



Lesing
ANSLEY

NICOLE ABRAMS

Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Synopsis](#)

[Author Note](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Note from the author](#)
[Finding Caroline](#)
[Stay Connected](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)
[About the Author](#)

Copyright (c) 2022 Nicole Abrams

LOSING ANSLEY

Release date: December 22, 2022

All rights reserved.

This book, or any portion thereof, may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. No copyright infringement intended. No claims have been made over songs and/or lyrics written. All credit goes to original owner.

For information, message: nicoleabramsaauthor@gmail.com

Cover design: Nicole Abrams

DEDICATION

To all the women who are strong, confident and beautiful to the world but struggle with inner demons. May you become someone's first choice. And may they give you lots of orgasms in the process!

Title Page

Losing Ansley

By

Nicole Abrams

Synopsis

He's my brother's best friend, my boss, and frenemy...And I think I love him.

Tragedy struck when I was five years old, which created an unbreakable bond between us. He's the one I go to for everything... before my brother, my friends, and absolutely before my parents. When I was little, I stated I would marry him one day. But, after my sixteenth birthday, he stopped taking my calls and texts like he used to. Creating another hurt I just didn't want to face.

In the end, I tried to let it go. After all, every time someone got close, they ended up hurting me.

A couple of years later, our parents die, causing the rollercoaster that is our relationship to start up once more. He is there again as if nothing had changed. When trouble hits my door, he's the one there to bail me out.

He hired me at his growing business. As time goes on, the tension between us grows. What I never counted on was for him to act on the subtle looks he had been giving. Never expected him to give in to the tension that had been growing between us.

But then he does, and it is explosive. Yet, the only thing he won't do is kiss me. Won't admit that there is more to us than attraction. Long ago, he made a promise to my brother. One he refuses to break... even at the expense of breaking my heart.

I'm sick of it all.

When an opportunity drops in my lap, I take it and run away.

Now I can't help but wonder... Will he follow me? Or will he be like everyone else and break me?

Losing Ansley is book two of the *Coming Home* series. While it can be read as a stand alone I do suggest reading *Finding Caroline* to get more background on the characters.

This is a mature spicy contemporary romance (18+), and contains some situations that may trigger readers. For a more in depth list of [Trigger Warnings](#), you can click the link or find them on my link

[Losing Ansley_playlist](#)

[\(available on Spotify\)](#).

CHAPTER ONE

ANSLEY

SEVEN YEARS Earlier

My parents are dead. My parents and Lincoln's parents are dead. On their way home from a double date, they were sideswiped by an eighteen-wheeler and went into oncoming traffic. Their car flipped three times, and none of them survived.

Staring at my ceiling, I will the tears to come, but they don't. You'd think I would have cried when we found out about their accident or even at the funeral this afternoon. But nothing. After several minutes of squeezing my eyes and scrunching my forehead to try and get the reaction that should come, I sit up in my bed and huff.

I should feel sadness, grief, or some other emotion besides relief. I walk to my door and open it, glancing down the hall toward Dylan's room. He's been in denial for thirteen years that our parents treated us differently, but after the will was read yesterday, he's accepted that our parents did not love me the way they loved him after that fateful day.

At the funeral today, he showed less emotion than I did. I faked it, at least. I sniffed at the appropriate times and brought

the handkerchief up to wipe away imaginary tears. Dylan stood with his arms crossed or in his pockets. He's angry and overcome with guilt.

And though he won't admit it, he's grieving. He's been holed up in his room since everyone left. Walking down the hallway, I stop in front of his room. I'm about to knock on the door when it swings open, and Rose walks out. She stops short when she notices me.

"Ansley, hey." She greets me, and I step back, giving her a small smile.

"Hey. Sorry, I didn't know you were still here." I reply. She steps toward me, but I take another step back.

"You don't have to apologize. I stayed to check on Dylan." My eyes travel down her body as she stands in only my brother's t-shirt. I'm sure she stayed to check on him and to make him feel better. She turns back toward the bedroom, her curly blond hair bouncing.

"He's in the shower, but he'll be out in a minute if you want to see him." She offers. I swallow and shake my head.

"No. It's okay. I'll talk to him tomorrow." I assure her. Rose tilts her head at me, and I look away. Rose is going to school to be a psychiatrist, and I always feel like she's examining me. She hasn't ever given me a reason to think that. It's not like she tries to make me talk beyond what I'm willing to, but she observes more than she lets on.

"I'm headed to the kitchen to grab a snack and something to drink. Want me to make you a sandwich or something?" She asks, and I'm not prepared for the emotions that choke up my throat. My parents just died, but this almost makes me cry. I clear my throat and shake my head.

"No, it's okay. I'm going to go back to sleep. I'll see you two tomorrow." I give her a small wave and walk back toward my room. She watches me for a few seconds before turning and heading downstairs. I hide in the shadows until she's gone, then tiptoe to the stairs and glance down. She's made it

to the kitchen, so I quickly walk downstairs and to the door leading out to the garage.

At the sight of my dad's Corvette looking pristine, expecting to be driven tomorrow, I bite down hard on my tongue. I always wanted that car, but he made it clear it would belong to Dylan one day. And now it does, to Dylan's dismay.

I walk to the door leading outside and open it, glancing up at the house next door and looking for Lincoln's window. His light is still on, so I go to the terrace, climb up the makeshift ladder to the awning, and scoot to his window. He's sitting on his chair beside the bed, looking at his laptop.

I tap on the glass, and his head snaps in my direction. Waving at him, he stands, walks to the window, and opens it. I climb in, and my eyes fall to his chest. He's wearing gray sweatpants that hang low on his hips and no shirt. I'm suddenly aware that I'm wearing my pajama shorts and a thin t-shirt that shows off my midriff.

"Ansley? What are you doing?" He questions. Swallowing, I force my eyes to his and clear my throat.

"I... Umm..." I lift my shoulders and hands. "I didn't want to be alone." It takes a lot to admit that to him, but it'll work, and he won't send me away. He'll always go out of his way to be there for me.

I found that out the night that I got drunk off my ass and was too scared to call my parents. Lincoln drove an hour to pick me up, and then he helped sober me up so my parents would never find out.

I've known Lincoln since I was born. He's my brother's best friend and my frenemy. When I was a kid, I was determined I'd marry him one day, but now that's impossible. He'll never take the stick that's up his ass out long enough to admit he has any feelings for me. He's been pushing me away since I was sixteen.

"Why didn't you hang out with Dylan?" He questions as he grabs a discarded t-shirt and pulls it on, to my

disappointment. I sit on the edge of his bed and pull my feet under me.

“Rose is over there. They’re having relations.” He arches an eyebrow at me.

“Relations?” He chuckles, and I groan.

“What do you want me to say? They’re fucking.” He narrows his eyes at me.

“Watch your language.” I roll my eyes and put my chin in my hand as I lean my elbow against my leg.

“Whatever. I’m eighteen. I can say whatever the hell I want.” I snap at him, and he takes a step closer, his eyes darkening. I’ve always loved doing this with him. Pissing him off is one of my favorite pastimes.

“Ansley.” He warns, and I smirk up at him.

“What are you going to do? Spank me?” He takes another step toward me as he clenches and flexes his hand, and I bite the inside of my cheek. I wonder how far I could push him until he gives in to whatever the hell is between us. He refuses to admit it, but I notice how he watches me because I watch him too.

“You wouldn’t know what to do if I spanked you,” He replies. My tongue darts out to wet my lips, and his eyes follow the movement.

“Nothing’s stopping you,” I taunt him. He blinks, and the connection is broken. I sigh as he walks backward until he’s leaning against his dresser.

“Are you okay?” He inquires, and I shrug as I glance out his window toward the house that now belongs to Dylan. I have nothing. Nothing.

“It doesn’t feel real.” I look back at him, and he crosses his arms over his chest as he waits for me to explain. He and Dylan were supposed to be apartment hunting this week, but that’s not happening now. They both have houses that have been left to them.

On the other hand, I had nothing left to me, not even the fucking car. Although Dylan said I could have it since I'm the one that's always wanted it. Lincoln pushes off the dresser and crosses his room, sitting beside me on the bed.

"Ans?" Lincoln knows. He understands the hell I've lived in since that day. I was five years old! How was it my fault? Dylan refused to acknowledge it until the lawyers showed up, and the will was read two days ago. Somehow it was mine and Lincoln's fault. The perfect life our parents had planned out derailed.

"I don't know what I did, Lincoln. Other than survive." He wraps his arm around my shoulder and pulls me into him.

"They were assholes." I huff and lean into him, allowing his warmth and smell to seep into me. His parents left him the house, but I'm assuming it's because they couldn't leave it to anyone else. If they donated it, it would have sullied how their family looks, and god forbid anyone on the outside be aware of what was happening inside.

"If only she had lived." I start to say, but stop because I don't want to upset him. He pulls me closer and rests his chin on top of my head.

"I know." He whispers. This one thing brought Lincoln and me together because we both experienced the wrath of our parents. Because he wasn't able to pull a miracle out of his ass by saving his sister and me and because I lived and she didn't.

"I wish I had died," I admit. It's the first time I've ever said it aloud. Lincoln immediately pulls away and grabs me under my arms, pulling me into his lap. His finger and thumb gripping my chin.

"Don't you ever say that again. Ever!" He exclaims as he rests his forehead against mine. I wish he would see me as more than just his best friend's little sister. More than someone he feels this need to protect. I swallow as our eyes connect.

"It was your sister. Don't you wish she would have survived instead?" He shakes his head and moves his hand to wrap around the back of my neck.

“Don’t do that, Ans. Do I wish she had survived? Yes. If I had it my way, there wouldn’t be an either-or. You’d both be here, and our lives would have turned out differently. But the thought of it being you. I can’t. I can’t think about that.” I put my hands on either side of his neck and suck in a breath.

“Are you okay?” I ask him. His parents died too. He was just as stoic as Dylan was at the funeral today. He only showed any emotion when he wrapped his arm around me to show some support. He scoffs.

“Yeah. I’m just as relieved as you. I don’t have to listen to my mom’s constant guilt trips or hear my dad telling me what I should have done differently. Or any other shit I’ve dealt with for the past thirteen years.” He closes his eyes and releases a long breath.

“You’re the only person who knows everything and understands,” I whisper. His hand wraps around my waist as he pulls me closer to him, and I stop breathing. I don’t want the connection to break again. I want him to kiss me. I want him to do more than that, but we all have to start somewhere.

“I’ll be here for you always, Ans.” Without thinking, I close my eyes and lean in, taking matters into my own hands. If he’s not going to act on this, I will. But my lips don’t land on his; they land on his cheek. He turned his head. I lean back, and he faces me again. I scramble off his lap.

“Sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.” I head toward his window. Why I’m still climbing in and out of his window is beyond me. His fucking parents aren’t alive anymore to stop me from coming into their house. Old habits die hard, I guess.

“Ansley!” He calls out to me, but I’m pushing his window open and trying to climb out. Before I can get one leg out, he grabs me and pulls me around to face him. “Stop!”

“You don’t want me. It’s fine.” It’s not fine. I try to pull out of his grip again, but he pulls me to him and holds me tight.

“Ansley, you have no idea. None.” I don’t return his embrace. I keep my arms at my side because if I touch him, I’ll try again.

“Lincoln, let me go.” He immediately releases me and begins pacing, running his hand through his dark brown hair.

“I made a promise to your brother. I’m not going to break it.” I stare at him. I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“What promise? What the hell are you talking about?” He stops in front of me, but instead of looking at me, he tilts his head back and looks up at the ceiling.

“I promised him when you were born I would always protect you, and I’d never kiss you.” I stare at him as he finally looks at me. Squinting my eyes, I put my hand on my hip.

“You promised my brother you’d always protect me and never kiss me?” I implore, and he nods. I think back to that day.

“Is that why you saved me?” I ask him gently, and he shakes his head.

“She was already....” He trails off. “I tried. God, I tried.” He agonizes, and my heart breaks for him. I can’t imagine what it was like for him to lose his baby sister. I move past that because talking about it bothers him so much, and I never want to hurt him, even if his words hurt me.

“And you promised you’d never kiss me. You were like six, right?” I roll my eyes.

“There’s a code.” He declares, and my mouth pops open.

“A code?” This time he rolls his eyes, which is very unlike him. I smirk, enjoying how ruffled he is.

“Yes, a code. You never kiss or sleep with your best friend’s sibling or an ex.” He huffs, and I snort, causing him to glare at me.

“Did he make the same promise to you?” He stares at me before comprehending what I said.

“Yes. He beats himself up that he wasn’t there that day.” I sigh and glance down at my bare feet. We had been dumb five-year-old kids jumping into a lake. We had been told countless times not to do when adults weren’t around.

“Besides, I made a promise.” He murmurs. I step up to him and push his shoulder.

“You know what?” He eyes me, waiting for me to speak.

“To hell with your promise.” I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him before he can back away. This time he’s the one that doesn’t return my embrace. He stiffens, and I realize the mistake I’ve made. Pulling back, I don’t look at him.

“I’m such an idiot,” I whisper more to myself than him.

“Ansley.” I shake my head, stopping whatever he has to say. I bite my lip and take a step back toward his window.

“Sorry, Lincoln.” With that, I climb out of his window and down the terrace. He doesn’t come after me or try to stop me this time. One day I’ll become a famous designer, and I can move to a big city and forget this night has ever happened.

CHAPTER TWO

LINCOLN

PRESENT DAY

I sit at my desk and stare at my computer, waiting for Ansley to come in here to review the plan for recording demos before the app launches in a few weeks. She walks to my door but her phone rings, so she puts her finger up to answer it and walks away.

I grind my teeth. She tests me as no one does. She's the only one who won't align with how I want things to run around here. Although lately, Caroline and Liv have been pushing back too, and I blame Ansley for that. While I wait, I organize the items on my desk.

I've known Ansley since she was born. Her brother, Dylan, and I have been best friends since our parents brought us home from the hospital. My mom and his mom were friends in high school. They always dreamed of getting married around the same time and having babies simultaneously.

The plan worked until it didn't. Dylan and I were born a day apart. I'm older, and I'll never let Dylan forget it. We were six when Ansley and Ivy were born. I'll never forget the day they were born. We made two promises to each other that day.

One, we'd protect the other's sister for the rest of our lives. Two, we'd never kiss the other's sister. At the age of six, that was an easy promise to make. I didn't want anything to do with girls, but things started changing as we got older.

The day I saved her caused a bond between us that is unexplainable. And the day our parents died, and she climbed into my bedroom window, it changed many things. And ever since, our relationship has been strained.

She doesn't want to be working for me. She'd rather be doing something with fashion, but she's made unfortunate financial decisions that put her into debt. So, now, she's working for me. She hates it and tries to keep it a secret that we know each other.

But lately, it's gotten worse, and I'm at a loss about what to do or how to improve it. She's struggling, but she refuses to ask for help. It's not in my nature to let that go, which is why I insisted she works here. She refuses to tell Dylan and puts on a show for her friends, but I know, and she hates it.

I glance at my watch and have had enough of waiting for her. Ten minutes, Jesus! Standing, I walk out of my office and into hers. She has her phone in front of her, and she's talking about cheering on someone.

"Ansley," I bark. "Some time today!" She glances up from her phone and rolls her eyes.

"I have to go. Lincoln is riding my ass hard tonight. I'll put Saturday night on my calendar. Text me the details later." I arch an eyebrow at her as she waves bye and hangs up.

"There, are you happy?" She snaps. And I want to throttle her or spank her. I can't decide.

"Why are you such a brat?" I question her, and she shrugs one shoulder as she runs her hands through her red hair.

"You like it when I'm a brat, and you know it." I grind my teeth and motion for her to move her ass. She huffs, standing from her chair, and I clench my jaw. She's wearing a knee-length red skirt showing off her long legs and a black blouse with the top two buttons undone.

Her red hair hangs in waves around her shoulders today. I can't remember the last time I saw Ansley not wholly put together. I miss the nights of us chilling and watching TV. Now, she avoids me at all costs. Pushing those thoughts away, we walk into my office, and I sit in my chair.

"You can pull that chair over here." Of course, she doesn't. She sits on my desk, crossing her legs and eyeing me, waiting for me to give her instructions. I inhale deeply, trying to ignore the fact she's messed up the desk I just spent time cleaning. I turn the monitor slightly so she can see what I'm looking at and try my best to ignore her legs.

She leans over to look at the monitor, giving me a glimpse of her bra. I can't tell if it's black or dark green. My jaw tenses when she glances at me, and I realize I've been caught—considering the smirk she's giving me. I turn my attention back to the screen.

"We need to make a video showing people how to create their profile and explain to them how the app will link them with potential companions."

Ansley scoffs.

"What?" I grind out.

"Companions? They're not your grandparents. Jesus!" She exclaims.

"What should I say then, Ans?" She rolls her eyes.

"Uh, partners. That's what everyone calls it." She pauses and arches an eyebrow at me. "I knew you were old, but come on." I shake my head and ignore her jab at my age.

"Anyway," I start again, but she interrupts me.

"What kind of questions will people be answering? Generic stuff or personal stuff like do you kiss on the first date? Or questions about if they like to be tied up or their ass smacked?" I turn my attention to her.

"Who kisses on the first date?" I ask, ignoring her other comments. Her mouth pops open like she can't believe I asked that.

“A lot of people kiss on the first date. Some people even have sex on the first date. There are actually apps out there specifically for that.” She says emphatically. I lean back in my chair and stare at her. Has she had sex on the first date? I envision finding this guy and killing him with my bare hands when I realize she’s talking again.

“I know you have an aversion to kissing, but not everyone does.” I bite my tongue at her insinuation, tasting copper. This woman is going to be the death of me. She stares at me, waiting for me to deny her accusation. I stand from my chair and crowd her. She tilts her head at me, giving me a bored look.

“I don’t have an aversion to kissing Ansley.” A brief flash of hurt fills her eyes before she hides it.

