



Football Legend
Notorious Playboy
Sarcasm Extraordinaire

Henri

KELSEY CLAYTON

HENDRIX

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I'm dedicating this book to myself.

For managing to cram this into my writing schedule.

For writing such a heart-melting character.

And because it shares a birthday with me.

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EVERYONE HAS THAT ONE TRUE THING IN THEIR LIFE. A childhood friend. A high school sweetheart. A trusted adult. Mine, on the other hand, is football. The tension of the game and the burning need to win—it's everything. My best memories, my most cherished moments, the turning points in my life, all follow the pigskin.

My earliest memory is being four years old and running down the field with a ball in my hand. Granted, I was going the total wrong direction and the touchdown I scored was for the other team, but it was the most fun I'd ever had. Once I got a sense of direction and learned the rules, my parents had to force me to come in for dinner.

Pressing all my weight into my heels, I jump as high as I can to catch the ball that's soaring through the air. The power behind the throw makes the widest grin stretch across my face, knowing that the person who threw it—my best friend and favorite player—is finally back from a two-year injury.

Asher Hawthorne smirks as I jog across the field to him. It must feel good, to get back to what he loves after so long. It was two years ago when a couple of asshole players from another team sacked him from opposite directions and screwed his shoulder. After an experimental surgery and more dedication than I've ever seen in my life, he's been cleared to play again. His first game back is this Monday, and I can't fucking wait for it.

"Goddamn, I've missed your throws," I tell him. "You're definitely ready for this weekend."

He nods slowly, stretching out his shoulder. “I still want to practice some more.”

“Ash, we’ve practiced every day for the last month. I’m telling you—you’re ready.”

My words don’t do enough for his confidence because he sighs. “One more hour?”

“All right, fine,” I cave. “But we’re taking tomorrow off.”

The corners of his mouth raise and he backs up, getting ready to throw the ball. I groan and take off running.

ONE OF THE BEST parts of having money are the luxuries. For example, when one of your best friends is across the country for school, you can do things like hire a private jet to bring her home for Asher’s first game back on Sunday after being out of the game for two years. She’s probably going to kill me for it, the same way she wanted to when I paid for her college tuition and NYC apartment, but that’s the breaks when you’re my number one.

I hang up with the company after confirming there will be a jet waiting for her at JFK Airport on Monday morning, and swipe over to my text messages.

**Colby: Hey Len. Plane is booked for 8 AM on Monday.
JFK. Make sure you’re there.**

After hitting send, I slip my phone into my pocket and walk over to the fridge to grab a beer. Practicing with Asher is understandable, since he wants to make sure he’s in the best possible shape, but I swear I’ve worked ten times harder recently than I normally do. He’s in better condition now than he was before the injury. As am I.

The vibration against my leg is expected, and I chuckle while bringing the phone to my ear, not even bothering to look at who it is.

“Lennon, if you’re going to bitch at me about the private plane, save it. It’s already paid for.”

Instead of my favorite girl on the line, a less expected voice comes through. “Lennon? Who is that? Is there a girl in your life you haven’t told me about?”

I wince at the instant interrogation. “No, Mom. She’s just a friend.”

The excitement in her voice plummets. “Oh. That’s a shame.”

My mother is a gem, but her obsession with my love life is a little much. She doesn’t seem to understand that I can be completely happy without having a permanent woman in my life. If I’m honest, relationships scare me more than the thought of losing my career. Something about the commitment and the responsibility just sends me running for the hills. Besides, it would be downright rude to give all of me to just one girl.

“Is everything all right, Ma?”

“Yes,” she answers tartly. “Why does something have to be wrong for me to call my son?”

I chuckle. “Down, woman. I’m just checking.”

The two of us talk for a little bit, about my dad’s medical issues that scare the shit out of me, and my little brother’s run-ins with the law. I hate all the stress she’s under, but as much as I’ve tried to help, there isn’t a lot I can do. I already cover all their medical expenses, and my brother seems to have an unlimited supply of bail money. The only other thing I could do is go home to physically help them, but my schedule simply won’t allow it.

“Oh, I almost forgot to tell you,” she gasps. “Saige is going to be on *Chats With Chastity* tonight!”

The mention of my ex has me immediately confused. “The talk show? For what?”

“Apparently, she’s dating some big-shot actor. Christopher something.”

Saige Ambrose, the only girlfriend I've had within the last decade, and the one girl my mom can't seem to let go. Sure, I dated a lot in high school, but they were never anything serious. Most of them got annoyed with my workout schedule or my refusal to skip a practice. Not Saige, though. She stood in the stands during every single one, cheering me on.

I shake the memory from my mind. "That's great, Mom. I'm glad she's happy."

She hums. "I still don't understand why you two broke up. She's such a sweet girl."

My eyes roll practically into the back of my head. "It was six years ago. You have to let it go."

"Well, maybe if you'd tell me, I would."

Honestly, I can't. Not because I don't want to, but because she would fly to California just to smack me upside the head. My dad always instilled in me that I don't let anything keep me from my dream. My mom, however, always insisted that I don't put football above everything in my life, and that's exactly what I did with Saige.

"We just knew the distance thing wouldn't work."

Okay so it's not exactly a lie, but not the truth either. Either way, she partially buys it.

"It would have been nice if you tried though," she presses, her tone more wistful than argumentative. "At this point, I'm wondering if I'll ever get grandkids."

Oh, Jesus Christ. "Wow, Ma. Look at the time. I've got to get going."

"Why? Do you have a date?"

No, but that's not the worst idea. I'm sure there's someone in my phone I could get to come here tonight.

"If I say yes, will you let me get off the phone?"

She snickers. "You always were a bad liar."

"Ay!" I huff, offended.

“I’ll call you tomorrow after your dad’s appointment.”

I nod, even though she can’t see me. “Sounds good. Thanks. Tell him I said hi, and tell Madden to stop getting in so much damn trouble.”

A long exhale leaves her mouth. “We can dream, can’t we?”

The two of us hang up, and I take a deep breath. I really need to find time to go home and see my dad—before it’s too late.

I’M LYING ON MY couch, flicking through channels. As much as I considered fucking some nameless face into a mattress tonight, Asher wore my ass out today. Instead, I decided to chill at home. I just never expected it to be this boring.

The name of the talk show my mom mentioned earlier stares back at me from the guide. I know I should move on. Her life is none of my business—not after what I did to her—but I can’t help but be curious.

I press a button, and the sight of my ex fills the screen. She looks good, but not at all how I remember. There’s something about her that just seems to hit differently, though it could be the douchebag at her side.

Topher James is one of Hollywood’s favorite actors, and a grade-A prick. I’ve had the displeasure of meeting him a couple times, and each time I’ve wanted to punch him right in the face. Saige deserves someone nice. Someone sweet. Someone like I was before I fucked it all to hell.

SIX YEARS AGO

They say your time spent in university is supposed to be the best time of your life. You get new freedoms you didn't have at home. New friends. Unlimited parties. It's the ideal situation... to create an alcoholic and/or gain twenty pounds. When your only goal is using collegiate ball to get into the NFL, not so much. I've already spent two years in this place, and the only thing I've liked about it is football. Then again, that's probably not surprising at all.

I walk into my Wednesday morning class, wondering why I signed up for something this early when I know I have practice late on Tuesday nights, and there she is. Long, chestnut hair tied back into a messy bun. Innocent hazel eyes. And a massive cup of coffee sitting on the corner of her desk that tells me she's definitely not a morning person.

Moving across the room, I slip into the seat beside her. She only glances up for a second, but I can guess by the amount of pens she has sitting on her desk that she's a freshman. There's something about her I can't put my finger on, but I just want her attention.

"I don't think you have enough."

She turns to me, and confusion etches across her face. "Excuse me?"

I nod toward the seven pens. "You need at least ten for this class, or you have no business being here."

At first she looks offended, but when my smile breaks through, she rolls her eyes. "I didn't know smartasses could function before noon."

I shrug with a smirk. "What can I say? I'm one of a kind."

"I bet you are."

Extending my hand, I give her my best smile. "Colby Hendrix."

Thankfully, she takes it and slips her hand in mine. "Saige Ambrose."

I can still remember how soft her skin felt against my own, but that's not my business anymore. She's his now, despite my thoughts about it.

The two of them looked like your typical loved-up couple as she shows off her flashy engagement ring. If the purpose of this was to break the hearts of all his idiotic female fans, I'm sure they succeeded. When he presses his lips to hers, I'm instantly searching for the remote.

"Get this crap off my TV," I grumble.

I grasp it in my hand and go to change the channel when something Chastity says stops me.

"Okay, so I know it's a very private subject, but I can't help but ask." She pauses to build the suspense, and a picture of a little girl fills the backdrop. "You have a daughter, correct?"

Saige pulls her thumb in and wraps her fingers around it—a nervous habit she's always had. "I do."

"Tell us a little about her. She's adorable."

She smiles uncomfortably. "She's five, and the smartest little girl I've ever met in my life."

Chastity chuckles. "I'm sure she can thank you for that." She looks over at Topher. "And what about you? Do the two of you get along?"

He grins down at Saige. "I don't know, babe. Do we?"

Saige rolls her eyes and lightly smacks his arm. "My daughter loves him, though there was one time she got to meet Harry Styles on set, and I swear she almost fainted."

The audience fills with soft laughter.

"Oh, she sounds like the cutest thing."

"She is." Saige smiles proudly.

Chastity places her hands in her own lap. “And what about her father? How does he feel about his daughter’s mom being engaged to Hollywood’s favorite?”

She glances up at Topher who gives her knee an encouraging squeeze. “It’s actually just the two of us. Her dad isn’t involved, but she’s never suffered because of it. She’s always had everything she needs.”

Chastity smiles. “Well, I don’t doubt that for a second. She’s lucky to have you.”

After a little more banter, the interview ends, and the show credits roll before changing to an infomercial, but I’m frozen in place. The only thing I can picture is a little girl with brown hair and green eyes.

She’s five. Her dad isn’t involved.

I do the math over and over again, running my fingers through my hair.

It’s not possible.

She wasn’t.

She wouldn’t have.

Right?

HOURS PASS IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE AS I LIE ON MY BED. ALL the tossing and turning in the world can't seem to get me to fall asleep. The only thing I can picture is big green eyes staring back at me. My eyes. The eyes of a little girl who looks like an equal mix of Saige and me.

No matter how many times I do the math, it all comes out the same. She had to be pregnant or get pregnant right around the time we broke up.

Maybe it was a rebound. Perhaps she wasn't thinking clearly and jumped into bed with someone else, only to get knocked up in the process. That would explain why the father isn't involved. Hell, she might not even know who the father is.

Who am I kidding? She's never been that kind of girl, and I don't think our break-up would change her personality.

I grab my phone off the nightstand and open Instagram. From what I remember, Saige was never the biggest person on social media, but she always had one. It takes a little searching and going through friends of friends, but I finally land on Madelyn's—Saige's best friend.

Her profile is filled with pictures, including those with the little girl, but even when Saige is tagged, I can't seem to click on her profile. An idea pops into my head, and I switch over to my fan account. It may be shady, to have a secret account that no one knows about, but it's the only way I can interact with fans without people reading too far into everything I say.

Once on my other page, Saige's account appears with almost no effort on my part. It all becomes alarmingly clear.

She blocked me.

I scroll through her pictures, ignoring the ones of her and Topher. When I land on one of the little girl, my breath hitches. It's from back in January. Saige wishes her a happy birthday and sings praises about what an amazing person she's becoming.

I do the math one more time.

Fuck.

IT'S BARELY EIGHT IN the morning when I enter the penthouse code in Asher's elevator. My hand clutches around my phone, shaking the whole way up. Needless to say, I didn't get a wink of sleep last night, and the cup of coffee I grabbed on my way over here did nothing but give me the jitters.

The doors open, and Tessa, Asher's girlfriend, looks up from where she sits on the couch. I can tell by the look on her face that I'm the last person she expected to see at this hour. Then again, I don't know the last time I got out of bed before eleven on a day where I don't have practice.

"You look cracked out," she says bluntly. "Too much partying last night?"

I pace back and forth across the living room, unable to say anything. When Asher walks in, he stops and glances at me, then at Tess. She shrugs.

"I think he's broken, or on drugs."

Ash snorts and shakes his head. He walks over and puts both hands on my shoulders to stop me in place.

"What's wrong with you, and why are you here at the ass-crack of dawn?"

My shaky hands swipe open my phone, and I shove the picture in his face. “Does this little girl look like me?”

He narrows his eyes and backs up, chuckling. “Give me that thing.”

I watch as my best friend inspects the photo carefully before passing it to Tess.

“Is this some kind of joke?” he asks. “Whose kid is that?”

“My ex’s.”

His brows raise. “*You* have an ex?” Tessa looks away from the picture to elbow him in the side, and he hisses. “What? He’s been Mr. Anti-Commitment since the day I met him.”

She gives him a pointed look. “Says the guy who has only had a total of two girlfriends in his entire life.”

He wraps his arms around her and smiles. “It only took me twice to get it right.”

“Is that right?”

“Mm-hm.”

I groan and plop down onto the empty chair. “You two make me sick. I came here for help, not to watch you grope each other and act like we’re in a real life chick flick.”

Tessa smirks and pulls away from Asher before looking back at the picture. “I mean, she kind of does, but it could just be because you both have a baby face and dimples.”

“What makes you think she’s yours?” Asher questions, taking the phone back from Tess.

I run my hands over my face. “The math adds up to her getting pregnant either right before or right after we broke up.”

The two of them glance at each other, and Tessa looks anywhere but at me. Asher sighs heavily. He gets up and brings my phone back over to me, then pats me on the shoulder.

“Try not to freak out until you know for sure,” he tells me. “For what it’s worth, I think you’d make a great dad.”

I snort. “Have you *met* me? You’re the skilled one with children.”

Tessa glares at me, getting the obvious dig at the fact that she’s ten years his junior. She knows I’m kidding, though. That girl may have been a ticking fucking time bomb when they first got together, but I respect the hell out of her. Between her, Asher, and Lennon, I’ve got all I’ll ever need.

“So, what are you going to do?” Tess asks me.

I exhale, because I genuinely don’t know. The only thing I can think to do is buy some time before my chest explodes from anxiety.

“First, I’m going to focus on this Monday’s game, and then I’ll make a plan.”

They both look like they want to argue against it, but thankfully they don’t. It’s just all a bit much to take in. I need a minute to breathe. To get a grip on my emotions. To calm my mind so I can think clearly.

THE WHOLE TEAM FILLS the locker room, pumped for the first game of the season. I pull my jersey over my head and turn to Asher. He’s sitting down, staring at his helmet like it’s the most mesmerizing thing he’s ever seen.

“You good?”

He looks up at me and grins. “Never been better.”

I smile back at him just as Coach gets all of our attention. “All right, listen up. This is the first game of the season, and it matters more than ever. That other team is going to look at us like we’re weak.” He focuses on Asher. “Like you’re a refurbished player that we pulled back in from the grave.” His eyes scan the room again. “It’s important that we show them just who they’re dealing with. Let’s show Hawthorne what it feels like to win again.”

Cheers erupt and everyone gets amped up, fist bumping Asher like they couldn't be happier that he's back. Losing him as our quarterback changed this team. We always felt like we were missing something. Now that he's right back where he belongs, it's like we can all enjoy the game again.

We all filter into the tunnel, and the announcer starts to introduce each one of us to the crowd. I hop up and down, shaking the tension from my body. This is what I love about this sport. The energy. The crowd. The need to win like I need to breathe. It's intoxicating.

"You ready?" I ask Asher, nudging him with my shoulder.

He takes a deep breath and nods. "It's now or never, right?"

"Damn right. Just enjoy it. This is the fun part."

I turn to face him and take a couple steps backward toward the opening. The announcer starts to say my name, and the screams become deafening. Asher chuckles.

"Could they get any louder?"

Shrugging, my grin widens. "What can I say? The ladies love me."

He laughs in response as I pull my helmet over my head and run out to join my team. I jump onto Griffin's back, and he spins me around like a child. When he puts me down, we know it's the moment we've all been waiting for.

"And now, playing for the first time in two years..." The crowd goes quiet, and the whole team goes still as we watch Asher step into view. "Let's give a big welcome back to quarterback Asher Hawthorne!"

Everyone in the stands are on their feet in an instant, cheering louder than I've ever heard in my life. He jogs out with his helmet in his hand and joins the rest of the guys—exactly where he belongs. The mood around us is electric, and I watch as Asher looks around the stadium.

We make our way over to the bench and all of our coaches. I spot Tessa and Lennon in the crowd. They both sport proud

grins as they cheer along with everyone else. I point at Lennon, and she rolls her eyes playfully. When Asher follows my line of sight, he sees his girl, and all the tension he may have been holding dissipates in an instant.

He uses the fact that they're on the lowest level to his advantage and pulls himself up to kiss Tessa. The cameraman gets a perfect shot, and their lip-lock is showcased front and center on the scoreboard. The women in the crowd coo while the men egg him on with wolf whistles. As he comes back over to me, I shake my head and snicker.

"Don't judge," he quips. "That could've been you, too, if you had just told Lennon how you felt."

I look back over at the two women who have changed both our lives for the better. Lennon's blonde hair flows down and rests against the jersey that matches my own. Anyone with eyes can see she's gorgeous, and her boyfriend, Cade, is one lucky son of a bitch.

She must feel my eyes on her, because she pulls her attention away from Tessa and over to me. When she catches me staring, she smiles and flips me off with a laugh.

"Nah. She's happier now than I could've ever made her." I voice the truth, regardless of how harsh it feels to admit.

He grabs one of the water bottles and hands it to me. "If you say so."

WE'RE MINUTES AWAY FROM the end of the fourth quarter, and Asher has played better than I've ever seen him. Our defense has been on point, only allowing them to score one touchdown while our offense has scored five.

Asher hikes the ball, and I run down the field, knowing it's coming right for me. He throws the ball and watches as it soars through the air. I jump up as high as I can and catch it, then fall backward right into the end zone, letting my momentum tumble me into a somersault and then back onto my feet. The

score is forty-one to seven. Even if Ollie misses the field goal, there's no coming back from this. We have this game in the bag.

The buzzer sounds to end the game, and the crowd goes wild. Not only did we win the game, we kicked ass. I walk up to Asher and press my helmet against his.

“Now that's what I'm fucking talking about!”

He chuckles, looking like he's on top of the world.

Yeah, he's back.

My best friend's back.

I'M SITTING ON THE arm of the chair with Lennon beside me and a beer in my hand. Tessa lies across the couch, her head in Asher's lap. While the rest of the team went out to celebrate, we opted to spend the rest of the night at my house. Lennon has to go back to school in two days, but she's staying here in the meantime. After last summer, she and her dad are no longer on speaking terms.

Asher runs his hand through Tessa's hair, and she moans erotically, as if he just shoved his hand down her pants. Lennon giggles into her sleeve as I roll my eyes.

“If you two are going to fuck, please don't do it on my couch and remember to use a condom.”

Asher snorts. “Surprise babies are your thing, Daddy.”

I wince subtly at the mention of Saige's—and potentially my—daughter, knowing I haven't told Lennon about it yet. It's not that I was planning on keeping it from her. I just knew the second I bring it up, it becomes real. Suffocatingly, terrifyingly real.

“What is he talking about?” she asks me.

My hand moves to rub the back of my neck as I look around the room. “I, uh, might have a kid.”

“Might?” Her eyes bore into me. “Is some girl claiming she’s pregnant with your baby?”

I shake my head. “It’s more like my ex-girlfriend from college. She has a daughter, and if the math is anything to go by, she could be mine.”

Lennon is quiet for a second before exhaling. “I don’t know what’s more surprising—that you might be a dad, or that you’ve had a girlfriend.”

Asher throws his hands in the air. “That’s what I said!”

She laughs softly and looks back at me. “So, what did she say when you asked her about it?”

The whole room goes quiet, and I bite my lip as I once again avoid her gaze. Before I know it, she sighs and pushes me right off the chair. I fall onto the floor and my beer spills all over me. My brows furrow as I look up at her.

“What was that for?”

She glares at me, ignoring Tessa and Asher, who are cackling at my expense. “For being an idiot. Don’t be that guy, Colby. You’re better than that. Cut the shit, be the man I know you are, and find out if that kid is yours.”

My tough exterior melts under her stare, the same way it always has, and I starfish on the floor. “And what if she is? I don’t know how to be a Dad, Len.”

She shrugs. “I don’t know, but I do know you’re not the kind to ditch out on your responsibilities, even if it isn’t what you imagined for yourself.”

I sigh heavily, because she’s right.

She’s always right.

I need to find Saige.

PEOPLE RUN AROUND THE OFFICE LIKE THEY'RE GOING TO LOSE their minds if they don't get everything done within the next five minutes. I sit at my desk and roll my eyes. Busy work days have never been my forte. I'm more of a go-with-the-flow kind of girl, and apparently it's paid off. Being an event coordinator, you need to be able to do what the client wants, your opinion be damned.

The clock stares back at me, looking like it's not even moving. A part of me wonders if I could get away with changing it without anyone knowing. After the past couple days, all I want is to go home and have a night with my two favorite girls. Topher, my fiancé, has a flight booked for right after I get home. Some business thing he needs to go to. But that's what I get for dating one of Hollywood's favorite actors.

Fame and fortune has never really been my thing, but while I was working in New York, Topher and I met at a party for work. If I'm honest, I didn't even know who he was until my best friend, Maddie, told me the next day.

We tried the long distance thing for a few months, but it was hard, especially with the relationship being so fresh. It all came to a head when we both agreed we didn't want to do it anymore. However, instead of breaking up, he asked me to move with him to California instead.

It wasn't an easy decision, to leave my family behind and uproot my daughter, but Maddie agreed to come with me, and that made it a little better. I had to find a new job, but with Topher's connections, getting a job out here was effortless.

That was a little over a year ago, and while I'm still getting used to the West Coast, everything is great.

As soon as it's time to leave, I pack my things and head for the door. My Lexus sits in the parking lot and reminds me of how Topher spoils me. I keep telling him not to, that I'm in no way with him for the money, but he says that no woman of his is going to have anything but the best. Maddie said it's creepy, but I think it's understandable. He has a certain image to uphold, after all.

THE OUTSIDE OF THE elementary school is filled with judgmental mothers who love to give me dirty looks. Maddie says they're just jealous, though that doesn't make it any less uncomfortable. I considered enrolling my daughter in the private school Topher recommended, but I've always envisioned her having a normal childhood, like I had. Not one filled with the children of celebrities and all the expensive things in the world.

"Mommy!" a little voice calls out, and a grin spreads across my face.

"Hi, baby!"

Brenna runs across the grass and jumps into my arms, looking like she just had the best day. "Can we have ice cream for dinner?"

I chuckle and tickle her side. "What kind of dinner is that?"

She shrugs. "Aunt Maddie lets me."

"Oh, does she now?" I smile at the way she just got ratted out. "Well, I'm going to need to have a talk with Aunt Maddie."

"Did I say Aunt Maddie? I meant that old lady babysitter you got that one time. Gladys, that's it."

I open her door and buckle her into the car seat. "Mm-hm."

The whole way home, Brenna rambles about what she did in school today, and it makes me smile. I love how much she's been enjoying it. I was afraid she wouldn't adjust well, not having the same friends she went to daycare with since she was a toddler, but she's blossomed here. All her teachers say she's a joy to have in class, and she has more friends than I can name. She's a little social butterfly.

I pull into the driveway and turn off the car. The suitcase sitting on the porch tells me I made it home in time to see Topher before he leaves. I get Brenna out, and the two of us go inside.

"Babe?" I call out. "You home?"

My fiancé comes around the corner, holding his phone to his ear and his finger to his mouth. Great. I can already tell he's in a bad mood. So much for spending some time together before he jets off for a couple days.

"Why don't you go get changed, and I'll start dinner," I tell Brenna, and she scampers off for her room.

Honestly, it's just an excuse to get her upstairs until he finishes his phone call. The last time she was loud while he was on the phone with someone important, he got really mad. From that point on, I've made it a point to keep her away from him when he's working.

I go into the kitchen and pull out the ingredients for pancakes. Breakfast for dinner happens to be Maddie's favorite, which means it's Brenna's favorite, too. Anything to be like her favorite person.

She comes down a few minutes later and wraps her arms around my waist. "Can I help you stir the batter?"

"Of course, munchkin."

We make it a point to stay really quiet as we get everything together, but it all goes to hell when the front door opens and a loud, familiar voice booms through the house.

"Where is my favorite little peanut?" Maddie shouts.

"Aunt Maddie!"

Brenna jumps down off her stool and runs for the door. Topher gives me the dirtiest look, and I just smile apologetically as he storms out of the room. Maddie slips past him on his way out while carrying Brenna. She watches me intently and I sigh, running my fingers through my hair.

“What’s up his ass?”

I shake my head. “You know how he gets when he’s on a work call.”

She chuckles. “Because his life is just so hard, with all the people he has waiting on him hand and foot all the time.”

Throwing my hand over her mouth, the rest of her sentence is muffled, and it makes Brenna laugh. I don’t know where he disappeared to, but if he hears Maddie talking about him like that, he won’t be happy. Topher is a great guy, don’t get me wrong. He just doesn’t have the best sense of humor.

Ten minutes later, I’m pouring the batter onto the skillet when Topher finally makes an appearance. He comes up behind me and kisses my cheek, brushing everything that just happened under the rug like a professional. Maddie makes faces behind his back, and I need to train my expression to keep from giving it away.

“That smells good,” he tells me.

I smile. “You can have some if you want. I made plenty of batter.”

“Thanks, but no. I have to stay in shape for this movie or they’ll cut my part.” He reaches forward and grabs a handful of the chocolate chips, like that’s any better than eating the pancakes. “Besides, I have to get going.”

“Oh.” Like I said, so much for getting to see him before he leaves. “Well, have a good trip. Let me know when you get there. Maybe we can FaceTime tonight?”

He makes a face that tells me the answer I already expected. “You know how it is when I go on these trips, babe. They always want me to go out with them, but I’ll text you.”

With a chaste kiss to my lips, and one to Brenna's forehead, he salutes Maddie and leaves through the front door. Once he's gone, Maddie groans.

"He's such a dildo."

Brenna giggles. "What's a dildo?"

My eyes widen as I turn to glare at my best friend. She bites her lip to contain her laughter and tickles Brenna's side.

"How about you don't repeat everything I say, okay?"

She pouts. "But what is it?"

I jump in before Maddie can make matters worse. "It's someone who's in a bad mood all the time."

Maddie snorts, but, thankfully, Brenna accepts that answer. She tilts her head to the side and nods.

"Yeah, he kind of is a dildo."

My best friend breaks into hysterics and tries to high-five my sweet, innocent daughter. Brenna smiles proudly, like she did something right, and I pick her up.

"All right. Enough you two." I take three plates from the cabinet and hand them to Maddie. "Go set the table."

She rolls her eyes. "Formal breakfast for dinner. How *you* of you."

THE THREE OF US eat dinner together and then watch a movie. When it's over, Brenna insists that Maddie put her to bed instead of me. A part of me wonders if I should be offended, but I know it's only because she loves her aunt. When Maddie finally comes back downstairs, she sits down on the couch across from me.

"So, how'd the interview go the other night?" she asks.

My brows furrow. "I thought you watched it."

"I did, but that doesn't mean I know how it went."

I shrug. “It went all right, I guess.”

To be honest, the only reason I agreed to do the interview in the first place was for Topher. I’m not great with being the center of attention, and all of it makes me really uncomfortable. But, his publicist said that doing an interview about our recent engagement would make his fans feel more connected to us, and that’s important to him.

“You’re worried,” she says, reading my mind.

I nod. “What if he saw it? What if he knows about her?”

I don’t even need to say who I’m talking about for her to know. She was there. She watched how broken he left me.

I pace back and forth across my dorm, freaking out as Maddie holds the positive pregnancy test in her hand. Her jaw is practically on the floor and she’s saying nothing, which is a lot for someone who always has something to say.

How could I have let this happen? I’m only nineteen! We were careful. We used a condom every time, and I was on the pill. Still, my period was late, and Maddie half-jokingly suggested I take a pregnancy test. Three hours later and here we are, freaking out over the fact that there is a baby growing inside of me.

“Okay, breathe. Maybe this isn’t the worst thing in the world.”

I stop dead in my tracks and turn to face her. “Are you kidding? He’s going to flip out.”

Colby and I only started dating six months ago, and with his recent draft into the NFL, he’s almost guaranteed to freak. Our relationship isn’t even stable right now. He’s been under a lot of pressure with the draft season, and he’s started to distance himself—from everyone, including me.

“You don’t know that,” Maddie tries to reassure me. “Just go talk to him. He might surprise you.”

I take a deep breath, trying to get my feet to move toward the door, but I can't. "We haven't even talked since that fight we had a couple days ago. He won't respond to my texts."

She shakes her head. "His phone has been blowing up since the news broke about him being drafted. Maybe he hasn't seen it."

"Maybe you're right." I go to grab my phone when she stops me.

"What are you doing?"

I stop, confused. "Calling him?"

She grabs it from my hands and slips it into my pocket. "I don't think this is a conversation you want to have over the phone."

"Good point." I grab my sweatshirt and pull it over my head. "I'll be back. Wish me luck."

"Good luck!"

It's a ten-minute walk across campus to get from my dorm to his, but it gives me time to think about what I'm going to say. The positive test bounces around in my sweatshirt pocket as I walk up the steps. When I reach his door, I debate whether I should knock or walk in. Eh, I better knock.

The door opens, and Colby's roommate, Mason, stands on the other side of the door. His eyes widen when he realizes it's me, but I smile sweetly.

"Hey Mase, is Colby here?"

He swallows harshly and opens the door further to let me in. "I take it he didn't listen to me?"

Confusion etches across my face until I see his side of the room. It's completely empty. All his things, the posters that covered the walls, the picture of his family that sat on the nightstand—it's all gone. It doesn't even look like Colby ever lived here.

"What's going on? Where's all his stuff?"

Mason sighs and goes over to his dresser. “The 49ers wanted him to come early and the administration told him he could finish his classes for the semester online. He left last night, but he told me to give this to you.” He hands me an envelope with my name scribbled across the front in Colby’s handwriting. “I’ll, uh, give you some time.”

I walk over to sit down on the bed that used to be Colby’s and tear open the letter.

Dear Saige,

I’m sorry to have to do this, especially this way. I thought about calling you, but I figured it would hurt less to read it rather than hear it come from my mouth. The past few months we’ve spent together have been great, but with how hectic my schedule is going to be and with entering the NFL, I just don’t want to be tied down with a relationship. Don’t be upset. You’re a gorgeous girl. You’ll find someone who can make you happier than I ever could. I hope you can forgive me one day, but I understand if you can’t.

With love,

Colby

Angry tears flow down my cheeks as I pull my phone out of my pocket and click on his contact. He needs to know, before he moves on with some super model from Victoria’s Secret. I have to tell him about the baby.

“I’m sorry,” a robotic voice comes through the phone. “The number you have reached is no longer in service.”

