issues, it had seriously fucked me up.

"Maddox!" I heard my name and seriously considered ignoring it.

"Maddox Cruz! Where are you going?" Melinda Baxtor, who had organized this multi-year reunion rushed to my side. "We haven't announced Reunion King and Queen yet."

What the fuck was Reunion King and Queen? I'd been named Prom King, but I hadn't attended prom since my date disappeared two weeks before the dance.

My phone rang in my pocket, and I saw that it was Lizzy calling.

"I have to take this. Business. I'll be right back." I lied. I had no plans of returning to the reunion.

"Oh, of course," she nodded in understanding.

One of the perks of being the CEO of a billion-dollar business was that people never questioned the validity of you having to take a call or go to a meeting. It was how I'd been able to escape more than one uncomfortable playdate, much to the chagrin of my baby mama Lizzy who apparently wanted me married off and reproducing.

I walked out of the ballroom and answered the call.

"Hey, is Peanut okay?"

"Yep, she went to bed an hour ago. This is a check-in call, have you seen Totga?"

"You called just to ask that?"

"Yes, she did!" Ryan called out from the background.

"Yes, I did," she replied unapologetically. "My imagination has been going crazy, and I just needed to know."

It shouldn't surprise me. Lizzy was a hopeless romantic. She watched Love Island, The Bachelor, and Love is Blind *unironically*. She truly believed in soulmates and in happily-ever-after. I guess I couldn't blame her since that's what she was living with Ryan.

"What if I was with her and you interrupted something?"

"Then you wouldn't be answering your phone," she responded as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I sighed. "No, I haven't seen her. She was a no-show."

"Nooo!" Lizzy cried out.

"Why do you sound more upset about it than I am?"

"Because you're a robot, and I have gone to years of counseling to learn to express my emotions."

"I thought you went to counseling to learn to *process* your emotions, I don't remember you ever having an issue expressing them."

"Tomayto, tomahto."

"Anyway, I'm gonna head back to the city tonight."

"Okay, well, drive safe."

"I will."

"And Maddie-locks..."

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about Totga."

"We both are. That's shitty," Ryan added.

As disappointed as I was that Peyton didn't show, it did actually make me feel better knowing that I had people that cared. Not just Alex and Nick, but Lizzy and Ryan. They really were my family.

"Thanks, guys."

I hung up the call and just as I approached the elevator bay, I heard something. Something that stopped me dead in my tracks.

It was a laugh. A laugh that instantly transported me to lying in the grass and looking up at the stars. To walking down by the water and feeling the sand beneath my toes. To riding a tandem bike across Golden Gate Bridge.

The sound hit my eardrums and my body responded before my conscious thought caught up with what I was hearing. The hairs on the back of my neck and arms stood up on end. My chest ached as my pulse began to race and my palms dampened. Slowly, I turned and began walking toward the melodic sound. It was a completely involuntary response. I was being drawn like a sailor at sea to a siren. Just like the sailor, there was a very good chance I was heading straight toward my destruction.

Each step I felt like I was walking the plank unsure if I was going to reach the end and plummet to my doom. When I entered the hotel bar, even though her back was facing me, I knew that the woman seated at the end of the bar in the red dress was Peyton Russo. After all these years, I instantly recognized the rounded curve of her bare shoulder and the delicate lines of her slender arms, and her long flowing hair. It was her.

This moment was one that I had envisioned, fantasized, and dreamed of thousands if not millions of times. I thought I was prepared for it happening. Turns out, I wasn't.

Seeing her again hit me like a sucker punch in the gut. It knocked the wind out of me. My fight or flight instinct kicked in and I was leaning toward flight. I could go up to my room, grab my bag, and be back in the city in a couple of hours.

No harm. No foul.

But then what?

Would I spend the next two decades with her and the memories of what we had haunting me?

No.

I knew that I couldn't let this moment pass me by. I had no idea when or if I would ever get the chance to see her again. Despite my legs not wanting to work, I managed to make my

way across the bar and stood behind her left shoulder, just like I had all those years ago in the cafeteria.

The bartender nodded at me in greeting, but I ignored him.

I lowered onto the barstool beside her. “Thanks for saving me a seat.”

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PEYTON

“THANKS FOR SAVING ME A SEAT.”

I knew that voice. It was the one that had haunted me for twenty years.

Slowly, I turned my head, and my eyes met the same brown eyes I'd fallen in love with when I was sixteen. The eyes were the same, but the surrounding area had changed. There were tiny lines around them that women would pay hundreds of dollars in Botox to get rid of but only served to add to his sex appeal.

Maddox Cruz was no longer a boy. He was a man. A very handsome, very sexy man.

His square jaw was peppered with scruff, not clean-shaven like he was in the picture on his website. His chestnut brown hair, which he'd kept short in high school, was now longer and my fingers itched to run through it. He'd filled out his frame, his shoulders were noticeably wider.

His eyes weren't the only things that were the same, though. The scent that drifted through the air, the fresh, masculine scent that was uniquely him hit my nostrils and I was transported back in time to the first time I smelled it when he hugged me after joining me for lunch.

I wasn't sure if I was having an allergic reaction to his sexiness, but suddenly, I couldn't feel my face, my hands, my arms, or my legs. I felt like I was floating away.

“Breathe, just breathe.”

It was the same words he'd whispered in my ear after the first, and only time, we had sex. It was the first time for both of us and I had expected it to be painful, awkward, but it had been the opposite of that. To this day, it was still the best sex I'd ever had. It had overwhelmed me and I suddenly forgot how to breathe.

Looking back, I'm sure the knowledge that I was leaving had a lot to do with me hyperventilating and having a near panic attack, but it was also how incredible being with him had made me feel.

As I sat beside him now, I stared into his eyes just like I had when we'd lain in his bed at the group home he lived in and inhaled through my nose and out through my mouth.

When I was able to speak, I said, "Maddox."

Hearing his name come out of my mouth after all these years was both foreign and familiar. I hadn't spoken his name in twenty years. It was too precious. Too special. Too sacrosanct.

The only person who ever brought him up was Leo and he only ever referred to him as The Elephant. I'd never actually told my GBF his name because I was scared he'd do something that he would think would be epically, cinematically romantic, like look him up and try to reunite us, which I knew could never happen.

Except it was. Now. The Elephant was sitting in front of me.

I wanted so badly to reach out and touch his face, just to prove to myself that this was real and I wasn't dreaming. But I knew that I couldn't do that.

"Hi," he said with the same mischievous bad-boy half-grin he'd worn the first time we met. And just like that, all the anxiety I was feeling dissipated. It was the exact same thing that happened two decades earlier when I was sitting at that lunch table, alone feeling overwhelmed with the social anxiety that starting a new school created in me. With one smile he'd put me right at ease.

“I see you’re still using the same pickup lines,” I teased, trying to lighten the heaviness of the air around us.

“What can I say?” His smile widened. “It has a one hundred percent success rate.”

An unexpected jolt of something hit me square in the chest. I had no clue what it was for a second but then I realized it was jealousy. It was a foreign emotion, one that I wasn’t very familiar with, but I recognized it because it was the same feeling I’d gotten when Maci Reynolds asked Maddox to the Winter Formal, which was a dance where girls asked the boys in a sort of role reversal.

We’d been seeing each other for about six weeks, and she’d done it right in front of me. He’d put his arm around me and said that he already had a date, that he was going with me.

When she left, I turned to him and said, “I haven’t asked you yet.” I’d been trying to work up the courage to do it for close to a month, but hadn’t been able to.

He just smiled and said, “Yes you did. You just didn’t use words to do it.”

He’d always understood me. Seen me. More than anyone in my life. More than Nonna, or Leo. Definitely more than my mother and father. They didn’t know me at all.

From the first moment we’d met, it was like he knew me and I knew him. Which made what I did to him even worse. I knew all about his abandonment issues. And yet, I still left without telling him goodbye.

Maddox lifted his hand to get Micah, the bartender’s, attention. When I looked up, I saw he was at the other end of the bar. His green eyes widened as he silently asked if this was the ex I’d told him about. Apparently, my face gave it away because his lips curled in a knowing grin.

I lifted my drink and sipped it, in an attempt to appear casual and unaffected, I ask, “How many times have you used that line?”

Micah arrived, causing my question to hang in the air.

“Whiskey, double,” Maddox ordered.

Micah quickly filled a tumbler glass with a double shot of whiskey and set the drink in front of Maddox.

I watched as Maddox wrapped his hands around the glass wear. I’d always loved his hands. Not just the way they felt on me, but also just to look at them. They were large, and even in his teens had a manly appearance. They just looked capable. Like he could handle anything, fix anything, do anything. And he could.

There was never a situation that Maddox couldn’t get out of or a problem that he couldn’t solve or an appliance or car he couldn’t fix. He was book smart, street smart, mechanically smart and emotionally smart. He knew people. He could read people.

He was a true renaissance man, even at fifteen.

My eyes traveled down his large fingers and that’s when I noticed the tattoos on his hand. I’d never had an opinion about tattoos. I knew some people who considered ink as catnip, but I’d never had strong feelings one way or another. Until now.

Seeing the ink on Maddox did things to me. It awakened a curiosity that I desperately wanted to satisfy. What other tattoos did he have? The ones I could see went up his arm. I gulped as I noticed ink peeking out from the collar of his shirt. He had a neck tattoo. And arm tattoos.

That meant he most likely had chest and maybe even back tattoos. His body was so filled out now. I imagined my fingertips grazing along the chiseled dips and lines of his muscled frame.

“Including just now?” Maddox asked, pulling me out of my fantasy.

“What?” I blinked.

Get a grip, Russo, I reprimanded myself. This was not the time for my mind to wander into Skinemax territory. I needed to be on my A-game. This was go-time. This was the moment I’d always secretly wished would come to pass even though I knew that it never should.

“You asked how many times I’d used the line. I asked including just now?”

“Oh,” I nodded. “Right. Yes, including now.”

He looked back down and his eyes narrowed slightly. His lips flattened in a straight line as he ran his finger around the edge of his glass. I’d never wanted to be the edge of a glass so much in my life.

When he lifted his gaze back to me my breath caught in my throat.

The deep vibrato in his voice echoed through me as he said, “Including tonight, twice.”

My heart skipped happily in my chest as I exhaled in relief. I knew it was ridiculous that I would care at all if he’d said that line to anyone else, but it did matter.

After it finished skipping, my heart ached painfully. I’d thought about Maddox Cruz every day, and every night for the past twenty years. My memories of him were crystal clear, but somehow I’d forgotten one of his best qualities.

I’d forgotten the way he could make me feel like the most special girl, the only girl in the world in a single sentence. It didn’t even have to be a compliment. What he’d just said wasn’t. But it was the way he said things and the meaning behind it.

The innocent comment unearthed emotions I’d packed away, buried deep in the soil of my soul, and built an entire life on top of.

I cleared my throat and sipped my drink once again. I wouldn’t allow myself to drown in the avalanche of feelings that were crashing down on top of me. No. I could have a nervous breakdown later. Right now, now I had to appear to be a totally together, functioning adult.

“So, how have you been?” I asked.

He held my stare, and I could see that there was a lot going on behind his coffee-colored gaze.

Fuck. I'd missed those eyes. I could easily drown in those eyes. His body, even his face might have matured into a man, but the eyes, the eyes were the same ones I'd seen the first time I'd turned around when he'd thanked me for saving a seat I hadn't saved.

"You mean, for the last twenty years?" he asked flatly.

"Yep." I grinned.

"Good."

"You've been good?"

"Yep."

There was obviously more to say, but it seemed neither of us wanted to say it.

"What about you?" he countered as he lifted his glass to his mouth.

I watched as he tipped the tumbler up and his Adam's apple bobbed. A shiver of awareness rushed through me. He even drank sexily. How was that possible?

"Um," I took in a shaky breath. "Yeah, good."

He set the empty glass down and it thudded against the bar top. He motioned for Micah to make another. We sat in silence as Micah filled another glass and put it in front of him. Maddox wrapped his fingers around the glass, lifted it to his lips, and downed the liquid contents.

Hmm, I wondered if he always downed two double shots of whiskey within a five-minute timeframe or if running into me had inspired the four shots.

My phone vibrated and I looked down. It was Trent calling me.

"Do you need to take that?" he asked, his voice sounding a little deeper than it had before his second double.

"Nope." I sent the call to voicemail and finished the contents of my vodka soda. I glanced over to the end of the bar where Micah was walking toward me with another drink.

The man was an angel.

Angel.

That's what Maddox used to call me. I wasn't sure I remembered that until just now. I'd worked so hard, for so many years to repress the memories because they were just too painful. But now it seemed that they were flooding back to me.

"Who's Trent?" he asked.

I could feel my cheeks heating and I wasn't sure if it was the alcohol, the company, or the question.

"He's, um, a guy that I've been seeing." My admission felt like a betrayal. It felt wrong to talk to Maddox about another man. Which made no sense. We hadn't seen each other since our teens.

We were both grown adult people now.

I took a drink of my fourth vodka soda and my phone started vibrating again.

Shit. When Trent wanted to get a hold of me, he didn't stop until he did. I knew that if I didn't answer now, he'd just keep calling back.

I glanced over at Maddox and smiled apologetically. "Sorry, I better..."

He dipped his chin in a nod. "Of course."

I watched my arm as I brought the phone to my ear as if it wasn't connected to my body. This entire scenario felt so surreal.

Maddox Cruz was at the reunion. And he was sitting next to me. And I was answering a call from Trent.

None of this felt real. It felt like a dream. I just hoped it didn't turn into a nightmare.

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MADDOX

THIS WAS REAL. THIS WAS REALLY HAPPENING. I WAS REALLY sitting beside Peyton. I kept having to remind myself that this wasn't a dream. If it was, I sure as shit didn't want to wake up.

I sipped my third drink as Peyton took her call. She was speaking in a low tone, and I wasn't trying to eavesdrop. No that's bullshit. I totally was.

“Okay.”

She sounded like she was on a business call. Like she was using her professional voice.

“It's fine.”

Was she keeping her answers short because I was sitting beside her?

“Yeah.”

One word response.

“No, don't worry about it.”

That sentence was clearly supposed to be reassuring, but if I was on the other end of the call, I would *definitely* be worried about it.

“Okay.”

And we're back to just one word.

“Okay.”

One. Word.

“Yeah. Okay. Bye.”

Those were three words, but they weren't I love you.

How serious could she be with this guy if she hadn't ended with, I love you?

She set the phone down and I noticed that her hands were shaking. Her hands had a tendency to tremble when she was scared, nervous, mad or turned on. I wondered which one she was feeling now.

“How's Trent?” I asked.

“Good.”

“So, he's the boyfriend?”

She took a drink before answering, “Sort of.”

Sort of? That wasn't a yes but it sure as hell wasn't a no.

I waited for her to continue. When I didn't speak, she glanced over at me.

“What?” she asked, even though I knew that she knew what I was waiting for.

“Sort of?” I repeated.

She closed her eyes in a long blink as if this was not a conversation she wanted to have. Well, if that was the case, it made two of us. If she thought for one second that after not seeing her for twenty years I wanted to be sitting here talking about a guy that was ‘sort of’ her boyfriend she was out of her mind.

When her lids reopened, she calmly stated, “We don't use labels.”

“How long have you two not been using labels?”

“A while.” Her professional tone was back. I didn't like it. I didn't want her to talk to me like that.

“How long is a while?”

“Ten years.”

“Ten years?” I repeated. “Seriously?”

“What?” she asked defensively.

I was happy that “Business Tone Barbie” was gone, and real Peyton was back, even if she was irritated at me. I’d take a pissed off Peyton over a guarded Peyton any day of the week.

“Nothing.” I held up my hands in surrender.

Ten years. That was a long time, labels or not. Not that it mattered. Nothing was going to happen between us.

She left. She didn’t call. She disappeared from my life. The first few months that she was gone had been excruciating. Time had lessened the pain a little bit. But every single fucking day, my heart had a dull ache.

I clearly wasn’t over her. Everyone knew it. Alex texted me the second he saw that she was listed as an attendee. Nick tried to fly back from New York to make it to the reunion just in case she was there. My baby mama had nicknamed her the acronym for the-one-that-got-away, for fuck’s sake. Hell, even Ryan felt bad when I’d said she hadn’t shown up.

That’s who she was to me. Why would I rub salt in a wound? Which is exactly what would happen if I opened myself up to her again.

But fuck, she did look good in that dress. And then there were her eyes, her lips, her hair, her voice. I’d missed her so fucking much. It was as if all these years I’d held those feelings at bay, and now the dam had burst and they were flooding through me.

I knew that I should drop it, but I couldn’t. I needed to know how serious they were, labels or not. “So, are you two exclusive?”

There was a long pause before she looked down at her drink and answered, “No.”

Hmm. That was interesting. “You date other people?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Okay, do you date other people?” I rephrased the question.

She turned to look at me. “Why?”

“Just catching up.”

A soft sigh fell from her lips as she turned her attention back down to her glass. “No.”

“Does he?”

Her left shoulder lifted in a shrug. “I don’t ask.”

What the fuck? How was that a thing?

In an attempt to hide my actual feelings on the subject, I said, “Ah, the old don’t ask, don’t tell policy.”

Her eyes shot to mine, and I could see that she didn’t find my joke funny. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you exclusive with anyone?”

“No.”

“Dating?”

“No.”

“When was the last serious relationship you’ve had?”

“Twenty years ago.”

She tilted her head to the left. “Very funny.”

“I’m serious.” I held her gaze. She was the first and only serious relationship I’d had.

Her brows dipped causing a cute crease above her turned up nose. “You haven’t had *any* serious relationships in all that time?”

I knew that this was the time to tell her about Lizzy. She would probably read more into it than there was, but I needed to be honest with her.

“I have a daughter.”

Her eyes widened and, if I wasn’t mistaken, the color drained out of her skin.

“You do?”

Even if she'd read articles about me, or had checked my social media, she wouldn't have known about Hannah. Lizzy and I agreed to do our best to keep her out of the press so she could have as normal a childhood as possible. Or as Lizzy liked to say, as normal a childhood as possible with a millionaire tech genius for a father.

I nodded. "She's five. Hannah."

She exhaled some of the color came back. "Oh."

"Her mom, Lizzy, and I were casually dating for a few years. She got pregnant and wasn't sure if it was mine or not. It was between me and another guy. Her plan was to take a DNA test after Hannah was born. I decided I didn't want to miss out on any of it, just in case I was the dad. I've always wanted to be a dad."

"I know." She looked away from me, lifted her glass to her lips and drained it. "I remember."

"Right." I wasn't sure if she was offended that I'd reminded her, but it was twenty years ago and I didn't want to assume that. "Anyway, I took Lizzy to all her appointments, got her food that she was craving, and generally drove her crazy trying to make her stay off her feet and rest."

Peyton smiled and I noticed that her eyes were watering, but she quickly sniffed back the emotion. "That's...sweet."

Was she crying because she was upset I had a child with someone else? No. That's crazy.

I quickly dismissed that thought and continued, "When Hannah was born, we did a DNA test and it came back in my favor. I was the dad. It was one of the best days of my life. Lizzy and I are great friends, and kickass co-parents."

"You two aren't...together?"

"No. Strangely enough, once we found out she was pregnant, we never hooked up again. She reunited with her college sweetheart when Hannah was around a year old and the two of them got married six months later. I actually walked her down the aisle. Ryan's a great guy. He's a firefighter and was just in one of those calendars, you know the fundraiser

ones. He loves Hannah and Lizzy. I never have to worry about them when he's around."

Peyton was smiling, and I could see that she was trying to be happy, but in her eyes there was sadness. "Do you have a picture of her? Of Hannah?"

I shook my head. "No."

Her brow furrowed again. "Oh."

"I'm kidding. I have like a thousand." I pulled out my phone and opened the photos app.

I handed it to Peyton and watched as she scrolled through them. She gushed about how cute, adorable, sweet, and beautiful my little Peanut was. I might be biased but I wholeheartedly agreed.

There were a few videos in there. One was from Hannah's fifth birthday of Ryan, Lizzy, and I all standing around Hannah singing.

"Is that Lizzy and..."

"Ryan, yeah."

"She's beautiful. And he's really, really...good looking."

I grabbed the phone. "That's enough."

She chuckled and tried to grab the phone back. When she reached across me to retrieve it, I held it out of reach and turned toward her. When I did, we were face to face. Our lips were mere inches apart.

The energy shifted rapidly from comedic to intense. I lowered my arm and she followed suit but we didn't move our heads. We stared into each other's eyes. We were so close I could see the tiny specks of gold that swam in her emerald-green eyes.

Look away, my self-preservation spoke up.

I ignored that voice. The voice that I had always listened to. The voice that had kept me alive growing up in a system that could have easily chewed me up and spit me out and onto the streets. I could've easily ended up in jail or a grave.

I wasn't the only one who was fighting what was transpiring between us. I could see the battle swimming in Peyton's emerald gaze.

"There you are!" I heard behind me right before I felt a hand clasp on my shoulder.

The interruption burst the bubble of intimacy that we'd been floating in. My brain tried to process what had almost just happened.

Had we almost just kissed?

We had. I think.

I didn't know for sure, but I was not about to let an interruption stop me from finding out.

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PEYTON

“I’VE BEEN LOOKING ALL OVER FOR YOU.” A WOMAN WHO looked vaguely familiar pulled on Maddox’s shoulder.

Her presence served as a wedge between us. I leaned back into my own stool and told myself the past few seconds hadn’t just happened.

We had *not* been about to kiss.

That would be crazy.

Reckless.

Irresponsible.

Those were three words I never associated with myself. At least, I hadn’t in the past twenty years.

I was practical. I was cautious. I was responsible.

I paid off my credit card balances every month. I drank half my weight in water every day. I ate twice the daily recommended servings of vegetables. I used SPF 50 even during the winter. I was a teacher. Even my profession was responsible.

Every day for the past twenty years I’d had to actively keep my distance from Maddox to protect myself. To protect him. And in less than ten minutes in his presence I was about to blow all that up. This was just another reason why I wouldn’t have come if I’d known he was going to be here. Because I had no self-control around him.

It didn't matter that anything happening between us would inevitably lead to more pain and heartache, nope. When I was with Maddox the past disappeared, the future was nonexistent, the only thing my mind could comprehend was the present. The here and now. And here and now, I'd wanted so badly for him to lean forward and press his lips to mine.

"You have to come back to the reunion!" the woman insisted. "They're announcing king and queen."

"No," Maddox responded in a clipped tone.

It was the first time I'd heard him sound angry. That was an emotion I'd never seen him display during the time we'd shared together in our teens. I blinked up at him and saw that he was staring at me.

The look in his eyes stole the breath from my lungs. It was more intense and hotter than the Fuego Box Choco Challenge featuring the Black Reaper pepper Leo had forced me to do for one of his Instagram stories. The same challenge that had caused Kristen Bell and Dax Shepard to melt down into pools of tears and snot in a viral video when they tried it.

The woman must have noticed that I was there because she exclaimed, "Oh my god! Is that...Peyton Russo?!"

I looked at her again to try and place her. When I couldn't my eyes dropped down to her name tag. Melinda Baxter. Oh, right. Melinda Baxtor. She'd been really involved in student government, from what I remembered. There'd been posters of her around the school asking people to vote for her for student body president.

"Melinda, hi! How are you?"

"Good, but we have to go!" She tugged at both our arms.

I wasn't sure if it was because I was scared to be alone with Maddox, or if I was just too confused about what was going on to do anything about, or if it was just the people pleaser in me but I allowed myself to be pulled out of my chair, but whatever the reason, I agreed to go with her. "Okay."

Once I stood, Maddox followed suit and threw a couple of hundred-dollar bills on the bar, taking care of both of our

drinks and then some.

He lifted his hand to Micah. “Thanks, man.”

Micah dipped his chin and grinned. His eyes then darted in my direction and the look in them told me he had not missed the moment that had just transpired between me and Maddox. For some reason it made me feel better to know that it was witnessed, and I wasn't crazy.

Melinda was rattling on about her kids and her job and I was only half-listening. My heart, head, and hormones were having an impromptu debrief over what had just happened. There was a quick vote as to whether kissing Maddox would have made the Guinness Book for Dumbest Thing I Could Possibly Do. The vote passed two to one. My heart and head were on the same page, but my hormones were not.

We walked into the ballroom and I looked around. It was filled with a sea of faces I didn't recognize.

Melinda squeezed her hold on my arm. “I was so surprised when I saw your name on the list of attendees!”

I smiled at her. “So was I.”

She chuckled politely. I wasn't joking.

“Okay, I have to go up on stage.” She turned to Maddox and her long French tipped nail pointed directly at his face. “Do *not* go anywhere.” Then she turned back to me and instructed, “Watch him like a hawk.”

That wouldn't be a hardship. I grinned and nodded in agreement.

Once she scurried away, I turned to him and once again tried to lighten the mood and distance the conversation from whatever had passed between us at the bar. “I'm *not* above accepting a bribe if you want to sneak out and from what I've read, you can afford it.”

“Are *you* staying?” The intensity in his eyes combined with the growl in his tone had my cheeks burning.

The question was innocuous enough on the surface, but the implications had my hormones doing jumping jacks and

shouting, “*Put me in coach!*”

“Yes, I’m staying,” I breathed out the response.

A flash of disappointment and, if I wasn’t mistaken, relief flickered in his dreamy brown eyes. I could see that I wasn’t the only one struggling with the attraction that was clearly still between us. I was, however, the only one who knew that nothing could happen. Maddox might *think* he knew that, but he didn’t know the half of it.

“And now, your Union High Class Reunion Queen...” A drumroll played over the speakers. “Julianna Pierce!”

There was a wave of applause as the pretty brunette stepped on the stage and had a crown put on her head. I’d always liked Julianna. From what I remembered she was quiet but very sweet and smart.

I clapped as Melinda stepped back in front of the microphone. “And your Union High Class Reunion King is...” There was another drumroll. “Maddox Cruz!”

The applause was louder for Maddox, who exhaled in irritation a split second before he pasted a smile on his face. He took one step toward the stage before turning toward me, his cocoa-colored gaze pinning me in place. “Do *not* leave without saying goodbye.”

I could see the deep seeded abandonment insecurity in his stare that my actions had attributed to, and I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“I won’t,” I promised.

As I watched him walk up onto the stage, the guilt I’d thought I’d worked through in a decade of therapy to try and process reared its ugly head.

I’d left Maddox without saying goodbye. I’d spent the night with him. We’d taken each other’s virginity, and I was gone when he woke up in the morning. Not gone to go home. Gone out of the country.

I didn’t even leave a note. I couldn’t, because I hadn’t known what to say. At the time, I’d known that it was selfish,

but I'd done it anyway.

Maddox had been abandoned by everyone who was supposed to love him.

His dad went to prison when he was one for armed robbery and manslaughter. As far as I knew, he was still there. Maddox didn't remember him and the last I knew, had no desire to know him.

His mom left to go get milk when he was three, and never came back. He spent almost a week in an apartment by himself before a neighbor checked on him and found him. His mom was an addict and was off getting high somewhere. Maddox told me that he had memories of being alone. Being scared. Trying to find food to eat. And of the neighbor, who had bright red curly hair and smelled like cigarettes coming in and calling the police.

After that he lived with his paternal grandmother. Maddox said from what he remembered she seemed checked out, or maybe just old. She didn't really talk to him, but she had made sure he was fed and had clean clothes, which apparently was more care than his mother had ever shown him. Then one day she dropped him off at kindergarten and never came to pick him up. He had memories of sitting in the school office until after it was dark. Then a cop walked in and told him that his grandmother died of a heart attack.

They brought him to her house, he packed a bag, and was put in the system.

I met him ten years later. And then he loved me and I hurt him, just like they had.

My therapist told me that I was also a child with my own issues from being treated like property instead of a person and going to forty different schools from kindergarten to twelfth grade. But I didn't believe that gave me a pass to treat someone I loved like that.

I had my reasons at the time, and they were good reasons. But they didn't change the fact that I'd hurt him.

“And now the king and queen will share a dance,” Melinda announced.

I watched as the dance floor cleared. Maddox offered Julianna his hand and helped her down the stairs. He guided them to the center of the dance floor and placed his hand on her hip as they swayed to the music.

He looked so different and yet exactly the same. He was a man now, clearly, but when I looked at him, I still saw that teenage boy.

“Peyton?” I looked up and saw Brett Wilson.

He looked...good. His cherubic face had slimmed down revealing a square jaw that was covered in stubble. His reddish-brown hair was cut shorter than he wore it when we were kids and, unless my memory had totally failed me, he’d grown at least four inches. He had to be standing at well over six foot now. When we were kids, he was barely taller than my five-foot-four stature.

“Brett, how are you?”

“Good. Johnny said that he’d seen you but that you disappeared. Again,” he chuckled.

“Yeah, I had um...a call to make,” I lied.

“How have you been?”

“Good.”

“I’ve wondered about you... a lot. You were there one day and gone the next.”

“Oh, um, yeah.” I brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. “It was all very sudden. I had to move overseas with my parents.”

“Oh, wow, okay.” He grinned. “The rumor going around was that you were in witness protection or that you got pregnant.”

His words hit me like a punch in the gut, but I forced myself to smile. I was trying to think of a way to excuse myself when a familiar voice sounded beside me.

“Hey Brett, sorry to interrupt, but I was going to steal her for a dance.”

I turned and saw Maddox holding out his hand to me wearing his patented bad boy grin. Just like that, all the anxiety that had just risen up in me was gone.

“Aren’t you supposed be dancing with Julianna?”

“You know how I feel about rules.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. Being a lifelong rule-follower myself, that was part of what had made mine and Maddox’s relationship so exciting. He was the only person who had ever persuaded me to break a rule. Like sneaking out of Nonna’s and going to see him at the group home.

I’d gotten away with it for months, but then my father had a security detail put on me and they told him what I was up to. That’s why he’d come to San Francisco and taken me to Germany. He’d known that I was seeing Maddox.

“Shall we?” Maddox asked.

I placed my hand in his and my entire body relaxed and came alive at the same time. I turned to apologize to Brett, but he was gone.

As we walked onto the dance floor, the rest of our classmates faded away as well. It was always like that with Maddox. When we were together it was like the rest of the world didn’t exist.

MADDOX

MY HAND RESTED ON PEYTON'S HIP AS I PULLED HER INTO ME and wrapped my arms around her. She melted against me and I could feel her body trembling. Her breaths were coming in short pants.

She wasn't the only one affected by our nearness. My heart was pounding so hard I was sure that she could hear it, and my legs felt like jelly. I closed my eyes as we swayed together and inhaled the sweet floral scent of her perfume.

It had been so long since I'd held her, since I'd touched her, but it felt so familiar, like no time had passed at all.

"I've never danced with a king before."

Yeah, because you ghosted me the week before our prom. I shook off the snarky comment. As grateful as I was that she had shown up and was here, seeing her again brought back so many feelings that I'd done my best to bury.

One would think that in the two decades that had passed I would have gotten over the pain; I'd tried to convince myself I had, but seeing Peyton again made it feel like it was yesterday. It was raw. Like an open wound.

"You said you read about me, what did you read?" I asked referring to the comment she made about me being able to afford a bribe.

She licked her lips nervously. I watched as her tongue slid along the seam of her mouth and my cock twitched in my pants. Apparently, my dick was ready to forgive and forget.

“Um, I read the Time article on tech billionaires. And a few other things I found online.”

“Did you Google stalk me?” I teased.

“There may have been a few deep dives, yes. But there’s not a lot out there.”

As the DJ mixed the last song into the next, I found it ironic when I heard the soft melodic stylings of Jodeci’s “Stay” coming through the speakers. In the song it talked about starting love again and forgetting about yesterday. It was like it was playing just for us. I tried not to think about the lyrics or about how *good*, how *right* she felt in my arms.

“Have you ever looked me up?” she asked quietly.

“I may have done a few dives in the Google pool looking for you, too.”

She tilted her head to the right. “What did you find?”

“Nothing. You don’t have a digital footprint. No Insta. Facebook. LinkedIn. Twitter. TikTok. Snapchat. Nothing.”

“Yeah, I never really got on the social media train. And now that I’m a teacher, I just feel like it’s safer not to have anything personal about my life online.”

That was smart, but it had been frustrating for me. “What grade do you teach?”

“Right now, fourth grade. But I’ve taught middle school and high school aged kids, too.”

“Do you like it? Teaching?”

“I do.” She nodded. “It comes with a lot of challenges that I wasn’t expecting, but that’s probably true for any job.”

I nodded. “And where do you teach these fourth graders?”

“In Brooklyn.”

“East Coast, huh?”

“Yeah. I went to school at Sarah Lawrence, and just stayed in New York after I graduated.”

“So you’re happy? I mean, with your life in general, you’re happy?”

She stared at me, and opened her mouth to speak but then shut it again. Her nose twitched right before she nodded her head. “Yes, I’m happy.”

She was lying. Whenever she lied her nose twitched like Samantha in Bewitched. She wasn’t happy, but why? And why would she lie to me about it?

“What about you? Are you happy?” she asked.

“I am, most of the time,” I answered honestly. I left out the part where I felt empty, and like I was missing part of myself, because *she* was the remedy for that, and I could never admit that to her.

I hadn’t truly admitted it to myself. But after seeing her again, hearing her voice, feeling her touch as we swayed to the music, I knew it to be true.

I cleared my throat as I changed the subject. “Why did you say it surprised you that your name was on the list of attendees?”

“Oh, um, because Nonna RSVP’d for me. She can’t work her TV remote but somehow figured out how to scan the invite barcode and book the hotel room.”

“Wait, so if you didn’t plan on coming...how did she...?”

“Get me from New York to California. Well, she called three days ago and told me that she fell and hurt her hip and couldn’t walk. I was on the next flight and when I got here, she answered the door standing up. Apparently, she’d made a miraculous recovery. Then she told me, since I was here, I should go to my reunion.”

I grinned. “I always liked Nonna.”

“The feeling was mutual.”

“How is she doing?”

“Good enough to plot and scheme to get me to this.”

Even though she was joking, I could see the worry in her eyes.

“Is she okay?”

“She’s a lot thinner than the last time I saw her. And I don’t know. I mean, she’s ninety years old and still living alone.” She bit the inside of her cheek, the way she used to do when she was studying.

Seeing her do it transported me back in time to the countless hours I’d studied her while she was studying her books. Schoolwork had always been easy for me. From the time I could remember, I was able to teach myself whatever I wanted to learn.

I’d always considered my high intelligence as my superpower. In one of the articles I was featured in, the writer compared me to Batman, which Nick and Alex got a lot of entertainment from giving me crap about. But, like I told them, look at the facts. I did have a shitty upbringing. I am a billionaire. I used my resources to help those who weren’t privileged and those in trouble.

But whether it was a superpower or not, the truth was I’d never had to work hard at school. What took some people hours, took me minutes. I remember watching *Good Will Hunting* the first time with Lizzy because she said the main character reminded her of me, there was one scene that stood out to me. Matt Damon’s character explained to Minnie Driver how his brain worked. He said that Beethoven, Chopin they looked at a piano and could just play. He couldn’t hit the ball out of Fenway and when he looked at a piano he saw chopsticks, but he could do an O chem paper in under an hour. When it came to stuff like that, he could just play.

I’d never heard it explained so clearly, and that’s exactly how it had always been for me. I could always just play.

I used the extra time I had on my hands while she did her homework to stare at Peyton. I memorized every freckle on her face, there were ten. Six scattered across her nose, three on her left cheek, and one on her right. The curve of her nose, her lips, her chin, her cheekbones were seared into my memory.

And besides biting the inside of her cheek when she was worried or considering something, twitching her nose before she lied, and her hands trembling when she was nervous, mad or turned on, she blinked twice before she yawned. She tilted her head to the left when she was mad and to the right when she was happy. And she sighed with a little hum when she was sad.

She glanced up at me and sighed with a little hum. “I don’t know for how much longer she’ll be able to do that.”

“There are some really good retirement homes in the city. I know one in particular that Alex owns.”

“Alex? Alex Vaughn?”

I nodded.

“*Alex Vaughn* owns a retirement home?”

“Yeah, he met a man at his grief support group, and I guess he bonded with him. When Mr. Williams ended up having to go into a senior living facility, Alex bought it so that he could make sure his friend was taken care of.”

Her brows furrowed. “Grief support group?”

“Ash and AJ died.”

She stopped dancing and her lips parted in a silent gasp. Her eyes searched mine in confusion and shock. “What? When? How?”

“You didn’t hear about that?”

“No. I haven’t kept up with...anyone.”

“They died about six years ago. Ash and AJ were crossing the street and a truck hit them, they didn’t survive. Ash was nine months pregnant. Her baby, Lexi, survived.”

Her fingers gripped my shoulders as she shook her head back and forth slowly. “I had no idea, I would have...I don’t know what I would have done. AJ was such a sweet baby, and Ash... I was sure she was going to rule the world one day.”

We’d spent a lot of time at Alex and Ash’s apartment during the time we were together. We’d babysat AJ, who was

around one. I remember watching Peyton with him and thinking what an amazing mom she'd be one day.

"How is he?" As soon as she asked the question, she shook her head. "That's a stupid question. I'm sure he's devastated. Ash and AJ were...everything to him."

"He's okay. I couldn't have said that a year ago. Nick and I were really worried about him. He just sort of, I don't know, shut down when he lost them. He had to keep going because he had Lexi, but it was like he was a robot, or on auto-pilot."

Peyton nodded in understanding. "Of course."

"But then he met Sadie."

Peyton's eyes lit up. I'd always loved that about her. Every emotion she had was advertised on her face. She was so expressive. So real. So honest. Which was another reason her taking off without saying goodbye had hurt so much. I trusted her, more than I trusted anyone except Alex and Nick.

She'd always said that she had a hard time expressing what she was feeling, but to me she didn't have to. You could see it on her face.

"Sadie?" she repeated.

"Yeah, he didn't really date and was completely closed off. But one day, he walked into a bakery, saw her and, it was game over. He fought it, of course, but they are engaged and just had a baby. Penelope. Lexi named her."

"Really?" Her bottom lids filled with moisture, and she smiled from ear to ear. "And how's Nick? Is he still..." her question trailed off.

"A man-whore? Yes. I thought fatherhood would slow him down, but if anything, having Bella just opens up more opportunities for him to meet women."

"He's a father?" Her eyes widened.

"Yeah, he had a real-life *Three Men and a Baby* situation."

"What?" She chuckled as her full cherry red lips parted and a huge smile spread on her face. There it was. The smile.

The smile that could end wars or start them. The smile that had cast a spell on me that I was still under.

That smile spread through me like butter on a hot skillet. It coated my soul, my heart, my entire being. I hadn't seen it yet, but there it was.

I took in a shaky breath and did my best not to let her see how much she was affecting me. "Um, yeah, he uh opened his front door and there was a baby in a stroller with a note that said her name was Isabella and he was the father."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah, that was his thinking, too."

"What did he do?"

"He got a paternity test, contacted his lawyer and hired a nanny."

"Wow. That's so..."

"Un-Nick-like," I finished for her.

She grinned as her eyes twinkled up at me. "I was going to say responsible, but same thing."

I laughed. "Yeah, it is."

"And then what?" she asked.

"The paternity test came back two days later. I actually read the results out loud like we were on Maury. Nicholas Matthew Locke you are the father."

Her smile widened. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, and then he spent months and a small fortune on private investigators to find Bella's mom. She turned out to be a model he hooked up with once. She asked him not to go the media, and he said he wouldn't if she signed over her parental rights to him. She did, and I have to tell you, I never thought Nick would or should have kids, but he is an amazing dad. I guess you just never know what a person's going to be like as a parent until they're in the situation."

Her lips pursed and she nodded.

“And honestly, I feel bad for Bella’s mom. She’s such a great kid and I don’t think her mom has any idea what she’s missing out on.”

Peyton stopped dancing and stepped out of my arms.

“What’s wrong?” I moved toward her, but she took another step back.

“Nothing.” She shook her head and her nose twitched. “I’m just tired.”

She was lying. Her nose told me that. I just didn’t know why.

“What’s wrong?” I asked again.

“It’s just...tonight has been a lot.”

Her nose didn’t twitch that time.

“I think I’m just gonna head upstairs. It was great seeing you again. Really great. Bye, Maddox.” She turned to head out of the room.

I stared at her as she walked off the dance floor and part of me said that I should just let her go. She was leaving. Again. Why should I chase after her?

The answer was simple. Because it’s Peyton.

Within three large strides I caught up with her.

She jumped a little when I placed my hand on her lower back. “I’ll walk you to your room.”

Her breath was shaky as she agreed, “Okay.”

The reunion was winding down at that point and as we filed out of the ballroom, we were in a group of about ten people. They all got on the elevator with us.

“What floor?” I asked her.

“Five.”

“I’m on the fifth floor, too. Room five ten.”

She grinned. “I’m five forty.”

The elevator stopped at floors three and four and half of the occupants got off, leaving only Peyton and I and a group of three women who I didn't recognize but all had nametags on which meant they were at the reunion.

I stared straight ahead but could feel their stares burning into me and heard their whispers because they were drunk, so they weren't being that quiet and we were all standing a foot away from each other.

They said, "That's him."

"He's even hotter now."

"I heard he's a gazzilionare."

When the doors opened, I was relieved to step off. I turned, heading in the opposite direction of my room to walk Peyton to hers. We were halfway down the corridor when she looked up at me and smiled.

"Do you get that a lot?"

"What?" I asked.

"Unwanted attention from women. I could see how uncomfortable it made you."

"Not a lot. Mostly on playdates."

"Playdates?"

"Yeah, for Hannah. The moms are just..."

"Horny?" she offered.

I chuckled. "Yeah, I guess so."

Peyton had always had a way of easing my stress. No matter what was going on at the group home or at school or anything, if I could talk to her, everything was fine. Even if nothing got solved. She just diffused any anxiety in me.

We stopped in front of her room, and she pulled her key card out of her clutch.

"Well, this is me."

"This is you." There was so much more I wanted to say, needed to say, planned a million times in my head to say if I

ever saw her again, but for some reason, I couldn't think of anything except, don't go. Don't go inside your room. Stay with me.

Since I couldn't say those things, I didn't say anything.

She lifted up on her toes and her arms snaked around my neck. "It was good seeing you, Maddox."

I wanted so badly to wrap my arms around her and pull her to me, but I was so scared if I did that, I'd never let her go. So instead, I just patted her back with one arm and kept the other at my side. "You, too, Peyton."

I saw the confusion on her face as she leaned back, before she turned and opened her door.

"Take care of yourself," I said as she walked inside.

She turned back to me. "You, too."

Before the door shut, I started down the hall toward my room. I had to leave before I did something I'd regret, like push the door open, pin her up against the wall, and kiss her with all the pent-up love, anger, sadness, and desire that had been building up inside of me like a pressure cooker and was about ready to explode.

For so many years, I'd thought that if I saw her again, I'd finally get the closure that I'd been missing. Instead, I just had more questions. I did get one answer, though.

I'd always wondered if the connection we'd had was as strong, as potent, as real as I'd remembered and I got my answer. No. It wasn't. It was stronger, more potent, more real.

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PEYTON

“DON’T. DO. IT,” I WHISPERED AS I STARED AT MYSELF IN THE bathroom mirror.

Tonight had been magical. Perfect. It was better than I could have ever imagined. If I went to his room that would ruin the perfect night we’d shared.

I’d always wondered if what we’d shared all those years ago had been real, or if I’d just built it up in my head.

I had my answer. It was real. It was so real that I couldn’t go see him. Because if I did, I’d destroy it.

Plus, I’d already washed my face and changed into my pajamas. If I was going to have the balls to go to his room, I should have done it before I was in sweatpants and a T-shirt.

I turned the bathroom light off and was heading to my bed when I heard a knock on my door. My heart instantly lodged in my throat and I froze. Maddox was here. It had to be him. No one else knew what room I was in.

My breaths were choppy than waves in a hurricane as I slowly and walked across my room. I told myself to pull it together but when I opened the door and saw Maddox standing on the other side, I started to tear up. His hands were clasped behind his neck, and he was looking down. When he looked up, I could see he was just as conflicted about being there as I was about going to his room.

We stared at each other, neither saying a word. The air between us was so thick, I was choking on it.

Why was it like this with us?

Why did the atmosphere change when we were in the same space?

Why did every cell in my body come alive when he was near?

I opened the door wider. “Do you want to come in?”

His jaw ticked and his nostrils flared. Indecision danced in his dark whiskey stare.

I wanted to beg. I wanted to grab him and kiss him. I wanted to do a lot more than kiss him. But I knew that I couldn't.

If I did, I would be opening the door to a world full of emotions, feelings, and regrets.

I didn't do well with any of those things.

After what felt like a two-day drive as an '80s kid without any devices, he dipped his chin in a nod.

I exhaled a breath I hadn't even known that I'd been holding as I stepped back so he could enter. My shoulders relaxed at the knowledge that there were a few more grains of sand in the hourglass of time with Maddox. I had no idea how long he'd stay. A minute. An hour. All night.

All I knew was that the awkward hug at my door hadn't been the final goodbye between us.

It could have been my imagination, but as the door clicked into place his energy shifted again. The only light in the room came from the tiny sconce above the television. I thought about turning another one on, but somehow the subdued hue seemed to fit the mood.

“Did you want something to drink?” I asked even though I never indulged in mini-bars. If I wanted to drink, I either went down to the hotel bar or I stopped at a liquor store or gas station and bought a respectable bottle of my alcohol of choice.

He stopped in front of the TV and turned toward me. “Why?” he asked gruffly.

“Um, I thought you might be thirsty,” I responded.

“No.” He shook his head. “Why did you come to the group home that night? Why did you crawl into my bed? Why did you tell me you were ready? Why did you leave and not say goodbye?”

I felt tears welling up in my eyes. This was the conversation we’d been avoiding all night. We’d danced, we’d reminisced, we’d been...polite.

This conversation was the reason I wouldn’t have come to this reunion if Maddox had RSVP’d that he was going to be here.

I licked my lips nervously and I saw his eyes dip down to my lips. I could see the desire was still there. I knew his tics, I knew his expressions, I knew him.

“Um, I came to the group home because I needed to see you. I crawled into your bed and told you I was ready because I wanted you to be my first. I didn’t say goodbye because I knew that if I did, you’d convince me to run away with you.”