“So, it’s just me then.” She pushes on my chest to move me, trying to climb off my desk, but I don’t budge.

“Move Lincoln.” I do move, but not away like she’s expecting. I place my hand on my desk behind her, forcing her to lean back and uncross her legs so I can stand between them. My eyes roam over her face, landing on her lovely full lips.

“You know why I can’t kiss you.” I’m so close to her that I feel the small pants leaving her mouth.

“You were six, Lincoln, and that was twenty-five years ago.” She huffs and tries to lean back further, but I crowd her even more. The bottom of her skirt is digging into my upper thighs, and her breasts are touching my chest. Every time I inhale, I smell her vanilla scent. I’m sick of this back-and-forth with her. It’s been this way since that night. I bring my hand to her hip and massage it, causing her to gasp.

“Have you kissed on the first date?” I whisper, and she shifts, causing her legs to widen and allowing me to step closer.

“Yes.” Her tone matches mine, but her answer causes a visceral reaction. I rub my palm down her outer thigh to the hem of her skirt, rubbing her skin briefly before trekking back up.

“What about sex?” I’m not sure why I’m torturing myself. I stare into her beautiful eyes. Growing up, she hated them; she felt self-conscious about having two different colored eyes. One is green, and the other is hazel with flecks of green. I always told her they proved her uniqueness; eventually, she overcame that self-consciousness.

“I... Ummm...” She swallows and brings her hands up to rub along my pecs and my shoulders. “Yes.” She admits, and it makes me want to lift her skirt, rip her panties off and make her forget any other man she’s ever been with. I rub my palm down her thigh again, but this time I don’t stop at the hem of her skirt. I keep going until I touch her skin. My fingers slip under her skirt when I slowly rub her thigh. I’m about to remove them when her hips buck forward, and I realize I will hate myself in the morning.

“I want to kiss you, Ans,” I admit, and she squints at me, tilting her head. I lean forward and nip at her earlobe, allowing my fingers to trail further under her skirt. Her breathing begins to pick up as goosebumps break out along her collarbone.

“On a different set of lips, though.” I breathe out as my index finger grazes the edge of her panties. My cock is about to punch through my pants at the thought of finally getting my hands on her.

I have wanted this since she was eighteen, probably before, but I wouldn’t let myself dwell on it. She shifts, leaning back a little, causing me to pause. But she leans forward until her lips are almost touching mine.

“I dare you.” She provokes, and that pushes me into action. I shove the items off my desk and pull her so her ass is at the edge. I force her to lay back, shoving her skirt up, and drop to my knees. I rub my nose along her thong and can tell how wet she is.

“You’re my dirty girl, aren’t you? Your panties are soaked for me.” I turn my head, bite down on her inner thigh, and then kiss it to ease the slight pain. She groans and bucks her hips up. Turning my head, I do the same thing to her other thigh,

causing her to cry out. I rub my hands up her smooth legs to her knees, push her legs wider apart, and rip her thong off.

“Lincoln!” She cries out. I take one look at her pretty pussy and lick up her center.

“Oh my god!” I take her legs and wrap them around my shoulders. Putting one hand down on her abdomen to keep her firmly on my desk, licking between her folds, pulling her clit between my lips, and sucking.

“Oh fuck! Oh shit!” I bite down lightly on her clit and flick her with my tongue as she tries to raise her hips to rock, but I won’t let her.

“Lincoln!” She moans in frustration.

I insert one finger, hooking it to find her sweet spot. Her hands come up to my head, and she holds me to her pussy as she tries to rock against my tongue. I insert another finger and pump them as I scrape my teeth along her. I pull her between my lips and assault her with my tongue until she’s screaming my name and coming all over my tongue. I slowly remove my fingers from her and lean back as she tries to catch her breath.

I surge to my feet and unzip my pants. I pull my cock out, wrapping my fingers coated with her wetness around me. I start stroking and moaning, wishing it was her engulfing me, not my hand.

My eyes are still on her swollen pussy lips as I rub my palm up and down my length. Ansley slowly comes down from the high she was riding and sits up, her eyes widening when she sees my cock in my hand. She wraps her legs around my waist and pulls me to her, forcing my hand away.

“Take what you want, Lincoln.” She taunts me as her arm wraps around my waist and pulls me closer. I line myself up with her and thrust into her, throwing my head back as my arms come around her to hold her close.

“Fuck, Ansley!” I did not plan on it going this far. I didn’t plan on this at all, but now here we are. She’s come on my tongue, and now she’s riding my dick. I grit my teeth, forcing my orgasm away because I want to see her come again.

“Come on, Ansley. Give me one more.” I groan in her ear, kissing her along her jaw. She moans and shakes her head.

“I can’t.” I huff, wrapping my arms around her waist and laying her back, so I’m pounding into her. I massage her clit with my thumb as I continue to thrust. Before too long, she’s clawing at my arms as she comes unglued.

“Don’t stop. Keep doing that.” I keep the same pace and movement, and then she arches her back and wraps her legs tighter around my waist as her pussy begins pulsing on my cock. I have to bite down on my lip to keep myself from coming. Once she’s done, I lean forward, run my lips up her throat, and slam into her. One. Two. Three times. Before pulling out and coming all over her black blouse.

“Ansley! Fuck!” I jack myself until my orgasm subsides, my eyes catch hers, and reality hits. I fucked my best friend’s sister and my employee. She notices the panic in my eyes and begins to shut down immediately. She pushes me back and scrambles off my desk, glancing down at her ruined blouse. She pulls her skirt down her hips and looks around for her ruined pair of panties.

“Ansley,” I whisper, and she turns on me.

“Don’t!” She says with a sob, and my heart breaks. I can’t believe I did this. “It was a mistake. I know.”

I tuck myself back into my trousers and stand up.

“It wasn’t a mistake. You aren’t a mistake.” I proclaim. She turns her attention to me, giving up looking for her panties.

“I am Lincoln. I’m always the mistake. When are you going to realize that?” Her eyes are brimming with tears as she turns around and storms out of my office. I want to run after her and tell her how much she means to me. She means more to me than she should.

I have fantasized about doing that with her far more than I care to admit, and it never ended like that. Running my hands through my hair, I spot her panties on the fake plant in the corner of my office. I grab them, lifting them to my nose and

inhaling. I pocket them and shake my head. What am I going to do? How am I going to fix this?

CHAPTER THREE

ANSLEY

WHAT THE hell did I do? I run to my office to grab my purse and then hightail it to the elevator. Lincoln won't let that go. He'll try to fix it like he tries to fix everything. I push the button to the elevator and glance toward Lincoln's office. I'm surprised he hasn't come looking for me yet. I press the button again and wipe my hands on my skirt. Five minutes ago, this skirt was around my waist, and he was buried inside me.

"Oh god!" I whisper. Nothing will ever be the same again. If it was awkward after the non-kiss we had seven years ago; it's going to be uncomfortable after this. What the hell is taking the elevator so long? Just as I turn toward the staircase, the elevator doors open. I see movement out of the corner of my eye. *Lincoln*. I rush into the elevator, press the button for the ground floor, and continuously push the close door buttons.

"Ansley!" I push the close button again.

"Close! Dammit!" The doors close just as he stops in front of me, regret evident on his face. I let out a sigh of relief and lean against the wall. I have got to take control of my life. I keep living in the past while everyone else is moving forward.

Caroline found Bass, Liv is going to therapy, and Dylan has decided to move to Atlanta and chase his dream of being a film producer. He keeps trying to talk me into going with him

and being a costume designer. I might take him up on that after what happened tonight.

When the elevator makes it to the ground floor, and the doors open, I sigh in relief. I'm ready to go home, shower, drink a bottle of wine and pass out. I stop when I come face to face with Lincoln, and my mouth pops open. What the hell?

"How the hell did you get down here so fast?" I start walking to my car, and he starts walking beside me.

"The stairs." He says simply, and I want to punch him. He got down here before me, and he's not even breathing heavily. I work out, but even I'd be a little out of breath. I smile at the sight of the Corvette. Dylan handed me the keys to the car a few days after the funeral.

He stated he never wanted the thing, to begin with and felt it should have always gone to me. His denial had been so deep, and the rude awakening finally made him see how imperfect our parents were. When we make it to my car, I turn and glare at Lincoln.

"What do you want, Lincoln?" I demand.

"I want to talk about what happened." He states. I put my hand on my hip and cock my head.

"We had sex. What is there to talk about?" I shrug, and he narrows his eyes.

"Ansley." He warns. I'd smirk at his discomfort any other time, but I'm not in the mood right now.

"What, Lincoln? We had a moment of weakness. It won't happen again." I promise him and open my door. He steps toward me, causing me to back up into my door.

"Let it go." I'm two seconds from losing my shit, and I think he sees it. He steps away and sighs.

"I'll see you tomorrow." He promises, and I nod without responding. I scramble into my car and speed away. I'm tempted to call Liv and Caroline to see if they're still at the Mexican restaurant, but I need to shower. Lincoln's smell is all

over me, and I need it off before I go crazy. And I can't go there with a cum stained shirt.

Walking up to my apartment door, I see the paper taped to the door. Groaning, I pull it off and swallow; I have three days. I can't catch a fucking break. I was always so responsible when it came to money because I knew there wouldn't be anyone to bail me out.

Then I had a moment of weakness, wanting something quickly and easily. Before I knew it, all my savings were gone, my credit cards had been maxed out, and my identity had been stolen.

I unlock the door and walk in, leaning against the door as I exhale. What am I going to do? Dylan keeps telling me to come live with him, but I can't. I can't live in that house for another day of my life. All of the memories bombard me. Even Lincoln sold his parent's house and bought another place across town.



Ansley: Five

Lincoln: Eleven

“Get out of my house!” Ms. Holloway seethes at me, and I stare at her wide-eyed. I look up at mama, not understanding, but she scowls at me, and I don't know why. I didn't do anything.

“Go on home, Ansley.” My mouth pops open, and my chin begins to tremble. Daddy and Dylan aren't home.

“I'll be home by myself,” I whisper. Mama gives Ms. Holloway an apologetic look and ushers me outside.

“Go home right now, Ansley! Stop being such a baby.” I don't understand why she's acting like this. I used to follow her

around everywhere, and she'd let me. Now she doesn't want me to be anywhere near her.

"Why don't you like me anymore?" I whisper. Mama doesn't respond; instead, she swats my butt.

"Don't be ridiculous. Go home. I'll be there soon." She walks back inside, and I stare at her. Glancing back at our house, I don't want to be alone in that big house. All I can see is Ivy face down in the water. I slowly walk down the steps toward my house but stop at the sight of Lincoln walking toward me.

"Want to climb up the terrace with me?" Lincoln asks. I look over my shoulder and back to him, nodding as I follow him around the side of the house. He shows me the terrace.

"You put your feet and hands in the holes and climb it like a ladder. You go first, and I'll be behind you to make sure you don't fall." I glance back and forth between him and the terrace and decide to do what he says. I climb up and crawl onto the roof. He comes up right behind me, and we sit together against the house, not talking.

"I miss Ivy," I confess, and he sighs.

"Me too." He replies. I pull my knees into my chest and rest my chin on them.

"I think your mom hates me," I whisper, and he wraps his arm around me, pulling me into his side.

"She hates me too." He whispers back, and a tear treks down my cheek.

"You can come over here anytime you need to, Ans. I'll always open my window for you. Or sit out on the roof with you." Lincoln murmurs, and I wipe away my tears.

"Lincoln!" Ms. Holloway yells. He jumps up and glances down at me.

"I'll be right back." Before I can respond, he climbs into his room, and I hear him arguing with his mom. I crawl to the window and glance in just in time to see her slap him across his face.

“It’s your fault!” She screams in his face. She storms out of his room and slams the door. As he returns to the roof, I scramble back to where I was sitting. He sits next to me without saying a word. I wrap my arm through his and lean my head on his shoulder.

“I’ll always be here, Linc,” I tell him.



I KICK MY heels off and walk to the bathroom turning on the shower to warm it up, shaking off the memories.

All of this is my fault. I wouldn’t be where I’m at if I didn’t believe in something too good to be true. I thought I was investing in a company that would help me break into the fashion industry. I got three months behind on rent, and the landlord has had enough of my promises. I have been trying, but I’ve been living paycheck to paycheck.

I should have just sold my Corvette. I couldn’t bring myself to do it, though. Now another unwise decision has brought me here.

If it weren’t for Lincoln, I’d be on the street. He gave me a job when I was desperate. He even pays for my Friday nights out with Liv and now Caroline. He’s offered to provide me with a raise on multiple occasions to help me more, but I refuse.

I don’t want a special favor just because he knows me. I don’t have a college education, but he argues I’ve had on-the-job experience that equals a college education. I don’t want him to do it for me if he wouldn’t do it for everyone.

He made me the lead of my team earlier this year, bringing me from making forty-five thousand a year to forty-nine. One of the downfalls of living in a small rural town in Mississippi

is that the pay sucks. Sometimes I wonder why Lincoln doesn't move his company to a bigger city so he could make a lot more money.

I step into the shower and let the water wash away the remnants of Lincoln from my skin. After my shower, I dry my hair and do my skin routine while trying to figure out what to do. I pick my phone up and find Dylan's number.

"Hey, Ans!" I swallow and sit down on my bed.

"Hey! What are you doing?" I ask him.

"I'm packing. I sold the house." He says excitedly. I fall back on the bed and stare up at the ceiling. There goes that plan. Tears prick my eyelids, but I blink them away.

"That's great, Dylan! Do you need help with anything?" I ask even though I won't help with anything. He huffs.

"No. If you need some furniture, let me know. I can't take all of this to Atlanta with me." He leaves this weekend, but I was hoping I could stay at the house until I could figure something out. That's not happening now.

"Have you thought about coming?" I lay there thinking about it before answering.

"Yeah." I have to do something, change something.

"When you get there, find out if there's anything available. I can send them photos of what I've made." I tell him.

"Absolutely! My apartment has two rooms. You can even stay with me." He says excitedly. The last thing I want to do is live with Dylan, but this isn't a forever thing. It's a plan for now. Something that can help me get through this rough patch.

"Yeah. I could do that." As always, Dylan doesn't hear the hesitancy in my voice. He only hears and sees what he wants.

"Okay! I'll take some furniture to put in the other room." I shake my head but don't say anything.

"You could move in with me and search for a job while here. We can figure the logistics out later, or I can cover us both until you find out. Whatever works best." Of course, he

could cover for both of us. He still has his inheritance, but I don't say anything. Dylan tried to give me half, but I refused it. Now, I wish I hadn't.

"I can't do that to Lincoln. This app is about to launch. I'll come down after that. Okay?" I hear him sigh.

"Yeah. I understand. Well, I need to go. I have to finish so everything is ready when the moving company arrives tomorrow." We say our goodbyes, and I hang up. What am I going to do?

THE NEXT FEW days, I ignore Lincoln and wonder how long it will take him to take things into his own hands. I walk into the break room, put a k-cup in the Keurig, and pull up the dating app I downloaded a while ago to do research for the app we're about to launch.

A few weeks ago, I got a match from a guy named Cole. We chatted a few times and even face-timed last weekend. I pull up his profile and stare at it while my coffee brews, wondering if it'll come across as desperate if I ask to move in with him. I'm about to exit the app when a hand reaches in front of me and grabs my phone.

"What the hell?" I turn toward the person and scowl when I see Lincoln. He's staring at the screen and then glances up at me.

"Who the fuck is this?" He snarls. I snatch my phone away from him and slide it into my bra. His eyes follow my hand and stay glued to my chest for three heartbeats. I turn toward the Keurig and put some creamer and sugar in my coffee, ignoring the frantic beats of my heart.

"None of your damn business!" He crowds me, pressing against my side, and it takes all my strength not to lean into him.

"Two days ago, when my cock was buried inside you, made it my business, and I bet if I slip my hand into your panties right now, you'd be drenched for me." He says in a

low voice, and I have to control myself from reacting to his words. I grab my coffee and begin walking out of the break room, turning back toward him at the last second.

“You’re wrong; it would be for him,” I smirk when his jaw tenses, and he looks two seconds from taking me over his knee. But he can’t do much about it unless he wants to make a scene, and there’s no way in hell he’s going to make a scene.

I try my best to stay in my office for the rest of the day. The one time I ventured out to chat with Liv and Caroline, he found us in the break room, and I ignored him again. I still wonder how long he’s going to let me do that. He answers that question when he comes into my office that afternoon. Before I can greet him, Caroline texts me, and I assure her I’m okay, even though I’m not.

“What do you want, Lincoln?” He closes the door and stares at me.

“Dylan said he sold the house.” I refuse to look at him; instead, I stare at my computer screen.

“Yep, he did,” I state, hoping he’ll leave. I still have no idea what I’m going to do. At least tomorrow night, we’re staying at Liv’s house. I spoke to the landlord, and he said he’d give me until Sunday instead of tomorrow at midnight. That gives me one more day to figure out where to go.

“Ansley. Please talk to me.” I glance up at him.

“What do you want me to say? You regret the other night, so I’m giving you your space.”

He walks around my desk and leans against it crossing his legs as he stares at me.

“I don’t regret it. And you seem to be moving on pretty quick anyway.”

Leaning back in my chair, I glance at him and ignore his comment. He looks so good in his black button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up, showing his forearms, and his gray dress pants.

It's Friday, so he's dressed casually. Well, casual, according to him. I don't have a lot of room to talk. I wear a faux leather camel-colored skirt with a white top and leopard print heels.

"Come here." He crooks his finger and uncrosses his legs. I stand from my chair, feeling my heartbeat wildly in my chest, and step between his legs. I'm not sure why I'm following his instructions so easily other than I'm emotionally exhausted and need something.

He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me close. I can't help myself. I allow him to pull me in, and I wrap my arms around his shoulders. I'm not short by any means, but even with heels on, he's still taller than me.