I fall to the ground, clutching my phone in one hand, and the letter and pregnancy test in the other.

What am I going to do now?

“Hey,” Maddie shakes me from the painful memory. “Don’t even worry about it. He’s probably too busy fucking half of Northern California to watch anything that isn’t sports on TV.”

I chuckle half-heartedly because I know she's probably right. His playboy antics have been all over the media the past six years. They stung at first, but over time they've become easier to ignore.

"Yeah," I sigh. "I'm sure I'm just freaking out over nothing."

A COUPLE DAYS LATER, I'm cleaning up the mess from a blanket fort when there's a knock at the door. I roll my eyes and get up to answer it.

"Maddie, I gave you a key for a reason. You don't have to ___"

The words are sucked right from my lungs, along with my breath, when I find none other than Colby Hendrix standing at my door—looking every bit like the Greek god I always remembered.

SAIGE'S EYES WIDEN, GIVING AWAY THAT I'M THE LAST PERSON she expected. Her mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water. I take the few moments she needs to get a handle of herself to look her over. She looks beautiful, as always. Her hair is a little shorter than it used to be, and she looks more grown up than the nineteen-year-old I left behind, but she's just as gorgeous as she was back then—if not more.

“I know this is weird, me just showing up here.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Weird is an understatement.”

I nod and rub the back of my neck. “Do you have a minute to talk?”

It looks like she wants to turn me down. To tell me to fuck myself and slam the door in my face. And honestly, I'd deserve it. But instead, she steps back and gestures for me to come inside.

The house of Topher James is nothing like I thought it would be. I always pictured a statue of himself in the middle of the foyer and self-portraits covering all the walls. It's a lot homier, though I don't think the credit for that goes to him. Saige always did have a knack for decorating.

“How've you been? You know, since...”

She snorts, leading me through the house and into the living room. “You mean since you broke up with me through a small paragraph?”

I swallow thickly. “Yeah.”

“I’ve been great.” She bends over to pick up a few things off the floor, and it takes everything in me not to stare at her ass. “You really did me a favor back then, you know. It would have sucked to spend even more time with someone who always had one foot out the door.”

“Oh, come on. That’s not fair.”

She pins me with a look. “Isn’t it though?”

The two of us stand here, with so much tension in the room it’s hard to breathe. The time we spent together wasn’t without arguments, but we never felt uncomfortable. Not like now. Not like this.

Finally, she gives in and sits down. “I’d offer you something to drink, but I don’t want you to stay any longer than necessary.”

“Noted,” I respond, sitting across from her.

My eyes scan the room until they land on a picture on the end table. It’s of Saige from years ago, holding a tiny little infant in her arms. Madelyn is off to the side, smiling brightly at her best friend, but Saige doesn’t take her sights off the little girl wrapped in pink.

Saige’s breath hitches as I take the picture into my hands, and my chest tightens. My eyes water, and a stray tear slips out. I look up at the only girl I’ve ever really given a part of myself to, and the answer to my question is on her face before I even ask it. Still, I need to hear it for myself.

“Please,” I beg. “Please tell me I didn’t miss out on the first five years of my daughter’s life.”

She stays completely still, not saying anything at all. I’m not even sure she’s breathing. She’s just staring back at me, with nothing but fear and heartache written all over her. My grip on the frame tightens.

“Saige,” I say a little more sternly. “Who is her dad?”

Her throat bobs with a heavy swallow. “Y-you are.”

The truth hits me like a ton of bricks. Not only do I have a kid, but I have a five-year-old daughter who doesn't know me. I've never gotten to hold her in my arms. To sing her to sleep. To watch her take her first steps.

“How? How could you keep this from me?”

Saige is instantly ripped from the emotional daze she was in, and her eyes narrow on me. “Excuse me?”

I put the picture back in its place. “What? Because I left you behind, that meant I didn't deserve to know about my child?”

“And how the fuck did you expect me to tell you?” she sneers. “I had to find out from Mason that you were gone. You left me a literal note on a pillow and then changed your number so I couldn't reach you.”

The small detail at the end sticks out and I rack my brain to remember everything that happened during my transition to the pros. When I realize what she's talking about, I shake my head.

“I didn't change my number because of you,” I tell her. “You saw what it was like for me. Everyone and their mother was hitting me up for cash. As if signing that contract instantly turned me into a fucking ATM.”

“Yeah, well, I had no way of getting in touch with you.”

I scoff. “That's bullshit, and you know it!”

“Mommy?” a little voice sounds from behind me.

The look on Saige's face softens as she looks past me. I turn around to see the little girl from the pictures. *My* little girl. She's wearing a pink nightgown covered in butterflies. Her brown hair matches her mother's, but her eyes are all me.

“I had a nightmare and then I heard yelling.”

Saige walks over and scoops the little girl up in her arms. “Come on, Brenna. I'll tuck you back in.”

Brenna.

“Will you check for monsters?”

Saige chuckles. “Don’t I always?”

As they disappear back upstairs, the heaviness of the situation feels like a weight inside my stomach. I should have been the one checking for monsters all these years. She shouldn’t be looking at me like a stranger.

I know I said the mere idea of having kids makes me want to run for the hills, but after seeing the innocence in her eyes, I can’t imagine going anywhere. Not now. Not after this.

It takes a few minutes for Saige to come back down, but when she does, she looks everywhere but at me. I glance at where she came from to make sure she wasn’t followed by her little mini-me.

“She okay?” I question.

Nodding, she goes into the kitchen and grabs a bottle of water. “Just your typical five-year-old who believes in scary things that hide under your bed.”

The corners of my mouth raise. “Reminds me of someone else I know.”

It’s a reference to the time Mason hid underneath my bed to scare me, but ended up nearly making Saige piss herself instead. I can tell she knows exactly what I’m talking about by the way her face drops, but that’s not the response I was expecting.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

She’s clearly in a taking no shit mood. “Reminisce about the past like it’s full of happy memories.”

The whole situation is tense. Both of us have a reason to be angry, and neither one of us seems to be willing to give an inch. We go quiet for a minute before we both try to speak at one time.

“I want to be involved in her life.”

“I think it’s time for you to go,” she says, and then realizes what I just said. “Wait, what?”

I square my shoulders and stand tall. “She’s my daughter. I want to know her. I want her to know me.”

Saige’s grip on her water bottle tightens. “Colby, you don’t know the first thing about being a parent.”

“Yeah?” I bark back. “I wonder why that is.”

She winces at my tone. “If you keep yelling at me, she isn’t going to want to know you.”

I roll my eyes. “Haven’t you made enough choices for her, and me for that matter, over the last five years?”

She laughs dryly. “Excuse me for not jumping at the chance to let someone who never grew up jump right into my daughter’s life.”

“*Our* daughter.” I correct her. “Or are you forgetting that there’s another parent in this mix?”

“You didn’t want to be tied down with a halfway relationship with a nineteen-year-old, Colby.” She grips the counter and leans forward. “Do you know what a child is? Being tied down in ways you couldn’t begin to imagine. For life.”

This conversation is clearly going nowhere. We’re both angry and rightfully so. If I stay, we’ll only yell more, and I don’t want Brenna getting a bad first impression of me. The acknowledgment that it *is* a first impression stings.

“This isn’t over,” I tell her and turn on my heels.

Saige says nothing as I walk out the door. As it shuts behind me and I hear the lock click, I press my back against the wood and try to calm my breathing.

I need a fucking drink.

THE BAR IS FILLED with women who check me out from all angles, but none of them register in my mind at all. Not tonight. The glass of whiskey is almost empty—my third

glass. Still, no amount of liquor has even begun to numb the pain of knowing the truth.

I have a daughter. Saige and I have a daughter together. Not only did I break up with her through a letter, but I left her pregnant and alone. Unknowingly or not, I can't imagine what she went through. Her parents were very conservative, so I'm sure they weren't exactly happy about the news.

From what I saw for the short time I was there, it looks like she's doing well. Then again, part of that probably stems from being engaged to an actor. The fact that Topher James knows my own daughter better than I do is not something that sits well with me. They say little girls are more likely to find someone like their father when they grow up, and trust me when I say he's not the kind of guy she wants to end up with. Hell, I don't even know what Saige sees in him.

Asher slips onto the stool next to me and orders another drink for me and one for himself. He turns around and leans back against the bar, scanning the room and giving me control of whether or not we say anything at all.

"How'd you know where to find me?" I murmur.

He smirks. "Did you know there's a Twitter account that posts updates of our current locations? Tessa showed it to me."

I snort. "I don't know what's more frightening—the fact that that exists, or that Tessa knows about it."

"I'm going to say both," he quips. "So, I take it tonight didn't go well?"

I take a deep breath. Asher is the one who gave me the number of the guy who managed to track down Saige's address and phone number for me. Apparently, finding out where a top actor lives is harder than I originally thought it would be. Lucky him for not having a Twitter account as a stalker.

I thought about calling her, but I figured she'd hang up the second she realized it was me. And judging by her attitude tonight, I assumed right.

“She’s mine, Ash.” It feels weird to say it out loud. “I have a kid.”

He exhales slowly. “So, what now?”

That’s the question I’ve been asking myself all night. It’s obvious Saige isn’t jumping for joy at the idea of me being in Brenna’s life, but I can’t let that stop me. Sure, she’s five years old, and I’ve never formally met her, but that’s not my fault. Up until last week, I didn’t even know she existed. If I’d known, we wouldn’t be in this situation.

“Now, we drink.” I lift the glass to my lips and let the alcohol burn my throat as it slides down.

He must know I don’t have an actual answer for him, because he doesn’t press. Instead, he’s the exact friend I need. He sits there quietly and lets me lead the conversation into something more comfortable and away from everything ex-girlfriend and secret child.

I STUMBLE INTO BED at almost four o’clock in the morning, careful not to wake Lennon, who’s sleeping in the guest room. However, as tired as I am, I can’t seem to fall asleep. Not with everything being left so open and unresolved.

Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I swipe a few buttons until Saige’s contact appears. Turns out, her number hasn’t changed, so the second Raul gave it to me, I knew it was the right one. I pull my bottom lip between my teeth as I try to focus on the keys in front of me. All I can say is thank God for autocorrect.

Saige, I’m sorry if I came off a little strong tonight. The whole thing is a shock to the system. But I meant what I said. I want to get to know our daughter. I’ll give you a few days, but here’s where you can find me.

I add my address to the end of the message and press send. All I can do now is hope for the best and figure out what my next step is if it doesn’t go my way. The only thing I know for

sure, is I'll do whatever it takes to have that little girl in my life.

I STARE DOWN AT MY PHONE, REREADING THE SAME TEXT message for the millionth time in the last two days. It's as if I'm waiting for it to change. Disappear even. But it doesn't. It just stays there, taunting me in the worst way.

"I'm surprised you don't have that memorized by now," Maddie says, reading over my shoulder.

I sigh and toss the phone down in my lap. "I do."

She plops herself next to me. "I don't know what you're so stressed about. That whole altercation could have gone a lot worse. Honestly, I'm surprised he was so mature about it."

"What part about yelling at me until Brenna came downstairs do you consider mature?"

"The part where he didn't threaten to take you to court to see his child."

Okay, maybe she has a point, but I can't get over everything that happened. The pain I felt when he vanished from my life is still fresh, despite six years passing. He walked out the door without even saying goodbye, and lived his best life. I can't even explain how much it killed me to see his smile all over the magazines while I agonized over every day that followed.

I was pregnant at nineteen years old and had bigger choices to make than I was ready for. Thankfully, after getting past the initial shock of their precious daughter having a baby out of wedlock, my parents were overwhelmingly supportive.

But while Colby was out living the dream, I was dropping out of college to raise our daughter.

I lean into her, resting my head on her shoulder. “What if he gets a better opportunity again? What if he leaves her the same way he left me?”

“Do you really think he would do that?”

“No,” I answer honestly. “But I also never thought he would do what he did to me. And last night, he was pissed.”

Maddie chuckles. “Well, can you blame him? He found out he has a child, and not just like ‘Surprise, you have a baby!’ He found out he has a five-year-old.”

“I just want to keep her from getting hurt.”

She wraps her arms around me. “I know you do, S, but you can’t exactly tell him no. It would be one thing if he had walked out on you, knowing you were pregnant, but he had no idea. There’s no telling what he would have done if he had known. The one thing I’m sure of is that his anger the other night shows he cares, and that should count for something.”

That’s the thing I love about my best friend—despite her feelings about someone, and she has awfully hateful ones toward Colby Hendrix—she’s always honest. Even if it’s not what I want to hear. Even if it scares me. Even if it kills her to say it.

I PULL UP TO the house, hearing my GPS tell me that I’ve reached my destination. Honestly, it’s a little surprising. I expected there to be a gate with some kind of security, but there isn’t. It looks like an average house for this part of town—maybe a little bigger than most, but there isn’t anything about it that screams NFL superstar.

As I get out of the car, I start to wonder if maybe I should have called first. Or at least texted to let him know I was coming. I didn’t, because I wanted the opportunity to turn around and chicken out, but every time I considered it,

Maddie's voice popped back into my head. She's right. He's done nothing to Brenna and as much as I want to protect her—he's her dad.

My heart pounds inside my chest the second my hand reaches the front door. Do I knock? Ring the bell? I don't know what to do. Back in college, our time together felt almost effortless, but those days are so long gone. He's practically a stranger.

Just as I'm trying to talk myself into knocking, the door opens. Colby is coming out with a blonde, laughing together, his arm wrapped around her shoulders. Fuck, I really should've called first.

After all the time I've seen articles about him and the plethora of women he's been with, I should be used to this. However, seeing it in person is something completely different. It stings, worse than it did after he was seen making out with some supermodel at a party while I was giving birth to our child.

His girlfriend sees me first and she stops short, causing Colby to walk straight into her back. He chuckles while still looking down.

"Did you forget how to walk?" He lifts his head and his eyes meet mine. "Saige."

"Is this a bad time? I can go." *I knew this was a bad idea.* "You know what, I'm going to go."

I turn to walk away but he stops me. "No, it's fine. Really. Lennon was just leaving."

The girl, Lennon, smiles sweetly and steps past me. She must mouth something behind my back because Colby smiles and flips her off. Great, just what I wanted, to be in the middle of their flirting. This isn't awkward at all.

"Want to come in?" he asks.

I nod. "That'd be great. Thanks."

We go inside, and he closes the door behind me. The house is nothing like I imagined, except for the trophies that line one

of the walls. His football trophies have always been Colby's prized possessions. Only now, there's more of them.

Another thing that's new but not quite surprising are the two framed magazine covers of when he won Hottest Man Alive...twice. Maddie still liked to bring it up. Every time I felt bad about myself or stressed out, she so lovingly reminded me of who my ex is.

"Don't be dumb. You're gorgeous, even the Hottest Man Alive thought so."

I know she only meant to cheer me up and make me feel better about myself, but all it did was bring back up the fact that he left. Maybe I dwell on the past too much, but you would too if your boyfriend broke up with you by writing a letter and leaving town.

"Do you want something to drink?" he questions, pulling me from my thoughts.

I shake my head. "I'm all right. Thanks."

He grabs a beer from the fridge and comes into the living room, gesturing for me to sit on the couch. The awkward tension in the room is enough to choke on, but I have to do this. Not for me, but for Brenna. I might hate his guts, but I know she won't.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" I blurt out. "Being a parent isn't a part-time thing. You're either all in or all out. You can't be both."

His back straightens, and he puts the beer on the coffee table. "Saige, I know you probably couldn't think less of me right now, but trust me..."

"That's the thing. I don't trust you."

He winces. "Fair enough. I deserve that." After taking a deep breath, he continues. "I'm not going anywhere. I just want to know my daughter."

I nod slowly, coming to terms with what I'm about to say. "We have to take it slow, especially after the other night. She's

only five, and suddenly introducing you as her dad isn't something she can handle."

"Absolutely. Whatever you think is best." He sounds relieved. "I just want to get the chance to be in her life. We can go as slow as you want."

Fiddling with my sleeve, I look away from him. I can't watch that smile on his face. Not now. Not anymore.

"How does Saturday sound? Do you have football?"

"Practice in the morning, but I can skip it if you need me to."

Wow, Colby offering to skip football? Maybe he is serious about this. "That's really not necessary. We can make plans for after."

He leans back against the couch. "Thank you, Saige. For not fighting me on this."

"Thank me by not letting her down."

I TUCK BRENNA IN and go back downstairs, where Maddie is waiting for me. It's obvious by the way she's squirming in her seat that she's dying to talk about what happened today. I refused to say anything about it because I didn't want Brenna to overhear, but with her sound asleep upstairs, I'm left with no excuse.

"Okay, spill," she demands before I even sit back down.

I roll my eyes playfully. "You're so bossy."

A wide grin spreads across her face, and she flips her hair back. "I know, but this is juicy gossip. I want to know what happened!"

"Which do you want to hear first? How we made plans for Saturday, or how I walked smack into him and his girlfriend?"

Maddie practically chokes on the water she was drinking and spews it halfway across the room. Gross.

“Colby doesn’t have a girlfriend,” she says pointedly.

Not that you know of. “They looked pretty comfortable to me. I think I’ve even seen them in articles together before. Blonde. Tiny. Can’t be much older than eighteen.”

Realization crosses her face, and she pulls out her phone. “You mean this girl?”

She turns the device toward me and on it is a picture of Colby and Lennon. It looks like it was taken on a camera phone by someone trying to be discreet, but you can definitely tell it’s them. They’re sitting at a hibachi table and looking very cozy.

“That’s the one. Apparently, her name is Lennon.”

She hums but doesn’t take her eyes off her phone. “They’ve been seen together a few times, but he’s also been seen with other women in the same time frame.”

My brows furrow. “Should it concern me how much you know about him?”

Her head falls back as laughter bellows out of her. “Don’t even start. Given the chance, I’d punch him in the nuts for what he did to you. Celebrity gossip just also happens to be my thing.”

“Yeah, well, gossip about this. Topher James dumps sorry ass fiancée for lying about who her daughter’s father is.”

She cringes. “I forgot about that. Are you going to tell him?”

I shrug. “I don’t think I have any other choice.”

After coming to terms with the fact that Colby was gone and never coming back, I had to deal with the reality that I was pregnant and having a baby. The easiest way to do that without total humiliation was to tell everyone that the father was someone from a one-night stand. It may have made me sound like a slut, but, at the time, it was easier than admitting the truth.

Except, now I have no choice but to tell everyone I lied.

Starting with my fiancé.

THE DAYS WHEN TOPHER gets back from a work trip are always my favorite. He's super attentive and wants nothing more than to spend time with me. Other than understanding these things are just part of his job, it's one of the main reasons I don't mind him being gone for days at a time.

While he puts Brenna to bed, I text Colby to finalize our plans for tomorrow. We're meeting at a park, a secluded one, after he gets out of practice. To say I'm nervous would be a massive understatement, but I'm more nervous for what I'm about to do.

"She's adorable when she falls asleep," Topher tells me as he comes into our room.

I smile. "When she was going through her terrible twos, I would watch her sleep just to remember the angelic side of her."

He chuckles. "Her? A terrible twos stage? No."

"You'd be surprised."

Coming over, his arms wrap around my waist and he pulls me close. "Well, now it's alone time for us. My favorite part of the day."

Our lips press together in a kiss that shows how much he missed me, but I need to get this out. If I don't do it now, with Maddie's pep talk fresh in my mind, I might not be able to do it at all. I kiss him once more and pull away.

"As tempting as that sounds, there's something I need to tell you first."

Confusion etches across his face. "Is everything okay?"

I tilt my head to the side. "In theory, but you might be mad." Looking down at the floor, I admit the secret that's been eating me alive. "I lied when I said Brenna's dad was just some guy from a party. He wasn't. He was a guy I dated for a

little while, and he broke up with me before I could tell him I was pregnant.”

Topher scoffs. “Why would you lie about something like that?”

“I was nineteen and pregnant and scared. It was the lie I got used to telling everyone. The only person who knew the truth is Maddie.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and steps back. “So, why now? Why are you finally telling the truth?”

I sigh heavily. “Because during the interview with Chastity, he saw the picture of Brenna and did the math. He showed up on Tuesday night, and I had no choice but to admit she’s his daughter.”

“He was here?” he asks, surprised. “How did he get past security?”

Running my fingers through my hair, I finally meet his gaze. “He’s Colby Hendrix.”

His brows raise. “Colby Hendrix? Football star, douchebag playboy, hooks up with more women than a zip code, Colby Hendrix? That Colby Hendrix?”

“That’s the one.”

“Wow.” He looks like he doesn’t know what to say. “Well, to be honest, it’s probably better he hasn’t been involved. Brenna doesn’t need him as a role model.”

Fuck. “That’s the thing. He wants to see her, and I’m going to let him. We have plans to meet tomorrow.”

“You’re what?” he shouts, and I have to shush him so he doesn’t wake up Brenna. “No. Absolutely not. He’s not going anywhere near that kid.”

I take a step back, surprised at the response. “No offense, but that’s not really your choice to make.”

“The hell it’s not. He can go fuck himself, or fuck one of the million checkmarks on his bed post.” He laughs dryly at me. “Oh look, there’s one of them.”

I recoil further at the insult. “You’re mad? Not because I lied to you but because of who he is?”

He comes forward until he’s right up against me. “Oh, I’m more than mad, but mark my words— Brenna is not going to have anything to do with him. I get a say, and I’m saying no.”

His insinuations and tone push all my mama bear feelings to the surface. “You don’t get a say, Topher! *You’re not her father.*”

It happens so fast I can barely even register it. His hand flies up and slaps me right across the face. The only thing that tells me it happened is the stinging feeling in my cheek. My eyes widen as I stare at him. Remorse overtakes his features, but it’s too late.

“Saige,” he breathes.

“Don’t!” I step around him and grab my phone off the dresser. “Don’t come anywhere near me.”

I rush down the hallway and into one of the many guest rooms, making sure to lock the door as soon as it shuts. Tears rush down my face. He hit me. He actually hit me. I collapse into the bed and let my sobs rock me to sleep.

I WAKE IN THE morning to a text from Maddie, asking me if I’m nervous about today and if I want her to come with me. It’s tempting, but with the hostility she holds toward him, I’d hate for Brenna to pick up on it. Starting their relationship off on the wrong foot won’t do any good for anyone.

Sitting up in bed, I catch my reflection in the mirror and memories of last night come rushing back. There’s a bruise on my cheekbone, but thankfully it’s one that should be easily covered with makeup.

I can’t believe he hit me. Sure, we’ve had some pretty intense arguments at times, but I never thought he would be one to put his hands on me like that. It’s definitely something we’re going to need to talk about, but my stress is already on

overload right now with introducing Brenna to Colby. It'll have to wait.

After sneaking into my room to put on some foundation to cover the bruise, I head downstairs. Brenna is sitting on the couch, watching TV. I look around for any signs of Topher, but the only thing I find is a vase of flowers on the kitchen island that wasn't there last night. I walk over and pull the card out.

Saige,

I'm so, so, sorry. I promise it will never happen again. Please let me make it up to you.

- Topher

I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER BEEN THIS NERVOUS. NOT WHEN I played my first football game. Not when I knew scouts were watching me. Not even when I was drafted. Nothing even begins to compare to how hard my heart is pounding against my ribcage.

"I don't know if I can do this," I say, probably looking like a freak to anyone not in my car.

"You can," Lennon's voice comes through the speaker. "I know you can. She's just a little girl."

"She's my little girl, Len. Do you know how scary that is? What if she hates me?"

She giggles. "Well, then she can join the other half of the female population."

"Ha ha," I deadpan. "You're such a comedian."

Cade's voice echoes in the background, and Lennon mumbles for him to shut up. "You're going to be fine. Mentally, you're practically her age. Just relax. She's going to love you."

Her words shouldn't make me feel better. She's basically done nothing but roast me this entire conversation. But somehow, they do. She manages to instill confidence in me that I didn't have before. Kind of like Saige used to before a big game.

"Thanks, Len," I say, bringing my thoughts back and away from places they shouldn't go. "I'll call you tonight to tell you

how it went.”

“You better.”

We get off the phone, and I climb out of the car. The park is empty, which is part of the reason I picked this one. It’s secluded, and most people don’t even know it’s here. With Saige wanting to take this slow, I figured the last thing she would want is for the media to get pictures and start up with their theories. Granted, they could end up being right, but it still isn’t what she wants. I get that.

Baby steps.

Saige’s Lexus pulls into the parking lot, and my palms begin to sweat. She gives me a polite smile as she gets out and walks around to the passenger side. Brenna waits for her as she closes the door and locks the car, then they hold hands as they walk toward me. Those green eyes that match my own watch me with pure curiosity.

“Brenna,” Saige says. “This is Mommy’s friend, Colby.”

The introduction stings a little, I’m not going to lie, but I swallow it down and drop to her height. “It’s very nice to meet you, Brenna.”

Her bottom lip juts out in a pout. “You’re the guy who was at our house the other night. You were yelling at Mommy.”

Saige winces. “He wasn’t yelling, baby. Sometimes grown-ups just talk loud.”

“Like you do to old people who can’t hear?”

That manages to pull a laugh out of the both of us. “Yeah, like that.”

Brenna looks back at me, and I can’t help but smile at her. She smiles back and sticks a finger right into one of my dimples.

“You have dimples like me,” she says proudly, showing off her own.

Seconds in and this girl is already melting my heart. “That’s because we’re special. They’re our secret weapon. No

one can resist the dimples.”

She covers her mouth and giggles. Then, she comes closer to whisper in my ear. “Sometimes, I use them to get extra dessert out of Mommy.”

I snicker. “I don’t blame you. I would, too.”

“All right,” Saige interrupts. “Secrets aren’t any fun when there are three people. Brenna, why don’t you see if Colby will push you on the swings.”

Her eyes light up. “Will you?”

“I would love to.”

She grabs my hand and starts pulling me so fast I almost fall over. “Let’s go, Colby! We don’t have all day!”

I glance back at Saige, who watches us as we walk away, and I mouth a silent ‘thank you.’ It’s obvious that she’s anything but comfortable with this, but she’s trying, and that’s all I want.

ALL THE YEARS I’VE spent with elite trainers, nutritionists, and physical therapists, and none of it prepared me for the playground with a five-year-old. Every time I think we’re going to stay in one place, and she’s ready to run to the next. Don’t get me wrong, I’m in really good shape. I need to be. But this girl has me out of breath.

“Come on, Colby!” Brenna pulls at my arm. “It’s going to get dark soon!”

We’ve been here for close to three hours, and all I know is my body is going to hate me in the morning. Coach really needs to think about enlisting a bunch of kindergarteners to keep us in shape. They’re like little energy packs that never seem to run out.

The ice cream truck pulls in, and it’s like the Lord answered my prayers. “How about we go get some ice cream instead?”

“Yes!” she yells, jumping up and down.

I smile at her excitement. “Go ask your mom if it’s okay.”

She runs over to Saige, who’s been sitting on a bench since we got here, and starts rambling about ice cream and how much fun she’s having. Her mouth is moving so fast, I’m surprised Saige understands a single word that comes out.

“Can we, Mommy? Can we please?”

I make big eyes at Brenna and stage-whisper, “Dimples!” Brenna and I both turn and give Saige our best smiles.

“Yeah, Mommy. Can we please?”

A hint of fondness crosses her face before she covers it back up. She looks at her daughter and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Yeah, okay.”

Brenna squeals. “Yay! Ice cream!”

She takes off toward the truck, ignoring Saige’s calls to slow down. The two of us walk in silence until I decide to take a chance and break it.

“She’s an incredible kid,” I murmur. “You’ve done really well with her.”

Her breath hitches for a second. “T-thanks.”

“No problem.”

We catch up to Brenna, who is naming every flavor known to man to the poor guy in the truck. Saige rolls her eyes playfully like this is totally normal for her and reminds Brenna she can only pick one. We all choose what we want—well, Saige and I choose, and Brenna changes her mind four times before settling on cookies and cream, and I hand the guy a twenty for his troubles.

“Let’s go over and sit at that table so we don’t make a mess, okay?” she says to Brenna.

Our daughter bounces away to go eat her ice cream.

“I could watch her all day long and never get bored.”

Saige snorts. “Trust me, it gets exhausting.”

I take a sip of my milkshake. “Oh, I believe you. I got a better workout today than I have in years.”

“What’s wrong? Getting old?”

My eyes narrow on her. “Watch it. I’m nearing thirty. It’s a very sensitive topic.”

She laughs, with a smile that I never realized I missed until now, and runs her fingers through her hair. With the brown locks out of the way, the sun hits her face and alarm leaps in my chest.

“Is that a bruise?”

Panic fills her expression for a second as she moves it back. “Uh, yeah.”

“What happened?”

“I walked into a doorway. You know how clumsy I can be.”

Her excuse kind of checks out—she was always tripping over herself and everything else in a room—but there’s something about the way she says it that makes me wonder.

“Saige, are you in danger?” I ask carefully. I’m really not in the place to overstep.

She scoffs. “Yeah, right. Unless you mean that my own two feet are going to be the death of me one day, then absolutely.”

I exhale. Something is telling me she’s lying. “I’m serious. Do you need help?”

Her demeanor goes cold as she turns her back to Brenna and faces me. “Look, just because you’re in Brenna’s life now doesn’t mean you get to be in mine.”

“Saige.”

“I mean it, Colby,” she says firmly. “*She’s* your business. Not me. Not anymore.”

A COUPLE WEEKS PASS, and we fall into a routine. The three of us meet up and do different things. Or more like Brenna and I do different things while Saige supervises. I think my favorite has been the go-carts, and Brenna would probably agree. I rented out the whole place, despite Saige yelling at me about how ridiculous it was, and we drove them for hours. The way I saw it was I wouldn't get schooled in workouts by a five-year-old if we were in cars.

A few days earlier, we went to a trampoline park, and I literally thought I was going to die. I was good for the first hour and a half, but after that, I was panting on the floor while Brenna proceeded to laugh and jump on me. Still, I wouldn't trade this time for anything in the world.

Saige has kept to herself since I asked her about the bruise on her cheek, but that hasn't stopped me from checking to see if she's had any new marks. Each time we meet up, she seems to warm up a little more, but that could also be my wishful thinking. She's a lot different than the girl I left behind, and if she doesn't even want to look my way, it's no one's fault but my own.

We're sitting at a picnic table, eating the McDonald's that Brenna begged for. Honestly, I can't remember the last time I allowed myself to eat this junk, but if Brenna wants it, that's what she gets.

"I can't believe you still do that," I cringe, watching Saige dip her fries into her milkshake.

She rolls her eyes, but there is a hint of a smile on her face. "Don't knock it until you try it."

"No thank you," I refuse. "There's something unnatural about that."

Brenna grabs a fry and dips it in before shoving it into her mouth. "So yummy!"

My head falls back as I groan. "Not you, too!"

Saige smirks. "I raised her well."

It's honestly adorable, seeing the way the two of them gang up on me. I almost let it slip out that it's my eyes and dimples that make her so cute, but thankfully I swallow it down before I wreck all the progress we've just made. Letting Brenna find out I'm her dad before Saige is ready for that could be detrimental to everything.