I did my best to answer his questions as honestly as I possibly could.

He inhaled slowly through his nose as he lowered down on the armchair in the corner of the room. His shoulders dropped as he leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees.

I waited, allowing him time to process my answers. His eyes were cast down and I took advantage of his distraction to study his handsome face. His jawline was so square and strong. My fingers itched to reach out and touch him.

“Would that have been so bad?” His words were rough and ragged, like they’d been dragged through gravel. “If we had run away together?”

I could hear the agony in his question. I wanted to ease it, but I knew that I couldn’t. “Yes.”

He hung his head again, and his shoulders slumped.

“For you, not for me.”

His head lifted and I saw fire in his eyes. “How in the *fuck* would it have been bad for me?”

I sucked in a startled breath. Maddox had never cursed at me. He’d always treated me like a china doll he was scared would break.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized as he took another deep breath.

“No, it’s fine. It’s...I understand.” I licked my lips nervously again. Hearing and feeling the depth of his emotions, especially after all this time was both flattering and also terrifying. It somehow made me want him so much more. I wanted to walk over and crawl onto his lap and kiss all of his pain away. But I couldn’t do that. I’d made too many mistakes. Mistakes that, I knew, if he knew, would make him hate me.

He might be mad at me now, but he didn’t hate me. Because he didn’t know the truth. At least, not all of it.

Instead of comforting him physically, I hoped that my words would bring him some comfort. “My father would *never* have just let me go. I was...his property. I was a reflection of him, of his success. He would have found us, and when he did, he would have put *you* in jail.”

“I was a minor, too,” Maddox argued. “I’m younger than you. It’s not like he could have charged me with kidnapping.”

I looked at him and saw that it wasn’t thirty-five-year-old Maddox talking now. It was the teenager that I’d abandoned. The child that his mother, father, and even his grandmother had abandoned.

“You don’t know my father. He has connections. He would have made sure that you were behind bars. He would have trumped up some charges. Or planted drugs on you. He would have destroyed your life. I knew that. I knew that he would have hurt you.” I sighed. “The reason he came and took me was because he knew about *you*. Do you remember that security detail I had the week before I left? They told him about you. That’s why he showed up. Because he didn’t want us to be together.”

He was quiet for a few beats. I could see that he was processing the information that I was telling him.

“That’s why I couldn’t tell you that I was leaving. You would have talked me into running,” I repeated. “And my father would have destroyed you, your entire life.”

His chest rose and then fell in a deep exhale. “Okay, I guess I understand that. But why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you ever try and reach out to me?”

“I was in Germany.”

It was a lame excuse and his leveled stare called me on it.

“They have phones in Germany,” he stated flatly.

My palms dampened as I calculated how much I should tell him. “I did try to call you. In July, I tried. They said you were gone.”

“I was. I got emancipated.”

I nodded. I’d read that in his bio.

“But what about when you came back to the States? When you were at college? You could have tried to find me.”

“I was scared it was too late. That you would have forgotten about me.” That was partially true. It was too late, and I had been scared that he had forgotten about me, but that wasn’t the reason that I hadn’t tried to contact him.

I would take the reason for that to my grave.

His brow creased. “How could you think I would forget you?”

“We were young, Maddox. You were fifteen when we started dating. Sixteen when I left. We were together a few months.”

“Yeah, but...you knew...it was more than that. It *is* more than that.”

I could feel the tears in my eyes starting to swell, but there was no way I was going to give into them. If I did, I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop.

“I know, I know it was more than that. But, back then, with each day, each week, each month that passed, I wondered if I had made it into something that it wasn’t. That maybe I’d romanticized our connection.”

“What about now? Do you still think you romanticized it?”

“No.” I shook my head.

I could see the flames of desire flickering in his eyes, and I was sure that they mirrored my own. Maddox might be sitting in a chair three feet away from me, but I could feel his stare like a physical touch. “I wanted to kiss you tonight. At the bar. On the dance floor. Now.”

“I wanted that, want that, too,” I admitted.

Maddox inhaled slowly through his nose as he flexed his fingers. I watched, captivated as his fingers opened and then closed in a fist. Those hands that had been on my body on the dance floor were addictive.

He was addictive. His voice. His stare. His touch. His kiss.

I hadn’t been prepared last time I’d had to go cold turkey. But this time, if anything happened between us, I knew what it would take from me.

Was one night together worth it?

He stood and my stomach dropped out from under me like the time we’d gone to Great America on the Drop Zone. That’s what I felt like I was doing. I felt like I was freefalling from hundreds of feet in the air.

I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, couldn’t think as he closed the distance between us in one wide stride.

“Peyton?” he whispered my name in pain and desperation.

I knew what he was asking. He wanted to know if I was sure. If I really wanted to do this.

I swallowed over the lump of emotion and lust clogging my throat. “It can only be tonight. That’s all. Just tonight.”

The flare of his nostrils and the tension in his jaw told me that he didn’t like my answer. I knew there was a very good

chance he was going to walk out of this room, and I'd never see him again. Still, I needed him to know what this was and what this wasn't.

The first time we were together, I didn't tell him I was leaving.

That was wrong. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

"I understand if that's not what—"

I didn't get to finish my sentence before his mouth collided with mine.

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MADDOX

PEYTON'S LIPS PRESSED TO MINE, WAS THE ONLY THING IN MY life that had truly made sense. When I was with her, touching and kissing her, everything in my world was right.

But something was holding me back. I didn't have to be a genius to know that this was going to end badly. Peyton was involved with a man who she'd been with for ten years. She'd made it clear that this was just one night. I should have turned and walked out the door, but instead, I couldn't resist kissing her.

She moaned into my mouth as her lips parted in invitation. Without hesitation my tongue slid between her lips and met hers. The second they touched every worry, every concern, every thought in my head evaporated in a lust haze.

Foreplay was something we were always good at. We'd had enough practice. During the six months we didn't have actual sex I made her come with all her clothes on, with my fingers, with my palm, with my lips, with my tongue, once I'd even made her come just by blowing on her clit. Sometimes I'd get her off two or three times in a night. She was my playground and I loved exploring every inch of her. Her body, her turn-ons were hard-wired into my brain.

As our mouths melded together like molten steel, it didn't feel like I was kissing someone I hadn't kissed in two decades. We picked up right where we'd left off.

My hands cupped her chin, tilting her head up giving me better access. Every cell in my body was alive and tingling

with awareness. Our kiss started out slow and exploratory. She tasted sweet, exactly how I remembered. I luxuriated in the soft, velvet warmth of her mouth.

As our kiss deepened, her hands fisted in my shirt as she tugged it out of my pants. Breaking our kiss, I quickly unbuttoned and removed the garment. When I did, she stared at me, lifted her hand and began trailing it along the lines of my tattoos.

The last time she'd seen my body it was ink free. I stood still as she took her time tracing the outlines of my work. I wondered if she was going to notice the letters that were hidden in the eagle's wings across my chest.

"When did you get this?" she asked as her finger grazed over the beak.

"That was my first tattoo. I got it the day that the judge emancipated me."

She nodded.

"Do you see the letters in the wings?" I stared down at her, watching her eyes search. "It's like one of those auto-stereograms that you were always good at."

"Oh the magic eye pictures. I love those!"

"I know." We'd spent hours at Pier 39 at a booth that had hundreds of them racing to see who would find the image within the image first. She won every time.

She said the trick was just not to think, to relax your eyes. I could never do that. I looked at it like a puzzle to solve. I couldn't relax my brain or my eyes.

When I decided to get a tattoo, I researched artists that were able to do stereograms in their work. It wasn't cheap, but it had been important to me.

She squinted and looked closer then backed up.

"Oh." The corners of her mouth tilted up in a grin as her eyes shot up to mine and then back down again. "I see it's an M." Her fingertip ran along the outline of the wing on the right.

“There’s a letter on the other wing.”

She studied the other wing and I saw the moment she made it out. Her lips parted and her lower lids filled with moisture. Her gaze lifted to mine, and she whispered, “It’s a P.”

Her bottom lip trembled. “But...you got that after I left. Why?”

I nodded as I brushed a stray strand of hair off her face and tucked it behind her ear. “Because I’ve always needed you to fly. And I put it on the left wing, so you’d be close to my heart.”

She closed her eyes as a single tear slid down her face.

If that made her cry, there was no way I could show her the magic eye picture I’d bought after our first trip to Pier 39 and still kept in my wallet. No one knew about that custom stereogram that had two words on it and asked her to be mine forever. Not even Alex or Nick.

Another tear slid down her face and I could see that this was getting emotional and that was not the direction I wanted this night to go. To get things back on track, I slid my hand beneath her T-shirt, my fingertips grazed the side of her waist and ribs. My thumb brushed the half-moon of the lower curve of her breasts.

Her body quivered as she sucked in a shaky breath as she grasped my biceps tightly.

I could sense some hesitation and I wondered if this was too much for her. “Do you still want—”

“Yes,” she breathed as she lifted her arms.

I tugged the T-shirt up and off. It fell to the ground, and I stared at her bare breasts which were rising and falling in labored pants. I’d given her time to take in my matured body, and she allowed me the same pleasure. She stood, topless as I drank her in.

Her body still held the hourglass shape that had always driven me fucking crazy, and now it was even more defined. Her hips were wider, her breasts were fuller, and her stomach

still cinched at the waist. Her pink nipples that sat on top of her generous mounds which were pebbled and standing at attention. Seeing her half naked caused my pants to tighten painfully as my cock swelled behind its zippered restraint.

Urgency roared in me, but I forced myself to take things slow. I lowered my head and gently pressed my lips to her shoulder before moving my mouth to her neck. She tilted her head to the side as I peppered barely-there kisses up her neck and nipped the sensitive area just below her ear.

A soft moan escaped from the back of her throat and vibrated against my mouth. I licked the area I'd just lightly bit. She loved having her neck kissed, almost as much as she loved having her breasts and sex kissed. I continued planting open-mouthed kisses on her neck until her breathing grew even more labored.

Her fingertips grazed my scalp as she raked her hands through my hair. I wasn't the only one who remembered the other's turn-ons. I'd always *loved* it when she played with my hair. When her nails scraped along my scalp the sensation shot straight to my cock, driving me damn near the edge and over it. But she wasn't the one in the driver's seat, and I had no plans of going anywhere without her.

My hands moved down to her ass, and I gripped it, hard, as I picked her up. Her legs wrapped around me, and I turned and lowered her down onto the bed. I never stopped kissing her as I scooted us both up toward the headboard.

The mattress dipped beneath our weight as I rolled my hips between her legs, pressing my rock-hard erection against her sex.

Her hands fisted in my hair as I ground against her. I held myself up on one forearm and the other hand moved up her body to her breast. My mouth travelled south, over her shoulder, down her chest and met my hand at her nipple, which was knotted and begging for my attention.

Instead of giving her body exactly what it needed, I teased her. Using only my fingertip, I trailed along the tiny

goosebump edges of her areola. Each pass I made the bumps became more defined and her nipple puckered tighter.

I continued rolling my hips which pressed my cock into her as I turned my attention to her other breast, giving it equal time but never touching her nipple.

“Maddox.” My name was a demand as her fingers fisted in my hair and tugged with just enough pressure that my balls tightened against my body.

Unrestrained need crashed over me, and a growl ripped from my chest.

She knew how to push my buttons just like I knew how to push hers, but I wouldn't be rushed. Not tonight. Not when I only had one night.

Using just the tip of my tongue, I traced the same area that my finger had. She sighed in frustration that her tactic hadn't worked. I continued circling the tip of her breast until finally my tongue flicked the hardened nub.

Her hips jerked up as I closed my mouth over her nipple and sucked it into my mouth, then scraped my teeth across it.

“Yes, yes,” she cried as her hips lifted, pressing her sex harder against my throbbing erection.

I could feel the heat between her legs and my balls tingled with release. We'd gotten off by dry humping more times than I could count. But that's not what was going to happen tonight.

After all this time, when I made her come, I was going to feel her, taste her and then be inside her.

I knew she was close and that I could take her up and over the edge like this, but since that wasn't going to happen, I rose up onto my knees, causing her arms to flop beside her on the bed. I stood as I unbuttoned my pants and kicked off my shoes.

She began to push her sweats down, but I stopped her. “No.”

Her hands stilled before she lowered her arms to her sides as a flush rose up on her cheeks. She'd always liked when I

took control of things, which I'd had no problem doing as an inexperienced, cocky teenager and I sure as hell had no problem doing as a grown man.

She watched intently as I unzipped my pants and pushed both my boxer briefs and trousers down and off. I took myself in my hand and stroked up and down my shaft twice before pressing hard against the base to push my balls down away from my body to buy myself some more time. She licked her lips seductively, tempting me to put my dick in her mouth and let her suck me. But I knew if I did that, it would be game over. I would shoot my load in the back of her throat as soon as I felt her lips and tongue.

Instead of giving into my base desire, I leaned over and tugged her sweatpants and panties down and off her legs. I moved onto the bed and pushed her thighs apart as I rested on my forearms and kissed her ribs then down over her stomach. As I did, I noticed that I wasn't the only one who had new marks on their body. She had a scar on her lower belly.

“What is this from?”

“Um, surgery.” She sniffed and wiped her hand across her nose. “My appendix.”

I'd never had my appendix out, but I thought it was on the lower right-hand side. This scar was in the center.

She must have seen my concern, because she quickly explained, “It happened when I was in Germany.”

I hated thinking about her in another country, being in pain, hurt, having a surgery, even if it was a routine one.

Pushing that thought aside, I continued moving south, kissing the triangular patch of hair that sat on her pelvic bone before scooting my upper body lower so that I could give all my attention to her pussy. My shoulders pressed her thighs farther apart and her legs fell to the side.

Her sex was a mere inch from my mouth, but I didn't immediately taste her. Instead, I just breathed, allowing the hot air to fan her glistening folds. As I did, her body squirmed and her hips tilted up, seeking contact.

I shifted my hand so that my fingers could run up and down her feminine creases. Each pass the tips of my fingers grew damper from her arousal. The seam of her opening pulsed against my touch as her breathing grew jagged and mewling sounds escaped her throat.

She was close. Hell, I was close and scared I would come just from being this fucking turned on and the friction of the mattress.

Doing everything I could to concentrate on her pleasure and not on the release building inside of me, I spread her folds apart and licked from the base of her sex up to her clit. Once, twice, three times before I pushed my finger inside of her and covered her pleasure button with my mouth. I suckled it and flicked it with my tongue in the way that used to bring her to immediate climax and it worked.

Her entire body shook as her inner walls clamped down around my digit. I continued to lick and suck her clit as my finger intimately massaged her tight canal while she rode out her orgasm against my face and hand.

When her body began to relax, I licked her sex once more, loving the way her juices tasted on my tongue before moving up her body. Hovering above her I saw that there were tears in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as I kissed her temple, her forehead, her cheeks.

She shook her head as another tear slid down her face and a small smile lifted on her mouth. “Nothing. Nothing’s wrong.”

I knew that she was overwhelmed, I was too. Overwhelmed in the best fucking possible way.

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PEYTON

I TRIED TO GET MY EMOTIONS UNDER CONTROL, BUT Maddox's tenderness wasn't helping my goal. For so many years I'd convinced myself that I'd built my memory of our time together into something it wasn't. I'd told myself that I'd romanticized our connection and made it into some mythical, imaginary thing.

But now that he was touching me again, kissing me again, making me come at his whim again, I knew that if anything, I'd sterilized my memories. I'd diluted them somehow. Maybe to protect myself because there was no way anything could ever live up to this.

The bar was way too fucking high.

I felt myself getting choked up, but I tried my best to blink away the tears.

Maddox stilled above me. The concern in his stare pinned me to the pillow. "We can stop."

"No. I don't want to stop." I shook my head, that was the last thing I wanted. I sucked in a shaky breath as I tried to explain, "Being with you...it's just so...it's so different with you."

Maddox inhaled through his nose. He didn't have to tell me what he was thinking. I knew he didn't love me comparing him to other men. What he didn't know is that there'd only been a handful. Three to be exact. And none of them ever came close to making me feel what he had and what he still did.

“You make me feel...” I searched for the right word. Ecstasy. Oblivion. Nirvana. None of them encapsulated the gravity, the weight of reality. Unable to come up with something that did, I said, “Everything.”

His expression softened. I lifted my hand and cupped his handsome jaw. His stubble tickled my palm as he tilted his head into my touch and closed his eyes.

“I thought I’d built it up into something bigger than it was, being with you. But I was wrong. It’s even better, even *more* than I remembered. I just missed you so much. No one else ever compared.”

His eyes opened and when they did, I saw that the look in them had changed. His energy had shifted. Instead of a loving, caring, and tender, it was intense, dominating, and predatory.

My body instantly responded to the change in his demeanor, tingling with anticipation for what was to come. My thighs parted farther in silent invitation as my hands ran up and down his back.

“I just want to feel you inside me, please,” I begged.

He rested on one elbow holding his weight as his hand moved between my legs. I felt the brush of his knuckles on my inner thighs as his fingers teased my folds.

“You want to feel me?”

I nodded. He held my stare as he pushed two fingers inside of me roughly. My body clamped down around him and began throbbing.

“Has anyone else made you feel like this?” he gritted out.

I knew that it had bothered him that I’d compared being with him to other people. I wasn’t sure if it was healthy or not, but his possessiveness turned me on. He bent his fingers, and the tips stroked the epicenter of my sex.

My back arched in pleasure. “No. No one ever has.”

“No one’s made you this wet?”

I shook my head as another release began to build low in my belly. “No. Never.”

“Only me,” he whispered roughly against my neck as his teeth scraped the sensitive area just below my ear.

“Only you,” I managed to respond as tingles began to burst in my core.

Unlike my first release which ebbed and flowed as he teased me until finally reaching its crescendo, this one hit me like a Mack truck. It slammed into me with a force that knocked the wind out of me.

My stomach tightened as I lifted up off the bed, gripping his shoulders as he continued kneading my body from the inside, drawing out every last bit of pleasure he could give me. Stars exploded behind my shut lids as my body trembled in delight.

Once the crest of release subsided, I fell against the bed, spent and exhausted. He’d made me come twice in the span of a few minutes. That should be impossible, but with Maddox nothing was impossible.

He was above me still, continuing to plant kisses on my body. I slowly came back to reality when I felt the pressure of his engorged head at my entrance.

Feeling the promise of him being inside of me caused me to rally. A renewed arousal spread through me like an erotic second wind. I lifted my arms and wrapped them around him. My hands ran up and down his back, over his shoulders and arms, and back again.

I’d forgotten how much I just loved touching him. Loved feeling the sensation of his body against mine with nothing in between us. Skin on skin. It was intoxicating and sobering. Exciting and soothing. Addictive and fulfilling all at the same time.

Heated tension radiated off of him as he rasped against my ear, “I don’t have protection.”

“I’m on the pill,” I lied.

I wasn't, but I knew that I couldn't have kids and I never had unprotected sex with Trent because we weren't exclusive. I also got tested regularly, just to be safe.

He hesitated and for a second, I thought he was going to stop. But then, he stared down at me. His hand cupped my face, and his thumb grazed my jaw. I knew, from the look in his eyes, that we were going to do this.

I held my breath in anticipation, waiting for the moment that he would push inside of me. I wasn't even aware that I was doing it until the corner of Maddox's lips turned up in his patented bad-boy half-grin and he said, "Breathe. Just breathe."

I exhaled and he entered me. It was slow, giving me plenty of time to adjust. My entire body tensed with pleasure as bliss curled in my lower belly. I closed my eyes from the onslaught of sensation, but then he stopped.

"Look at me," he demanded.

I knew that he would not continue until I heeded his request. I also knew that if I opened my eyes, my heart might explode. Logically, I knew that could not physically happen, but my chest ached so much, logic went out the window.

Why would opening my eyes break my heart even further? It didn't make sense, but I knew it would.

"Peyton."

Hearing him say my name while being inside of me caused a single tear to slip out from my closed lid.

"We can stop," he whispered.

My eyes flew open in panic. "No!"

My hesitation was not without merit. When my gaze met his soulful chocolate stare, my heart ached painfully as it expanded in my chest.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I nodded, trying to fight back the tears. "I don't want to stop." My fingernails dug into the taut skin on his shoulders. "I

just don't want to feel so much.”

His eyes blinked heavily in understanding. When he opened them again, he asked, “What do you feel?”

“Everything.” It was the only word that even came close to encapsulating what I was feeling. “When I'm with you I feel *everything*.”

He began to move inside of me, slowly, and my body moved with him. My hips rolled into his as our bodies moved together. My legs wrapped around him, and my arms did the same. I buried my face into his neck as I tightened my hold on him. Need like I'd never known before consumed me. I just wanted to be as close to him as physically possible. His fingertips dug into the flesh of my hips as he continued thrusting in and out of me.

“You feel so fucking good. So tight. So wet.” The heat of his breath fanned against my neck as he whispered against my ear.

The more he said, the closer I got to my release.

“You make me so fucking hard. Only you make me feel like this. Only *you*.”

In the back of my mind, I knew that he could just be saying that in the heat of the moment. But I didn't care. Hearing that I was the only one who made him feel like this, whether it was true or not, I still loved hearing it.

He tilted my hips up and his thigh moved beneath mine giving him an angle to drive even deeper inside of me. I could feel my third release of the night building, but I fought against it. I didn't want this to be over. I wanted this to last forever.

His breaths were growing shallow as he grew larger inside of me. My body stretched as he thrust into me again and again.

My first release rose and fell before claiming me, my second crashed into me, and this one was something totally different. This was like a pressure cooker, building at a steady pace. Bliss swirled low in my belly. Each time he pulled out of me then entered me it drove me closer to the tipping point until finally, it pushed me over and I lost myself in oblivion.

As my own orgasm claimed me, he groaned and thrust into me one last time. “Fuck.”

I felt his dick pulse inside of me as he came and my nails dug into his back. I loved feeling his muscles twitch wildly beneath my touch.

When his shoulders dropped in an exhale, he flipped on his back and pulled me against him, so I was resting my head on his chest. One leg draped over his thigh as I snuggled against his side in the crook of his arm. His right hand ran up and down my bare back as his left hand raked through my hair.

We lay in silence. The only sound was our heavy breaths and his heart beating against my cheek. I was sure that there were things to say, but I think we were both too scared to say them. Scared that if we did, it would pop the bubble of intimacy we were floating in.

I’d gladly stay in his arms, in this bed forever. But I knew that wasn’t possible. So, instead I just closed my eyes and allowed myself to feel...everything.

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MADDOX

I CHECKED MY PHONE FOR PROBABLY THE HUNDREDTH TIME today. I wasn't sure why. Peyton wasn't going to text me back. I knew that. I didn't know why she wouldn't, but I knew that she wouldn't.

After tucking the device back into my pocket, I pulled open the door to the diner. This place had been a safe haven for me, Alex, and Nick when we were growing up. Most of that had to do with Leticia, a server who allowed us to pay in spare change we'd collected and order one soda with unlimited refills and a plate of bottomless fries to share together, even though the restaurant didn't offer bottomless fries.

There were quite a few days that all three of us would have gone hungry if it hadn't been for her. She bragged about our successes like a proud mom and loved to tell the younger female staff that she knew us when we didn't have a penny to our names, and she wasn't lying.

The week that I came back to the city after college, Alex, Nick and I all met here for lunch. And we'd been meeting here weekly ever since. It was going on sixteen years now. No matter what was going on in our lives or how busy we were, we had lunch together every week. That is if we were in town. Alex and Nick travelled a lot for work. I didn't. But I was here every week.

"You here for the meeting?" Delilah, the hostess smiled at me as she wiped down the plastic covered menu with a rag.

I grinned and nodded. One of the servers, who I'm 99.999999% sure Nick hooked up with, started calling our weekly lunches the Sexy CEO Club about ten years ago. That title changed once we all became dads to the Sexy Single Dads' Club. The wait staff, especially Leticia, seemed to get a kick out of the name and Nick loved the attention.

Delilah tilted her head to the back of the restaurant. "The other members of your club are already seated at your booth."

When it was available, we sat in the same booth in the back that we'd sat at the first time we'd come in here after we'd found a twenty on the ground and bought a chicken strip meal and soda to share between us.

"Thanks." I smiled.

The dining area was filled with a combination of locals, businesspeople, and tourists. The diner had been featured on a *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* and the exposure had made the destination a must see for out-of-town visitors.

The management had made some improvements since receiving the notoriety, like reupholstering the booths and replacing tables with wonky legs, but the new versions were identical to the old. The place looked exactly the same as the first time I'd come in. The interior was a 1950's retro style with white and black checkerboard flooring, high top booths that lined the walls with red fake leather tufted seats, the walls were filled with black and white photos of the city that dated back all the way to the 1800s, and the tables were all white tops with silver legs and trim.

As I made my way to the back, I could feel Nick and Alex's gazes on me.

"You got laid!" Nick announced confidently before I even made it to the table.

Nick harbored the fantasy that he had a sixth sense for when people had had sex. I wanted to refute his claim, but damn if he wasn't right nine times out of ten.

I silently took my seat.

“How was the reunion?” Alex asked, because he, unlike Nick, had matured past the age of twelve.

“It was fine.”

I didn’t want to discuss the weekend. I was still trying to figure out if it was a good thing or a bad thing that Peyton had been there. I was still trying to figure out if it was a good thing or a bad thing that we’d slept together. I was still trying to figure out if it was a good thing or a bad thing that she was gone in the morning and hadn’t said an actual goodbye.

“Fuck *fine*, we need a full debrief.” Nick insisted as he slapped his hand on the table. “And I would like confirmation that I am correct.”

I stared at the two men who knew nearly everything about my life, and mine theirs, and resigned myself to the fact that at some point I would have to share what happened. It might as well be now.

I sighed and told them everything from me leaving because she wasn’t there, to spotting her at the bar, to her taking the phone call from Trent, to us almost kissing, to us dancing, to us going upstairs, to me showing up at her door, to me spending the night, to her being gone when I woke up in the morning.

“She was gone?” Nick repeated.

“Yep.”

“Have you spoken to her since?” Alex asked.

“She didn’t give me her number.”

They both stared at me with a cut-the-shit look. They knew I had the resources to get her phone number. I had the resources to find out her address, credit score, what she ordered from DoorDash, what Ubers she took and where they took her. But I’d never used them before.

Last night, I had to admit, I had used my unique skills and attained her phone number. And I’d texted her. It was a simple text.

Maddox: *It’s Maddox. Hope you got home safe.*

That was it. I'd written, erased, and rewritten it at least a hundred times before sending it. Some drafts included that it was nice to see her. Other versions said that I hoped we could keep in touch. Some asked why she'd left, again, without so much as a word.

But in the end, I'd gone with short and sweet. There was no expectation attached to it, which I hoped would protect my heart from breaking further. If I didn't ask a question, there was nothing for her to answer. If I didn't mention that I hoped we'd keep in touch, there was no rejection if we didn't. If I didn't comment on how good it was to see her, there was no reason for her to respond in kind. Sending her the text I had would mean I wouldn't be disappointed if she didn't send one back.

So far, my brilliant plan hadn't worked.

"I have her number. I texted her. She hasn't texted back."

Nick cringed as he sucked air through clenched teeth. "That's gotta hurt."

"Do you think it's because of Trent?" Alex asked.

Nick turned his head toward Alex. "Who's Trent?"

"He's the guy she's seeing," I explained.

"But they aren't exclusive, right?" Nick clarified.

"Yeah, but it doesn't sound like she's seeing other people. Maybe she's feeling guilty," Alex offered in way of explanation.

"Or maybe she's just not that into you," Nick stated bluntly before his face contorted and he howled, "Ow!" as he bent down rubbing the shin that I was sure Alex had just kicked.

I couldn't help but grin at the indignation on Nick's face at what I'm sure he classified as an undeserved injury.

"What?!" He threw up his hands. "This is the *second time* she's up and bounced after gettin' down and dirty. I'm just saying, it might be time to move on."

I nodded as I lifted the cup of coffee to my lips. “At least this time she told me that it would just be one night. She made that very clear.”

Both men just sat and stared at me in silence.

“From the long faces, I’m guessing the reunion didn’t go well.” Laticia commented as she dropped off a roast beef sandwich in front of Nick. A chicken club in front of Alex. And a double cheeseburger with extra fries in front of me.

It didn’t surprise me that the guys had already ordered or that Laticia knew about the reunion. Nick was a talker; he just couldn’t help himself. In fact, some of the listeners of his podcasts had started calling him Lord Whistledown after the notorious gossip Lady Whistledown from *Bridgerton*.

“It was fine,” I lied.

“Peyton was there. They hung out. Had a sleepover. She ghosted him, again.” Nick summarized the reunion with depressing accuracy.

“I’m sorry.” Laticia patted my hand. “But, just remember, sometimes things aren’t as they seem. People do things for all sorts of reasons. So just don’t jump to conclusions. I remember her, and she’s a good girl. You might not have the full story of what’s going on with her.”

I nodded as Laticia moved on to help other customers. As much as I appreciated Laticia trying to make me feel better, I’d always believed actions spoke louder than words. And her actions were screaming that she didn’t want anything to do with me.

“Anyway, enough about me. What’s going on with you guys?”

Nick lifted his pointer finger in the air. “The podcast is number one on iTunes and Spotify.”

“I still can’t believe you have a relationship advice podcast.” Alex shook his head.

“Why not?” Nick asked incredulously.

“How long is the longest relationship you’ve had?”

“Why?”

“He’s just going to argue it’s about quantity not quality.” I popped a fry in my mouth.

“Exactly!” Nick grabbed my shoulder. “Women want to hear a man’s honest, unfiltered point of view on things and I give them that. And, I haven’t announced it publicly, but I just signed a very big deal to do another podcast with a certain radio personality. It’s going to be a he said-she said sort of thing. I can’t say who it is for legal reasons.”

“That’s awesome.” I smiled.

“That’s great, congrats man.” Alex lifted his coffee cup in cheers.

“Okay, fine.” Nick leaned forward and whispered, “It’s *Selena Grace*.”

Nick had never been able to keep a secret. It still boggled my mind that out of our group he was the oldest. He would be forty this year and still acted like a frat boy half his age the majority of the time.

I looked at Alex. “Have you and Sadie set a date for the wedding?”

“We did, but this morning we decided to postpone it.”

“Why is Sadie knocked up again?” Nick joked as he took a drink of his coke.

Alex’s mouth curled in a goofy smile. “Yep.”

“Seriously?” Nick choked on his soda.

“Seriously,” Alex confirmed. “We’re going to have Irish twins.”

Penelope was just a couple months old, so the next baby was going to be born within a year of her.

I stood and hugged Alex around his neck. “Congratulations, man!”

I couldn’t be happier for my friend. No one deserved happiness more than him. He’d lost so much and had been in

such a dark place for so long.

What he'd gone through really put my issues into perspective. The one that got away, got away again.

So what?

There were worse things.

And, no matter how I felt now, Alex was proof that there was always hope for love. He'd sworn he'd never love anyone again. Him and Ash had been together from their teens. They'd had a child together, raised him for fourteen years.

Then she was gone. His son was gone.

It could have destroyed him. But now, now he was beaming as he talked about his pregnant fiancée and his daughters.

For once, Nick was right. It was time I moved on with my life. I was determined to put Peyton and the past behind me once and for all. I'd wanted answers for all these years, and I'd gotten them. I knew now why she left and hadn't said goodbye to me. She knew I would talk her into running, and she was right. I would have. And I knew she was right; her dad would have ruined my life.

That was my closure.

It was time to move on.

My phone buzzed and my heart jumped as I pulled it out of my pocket thinking it might be a message from her. It was not and my heart sank.

So much for fucking closure.

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PEYTON

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SIX MONTHS LATER

“SO THIS IS IT? YOU’RE *REALLY* LEAVING?” LEO SAT ON THE edge of my bed as I wrapped a framed picture of Nonna and me in bubble wrap.

“This is it,” I confirmed. “I’m really leaving.”

“Why don’t you sublet this place? Airbnb it? Something?”

I sighed. I’d thought about those options, but in my gut, I knew it wasn’t the right thing to do. “If I do that, then I’m basically telling the universe that I’m waiting for Nonna to die. That’s what my actions will be saying, even to Nonna. I can’t do that.”

“Yeah, but this is all so—” Leo looked around my nine hundred square foot walkup which was a shell of what it had been. The bookshelf was empty. The walls were bare. The couch was gone because I’d sold it. The plants had all been rehomed to various neighbors. “—permanent.”

It was permanent. And I couldn’t say that I was happy about it. But what choice did I have?

“Are you sure that this isn’t another scheme?” Leo asked. “Like the ploy to get you to go to the reunion.”

“No, this time it’s real. She fell and no one found her for two days. They kept her in the hospital for forty-eight hours because she was dehydrated and confused.” Saying it out loud made me sick to my stomach. Thinking of her lying on the floor of her hallway helpless, scared for two days. I didn’t

even want to think about what would have happened if I hadn't called in a welfare check.

“What about a retirement home? Didn't you say that one of your friends owns one?”

The night I got home from the reunion, Leo came over and brought a friend named Jack Daniels. Two glasses in, I'd spilled everything to him. I'd told him every last detail, including Alex Vaughn owning an assisted living facility.

I shook my head. “I can't do that to her. She loves her home, and she can't be there alone anymore.”

Not to mention, Nonna's home was the only home I'd ever really had. I spent every summer, and also the most important six months of my life during junior year there. Without her, I don't know if I would have survived my childhood. Whenever I was in a new place, a new school, no matter how bad it was I knew if I just made it to June, I'd be in San Francisco with her. It was the one constant in my life.

Besides being my only stability, she was the only adult in my life who loved me unconditionally. She fought for me; she was the only person who ever stood up to my dad. Most of the time, she lost, but she did fight. That was more than I could say for my mother. That woman never stood up for me. Not even when I begged her at the time I needed her most. When I pleaded, cried, and bargained for her to help me, she refused.

Nothing I said ever mattered. My father controlled her and, until I was an adult, me. Whatever he said went. No discussions. No negotiations.

I hadn't seen either of my parents in over twelve years, and during those years had only spoken to them a handful of times. People in my life sometimes thought that was strange but only because they didn't know them.

My father was a cold, unfeeling, controlling, narcissist and my mother was his puppet. One of my therapists had asked if I ever felt any empathy for my mother being in such an unhealthy marriage, and I said no. Maybe that made me coldhearted, but it was the truth.

“Soooo you’re really doing this?” Leo asked. “There’s *nothing* I can do to stop you?”

“I’m really doing this. And, no, there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

“Well, then I better tell Cam to start looking for jobs in San Fran.”

“Stop. You can’t uproot your entire life to follow me.” As much as I wanted to beg him to, I knew that was selfish. Cam and Leo had a great life in Brooklyn. They both had jobs they loved and a large group of close friends.

“Why not? *You’re* moving for family, and you, my sweet, are the only family I have.”

I leaned across the bed and wrapped my arms around Leo’s neck. As I hugged him tightly, I felt myself welling up, but quickly blinked away the tears.

“Uh, oh, you need me to get you some feeling antihistamines?” Leo loved to tease me that I was allergic to emotions.

“So funny.” I smiled as I leaned back and continued packing up my nightstand. Most of my belongings were going to charities, but my most personal items I was boxing up and shipping to California.

“So, any luck on the job hunt?”

“Not yet. I have three in-persons this week. I’m hoping I get offered a contract.” I’d done a handful of Zoom interviews and had three follow ups.

Two were public schools and one was private. I honestly didn’t have a preference. I’d worked in both. From my experience, the pay was better at the private school, but dealing with the parents was more of a nightmare. They were involved, which was great, but sometimes they were too involved. Helicopter parents were a problem.

In public schools I felt like I made more of a difference and didn’t have as much pushback from parents. But I didn’t have as much support in the classroom. My second year of

teaching, I ended up spending nearly half of my salary on supplies. I had to get a second job bartending just to make ends meet.

“And what are you going to do about living in the same town as *The Elephant*?” he whispered the nickname.

Before I could answer his question, there was a knock at the door.

I hopped off the bed. “That must be Trent.”

He was supposed to have been there four hours ago but had gotten held up in a meeting. Our plan was to order in and spend my last night in Brooklyn together.

“*Ugh*, I gotta piss.” Leo stood, went into the bathroom and shut the door with a little more force than was necessary.

I knew what my GBF was doing in there and I doubted it was relieving himself. He was meditating. He always did that before he faced people who “worked his last nerve.” As much as I would love it if Trent and Leo got along, I’d accepted long ago that was never going to happen.

After dozens of failed attempts at fostering their relationship, I’d given up completely. They were just too different. If I was being honest with myself, it did bother me. I’d already allowed my father to ruin one relationship in my life. I wasn’t going to let my best friend ruin another.

I opened the door and was faced with a massive bouquet of flowers and my stomach dropped.

“Oh wow!”

The bundled pedals lowered revealing a delivery person with a rainbow mohawk and brow ring.

“Peyton Russo?”

“That’s me.”

“Sign here.” He handed me the digital clipboard and I wrote my name with my fingertip.

I handed it back to him and he turned and walked down the hall leaving the gigantic vase and floral arrangement sitting on

my doorstep. I bent down and hefted it off the ground. It had to weigh forty pounds.

I walked into the kitchen and set it down on my small bistro table. The floral arrangement ate up the small space, filling it entirely.

“What in the name of *Beyoncé*?!” Leo walked into the room making the sign of the cross. “Who died?”

My relationship, I thought silently.

There was a card stuck in a pitchfork in the center of the arrangement, but even before opening it, I knew what it said. Still, I lifted the envelope from between the stems.

“Who are they from?”

“I’m guessing Trent.”

I removed the card written by someone who worked at the florist and began to read it.

“Out loud, please,” Leo demanded.

I sighed.

“Pay Pay,” I turned the card around to Leo. “Spelled p-a-y p-a-y.”

I’d never warmed to that particular nickname that Trent seemed so fond of. Not like when Maddox called me Angel.

Leo rolled his eyes, and I turned the card back around to finish reading it.

“Things are crazy at work so I’m going to have to get a rain check. Hope your move goes smoothly. All my love, Trent.”

“*Rain check*?! Bitch, you’re moving across the country!” Leo exclaimed as he ripped the card out of my hand.

I knew that I should be disappointed, but I wasn’t. I was actually happy that I’d get to spend my final night in Brooklyn alone in my apartment. I’d be able to say a proper goodbye to the only place that had felt like home to me as an adult.

This chapter of my life was over and as far as what was to come, I had no idea. And as far as Leo's question regarding The Elephant, my plan was to avoid him at all costs.

It should be easy. I doubted that we would run in the same circles. I was an elementary school teacher. He was a billionaire tech god. I was going to be living in a two-bedroom condo in Bayview with Nonna. He lived in a state of the art, renovated Queen Anne five thousand square foot house in Pacific Heights, which I only knew because it had been featured in Architectural Digest.

Nearly a million people lived in San Francisco, which meant the chances of running into him would be one in a million. The odds were in my favor.

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MADDOX

WHAT AM I DOING? I ASKED MYSELF AS I SAT ON A PARK bench with Heather Combs while Hannah and Heather's daughter Willa played on the swing set.

The park we were at was right across the street from Hannah and Willa's school, so when Lizzy had suggested I take Hannah there after pickup, I hadn't given it a second thought. It wasn't until I sat on the bench that my baby mama texted me and said that one of Hannah's friends was going to be joining us and I knew what this really was.

A fucking playdate.

Growing up in the system, I hadn't been familiar with the phenomenon. When I was a kid, I went to the park, the store, everywhere, by myself. I never had adult supervision.

Obviously, it was a different world now. There was no way in hell that I'd allow my six-year-old the same freedom I'd had. I just wondered if some of the parents at the school Hannah went to weren't overly involved. I'd heard the terms helicopter parent and snowplow parents and from what I'd observed, ninety percent of them fit those descriptions to a T.

Lizzy and I were on the same page that we wanted to give Hannah as much freedom as possible to make mistakes, learn from them, and problem solve on her own, without us figuring out everything for her. We did our best to have the same set of rules at both houses: bedtimes, chores, screen time, discipline, everything. That way, Peanut's life would be consistent.

For the most part, it worked out well. Lizzy and I agreed on the important things. And even if we didn't, if one of us felt strongly about a situation, the other would compromise.

For instance, when she started first grade this year, Lizzy and I decided that Hannah should be responsible for picking out her clothes for school the night before and also getting her lunch from the fridge and putting it in her backpack.

Everything went fine the first two weeks of school, but then on week three Lizzy got a call that Hannah had forgotten her lunch. The school was mortified when she didn't rush down with another lunch for Hannah. To be honest, I had wanted to take one down for her. But Lizzy insisted that if we did that, she wouldn't learn her lesson.

Was she hungry when she got home from school? Sure. But that was months ago, and Hannah hadn't forgotten her lunch since.

When Lizzy insisted that Hannah's screen time be limited to one hour per day, I'd explained to her all the benefits of online learning. Just because she was on a screen, didn't mean that she was just mindlessly being entertained. Now, Hannah had an hour a day of what we called "junk food" screen time, but she could have up to two more hours of "healthy" screen time.

So far in our co-parenting journey, the only thing we hadn't agreed on were these fucking playdates. I didn't think that Hannah needed them. She had Nick and Alex's daughters Bella and Lexi, who were her best friends. They went to the same school and she got to have sleepovers with them all the time.

Why did she need a dozen other friends? I'd had two close friends growing up and I'd turned out okay. Some would argue better than okay.

I should have never agreed to these playdates. Lizzy had taken advantage of me at a very vulnerable time.

"Maddox?"

“Huh?” I’d zoned out as Heather droned on about her husband, who she was recently separated from. I didn’t have any desire to know the details of their marriage and had no clue why she was sharing them with me.

“She said, how do you guys do it? You and Lizzy, you guys are like the gold standard for co-parenting.”

Normally, I would agree with her. But right now, I wasn’t so thrilled with Lizzy. She’d sensed blood in the water and had attacked. Sure, I was being dramatic. But this was the dozenth playdate I’d been on in six months, and I was only halfway through the hell I’d signed up for just so I could go to my fucking reunion.

“We both love Hannah very much, and always put her first.” I responded the way I always did when I was asked that question.

“Yeah, but you guys seem like friends, too.”

“Family. Lizzy and Ryan are my family,” I corrected her.

I caught my mistake as soon as I saw cartoon hearts floating around Heather’s head. *Shit*. Why did women always swoon when I talked about Lizzy and her husband in a favorable light?

From my limited dating experience, the bar that other men were setting had to be pretty fucking low considering the shit I said or did that women were impressed with or thought was sweet or romantic.

Heather leaned over and threw her arms around my neck. It was the fifth unprovoked and uninvited hug that she’d given me. Her arm kept brushing against mine and she reached out and touched me every chance she got. She’d just earned the nickname Huggy Heather.

I didn’t want to be a dick, but there was such a thing as personal boundaries. If the roles were reversed, I’d be seen as a predator or a pervert for giving a woman unwanted attention. But somehow, because I had a penis, the rules weren’t the same.

“Daddy, look!” Hannah, who was the best wingman in the world considering she always broke up any conversation I was having with a woman or anytime she saw a woman getting too friendly, called out. I guessed that made her the anti-wingman, and I loved her for it.

I leaned away from Heather. “I’m watching, Peanut!”

She swung from one side of the monkey bars to the other and I gave her a thumb’s up. When she hopped down onto the ground, I checked my phone, hoping that this playdate was almost over. When I saw that we’d only been at the park for thirty minutes I wanted to scream.

Actually, I wanted to claim that I had a business emergency and had to go. But when I looked up and saw Hannah and Willa giggling as they ran up the steps of the slide, I knew that I couldn’t do that.

This was the price I had to pay for deciding to go to my reunion just to get my heart trampled on. Again.

“Anyway, after I found out about his cheating, I threw him out. So, I’m single. Very newly single.”

“Great.”

“How long did you and Lizzy date?”

“About five years.”

She looked at me with pitying eyes. “And you haven’t been serious with anyone since?”

I wasn’t ever that serious about Lizzy, not that I would share that with Heather. She wasn’t the first woman to think that Lizzy was my Totga, the one that got away. I understood why people who barely knew me assumed that, since I hadn’t been with anyone since she had Hannah. But what they didn’t know was that I hadn’t been with anyone seriously before or during my casual relationship with Lizzy.

“Between work and Hannah, I don’t really have time for a relationship.” It was my standard answer.

Heather put her hand on my knee and batted her fake extension lashes at me. “For the right person, you could make

time.”

I was about to move away when a text came through. I looked down, and even though it had been six months since I’d messaged Peyton and she still hadn’t responded, my heart still jumped every time I got a notification. Pathetic. I know.

It wasn’t her. It was work. My assistant Samara was just reminding me that I had meetings scheduled this evening with the new crop of interns. I always liked to meet each one personally before they were officially selected, although once they made it to the meeting with me, the position was theirs to lose. They had to do something really fucked up to not get hired.

The message didn’t require a follow up, but it gave me an excuse to put some space between myself and Huggy Heather.

I stood abruptly causing Heather’s hand to fall off my lap. “Excuse me, it’s work. I need to make a call.”

“Of course.” She nodded her head and smiled.

As I walked out of earshot, I felt like such a prick. Heather seemed like a nice enough woman. From what I had observed, she was a good mom. She had a decent sense of humor, and even courtesy laughed at my bad dad jokes. And she was clearly interested in me.

But I wasn’t interested in her. Or anyone. And I did not want to go through six more months of this crap.

I pulled up recent calls and hit Lizzy’s name.

“You better still be at the park,” she answered. “If you lied about a work emerg—”

“I’m still here, I just needed a breather.”

“Aww poor baby, was a hot mom giving you too much attention?”

I felt like after the reunion, Lizzy had been even more determined for me to find someone.

“Look, I want to make a new deal. Name your terms, I just can’t keep doing these.”

“No, no, no. Sorry, not sorry.”

When Lizzy started quoting pop songs, I knew there was no hope. She was sticking to her guns. I wasn't getting out of my verbal contract. I would have to do twelve more playdates over the next six months. I'd been through worse. I just needed to suck it up and power through. How bad could it be?

I glanced over at Heather who was holding her phone out in front of her and taking selfies with pouty lips and my question was answered.

Bad. It was going to be bad.

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PEYTON

“IT WAS SO NICE MEETING YOU TODAY, PRINCIPAL SOTO.” I stood and smiled as I shook the principal’s outstretched hand. “I mean, in person.”