"You're not being a brat for once." He whispers as his nose nuzzles into my hair. I snort and run my fingers through his hair.

"You're not pushing me away for once," I reply, and his hands splay across my ass, and he rocks his hard cock against me. I swallow, wondering where this is going. He slips his hands inside the waistband of my skirt and starts to move them lower.

"I can feel your heat, sweetheart." He whispers, and I swallow, trying to control my breathing.

"You're not going out for girl's night?" He questions as he brings his lips to my throat and runs them along my skin to my ear, where he nips at it. Goosebumps break out along my spine, and I shiver. When his hands stop moving, I try to move closer to him. Remembering he asked a question, I try to focus.

"No. Caroline and Bass have a date tonight, and I have to pack." He stills and leans back.

"What?" He asks. I lean back, my arms still around his shoulders, to look at him.

"We're going to hang out tomorrow night instead," I explain. He removes his hands from my skirt, takes ahold of my forearms, and pushes me back to look at me.

“You said you have to pack. What do you have to pack for?” I swallow and realize where I slipped up.

“I... uh...” I pull my arms out of his grasp and pace, running my hands through my hair. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I got evicted. I have to be out by Sunday,” I finally admit. He runs his hands through his hair and stares at me in shock.

“What the hell Ansley? Why didn’t you tell me?” He proclaims. I shrug, not knowing what else to do.

“You’ll come to stay at my place.” He demands, and I gape at him as he stalks toward me and wraps his hand around my throat, pushing me into the wall.

“Like hell I will.” I balk. His hand moves from my throat to my neck and slips into my hair, gripping it and pulling it, causing a chain reaction in my body.

“Don’t test me. You will stay with me.” I lift my chin and glare at him.

“I’ll figure it out,” I exclaim. He tightens his hand around my neck, and I rub my thighs together. He stills when he notices. He leans his forehead against mine.

“What are you doing to me?” He mutters as his nose runs along my jaw. I moan as he takes my earlobe between his teeth.

“Nothing... I don’t know....” I whisper. He pauses and turns his gaze to mine. Before I can think, he’s yanking my skirt up with his other hand and ripping another pair of panties off me.

“I am going to fuck you.” He growls as his fingers glide through my folds, and I bite back a groan.

“I’m going to own this pussy like no one before me or after me ever will.” I hear his zipper, and then he’s lifting me, and as if of their own accord, my legs wrap around his waist, and he lines himself up.

“Oh god!” My head falls back against the wall.

“So fucking wet.” His forehead falls against mine as our breaths mingle, his cock teasing me.

“So fucking wrong. Tell me no, Ansley.” He demands. I shake my head.

“Yes!” I gasp out.

“Always such a brat.” He grinds out and slams into me. I claw at his shoulders as he rocks his hips hitting my clit and g-spot simultaneously.

“Hold on to me.” He orders, and I cling to him as he turns and sits me down on my desk. I lean back as he begins to thrust into me at almost a leisurely pace.

“Unbutton your blouse.” He instructs, and I fumble with the buttons as he rocks into me. How is it this good?

He yanks my bra and leans down, latching his mouth onto my nipple. He begins to rub my clit with the thumb of his other hand, and he glances down at where our bodies are connected. After a few strokes, he looks back at me with a smirk.

“You look so good with your skirt around your waist and my cock inside you.” The build-up is so good. I’m about to come, but he stops and pinches my thigh. My eyes pop open at the added sensation I wasn’t expecting. I didn’t even realize they were closed.

“What the hell, Lincoln?” I try to grind against him, but he holds me still.

“I’ll let you come when you agree to stay with me.” He reveals, and my mouth falls open in shock. He rocks against me, and waves of pleasure skirt up my spine.

“You’re bribing me?” I ask, appalled. His middle finger lightly touches my clit, and I moan as shock waves go up my spine. I rock against him for more, but he won’t let me.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure you’re safe.” He grinds out. His jaw is tense, and sweat trickles down his face slowly. I tighten my walls around him, and he throws his head back.

“Fuck!” He whispers. At least I’m not the only one affected here. He grinds into me but stops himself when I whine. I need to come. Now.

“Fine! I’ll stay with you.” I practically scream, and then he’s leaning over me, his lips almost touching mine. Will he kiss me?

“Promise me.” He demands, and I glare at him.

“I promise.” I lean up, so our lips touch, but he pulls back slightly. I ignore the disappointment that tries to rise in my chest.

“Now fucking let me come.” I grind out, and he stands and begins to thrust into me. He brings his middle finger up again to rub against my clit, but then he’s stroking it through my folds and allowing me to suck it in along with his cock.

My eyes widen at the sensation, and then he’s rubbing my clit with his pinky finger, and within seconds, I’m coming. I whisper his name over and over again as he prolongs my orgasm. He pulls out of me and grabs my hand, lifting me off the desk.

“On your knees, sweetheart.” My heart jumps into my throat as he pushes me to my knees.

I kneel and glance up at him through my eyelashes. He tilts his chin, his way of telling me to take him. I engulf his length with my hand, rubbing it up and down a few times before wrapping my lips around his tip and tasting myself on him. I hum, and he groans, never letting his eyes leave mine. He wraps my hair in his fist and guides me down his entire length.

“Keep your eyes on me.” He demands as he begins to thrust. My eyes water, but I don’t tell him to stop. I want this, I want him, and I want to feel him come undone. When he hits the back of my throat, I swallow, and he moans.

“Fuck! Ansley. I love seeing you on your knees, taking my cock like a good girl.” My heart stutters at his praise, and I hollow my cheeks, sucking him harder.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Keep doing that.” I want to close my eyes but keep them trained on him as he thrusts. His hand

comes up to cup my jaw as he moves, and how he looks at me almost brings tears to my eyes.

“Holy shit! Fuck!” He breaks eye contact and throws his head back for a second before looking back at me.

“I’m going to come.” He warns, and I nod, letting him know it’s okay. He hits the back of my throat and groans. I swallow him down until he’s done, and then he pulls out of my mouth and sits down on my chair.

He lifts me and pulls me into his lap, holding me close. He runs his fingers through my hair.

“You’ll stay with me?” He inquires again, and I nod as his lips find my jaw. I wonder if he’ll ever actually kiss me.

“Yes. I’ll stay with you.” He exhales and wraps his arms around me even tighter.

“And you won’t see that guy?” He throws in, and I huff.

“I didn’t agree to that,” I tell him as I lean my head on his shoulder. He rubs his palm up and down my back.

“We’ll see.” He murmurs, and I don’t respond. What are we doing? This is going to break my heart, but I can’t seem to stop.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANSLEY

LINCOLN RENTED a truck. He showed up at my apartment with a huge UHaul, and the stuff I have won't even fill half of it. I don't have a lot; when I had fallen prey to the scam, I sold many of my things to help get me some money back—everything except the Corvette. As stupid as it sounds to be emotionally attached to a car, I am to that one. I know what I will have to do, but I put it out of my mind for now.

When everything happened, I just started going to fashion school but had to drop out and find a job. One night, I showed up at Lincoln's house and confessed to him what happened, so he gave me a job and helped as much as I'd let him.

Unfortunately, I waited until things were almost irreparable. We've been working over the past two years trying to fix everything. Over the years, Lincoln became the person I leaned on even more so than my brother, but usually, it's because he doesn't give me a choice. Like living with him.

"Lincoln, I don't know why you got this huge truck. We don't need it." He shrugs as he grabs a box and begins walking outside. I follow along with a box of my own.

"It was the only one they had." He says. "And you had more stuff than this when we moved you here." Sighing, I lean against the truck while he loads the boxes.

“Yeah, well, I sold just about everything except my sewing machine and clothes. Thank goodness I know how to make my clothes, or I’d be walking around naked.” I joke, and he turns, looking me up and down.

“I wouldn’t complain about that.” He states, and I gawk at him. My neck heats, but I ignore it.

“You would. No one else would be allowed to look because you’d go crazy.” I accuse him. He chuckles as he hops down from the truck, leans back next to me, and crosses his arms over his chest.

“You’re probably right.” He admits, and I snort, turning to stare at him.

“Of course I’m right,” I tell him as I check him out discreetly. He’s wearing gray basketball shorts, a tight-fitting black shirt, and white tennis shoes. It’s not fair that he looks good in a suit and workout clothes.

I, on the other hand, feel like something the cat dragged in. My red hair is piled on top of my head, and I have cut-off shorts and a tank top on. He takes his index finger and rubs it from my shoulder to my wrist, catching it and pulling me in front of him.

“We have to set some ground rules, Lincoln.” He lets me go and crosses his arms over his chest again.

“What kind of ground rules?” He questions. I huff and begin pacing in front of him.

“No more sex.” I stop in front of him, put my hands on my hips, and he arches an eyebrow at me. I lift my hands and shrug my shoulders.

“This went from zero to sixty real quick,” I declare, and he tilts his head.

“You know that’s not true.” He lifts his hand like he’s going to pull me toward him again, but I dodge him.

“I’m serious, Lincoln.” He pulls his hand back and stares at me for several beats of my heart.

“Are you going to date that other guy?” I stare at him in confusion before realizing what he’s referring to.

“Maybe. That’s my business.” He shakes his head and pushes away from the truck, walking back toward the apartment.

“Fine. Maybe I’ll download the app too. I need to do some research.” Staring at his back as he walks away, I grit my teeth. He’s just saying that to piss me off. And it’s working. Asshole.

I SENT A message to Cole, and now I have a date with him next weekend. Lincoln saw me texting and grabbed my phone, seeing I had a date. He was so pissed. It serves him right for being so nosy.

I stare up at the ceiling in Liv’s living room. Liv is in her bedroom, and Caroline is in the guest bedroom. She offered to take the couch, but I insisted it would be okay. Guilt rises within me for not being honest with them about what’s going on in my life.

These two are my ride-or-die. They have become my family, and I will do anything for them. Caroline recently started dating the owner of the gym we all go to, which is a big deal for her. She got out of a horrible marriage with a narcissist that emotionally and mentally abused her for years. Bass treats her like a queen, and I’m so happy for her and maybe a little jealous.

I’m pretty sure Liv knows something is going on, but it’s not like her to push. But she has her way of letting us know she’s there for us. She won’t talk about whatever she’s been through, so she won’t force others to talk, either. Liv has her silent demons. I only know that it has something to do with her stepfather.

Maybe one day she’ll want to talk about it, but even if she never does, I’ll always be here for her when she feels like she’s going to break.

The day I found her in the bathroom at work crying wrecked me. I hate seeing other people hurt because I hurt quietly for so long. I still do, I guess. The only person who knows all the shit I've been through and had to deal with growing up is Lincoln. I roll over onto my side and punch my pillow.

“Ansley?” My head snaps up at Liv’s whisper, and I find her silhouette in the dark. Sitting up, I motion for her to sit down.

“Yeah.” I reply. She walks over, sits next to me, and pulls her feet under her.

“I wanted to check on you and make sure you’re okay.” I swallow and glance down at my hands.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” I tell her, but even I hear the lie in my voice. It’s easier to admit and talk about things when the world is quiet and dark. “I have to move in with Lincoln,” I admit, and she gasps.

“What? Why?” She questions and I’m tempted to tell her the truth, but I pride myself on looking put-together on the outside. I don’t want people to know I’m falling apart on the inside. My parents taught me well, after all.

“There’s been a pest problem, so they’re fumigating it. It’ll only be for a little while.” I lie. She sighs and leans back against the couch.

“You could have stayed here.” She offers. I turn and smile at her even though she can’t see it.

“I know. You know how Lincoln is. He wants to fix everything.” She doesn’t respond right away. After a few seconds, she clears her throat.

“Caroline was right; he really cares about you.” I bite the inside of my cheek. He cares about me but not enough to kiss me and not enough to tell my brother to fuck off with his promises. I want someone who is going to love me loud and proud as Bass does for Caroline.

“He’s practically my brother. He kind of has to.” I tell her.

“He doesn’t look at you like you’re his sister.” She replies, and I turn my body toward her.

“What do you mean?” I question, and she turns toward me too.

“He watches you constantly. And not like a brother watches his sister. More like a predator watches his prey. Like he’s ready to pounce at any moment.” I swallow and pull my legs up to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. She has no idea what that does to my heart. When I’m about to respond, she interrupts me.

“Don’t say you only see him as a brother because you don’t.” I snort at her confidence.

“You don’t have to tell me anything. I’m not here to grill you, but I want you to know we’re here for you. Caroline and I love you. You can talk to us if you need to or even if you don’t want to talk if you need to scream or cry. You don’t have to be alone.” My eyes prick with unshed tears, and I climb across the couch and wrap my arms around her. She returns my embrace.

“I love you too, Liv. You have no idea how grateful I am for your friendship and Caroline’s. We’re like the three musketeers.” She chuckles as we break apart. I hear shuffling behind me and turn to see Caroline standing near the end of the couch.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. I came in for some water. I drank too much of that giggle juice you made, Liv. I can go back to bed, though.” I grunt and reach my hand out to her.

“Don’t you dare! Come over here.” I command, and she climbs on the couch Liv at one side and Caroline at the other. Their presence comforts me.

“I’ll talk about everything eventually. I’m just... I’m not ready. It’s a lot; honestly, I haven’t dealt with it as I should.” I take a deep breath and exhale.

“Rose keeps telling me she’ll refer me to one of her colleagues, but the thought of speaking everything out loud

scares me. That probably makes me a hypocrite.” Liv grabs my hand, and Caroline runs her fingers through my hair.

“It doesn’t make you a hypocrite, Ans,” Caroline says. “Everyone deals with their traumas differently. Maybe you haven’t reached your tipping point yet.” I lay my head back on the couch and stare at the ceiling.

“Are you really going on a date with that guy Cole?” Caroline asks, and I chuckle.

“Yeah. If only to piss Lincoln off.” I tell them. Caroline and Liv laugh.

“You two have a weird relationship,” Caroline replies, and I pat her on the leg.

“I know. Trust me.” We all go quiet, and we’re drifting off before too long.

DYLAN CALLED AND said many positions are open for costume designers. He sent me several links and said he’d put in a good word for me. He thinks I’ll love Atlanta.

Well, except for the traffic, but according to him, there’s always something to do. It would be fun living in a big city where you can disappear and not a small town where everyone looks at you in sympathy because you lost your parents when you were eighteen.

Things are awkward between Lincoln and me. I’m living in his home, but we barely speak. We skirt around each other at work and his house. In the mornings, when we’re getting ready for work, we try to avoid each other as much as possible.

He asked if I wanted to carpool with him on Monday, but I refused because I didn’t want anyone to know I was living with the boss. The only people who know I have any relationship with Lincoln are Liv and Caroline. I plan on keeping it that way.

My date with Cole is tomorrow night. Caroline and Liv said they'd come to the restaurant and sit at the bar to see if I needed to be rescued. I most definitely will need to be saved.

The only reason I'm going is to get under Lincoln's skin anyway. I wonder what it will be like my first weekend at Lincoln's. But as I walk to my car, he calls out. I wait for him to catch up to me in the parking garage.

"I wanted to let you know I'll be home late tonight." I nod slowly, wanting to ask him why but refusing.

"Okay. I'm probably going to go to sleep early anyway." I tell him, and he tilts his head at me.

"You don't have girl's night tonight?" I think for a second and then shrug.

"I honestly forgot about it, and I think Caroline and Liv did too. It's been a crazy week, and Caroline is going through a life crisis right now." He arches an eyebrow at me.

"Another one?" He quips, and I scowl at him.

"Don't be an asshole." He smirks and shrugs.

"You know that's hard for me." I snort and nod.

"Yes. I do know that." I turn toward my car and begin walking. "I'll see you when you get home if I'm still awake."

"Yeah. Okay." He mutters. I open my car door and glance back at him. He's still standing where I left him, watching me with a scowl. I lift my hand and wave, and he returns it as I climb in the Corvette and drive away.

Did he want me to ask questions? I shrug. He will have to tell me if he wants me to know something. I don't play that game. But then my mind begins to run away with me. What if he did download that app? What if he's going out with someone else tonight? What if he sleeps with her? What if he kisses her?

I groan and turn the radio up, trying to drown out my thoughts. He can do whatever the hell he wants. He's a grown man, and he's not mine. He'll never be mine.

CHAPTER FIVE

LINCOLN

I SIT in my home office and try to ignore that Ansley is getting ready to go on a date that isn't with me. I want to march in there and demand she stay home with me. Or better yet, let me take her out. I tried to make her jealous last night, and of course, it didn't work. Shaking my head at myself, I should have known better.

She's getting ready in the guest bedroom down the hall from my room. I tried to offer her the pool house in hopes she'd stay here for as long as she wanted, maybe forever. Still, she said this was a temporary situation, and I hate that as much as I hate her going on this date. She pokes her head in my door.

"I'm headed out. Don't wait up." She winks at me, and I nod, gritting my teeth. When I hear the engine of the Corvette, I walk to the living room and glance out the window, watching as she drives away. I put my hands in my pockets and lean against the wall.

What if this guy is a jerk or a serial killer? Before I can talk myself out of it, I walk to my room and change out of my jeans into slacks and a button-up shirt.

I'll go to the restaurant and sit at the bar to watch and ensure she's safe; if she gets pissed, oh well, everyone has to

eat. I grab my wallet and my keys and walk out the door. I climb into my Audi and pull out of the driveway.

She did tell me what restaurant they were going to, but even if she hadn't, I'd look up her location on my phone. I'm bordering on controlling and stalkerish, but I can't seem to help myself when it comes to her.

Ansley and I have shared a special bond since that day at the lake. For years I only looked at her as a sister. I always thought it was cute when she was little, and she'd tell me she'd marry me one day. Then I went away to college, hating it because I knew the hell she had to deal with from her parents. I made her promise to call or text me if she couldn't handle it anymore.

On her sixteenth birthday, I knew her parents wouldn't do anything special for her, so I convinced Dylan to come home and we'd do something special for her. I'm not sure what happened between summer break and her birthday, but she hit a growth spurt, and I wasn't expecting her to look so grown.