Once we're done, Saige stands up and gathers all the garbage together. "We have to go, Bren. Topher is waiting for us at home."

"Okay," Brenna sighs, looking surprisingly unenthusiastic about the idea.

We toss everything in the trash and all start walking toward the car. After looking down at my daughter, I can't help but crack a joke.

"What kind of name is Topher, anyway?"

Saige snorts. "Better than being named after a cheese."

Brenna breaks out into a fit of laughter. "Oh, burn!"

"Ouch," I whine and feign injury. "Whose side are you on?"

She giggles and goes to run away, but I scoop her into my arms and tickle her. She thrashes around and begs me to stop in her tiny voice, so I lift her up onto my shoulders instead. The small grin on Saige's face doesn't go unnoticed as she watches us.

Yeah, this is happiness.

WATCHING LENNON TRY TO teach Asher and Tessa how to do a proper pirouette is probably the funniest thing I've ever seen in my life. For one, Tessa is about as coordinated as a baby deer, and two, Asher is way too tall to do any kind of dance moves. In all the time I've known him, he's always been

my manly best friend. He's a quarterback, for crying out loud. Right now, however, I just want to throw a tutu at him.

"Come on, Colby," Tessa wheedles. "Don't be such a wuss."

I chuckle. "Not going to happen, Spyro. The only spinning I do is with a chick in my bed."

Lennon tries to correct Asher's form but she can barely see through her tears of laughter. Finally, they all give up and sit back down. We have a game on Sunday, and while I didn't expect Lennon to want to come home, she seemed like she was pretty lonely.

Savannah and Grayson, her closest friends in New York, are spending the weekend in Rhode Island with Delaney and Knox, another couple they're all friends with. Since Cade is in Hawaii at the moment for a surfing competition, she didn't want to be the fifth wheel. I don't blame her. I've been third-wheeling it since Tess tied her ball and chain to Asher's ankle. She stole my wingman.

"What's Poppin" comes through the speakers, and I instantly chuckle. With Lennon next to me, it's perfect.

"I could put a ball in the end zone," I sing and then point over at Lennon with my thumb. "Put a bad bitch in the friend zone."

Asher and Tessa laugh while Lennon rolls her eyes and punches me in the arm, but she knows I'm just kidding. In all actuality, we put each other in the friend zone. For starters, I made the mistake of hitting on her while she was still seventeen, and going to jail isn't exactly on my bucket list. From there, we just became really close friends. The idea may have run through my mind once or twice, especially when she got cheated on by her douchebag ex, but she ended up with Cade, and I really am happy for her.

I look down to check my phone and realize the time. "Shit, we have to go. Saige and Brenna will be at my place soon."

We're having a movie night in the theater room. Saige and Brenna came with me to watch my practice one day. When we

stopped back at my house so I could change before we went to the zoo, they both got a tour of my humble abode. The second Brenna saw the theater room, with tons of large pillows instead of chairs, her eyes lit up. Needless to say, she's been dying for this night.

"About that," Lennon says as I stand up. "Are you sure you want me there? I don't want to intrude."

I roll my eyes and pull her off the couch. "Don't be dumb. She'll love you."

Her face shows she's unsure. "Yeah, it's not Brenna I'm worried about."

Ah, Saige. "Don't worry about her. You're my best friend, and I want you there."

She doesn't fight me further on it, and the two of us head down the elevator and into my car.

IF THERE WAS A queen of hot and cold, Saige would hold the crown, no doubts about it. After the other day at lunch, I thought we were making some progress in getting her to warm up to me, but while at my house, she won't even look in my direction. Her fingers move a mile a minute across her phone and the pinched look stays firmly on her face.

"I'm hungry," Brenna whines.

I glance over at Saige and back to Brenna. "Well, if your mom is okay with it, I have stuff to make our own ice cream sundaes."

Her whole face lights up. "You're the best grown-up, ever!"

"Oh, thanks," Saige remarks.

Brenna waves her off dismissively. "You're my mom. You don't count."

I don't know whether that makes it better or worse, but it's comical all the same. We pause the movie and all head for the kitchen. It only takes a couple minutes for me to get everything out. Lennon helped me pick it all out. We've got three flavors of ice cream, waffle bowls, whipped cream, hot fudge, caramel, peanut butter sauce, sprinkles, and last but not least, cherries. Brenna looks like she's in five-year-old heaven as she looks at everything sprawled across the counter.

"You're not going to sleep tonight, are you?" Saige asks our daughter.

She giggles and shakes her head. "Can I eat it all?"

A ringing phone catches all our attention, and Saige brings hers to her ear. She holds up a finger to wait and walks away. Lennon goes over to Brenna, and the two of them stare at the makeshift ice cream shop in my kitchen.

"So, what's your favorite flavor?"

"All of it," the little one answers in a daze.

I'm about to help Brenna make her sundae when it occurs to me—I don't know if she's allergic to anything. Wow, look at me. Dad of the fucking year.

"Watch her for me for a second?" I ask Lennon. "I just have to ask Saige a question."

She nods, and I head in the same direction Saige disappeared to. When I get just outside the front door, I find her frustratedly running her fingers through her hair. Whoever it is on the other side of the line, it's not a conversation she wants to have right now. We may have lost touch, but I know her well enough to know that at least.

"I said I was sorry. What more do you want from me?" She sighs and then catches sight of me. "Topher, I have to go. We'll talk about this later."

I wait patiently for her to get off the phone, ignoring the way my stomach churns when I hear her say those little three words we never exchanged.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” I apologize. “I was just coming to see if Brenna has any allergies before I make her the ice cream mountain she’s imagining in her head.”

Saige laughs softly, but it doesn’t look genuine. “No, she doesn’t.”

“Okay, thanks.” I turn to go back inside when I stop. “You coming?”

She nods. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

IT’S TEN-THIRTY BY the time Saige can get Brenna to agree to leave, and it’s only because she’s passed out cold. I carry Brenna out to the car and buckle her in, then watch as they drive away. It’s funny, because the idea of kids used to scare the crap out of me, but spending these last couple weeks getting to know Brenna, I couldn’t imagine my life without her anymore. That little girl has dug her way in and formed a permanent home inside my chest.

When I get back inside, I find Lennon cleaning up the mess from earlier, even though I told her not to worry about it. She smiles sweetly at me and continues to wipe down the counter.

“She’s adorable,” she tells me.

My grin widens. “She really is.”

“Her mom isn’t bad either.”

I don’t even need to see the devious look on her face to know what she’s insinuating. “Don’t go there.”

Lennon laughs. “Why not? You two would be so cute together. And I’m not the only one who thinks so.”

My brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

She shrugs. “When you went outside, Brenna asked me if I was your girlfriend. I think she’s hoping you and Saige will end up together.”

It's a topic that haunts my mind late at night, but I never let myself indulge in it. She's engaged, for one, and I'm not about to ruin that for her. I've done enough damage in her life. All I'm focused on right now is Brenna and football. Anything else is simply a cherry on top of the sundae of life.

THEY SAY THAT EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON, AND FOR the most part, I'm a firm believer in that. Colby coming back into my life was the last thing I thought I wanted, but after seeing the way Brenna lights up when she's around him, I'm grateful he did. The relationship the two of them share is special, and she doesn't even really know who he is yet.

A big part of me is still terrified. I know his first away game is coming up in a few weeks, and I'm so afraid he's going to realize that being held down by a kid isn't what he wants. I can already see Brenna getting attached, and him not wanting to spend time with her would break her little heart.

All I can do is hope he's as invested in this as he claims.

"Good morning, beautiful," Topher greets me as I'm brushing my hair.

"Morning."

After the night he laid a hand on me, he's been super apologetic. I got flowers for a week straight, each filled with cute little love notes about how much I mean to him. I decided to believe him when he said it was a mistake and leave it in the past.

"I was thinking," he says as he comes to stand beside me. "Why don't you and Brenna come to the set with me today? I've missed you two, and it would be nice to spend the day together."

The idea would be tempting, being as we haven't had much time together in a while, but I remember the last time we went there with him. Brenna was bored out of her mind, and it was almost impossible to keep her quiet while they were filming. A movie set just isn't the place for a five-year-old, but he doesn't seem to understand that.

"I would, but we have plans," I reply with a mock frown.

"Oh? What are you up to?"

I shrug. "I told Maddie we would meet her for lunch, and then Colby wants to take Brenna to the batting cages."

He scoffs. "Colby. Of fucking course."

"Don't start this again, please," I beg, but it's no use.

Topher rolls his eyes. "Well forgive me for being pissed that a spineless asshole has gotten to see my fiancée more than I have lately."

I exhale slowly and put my brush down before going to leave. "I'm not having this argument, again."

Before I can go anywhere, his hand wraps around my wrist and squeezes tightly. "Don't you dare walk away from me."

His grip sends a pain up my arm, and no matter how much I try to pull away, he doesn't relent. "Let me go. You're hurting me."

He lets go but shoves me away from him in the process. "Go spend the day with your boyfriend. Maybe the two of you will rekindle the flame."

As he storms away, a part of me considers stopping him, but I'm too concerned about the finger marks left behind on my arm. So much for being sorry. And to top it off, if it bruises, which I would be surprised if it didn't, it's going to be a pain in the ass to hide.

Fucking lovely.

SINCE THE INCIDENT WITH Topher this morning, my mood has completely plummeted. Even my favorite restaurant is failing in cheering me up. Brenna is coloring with Maddie while I scroll through my phone. Tweets between Topher and his female co-star are trending right now, and they're enough to cause speculation.

"Have you seen this?" I ask Maddie and pass her my phone.

Confusion etches across her face as she reads. "What the fuck?"

"Mads."

Brenna giggles. "Aunt Maddie said a bad word."

She winces. "Sorry, what the heck."

I take back my phone and put it down on the table. "We had an argument this morning, and I guess this is his way of getting back at me."

"That's not right, S. He shouldn't be doing anything to make you feel bad, and especially not something this public."

She has a point, but he's going to do whatever he wants, regardless of what I say. "What can I even do about it? If I get mad, he'll spew some crap about it being for work."

"You could always ditch the loser. Even someone whose name rhymes with Molby Mendrix is waiting in line for a chance with you."

I roll my eyes. "Not this again. I told you. He has a girlfriend. One I was forced to spend time with last night, mind you."

Chiming in even though I didn't even know she was listening, Brenna says "Lennon isn't Colby's girlfriend."

"Yes, she is!"

Brenna pouts. "Is not."

My brows raise as I look at my all-knowing tiny human. "Oh yeah? And how do you know that?"

“I asked her,” she answers, like it’s not a big deal.

“You what?” Maddie and I gape at the five-year-old gossip columnist in the making.

Brenna looks back down at her coloring page. “Last night, when Colby went to talk to you outside. I asked if Colby is her boyfriend and she said no. She said they’re just friends.”

I don’t know what I’m more surprised at—that they’re not together or that my child had enough balls to ask. I chuckle in disbelief as I look away from Brenna and back at Maddie. My best friend bounces her eyebrows at me suggestively, and I throw the crumbled up straw wrapper at her.

Colby being single doesn’t change anything.

BATTING CAGES ARE BY far every mother’s worst nightmare. There’s something about a ball flying toward your child that makes you want to stick them in a bubble. However, the second Brenna mentioned wanting to do something involving a sport, Colby was on it. He rented out the entire place so we didn’t have any wait or time limits.

I stand behind the fence and watch Colby teach Brenna where to stand and how to hold the bat. She’s played t-ball since last year, but at least that ball is stationary. Even at the slowest setting, this whole thing is giving me anxiety.

Colby stands behind her and helps guide her to hit the first couple. Then, he steps back to let her do a few on her own. The proud smile on his face is enough to melt even me, and I don’t allow myself to feel much toward him. It’s safer that way.

“This is too easy,” Brenna whines. “I want it faster.”

Before either of us can stop her, she reaches up and turns the dial to 60mph pitches.

“No, Brenna!” I shriek as a ball comes flying out right at her.

Colby steps in front of her and takes a baseball right to the back as he shields her from it. He tries to mask his pain, but I can see it all over his face. He hits the kill switch and leads Brenna out of the cage.

“Bren, Colby told you not to touch that,” I scold her. “That ball could have killed you if it hit your head, and now Colby’s hurt.”

She looks at Colby, crestfallen. “I’m sorry.”

I glance over at my ex, who is doing what he can to rub the spot on his back, all while still trying to look like a tough guy. Figures.

“Are you okay?”

He plays it off like he didn’t just get hit with a fast ball. “Me? I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

I sigh and smack his hand away, massaging the tense muscle. “Thank you, for protecting her like that.”

Glancing over his shoulder at me, he smiles softly. “I’ll always protect her.”

“Can we go again? I promise I won’t touch anything this time.”

Colby shakes his head before I can say no. “Sorry, B. I think your mom was right when she said you’re too young for this.”

Her arms cross over her chest, but before she can say anything, Colby stops her.

“I have a better idea though.” He turns to me. “Can you meet me at my place?”

I nod, not knowing what he’s up to but unwilling to tell him no after he took a ball to the back for her.

BY THE TIME WE get to Colby’s, there is a truck in the driveway and three men walking out from the backyard. I

watch as Colby gets out and hands them what I assume is a tip, and they all climb back into the truck and leave. He comes over to help me get Brenna out of the car, all while sporting an excited grin on his face.

“What did you do?” I ask. “Who were those guys?”

He pulls Brenna into his arms and smirks. “You’ll see.”

Walking through the house, Colby keeps his hand firmly placed over Brenna’s eyes so she can’t see. However, the second we get to the back door, I spot the surprise. It’s a massive bounce house that rivals the size of the house, and I can only imagine how excited Brenna is going to be.

We step out into the yard, and I close the door behind us.

“All right, B. You ready?” Colby asks her.

She nods hurriedly, and the second he removes his hand from her eyes, she lets out an ear-piercing shriek. She squirms in his arms until he puts her down and immediately darts toward the bounce house.

“Excuse me, little miss,” I get her attention. “What do you say?”

She smiles and runs back toward us. Colby bends down just in time for her to wrap her arms around his neck. She squeezes him tightly, and I watch as he hugs her back.

“Thank you, Colby. You’re the bestest ever.”

“You’re welcome, little bug.”

He releases her so she can go jump, but instead of standing, he sits on the ground for a second. I chuckle as I look down at him.

“You okay?” I question, already knowing the answer.

Nodding, he rubs his chin. “Just a little melted, that’s all.”

The two of us watch Brenna in silence, until I can’t hold back anymore. “You know, that’s an awfully big bounce house for such a little girl. So much unused space.”

Colby chuckles and stands up. “It would be a shame if it went to waste, wouldn’t it?”

We share a look before both taking off toward the oversized inflatable.

I COLLAPSE ONTO THE floor and bounce with Colby’s movements as he follows. After a straight hour of being all over this thing, I’m completely out of breath. Even Brenna looks exhausted, but she keeps going anyway. I don’t know how she does it.

“This was a much better idea than batting cages,” I point out. “Which I tried telling you was a bad idea, by the way.”

Colby throws his head back, laughing. “Touché. Next time I’ll listen to you.”

“Oh, that’ll be a nice change.”

“I wasn’t always that bad, was I?” He grins, flashing the dimples that always seemed to make me swoon, and pokes me in the side.

The breath is sucked right out of me as I stare back at him. “No, you weren’t.”

We’re both frozen in place, less than a foot away from each other. His eyes drop down to my lips for a second, and I’m paralyzed. I can’t move. I can’t speak. I can’t even breathe.

He starts to move in.

“Are you going to kiss?” Brenna asks.

Colby jerks away so fast I wonder if I imagined it, but the pink tint that fills his cheeks tells me I didn’t. He looks over at Brenna and chuckles before attacking her with tickles. It wipes the moment straight from her mind, but I know it will be in my memory bank for a lifetime.

My phone rings, and like she could sense my heart pounding, Maddie's picture fills my screen. I climb out of the bounce house and put it to my ear.

"Hey, Mads."

"Hey." Her voice sounds a little panicked but more sorrowful. "I don't have long, and I hate to do this. You know I'm always there to help you, and if it wasn't a crazy opportunity, I'd turn it down."

I snicker at her rambling. "Maddie, spit it out."

"I can't watch Brenna on Friday. Something came up for work."

This Friday is the premier for a movie Topher is in, and I promised him I'd go. It's been on the calendar for months. Dread fills my stomach when I think about how disappointed he's going to be. And with my wrist still aching from this morning, I can only imagine what his reaction will be. Still, I can't expect my best friend to give up important opportunities to babysit.

"It's okay, really," I assure her. "I'll figure something else out."

She sighs. "I really am sorry, S. Are we still on for coffee tomorrow morning?"

"Duh, and you can tell me all about what has you so excited."

"Definitely. Love you!"

I smile even though she can't see me. "Love you, too."

Hanging up the phone, I turn around to see Colby standing there. I startle and bring my hand to my chest.

"Don't do that."

He smiles and raises his hands defensively as he takes a step back. "Is everything okay?"

I take a deep breath and shrug. "Yeah. Maddie was supposed to watch Brenna this Friday night so I could go to Topher's premier, but she can't now."

Maybe it's wrong to talk about my fiancé with the guy who almost just kissed me, but it could also be exactly what's needed to bring this back into neutral territory. Thankfully, he seems to agree because he doesn't miss a beat.

"I can watch her."

My brows raise. "You would babysit?"

He runs his fingers through his hair and glances back at the bounce house that Brenna is still ricocheting around in. "When it's your own kid, it's called parenting."

My nerves are shot. This is the last thing I expected. And still, my stomach churns.

"I don't know," I say hesitantly.

He puts a hand on my shoulder. "Saige, you've seen me with her. She'll be fine, and imagine how happy she would be. She can sleep here Friday night, and you can pick her up on Saturday."

A part of me wants to say no. It's too soon. He knows nothing about being a parent. What if she gets hurt? But the hopeful look in his eyes renders me defenseless.

Brenna slides out of the bounce house and runs over.

"Why aren't you two jumping? Come on, it's fun!"

I smile at her. "We were just talking about you having a sleepover here on Friday night."

Her eyes double in size as she looks at Colby and back at me. "Really?"

"Yeah, really?" Even Colby looks like he's in awe.

I nod, and Brenna leaps into my arms, making me giggle. "I take it you want to?"

She squeezes me tighter. "Yes! Thank you, Mommy!"

And okay, maybe that makes it totally worth it—even if I feel like my anxiety level just hit new heights.

IF SOMEONE TOLD ME A FEW MONTHS AGO THAT I'D BE cleaning out my gym to replace it with a little girl's bedroom, I may have actually punched them in the face. The idea is so outlandish, and yet here I am, loading my gym equipment into the back of Griffin's truck.

"Dude, you sure you're good with me taking all this stuff?"

I nod. "I need the room for something more important. And besides, I can always use the gym at the stadium."

We secure everything in, and he drives away as I go back inside. I take a minute to look at the now empty room. A hint of a smile appears on my face, and I know I'm doing the right thing. Grabbing the cans of paint I bought yesterday, I get to work.

"HEY SPYRO," I SAY the second I walk through the door. "I need your help."

She rolls her eyes. "Are you ever going to stop calling me that?"

I shake my head. "Definitely not."

A year ago, Tessa was dealing with a few things and ended up intentionally burning a house down. Granted, the house belonged to someone who fully deserved it and who was dead

months before, but still. From that point forward, she became Spyro. And if it wasn't that, it would be Swinger, for making me watch her beat the shit out of her gorgeous Lamborghini with a baseball bat.

"Enough nonsense," I tell her. "You need to come with me to the store."

Her brows furrow. "Isn't that what you have a personal stylist for?"

"It's not for clothes. It's for children's bedroom furniture."

She practically chokes on the water she was drinking. "I'm sorry. What?"

I sigh. "Brenna is sleeping over on Friday, and I want her to have her own room."

"And that's not something you can handle?"

Man, she's making this hard for me. "Look, I know plenty about women, but I'm fucking clueless when it comes to little girls."

She chuckles. "And you think I'm not?"

I shrug. "Well, you used to be one, so..."

Honestly, as much as I love Tessa, she wasn't my first choice for this. Lennon would be able to help me design the perfect room, but she left on Sunday and won't be coming back any time soon. Especially not soon enough to help me pick things out.

By the grace of God, she gives in and stands up. "Fine. Just let me get dressed."

WE WALK THROUGH THE furniture store, being led by a lady who doesn't seem to know her ass from her elbow. Last time I checked, Brenna is like three-foot shit and forty pounds soaking wet. She doesn't need a queen-sized bed unless she

has a twin I don't know about. Then again, until a couple weeks ago, I didn't even know about her.

"What about that one?" I ask about a metal bed with a canopy. It looks like something a royal would have.

Tess cringes. "Is she a magical baby from the olden times?"

I snicker and keep walking until we come up to the perfect set. It's all white, with a twin-sized bed, a dresser, and even a little vanity. The whole set just screams Brenna.

"That one," Tessa and I say in unison.

The sales rep turns to the one we're looking at and smiles. "Ah, yes. That's one of our best sellers."

I pull open each of the drawers to make sure it's made well. "How soon can you have it delivered?"

"Well," she says and looks down at her tablet. "We're a little backed up, but I could have it there as soon as Monday."

Nope, that won't do. "Make it this Thursday, and I'll pay double."

Her eyes widen to the size of saucers and she nods, suddenly able to move the date up with no issue at all.

I fill out all the paperwork and swipe my card before leaving the store, feeling accomplished. As we're walking to my car, however, Tessa realizes something.

"Hey, did you and Saige tell her that you're her dad yet?"

I shake my head. "Not yet, but hopefully soon."

The whole topic is obviously a sore spot for Saige, and I've been trying not to push my luck. If she ends up not letting me see Brenna because I pissed her off, this is going to get ugly. No one is going to keep us apart now. I'll make sure of that.

"Well, I'm just wondering," she says, looking confused. "Isn't she going to find it odd she has her own room at her mom's friend's house?"

Honestly, I hadn't thought about that. But then again, that's all the more reason for Saige to tell her the truth. I don't know what else I can do to prove I'm not going anywhere, and this room is even more assurance. That little girl has quickly become my whole world.

I FINISH PAINTING ON Wednesday, a ballerina pink I know she'll love, and the furniture gets delivered early Thursday morning. Throughout the time we've spent together all week after Saige gets out of work and I get done with practice, it's been hard not to spill the secret. But, I know it'll all be worth it when I see her face.

Before I know it, it's Friday morning, and Saige texts me to say she's on the way. I do another sweep to make sure I have everything while listening to my mother ramble about how wonderful this is.

Comfortable blankets.

Movies.

Candy.

Something to make for dinner.

It may seem like overkill, but messing this up is not an option. It's the first time Saige is allowing me to be alone with Brenna, and if this goes well, it could become a regular thing.

The doorbell rings, telling me they're here.

"Okay, Mom?" I say into the phone. "They're here. I've got to go."

She sighs heavily. "Colby, you can't just drop a 'you have a five-year-old granddaughter' bomb on me and then jump off the phone."

"I promise I will call you tomorrow."

It's not the response she was looking for, but she accepts it anyway and we both hang up.

As soon as I open the door, Brenna stands there with a huge smile on her face. I'm not sure who is more excited about this, her or me. She rushes inside, not even caring if her mom follows or not.

"Tell me you bought more ice cream," she says, pure drama.

I chuckle. "I'm starting to think you only like me for the sweet treats I provide."

She smiles sweetly. "Well, duh. Why else?"

"I'd like to think I'm funny."

"Eh," she quips. "You're okay."

Saige sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose between her thumb and index finger. "She has too much sass for her own good."

I give her a knowing look and smirk. "No idea where on earth she got that from."

"Must have been her dad."

It's the first time Saige has been the first to mention something about me being Brenna's father, and I'd like to think that's a step in the right direction. I take the backpack that I assume has B's clothes in it and put it on the stool. Then, I grab her wrist.

"Come on," I tell her. "I have a surprise for B, and I want you to see it, too."

"A surprise?" the little one cheers excitedly. "I love surprises!"

We walk through the house and down the hallway, and I try not to relish in the fact that Saige hasn't removed herself from my grasp. When we get outside the door, I reluctantly let go.

"Okay, you ready?"

Brenna nods excitedly while Saige looks confused, until I open the door and show them my former gym. B's jaw drops and her whole face lights up as she runs into the room. The

white furniture looks great with the pink walls. It's truly a room fit for a princess, and I can tell by her reaction that Brenna loves it. Saige, on the other hand, is completely speechless.

"Do you like it?" I ask her.

She lets out a shaky breath and turns around for a second. My brows furrow as I step around her and lift her chin so she's looking back at me. Her watery eyes give away the fact that she's about to cry.

"Hey," I whisper. "What's wrong? I thought you'd like it."

Shaking her head, she does her best to compose herself. "I do. Honest. I just didn't expect you to do this. What about your gym?"

I shrug nonchalantly. "There are a ton of gyms I can use. This is more important."

"Mommy!" Brenna calls. "You have to feel this bed. It's so comfy!"

Saige and I look over at our daughter and both smile. Her happiness is contagious. I could bask in it all day. It's almost impossible to be in a bad mood around her.

"I have to get going," Saige says after checking the time on her phone. "Any issues, you can call my cell. I'll be in the theater, but I'll have it on vibrate."

"Everything will be fine."

She levels me with a look. "I mean it, Colby. I don't care if she skins her knee. I want you to call me."

It's adorable how protective she is of our daughter. Some guys might be offended if they were talked to like this about taking care of their child, but I'm glad Brenna has always had someone willing to go to bat for her. Everyone needs that in their life.

"Brenna," I call. "Come give your mom a hug."

Her little feet run across the floor until she wraps her arms tightly around her mom's waist. I can tell Saige is nervous,

leaving her with me, but this is my chance to prove to her that I can do it.

WE SPEND THE DAY doing everything imaginable. I had another bounce house delivered and set up in my backyard. We ate ice cream for lunch. We watched *The Little Mermaid* in the theater room...twice. We even had a pillow fight before Brenna jumped on my bed for a straight hour.

By the time it reaches six o'clock, we're both exhausted. We grab a few blankets and cozy up on the couch. Brenna is playing some game on her iPad while I flick through the channels. I'm about to turn on a football game when something else catches my eye—the red carpet to Topher's movie premier.

I figured Saige was on her way there when she stopped sending me a text every half hour making sure everything is okay. A part of me says that turning this on is a bad idea, but for some reason I do it anyway.

There are a few other actors, actresses, and producers that get photographed and interviewed, and then I see them. All the fans surrounding the red carpet begin to scream, and the camera pans around to the limo Topher James is getting out of. He's wearing an all-black tuxedo with a cocky grin on his face. He doesn't even turn to help Saige out of the car, but lets her manage on her own.

Dick.

She looks breathtaking. The dress she's wearing is black, to match his tux, but it sparkles in the light. It's cut low on her chest with a slit up the side. Her hair is half tied up and curled, and her makeup looks professionally done. As gorgeous as she looks, I have a feeling she isn't the one who chose all of this. Saige is the kind of girl who would rather wear jeans and a tank top. The most makeup I've seen on her face, even in the last couple weeks we've reunited, is a little eyeliner and the cover-up she wore when she needed to hide the bruise on her

cheek. Other than that, she embraces the natural beauty she possesses.

As they walk down the red carpet, I can't help but notice how uncomfortable she looks. Big parties and being in the spotlight was never her thing. Even with the draft, once she found out it was going to be televised, she was iffy about it. Therefore, walking that red carpet is something that puts her completely out of place.

If Topher cared about her, he would hold her hand or put an arm around her. Do something. But instead, he's waving and winking at his fans like his fiancée isn't standing three feet away from him. He doesn't deserve her. I've thought that since the minute I saw them together on that talk show. However, after that almost-kiss the other day, the topic has been front and center.

That moment has been haunting my dreams, and if she wasn't engaged, I would try again. I've sworn off relationships since I was drafted. And yet, something about Saige has me questioning all of that. It's the same thing that pulled me toward her all those years ago. But, the fact that her fiancé is a complete tool be damned, I'm not a home-wrecker. I just have to live with the fact that I fucked up, and Topher James hit the jackpot instead.

"Do you like him?" I ask Brenna, tipping my head toward Topher on the screen.

She glances up from her iPad but only for a second. "Meh, he's okay."

I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing. "That doesn't sound very convincing."

"I just want a dad."

That sentence hits me straight in the chest and makes it hard to breathe. "What?"

Keeping her eyes trained on the screen, she moves her fingers around it like a pro. "Everyone at school has a mom *and* a dad. I'm the only one who doesn't, and I don't want to

be different. When Topher asked Mommy to marry him, they said we're going to be a family now."

A stray tear leaks out and slides down her cheek. I reach over and wipe it away with my thumb.

"If that's a good thing, why are you crying?"

She turns to me with a heartbreaking look on her face that threatens to break me into a million pieces. "My dad didn't want me."

My bottom lip starts to quiver, but I hold it in. "Why do you think that?"

"Because if he wanted me, I would know who he is. He would come to my birthday parties and see me on Christmas. He would sing me lullabies and tuck me in at night. But I've never met him."

I don't know what to say. Anything that comes out of my mouth right now would only give away the fact that I'm her dad. So instead, I pull her in close and kiss the top of her head.

"I'm sure he has a really good reason, B," I whisper. "Anyone would be crazy not to want you."

That night, I tuck her into bed and sing *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* until she's sound asleep.

I'M JUST FINISHING CUTTING up Brenna's waffles when the doorbell rings. I put the plate in front of B and go to answer the door. As soon as I open it, I frown. Saige looks utterly exhausted. Her face is clean of the makeup she wore last night, but her hair is in a sloppy bun, and she looks like she barely got a wink of sleep. And somehow, she still looks beautiful.

"Have a good night?" I question.

She nods. "How's Brenna?"

I open the door wider for her to enter. “Come see for yourself.”

We both walk into the kitchen and see our daughter happily digging into her plate of waffles. Saige walks over and kisses her cheeks before taking a bite. When she’s done, she turns to me.

“Chocolate chips and whipped cream?”

My grin widens and dimples show for some extra leverage. “She’s hard to say no to.”

Saige laughs and rolls her eyes. “Such a pushover.”

It’s such a calm morning that I hate to do this, but after last night, it has to be done.

“Can we talk a minute?” I ask, nodding toward outside.

“Yeah, sure.” She ruffles Brenna’s hair. “We’ll be right back. Finish your waffles, because we have to leave soon.”

We walk outside and far enough away from the door that I know B won’t overhear. My palms are sweaty and my nerves are out of control, but part of being a parent is trying to do what’s best for them. And that is exactly what I’m doing.

“What’s up?” Saige asks, sensing how anxious I am.

I take a deep breath. “We need to tell Brenna the truth, about me being her dad.”

“Excuse me?”

“Last night, she cried and told me that her dad didn’t want her,” I argue. “She thinks that something is wrong with her and that I don’t want her. She needs to know.”

She scoffs and crosses her arms over her chest. “Whoa. You’ve spent all of like five minutes in her life—”

“Yeah? And whose fault is that?” I snap back. “She deserves to know the truth!”