My first interview had been over Zoom. She was much taller than I’d expected her to be. I stood five foot four and had on heels and she had to be at least four inches taller than me in flats.

“Please, call me Michelle. We are very informal here at The Bradley School.” Her jet-black hair was cut in a bob which complemented her square jaw perfectly. She wore a white silk blouse that if I dared to put on would be a wrinkled mess within minutes, but at the end of her workday still looked runway ready. “We should have the final decision by the end of the week. You can expect a call.”

“Sounds good.” I nodded and gathered my jacket and purse. “Thanks again.”

During our interview, Michelle had been upfront that she still had several more interviews to do. I believe she said she had three more candidates that were up for consideration. Three people that might get my dream job.

As I left the principal’s office, I did my best not to get my hopes up. This school was perfect. It was within walking distance from Nonna’s house, which was great considering I didn’t own a car. I hadn’t needed one in Brooklyn, because I just used public transportation. Nonna had offered to let me drive her Cadillac, but it was old and I would rather not rely

on it to get me to and from work. The salary at Bradley was nearly double that of the public schools and the mission of the school was outreach and social justice. It focused on emotional intelligence, arts and music, as well as standard learning. The children in the school volunteered in the community and they held yearly fundraisers for several charities.

This school aligned with my beliefs, and my pocketbook. It was a win/win.

And the class that was available was first grade. I'd always preferred teaching that age. The kids could take care of themselves, but they weren't jaded by school yet. Most of them were actually excited to be at school for a whole day.

My heeled boots clicked on the poured concrete flooring as I walked down the hallways. The building was a renovated textile factory. It had a very modern industrial vibe but somehow managed to still have a homey feeling.

I glanced in one of the classrooms. The walls were clean and white with large glass windows framed in black iron. Instead of the traditional desks there were both round and square tables with a variety of chairs to choose from. There were exercise balls, bean bags, and everything in between.

Seeing an environment that didn't restrict a child's learning by forcing them to be seated in an uncomfortable chair facing the front of the room, felt like a warm hug around me. I knew that I could succeed if I just got the opportunity to teach here.

I was so caught up in my daydream of being employed here, that when I turned the corner, I walked right into someone.

"I'm sorry!" I exclaimed as I heard the clink and clank of pens and scissors dropping to the ground.

"No problem, that's what I get for being in a hurry."

I bent down to help pick up the mess I made. As I gathered the fallen items, I instantly recognized the woman who I'd bumped into. Not specifically. I didn't know her at all, but I

knew who she was in the social stratosphere. She was the it girl. The popular girl.

With curly, shoulder length hair that was blonde at the tips and dark brown at the roots, light blue eyes that contrasted the thick dark lashes that framed them and flawless skin...she glowed. Wearing a black sleeveless turtleneck and high waisted jeans that ended about an inch before her ankle, which revealed a little skin above her white sneakers she looked effortlessly stylish.

She was one of those women I'd always admired that just radiated cool, confident, and together.

I'd always been intimidated by her kind; it was hard not to be. As we stood, I fought the urge to feel blah in my mustard trench coat, black slacks, and fitted white cotton button-down. Leo had packed this outfit especially for this interview and before seeing this woman, I'd felt great about what I was wearing. But now old insecurities flooded back to me.

I reminded myself that even though we were in a school, I wasn't here as a student. I was here as a potential member of the faculty.

"Thanks." Cool girl grinned revealing dimples on both cheeks. Of course she had dimples. "I'm Bianca, second grade."

"Hi Bianca. Peyton, I just interviewed for first."

"Right." She drummed her fingers on the plastic bin she held. "Kimmy is out on maternity leave."

"Yeah."

"How did it go?" She tilted her head down the hall. "With Michelle."

"Good, I think."

"She's hard to read, but she has a tell." Her blue eyes glimmered. "Did she say you can expect a call?"

My heart started thumping. Was that a good thing or a bad thing? I had no idea. "Yeah, she did."

A wide smile split her perfectly symmetrical face. “Then you got it.”

“Seriously?!”

“Yep. She only says that to candidates she’s planning on hiring. Every other interview is ended at thanks for coming in.”

Obviously, there was nothing official about this conversation, but it still caused a spark of hope to light in my chest.

“That’s great!” I beamed.

We said our goodbyes and I was walking away when I turned. “Wait, what if I told she hadn’t said that?”

Bianca thought about it for a second and then shrugged her left shoulder. “I probably still would have told you you got it. I mean, it’s not like I’d see you again.”

“Right.” I chuckled and appreciated her honesty about being dishonest. “Good point. See ya!”

There was an extra pep in my step as I walked out of the large glass doors of the school. Whether it was because the “cool girl” had been nice to me or whether it was because she’d said there was a good chance I got the job, I wasn’t sure.

I inhaled deeply as I stepped outside into the brisk winter air. It was late January in San Francisco which felt like spring in New York. The temperature was a crisp fifty-five and the sun was shining. One thing that the West Coast definitely had going for it was the weather. East Coast winters were brutal.

As I practically skipped down the steps, I noticed a park across the street that I hadn’t seen when I’d arrived, probably because I’d been so nervous about the interview.

This had been my final in-person interview of the week, and the other two had not gone well. At least, from my perspective. The last school I’d sat in front of a hiring committee and two of the four members had received phone calls and left within minutes of me arriving.

I didn't think that boded well for my chances of being hired. Not that I was too bummed if I didn't get offered contracts at those schools. This was the place I really wanted.

But I knew that because it had so much more to offer, the competition for employment was probably a lot greater.

As I reached the last step, my phone buzzed in my purse.

"Shit," I cursed beneath my breath as a wave of terror and relief washed over me.

How had I forgotten to put it on silent? Thank god it hadn't gone off during the interview.

I pulled it out and saw that it was a message from Trent asking me to fly home for a partner's dinner in three weeks. He wasn't a partner yet, but he was on the partner track. The fact that he'd been invited to the dinner was a good sign.

I should be excited for him but instead, irritation niggled at me. It had never bothered me before that our relationship had always been on his terms. I was available to him when he needed someone, and I never complained about last minute canceled plans or how long it had been since the last time I'd seen him.

Once I got used to him canceling plans on a whim, I'd appreciated the fact that it was a zero-expectation relationship. He never disappointed me because I had zero expectations.

In Brooklyn, I'd had a very full life. I taught at a school that I loved. Had Leo and a large group of friends and acquaintances. My life was full without Trent. He was sort of like the cherry on top of my already delicious life sundae.

But now, now I had to admit that it was bothering me that this was the first interaction we'd had since he'd sent the flowers the night before I left. I'd been in San Francisco five days, and this was the first time he'd reached out. And it was because he wanted something.

Part of me wanted to ignore Trent's text and wait a day or two to message him back. He hadn't even asked how I was, or more importantly how Nonna was. But I knew that would just make me what Leo lovingly referred to as a "Petty Betty." He

used the term as an endearment because he was a self-proclaimed lover of all things petty, but that wasn't me.

I quickly typed back that I wouldn't be able to make it. I could say that I would try, but that would be a lie. There was no way I was going to leave Nonna this soon and waste money on a flight. Of course, I knew that if it was just a financial decision, Trent would have no problem buying my tickets, but it wasn't just that. I was just getting settled here and going back to New York didn't feel right. I needed to make this place my home.

The sound of teens laughing caught my attention and I looked up to see them playing frisbee in the park. I checked the time and saw that Nonna still had another two hours with her physical therapist who was at the house, so I figured I'd head over.

A stroll to clear my mind about Trent would be good. As I walked along the cement path that wound through the green grass, I was starting to think that the relationship had run its course. I didn't see how it could work being bicoastal.

It's not like I loved him. I'd only ever loved one person. Maddox Cruz.

I lifted my head and stopped dead in my tracks. I wasn't sure if I was seeing things or if I'd somehow subconsciously summoned him, but on a park bench a few hundred yards away was the only person I ever loved.

Maddox was sitting with an attractive brunette who was talking animatedly. I wanted to turn away, to leave, but I found myself frozen in time.

He glanced in my direction, and for a split second I thought he saw me, but then his attention was pulled away when the brunette threw her arms around his neck and wrapped him in an intimate embrace.

Seeing the affectionate hug served as a catalyst to thaw out my frozen state. I was able to force my cemented feet to move.

As I turned around and rushed out of the park, moisture filled my lids. Seeing him with another woman felt like a slap

in the face. Which made zero sense.

I'd told him it could only be one night. I'd left without saying goodbye, again. I hadn't responded to his text.

Of course he was going to see people.

I just didn't want to see him seeing them. So much for my one in a million chance of running into him. Maybe I should go buy a lottery ticket.

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MADDOX

I GLANCED DOWN AT MY PHONE FOR PROBABLY THE hundredth time over the past hour. This ninety-*minute* playdate felt like it was ninety *days* long. Only five minutes had passed since the last time I checked which meant I still had fifteen minutes left.

As Heather droned on about her ex and how many men had been pursuing her, I tried to ignore her without being completely rude. I smiled and nodded at appropriate times but made sure not to maintain too much eye contact.

I remembered the tips Lizzy had given me. She said that my eyes were what always drew her back in, even though she knew our relationship wasn't going anywhere. She said that for most people eyes were the window to the soul, but my eyes were liars. She said they made women believe that I was much more interested in them than I actually was.

I was *not* interested in Heather, and I did not want my eyes telling her I was.

So, I kept eye contact to an absolute minimum. I scanned the park, only giving Heather occasional glances.

On this scan, I spotted a group of kids that had started playing frisbee. The group was six deep, four boys and two girls. It looked like they were on teams and were basically playing football, but instead of pigskin had a flat disc.

A young mother was running with one of the fancy new three-wheel strollers. She had earbuds in and was clearly talking to someone on the phone.

As I continued my ocular perusal, I noticed a senior couple walking hand in hand, looking at each other adoringly.

They reminded me of a couple that Peyton and I had seen when we had walked across the Golden Gate Bridge as teens. I'd told her I wanted to be like them someday, still together after sixty years. A grin pulled at my lips remembering her theory that every time people saw a couple of a certain age, they assumed they'd been together for decades.

She was right. It was the conclusion my subconscious always came to. Even now that's what I thought as I looked across the park. But that couple could have just met on a dating app. This could be their second date for all I knew. Still, I imagined them together as teenagers, young adults, getting married, having kids, becoming empty nesters, becoming grandparents, and then finally retiring.

I projected onto them what I'd always wanted. A forever love. But that could only happen with one person, and she wasn't interested.

My eyes scanned past them, and I saw a woman in a yellow coat who my body recognized before my mind caught up with what I was seeing. My heart started pounding, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

It was Peyton.

Peyton Russo was at the park in San Francisco. And she was looking this way.

I started to stand when Heather wrapped her arms around my neck. Again. "I'm so happy we're finally doing this."

Her embrace, which could be more aptly described as a choke hold, caused my head to turn and when I pulled away and looked back to the spot where Peyton stood, there was no one there.

She was gone. I stood, trying to catch a glimpse of her. But I didn't see her anywhere.

Beside me, Heather sprang up from the bench like a Jack-in-the-Box. "Is everything okay? What's wrong?"

“Nothing. I just...I have to go. Peanut, let’s go!” I called out.

“But, Daddy—” Hannah started to protest but I shot her a look that told her I was serious. Her shoulders slumped as she climbed down from the play structure.

I snatched her backpack off the ground, and we said a quick goodbye to Heather and Willa before I grabbed Hannah’s hand and practically dragged her alongside me.

“Daddy, what’s wrong?” she asked as her little legs ran to keep up with me.

“I saw a friend that I need to talk to,” I explained.

“What friend?”

Did I want to tell my daughter her name? If I did, she would definitely repeat it to Lizzy, who would definitely have follow-up questions for me.

“An old friend.”

“How *old* is she?”

“She’s my age.”

“Oh Daddy, you’re not that old,” Hannah assured me sweetly.

I chuckled as I continued to search the park. If Hannah was a few years older, I know her sentiment would have been sarcastic. I had precious little time left of sincere adorations, then I knew everything I did would embarrass her and she would think I was *very* old.

“What does she look like?” Hannah asked, eager to help.

An angel.

I knew that description wouldn’t help, so I said, “She has long brown hair and she’s wearing a yellow coat.”

Hannah’s eyes widened. “Like Belle?”

Belle was her favorite Disney princess. She’d gone as Belle for Halloween the last two years and her room at my house was decorated with all things Beauty and the Beast.

“Yeah, like Belle.”

Hannah gasped. “She sounds beautiful.”

She *is* beautiful. We walked the entire length of the park twice before I was convinced that Peyton was gone.

My mind scrambled trying to think of what she would be doing in town. Then I remembered. Nonna lived just a few blocks away. Peyton must be visiting her.

“Come on, let’s go!” We jogged back to my SUV, which was parked on the street.

When we were close, I hit the fob unlocking the doors. Hannah hopped up in her booster seat in the back seat. I threw her backpack next to her, shut the door, and got in the driver’s seat.

“Buckle up,” I instructed as I glanced in the rearview and saw her doing as I asked. When she was safely clicked in, I pulled out.

“Where are we going?” she asked from the back seat.

I glanced down at the time. I still had an hour before I was dropping her off at Lizzy’s who was at a doctor’s appointment. After that I was due back at the office to interview the latest intern candidates. I wouldn’t have time to stop by Nonna’s after dropping off Hannah before my first appointment back at the office.

Shit. I didn’t want to drag Hannah along to go and find out what the hell Peyton was doing here, but there was no way that I could wait until after the interviews to do it.

“We’re going to go see if my friend is home.”

“Your old friend?”

“Yep.”

On the short drive I made a quick detour to a florist and grabbed a bundle of tulips. Peyton didn’t like flowers, but if memory served, Nonna loved tulips, they reminded her of Italy. I didn’t want to show up with a bouquet for Nonna and empty-handed for Peyton. Luckily, I had a box of Sadie’s

Special cupcakes from Alex's fiancée already that I'd got this morning for the intern meetings. I found that a cupcake eases people's nerves. But today there would be no cupcakes at the meeting. The interns would just have to deal with their nerves without any sugary treat to take the edge off.

I pulled onto the street that I hadn't driven down since returning from college and parked. The house was in the middle of the street which was on a hill and had a decent incline. I got out and grabbed the flowers and box of cupcakes.

"Alright, Peanut. Best behavior mode activated. Beep boop." I pressed an imaginary button on her forehead as I made the robotic sound. It's something that I'd started doing when she was around three and would melt down in stores. I had told Alex about the tantrums and he said that kids were so much harder than computers because there was no button you could program to predict behavior.

So, as a joke I did it the next time we went to the store. And to my surprise, it worked. Obviously one successful breakdown-free outing was not enough data to come to any conclusions, so I tested the theory again, and got the same results.

To this day, whenever I pushed the center of her forehead and said the four magic words, Hannah was on her best behavior. I knew that its days of efficacy were numbered, but I planned on using the parental hack until its inevitable expiration date.

Hannah hooked her finger through the belt loop on the side of my pants as we walked up the hill. Whenever my hands were full, she had to be holding onto me for safety.

When I started up the steps to the modest, duplex with gray siding, a black shaker roof, and yellow front door my palms began to sweat. Just like seeing Peyton again at the reunion, this was both familiar and brand new.

With each step I took, I felt like Tom Hanks character at the end of *Big* where he walks down the street and, spoiler alert, shrinks as he morphs back into a thirteen-year-old. I felt

like that was happening now. It was stronger than a sense of déjà vu.

“Daddy, are you okay?” Hannah, who was very in tune to people’s—especially my—energy asked as we reached the top of the steps and walked onto the porch.

“Yeah, I’m good, b-a-n-a-n-a-s.” I spelled her nickname out like they did in the Gwen Stefani song to try and show her that I was fine.

She grinned, but I could see in her much-too-wise-for-a-six-year-old eyes she wasn’t buying my attempt at masking what I was feeling.

I knocked on the door and held my breath. It couldn’t be a coincidence that I’d seen her. That she was in the city, and I’d seen her. It had to mean something.

I knew my life wasn’t a rom-com, but this sort of felt like one. I just hoped it had a happy ending.

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PEYTON

WHY HAD SEEING MADDOX WITH ANOTHER WOMAN AFFECTED me so much? It was the question I'd been asking myself for the past two hours that I'd been walking around aimlessly.

Seeing him had felt like a punch in the gut, which made zero sense.

I pulled out my phone and looked at the text he'd sent me the day after the reunion.

It's Maddox. Hope you made it home safe.

I'd read and reread that text a thousand times. I tried to decipher what it meant. Was it his way of saying goodbye?

I obviously had issues with those, so I had no clue if that was the case.

If I were being a hundred percent honest, I thought, for sure, he'd text me again. Maybe not the next day, but the next week, the next month.

But he hadn't. Which made me think this text was his version of closure.

He'd obviously moved on. Not that I had any right to be upset about that. The past six months, Trent and I were talking about marriage. We were talking about a future.

I'd been the one who told Maddox that it could only be one night. I'd been the one who'd snuck out of the hotel room ninja style and hopped on the first plane back to JFK. I'd been the one who hadn't responded to the text.

This was on me. Yes, I had my reasons. If Maddox knew the whole truth, forgiving me for ‘ghosting’ him would be at the bottom of the list of things I needed forgiveness for.

If he knew the whole truth, he’d hate me. And as much as it might kill me to live in the same town with him and see him around with other people, which I honestly thought was not going to happen, the thought of Maddox hating me was a thousand times worse.

I walked up the steps to Nonna’s house with a renewed determination to let Maddox go. Once and for all.

“Nonna! I’m back!” I called out as I dropped off my bag on the table by the door and stepped out of my shoes.

“In the sunroom!” she yelled.

As I made my way to the back of the house, my nostrils tickled with the woodsy, masculine scent that was pure Maddox.

I knew then, my mind was playing tricks on me. It was causing my olfactory nerves to lie and think I smelled him. I was going to be like one of those people in movies that see their dead loved ones and talk to them, except Maddox was alive and well and instead of seeing him, I was smelling him.

That was seriously pathetic.

So much for my attempt at closing the Maddox Cruz chapter in my life.

As I walked out onto the covered back porch, I saw a beautiful bouquet of flowers on the table in front of Nonna’s rocking chair.

Trent. He must have sent them before I responded that I wasn’t going to fly back to go to the partner’s dinner with him. Either that, or he was trying to convince me to go.

“Beautiful, huh?” Nonna asked.

“Yes, they are.” I just wished I actually liked flowers.

She smiled from ear to ear. “I had a visitor today.”

“You did?”

I assumed that it was one of the ladies that she played mahjong with.

“A gentleman.”

“Oh!” I lit up as I leaned down to sniff the flowers.

At least one of us was killing it in the romance department.

“Someone from the past,” she said.

I knew that she was being deliberately coy and vague. Nonna was nothing if not dramatic. She loved a good build up and then reveal. Another thing that she and Leo had in common. The two were honestly two sides of the same coin.

“Someone from your past?” I lowered down in the chair beside her and smiled. “That sounds mysterious.”

“Not my past, Farfallina.” She leaned toward me and patted my cheek. “Yours.”

As soon as she said that, I knew who it was. Maddox had shown up here. At Nonna’s. My olfactory nerves were not playing tricks on me.

“Maddox,” I breathed.

Shit. He’d seen me. I thought he might have. I shouldn’t have cut and run when I’d seen him. I should have stayed and acted like the grown adult person I was.

“Yes, Maddox.” Nonna clapped. “And he was not alone. He come with his bambina.”

“His daughter?” He’d brought his daughter to Nonna’s. Why?

Nonna’s face lit up even brighter as she said, “Cara bellissima, Hannah.”

I felt like the walls were closing in on me. I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

“He brought Hannah here,” I repeated.

“He must have heard I fall. He brought me these.” Nonna waved her hand at the flowers.

“Oh,” I smiled. Right, of course, he did. He brought Nonna flowers.

I knew that it shouldn't make a difference, but I was so happy that they weren't for me. Trent forgot that I didn't like flowers and it didn't bother me in the slightest. But if Maddox had made the same mistake, I would have been heartbroken. I didn't want to dive into what those opposing reactions meant. Best to just ignore it.

“He brought *you* those.” Nonna pointed to the small table beside her.

I looked down and saw a pink box that read Sweet Temptations on it. I opened it up and saw six cupcakes and a handwritten note. I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face as I lifted it out.

He'd written it on Nonna's stationary. It said: *8pm Full Moon tonight. Anything on the menu. Maddox*

Full Moon was an upscale restaurant that Maddox and I had always dreamed about going to when we were teenagers. At the time it seemed like an unreachable goal. Who would ever be able to afford to eat at a place where the appetizers were nearly a hundred dollars? But he promised me that one day, he'd take me there and I could order anything on the menu and not look at the prices.

Even though it had been twenty years, everything seemed to be happening so fast. The reunion. Moving back here. Seeing Maddox with another woman. Him showing up at Nonna's. The cupcakes. The dinner.

I felt like I couldn't catch my breath.

“He ask if you have plans tonight, I say no. She does nothing. No social life.”

“Thanks, Nonna,” I said flatly. I'd been here for less than a week, so I wasn't sure what she was basing that on.

Her arms flew up in the air. “What? Is true! You don't!”

I was tempted to point out that I *did* have a social life in Brooklyn. I had a group of friends. I had Leo. I had Trent. But

there was no reason to.

“But is no problem, because you do now.” Her eyes twinkled. “You not tell me that you talk to Maddox again.”

“I don’t. I mean, I hadn’t talked to him for years. Since I moved away. But I saw him at the reunion.”

“You did, huh?” Nonna’s eyes lit up. “See, I tell you go and you see il tuo cuore.”

“He’s not my heart,” I lied. “He’s just an old friend.”

“Pfft. He is amore della tua vita.”

“He’s not the love of my life.” If I were Pinocchio, my nose would have just grown another inch long. “What did he say to you?”

“We talk about life, he tells me about his business, his little girl draws pictures.” She handed me a picture of what looked like Belle from Beauty and the Beast.

Nonna pointed. “That’s you. That’s for you.”

Tears began to prick the back of my eyes. This was too much. His daughter had drawn a picture of me.

“You meet him tonight? Yes.”

“It’s been a long day, Nonna. And I need to make us dinner.”

She shook her head and tsked. “No, no. I had dinner. Joanna brought casserole.”

I glanced at the time. It was already ten past seven. If I was going to make it to Full Moon, I’d have to leave in the next twenty minutes.

“It’s late.”

“I know.” She started to stand, I got up and held her elbow to steady her. “I’m going to bed. You go to dinner.”

“Okay,” I agreed even though I felt like I was going to throw up.

As I helped Nonna get ready for bed, she continued talking about how handsome Maddox was, what a good father he was,

how sweet it was that he remembered her favorite flowers because they reminded her of Italy, how nice it was that he brought me cupcakes, and how lucky any woman would be to be loved by him.

I didn't need reminding of all of Maddox Cruz's amazing qualities, and Nonna didn't even know half of them. She didn't know how loyal, kind, smart, and funny he was. She didn't know the struggles he'd been through, and how he'd used that to fuel his success. She didn't know the loss and rejection he'd felt, but how he'd managed not to let that harden his heart.

She didn't know how the roughened pads of his fingers felt grazing the cusp of my ear as he tucked a stray strand of hair behind it. She didn't know how soft his lips were when they pressed against my forehead. She didn't know the safety in feeling his hand on my lower back as he guided me in a room.

She also didn't know that we could never be together. But I did. And I needed to tell him that. I needed to make it clear to him that there was no future for us, only a past. Tonight would be the closure we both needed.

And tomorrow, and for every day for the rest of my life, I'd love him forever from afar.

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MADDOX

“I’VE ALWAYS WANTED TO WORK IN CYBER SECURITY. EVER since I was a kid and watched *The Net*. You know, with Sandra Bullock.”

“I do know.” I nodded.

About half the prospective interns that sat in the chair Kyle was sitting in now mentioned *The Net*. I was never sure if it was because they had actually watched the movie and it had inspired them, or if they’d read the article in which I had said that it was the movie that had piqued my interest in computers.

Either way, it was a mark in their favor. If it had been the movie that had inspired them, then we had it in common. If not, they’d taken the time to research the CEO of the company they were applying for.

“Where did you grow up? Do you have family close?” I always tried to get a feel for a potential employees homelife. Not that it had any bearing on whether or not they were chosen, I just liked to get to know the people who worked for me.

“Um, it’s just my grandma, who raised me. She’s still back in Georgia. When I can, I’m going to move her out here.”

I nodded. I’d known, of course, that Kyle had been raised by his grandmother. Every candidate we considered was thoroughly vetted. Once they got to the point that they were seated across from me, they were practically as good as hired, but I liked to have a face to face.

Our internship was extremely sought after. I didn't believe in not paying people who worked for me. I believed that people worked harder if they didn't have to stress about finances, so I paid a fair wage, which in San Francisco was a starting salary of \$120k. That might sound like a lot, but the cost of living here was astronomical.

I believed in promoting in house. I prided myself on finding quality talent and then creating a working environment where they could fulfill their potential. I wanted to hire people that would grow with my company.

To that end, I'd instituted a policy that after being employed for five years, each employee was given shares in the company. I worked with highly intelligent people who were often approached by other companies trying to poach them. It rarely happened.

We talked for ten more minutes about where he saw himself in ten years, what he thought he could offer the company, and then finally what his favorite video game was. I was old school *Dungeons and Dragons*; he was into *Minecraft*.

When the bubble appeared on my screen from Samara letting me know that my next appointment was here, I checked the time. It was seven fifteen. In less than an hour, I was going to be sitting at Full Moon, a restaurant I'd never gone to because it held so much meaning.

The question was, would I be sitting alone, or would Peyton join me?

I stood, indicating the end of the interview. "Thanks for coming in, Kyle."

"Thank you, Mr. Cruz."

"It's just Maddox."

"Maddox, right." I reached out and shook Kyle's hand, it was sweaty so I knew his enthusiasm was not put on. It was real. "TTT Security Solutions is my first choice. I just want to put that out there."

"Noted. You'll hear either way by the end of the week."

I knew then that he was going to be hired, but I'd stopped telling people that after I'd been kissed on the lips with gratitude. It had happened completely by accident. The kid was trying to hug me, and it took me by surprise. I turned my head and his lips were on mine.

Chris and I laugh about it now that he's worked here for eight years. But it was uncomfortable, and I decided after that day to let Samara handle being the bearer of the good news over the phone.

As Kyle exited, I took a seat at my desk and checked my phone. I'd been expecting a call or text from Peyton, but still hadn't received one. I knew that she had to be home by now. Nonna said she was expecting her around this time.

I'd wanted so badly to stay and wait for her. For reasons I couldn't explain, I'd wanted her to meet Hannah. It made no sense. I never introduced women to Hannah. Not that I'd dated often. But when I did, none had ever been serious enough for Hannah to meet.

Peyton and I weren't serious. We weren't anything. She'd ghosted me. Twice.

So why had I been so fucking disappointed leaving Nonna's house knowing that the opportunity for her to meet the most important person in my life had slipped away?

To find the answer, all I had to do was look at the context clue in the question. Hannah was the most important person in the world to me now, and Peyton had been the most important person to me before her. It made sense that I'd want those two people to meet.

The door opened and I looked up to see an attractive young girl walk in. She had sandy blonde hair and large brown eyes. She looked vaguely familiar. So much so that I clicked on her file on my computer to see if there'd been a picture attached to it.

There was, but I was sure that wasn't why she looked familiar.

I stood. “Angelina Chaplin, I’m Maddox Cruz, nice to meet you.”

She smiled as the door shut behind her. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Cruz. You can call me Lina.”

“Lina, right, and please, call me Maddox. Have a seat.”

She smiled as she crossed the room to the chair facing my desk and lowered down onto it.

“Chaplin, that’s a unique last name. Do people ever ask if you’re related to—”

“Charlie? Yeah, all the time. Actually, my dad is. His great grandfather was Charlie’s first cousin. But apparently his grandfather said *his* dad always got along better with Charlie’s brother Sydney than Charlie.”

“Oh, that’s interesting. That has to be a unique experience to grow up being related to someone so famous.”

Her only response was a small, tight-lipped grin. I’d always been good at reading people. It had been somewhat of a survival skill growing up. I had to know if people were safe, and if they weren’t, I needed to know what their triggers were and what their tells were.

It was clear to me that Lina didn’t want to talk about her family, I just didn’t know why.

Maybe she didn’t want to talk about her great cousin twice removed, or whatever he was. Maybe she wanted this interview to be about her. Maybe she was concerned about nepotism, and she wanted to get the internship on her own merit.

I normally asked more questions about family and childhood, but I didn’t want her to think that I was only interested in those things because she was related to Charlie Chaplin.

“So, I see you graduated high school with honors at fourteen and MIT at nineteen after completing a dual master’s program.”

“I did.”

I always had a soft spot in my heart for people that graduated early. It definitely wasn't a prerequisite for getting the job, but it didn't hurt. I'd graduated high school at sixteen and my master's degree at twenty, which most people thought was impressive, but Lina blew my stats out of the water.

"And I see you already had a position at Google. Wouldn't this be a demotion?"

She pushed the glasses on her nose up. "Not financially."

"Still, to be an intern instead of a programmer."

She paused before saying, "I think there's more room for growth here."

Fair enough. She was probably right. I liked that even at her young age, she was thinking toward her future.

Before getting into where she saw herself in ten years, I wanted to know a little about her past, but steered clear of her family. "When did you know you wanted to work in computers?"

She paused, as if she was truly considering the question. I appreciated that. A lot of the people that sat across from me in that chair were so eager to say the right thing, half the time they blurted out a response that I knew was not thought out and they would probably kick themselves for saying later.

"I guess it started with animatronics. My first memory of being interested in that was when I was three. I had a Teddy Ruxpin and instead of being amazed that it could speak, my mom found me in my room with my dad's screwdriver dismantling it. She asked what I was doing and I told her I wanted to know how it talked. And when I was six, I reprogrammed my Speak and Spell."

"So that's what got you interested in programming." I'd read in her file that her true gift and genius was in programming.

Her lips curled in a smile. "No, when I was five my dad was watching—"

Here it comes. *The Net.*

“—War Games. I loved that movie and ever since then I was obsessed with all things computers.”

“Did you say War Games?” I was sure that I heard her wrong.

She nodded.

“You loved War Games?”

She nodded again.

I’d never told anyone about my love of that movie.

“Do you know what TTT stands for?” I asked her.

I’d never told anyone what the triple Ts I’d named my company after stood for. I’d named it after the game that Mathew Broderick’s character has the computer program play tic tac toe against itself which leads to a string of draws to prove the futility of no-win situations to prevent a war.

Not even Alex or Nick knew why I’d gone with the name. Nick, of course, thought it had to do with something sexual.

She stared at me blankly, before I saw realization dawn on her. “Are you kidding!?”

“What?” I had a pretty good idea that she’d puzzled it out, but just in case I didn’t want to tell her.

“Tic. Tac. Toe.” She said slowly at first, then her words rushed out. “It stands for tic tac toe.”

A wide smile spread on my face. “It does. And you are the only person in fifteen years that has figured that out.”

Her jaw dropped and I could see that she was genuinely shocked. I was pretty shocked myself.

“That’s so rad.”

Rad. I hadn’t heard that word in a while. I wondered if vernacular was like fashion and it came back into style every twenty or thirty years.

We talked for about ten minutes about the film before a bubble popped up on my screen from Samara telling me that it

was time to go. I needed to leave now to make it to the restaurant.

I stood. “Lina, it was great meeting you.”

Her eyes widened and she blinked as if I had startled her. “Oh, that’s it?”

I realized then that my ending of the interview had probably been abrupt. That hadn’t been my intention, I was just nervous to see if Peyton was going to show up or not.

“Yep, that’s it. You will hear either way by the end of the week.”

She nodded as she stood and pushed her glasses up on her nose. “Oh okay, well, it was nice meeting you.”

“You, too.”

Instead of turning and leaving, she just stayed staring at me. A lot of people in this field could be a little awkward socially, so it didn’t surprise me. It happened quite a lot.

“Make sure Samara validates your parking before you leave.”

“Right.” She blinked as if she’d zoned out. “Parking, yeah. Got it. Thanks.”

Her head bobbed up and down and I could see as she rushed out of the room she’d thought she’d fucked up the interview.

“Lina.” I said as her hand reached for the door.

She turned and looked over her shoulder.

“See ya Monday.” I grinned.

“Monday?”

“Yep.” I nodded.

“I got it?”

“You go it.”

The smile that spread on her face went from ear to ear and looked to be a combination of both relief and excitement.

“Thank you!”

I couldn't help but smile as she walked out and the door closed behind her. I grabbed my phone and saw that I still didn't have a text from Peyton. There was a chance that I was going to show up at the restaurant tonight and get ghosted for the third time.

But it was a chance I was willing to take.

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PEYTON

I WALKED UP THE STREET AND MY CALVES WERE BURNING. I'D forgotten how many hills were in the city. My palms grew damp and my mouth grew dry as I approached the restaurant. My senses were already on overload, and I hadn't even seen him yet.

I'd rehearsed what I was going to say over and over in my head. I would tell him that what we'd shared in the past was amazing, but it was just that, the past.

I'd tell him that I would always love him, but I wasn't a teenager anymore.

I'd tell him that I wished him the best in his life and that I hoped he wished the same for me, but I would understand if he didn't.

Those were my talking points. It was simple. Straightforward.

I knew that he would have questions. I knew that he would be persuasive. I knew he would look in my eyes and see that I was lying about what I really wanted. But I had no other choice. This had to be done.

I walked into the restaurant and was immediately greeted by a tall, reed thin man with thinning red hair and wire rimmed glasses. "Miss Russo, Mr. Cruz is waiting for you."

I licked my lips nervously and knew that tomorrow I'd probably wake up to them being chapped because of my nervous tic.

As I followed the nice gentleman in the white button up shirt and slacks, I couldn't help but feel like I was walking the plank to my demise. With each step I was sure my blood pressure rose by at least ten points.

The door opened to a magical outdoor garden complete with twinkle lights in the trees and soft music playing. As gorgeous as the scenery was, it didn't hold a candle to the man seated at the sole table in the center of the courtyard.

He stood and my heart constricted painfully in my chest. I wasn't sure why it did that whenever Maddox was near. Maybe it was because he'd always been something I couldn't have.

When we were teens, I'd had to keep our relationship a secret because I was forbidden to date. Nonna knew that he was my "friend" but I'd always suspected she knew there was something going on. Now as an adult, I couldn't be with him for other reasons that were even more complicated. Nonetheless, the outcome was the same. Maybe that's why my heart ached, because it knew it couldn't be with him, where it belonged.

"Hi." He rounded the table and leaned down, kissing me on my forehead.

I closed my eyes and for a brief moment everything was right in my world. I was in the perfect bubble where I felt safe. I felt protected. I felt loved.

When he moved away, I exhaled heavily as reality came crashing down around me. He helped me out of my coat and pulled out my chair as I lowered down onto it. He took his seat opposite me. He stared at me with a look that I'd never seen before. It was detached. The connection that was always so alive between us was broken. His guard was definitely up.

Maybe it was up because I left without saying goodbye, again. Maybe it was up because I was in San Francisco and hadn't told him. Or maybe it was up because the woman I'd seen him with today was someone he was serious about and he was here to tell me.

The last option would be the best. It would solve everything. Nevertheless, the thought of it made me feel sicker than the night Leo and I had finished off two bottles of Don Julio by ourselves.

When he didn't speak, I sat up taller and cleared my throat. "Thanks for coming."

His lips curled up in a lethally sexy half-grin, the one that acted as a shot of espresso to the slumbering butterflies low in my belly awakening them and causing them to party.

"I invited you." The deep timbre in his voice sent shockwaves rolling through my body.

This was not a good start.

The server appeared and introduced himself as Marco before telling us the specials and offering us wine. We both refused. I went with chamomile tea, I needed to do this stone cold sober. Maddox ordered coffee, and I wondered if the caffeine would keep him up, but I kept my query to myself.

"Remember, anything you want." Maddox grinned as I picked up my menu.

Internally, I swooned. I knew it was silly to feel special because he'd remembered his promise to me. But it had been a long time ago and I did feel special.

I tried to read the menu but was having a difficult time concentrating as Marco prepared our drinks from a station in the corner. After delivering our beverages he took our order then left the outdoor, private space.

The moment the door clicked in place and we were, for all intents and purposes, alone the energy shifted, just like it always did.

"This place is beautiful."

"You're beautiful."

I felt my cheeks blush. Not from embarrassment. I was never embarrassed when Maddox complimented me. No, the flush I was feeling was because my hormones were working overtime.

Every cell in my body was buzzing like a live wire. It had always been that way with Maddox. Since the first time he sat next to me at the lunch table. When he was near, I got goosebumps. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

I had a physical reaction to his presence. I didn't need any wine; I could easily get drunk on the pheromones and endorphins that Maddox exuded. He was intoxicating.

But I needed to keep my wits about me. This was *not* the reunion. I'd given myself one night to indulge in my base, animal desires. I didn't regret the time we'd shared together but there was not going to be an encore. There couldn't be.

Even if he was mad at me, confused, sad about what I had to say, I could deal with that. What I couldn't deal with was having him hate me. And he would. If he knew everything, he would.

There were things I needed to say, but first, I had to ask. "Why did you bring Hannah to Nonna's today?"

"There were a few reasons."

I lifted my cup and sipped my hot tea. "Care to share with the class?"

"I saw you at the park—"

"You saw me?" I thought that might have been the reason he'd shown up, but I hadn't been sure.

His brow furrowed. "Yeah, did you see me?"

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Why had I said that? Why was I going off-script? I'd come here to tell Maddox that we didn't have a future. That was it.

"Mmm, hmm," I admitted with a nod.

"Is that why you disappeared?"

I continued to nod. "You were with someone."

As soon as I said it, I heard how jealous it made me sound. Which I had been, but that wasn't the reason that I'd left. Or

was it? I couldn't even be sure at this point my head was so scrambled.

"I wasn't with her. It was one of those fucking playdates. You should have said hi."

"I should have. And I should have texted you back. And I should have said goodbye in Napa. And I should have said goodbye before I left for Germany. There's a lot of things I should have done that I didn't. I'm sorry, Maddox."

He stared at me, studying me. It felt like he was trying to figure out where this was going before he accepted my apology. "I don't care about the past. I care about now. Are you staying in San Francisco?"

"I am. Nonna had a pretty bad fall. It was days before anyone found her."

"She mentioned something about that, but I didn't know it was that serious."

"Yeah, she has a tendency to make a big deal over small things and downplay serious things. Anyway, yeah. I moved back." I saw the flash of something in his eyes and I quickly added. "But I can't do this."

"Do what?" he asked. "Have dinner with an old friend."

I smiled. "You know you're more than that."

His left brow lifted. "Am I?"

"Maddox, what we had, it was...special." Special didn't come close to encapsulating what we'd had, but that was the only word I could come up with. I wasn't sure one had been invented to actually summarize what we'd shared. "But we were young, and as much as I care about you, and I do, that was my past."

"It doesn't have to be."

"Yes. It does. I'm with someone." This had gone so much better in my head. Now that we were sitting here everything that came out of my mouth sounded lame and utterly ridiculous. Probably because it was.

“With someone.” He repeated as he lifted his coffee mug to his lips and took a sip.

“Yes. And I can’t just blow up my life because of...” I searched for the right word.

“Everything.” The intensity in his stare stole the oxygen from my lungs.

“What?” I asked as I tried to breathe.

“You said that’s what I make you feel. Everything. You can’t just blow up your life because of everything?”

I closed my eyes and when I opened them said, “This was a bad idea. I shouldn’t have come.”

My legs were shaky as I tried to stand. Maddox lunged across the table and wrapped his hand around my wrist. “Stay. It’s just dinner. We don’t have to talk about us. About anything.”

With my pulse racing a mile a minute and my chest aching as I started to hyperventilate my fight or flight instinct was in full gear. But looking into Maddox’s eyes, feeling his touch on my arm started to calm me down.

Slowly, I lowered back into my seat and he did the same.

His lips curled in a half-grin. “Just breathe.”

So that’s what I did. I breathed. And had the most romantic dinner of my life with the love of my life who I could never spend my life with.

MADDOX

“CAN I HAVE ONE?” HANNAH ASKED FROM THE BACKSEAT AS she held the Sweet Temptations box on her lap.

“No can do, Peanut. Those are for your teacher.”

“Mrs. Kim?”

“No, remember, Mrs. Kim is going to have a new baby so she’s not going to be your teacher anymore. You’re going to have a new teacher.”

“What’s her name?”

“I don’t know if it’s a her and I don’t know what their name is.”

“My teacher is going to be a boy?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

Lizzy was supposed to do drop off this morning, but she wasn’t feeling well. She was the one who told me the new teacher started today. The school had sent out an email over the weekend announcing the new hire, but Lizzy had been under the weather, so she hadn’t opened it and neither had I.

This weekend I’d been totally distracted. All I’d been able to think about was the dinner with Peyton on Friday. Something was wrong. I was missing something, and I had no idea what it was.

I’d been trying to tell myself that I didn’t really know Peyton. Not adult Peyton, at least. So who was I to call bullshit on the speech she gave me?

Still, I knew it was bullshit.

There was more to her story than just that we were in the past and she was with someone. There was something she wasn't telling me. My imagination had run wild. I'd considered every scenario, from her secretly being married already to Trent or to someone who had mob ties and had threatened her and her family if she ever left.

I was sure the actual truth wasn't quite so dramatic. It was probably just that her childhood had caused her to have commitment issues as well as abandonment issues, which was why she always left without saying goodbye, because goodbyes were too final for her. And why she was satisfied being with a man who she wasn't even exclusive with for ten years.

Being with me would be real. Too real.

At least that's what I was telling myself. But even that wasn't sitting right with me.

I also had to face the probability that she just didn't have the same feelings as I did. Maybe what I felt from her was just a projection of my own feelings. Maybe, she just wasn't that into me.

That didn't sit right with me either, but that could just be my ego talking.

I pulled up to the school and was relieved when I easily found parking on the block. Usually, this would just be a drive by drop-off, but Lizzy had insisted that I meet the new teacher and that Hannah and I pop by the bakery so we didn't show up empty handed.

Since my childhood had been void of parents, I followed Lizzy's lead on this. I never had an actual parent, or even a guardian come to parent teacher conferences, much less meet a new teacher. This all felt very strange to me, but what the hell did I know?

We got out and started toward the school.

"Daddy, can you please hold my backpack?" Hannah whined.

“Sure, if you want to hold the box of cupcakes.” I offered her the box and her shoulders dropped.

“Never mind.”

I knew that the backpack was probably heavy for her, and as much as I wanted to take it from her and carry it, I knew that wouldn't be doing her any favors. No one had carried my backpack for me and sometimes in life you had to do things you didn't want to do.

Yeah, like playdates, I heard Lizzy's voice in the back of my head.

I grinned as I held Hannah's hand and we entered the school grounds. The parents of Miss Kim's class were all huddled together at the bottom of the steps waiting to meet the new teacher. Some had flowers, a few had cards which I was sure had Starbucks gift cards in them, others had gift bags. I was glad Lizzy wasn't here to witness her I-told-you-so moment. She'd been *adamant* that I had to meet the new teacher and that I absolutely could not meet them empty handed.

As soon as I joined the group, Heather beelined straight to me. She was in yoga pants, a zip up form fitting hoodie with her hair down and curled and a full face of makeup. Why would someone put on makeup to work out? Or if she wasn't going to the gym, why was she in workout clothes?

I might be a genius, but there were things about the opposite sex I would just never understand.

Heather smiled up at me as she placed her hand on my forearm and leaned in close, too close for my liking, to me. “Have you met the new teacher yet?”

“Nope.” I reached down and adjusted the strap of Hannah's backpack on her shoulder to give me an excuse to shift away from Heather.

Her hand dropped from my forearm, but she took a step closer to me, closing the distance I'd just created. “She's from the East Coast, apparently.”

“Oh.” I stared straight ahead, only half listening as she rambled off the teacher’s credentials, including the prestigious school she’d apparently taught at in New York.

“...Peyton something.”

My brain lit up when it heard a familiar keyword and my head spun in her direction. “What did you say?”

Heather blinked up at me. “I said her name was Peyton something.”

Peyton. East Coast. Teacher.

During our dinner I hadn’t asked Peyton what she was going to do while she was here in San Francisco. But, of course, she was a teacher. So, she would teach.

Like something out of a movie, I turned in slow motion as the front doors of the school opened and Peyton Russo walked out with a huge smile on her face. My heart slammed into my chest. I was sure if my jaw hadn’t been hinged onto my face, it would have hit the floor.

“Oh, there she is!” Heather pointed.

Heather and the rest of the parents all surrounded her like she was Kim Kardashian and they were paparazzi. I kept my distance, watching undetected from a few yards away while she spoke to each parent as they introduced her to their children and gave her the résumé of what their child’s likes, dislikes, learning style, and food allergies were.

I had to give her credit, she patiently listened to all of them, making each and every one feel heard and seen.

Seeing her in a professional setting was so surreal. The last time I’d seen her at a school, we’d been students. Seeing her as part of the faculty, interacting with parents and children was a completely different experience.

“Daddy!” Hannah tapped my arm before reaching out and tugging on the box of cupcakes. “Can I take these to Miss Peyton?”

I glanced up and saw that the swarm of parents had thinned out. Only two remained and they both seemed to be wrapping

things up. The second bell rang, signaling it was time for the kids to head inside and they both began to say their goodbyes.

“Yeah, you can.” I walked a few steps behind Hannah, who waited her turn to speak to Miss Peyton.

After the moms turned to leave, my daughter walked up confidently with a smile on her face.

“Hi, Miss Peyton. I’m Hannah and these are for you.”

Peyton’s face lit up when she saw the box. I didn’t blame her; Sadie’s cupcakes were the bomb. I didn’t know how Alex hadn’t gained fifty pounds by now. I sure as hell would have.

“Oh, wow. Thank you!” She opened the box. “I’ve had these, they are amazing!”

“My Aunt Sadie makes them, huh Daddy?” Hannah turned to me, and I saw the moment that Peyton realized that she might be talking to my daughter.

It was when Hannah referred to Sadie as her aunt. I’d told her that Alex was with the woman who owned the bakery. I could see that she was already putting two and two together when she looked up and her suspicion was confirmed.