I felt like a perv checking out my best friend's sixteen-year-old sister, especially since I was twenty-two. After that, I kept my distance. I stopped calling her, but I always answered the phone when she called.

But eventually, she noticed and stopped calling me too. It killed me. I hated not talking to her regularly, but I knew it was for the best. Then Dylan and I returned to town after graduating to start apartment hunting, and our parent's accident happened.

That night she climbed into my window. It took all my strength not to take her then and there, especially when she teased me about spanking her. After that, we stayed distant until she came to me and told me she had gotten into financial trouble. So, I gave her a job and helped her get back on her feet after her identity was stolen.

Well, as much as she'd let me. She only accepted my help because she refused to tell Dylan and had no idea what she was doing. She needed someone with more life experience

than her to walk her through it. Unfortunately, she waited until it was dire, and now she's living paycheck to paycheck.

Or, at least, that's what I thought. Apparently, it was even worse because she was so far behind on her rent that she got evicted.

I tried to convince her to move in with me and continue attending fashion school, but she refused. She never stopped making her clothes, though. I'm sure the majority of the clothes in her closet she made. She's talented and deserves to be doing something she's passionate about. Not stuck in my office doing something she's good at but not passionate about.

When I arrive at the restaurant, I find her Corvette and park next to it. I walk into the restaurant and glance around, looking for her and noticing her red hair immediately. She's facing the bar; she will be pissed when she sees me. I grab a menu from the hostess and head to the bar. I glance up and see Caroline and Liv. Well, this is going to be fun.

They haven't noticed me yet, so I take the corner seat next to the wall and lean against it, perusing the menu and keeping my eyes on Ansley. No one has noticed me yet, but it's just a matter of time.

I order an Old Fashioned from the bartender and continue to glance between the menu, Ansley, Liv, and Caroline. After about five minutes, Liv and Caroline get up from the bar and make their way toward the door.

"I can't believe she told us to leave. That guy seems like a creep." Caroline says. Scowling, I glance back toward Ansley's table. She's moved her chair so it's closer to the guy, and she's touching his forearm. I have to force myself not to make a scene. I order an appetizer and keep my eyes focused on them. Ansley keeps getting closer and closer to the guy, and it's taking all I have not to go over there and drag her outside.

The bartender hands me my second drink, and Ansley stands. I sit up and watch as she walks toward the hall with the bathroom. I motion to the bartender and tell him I'll be right back. I follow her down the hallway, keeping my distance, and watch as she walks into the single bathroom. When she walks

into the bathroom, I stop the door from closing and push it open.

She turns, and her eyes widen at the sight of me. I close the door and lock it.

“What the hell, Lincoln?” I stalk toward her, wrap my hand around her throat and lift her chin, pinning her against the wall. She stares up at me.

“I knew you were here.” She tells me, and I smirk.

“Were you hanging all over him to make me jealous?” I ask her, bringing my other hand up and playing with a lock of her hair. She tries to turn her head, but I won’t let her.

“Maybe.” She whispers, and I bring my lips to her jaw and run them up to her ear, pulling it between my lips and biting down.

“Mission accomplished,” I hiss and yank her head back further. She moans but doesn’t fight me. I bite down on her neck and suck.

“What would he say if you came back to the table with my mark on you?” She gasps as I suck harder.

“Oh god!” She moans, and I grin, leaning back to inspect my work. She looks so good with my mark on her neck. I run my hand down her body and to the hem of her dress.

She doesn’t try to stop me; instead, she spreads her legs, even more, making my already hard cock harder. It’s straining against my slacks. I want to release it and bury it deep inside her. Now that I’ve tasted her, I can’t get enough.

I pull her dress up, run my hand up her abdomen, and push my hand into her panties. I grip her pussy and thrust two fingers into her. Her head falls back into the wall at the sudden intrusion.

“This pussy is mine,” I growl as I pull my fingers out and thrust them back into her.

“Lincoln!” She whisper-yells.

“You need to be quiet, sweetheart or the whole restaurant will hear you.” I remind her.

“Now I want to hear you say it. Say this pussy is mine.” I demand. She tries to shake her head, but my other hand is still around her throat. I pull my fingers out and thrust them back into her harder. She rocks against my hand.

“You have to stop.” She whispers desperately. I mouth at her throat, thrusting my fingers into her again. “Fuck!” She pants.

“Why?” I ask her. She thrusts her hips against my fingers again, and I bring my thumb up to rub against her clit.

“I’m going to come.” She says too loud. She warns me, which makes me want to finger fuck her harder, so I do. She bites down on her lip and shakes her head. She’s going to be loud, so I remove my hand from around her throat and put it over her mouth.

“Make a mess, sweetheart. I want to feel you drench my hand. I want to taste you even after washing you off me.” I stop thrusting, though, and she moans in frustration.

“But not before you say this pussy is mine.” I remove my hand from her mouth and she grunts.

“This pussy is yours.” She admits and lifts her leg, wrapping it around my leg and pulling me closer as I begin thrusting my fingers into her again and covering her mouth.

She clutches at my shoulders, and then she’s coming undone. She moans against my hand, and everything in me wants to kiss her so I can feel that moan on my tongue. She pushes me away when she comes down from her high, causing my fingers to leave her.

She glares at me as she adjusts her dress, but I only smirk, bringing my fingers to my mouth and licking her juices off. Her mouth opens, and her tongue darts out to wet her lips.

“I can’t believe we just did that.” There’s a knock on the door, and she looks at it in panic.

“You should tell me what Cole says about my mark.” I tilt my head at her and arch an eyebrow to see how she will respond. Her mouth pops open as her fingers go to her neck like she remembers it’s there.

There’s another knock at the door. She takes a deep breath, runs her hands down her dress one more time, and opens the door only to come face to face with her date. I step up behind her, and his eyes dart between her and me.

“Never mind,” I tell her, and she glares at me over her shoulder.

“Ansley?” He questions, and she glances back at him. I step around Ansley and pat him on the shoulder, grabbing her hand.

“Sorry, man. She’s taken.” I pull her down the hallway, and she yanks her hand out of my grip.

“I am not taken!” She screeches, and I turn to look at her. She looks back at her date.

“I’m sorry, Cole. I have to go.” She points her thumb at me over her shoulder.

“He’ll take care of the check.” With that, she walks down the hallway with her head held high. I follow her as she walks to their table, grabs her purse, and exits the restaurant. Sighing, I put my hands in my pockets. I don’t give the guy another glance as I walk to the bar, pay my check, and then take care of their check. As I walk out to my car, I silently hope the Corvette is still there, but of course, it’s not.

I try to adjust myself discreetly when my phone begins ringing. I run my hands through my hair when I see it’s Dylan. What the hell am I doing?

“Hey, Dylan. What’s up?” I answer and hear the noise in the background slowly fade away.

“Hey, man. Have you talked to Ansley lately?” I bite my cheek and lean against the hood of my car. I’ve talked to her, had my fingers in her, and had my dick in her.

“Yeah. Yesterday at work.” I lie. He huffs.

“She’s not answering any of my calls. I sent her a text earlier and haven’t heard from her either.” I lean against my car.

“She mentioned she had a date,” I say and run my hands through my hair.

“Oh, alright. I wanted to give her some information.” I hear the noise again, and I squint my eyes.

“Where are you?” I ask.

“I walked to a restaurant close to the apartment to get some food. It’s a Saturday night, so it’s crazy busy.” He tells me. I push away from my car and walk to my door, climbing inside it.

“Be careful there. Crime rates are high in that city.” Dylan scoffs.

“Yeah, whatever. Just because you’re one day older doesn’t mean you have to act like it.” I roll my eyes at his predictable statement.

“Do you like your apartment?” I put my car in drive and pull out of the parking lot.

“Yeah. And it’s big enough for Ansley too.” I almost slam on my brakes at that comment.

“What do you mean?” I ask cautiously.

“I have to go. Ansley’s calling me back. I’ll call you later.” Before I can say anything, he’s hanging up, and I scowl, throwing my phone in the passenger seat. Is Ansley leaving? Or did he mean for her to come to visit? She’s only been at my house for a week, but I can’t help but worry about the thought of her moving out. Her moving to another state. Out of the question.

ANSLEY AVOIDS ME, and she does it well, considering we live and work together. She’s pissed about the bonus I gave her, Liv, and Caroline. When I tried to provide her with more

money before, she wouldn't accept it because she said she didn't want to be treated any differently. So, I gave it to all three of them, and they each deserved it. I'm not an easy man to work for, and they've worked hard on this app launch.

I've tried calling Dylan several times this week, but with his crazy job, he hasn't been able to talk much. We've been able to text a few times, but that's it. It's been a crazy week at work with the app launching, so it's kept my mind busy from wondering if Ansley is leaving. I've noticed she has yet to unpack any of her things except for some clothes she's hung up.

Thursday is complete chaos. Liv is trying to find a bug in the app. Ansley is recording some last-minute demos, and Caroline is sending out emails and staying on top of our social media platforms. The few times I've seen Ansley this week, I've teased her, asking if she would download the app. Usually, that's met with a scowl and her walking away, mumbling something about I'd show up on any dates. She's not wrong.

I'm helping an intern when I catch Ansley's eye across the office and smirk at her. She scowls and turns her back to me, talking to Caroline. I shake my head and turn my attention back to the intern.

"What?!?" I hear Caroline screech. My head jerks up as Ansley grabs her hand and pulls her toward her office. My eyes narrow as I watch them, but I can't focus on them for too long because my attention is drawn in many different directions.

I work late, and I'm surprised Ansley lingers longer than anyone else. Instead of seeking her out, I give her the space she's been desperate for this week. When she sticks her head in my door, I'm surprised.

"Hey. I'm leaving." She tells me. I glance up at her and lean back in my chair.

"Okay. I won't be much longer." I tell her, and she looks disappointed.

“What is it?” I ask her, and she steps further into my office. She’s wearing tight black slacks and a black blouse tucked into it with snake skin heels, and her hair is pulled up into a high ponytail. She’s fucking gorgeous.

“I wanted to cook you dinner so we could celebrate.” She admits, and I smile. I lean forward, shut my computer down, and turn my desk lamp off. I stand and walk to her.

“That sounds great.” She glances from my face back to my desk.

“Just like that.” She murmurs. I walk closer to her and wrap my hand around her neck, pulling her to me and holding her for a few seconds before pulling back and answering.

“Yeah. Just like that.” I rub my thumb over her bottom lip, imagining what it would feel like to kiss her.

“If you ever want anything from me, all you have to do is ask. I’ll give you the fucking moon, sweetheart.” She stares at me and swallows. She opens her mouth like she’s about to say something but closes it again. Sighing, she grabs my hand.

“Well, come on. I have champagne chilling and steak ready to be cooked.” I smirk and let her pull me to the elevator. I want to ask her about Dylan and Atlanta but decide to leave it alone. We’re having a moment, and I want to enjoy it.

CHAPTER SIX

ANSLEY

I LIED to Caroline and Liv. I told them I was going to Atlanta to escape my brother and Lincoln. Well, I said half a lie. I am going to get away from Lincoln. I applied to all of the places Dylan told me about and got an offer.

I'll be working on a television show and helping with the costumes. Of course, I'll start toward the bottom, but Anita, the woman who interviewed me, loved the pieces I showed her. The pay is fantastic. I'll be making almost double what I'm making with Lincoln.

If I had any idea that costume designers could make so much, I would have done this sooner. I finally decide to talk to my brother and tell him about my financial problems.

“Ans! Why didn't you tell me?” He asks as I look through the emails bombarding my inbox about the Corvette.

“I don't know, Dylan. I was disappointed in myself for letting it happen. I was embarrassed too.” I explain as I scan another email.

“But you went to Lincoln.” He states. “Why is that?” He questions, and I sigh, closing my laptop.

“I don't know how to answer that, Dylan. He's always....” I trail off.

“I know. I feel like such a fuck up sometimes. I wasn’t there that day, and then I didn’t notice how mom and dad treated you for years. And now this.” He exhales in defeat.

“Well, I have a secret to tell you if it’ll make you feel better,” I change the subject.

“What’s that?” He asks. I inhale, not wanting to say this out loud.

“I’m going to sell the Corvette to help me move to Atlanta. I need your help, and I need you to promise not to tell Lincoln.” I announce, and I’m met with complete silence. “Dyl?”

“You love that car.” He says, and I swallow back the lump in my throat.

“It’s the only way I can make this happen. My credit is shit, and since I got evicted, the apartment complex is making me pay the first and last month’s rent plus a ridiculous deposit. And as much as I love you, I don’t want to live with you. I need my space.” I confess.

“What if we put the apartment in my name? Can we do that?” He asks, and I think about it for a second.

“Like, put the apartment in your name or cosign?” I question.

“Whichever works out to your benefit. Call and find out. I’m not letting you sell that car Ans.” He tells me, and a tear slips down my face. I wipe it away quickly.

“Thanks, Dylan. I’ll let you know.” I whisper.

“You know we have to talk about what happened eventually.” He murmurs, and I bite the inside of my lip. He’s right but today is not that day.

“I know.” It’s all I can say for now. He doesn’t push, and I’m grateful. We say our goodbyes, and I hang up. I call the apartment complex immediately to see what they say, and they agree that he can cosign.

Relief washes over me. I tell them my brother lives in Atlanta and can come by there to fill everything out, and I’ll

sign everything once I arrive.

Now, I'll need the first month's rent and the deposit to turn my power on. I call Dylan back to give him that information, but he doesn't answer. Shaking my head, I shoot him a quick text. This job of his has him working all kinds of crazy hours. It worries me a little, but I try to push it out of my mind.

Me: They said you could cosign with the apartment. You can go by anytime to complete the paperwork, and I'll fill everything out when I get there.

I don't expect an answer quickly, so I'm surprised when he does.

Dylan: Sorry. My boss was talking to me, so I had to ignore your call. We're about to start filming so I can't talk anyway. That's fine. I'll go by there tomorrow since I'm off.

Me: Okay. Don't forget not to say anything to Lincoln. I still haven't said anything to him.

He sends a thumbs-up emoji, and I want to punch him through the screen. Don't people who send thumbs-up emojis realize it's rude? It's just as bad as saying K. When I give Lincoln my two weeks' notice, he will lose his shit.

THINGS HAVEN'T BEEN quite as intense between Lincoln and me since the night I made him dinner so we could celebrate the app launch and its success. It's Sunday night, and I'm sitting on his deck, drinking a glass of wine and watching him swim laps in his Olympic pool.

Lincoln was on the swim team in high school and college. He was excellent too. His parents never went to one swim meet, but I was at every single one until he went to college. Even then, I tried to go to them when I could. I always got there late and left early before he could see me.

I used to get jealous because he had his own cheering section in college. I always wondered if one of the girls was his girlfriend. To this day, I'm still not sure he ever had a

serious girlfriend. He never talked about them or brought a girl home. During one of his rest periods between a set, he turns to me and gives me a goofy grin. I return his smile and arch an eyebrow.

“You should get in.” He says, and I shake my head, showing him the glass of wine I haven’t finished. He shakes his head and gets back into position to do his last set.

“Finish that, and then get in.” He instructs. I think about it for a second but then nod.

“Okay.” I agree. He smirks and starts his next set. I have to tell him tomorrow, and I am dreading it. Should I tell him first thing in the morning, go ahead and rip the band-aid off, or wait until the afternoon? Either way, I won’t be able to get away from him. I swallow the rest of my wine and run into the house to change into my bikini.

I open the sliding door and step outside as he’s finishing and turning to look for me. He crooks his finger at me, and I smile. Running, I jump in and cannonball right next to him, splashing him. When I come up, he’s laughing and grabbing for me.

“You’re going to pay for that.” He threatens as he grabs me around the waist. He acts like he’s pulling me to him, but then I’m being thrown through the air, and I laugh right before I’m submerged under the water. When I come back up, I turn to look for him and see he’s on the other side of the pool.

“I’m going to get you,” I yell and swim toward him. I cage him into a corner, and he lets me because he could easily swim away. He chuckles as I grab at him.

As soon as I think I’m about to grab him, he dunks under the water and grabs my legs, pulling me under with him. I flail, trying to get my bearings about me when he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me up. I’m out of breath and can’t handle going under anymore.

“Okay. I give. I give.” I tell him, and he chuckles as he helps lift me and sit me on the pool’s edge. He puts his hands on my knees and spreads them a little, putting his arms around

my waist and holding me close. Heat spreads from my neck to my stomach and settles in my pussy. He stares at me, and I swallow.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” He states, and I don’t deny it. I have been avoiding him. He doesn’t say anything else; instead, he fingers my top and arches an eyebrow at me.

“This swimsuit looks familiar.” My mouth opens at his comment, and I glance down at it.

“You recognize this swimsuit?” I ask, and he nods.

“It’s the one from your sixteenth birthday?” I’m so shocked it takes me a moment to answer.

“Well, no. That one got old and ratty, but it’s pretty close.” I admit he rubs his palms up my thighs and back down.

“Was it your favorite or something?” He questions, and I give him a *really* look. He chuckles and waits for me to answer. I shrug one shoulder and answer him.

“I saw how you looked at me and watched me at that party. It made me feel sexy even though you stopped talking to me after that. So, I made a new one.” I admit. His hands slide up my sides, shoulders, and then to the strings tied at the back of my neck.

“Well, you do look sexy as hell.” He declares. My breath catches in my throat when he pulls the string and then reaches around my back, pulling those strings too. He yanks the top from my chest, and everything stops.

Then he’s leaning forward and pulling one of my nipples into his mouth. I tilt my head back and moan.

“I had to stop talking to you.” He confesses as he runs his tongue along the underside of my breast.

“Why?” I groan out as he moves his attention to my other breast.