Saige’s eyes burn with rage. “So, you have her alone for one night and suddenly you’re a fucking expert on what’s best for her?” She shakes her head. “Fuck you, Colby.”

As she turns around, I can already tell she's going to storm out of here, and who knows when I'll get to see Brenna again.

"Saige, stop."

She doesn't listen to me as she rips the backdoor open and grabs Brenna's bag off the couch. "Come on, Bren. We're leaving."

Brenna pouts. "But I didn't finish my waffles yet."

"I'll make you more at home. Let's go."

It's obvious she doesn't want to go, but she's a good kid and listens to her mom. Before they can leave though, I go over and pick B up into my arms. We hug each other tightly, and I try to commit the feeling to memory. If I have to, I'll take Saige to court and make it so she has to let me see my daughter, but that could take a while.

"Be good, little B."

She lets go and steps back when I put her down. "Bye, Colby."

I watch them walk out, and Saige puts Brenna in the car. Before getting in herself, she gives me a dirty look that silently tells me to go fuck myself.

Yeah, noted.

HOW COULD EVERYTHING GO FROM SO PERFECT TO SUCH A shit-show in a matter of five minutes? Things with Colby and Brenna were great. Their relationship was on the right track, and he wasn't impossible to be around. And yet, when I picked her up yesterday morning, he went and ruined everything.

I walk around the kitchen, grabbing the things to bake chocolate chip cookies and slamming every drawer and cabinet I open. Most of them end up bouncing back with the momentum and it only pisses me off more. Needless to say, I haven't calmed down a bit since I left Colby's.

"As amusing as it is when you rage bake, you need a chill pill," Maddie tells me, but I'm not in the mood for her shit either.

"No one said you have to be here to watch."

She puts her feet up on the other bar stool and smirks. "And miss this show? No, thanks."

I roll my eyes and grab an egg to crack it. Instead, the whole thing crumbles in my hand and shells fall right into the bowl. I let out a groan, but my so-called best friend only chuckles.

"That's the thing about eggs," she says. "They don't do very well with hostility."

Her sarcasm strikes a nerve. "You know, if you had just watched Brenna on Friday night like you said you would, none of this would have happened."

My words are meant to hurt, or at least cause her to leave, but she just smiles at me. “Oh, so I’m to blame right now? Okay.”

Maddie has known me long enough to know that when I’m in a mood like this, things will fly out of my mouth that I don’t necessarily mean. However, it also makes it so she doesn’t leave when she’s clearly not welcomed right now. I don’t know if that’s good or bad.

I ignore her always so carefree attitude and do my best to salvage the cookie dough. Thankfully, the recipe only calls for one egg.

Baking is always what I’ve done when I’m upset or angry about something. Not that it calms me down, but it distracts me enough to keep me from doing things I may regret in the future—like calling Colby and telling him to stay the hell away from Brenna and me for the rest of our lives.

“Oh, cookies!” Brenna says excitedly and reaches her hand up to take some dough from the bowl.

“Brenna, don’t touch that.”

She doesn’t listen, and while trying to grab some, she knocks the bowl right off the counter. The whole thing shatters on the floor and ceramic goes everywhere. I whip around at the noise and glare at my daughter.

“Now look what you did!” I shout. “Don’t you listen? I said not to touch it!”

Her eyes instantly start to water, and she quickly runs away. I can faintly hear the sound of her sobs as she rushes up the stairs. I run my fingers through my hair and pull before realizing I have cookie dough all over my hands. Great, just another thing going wrong today.

“Okay, enough being a bitch,” Maddie tells me.

I narrow my eyes on her. “What did you just call me?”

“You heard me. A bitch,” she says like it’s the godforsaken truth. “You’re pissed but you’re taking it out on the wrong people.”

A dry laugh emits from my mouth. “So, what? I should go scream at Colby instead?”

“No, because he’s not in the wrong either.”

In all the time that I’ve known my best friend, I’ve never wanted to slap her so much. “Oh, really?”

She shrugs. “You’re angry at yourself. You realized you did something wrong and something that hurt Brenna by not telling him about her when you were pregnant.”

“He changed his phone number!”

“Oh, please. There were ways for you to get in touch with him if you really wanted to and you know it.” She stands up and comes over to help me clean up the broken bowl off the floor. “I didn’t push you to do it because I figured you were doing the right thing, or you were afraid he would ask you to get an abortion. But now? The only thing that matters is Brenna and her happiness. If that’s Colby, that’s just something you’re going to have to deal with.”

Deep down, I know she’s right. And still, I’m terrified. “I don’t want him to hurt her. Right now, he’s just Mom’s friend, but once he’s her dad, he has the ability to cause irreparable damage.”

Maddie wraps her arms around me and pulls me close. “Well, then it’s a good thing she has a kick-ass mom to be there for her. She’ll always be okay, as long as she has you.”

I let her comfort me, and when we separate, I sigh. “I have to go see if she’s okay.”

“I know.” She smiles. “Go. I’ve got this.”

TWO DAYS PASS, AND I ignore each one of Colby’s phone calls. It’s not that I’m still angry at him. After talking with Maddie, I realized he has a point. No, the reason I’m not answering is because I’m afraid of what will happen if I do. He made it very clear Saturday morning what he wanted, and I

don't think that's something he's going to let go of any time soon.

Telling Brenna that Colby is her dad is not a topic that should be taken lightly. For one, she's spent the last few weeks thinking that he's just one of her mom's friends. While I understand his reasons for wanting to tell her, I'm also terrified of what it could do to her—especially when he starts traveling for football again and she needs to go weeks without seeing him because he's just too busy.

I'm sitting on the couch after putting Brenna to bed. My phone weighs heavily in my hand as I look over all the texts Colby has sent since Saturday morning.

Colby: I'm sorry I snapped. Call me.

Colby: Saige, please. Just call or text me back.

Colby: When can I see Brenna again?

Colby: Are you ever going to answer me?

Colby: You can't keep her from me. Whether you like it or not, I'm her dad.

Colby: If you don't answer me soon, I'm going to have to take alternative action. Please don't make it come to that.

The front door swings open, and Topher stumbles into the house. He doesn't even bother to close it behind him as he trips and slams right into the wall. A picture falls off and the frame breaks with the impact of hitting the floor. I roll my eyes as I put my phone on the coffee table and go over to help him.

“What happened to you?” I ask.

He mumbles something inaudible and pushes me away as I try to help him up. “I'm fine.”

At the smell of his breath, I take two steps back. The amount of alcohol in his system must be enough to drown a ship. I shut and lock the front door before picking the broken wood up off the ground. Thankfully, the glass is still all in one piece.

“So, what?” Topher slurs. “I have a few drinks and you don’t love me anymore?”

Tossing the remnants of the mess into the garbage, I turn to him with an emotionless look on my face. “You told me not to help you. I was cleaning up the mess you made.”

He scoffs. “The mess I made? What about the mess your little tater tot makes every day? Huh? What about that mess?”

“Don’t bring Brenna into this,” I tell him. “You knew I had a daughter when you got involved with me, and again when you asked me to marry you.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know you were one of Hendrix’s whores.”

The insult is like a punch to the gut, and while a part of me knows it’s only because he’s drunk, I know there’s some truth to it, at least where his feelings are concerned. Ever since I told him about Colby being Brenna’s father, things have been different between us. And this whole coming home drunk thing? Yeah, it’s nothing new.

“I’m going to bed,” I say, not willing to sit down here and endure his verbal abuse. “Try not to puke on yourself.”

He mocks me like a child as I walk out of the room and head upstairs. I go into my bathroom, washing my face and trying to calm myself down. If this is what being married to him is going to be like, I’m not sure I’m interested. I miss the guy I started dating. The one who used to help me with tough decisions and wanted to be there for me through it all. Whoever that man is downstairs is not him.

“SAIGE!” I WAKE UP to Topher screaming my name. “Saige! Get your fucking ass down here!”

I jump out of bed, noticing it’s one o’clock in the morning. My feet pad quickly down the stairs, just to get him to shut up.

“Are you out of your mind?” I hiss. “You’re going to wake up Brenna!”

He’s holding yet another beer in his hand and my phone in the other. “Your boyfriend called. I figured you’d want the message.”

I catch the phone he tosses at me, and when I look through my call log, I notice the last time Colby called was 10:15, right after I went upstairs. It must have taken a while for Topher to realize my phone was downstairs while I wasn’t, and when he did, the first thing he found was a missed call from Colby on the screen.

“You should probably call him back,” he sneers. “Maybe he wants a late-night booty call.”

I exhale slowly, not willing to give in to his taunting. “Okay, I think you’ve had enough to drink.”

As I go to grab the beer from his hand, he rips it away from me. “You’re not the fucking boss of me.”

“Topher, please. Keep your voice down.”

“Fuck you!” He starts to pace back and forth. “Ever since that prick came around, you’ve acted like I’m nothing but a piece of shit! Are you leaving me for him? Is that what it is?”

I shake my head. “Not at all. You’re just drunk. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“Shut the fuck up!” he shouts.

His grip on the bottle tightens as he rears back and throws it directly at my head. Somehow, I’m quick enough to dodge it, but that doesn’t stop me from shrieking as it shatters against the wall. If that had hit me, if I hadn’t moved out of the way, it would have knocked me out—and for some reason, I think that’s exactly what he was going for.

For a second, his eyes widen, but that’s only until laughter starts to bubble out of him. I stand there watching him in disbelief as he breaks out into hysterics. It isn’t until we hear Brenna behind us that he snaps out of it.

“Mommy?” she asks. “Is everything okay? I heard screaming.”

“Yeah, princess,” I reply. “Go back to bed. I’ll be up in a second.”

Topher shakes his head and extends his arms. “Brenna, babe. Come cuddle with me. You always give the best cuddles.”

Being the good girl she is, she looks to me for the answer on whether or not she should listen to him. I shake my head, and she turns around to go back upstairs.

“See? Worthless little kid,” he spits. “Can’t even give a hug when she’s asked to.”

Not caring about the fact that he’s in some psychotic drunken state right now, I step closer and get in his face. “You do not get to say things like that about her. She is a brilliant child who will grow up to do amazing things, and if you keep acting like this, you won’t be around to see it.”

I walk away, only stopping to look at the mess of glass and alcohol that covers the floor.

“Clean this mess, and yourself, up, Topher.”

He says nothing as I leave him standing in the middle of the living room alone. I go upstairs, and instead of going into my own room, I opt for Brenna’s instead. I shut and lock her door behind me before climbing into bed with her. She cuddles into me the second she feels the bed dip beside her.

“Is Topher being mean again?”

I shush her softly. “That’s nothing for you to worry about. Close your eyes, baby girl.”

It only takes a minute for her to fall back asleep and her breathing to steady. I, on the other hand, can’t seem to get the tears to stop once they start. First the slap across the face. Then the thing with my wrist. And now this. When is enough going to be enough? Is the guy I agreed to marry even still in there?

Honestly, I’m not so sure.

THE NEXT DAY, I IGNORE Topher's endless apologies and finally answer Colby's plethora of calls and text messages. Being around him may not be something I want to do right now, but that doesn't mean Brenna doesn't. There hasn't been a day that's passed where she hasn't asked me about him. So, I decide to let him start taking her alone for a bit. Besides, the more time she spends with Colby, the less she spends around Topher.

The doorbell rings, and I don't even need to look at the camera to know who it is. The second I told him he could come pick up Brenna for a bit, Colby was already getting in his car. If I wasn't so against letting myself feel absolutely anything for him, I'd probably find it endearing.

I open the door and give him a polite smile.

"Brenna!" I call up the stairs. "Colby's here!"

The sound of her little scream has the two of us chuckling as she comes out of her room and down the stairs. "Colby, Colby, Colby!"

She runs straight toward him and leaps into his arms. He catches her with ease as she latches on and hugs him tightly.

"Hey, B," he greets her. "I've missed you."

"I missed you, too!" she replies. "I asked Mommy every day when we could go see you again. Didn't I, Mommy?"

I cringe, but I know I need to answer her. "That you did, princess. That you did."

As she hugs Colby again, he subtly glares at me. It doesn't take him saying anything for me to know he's pissed that I kept her from him when she wanted to see him. It was wrong, I know, but I couldn't bring myself to let her see him again. A part of me is afraid he's going to take it upon himself to tell her the truth, and make me out to be the bad guy in the process. Not that I think he's vindictive like that. Maddie called it—a part of me really believes I am the bad guy in this.

“Where are you taking her again?”

He pulls a piece of paper out of his back pocket and hands it to me. There’s an address for a penthouse downtown scribbled across it.

“It’s my best friend Asher’s place. We’re just going to hang out there for a bit and have some pizza.”

It’s understandable, being as it’s already four in the afternoon, and there isn’t really much he can do with her at this point.

I nod. “And you’ll have her back before nine?”

“Yeah. I’ll even text you when we’re leaving Asher’s.”

“Thank you.”

Giving Brenna a hug, I watch Colby take my daughter... our daughter, and buckle her into the car seat he bought shortly after he met Brenna. My stomach is in knots as he gets in the driver’s seat and pulls away.

SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE this whole thing is a catch-22. No matter what I do, no choice I make is good enough for Topher. I thought he was pissed that I was spending too much time with Colby, but now that I’m purposely letting Colby take Brenna by himself, he’s still mad. Every time she goes with him, I get a lecture from my fiancé about how I’m a bad mother for letting her go off with a guy she’s known for less than a month.

Clearly, I can’t win.

I’m sitting at work on Saturday afternoon. To be honest, I’d rather be anywhere but here. However, a huge client needed a party planned at the last minute, and they only trust me to get it done right in such a short time. Thankfully, Colby wasn’t busy and I was able to drop Brenna off with him. The second she saw the brand-new trampoline in his backyard, she shouted her goodbye to me and ran out the door.

Well, at least I know she's happy.

I print out a few things, putting together a vision board for the theme they're going for along with the other people I'm going to need to hire. They want the works. Five different kinds of performers. A band. A DJ to play when the band is taking a break. Even a fireworks show to take place at the end of the party. Something like this would normally take weeks to plan, and I only have five days to make it happen.

I'm just hanging up after striking out with the third band I've called when my cell phone rings and Colby's name appears on the screen. That's weird. He normally just texts me updates.

I swipe to answer it and put it on speaker. "What's up? I'm kind of swamped."

"Uh, hey," he says, the dread in his voice evident. "I hate to bother you at work, but there's been a bit of an accident."

My heart drops. "What kind of accident?"

He sighs heavily. "Brenna fell while climbing off the trampoline and hurt her arm. We're at the ER now."

My whole body goes cold as I realize my daughter is in the hospital. My sweet, innocent, perfect little girl is sitting in a bed surrounded by doctors, and I'm not even there with her because I'm at work. I don't even bother turning off my computer as I grab my things and rush out the door. I barely even get the name of the hospital out of Colby before hanging up the phone and jumping into the car.

The universe must be on my side, because there are no cops the whole way to the ER, and that's good because I probably break just about every traffic law on the way there. I pull up and toss the valet attendant my keys. No part of me even thinks to take the ticket that tells them which car is mine. All I can focus on is Brenna.

"My name is Saige Ambrose," I tell the receptionist through panicked breaths. "My daughter was brought in here a little while ago."

“Saige?” A girl in the lobby asks. She has long brown hair and looks like she’s fresh out of high school.

“Yes?”

She smiles politely at me. “I’m Tessa. Colby told me to come wait for you. I’ll bring you to him and Brenna.”

I follow behind her through the ER doors and down the hallway, wishing she would move a little faster. The second I see Colby standing right by one of the rooms, I run past Tessa and through the curtain. Brenna is sitting on the bed, looking perfectly fine except for the swelling of her arm.

“My poor baby,” I coo, rushing to her side. “Are you okay?”

She pouts. “It hurts, but Colby and the doctor said I’m going to be all right.”

I place a kiss on her forehead and turn to look at Colby. “What happened?”

“She was getting off the trampoline and got her foot caught in the net. Before I could get to her, she wiggled free and landed on her arm.” He looks visibly shaken up and disappointed in himself, but that doesn’t stop the anger from coursing through me.

“You have to watch her, Colby!” I chastise him. “She’s only five. You can’t just let her do whatever she wants while you dick around with your friends.”

Brenna shakes her head. “Don’t yell at him, Mommy. It’s not his fault.”

Colby sighs. “No, it’s okay, B. Your mom is right. I should have kept a better eye on you.”

The way I see it, I have two options. I can continue to lecture Colby on how I was right when I said he doesn’t know what it takes to be a parent, or I can focus on what’s most important here—Brenna. I go with option two.

“What have they done so far?” I ask him, my tone a little calmer.

“They took x-rays. We’re just waiting for the results.”

Just then, the doctor steps in holding an iPad. “Okay, Miss Brenna. It looks like you broke your arm. Thankfully, it’s a clean break, so it should heal just fine, but we’re going to need to put a cast on it. Do you have a favorite color?”

“Pink!” she shouts excitedly.

I notice how Colby’s head dropped the second the doctor said it was broken, but I’m not about to comfort him right now. He should have been watching her. Hell, trampolines come with like a thousand warnings on them. Anyone would know better than to leave her on it unattended.

The doctor chuckles. “Lucky for you, I happen to have plenty of pink. Just sit tight, and we’ll be back in to get that arm casted in a bit.”

“Will I get to color on it? My friend broke her arm once and we all got to color on her cast.”

He smiles warmly at her. “You bet! I’ll even give you a sharpie to take home.”

Her face lights up, like breaking her arm is all made better by a simple marker. “You hear that, Colby? I get to draw on my cast!”

“That’s great, B,” he says. “But let’s not make a thing of breaking your arm, okay?”

“Agreed,” I murmur, unable to ignore the tension in the room.

Unfortunately, there’s nothing I can do about it now. There’s no rewind button that will allow me to go back and tell my boss to fuck himself instead of bringing Brenna to Colby’s this morning. However, the trampoline...

“What are you going to do about the—”

I don’t even get to finish the question before he answers it. “I have people at the house taking it apart now.”

Well, at least he has somewhat of a brain.

THAT NIGHT, WE'RE JUST finishing up dinner when Brenna gasps. I glance up at her from my plate and can already see the tears forming in her eyes. My brows furrow as I try to figure out what's on her mind.

"Everything okay, Bren?"

She shakes her head. "I forgot Puddles at Colby's!"

Puddles is her favorite stuffed animal that Maddie got her when she was two. Since the day she got it, she's brought it everywhere. I've tried to take it away, but after a little research, I realized it's her security item and that there's nothing wrong with letting her have it.

"Why don't you take my phone and try calling him?" I suggest. "Maybe he can drop it off."

Topher groans quietly while Brenna seems a little relieved at that idea. I hand her my phone, and she scurries away to call him. Meanwhile, Topher and I get up and start cleaning up the table. The whole time, anger radiates off him. He tosses the plates into the sink with a little more force than normal. The minute he breaks one of the glasses, I can't take it anymore.

"What's your problem tonight?" I snap.

He rolls his eyes. "Like you even care."

Okay, ouch. "If I didn't care, I wouldn't ask."

It looks like he's going to ignore me and I'm about to drop it when he finally opens his mouth again. "I just don't understand why you're still letting him have anything to do with her. She broke her arm today, Saige. You trusted him with her, dropped her off in one piece, and got her returned broken."

"I know," I sigh. "But..."

"There shouldn't be a but," he argues. "He fucked up and wasn't watching her. Are you going to go back to supervising their visits? Because clearly that seems to be what he wants."

My jaw drops. “You can’t honestly be insinuating he broke her arm on purpose.”

Colby is a lot of things, but abusive and manipulative is not one of them. Selfish and arrogant, maybe, but I know he wouldn’t hurt a hair on Brenna’s head. Surprisingly, Topher must realize that too because he backs off that topic.

“No, I guess not, but I think you’re giving him too much time with her. I don’t trust him.”

It’s a pointless argument—one we’ve had too many times at this point, and I’m really not interested in having it again. Especially not when he has the leverage of Brenna’s broken arm on his side.

“I don’t know what you want me to do, Topher. He’s her dad.”

A little voice behind me has me freezing in place. “*He’s what?*”

COLBY

I CLIMB OUT OF MY AUDI AND HIT THE BUTTON TO LOCK IT before heading into the restaurant. It's one of the overly fancy ones, where you need to be someone in order to get in. The hostess recognizes who I am without me having to say anything and leads me to the table. Three men in business suits stand up and each shake my hand.

"It's nice to see you again, Mr. Hendrix," says one of the suits.

"Likewise," I reply.

As I sit down, I glance around the restaurant. It's not a place I would choose to come myself. There's something about the chandelier that must be worth over ten mil that feels gaudy. Still, when these men try to impress someone, they try hard. And them wanting me for this endorsement deal means they're pulling out all the works.

"So, where did we leave off with negotiations?" The head honcho looks down at his tablet. "Ah, that's right. You had a problem with the fact that you cannot be seen drinking anything from one of our competitors."

I nod. "It's an impossible thing to ask of me. You can't honestly expect me to only ever drink Coke products for the entire duration of the contract."

Oh, did I forget to mention that I'm meeting with the CEO of Coca-Cola? Yeah, I guess that part matters.

"I'm not sure this is something we can budge on, sir."

Just as I'm about to answer, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I consider hitting ignore, but the moment I see Saige's name and a picture of Brenna on the screen, I know I have to answer it. This is the second time she's calling, so it must be important.

"One second, sorry."

I bring the phone to my ear. "Hey. Is everything okay?"

"Colby," Saige cries, and the panic in her voice is enough to send chills down my spine.

"What happened?"

"It's Brenna," she says, and I'm already halfway out of my seat. "She heard me talking to Topher about you being her dad. She's locked in her room and won't come out."

Frustration spurs inside of me, knowing this is exactly what I wanted to avoid. "I'll be right there."

I hang up the phone and focus my attention back on the three men, who stare back at me with shock on their faces.

"If you can't change that stipulation, consider me out," I push my chair in. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have something more important to attend to."

THE STREETS OF THE city are hard to navigate, especially at this time of night. They're filled with people trying to get home from work, and traffic is a bitch. I whip around cars like I should have been a professional driver. It may be dangerous, driving this erratically, but I need to get to Brenna.

I drift into the driveway, relieved that the gate is already open. If it wasn't, I would've had to wait for them to open it, and I don't exactly have much patience right now. The second I get in front of the house, I throw the car in park and don't even bother to turn it off before I'm out and running up the

front steps. I pound on the door and Saige answers, her face soaked and her eyes bloodshot.

“Where is she?”

She steps back and out of my way. “Upstairs. She won’t open the door. She won’t talk to me.”

“Well do you blame her?” I snap. “None of this would be a fucking issue if you had just let me tell her when I wanted to! Instead, she had to overhear it! Who knows what she’s thinking up there!”

“Don’t speak to my fiancé that way,” Topher growls.

I turn around and look him up and down. “Don’t even get me fucking started on you. That’s my daughter up there, and I’m not about to listen to your ass tell me how I should and shouldn’t handle things that concern her.”

His mouth forms into a devilish smirk. “Yeah? You seemed to do such a great job of being her dad earlier, didn’t you? That cast is real cute.”

My body goes stiff. Everything in me wants to pummel his face in until his blood soaks the floor, but there’s a little girl upstairs that needs me. My little girl. A dry laugh leaves my mouth as I shake my head.

“You’re not even fucking worth it.”

Instead of indulging them further, I leave them both downstairs and head up to Brenna’s bedroom. I can hear her sniffles from the hallway, and I lightly tap on the door.

“Go away!” she sobs.

“B, it’s me,” I tell her softly. “Can you open up?”

It takes a minute, but the lock on the door clicks, and I’m able to open it. Not wanting Saige to come in, I lock it again as soon as I’m inside. The minute I see the state Brenna is in, my heart breaks. It’s obvious she’s been crying, and being as the arm she broke is her dominant one, she’s having trouble wiping away the tears.

“I-is it true?” she whimpers. “Are you my dad?”

I drop down in front of her so we're eye to eye. The way she looks at me, it's like she's begging for someone to finally be honest with her. To realize that she's a person. Little she may be, but still a person with feelings that matter.

"Yeah," I breathe, letting the reality of it really set in for both her and for me. "I'm your dad."

Another sob rips through her, and when I go pull her into a hug, she steps back. "Where were you? I'm five now. Where were you before that?"

My chest tightens, thinking about how much of her life I missed. Milestones I can never witness in person. Years together we can never get back. And still, I don't want to throw Saige under the bus, so I try to come up with an answer that doesn't make either of us look like a villain.

"I didn't know about you, B. I promise. If I had known, I would've been there."

"Mommy didn't tell you?"

I shake my head. "She couldn't get in touch with me. I moved away before I knew she was pregnant with you and she had no way to reach me."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "Well, I'm still mad at her."

"Why's that?"

"Because," she says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "She lied to me. She should have told me who you are that first day at the park."

Sighing, I sit on the floor and pull her into my lap, thankful when she goes willingly. "Sometimes grown-ups do things to try to protect people they care about. Your mom was just trying to protect you."

The words coming out of my mouth sound foreign, being as I'm not sure I believe them. A part of me wonders if Saige was keeping this from Brenna to be selfish. When I brought up the idea of telling her, she snapped and didn't want to hear

anything on the subject. And then to top it off, she made me go four days without seeing her.

I hug Brenna close to me. “Why don’t you come spend the night at my house? Would that make you feel better?”

She nods, and I help her up off my lap.

“Can you pack a bag while I go tell your mom?”

Rubbing her nose with the back of her hand, she looks up at me as I stand. “Can I bring a friend for Puddles?”

I can’t help but smile. “Sure, B.”

As soon as I get downstairs, Saige rushes over to me. “Did she talk to you? Is she okay?”

I shrug, having no sympathy for her. “She’s hurt. She feels like you lied to her.”

A fresh set of tears build in her eyes. “That’s not what I was trying to do.”

“Well, she’s going to sleep at my place tonight,” I tell her. “I’ll bring her back at some point tomorrow.”

“Like hell she is,” Topher’s voice booms. “You’re not taking that kid anywhere.”

I’m *really* not in the mood for his shit. “And who’s going to stop me? You?”

He steps up into my face, and it takes everything in me to resist punching him in the jaw. Saige pushes herself in between us and focuses all her attention on Topher. She places her hands on his chest and forces him to take a step back.

“Topher, stop,” she pleads. “Just let him take her. She wants to go.”

Scoffing, he rolls his eyes. “Great. That’s just great, Saige,” he growls. “Let her go right back with the guy who let her get hurt on his watch. Mother of the fucking year.”

Before she can say anything, he turns around and storms away. She runs her fingers through her hair but ultimately seems relieved he’s not in the room anymore. A couple

minutes later, Brenna comes down the stairs with her overnight bag. I meet her at the bottom and take it from her.

“Ready to go?”

She nods, and Saige bends down to give her a hug. “I’m so sorry, Bren,” she whispers. “Have fun, and I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Brenna gives her a half smile but says nothing as she takes my hand and leaves without so much as a goodbye.

AFTER WATCHING *FROZEN TWO*, I get Brenna in her pajamas and tuck her into bed. She’s been quiet since we left Saige’s place, but what she found out tonight is a lot to process for a little girl. I figure I’ll just wait patiently until she’s ready to talk about it. Until then, I’m going to continue to be there for her.

I kiss her forehead and turn on the nightlight. “Sweet dreams, B.”

“Wait,” she says. “I don’t know what I call you now.”

My brows furrow as I go back over and sit on the side of her bed. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re my dad, right?”

I nod. “Right.”

She looks unsure. “Does that mean I call you Dad, or do I still call you Colby?”

The idea of her calling me Dad makes my heart swell, but unlike Saige, I’m not about to make any choices for her.

“You can call me whatever you want, even if it’s something silly like Butthead or Stinky-Pants.”

For the first time all night, she giggles, and it’s like music to my ears. “I like Stinky-Pants.”

A dimpled grin stretches across my face. “Stinky-Pants it is then.” I stand up and tuck the blanket around her body again. “Now, it’s time to get some sleep. There will be plenty of time for questions in the morning, when you’re rested.”

She yawns and sinks into her bed. “Okay.”

“Goodnight, Brenna.”

“Goodnight, Stinky-Pants.”

I walk out of her room and close the door behind me, wondering if she’s going to be okay. And a little less important but still on my mind, *will Saige?*

I STAND ON THE side of the room with Asher and watch from a distance as Tessa puts French braids in Brenna’s hair—as if she’s not heartbreakingly adorable as it is. Since she woke up this morning, she’s seemed in much better spirits. However, she did get a little upset when she asked if she could spend the night again, and I told her that she had to go back to her mom’s. It’s not that I wanted to turn her down, but I have practice and need to leave the house by four in the morning.

“She looks just like you,” Asher tells me. “That picture was a little hard to tell, but seeing her in person, there’s no question.”

I chuckle. “Yeah. Out of everything she got from me, though, I could have gone without the dimples.”

He snickers into his glass. “Why? They’re the best thing about you.”

“I know, but they make it practically impossible to say no to her.”

“Now you know how everyone feels about you.”

I playfully elbow him in the side, but he has a point. I’m no stranger to using my secret weapon for my own personal gain. The fact that Brenna has them too can only mean one thing—trouble.

“Stinky-Pants!” she shouts excitedly after looking in the handheld mirror. “Look at my hair!”

I smile brightly at her. “It looks great, B.”

“That side might,” Tessa chimes in. “But if you don’t stop moving, the other side will look like a bird’s nest.”

Brenna giggles. “Oops.”

Looking back at Asher, he seems deep in thought. “Stinky-Pants?”

I exhale, still finding it amusing. “She asked me last night what she calls me now, Dad or Colby.”

“And you said...Stinky-Pants?”

“No, you douche,” I huff. “I told her it was up to her, and that she could call me anything she wants, even if it’s Butthead or Stinky-Pants.”

Realization crosses his face, and he nods in understanding. “And that’s not going to bother you? If she doesn’t call you Dad?”

“Eh,” I answer. There’s no point in lying to this guy, so I don’t even bother. “It stings a little, but I just want her to be happy. That’s all that matters.”

The corner of his mouth raises into a smirk. “Look at you, being all fatherly and shit. Who would’ve thought?”

Honestly? Not me. But here I am, and even if I could, I wouldn’t change it for the world. Now if only I could figure out what to do about Saige, because this whole parenting thing isn’t going to work well if the two of us are constantly against each other.

BEING AWAY FROM BRENNA IS ABSOLUTE TORTURE. I NEVER knew being away from someone for a couple of days could hurt so badly. I even slept in her room the second night because at least then I felt like I was near her.

“She hates me,” I sigh, massaging my temples.

Maddie frowns. “She doesn’t hate you, S. You’re her mom.”

“Then why won’t she come home?”

Originally, she was only supposed to spend one night at Colby’s, but when he tried to bring her home the next day, she was a mess and refused to get out of the car. He did the responsible parent thing and told his coach he would miss practice, and kept her for another night. With every hour that passes, however, I worry even more. Is she eating enough? Is she okay? Does he know what he’s doing?

“Because she’s mad at you, and she’s not mad at Colby.” Maddie grabs her drink off the table and shrugs. “You need to go over there and talk to her. She’s five. You’re the adult here, not her.”