“Maddox,” she mouthed more than actually saying it aloud.

“Hi.” I was glad that I’d had a few moments to prepare myself, because seeing her, speaking to her again hit me like a punch square in the chest.

She was just so fucking beautiful. Even with all the color drained from her face, she still looked breathtaking.

Her mouth opened and then shut again. Clearly, she was at a loss for words. I knew the feeling. The kids were all running inside, and I saw a woman with curly hair holding the door.

“Peyton!”

Peyton glanced over her shoulder then looked back at me. “I um I have...”

“To go,” I finished.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

I leaned down and kissed Hannah on her head. “Have a good day, Peanut.”

“Bye, Daddy!” Hannah ran inside the school.

Peyton turned and immediately tripped as she started up the steps. I reached out and caught her elbow. Once she was steady, I brushed strands of hair that had fallen in her face and tucked them behind her ear. She gasped softly and a flush colored her cheeks. We were standing less than an inch away from one another. She looked up at me and swallowed so loud I heard the gulp.

I smiled, happy to see that I wasn't the only one affected by this turn of events. “Have a good day, Peyton.”

She pulled away from me and continued up the stairs. “Yeah, you too.”

I watched her make it all the way up the steps and disappear behind the glass doors.

If this wasn't fate, then I didn't know what the fuck was?

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PEYTON

THE BELL RANG FOR LUNCH AND ALL THE KIDS STOOD UP AND single filed out of the room. Some of them were talking and giggling. Some were already digging into their lunchboxes. Some were pulling out their cellphones, which still blew my mind that six-year-olds had them.

As they walked out, my eyes were drawn to one student in particular. Hannah Cruz. I'd been doing my level best to not pay any extra attention to Maddox's daughter, to not stare at her and wonder things I had no business wondering.

She truly was an exceptional student. Not only was she clearly gifted, like her father, she also had a heart of gold, like her father. One of the girls was a little overwhelmed this morning because she was missing her mom, and Hannah sat next to her and told her that it was okay if she needed to cry. She said that crying wasn't being a baby it was being brave.

The girl, Willa Combs, whose mom definitely fell in the helicopter category and might even fall in the bulldozer category, sniffed and wiped her face then seemed totally fine. It seemed that all she needed was the permission to cry and then she felt better.

My heart melted as I watched the exchange.

All morning, Hannah was the first student to finish her assignments, after that she made sure everyone else had what they needed. The kids all colored an outdoor landscape that had the letters of the objects in them and after she'd completed her worksheet, she walked around and made sure everyone

had the colors they needed. She'd also hopped up and got a tissue for Viraj when he sneezed, and snot bubbles came out. The rest of the class laughed but she helped.

Even if she wasn't Maddox's daughter she would have stood out and made an impression on me. The fact that she was such an incredible student only made my decision of what to do harder. I wanted Hannah in my class, but I wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not.

When the last student exited the room and the door shut, I flopped down onto the chair behind my desk and tried to process the events of the morning. I'd heard the phrase it's a small world before, but what were the chances of me getting this job, and Maddox's daughter being in my class? I'd thought seeing him would be one in a million. This was ridiculous.

Unable to stop myself, I pulled out my phone and texted Leo.

Me: *The Elephant's offspring is a student in my class.*

After sending the text I exhaled for what felt like the first time since Hannah had said the cupcakes were from her Aunt Sadie. The simple act of telling someone had eased some of the tension that I was feeling.

My phone buzzed on my desk. I picked it up to see that Leo had texted back a GIF of Chris Pratt's character Andy on *Parks and Rec* turning around in his chair looking shocked and excited.

Another message came through before I set it down. This one was a GIF of a casket being lowered into the grave with the words I'm Dead written across it, which was the term that Leo used when he thought something was unbelievable.

Which this was.

A third message came through in rapid succession.

Leo: *On rounds now, will call tonight for all the tea.*

It still blew my mind that Leo was an actual medical doctor. It wasn't that he wasn't smart, he was brilliant, it was

just that I could never see him taking anything seriously. How did he deliver bad news to patients?

The one and only time I'd seen him in action, I'd felt very proud. It was like something out of a movie. We were having dinner. A man at a table in the back of the restaurant collapsed and someone called out asking if there was a doctor there.

Leo jumped right up and got into action. He calmly instructed everyone what to do. My job was to call 911. While he administered CPR, he had a server bring him the defibrillator. Then he'd cut open the patient's shirt, slapped some pads on his chest and side, and shocked him. Three times.

The man had had a heart attack and if Leo, or another health care professional, hadn't been there, the man would have ended up like the GIF and being lowered into the ground.

Once the paramedics arrived Leo stood up, went back to the table, sat down and finished eating while they wheeled the man away. He acted so nonchalant about the whole thing. Like it was no big deal. And, I suppose to him, it wasn't. It happened while he was doing his residency in one of the busiest ERs in Manhattan, so it was just a Tuesday.

I scrolled up in my messages, just to make sure I hadn't missed a text from Maddox. The only message I had from him was the one he'd sent after the reunion. I figured he would have reached out after this morning, but I guess he was respecting my boundaries.

The fact that it made him even sexier and more irresistible was probably not healthy.

"Hey!" Bianca stuck her head in the doorway. "Just wanted to check in and see how your first day was going."

"Um, yeah, it's, yeah, yeah it's good!"

A slow grin spread across Bianca's beautiful face as she stepped completely inside and shut the door. "That was one too many yeahs. What's up? Did the helicopter parents scare you off? Did Tommy Reynolds pick his nose and wipe it on you? Was there a meltdown?"

I couldn't help but smile at her accurate description of the morning. Tommy Reynolds had picked his nose, thankfully he'd only wiped it on my desk. There were two meltdowns, would have been three if Hannah hadn't intervened, but I was able to coach both the melt-downers through it by using the smell the soup, blow the soup breathing technique. And the helicopter parents were in full hover mode this morning at drop-off, but none of that was the reason for the extra yeah.

Most of the time, it took me years to trust people, if I ever did. It was probably because I'd had to travel around so much growing up that I never really knew what people's true intentions were. I left before I ever found out. But I liked Bianca. A lot. And I needed to tell *someone* about this and Leo was on rounds.

"Actually, the dad of one of the kids in my class is my ex."

Bianca's mouth opened in a perfect O. She walked over and plopped down on a bean bag in front of me. "Holy shitake mushrooms! Did the wife go nuclear on you?"

"Uh, no. He's not married."

"Then the ex-wife, baby mama?"

"No, I didn't see her, um. I haven't met her, yet."

Crap, I hadn't even thought about that. What would Hannah's mom think about me teaching her daughter? At the reunion, Maddox had said that the two were close and that she was happily married, so it would probably be okay.

I was most likely safe there, at least.

Bianca's eyes narrowed slightly as she tilted her head to the side. "Okay, so what's the problem? Did it end badly? Was he a stalker? Did you go psycho?"

"No," I chuckled. "Nothing like that. We were together a long time ago. In high school. It was just... a shock to see him."

"Oh!" She dipped her chin in understanding. "So you haven't seen him since high school and then he showed up with his daughter this morning. Okay, I get it."

“Um, no. We *hadn't* seen each other since high school, but there was a reunion last year we were both at. And I had dinner with him, last week.”

“Oh, okay. So...” She lifted her hands in confusion. “What’s the problem?”

“There’s no problem, it’s just...um, well, at dinner I told him that I didn’t want to see him anymore. I’ve been with someone, for ten years and you know.”

“Did he go nuclear? Did he pull a Teresa Guidice and toss the table? Or worse, did he cry?” she asked as she cringed, apparently she did not find men showing emotions attractive.

“No. Nothing like that. We finished dinner. He walked me out to my Uber and he wished me well.”

She stared at me for a moment. “Okay, so I’m still not seeing the problem.”

“You’re right. There probably isn’t one.” Not one that I could explain to her. I couldn’t say that I was keeping the secret of all secrets from him which was why I needed to keep my distance. And having his child in my class would be a daily reminder of my past that I didn’t think I could handle. I wished I could tell her all that, but I couldn’t.

She leaned forward on the bean bag chair. “So who is he? Is it Ryland’s dad? No, wait. Jessima’s dad. He’s a doctor, right?”

I took a deep breath and knew that I had to reveal who he was. I’d opened up this can of worms, and I knew I couldn’t play coy now.

“It’s Hannah Cruz’s dad.”

Her eyes widened and she sank back into the chair. “Fuck. Off.”

“What?!” Had she dated him? I hadn’t even thought about that. Of course, she was gorgeous and Hannah mentioned that she went to kindergarten here. Of course, he would have met her and dated her.

“Maddox Cruz?”

“Yeah.”

“You dated Maddox Cruz?” she repeated

“Yeah.”

“And *you* told *him* that you didn’t want to see him again because you have been dating someone for ten years?”

“Yeah.”

“Who are you dating? Ryan Gosling? Jason Momoa? Idris Elba? Jake Gyllenhaal? Bradley Cooper? I mean what man could possibly be better than Maddox Cruz?!”

No man. No man was better than Maddox Cruz.

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MADDOX

I STARED AT MY COMPUTER SCREEN MINDLESSLY. I'D BEEN running a program that had a bug and I'd been trying to fix it for the past two hours. Normally, this would take me less than ten minutes to solve but I couldn't focus on the task.

Irritation at my distraction had me typing a message to Samara with the program attached on our internal system.

Have an intern work on this.

Her response of a thumbs up emoji was instant.

Normally, I didn't pawn off work, but today my head was just not in it.

My phone vibrated a moment before the text came up on my computer's screen.

Nick: *Holy shit, bro! Is it true?!*

Word must have gotten back to him that Peyton was Hannah's new teacher.

I typed back, *yeah*. What else was I supposed to say?

Another message came up on my screen.

Nick: *What are you going to do?*

What was I supposed to do? I honestly didn't know what to feel about this development. Everything was telling me that there was still something between us, but she'd made it clear she didn't want anything to do with me. But now she was Hannah's teacher.

I responded, *nothing*.

There was nothing I could do. Right?

As I sat back in my chair and ran my fingers through my hair in frustration there was a soft knock on my door.

“Come in.”

The door opened and Lina stepped inside. Her hair was styled in two French braids, and she wore a white turtleneck and wide leg jeans. I’d never instituted a dress code at the company. I’d always thought that people worked best in what they were comfortable in, still, a lot of employees dressed in business casual at least through their internships. I was happy to see that she didn’t feel the need to do so even on her first day.

“Hi,” I said, wondering why she was there.

My inner thoughts must have been evident on my face because she glanced at her Apple watch. “Are we early?”

We?

Early?

As she asked her question Kyle, Wendell, and Julissa all walked in behind her.

Shit. The interns lunch. I had lunch with the interns on their first day. It was tradition. How could I have forgotten that?

Why hadn’t Samara reminded me? I checked my phone and sure enough, she’d sent the reminder at 7:55. The exact time Peyton had walked out of the room to collect the kids.

“No, you guys are right on time. Come in.”

They all filed in as I stood. The food delivery, which Samara always took care of, showed up as we all took our seats around the conference table at the back of the room.

The first five minutes or so of the lunch, I went through my normal speech telling everyone a little bit about where the company started, where I saw it going, and letting them know that I was excited for them to be an integral part of the future.

Thankfully, I'd given this speech dozens of times since we had several groups of interns each year, one for every fiscal quarter, so I was able to get through it without missing a beat even though my head was miles away.

Every time I'd given the welcome speech in the past, all the interns hung on my every word. Some even took notes. A few had asked to video it on their phones. Today, I thought would be no different. But I was wrong. As expected, Wendell, Julissa and Kyle were completely enraptured, hanging on every word I said. But then I noticed Lina, who was seated beside me, looking down, not up at me.

At first, I thought it might be a social tic or something but then I saw the reflection of the screen in her glasses, and I knew that her phone was on her lap and that she was typing on it. She glanced up every once in a while, but then her eyes dropped right back down.

Strangely, I wasn't insulted by her lack of interest. Instead, I was curious as to what was more important than her new boss giving a welcome speech.

After finishing my spiel, everyone started eating and talking. Kyle, Wendell, and Julissa all got into a heated debate over whether or not *House of the Dragon* lived up to *Game of Thrones*. Kyle was the sole man on the side that it did. Wendell and Julissa argued against.

I was slyly attempting to spy on Lina when she let out a short inhale with a smile, lifted her head, and began eating.

"Is everything okay?"

Her eyes darted to me, and she stared at me blankly. It was almost as if she'd forgotten I was there.

"Huh? What?"

"I asked if everything was okay. You seemed distracted."

"Oh, sorry, yeah." She lifted her phone up and turned it around. On the screen the program that I had been too distracted to fix was running and it appeared to be bug free. "I got this as soon as we sat down and I just...sorry, I had to fix it. I couldn't eat or concentrate on anything else until I did."

That's exactly how I used to be. Up until a few years ago, I was obsessed with my work. Then I had Hannah and my priorities shifted.

I checked my watch and realized she'd just fixed that in less than ten minutes. And she'd done it on her phone.

"May I?" I asked as I held out my hand, palm side up.

"Sure." She nodded as she handed me the device.

As I looked around in the program, I saw that she'd not only found and fixed the bug, she'd reprogrammed the code so that it was running at a significantly faster speed. I noted how she did it and, honestly, it was something I should have caught as well.

I handed her the phone back. "Good work."

She smiled and I saw that the praise actually meant something to her. "Thanks."

"I should have caught that duplicate series. It was slowing everything down."

"Oh, you looked at this? I mean before."

"Yeah, I've been working on it all morning. But, I've been distracted."

Her head tilted to the side in disbelief. "*All morning?*"

The comment and expression on her face made me a little defensive. I wasn't sure why, but I felt the need to explain to her why my head had not been in the game. I glanced around the table and saw that the George R.R. Martin fans were still in a heated debate. They weren't paying any attention to me or Lina.

Still, I lowered my voice slightly. "There was an incident when I dropped my daughter off at school."

"Hannah, right?" she asked as she pushed her glasses up on her nose.

I'd done my best to keep Hannah out of any publication that I was featured in. She wasn't on any of my social media. I

wanted her to have as normal a childhood as she possibly could.

“Yeah, how did you know...”

Her eyes widened, but only for a split second, then her face went back to neutral. “I think I heard someone mention her name in the break room.”

“Oh.” It struck me as odd that any staff would be talking about my daughter, but I didn’t know what sort of water cooler gossip went on. When I walked into a room, people acted differently. They usually stopped whatever conversation they were having and started talking about work or something industry related.

“What happened at school? Is she okay?” Concern filled her voice and stare.

“She’s fine. I just...” I had no clue why I was sharing any of this with Lina. I *never* talked about my personal life at work. Ever. But something about her had me dropping my guard. That, or I was actually losing it because Peyton had come back into my life. Either way, I found myself explaining the situation. “Hannah’s teacher is out on maternity leave and when I dropped her off this morning to meet her new teacher, I found out it is my ex.”

Her eyes widened. “Was it awkward?”

“No. It wasn’t, it’s just... We hadn’t kept in touch for years after school then I ran into her at our reunion last year. After that we didn’t talk again, and then last week we had dinner and she made it clear what we had is in the past and she wanted to leave it there.”

In the back of my head, I thought I must be having a nervous breakdown. That was the only explanation as to why I was spilling my guts to a twenty-year-old intern.

A wrinkle appeared between her brows as she furrowed them in confusion. “So, it *was* awkward.”

“No, it was just...I don’t know how to explain it. But it’s just been on my mind all day.”

“Did you talk to her? This morning?”

“Briefly.”

“Maybe you should talk to her again. I don’t know, clear the air.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“You said you knew her in school? Was she your high school sweetheart?”

I nodded.

“Were you two together for a long time?” she asked.

“No, not really. Six months. And we were kids really. Teenagers.”

She grinned. “Puppy love.”

“No, it was more than that. It was real.”

“Why did you breakup?” She blinked. “I mean, if it’s okay to ask. It’s none of my business.”

“No, it’s fine. We didn’t technically breakup. She moved away suddenly and we lost contact. It was before social media was really a thing and neither of us had cell phones.” Again, I had no idea why I was opening up to her, but I was.

My phone vibrated and I saw it was a Lizzy calling.

“Excuse me, I need to take this,” I excused myself to Lina and the other interns as I stood and walked over to the other side of my office and stood in front of my floor to ceiling glass wall that overlooked the bay. It still blew my mind sometimes that this was my view.

“Hey,” I answered.

“Hey, can you drop Banana’s ballet bag off tonight?”

“Sure.” I wondered why she hadn’t just texted to ask me that.

“And if you have a few minutes to talk, that would be good.”

Lizzy only ever asked to talk if it was important. She hadn't been feeling well and had gone to the doctor twice over the past couple of weeks. Fear gripped me.

"Is everything okay? Do you need anything? Do you need me to pick Hannah up from school?"

Lizzy chuckled, probably at my overreaction. "Everything's fine. And, no, I can get her."

"Okay, if that changes, just let me know."

"I will, oh hey, did you meet the new teacher? Thoughts? Do we like her?"

No. We love her.

"I know her."

"Oh, do you?" she asked.

"It's Totga."

There was a moment of complete silence and I thought that I'd dropped the call.

"Wait? What?"

I lowered my voice. "Lizzy's new teacher. It's Peyton."

"Holy. Shit," she emphasized each word.

"Yeah."

"Did you know she was back in the city? Did you know that she was Hannah's new teacher?"

"Yes, I knew she was back in the city. No, I didn't know she was Hannah's new teacher. Look I gotta go. I'm at the interns' lunch."

"Okay. Well, you know I'm here if you want to talk and you also know I'm going to have *a lot* more questions."

"I know." I grinned. "Thanks. And let me know if you need me to pick Peanut up."

"I could be on my *death bed* and would still go to pick her up." She chuckled. "I can't believe I'm finally going to meet the infamous Totga."

“Maddox,” Samara stuck her head in the door and her expression told me that something needed my attention immediately.

“Be nice,” I instructed Lizzy.

“I’m always nice.”

Lizzy was one of the nicest people I knew, but she was also one of the most protective. If she felt that Peyton had wronged me, she would not keep her feelings to herself.

I disconnected the call and walked over to Samara who explained an issue one of our clients was having with an internal data breach, I did my best to listen, but my mind kept wandering back to Peyton.

She was living in San Francisco. She was Hannah’s new teacher. She was closer than she’d ever been, but somehow there was more distance between us than ever.

After putting out the fire Samara had brought to me, I returned to the lunch, but my mind was stuck on the conversation Peyton and I’d had at dinner. Just like a program that wasn’t running right I knew something was wrong, I just couldn’t see it.

Lina was right. I needed to go talk to her. Clear the air.

I pulled out my phone and texted Samara.

Me: *Clear my afternoon schedule*

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PEYTON

“OKAY, THAT’S THE BELL. EVERYONE GATHER YOUR THINGS.”

I heard my voice go up an octave. It tended to do that when I was nervous. And right now, I was freaking out.

My heart was beating triple time as the students all put on their jackets and backpacks. I had no idea what I was going to face when I took the class out for pickup. Would Maddox be there? If he was, would he try and talk to me?

I just needed to get through the next few hours and then I could go home and drink all the wine I want. I’d call Leo and he would talk me down off the emotional ledge I was dangling on. All day, I’d been considering what my options were.

I could quit, but what would that solve?

I could ask for Hannah to be moved to another class, but what reason would I give?

I’d already spilled the tea to Bianca which meant, if this school was like every other school I’d taught at, half the faculty and maybe some of the administration knew by now.

I took a deep breath as I held the door open for the class then walked them to the front of the school. The hallways were filled with the sound of sneakers and boots shuffling along the tiled floors, kids laughing and talking, and a few teachers calling out commands such as stop running, and no roughhousing.

But all of that noise faded away and was replaced with a buzzing sound that I hadn’t experienced in twenty years. The

time I'd lived in Germany was the hardest of my life and once I turned eighteen and moved back to the States to go to college, I started experiencing panic attacks.

My freshman year had been a nightmare. I'd be in class, or studying at the library, or working at the campus coffee shop and my mouth would start to water. The walls felt like they were closing in on me. I'd hear the buzzing noise. I'd get dizzy, nauseous. A few times I'd even passed out.

On the recommendation of an ER doctor that treated me after one of the fainting spells, I started seeing a counselor who referred me to a psychotherapist. She put me on a low dose of anti-anxiety medication and suggested weekly sessions with her. It took time, and work, but by the end of junior year, I was much better. I'd gone through the rest of my adult life panic attack free, until now.

I tried to breathe through my nose and out through my mouth as nausea rolled in my stomach. My peripheral vision blurred, but I could see that the walls were closing in on me. Everything around me felt like it was spinning, and I was standing still. I tried to ignore it, to fight against it, to do everything in my power to hold it off, because this absolutely could not happen now, but that just made everything worse.

The more I fought the wave of anxiety that was crashing over me, the faster I drowned in it. I needed to breathe through it, accept that this was what I was feeling, but that it would pass.

Just breathe.

Maddox's voice sounded in my head. Over and over again, I heard him whispering it in the dark against my ear.

Slowly, I felt myself returning to my body. I could feel my legs beneath me. I could hear the sounds of the people around me. And I no longer felt like I was going to revisit my lunch. I wasn't sure if it had been a few seconds or a few minutes. When I was dealing with those, time didn't pass in a linear sense. It was all-consuming. But I could feel the symptoms drifting away as my senses all began to return to me.

That had been close. These episodes were brought on by stress and triggers. I thought I'd been under stress and had triggers at other times in my life, but it seemed moving across the country, leaving the only life I knew, caring for my elderly grandma, starting a new job, and having Maddox's daughter in my class was my threshold.

I still felt a little shaky as I opened the front glass door and was met with a flock of parents waiting to collect their children. I smiled, and hoped I was doing a good job of disguising the mini panic attack I feared was waiting in the wings ready to come back on stage at any moment for an encore performance.

Each conversation was a variation of parents asking how their child was in class, if I noticed fill-in-the-blank behavior, if I knew about the parent portal where I could communicate directly with each parent and welcoming me to the school.

By the time I'd made it through a dozen or so of the same conversation, I was feeling much more like myself. I could hear the sounds around me. My stomach was calmer than Mr. Rogers' voice. And my pulse was no longer beating like I'd stabbed a shot of adrenaline straight in the heart.

"Okay, Willa, tell Miss Peyton you'll see her tomorrow," Mrs. Combs instructed.

"See you tomorrow, Miss Peyton," Willa obediently parroted.

It was only after the mother and daughter duo walked away that I recognized the woman. It had been driving me crazy since I'd met her this morning where I'd seen the brunette before. Willa's mom was the woman I'd seen hugging Maddox in the park. That was who he'd been on a playdate with.

I'd thought he was exaggerating at the reunion about the whole "playdate" thing. But after talking to Bianca this afternoon, apparently that was a thing. And Maddox Cruz was in *high demand* in the playdate department.

Not having children myself, I knew it wasn't my place to judge, but I just couldn't imagine a scenario where I'd ever use my child as some kind of wingman to get the attention of a man. It just didn't sit right with me, but then again, I'm sure the choices I'd made in my life wouldn't sit right with a lot of people.

"Peyton?" An attractive woman with red curly hair, bright hazel eyes, and freckles sprinkled over her nose who looked familiar approached me but I couldn't place her.

"Yes, hi!" I smiled brightly.

"Hi, I'm Lizzy, Hannah's mom."

"Oh!" Right. I'd seen her in the pictures on Maddox's phone at the reunion. I wondered if she knew about me. From the twinkle in her eyes, I was pretty sure that she did. I wasn't sure what the protocol was in this situation, so I played it safe. "It's so nice to meet you. Hannah is a delight. She has a heart of gold."

That wasn't a lie. After lunch, she'd saved the day again. When Zoya, who was clearly painfully shy, tripped and fell as she carried a box of crayons sending them flying, Hannah jumped up and started helping her pick them up, then walked her over to her desk and sat with her the rest of free time, taking her mind off of falling in front of the class.

"Thanks, we think she's pretty special." Lizzy glanced over to where Hannah was playing hopscotch with some girls from another class.

When she turned back to me, I thought she might be suffering from the same symptoms I'd just experienced. The color drained from her face, and she breathed out her mouth as she placed her hand on her stomach.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "Did you want to sit down. Do you need some water?"

"No... I'm just..." She looked upwards, swallowed, and then inhaled slowly through her nose and out through her mouth. When she tilted her chin back down, her eyes met mine

and she smiled. “I’m fine. I better go, I just had to make sure I said hi and it’s so nice to finally meet you.”

The smile that she had on her face was warm, and kind but the way she said finally was a dead giveaway that she definitely knew who I was.

“You too.” I waved as mother and daughter headed out of the school gates.

Maddox had always talked about wanting a family. A big family. He wanted to be a dad more than anything. I was so happy to see that he’d gotten his dream.

Even though the circumstances weren’t ideal, I was happy that I’d met Maddox’s daughter and the mother of his child. They were two of the most important people in his life and it felt strange to me that I didn’t know them.

But, now that I did, the question remained if I would be able to keep my relationship with him professional for the rest of the school year or not. It would be hard. Maddox had a way of getting under my skin with a single look. I guess it was easy because he was already there. He was a part of me, like my DNA.

Which was why I didn’t know how I’d be able to keep my emotional, or physical for that matter, distance from him. I walked back inside and was deep in thought as I entered my classroom.

“Hi.” A deep voice sounded that my body instantly knew.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as goosebumps rose on my arms as I lifted my head and saw Maddox Cruz leaning against the table in the back.

“How did you get in here?” I hadn’t seen him out front and the school was secure and no parents or visitors were allowed inside without getting a visitor’s pass with the office.

“I came in the back. My company installed the security system when Hannah started kindergarten last year.”

Of course. Of course they had.

I would ask him what he was doing here, but I figured I had a good idea. He probably had the same questions I did. Like, was it a good idea that I was his daughter's teacher? I knew we needed to talk but this was not the time or place.

"So this is quite the coincidence." He straightened from his leaning pose. "Or maybe fate?"

My door opened and I turned to see Principal Soto, or um, Michelle. She looked surprised to see Maddox. Her eyes danced between us and I could see her wondering what he was doing in my room and why the atmosphere seemed so charged. Or I could just be projecting.

"Mr. Cruz, nice to see you."

He nodded. "You too, Principal Soto."

"How's Hannah?"

"Great."

She nodded politely but behind her intelligent onyx eyes I could see her trying to puzzle out if there was an issue or not. After a few moments of silence, she blinked and directed her attention to me. "I was just stopping by to let you know the faculty meets every Monday in the lounge after pickup."

"Oh, okay. I'll be right there."

She gave both myself and Maddox a smile/nod combo before stepping back into the hall. When the door closed behind her I turned back to Maddox.

"Look, I know we need to talk. But I can't do this now. This is my job. It's my first day."

His nostrils flared as he inhaled. "We do need to talk. Soon."

"I know. We will."

"When?"

"Tonight. I promise."

He walked toward me and the closer he got the faster my pulse raced and my heart beat faster. My hands and lips tingled

as my chest constricted. When he stopped a mere foot away, I was scared I was going into cardiac arrest.

“Tonight. I’ll hold you to that.” His deep voice rippled through me.

There was nothing sexual about what he said but that didn’t stop my sex from throbbing at his words. My mind filled with images of all the ways I wanted him to hold me. Up against a wall. Down on the floor. Under him in bed.

I could feel my cheeks heating and he must have noticed because his lips curled in his trademark sexy grin, before he leaned down and kissed me on the forehead and whispered against my skin, “Tonight.”

With that promise, which my brain processed as an erotic threat that I wanted him to keep, he sauntered out of my classroom.

As I stood in place, my head swam with confusion as my hormones dove off the high dive ready to plunge into the pleasure pool. Maddox had barely even touched me and yet my core was filled with an achy tingle. I found myself squeezing my thighs together and closing my eyes picturing him holding me up against the wall and...

The door flew open, and my eyes did as well.

“We’re all going to the lounge,” Bianca announced as she stuck her head in. “You coming?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

At least, I almost was.

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MADDOX

MY HEADLIGHTS SHONE ON THE FRONT OF LIZZY AND RYAN'S 1920's Craftsman as I grabbed Hannah's ballet bag from the back seat. I'd been preoccupied all day by two things. The first, Peyton, of course. Seeing her after school had only confused me more. The look in her eyes. The hitch in her breath. The flush on her cheeks was not saying that what we had was in the past. So, I had no idea why her words were.

The second thing that had been playing on repeat was Lizzy saying we needed to talk. She only did that for big things. She'd been looking tired the past few weeks. I'd noticed dark circles beneath her eyes on more than one occasion.

I sat for a moment in the car and took a deep breath. Whatever news she had, whatever she and Ryan were facing, we'd face together. Whatever resources she needed, doctors, help, anything she'd have it.

Before I even reached the top of the steps to the porch the front door flew open and Ryan stepped outside. My stomach dropped as my hands fisted around Hannah's ballet bag straps. I searched his stare for a hint of how bad her news was on a scale of one to ten, but I couldn't tell because he had a glint in his eyes like he was about to give me shit for something.

The corners of his lips twitched. "I heard about *Miss Peyton*."

Relief washed over me. It couldn't be that bad if Ryan was giving me shit about Peyton.

“Talk about a blast from the past.” He wagged his brows.

“Yeah.” I wanted her to be my future, not my past, but I guessed that’s what she was.

A slow smile spread on his face as he slapped my shoulder. “I can’t wait to meet Totga.”

I nodded and continued into the house, dropping Hannah’s bag inside the front door.

“Lizzy’s in the kitchen,” he said as he closed the door.

On my way I saw Hannah on the couch playing a game on her iPad.

“Hey, Peanut!” I ruffled her hair. “How was school?”

She barely looked up. “Good.”

I knew that those types of reactions were going to get more frequent the older she got. I couldn’t even imagine what she would be like in her teens.

I made my way to the back of the house where the kitchen was located and the scent of pot roast wafted through the air. Lizzy was an excellent cook. She took pity on my bachelor self and sent dinners with Hannah nearly every time I had her. She could cook anything, but the last time I remembered her cooking pot roast was when she was pregnant with Peanut. She’d cooked it several times a week.

“What’s up?” I reached around her to dip my finger in the gravy, but she swatted it away.

“Wash your hands,” she instructed.

I made quick work of cleaning up and turned to find her holding out a spoon with her homemade gravy. I took it from her and closed my mouth around the utensil as flavor exploded in my mouth. My eyes closed as I groaned at the deliciousness.

When I opened them, I found Lizzy smiling from ear to ear and holding a picture of a sonogram as she held one finger up to her mouth, which was the universal parental signal to stay quiet because little ears didn’t know what was going on.

“Holy shit,” I mouthed before pulling Lizzy into a bear hug.

It was then that I realized just how spaced out I’d been. She was pregnant. *Of course* she was pregnant. She wasn’t feeling well. She went to the doctor. She was making pot roast. I’d been so fucking distracted with my own shit I’d totally missed the signs.

“Congratulations,” I whispered against the top of her head.

“Thank you,” she squeezed me tightly then stepped back.

“When are you going to tell Peanut?”

“I wanted to see if you wanted to be there or if you were good with Ryan and I telling her.”

As much as I appreciated her running it by me and that they were willing to include me, they had their own family, I didn’t want to intrude on that. “You guys go ahead. This is your thing.”

She sniffed as she looked at the printout before putting it back in her purse. “Do you want to stay for dinner?”

My stomach did, but my heart had other ideas. I needed to go see Peyton. She’d said that we could talk tonight. I was going to head over to her Nonna’s right after this.

“Not tonight, thanks.”

“Passing up my pot roast, does that mean you have plans with Totga?”

“Maybe.”

A slow smile spread on her face. “I met her when I picked Hannah up.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. I just introduced myself. She said how *amazing* Hannah was, which of course, she is. And I told her it was nice to *finally* meet her.”

“Did you say it like that?”

“I did.”

I wasn't sure what the right protocol was with these things. Would Peyton think it was good that Hannah's mom obviously knew who Peyton was? Or would she think it was weird?

I'd never second-guessed myself so much in my life. But I'd never been in this situation before. Peyton was the only person I'd ever truly wanted to be with, the only person I'd ever loved. Or, I guess, been in love with. I loved Lizzy, even when we were just dating. I loved her as a person, I was just never in love with her.

Now, I loved Lizzy like family. Like I loved Alex and Nick. They were all my family. Hell, I even loved Ryan. He was a kickass stepdad and I couldn't be happier that he made Lizzy so happy and that they're family was expanding. They'd been trying for a while and I was so happy that they were finally expecting.

But not even that news could distract me from Peyton. I wanted to know what Lizzy, my very opinionated baby mama thought about her.

"*And...*" I waited to hear what the verdict was.

Lizzy never sugarcoated anything with me, or anyone for that matter. She always told me the truth, whether I wanted to hear it or not. It was something I respected and annoyed the shit out of me sometimes.

"Mmm." Her lips pursed as she tilted her head to the side. "She's not what I expected."

"How so?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "I guess that all this time I just sort of built her up into this snobby, uptight—"

"*Snobby and uptight?*" I interrupted. "Why the hell would you think that?"

"Whoa, snapping turtle. Relax." She held up her hands in mock surrender and I realized I might have overreacted a bit.

"Sorry," I immediately apologized.

Lizzy didn't seem at all offended, if anything she looked amused. She lowered her arms to her side. "I wasn't *calling*

her those things. It's just, you said that her dad was a dignitary, and she had a bodyguard. She'd traveled all over the world and spoke four languages. I guess, I don't know, I just wasn't expecting her to be so sweet. And so *down to earth*. And so *stunning*. I mean she is the definition of natural beauty."

"I know that all the things you're saying are technically nice, but I sort of feel like they are digs at me."

Her head fell back, and she chuckled as she swatted my arm playfully. "I didn't mean it like that. I just mean...she's amazing. Like, seriously, perfect."

"I know."

"I can see why you haven't gotten over her all these years. She's really special. And Hannah hasn't stopped talking about her all day. Miss Peyton let her help the other kids when she was finished with her work. Miss Peyton made sure that all the kids had a snack during break, not just the kids that brought their own. Miss Peyton has the prettiest earrings. Miss Peyton smells nice."

It didn't surprise me that Hannah liked her so much. I was sure all the kids in her class did.

"When did you find out she was back in San Francisco?"

"I saw her last week when I was at that playdate with Heather and Willa."

She swatted my arm with a dish rag. Again. This time harder than the first.

"Hey." I pretended it hurt. "What was that for?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"There was nothing to tell. We had dinner, she said that what we had was special but it was in the past."

"*Ouch*. That had to hurt."

"It didn't feel good."

"Well, I still think there's hope. I mean her moving back here, getting hired at Hannah's school, Hannah being in her class that has to be *fate*."

“Says the hopeless romantic,” I deflected so she didn’t get a hint that I’d thought the exact same thing as I pushed off the counter. “Congrats again. I’m really happy for you guys.”

“Thanks, Maddy-Cakes, and hey, don’t give up hope!” She poked her finger in my chest. “Look at me and Ryan. If it’s meant to be, it will be.”

I nodded and after saying bye to Peanut and Ryan I was back in my SUV heading to Bayview. The drive took a little longer than I’d hoped it would to get across the city. Lizzy’s parting statement was playing on a loop in my mind. I wanted to believe that she was right. But only if we were meant to be, not if we weren’t.

Finally, after what seemed like hours but was more like thirty minutes, I pulled onto Nonna’s street and was happily surprised to find street parking right in front of her townhouse. Maybe that was a sign. I walked up the steps to Nonna’s and tried to tell myself it was the right thing being here. She had said *tonight* but hadn’t specified whether it would be over the phone or in person. I was making that decision for her and doing everything in my power to convince myself that I was not being a stalker.

I had shown up in her classroom this afternoon and used a code to get in the back to avoid the rest of the parents and was now showing up at her house uninvited.

But, in my defense, after the dinner we’d shared, I fully intended to walk away and let her go. I hadn’t been happy about it, but I’d told myself that she’d set boundaries and I needed to respect them. But then, to show up at Hannah’s school and she is her teacher.

This had to be *fate*. What else could it be? I just needed to have one conversation with her. One real conversation where we put all our cards on the table. Where she was being honest with me. Then, I would move the fuck on.

I lifted my hand and knocked on the door. I waited, there was no answer. I knocked again. Still, no answer. I leaned to the right and peered into the sidelight. The house was dark, and it didn’t look like anyone was home.

My head fell back in a sigh. The right thing to do was probably to leave and come back later. Or even call or text Peyton to see if she wanted to talk over the phone. But I couldn't do either of those things. This was too important.

I'd always considered myself a patient man, but not when it came to this talk. This needed to happen tonight. Turning around, I lowered down, sitting on the top of the steps. I would wait. For as long as it took.

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PEYTON

“YOU HAD A MINI-PANIC ATTACK, MET YOUR EX’S BABY MAMA, and then went back to your classroom and The Elephant was waiting for you?” Leo repeated what I’d just told him, catching him up on the rest of my day.

“Yes.” I’d decided instead of going straight home after work, I’d walk around the park and talk with Leo to try and clear my head. But the sun had set an hour ago, so I figured I should head home and was on my way there.

“What did he want?”

“I don’t know. I had to go to a meeting. I told him to leave.”

“Why?!”

“Because I did and it was my first day!” I defended myself. “I can’t have my ex showing up to my classroom. The principal came in and saw him.”

“I thought his child is in your class.”

“She is.”

“So, you were just having a parent-teacher conference.”

“How do you do that?”

“You mean spin everything?”

“It’s a gift.”

I sighed, wishing my life didn’t feel so complicated.

“What did he say when you told him to leave?”

“He said that we needed to talk. Soon.”

“Soon, huh?”

“Yep.”

I turned the corner of the street that Nonna lived on and started up the hill, then stopped.

“So do you think he’s going to call you tonight?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s sitting on Nonna’s porch.”

“Damn I wish I was there with popcorn.”

I waited at the bottom of the street. Maddox’s head was cast down as he rested his forearms on his knees. I couldn’t see his face, but his body language looked defeated.

“Listen to me, chickadee,” Leo’s tone grew serious. “I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but it’s *clearly* more than just the past. You need to talk to him.”

“I know. I am.”

“Call me later and tell me everything.”

“I will.” I disconnected the call and tears were already filling my eyes. I’d hoped this day would never come, but now I knew that it had. It was time. I had to tell Maddox the truth. The *whole* truth. And after I told him, I would tell Leo and Nonna, they were the two most important people in my life and I’d kept a secret from them. From everyone.

For a split second I thought that I might be about to experience my second panic attack of the day, but just when I was sure it was headed in that direction a strange sense of calm washed over me.

The moment that I’d been dreading, avoiding, creating my entire life to make sure didn’t happen was here. There was something oddly comforting about fearing the worst and then it happening. I wasn’t sure if this calm was a real thing, or if I

was having a nervous breakdown and had completely detached from reality. But, even if that was the case, I was not mad at it.

A sense of peace and purpose settled into my bones as I walked up the steep sidewalk. I was about halfway to Nonna's when Maddox lifted his head and saw me.

"Hi." I smiled weakly.

He stood and wiped his hands on his jeans nervously. It was so strange to see him unsure of himself. It was a side of him I'd never seen before, and just like every other side of him was endearing and *sexy* as hell.

"Hi, I um, I just think we should talk."

"Okay." I nodded as I walked up the steps and past him. My hands weren't even shaking as I unlocked the door and turned on the light. If this was a nervous breakdown, I would take it over a panic attack any day of the week. "Come in."

"Where's Nonna?" he asked.

"She's playing cards at the Bay View Senior Center."

"That's the place Alex owns."

Of course it was. San Francisco was *not* a small town, but it sure as hell felt like one right now. "I'm picking her up at nine."

I turned to face him and as soon as I looked into his eyes, the peace that I'd had just moments before evaporated like dry ice in a sauna. It was replaced by a tidal wave of anxiety.

Well, the detachment was nice while it lasted.

He must have sensed the shift in my demeanor because he lifted his hands and started speaking to me like I was a frightened animal. "Listen, I just wanted to—"

"No," I cut him off and took a step back to try and distance myself from his potency. I knew if I let him start talking or touch me, I would lose whatever little nerve I had. "*I* need to talk to *you*. I need to tell you something. Something I should have told you a long time ago."

He stared down at me. His eyes brimmed with concern and worry and love. Seeing the care in them only made the situation more painful. My chest tightened and it felt like all of the air was sucked out of the room. The tears were back, and this wasn't a little drip of a faucet, I felt like Niagara Falls was about to pour down my face.

Maddox took a step toward me. "You don't need to—"

"No, I do need to." I lifted my hand to stop him and blurted out, "I had a baby. *Our* baby. In Germany."

There. I did it. It's not how I planned on telling him. I was going to ease into it. But now the information was out there and there was no turning back.

His eyes didn't change, but his jaw dropped and a nearly silent, "*What?*" fell out.

I inhaled and exhaled slowly, feeling once again that I could actually breathe.

"I found out I was pregnant in the summer. I *did* try and call you. I tried calling the group home, but they said you were gone. I know that I should have tried harder to get a hold of you, but it's not like things are now. There wasn't the Internet or social media." I wiped away tears that were pouring down my cheeks. "My father was furious when I told him. He said that I was going to be home schooled senior year because no daughter of his was going to go to school knocked up. And he said I *had* to put the baby up for adoption. I said no. I tried to make him listen, but he wouldn't. He stopped speaking to me altogether. I *begged* my mother to let me come back to California, to live with Nonna and have the baby, but she *wouldn't* help me. She said that my father knew what was best. They even took my passport away from me so I couldn't have come back even if I'd found the money somehow.

"I didn't know what to do. I was so upset. Scared. Alone. I stopped eating. I wasn't sleeping." I sniffed and wiped my nose with the back of my hand. "I think that might have been why I went into labor early."

"You went into labor early?" he repeated.

“Yes. She was born six weeks premature. I woke—”

“*She?* We had a daughter.”

I nodded as I continued, “I woke up and I was having *excruciating* pains in my back. I couldn’t even stand or walk. My parents rushed me to a hospital, not the one on the base. My father didn’t want anyone knowing what was happening. He took me to one in another town, hours away. I thought I was going to die on the way there. I wanted to, I was in so much pain.

“When we got to the hospital, my mom didn’t come back in the room with me. She left with my father. So I was all alone. None of the nurses or doctors spoke English. I knew that it was too early, I kept telling them that. I have no idea if they understood me or not.

“After a little while, I don’t know how long, they gave me something in my IV. I thought it was to stop the labor, but it knocked me out. When I woke up, I wasn’t pregnant anymore. A nurse who spoke broken English explained to me that they’d had to do an emergency C-section. I asked to see the baby, but they never let me.” A sob choked me, but I pressed on. “She did tell me that it was a girl and she was healthy, even though she was premature, her heart and lungs were strong. Two days later I went home. My parents never spoke to me about it. I went back to school after the holidays, graduated and turned eighteen. On my birthday, I left Germany and went to New York for school.

“I *know* once I got back to the States and away from my father, I should have tried to find you. To tell you. But those first years after...” I shook my head remembering how dark those years had been. “I was *really* depressed. I was having panic attacks and I went to see a counselor who told me that I had PTSD from the experience.

“Then, I don’t know, I guess, days turned into weeks, weeks turned into a months, and months turned into years, and then, I don’t know, when I finally came out of everything, so much time had passed I knew it was too late.”

I sniffed as I wiped the moisture coating my cheeks. “Anyway, that’s why I never looked you up. That’s why I left the reunion without saying goodbye. That’s why I told you last week that we had to leave the past in the past, because I knew that if I was around you, I’d have to tell you. And I knew when I told you, you’d hate me.”

Maddox didn’t say anything. He was just staring at me. I knew that the bomb I’d just dropped on him was a lot of information and he might need a minute or two to process it.

So I waited and tried to brace myself for the fallout, for the anger, for the betrayal, but he just asked, “Are you okay? Now, are you okay?”

“Um, I was doing okay, I guess. Before today I hadn’t had a panic attack in like fifteen years.”

“You had a panic attack today?”

“Sort of. Not a bad one. A little one. It’s just been a lot... being back here. Seeing you.” There was still one more thing I was scared to tell him, but I knew that if I didn’t, I would regret it. I didn’t want *any* secrets between us. “Um also, after the birth, I was really sick, but my father didn’t want to take me back to the doctor. He thought I was faking it for attention or to punish them somehow. They didn’t take me back until my mother found me in my bed unconscious. It turned out that I had an infection in my cervix from the C-section. They had to do *another* surgery and there is some scar tissue, anyway, it’s made me infertile. I can’t have any other children.”

There. I’d said everything I’d been terrified to say. All the secrets I’d kept hidden were out. I thought telling anyone would destroy me, but it hadn’t. My world hadn’t ended. I was still standing. My legs felt like they were going to give out at any second, but I was still standing.

MADDOX

PART OF ME COULDN'T BELIEVE WHAT PEYTON WAS TELLING me, but another part knew it was true. She'd had a baby. A baby girl. I was a father. I mean, I am a father, but I'd been a father for twenty years and had no fucking clue. My head was spinning with what that meant.

Slowly, I lowered down into the chair behind me. I didn't trust my legs to keep me upright. The plastic covering crinkled beneath my weight.

I was trying to wrap my head around the information when a thought hit me. Hannah. She had a sister. One that she had no idea about.

How was I going to tell her? How could I explain to her that I didn't know I had another daughter?

"I understand if you hate me," Peyton's words were barely above a whisper.

That was the second time she'd made that statement.

I lifted my head. "Hate you? Why would you think I would hate you?"

Her mossy-green eyes grew wide as her hands turned over palm side up and her shoulders shrugged. She took in a shaky breath as more tears slid down her face. "Because I slept with you and left without saying goodbye, and then when I found out that I was pregnant I didn't tell you—"

"You said you called the group home," I interrupted her.

“I did. But I should have tried harder. I should have stood up to my dad. I should have done something. I was just...so scared.” Her bottom lip and hands trembled uncontrollably. The site commanded every protective instinct in my body to report for duty.

I’d deal with my own feelings later. I was good at that. I’d learned to compartmentalize long ago.

I stood and pulled her into my arms. “It’s okay.”

She cried against my chest, and I rubbed my hands up and down her back as I whispered over and over against the crown of her head, “I’m here. It’s okay. Just breathe.”