“Because I wanted to do things like this to you, and I couldn’t.” His mouth treks up my throat and to the underside of my jaw. I don’t move, hoping he’ll continue moving toward

my mouth, but he doesn't. He moves his mouth to my ear, biting down gently, and takes my earlobe between his teeth.

"You have no idea how much I wanted you and how guilty I felt for that." His hands trail down to my hips and undo the strings of my bottoms, causing them to fall away from my body. I'm completely naked. It's the first time I've been naked in front of him. He pulls back, and I open my eyes to see him looking at me.

"You are so fucking gorgeous, sweetheart." I swallow and try my best to shove down the emotions that rise at him calling me sweetheart again. It almost feels like we're in a relationship. Almost.

He pulls me closer to the pool's edge, swiping his tongue up my center and catching me off guard. I'll never be able to be with another man. No one will ever compare to Lincoln Holloway. He takes his time going back and forth between licking me and sucking my clit.

"I love watching you squirm for me. You're so wet." He inserts a finger, and I moan. He is so good with his mouth, fingers, and cock.

"Look at that." He whispers, and I open my eyes to see what he's talking about. He nods toward my pussy, and I glance down. "You're so greedy sucking my finger in like that."

"Lincoln. Please!" I beg, and he chuckles.

"I like the sound of you begging for me." I buck against his finger, and he inserts another as he picks up the pace. He leans up and takes my nipple into his mouth while he continues to fuck me with his fingers.

"Maybe if you beg real nice, I'll let you come." I groan again and bite my lip. This man is insufferable. He wants to claim me and make me beg, but he's not willing to give me anything of substance. I push that thought aside and do what he asks because I'm greedy, and he's the only man who can make me feel this way.

“Make me come, Lincoln. Please.” I moan, and his mouth moves down my body, and he swipes his tongue through my folds once.

“Mmmm. You taste so sweet and needy.” I throw my head back in frustration, and I hear the smirk in his voice when he says. “Ask me nicely.”

“I thought I did.” I grit my teeth as I move against his fingers, chasing after what I want. He moves his mouth away again, and I give in. “Lincoln, please. Please! Please make me come.”

“Now, was that so hard?” Then he sucks my clit into his mouth and thrusts his fingers into me. One hand stays behind me to support my weight, and the other goes to his head so I can hold him to me.

“Oh god! Oh god! Oh god!” I’m grinding against his tongue, and he’s massaging my inner walls, and then I’m coming. He keeps sucking and licking until I’m done. I fall back to the ground, not caring if the concrete scratches me. But I can’t even catch my breath before he pulls himself out of the pool and helps me to my feet. He pulls me to the outdoor sofa pushing his swim trunks down as he sits on the couch.

“Ride me.” He demands. I straddle his lap and sink onto him. We both moan, and then I move my hips. His hands hold my hips while I rock against him.

“Fuck Ansley. You look so gorgeous taking my cock.” I fall forward and put my head into the crook of his neck. I mouth at his throat and bite down on his ear. Causing him to moan.

He’s so long. He touches all of the right places inside of me. I have never been a multiple orgasm kind of girl, but he’s done it once before, and I’m almost sure he will do it again.

“Lincoln,” I whisper. His hands come up to my back, and he holds me close. He moves me just enough, so now my clit is rubbing against him too.

“Oh fuck. I think I’m going to come again.” I whimper, but I need a little more. As if he senses it, he moves us quickly, so

I'm flat on my back, and he's kneeling above me. He brings his thumb down and rubs my clit as he rolls his hips into mine. I claw at his forearm as the orgasm builds in my core, and then I fall over the edge.

He pounds into me several more times before pulling out and jacking off. Before I know what I'm doing, I put my hands on his hips and pull him up my body.

I shove my tits together, his eyes go wide when he realizes what I'm telling him to do, and then he moves between them and throws his head back. He thrusts several times, and then he's coming all over my neck and chest. He catches himself from falling forward, and I smile at having that effect on him.

Once he catches his breath, he jumps up and grabs the towel he brought outside with him. He helps clean me up and then sits on the couch, pulling me into his lap. I snuggle into him and sigh. He kisses the top of my head, and I have to bite down on the inside of my cheek. This. This is why I'm leaving. I can't keep doing this. I need more. I deserve more.

I TAKE A deep breath and knock on Lincoln's office door. I've given him enough time to settle, but I can't keep thinking about this. I must take care of it now, or I will go crazy.

"Come in." He yells, and I step in. When he sees it's me, his hazel eyes heat with desire, and he smirks. I'm about to wipe that look off his face in fifteen seconds. I have my hands behind my back, clutching my notice as I walk to his desk.

"I came to give you this." I place it on his desk and take a step back as he looks from my face to it.

"What is it?" He asks as he grabs it without looking at it. He knows. I can tell by the look in his eyes. My heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest, and my hands are sweaty.

"You know what it is, Lincoln." His jaw tenses as he glances back down at the piece of paper, and I can tell he's struggling not to crumple it up.

“I need to hear you say it.” His voice comes out dangerously low, and I exhale.

“It’s my two weeks’ notice. I’m moving to Atlanta. Dylan was able to help me find a job with costume design on a television show.” He continues to stare at the piece of paper, and I watch as he takes several deep breaths before he looks up at me. The look on his face is the same one he gave me the night of the non-kiss. A look of detachment. He’s separated his emotions from what’s happening. He’s not going to fight for me.

“That’s great, Ans. I know you’ve wanted to do that for a long time. Congratulations.” Disappointment rises within my chest, and a weight settles in the pit of my stomach. Did I want him to fight for me? Would I stay if he did? I push my tongue against the roof of my mouth to stop the tears from forming in my eyes.

“Thanks,” I whisper, hoping he’ll say something. Anything. He places the notice to the side and turns his attention to his computer.

“Well, if that’s all.” He says, and I back up to exit his office.

“Yeah.” I choke out. That’s all I can say because if I say anything else, I’m sure the tears will fall. I leave his office and close the door. I walk straight to the elevator and take it up two stories. Then walk to a unisex bathroom.

Opening it, I rush in and lock the doors. I lean against the door, resting my head against it as tears fall. Why does everyone always choose Dylan over me? My parents and now Lincoln. He’ll fuck me, but it looks like that’s all he’ll ever give me. I need more. I have to have more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ANSLEY

I STARE out the window and watch as we pass other cars. This has to be the most awkward drive in the history of awkward drives. Lincoln and I have existed for the past two weeks. We've barely spoken to each other, but he insisted on renting another UHaul and driving me almost five hours from Mississippi to Atlanta.

It's too big again, but that's Lincoln, and I'm done arguing with him. He also got one of those trailers to pull my Corvette behind the UHaul. I told him I could follow him in it, so we didn't have to pay for it, but he refused. I lift my Kindle and begin reading again, trying to ignore Lincoln, but the words blur together as I think back over the past month or so.

I have always wanted Lincoln. I never denied that to myself. I may have denied it to other people but never to myself. I finally got a taste of him, and he broke my heart. And he probably has no idea. How can the one person you thought knew you the best hurt you the worst? I sigh and turn my Kindle off, giving up. Lincoln glances my way.

"We should be there in about forty-five minutes." I nod but don't respond. "Are you hungry or anything? We should stop before we get into the city if you are." I shake my head.

"No. I'm fine." He huffs, and I turn to look at him. "What?" He shakes his head as his knuckles turn white from

tightening his grip on the steering wheel.

“You’ve been saying that for the past two weeks.” I gape at him and roll my eyes.

“Fuck off, Lincoln. Sorry, your fuck buddy is leaving.” I snap, his head turns toward me, his eyes flashing in anger.

“Don’t do that! Don’t belittle what was happening between us.” He responds. I shake my head and stare out the passenger window again.

“What was happening? You were fucking your best friend’s little sister. It was great. I’ll give you that. But you still can’t kiss me, and you still don’t have the balls to tell your best friend.” I want to scream. I want to scream until my voice is hoarse.

“Ansley...” He trails off, and I shake my head.

“Forget it, Lincoln. I found a good job, and I’m excited about it. We’ll keep in touch just like we did when you were in college.” Lincoln grimaces at my comment. Good. We didn’t keep in touch when he was in college. After my sixteenth birthday, he stopped calling me, so I stopped calling him. I’ll probably see him for the holidays.

And I have to be okay with that. We drive in silence the rest of the way. Atlanta traffic is crazy, even mid-day on a Sunday, causing the drive to be longer than Lincoln predicted. When we arrive at the apartment complex, Dylan is already waiting for us.

I jump out of the UHaul, and Dylan comes over, wrapping his arms around me and twirling me around. I laugh and return his embrace. I don’t start my new job until Tuesday, so I have the rest of today and tomorrow to settle in. I glance around the area and smile.

“It’s nice, Dylan.” He smirks and nods.

“See! I told you.” He exclaims. I had no idea what I was expecting. I give him another hug.

“Thank you,” I whisper. He kisses me on the side of my head.

“I’m here. I promise.” He tells me. My apartment complex is about ten minutes away from him, so that I can have my space. I’m thankful he understands I need that, and he helped me get in here, so I didn’t have to give up my Corvette. Lincoln comes around the front of the truck.

“Hey, man!” Dylan greets him, and they do that hand clasp one-armed hug guys do, and I shake my head.

“Hey!” Lincoln greets him back. These two couldn’t be more different. Lincoln is sophisticated and put together. Dylan is goofy and goes out of his way to make everyone around him laugh. But they’re best friends, and I’ve seen them drop everything for one another at any moment.

“How was the drive? Did you two drive each other crazy?” Dylan glances back and forth between us, and I roll my eyes. Dylan only ever sees us arguing and jumping down each other’s throats.

“You could say that,” I say as I share a brief look with Lincoln. His hazel eyes heat for a moment before he turns it off, and I bite my lip. Dylan hands me the key to my apartment, and excitement churns in the pit of my stomach.

I hate what led me here, but I’m excited to see where this goes. We walk to my apartment, and Lincoln looks around the area to ensure it’s safe. I open the door, and my mouth drops open.

It’s gorgeous, and Dylan has already brought some furniture that he had for me. I didn’t know he would move it all in, though. I turn to him in shock.

“You did this?” I ask, and he cocks his head at me in confusion.

“Yeah! Who else did you think would do it?” He questions. I share a look with Lincoln, and then I throw myself into Dylan’s arms.

“Thanks, Dylan. This was very sweet.” He holds me tight for a few seconds before releasing me. I glance around the room.

“You can move things if you don’t like how it’s set up. But I figured all your furniture should be pointing at your TV.” My eyebrows furrow and I snort at his *Friends* reference, but then I notice the TV above the fireplace. My mouth pops open in surprise.

“Did you buy that for me?” He nods, and I hug him again. “Thank you!” I squeal, and he chuckles. I don’t watch TV a lot. I read more, but without Liv or Caroline here or Lincoln, I’m sure boredom will set in, and I’ll watch more than I usually do.

“I installed all the streaming channels, too, so you can binge to your heart’s delight.” He announces. I laugh and clap my hands.

“This is great!” I exclaim and turn toward Lincoln, noticing the fake smile on his face. He wants to be happy for me, but I can tell this is hard on him. Is it weird that I’ve always been closer to him than my brother?

This move may allow me and Dylan to become closer. We’re not working on the same show together, but we’ll be nearby, so maybe that will help. After I tour the rest of the apartment, we head to the UHaul. Lincoln and Dylan take my car off the trailer and begin unloading the truck.

“Ansley, where is all your stuff? I could have sworn you had more.” He asks, and I arch an eyebrow at him. Understanding dawns on him, and he shakes his head as he begins to help Lincoln unload items. I haven’t told Lincoln I talked to Dylan, so I avoid his eyes, unsure if he will question that interaction.

After we unload everything, we walk to a close pizzeria and share a pizza and some beer. I’m more of a wine girl, but drinking beer with the guys has always been fun.

The first time I had a beer was with these two. I was fifteen, and they had just turned twenty-one. They let me have one beer with them to celebrate their twenty-first birthday. I felt like such a grown-up. That was the night I realized I had a crush on Lincoln.

— ❦ —

Ansley: Fifteen

Lincoln: Twenty-One

“Where’s Rose?” I ask Dylan hoping she doesn’t come as much as I like her. I’m sure she’ll see the day I’ve had right away.

“She has a big test, so she couldn’t come.” He responds. There’s a knock on the door, and my heart begins to pound, knowing it’s Lincoln. I haven’t seen him since Christmas. Dylan opens the door, and I stand from where I was sitting on the steps putting my converse tennis shoes on. My mouth pops open when I see his reddening eye that will probably turn into a black eye, and I rush to him.

“What happened?” Dylan and I ask at the same time. Anger is vibrating off him, and I know immediately what happened. The anniversary is coming up, and emotions always run high around this time, which is why I’m wearing long sleeves on this hot day in May.

“Just an accident,” Lincoln replies, but the look we share tells a different story. Dylan’s eyes narrow.

“What kind of accident?” He asks, and Lincoln sighs.

“I slipped in the shower.” He lies, and I wait to see if Dylan will buy that story. Lincoln is an athlete, but Dylan doesn’t question he shrugs.

“That sucks, man. A couple of beers will help the pain.” I roll my eyes at Dylan being oblivious yet again, and look at Lincoln with concern. I don’t know why we came to this silent agreement we’d leave Dylan in the dark about how our parents treated us since Ivy died. Maybe because he beat himself up, he wasn’t there that day.

Or maybe because it was something Lincoln and I shared. Dylan pats his pockets.

“I forgot my wallet. I’ll be right back.” He runs up the stairs, and I turn back to Lincoln.

“Your dad?” I ask, and he nods. I rub at the spot on my arm my mom grabbed earlier, and his eyes zone in on it. He gently grabs my arm and pushes my sleeve up. He exhales through his nose at the bruise on my arm and touches it gently.

“Your mom?” He asks, and I nod. He lets my arm go and adjusts my sleeves so it’s covering my arm again, pulling me into a hug.

“Happy birthday Lincoln,” I whisper.

“Thanks, kiddo.” Inwardly I groan at being called that by him, but there’s nothing I can do about it.



ON OUR WAY back to the apartment, I’m between Lincoln and Dylan. My hand accidentally brushes Lincoln, and I try to pull away, but he stops me. His middle finger rubs up my palm to my wrist, and then he interlinks our fingers.

My head snaps up to him at his boldness, and he winks at me. I glance at Dylan and see he’s not paying us attention. Of course! I snatch my hand away and refuse to look at him.

I’m not going to be someone’s dirty little secret.

“So, Lincoln, Ansley’s room turned guest room is ready for you. What time are you leaving tomorrow?” Dylan asks. Lincoln’s eyes are on me, but I ignore them. He knows I’m not working tomorrow. He probably wants a quick fuck before he leaves. Not happening. I hear him sigh but still refuse to look at him.

“My car rental should be ready to pick up first thing in the morning. I’ll take an Uber there and leave.” Lincoln answers. I

still don't say anything, trying my best not to think about the fact that he'll no longer be just a call away.

"Ansley, why don't you take him? Instead of making him take an Uber? I know you two are probably tired of each other, but still."

I grind my teeth and glare at the back of Dylan's head as he walks ahead of us. I still refuse to look at Lincoln.

"Yeah. I guess I can do that." I mumble.

"Great!" Dylan responds. They walk me to my apartment and insist on walking me inside. Dylan gets a phone call and walks outside, leaving me alone with Lincoln.

"You don't have to take me tomorrow," Lincoln says, and I shrug.

"It's not a big deal. I'll be ready at eight, so come over, and we'll go." I murmur. He glances at the door and walks to me, wrapping his arms around me as he pulls me close. I want to fight it. I do. But the thought of not seeing him every day makes me not want to stay.

"I'm going to miss you, Ans." He holds me tighter, and I return his embrace as I fight the rising emotions in my chest. "I wish I could convince you to come back with me." *I wish I could convince you to come clean to my brother.* I want to say it, but I don't. I keep my thoughts to myself.

"I have to do this, Lincoln." I feel him nod, and he turns his head so his lips brush against my neck, but I pull back, refusing him. He stares at me.

"What's wrong?" He asks, and I turn my eyes toward the ceiling.

"I'm not going to be your dirty secret, Lincoln," I state, and he opens his mouth and then closes it. He knows I'm right.

"It's not like that, Ansley." I scoff and glance toward the door to ensure it's closed, so Dylan doesn't overhear.

"It is. Or you'd tell him." I challenge him, and he runs his hands through his hair.

“It’s not that simple.” I pull my bottom lip between my teeth and clench my fists.

“It is that simple,” I tell him, but before he can respond, my door opens, and Dylan walks back inside. Lincoln takes a step back, breaking my heart a little more.

“Sorry about that. One of the guys from work was telling me the new location for filming tomorrow.” He glances back and forth between Lincoln and me, sensing the tension. “Everything okay?” I wait for Lincoln to say something, but he turns to Dylan and nods.

“Yeah. We were planning when she’d take me to get my rental.” He replies. I’m not sure why I expect anything different, but his response causes disappointment to settle in my stomach. We all say goodbyes, and I refuse to meet Lincoln’s eyes again.

After they leave, I pull up the dating app we launched a few weeks ago and fill out my profile information. I refuse to sit around and have a pity party for myself. Even if I don’t find a perfect match, I’ll get a few free meals.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK is crazy and fast-paced. I work crazy hours because filming is not an eight-to-five job. Sometimes it’s filming at three in the morning or noon, but I enjoy it. But the past few days have been weird, so I’m ready to chill with Liv and Caroline on Friday and have a fun girl’s weekend.

They’re driving down to see my apartment and staying for the weekend. They wanted to drive down last weekend but I convinced them to wait and let me settle into my apartment first. I can’t wait to see them. They should show up around the same time I get home if everything goes according to plan.

I told Dylan to stay away this weekend because they still don’t know he lives here too. I didn’t tell him that, though. I’m going to tell them everything. I’m tired of the secrets. I can’t

be upset with Lincoln for keeping secrets and then do the same.