She’s right, but the idea of going to talk to her and being rejected scares the hell out of me. Brenna has never been this mad at me. Not when I took away her iPad for a week because she stayed up all night secretly playing it. Not when I yelled at her the other night for breaking the bowl. She will barely even say goodnight to me through the phone when Colby tells her to.

“It would have gone so much better if Colby and I just told her.”

She shrugs. “I don’t disagree, but it’s too late for that now.”

I take a deep breath and convince myself I can fix this. “Okay, I’ll go over there today.”

Her grin widens. “That’s my girl.”

PULLING UP TO COLBY’S, I don’t think I’ve ever been so nervous. What if she doesn’t want to see me? What if she tells me she hates me and never wants to see me again? My stomach churns at that actually being a possibility. It’s always been Brenna and me. We’ve always had each other. And now? I can’t say for sure that she wouldn’t rather have Colby.

I grip both my hands into fists to find some ground and ring the doorbell. It only takes a couple minutes before it opens and Colby stands there looking just as hot but somehow more responsible. He looks like a protective father.

“I just want to talk to her,” I tell him.

He nods and opens the door further to let me in. “I was going to bring her to your place tonight, but you’re probably right. It’s better you talk to her here than with Topher there being an asshole.”

The instant reflex to defend my fiancé simmers under the surface but I swallow it down. Now’s not the time. The only thing I need to focus on right now is Brenna.

We walk through the house and out to the patio. She’s sitting at the table playing her iPad when she looks up and sees me. I expect a hug, or at least a smile—something that tells me she’s happy to see me—and my heart drops when she does nothing but look away.

“Hey, Bren,” I say softly, pulling out the seat next to her. “Have you had a good time with C—your dad?”

She nods but says nothing. The awkward tension between us pulls at me and makes me wish I could rewind and take it all back. Tell her the truth when Colby wanted to, because he was right. If we had, there wouldn't be an issue.

“B,” Colby says sternly. “Put the iPad down and talk to your mom.”

Giving him a sad smile, she does as he says, and I mouth a silent thank you his way. She turns toward me, and I slide off the seat to drop down in front of her. I take her hands in mine and press a kiss to one of them.

“I am so sorry, baby girl. I swear I was going to tell you, I just wanted to keep you safe.”

Her brows furrow. “Why would you need to keep me safe from Colby?”

I know I can't tell her the truth about how he left. She's too young for that. So, I go with something safer.

“Because he just came back into our lives,” I explain. “I wanted to make sure he was good enough for you, because you deserve all the best things, and I never want to see you get hurt.”

She looks away and down at her lap. “But you lied to me.”

I exhale slowly. “I know, and I'm sorry. Sometimes parents lie in order to protect their kids, and it's easy to forget how smart you are. I promise I will never lie to you again.”

It may be an empty promise, knowing there are things I still can't tell her. Like Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or when Topher and I argue. But I will make it a point to tell her the truth more when it comes to things that matter, like her dad.

She squeezes my hand just as a tear escapes and slides down her cheek. “Can I see Stinky-Pants more?”

“Stink—”

“Whenever you want, B,” Colby interrupts me.

Nodding, she lunges forward and wraps her arms around me, and it's like coming up for fresh air. My lungs fill and the

weight lifts and it finally feels like I can breathe again. I hold my daughter close for the first time in two days, and it's everything.

She doesn't hate me.

We sit for a bit and talk about all the things she's done over the last couple of days, including when Brenna made Colby learn how to do French braids because she loved them so much after a girl named Tessa did them. The mention of another woman strikes a nerve, and I hope Colby wasn't stupid enough to have one of his many hook ups around our daughter, but I tuck it away. Right now, I have Brenna back, and that's all that matters.

"Hey, B," Colby says. "Why don't you go get changed out of your pajamas and we'll go for ice cream? I just want to talk to your mom a minute."

She nods excitedly and gives me another hug before running inside. The October air might be chilly, but that's not why I shiver. Being alone with Colby, especially after everything that's happened, makes me nervous.

He leans forward on the table and gives me his no-bullshit look. "You and I need to come to a common ground. Now that she knows I'm her dad, there can't be any more arguing. Not where she's concerned."

Honestly, I'm glad he said something, because I agree. "You're right. I was wrong to keep her away from you those few days. Being without her has been excruciating."

A dimpled grin stretches across his face. "She's an incredible little girl."

"She is." We sit in silence for a couple minutes before I finally break it. "So, how about a fresh start? I'll agree to leave the past in the past if you will."

He takes my extended hand and shakes it. "Deal."

My arm tingles with the contact, but I mentally push it away. Just because we're putting everything behind us does not mean I can go have feelings for him. That is one thing that is not an option.

“You coming?” he asks by the door, snapping me from my thoughts.

I let go of the tension and smile. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

THE PLACE IS PACKED with families from all over, and I’m honestly surprised Colby chose such a public ice cream shop to come to. But he says it’s the best in town, so I believe him. Of course, there’s a few people who ask him for an autograph, but for the most part, we’re left alone.

“You were right,” Brenna says with her mouth full. “This is the best ice cream I’ve ever had in my life.”

He chuckles and hands her a napkin to wipe her face. “Your life has only been five years long. I’m not sure how much credibility that statement has.”

“She’s eaten a lot of ice cream,” I assure him. “Trust me, it has credibility.”

I get up from the table and start toward the trash can to throw out my bowl, when someone barrels past me. I stumble backward and before I can stop myself, fall straight into Colby’s lap. Thankfully, he catches me and my bowl, but I freeze the second I notice how close we are.

“You okay?” he asks.

Right now? Not even a little. “Y-yeah.”

The two of us stare at each other, and the corner of his mouth raises, a dimple showing with it. “Are you going to get up or are you comfortable?”

“Shit, sorry.”

I jump off his lap and go back over to my side of the table. Brenna giggles, and I realize I never threw away my cup. Fuck it. I’ll do it later.

I'M GETTING ALL THE ingredients for brownies out when the door opens and Maddie comes rushing in. It catches me off guard, because I know she's supposed to be at work right now. I should be, too, but I called out and opted to spend the day with Brenna instead.

"Aunt Maddie!" she exclaims happily.

Picking Brenna up, Maddie gives her a tight hug. "I've missed you, little dork."

Brenna grins. "I had two sleepovers at Stinky-Pants's house."

"Stinky-Pants?"

I wave it off. "It's what she calls Colby. Don't ask."

My best friend chuckles. "Oh-kay."

"Brenna, why don't you go change into something a little less nice, and I'll let you crack the eggs."

She beams, since I don't usually let her do that—it's too messy—but she could get anything out of me right now. The second she's gone, I turn to Maddie.

"Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

Her one brow raises. "Aren't *you* supposed to be engaged?"

Taking a couple eggs out of the carton, I chuckle. "Yes? Thank you for that update on my relationship status."

She pulls a magazine from her purse and slaps it on the counter in front of me. Front and center on the cover is a picture of Colby and me. We're sitting outside the ice cream shop, with me planted firmly in his lap. The whole thing lasted a few seconds, but this picture was taken at the exact wrong time.

Has Hendrix Finally Found The One?

The headline stares back at me and makes my stomach churn.

“An insider tells us all about Colby’s mystery date and her adorable daughter,” she reads out loud. “The fuck is this?”

I pull it into my hands and shake my head. “It’s not what it looks like. I fell, and he caught me. I got up after. It wasn’t this big thing.”

She gives me an unsure look. “You better hope Topher believes that.”

Fuck—Topher. There’s no way he’s going to listen to a word I say about it, let alone believe me. The picture looks bad, and the article to go along with it looks even worse.

“I’m ready, Mommy!” Brenna says excitedly.

I take a deep breath and focus all my attention on my daughter. “Great, sweetie. Let’s wash your hands.”

Everything else will have to wait.

IT’S HALF PAST ONE in the morning when Topher finally gets home. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know he’s been out drinking. He comes through the door, not as loud as he was the other night, but not much quieter, either. However, the second I go to talk to him, I already see it—the magazine clenched tightly in his fist.

“Topher,” I beg quietly, careful not to wake Brenna. “It’s not what it looks like.”

He scoffs. “No? What the fuck does it look like, Saige?” He throws the magazine at me. “Because to me it looks like you’ve been screwing Hendrix behind my fucking back.”

I back up with every step he takes toward me, but he’s not stopping, and there isn’t anywhere else for me to go.

“I haven’t. I swear.”

“So, now you’re going to lie to my face?” he snarls, his fist tightly clenched. “Fuck you.”

The first blow is a knee to my stomach. The second, a punch to the face. There’s nothing I can do to stop him, and opt to try to cover my face. I’m careful not to scream, because if Brenna comes down while he’s this angry, who knows what he’ll do to her. That’s not something I’m willing to risk.

I’m not sure when the beating stops, but when it finally does, I’m a bleeding mess on the floor. Topher spits on me and walks away.

“Maybe next time you’ll think before being such a whore.”

I hide my sobs behind my sleeve, wincing with every breath I take. There’s a burning pain all over my body, and the metallic taste in my mouth tells me my lip split open. I don’t move until I hear Topher go upstairs and shut our bedroom door. Once the coast is clear, I push through the pain and get up, muffling my scream of brutal agony.

What am I going to do?

LYING ON THE COUCH, I watch as the sun begins to peak through the windows. I don’t know how much time has passed. All I know is that I didn’t get a single second of sleep. Maybe it’s because I was afraid Topher would come down and finish the job he started. Maybe I was afraid he would go for Brenna next. Whatever the reason, I still don’t feel tired.

I tip-toe upstairs and sneak into my bathroom to grab my makeup bag. When I get out of there without waking Topher, I go into the downstairs bathroom and get to work on covering up the bruises and making myself look a little less like a train wreck.

I’m just finishing up when Brenna comes downstairs. She looks adorable in her nightgown as she rubs her eye with her fist.

“Mommy, can we have pancakes?”

I force a smile on my face and hope she can't see through it. "Of course, princess."

"You're the best mom ever!"

She wraps her little arms around me before I can brace myself, and I wince as she accidentally presses against one of my many bruises. She pulls away with concern etched across your face. Her eyes widen when she notices the purplish skin on my abdomen from where my shirt rode up.

"Are you okay?"

I fix my shirt quickly to cover it. "I'm fine, baby. Mommy just had to fight a monster last night. That's all."

She frowns. "Is he going to come back?"

Probably. "Not a chance. I took care of it."

Thankfully, she buys the excuse, and the two of us go into the kitchen. She sits on one of the barstools while I get the mix out of the pantry. It's the simple just-add-water kind, but Brenna watches anyway. Cooking and baking of any kind is something she loves to do. She always tells me one day she's going to be a chef.

As I flip the first batch, Topher's voice booms through the room, and I jump, my heart in my throat.

"Wow, that smells great, babe."

He goes to kiss my forehead, but I flinch out of instinct. My whole body tightens as I look up at him with pure terror in my eyes. He swallows down a lump in his throat and backs away.

"I, uh...forgot something upstairs," he says and quickly exits the room after saying good morning to Brenna.

I put a couple pancakes on a plate and cut them up before handing them to her. She smiles happily and digs in, but I can't seem to get the look on Topher's face out of my mind.

"I'll be right back," I tell her. "Don't touch the griddle."

I go upstairs to find him, but the second I open my bedroom door, I stop short. Topher is sitting on our bed, with

lines of white powder on his nightstand and tears rushing down his face. His eyes meet mine, and it only makes him sob harder.

“I need help, Saige.”

COLBY

THE PARTY SWIRLS AROUND ME, WITH THE WHOLE TEAM celebrating our win. This is always the best part of the night, when the stress is off and we can relax for a minute. Our undefeated streak stands strong at 5-0. No one can convince me that doesn't have something to do with Asher being back. That man belongs on the field.

Drinks are flowing, and the music makes the whole room pulse. There isn't a single person in the place that doesn't have a huge smile on their faces. We almost lost this one. It came down to one final play—a Hail Mary of sorts. I've never run so fast in my life. As I reached the end zone, Asher sent the ball soaring through the air. I used all the power I could find in my legs to jump and caught the ball by the tips of my fingers—winning the game 27 to 24.

“I still don't know how you caught that throw,” Asher tells me.

I chuckle and give him my most charming grin. “Colby Hendrix doesn't drop the ball. Not on the field, and not in life.”

My phone vibrates, and a text from Saige comes through. It's a video of Brenna watching the end of the game, cheering excitedly as we celebrate our win. I can't help but grin. It's one of the most adorable things I've ever seen.

“Is that your jersey?” he asks as I show him the video.

Busted. “Yeah. I had one made in her size.”

Tessa swoons. “That’s so cute!” She turns to Asher. “Are you going to be that cute when we have kids?”

His brows raise. “You expect me to share you with a child? I’ll get none of your attention.”

She rolls her eyes. “Relax, Mr. Possessive. I’m not talking any time soon.”

“That’s good, because as cute as Brenna is, our sex life is a little too active for a tater tot.”

Tess makes a face and looks over at me. “Speaking of sex lives, yours has been rather tame lately.”

“It has not,” I defend, but it’s useless. “Okay, maybe a little. I’ve just had more to focus on than women lately.”

Asher watches me intently. “It doesn’t have to do with your blast from relationship’s past? Don’t think I didn’t see that magazine article.”

Right, the article. I’ve been meaning to talk to Saige about that. She and I both know it was all taken out of context. I know how these photographers and journalists work. Saige, however, is new to all of this. Even Topher keeps her out of the spotlight for the most part. However, every time I’ve tried to talk to her about it, she’s changed the topic.

I shake my head. “She’s happily engaged to someone else. That ship sailed the day I packed my bags and left her a letter.”

“Ouch,” Tessa cringes. “That’s pretty low, even for you.”

I shrug. “We all made mistakes. I was young and stupid.” I nudge her playfully. “At least I didn’t burn down a house.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and keeps her head high. “That wasn’t a mistake. A little psychotic, maybe, but definitely not a mistake.”

“Fair enough.”

Asher taps my shoulder and gestures to a woman across the room who’s had her eye on me all night. She’s pretty, with long black hair and a dress that’s tight enough to look painted on. As our gazes lock, she smiles and starts to come our way.

“Colby Hendrix,” she greets me. “You’re even hotter in person.”

Tessa snorts, and it takes everything in me to ignore it. “So, I’ve been told.”

“And confident, too. I like that in a man.”

I lick my lips and look her up and down. She’s supermodel hot, with her long legs and tiny waist, but she’s missing something. Still, if I turn her down, I’ll never hear the end of it. She’ll have to do.

“Yeah? Why don’t you tell me all the other things you like while we get out of here?”

She gives me a flirty smile as I drape my arm around her and lead her out of the club.

WITH THE WEATHER GETTING colder, I figured it’d be the perfect time to have the last barbecue of the year. My backyard is filled with all my favorite people, sans Lennon, who couldn’t make it due to an exam. Asher and Tessa are talking to Griffin and his new girlfriend. Brenna is jumping on another bounce house I rented, not caring at all about the cast on her arm. A couple other guys on the team stand around drinking beers. Saige, however, seems to space out every few minutes.

Since we decided to leave all our mistakes and bad choices behind us, I expected things to become a little lighter between us. Don’t get me wrong, we get along perfectly well for Brenna’s sake, but when she’s not around, Saige goes quiet. It’s not the kind of silence that makes me think she’s mad at me. More of one that shows she’s lost in thought. I tried to ask about it once, but she brushed me off and acted like nothing was wrong.

Everyone on the team knows about Brenna. They were all more than shocked to find out I have a daughter, but we’ve made it a point not to let it get out to the media. They’re

vultures, and if they find out, I have no doubt they'll follow Saige and Brenna around incessantly. I'll do whatever it takes to protect them, even if it means not being able to tell the world Brenna is mine.

EVERYONE GOES HOME AROUND ten, except for Asher, Tessa, and Saige. Brenna is half asleep on the couch with her head in my lap when Saige stands up.

“It’s time to go, Bren.”

B whines subtly and covers her head with the blanket I draped over her a little while ago. I chuckle and run my fingers through her hair.

“Why don’t you just let her sleep here?” I suggest. “I’ll drop her off in the morning.”

She looks hesitant for some reason, but ultimately agrees. She kisses Brenna’s forehead and waves goodbye to the rest of us before heading out.

“You two seem to be getting along,” Asher points out.

I smile, because it’s true. “Anything for this little munchkin.”

Tessa watches with a loving grin on her face while cuddled into Asher’s side. “The dad life looks good on you, Colbs.”

Chuckling, I pull up my shirt and pat my stomach. “Next I’ll have to work on getting my dad bod.”

“Oh, I’m sure the ladies would love that.”

I think back to that girl at the party the other night. She was no different than all the others I’ve let myself get lost in for a night, but something felt off this time. Like it was wrong. Like I should’ve been somewhere else.

“I’m not sure there will be any more ladies,” I tell her honestly.

Asher practically chokes on his beer. “Was this shit laced or something? I must be hallucinating. I just heard you insinuate there won’t be any more random hookups.”

Rolling my eyes at his dramatics, I snicker. “Because there won’t be. At least I don’t think so.” I look down at Brenna, who’s now sound asleep. “I have more important things in my life now.”

With B out cold, the three of us hang out and watch funny videos on YouTube. It may be childish, but that’s what’s best about these two. They don’t care. As long as it makes us laugh, that’s all that matters.

A trailer of Topher’s new movie comes onto the screen and I roll my eyes. “Douchebag.”

Tessa snorts. “Not fond of the ex’s current beau?”

“I met him way before he started dating her, so don’t get any ideas in that pretty little head of yours.” I take a minute to think of how I can put this without being rude. Nope, not possible. “He’s just a piece of shit with anger issues. I don’t know what Saige sees in him.”

Asher laughs while Tess looks deep in thought. She takes out her phone and starts typing, but doesn’t say anything until a few minutes later.

“You, uh,” she starts, seeming to grasp at words. “You don’t think he’s abusing Saige, do you?”

“Like, beating her?”

She nods, and I get an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach. It’s not something I ever considered, but I also never had a reason to.

“Not that I know of,” I answer honestly. “Why?”

She exhales slowly. “When she got here today, she dropped her keys, and when she went to pick them up I noticed a huge bruise on her side. And she’s skittish when anyone goes near her. I asked Sav, since she has experience with that stuff, and she said it sounds sketchy.”

My body goes cold at the thought of him laying a hand on her. A man hitting any woman would piss me off, but with the mother of my child? Absolute fury.

“The bruise is from the monster.”

We all stare in surprise at my daughter, who pulls the blanket up higher and closes her eyes again. “What monster?”

She yawns. “Mommy protects me from the monsters. She had to fight one, and it gave her a bruise.”

Everything in me tenses, and my eyes immediately lock with Asher’s. I can’t move. If I move, I’m going to get up, and I’m going to kill the fucker. I glance over at Tessa, who genuinely looks alarmed, and I know I can’t just do nothing. It’s not an option.

“Can you watch her?” I ask, and she nods immediately.

“Of course. Go.”

Slipping out from under Brenna, I get up and grab my keys from the counter. As I go to shut the front door, I see Asher behind me.

“What are you doing?”

He slips past me and out the door. “Coming with you.”

I shake my head. “So that you can hold me back? Not a fucking chance.”

His hands raise in innocence. “I’m just going to make sure you don’t do anything drastic and go to jail. I can’t go to the Super Bowl without you.”

He’s speaking in hushed tones so Brenna can’t hear us, but he must be able to see in my eyes that it’s a legitimate possibility. Instead of fighting with him over it, I nod, and the two of us climb into my car.

MY FIST POUNDS AGAINST Saige’s door, not caring at all that it’s almost midnight. When she opens it, her eyes widen.

She looks around me and at the car, where Asher leans against the passenger side.

“What are you doing?” she questions. “Where’s Brenna?”

I push past her and into the house. “Where is he?”

“Who?”

“Topher. Where the fuck is he?”

She looks perplexed for a second before realization sets in. I don’t even need to ask if it’s true. It’s written all over her face.

“Colby, don’t do this,” she pleads.

“Babe?” Topher calls from the kitchen. “Who’s at the door?”

My blood boils as I see the fear in her eyes, and it’s not over what I’m going to do. It’s because of him. Because he treats her like his own personal punching bag. She tries to grab my arm, but I yank it away and march toward him. When he sees me turn the corner, his eyes narrow.

“The fuck are you doing here?”

I grab him by the shirt and slam him against the wall. “You think you’re a fucking tough guy, huh? Think you can fucking toss girls around for sport?”

He uses his acting skills to look genuinely confused. “Did she tell you that?”

I’m not buying the performance. I know Saige well enough to be able to read her, and she didn’t even have to say it out loud. I pull him away from the wall and slam him up against it again, hearing the sheetrock crack.

“Stop!” Saige shouts. “Please, Colby! Stop!”

I get up in his face, close enough where he can feel my breath on his skin. “What kind of piece of shit beats his fiancé? Did that make you feel like a man? Did you feel strong?” I throw him onto the ground. “Let’s see how fucking tough you are against me, you fucking prick.”

He gets up and goes to lunge at me but stops as soon as he glances behind me. Asher is standing behind Saige, not intruding or getting involved, just having my back. I walk up to Topher and grab the collar of his shirt again.

“Colby!” Saige is now in tears as she tries to get me to stop.

I look over at her and soften slightly, but it’s not enough. “Get in the car, Saige.”

She shakes her head. “No, just leave him alone. I’ve got it handled. Please.”

“Handled? Look at your side! You call that handled?” No way in hell am I leaving her here. “Hate me for this all you want, but do it from somewhere else. Get in the fucking car!”

Finally listening, she turns around and scurries from the room. I turn my attention back at Topher, who is unmoving in my grasp. Maybe he’s got a brain when it comes to staying alive.

“I ever see you anywhere near her again, I swear to God, I’ll rip your heart straight from your fucking chest,” I hiss. “I’ve got a lot of connections and more than enough money. I can kill you in broad daylight and make it look like a goddamn accident. Do you understand me?”

He nods like a coward, and the second I let go, he falls to the floor. I turn around and walk past Asher, grabbing Saige’s purse and car keys from the table in the hallway. When he steps outside, I can see Saige in the passenger seat of my car, safe. A hysterical mess, maybe, but she’s safe.

I hand Saige’s keys to Asher. “Bring her car back to my place.”

“You got it.”

He does what I ask without question, not that I expected anything different. That’s just the kind of friendship we have. There for each other one hundred percent of the time. Once he drives away, I walk over to my car and climb in.

“Why did you do that?” Saige cries. “You shouldn’t have done that!”

I don’t answer, instead putting the car in reverse and pulling out of the driveway. The whole way back to my house, she’s a sobbing mess. Like she actually lost something important and not some piece of shit who abused her for kicks. When we finally get back, she still hasn’t stopped crying.

Reaching over, I put a hand on her knee. “It’s going to be okay.”

“It’s not!” she snaps. “You ruined everything!”

I recoil from the verbal onslaught. “*I* ruined everything? Saige, he was beating you!”

“It was my fault!” The argument is weak, but the look on her face is what scares me. It’s as if she genuinely believes that. “I made him mad, and I shouldn’t have! I should have been more thoughtful of his feelings! I deserved it!”

My heart twists as I watch her break down in front of me, not even half the girl I knew in college.

“Will you listen to yourself?” My voice is softer now, because the last thing she needs is for me to scare her. “He has manipulated you into thinking that he has the right to put his hands on you. What if he had hit Brenna? Would you say she deserved that, too?”

The mention of our daughter seems to get through to her. “Oh my God, Brenna.”

Her hands cover her face as she breaks even more, and I pull her into my arms. “It’s going to be okay, Saige. We’ll get you through this. I promise.”

I press a kiss to the top of her head, almost afraid to let myself wonder how he managed to break one of the strongest women I know.

COLBY HOLDS ME TIGHTLY, RUBBING HIS HAND UP AND DOWN my back in a soothing motion. The position we're in causes the center console to press on my bruise, but I don't care enough to move. I need this. The comfort. The support. Someone *knowing*.

I know what Topher did was wrong. I'm not dense enough to believe he was in the right. And yet, a part of me feels an obligation. He needs my help to beat his addictions. I can't just leave him. Not now. But I don't think Colby has any intentions of letting me go back there.

Watching him swoop in was like nothing I've ever seen. There was a point where I honestly thought he was going to kill him and Asher was there to help clean up the crime scene. I've never witnessed that side of Colby, but I can say one thing with certainty: Lord help any guy who ever hurts our daughter.

"Let's go inside," he whispers. "I have some cream that will help those bruises heal faster."

Not having any fight left in me, I nod and climb out of the car. I keep my head down as we walk into the house and through the living room. Colby fist bumps Asher on our way through, in what I can only assume is a silent thank you. When we get into the master bathroom, the lights are so bright they're almost blinding.

Colby rummages through a drawer and pulls out a tube. He comes over, standing in front of me and waiting patiently. No

part of me wants to do this. I want to run away and go back to pretending nothing was wrong. But there's no more hiding.

I look away as I grab the bottom of my T-shirt and pull it over my head. Colby hisses at the sight of me, and it causes more tears to spring to my eyes. I know. I'm disgusting, and stupid, and all the things Topher said I am.

"Saige," he whispers, sounding broken.

"Just put the cream on, please." It's not meant to sound so weak, but that's how it comes out.

He carefully starts applying it to the bruise on my side first, and I flinch at the coldness of it. He mumbles an apology and keeps going. I've made it a point to avoid looking at myself. I never want to see the damage that was caused by that night. It's been making me have nightmares as it is. But feeling everywhere that he has to put this cream, my whole torso must be black and blue.

"You're going to be okay," he tells me, putting his hands lightly on my hips and blowing on my stomach to help it dry.

The feeling of his cool breath on my skin would be sensual if I wasn't a complete mess, but it's not. Colby Hendrix is worth more than a broken shell of a woman like me. He should be dating supermodels and pop-stars, and he does. Not teenage mothers with emotional baggage.

He hands me back my shirt, and I make quick work of putting it back on. "So you keep saying."

"I mean it."

Changing the topic, I bring it back to something more pressing. "Where's my phone? I have to call Maddie and tell her I'm going to be staying with her for a bit."

He shakes his head immediately. "Not happening. You'll just go back to Topher's."

I throw my head back and groan. "Then where do you expect me to stay, ruler of my life?"

"Here," he says, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

Glancing out the bathroom door and over to his king-sized bed, I immediately imagine how many women he's had sex with on that thing. Gross.

"No way." I stand my ground and shake my head. "Have you ever taken a black light to that thing? There are probably bodily fluids from at least a hundred different people in this room."

He snickers, like what I said is funny. "I'm going to try not to take offense to that. And besides, I didn't mean my bed. I meant my house. I do have a guest room, you know?"

My head whips his direction, and my brows furrow. "If you have a guest room, why did you give up your gym for Brenna's room?"

He shrugs. "Because I figured if you didn't want her sleeping here alone all the time, you'd have the guest room to sleep in. It's right across the hall."

Well, that's nauseatingly thoughtful of him. "Oh."

With a hand on my back, he leads me through his room and out to the living room. Tessa and Asher are still here, and Colby holds up one finger.

"Just to make you feel better about bodily fluids and all, I'll go change the sheets," he quips. "Though, no one has had sex on that bed...that I know of."

For the first time since he barged into my house, I chuckle. "Because that makes me feel so much better."

He turns back as he walks down the hallway and winks at me. I roll my eyes in response. Such a charmer.

Tessa whispers something to Asher and then moves over to me. "Are you okay?"

Honestly? Not even a little, but I don't know this chick well enough to tell her that. I felt a little better about the fact that she did my daughter's hair after finding out she's dating Asher, but that doesn't make us friends. Even my best friend doesn't know about any of this. Ugh, that will be a conversation for the books.

“I will be.” I repeat what Colby has been telling me, hoping if I say it out loud, I’ll actually believe it.

Tessa must be able to sense I don’t want to talk about it because she takes a step back. “Well, if you ever need someone, I’m here.”

A part of me feels guilty for writing her off so quickly. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Colby comes out a couple minutes later and tells me the room is ready. With a polite but forced smile, I walk away and toward the guest room. Once the door shuts and I’m alone, the emotions wrack through me once again.

Will I ever really be okay?

MADDIE SITS ACROSS FROM me at Colby’s, with her jaw practically on the floor and a very angry scowl on her face. I didn’t want to tell her. As much as I love her and trust her with my life, I didn’t want her to know. She already never liked Topher as it is, but this—this may drive her to commit murder.

“I’m going to kill him.”

Yep, there it is. “Mads, stop. It’s not worth it.”

She scoffs. “Not worth it? S, he fucking hit you!”

Thankfully, Brenna is at school and nowhere near this conversation. As much as she thinks she wants to know everything, this is one of those things she just doesn’t need to hear. We’ve been staying at Colby’s for two days now, and while she’s asked questions, we’ve managed to keep our answers pretty vague.

I wrap my arms around myself and refuse to make eye contact with her. “I know, but he’s not all to blame. I should’ve known better than to make him mad. He’s dealing with some serious problems.”

“What the fuck?” she says in disbelief. “Are you even hearing yourself right now? There is nothing, and I mean nothing, you can do that would make it justifiable for him to put hands on you. Not a damn thing!”

Cowering at her tone, I swallow down a lump in my throat. “Please don’t yell.”

She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. “I’m sorry, S. I just hate seeing you like this. You’re smarter than that.”

I shake my head. “But I’m not. I’m not smart, or pretty, or anything.”

“And who told you that? Topher?”

Colby comes storming out of his bedroom, where he disappeared to when Maddie arrived. Honestly, I think she scares him. He comes over and grabs me by the wrist and pulls me with him.

“What the hell are you doing?” I shout. “Let go of me.”

Maddie follows behind as he brings me into his bathroom. He turns me so I’m facing the mirror, and I already know what he’s about to do. I shake my head and squeeze my eyes shut as he pulls up my shirt.

“Don’t,” I plead, trying to get away. “I don’t want to see it.”

“Open your eyes, Saige,” he demands.

“No.”

“Saige,” Maddie says, and I can hear in her tone, she’s crying. “You need to look.”

Reluctantly, I force my eyes open and stare at my reflection. There are bruises all over my body—some healing and others still livid and swollen. My skin looks more black and purple than it does my normal pale complexion. As I look over all the damage Topher caused, I feel my chest tighten.

“He loves me,” I croak, not even sure if I believe my own words anymore.

Colby shakes his head. “Someone who loves you wouldn’t do this. Take it from someone who knows what it’s like to love you.”

My gaze meets his in the mirror and searches for any sign of him lying. He and I had never exchanged those three little words in all the time we dated, so hearing it from him now is a shock to my nervous system.

“You did?”

He nods once. “He doesn’t know the girl he lost. It’ll be the biggest regret of his life.”

As he lets me go, I’m finally allowed to pull my shirt back down, but I don’t. I take a step closer to the mirror and commit each one to memory. To remind myself that love shouldn’t hurt. I run my fingers over one particularly dark one and wince at the deep ache.

The front door slams shut, and it’s then I notice Maddie is gone.