Her tiny body shook as she sobbed against me. My heart shattered into a million pieces at the pain that she’d been carrying around all these years. I had a feeling these tears were a long time coming. I knew that I was going to have to process the information that I’d just been given, but right now, right now I just needed to make sure that Peyton was okay. I needed to do what I hadn’t been able to do twenty years ago and take care of her.

I continued to rub up and down her back, repeating that it was okay, everything was going to be okay. After what could have been twenty minutes or an hour, I wasn’t sure, she stopped crying and lifted her head, looking up at me.

Her red-rimmed, puffy eyes shone with raw vulnerability as she sniffed. “Do you promise you don’t hate me?”

“Peyton...” I brushed my hand over her head, wiping some of the hair that had stuck to her cheeks which were damp with her tears. I wanted so badly to tell her that I loved her, that I always had and always would, but I wasn’t sure this was the time that she was ready to hear that. This wasn’t about me or my feelings for her. This was about her. “I could *never* hate you.”

Her face started to crumble in tears again. “I was so scared.”

I bent down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. My lips stayed in place as her entire body relaxed melting against me.

“I’m so sorry.” My lips brushed against her skin.

“*You’re* sorry?” She pulled back and looked up at me. “You’re sorry for what?”

“For you going through that alone. I can’t imagine how terrifying and traumatizing that must have been. I would do *anything* if I could go back and be there.”

Her bottom lip trembled once again. “Thank you.”

“When was she born?”

“What?”

“Our daughter, when was she born?”

A smile lifted on her face. “On November eleventh.”

“Eleven eleven?” I repeated in reverence.

“Eleven eleven.”

That date had been so special to us. What were the chances? What were the odds that that would be her birthday?

I was still trying to process that information when a realization hit me like a Mack truck. “The scar, on your belly, it’s not from your appendix, is it?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s from the emergency C-section.”

“Can I see it?” For some reason I had a primal need to see it, to touch the proof that Peyton had carried my baby.

She nodded as she unbuckled and unzipped her pants, then pulled the waistband down revealing the faded scar.

I lowered back down into the chair, and again the plastic protested under me.

Slowly I lifted my hand and ran my finger over the uneven skin. The scar that was on her body from when they took our baby out of her. Not able to help myself, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to it.

Peyton sucked in a shaky breath and her hands settled on my head.

“I’m sorry.” I whispered as I pressed kisses against it. Apologizing to her, to our daughter that I hadn’t been there to protect them. My family. “I’m sorry.”

With every kiss her fingers raked harder against my scalp. Gradually, the energy between us shifted. It became thick with sexual charge. In the back of my head, a little voice was telling me this probably wasn’t a great idea. We were dealing with enough and being intimate would just add more confusion. But I quickly hog-tied that voice to a chair and gagged it. Even if it was right and this might not be the best time because there was more we needed to say, that conversation would have to wait.

Right now, we just both needed to feel alive. To feel the connection that only we shared. Being with Peyton could never be wrong. I knew that on a base, animalistic level. Logic didn’t get a vote on this decision.

But I did need to make sure that Peyton and I were both on the same page.

I lifted my eyes and found her staring down at me and I had my answer. Carnal desire flickered in her emerald gaze. We didn’t have to say anything. Our communication was not reliant on speaking. She needed me just as badly as I needed her. It was as simple as that.

My hands slid beneath her shirt and traveled up, taking the material with them. She lifted her arms and pulled it up and off. With one tug, I pulled down her pants and panties down to her ankles. Her hands rested on my shoulders for balance as she stepped out of her shoes, slacks and underwear.

When she straightened up, I nudged her legs apart and began to run my fingers along her damp feminine folds. She stared down at me as I gently cupped the back of her knee then placed her leg over my shoulder, bringing my mouth in direct contact with her sex.

She reached her arm out and braced herself on the wall beside the chair as I licked and teased her opening. I gripped the hip of her leg that was standing with one hand, while the other joined with my mouth to give her pleasure.

Using the pad of my thumb I flicked her swollen clit as my tongue gently massaged the base of her slit. As I licked her opening and flicked her pleasure nub, her thighs began to tremble, and I knew that she was already close. I continued the sensual strokes of my tongue as my finger moved in a steady pace over her button, stimulating both the nub at the top of her sex and the slit of her opening simultaneously.

The sweet taste of her arousal coated my tongue as her hands fisted in my hair. She began to roll her hips against my lips and tongue and into my touch. I held still and allowed her to set the pace and take her pleasure from me as she ground her pussy into my mouth and hand.

I lifted my eyes and watched as her head fell back and her mouth opened in a cry of release. Her skin flushed a faint shade of pink and her belly fluttered as she rode out her climax. My own body was throbbing painfully with urgency. I was tempted to stroke myself as I watched her come but I ignored the impulse and knew that we would both benefit from prolonging my pleasure.

When the last spasms of her orgasm subsided, her leg dropped from my shoulder. I kissed her gently once more on her scar before standing. As soon as I was on my feet her hands snaked around my neck as her mouth crashed into mine. Knowing that she could taste herself on my lips as we kissed deeply only added to fuel the bonfire of desire that was burning in me.

With impassioned urgency, she reached between us and began to pull my shirt from my pants. I could feel her desperation, and it mirrored what I was feeling.

“I need you,” she declared as she broke our kiss and tugged my shirt off my head.

“I need you, too.” I pulled the shirt the rest of the way and when my arms dropped down to my sides, she was already undoing my pants.

Her hands trembled as she unbuttoned and unzipped my slacks. I watched her and thoughts began to crowd into my mind. Thoughts of the past and the future. What could have

been. What should have been. But just like the voice telling me that this might not be a good idea, I silenced them.

Tonight, I was just going to be in the moment. All that mattered, right now, was the connection that Peyton and I shared, the intimacy, the love. None of that had wavered over two decades. No matter what else happened, what transpired in the past, or what was to come in the future, that had to mean something.

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PEYTON

AS I WORKED TO GET MADDOX NAKED, I FELT LIKE A WEIGHT was lifted off my chest. I felt lighter than I had in years. The biggest secret of my life had been revealed and the worst hadn't happened. Maddox was still here, he said that he didn't hate me and I believed him.

He'd always been a big proponent and believer in actions speaking louder than words, and the orgasm he'd just given me was not one born of hate or anger. Pain, maybe, but not his, mine. It felt like he was trying to heal me with his touch. And it was working.

Now, I wanted to return the favor.

After sliding his pants and boxer briefs down his muscular thighs, I watched as he kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his dress pants. I placed my hands on his chest and pushed him back. He fell back into the chair, which caused the plastic to squish beneath him. I smiled at the very unsexy noise occurring at a very sexy time as I lowered down onto my knees.

His erection was standing at full attention and my mouth watered as I wrapped my fingers around his girth. I stared at the perfection that was his manhood as my hold tightened around him. His shaft pulsed in my grip as I slid my hand up to his head and squeezed.

“Peyton, you don't have to—”

His words cut off when I leaned over and put my lips around his cock, sucking him into my mouth. My tongue

massaged his shaft as I gripped his base. I'd always loved giving Maddox head. It had always turned me on. The sensation of his cock sliding up and down my tongue, holding his shaft in my hands and stroking him as I licked and sucked him made me feel sexy, like a seductress, two adjectives I would never use to describe myself otherwise.

On several occasions, I'd worked myself up to the brink of orgasm doing it. Maybe it was because so much of our relationship was spent doing everything but having sex, foreplay was something we excelled at. Whatever the reason, I'd always found an odd sense of pride at being able to drive him to the brink of madness, feeling the muscles of his thighs twitch, his hands fisting in my hair, hearing the groans and grunts of male appreciation. It empowered me. It made me feel connected to Maddox, it was as intimate to me as the actual act itself.

When his hands didn't automatically move to my head, and I didn't hear any sounds of pleasure a moment of insecurity floated through my mind. Maybe I'd lost my touch. Maybe I didn't know his body the way I thought I did. Maybe he wasn't enjoying what I was doing. But no sooner had it floated by than it was burst by a deep, masculine groan of satisfaction that ripped from his chest as he curled his hand around the back of my neck.

"Fuck that feels so good," he growled.

Relief, and I'm not going to lie, pride swelled in my chest. It turned out going down on Maddox was just like riding a bike, it didn't matter that it had been twenty years, all my tricks came back to me.

I worked his erection up and down with my mouth and hand, loving the sounds of pleasure that were escaping from him. I moved my fingers in tandem with the suction that my lips created and when I got to his tip, I licked the top and then rolled my hand over it before sucking him inside my mouth again. I could do this forever, but I knew that he was getting close when I felt a surge of pre-come shoot up the vein of his shaft.

His hands tightened around my neck. “You need to stop or I’m going to explode in your mouth.”

As much as I would love to taste him, I needed to feel him inside of me. I stood up and he quickly and stealthily unhooked my bra, which was the only garment I had on. Before it even hit the ground I climbed on top of him, straddling my legs on either side, ignoring the groan of plastic as I did.

My hands rested on his shoulders and his knuckles brushed my inner thighs as his hand moved to the apex of my legs. His fingers caressed my intimate folds. They slid easily revealing that I was wet and very ready for him. My legs were trembling as I positioned my hips so that my entrance was hovering over his engorged crown.

He took himself in one hand and with the other grasped my hip to guide me. We both watched as I lowered down, slowly, taking him inside my body. My inner canal clamped around him as my body accepted him. My walls stretched, walking the erotic line of pain and pleasure as I slowly sank until he filled me completely.

Now both his hands were on my hips as I sat still, luxuriating in the sensation of him being buried to the hilt inside me. Soon, the tips of his fingers dug into my skin and guided me up. As I rose, we both watched his impressive girth slide out, now glistening with my arousal. The sight caused a shiver of pleasure to run up my spine.

I sucked in a breath and closed my eyes as the sensation rolled through me. When I did, I felt Maddox’s mouth clamp down around my left breast while one of his hands moved to my right. He bit down on my nipple while pinching the other with just enough force the sting shot straight to my core. My hips jerked wildly, and he took over completely.

The hand that wasn’t massaging my breast clamped onto my hip and guided me up and down as his mouth and fingers continued their sensual attentions.

“This is...so good.” I didn’t even know how to express what being with Maddox was like. It was so much more than

anyone else I'd been with.

There was sex, there was making love, and then there was what happened when we were together. For years, I'd thought that I'd built the experience up in my head because it was my first time and the next time I had sex, which was in college, it had been so terrible.

The reunion had been even better than our first time, and this was even better than that had been. Maybe it was because I'd finally been able to be honest so there were no secrets between us. Every other time we'd been together, I'd been keeping something from him. Our first time, I'd known I was leaving. At the reunion, I was hiding the past. Now, he knew everything.

Instead of overthinking it, I decided to just feel. All I wanted was to lose myself in Maddox and that is exactly what I did.

His tongue circled my nipple before his teeth bit it with just enough pressure that a shock of bliss erupted in my core. My inner walls tightened around him as I lowered down on him with enough force that a slapping noise rang out.

The erotic sound sent tingles racing down my arms and legs, so I lifted up and did it again. The familiar ache of release began to pulse low in my belly. I could feel myself getting closer and closer to going up and over the edge once more.

I opened my eyes and looked down, watching as Maddox sucked on my breast. My hands roamed over his muscled shoulders. His skin was hot beneath my touch, and I reveled in the privilege of touching him, of loving him, of being loved by him.

Despite my efforts to clear my brain of any intruding thoughts and just focus on the here and now, some snuck past my defenses. I'd been so sure that once he knew the truth, we would never be the same. But I'd been wrong.

I hadn't trusted what we shared. I hadn't trusted him. I hadn't trusted our love. I promised myself then and there I

would never do that again.

As my climax overtook me, thousands of tiny explosions of pleasure erupted from my core and spread throughout my limbs. My stomach contracted and I wrapped my arms around him, nuzzling my face into the crook of his neck. He continued driving up into me until his entire body tensed and a groan vibrated from deep inside of his chest.

I continued to hold onto him, hugging him tightly as both of our bodies began to relax. His large hand ran up and down my back as we caught our breath.

“I love you,” I breathed against his neck so quietly I wasn’t even sure he heard me. I don’t know what possessed me to make that declaration. Usually, I had a difficult time expressing myself. But when I opened my mouth, it just came out.

When I felt his arms wrap around me and pull me tighter, I knew that he had. “I love you, too. I never stopped loving you and I never will.”

I didn’t know what the future held for us, but this was enough. For now, this was enough.

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MADDOX

IT HAD BEEN LESS THAN TWELVE HOURS SINCE I'D FOUND OUT that I had a twenty-year-old daughter but I felt a lifetime had passed. Because that's what I'd missed with her and now I had to find her. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep again until I did. After leaving Peyton's, I'd gone to bed hoping I would wake up with a clear head. Sleep was never easy for me because I couldn't shut off my brain and last night it had been on overload.

I'd given up on any hope of slumber at three a.m. and come into the office. I had to find my little girl and I was going to try the legal route first. First thing this morning, I hired the company's private investigating firm to find her, but I wasn't going sit around and wait for what they found.

I'd requested records from every hospital within a three-hundred-mile radius of where Peyton had lived and also sent requests to registrar's offices but that was taking too long. It was so frustrating knowing that I could easily hack into any of those hospitals and government systems, and I was really fucking tempted to.

Ever since I had Hannah, I'd held myself to a higher standard. I'd never used my powers for evil, but I had used my powers for convenience. Since I believed that kids learned by what they saw not by what they heard, I'd done my best to stop doing anything that wasn't above board.

Hacking into foreign hospitals and government offices to get records was not exactly legal but it was a much faster

means to an end. I felt like I had an angel on one shoulder and a little devil on the other. Right now the angel was winning, but I feared the horned one was going to prevail.

Angel. That's what I'd always called Peyton. And she was. She was my angel.

As I sat at my desk trying to come up with other legal avenues to pursue, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was bothering me. There was something about what Peyton had told me last night that was nagging at me but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. There was something that I was missing. Some piece of the code that was out of place that would be a clue to solve the mystery. I knew it was there, I just wasn't seeing it.

It had been driving me fucking crazy.

I leaned back in my chair and ran my hands through my hair in frustration. When I did my eyes landed on one of the pictures I kept on my desk of Hannah and me. It was taken an hour after she was born. I was sitting on a chair holding a bundled up tiny little girl. At that moment, I hadn't even known if she was biologically mine or not, but in my heart, she was mine.

Thinking back to that day and everything that Lizzy had gone through during childbirth, how hard and scary it was, made me want to throw up and/or punch a hole in the wall for Peyton. Lizzy was twenty-eight, had the best medical care money could buy, was full-term, and I was there supporting her.

Peyton had been sixteen, alone, knew the baby was coming too soon, and no one even spoke English. My fingers curled in a fist. I'd never liked Peyton's father but now I wanted to kill him. Literally. End his life. The fact that he would put his baby girl in that terrifying, dangerous situation told me he didn't deserve to draw oxygen on this earth.

I was glad that he was living overseas, because if I ran into him on the street, I couldn't be held responsible for what I would do.

With a loud sigh of frustration, I rocked forward and leaned my forearms on the desk as I picked up the photo of baby Hannah. I stared down at the date scrawled on the wristband I was wearing. Her birthday was coming up in a few months and I couldn't believe she was going to be six.

I started to set the photo back down but then something stopped me. My eyes shot back to numbers signifying the date Hannah was born.

The date. November eleventh. 11/11.

I knew that date. Not because it was special to us, but because I'd just seen it.

My breaths were coming in short pants as I moved my hand over the mouse and clicked on the file that held Lina Chaplin's internship application. The PDF came up on the screen.

I scanned for her birthdate. It was the exact same date that Peyton had said she gave birth. Our special number. November eleventh twenty years ago.

Due to corporate espionage and because of the highly sensitive access we had to our clients' businesses even our interns had to have background checks that rivaled the highest level of security clearance in the government. I pulled up her report and found out that Lina was adopted by Frank and Carrie Chaplin at six weeks old. Her place of birth was Germany.

"Holy shit," I breathed out.

My chest tightened like it was being squeezed by a vise. I leaned back and tried to catch my breath. Questions were racing around my mind like cars on the Indy 500 track.

Was I having a heart attack?

Did I need to call an ambulance?

Was Lina actually my daughter?

If she was, did Lina know that she was my daughter?

At this moment, that was the most important question.

I closed my eyes and put my hand on my chest. Every conversation, every interaction we'd had played back in my head. Thankfully, my subconscious could've had a successful career as a court stenographer, so I easily recalled each encounter.

Her wording when I brought up her last name was so relevant now.

My dad is related to him. She never said *she* was, because she was adopted.

Her interest in my childhood sweetheart at the lunch made a heck of a lot more sense now. I'd just chalked it up to her being barely out of her teens and maybe being a romantic like Lizzy, but maybe I was wrong.

It all flooded back to me now. Her asking me if we'd been together in high school. How long we'd been together. If it had been puppy love.

Was it because she thought Peyton might be her mother?

She *had* to know I was her father. I know that I'd been pinning a lot on fate lately, Peyton coming back here. Her being my daughter's teacher.

But this...? It was way too much of a coincidence that a girl who was born in Germany on the exact day that Peyton gave birth ended up as an intern in my company.

I had to know what she knew. What I was about to do was not only illegal, but also unethical, but I didn't give a shit. I started typing and hacked into Lina's email.

It took me less than ten minutes to find my answer. She received a genetic genealogy result naming me as her father three months ago. Which explained why she'd put in for this internship when it was a lateral move, at best, from her position at Google.

I'd had a full genetic workup done through 23andMe after I found out that I was Hannah's father because I had no idea what my family's medical history was. I'd wanted to know if there were any hereditary issues I needed to be aware of.

That's how she found me. My results hadn't been in any public database, but she was my daughter. She must have hacked the system and then sent in her DNA along with my results to the genetics lab.

I was staring at the letter she had from the genealogist stating that I was *not* excluded as the father and that there was a 99.99998% probability of paternity.

All my life I'd wanted to have a family.

People gave me so much credit for supporting Lizzy through her pregnancy. They acted like I was a saint or a superhero. They wanted to fit me for a halo or a cape. But the truth was, it had been selfish. I didn't want to miss all those milestones in case I did end up being Hannah's father. I wanted to hear the heartbeat, to see the ultrasounds, to get Lizzy ice cream and pickles at two in the morning because she was craving it. That last one never actually happened, the strangest craving Lizzy had was putting salt on a tomato and eating it like an apple. But if she had wanted a pickle and ice cream at two in the morning, I would have gotten it for her and loved every minute of it.

I'd known, of course, there was a chance when the baby was born things wouldn't have gone in my favor and I would already be attached to the baby, but I rolled the dice anyway. It was a gamble that paid off.

I continued scanning Lina's background check. I was going to read every word of the report from start to finish. I wanted to know *everything* about the daughter I had no idea existed. I needed all the information I could find before I decided what my next move would be.

As I started back at the beginning her birthday caught my eye again. 11/11. I couldn't count the number of times Peyton had told me to make a wish when she saw the time was 11:11. And I always wished for the same thing. To marry her and have a family with her.

The 11:11 genie, or whoever was in charge of those wishes, must have a sense of humor.

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PEYTON

BREATHE, JUST BREATHE, I IMAGINED MADDOX SAYING THE words to me as I tipped the whistling kettle and filled two mugs. I watched as the water changed from clear to a hazy brown as the leaves from the tea bag infused the hot liquid.

“I can do this,” I whispered to myself while scooping two sugars into Nonna’s cup and four into mine.

Last night, after I picked Nonna up from the senior center, I hadn’t been ready to tell her. Telling Maddox had been enough for one day. And I hadn’t wanted to break the news this morning before I left for work. That wasn’t something you just sprang on someone and then said, “*Okay, well, see you in eight hours.*”

But I was home from work now and we had the entire evening in front of us. Our plan was to watch *The Bachelor*, but I would make sure that it was recording because I doubt that we would catch any of it.

I hooked my pointer fingers in a handle each and carried the steaming mugs to the family room. As I passed the chair that Maddox and I had made love on I felt a flush rise up on my cheeks. I felt a little guilty that we’d done the deed on Nonna’s furniture, but I’d wiped it down and sprayed Lysol on it before I left to go pick her up, so there was at least that.

“Oh, thank you, Farfallina,” Nonna cooed as I handed her the mug.

“Careful, it’s hot.”

She didn't heed my warning and sipped anyway. Her face scrunched as her lips pursed. "Ohh, is hot."

"Yeah." I lowered down on the couch beside her and took a deep breath. "Nonn—"

"How is the nice boy?" she spoke over me. "Maddox?"

"He's good." I hoped I'd hear from him today, but I hadn't. I was trying not to read too much into the fact that he hadn't texted or called.

Last night after we desecrated Nonna's armchair, there hadn't been a lot of time to talk. I'd cleaned the chair, we got dressed, Maddox walked me out to Nonna's Cadillac, hugged me, kissed me on the forehead, and apologized again for what I'd gone through.

Hannah's mom dropped her off and picked her up today, so I hadn't seen him at the school. I knew that he had a lot to process but I couldn't help feeling disappointed, rejected even that he hadn't reached out at all.

Not that he had any obligation to. I'd dropped a huge bombshell on him. I knew Maddox. I knew that he processed things slowly. Still, so many times today, I'd picked up my phone to shoot him a text, but each and every time, I stopped myself.

When he was ready, he'd get in touch with me.

"You know, Farfallina, love isn't like milk. It has no expiration date."

I blinked, snapping out of my inner thoughts. "What?"

"Joanna who I play mahjong with, she tells me her and her love were together fifty years ago and just found each other again. After all this time."

"*Fifty years?*"

"Yes, they were young and in love. He was a chipmunk, and she was a bunny."

I knew that Nonna was getting older, and her accent was still thick even though she'd lived in America for over seventy

years, but I was sure that I'd heard her wrong.

"He was a *chipmunk* and she was a *bunny*?" I repeated.

Her eyes twinkled with delight. Nonna didn't gossip often, she liked to say gossip was the devil's playground. But when she did decide to take a ride on the horned one's slide, she put her hands in the air and wooed the whole way down.

She leaned closer to me and whispered even though we were the only two people in the house. "He was stripper and she was with the playboy."

He was a stripper and she was with the Playboy? I repeated in my head then considered the key words. Chipmunk. Stripper. Bunny. Playboy. It took me a second but then I deciphered what she meant.

"Was he a Chippendale's dancer and she was a Playboy bunny?"

"Yes!" She threw her hands up. "This is what I say."

Okay, there was *definitely* a story there and I wanted to know every detail, but now was not the time.

I was trying to refocus on what I needed to say when Nonna patted my cheek. "See, even fifty years is not too long for true love."

It was a nice sentiment, one that I definitely wanted to believe in, but just like the Chippendales dancer and the Playboy Bunny story, now was not the time to think about that. There was something I needed to get off my chest. "Nonna, I need to talk to you."

She gasped and clutched her chest. "You are moving?! You go back to Brooklyn?!"

Her horrified reaction solidified that I'd done the right thing by not subletting my place. I'd known that me keeping one foot on both coasts would be a point of insecurity for her, and I wanted her to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I wasn't going anywhere.

"No. I told you, I let my apartment go. I live here now, permanently," I assured her.

She didn't look all that relieved. Her brow furrowed. "Are you sick? Dying?"

"No." I shook my head.

"Oh no! You're going to marry *That Man*?" she asked as she made the sign of the cross.

That Man was how Nonna referred to Trent. Unlike The Elephant, which was Leo's endearing name for Maddox, That Man was an insult coming from my grandmother. She'd never warmed to Trent, and I honestly can't say that I blame her.

The handful of times he'd met her, she'd barely said three words. He'd talked to her about his career, his family, hell he waxed poetic for over an hour about a designer watch he'd just purchased last time he'd seen her. But he never asked her about her.

It always bothered me, but I told myself that was just his way. Not everyone was a great communicator, even though as a lawyer that was sort of his job.

I didn't miss the fact that Nonna appeared more horrified asking if I was going to marry Trent than she did asking me if I was dying. That was probably something else I should revisit.

"No, I mean, we've talked about it, but no that's not what I need to talk to you about."

"Okay!" She threw her arms up in the air. "You say we talk, talk!"

There was no way I was going to point out to her that the only reason I hadn't told her was because she kept asking me questions.

"Um, you know when I left to go to Germany, my junior year."

"Yes." She nodded. "I know. Your papa come and rip you away."

"Right." I took a breath and told her everything that I'd told Maddox. From finding out I was pregnant, wanting to come back to live with her, my father forcing me to home

school, going into labor early, the doctors not allowing me to see her, getting the infection and almost dying...everything.

When I finished and took a breath, I saw that she had tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, if you’re disappointed in me.”

She patted my cheek with her hand. I closed my eyes and tilted my face into the comfort of her well-lotioned palm.

“Oh Farfallina, how can I be disappointed in you when I have done same thing.”

“What?” My eyes flew open. “What do you mean? Same thing?”

She dropped her hand from my face as her lips pursed and her shoulders squared as she sat up straighter. A single tear slid down her wrinkled cheek. “I had bambina. Before your papa. In Sicily. I was a girl. Only sixteen. I had love affair with boy, Lorenzo.” Her lips curled in a sad smile, that made my heart feel like it was being hacked up by a weed whacker. “He worked on farm. It only last the summer, he leave to go to fight in war. My parents send me to stay at convent with nuns and then after I have bambina, they take her and my parents send me to America.”

“You had a baby?” I knew that’s what she’d just said, but it was so hard for me to believe.

“Sì. I have baby. I never tell no one. Not your papa, or your Nonno. No one know. Not even Lorenzo. Is secret I keep all these years.” Another tear slid down her cheek.

The pain that Nonna still carried radiated off of her. I felt it physically hit me.

I set my cup down and wrapped my arms around her. “I’m so sorry.”

“No.” She pulled away and looked at me. “Me. *I’m* sorry. If I tell your papa, then maybe he do different. Maybe he let you keep baby.”

I had no idea if she was right. Would my father have done anything different if he’d known what his mother had gone

through? I wanted to believe that he might, but deep down I doubted it.

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MADDOX

AS MUCH AS I'D WANTED TO CALL LINA INTO MY OFFICE today after discovering that she was my daughter and that I was her father, I hadn't. That wouldn't be professional. Not that showing up on her doorstep unannounced and uninvited after work or hacking into her email was the height of professionalism. But these were extraordinary circumstances and as such required extraordinary measures.

I pulled up the address that was listed on her application on my phone and checked to make sure I was at the right place. It was a small brick apartment complex in the Mission District. I'd actually lived a block from there when I was starting TTT Security Solutions.

As I sat in my hybrid SUV all I could hear was the sound of my heart thudding in my head. My throat was dry but my mouth was watering as I got out and I walked up to the vibrant blue door of her building. My arms and legs were heavy, but my head felt like it was floating away. My vision was blurry but I could see everything in sharp detail.

It seemed all of my systems were malfunctioning. I might be having what people called an out-of-body experience, or this might just be the most nervous I'd ever been. I wasn't sure.

As I searched the call box for her name, a woman with bright purple hair, green eye makeup and several face piercings opened the door and stepped out. I grabbed the painted wooden door before it could close. I stepped inside

and immediately my eyes searched the entry for cameras. There were none. The lock on the front door was shabby at best. If someone hadn't come out, I probably could have just forced it open. This place was not secure. I made a mental note to find out who the owner was and offer to upgrade the security system. Or hell, I might just buy the damn building.

Yep. That's what I would do. If this is where Lina wanted to live, I'd make damn sure she was safe.

She was my daughter. I may not have raised her or even known she existed before last night, but that didn't change the fact that her DNA was fifty percent mine.

The staircase was typical of an old building in the city. It was so narrow my shoulders brushed the walls and as I placed my foot on each step, it creaked telling a story of a hundred plus years of history.

Lina lived on the tenth floor and there was no elevator, so I had plenty of time to think as I made my way up. A little voice in my head said that I should have told Peyton about my discovery. She was her mother. Maybe we should be doing this together.

But after seeing how much pain Peyton was in still after the trauma she'd been through, I'd decided I needed to speak to Lina first. Alone. I needed to find out what her feelings were on her birth parents. Obviously, she was interested in meeting me. She'd been demoted to intern to work at my company.

I wanted to believe that she had good intentions. But there was a part of me, the part that had grown up in a very harsh system, that didn't trust that was the case.

What if she hated us?

What if she'd come to my company to sabotage it?

What if she had ulterior motives?

Not that I could blame her. The circumstances of my upbringing were different than hers, obviously, but most of my life I'd spent being angry at my parents for not being there. I

hadn't let that anger go until Hannah was born. I just didn't have any room for it in my life after that.

Whatever Lina's intentions and feelings were, I just needed to find out and I'd deal with it.

I wasn't thrilled that by the time I made it up to the tenth floor I was more than a little winded and feeling every bit of my thirty-five, nearly thirty-six years. I needed to get back into the gym.

After taking a moment to catch my breath, I lifted my hand and knocked. I heard some commotion behind the door before it opened.

A spoon hung out of Lina's mouth as she held a large bowl of ice cream. She wore sweats, had her hair up in a bun and wasn't wearing her glasses. A few things struck me all at once. First, she looked so much like Peyton with her hair up and without her glasses. Second, she must have inherited her mother's penchant for ice cream in cold weather because it was in the forties outside. And lastly, she looked surprised to see me which meant she hadn't checked the peephole to see who was on the other side of the door.

That was a problem. But one for another time.

She squinted slightly as she removed the spoon from her mouth and set it in the bowl. "Maddox?"

"Hi."

"Is something wrong? Was there an issue with the Parker ___"

"No, this isn't about work."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Oh. Okay."

"Can I come in?"

She glanced over her shoulder, and I realized I had no idea if she lived alone. If she was in a relationship. I felt bad about that, but since I'd only found out she existed twenty-four hours ago and who she was to me six, I guessed I shouldn't be too hard on myself.

“Um, yeah, it’s a little messy.”

I walked in and had to step over several piles of clothes.

“I haven’t really had a chance to unpack totally.”

The apartment was a loft style studio with a full bed in one corner. A kitchenette in the other corner. And a table with two chairs and a couch with a bean bag beside it that was the living area. There was exposed brick on one wall and opposite that was a wall of windows that faced out to the bay. There were high ceilings that were painted black with exposed ventilation which made the area feel even larger. The space was probably three times the size of my first studio, which had been less than three hundred square feet. The building itself was old, but the space she lived in was renovated. The appliances and finishes were all high end and it had a very cozy vibe.

“This is a nice place.”

“Thanks!” She beamed. “When I decided to move to the city, the only requirement was that I had a view of the water. This was the first apartment I looked at and I fell in love.”

I nodded, suddenly feeling unsure of my decision to just show up like this. Now that I was face to face with Lina, the situation seemed a lot less black and white. Maybe I should have let her come to me with the discovery instead of forcing the issue.

“Do you want to sit down?” She asked as she moved a blanket making space on the sofa.

“Sure. Thanks.” I lowered down and she plopped on the oversized bean bag and folded her legs into a crisscross applesauce position, which was Hannah’s favorite way to sit. I wasn’t sure if I was trying to make connections between Lina’s behavior and appearance with Hannah and Peyton or if they were really there. This whole thing had been such a mindfuck.

“I’m not really sure how to say this. Um…” I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. I glanced down at my hands as I folded them together. I should have given more thought as to how I was going to broach this conversation. I

wasn't sure what my opening should be. This was one of the most important conversations I'd ever had in my life and I didn't want to fuck it up.

“You know that you're my birth father, don't you?”

My head lifted, surprised and relieved at her bluntness. “Yes. I do.”

She stared at me for a second before asking, “Are you mad?”

“*Mad?* Why would I be mad?”

“Because I sort of, you know, infiltrated your company just so I could meet you.” She shifted in her chair and bit her bottom lip.

“I'm *happy* that you came to the company. And I just want you to know that I had no idea that you even existed until last night. Remember the ex I told you about during the lunch?”

“Is she my birth mom?”

“She is,” I confirmed. “I went to talk to her last night, like you suggested, and she told me about you.”

“What did she say?” she asked nervously.

I wasn't sure if this was my story to tell and I was starting to think maybe I should have told Peyton about my discovery before coming here. But it was too late now. I was in this.

“I'm sure she'll want to tell you in her own words, but it wasn't her choice to give you up for adoption. She didn't want to do that. She wanted to keep you. She never agreed to anything. Never signed anything. They were living in Germany and she begged her parents to allow her to move back to the States with her grandmother and raise you. Her father, your grandfather, was a pretty powerful man and very controlling. He forbade it, took her passport away, and forced her to be homeschooled because he didn't want anyone to know that his teenage daughter was pregnant. When she went into labor, six weeks early, he took her to a hospital where none of the nurses or doctors spoke English. She thought they were giving her something for her pain and she woke up and

she'd had an emergency C-section. She never even got to see you. Hold you. Anything.”

“That’s awful.” Lina shook her head in disbelief. “Is she... okay?”

“She is. She is okay.”

“But she didn’t want to come with you?” I could see the vulnerability in her large brown eyes. “She didn’t want to meet me?”

“No!” I quickly rushed to assure her. “She doesn’t know... I haven’t told her that I found you.”

“Why not?”

“I wanted to talk to you first. Just to make sure...” I didn’t want to tell her my reservations, which all seemed ridiculous now.

“To make sure I wasn’t crazy?” she chuckled.

“No, I knew you weren’t crazy. I just wanted to make sure that you weren’t mad or upset or...” I knew this wasn’t coming out right. “I mean, that’s fine. If you are, I totally understand.”

“Are you kidding?” she asked as if it was ludicrous to even suggest that. “No. I’m not mad or upset at all. Just curious. I always knew I was adopted. It was never a big talk or anything; my mom and dad just had a ton of books that they read to me, from the day they got me, that talked about it. I always felt...special...that they chose me. That’s how they framed it. I just wanted to meet you and my birth mom to know, you know, where I come from.”

I nodded as gratitude and relief warmed my chest. I knew firsthand how hard life was out there without parents, and the fact that my daughter had been raised to feel special and chosen was the best I could hope for.

“Okay, so I have to know, if you just found out I existed last night, how did you figure out I was the baby that she had?”

“Your birthdate. When Peyton—”

“Her name is Peyton?”

Oh shit. That’s right. She didn’t know anything about her.

“Yes, your birth mom’s name is Peyton Anne Russo.”

She repeated, almost reverently, “Peyton Anne Russo.”

I felt myself welling up, but I blinked away the emotion. “Peyton told me that you were born November eleventh, which is a significant number to us. When we were younger, she always used to stop everything and have us close our eyes and make a wish whenever the time was eleven, eleven.”

“Are you kidding?!” she asked, I was pretty sure rhetorically, as a wide smile spread on her face. “That’s crazy! What did you wish for?”

I sighed. “I wished that Peyton and I would get married, have kids. I wished for you.”

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PEYTON

I CHECKED MY PHONE FOR THE FIFTIETH TIME IN THE PAST TWO hours since school ended, and the kids went home. This was the second day that Maddox had been on total radio silence. The second day that Hannah's mom had done both drop-off and pickup. Maybe I'd misjudged his reaction.

Or maybe, the more he thought about and processed what I'd done, the less forgiving he'd felt.

He had every right to be upset at me. I just wished he would tell me if he was. If I didn't hear from him by tomorrow, I was going to text and ask how he was doing. I'd just check in casually and hope for the best.

The door to my classroom opened and my heart jumped, thinking it might be him.

When I looked up, my heart sank in disappointment.

Bianca stood in the doorway; her long hair pulled up in a messy bun that looked effortless, yet I'd never been able to pull off. "Hey, girl, we're doing drinks Friday after work. You in?"

Friday. I mentally scrolled through the calendar in my brain. Nonna had mentioned she was going to be at Bay View Senior Center for an art class on Friday night. And no matter how the rest of the week went, I was *definitely* going to need a drink.

"Yeah, sounds great!" My phone buzzed and hope sprang in my chest that the message was from Maddox.

“Cool beans! See ya!” Bianca waved and shut the door.

When the door shut, I grabbed my phone from my purse and saw the message was from Leo. After telling Nonna last night, I’d texted Leo to see if he was still awake since there is a three-hour time difference. He was just getting off a double and called me immediately. With a glass of wine in hand, I told him everything.

It felt so good that all the important people in my life now knew my deepest, darkest secret. I still couldn’t believe that Nonna had had a baby before my dad. I wondered, if he had known about it if he would have done anything different. I doubted it. I’d never really been a person to him, more just a reflection of him.

Looking down, I read the text.

Leo: How are you? I’m here if you need to talk. I still can’t believe you kept that to yourself for so long. You know you can tell me ANYTHING and I will always love you.

My lips curled in a smile. It was so amazing to have people in my life that truly loved me unconditionally. I don’t know what I would do without Leo and Nonna. And I feared, Maddox had also slid into that category.

Now that I’d told him about the baby, the main reason that I’d kept my distance was gone. Of course, that didn’t change the fact that I wasn’t able to have more children. He’d always wanted a big family. Also, even if he had forgiven me for what I’d done, the fact that I’d kept it from him for so many years might be a deal breaker.

I was honestly more confused than ever.

What if it was too late?

What if he didn’t love me the same?

What if he could forgive me, but he’d never trust me again?

Trust was such a big deal to Maddox. I didn’t have a degree in psychology, but I was sure it had something to do with his unconventional and challenging upbringing.

For the first few months we dated, he always looked relieved when I showed up when I said I was going to. Or if I called when I said I would. Alex, who was like a brother to Maddox, told me that he was used to people disappointing him and that he didn't trust people easily.

I remember the first time he told me that he loved me. We were walking around Pier 39, pretending to be tourists, and I found a wallet with a thousand dollars in it. I immediately brought it to the lost and found and after I turned it in, Maddox asked me why I didn't keep the money. I told him because it wasn't mine. And then, he said he loved me for the first time. I laughed because I'd thought he was kidding, but he cupped my face and said it again before kissing me and I knew he was serious. I, of course, immediately told him that I loved him too. I think I'd been half in love with him from the moment I looked up from the lunch table and into the depths of his big brown eyes.

His trust issues were a big reason I'd carried around so much guilt for leaving him and not telling him I was going. I'd tried to convince myself that I was young, too, with my own abandonment and attachment issues, but I don't think I've ever really forgiven myself for doing that to him.

The door opened once more and I expected to see Bianca, but it wasn't. It took me a second for my brain to catch up to what my eyes were seeing. The man walking into the room in his tailored suit, haircut that I was sure cost several hundred dollars, and Italian leather shoes, was so out of place in my classroom.

"Trent?" I stood. "What are you doing here?"

"I had a layover on the way to Seattle. I thought I'd come see my girl."

I'd never liked it when he referred to me as his girl. Maddox used to call me his angel and it never bothered me, in fact, I loved it. Somehow Maddox's term of endearment didn't make me feel like an object that belonged to him, which was how I felt with Trent's.

He walked over and pressed a kiss to my mouth. I didn't feel anything, no spark. No desire. No fire. Nothing.

I knew that what I had with Maddox was special, and that after ten years with Trent I couldn't expect fireworks, but I wasn't even sure I was attracted to Trent anymore.

"Are you surprised?" he asked.

"Um, yeah. I am."

"I have another layover on Friday night, and I was thinking we could go to dinner."

I started to say okay, out of habit mainly, but then I remembered that I'd just agreed to go to drinks with Bianca. "Actually, I have plans Friday."

He stared at me like I'd grown two heads. I realized that he wasn't used to me saying no to him. Historically, I'd always agreed to see him whenever he was available since his schedule was so much more demanding than mine, but half the time I'd cancel my plans only to have him cancel on me.

His icy blue stare got a little chillier. "I haven't *seen* you since you've moved."

"We've gone months without seeing each other before." And that was when we lived in the same zip code.

"Yes, but that's before we were bicoastal."

Which meant before, when I lived in Brooklyn, I was available at the drop of a hat for his convenience and now, that I lived in San Francisco, I wasn't.

He rubbed his hands up and down my arms and I instinctually stepped away from his touch. It didn't feel right to allow him to touch me after I'd been with Maddox. In fact, now that I thought about it, I hadn't had sex with Trent since before the reunion.

And I knew, in that moment, I didn't want to be with him ever again.

"Look, Trent, I don't really think that this is going to work."

“Just change your plans.”

Change my plans? It took me a second to figure out what he was talking about. “No, I’m not talking about dinner Friday. I’m talking about—”

My sentence was cut off when the door opened again. I looked over expecting to see Bianca, I was three for three. Wrong again.

In my doorway was the man who had owned my heart since I was sixteen. His hair was messier than I’d seen it and the stubble covering his jaw told me that he hadn’t shaved in a few days. He wore a gray hoodie, worn blue jeans, and Timberland boots. His appearance reminded me of how he dressed when we were teens and my inner self went into full swoon. Maddox was brilliant, kind, funny, and sweet but he’d always had a bad-boy edge that had made him downright irresistible. Every time I’d seen him as an adult, he’d been in business clothes. I wondered if his casual, disheveled look had anything to do with the news that I’d sprung on him.

I took another step back from Trent, putting more distance between us.

“Maddox, hi.”

“We’re right in the middle of something.” Trent spoke dismissively, not even sparing a glance in his direction. “You can wait outside.”

“Trent! You can’t...this is...you can’t...” I was fumbling over my words. I did that when I got mad. I took a breath and collected my thoughts. “This is a parent of one of my students. We have a meeting. You need to leave.”

Trent shot me a look that would have put me six feet under if it could kill. I’d never stood up for myself or called him on his arrogant behavior. I’d never had a reason to. As much as I wanted to end things with Trent, to be over and done with it once and for all, right now I wanted him to leave more. I wanted, no *needed* to hear what Maddox had to say.

My soon to be ex took a step toward me. “Pey, pey—”

“No.” I cut him off. “I’m at work. I have a meeting. We can talk later.”

My heart beat heavily in my chest, but it had nothing to do with ending my ten-year relationship and everything to do with the relationship I *never* ended twenty years ago.

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MADDOX

A PARENT OF ONE OF MY STUDENTS? EVEN THOUGH technically that's what I was, it still stung to be introduced that way. Especially to Trent, the non-exclusive prick. Peyton could've said that I was an old friend. I mean, damn, I was buried inside of her forty-eight hours ago.

I stood at the door giving Trent and Peyton semi-privacy to say their goodbyes and tried not to be too butthurt about the situation.

He was exactly what I'd expected him to be like in person. After the reunion, I'd looked him up. He worked for a law firm that had tried to get my company's business. I'd passed and stayed with the firm I'd been with since the company's inception. I was loyal like that.

Trent looked exactly like the headshot on his firm's page. Dirty blond hair, narrow nose, square jaw. If you looked up "preppy trust fund baby" I wouldn't be surprised if his picture was the number one result. I guessed some women might find him attractive, but he was a little shorter than I'd expected. Still, he was a decent looking guy and it was obvious from his well-tailored suit that he went to the gym.

But I could sniff out a douchebag ten miles away and Trent reeked of all the bags of douche.

Two seconds was all I needed to know that he wasn't right for Peyton. Not that that wasn't abundantly clear at the reunion when she'd told me that they'd been seeing each other for ten

years and weren't exclusive. That he saw other people and she hadn't.

I guessed I should be thanking the man because if they had been exclusive, the night at the hotel or the other night at her house wouldn't have happened. Peyton wouldn't cheat. She was too good of a person for that.

It was one of the reasons I'd fallen in love with her. The first time I'd told her I'd loved her was when she'd found a wallet with a lot of money in it, and without hesitation turned it into the authorities, even though there was a prom dress at Macy's she really wanted. She did the right thing, always. Which was why I knew it must have eaten at her to have kept such a big secret.

My hands fisted at my sides when Trent leaned down, put his hand on Peyton's waist and pressed a kiss to her mouth. Did he have any right to do that? Sure. Did that stop me from wanting to put his head through the large glass window he was standing beside? No.

I'd never been the jealous type, except with fucking Peyton. She brought out a Neanderthal in me.

Douchebag turned to leave. On his way out he took a call, ignoring my presence completely. I couldn't help but grin. If he had any idea who I was, he'd be kissing my ass. I knew his type. I knew that business trumped all in his world. Even if he knew that Peyton and I had hooked up, it wouldn't matter to him if he thought he could acquire my company's business, I'd be his new best friend.

"Prick," I said under my breath as he walked by.

He stopped and looked at me. "Excuse me?"

From the ice cold look in his eyes, I knew that he'd heard me. I stared directly at him, silently daring him to do something about it. He didn't.

It didn't matter how much money was in my bank account, or how nice my suits were, or what home I lived in, or what car I drove, I was still a street kid at heart. And sometimes, it just came out.

His eyes narrowed slightly before he returned his attention to his call and exited the room. The door shut and I turned to Peyton.

She looked...tired. There were dark circles beneath her eyes and there was a hollow in her usually round cheeks. It was clear to me that she hadn't been eating or sleeping, and I realized I was most likely the reason.

Yesterday, I'd been playing Sherlock Holmes and then I'd gone to see Lina. I'd almost called her when I got home from our daughter's apartment last night, but this wasn't a conversation I wanted to have over the phone.

And I didn't want to tell her this morning when I knew she had to work today. So I'd waited, but I could see now that my silence had affected her.

"Sorry about that. He just...showed up. I didn't know he was coming." She took a step forward. "How are you? You know after everything."

"Everything is actually why I'm here."

Her shoulders dropped as she stood a little taller, just slightly, but I noticed it. I could see she was bracing herself in case I came here because I was angry or upset. I wasn't.

"I found her."

She stared blankly at me and blinked. "What?"

"I found our daughter."

Her mouth opened but no words came out. The only sound in the air was that of her labored breathing. All the color had drained from her face. Her chest rose and fell in shallow pants before she asked, "What? How?"

"Do you want to sit down?"

"No, how did you find her?" she demanded.

"She actually found me."

Her eyes widened further, and her already pale skin grew paler. She was white as a sheet. "What?!"

“Please sit down.” I was scared she was going to pass out.

I took a step forward but stopped when she put up her hands in a defensive stance. “No! What are you talking about? She *found* you?”