As I pull up to the gate at my apartment complex, I'm hoping Liv and Caroline are already here. I gave them the code to get in, so maybe they are. When I pull in, I see Liv's Acura, and a huge smile spreads over my face. They're jumping out of the car and running up to my car as I'm parking. When I climb out, I'm engulfed in hugs and giggles. I love these girls so much.

"I have missed you two so much," I tell them as we separate.

"Us too!" Caroline says. I grin at her and Liv.

"Lincoln is being a total prick without you there," Liv informs me. A pang settles in my heart, but I shrug and roll my eyes.

"He'll get over it eventually." I encourage them as we walk back to Liv's car. They grab their bags, but I stop Caroline.

"I don't think so, girly. Bass would kill us if anything happened to you and your unborn child." I grab her bag, and she rolls her eyes taking it back.

"Not you too! I am quite capable. I swear that man won't let me tie my freaking shoes." Liv and I laugh as we make it to my apartment, and I open the door.

"Did you expect anything less from him?" Liv asks her, and Caroline shakes her head smirking.

"I secretly love it but don't tell him I said that," Caroline replies.

"Ansley, your apartment is gorgeous!" Liv exclaims. I'm so proud of this little apartment. The place I lived in, Mississippi, was a hole in the wall. I never invited them over because I was so ashamed of it. It's a nice change, for sure.

I show them around and let them settle in. When we sit on the couch, I look between the two of them.

"I thought tonight we could order pizza and have some wine. Then tomorrow, I'll take you two out on the town.

There's so much to do here! It's so different from our small town." I exclaim, and they both nod in agreement.

I order pizza and bread sticks, grab a bottle of wine for Liv and me, and a Ginger Ale for Caroline. She's been having morning sickness all day, and Ginger Ale helped her, so I made sure to buy a few bottles for her.

"You look so happy, Ans," Caroline observes as she takes a drink. I take a deep breath and give her a small smile. Is it possible to be happy and sad at the same time?

"I am. I love this job. I've wanted to be in fashion for as long as I can remember, but it didn't work out, and now here I am." Liv tilts her head at me.

"How did you even find out about this job? Were you looking?" She asks, and I bite the inside of my lip.

"Ummm..." I take a sip of my wine to give myself a minute to gather my thoughts. "About that. I haven't been completely honest with you two." They share a look and then turn their stares on me.

"What do you mean?" Caroline asks. I take a deep breath. Here it goes.

"Dylan helped me get this job. He moved here a few weeks ago to be a camera guy because he dreams of being a film producer, and you have to start somewhere." I ramble.

"Anyway, he reached out to me to let me know there were a lot of positions open for costume designers." They look at me in confusion, but Liv speaks up first.

"I thought you were leaving to get away from your brother?" She asks.

"And Lincoln." Caroline chimes in. I take another sip of my wine and nod.

"Yeah. It was because of Lincoln." I pause. "I mean, I wanted this job but needed space from Lincoln." They stare at me, waiting for an explanation, but I'm not sure I'm ready to give it. After several beats of my heart, I finally blurt it out.

"I slept with Lincoln!" Their mouths pop open.

“What?!?”

“Oh my god!” They both speak at the same time. I run my hands through my hair and glance up at the ceiling.

“How did that happen? When did it happen?” Liv asks.

“How many times did it happen?” Caroline adds on, and we all laugh.

“You both know I’ve known Lincoln since I was born. I have had a crush on him since I was little. I don’t know. The night you two went to the Mexican restaurant, and I stayed late was the first time.” I admit.

“What?!?” Caroline exclaims again, stands up to pace, then stares at me. “I knew it! I knew you two had a weird relationship. He didn’t want you on a dating app because he wants you.” I chuckle, and she glares at me. I put my hands up, well, hand, I’m not compromising my wine.

“You said that was the first time? So there was more?” Liv asks, and I look between her and Caroline guiltily.

“Yes. A few more times, actually. He was at the bar when I was on my date; that’s why I told you two you could leave.” I admit. Caroline turns her head to Liv, and Liv raises her eyebrows.

“I told you I thought I saw him,” Liv says.

“What?” I ask, and Liv turns back toward me.

“I returned to the restaurant because I left my cardigan, and I swore I saw him walking down the hall toward the bathroom,” She explains. I smirk and nod. That day will live rent-free in my head for the rest of my life and will be my go-to fantasy for all future appointments with my vibrator. Caroline plops down next to me.

“Did you two do it in the bathroom?” She asks, sounding scandalized.

“No, we didn’t have sex. However, we did do other things. Don’t look at me like that! You got it on in the gym’s locker room that your boyfriend owns.” I tell her, and she looks away sheepishly. Liv laughs.

“This is great!” Liv exclaims, and I glance at her and take a deep breath.

“It’s not. Although we’ve done all these things, he refuses to kiss me on my mouth.”

Liv frowns, and Caroline scoots closer to me.

“Why not?” They ask at the same time. I groan.

“He and my brother made promises to each other they would protect each other’s sister, and they wouldn’t kiss each other’s sister,” I tell them, wincing. I’ve never talked to anyone about what happened that day on the lake, not even Dylan.

“Wait! Lincoln has a sister?” Liv asks.

“He had a sister. She died when we were five.” I answer. Caroline’s hands come up to her mouth as she gasps.

“What happened?” She whispers. Anxiety crawls up my spine, and my heart beats heavily in my chest. I look away. I’m not ready to talk about that yet. Liv places her hand on mine.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to talk about it.” She assures me, and Caroline is quick to nod in agreement.

“I will eventually. I know I’ve encouraged both of you to see a therapist when you were ready, but I’m not. Maybe one day.” I stop talking and close my eyes. Caroline wraps her arm around my shoulders and hugs me.

“I told you before that sometimes you have to reach a tipping point. Maybe what happened with Lincoln and moving is yours.”

Maybe she’s right. I need to move on. I’m sick of having this cloud over me all the time. I want to move on from Ivy’s death, how my parents treated me growing up, my animosity toward Dylan, and my feelings for Lincoln.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LINCOLN

I FUCKED up. I haven't seen or talked to Ansley in three weeks, and I am going fucking insane. It's like an itch; I can't scratch, and I can't take it anymore. I've tried to call her, only for her to send my calls to voice mail. I've tried to text her, only for them to go unanswered. So, I call Dylan for the thousandth time.

"Hey, man!" Fucking finally! I want to scream at him, but I keep myself cool because his hours have been crazy.

"Hey! What are you doing?" I ask, and he grunts like he just sat down.

"Nothing right now. I just got home from work. It has been a crazy schedule." He explains, and I nod even though he can't see. I need to know how Ansley is doing, but I also need to keep my cool.

"I can tell. Trying to get a hold of you and your sister has been hard. How's Ansley adjusting?" I ask, trying to sound casual. Dylan chuckles.

"She was made for this. The girl is rocking it." He exclaims. Pride swells within my chest. I knew she would, even if it took her from me. She deserves to do something that makes her happy. "She'll be up there this weekend visiting her friends." He tells me, and my heart stops.

“Really?” I ask, still trying to sound calm and collected.

“Yeah. She’s staying with Liv.” He mentions, and I try to come up with a plan on how I can run into her somehow. I half listen to the story he’s telling me about shooting in the city. He says something about getting hit by a car.

“What?” I ask.

“Not me. One of the cameras. The idiot wasn’t watching. But I’m glad it was the camera and not me, honestly.” He says, and I agree wholeheartedly. “Sorry to jump off so quickly, but I have to get a couple of hours of sleep.” He explains.

“Will she be coming in on Friday?” I ask him before he gets off.

“Huh? Oh... Yeah. She said something about them doing their girl’s night like they used to do.” I begin to form a plan in my mind.

“Alright. Well, I hope you get some rest. It was good talking to you for a few minutes.” He says bye, and I hang up, leaning back in my chair.

I stare at my computer screen. Fridays turned into a girl’s night, but it started as a night out for everyone in the office to unwind. It’s still an open invitation, so I’ll find out where they’re going this week. It’s a different bar and grill every Friday. I stand up and button my suit jacket.

Walking out of my office, I make my way to the break room. Usually, when people see me coming, they scurry away because I don’t particularly appreciate seeing them standing around chatting. This time I’m hoping they don’t. I consider asking Liv or Caroline outright where they’re going, but I’m afraid they’ll tell Ansley, and she’ll avoid me again.

When I walk into the break room, a few interns are chatting and munching on some trail mix that someone brought in. When they all see me, they stand to attention.

“Mr. Holloway! Hi sir!” I shake my head and wave at them.

“You’re okay. Don’t pay me any mind. I came in to grab some coffee.” They all look at each other in confusion and then awkwardly stand there as they watch me start the Keurig. I take advantage of their silence and turn toward them as the coffee begins to brew.

“Are any of you going to the office outing on Friday night?” They all share looks and turn back to stare at me. They all look terrified. Am I that hard on people? One of the interns speaks up.

“I... Ummm...” She stutters, and I raise an eyebrow. She takes a deep breath and tries again. “I’ve never been. I’ve heard it’s fun, though.” I nod and glance around at the other two.

“I’ve been a couple of times.” The guy says. I don’t know any of their names. I need to start learning people’s names. Ansley used to fuss at me all the time about being more personable. I guess she was right.

“What’s your name?” I ask the guy, and he looks at me, startled. I’m unsure if it’s because I asked or because he thinks I should know.

“Chris, sir.” I wave my hands at him.

“You don’t have to call me sir,” I admonish, and some of the fear he had in his eyes seems to dwindle. That’s progress. “Will you be going this Friday?” He shrugs.

“Maybe. It depends on my work schedule.” I stare at him in confusion. “Not this work schedule. I have another part-time job.” He clarifies, and I nod. I should know these things about my employees. Well, maybe not all the tiny details but at least their names. I’m going to start doing better.

“Do you know where it’ll be? I might join this week.” Chris shakes his head and glances at the other girl I haven’t paid much attention to.

“I think they’re going to that new pub that just opened.” I think about it for a second and remember a pub that opened a week or so ago. I know the owner.

“Great! Thanks...” I trail off and glance at her for her name.

“Katrina.” I nod.

“Katrina. Sorry, I’ll get better at remembering everyone’s names.” I turn to the first girl because she still hasn’t said her name.

“Lisa.” She says, and I smile. I grab my coffee and take a sip.

“Thank you, Chris, Katrina, and Lisa. Hopefully, I’ll see you three there.” As I walk out of the break room, I almost run into Caroline as she’s walking into the break room.

“Oh! Sorry, Lincoln.” I eye her wondering if she just heard my conversation. Her expression doesn’t give me any indication, but I swear, when I turn away to go back to my office, I see her smirk.

WHEN FRIDAY AFTERNOON rolls around, I am incredibly antsy. I consider leaving work early, but that would be out of character for me, so I suck it up and try to focus on the spreadsheet I have pulled up on my computer.

The numbers for this quarter are out of the water. We’ve had two app launches this year, and the third one is scheduled to launch before Christmas. I gave Ansley, Liv, and Caroline bonuses for their help with this most recent launch, but because of the numbers, I’ve decided I will give everyone a bonus. They’ll also get their regular Christmas bonus in December.

I wonder if Ansley has made it into town yet, wondering if she’ll be pissed when I show up tonight. I scoff to myself. Who am I kidding? Of course, she’ll be pissed, but I don’t give a fuck. Even when I was in college, we didn’t go this long without talking.

After her sixteenth birthday, I never attempted to call her, but since Dylan was my roommate, he talked to Ansley

regularly, so I could always tell her hi, at least when they would chat. But even with the few times I've spoken to Dylan, she isn't around.

They work on two different sets and don't live together, so it's made it challenging to say the least. I need to come clean to Dylan. She's right, we were six, and it was almost twenty-six years ago since her birthday is in a couple of weeks. Sighing, I think of how I can tell Dylan and how he'll react.

"Bye, Lincoln! Have a good weekend!" My head snaps up at Caroline's voice, and my eyes narrow. She never tells me bye. In fact, she and Liv both go out of their way to avoid me, so I don't ask them to stay late. I nod at her.

"You too, Caroline." She smirks, turns away from my door, and walks toward the elevator. She heard me in the break room. I turn my computer off and grab my phone off my desk, pocketing it. Is that her way of telling me they're headed to the pub? Is she playing matchmaker? If she is, I'll let her. I need all the help I can get.

I take my time walking to the elevator, walking through the break room as a detour, so Liv and Caroline have already made it downstairs. When I make it to the elevator, it's just one of the interns from the break room and me. Shit! I said I would remember their names. Her name comes to me when we make it to the ground floor.

"Have a great weekend, Lisa!" She looks at me, startled, and gives an awkward wave as she runs to her car. Ansley would be proud. Opening the door to my Audi, I glance around the parking lot to see if anyone is lingering. Lisa has just pulled out of her parking spot, and there are no other cars in the lot except mine and a couple of people who work on different floors.

I climb into my car and take a deep breath. How is this going to go? I pull out of my parking spot and onto the street.

"Guess I'm about to find out," I mutter.

THE FIRST THING I see when I pull into the parking lot is Ansley's Corvette. It takes all I have not to barge into the pub, drag her out, and take her back to my place. I'm nervous. I'm actually nervous.

I walk into the pub and try to keep to the shadows so I can spot Ansley first before she spots me. My eyes are drawn to her like a moth to a flame. She's beautiful as always.

Her red hair is straight today, and it looks like it's gotten longer since the last time I saw her. She's wearing a cream-colored top with some jeans and leopard print heels. As if on cue, she stands and walks to the bar. She waves at the bartender, and I stare.

She looks at ease. Being in Atlanta is good for her. I don't know how to feel about that. Will she ever come home? She turns her head in my direction, and our eyes connect. She freezes, her eyes widening before anger settles on her face. I walk toward her, never breaking eye contact with her. Even angry, she looks beautiful. I slide in next to her, and she looks away.

"Hey, Ans," I whisper, and she turns to me again, glaring.

"What are you doing here, Lincoln?" She asks, tapping her fingers on the bar.

"Dylan told me you were coming into town, so I thought you'd be coming here with Liv and Caroline," I tell her. Her lips are thin, and she glances over at Liv and Caroline. They're chatting with each other. It doesn't look like they've noticed I'm over here with Ansley. She finally sighs.

"What do you want, Lincoln?" I'm at a loss. Usually, she's her bratty self, and I can banter back and forth with her, or we do our flirting but this. This is out of my element.

"I wanted to see you. You haven't answered my calls or returned any of my texts." I answer. The bartender walks over with Ansley's drinks, and Ansley hands over her card to start a tab.

"There's a reason for that, Lincoln." She proclaims. She grabs the drinks, trying to balance them, and I go to grab them

to help.

“Don’t!” She exclaims, and I stop. She takes a deep breath and looks at me. I see the hurt in her eyes, and it breaks my heart. “I’m not doing this with you anymore, Lincoln.”

“Ans...” I try to interrupt, but the look she gives me stops me.

“I take full responsibility. I should have never had sex with you. I knew this would be the result. Your loyalty is to Dylan, which is fine. But my heart is no longer a stomping ground. Like I told you before, I will not be your secret.” She pauses and glances up at the ceiling. “I’ve moved on. You need to as well.” She starts to walk away, but I stop her.

“I’m not moving on. You. Are. Mine. When will you finally understand that?” I command. She steps into my space, catching me off guard.

“And when are you going to understand I can’t be yours when you can’t even kiss me or admit to my brother you have feelings for me? This is a two-way street, Lincoln. If you want me to be yours. Prove. It.” With that, she walks away, and I stare after her, having been completely and thoroughly put in my place.

Liv and Caroline have noticed me, and by their excited expressions, this is not how they thought this would turn out. When Ansley gets to them and begins talking, their faces fall, and Caroline glances back at me in sympathy. I turn away from it, not wanting to see it. I flag for the bartender’s attention and hand her a hundred-dollar bill when she gets to me.

“The girl that was just with me. This should cover her drinks. Whatever she doesn’t use can be your tip. Okay?” She looks between me and the money that’s now in her hand.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.” I nod and look back at Ansley. She’s right. I need to prove to her that I want to be with her. I’m not even sure Dylan would care. He’s never threatened me or anything. It was just a promise two six-year-olds made to each other, and the only time it ever got brought

back up again was after that day on the lake happened. I'm going to talk to him. Hopefully, he'll be okay with it; if he's not, I'll deal with that as it comes.



Lincoln: Eleven

“Oh my God, Lincoln! I can't believe I wasn't there!” I hear mom in the house crying. We left the lake house in the middle of the night to come home. I want to run to the woods to escape it all, but I don't want to leave just in case Dylan's mom and dad get back from the hospital soon.

They took Ansley to the hospital to get her checked out because she was also under the water for a long time. I can't get the image out of my head. I run my hands through my hair.

“Lincoln?” I look at Dylan and realize he's talking.

“It's not your fault, Dylan,” I reassure him. Again. “It happened so fast.” I close my eyes, trying to get the image out of my head. Her foot got stuck. Ansley tried to help at the expense of her own life. All I can hear is Ansley's screams for help and me running to them and then not seeing either one. I got Ansley out, but she was like a rag doll. I wasn't even sure she was okay.

When I finally got Ivy. I knew. I shake my head and focus on Dylan again.

“We promised each other,” Dylan says, and I swear if he says that one more time, I'm going to scream. Dylan's parents get home, and I want to run and make sure Ansley is okay, but I stop when I see my dad's shadow in the doorway. Dylan doesn't notice, though; he takes off. My dad walks out and glares at me. I swallow.

“How could you not save your sister, boy?” I tighten my hands into fists and stare at him. I've told him over and over. I

tried. “What was the point of putting you in swim lessons if you couldn’t do that, huh?”



MY PARENTS REFUSED to go to any swim meets after that day and I refused to allow Ansley to be afraid of the water. I guess it’s time for me to stop being afraid of what her brother may or may not do. Giving Ansley one last lingering look, I walk out of the bar.