My eyes widen to the size of golf balls. “Maddie!”

Colby and I both rush outside just as she’s starting her car. I try to open her driver’s side door, but it’s locked.

“Mads, stop!”

She shakes her head and throws the car in reverse, only to slam on her brakes when she almost backs right into Colby. He’s standing behind her car with his arms crossed, caging her in. She rolls down the window and sticks her head out.

“Move it or lose it, Hendrix!”

He raises his brows. “And have to explain to my daughter why her favorite person is spending life in prison? I think I’ll pass.”

Maddie throws the car in park and gets out, going over and trying to move him herself, but he won’t budge. She’s a tiny girl, and he’s two hundred pounds of NFL muscle. When she realizes that she doesn’t have a chance, she groans.

“Ugh! You’re so...ugh!”

A sarcastic smirk spreads across his face. “I see nothing’s changed in six years.”

She rolls her eyes and punches him right in the chest, only to shake the pain out of her hand. Meanwhile, Colby didn’t even wince. He looks down at her and grins smugly.

“Do you feel better now?”

Maddie sighs. “You’re the worst.” She turns to me. “What did you ever see in him?”

I shrug. “Don’t ask me. Clearly I have bad taste in men.”

My words are cruel, but Colby must be able to sense the humor undertones to them because he chuckles. Walking over to Maddie’s driver’s side, he reaches in and grabs the keys.

“You can have these back when you feel a little less murderous,” he tells her.

I can’t help but laugh. “Look, now you’re a hostage, too.”

The two of us start to follow him back inside like children in trouble.

“This is just his way of getting that threesome he always wanted,” she replies pointedly enough to sound like an accusation.

He chuckles. “It wasn’t *me* that wanted that, Madelyn.”

Maddie cringes at the use of her full name, but he has a point. That threesome was something Mads brought up one night when we were all drunk. Granted, Colby seemed completely on board with the idea and it had to be stopped by me, but it wasn’t his idea originally.

And like all those years ago, it’s never going to happen.

A FEW DAYS LATER, I’m searching through different apartment listings on my computer when Colby comes in. He plops himself down next to me and looks over at my screen.

“Uh, what is that?”

I glance at him and then back at the screen. “Apartments. What does it look like?”

He shakes his head. “I get that, but why are you looking at them?”

“Let’s see,” I put a finger to my chin. “Because my ex-fiancé is a psychotic asshole. Because you won’t let me go back home. Because you won’t let me stay with Maddie, because you think I’ll go back to aforementioned psychotic asshole. Because—”

Stopping me with his hand over my mouth, he exhales. “My God, I thought you’d never shut up.”

“You asked why.”

“I meant why in the sense of there’s no point,” he explains. “You already have somewhere to live.”

His words make me look at him like he’s lost his mind. “What—here? I can’t live here.”

“Why not?” He almost looks offended, but I think he genuinely doesn’t understand why.

“For one, this is your house, not mine.”

He shrugs and grabs the remote like we’re not talking about a serious topic right now. “So what? We share a daughter. Why not share a house, too?”

I open and close my mouth like a fish out of water as he scrolls through channels. For a minute, I almost consider it, but then I shake myself out of it. “Because that’s not what co-parents do.”

“Says who?” he asks, finally bringing his attention back to me. “Look, Topher has been quiet, but that’s not to say he won’t try to come after you again. I don’t want to scare you, but it’s a possibility. Guys like him, they don’t bow out gracefully, and I need to be able to protect you. And besides, you can’t say it wouldn’t make Brenna happy. She loves being here.”

He makes a good point, but being here is not like having a home. However, I've already put Brenna in danger by staying with Topher after the first time he hit me. I don't care about me, but if it means keeping her safe, I'll do whatever it takes.

Colby watches me patiently, waiting for an answer when I sigh.

"Fine," I cave. "For now. But I'm paying you rent."

A disbelieving look etches across his face. "You are aware I'm a multimillionaire, aren't you?"

"Brag much?" I quip. "Yes, douche. I'm aware. But that's my stipulation. Brenna and I will stay here, but I'm paying you rent."

He snickers to himself as he sinks back into the couch and goes back to watching TV. "If you insist."

My eyes scan around the room, and I notice for the first time that as beautiful as this place is, it hardly looks lived in. Actually, now that I think about it, the only room that has any kind of cozy feel to it is Brenna's room. Everywhere else looks like a giant hotel suite.

Well, at least now I know my first project. That should keep me busy and my mind off the awkwardness that is living with my ex.

SAIGE'S HAND IS CLUTCHED TIGHTLY IN MY OWN AS WE WALK UP to the door. I can tell by the way she's physically shaking that she's nervous, and honestly, so am I. All of this dating shit is new to me, but I couldn't resist when it came to her. This girl and her seven pens won my ass over like it was the easiest thing in the world.

"Relax," I tell her. "It's going to be fine."

She rolls her eyes and smiles. "Who are you trying to convince? Me or yourself?"

I chuckle. "All right, smart-ass. Let's go."

Taking a deep breath, I unlock the door and step inside. My childhood home is just as it's always been. It provides that sense of comfort you miss while you're away. Saige looks around at all the pictures of me as a child.

"Mom, we're home."

The bed bounces beneath me, pulling me from my dream and back into reality. I peek my eyes open to see Brenna, happily jumping up and down with her hair flying everywhere. I don't know what time it is, or if the sun is even up, thanks to my black out curtains, but I know it must be early. This little girl is a big bundle of energy at all times.

"Stinky-Pants!" she shouts. "It's time to wake up!"

I close my eyes the second she notices they're open, and she giggles. She falls down next to me, and I can feel her breathing on my face. Judging by the way she's trying to hide her laughter, I know she's up to something.

She reaches forward and pulls one of my eyelids up. "I know you're awake."

In one quick move, I jump up and grab her. It catches her off guard and she squeals as I tickle her until she's begging me to stop.

It's been a couple weeks of them living here, and I never knew how nice it would be to have the house filled with more than just me. Getting to tuck Brenna in every night and watching TV with Saige...I didn't know what I was missing.

"Come on!" Brenna says excitedly. "Mommy's making breakfast!"

Like she knows the direct line to my heart, I get up and pull on a pair of sweatpants. If there's any way to get me out of bed on a day I don't have practice at the ass-crack of dawn, it's with food.

I walk out to find Brenna sitting at the table and Saige slaving over a hot stove. She's still wearing pajama pants and a tank top, but she could look gorgeous in anything. Even with bed head.

"B said you were making breakfast," I murmur, looking over at everything she's cooking. "She didn't say it was a whole damn feast."

Saige rolls her eyes playfully and smiles. "Like you're going to complain. Don't think I forgot how much you love your breakfast on off days."

"It's the only time I can eat it without throwing up."

Even in college, if I ate breakfast before practice, it would all come back up. The only option I have on those mornings is either a pre-workout shake or a protein bar. Anything else is a lost cause.

I sit down at the table with Brenna, and Saige hands us our plates full of food, only mine comes with an envelope. I look at it suspiciously.

“What is this?” I ask her.

She doesn’t answer me, so I put down my fork and rip it open. Inside is a little over five hundred dollars. Oh, right. The idiotic stipulation she added into our agreement for her to stay here with Brenna.

“I don’t need this.” I toss it into the middle of the table.

Sitting down with her own plate of food, she hands it back to me. “That was the deal, remember? You let me pay rent. I’ll give you the other half when I get my next paycheck.”

My eyes widen. “That’s only half? Saige, you don’t need to give me that much! You two hardly add anything to the electricity bill, and if you haven’t realized, the house is paid for.”

“There’s still other bills like water and property taxes. Those can’t be cheap.”

I shake my head. “Honestly, I don’t even see them. I have someone who takes care of all that for me.”

She isn’t backing down as she sits back and crosses her arms over her chest. “Either you take the damn money, or I’m going to find an apartment for me and Brenna.”

B pouts. “Mommy, no! I like it here.” She turns to me. “Dude, just take the money.”

I nudge my daughter in the side. “Oh sure, take her side.”

No part of me wants to accept it. I only said it to get her to agree to stay and stop looking at apartments. The thought of Topher being able to get to her and Brenna made me sick, and seeing her searching for an apartment made me want to pull a Lennon and throw her computer in the pool.

Yes, my best friend did that.

“How about you give the money to me?” Brenna suggests, making me snort. “I mean, he is my dad. That makes this my

house, too.”

“Brenna Elizabeth!”

I practically choke on the piece of pancake I had just put into my mouth. “What did you just say?”

Saige’s eyes widen when she realizes. “Uh, I...um...”

She’s completely tongue-tied, and actually, so am I. I open my mouth to say something, but I realize Brenna is sitting right here and maybe it isn’t the conversation to have in front of her. Especially if she is just as unaware about it as I was.

A brilliant idea comes to mind, and I finally take the envelope. “Fine. I’ll take the money, Saigeasaurus.”

As I fold it up and slip it into my pocket, Brenna giggles. “He called you a dinosaur.”

Saige scowls, but there’s a hint of a smile behind it. “You’re such a jerk.”

I shrug. “Better than being a dinosaur.”

Later that day, when Saige takes Brenna to a friend’s birthday party she was invited to, I sneak into Brenna’s bedroom. While picking out all the furniture and decorations, Tessa insisted we get a piggy bank. I thought it was dumb. I mean, who actually uses these things anymore? However, it’s definitely being used to my advantage now.

I pull the envelope from my pocket and smirk. One by one, I put each bill into the piggy bank. Saige said I had to take it. She never specified what I need to do with it.

Take that, Saigeasaurus.

TWO DAYS PASS BEFORE I finally get the chance to bring up the topic that’s been on my mind since breakfast Saturday morning. With Brenna at school, Saige and I are finally alone. She’s working from home, since that shithead Topher sent

flowers to her job and made her worry he might show up there. I step behind her.

“You named our daughter after my mother.”

Even the words coming out of my mouth sound foreign. I can't believe I never thought to ask about her middle name. I've been making it a point to get to know her, but being someone who doesn't have a middle name, I guess I never realized I didn't know Brenna's.

Saige freezes at my words and then sighs. “I figured that if you were there, that's what you would have wanted.”

I walk around and sit on the coffee table, taking her computer off her lap and putting it to the side. “I don't get it. You hated me for leaving.”

She nods and looks down at her lap. “I guess a part of me subconsciously always hoped you'd come back for her.”

“I would have been there the whole time had you told me. You have to know that.”

The topic of why she never told me isn't one we've ever talked about. It's one of those things that can't be changed, so I've left it in the past. But now, knowing she chose Brenna's middle name with my mother in mind, I have to ask.

“Why didn't you reach out? And don't go bringing up my number being changed. There were other ways for you to get in touch with me. Especially you.”

Fiddling with her sweatshirt sleeve, she sighs. “Your letter said you didn't want to be tied down by a relationship. All your dreams were finally coming true. I didn't want to ruin that for you.”

I pull back, watching her expression. “You thought I wouldn't want her.”

“The strings attached to a child are a lot less breakable than the strings attached to a girlfriend.”

I shake my head and let her words sink in. All this time I thought she didn't tell me because she was angry I left, or because she wanted to keep Brenna all to herself, but I was

wrong. She thought she was doing right by me, letting me follow my dreams.

“Saige,” I breathe. “I am so sorry I made you think that you weren’t enough. That Brenna wasn’t enough.”

The conversation is clearly going somewhere she isn’t willing to go, because she snaps her fingers and hops up. “You know, I forgot I needed to go by the bakery and put a client’s cake order in.” She walks over and grabs her purse. “I’ll be back later after I get Brenna from school.”

I sigh. “But I’m trying to talk to you.”

“Talk later?” she asks, with no promise to her words. “Bye.”

As she walks out the door, I’m left completely alone, which I’m really starting to hate lately.

THREE WEEKS. TWENTY-ONE days. That’s how long we managed to slip by the press with them living in my house. However, it seems like word is starting to spread, because paparazzi are camping outside, right on the outskirts of my property line. No matter how many times I call the police, they always come back.

“Why do they keep wanting to take my picture?” Brenna asks, peeking through the blinds.

Saige goes over and picks her up, pulling her away from the window. “You know how your dad plays football on TV?” Brenna nods. “Well, there are a lot of people who like to watch him and they want to know things about his life.”

With an adorable look on her face, she’s obviously trying to work it out in her head. “So, they want to know about me?”

“Right,” Saige and I answer in unison.

Brenna squints. “That’s kind of creepy.”

That manages to make the two of us laugh.

“You’re right, B,” I answer, taking her from Saige. “It is creepy, and I’m going to figure out how to make them go away.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and send a text to Asher.

Colby: I need Selena’s number.

Selena is Asher’s publicist. He used to have another, Blaire—an evil little twat. When Asher started dating Tessa, Blaire almost ran their relationship straight into the ground. When it came down to having to choose between her or Tessa, his choice was easy. He tossed the blonde witch to the curb and brought on Selena. She managed to twist their relationship into something the public could handle, being as the immediate response was outrage due to the fact that she was once his student. Long story short, Selena is a public relations genius, and if anyone knows how to handle this situation, it’s her.

THE DOORBELL RINGS TWO hours later, and I let her in. It’s amazing she was able to come on such short notice, but these people are literally making it hard for us to leave. The only way we can get out is by going through the garage and using my tinted SUV. And still, they take pictures.

Selena walks in looking like a million dollars. Her black hair is a little longer than her shoulders, and the heels she’s wearing look like they could literally stab someone. Her oversized sunglasses just add to the rock star look.

“Thanks for coming so soon,” I say.

She smiles and moves the glasses to the top of her head. “You were right to call. They’re total animals when there isn’t someone to keep them in line.”

I lead her into the living room, where Saige sits on the couch and Brenna is sprawled out on the floor. She kept trying to look outside, so Saige gave her a puzzle to keep her distracted.

“Saige, this is Selena.”

Saige smiles. “The girl who’s going to make the vultures go away.”

Selena winks at her. “That’s my plan.” She turns to Brenna, who is watching her carefully. “And you must be Brenna. Aren’t you a cute little thing?”

She lights up like the Fourth of July at the compliment.

“B, why don’t you go play in your room for a little bit, while we talk to Selena about a couple of grown-up things?”

Like the well-behaved little kid she is, she nods and gets up, giving Saige and me each hugs before leaving the room. Selena and I join Saige on the couch, and she pulls a tablet out of her purse.

“You know, I have to admit, when Asher called and said you don’t have a publicist, I was rather shocked,” Selena tells me.

I chuckle, because Lennon has been on me for months about hiring someone, but I never had a reason to. For the most part, the press knew my love life was non-existent and my sex life was overcharged. But the second Brenna came in like the beautiful little storm she is, everything changed.

Selena types a few things in and then looks over at Saige and me. “You make such a beautiful couple. It’s going to be really easy to make the public fall in love with your love.”

“Oh, we’re not—” we both say in unison.

Her eyes widen. “Oh, pardon me. I just assumed that with the little girl having her own room that you were together.”

“She’s our daughter,” I tell her. “Saige and I dated right before I was drafted. I didn’t learn about Brenna until recently.”

She nods in understanding. “And that’s how the media has no clue about her.” After typing a couple more things in, she focuses back on us. “So, what’s the end game here? What’s the ultimate goal, other than getting them to stop standing outside your house?”

I look over at Saige, because she's just as much involved in this as I am, and she shrugs.

“What would you suggest?”

Selena grins at her. “Well, I would like to put together a plan where we release little bits of information over the course of a few weeks or months, ending with Colby doing an interview where he proudly tells everyone that Brenna is, in fact, his daughter. In the meantime, I'm going to work on getting an order that says they're no longer allowed to sit outside your house.”

Saige looks unsure, but as I reach over and grab her hand with my own, she exhales. “Okay. You're the expert here.”

“Great,” Selena responds. “Let's get to work.”

She goes off into a ramble of questions and explains how certain things will transpire, but all I can focus on is the feeling of Saige's hand in mine and how neither of us are letting go.

SAIGE

IT TAKES A COUPLE HOURS BEFORE SELENA HAS CREATED WHAT sounds like a foolproof plan and explained it to us in full. We had to explain everything to her, and reliving the past was an experience in itself. One thing that stuck out though, was the way Colby got uncomfortable when it came to our break-up. But, she needs to know all the gritty details to be able to do her job.

Colby walks Selena out and then comes back to the couch. “Well, that wasn’t exactly fun, but at least we’re getting the ball rolling.”

“Whatever gets those bastards to stop stalking us, I’ll do it.”

He chuckles and sits down, a little closer than necessary. “How do you feel about everything she said? Is there anything you didn’t agree with but didn’t want to say?”

I shake my head. “Like I said before, she’s the expert in this department.”

“So, you’re okay with me eventually doing that interview?”

The interview. Right. It would be silly of me to think that he would hide the truth about Brenna from the world forever. I might not have expected it to be so soon, but if that’s what needs to be done, then so be it. She knows the truth now, and I know that Colby will always make sure she stays safe.

“Yeah,” I tell him honestly. “We’re good.”

A grin spreads across his face. “Okay. I just wanted to make sure. You’re just as much a part of this as I am, and I don’t want you to feel railroaded into anything.” He reaches over and holds my hand again, for the second time tonight. “Your opinion matters, Saige.”

My nerves go haywire, and suddenly, he’s way too close. “Thanks, but I promise I’m okay.” I pull my hand away and stand up. “It’s getting late, though, and that meeting was exhausting. I think I’m going to take a shower and go to bed. Can you tuck Brenna in?”

He looks like he wants to say something, but decides against it and nods. “Sure. No problem.”

I thank him quickly and all but run out of the room and down the hallway. Sharing a daughter with Colby is one thing. Living with him is another. I can’t let lines get crossed. There’s too much at risk here. Way too much to lose. It’s not an option.

“You weren’t there, Mads,” I vent to her about Colby. “He was being all genuine and caring, asking me how I feel about the plan and making sure I’m okay. He needs to stop.”

She feigns outrage. “What a pig! How dare he.”

I roll my eyes. “Maddie, come on. I need you to be serious.”

Chuckling, she takes another sip of her iced coffee and puts it down on the table. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I just don’t see what the problem is here.”

“The problem is that it’s dangerous. Him and I didn’t end well. You should know, you had to watch the fallout.”

Her head tilts from one side to another. “Yeah, but that was also six years ago, S. What if he’s grown up since then?”

My brows raise. “Wow, you’re on Team Colby. Now I’ve seen everything.”

She grabs a fry off her plate and throws it at me. “Don’t even. You know I’m always on Team Saige. I just also remember what you refuse to.”

“Oh, yeah? And what’s that?”

“How happy you were when you were with him.” Her words hit me right in the gut. “I think that was the happiest I’ve ever seen you, other than the day Brenna was born.”

I think back to those days—when everything was great and Colby was mine. Everyone acts like he’s this unattainable guy who is incapable of love, but they don’t know him like I do. He sent me flowers when I was having a bad day, and brought me lunch when he knew I was too busy to get it myself.

Maybe that’s why it hurt so bad when he left, because it was completely unexpected. It’s one thing to get dumped when you kind of saw it coming, but that came out of left field and knocked my entire world off its axis. And if I had to go through that again, I don’t know if I’d make it through this time.

“All the more reason why it shouldn’t happen,” I declare.

Maddie hums, like she knows something I don’t, and drops the subject. “If you say so. Mama knows best, right?”

“Exactly.”

THUNDER BOOMS AND LIGHTNING makes the dark night sky come to life. The whole house rattles, shaking the little trinkets I put on a couple of the empty shelves. Brenna is sitting on Colby’s lap and watching him play a game on his phone. Meanwhile, I can’t stop staring out the back door.

Storms have always been something I love, and I was hoping to pass that onto Brenna, but she isn’t really fond of them. Loud noises aren’t exactly her style, which is comical to me being as she’s the loudest person I know.

One particularly close bolt of lightning slams into the ground and the whole house goes dark. Brenna shrieks, and Colby chuckles softly at her.

“Relax, B. It’s just a power outage.”

She takes a deep breath. “I knew that. It just scared me.”

I make my way to the front of the house and open the door. From what I can see, the whole neighborhood is out. Great. They won’t even come fix it until the storm stops, which isn’t supposed to be until morning. I go back into the living room and check my phone.

“All right, Bren. It’s bedtime,” I tell her.

She whines and tucks her head into Colby’s chest. “Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

Colby tickles her side. “You have school tomorrow, bug.”

Brenna groans but still climbs off his lap and comes over to grab my hand. Before I leave the room with her I look over at him.

“Do you have any candles or something?” I ask. “Just to add some light in here.”

He nods and gets up as I head down the hall with Brenna. Thankfully, the nightlight she has is battery operated, so I don’t need to worry about her complaining about it being too dark. I carry it around the room with me to find her some pajamas then set it on the nightstand and tuck her into bed.

“Will you sit in here with me, Mommy?” she pleads. “Just for a minute?”

Whenever she asks me that, I can never manage to say no. I’d rather take advantage of it while I can, because there’s going to come a day where she doesn’t ask me anymore. I don’t ever want to regret not doing enough with her.

“Sure, baby girl.”

I sit on her bed and run my fingers through her hair. It’s a trick my mom would do on me when I was younger. For some reason, it always made me fall right to sleep. Brenna must have gotten that trait from me, because it only takes a few minutes before she’s sound asleep. I press a kiss to her forehead and quietly leave the room.

By the time I get back to Colby, there are at least ten candles set all around the living room and kitchen. As I look around at them all, I can't help but laugh.

“Okay, I never expected you to have this many.” My eyes narrow on the closest one and read the scent. “Summer breeze? Really, Colb?”

His bottom lip juts out as he looks up from his phone. “What? It smells good!”

I shake my head teasingly. “I always knew you had a secret girly side.”

Plopping back onto my corner of the couch, I grab the closest blanket and drape it over myself. For some reason, it feels chilly in here. Once I'm comfortable, I notice Colby glancing over at me and smirking.

“What?”

He snickers. “Nothing.”

I take the closest throw pillow to me and swing it at him. “Don't be like that. Tell me.”

His thumb scrolls back up on the screen, and he turns the phone toward me. It's a picture from seven years ago, and one I remember well. Maddie took it shortly after we started dating. Colby had just scored the winning touchdown, and I was so excited that I ran onto the field and leaped into his arms. It was the first time that I had done anything spontaneous like that, and the first time he kissed me in public. It didn't matter how many people were in the stands or that everyone's eyes were on us. He grabbed my face and he kissed me.

“Where did Selena even get these?” he asks.

I pull my eyes away and look down at my lap. “I gave them to her.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.” I shrug. “She said she needed old pictures of us to start the dialogue that we've dated in the past, so I emailed her a few.”

The corners of his mouth raise. “You sending them to her isn’t the part that surprises me. The fact that you still had them is.”

We’re encroaching on dangerous territory again, but I can’t run away every time the conversation gets a little risky. I need to learn how to steer it back to the safe zone. Reaching over, I grab the phone and pull it from his hand.

“Is this the whole article?” I question, scrolling up to the top.

“Yeah,” he answers. “I think it’s going exactly how she wanted it to.”

Hendrix’s Mystery Girl: New Lover or Old Flame?

Now, you know we’re always ones for the hot gossip, and this topic is no different. While everyone has been speculating about Colby Hendrix and Topher James’s ex, Saige Ambrose, we’ve managed to find a pretty reliable source who gave us the 411. According to them, these two are anything but new. It turns out they were pretty hot and heavy together up until Colby was drafted to play for the 49ers. Now, I don’t know about you, but the only thing rushing through my head now is who’s the dad to that adorable little girl? If you know us, you know we’ll get down to the bottom of this. Until then, enjoy these swoon-worthy pictures of Colby and Saige from back in the day.

“It looks good,” I acknowledge. “Would look better if they stopped referring to me as Topher’s ex.”

He laughs and moves closer to look with me. “What else would you like to be called? Colby’s baby mama?”

I shove an elbow into his side playfully. “You’re a jerk.”

The two of us scroll through the photos I hadn’t let myself look at for years. A part of me wanted to get rid of them, and believe me when I say Maddie offered to do it for me, but I could never bring myself to do it. There was always something holding me back—whether it be Brenna or misplaced hope.

“Oh my God, I remember that one,” he says, pointing to one of us with icing all over our faces. “You smashed Maddie’s birthday cake into my face, so I smeared it all over yours.”

There isn’t anything in the world that could keep me from smiling when I look at the picture. It’s always been one of my favorites. We were so unbelievably happy together, and everyone could see it. You’d have to be blind not to.

“We were pretty cute, weren’t we?”

He sighs and turns his head away from the phone and toward me. “We always were good together.”

I know I shouldn’t, but my body doesn’t seem to be listening to me as I let my gaze lock with his. He’s closer than I originally realized, and way closer than he should be, but I can’t fucking move. It’s like a magnet, pulling me in and not letting me go.

His eyes drop down to my lips and back up to my eyes. If I don’t stop him, he’s going to kiss me. I know this, and yet my mouth just won’t open to say the words. The storm booms around us, but nothing compares to the one brewing in my mind right now.

He starts to lean in, and as if I have no control at all, I do, too. Our lips are only centimeters away, and with the slightest move they’d be touching.

Don’t kiss me.

Please kiss me.

“Mommy?”

Hearing Brenna’s voice is like someone dousing me with a bucket of ice water, and the spell is broken. I spring up and find her standing in the hallway, half asleep and clutching Puddles to her chest.

“The thunder woke me up,” she pouts. “Can I sleep with you?”

“Of course, sweetie. Let’s go cuddle.”

AFTER THE FIRST TIME we had a moment, it was easy to avoid him. All I needed to do was keep my distance while we were together. The rest of the time, I was at Topher's, and he was here. Now, everything's different. It's almost impossible to avoid someone you live with.

The first couple days are easy to come up with excuses.

Maddie wants to hang out.

I have to do something for a client.

Brenna needs help with her homework.

I learned that as long as our daughter is around, I'm safe. He won't even consider bringing it up in front of her. When she's not is when I need to think of ways to keep my distance.

Every part of me believes that Brenna interrupting us not once but twice is a sign from the universe that it's a bad idea. It's like I'm being warned to keep my distance, and I'd be stupid not to listen to that.

I'm just about to leave the house when Colby walks in from practice—twenty minutes early.

Fuck.

I try to slip past him, but he steps in front of me.

"Oh, no, you don't," he says, pulling me away from the door. "You can't keep avoiding me like this."

"I'm not avoiding you," I lie.

He smirks knowingly. "You're not, huh?"

"Nope."

"So, if I bring up the other night..."

I shake my head and tap my metaphorical watch. "Sorry, Colbs. I don't have time. Things to do and people to see."

This time, he doesn't stop me as I walk around him and toward the door.

“We’re going to have to talk about it,” he tells me, and my steps halt. “The first time, I let it go. You were in a relationship, and I had no business bringing it up. But this is twice now.”

“I know,” I sigh.

Two options run through my mind. I can either run out of here and continue to play this game of cat and mouse with him, or I can act like the grown-up I’m supposed to be and face the monster head on.

I can do this. I can do this.

Colby stands there patiently, and as I turn around, I realize this is probably the worst time for this conversation. His shirt is a rolled-up piece of fabric tossed over his shoulder, and sweat glistens across his perfectly sculpted torso. The fact that this man is even real is unfair to humanity.

“Saige.”

He goes to take a step toward me, and I hold up a hand to stop him.

“Don’t. Please, don’t.” I exhale in relief when he freezes. “If you come over here, you’re going to kiss me, and I’m going to let you. So, before I lose all control of my brain again, I’m asking you not to.”

He sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. “Would giving us another shot really be that bad?”

“No,” I admit. “Probably not. Chances are it would be as wonderful as it was the first time. Maybe even better.”

“Then why won’t you let me come over there?”

My shoulders sag. “Because there’s still that chance it could all go wrong, and for Brenna’s sake, I can’t do that. She finally has you in her life, and the relationship you two have together makes me so unbelievably happy. I won’t play games where she’s concerned, and things between you and me are a gamble.”

He rubs the back of his neck and nods. “Okay. I can respect that.”

With a thankful smile his way, I continue my way out the door—not knowing if I just protected myself from chaotic heartbreak or pushed away the love of my life.

COLBY

THE PAVEMENT MOVES QUICKLY BENEATH MY FEET AS MY lungs burn with the need for more air. Running has always been my outlet. There's nothing like pushing your body to the breaking point when you've got something plaguing your mind.

I come to a stop next to the large oak tree. It takes a few seconds for Asher to catch up, and when he does, he's panting like a dog. I chuckle and grab him a bottle of water from the cooler we left here before we started.

"You're getting old," I tease.

He rips the water out of my hands and glares at me. "Fuck off. You're only two years younger than me."

I shrug. "If anything, you should be in better shape than I am. You've got a toddler girlfriend to keep happy."

His head falls back as laughter roars out of him. "Let Tessa hear you call her that. I dare you."

"Hell no. My house isn't fireproof, so I'll stay away from your little psycho's bad side, thank you very much."

He knows I'm kidding, sort of. I love Tessa to death, but if I'm being honest, she scares the shit out of me. But she has settled down a lot since her and Asher got serious. I will give her that. He'll just never hear the end of the age-gap jokes.

I sit down and lean back against the tree, allowing myself to catch my breath. I've been running every morning lately, if

not at practice, then here. With my stress level lately, I've needed it.

Everything Selena set up has been going according to plan, but that doesn't mean it hasn't been a lot. Since the press can't camp out in front of my house anymore, they've been swarming the stadium. Each day I have to go there for practice, I either need to sneak through the side entrance on the other side of the place, or I have to walk through a barrage of cameras.

"You look like you need a drink," Asher tells me. I raise up my water bottle but he shakes his head. "No, dumbass. An alcoholic drink."

"I knew that," I lie. "I was just testing you."

He's probably right. I haven't had a drink since before Saige and Brenna moved in. It was clear when Saige saw the beer in the fridge that it made her uncomfortable. Probably because Topher was drunk when he decided to use her as his own personal punching bag. The second I noticed, I got rid of it all.

"No, I know what it is!" he exclaims. "You need to get laid."

I roll my eyes. "Here you go with your tangents about my sex life again."

"Well can you blame me? You went from having a nameless girl in your bed every other day, to an eight-week dry spell."

Leave it to him to keep count. "Has it really been that long?"

He nods. "Honestly, we're concerned."

I shield the sun from my eyes as I look up at him and smirk. "Concerned enough to finally let me in on that threesome?"

His grin drops right off his face. "I'll let you die of sexual deprivation before that shit happens."

"Still possessive, I see."

“And you’re still a bastard.” He snickers as he throws his empty water bottle down at me. “I mean it, though. You can’t go from Hugh Hefner to celibacy. Your body will go into shock from lack of orgasms.”

“If it does, can you put that on my tombstone?”

I can see it now.

Here lies Colby Hendrix.

Died from orgasm deprivation.

He rolls his eyes. “No, but I will put Sarcastic Asshole.”

I take a deep breath and look over at the creek. “I just haven’t wanted anyone. Not anyone I can have, at least.”

Realization fills his face. “I knew it! This is because of Saige!”

“And you’re supposed to be the smart one?”

He flips me off. “Fuck you. Why don’t you just go for it?”