Since she wasn’t going to take my advice and sit, I figured the best thing to do was get to the point as quickly as possible. “Something was bothering me, or not bothering me, but I just couldn’t put my finger on something after I left your house. I went home and started all the regular avenues of searching for someone. I requested records from hospitals and the Standesamt, um the registrar offices.” I clarified. “I hired a private investigator. And while I waited for the records or to hear something back, I couldn’t shake this niggling feeling I had. I was sitting at my desk and I noticed a picture on my desk of Hannah, and it had her birthday written on the back of the incubator she was in. Then it clicked what was bothering me. I’d seen the exact date you said that you gave birth recently.

“We just had a new batch of interns and one of them just turned twenty on November eleventh. So, I pulled up her file. Whenever we hire anyone, we have extensive background checks done on them to protect the company and our clients.” I explained. “Lina was the right age, same birthday, she was born in Germany and adopted six weeks later.”

“Lina?” Peyton repeated quietly.

“Angelina Chaplin.” I nodded. “I don’t know how to explain it, but I just *knew* that it was her. Still, I needed proof. So I hacked her email.”

“You did *what?*!”

“I’m not proud of it, but like I said, I needed proof. And I found it. When Hannah was born, I had a genetic workup done to get a clearer picture of my medical history. My DNA was stored in the 23andMe database but not public. But Lina’s really good and she hacked the database to see if there were any familial matches and found me. Once she did, she applied for an internship and was hired last week. She started on Monday, the day I found out that I had a daughter.”

The coincidence was still colossally mind blowing.

Peyton staggered back and finally sat down.

“When did you figure this all out?”

“Yesterday.”

“Yesterday? Why didn’t you call me? Why are you waiting until *today* to tell me!?” she sounded angry.

“I wanted to talk to her first.”

“You *talked* to her?”

“Yes, I interviewed her last Friday and spoke to her at the interns’ lunch on Monday. But I needed to talk to her about this. About being her father.”

She stood back up and her voice raised. “You went and talked to her about this without me?!”

“You had our baby and didn’t tell me for twenty years,” I shot back.

She flinched at my words, like they’d been a slap in her face, and I instantly wished I could take them back. I realized then that I might have some feelings about this situation that I wasn’t dealing with. I knew that Peyton wasn’t to blame, but I couldn’t help feeling that my child and the love of my life had been taken from me. I’d been robbed of the life that I’d always wanted.

“I’m sorry.” I moved toward her closing the distance between us.

“No.” She shook her head as her shoulders dropped. “Don’t apologize. I deserved that.”

“No, you didn’t. And I didn’t mean that. The truth is, I needed to know why she’d applied to be an intern instead of just coming to me directly. I wanted to find out if she was angry or upset that she’d been adopted.”

Her eyes widened, misting with emotion as she nodded. “And? Is she?”

“No. Not at all. She had a great childhood and only looked for us because she was curious about where she came from.”

“What is she like?”

Peyton and I sat at a table, and I told her all about our daughter. I showed her pictures and even sent her the background report on her. It felt surreal and completely natural at the same time. This definitely wasn't how I'd imagined and dreamed my parenting experience with Peyton would go, but that didn't mean I wasn't grateful. I did get part of my wish, it had just been granted in an unconventional way. Apparently, I should have been more specific.

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PEYTON

PEOPLE AROUND ME CHATTED, ATE, DRANK AS I SAT IN A booth staring at my phone. I didn't know why, but I was sure that Lina was going to cancel.

When I'd messaged her asking if she wanted to meet after Maddox came to see me last night, she'd replied right away and said that there was a restaurant she'd been dying to try and that she was free tonight.

So here I was. I still wasn't sure that this happening in a public place was the best idea. But I didn't want her to come to Nonna's because my grandmother was under the weather. Plus, I sort of wanted it to just be me and her the first time I met her.

I had to do this alone.

I checked the time again. Only one minute had passed from the last time I'd checked, but it felt like ten. Time felt like it was standing still. I'd shown up a half an hour early and I was waiting on pins and needles.

This was the most important moment of my life, and I still had no clue what I would say. I would apologize, of course. But after that...I was drawing a blank. Maybe she would have questions. I know that I did. I wanted to know everything about her life. Her childhood. Her teen years.

I'd read the background check that Maddox shared with me. I knew that she was a genius. She got that from her father. She'd graduated with a double masters from MIT at nineteen.

As proud of her as I was, there was another part of me that wondered if she might judge me harsher because of how she clearly had her shit together at that age. I was only two years younger when I gave her up.

Not that I'd had much of a choice. Or any choice at all. At least, at the time I didn't think I did. Looking back, I should have called Nonna. I'd just been so scared. I'd always told myself that I'd been scared of what my dad would have done if I had, and that was partly true. But now I knew that I was also scared of disappointing Nonna. She was the only adult in my life that loved me.

Maddox told me that he had already explained the circumstances surrounding Lina's birth to her. He said she didn't have any animosity or anger or abandonment issues. He said that she loved her adoptive parents and was grateful for her life.

As happy as I was to know that the tiny baby girl the nurses had taken away from me before I could even hold her was okay, was better than okay, I still wished things were different.

"Can I get you anything while you wait?" Carson the server with a mullet and handlebar mustache asked for the third time.

He had to be in his early twenties yet struck me as someone so confident who knew exactly who he was. I was still trying to figure it out in my mid-thirties.

"No. The water's fine. Thanks."

A vodka water sounded like just the thing to take the edge off, but I didn't want any part of this to be dulled. I needed to be totally present. I just hoped being totally present wouldn't lead to a panic attack. It was a fine line to walk.

My foot tapped on the hardwood floor as I waited for my daughter to arrive. *My daughter*. For so long I'd done everything I could to suppress the memory of having her. I worked so hard to block out her existence. I actively forced myself not to wonder about where she was, how she was

doing, what her life was like. But no matter what I did, my mind still demanded those answers. Those questions haunted me. They didn't let me rest.

Now I had the answers and more. I was actually going to meet her face to face. I was going to know what her voice sounded like. What her mannerisms were like.

I checked my phone again to see if she had canceled, or if Nonna had texted that she needed anything. I'd gone home from work to check on her before coming to the restaurant and got her settled in bed. I told her that if she wasn't feeling better by tomorrow, I was going to make a doctor's appointment. She hadn't been happy about that ultimatum, but I honestly didn't care. Situations like this were exactly why I was here. To take care of her.

The glass door to the restaurant opened and the girl I'd seen in the photo of the background check walked inside. She had long, straight light-brown hair, a sweetheart shaped face with a turned-up nose and full pink lips. She was wearing glasses so I couldn't make out the color of her eyes, but Maddox had told me that they were brown, just like his.

She spoke to the hostess who smiled and gestured for her to follow. My mouth went bone dry and my heart was beating so hard I was sure it was going to crash right through my chest like the Kool-Aid man as I stood. I couldn't feel my legs, so I wasn't sure how they were holding me up.

As she approached, a wide smile spread on her face. "Peyton?"

"Hi." I wished that the first words I'd spoken to my daughter would have been more original or significant than hi, but it was all I could manage at the moment.

The hostess set the menu down on the table and returned to the front of the restaurant. We stood there, just staring at one another for a moment before she shook her head.

"It's weird, we look so much alike," she said.

"We do." I nodded. Maddox was right, she had my same face shape, nose and lips, but his eyes.

I'd imagined this moment so many times in my life, but none of the scenarios I'd pictured had happened like this. Meeting in a restaurant, not knowing what to say, feeling like my head was going to float away from my body.

"Should we sit?" Lina motioned to the table.

"Oh, right, yes. Sorry, I'm not usually this...awkward." I didn't have a better word for it.

"Really, I am." She laughed as we both took our seats.

"Have you ordered yet?" she asked as she picked up her menu.

"Um, no." *I didn't think you were actually going to show up.*

Her eyes lit up as she read the menu. "Ooh, do you want to start with potato skins?"

"Sure." I nodded in agreement.

This entire encounter was surreal. It was so momentous yet felt so casual. I tried not to overthink it and just go with the flow, but all of my senses were short circuiting.

We talked about some of the items on the menu, she asked if I'd ever been a vegetarian, I told her yes, for about five years in my twenties. She'd tried to go vegan between the ages of twelve and fourteen, but it hadn't stuck.

By the time Carson returned and took our orders, I was feeling a little less like I was either going to throw up or pass out, or both.

"Okay, great." He smiled as he tucked our menus under his arm. "Your skins should be up soon."

When we were left alone again, I found myself at a loss of what to say. There was so much, I didn't know where to start.

"Wow." Lina shook her head. "I can't believe that it's actually *you*. I've wondered who you were for so long."

"Same," I smiled.

"Maddox said that you never even got to hold me."

“No, I didn’t.” I was having a hard time reconciling that the baby they took out of me was the young woman sitting across from me. She was a fully functioning adult person.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized.

“No! Don’t...you don’t have anything to apologize for. *I’m* sorry. I should have... for so many years I wished I’d just... done things differently. I am so sorry that I wasn’t stronger. That I wasn’t braver.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you kidding?”

I wasn’t, but I also wasn’t sure she was actually asking me that.

“You were *so* young. And you were in a totally different country. And you went to a hospital where no one spoke English. I’d freak out. I don’t know what I would do. You were *so* brave. So strong!”

I’d always hoped that if this day came, the baby I gave up would accept my apology and if I was really lucky forgive me. Hearing her say I was brave. That I was strong, that was almost too much to process. Actually, it *was* too much.

I needed to change the subject. “Maddox said that you grew up in Vermont. Did you like it?”

She nodded and started telling me about her favorite spots and activities there. Lina and I sat and talked for hours. Three and a half hours to be exact. She told me about her childhood, her parents, her hopes and dreams, which finding Maddox and I were on the top of, and she asked me about my life. About my work, about my relationships. I told her about Nonna and she was so excited to meet her once she was feeling better.

As I sat, having one of the best conversations of my life, I knew that I had one person to thank for it. Maddox. Without him, I wouldn’t have found her. He was more than just the love of my life; he was my hero. He made the impossible possible.

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MADDOX

MY NECK STRETCHED AS I PEEKED INTO THE MEDIA ROOM AND checked on the girls to make sure their attention was solely focused on the screen in front of them. Lexi, Bella and Hannah were glued to the TV as they watched baby Moana get leis thrown over her head while her father sang to her about her village in the song *Where You Are*.

With ninja-like stealth, I slid the barn door shut. As I walked back down the hall, with one tap on my phone, I activated the alarm to that room so that I would be notified if any little ears were about to make an appearance.

When I entered what the overpriced designer I'd hired when I'd renovated this place labeled my farmhouse-chic kitchen I found Alex staring down at the phone in his hand. Against his chest baby Penelope was sound asleep in a BabyBjörn front-facing carrier, a tiny bubble of drool sat in the corner of her mouth.

I crossed the room and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. There was nothing as sweet as the smell of a baby. I inhaled the sweet goodness as I sighed. "I can't believe she's already nine months old."

It seemed like just yesterday we'd been summoned to San Francisco General when Sadie's water broke at two a.m.

Alex shook his head and sighed. "I can't believe in six weeks, I'm going to have another one."

"Are you guys going to find out what you're having?" There'd been a great debate when Sadie was pregnant with

Penelope whether or not they'd find out the gender. In the end, they'd waited for the big reveal at delivery.

"I want to, but Sadie doesn't."

"So you're not going to find out," I concluded.

The signature goofy grin he only got when he was talking about Sadie spread on Alex's face. "Exactly."

From what I'd seen, Sadie didn't take advantage of the fact that she had Alex wrapped around her little finger, but that's exactly where she had him.

"Okay, so what's the big emergency? I cancelled a date to be here." Nick, apparently tired of all the baby talk, tossed a piece of popcorn up in the air and caught it in his mouth.

It seemed like I'd had this information forever, but in reality, I'd found out I had a child on Monday. Who she was on Tuesday. Told Peyton about her last night. And tonight, I was telling the guys. This was honestly the first opportunity I'd had.

As excited as I was to share the news, I wasn't sure where to start, so I just blurted out, "So it turns out I have a daughter."

They both just stared at me blankly until Nick shrugged. "No shit, Sherlock."

Right. They thought I was talking about Hannah. I hadn't worded that correctly. I'd gotten even less sleep than normal this past week and I was sort of running on fumes. "No, not Hannah. I have a twenty-year old daughter with Peyton."

"Holy fuck!" Nick exclaimed.

That was closer to the reaction I'd expected.

"Shhh," I hushed him. "I haven't told Hannah yet."

"What?" Nick questioned. "Why not?"

"Because I just found out on Monday that Peyton had a baby after she moved to Germany. She didn't have any information about her, didn't have any idea what happened to her. I didn't find out who she was until Tuesday."

“Wait, you found her?” Nick clarified.

I nodded.

“Where does she live?” Alex asked. “Are you going to contact her?”

“I already knew her. She’s one of my new interns.”

“Holy fuck!” Nick exclaimed again.

“Shh,” I hushed him again.

At Nick’s second outburst, Penelope stirred, and Alex patted her back to settle her as he asked, “Did she know you were her father?”

I nodded. “She found out a few months ago. She left a job at Google to apply for the internship. She didn’t say anything in the interview or the first day she was there. I figured it out on Tuesday and went to see her after work.”

“Wait. Start from the beginning,” Alex instructed.

I explained the entire story to them, from the beginning. I told them everything, including Peyton seeming upset at me that I’d spoken to Lina without her and that the two of them were having dinner tonight. After telling her, she’d been quiet and I could tell that she wasn’t happy that I’d gone to see our daughter without her.

“Is Peyton still mad at you?” Nick asked, after I finished.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged.

“She’s just scared. And hurt,” Alex explained.

Nick shot him a look. “How do you know?”

“All anger is just hurt and fear.”

Nick just stared at Alex like he was full of shit. “Okay, Yoda.”

I sighed. “If that’s the case, I don’t know what she’s scared of. Lina isn’t upset at us for not keeping her. She had a great childhood and was honestly just curious about meeting her birth parents.”

“She’s probably scared because for all these years she’d had this secret. And even though that was a burden, it was still hers. Now, it’s not just hers anymore. That’s got to feel scary,” Alex hypothesized.

“When did *you* get so fucking wise?” Nick threw another piece of popcorn in the air and caught it.

“I went back to counseling.”

After Alex lost his wife and son tragically, he’d gone to a few sessions with a therapist, but stopped. Nick and I had both encouraged him to continue, but he’d been in a dark place and hadn’t wanted to get help.

Our faces must have shown our surprise because Alex kissed Penelope on the top of the head before explaining, “I need to be the best dad and husband I can. That means dealing with my shit.”

“Good, man.” Nick smacked the back of his shoulder. “I’m glad.”

“Yeah, that’s great,” I agreed.

“Speaking of dealing with your shit,” Nick pivoted toward me. “Does this mean that you and Peyton can finally be together? She said the reason why she’d kept her distance was because of the secret. Well, secret’s out.”

I couldn’t deny I’d thought the same thing. “When I went to go see her yesterday to tell her I’d found Lina, Trent was there.”

“Who’s Trent?” Nick asked.

“The guy that she’s been seeing for ten years,” Alex explained before turning his attention back to me. “You met him?”

“Sort of.”

“So they’re still together?” Nick clarified.

“Yeah, I think so. She introduced me as a ‘parent of one of her students’ and told him we had a meeting.”

Nick sucked air through clenched teeth as he cringed. “That’s brutal, bro.”

“Well, you are a parent of one of her students,” Alex reasoned.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Does Hannah know that you and Miss Peyton used to...” Nick stuck his pointer finger into his other hand which was curled in an open fist and make a squeaking noise.

“Date,” Alex interjected.

“No. I need to tell her about Lina first. Then, after she gets used to that news, I’ll tell her about Peyton. At least that’s my plan, I have to talk to Lizzy about it first, but I haven’t had a chance because the past few days she’s been sick.”

“Sick? Is it serious?” Alex asked.

“Oh, no, not sick. She’s pregnant.” So much had been going on, I hadn’t even had a chance to tell them.

Nick whistled as he exhaled. “Fuck, dude, that’s a lot.”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s she like? Lina, right?” Alex swayed side to side to keep Penelope sleeping as he held her in the baby carrier.

“She’s...great. She’s smart, well adjusted, and funny. She did a dual master’s program at MIT and graduated at nineteen.”

“Damn, she got you beat,” Nick teased.

“I know.” And I was proud as shit about that.

“I bet her parents, or her *adoptive* parents” —Nick corrected—“are really proud.”

“They *are* her parents,” I clarified. “And, yeah, she said that they were but that they never really cared about her academic achievements. She said all they ever cared about was that she was happy.”

“They sound like they raised her well.” Alex smiled.

“Yeah, I think they did.”

“Do you have a picture of her?” Nick asked.

I checked the monitor on the counter and saw that girls were all still engrossed in their movie. I pulled out my phone and passed it to Nick.

“*Damn*, she’s—”

“Twenty and my daughter,” I cut him off before he said something that would require me to kick his ass.

His head snapped up. “Calm down, papa bear. I was just going to say that she’s Peyton’s mini-me. She looks like her twin. I mean, lose the glasses and that’s exactly what I remember Peyton looking like.”

She did, but she had my eyes. She was the perfect mix of the two of us. It was so difficult for my mind to comprehend that her existence was the reason that Peyton had stayed away. It seemed completely illogical and totally logical at the same time.

I might not know what was going to happen in the future, but I did know that Lina coming into my life felt like a piece of what had been missing clicked into place for me.

Even though she had parents, and I hadn’t had the honor and privilege to raise her, she was still my daughter and for that, I would be eternally grateful.

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PEYTON

“HERE’S TO YOUR FIRST WEEK IN THE BOOKS!” WENDELL, THE fifth-grade science teacher lifted his glass to me saying cheers, and tipped his fedora in my direction. His distinct pencil thin mustache and checkered bowtie caused him to stand out, even in a room filled with hipsters.

“My first week!” I lifted my glass and tapped it with Wendell, Bianca, Deshawn, and Ariella’s.

Ariella, who taught both Spanish and French, and I had bonded earlier this week over our love of foreign languages. We’d both grown up as Army brats and had travelled the world by the time we hit double digits. As a child, and in my teens, I’d been fluent in Italian, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. As an adult, I wasn’t quite so. I could hold my own in conversation but wouldn’t consider myself fluent by any means. My language skills fell prey to the use-it-or-lose-it rule.

Deshawn was a six foot six, hulk of a man. He not only resembled Idris Elba he also radiated the actor’s charm and charisma. He was a triple-threat teacher who taught math, music, and physical education.

Just like Bianca, the rest of the group had welcomed me with open arms. Which I appreciated more than normal since my best friend was thousands of miles away and I’d been riding the roller coaster that was my personal life this past week.

All the faculty at the school seemed nice, but these four were definitely my tribe. Having friendly, supportive faces cheering me on at my new job had been a godsend.

I checked my phone, feeling a little guilty for going out since Nonna had skipped her art class because she was still under the weather. Today, against her wishes, I made her a doctor's appointment for Monday. I'd also insisted on bailing on drinks tonight. But she'd countered that if I didn't go out tonight, she would not be going to see Dr. Williams on Monday. I'd considered calling her bluff, but since my grandfather, Nonno, had nicknamed her Bull because she was as stubborn as one, I figured it was best to accept her bargain. So here I was, toasting to my first week.

I'd made sure she was tucked away in bed and fast asleep before leaving, but it still felt wrong to be here. I'd stay for an hour, have two drinks and head home.

As my coworkers discussed life, work, and pop culture I took a sip of my vodka water and looked around the bar. It had a fun, eclectic vibe. The walls were all brick and painted with black and white portraits of musicians. All the tables and chairs were different bright colors and window frames hung from the ceilings covered in twinkle lights.

It's nothing like I'd ever seen before, but it worked.

Ariella lifted her glass, downed her entire drink and then set it on the table. "Okay, I don't know if we're supposed to talk about it but...I have to. *Maddox Cruz* is your ex?!"

My eyes sliced to Bianca, who was the only soul I'd told I had any connection with Maddox. I wasn't surprised that she'd spilled the beans. If anything, I was shocked it had taken a full week for someone to ask me about it.

She shrugged. "Sorry, I had to tell someone."

Wendell leaned forward; his brows lifted. "Maddox Cruz is your *ex*?"

Deshawn didn't say anything but was looking at me expectantly.

“Yes, but from a long time ago. High school.” If they thought that was juicy gossip, I couldn’t imagine how they’d react if they found out I’d had his child, she was interning at his work, and I’d met her the night before.

It was so unbelievable. I felt like it was a dream and I didn’t want anyone to wake me up.

“I need *all* the details.” Ariella started counting on her fingers. “How long were you together? Is he a good kisser? Are you going to marry him?”

I chuckled. “Um, we were only together for about six months. Yes, he is a good kisser. And no, I’m not going to... we’re not...it’s not like...” I stopped stammering and just shook my head no.

I wasn’t sure why I was getting so flustered over the marriage question or why I couldn’t bring myself to say that I wasn’t going to marry him. Of course I wasn’t. That should have been a quick no.

“Why not? Was the breakup dramatic?” Wendell persisted.

“We, um, we actually never broke up. Officially.”

“You didn’t?” Bianca questioned.

“No. I just left. I moved to Germany.”

“Germany?” Wendell repeated.

“Yeah, my dad worked for the government, and we moved around a lot. I was supposed to stay with my grandmother for the last two years of high school. You know, be able to stay in one place, but one day, he showed up and said that he and my mom were going to Germany and I was going with them. Our flight was in eight hours.”

They all just stared at me.

“So that was it?” Bianca asked. “You just left? You didn’t see him before you left?”

“No. I did.” I snuck out of Nonna’s bathroom window and escaped, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to.

“So, what? You guys decided to do long distance?” Ariella followed up.

“No. I didn’t, um, he didn’t know I was leaving. I’ve never been good at goodbyes, so I just, um...” I snuck out of his bed, just like I did in Napa at the reunion. I felt shitty about both those times. “I just left.”

“Did you keep in touch?” Wendell leaned forward. “When you were in Germany?”

I shook my head back and forth. “I hadn’t seen him in twenty years before the reunion. And I didn’t know that his daughter went to Bradley when I got this job. I had no idea until the first morning of class when he dropped her off.”

Wendell let out a long exhale. “Wow.”

“I know, right? It’s like a Lifetime movie,” Bianca joked.

She had no clue how true that statement actually was.

“Well, I think that calls for another round!” Wendell went up to the bar and came back with more drinks. We all held our respective glasses up as he said, “To billionaire exes and unexpected reunions!”

It seemed like a very specific cheer as we all clicked our glasses when I heard my name.

“Peyton.”

I turned and couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Trent was standing in the bar holding flowers.

“Trent?!” I stood up. “What are you doing here?”

He smiled as if my reaction was a happy one. It wasn’t. “I told you I had a layover.”

“Yeah, and I told you I had plans.” I motioned to the table of my coworkers.

“Right, so I came to you,” he smiled, either totally ignoring the fact that I was not pleased with his arrival or being totally oblivious to it, I wasn’t sure which.

I knew that I should have ended things officially after he showed up at the school on Tuesday, but I'd had a lot on my plate since then.

“How did you find me?”

“Your phone.”

“My phone?”

“Yeah, I enabled Find My Friends on your phone so I could see your location.”

“You've been *spying* on me?”

He ignored my question completely. “There's something I needed to ask you.”

Oh for the love! Was this still about the fucking partners dinner? I wasn't going.

“I told you I can—”

My words dropped off when he dropped to one knee.

“Peyton Russo, you are the most beautiful woman in any room. I know that we can build a life together that anyone would envy. You are the yin to my yang, the proverbial woman behind the great man. Will you do me the honor of being Mrs. Trent Windsor?”

He opened a Tiffany box with an absurdly large solitaire diamond ring in it set in a slim gold band.

The restaurant had fallen quiet around us, and I could feel my cheeks heating. I hated attention being directed at me. He knew that. Or at least he should know it. I forced myself to smile and I spoke without moving my lips, “Trent, get up.”

He did as I asked and pulled me into his arms asking me quietly in my ear, “Is that a yes?”

“What? No?” I said into his shoulder. “That's not—”

He spoke against my ear. “Don't answer yet. I know you need time to process things. Just wear this, get a feel for it.” He leaned back and slid the ring on my finger and the room around us exploded. He leaned down and gave me a

passionless kiss. “I have to go. The drive from SFO across the city was a nightmare.” He looked at the table. “You take care of my girl.”

And then without another word, he turned and disappeared into the crowded restaurant.

I stared blinking in the place he had just stood.

Had that really just happened?

Had he actually proposed and then walked away?

I looked down at the evidence on my finger and in my hands.

Had he given me flowers again?

How many times did I have to tell him I wasn't a flowers girl?

I knew that I should go after him and give the ring back, but my feet weren't moving. I blinked and Bianca was in front of me. “Who was that?”

“Um...”

“Let me see the ring!” Bianca pulled my hand as the table exploded with questions.

I was going to answer them all, but first I announced, “I need another drink.”

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MADDOX

“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” LINA ASKED BESIDE ME AS WE drove to Lizzy and Ryan’s house.

I’d told Lizzy about Lina last night when I dropped Hannah off, and she felt that even though there’d been a lot of news for our daughter it was not something we should keep from her and we should tell her right away.

So we did.

The first thing Hannah said was that she wanted to meet her. So, I texted Lina and asked if that was something she’d be interested in. She’d immediately texted me back “yes,” but now it seemed she was feeling uncertain.

“I am, are you?” I threw the question back to her.

“Are you kidding? I’m *so* excited! I’ve always wanted a little sister.”

Hearing Lina call Hannah her sister was a stick of love dynamite that caused my heart to explode.

Lina turned toward me. “Wait, she does know that I’m your...”

“Daughter, yes. She knows.”

“How did she take it?”

“She’s so excited! She was a little confused about why I didn’t know about you before, so Lizzy and I explained adoption and being a biological parent. Luckily, Kenny, a boy in her class, was adopted and had brought a book for show and

tell, so she was familiar with the concept. Although, she keeps calling me your bionic dad, which Lizzy finds hilarious.”

Lina chuckled. “That is pretty cute.”

“How did dinner go with Peyton?”

I hadn’t messaged Peyton to ask because I wanted to give her space and not make her feel like I had to be involved in her relationship with Lina. I was trying to respect her boundaries. When Alex pointed out that this had been just hers for so long and now it wasn’t, I realized I needed to tread carefully.

“Great!” Lina beamed. “She’s not at all what I’d pictured her being like, but she’s so sweet.”

That’s so funny. That’s the same thing that Lizzy had said about Peyton.

“What did you picture her being like?”

“I don’t know. My mom said that the adoption agency had told her that she was the daughter of some big shot guy in the government who was rich and powerful and so I guess I thought she would be...I don’t know, not so down to earth.”

“Did you ever wonder what I was like?”

Her eyes widened and she pushed her glasses up on her face. “Are you kidding me? All the time.”

“And?” I asked as we made our way across the city in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

“Well, when I was really young, I imagined you were Prince Eric, from *The Little Mermaid*.” She glanced over at me. “Actually, you sort of have a Prince Eric vibe.”

I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

“Then when I got older, I imagined you were David Beckham. I don’t know why. I’m not a soccer, er I guess football fan. It’s so weird that we are the only country in the world that calls it soccer. Everywhere else it’s football. I mean, they literally kick the ball with their feet. If anything should be called football, it should be what we call soccer. Don’t you think that’s weird?”

“Yeah.” I had always thought that was weird.

She shook her head. “Anyway, it wasn’t that I was a huge Victoria fan either, the Spice Girls were before my time. I think it was just because he was always on the tabloid covers with his kids, and I’m around their age. And I don’t know, he just seemed like such a great dad. I guess that’s why I used to imagine that you were like him.”

I waited for her to tell me that I had David Beckham vibes, but sadly that didn’t happen.

“Prince Eric and David Beckham, huh? Those are pretty big shoes to fill. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Are you kidding me?”

I noticed she said that a lot. I liked that I knew things she said a lot. Well, one thing.

We talked a little bit more about her dinner and when I parked at the house, I’d barely stopped the car before she hopped out. We made our way to the front door and before I could knock, it opened. Hannah was standing there with Lizzy.

“Hey, guys, this is Lina.”

Before the introduction was even able to leave my mouth, Hannah ran out and threw her arms around Lina’s waist. Lina hugged her right back.

“Hey, Peanut no love for me?”

“Hi, Dad.” My obligatory greeting was cut short when Hannah grabbed Lina’s hand and started to drag her inside. “Do you want to come see my room?”

“Um, yeah, sure. Hi!” Lina said to Lizzy as she passed her.

“Hi!” Lizzy smiled widely.

We watched as Hannah talked a mile a minute about her favorite color, her favorite animal, her favorite movie, her favorite TV show. Lina was taking it all in and interjecting her favorites every few sentences.

As they disappeared upstairs, Lizzy turned to me. “Well, I think she’s a little excited to have a big sister.”

“I think Lina’s excited to be a big sister, too.”

It was strange that my ex was pregnant at the same time that Lina came into our lives. A lot was changing quickly for Hannah, and although she seemed to be handling it all really well, I was still trying to give her time to adjust to the new situations.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Tired. But other than that, okay. Robbie’s been a big help when Ryan’s gone.”

“Is he around?” Robbie was Ryan’s little brother. I hadn’t seen him since the wedding, he was Ryan’s best man. That was five years ago, and I remembered he was a senior in high school then. He’d moved in with them last week because he’d gotten a job at the same firehouse Ryan worked at.

“He’s actually at the station. Today was his first paramedic shift.”

I nodded. “I’m glad you have help here, but you know I’m only a phone call away. If you need anything with Hannah, or for you.”

“I know, thanks.”

“I’m serious, Lizzy. I know you are woman hear you roar, but you can ask for help.”

She batted her eyes at me. “Does that offer extend to playdates?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. That’s the only thing it doesn’t extend to.”

She smiled, pleased with herself for getting a reaction out of me.

We walked into the kitchen, and I sat down at the island while she brought out a bowl of cherries and sat down to eat them. I remembered her eating a lot of fruit when she was pregnant with Hannah, too.

She popped one in her mouth and as she ate it whispered, “So what’s going on with you and Miss Peyton aka

Totga?”

“Nothing.” I wished I was lying, but it seemed like there truly was nothing going on. “When I went to tell her I’d found Lina, Trent was there.”

I knew that even though I kept trying to convince myself that it didn’t bother me, it obviously did. I’d brought it up to Nick and Alex and now Lizzy.

“The lawyer guy she’s been not exclusive with for ten years?”

“That’s the one.”

“She introduced me as a parent of one of her students.”

She cringed. “Ouch.”

Again, that seemed like it might be a sore spot for me.

“Well, maybe that’s because she wasn’t sure about what’s going on with you two either.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “I mean, you two obviously have history. But maybe she’s not sure where she stands with you now.”

No. That couldn’t be the case. She had to know that I loved her. That I’d always loved her.

“You haven’t told her, have you?”

“Told her what?” I responded even though I had a pretty good idea where she was going with this.

Lizzy, who knew me too well, tilted her head to the side, giving me a look that called me on my feigned ignorance. But I still didn’t respond.

“You haven’t told her that she’s The One, capital T capital O. She’s your lobster.” Lizzy lifted her hands and clamped her fingers together in what I could only assume was supposed to be lobster hands.

“She knows.” I wasn’t sure if I was trying to convince myself or Lizzy.

If it was Lizzy, it hadn’t worked. She crossed her arms in front of her. “How? How does she know? If you haven’t told

her explicitly, how does she know? Is she a mind reader?"

"You wouldn't understand." It was a cop out response. I knew it and so did Lizzy, who immediately called me on it.

"I wouldn't understand? Really?" She scrunched her nose. "Let me just take a wild guess. You think that your connection, your *bond* is so strong, so *evident* that of course she knows how you feel without you having to say a word? Am I warm?"

Knowing it was a rhetorical question, I didn't respond.

"Well, let's just say, for fun, that your feelings aren't as transparent as cellophane after all. Maybe you should have a *conversation* with her and go ahead and say all the things that you are sure she knows."

I stared at her knowing, in that moment, the reason I wouldn't do that. Because if I did, and she rejected me, that would really be it. There'd be no hope. And, for better or worse, even when we hadn't spoken in decades, I'd always had hope.

I haven't been dealt the greatest hand in life, but I've always stepped up to the table and anted up. But losing hope wasn't a hand I was willing to play.

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PEYTON

MY HEAD WAS POUNDING AS I ROLLED OVER IN MY BED. I still wasn't used to being back in a twin and I nearly rolled off. My arm, leg, and hip went over the side. That woke me up. My heavy lids popped open as I tried to balance myself so as not to fall on the floor. Once I made it safely back on the mattress, I squinted at the bright rays of light shining through my window.

I wearily scanned the room and saw the shirt and pants I'd worn to the bar the night before were strewn out on the floor. I must have stripped on the way to bed. I glanced down and saw that I was wearing Maddox's shirt. The one I'd 'borrowed' from him the morning I left for Germany. His Roger Rabbit shirt.

It was the shirt he was wearing the first day I met him when he sat next to me at the lunch table. I told him I liked the movie and he invited me to go and see an outdoor showing of it at Golden Gate Park a week later. That was our first date and first kiss.

When I was sneaking out of his room at the group home and I knew that I wasn't going to see him again, I saw it laying on the floor and I took it.

In all the years I'd had it, I'd only allowed myself to wear it once. It was the night I came home from the hospital after I had Lina. Although, I didn't know her name then. I did now.

Angelina Faith Chaplin.

I knew my daughter's name. I knew where she lived. I had her phone number.

I was lying in my bed trying not to throw up and as I became more and more awake and aware I realized it had to be much later in the morning than I normally slept. It was never this bright in this room before noon. I reached out to grab my phone and that's when I saw the ring on my finger.

Holy shit!

How had I forgotten Trent showing up to the bar and proposing?

Maybe because it wasn't that memorable, I heard Leo's voice in my head.

I replayed what I remembered from the proposal.

"We can build a life that people will envy."

"The proverbial woman behind the great man."

I took note of the use of adjectives in that sentence. Why was he great and I was proverbial?

"Do me the honor of being Mrs. Trent Windsor."

Not marry me. Not be my wife.

And don't even get me started on the fact that every time we'd talked about getting married, I'd told him that Nonna had promised me her ring. And that I didn't want anything in public because I hated being the center of attention.

He'd shown up, in public, brought flowers, and bought me this massive rock. To most people it would probably seem like I was being irrational, those things out of context were all great. But I wasn't most people.

I needed to break up with him ASAP. I tried to pull the ring off my finger but my alcohol and nacho consumption from the night before had caused my fingers to swell to the size of bratwurst sausages.

Maybe I could use butter or soap to remove it. I sat up in bed and picked up my phone to check and see if I'd gotten any messages. I lied to myself and pretended it was just a general

check, but truthfully, I was hoping to see a message from either Maddox or Lina.

When I tapped on the home button the screen remained black and I realized it was dead. I grabbed the charger to plug it in and noticed the time on my old alarm clock. It was eleven thirty. I never slept this late.

Oh no! Nonna. I vaguely remembered checking in on her last night when I got home, and she was in her bed. But she got up at what Leo referred to as “old people early.” She never slept past five in the morning.

“Crap!” I pushed out of bed and the tiny men jackhammering in my brain doubled down as my stomach revolted against the grease and tequila that was still in my system.

I winced as I grabbed a pair of sweats off the floor. I desperately needed to do laundry but since Nonna didn’t have a washer and dryer, that meant a trip to the laundry mat and with everything else going on, I just hadn’t made it happen.

As I headed down the hallway I called out, “Sorry I slept in, Nonna. I just need to pee, and I’ll be right there.”

After stopping in the bathroom and taking care of business and trying, unsuccessfully, to remove the ring, I walked back into the hall and realized that the house was quiet. Eerily quiet. There was no TV on. No music playing. No smells of food.

A sick feeling churned in my stomach that had nothing to do with my hangover.

“Nonna!” I called out again as I walked to the front room where I expected to find her on the couch or the chair that Maddox and I had defiled.

She wasn’t there.

The knot of dread in my belly tightened as I walked through the kitchen out to the screened in back porch, both were empty.

Was she still in bed? Nonna was never in bed when the sun rose.

I ran down the hall calling out to her as panic raced through me. “Nonna!”

When I got to her room, I found her lying in bed, perfectly still. Her eyes were shut but her mouth was open.

“Oh my god!” My knees almost gave out beneath me. She was dead. “Nonna!” I shouted as I ran to her bedside and put my face next to her mouth to see if I felt any breath.

I heard a slight wheeze and saw her chest rising and falling. I shook her gently. “Nonna!”

Still nothing. I felt for a pulse on her wrist and there was one, but it was very faint.

I grabbed the landline that sat on her nightstand and dialed nine-one-one.

I explained to the operator that Nonna was breathing but not responsive. The woman stayed on the line with me, doing her best to keep me calm until I heard the sirens outside. I unlocked the front door and two fireman and two paramedics came inside. One didn’t even look old enough to drive, much less save a life and he looked like he should be a TikTok star or boy band member.

The first responders asked me questions about her age, medication, medical history, and how long she’d been unresponsive. My brain was more scrambled than a Denny’s omelet but I answered to the best of my knowledge.

A feeling of helplessness consumed me as I stood in the hall and watched as they worked on her. The firefighters were both called to another scene but the paramedics remained.

What would I do if she was gone?

This was my fault.

I shouldn’t have had that third, fourth, and fifth drink last night. I shouldn’t have gone out at all last night. I should have stayed home with Nonna. I should have been up this morning at a normal time and checked on her.

The knot in my throat grew larger as I watched them put her on the gurney.

“Is she okay?” I asked the boy band member. “Is she going to be okay?”

“We’re taking her to SFGH,” the older bearded paramedic responded.

It didn’t answer my question. I needed to know if she was okay.

“Do you want to ride along?” the boy band one offered.

“Yes.”

My back pressed against the wall as they wheeled her past me in the hall. There was an oxygen mask over her face and they had started an IV. Tears welled in my eyes as they took her outside. I pushed my feet into shoes, grabbed my purse and locked the door on my way out.

The bearded one drove and boy band rode in the back.

As we made our way through the city, I held her hand. I wasn’t sure if she could feel me or not, but if she could I wanted her to know I was there.

I wanted to ask boy band how old he was, but I wasn’t sure if that was insulting or not. “How long have you been doing this?”

“I’ve been an EMT for two years, but this is my first day at the station as a paramedic.”

“First day, wow. How’s it going so far?”

“This is my first call, so good.”

This call was good? I guess it could have been a lot worse. What if she hadn’t had a pulse? Or what if the call had been a house fire?

Perspective was everything.

I stared down at Nonna as we drove through the city. Once we got to the hospital and I knew what was going on I’d have to call or text my dad. Since he’d never responded to me when I told him that Nonna was hospitalized after falling and no one found her for two days, or when I told him I was moving in with her, I doubted he’d respond now.

But I'd still tell him. He was her only son. But not her only child.

When that thought occurred to me, I wondered if I'd be able to find her daughter. It was so long ago, and it was in Italy. I doubted that I'd be able to, but I knew two people who would.

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MADDOX

THE LIGHTS IN THE CITY LOOKED BRIGHTER, THE AIR SMELLED fresher, even the streets looked cleaner as I drove Lina back to her apartment. It was like the world was somehow shinier tonight.

We'd stayed at Lizzy's for over six hours. We played Hannah's favorite game of beauty salon and everyone got their nails painted including me. Hannah painted Lina's nails purple. Lina painted Hannah's pink with sparkles. I painted Lizzy's nails light blue and she painted mine white. We'd all watched *The Little Mermaid*, which was Lina's favorite Disney movie, and played four rounds of Go Fish.

It was one of the best days of my life. And it felt nearly perfect. But I just kept thinking how much better it would be if Peyton was there. Which reminded me, I was going to need to tell Hannah that Peyton was Lina's mom.

Hannah had taken everything in stride so far. Lizzy being pregnant and having a big sister. I hoped that finding out that Peyton was Lina's mom would just be more of the same.

I'd sent Peyton several pics of Hannah and Lina. One of them watching the movie together. One of them playing outside with Bubba, Lizzy and Ryan's boxer. And one of them doing each other's nails. But she hadn't responded to any of them.

I checked my phone again, and still there'd been no response. I was beginning to grow concerned. It couldn't hurt

to stop by and check on things after I dropped Lina off. Just to make sure she and Nonna were okay.

“Hannah is adorable,” Lina said as she stared out the window. “She reminds me a lot of me at her age.”

I was still trying to come to terms with missing out on Lina’s entire life.

There was nothing that I could do about it now. Unless I had a time machine, I couldn’t change the past. But my mind kept wondering what would have happened if I hadn’t moved out of the group home and Peyton would have gotten a hold of me.

At the time, I was a sixteen-year-old kid without a dime to my name, but I’ve always been resourceful as hell. My circumstances would not have stopped me. I would have found a way to get Peyton home to the States and figured out how to support us. Just like Alex had done at the same age.

It would have been a struggle, but I was sure that Peyton and I would have made it. We would have gotten married and raised Lina. My mind filled with all the memories that had been robbed from me.

First step. First tooth. First day at school.

But then, if I would have gotten to experience those firsts with Lina, I wouldn’t have had them with Hannah. Hannah wouldn’t exist.

I’d always hated when people claimed everything happens for a reason. But I was starting to think they might just be right.

“I’d love to see pictures or videos of you growing up, if you have them.” I was sure Peyton would, too.

“My mom has a ton. I think because she tried for so long to have kids of her own, she just wanted to document every second of my life. It was annoying sometimes, but now, I’m happy I have them. I can have her send you some, or if you want to see them you can follow her on Instagram.”

“Would that be okay with her?”

“Are you kidding me?” She let out a forced laugh. “My parents have been ready to jump on a plane since I told them about you before I even got the internship. And now it’s not just meeting you but Peyton and Hannah, I’m sure they both have their bags packed by the front door and are just waiting for the green light. I told them to give me some time to get to know you before we bombard you guys. They are amazing, but they can be *a lot*.”

“I’d love to meet them. And thank them for—” I wanted to say raising my child, but I wasn’t sure what was appropriate. “—everything.”

“My mom will *definitely* cry when you do. Like, a lot.”

“I can handle crying.”

“She’s going to tell you I’m a miracle and the greatest blessing in their life,” Lina sing-songed, as if it was something she’s heard a million times. Like it was the soundtrack of her childhood.

Knowing that’s what she’d been told over and over again growing up, that she’d been raised by two loving, kind people who made her the center of their world had my own eyes welling up a bit.

“You *are* a miracle and I’m sure you *are* the greatest blessing in their lives.”

“I mean, I guess.” She shrugged and then shifted toward me as she pushed her glasses up on her nose. “I would get it if they cared about any academic stuff or my aptitude and IQ. But they never did. You know all the things that everyone at school and in the world thought made me special, none of that stuff ever mattered to them. I mean, they were proud of me, but only if I was happy. Like, every time they thought I was getting too stressed about school or my work, they would force me, *literally* force me, to walk away from computer and go outside for a walk. Or volunteer at the women’s shelter. Or go get my nails done.” She lifted her hands and wiggled her freshly painted fingers at me.

I grinned.

“They always told me that there was more to life than school, computers, algorithms and code. But I don’t think they understood that my brain doesn’t know that. To it, that is all that exists. It won’t shut off. It’s like once there’s something I need to solve, I can’t sleep, eat, or do anything until I solve it, you know.”

I glanced to my right and saw from her expression that she thought I was going to take her side on this. I *did* understand what that felt like. To not be able to shut my brain off and not concentrate on anything until I could complete a project. But I was on her parents’ side on this one.

“I do know what that’s like but it’s sounds like they did exactly what you needed.”

She sat back in the seat and for a second, I thought I might have just fucked up. She’d wanted backup and I hadn’t given it to her. I felt like an ass that she’d opened up to me, obviously thought that I would be the one person who would understand what her brain was like, and I hadn’t had her back.

But then, she sighed. “Yeah, the older I get I’m starting to see there was probably a method to their madness. But at the time, I would just be counting the seconds until I could get back to my schoolwork or program and plotting ways to try and make that happen. I once *faked* being sick so I didn’t have to go to my friend’s birthday at an amusement park because a program I’d developed had a glitch in it and I knew that there was no way I could eat a churro or go on a roller coaster ride without fixing the code.”

I chuckled as the console on my dash lit up. It was Nick.

“Nick, you’re on speaker.” I always had to preface that if there was anyone else in the car because I never knew what was going to come out of his mouth.

One time I was on the way to the airport with Samara and when I answered the call, before I even said hello, he said that he’d fucked so hard and long the night before his dick was raw. Thankfully, Samara took it with a grain of salt, like everything else, and even suggested a remedy for his chapped penis. But I was not about to take the chance of Nick blurting

out something wildly inappropriate about his sex life with my daughter in the car.

“Sadie’s in labor. Alex is taking her to SFGH.”

“It’s too soon.” Sadie still had six weeks left before she was due.

“I know. I’m headed there now.”

“Okay, I’ll be there as soon as I can. Call me if you get any updates.”

“Will do.”

The phone disconnected and Lina asked, “Is that the one who owns the bakery?”

“Yeah.”

“Is this the way to the hospital?”

“No, I was going to drop you off first.”

“I don’t mind going.”

“I have no idea how long I’m going to be there.”

“I don’t have to be anywhere until Monday morning, and I think my boss would understand if I’m late.” She grinned.

“Are you sure? It might be boring.”

“I just...don’t want to stop hanging out. If that’s okay.”

My heart expanded four times in my chest. “Yeah, that’s more than okay.”

PEYTON

MY HANDS RAN UP AND DOWN MY BARE ARMS IN A FAILED attempt to warm myself as I yawned and stepped into the elevator in search of caffeine. After securing a hot, steaming, cup of coffee I was going to see if the gift shop was still open. If it was, I was hoping and praying that they had a sweatshirt or blanket or something I could buy to ward off the freezing temps in Nonna's room.

She had been admitted a few hours ago. She was settled in her room, but a nurse just came and took her to radiology for x-rays.

I was kicking myself for not grabbing a jacket or a sweatshirt or a bra or a *phone charger* before I left the house. I'd been so panicked that I hadn't thought about how freezing it was going to be in the hospital or that I would be dealing with a nipple-gate situation. I'd been crossing my arms over my chest for the past six hours as I spoke to nurses and doctors.

I had no idea how I was going to get home since my phone wasn't charged and I didn't have a car. Maybe they'd have a charger in the gift shop. If it was still open.