CHAPTER NINE

ANSLEY

“HE’S GONE,” Caroline whispers, and I look over my shoulder to where he was standing, missing him already. Turning back to Caroline and Liv, I grab my drink and down it. Liv pats my forearm in comfort.

“We would have told you, Ansley, if we knew you’d be so upset,” Liv says, and Caroline nods earnestly, her blond hair falling into her face. I shake my head and give them a sad smile.

“It’s not your fault. I should have known he’d know I was coming. Dylan told me he asks about me every time they talk. He keeps asking me why we’re fighting this time.” I go to grab my drink but realize I just drank it all.

“I don’t know what to tell him. Lincoln says I’m his but refuses to kiss me or tell Dylan. I’m so sick of it all.” Liv and Caroline share a look of sympathy, and I hate it. I don’t want to be pitied. This is why I don’t talk about this. This is why I don’t talk about my childhood. Like they can read my mind, they both lean forward.

“We’re your friends Ans,” Caroline says. “We love you and want to make sure you’re okay.” She stands and rubs her hand down her belly. She’s not showing yet, but I guess it’s intuitive for a pregnant woman to do that.

“I’m going to grab you two more drinks and me a ginger ale. I can’t wait for this period of constant nausea to pass.” When she returns and hands us our drinks, Liv turns to me, her black hair swinging over her shoulder. I admire her. She’s so beautiful, and she has no idea. She could be Snow White with her black hair, ice-blue eyes, porcelain skin, and bright red lips.

“Are you really okay?” She asks, and I shake my head.

“I hate this, Liv. It is killing me to ignore him. You two knowing how I feel about him has been such a relief. Finally, having someone to talk to about it is nice. I always give him a hard time and never completely ignore him.” I admit to them, and she tilts her head.

“Maybe this will get through to him?” She suggests, and I lift one shoulder in a shrug as Caroline nods in agreement. I take a sip of my drink and glance around the pub.

“I’m not a fan of this place,” I tell them, and they both nod. “We shouldn’t have to go up to the bar to get our drinks unless we’re at the bar. And I’m starving.” I complain.

“I’m a little surprised. I hate that I suggested this place now.” Liv comments, and I wave her off. It’s not her fault.

“Want to go somewhere else after these drinks?” Caroline asks, and we all nod and finish our drinks. As we’re walking out, Liv leads the way but stops suddenly, and we bump into her.

“Liv?” Caroline and I say at the same time. She turns suddenly and hides behind me.

“It’s him.” She whispers, and my heart begins to beat wildly in my chest, thinking she’s talking about her stepfather. I put my hand behind me and scan my eyes over the area.

I’ve never seen her stepfather in person before, but Liv has shown me a picture. Then I see him. It’s not her stepfather. It’s the man from the restaurant we saw several weeks ago.

He looks different tonight. At the restaurant, he wore a suit and demanded attention and respect. Not that he doesn’t

require that here, but he is dressed differently and covered in tattoos.

I overlooked that at the restaurant because his suit covered his arms. He's standing around a table with a group of people talking. As if he can sense our eyes, he looks up and turns toward us.

"Oh shit!" Liv whispers. He turns his body toward us and begins walking over.

"He's coming over," I warn her, and she straightens her spine. She steps up next to me, and I see her chin lifted out of my peripheral vision. Victor's eyes never leave Liv. Caroline steps up next to her to give her strength. She's handling this run in a lot better than the last one.

"Olivia." He greets her, and his voice sounds like whiskey over rocks. He's in jeans that hug him tight, and I try not to gape, but it's hard. This man is rough around the edges but gorgeous. He has to be in his late thirties or early forties. It's not fair that men age like fine wine.

"Hi, Victor. You can call me Liv." Liv responds, and his mouth tips into a smile as he openly looks her up and down. I glance at Liv to see how she feels about that, and I notice the flush of her skin, even in the dark, making me pause. Interesting.

"Did you enjoy your visit?" He asks, and she scoffs. His eyes narrow as he waits for her reply, and I roll my lips between my teeth to keep my mouth shut.

"No, actually. We were leaving to go somewhere else." Victor's stance changes from relaxed to tense, and he takes a step forward.

"What do you mean? Why didn't you enjoy it?" He demands. Liv actually rolls her eyes.

"Why do you care?" She asks, and he growls. He is intense.

"Because this place is mine, and if you weren't pleased, I need to know why so I can fix it." The way he says pleased causes goosebumps to break out on my arms. I can only

imagine what kind of reaction it's causing Liv. I can tell she's barely hanging on from the subtle glances she's giving him. I grab her hand and catch Caroline's eyes.

"Listen, Victor; we sat there for almost an hour, and no one came up to take our order. We had to go to the bar and order our own drinks." Shit! I forgot my card. But I keep going. "So, we weren't pleased." His eyes narrow, and he nods once.

"I'll handle it." He starts to walk away but then stops giving Liv one more look. "It was good seeing you, Olivia." With that, he walks away, and Liv stomps her foot, but he's gone before she can reply. She turns to us in exasperation.

"I hate that he calls me that!" She exclaims. Caroline looks back and forth between us, wide-eyed. She has no idea who Victor is, only that he's Liv's stepfather's best friend or ex-best friend, according to the run-in we had with him a few weeks ago at the restaurant.

"I'll be right back. I have to go grab my card and pay out my tab." They both nod, and I walk off. Liv and I have been friends longer than Caroline, so there are some things Caroline doesn't know. She's probably confused as hell.

When we all had the run-in with Victor a while back, she didn't ask any questions because Liv was so upset. I don't know all of Liv's story, but I do know her stepfather is not a good guy. I found her in the bathroom crying one day at work and practically hyperventilating.

She wouldn't tell me what happened, but I hated seeing her hurt, and it seemed like she didn't have anyone. So I told her about Rose, which pissed her off at first. I was persistent, though, with being her friend; I let her decide if she wanted to start seeing Rose.

We started eating lunch together and having girl's night every Friday. Over time we adopted Caroline, and now the three of us are like the three musketeers. I've never had friends like them. I've always been closed off, but they've become like sisters.

I walk up to the bar and wait until the bartender notices me, turning my eyes toward the end of the bar, where Victor is talking heatedly with an employee. My attention comes back to the bartender when she comes over and smiles at me.

“I need to close my tab. Ansley Lawrence.” I tell her, and she nods. She turns around and hands me my card without a receipt. “Where’s my receipt?”

“Nothing was charged to your card. Someone else paid for it.” Lincoln!

I slam my hand down on the bar top.

“Son of a bitch!” I exclaim. The bartender yelps, and her eyes go wide.

“Is something wrong?” I turn toward Victor’s voice. He got over here fast. I look back at the bartender, and see the anxiety on her face. Sighing, I grab my card and shake my head.

“No. She’s perfect. It’s not her fault.” I mumble as I put my card in my purse, turning back toward the bartender. “Sorry for my outburst. Thank you!” She nods and hurries away. When I turn around to leave, Victor still stands there like he’s waiting for an explanation.

“Someone paid for my tab that shouldn’t have.” I find myself telling him for some reason. He narrows his eyes.

“Why shouldn’t they?” He questions and I scoff.

“For many reasons,” I reply, and he raises an eyebrow, but I don’t say anything else. I wave my fingers and begin walking away.

“Is Olivia okay?” He asks before I can get too far. I turn around slowly and tilt my head at him.

“Yes,” I say slowly, and he nods.

“Good.” He glances over his shoulder at the person he was talking to, still standing there. “I handled what happened tonight. It won’t happen again. Will you all come back again?” I squint my eyes at him and bite my lip.

“Maybe,” I say elusively, and he gives a short nod before walking away. What is it with this man? Liv has never talked about him before. I wonder if she’d be willing to tell me anything about him. I pull my phone out.

Me: What the hell? I don’t need you paying for my girl’s night anymore.

Lincoln: Got you to finally text me, though, didn’t it?

I grind my teeth. Son of a bitch! I don’t respond, choosing to ignore that comment. I’m sure he’s grinning at his phone, expecting me to come back with something. That’s not happening.

When Sunday comes, I’m sad to leave Liv and Caroline. Bass and Caroline come over to Liv’s to tell me bye. They brought over some burgers and fries for us to eat before I left. As we all sit around Liv’s table, Bass constantly has to touch Caroline, whether tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, rubbing his finger down her arm, or leaning in and kissing her; he finds some way to touch her throughout the meal. I feel like a lead balloon drops in my stomach.

I’m so happy for her. She deserves to be happy. She deserves someone devoted to her, but it makes me wonder if I’ll ever have that. Will someone finally choose me over everyone else? I swallow and glance away as I pop a fry in my mouth. That is why I’m ignoring Lincoln because that’s what I deserve. I will not be someone’s second choice, mistake, or dirty secret.

Bass grabs my bags and puts them in my car when I’m leaving. I let him so I could tell Liv and Caroline bye.

“We’ll see you in a few weeks when we visit you for your birthday,” Liv tells me, and I nod at them both. We huddle into a group hug.

“We’re going to miss you, Ans.” Caroline sniffs, and I pull back to look at her. She wipes at her eyes. “Ignore me. Pregnancy hormones.” She cries. I chuckle and pull them back into a hug.

“I’ll miss you, girls, too.” They walk me to my car.

“Do you think you’ll try to call or text Lincoln again?” Caroline asks and Bass’ head pops up at that.

“Lincoln? Isn’t he the asshole?” Bass asks. Caroline’s head pops up, and she glares at Bass. I start laughing.

“Yes. He’s the asshole.” I reply, and Bass pulls Caroline into his side as she swats at his abs and turns to me.

“I used to complain about him always keeping me late. I didn’t tell him about you two.” Caroline explains. Bass’ eyes widen.

“You and Lincoln?” He gasps like he’s one of the girls, and I roll my eyes. “Wasn’t he your boss?” I narrow my eyes at him.

“And didn’t you sleep with your client?” I motion to Caroline, and she breaks out into a big smile as she tilts her head back and beams up at him.

“Touche.” Bass mumbles. He owns a gym and is a trainer. Caroline was his client, and he trained her in more ways than how to gain muscle. He kisses Caroline on the head and says bye to me, walking to his truck to give us a few minutes.

“So, are you going to go see Lincoln?” Caroline asks, and I shake my head as I look between her and Liv.

“I can’t. I have to move on. I have a few matches on the app. I think I might try to go out on a couple of dates. Maybe I’ll actually have a date for my birthday.” I force myself to sound optimistic, but my heart breaks.

Technically it’s already broken. I’m just trying to put band-aids on it to cover it up. They both nod in understanding and hug me before I climb into my car and drive off. I look down at my phone as it buzzes at the end of Liv’s neighborhood.

Lincoln: Please talk to me. Come see me before you leave.

I stare at my phone for several long seconds before making a decision. I take a deep breath and let my foot off the brake.

CHAPTER TEN

LINCOLN

AFTER THREE glasses of bourbon and me staring at the text I see Ansley read over two hours ago, I come to terms with the fact she's not coming. She's probably halfway to Atlanta by now. My phone starts ringing, and I grab it so quickly it almost slips out of my hand. I scowl at Dylan's name, but I haven't talked to him since Friday, so I answer it.

"Hey, man!" I greet him and stand from the chair I was lounging in to take the bottle of bourbon back to the bar and rinse my tumbler.

"Hey! Three weeks from today, you're coming to Atlanta." I pause what I'm doing while my half-drunk brain tries to process what he just said.

"Okay. Why?" I ask as I put my tumbler back precisely where it's supposed to go.

"For Ansley's birthday!" He exclaims like I should know this already. And I do, but again my brain isn't firing on all cylinders as I wallow in the fact she refused to come to see me. I sigh. "You know you have to come. It's been a tradition since she turned sixteen." Yeah. A tradition I inadvertently started.

"Right! What are we doing?" I ask him, walking to the kitchen to find something to eat for dinner.

“We’re going to go to a Braves game because, according to Ansley, it’s something we have to do since we live here. It’ll probably be hot so dress accordingly. We did get good seats, though.” I scowl.

“You already got tickets?” I ask, and he hums.

“Yeah. One of the guys I work with knows one of the players and can get us tickets. We didn’t even have to pay for them. After the game, we’ll go to a dueling piano bar.” I make a sandwich instead of cooking something, so I grab the lunch meats and bread.

“Sounds like a fun day. Will it be just us three, or will Ansley’s friends be there too?” I ask him as I spread mayonnaise on the bread.

“Yeah. Liv and Caroline will come up to stay with Ansley, and I figured you could stay with me. Unless you only want to come up for one day, I thought you could stay the weekend. Bass, Caroline’s boyfriend, is coming too.” I begin layering the lunch meat on the bread.

“That sounds great. I’ll come straight there when I leave work that Friday.” I put everything away, wash my knife, and then sit at the island to eat.

“Awesome! The next week will be a crazy filming schedule, so I wanted to make sure and call you just in case I didn’t get a chance later.” He tells me. It makes me miss the old days when we were roommates and we didn’t have busy lives. We could hang out whenever we wanted, and the only time we were stressed was during exams.

“Thanks for letting me know! I’m looking forward to it.” I take a bite of my sandwich and hold in a sigh. I miss Ansley.

“I’ll call you later. I need to go to sleep. We have an early start tomorrow.” Brushing off the crumbs on my fingers, I grab a glass of water. I begin to think of what I can do to make Ansley feel special for her birthday.

“Alright. Talk to you later.” We say our goodbyes, and I hang up. A plan begins to form in my mind on how to make Ansley’s birthday memorable. She’ll be twenty-six. I

remember when she was ten, and I was sixteen, she told me she would marry me when she was twenty-six.



Ansley: Ten

Lincoln: Sixteen

“I’m going to marry you when I’m twenty-six.” I glance down at Ansley and chuckle. We’re making chocolate chip cookies because her school has some bake sale, and of course, her mom can’t be bothered to help her, so I’m helping her. Dylan went to the store to buy more chocolate chips, so it’s just Ansley and me.

“Oh yeah? Why twenty-six?” She shrugs and pops a chocolate chip in her mouth which is why we need more chocolate chips. The kid won’t stop eating them.

“I dunno. Seems like a good age to get married.” I snort and pour the chocolate chips we have into the batter before she eats them all. She scowls at me and grabs a few that are on top. I shake my head and start mixing.

“If I’m still not married by the time you turn twenty-six, I’ll marry you. Deal?” She beams up at me like I just solved world hunger.

“Deal!” When Dylan walks into the kitchen, she turns to him. “I’m marrying Lincoln when I turn twenty-six!” She exclaims, and Dylan stops in his tracks and glances at me. I shrug and bark out a laugh.

“Sounds like fun, Ans! I’ll be your ring bearer.” I roll my eyes as he starts to mix another batch of cookies, and we spoon clumps onto a cookie sheet.



MAYBE I SHOULD ask her to marry me. I did tell her I'd marry her when she turned twenty-six. A promise is a promise.

I STARE AT the back of the guy's head Ansley brought with her to the baseball game. I'm trying to figure out a way I can commit murder without being convicted. Temporary insanity? That could work because this woman drives me insane. By the time we get to our seats, I have envisioned multiple ways of killing Zack.

Ansley glances over her shoulder at me for the hundredth time since we got to the ballpark. I had no warning. Dylan didn't tell me, and Ansley has continued to ignore every call and text I've sent her over the past few weeks. I've had enough of being ignored. I've given her space, but I'm done.

I had every intention of declaring how I felt to Dylan this weekend so she'd see how much of a mistake she isn't and how much she is wanted. She asked me to prove it, so this is me proving it. Zack will know, too, if he manages to make it to the end of the night without me killing him.

He places his hand on the small of her back, leading her to our row, and I growl. Liv turns to me and smirks. I glower at her, and she breaks into a smile. My eyes narrow at her. She knows. I had my suspicions after the pub but never approached her or Caroline, so I wasn't sure. I put my hand on her elbow to stop her. Everyone walks ahead as she turns to me and gives me a questioning look.

“Did Ansley tell you about us?” She looks over her shoulder toward everyone else, then back to me, and nods.

“She didn’t tell us everything. But she needed someone to talk to.” I lean back and think this through and decide to confide in her.

“I’m going to tell Dyan how I feel about Ansley this weekend. One way or another, I’m making this thing between us permanent.” Liv’s eyes widen, and she looks over her shoulder again. Everyone has made it to the seats and is looking back at us. Ansley’s eyes narrow at Liv and me, but I ignore it. Dylan waves at me, and I motion for him to give us a minute.

“You’re doing all of that this weekend?” She questions with uncertainty.

“She asked me to prove how I feel. This is me doing just that.” I explain to her. Liv begins playing with her ponytail.

“Okay. Go for it. But please don’t hurt her. I know you’re my boss, but she is like a sister to me. Make this better.” She pleads. I stare at her for a long time before nodding.

“I want to. Trust me.” I reply. She pats me on the arm as I look back at Ansley and Zack. He has his arm wrapped around her shoulder, and she’s laughing at something he’s saying. After a few seconds, she looks up, and our eyes connect. I refuse to look away.

Instead, I show her everything I feel for her. I want her to see it in my eyes. How she affects me, how much I want her, and how I can’t live without her. She shifts away from Zack and leans forward, her hand coming to her neck, and I smirk. She’s not over me. I arch an eyebrow at her in a challenge. She scowls and looks away. I look back at Liv.

“I’m going to try my best to show her how much I want her.” She pats my arm again and turns toward our seats.

“This weekend just got more interesting.” She mumbles. Ansley’s eyes find mine again. Game on!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ANSLEY

I TRY to keep my eyes from drifting to Lincoln and Liv, but I can't help myself. When they begin walking this way, I am fully prepared to grill Liv and find out what the hell they are talking about. Of course, Lincoln ruins that when he leans forward and says something in her ear.

She looks up and gives me an apologetic look, and it takes all I have not to glare at her when Lincoln steps in front of her and makes his way down the aisle. I move my feet out of the way and look at him in horror as he sits to my left. Before I can say anything, he's leaning over me and extending his hand to Zack.