A breathy laugh leaves my mouth. “I tried. She rejected me.”

His eyes widen bigger than I’ve ever seen them. “Holy shit. Really? I thought every girl wanted you.”

“That’s the thing, I know she does.” I pick up a rock that’s close by and throw it. “There have been two times where we almost crossed that line, but when I finally tried to talk to her about it, she said that we can’t risk it because of Brenna.”

Asher looks down, like he has something he’s trying not to say, but that’s not how our friendship works. The reason I tell him everything is because he’s always the one to tell me when I’m being a stupid son of a bitch.

“Don’t go all quiet now, douchebag. Spit it out.”

His gaze meets mine and he sighs. “You don’t think that maybe she’s just using that as an excuse, do you?”

Honestly, the thought had never crossed my mind until now. I guess it’s a possibility. Hell, if she didn’t feel a single thing for me, I wouldn’t blame her. I fucked up all those years

ago, and that's something I'm going to have to live with for the rest of my life.

I voice the painful truth. "Regardless, I can't have her. And that sucks, 'cause my body doesn't want anyone else."

The corner of his mouth raises. "You could always turn gay."

"You bite your tongue before I rip it the fuck out myself."

He chuckles and takes a step back. "In all seriousness, though, don't stress over it. I'm sure you'll get your game back eventually. It just might take a little bit."

For the first time, I don't believe him, because what he doesn't know is that all the random hookups and my habit of sleeping around—it all began with her.

The party booms behind me as I sit on the steps of the back deck. It's been two months since I packed up my things and moved out to California, and it seems like with every day that passes, the more stressed out I get.

I should be inside, living my best life and partying with the rest of the guys. Instead, I'm staring at my phone with my finger hovering over Saige's name.

Maybe it was stupid to think I didn't want to be tied down. She was never the type to hold me back from anything in the first place, so why would I think the NFL would be any different? Then again, after the way I left things, I don't even know if she'd want to talk to me.

Breaking up with her through a letter was probably the lowest thing I could have done, but I knew I wouldn't be able to do it to her face. I would have changed my mind. So, I did the cowardly thing and scribbled down the most emotionless paragraph I could think of and asked Mason to give it to her.

"What are you doing out here, man?" Logan asks, coming over to sit beside me. "Missing home?"

“More like a part of home,” I admit.

He bumps his shoulder against mine. “I get it. The first year is the hardest, but then it gets easier.”

“Oh, so just ten more months to go,” I say sarcastically. “No big deal.”

Taking a swig of his beer, he nods to my phone. “That your girlfriend?”

“My ex.”

“And you’re going to call her?”

I shrug. “I was thinking about it.”

He reaches over and takes it from me, then shoves it into his pocket. “You’ll thank me for that later.”

“Dude, the fuck?” I try to get it back but he slaps my hand away.

“No, man. Think about it.” He drapes an arm over my shoulders. “There are hundreds of women dying to get with you. Most of them don’t even care if you remember their names in the morning. Do you really want to chain yourself to one pussy for the rest of your life?”

I say nothing as he releases me and stands up.

“If you still want to call your ex tomorrow, I’ll give you your phone back. But tonight, just have some fun. You’re twenty-one, and you’ve got the world by the balls. Live it up.”

That night started it all. Instead of drowning my sorrows in a bottle of alcohol, I washed them away in women who would never compare to her.

I wish I could go back to that night. Hell, I wish I could go back to the night I wrote the letter. I’d rip it up and throw it away. Maybe then we’d still be together. I would have been there through the pregnancy, and she wouldn’t feel so close yet just out of reach.

But life doesn't give you a chance to rewind.

I made my bed, and now I have to lie in it.

THE PLANE IS FILLED with a bunch of rowdy football players, despite the fact that it's only seven in the morning. We're on our way to Wisconsin for a game against the Packers, and I've got Brenna and Saige tagging along. The second Selena suggested I bring them, I jumped at the opportunity. I haven't had to be away from Brenna yet, and I don't think I'm ready to start.

"This is so cool!" Brenna beams as she looks around the private plane. "Is that a soda machine?"

"Don't even think about it, young lady," Saige stops her. "You know how you get on caffeine. I'm not dealing with that mess thousands of feet in the air."

B's smile drops, and I pull her into my lap. "Don't worry. Your mom will fall asleep twenty minutes into the flight."

She giggles, and while Saige couldn't hear what I said, she glares at me anyway.

What can I say? My little girl gets what she wants.

I'M LOOKING OVER PLAYS for tomorrow while Saige watches TV. The hotel suite is perfect, except for the fact that there are only two beds. I offered to take the couch, but Saige refused. So instead, we agreed that Saige would share the master bedroom with Brenna and I'd take the smaller bed in the other room.

I glance up at the TV and find E! News playing. I chuckle softly and shake my head.

"I can't believe you watch this garbage."

She smiles guiltily. “Blame Maddie. She has this weird obsession with celebrity gossip, and after spending so much time at her place, this became my guilty pleasure.”

“Whatever floats your boat, I guess.”

I go back to focusing on making sure I know my stuff when a familiar name catches my attention.

“New couple alert! Word on the street is that Topher James is having no trouble moving on from ex-fiancée Saige Ambrose. Turns out he’s found love again with Hollywood starlet Camila Benson, and according to an inside source, they’re already talking about wedding plans.”

A picture of the loved-up couple fills the screen, and a strangled whine slips from Saige’s mouth. I grab the remote and quickly turn it off, but the damage is done. She won’t look at me, which tells me all I need to know.

“Oh, come on. You can’t honestly still be hung up on that prick.”

She shakes her head. “It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” I’m dying to know why this guy still has the ability to make her go from perfectly happy to this in seconds flat.

“He was right, that’s all.”

She gets up and goes to walk away, but I’m not about to allow that. She’s only going to lie in bed and cry herself to sleep, when really she should be glad that piece of shit is out of her life.

“What do you mean he was right?”

She tries to wave it off. “Forget it. It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

I stand up and walk toward her. “If it’s doing this to you, it is.”

Looking up at the ceiling, she tries to blink back her tears. “He always used to tell me he was slumming it with me. That he could get so much better. And he was right.”

My brows furrow. “What? Because he’s dating that celeb-slut?”

“She looks like a supermodel, and I’m just an everyday mom with the stretch marks and cellulite to prove it.”

I shake my head, blinking like I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “Topher James never deserved you for a second, and that chick”—I point at the TV behind me—“doesn’t hold a goddamn candle to you. I’m not going to sit here and let you think that you aren’t good enough.”

She scoffs. “Oh, whatever. What do you know? You’ve had every girl you’ve ever wanted.”

I take a step closer and cage her in against the wall. “I know that if you hadn’t rejected me last week, I would’ve made you see just how well you deserve to be treated.”

Her breath hitches, but I’m not done.

“You asked me not to risk it, and I meant it when I said I’d respect your wishes, but that doesn’t mean my eyes aren’t glued to you every damn time you’re around.”

Knowing that if I don’t leave now, I’m going to do exactly the opposite of what she asked, I take a step back.

“Fuck, Saige. You don’t even know how perfect you are.”

With that, I turn around and force myself to walk away—saving us both from what could either be an argument or something she ends up regretting later.

THE ENERGY IN THE locker room is as intoxicating as ever. All of us are pumping each other up and making our drive to win even higher. I’m just about to put on my shoulder pads when Asher comes in.

“Hendrix,” he booms over the noise. “Saige and Brenna are outside for you.”

I smile at the idea of being able to see B before the game. She was napping when I left, so I didn't get a chance to say goodbye. I put my pads down and throw my jersey over my head to cover up. The second I walk out the door, I see them standing to the left.

"I'm sorry," Saige apologizes. "I know you're getting ready, but she wouldn't stop bugging me about seeing you before the game. I tried to call you."

I shake my head to reassure her. "No, it's fine. I'm glad you brought her to me."

Brenna looks adorable with her braided pigtails and her mini jersey that matches my own. Even Saige thinks so, because she insists on taking a few pictures. We smile in one and make a tough face in another. Without even seeing them, I can already tell they're ones I'm going to want to hang up at home.

"All right, B." I lift her into my arms. "I've got to go get ready, or I'm going to get in trouble."

She giggles. "You can't get in trouble. You're a grown-up."

"Tell that to my coach."

"Give him a hug, and we'll go find our seats, okay?" Saige suggests.

Brenna nods and wraps her tiny little arms around my neck. "Good luck, Daddy. I love you."

A lump builds in my throat as I hear the words I've been wishing would come from her mouth, and they're everything I thought they would be. I don't think there's any greater feeling than this one. Not scoring the winning touchdown. Not taking the Super Bowl Championship. Not even getting drafted into the NFL in the first place.

Saige must have heard it too, because she covers her mouth to hide the fact that she's getting emotional. I hold Brenna even closer and press a kiss to the side of her head.

"I love you, too, B. Always."

SAIGE

I PULL A MAP OF THE SCHOOL UP ON MY COMPUTER, TRYING TO show Colby where to go, but he's barely paying any attention. Today, his job is to pick Brenna up, and out of all the things we've been told to do, this one makes me the most nervous. It's no secret that people tend to go a little crazy when he's around, and the idea of him needing to reach Brenna through that gives me heartburn.

"Colby, focus," I tell him. "You have to park over here if the other parking lot is full, but Brenna will come out from this door over here."

He chuckles. "It's picking a five-year-old up from school, Saige. I think I can manage."

Running my fingers through my hair, I sigh and shake my head. "What if I just come with you? I should come with you."

Colby groans quietly and turns me with his hands on my shoulders. "You know you can't. The purpose of this is so people see I'm also a responsible adult involved in her life. But I promise you, I won't let anything happen to Brenna."

He swipes open his phone and goes to a text conversation with Michel, a bodyguard he's hired in the past. As I read the messages, I realize he's had this under control all this time.

"Michel will be in the car in front of me, and Garret will be in the car behind me. Trust me when I say Brenna's safety is never something I would mess around with."

Deep down, I know that, but I still get nervous. That little girl is my whole life. If anything were to happen to her, I wouldn't survive it. And for almost the last six years, I've been in charge of everything that involves her. Giving up part of that control hasn't been easy.

"Thank you," I breathe.

He smiles and grabs his keys off the counter. "We'll be back safe and sound before you know it."

THE WHOLE HOUR IT takes for him to pick her up and bring her home, I can't even sit still. I pace back and forth across the house. Even Maddie told me I need to chill after the fifth time I asked her where they are and if she heard anything about a mob at the elementary school.

Brenna's voice meets my ears as the front door opens, and I sigh in relief. She leaps into my arms the second I turn the corner. Colby takes one look at me and snickers.

"You spent the entire time I was gone freaking out, didn't you?"

"No," I lie, only to get a knowing look in response. "Okay, maybe a little."

He shakes his head. "You're such a control freak."

"Oh, come on," I argue. "Can you blame me? Those moms can be ruthless."

"I thought they were pleasant."

Brenna giggles. "That's not what you said in the car."

He winces. "Brenna!"

She turns to me and smiles. "It was so funny, Mom. They all surrounded Daddy and kept asking for pictures and touching his arm. He told Uncle Asher they're a bunch of ho ___"

“Okay, B,” he interrupts her. “We talked about not repeating that, didn’t we?”

Sticking her tongue out at Colby, I put her down and she scurries away. Meanwhile, my brows raise, and one hand moves to my hip.

“Pleasant, huh?”

He rolls his eyes playfully. “Oh, whatever. It’s nothing I’m not already used to.”

Yeah, I know, and that’s part of the problem. Seeing Colby surrounded by hundreds of women who would kill for a chance with him has never been easy, but at least before, I could ignore it. Pretend it wasn’t there. Avoid acknowledging its existence. But now, it’s right there. Constantly in my face and forcing me to watch.

“Brag much?” I tease as I walk into the kitchen, but the seriousness in my tone shows just a little more than I intended.

I grab a water bottle from the fridge, and when I turn around, Colby is standing there—up close and personal.

“Jealous, much?” His words are accusing, but the smile on his face, with dimples on full display, says otherwise.

I take a step back but can’t contain my giggle. “You keep those things away from me. If you didn’t have the dimples, you’d be totally striking out. You have zero game.”

“That’s not true,” he counters. “These bad boys don’t come out until the closing.”

Chuckling, I go to walk past him, but he stops me and cages me in with my back against the counter. He’s so close, his intoxicating cologne is fogging up my mind and making it hard to remember how to breathe.

“For example, if I met you at a party, I’d get this close.” He looks down at the small distance between us. “And I’d look you up and down, while subtly licking my lips.” His actions follow his words, and I’m fucking mesmerized. “I’d stare deep into your eyes, and make a comment about how the light reflects just right, making them sparkle. And when you

were least expecting it, I'd lean in"—his nose brushes mine and my breath hitches—"and I'd kiss you. You know, if I met you at a party."

He pulls away and takes a step back. It takes everything in me not to acknowledge the heavy disappointment in my chest.

"Still think I've got no game?" he asks, winking as he walks backward out of the room.

And then he's gone, and I need to catch my breath.

THIS RESTAURANT SEEMS TO be one of the only things that's stayed the same. Since we moved here, Maddie and I have made it a point to come every Saturday for lunch. They even make sure to keep a pack of crayons for Brenna, who complained that they didn't have any the first time we came.

Maddie sits across the table from us, Googling mine and Colby's names together and scrolling through all of the articles that have come out over the past few weeks.

"I have to admit," she starts, "that publicist he hired is brilliant. It's like you're slowly easing the public into all this, and most of the feedback is positive. I mean, of course you're always going to have the one delusional girl who thinks she's going to marry Colby, but for the most part, everyone seems happy for him."

I shrug and take a sip of my water. "That one delusional girl could marry Colby. You never know."

"Sure, and she could also learn to fly."

Brenna looks up. "I want to learn how to fly."

Maddie smiles at her. "Don't we all, Bren. Don't we all."

My best friend focuses back down on her phone. "I don't know how you don't see how much you want—" I cut her off by kicking her leg under the table and she yelps. "What the hell was that for?"

I use my eyes to gesture toward Brenna. The last thing I need is for her to get some little fantasy in her head of Colby and me getting back together. She may think that's what she wants, but she's only five. She doesn't know what she's talking about.

Mads groans. "A salad. I don't know how you don't see how much you want a salad."

"Because I don't."

"Not even if it's covered in delicious dressing and calling your name like a love song?"

Okay, now she's teasing. "No, because sometimes salads aren't good for you and can lead to really bad choices."

She rolls her eyes. "Well, you can't know if it's a bad choice until you've tried it. And don't bring up seven years ago. This is different."

Brenna giggles. "I know what you guys are talking about. You're not tricking me."

My brows furrow at my little girl. "Oh yeah, smarty pants? And what are we talking about?"

"Maddie wants you to date my dad."

Maddie snorts, and my shoulders sag. Leave it to Brenna to always figure everything out. Though nothing beats the time she pretended she couldn't spell for an extra three months just so she could pretend she didn't know what I was saying. Meanwhile, she knew everything that came out of my mouth.

"I think she's right," Brenna says, like she has an opinion on my relationship status. "He's always happy when he's around you."

"Is he now?" Maddie asks with excessive enthusiasm.

I shake my head. "All right, you two. Enough about my love life." I focus all my attention on Maddie. "I don't want Colby. End of story."

But the way I mentally begged for him to kiss me the other day sits at the forefront of my mind.

I'm a liar.

I'm a fucking liar.

FINALLY FINISHING OUR MEALS, the waitress brings the check, but has an unsure look on her face. She looks between Maddie and I, and when she notices Brenna beside me, she realizes who she's looking for.

“Are you Saige Ambrose?”

I nod. “Yes?”

She smiles politely. “My manager told me to let you know there is a crowd of photographers outside the restaurant doors. We refused to let any of them in, but they're all looking for you.”

Dread fills my stomach as I realize I'm alone with Brenna in what could end up turning into a media circus. I may have Maddie with me, but no part of her is prepared for this. Hell, I'm not even prepared for this. Maybe it was stupid to think I could still go out in public without the press having a field day. With all the attention that's been on us lately, this was inevitable.

We pay the check, and I grab Brenna's hand tightly in my own. Maddie stands on the other side to protect her, but the second we walk out the door, they flood the entrance. Cameras flash from all directions, making it hard to see, and the questions they're shouting at us are unbelievable.

Are you dating Colby Hendrix?

Is Colby the father of your daughter?

Why are there no pictures of him with a baby? Did he not want her?

Are you just trying to get money out of him?

There's no way for us to get through them. No matter what way we turn, they're blocking our exit. Instead of trying to

navigate around them and risking Brenna getting hurt in the process, we turn around and go back inside. Maddie picks Brenna up in her arms and holds her tight while I take out my phone.

“Colby? We have a problem.”

IT ONLY TAKES TWENTY minutes for him to get here, but when he does, you can feel his anger radiate from a mile away. The black SUV comes to a screeching halt out front, and he jumps out, along with Asher and Griffin. They turn to take his picture when he holds his hand up to block someone’s shot.

“Are you vultures out of your goddamn minds?” he roars. “There is a fucking child in there! She’s not someone you can use to get your paychecks! Don’t you have a Kardashian to go stalk?”

He rips the door open to the restaurant and immediately grabs Brenna. She buries her face in his neck, clearly feeling uncomfortable with everything. He looks me up and down.

“Are you all right?”

I nod. “A little shaken up, but I’ll be fine. I’m sorry I interrupted practice.”

He shakes his head and grabs my chin. “Never, ever, apologize for keeping our daughter, or you, safe. Ever.”

I swallow the lump in my throat but say nothing. As he turns to lead us outside, Maddie elbows me and makes a face. *Trust me, I already know.*

Asher and Griffin use their bodies as shields to keep the press back as we walk out and climb into the Range Rover. When we’re safely inside, I hand Asher my keys so he can bring my car back to Colby’s, and Griffin makes sure Maddie gets to hers safely, then gets in the car with Asher.

As Colby pulls away, he dials a number, and Selena’s voice comes through the speaker within seconds.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“No,” he growls. “I want restraining orders for Saige and Brenna, and I want them now!”

Selena sighs into the phone. “Absolutely. I’ll have them for you within the hour.”

I COME OUT INTO the living room after putting Brenna to bed. She insisted on waiting up to see the end of Colby’s game, but once she saw that they won, it’s like all the energy drained right out of her.

Maddie is sitting on the couch while painting her toenails on Colby’s coffee table, and it makes me laugh.

“If he could see you doing that right now.”

She rolls her eyes. “Aw, what would your big, strong, boyfriend do? Ask me for another threesome?”

I snort. “Mads, you asked for the threesome.”

“Whatever,” she saves me off. “He wasn’t exactly saying no.”

Yeah, I know. Thank God I did.

Grabbing a water, I sit down on the couch next to her and watch to make sure she doesn’t spill any polish on the coffee table. I might live here, but ruining his furniture isn’t something I want to do.

“Is he on his way home?”

I shake my head. “No, he’s going to the celebration party over at Griffin’s. He asked me to meet him there, but I said no.”

She groans and closes the nail polish before throwing herself backward into the cushion. “You’re absolutely impossible. Do you know that?”

“Why? Because I don’t want to play Russian roulette with my daughter’s life?”

Maddie raises one brow. “Okay, no one is holding a gun to her head, Miss Overdramatic.”

“Still. What if things end up going just as wrong as they did last time? I’m stuck with him for the rest of my life, and I can’t be the reason he leaves Brenna again.”

“No, no,” she stops me. “There is no again. As much as he was a total dick for that letter, he didn’t leave her because he didn’t even know she existed. He left you, and that sucks, and I hated him for it for a long-ass time. But now? If you honestly believe that he would let something between you two affect his relationship with Brenna, you haven’t been paying attention.”

Like usual, her words make sense, but I just can’t bring myself to do it. “Maybe not, but she would never forgive me if I messed this up for her. Hell, I wouldn’t forgive myself.”

“Fine,” she caves. “But at least don’t miss out on a killer party. Or at least don’t make *me* miss out on a killer party.”

“Do you want the address?”

Finishing a text, she puts her phone down on the couch and stands up. “No, because you’re coming with me. Kylie is on her way over to watch Brenna.”

Kylie is a girl Maddie works with, and someone I’ve trusted to babysit Brenna before. There goes my excuse to stay home tonight. And Maddie must know it, too, judging by the smug grin on her face.

WE PULL UP TO the house, and I look over Maddie while she touches up the makeup she just applied before we left. I roll my eyes, because there’s nothing to touch up, but she clearly has an agenda, and I’m just her decoy.

The whole place is packed as we go inside, and it only takes a few minutes before we see Griffin.

“Saige!” he greets me. “Colby said you weren’t coming.”

I shrug and force a smile on my face. “I changed my mind. Hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah, of course. He’s around here somewhere.” He glances around the crowded room and then focuses back on my best friend. “Hey. Maddie, right?”

She nods. “Thanks for getting me to my car yesterday.”

He smiles. “No problem. Any friend of Colby is good with me.”

The flirty giggle that comes out of her mouth makes everything clear, and it’s no surprise when she makes some excuse about needing a drink and the two of them venture off together, leaving me alone. *Thanks, Mads.*

I navigate through people as I try to find Colby. Even Tessa or Asher would be fine at this point. But when I finally spot the familiar face, my stomach drops. He’s leaning up against the wall, with a girl right in front of him. He grins down at her, saying something I can’t figure out, and my blood boils.

Just as I’m about to leave, he looks up, and his eyes meet mine.

“Saige?”

I shake my head, not wanting to hear a word he has to say. I turn around and push my way through people on my way to the exit. Colby is just as fast, though, because as soon as I get outside, he’s right behind me.

“Why are you leaving?”

I huff. “Why do you care? You looked like you had all the company you needed right inside.”

He throws his head back. “Come on. Don’t be like that.”

“I’m not being like anything, Colby. You go do what you do best. Like you showed me yourself, you’ve got game.”

Running his fingers through his hair, he throws his hands in the air. “I have no idea what you want from me. You rejected me, remember? And now you’re jealous because I’m having a conversation with someone?”

I’m out of line, I know, but there’s so much adrenaline coursing through my body that I can’t even reason with myself. “I’m *not* jealous.”

“No?” He smirks and steps closer. “Then look me in the eyes and tell me you didn’t wish for a second that it was you I was flirting with.”

My mouth opens and I try to say it, but I can’t. I groan in frustration and step backward.

“Do you think I want to feel like this? That I want to be afraid of letting my guard down with you? Dammit, Colby, I would do anything to take the way it felt when you left and erase it from my memory. It changed me in ways you can’t even begin to comprehend. So, fuck you very much.” I stop and take a deep breath, feeling all my vulnerability rushing to the surface. “But fuck me for still loving you anyway.”

His expression softens, and in one swift move, he grabs the back of my neck and presses his lips to mine for the first time in almost seven years.

FINALLY TASTING SAIGE AGAIN HAS MY ENTIRE BODY ON FIRE. Her mouth moves against mine as we both grab at any part of each other we can cling to. I reach down and lift her up by her ass. Her legs wrap around my waist as I blindly find the closest car and rest her on the hood.

It feels like a dream. Like it can't be real. But she's definitely underneath me, with her tongue swirling with my own. I take her bottom lip between my teeth and suck it into my mouth. She moans at the feeling, using her grip on my back to pull me closer. As her hips arch up and her pussy grinds against my bulge in my jeans, I groan in bliss.

“Fuck, Saige.”

She lets go in an instant and breaks the kiss. It doesn't take her speaking for me to know what's going through her mind right now. I can see it all over her face.

Regret.

Shame.

Sorrow.

But I can also see it in her eyes—the part of her that wants this just as bad as I do. I'm not delusional and I'm sure as hell not blind. She can act like this can't happen all she wants, but she's fighting herself just as much as she's fighting me.

“I have to go,” she murmurs.

I step back to let her get off the car. “Don't. Just talk to me.”

She shakes her head. “No. I really have to go.”

There’s nothing I can do. My only option is to stand here and watch as she walks away, no matter how much it hurts.

I WAKE IN THE morning, determined to get to the bottom of this thing going on between Saige and me. Knowing her, she’s going to do whatever it takes to avoid me, but I can’t let that happen anymore. Not now. Not after we shared that mind-blowing kiss.

Slipping out of bed, I expect to find the house empty. Brenna is at school, and I half expected Saige to make herself scarce for the day, but instead, she’s sitting at the kitchen table with her computer. I carefully make my way over to her and grab the coffee pot.

“Good morning.”

She glances over her shoulder. “Morning.”

Once I’ve got a cup poured, I go to join her. “Listen, about last ni—”

The words are sucked right from my lungs when I see what she’s looking at. There are at least four tabs open with apartment listings, and she’s writing down all the ones that seem suitable for her and Brenna.

“What are you doing?”

She sighs heavily. “With Topher dating Camila now, I don’t think he’s something we need to worry about anymore.”

My chest tightens as I let it set in. “So, you’re moving out?”

Saige looks up at me with a hint of sadness in her eyes. “Yeah. I think it’s time.”

Everything in me starts to panic. She can’t leave. I just got her back. If she moves out now, there’s a chance I’ll only ever

see her when we exchange Brenna, and that's not enough. Not for me.

“Is this about last night?”

She bites her lip and nods. “We can't live together, Colby. It just wouldn't work. There's too much sexual tension there.”

I shake my head. “No, Saige. Don't. Just talk to me.”

“I can't,” she says, exasperated. “Because every time I go to talk to you, my brain isn't sure of what it wants to say.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. That's bullshit,” I argue. “You know exactly what you want to say, you just don't think you should say it. I wasn't alone in that kiss last night. It wasn't unwanted.”

She throws her hands up. “That's the point!” She pauses to compose herself and exhales. “I did want it, more than I should, and that's the problem. We might have had something special back in college, but that's gone now, Colby. We can never get that back because it's tainted. And I don't even know if you're capable of having a relationship now, or if you ever were in the first place.”

My hand moves to my chest to try and ease the pain. “That's not true. I wasn't a shitty boyfriend.”

“No, you weren't,” she says softly. “But a life with me was always second choice for you, and it's taken me a bit to realize it, but I deserve someone who is going to put me first. I just don't think you can give me that.”

She gets up from the table and closes her computer.

“We'll figure out something with Brenna. Maybe she can spend half the time here and half the time with me or something.”

Smiling sadly, she walks away for the second time in twelve short hours.

ASHER'S COUCH ISN'T NEARLY as comfortable as it looks, but sulking at my house where Saige can see me isn't exactly attractive. I told her I would bring Brenna to practice with me tonight, but other than that, we haven't spoken since she all but told me things between us are never going to happen.

It's a shitty thing to hear, especially when it comes from the only person you've ever been able to see yourself with. If she would just give it a chance, I'd show her that not everything broken is irreparable. But I can't. She won't let me.

The elevator opens and catches me off guard, until a familiar head of blonde hair walks through. Tessa smiles at her best friend, and Lennon winks at her. When she turns to me, she makes a face.

"You look like shit."

I chuckle. "Thanks, brat."

Asher comes in from the kitchen and sighs. "Oh, thank fuck. I thought I was going to need to hire hookers to cheer him up."

Spoiler Alert: it wouldn't work.

"You're the reason she's here?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "I've never seen you moping like this. I figured we needed back-up."

I roll my eyes. "Guys, I'm fine." I turn to Lennon. "It's great to see you, but really, I'm fine."

She makes a sad face. "Hun, don't try lying. It's not a good look on you."

Assholes, all of them. I grab my beer off the coffee table and take a sip. It's piss warm at this point, but I pretend it's fine for appearances' sake. I can't let this get to me. Sometimes you want things in life that you just don't get.

Granted, they're not always things you had at one point and then lost, but that's just how the world works.

"It sucks, but I'll be all right," I tell her truthfully.

She tilts her head to the side. "Or, we could figure out a way for you to get your girl."

I snicker and raise my brows at her. "You got a magic wand shoved up that ass of yours?"

Grabbing a throw pillow from the chair, she chucks it at me and sits down. "Will you just trust me for once in your life?"

Fuck it. What do I really have to lose at this point?

"Fine, but if it doesn't work, I get to say I told you so."

Lennon smiles and shakes her head. "I swear, you're secretly a child."

THE FIELD IS PERFECTLY cut and ready for the game as we run out onto it. Everyone in the stands cheers for us, including the two girls who mean more to me than I ever thought possible. As I look over at Saige, who is watching Brenna while she happily blows kisses at me.

All week, I listened to Lennon's advice and acted like everything was fine. It was hard, don't get me wrong. Especially after I finally got to kiss her again, going back to this platonic level sucked. But, hopefully by the end of today, all of that changes.

"Are you nervous?" Asher asks me.

"Definitely."

"Are you going to chicken out?"

It's a loaded question, but as Saige's gaze meets mine and she smiles, the answer has never been more clear. I need her, and not in the way you need the newest iPhone or a car to get to work. I need her in the same way I need oxygen to breathe.

If this doesn't go my way, I don't know that I'll ever be the same.

“Absolutely not.”

WE'RE ALMOST AT HALFTIME, and the closer we get, the more I feel like I'm going to be sick. With thirty seconds left on the clock, we're winning the game by a mile. All the guys have been filled in on the plan, and thankfully, they're all on board. The only one who might have a fit is Coach. As we all huddle around, Asher looks over at me.

“You ready?” he asks.

I glance over at Lennon, who already knows what's coming, and her smile reassures me that I can do this.

“As ready as I'll ever be.”

We break and go into formation. The second Asher hikes the ball, I run directly in front of Saige. Asher throws the ball right into my open hands, but without moving an inch, I take a knee. Everyone goes quiet, and no one moves as I look straight at Saige, put the ball on the ground, and walk off the field.

My heart is pounding inside my chest as I enter the tunnel. It all comes down to this. If she still turns me down, there's nothing else I can do to change her mind.

Just as Lennon planned, Saige turns the corner and comes running toward me. “Is everything okay? Why'd you walk off?”

My whole body trembles as I stare back at her. “Seven years ago, I made a choice, and it was the wrong one. I hurt you, and that's something I'm going to have to live with for the rest of my life. But, no matter how many people I was around, I've never found someone who gets me the way you do.”

I take a deep breath, fully understanding what I'm doing and how my life can change from what I'm about to do. Still,

she's worth it.

“You were right when you said you deserve someone who is going to put you first.” I take the helmet off my head and toss it at her feet. “And that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

Her brows furrow as she looks down at the helmet and back up at me.

“For the longest time, I thought football was it for me, but that was before you.” I sigh and shake my head. “I made the mistake of picking this sport over you before, when there wasn’t even a choice that needed to be made. I was a stupid kid who didn’t know what he was doing, but I’m not that same kid anymore who doesn’t know his ass from his elbow.”

I take off my gloves and drop them onto the ground.

“So, if you want me to give it all up—if that’s what it will take for me to get you back—then say the words. I’ll take your hand and walk right out that door. I swear to God.”

A tear slips out and rolls down her cheek. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“No, babe.” I shake my head. “That’s where you’re wrong, because for the first time, I know exactly what I want. I’ve had you, and I’ve had my dream, and I know which one I want more.”