As the elevator descended it stopped on the twelfth floor where a young couple got on. They spoke in hushed tones huddled in the corner discussing a family member's drug overdose. They didn't make eye contact, for which I was grateful. I hoped that my disheveled appearance might serve as a cloak of invisibility.

On a trip to the bathroom this morning, I'd done my best to tame my hair by securing it up in a bun on top of my head and I'd managed to scrub off last night's makeup, which had migrated from my eyes to my cheeks like I was member of the band KISS. But I still looked like I should be an extra on *The Walking Dead*.

The elevator once again came to a stop, this time on floor ten. When the doors slid open the couple exited, and two elderly gentlemen entered. Both made eye contact. So much for my invisibility cloak.

"Hello there young lady. I'm Hugo and this is Felipe."

Hugo wore a Kangol hat and had two cigars in the pocket of his long-sleeved polo shirt.

Felipe, who stood five feet on a good day, wore a checkered button-up shirt with a bolo tie, wranglers adorned with a silver longhorn belt buckle that took up way too much real estate on his frame, and cowboy boots.

"Hi, I'm Peyton."

"Peyton, that's a pretty name." Hugo smiled.

"Just like the quarterback," Felipe added.

"Right." I nodded.

"You named after the quarterback?" Hugo asked.

"No." I smiled. "I'm named after a character in a book."

"What book is that?"

"Lie Down in Darkness." I'd always thought it was odd that my father named me after a character in a book who ended up committing suicide because of her dysfunctional upbringing and family. Not exactly setting me up for success there.

Felipe shook his head. "Never heard of it."

"Not many people have."

The elevator stopped on the eighth floor and a family of four got on. I stepped into the corner to make room for them.

Hugo stood in front of me, and Felipe was to my right.

“We’re here visiting our friend Jack who just had a triple bypass,” Felipe explained to me. “His two double-bacon cheeseburgers a day habit finally caught up with him.”

I nodded.

“And what about you, young lady?” Hugo asked. “What brings you to San Francisco General this fine evening?”

I wasn’t sure what the protocol was for hospital elevators, but I didn’t think that it was the best idea to ask people what they were doing there. But I answered anyway. “I’m here with my grandma. She had a minor heart attack this morning.”

“Oh yeah.” Hugo nodded his head.

“That’ll happen.” Felipe smacked his lips together. “How young of a lady is she?”

“She’s ninety.”

“And this her first?” Hugo followed up.

Her first? How many heart attacks did these men think she should have had? “Yeah, it’s her first.”

“Wow, she made it to the nineties club! Good job!” They gave each other high fives, which I wasn’t sure about as we reached the ground level.

“The nineties club?” I asked as we all exited.

“Yeah, if you make it to the nineties without having a stroke or a heart attack you get a pin.”

Sure enough, the men pointed to their shirts where they each, respectively had a tiny gold pin that said “90” on it.

These guys were characters, and I was actually disappointed when I immediately spotted the Starbucks kiosk.

“This is my stop.”

“Well, you take care now. And you tell your grandma, welcome to the club!”

“I will.” I smiled as the two men went on their way.

There were two people ahead of me in line. When it was my turn I stepped up and ordered. “Can I get a grande honey oat milk latte, please?”

“Name?” the cashier asked.

“Peyton,” I said as I handed her a ten-dollar bill at the same time I heard my name from behind me.

“Peyton?”

I turned around and a man stood in front of me, who was familiar, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on where I knew him from. He was tall with sandy blond hair and movie star good looks. He looked like he could be a Hemsworth brother, or at the very least one of the Chrises. Evans. Pine. Pratt. Or Hemsworth.

Was that where I knew him from? Was he an actor?

No. If he were an actor, how would he know my name?

“Hi.” I smiled as I tried to place him.

“Nick.” He placed his hand on his chest. “Nick Locke.”

“Nick!” I shouted.

Of course it was Nick. He had the same mischievous green eyes, and square jaw. He’d definitely grown into his lanky frame. He was filled out with wide shoulders and muscular chest and chiseled arms.

He pulled me into a warm hug, both emotionally and literally. He radiated heat and I gladly absorbed it. “I heard you were back in town.”

“Yep.” I wondered what Maddox had told his friends. Did they know about Lina?

He stepped back and wrapped his hands around my upper arms. “And that you’re in the BMC.”

“BMC?”

“Baby mama club.” Nick winked

Well that answered my question and *that* was the Nick I remembered. He was always saying borderline inappropriate

things but getting away with it because of his charisma, and I didn't think the deep dimples that kissed his cheeks hurt either. I'd always appreciated his bluntness because I knew where I stood with him. He had zero filter and in the world I grew up in, politics and the government, it seemed like people were always saying the "right" thing or whatever would get them what they wanted.

I would gladly take an ugly truth over a pretty lie any day.

"I didn't know there was a club." And if there was, I didn't know if I was in it. It's not like I had a child that I'd raised, and I wasn't sure where that left me. I sort of felt like I was in parental limbo. I'd had a child but given her up for adoption.

For years, when anyone asked if I had kids, I told them no. But now, now that Lina was in my life, would I say I had a daughter but didn't raise her? Would I say that I was a birth mom but had given my daughter up for adoption?

I didn't know what I was or where I fit into her life. It made a lot of insecurities I'd thought I'd grown out of come back again.

"Wow!" His eyes unabashedly scanned me from head to toe. Normally, I would feel self-conscious under that type of scrutiny, but there was something about Nick that put me at ease. "You look fucking hot."

"I do?" I asked, smoothing my hand over my wrinkled Roger Rabbit T-shirt and sweats.

"Yeah, you are a serious smoke show!"

The compliment didn't come off as cheesy or even gratuitous, it was Nick, so it came off as charming. "Thanks. How have you been?"

"Good. I own a media group, have the number one trending relationship podcast, and am a dad."

"I heard. Isabella, right?"

"Bella, yeah. She got dropped off on my front doorstep *Three Men and a Baby* style."

"I heard."

“Yep. Her mom was young and having a tough time.”

“Yeah.” I knew that most people would probably have an opinion on Bella’s mom, but I knew better than most that people shouldn’t judge a situation that they haven’t been in.

I’m sure people judged me that I hadn’t stood up to my dad.

“Does she ever see her?” I knew it was none of my business, but since this was Nick who hadn’t seemed to grow out of his over sharing, I figured it wouldn’t hurt.

“Sometimes. She’s a model and busy working all over. But we Facetime and she checks in.”

“Peyton.” The barista called my name and I turned to grab my drink.

“What are you doing here? At the hospital, I mean?” Nick asked as I turned back.

“Oh, Nonna, my grandma, had a heart attack.”

“Is she okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. They said they want to keep her for a few days for observation. What are you doing here?”

“Alex’s baby mama is in labor.”

“Sadie, right?”

“Yeah.” He nodded.

Nick’s phone buzzed and he looked down. “That’s him. I better go. Hey, give me your phone. Now that you’re in town, let me give you my number.”

I pulled it out of my back pocket and showed him the blank screen. “It’s dead.”

“Shit. That sucks.”

“Yeah, and I don’t have my car here either.”

“I’ll give you a ride. I’m gonna be on the maternity ward. Just come see me when you want to leave.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah, I got you, girl. You’re part of the family. You’re in the club, remember?” He gave me another hug and headed toward the elevators.

I watched him go and sipped my drink. The hot liquid wasn’t the only thing warming me up. Nick’s comment about being part of the family had wrapped me in a blanket. Maybe I actually was part of the baby mama club after all.

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MADDOX

“IS THIS THE SAME HOSPITAL LIZZY HAD HANNAH?” LINA asked as we moved into the elevator and I pressed the fifth floor where the maternity ward was located.

“Yep.”

“Were you there for the birth?”

“I was, yeah.”

“How long was Lizzy in labor?”

“Twenty-eight hours.”

Lina cringed. “That’s a long time.”

“It was, but she was a champ.”

“How long were you guys together before Hannah was born?”

“Um, well, we dated, casually for about five years. But we were never actually together, officially. I’ve only had one official girlfriend.”

“Really? Who?”

“Peyton.”

“Aww, that’s sweet. Did you love her? Do you think?”

It wasn’t past tense. I still loved her.

I nodded.

“And you said it wasn’t puppy love, right?”

“No, it was real. It’s the realest love, the only love I’ve ever felt. I mean, romantic love.”

“Wow. Does Peyton know that?”

“I think so.”

“If you’re not sure, you should probably tell her,” Lina suggested as we walked off the elevator.

I started to explain why that wouldn’t be the best idea when I heard. “Bro, why don’t you pick up your phone?”

When I looked up, I saw Nick walking toward me at a clipped pace.

“My phone?” I pulled it out of my pocket and saw that I had two missed calls from Nick. He must have called when I was in the parking structure and wasn’t getting service. “Did Sadie have the baby already?”

“No, better than that.” Nick glanced beside me and did a double take. “Wait is this—”

“Nick, this is Lina Chaplin, Lina this is one of my oldest friends, and basically brother, Nick Locke.”

“I’ve heard so much about you.” She smiled up at him as she held out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You’re family.” He pulled her into a hug. “We hug in this family.”

I checked to make sure she was okay with his outburst of affection. Apparently, Nick wasn’t caught up on the whole not touching people without consent thing. Thankfully, she was smiling from ear to ear.

He stepped back and stared down at her. “I hear you’re smarter than your old man. Thank god, someone can finally knock him off his high horse.”

She didn’t deny the statement as she beamed up at me.

As much as I was happy that Lina was meeting Nick, I was also interested in what could be better than Sadie having the baby. “So why were you calling me?”

“Oh, right.” Nick stepped away from Lina. “Guess who’s here?”

“Here at the hospital?”

Nick nodded.

“Alex and Sadie?” I ventured.

“Yes, but not them.”

“Steph Curry?” Lina asked excitedly.

“No, but good guess little one.” Nick smiled in approval. “I’m so happy you didn’t say one of the Kardashians.”

“They live in Calabasas the probability of them being here would be slim.”

“You’re right.” Nick smiled down at her before gripping my shoulder. “She really is smarter than you.”

“Nick, who’s here?” I tried to get him back on track. I swear, sometimes he had the attention span of a golden retriever. Actually, that’s sort of what he reminded me of.

“Oh, right. Peyton.”

My veins ran cold. “Peyton’s here? What’s wrong? Where is she? Is she okay?”

Why would Peyton be in the maternity ward?

Was she pregnant again?

Was it mine?

“She’s fine.” Nick was smiling from ear to ear. “Nonna had a heart attack.”

“Nonna had a *heart attack*?! When?”

“This morning. But she’s okay now. They are just keeping her a few days for observation.”

I let out a breath and moved my hand to my chest. This asshole was going to give *me* a heart attack.

“Bro, she looks *gooooood* now!” He drew out the word then his eyes shot to Lina. “Sorry, I don’t know if that’s weird cause she’s your mom?”

“Are you kidding me?” Lina smiled. “That’s not weird. She is very attractive. I come from very good genes.”

“She always looked good,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but she was a kid when you were with her before.”

Right. Nick was four years older than me so when I dated Peyton, he was already twenty. That would have been gross if he would have looked at her like that. Not that I was thrilled that he was looking at her like that now.

I pulled out my phone to check and see if she had responded to any of her messages from me.

“If you’re trying to call Peyton, her phone’s dead,” Nick informed me.

That must have been why she hadn’t responded.

“How do you know?”

“I tried to give her my number, but her phone was dead.”

Hearing that my friend, who had just said that Peyton looked *gooooood* had also tried to give her his number had me seeing red. Logically, I knew it was ridiculous, but it was like a patellar reflex when the doctor hits below your knee and your leg jumps. It was completely involuntary.

“Whoa.” Nick grabbed Lina and pretended to hide behind her. “As a friend. I was going to give her my number as friend.” Nick leaned down to Lina and whispered out of the side of his mouth. “Did you see him about to Hulk out?” Then he walked in a circle doing what I could only describe as a horrible impression of either me or the Hulk, I wasn’t sure.

Lina’s head fell back as she cracked up.

It wasn’t that funny.

“Is Sadie okay? Have there been any updates?”

Nick straightened and his tone grew serious. “She’s good. Alex texted a while ago that her water broke, so she’s definitely having the baby, but everything looks good.”

“Okay, I’m going to go check on Peyton and Nonna.”

“She’s going to come up here. I told her I’d give her a ride home.”

Now, I might Hulk out. “You told her you’d give her a ride?”

“Yeah, her phone is dead and she doesn’t have a car here.” He looked at Lina and smiled. “Don’t believe what you hear, chivalry is not dead.”

Chivalry my ass.

“If Peyton needs a ride. I’ll give her one.” I started to turn.

“Where are you going?” Nick asked.

“To check on her.”

“Oh, can I come?” Lina asked.

“Of course.”

“Aww,” Nick smiled and put his hand over his chest. “Daddy-daughter time.”

Lina chuckled again.

I’d never understood why people found Nick amusing. I put up with him because I knew his heart. He was loyal. Honest. And would do anything for the people he loved. But I’d never thought he was particularly funny or charming.

Lina and I turned to head back to the elevator bay and Nick asked, “Did you hear the new pod episode?”

“Not yet.”

“Check it out. It’s good.”

I nodded.

“I’ll text you if anything changes,” he called out.

“Thanks.” I lifted my hand.

We stepped back on to the elevator, and I thought about going down to the nurses’ desk but realized I didn’t know Nonna’s first name. I only knew her as Nonna. I knew her last name was Russo, but had no clue what her first name was.

I pulled out my phone and began typing.

“Are you hacking the system to find out what room Nonna is in?”

Shit.

I glanced up at her. This was illegal. What sort of example would I be setting? One rule Lizzy and I had always had was we never lied to Hannah, about anything. Not Santa Claus. Not The Easter Bunny. Not how babies are made. Lina was my daughter and I wanted her to be able to trust what I said was true.

Instead of answering, I just looked back at my phone and continued typing. “I got it. It’s room fourteen oh six.”

She smiled from ear to ear. “Cool.”

It shouldn’t make me happy that she thought it was cool that I could get the room number in under sixty seconds, but it did. I pressed the button for the fourteenth floor.

“Nick is funny.”

“He’s not as funny as he thinks he is.”

“I like him.”

Most women did so that wasn’t a surprise. Nick was objectively good looking, but his charm and charisma were what I believed drew people to him. He oozed those things from the time I met him at the young age of thirteen. It was the currency in which he’d moved through life. Not that he wasn’t a hard worker. He was. I’d watched him build his media empire from nothing, he’d started as an intern and within ten short years acquired the entire corporation.

Nick was the embodiment of work hard, play *harder*.

“What podcast was he talking about?”

“He has a few, I’m not sure which one he meant. He’s starting a new one with Serena Grace.” Shit. I realized Nick had told me that in confidence. I was normally a steel trap when it came to things like that. “Don’t say anything. It hasn’t been announced yet.”

“Are you kidding me? I love her! What’s Nick’s last name?” she asked.

“Locke.”

Lina pulled out her phone and started typing. “Holy shit! He’s a big deal. His podcasts are huge!”

“That’s what he tells us.”

“I can’t wait to listen.”

The elevator doors opened and we took a left following the signs pointing in the direction of the room number. On the way, several nurses smiled and one even blushed.

“Do you know them?”

“No.” I didn’t want her to think that I was like Nick. He reveled in attention from the opposite sex, actually gender was irrelevant. Nick just loved attention.

As we approached the room, my heart picked up the pace. It always did that whenever I knew I was about to see Peyton. It had since the day she walked into second period.

At the doorway I saw that the room was darkened, and I didn’t want to disrupt Nonna if she was resting, so I stopped.

“Are we going in?” Lina asked.

“Yeah. I just—”

“Who’s out there?” Nonna’s voice carried into the hall. “Go see.”

Before I could respond and announce my arrival, Peyton appeared from the darkness. “It’s Maddox and he brought a visitor.”

I searched her eyes to see if us being here was a good or bad thing. She definitely looked happy to see Lina.

Lina walked in without hesitation, I stayed where I was and lifted my hand in an awkward wave. “Hi.”

She smiled, “Hi.”

“Who is this?” I heard Nonna say.

Peyton turned as I entered.

“I’m Lina,” she introduced herself as I came around the curtain.

Nonna squinted as she instructed. “Turn on lights.”

Peyton turned on a single light that hung behind Nonna’s bed. When it came on Nonna clasped her hands at her chest. “Oh Lina, Lina, Lina, you look just like my Farfalina.” Then she gasped. “Farfalina, Lina.”

“Farfalina?” Lina questioned.

“It means little butterfly,” Peyton explained. “She’s called me that since I was little.”

“Cool.”

“Come here, come here, let me see you.”

Lina approached the bed and bent down. Nonna cupped her face in her hands. “Lina, Lina, Lina what a beautiful name.”

“It’s short for Angelina.”

Nonna’s face blanched white, and she clasped her hands over her mouth.

Lina stood back up and looked at Peyton and I with wide eyes. “What did I say?”

Shit. I’d been so laser focused on coming to make sure Peyton was okay, I hadn’t thought that us being here would upset Nonna. But of course it would. The woman just had a heart attack and I brought her long-lost great granddaughter to meet her.

What the fuck was I thinking?

“Nonna, what’s wrong?” Peyton rushed to her side.

“Get my bag,” she instructed.

“Your bag?”

“My bag! My bag with my things, with the things I wear!”

“Oh, okay.” Peyton walked to a cabinet and pulled out the white plastic bag that contained the clothes Nonna was wearing when she was admitted.

Peyton opened it and looked inside. “What do you need?”

“My bag! Give me bag!”

Peyton handed it to her, and she dug through it for a minute or so, before pulling out a gold bracelet. She handed the bracelet to Lina. “You read. You read on inside.”

Lina looked at both myself and Peyton, like she wasn’t sure what to do. We both smiled with encouragement.

“Read!” Nonna demanded.

Lina took the bracelet and looked at the inside. She tilted it up and down before slowly reading, “Angelina four... twelve...something I can’t rea—”

“Yes, yes. Angelina, I have her on April 12th. That was the name that I gave my baby before they take her.”

I looked at Peyton to see if she knew what she was talking about. There were tears in her eyes so I figured she did. I wondered if it was a baby Nonna had lost.

“Okay, Mrs. Russo.” A nurse came in and flipped on the florescent overhead lights. “Oh, I see you have a full house. “I’m going to need to ask you to wait outside while I take her vitals. Then we’re going to be taking her down for more tests.”

Peyton walked over to the bed and placed her hand over Nonna’s. “Are you going to be okay? Do you want me to stay?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” Nonna shooed her away. “Always so worried.”

“We’ll have her back in about an hour if you wanted to go get something to eat,” the nurse explained.

The three of us all walked out of the room silently. When we reached the end of the hall, Peyton, who looked like she’d seen a ghost, pressed the elevator button.

“Did you want us to take you home so you can get your car and charger?”

“Yeah, that would be great.” She nodded.

We stepped in and Lina handed the bracelet back to Peyton. “Who is she talking about?”

Peyton took it and looked down at the bracelet. “When I told Nonna about you, she told me that she’d had a baby when she was sixteen, in Italy. Her parents sent her to a nunnery and then she was sent to America. I guess when she gave birth, she named her daughter Angelina and then had this bracelet made to remember her.” Peyton held up the bracelet.

“Are you kidding me?” Lina’s eyes were as wide as saucers. “That’s crazy.”

It was crazy.

“Whoa! Nice ring!” Lina exclaimed as she lifted up Peyton’s left hand that had a very large diamond sitting on her ring finger.

Seeing the ring hit me like a punch in the gut. It knocked the wind out of me.

“Oh, no! This is...it’s not what you...” Peyton’s eyes darted to mine and I could see the panic in them. “I couldn’t get it off. This morning, because I was drinking last night and...and...”

“Is it from the guy in New York?” Lina asked.

That was another gut check. The fact that Lina knew about Trent meant that Peyton had thought he was important enough to tell her about him.

“Yes, I mean. No. Yes, it is from him but I’m not keeping it. I’m not engaged.”

I could see Lina looking between us and the elevator doors opened, and we all walked off. The last thing I wanted to do was make the first time that we were all together awkward, so I knew I needed to forget about what I was feeling and deal with it later. This wasn’t about me.

I smiled at Lina and Peyton. “It’s a beautiful ring.”

“It’s not—”

“Well, well, well little lady!” A man’s booming voice interrupted her. “Peyton, not the quarterback, don’t you have a beautiful family!” A man wearing a Kangol and a cigar in his pocket bellowed.

“Oh, it’s not—” Peyton repeated, but this time to the man.

“I’m Hugo and this is Felipe.” Hugo motioned to a small statured man wearing a bright green checkered shirt and very large silver belt buckle.

“I’m Maddox and this Lina.”

“You must be the man who put that rock on her finger,” Felipe assessed. Wrongly.

That one felt more like a shot to my nuts. Talk about putting salt in a wound.

“No, sir. I’m not.” I wish I was.

“Oh, sorry about that.” Felipe apologized. “You just look like y’all belong on a Christmas card or in one of those frames that you buy from the store.”

Hugo and Felipe stood smiling at us, and it was clear they were waiting for an explanation as to what our relationship was, but I had no clue what to say.

“Peyton and Maddox are my birth parents. We’ve just recently been reunited. They were high school sweethearts,” Lina summed it up in three concise sentences; something neither Peyton nor I had been able to articulate.

“Oh, well isn’t that the sweetest thing!” Hugo put his hands over his chest.

“Good seeing you guys!” Peyton smiled and walked around them.

“You too, young lady. Say hi to your grandmother.”

When we reached the exit to leave Lina stopped. “Is it okay if I wait here for you? I sort of wanted to ask Nick about

his podcasts.”

“Um,” I felt odd about leaving her here.

Lina must have seen the worry in my face, because she reminded me, “I’m twenty.”

“Right. Okay, yeah.”

She gave both Peyton and I a hug before bounding back toward the elevators.

As we walked outside, neither of us said a word until we got to my car. I opened the door and as she started to get inside, I asked, “Is that my shirt?”

She looked up at me and smiled sheepishly. “Um, yeah, I sort of borrowed it the morning I left. I can give it back to you. Not now, but you know, after I get other clothes.”

“No, it’s okay. It looks better on you.”

She licked her lips as she got inside the car and as I rounded the hood and got behind the wheel, I tried not think about how fucked up it was that she was wearing my shirt with another man’s ring on her finger.

“I’m not engaged,” she stated firmly. “I was having drinks at a bar with some people I work with and Trent showed up and put the ring on my finger and left. I didn’t say yes. I swear! Then I had more drinks and woke up this morning and couldn’t take it off. Then I found Nonna in bed and...” she started crying and out of habit I reached out and put my hand on her leg.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to explain. I know. It’s okay.”

She wiped her tears as she looked out the window. It had clearly been a long day for her. I didn’t want to upset her more. She said she wasn’t engaged and I believed her.

So why did it still feel like I’d just been kicked in the balls?

PEYTON

“I HOPE THE KIDS DANCE THIS YEAR.” BIANCA SCRUNCHED HER nose as we stacked red Solo cups up on the drink station to set up for the Valentine’s Day dance.

I was in charge of refreshments, so I made Nonna’s “Fancy Punch” which was made with Sprite, Hawaiian Punch, and sherbet ice cream. Technically the saint inspired holiday wasn’t until Monday, but the school dance was on Friday.

“They didn’t dance last year?”

“No, but I think that had more to do with the DJ. This year, *I* took care of securing the entertainment, and my DJ assured me he would not be playing Baby Shark.”

I froze. “They did not play Baby Shark.”

The school was K-8 which meant some of the students were preteens and a few were teens. I doubted a ton of them attended a school dance that was also catering to five-year-olds, but still you had to play to your audience.

“They did. But last year the DJ was hired by the PTA who is run by Daria St. Royce, who hired the DJ she had for her son’s *third* birthday party. When confronted with the hiring of ‘Baby Shark DJ’ her defense was that she wanted clean music. I argued that there was a lot of music that fell between Baby Shark and WAP.”

“WAP?” I filled the ladle of fruit punch and poured it in my cup before taking a sip to check to see if it needed more Sprite or ice cream.

“By Cardi B.” Bianca checked my eyes to see if there were any signs of recognition. There weren’t. “It stands for wet ass pussy.”

I choked on my punch causing some of it to retreat north and come out my nose. Bianca, wholly unfazed by my punch spouting nostrils handed me a napkin.

Thank god no kids were here yet. Although, if they were Bianca wouldn’t have said what she did. Probably.

“Yeah, I’d say there’s definitely some middle ground between those,” I agreed as I wiped my face.

“I know, right?” She nodded before she snapped her fingers. “Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask, how’s your grandmother?”

“Good, she’s doing good.” It had been two weeks since I found her unresponsive in her bed. Every day she seemed like she was doing a little better, getting a little stronger. “She’s up and around, doing physical therapy and I have a nurse that comes and stays with her when I’m at work and is on call if I need nights or evenings, like tonight. Nonna’s not happy about it, she says she doesn’t need a babysitter. But I told her that she’s there for me, for my peace of mind. She scared the shit out of me.”

“Wow, in-home care, that can’t be cheap.”

“I’m sure it’s not, but apparently it’s covered by Medicare.”

I was surprised when I got a call from a representative from the in-home care service to set up interviews with nurses on the day Nonna was discharged. I thought there had to be a mistake. But apparently, she qualified for a program that covered it.

Bianca and I stood and chatted as kids and parents began to trickle in. I noticed that the moms chaperoning looked like they should be going to the Grammy’s not an elementary school dance.

I’d worn a simple red silk shirt and black slacks. These women looked like they should be on a red carpet, and I

suddenly felt very underdressed. “Was there a dress code I didn’t know about?”

Bianca chuckled. “It’s the ESD effect.”

“I’m sorry?” Was this another WAP situation? I’d only found out that BDE stood for big dick energy last year.

“Eligible Single Dads. We have a handful of them, including your ex, and it brings out the hunter in these women. Backless, low-cut dresses and f-u-c-k me heels are their weapons of choice.”

“Oh, right.”

“What’s up with you two, anyway? Is he the reason that you’re not wearing that fat rock from preppy boy?”

“No. He’s not the reason.” I glanced down at my bare left hand. “Nothing’s going on between us.” Sadly.

Maddox and I had been texting over the past couple of weeks, and I’d seen him at pickup and drop-off a few times but we hadn’t really talked. I’d been busy getting Nonna home, settled, and taking her back and forth to doctor’s appointments and physical therapy and spending time with Lina.

Things had been strange between us after he saw the ring on my finger, even after I explained that I wasn’t engaged. The night at the hospital, he’d dropped me off at my house without another word about the situation. I’d thought he would have wanted to talk about it, maybe get further clarification, but he hadn’t.

I told myself the distance he was keeping was because of Nonna, he was giving me space because he knew how busy I was, but I worried it was actually because he just didn’t care.

The more days that passed, the stranger it felt to ask to see him to explain in even greater detail that I wasn’t actually engaged, especially since he wasn’t asking.

I felt Bianca’s stare boring a hole into the side of my head, so I turned toward her. “What?”

She bit the inside of her lip, and I could see that she was waffling on whether or not to say what she had to say.

“What?” I asked again as a sick feeling settled in my belly.

Was Maddox dating one of the moms? Was that why he hadn't been around or asked to see me? Just thinking of having to see him with the women that Bianca had nicknamed the Divorced Housewives of San Francisco made me want to puke.

“I wasn't going to say anything, but at lunch today I overheard Hannah tell Willa that she had a big sister named Lina and that you're her mom.”

Relief washed over me that the hole-boring stare hadn't been because of gossip about Maddox being with one of the women here tonight.

Last week, one of the messages he'd sent me was letting me know he was going to tell Hannah that I was Lina's mom. He'd wanted to run it by me since I was her teacher, and he knew it might get around the school. I'd been fine with him telling her, excited even.

For so long, I'd kept having a baby a secret from so many people and now that it wasn't, I felt like I could finally live my life. My true, authentic life.

“Is that true?” she asked.

“Yes. I had a baby in Germany that I wasn't allowed to keep. I never told anyone about her, not even Maddox, but it all came to light recently and we've been reunited with her.”

She stared at me for a moment with a totally blank face before saying, “Holy shit! Your life really is a Lifetime movie.”

I chuckled. She still didn't know the half of it. She had no idea that Lina had been born on November eleventh. Or that Nonna'd had a baby girl and named her Angelina, of all things. Those coincidences were still a lot for me to take in.

My life really was like a made for TV movie.

I just hope it has a happy ending, I thought as my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw Trent's name on the screen.

For the past two weeks I'd called and messaged at least twice a day, but he hadn't called me back. We hadn't spoken since he showed up at the bar and proposed. I'd been trying to reach him to break up with him since Nonna was released from the hospital, but he'd been avoiding my calls and not returning my voicemails. He just kept texting that he'd call as soon as he could.

Bianca must have noticed the look on my face because she bumped her hip against mine. "Go. Take that. I got this covered."

"Thanks," I said before heading out of the double doors that led to the back hallway for some privacy.

When I opened the text, I saw that it was a plane ticket for Saturday, tomorrow, from SFO to JFK with my name on it. I was still trying to make sense of why he'd sent that to me when my phone rang. It was Trent calling.

"Hey," I answered.

"Did you get the ticket?"

"I did, but I told you I'm not coming to New York. I'm not going to the partner's meeting. And why haven't you called me back?"

"I've been busy. And, of course, you're coming. I already told everyone my fiancée would be attending."

As soon as he said that, I knew what the proposal was about. I'd never thought it was actually about me, but now I knew that he wanted a ring on my finger for the partner's dinner because it made him look settled down. None of the partners in the firm were single.

I glanced down the hallway and saw that students were arriving.

"Trent, I can't really talk right now, but we *do* need to talk. I never said yes. I am not your fiancée. And I'm not coming to

New York.”

“Just get on the plane and we’ll talk when you get here. See you tomorrow.”

He hung up the phone and I stood there for a moment wondering what in the hell I was doing. Why was I dragging out a relationship with a man who didn’t give a shit about me? All he cared about was himself. He didn’t know anything about me or my life.

He didn’t know that Nonna had been in the hospital or that I’d found her unresponsive.

He had no idea about Lina.

He’d never once even asked if I liked my new job or not.

I quickly typed a message that was short and to the point.

Me: We’re done. I will FedEx the ring back to you. Please don’t contact me again.

As soon as I pressed send it was as if a huge weight had been taken off my shoulders.

I walked back into the auditorium and beelined over to the punch bowl where Bianca was holding things down with a line of kids and parents forming for Nonna’s “Fancy Punch.”

“Thanks!” I said as I scooted beside her and took the ladle from her hand.

“No worries. Everything okay?”

I nodded. “I just broke up with Trent.”

“Are you good?”

“Better than good.”

“Any chance you get to keep the ring?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want it.”

If I ever did get married, I wanted to wear Nonna’s ring. It meant something to me. It wasn’t just some overpriced piece of jewelry.

As I filled cups for the kids, I wondered if I did ever get Nonna's ring, if one day I could pass it on to Lina. Or was that not my place because she had a mom. She had a family with their own traditions and keepsakes.

"Get ready, game time," Bianca said as another swarm of students entered the room.

I put a smile on my face as I scanned the newcomers. Maddox was not signed up to chaperone. Lizzy, Hannah's mom was, but I still found myself hoping he'd make an appearance.

I had a feeling that this state was going to be the new normal for me. Always hoping that Maddox would make an appearance.

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MADDOX

“DADDY, HURRY!” HANNAH EXCLAIMED AS SHE RAN DOWN the hall toward the auditorium where the Valentine’s Day dance was being held.

The pink polka dot dress that she’d bought when she went shopping with Lizzy and Lina fanned out as she did two ballerina spins. The girls had spent the day shopping, having lunch at the Cheesecake Factory, and getting manicures and pedicures.

Lizzy and Lina had both sent me pics from each of the activities, which I, of course, forwarded to Peyton. She ‘loved’ all of them and thanked me for sharing them with her.

“I’m coming.” I hadn’t planned on chaperoning the dance tonight, but Lizzy wasn’t feeling great, and Ryan was at the firehouse on a shift, so I was called off the bench to get in the game.

Part of me hoped that Peyton would be here, but another part was hoping that she wasn’t. It had been two weeks since I’d seen her in the hospital wearing her engagement ring. I was still trying to come to terms with everything that had transpired in the past month.

It just seemed so unfair that after all this time, we came so close, or at least I thought we’d come close, just for it to be too late. But, I’d learned a long time ago, life wasn’t fair.

She’d insisted that she wasn’t engaged, that she hadn’t said yes, but the ring was on her finger. And to me actions had always spoken louder than words.

But she was also wearing my shirt. The one that she'd "borrowed" from me the night she left for Germany. And I had questions about that.

Did she wear it every night?

Had she specifically put it on because she'd gotten engaged?

I wanted to be happy for Peyton. She'd had enough pain in her life. If she did decide to marry Trent and he made her happy then, I needed to find a way to be happy for her.

Since the night at the hospital, when I'd done pickup and drop-off, I'd kept my distance. I was scared that if I spoke to her before I'd been able to come to terms with the situation, I'd say something that I would regret. Like beg her to leave Trent and be with me. Tell her that I loved her and had always loved her and that we were meant to be together.

But if I did that and she didn't feel the same way, I wasn't sure I'd be able to recover from that.

Lina mentioned that she'd seen her a few times. She'd gone over to Nonna's and had dinner. She'd also gone over to watch *The Bachelor*. And the three generations of Russo women had gone on a few walks to get Nonna's strength back up.

As happy as I was that Lina and Peyton and Nonna were getting to spend time together, I had to admit, I'd had FOMO whenever I heard about their visits. I wished that I could be there, too.

I did get to see Lina every day at work, but it wasn't the same. We decided not to divulge that she was my daughter for a while. Actually, *we* didn't decide. Lina did. She didn't want anyone to treat her differently. And as much as I wanted to shout from the rooftops that she was my daughter, I had to respect her decision.

She'd hung out with Hannah and I over the last weekend. We'd gone to Fisherman's Wharf, Alcatraz, and ridden on a cable car. It was sort of fun doing touristy things with my girls.

Hannah was loving having a big sister. The two of them liked to gang up on me and make fun of me, if Lizzy was around, she was usually the ringleader. I loved seeing them all bond, even if it was at my expense.

All my adult life, I'd had no idea Lina existed, yet somehow having her in my life had filled a void I hadn't known I'd had. For years I'd felt like there were missing pieces in the puzzle of my life. She was definitely a piece. Just like Hannah was.

And now the picture is damn near complete, I thought as Hannah grabbed my hand and we walked into the auditorium under a balloon arch.

I knew that in a few years, maybe even sooner, my little Peanut wasn't going to be this excited about going to a dance with her dad. I was going to soak this time up like a sponge.

Before I saw Peyton, I heard her. Her laugh. It washed over me like a breeze on a hot day. Like the first sip of beer after twelve hours of manual labor. Like a shot of whiskey in a snowstorm. It soothed me. Warmed me from the inside out.

I glanced up and saw her standing behind a table with a large bowl of punch on it. Her hair was half up and half down, and she was wearing a red top and black slacks. The shirt was a button down that was loose but clung to her in all the right places. It revealed a tiny hint of cleavage. My lips tingled with desire to kiss her there. I wanted to slowly unbutton her shirt and...

"There he is! I was wondering when you were going to show up." I turned and saw Nick holding a single red rose in his hand.

"Where's Bella?"

He nodded toward the dance floor. "Out there."

I glanced over and saw that Hannah had run out and joined Bella and Lexi on the dance floor. The girls were all giggling as they hopped around.

"Is Alex here?" I asked when I saw Lexi.

“No, he’s at home with Sadie and baby Tommy.”

After a scary start to the delivery, Sadie had given birth to a healthy baby boy. Thomas Alexander Vaughn—they named him after her father and Alex—came into this world screaming weighing in at six pounds and eight ounces. He would be two weeks old tomorrow.

“I brought Lexi,” Nick explained. “She’s going to sleepover to give Sadie and Alex a little breather. I can take Hannah Banana, too.”

“Sounds good.” I knew my daughter would not want to miss out on a sleepover with her besties. “Why do you have a rose?”

“It’s a Valentine’s Day dance.” He winked. “Ya gotta come prepared.”

“This isn’t *The Bachelor*.”

“Maybe not for you.” Nick’s lips curled in a half-grin. “How are things with your baby mama?”

I didn’t need to ask which one. “Good.”

Nick’s eyes narrowed. “You haven’t told her, have you?”

“Told her what?”

“That you’re in love with her. Still.”

“She’s engaged.”

His eyes widened slightly before his brow creased and he glanced over in Peyton’s direction. “I don’t see a ring on her finger.”

“She might not be wearing it now, but she had a ring on at the hospital.” Even though I believed her that she hadn’t said yes, the fact that she wore the ring meant she hadn’t said no.

At an early age, life had taught me to believe people’s actions more than their words and not to expect the worse, but to prepare myself for it.

“Damn, bro. Sorry.”

“Would you like to dance?”

We turned and saw Heather Combs standing in front of us. Thankfully, she wasn't speaking to me, her attentions were directed at Nick.

"I thought you'd never ask." Nick smiled, handed me the rose, and the two made their way to the dance floor.

As I stood, watching the kids and parents do the Cupid Shuffle line dance I did my best to not keep looking over at Peyton every few seconds. But it was tough. She was the flame and I was the moth. She drew me with an invisible force that I'd never been able to resist.

The question was, what was I going to do about it?

Whenever I had a problem to solve, I always started with the facts and moved my way out from there to find a solution. These were the facts.

Fact #1: There was a good chance that Peyton was going to end up with Trent. She hadn't said yes, but she had been wearing his ring and stayed with him for ten years.

Fact #2: Peyton was in my life again and I didn't want to lose her. Even if we weren't together, she was my best friend. The first person I wanted to tell if something good or bad happened. These past two weeks, not seeing her or speaking to her, had been torture. I missed her.

Fact #3: We shared a daughter. Even though we didn't raise her, we were still family. We would always be in each other's lives thanks to our common bond of Lina.

Once all those facts crystalized in my head, the solution was clear. I knew exactly what I had to do.

The rest of the dance passed by quickly. I danced with Hannah a few times and listened to Nick talk about his new podcast.

When it ended, I walked Hannah to Nick's car, gave her a hug, and told her I'd pick her up tomorrow. But instead of going to my car, I waited on the steps of the front entrance of the school. Now that I had some clarity, I needed to speak to Peyton.

I waited, and waited, and when the parking lot was all but empty, I was beginning to think I might have missed her somehow.

“Hey!” The brunette I’d seen talking to Peyton all night walked out and greeted me.

“Hi.” I lifted my hand in a wave.

“I’m Bianca Santos, I teach second grade.”

“Miss Bianca, yes, I’ve heard good things.” Her class had a waiting list each year. Lizzy had already put Hannah’s name on it. “Maddox Cruz, Hannah’s dad.”

Her lips turned up in small grin. “Yeah, I know.” She pulled out her keys. “I’m about to lock up. Peyton’s in her classroom, she had some work to catch up on.”

I wasn’t sure how she knew that I was waiting for Peyton. Maybe she’d seen the longing looks I’d been shooting her way all night.

“Oh, okay.” I wondered how long she would be. It didn’t matter, I would wait. I needed to speak to her.

“Do you want to go in?” she asked holding the door.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks,” I said as I passed her.

Bianca wore a knowing smile. “Just let Peyton know I locked up the front and it’s just the two of you in the building.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “I will, thanks.”

As I walked down the hallway, my nerves were getting the better of me. I wasn’t sure why. It’s not like I was going to ask her to be with me. The opposite actually.

Before I even got to her room I heard her singing, off key, which meant she was happy. She only sang when she was happy. I hoped that this conversation wouldn’t kill her good mood. But it had to be done. I wanted to be able to call her to talk. I wanted to be able to see her, not on the school grounds. I wanted my best friend back.

The classroom was empty when I walked in, but I saw that the door to the supply closet in the back of the room was open and the melodic sounds of her tone-deaf stylings were coming from there.

“Hey,” I said quietly as I lightly knocked on the doorframe.

“Ahh!” she yelped as she jumped in the air.

“Whoa.” I ducked as a roll of paper towels came flying at my head. I chuckled as I bent down and picked up the Bounty roll.

She swatted my arm as I handed the quicker cleaner upper back to her. “You scared me!”

“Sorry. Bianca let me in. She said that she locked up the front and it’s just the two of us in the building.”

Peyton’s breath hitched. I wasn’t sure if it was because we were alone, or if it was the aftermath of the adrenaline from the scare.

“Oh, okay. Hi.”

“You look...really pretty.” I wanted to tell her that she looked so hot I wanted to rip that silky shirt off of her, but that wouldn’t be the best way to start this talk.

A blush crawled up her cheeks as she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Thanks.”

“Look, I know things have been...a little off between us the past couple of weeks.”

She nodded in agreement.

“I think you know this, but I’m going to tell you anyway, I love you, Peyton. I always have and I always will. Nothing will ever change that. For a long time, I thought that love had to look a certain way. But tonight, I realized something. My love for you is more than just romantic, it’s deeper than that. It’s bigger than that. You are a part of me. I need you like I need air to breathe or water to live.

“The years that we were apart, something was missing. It felt like I had a phantom limb. Or, I guess, a phantom heart. I don’t want to ever feel like that again. I want you in my life. Forever. And I don’t want any sort of romantic messiness to threaten that or make me lose you. I would rather be best friends with my soulmate than not have you at all. And you are my soulmate, Peyton.”

I took a deep breath. “And not only that, we have Lina. No, we didn’t raise her together, but she’s half you and half me. That’s a bond that will never be broken. I don’t want anything to come between that or get in the way of that. I love you, Peyton. You’re my family and you will be my family forever.”

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PEYTON

I SHOULD BE HAPPY ABOUT WHAT MADDUX WAS TELLING ME. He said that he'd rather be best friends with his soulmate than not have me at all. He'd said that I was his soulmate.

He was telling me that he wanted me in his life, forever. That he wanted to be family. That's all I'd ever truly wanted. A real family. I should be ecstatic. But instead, all I felt was disappointment.

I stood there and tried to tell myself that it was better this way. Less complicated. What if we got together and it didn't work out? What then? Then I could lose him.

I'd done that already. I didn't think I could survive that again.

"Your hands are shaking," he said, pulling me out of my inner musings.

"Are they?" I glanced down and saw that sure enough, they were trembling.

"Is it still from me scaring you?" The timbre in his voice vibrated through me.

I nodded.

"You don't have to be scared, it's just me."

"I'm not scared of you. I'm scared of losing you," I answered honestly.

He stepped forward and brushed the hair off my face, pressing his lips to my forehead as he whispered, "You won't

lose me. I'm not going anywhere. Ever.”

The promise was nice to hear. And I knew if we remained just friends, best friends, then that would be the case. The thing was, I didn't just want to be friends. I wanted to be more than that.

An internal war was waging inside of me. One side was fighting for me to tell him that I didn't just want to be his friend. That I loved him and wanted to be with him. But the other side was equally as aggressive with its stance that if I did that and things didn't work out, I was opening up the door to lose him. I knew that was probably me projecting my own feelings of insecurity. I'd been in therapy for five years and I wasn't sure I was any closer to working through my abandonment and attachment issues.

I exhaled as Maddox wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close for an intimate embrace. As much as I wanted to tell Maddox that I didn't just want to be his friend, I knew it was for the best to just keep my mouth shut. Soulmate as a best friend. That was more than a lot of people had. I needed to count my blessings and stop being greedy.

The problem was, with Maddox rubbing his hand up and down my back as he held me tightly and I was cocooned in his muscular arms inhaling the musky fresh scent that was uniquely him, greedy was exactly what I was feeling.

I closed my eyes and rested my head on his chest. I just wanted to absorb all of Maddox. There was nothing like being held by him. Well, except him being inside of me. That was the only thing that was better.

But this was a close second and I'd take it. I'd take any chance I got.

He shifted his legs, and I felt the evidence of his arousal press against my belly. I guess I wasn't the only one who was feeling greedy.

I lifted my chin, and my eyes met his.

“Ignore it. It happens when I'm with you.”

“I don’t want to ignore it,” I confessed. “I want to give it lots and lots of attention.”

“You do?”

“Yes, but I don’t think...” I glanced around the supply closet. “They probably have cameras.”

“There’s no cameras in the closet.”

“How do you know?”

“I installed the security system.”

Right. How had I forgotten that?

I knew that having sex in the supply closet wasn’t the most responsible thing to do. But Maddox brought out the throw-caution-to-the-wind girl inside of me. The one who I suppressed because I was scared of anyone seeing me, the real me.

But Maddox saw me. He always had. From the moment he sat down next to me at the lunch table, he’d seen me.

“Okay.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, sensing my hesitation.

If we were just going to be friends from now on, I wanted, no needed to have one more night with him. Something that could warm me up on cold, lonely nights. Which, let’s face it, if I wasn’t going to be with Maddox, there would be a lot of in my future.

“Yes,” I responded breathlessly.

He turned around and closed the door. When he did the only light was from the small, low watt bulb that hung overhead. The closet had always seemed spacious. It was a few hundred square feet which was larger than my first apartment in the Bronx. There were shelves that lined the walls and an island in the center with drawers and cabinets for storage.

But now that Maddox occupied it, it seemed very, very compact. His six foot two, athletic frame ate up all the empty space in the room. He overwhelmed it.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he checked once more as his hands gently cupped my face.

“I might be confused about a lot of things, but not wanting this. I want this. I want you. I’m very clear on that.”

He let out a deep moan as he bent down and captured my mouth in his. He began to undo the buttons on my shirt, and I returned the favor working on his. My trembling hands were not as quick as his nimble fingers, and he was pushing the fabric off my shoulders before I even made it to the third button on his dress shirt.

Our kiss was broken as he finished unbuttoning his own shirt and took it off. His hands fell on my hips, and he lifted me up roughly and sat me on the island’s butcher block top. His whiskey stare pinned me in place as he brushed my hair off my shoulder and pressed his lips to my neck.

“This is all I think about. Your skin, your smell, your touch. I’m obsessed,” he whispered as he pressed soft kisses to the sensitive spot just beneath my ear.

“Same,” I managed to breathe out as my hands roamed over the muscular planes of his shoulder blades. My singular response was nowhere near as poetic as his statement, but I was actually proud of myself for being able to speak at all.

His hands brushed against my ribs, the roughened edges of his fingertips grazing my skin as he continued peppering me with open mouth kisses to my neck then collarbone.

As he traced the scalloped edges of my black lace bra, I gave myself an internal high five for wearing my sexiest bra and panty set. I’d only done it because I hadn’t done laundry so nothing else was clean. It had been between this and a bathing suit, and I was happy I’d chosen this.

My breath hitched in anticipation as he leaned down and his lips clamped onto my lace-covered nipple as he sucked my breast into his mouth. The material added a little extra friction that sent a shiver racing down my spine.

He continued lavishing attention on my breasts as one of his hands moved between us and undid the button at my

waistband. With impressive dexterity, his hand slid beneath my panties and slacks. The roughened pad of his middle finger brushed the sensitive spot of my already swollen pleasure button. My hips jerked in response. His hand cupped my sex and the base of his palm rubbed against my clit as his fingers sensually massaged the base of my opening.

My fingers raked through his hair as he continued sucking my nipples which were trapped beneath the lace barrier. Need consumed me like a wildfire. It spread through me from head to toe and I rolled my hips causing my sex to grind into his touch needily. Sensing my urgency, he turned up the intensity of his foreplay. His teeth bit down on my nipple as he used more force to massage the base of his palm against my engorged nub as he drove two fingers inside of me.

His teeth biting down on my nipple sent a shockwave like a direct line from my nipple to my sex. That combined with the pressure of his palm grinding against my clit as his digits caressed my tunnel took me up and over the edge of oblivion.

Flashes of light exploded behind my lids as I closed my eyes and fisted my hands in his hair. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed into me as I rode out my release. I surrendered to the sensation, allowing myself to get lost in the bliss bursting through me.

As I began to drift back to reality, a second wave of urgency crashed into me. This time it was panic. I didn't want this night, this feeling, this intimacy to end. If this was going to be the last time that we were together, I didn't want this to be over. It couldn't be.

I felt tears filling my lids, but I sniffed back the emotion.

Maddox removed his hand from between my legs and roughly tugged the lace cups of my bra down, leaving my breasts bare. I watched as he coated both my nipples in my own juices. My pink nipples glistened under the single overhead light. Then he leaned forward and licked every drop of my release off of them.

The sensual foreplay caused my belly to ache with signs of another release before the aftershocks of the first had even

subsided.

This was what being with Maddox was like. It was all-consuming. It was enveloping. It was *everything*.

In the back of my mind, I knew that being together like this tonight wasn't going to help heal my heart which would inevitably be broken once the benefits portion of our friendship was no longer available.

But, if we were just going to be friends, then I needed to remember every kiss, every touch, every single sensation, sound, feeling, smell, and second of this encounter because I knew there was a very good chance it would be our last.

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MADDOX

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THIS MEANT, OR IF IT MEANT ANYTHING, but I was not about to look a sex-gift-horse in the mouth. If being friends with benefits was what Peyton wanted, then that's what we'd be. I didn't have to worry about her ruining me for other women, she'd done that twenty years ago. From the first kiss we'd shared, I was destroyed for other women.

After licking and sucking all of her juices off of her nipples, I gripped her hips and lifted her off the island, setting her feet on the ground. My hands pushed her panties and pants down as she reached for the buckle of my pants. I held her steady as she stepped out of her shoes and kicked off her clothes. She'd barely managed to unzip me when I tightened my hold on her waist and spun her around, so she was facing away from me. A gasp echoed in the small, confined space. Her hands automatically flattened on the island in front of her.

Keeping one hand on her hip, I lowered down and whispered against the cuff of her ear, "Spread your legs."

Her breathing grew more labored as she did as I instructed. Using one hand I slid her hair off of her shoulder and pressed a kiss to the side of her neck. She let out a small sigh as I tilted her hips up, pressing her ass cheeks against my rock-hard shaft.

The motion caused her back to arch and her butt to press even harder against me. I snaked one arm around her waist and laid it flat on her belly, which trembled beneath my palm. The

other hand cupped first her right, then her left breast, massaging each with equal time and attention.

I continued kissing her neck as she rolled her hips back into me. The hand on her belly traveled south and my fingers dipped between her legs. Aware of her sensitivity from just having orgasmed, I traced her swollen clit with my finger as I pinched her nipples between my thumb and forefinger.

Her hips never stopped grinding against me as I lifted the hand that was playing with her breast up to her neck before tracing her lips then pushing my finger inside the velvety warmth of her mouth. She sucked my digit and my cock jumped at the memory of her mouth on it. I made sure that she got my finger nice and wet before returning it to her breast.

I covered her left breast with her saliva, then brought my finger to her mouth once more, pushed it inside and groaned as she sucked it even harder than the first time. As much as she enjoyed her nipples being played with when they were dry, she *loved* it when they were wet. Now that they were both amply coated, the pebbled nubs slid easily between my finger and thumb.

Every cell in my body was screaming for me to push inside of her. To claim her as mine. But I knew that I was close and there was no way that I was going to go up and over the edge without bringing Peyton with me.

“Have you ever fucked in a closet at work?” I whispered against her ear.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Has anyone ever made you this wet?” My lips grazed the cusp of her ear as I grazed her damp folds.

“No, just you. Only you.”

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

When I said the word fuck, a tremble ran through her entire body.

“Yes.”

Using the palm of my hand I pressed down on her upper back, causing her to lean all the way forward onto the island. The new position tilted her hips up, which offered her ass to me like a present.

My balls were tight against my body and my cock was throbbing heavily. This encounter was not going to last long which meant I needed her to come or close to it when I entered her. As much as I wanted to be inside of her, I knew that she wasn't close enough yet.

So instead of pushing into her, I stroked the head of my cock against her entrance several times until her seam began pulsing with need. Then, I lowered down, spread her ass cheeks and ran my tongue from her clit, along the seam of her sex, across her taint and then I tickled her puckered hole between her cheeks.

She gasped as the tip of my tongue teased the forbidden area. I continued licking her there as my hand slid between her legs and I pressed two fingers inside of her. Her walls were slick with her release and her body tightened around my digits.

Her back arched and her hips jerked as I pulled my fingers out and then pressed them in again.

“Oh...that feels...so good...”

When her knees buckled slightly and her tight canal began to spasm, I stood and replaced my fingers with my cock. I pushed into her with a forceful thrust as I gripped her hips tightly.

“Yes!” She cried out as her fingers clutched the sides of the butcher block.

“Do you want me to fuck you hard and fast or slow and steady?” I'd love to do both. I'd love to build up the momentum and then finish strong, but I was going to get ten strokes out of this, if I was lucky. I needed to know what would get her up and over the edge.

“Hard and fast,” she whimpered.

I kept my grip tight on her hips, pulled out and pushed in. Once, twice, by the third time I was slamming into her.

“Harder,” she breathed.

“Fuck,” I gritted out. I loved when she vocalized what she wanted.

Using more force, I thrust inside of her, this time tilting her hips up so I could go even deeper. That did the trick.

“Yes!” She cried out as her knees gave out beneath her. My fingertips dug into her flesh as I held her up so she didn’t fall. “Yes!”

My balls were tingling as I drove into her again. Then again. I was trying to hold on, to keep my release at bay, but she felt too good. My entire world exploded into a million tiny pieces as the longest, hottest climax of my life claimed me.

I collapsed as my dick continued to jerk with squirts of release. Her tight canal milked every last drop out of me before I stood. When I did, she pushed up off the block and turned around to face me.

We stared into one another’s eyes, and I don’t know why, but I just had to tell her one more time. “I love you.”

Her bottom lip trembled, as she replied, “I love you, too.”

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her into my arms. This might not be the way I’d planned things to go tonight, but I was glad I’d had at least one more time with her. One more time that she was mine, her body was mine, her heart, her soul were mine. Because until my last breath, I would always be hers.

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PEYTON

“IS LINA COMING OVER TODAY?” NONNA ASKED AS I HELPED her to her chair in the sunroom.

It was the same question she asked every day. I think I might have been replaced as her favorite. And I was perfectly okay with that.

“Yes, she is. Later, in the afternoon.” Lina had a busy day planned, but I was so thankful that she was making time to come over. She was going to goat yoga in the morning and then on to an escape room with some of the other interns, but she’d texted me asking if she could stop by after.

I loved that she wanted to spend time with not only me, but also Nonna. There might be a seventy-year age gap between the duo but they were like two peas in a pod. They’d played gin rummy while I graded papers the other night and Nonna laughed so hard she cried. I thought my heart might burst. I knew that it was just a coincidence that the daughter I was forced to give up had the same name as the daughter Nonna was forced to give up, but it definitely felt a little more like the Universe, or God, or magic fairies or something bigger than us was at play.

“Can you make me some tea?” Nonna asked as she patted my hand.

“Tea, coming right up.” I headed into the kitchen and took a moment just to be grateful for my life in this moment.

I filled the kettle up with water and put it on the burner as I counted the blessings in my life.

Nonna was getting stronger every day. I had my daughter in my life. The secret I'd held for so long was out and telling it had only made everything better. The fear and shame I'd lived with for two decades was gone. I'd broken up with a man who I knew wasn't good for me. I felt lighter. I felt like a different person.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I hoped it was Maddox. Last night in the supply closet had been incredible, better than incredible, but I wasn't sure where that left us.

Were we still just friends?

Were we friends with benefits?

I was hoping for the latter, but I knew that wasn't sustainable. It was playing with fire, and I would inevitably end up a pile of ashes. Because, at some point, he was going to meet someone. I was actually surprised he hadn't yet. Women were lining up to date him. Literally.

Every morning and afternoon at pickup I saw them wait their turn to flirt with him. They were constantly trying to set up playdates with their children and Hannah.

One day, some lucky lady, either one of them or someone else, was going to get past the walls he puts up. He would fall for them and any friends with bennies relationship we had would end. I'm not sure my heart, head, or hormones could take that.

It was better if we had boundaries. I knew I would never stop wanting him. But I needed him in my life. He *was* my soulmate. And I couldn't lose him.

When I pulled my phone out of my pocket, I was disappointed to see it was Trent telling me there was still time to catch my flight. I rolled my eyes.

He *never* listened to me. It was his way or no way. For years, that never bothered me. I had no problem doing things on his timelines and terms. But that was before. It was when I was living under the dark cloud of my past that had caused me to be a shell of myself. I hid it well.

I had lived a life a lot of people would consider rich and full. I had a job I loved, friends I loved, and a man in my life that took me on lavish vacations, dinners, and bought me expensive gifts. But inside I was hiding a huge part of my story, the biggest part. The part that made me who I was today. But now, things were different. No more clouds of secrecy, the sun was out and shining and I found my voice.

I was deciding whether to ignore the text or block him or both, when I heard the bell on the front door. No one used the doorbell except delivery people, so I figured it was a package. I'd ordered some things from Amazon to help organize my room.

It was time to unpack and get organized.

"Farfallina!" Nonna called out from the sunroom. "Door."

"I'm getting it." I put my phone back in my pocket and headed down the hall.

When I opened it, I expected to see a package on the porch, so I was looking down. Instead, I saw a rolling suitcase. I looked up and saw a sight that brought tears to my eyes.

"Leo!" I gasped as I threw my arms around his neck. "What are you doing here?"

As he hugged me, I realized just how much I'd missed him. He'd been the one constant in my adult life, except Nonna. But she'd lived so far away, I'd only seen her once or twice a year. Leo and I lived together for a decade and even after he moved out with Cam, he only moved around the corner so we saw each other every day or at the most every other day.

It had been a month since I'd seen his face and I'd missed it.

"I have a niece I need to shower with two decades worth of love, attention, and of course, gifts, a Nonna I need to help recover, and an *elephant* I need to meet."

I leaned back and wiped away the tears that had fallen down my face. "I'm so glad you're here! How long are you staying?"

“As long as you need me to, as long as that’s less than ten days, it’s all I could get off.”

“But, you’re gonna miss Valentine’s Day with Cam.”

“No I’m not. He’s at the hotel.”

“But, you brought your bag.” I pointed to the rolling case. “You’re not staying here?”

“No, I’m staying at the Marriot. But you know I’ve always wanted to show up on someone’s doorstep with my bag, and I will never pass up a cinematic bucket list opportunity.”

My head fell back as I laughed. Maddox and I might not have the sort of love and relationship that I’d always wished we would, but I had a family. For the first time in my life, I finally had a *real* family.

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MADDOX

“CAN I SEE LINA TODAY?” HANNAH ASKED FROM THE BACK seat as I turned onto Lizzy’s street to drop her off at her mom’s. I’d picked her up at Nick’s an hour ago after her sleepover and we’d gone to have pizza.

“Not today, she’s going to be with her mom today.” Lina had messaged that she was going to head over to Peyton’s after she went to some yoga class this morning with Wendell and Julissa from work and then to an escape room.

I glanced in the rearview mirror at Hannah who was staring out the window. “You mean her bionic mom, Miss Peyton?” she asked.

“Biological, yeah.”

“Can they come over to our house?”

“I think that they might already have plans.”

Hannah continued to gaze out the window forlornly. I wanted to remind her that she’d just come from a sleepover and had pizza, but Lizzy had discussed with me that I shouldn’t invalidate her feelings and I should just let her work through them. She was allowed to be disappointed with something even if she had a lot of other great things, as long as she regulated her behavior and didn’t throw a fit or act up.

She sighed. “I wish I could see Miss Peyton today.”

That made two of us. Last night had been amazing, but it did sort of put the talk we’d had in a gray area. I knew that hooking up while being friends wasn’t sustainable. One of us

would end up getting hurt and from my reaction when I'd seen the ring on her finger, I was pretty sure that one would be me.

The rest of the car ride was in silence. My usual chatterbox of a daughter didn't say another word until we got to Lizzy's and her mom greeted us at the front door.

"Hey, Banana." She said as she ruffled our daughter's hair. "Did you have fun at the dance?"

Hannah nodded.

"And the sleepover?"

"Yeah," she said quietly.

Lizzy looked up at me with a questioning look. I shook my head that it was nothing to be concerned about.

"Do you want to help Robbie give Bubba a bath? He's out in the backyard."

That offer lifted the dark cloud of disappointment that had been hanging over our six-year-old's head. She jumped up in the air. "Yeah!"

We watched as she ran out in the backyard calling both Bubba and Robbie's name and informing them she was coming.

"What had her in the depths of despair?" Lizzy referenced Hannah's favorite book *Anne of Green Gables* as we walked inside the house toward the kitchen.

"She wanted to see Lina today. I told her that Lina was going to see her mom. She asked if they could come over, I told her I thought they had other plans. She said she wished she was seeing Miss Peyton today."

"I'm guessing she's not the only one." Lizzy handed me a coffee and we sat at the breakfast nook.

"Yeah," I nodded, not even trying to deny my feelings.

"So how are things with you and Peyton?" Lizzy asked as she sipped her tea. "I heard you stayed after the dance to help her clean up."

“Who told you that?”

“Miss Bianca.”

“You know Miss Bianca?”

“She’s in my spin class. I saw her this morning.”

“Feeling that much better, huh?” I had a sneaking suspicion she hadn’t been that under the weather that she couldn’t go to the dance last night. She’d just wanted me to go to see Peyton.

“Yeah, it must have been because I rested last night.” She smiled sweetly and innocently batting her eyelashes at me. “Stop changing the subject. How are you and Miss Peyton?”

“Good. I talked to her last night.”

“I’m sure you did.” Lizzy wagged her brows.

I knew what she was insinuating, and she wasn’t wrong. Things had gone farther than talking, but we had talked.

“I did. I told her that she was my soulmate and that I’d rather have my soulmate in my life as a friend, as my best friend, as my family, than ruin it by things getting messy romantically.”

Lizzy stared at me for several beats before she said, “That is so...”

Her words trailed off, but I was pretty sure that I knew what she was going to say. Romantic. Selfless. Mature. One of those three.

“Stupid!” She swatted my arm, and it did not feel playful.

“Ow!” I rubbed my bicep; that actually stung.

“Why did you do that?!”

“Because it’s the truth. I *would* rather be friends with my soulmate than not have her in my life.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve heard since the series finale of Dawson’s Creek when Pacey told Joey that she’s off the hook and doesn’t have to choose.”

I remembered binging that show with Lizzy when she was pregnant and how irate she'd been during the scene in the kitchen when Pacey tells Joey that he loves her and that's enough for him. I'd thought it was selfless, but Joey didn't seem to take it that way and neither did Lizzy.

"Why are you acting like those are the only two options?" she asked. "Be friends or not be in each other's lives."

"Because, what if we did try something and then it didn't work out? What then? It's not just us anymore, we have Lina to think about."

"Lina," Lizzy repeated slowly.

"Yes, Lina."

"The most well-adjusted, sweet, bright *twenty-year-old* girl who was raised by two very loving supportive people and has a foundation of security and family? That Lina? That's who you're worried about?"

"You know what I mean." I took a sip of my coffee.

"And *you* know what I mean, so don't hide behind your daughter as an excuse because you're being a pussy."

I choked on my coffee. "Excuse me?"

Lizzy might not have a filter when it came to telling me how she felt but she had never resorted to name calling before.

"Sorry, but you are." She shrugged unapologetically. "You're scared Maddox. You're scared to love her and be loved by her because you don't think you can handle losing her again. But, guess what, you can. I'm sure it would be horrible and you'd be heartbroken, but that's basically been your constant state of living for the past twenty years and you've survived."

I sat, letting what Lizzy said sink in.

"I know you think what you did was so noble, so selfless, but it was actually selfish because the only person you're protecting is you. You need to fight for her. You need to remove your head from your ass, act like you got a pair, and go tell Peyton that being best friends with your soulmate," she

mimicked my voice, “is not enough for you. You need to tell her that you want to marry her and spend the rest of your lives together.”

“Anything else?” I asked, even though I knew she’d tell me anyway.

“Yes, I love you.” Sincerity shone in her eyes. “And I’m only saying this because you need to hear it. You deserve to be happy, Maddox.”

“I am happy.”

“You know what I mean. You deserve the love, the happiness, the life that only you and Peyton can have. She’s your lobster.”

“Can you please stop mixing TV show references? It’s so confusing.”

Lizzy swatted at me again. This time, it was playful.

I knew that Lizzy was right. About everything. Peyton was my lobster. I was scared. And if I ever wanted to have the love that only Peyton and I shared, I was going to have to man up and, act like I got a pair.

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PEYTON

“LEO IS AMAZING! I LOVE HIM *SO MUCH!*” LINA GUSHED AS WE sat at Nonna’s kitchen table eating ice cream.

Apparently, eating ice cream when it was cold outside was genetic, because it was in the thirties and when I mentioned ice cream sounding good, Lina had agreed. She said she’d always loved eating ice cream when it was cold outside. It made her feel cozy.

“He is,” I agreed wholeheartedly.

Leo and Nonna had both fallen asleep fifteen minutes into *Bachelor in Paradise*. We’d spent the day playing games, eating, and watching reality TV. It was perfect. Well, nearly perfect. It would have been perfect if Maddox had been here.

My phone rang and I saw that it was Trent calling. He’d called several times today, leaving messages insisting that we talk. I’d just been ignoring his calls.

“Do you need to take that?”

“No. It’s Trent.”

“Are you guys going to get married?”

“No,” I immediately shot back. “I broke up with him. He’s just choosing to ignore it.”

She nodded.

“What about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

Her cheeks flushed. “Um, well, there is sort of someone, but I don’t think he knows.”

“Really? Who?” I asked eagerly, then realized that I should respect her privacy. “If you don’t want to tell me, I totally understand.”

“You know Ryan? Lizzy’s husband.”

Oh no. Did she have a crush on Maddox’s baby mama’s husband? This would not end well. I tried to keep my face as neutral as possible. As an educator, I tried my best to listen to my students with no judgement, and my daughter definitely deserved the same judgement-free zone.

“Yeah,” I responded casually as I took another bite of ice cream.

“Do you know his brother, Robbie?”

Oh, thank god, I exhaled a sigh of relief.

“Yeah, he was actually one of the EMT’s that came when Nonna was unconscious. I didn’t know it at the time, but I recognized him last week when he was picking up Hannah with Ryan. He’s cute.”

“I know, right. I met him when I went shopping with Lizzy and Hannah for the Valentine’s Day dress.”

I’d heard that the three of them had a girl’s day, and as happy as I was that Hannah and Lina were spending time together, I had to admit, I’d been a little sad that I hadn’t been there. It just felt like there was so much I’d missed out on. I knew that I couldn’t make up for lost time, or anything like that. I just didn’t want to miss out on any new time.

Lina smiled as she tilted her head to the side. “I’ve never really been in a relationship. At school, I’ve always been so much younger than everyone else, so it’s not like I could date anyone. I graduated high school when I was thirteen and college when I was nineteen.”

“Yeah, I never thought about it like that. I was just so impressed that you did that, but I didn’t think about it from a social aspect.”

“I never really cared because I was obsessed with coding and busy with schoolwork, so I never really had time for a big social life. But I don’t know, now that I’m starting to go out more, I think I’m ready to date, but I’m not sure how.”

“I would love to give you advice.” I held up my phone as exhibit A. “But clearly I’m not the expert.”

Lina laughed.

“I’m always here, though. If you want to talk about anything, or pick out clothes, or run texts by me before you send them. And we have Leo, who is my go-to for all things men related.”

Lina’s face lit up at the mention of Leo’s name. “Do you think he would give me his number?”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t programmed it in your phone already. Actually, I saw he had your phone earlier, what was he doing?”

“He said he was adding me on Insta. Why?”

“Check under Uncle Leo.”

Lina picked up her phone and scrolled through it. Her jaw dropped. “It’s there, he even put a picture of himself.”

Of course he did.

“He did the same thing to me the first night we met.” Except in my phone, he put himself as Leo (GBF).

A text lit up the screen of my phone and I glanced down. When I saw who it was from, my pulse sped. Maddox’s name appeared on the screen.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. It’s from Maddox. He’s just checking in to see how we’re doing and to let us know that Hannah missed us today.”

“Oh, cool.” She set her phone down and I saw her take a deep breath as her hands flattened on the kitchen table. “Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask me anything.”

She looked down at her bowl. “It might be personal.”

“That’s okay. I’m your bionic mom, remember,” I teased, using the term that Hannah called us. “So nothing is too personal.”

She chuckled. “Right. Okay, so you and Maddox, are you guys...together?”

I dipped my spoon into the rocky road ice cream and shook my head. “No.”

“But, you guys are totally in love, right?”

“Um...well, I can only speak for myself but, yes, I am. I always have been.”

“Well, he is too.”

“I know he loves me, but I think he thinks it would be better if we’re just friends.” I actually knew that. That was what he’d said last night.

Her brow furrowed as her face scrunched up. “Are you kidding me?”

That was a phrase she used a lot, and I still wasn’t sure if it was a rhetorical question or not. But I answered it anyway. “No, he told me that.”

“Well, then he is lying because I saw his face when he thought that Nick was hitting on you and he—”

“Wait,” I interrupted her. “When did he think Nick was hitting on me?”

“At the hospital. When we got there. Nick said that you looked *soooo* good and that he knew your phone was dead because he tried to give you his number, and that he was going to give you a ride home. Maddox practically Hulked out on him.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And when I asked Maddox about you, he said that he’s only had one girlfriend, you. And that he loved you, not puppy love, but real love. He said it was the realest and only romantic love he’s ever felt.”

“Really?” I repeated again.

“Yeah, why do you think he’s paying for a nurse to be here for Nonna? Obviously, he loves you.”

“He’s paying for the nurse?”

Lina’s brow furrowed. “Yeah, when we left the hospital after baby Tommy was born, he called Samara and told her to find the best in-home care available for you guys. He said he wanted someone ready and waiting on the day she was released. He’s totally like twitterpated, head over heels, you’re the sun to his moon, in love with you.”

“He is?”

“Yeah, I mean, everyone knows it. Even *Lizzy* does, too. She calls you Totga.”

“Totga?” I had no clue what that was. Was it another WAP or BDE?

Lina smiled. “It stands for the one that got away.”

“Really?” I heard myself say again.

“Really. She’s been calling you that for years. *Way* before you saw each other at the reunion. And speaking of the reunion, did you know that Maddox wasn’t even going to go to the reunion until Alex texted him and said that *you* were going.”

“What?” Maddox never told me that.

“Yeah, he was supposed to have Hannah that weekend, but he asked Lizzy to take her.” Lina chuckled. “She made him agree to go on two playdates a month for a year before she’d agreed.”

“He agreed to go on playdates? To go the reunion?” Maddox *hated* playdates.

“Yeah, he’s still got five more months to go. But Lizzy said she’s going to let him off the hook. She told me she was only doing it to see how bad he actually wanted to go to the reunion. She never actually planned on making him do them. But then after he was so bummed, she was hoping maybe

someone would get him out of his funk. But now that she met you, she knows that you're it for him. Not even a playdate with Gal Gadot would get him over you. So she's not going to make him squirm anymore. She's not going to make him go on anymore playdates."

My head was spinning. This was so much information. But I did have an idea.

"Do you think that she might set up just one more?" I asked.

Lina's eyes twinkled. "I think that might be able to be arranged."

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MADDOX

“THANKS FOR COMING ALONG,” I SMILED AT LINA SITTING beside me in the passenger seat.

“No worries! I love hanging out with you and Banana.” She scrunched her nose as she glanced back where Hannah was in her booster seat, then turned back around. “Plus, it’s cool that we’re going to your high school. Can you show me where you met Peyton for the first time?”

“Of course!”

The annual Valentine’s Day carnival was happening today, and Lizzy had agreed to a playdate with Sandy Miller, whose oldest went to the high school, but she woke up this morning not feeling great. She must’ve known that I wouldn’t be happy about it because when she called, she said she’d already texted Lina to see if she wanted to tag along, and she had.

I hoped that Lina would be a buffer between me and Handsy Miller.

I’d messaged Peyton to see if she wanted to come too, a sort of walk down memory lane, but she said that she was behind on work this weekend and didn’t have anyone to stay with Nonna. The first part might be true, she could be behind on work. I had interrupted her the night before last at the dance when she was supposed to be catching up on work and distracted her a little bit.

But I knew for a fact that if she needed someone to stay with Nonna all she had to do was request it because that was the arrangement I’d set up with the private care service. Day

or night, all Peyton had to do was request a nurse and one would be there within minutes.

I felt a little guilty that she thought the service was paid for through Nonna's Medicare, but I knew she wouldn't accept it if she knew it was me paying for it.

"Okay, here we are. We're a little early, do you want to walk around and see where I had classes?" I asked Hannah in the rearview mirror.

"Are you kidding me?" Hannah exclaimed.

I glanced at Lina to see if she'd picked up on the fact that her little sister had started saying that phrase, but she just said, "Of course we do!"

We got out and as I walked up the steps of Union High, a wave of nostalgia hit me. I hadn't been back here since the day I got my diploma. I'd driven by, but walking on the steps, seeing the clock tower at the top of the building, smelling the unique scent of ocean breeze and the cannery that sat beside it was entirely different.

Lina and Hannah were walking ahead of me holding hands, and I took out my phone to snap a picture of them. I sent the shot to Lizzy and Peyton, who both "loved" it.

A year ago, if someone had told me that within a year I'd be back at my high school with my daughters, plural, for a playdate, I would have told them they were crazy. First of all, because at the time I thought I had only one daughter. And secondly, I hated this place.

I realized now the reason I'd had such an aversion to the high school wasn't because of the bad memories it held; it was because of the good memories. It hurt too much to see all the spots that Peyton and I had hung out.

But now that she was in my life again and I knew that she was here to stay, it wasn't so painful. It was actually kind of sweet. Especially since I was here with our daughter.

As Hannah and Lina walked through the booths that were set up for the carnival, I took a picture of the tree that Peyton

and I used to eat lunch under and sent it to her with the two hashtags. *#memories #wishyouwerehere*.

She immediately loved the photo and responded.

Peyton: *I wish I was there too. We'll have to go back soon.*

I put my phone in my pocket and ran my hands through my hair. I started to feel anxious, restless. This should be a happy day. I was with both my girls. I glanced over and saw that they were trying their luck at the plate coin toss. They were giggling and having fun.

This should be enough. Being with my daughters, having Peyton in my life should be good enough. But it wasn't.

Lizzy was right, which I had no plans of admitting to her. Telling Peyton that we should just be friends because she was my soulmate and I'd rather be friends with my soulmate than not have her in my life at all was horseshit.

I'd done it because I'd been scared that she was going to choose Trent, or just reject me, and then I'd lose her again.

But I wasn't sure I could do this friend thing. Yes, she was my best friend, but she was so much fucking more than that. She was the last face I wanted to see before I fell asleep and the first face I wanted to see when I woke up. She was the person I wanted to do late night food runs with and watch cheesy TV with. She was the person I wanted to share my day with, and I wanted to hear everything about hers. She was the person I wanted by my side through this life, whatever may come.

The money, the company, all that was amazing. I'd built all that from nothing and I knew if it went away tomorrow, I honestly wouldn't care. If the people I loved were healthy and happy and I had Peyton by my side, nothing else mattered.

Fuck. I'd made a huge mistake.

I hoped that it wasn't too late. I knew that she was at home working and this playdate was supposed to take a couple hours. After this, I'd drop the girls off and go to Nonna's. I'd pick up some Rocky Road on the way, just to set the mood.

Peyton was always in a better mood when there was ice cream.

“Hey girls!” I called out. “Do you want to go see the classroom?”

I figured I’d get the tour done before we had to meet Handsy.

“Are you kidding me!” Lina grabbed Hannah’s hand and the two skipped up to him. “Can you show us where you and Peyton met for the first time?”

“Sure.” I knew the school was unlocked because they were using the bathrooms in the gymnasium for the people at the fair. “I can walk you by the classroom that I first saw her and also the cafeteria where we officially met.”

“Dope!” Lina enthused.

“Dope!” Hannah seconded, although I think her enthusiasm had more to do with copying her big sister than it did with actually caring.

As we walked down the hallway, I felt like I’d entered a time machine. It didn’t appear that they’d done any renovations at all since I’d left. The walls were still a dingy cream color and the paint was peeling. The tiled floors were uneven and lifting, making them a trip hazard.

Since Alex, Nick, and I had all gone here and we were all doing well, I wondered if maybe we shouldn’t kick some cash their way. I made a mental note to bring it up at our next lunch.

I stopped at Mrs. Zolinski’s room and it was then that, for the first time, I noted the number on the door. 11. That’s the room number of the first place I saw her. I took out my phone and took a picture and sent it to Peyton and wrote: *Mrs. Zolinski’s class. Room 11. Coincidence?*

“This is it,” I told the girls.

I wasn’t the only one who noticed the special number, Lina pointed. “Look, eleven!”

“I know.” I smiled.

The door was locked but I showed them through the window which seat I was at when I saw Peyton for the first time and where she'd sat.

We kept walking and made our way to the cafeteria. Just like the rest of the building it didn't look like it had been updated. The tables were all lined up exactly how I remembered them. I weaved my way through to the corner table in the far left where Peyton had been sitting all alone.

"This is it." I sat down where she had been seated. "This is where I talked to Peyton for the first time."

"So cool!" Lina exclaimed. "I want to take a picture, but I need to go the bathroom first."

"I have to go potty, too!" Hannah shouted.

I started to get up to show them where it was, but Lina stopped me.

"No, don't get up. I know where it is, I'll take Hannah. And when I come back, I want to take a picture."

"Okay." I lowered back down.

As the girls left to go the restroom and I heard the door open and shut, I was actually glad for a moment alone to take this in. This was the exact place my entire world changed forever. I ran my hands over the top of the table, when I heard a familiar voice.

"Thanks for saving me a seat."

I turned around and saw Peyton standing there. And she was wearing my Roger Rabbit shirt.

PEYTON

I WISH I HAD A PHOTO OF MADDOX'S EXPRESSION. HE LOOKED *really* surprised that I was there. When I came up with this idea, I thought for sure Maddox would know that something was up.

Why would he think that he was going to a playdate at his alma mater? But Lizzy and Lina had both assured me that he would be none the wiser. They were right.

It took a second for him to recover from the shock, but then the corners of his lips turned up in a half-smile. "I didn't."

I chuckled and winked as I lowered down next to him, just like he'd done to me. "Yes, you did."

"What are you doing?" He asked. "Did you finish your work?"

Wow, he really had no clue what was going on. This was better than I could have imagined.

"Um, I didn't have any work. This was a setup."

"It was?" he looked around, probably to see what other surprises might be in store.

"Yeah, and Lina and Lizzy are in on it."

"They are?" he looked back at me.

"Yep." I took a deep, fortifying breath. "Maddox, I know that you said that it would be better to be best friends with

your soulmate than to not have me in your life at all, but I think that's crap."

His lips twitched. "Crap?"

"Yes. I do. I've spent the past twenty years of my life knowing that there was no way we could be together. I was in a relationship where I felt safe because I knew it would never compete with what we'd shared. I knew that it could never hurt me. Now I know that it didn't matter who I was with, I could have been dating Chris Evans or Zac Efron and if it ended, I would have been fine, because they weren't you.

"I might have borrowed this shirt, but twenty years ago I gave you something and you never gave it back. My heart. So anyone I've been with never had a chance, because my heart's been with you the whole time."

"Pey—"

"No." I held up my hand. "Let me finish, I need to get this out."

I could see that staying quiet was driving him crazy, but this was going somewhere and if he interrupted me, I wasn't sure I'd have the nerve to get there.

I took another breath. "I know twenty years is a long time, but Nonna told me about a friend of hers who she plays Mahjong with, Joanna, and she just reconnected with someone she was with *fifty* years ago. Apparently, he was a Chippendale's dancer and she was a Playboy bunny."

"Yeah, Mrs. G and Tom."

I blinked. "You know them?"

"Can I talk?" he asked.

I smiled. "Yes."

"Yeah, Mrs. G or Mrs. Garret was Alex's foster mom before he came to the home, she had to move to take care of her sister who was ill back East when he was eleven. But when Ash and AJ died, she came back to San Francisco to help him. And Mr. Burke, or Tom, is Sadie's dad. I was there when they saw each other again for the first time."

“You were?”

He nodded.

“Okay, I *definitely* need all the details on that later.” I shook my head and tried to refocus on what I wanted to say. “But, like I was saying, I know that twenty years is a long time, but when I saw you again, it was like no time had passed. You sat down next to me and everything I’d ever felt for you came flooding back. All of it. The love, the loss, the times we’d spent together. Those six months were the best time of my life, because of you. You are the best of me. You see me, the real me. You never cared about who my dad was, or that I had to have a security detail sometimes. You always respected my boundaries *and* allowed me to change my mind when I wanted to cross them. I still remember how many times you asked me if I was sure I wanted to do this the first time we were together.” I felt a tear slide down my cheek. “You are it for me Maddox Cruz. And I know that if we tried to be together and it didn’t work out, I would be devastated, but honestly, I don’t want to spend another day without you being mine. Officially. I want to be with you.”

“I want that, too.”

I lifted my hand again to stop him from speaking. “I’m not done.”

As much as I appreciated hearing him say that I was so close to the big finale and I didn’t want to lose my nerve.

He smiled and nodded.

“I know that I apologized before, but I need you to know that I am truly sorry for leaving you and not saying goodbye twenty years ago. And I’m sorry for leaving the reunion and not saying goodbye last year. But I promise you, if you give me the chance, I will never leave you again and I’d like to prove that to you by making it legal.

“You are the kindest, smartest, most loyal, loving, hottest, *sexiest* man in the world. When you look at me, it’s like everything else in the world disappears. All that exists is you and me. I never had a real home growing up, the closest was

Nonna's. But from the first time I looked into your eyes, you were my safe place, my happy place, my home. I know that we lost twenty years, but I don't want to lose another day, another minute, without you being mine, officially, so Maddox Cruz will you marry me?"

Maddox stared at me for a second before his lips curled in a wide smile. "Are you kidding me?"

I was pretty sure I knew what that meant, but I still asked, "Is that a yes?"

"No, that's a hell yes!" His mouth crashed onto mine as he wrapped his arms around me.

The kiss was filled with years of unanswered desire and passion. But suddenly, he pulled back.

"Wait. I don't have a ring for you."

"Oh, yeah, um well, I took care of that." I reached into my pocket and pulled out Nonna's ring. "It's Nonna's."

"Nonna's," he said with me. "It's perfect."

He took it from my hand and looked into my eyes. "As much as I appreciate all of this, you did sort of steal my thunder."

"I did?"

"Yeah, you're not the only one who's been planning something."

"I'm not?"

"Nope."

Maddox stood and pulled out his wallet and handed me an old looking folded-up piece of paper as he sat back down. I unfolded it and saw that it was a magic eye picture. I relaxed my vision and two words appeared. Marry me.

I clasped my hand over my mouth.

"When did you get this?"

"I had it custom made the day after I said I love you on Pier 39."

I looked up at him in shock and in love. “And you’ve carried it around all this time?”

“Yep.” He nodded and I saw that his eyes were also filling with tears.

I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him. I had no idea what I’d done to deserve him or how he felt about me, but I would spend the rest of my life trying to make him feel as happy, loved, safe and special as he made me feel.

“The girls should be back any second.” He sniffed as he pulled back. “They just had to go to the bathroom”

“Oh, they’re not going to the bathroom. That was part of the plan.”

For being so smart, sometimes he missed things because once he thought something was a certain way, it was hard for his brain to think otherwise. Maybe that’s why he’d always loved me. Once his brain locked on to loving me it was a done deal. That thought was oddly comforting to me. It soothed some of my insecurities.

“They’re waiting outside for us.”

We stood and headed out of the cafeteria and when we opened the double doors Nonna, Leo, Cam, Lizzy, Ryan, Robbie, Hannah, Lina, Alex, Sadie, Tommy, Penelope, Nick and Bella were all gathered in the hallway staring at us expectantly.

I lifted my hand. “He said yes!”

The group erupted in cheers. Maddox picked me up and spun me around and as everyone circled us, when he finally set me down, he cupped my cheeks and kissed me, sealing our fate once and for all. I was his and he was mine.

EPILOGUE

MADDOX

I GRABBED MORE WATER BOTTLES FROM THE FRIDGE TO PUT out in the ice chests outside. Hannah's seventh birthday was in full swing. The kids were all out by the pool and most of the adults were congregated around them. I looked around at the state-of-the-art kitchen and still couldn't really believe this was where I lived.

I'd always loved this house, but it had never been a home. That is, until Peyton and Nonna moved in. Now, just like everything in my life, it felt whole. Complete.

This was the home that we were going to grow old in, that our grandkids, if we were so lucky, would come and stay with us in. It was where we would have Christmases, Thanksgivings, 4th of Julys in. All of the traditions and things I'd dreamed of having when I was growing up in care without a family, we'd have here.

Peyton and I. Together. Forever.

We still hadn't set a date for the wedding, mainly because we decided that Alex and Sadie should be able to get married first. After they walked down the aisle, then it would be our turn. I didn't mind waiting. Peyton was mine, and I was hers, and I knew that it was till death do us part. I didn't need a piece of paper to tell me that. Not that I wasn't looking forward to it, I was. But the most important thing was just being with Peyton, and I was. I finally was.

I lifted my head as Peyton rushed through the accordion doors that led out to the backyard. Her eyes were huge and sparkling, the smile on her face spread from ear to ear as she power-walked toward me. “I just met Mrs. G and Mr. Burke.”

She was acting like she’d just met royalty, or the Kardashians, it was adorable. I hadn’t told her I was inviting them to Hannah’s seventh birthday because I’d wanted it to be a surprise. Seeing the look on her face, I knew I’d made the right decision.

“The whole time I was talking to them I was picturing him in a speedo and her in a bunny costume, is that weird?” she cringed.

I chuckled, “No.”

“They are so cute and so in love.” She glanced over her shoulder where Tom and Mrs. G were talking with Leo and Cam who had flown out for Hannah’s birthday. Tom’s arms were wrapped around Mrs. G’s waist.

Over the past year or so I’d gotten to know them, I’d noticed that Tom was very protective of Mrs. G. He never let her out of his sight, and he always had his hand on her lower back or wrapped around her waist, or he was holding her hand. She couldn’t be more than an arm’s length away. It was clear now that he had her, he was never letting her go. I knew the feeling.

Peyton sighed. “I just feel so bad that they lost so many years together.”

I knew that even though she was talking about Mrs. G and Tom she was thinking about us, too. I pulled her into my arms and kissed her on the forehead. She melted against me.

“But they’re together now, and that’s all that matters,” I whispered on the top of her head. She nodded against my chest.

“Hey guys!” Lina said as she walked into the kitchen.

I looked up and saw two people that I recognized from pictures but had never actually met. Carrie and Frank Chaplin, Lina’s parents. They’d been trying to come out for the past

couple of months, but Frank had to have back surgery so he wasn't able to travel.

"Hi, it's nice to finally meet you in person!" I reached out my hand, but Carrie threw her arms around Peyton and hugged her tightly.

I glanced over at Frank who didn't look at all surprised by his wife's outburst of affection. He was just smiling at her lovingly. Not letting Peyton go, she reached out and gripped my forearm, looking up at me with tears brimming in her eyes.

"Thank you both, so much! You gave us the greatest blessing in the world!"

"Thank you for taking such good care of her!" Peyton's voice was a little shaky as she pulled back and looked at Carrie. "I couldn't have asked for better parents for her."

Both Peyton and Carrie were crying, and I saw that Frank wipe his forefinger and thumb beneath his eyes as his glasses fogged up.

"Okay, okay! Enough crying, this is a party! Come on, I want you to meet Hannah. She's like a mini-me!"

Lina pulled her parents away to the backyard where Lizzy, who looked like she was about to pop but still had two months left, Ryan and Robbie were supervising the kids in the bouncy house.

I watched as Lina introduced everyone and then I noticed how close she was standing to Robbie and how her head fell back at something he said. He stood a little taller and puffed his chest out.

"What's that about?" I pointed to Robbie and Lina.

"What?" she asked, her eyes wide with innocence.

"Is something going on there?"

Her lips pursed and she shrugged. I guess there were worse guys Lina could be interested in. Robbie had just graduated with a degree in fire and had gotten on at Ryan's firehouse.

Still, I planned on keeping an eye on them.

After flirting with Robbie, Lina took her parents to meet Nonna and Angelina, Nonna's daughter. I'd found her two months ago. She was seventy-four now, and had grown up in Italy. She'd flown out last month and was spending the summer with us.

The reunion had been one for the books. I hadn't understood a word that was said because Angelina only spoke Italian, but I'd definitely shed a few tears as I watched mother and daughter reunited.

Carrie hugged both Nonna and Angelina tightly, too. And I was pretty sure she was crying again.

"Look," Peyton pointed to the clock on the stove.

I turned and saw it read: 11:11

She beamed up at me. "Make a wish."

"I can't. I have everything I've ever wanted."

"Everything," she breathed.

"Everything."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shawna lives in Southern California and is a mama to two adult people (she doesn't know how that happened...they were babies like two seconds ago!). She loves all things romance from books (of course!), movies, songs, and even reality TV... please don't judge.

She writes contemporary romances that are filled with sweet and sassy heroines, cinnamon roll alphas, casts of supportive *cough: meddling* family and friends who put the fun in funny, toe-curling combustible heat, and sugary sweet "aww" moments that will have your hearts and e-readers melting.

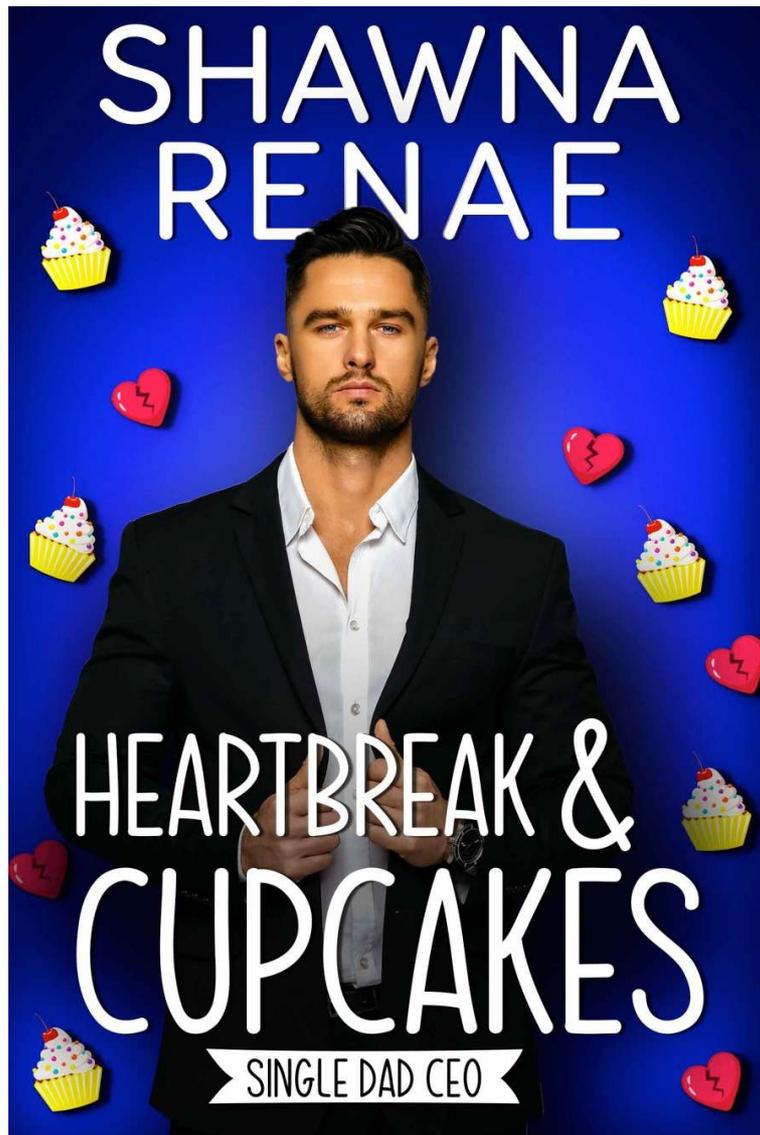
When she's not writing or reading, listening to love songs on Spotify, or binge-watching TV she loves spending time with her dog Romeo, teaching Zumba classes, and drinking lotsa Dr. Pepper. Oh, and she also has a girl crush on Julia Roberts and is a die-hard Dawson's Creek fan. #Pacey4Ever

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