She turns away, and my heart drops, but I’m not giving up that easily. I step up behind her and can hear the way she snuffles. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, I spin her around to face me.

“I’m so scared, Colby,” she cries.

I nod and press a kiss to her forehead. “I am, too. But I’m not about to let a little fear keep me from the only woman I’ve ever loved.”

She stares up at me through damp eyelashes. I can almost see the battle in her mind, until her resolve snaps and a smile makes its way through.

Wrapping her arms around my neck, she arches up on her tiptoes and pulls me into a kiss that flips my whole world

upside down. I sigh in relief and hold her close as our mouths move together. Everything in me is threatening to burst at the seams, to spill all the sappy love-sick words she deserves to hear. And the best part is, this time, I'm not afraid she's going to run away. This time, she's mine.

A couple minutes later, she slowly breaks the kiss and smiles brightly. I press my lips to her forehead, just enjoying having her in my arms again.

“You have no idea what you do to me, do you?” I question.

She chuckles and reaches down to pick up my helmet. “You're going to need this when you go back out there.”

My heart swells as I take it from her. “You still want me to play?”

Nodding, she arches back up and kisses me once more. “No boyfriend of mine is going to be a quitter.”

SAIGE

I WAKE IN THE MORNING TO THE SUN SHINING IN MY FACE, which means Colby must have opened the blackout curtains. An involuntary smile appears when I think of what happened yesterday. When I saw him take a knee and walk off the field, I honestly thought something was wrong. My heart dropped and I instantly started to panic.

Standing there and listening to Colby tell me that if I wanted, he would give up his career just to be with me—it showed how far he was willing to go. I was stuck between wanting to keep my heart safe and finally letting him back in. No part of me would ever ask him to give up his passion, but knowing he was willing to was everything I needed to trust him again.

After the game ended, and they secured yet another win, I expected to leave alone. Celebrating their wins with after parties is a bit of a tradition. But Colby surprised me when he draped an arm around my shoulders and told me that the only place he wanted to be was home.

We tucked Brenna into bed, made out like teenagers, and spent the rest of the night talking like we used to. It may not have been as X-rated as I expected, but it was perfect all the same.

The door opens, and Colby walks in holding a tray of food. “Oh, you’re awake. I have breakfast.”

He puts the tray down in front of me, and my eyes rake over it all. “You made all this?”

“Not exactly,” he chuckles. “I’m a terrible cook, but I have ninja skills with pickup.”

Now that sounds more like it. I reach over to the nightstand and grab my phone. When I notice the time, my eyes widen.

“Shit, Brenna’s late for school!”

Before I can jump out of bed, Colby grabs my wrist to stop me. “I already took care of it. She was up, dressed, and dropped off in plenty of time.”

I’m stunned into silence, but there’s a bright smile on my face. “Thank you.”

He leans forward and kisses me softly with a hand on my cheek. “Eat up and then get dressed. Maddie agreed to pick Brenna up from school, and I have the whole day planned for us.”

I all but choke on my sip of orange juice. “You’re conspiring with Maddie now?”

His mouth forms one of his panty-dropping smiles, and he shrugs. “We have something in common.”

“Oh? And what is that exactly?”

“A desire for you to have everything you deserve in life.”

He winks and walks out the door, leaving me to eat my breakfast in peace.

AFTER I’M FINISHED WITH the delicious food from God knows where, I decide to take a shower in Colby’s master bathroom. Since the first time I was in here, this shower caught my eye. It’s massive and has a rain-type shower head. The only problem is I realize halfway through that I forgot to bring clothes in with me.

I grab a towel and wrap it around me. All I have to do is make it from here to my bedroom, and it’s smooth sailing from

there.

Unfortunately, luck isn't on my side, and the second I turn the corner, I run directly into Colby. Both our eyes widen as we see each other, and he grins before I step around him. I only get a couple feet away when I stop.

There's no denying I want Colby. Not anymore, anyway. I have since the moment he barged his way into Topher's and threatened to kill him while all but kidnapping me. He looked so alpha and protective, anyone would be crazy not to swoon at that. And now, there's nothing holding me back.

I can feel as he steps up behind me, and his hand gently runs down my side. I turn around to face him, looking him straight in the eyes as I let go and the towel pools around my feet. He bites his lip while his eyes rake over me.

"Are you sure about this?" he asks. "I don't want you to think this is just sex to me."

My hands move to the hem of his shirt, and I pull it over his head. "Trust me, I don't."

That's all it takes. He grabs me by the waist and pulls me into him, turning us so I'm against the wall. His hand slides up to my chest, and he takes one of my nipples between his thumb and index finger. I moan out at the sensation.

"You always were so goddamn responsive," he murmurs against my ear. "I've missed it."

My back arches as he lets go, and I ache for more contact, but he isn't going anywhere. His hand runs down my torso, over my hip, and onto my leg before going exactly where I crave him the most. He presses a finger to my clit like he still has every inch of my body committed to memory.

He bends his wrist and slips two fingers inside of me, swallowing down my sounds with his mouth on mine. His thumb still presses on the bundle of nerves, while his fingers work me from the inside.

"You're so fucking wet for me."

Between the feeling brewing in my core and the rasp of his tone, I'm complete putty in his hands. It all starts to build up, and just when I'm about to come undone, he withdraws his hand and sucks both fingers into his mouth.

It shouldn't look as hot as it does, but the way he groans around the digits makes me want to watch him do that all damn day.

"Get your ass on the bed and sit on my face," he demands. "I'm craving something sweet."

I must not move fast enough for him, because he slaps my ass and grips it tightly. I quiver at the rough contact, but it's so fucking hot. He falls back onto the bed and manhandles me until I'm straddling his face.

The second his tongue meets my pussy, I turn into a stammering mess of moans and profanities. He eats me out like a starving man who hasn't had a meal in ages, and with every little bit of pressure, I'm falling into the sexual oblivion that only Colby Hendrix could send me to.

"That's it, baby," he says with his lips still against me. The feeling of his breath blowing against my sex brings me that much closer to the edge. "Give it to me. I want it all."

He shoves three fingers inside of me this time, and with just the tiniest press on my G-spot, I'm spiraling—screaming out his name as my orgasm wracks through me. He uses his free hand to grab my hip and pull me down onto his face even more. My whole body trembles with pleasure until I'm falling weightless onto the bed.

Getting up and onto his knees, he hovers over me and licks my juices off his lips. "We can stop if you want. I won't be upset."

I shake my head without hesitation. "Fuck me. Please. I need it. Need you."

He drops down and kisses me slowly while reaching into the nightstand for a condom. Eventually, I'll tell him about my IUD and how we don't necessarily need to use those, but

that'll be after we both get tested. Until then, I'll just have to settle with there being a barrier between us.

I stare shamelessly as he pulls his pants and boxers down and lets himself spring free. This guy is just as unfair to humanity as I remember. Even his dick is pretty.

Watching Colby rip the foil packet open with his teeth shouldn't be so erotic, but somehow, it is. He rolls the condom over his hard cock and lines up at my entrance.

Our gazes lock as he sinks inside of me, and I watch his eyes roll into the back of his head. The moan that leaves his mouth is pornographic, and mine only matches it. He leans in to kiss me while his hips start to rock. Our tongues swirl together in a fight for dominance before he takes the win and takes over entirely.

“Fuck, Saige,” he breathes as he presses in and out me. “You don't know how bad I've missed this.”

My head presses into the pillow, and my nails dig into his shoulder blades. “I think I have an idea.”

He sits up and grips my hips with both hands. Once he has good enough leverage, he starts to slam into me. Watching him is like watching a work of art. The way his muscles flex and his jaw locks—it's the hottest thing I've ever seen.

As my hands rake down his body, he grins deviously and pins them above my head. Holding them with one hand, he uses the other, along with his teeth, to rip his bed sheet like paper. I stare in awe as he uses the scrap piece of fabric to tie my wrists to the headboard behind me. When he's done, he runs his thumb across my lip.

“You look so fucking good like that,” he tells me. “All tied up and mine for the taking.”

He pulls out just to tease me by rubbing the head of his cock against my clit. I squirm, silently begging him to get back inside of me, but instead he just smirks.

He grabs my hips and flips me around so my ass is in the air. His hand comes down and lands roughly against the sensitive skin, and I cry out. He pushes inside of me and laces

his fingers into my hair, pulling my head back as he leans forward to kiss me. It's hard in this position, especially with him thrusting in and out of me, but it's everything.

His hips flex, allowing him to pound into me at a bruising speed. The sounds that fill the room are only those that come from the best sex, when even words become inaudible messes.

Pressure builds in my core again as he fucks me with everything he has, and before I know it, I'm falling again. My whole body goes weak as I clench around him and collapse onto the bed. He rides me through it before reaching his own high, my name rolling off his tongue like a prayer.

Lying there, we try to catch our breath. He pulls out of me and rolls over. After tying off the condom and tossing it into the garbage, he reaches up and unties me. Before I can move myself, he grabs me and maneuvers my body so my head rests on his chest. He pulls my hand up to his mouth and presses a kiss to my knuckles.

“I never want to be without you again.”

I sigh, feeling exactly the same way. “You won't be.”

BY THE TIME WE finally get out of bed, after naked wrestling, which may or may not have turned into round two, half the day is spent. He takes me out to lunch at a secluded place right outside the city, and then around to all the places that have made him think of me over the years.

A part of the aquarium, because he knows seals are my favorite animal.

A sea glass shop that has a whole display of seafoam green—my favorite color.

The San Francisco Bay, because of the way I love to swim.

With every spot we go to, I realize there isn't a single thing he's forgotten over the years. He still knows everything there

is to know about me, including the things that have either changed or I forgot about myself.

Once it's dark, I think we're about to go get Brenna and head home, but Colby has other plans. He drives us out of the city and up to a hill that overlooks it all. It may be cold out, but that doesn't stop me from getting out of the car. This is one view that needs to be seen without a windshield in the way.

I step out to the edge and stare at the city beneath me. It's all lit up but looks so tiny from this far up. Colby steps up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. He kisses my shoulder and rests his chin on it afterward.

"There were times where missing you got so unbearable that I just had to get away for a little bit," he says. "I used to come up here and it felt like I could see the whole world. I would just sit here for hours and wonder where you were and if you were happy."

I hold his arms to me and make sure he doesn't let go, but I can't ignore the elephant in the room. "No offense, but you didn't exactly seem lonely."

He hums. "They were all just nameless faces. People I used to try to numb the pain and forget the world for a little bit. But none of them even came close to making me feel an ounce of what you do. It's like I've been chasing a feeling in all the wrong directions."

Spinning me around in his arms, he pulls back and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, staring deep into my eyes.

"I love you, Saige, and I'm so sorry I never told you that when I had the chance."

My heart melts at his words and a breathy laugh leaves my mouth. "I love you, too."

THE DRESSING ROOM IS filled with staff doing everything they need to get Colby ready. Today is the day of his big interview, and while I'm in here with him, Maddie is

entertaining Brenna with candy and soda. It's something I know I'll need to deal with later, but right now I need to make sure Colby is prepared.

Selena comes in looking a little flustered. "We have a bit of an issue."

Both mine and Colby's faces drop. "What?"

She sighs. "Well, I was hoping this part would work itself out over time, but it didn't, and we need to make a decision before you go out there."

He reaches over and grabs my hand. "Whatever it is, we can figure it out."

Nodding, Selena hands Colby the questions he's going to be asked. "If we say that you didn't know about Brenna, it makes Saige look bad for not telling you, but if we don't place the blame on her, it makes it look like you chose not to be in your daughter's life."

She isn't even finished talking before Colby shakes his head. "No. Absolutely not. In no possible scenario am I going to be okay with throwing Saige under the bus."

"Colby," I say, but he levels me with a look.

"No, Saige. It's not happening."

I pull myself free and place my hands on his face. "Don't ruin yourself to save me. There are millions of people who love you."

His eyes scan my face intently. "But the only one I love is you."

"I know, baby, but we'll make it through it. All I'm saying is if that's what's best for you, I'll take the blame for this. It's mine, anyway."

He doesn't answer. Instead, he exhales and presses his lips to mine, not caring a single bit about the people who all need his attention for one thing or another. All that matters is him and me.

COLBY

THERE HAVE BEEN A LOT OF TIMES IN MY LIFE WHEN I WAS nervous, the most recent being when I pulled the Hail Mary of all plans to get Saige back in my arms where she belongs. However, this moment may be right up there with it. In a few short minutes, I'm going to go out on stage, and admit to everyone watching that Brenna is my daughter. There isn't a single part of me that doesn't want to do it. I want the whole world to know she's mine. But that doesn't make me any less nervous.

Putting her in the spotlight is one thing. People speculate and toss around rumors like it's their job, but confirming it is something else entirely. She won't just be the cute little girl in my life anymore. She'll be known as Colby Hendrix's daughter. Her entire life is about to change, and she doesn't even know it.

"Relax," Saige tells me. "You're going to be fine. Where's all that confidence you seem to have so much of?"

I chuckle. "Babe, I excel at three things—the three S's—sports, sex, and sarcasm. Talking about my personal life in an interview? Not so much."

She giggles at me, and the sound seeps down into my soul.

"I need you to come with me, Mr. Hendrix," one of the staff says. "You're on in two."

I tell them I'll be right there and turn to Saige, stealing one more kiss for good luck. "You'll be where I can see you?"

She nods. “Right in the front row with Maddie and Brenna.”

We hold hands as we leave the room, only letting go at the last possible second, when she goes one way and I go another. I take my place and stay completely still as they make sure I’m all mic’d up and everything is working. Then, it’s time for my entrance.

“Well, this is one guest I’ve been dying to have on my show, and it seems my wish has finally come true,” Maci, the interviewer, says to the audience. “Please make some noise for football legend Mr. Colby Hendrix.”

The entire crowd goes crazy as the doors slide open in front of me and I step out. I smile charmingly and wave at everyone, chuckling when I see Brenna with her hands over her ears and an annoyed look on her face. After I give Maci a hug hello, I take my seat in the chair slightly across from hers.

“It’s great to see you,” she tells me. “Thank you so much for being here.”

“Thank you for having me.”

“Now, I’m sorry, but I don’t watch much football,” she admits, and some people in the audience boo her. “However, I do know enough to know your team is currently undefeated and looking like you’re on a straight path to the Super Bowl. How does that make you feel?”

I chuckle. “Which part? Being undefeated or the fact that you just admitted to a football diehard that you don’t watch the sport?”

The whole room fills with quiet laughter as Maci smiles. “Fair enough. Fair enough. But really, that has to feel so rewarding but so nerve-wracking at the same time.”

“It is, but our team is really solid this year. We finally got our QB back, and he’s been playing better than ever, so that really helps keep us all in line to perform to the same level.”

“You’re talking about Asher Hawthorne, correct?” I nod. “And the two of you are quite close, aren’t you?”

A picture of Asher and I from a party last year shows up on the screen. It's a surprisingly good picture, and a few people in the audience hoot and holler at it. Little do they know, we were totally shit-faced when it was taken.

"Yeah," I answer. "He's my best friend. He and I actually met shortly after I was drafted, and he sort of took me under his wing when I needed it. I'm really lucky to have him."

She smiles and glances over at the teleprompter. "That was almost six years ago, wasn't it?"

"Mm-hm."

"It seems a lot has happened for you in the last six years. You were drafted into the NFL. You won MVP after only your second year. And you were voted Hottest Man Alive twice in a row."

At the mention of the last one, everyone starts to cheer. Saige laughs and rolls her eyes, making my smile grow and my dimples appear.

"Oh Jesus, look at those dimples." Maci pretends to fan herself. "Now I know why our audience is filled with women today."

I snicker and shake my head. "Yeah, it's been a wild half decade."

"I think anyone would agree with that." She adjusts herself in the chair, crossing her legs, and I already know what's about to come. "Now, it wouldn't be my show if I didn't try to dig into the gritty details and ask you about the stunning girl you've been seen with lately."

A light blush coats my cheeks as I glance over at Saige. "She is gorgeous, isn't she?"

The crowd coos, and Maci smiles. "Well, yes, but I think we're referring to two totally different females."

A picture of Brenna on my shoulders fills the screen behind us. She's smiling happily with her hands on my head while we walk down the street. It's not a picture I've ever seen before, but I have to admit, it's a good one.

“That’s me!” she yells in the audience. “Mommy, look! That’s me!”

Saige shushes her, but Maci turns toward the sound and lights up. “Oh, she’s here. My, you’re even cuter in person.” She turns her attention back to me. “Can she come join you?”

It wasn’t in the plan, but who am I to say no? I look over at Saige to make sure she’s okay with it, and she tells Brenna to go. B runs up on stage and jumps into my lap.

“And what’s your name, sweetheart?” Maci asks her.

“Brenna.”

The whole crowd is mesmerized by her, but I’m not surprised. She snuggles into my chest, and my heart melts.

“Well, it’s very nice to meet you, Brenna.” She focuses on me. “She looks very comfortable with you.”

I smile. “I would hope so.”

Another picture comes on the screen, this time one from the Packers game. It’s one of the few Saige took outside the locker room, the first day Brenna called me Daddy. Even the memory alone has me getting choked up again.

“Now, a lot of people have been speculating that you are, in fact, her father,” she says, and glances back at the screen. “I mean, who wouldn’t wonder, with those killer dimples you both seem to possess.”

“They’re our secret weapon!” Brenna tells her excitedly, making everyone laugh.

“And what a great secret weapon to have.” She pauses to add dramatic effect. “So, Colby. I like things cut, dry, and simple, so I’m just going to come out and ask. Is she yours?”

I look down at Brenna, who blinks up at me with green eyes that match my own and a smile that could melt icebergs. “Yeah. She’s my daughter.”

Brenna giggles as the whole place erupts, and I tickle her sides. When I glance over at Saige, she’s wiping away a tear

and flips me off when I silently tease her for it. I kiss Brenna's forehead and send her back over to her mom.

"Well," Maci sighs. "That must be nice to get out in the open after all this time, huh?"

"It is. I've never wanted to hide her or anything like that. But with fame comes its own set of dangers, and her safety is always our first priority."

She nods in understanding. "Well, it's funny you mention that, because it brings me to my next question. Where has she been all these years? Because people have noticed there aren't any pictures or anything of you with an infant."

Here it is. The moment I'm supposed to put the blame on Saige and walk out of here with my reputation untarnished, but I can't do it. We've both made our fair share of mistakes in the past, but no one deserves to have theirs broadcasted on live television.

"You know, Maci, I may play professional football and that requires a bit of transparency, but there are some things in my life that I'd like to keep private," I answer. "Brenna's mom and I have an incredible relationship, and Brenna and I are both lucky to have her, but I'd like to keep that out of the public eye as much as possible."

"A man who respects the mother of his child. That's refreshing." She glances at Saige and then back to me. "But I have to ask, is it a platonic relationship, or something a little more serious?"

I look over to Saige before saying anything at all, and she rolls her eyes playfully before nodding. With the go ahead to tell the world, my grin stretches and I can't hold it in anymore.

"One day, I'm going to marry that girl."

EPILOGUE

COLBY

TWO MONTHS LATER

ADRENALINE PUMPS THROUGH MY SYSTEM AS MUSIC BOOMS through the speakers. It's the Super Bowl Championship game. The one every team works for all year. The one to win it all. We went undefeated all season long and now it's finally here.

Asher steps up next to me and nudges my shoulder with his own. "What do you say? Should we go out there and show them how it's done?"

"You're damn right."

The announcer's voice fills the stadium, and the entire team runs out at once. Screams are deafening as we make our way onto the field. I can only imagine the earful Saige is going to get from Brenna for that one.

As soon as we get to the bench, I look over at the seats I know were reserved for us. Everyone Asher and I care about are in the stands. Our parents, Saige and Brenna, Tessa, and at the end is Lennon and Cade. Out of all of them, Brenna seems to be cheering the loudest. She has a custom-made jersey that matches mine, equipped with the Super Bowl patch on it and all.

Pulling an Asher, I run over to them and pull myself up, but it isn't to get a kiss. Instead, I put my hand out, and Brenna high-fives it.

“Kick their butts, Daddy!”

I reach up and poke her nose. “You know it, B.”

Jumping back down, I jog back over to Asher and the guys, ready to get this game underway.

WE MAY BE GOOD, but the other team is definitely not going down without a fight. By halftime, I’m exhausted. Everyone in the locker room is gearing up for the second half of the game, while I watch the videos Saige is sending me of Brenna dancing to Taylor Swift’s performance. She looks like she’s having the time of her life.

After we broke the news that she is my daughter, things got a little hectic for a bit. I had to hire bodyguards for both Saige and Brenna, but Selena navigated us through the whole thing and eventually it died down. Meanwhile, Saige and I have never been better.

We celebrated Brenna’s birthday last month with a trip to Disney World. One of the perks about flying private is you can keep where you’re going a secret from inquiring little minds. Having to listen to her ask us a million times what the surprise was and not being able to tell her? Torture. Seeing the look on her face when we took the blindfold off in front of Cinderella’s Castle? Priceless.

“Is that B?” Griffin asks, ripping my phone from my hand and smiling as he watches her dance. “Leave it to you to have the cutest kid in existence.”

I smirk at him and take back my phone. “And it doesn’t hurt that her aunt isn’t exactly hard to look at, huh?”

He flips me off. He and Maddie like to act as if there is nothing going on between them, but it’s more than obvious. Knowing Griff, he’s probably keeping it casual, but I’ve seen Maddie when she has her eyes set on something she wants. He may as well hand her the key to his house now, because he’s fucked.

“Let’s go, motherfucker,” Asher booms at me. “We didn’t come all this way for nothing, did we?”

I send a selfie back to Saige, not caring how much the guys might make fun of me for it, and toss my phone back into my bag. We all get up and grab our helmets.

It’s time to win this shit.

IT ALL COMES DOWN to one final play. If we make this touchdown, there’s no way they can recover, even getting the ball back for another run. They’d be too far behind. If we miss, however, it’s anyone’s game.

My blood is pumping as the ball is hiked straight to Asher. He takes a step back, scanning for an opening, but there isn’t any. They’ve got a guy on Griffin and two on me. His eyes meet mine, and I know exactly what he’s going to do. I fake left but go right and into the far corner as the ball soars through the air and straight into my hands. The second my feet hit the ground, I know we did it.

We are the fucking champions.

The celebration in the stands is unrivaled by anything I’ve ever heard in my career. I scan the writhing mass of bodies for my girl, and a wide grin stretches across my face as I point right at her. Brenna’s whole body shakes with how loud she’s screaming. When she sees me point at her, she throws her arms wide in the air, with a smile matching mine, and gives me a thumbs up.

Confetti rains down as we’re announced the Super Bowl champs. Asher and I grab each other by the face mask part of our helmets, jumping up and down and grinning like idiots.

“You fucking did it, you crazy son of a bitch!” I tell him.

He shakes his head. “*We* did it, man. *We* did it.”

After celebrating with the team for a minute or two, I toss my helmet by the bench and jog over to my family. I reach my

hands up for Brenna, and after a few gestures from Saige that communicate just how insane she thinks I am, she passes her down to me. Brenna wraps her arms around my neck and hugs me tightly.

“You won, Daddy! You won!”

I chuckle and bop her on the nose. “All because I had my good luck charm.”

THE FIELD IS FULL of people, and the stage is put together in minutes flat. News cameras flood the area as Ed stands at the podium, holding the Vince Lombardi trophy. He says a few words about what an honor it is to have such a dedicated and goal-driven team, and how he’s sure this team will obtain more of these wins in the future.

“It’s time I hand you over to this year’s MVP, Mr. Colby Hendrix.”

My eyes widen, shocked that my name is the one that came from his mouth. I hand Brenna over to her mom and walk up on stage. Everyone cheers as I step forward and take the microphone. I wave as they all start chanting my name.

“Wow,” I begin. “I never expected to win this one. Football is just something I’ve always loved to do, and the fact that I get to do it for—a living is just a huge added bonus.”

I look out at the crowd for the face of my best friend.

“I always respect the process and feel that the awards go to those most deserving of them, but this time I think they got it wrong. Asher, get up here.”

The screams get louder as Asher climbs up and stands beside me.

“What the hell is your crazy ass doing?” he asks, and I laugh.

“I don’t think there’s a person on this field, myself included, that deserves this award more than you. Everyone

thought you were done. Hell, there was even a point where *you* thought you were done, but with a little help...”—I wink at Tessa—“you managed to pull off the impossible. They do always say children have the ability to change the world.”

Tess laughs and flips me off, while Asher rolls his eyes with a smile.

“But in all seriousness, you deserve this one.”

I hand him the microphone and walk off the stage. Giving Lennon a hug on my way, I finally get back over to Saige and Brenna. I take the Super Bowl Champion hat off my head and put it backward on B’s. Then, I take her from Saige and raise her up so she’s sitting on my shoulders.

“So, what’s it feel like to have it all?” Saige asks.

“Baby, I’ve had it all since the day I got you back.”

With a light grip on her chin, I lean down and press my lips to hers. Brenna feigns disgust, making Saige and I laugh. With an arm around my girl, and my daughter on my shoulders, we walk off the field—together.

COMING OUT OF THE ice cream shop after getting a celebratory treat, I’m holding Brenna in my arms when a familiar face makes my jaw tick. Topher James is walking toward us with his girlfriend clung to his arm. His upper lip raises in disgust as he spots Saige.

“Well, if it isn’t the happy family,” he sneers, focusing on me. “You always did prefer whores.”

I try to pass Brenna to Saige but she shakes her head. “No. I’ve got this.”

B clings to me tightly, wanting nothing to do with Topher, and hides her face in the crook of my neck. Instead of trying to interfere, I stand back and let Saige handle it. She smirks as she takes a step toward him.

“How you have any fans at all is a mystery to me. You are nothing but a coward who beats women and manipulates them into thinking they’re not good enough. Well guess what? You can’t hurt me anymore. And Colby? He’s a hundred times the man you’ll ever be. So you can take your little insults, your bruised ego, and your drug problem somewhere else because I could care less about you.” She goes to walk by them when she stops and looks at his girlfriend. “Try to keep him away from the coke. He has a bit of a temper when he’s on it.”

There’s the girl I used to know.

Topher’s face turns an angry shade of red and I can’t help but chuckle as I follow after Saige. When I reach her, she smiles and leans in to kiss me. Meanwhile, Brenna’s face is formed into a pout.

“B?” I ask. “You okay?”

She huffs. “Aunt Maddie was right. He *is* a dildo.”

My eyes widen and Saige erupts into hysterical laughter.

Well, she’s not wrong.

THREE MONTHS LATER

I USED TO HATE being home. The quiet allowed my mind to wander, and I’d get stressed out about things I really shouldn’t worry over. But now? Home is my favorite place in the world.

Saige comes to sit next to me, cuddling against my side with an envelope in her hand. She looks at it for a second and then smiles as she hands it to me. My brows furrow as I take it from her.

“What’s this?”

She shakes her head. “Just open it.”

I carefully rip it open and pull out the contents. The first thing that catches my attention is the gold seal at the bottom. What kind of official document is this?

*I, Register of Probate, hereby certify that in a court of law the
name of
Brenna Elizabeth Ambrose
was this day changed to
Brenna Elizabeth Hendrix.*

My heart swells as I finish reading and turn back to Saige. “You changed her name?”

She nods. “To what it should’ve been all along.”

Unable to express how she makes me feel in any other way, I pull her into a bruising kiss. However, it doesn’t last long before Brenna interrupts.

Some things never change.

“Mommy!” she all but shouts, her eyes wide. “Look at all this money! There has to be a million dollars in here.”

Saige looks confused. “Where’d you find all that?”

“In my piggy bank.”

My eyes scan the room, looking anywhere but directly back at her.

“Colby!” She hisses accusingly. “Is that the rent money I gave you?”

It takes everything in me not to smile. “I can’t answer that.”

“Why not?”

“Because Brenna told me not to lie.”

Saige sighs, and her eyes roll into the back of her head, but I can tell she’s not angry. “What am I going to do with you?”

I smile, purposely making my dimples show to give me some leverage. “Love me for eternity?”

She chuckles. “Like I ever had a say in that.”

“Mommy, can I get a Ferrari?” Brenna asks as she tries to count all the money.

Saige gets up and goes over to help her stack it all neatly together. “What do you want a Ferrari for? You can’t even drive.”

“So? They’re pretty.”

“You don’t need one.”

B scoffs just like her mom. “You’d just be jealous because you don’t have a Ferrari.”

I grin contently as I watch them bicker back and forth, knowing Saige doesn’t stand a chance in winning this one.

Everyone has that one true thing in their life. A childhood friend. A high school sweetheart. A trusted adult. Mine, on the other hand, is them.

CORRUPT MY MIND

My name is Zayn Bronsyn,
and I think I screwed up.
I wasn't supposed to fall,
especially not for her.
She's in a league of her own,
and I'm just her brother's scumbag friend.
The last time I saw her,
she was thirteen with braces.
Now, she's back from boarding school,
with an hourglass body that'll bring me to my knees.
If Easton finds out I hooked up with his sister,
he might actually kill me.
She's too innocent, too perfect for a guy like me,
but I can't resist bringing her into my messed up world.
Amelia Donovan might be the one to revive my blackened
heart.

Corrupt My Mind

Coming October 16, 2020

Want more Colby and Saige?

[Check out this bonus chapter.](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After *The Rebel's* release day, my husband asked me how my day went. I told him it felt like my birthday. He laughed as I went to sleep saying, "Happy Birthday to me." The next morning, I woke up with an idea. I was going to write a surprise book for my birthday.

Funny story. Colby was actually supposed to be a side character that disappeared by chapter eight of *The Rebel*. And well, clearly he had other things in mind. He has to be one of my favorite characters to date.

I knew that if I moved onto the spin-off series without writing Colby, the chances of me going back to him and telling his story were slim. Only because when you write, there is growth with the characters. And I couldn't stomach the idea of not writing his story.

Colby, Saige, and Brenna stole my heart. I spent every day writing this until long past the time everyone in my house was asleep. The words felt like they were pouring out of me and I couldn't possibly love this book any more than I do. I couldn't love *Colby* any more than I do.

So, thank you to everyone who has written reviews asking me about if Colby is getting a story and to all of you who have sent me messages asking the same thing, because it assured me that it was the right thing to do.

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And lastly, thank you to all of you, the readers, for loving Colby as much as I do. I know I say it a lot, but I wouldn't be where I am without all of your support, and it means the world to me. I love you all.

xoxo,

Kels

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelsey Clayton is an internationally selling author of Contemporary Romance novels. She lives in a small town in Delaware with her husband, two kids, and dog.

She is an avid reader of fall hard romance. She believes that books are the best escape you can find, and that if you feel a range of emotions while reading her stories - she succeeded. She loves writing and is only getting started on this life long journey.

Kelsey likes to keep things in her life simple. Her ideal night is one with sweatpants, a fluffy blanket, cheese fries, and wine. She holds her friends and family close to her heart and would do just about anything to make them happy.



Books By
**KELSEY
CLAYTON**

North Haven University

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Change My Game (*Coming 2020*)

Wreck My Plans (*Coming 2021*)

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