"Hi! I'm Lincoln; I don't think we've been properly introduced." Zack gives him a friendly smile and shakes his hand.

"I'm Zack." When Lincoln retracts his hand, the back of his hand grazes my breasts, and I clench my entire body, so I don't react. He notices from the smirk I see out of the corner of my eye. I glance down the aisle to glare at Liv again, only to see Dylan looking down this way in confusion. Lincoln seems to notice, too, because he leans forward to look at Dylan.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dylan yells down, and Lincoln leans over me, placing his arm on my bare leg. I grit

my teeth. What game is he playing?

“I haven’t seen Ansley in three weeks. I want to catch up.” Lincoln yells back.

“You haven’t seen me since she moved down here.” I look back at Lincoln to see how he comes back to that.

“It’s her birthday!” He replies, and I roll my eyes, but it appeases Dylan, and Lincoln sits back. I turn to him, and he winks at me.

“What the hell are you doing?” I whisper, trying to avoid Zack from overhearing. He brings a finger up, runs it from my forehead to my ear, then tucks a stray piece of hair behind my ear, and I bite the inside of my cheek. He looks so good today in his shorts and Braves t-shirt. He doesn’t dress down often, so seeing him comfortable makes me want to straddle him here and now.

“I’m hanging out with you for your birthday.” He states. I huff and cross my arms, leaning back in my chair. “You should be glad I’m not down on one knee. After all, I did promise you I’d marry you when you turned twenty-six.” He says, and my mouth pops open. I can’t believe he remembers that.

I ignore him like I’ve been doing and turn toward Zack to start talking with him. Zack is handsome in the boy-next-door kind of way. He’s got blond hair, smooth skin, and blue eyes, but he’s not Lincoln.

“Thanks for inviting me to come. These are great seats.” Zack says, and I give him a tight smile. I met him on the dating app I helped launch a couple of months ago. When I was putting in my likes and dislikes, I put in things that were the opposite of Lincoln.

This is our second date, and I realize now what a mistake I’ve made. A finger begins gliding up my thigh, and I jump up, glaring down at Lincoln. He doesn’t acknowledge what he was doing, and I want to slap that smug look off his face so badly.

“Are you okay?” Zack asks, and I nod. Caroline and Bass look up at me too. Caroline glances over to Lincoln because she knows my reaction has something to do with him.

“I’m fine. I’m going to grab a snack and something to drink. Care...” Lincoln jumps up, too, interrupting me.

“I’ll go with you; I’m starving. I haven’t had dinner.” Internally I’m screaming, but I’m trying not to make a scene. I glance down at Zack.

“Want anything?” He lifts the peanuts he already purchased, and I give him another tight smile. Lincoln and I hurry down the aisle; when we’re in the tunnel that leads to the concession stands, I push my hands into his pecs.

“What the fuck?” I yell at him, oblivious to those around us. He tilts his head at me.

“What?” He replies. I scowl at him and walk away but then turn around, only to almost run into him because he started walking after me. He grabs my upper arms to steady me, and I pull away.

“Don’t what me? What are you doing?” He steps into my space, but I take another step back, only for him to step into me again.

“You have ignored me for six weeks, Ansley. I have had enough, so I’m not letting you ignore me anymore.” I stare at him in frustration and anger.

“Let me?” I balk. “I’m ignoring you because I’m done, Lincoln. I’m not doing this anymore.” He grabs me by my upper arms and pulls me into his body.

“I told you we are not done!” He growls, and there’s a tornado in my stomach. “You are mine, Ansley. Mine! I know I should have done this sooner, and I’m sorry. I am! But I’m doing it now. You are mine! And I will not let some Zack Morris look-alike come in and steal you away.” I want to believe him. I do. But he’s only acting like this because I came here with another guy.

He wraps one arm around my waist, and his other hand slides up my spine into my hair, gripping it tightly and adjusting how he wants me. Then his mouth is on mine. I tense, in shock that he just broke his rule. He coaxes my

mouth open, and then the dam breaks. He begins licking and exploring like he's a dying man and I'm his only saving grace.

He walks me into a wall, and I return his kisses with just as much enthusiasm. My hands cling to him as I meet each thrust of his tongue and the tornado that started in my stomach moves down to my core. Lincoln can fuck, but dear god, this man can kiss. I forget we're surrounded by people and lose myself in the storm that is Lincoln.

I can't decide if my heart is missing beats or has stopped altogether. Lincoln consumes me, and I never want him to stop. I have dreamt about this for years. The reality is so much better. He pulls my bottom lip between his teeth, and I moan. My panties are soaked, and I wouldn't be surprised if there were a wet spot on my shorts. He dives back in again, and I'm right there with him. I never want him to stop. I never want this to end.

When he moves his hand from my hair to my shoulder and down to my waist to pull me closer, a loud cheer erupts in the stadium, causing me to come to my senses, and I push him away. Oh my god!

"You kissed me?" I ask incredulously. He stares at me, his eyes widening at realizing what he just did. "I knew it! You only did that because you're jealous I'm here with someone else." His eyes harden, but I ignore it as I run my hands through my hair.

"Ansley..." He begins to say, but I swipe my hand in the air, cutting him off, and try to push him away so I can get away.

"Lincoln, I told you I'm sick of these games. I'm going back to be with my date, brother, and friends. You are going to sit next to Dylan." I hiss at him. "And you are going to fucking leave me alone! Now move!" He doesn't budge. Instead, he puts one hand above my head, caging me in.

"When will you get it through that thick head of yours that I want you? Yes, I'm jealous. I don't want you with anyone else, and I sure as fuck don't want to see you with anyone else. I'm not playing games with you. I'm laying it all out on the

line here and now. I'm telling your brother this weekend how I feel about you. I'll go back in there and sit next to him. I'll let you sit next to your Zack Morris look alike, but if he so much as lays a pinky on you, I will lose my shit. Understand?" He snaps. And I stare at him in shock. He cocks an eyebrow, and I nod.

He gives me one last hard kiss, then takes a step back with a warning look. He turns and walks back toward our seat, leaving me there staring after him, wondering what the hell just happened.

BY THE END of the Braves game, I am a bundle of nerves. Zack and I are not going to vibe. He's about as fun as watching paint dry. I give him a non answer when he asks if we can meet again soon. All the while trying to figure out if Lincoln meant what he said.

The next day Caroline, Liv and I do a day of exploring the city. We go to the aquarium, ride the Ferris wheel, do some shopping and go out to eat. When we sit down at the restaurant, we're all exhausted.

"Bass, is okay hanging out with Lincoln and Dylan today?" I ask Caroline as we wait for our drinks to arrive. She shrugs as she sips on her water.

"I told him it was going to be a girls-only day today before we came, and he said he was okay with it. I think he wanted to come because of the Braves game. He loves baseball." She replies, and I smirk.

"He also wanted to come because of you." Liv admonishes her. She chuckles and nods her head.

"You're probably right." She admits. Liv turns to me and arches an eyebrow.

"What happened with you and Lincoln yesterday?" She asks, and I gape at her. How does she know? I haven't told her or Caroline what happened yesterday, mainly because I'm still trying to process it. I play with my earring and glance away.

“What do you mean?” I reply. She tilts her head.

“He told me he was telling Dylan this weekend how he felt about you and making you two official.” With every word out of her mouth, my eyes widen. I’m surprised they haven’t popped out of my head when she’s done speaking.

“He said what?!?” I screech. People turn and stare, making me realize where we’re at. “He said what?” I whisper, and she shrugs.

“That’s what I thought he was doing when you two left. But then he came back looking pissed as hell and sat next to Dylan, and you came back avoiding him at all costs.” I gape at her, thinking back to yesterday. Was he telling the truth?

I tell them everything that happened—the kiss and what he said.

“Wow!” Caroline says. “If Sebastian were to ever say that to me....” She trails off, and I throw a piece of bread at her. She chuckles. Liv raises an eyebrow at me.

“We told you he cares about you. He was such a grump after you turned in your two weeks’ notice, but since you’ve been gone, he has not been pleasant.” Liv says.

“He has been learning everyone’s names and greeting people in the mornings lately.” She states, and I narrow my eyes.

“Really?” I ask, and they both nod. I used to tell him he needed to be nicer to his employees, or he would begin having a lot of turnovers. Our drinks arrive, and a few minutes later, our food comes, so we all dig in. I began to analyze what happened yesterday. Did Lincoln mean it?

“I guess I need to talk to him,” I tell them. “I’ve been so scared of getting hurt....” I stop, and they both give me sympathetic looks.

“Give him a chance, Ans.” Caroline encourages me, and I nod they’re right. He seemed genuine yesterday. I hope he doesn’t break my heart.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LINCOLN

I SIT on Dylan's balcony drinking a beer with him and Bass. Dylan is telling us about the show he's filming. I'm happy for him. This is something he's always wanted to do, but he didn't pursue it because his parents wanted him to go to school for business.

Initially, he and I were going to go into business together, but after his parents died, he decided to pursue this. He's had a few acting jobs here and there to help pay the bills, but his inheritance helped him stay afloat.

If only he knew the hell Ansley had been through the past eight years, he would have done more to help her. But I kept her secrets. I lean forward and put my elbows on my knees, listening to him, but he stops and glances at me.

"What's going on with you? You're being quiet." He asks. I sigh and lean back, running my hand through my hair. I share a look with Bass, and he gives me an encouraging nod. I inhale, trying to gain some courage.

"I have feelings for Ansley," I admit. He stares at me for several seconds before he stands from his chair and walks to the railing. He turns and faces me, leaning against it. He looks between Bass and me before settling on me.

"By feelings, you mean you like her more than just a little sister?" He asks, and I nod my head, watching his reaction.

“Huh.” He states and runs his hand down his jaw. “When did this happen?” He asks, and I’m not sure how to answer that.

“I don’t know how honest you want me to be with you,” I admit, and he narrows his eyes at me.

“Well, considering you haven’t been honest with me at all. I’m going to say I want complete honesty.” I look over at Bass, and he raises his hands in an I don’t know gesture.

“It started on her sixteenth birthday,” I tell him, and he pushes off the railing and begins to pace.

“What?!?” He rakes his hands through his hair. “You were twenty-two!” I sigh and look up toward the sky.

“Trust me. I know.” I look back at him, and he’s stopped pacing and is staring at me.

“I fought it. That’s why I stopped calling her after that. I only talked to her when she called you, and I happened to be around. We never started talking again until we moved back home when our parents died. Even then, when she was eighteen, I still fought it.” I explain to him. He leans against the railing again.

“So, what? Are you two a thing now?” He asks, and I rub the back of my neck. Complete honesty. That’s what he asked for.

“We had a secret relationship going on for a little while, but she broke it off when she came to Atlanta. I still want her, but she refuses until I come clean to you. So, here I am.” I spread my hands wide and shrug.

“You had a secret relationship?” Dylan asks, and he starts pacing again.

“Look, I know I made a promise....” I stop when Dylan turns on me.

“You kissed her.” He states, and I nod. He sits back down, putting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

“It’s not like it matters. I didn’t keep my promise either.”

“Don’t you dare!” I respond. “It was an accident, and I don’t blame you,” I say emphatically. Bass looks back and forth between us, his eyes creasing in confusion, but he doesn’t say anything.

Dylan has been quiet for a long time, so I let him. He obviously needs to think this over. This is his little sister. He slaps his knees, stands up, and leans against the railing again. He looks back and forth between Bass and me, then points at him.

“Did you know?” He asks Bass, and his mouth pops open.

“Well, yes.” He responds. “But my girlfriend is Ansley’s best friend, so…” Bass trails off, and I snort. He glares at me, obviously not liking being put on the spot.

“So, when did you two kiss? You said it’s been a secret?” He asks outright, and I think back to yesterday. That kiss was amazing. Having sex with Ansley is fantastic, but when kissing is just as amazing as sex, it is otherworldly.

“Yesterday was the first time I kissed her,” I inform him, and he cocks his head.

“But…” Realization dawns on him, and he pushes away from the railing coming at me. I jump from my seat, knocking it over, and Bass jumps from his seat getting between us. “You fucked her, but you wouldn’t kiss her?”

When he puts it like that, it makes me sound like a complete tool.

“I know, Dylan. I know!” I exclaims. Bass looks back and forth between us.

“You good?” He asks, and we both nod, so he returns to his seat. Dylan returns to the railing, but I stay where I’m at.

“Why would you do that to her?” He asks me, and I rub my hands down my face.

“Honest truth?” I ask him again, and he nods. “I couldn’t deny my feelings and attraction for her anymore, but I thought I could hold out by not kissing her. The deeper I got in with her, the more I realized I couldn’t do that to her.” I tell him.

“Can I say something?” Bass interjects, and we both look at him. Dylan waves his hand at him to go ahead, and I shrug.

“Look, all Ansley wants is for Lincoln to choose her. You haven’t done that completely from listening to this entire conversation. I don’t know what kind of promise you two had, and I understand that Ansley is your little sister and all, but she’s a grown woman now and can make her own decisions. She’s also a gorgeous grown woman who will eventually catch another guy’s eye if you don’t get your shit together. Case in point she was with another guy at the game yesterday.” He states and sits back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. The thought of Ansley with another guy makes me want to punch a wall.

“I don’t care about the promise. Honestly, it’s not something I walk around thinking about every day. I know you and Ansley are close, but you two also argue a lot, so it never crossed my mind. But apparently, this has been building between you two for a while.” He states, and I nod. He sighs.

“Are you asking for my blessing?” He asks. I pick my chair up and sit back down, staring at the city’s lights. Am I asking him for that?

“No. Would I like it? Yes. If you don’t give it, will it stop me from going after her? No.” I tell him. He pushes away from the railing and walks to me, stopping in front of me. I’m hoping like hell he’s not about to finish what he started earlier. Instead, he extends his hand, so I grip it, and we shake.

“I want her to be happy, and I want you to be happy. You two are the most important people in my life. We made a pact, but we were six, and that was twenty-six years ago. Growing up, she had a rough go of it, and I was too blind to see it. So, I want to make sure she’s happy now.” I stare up at him in shock.

This went a lot better than I expected. His eyes harden, and I wait to see what he’s going to say.

“You better not hurt her. Then I’ll have a problem.” I chuckle and shake my head.

“I won’t. I’ll do everything I can to make sure she’s happy.” I promise him, and he nods.

“I’m holding you to that. Do I need to talk to Ansley?” He asks, and I shake my head.

“No. I need to work things out with her. I know I screwed up, but I’ll fix it. Hopefully, she’ll forgive me.” I raise my hands and shrug, and he claps me on the shoulder.

“Ansley is stubborn as hell. So, good luck.” I snort at his comment. He has no idea. Now that I’ve had this conversation with Dylan, I want to march over to her apartment and demand she talks to me. But she was unequivocal that today was a girl’s day only. The girls and Bass are leaving early tomorrow to go home, and I’ll have her all to myself for the remainder of the day. I’m not leaving until she talks to me.

“Can I make one request?” Dylan questions, and I glance up at him and motion for him to go ahead. “I need you and Ansley to talk to me. About that day, how things were different for you two growing up, and why you hid it from me.” He pleads. I stare at him for a long time before nodding. This is not going to be easy.

THE FOLLOWING DAY we all meet at a cafe to eat breakfast before Caroline, Bass, and Liv leave to return home. Ansley ignores me again, but I’m not allowing that today. I sit next to her at our table, and she immediately stiffens. I don’t engage with her yet. I wait until everyone orders, and she begins to loosen up.

“What’d you girls do yesterday?” Dylan asks as he sips on the coffee that was brought to him. Ansley begins to tell about their trip to the aquarium. I watch her as she gets excited, talking about the otters. I place my arm on the back of her chair, and she doesn’t seem to notice.

“They’re so cute! I just wanted to hug one.” She states, and she turns toward me with a smile. I grin at her, and for once,

her smile doesn't disappear. She's gorgeous when she lets her guard down.

Her red hair is wavy today. She's wearing skinny jeans and a simple white t-shirt. When she turns back toward the table and everyone else, I take a piece of her hair between my fingers and begin playing with it. It takes her a moment to notice, but when she does, she goes completely still.

She moves her hands from the table to her lap, and I watch her body language closely. She rubs her hands up and down her thighs like she's trying to decide what to do. After a few seconds, she leans back in the chair, and I want to pump my fist in the air. It's a small victory, but she's not pulling away from my touch.

I move my hand to the nape of her neck to see her reaction. She sucks in a breath but doesn't move away. I want to touch her freely as Bass does with Caroline. I want to lean over and kiss her on the forehead. But I will have to take this slow with her, so I don't scare her off.

She's convinced I'm going to hurt her, and I will do everything within my power to show her I'll be here to protect her and treat her how she should have been treated every fucking day of her life. I watch her, not caring if other people see me staring.

Her hand moves from her thigh to my knee, and she digs her nails in. I chuckle darkly and grip the hair at the nape of her neck. I want to pull it but force myself not to make a scene.

Her breathing increases, and my cock swells. Fuck! What I wouldn't give to bend her over this table now and show everyone who she belongs to. Instead, I'm playing this game with her. Honestly, it's probably my favorite game. I lean over and put my lips next to her ear.

"Keep it up, sweetheart, and I'll have you screaming my name," I warn her huskily. Her nails dig into my leg harder, and I chuckle.

“I can’t wait either, baby. You better eat up. You’ll need your strength.” She whimpers, and I lean back as the server brings our food to the table. Everyone digs in, and I focus on other people at the table because if I don’t, I’ll drag Ansley out of here like a caveman.

“What’d you guys do yesterday?” Liv asks as she digs into her pancakes. How such a tiny person eats so much, I’ll never know. Dylan and I share a look, but it’s Bass who speaks up.

“Not much. We did a brew bus tour, grabbed something to eat, and returned to Dylan’s apartment.” He tells her, and Caroline huffs.

“I can’t wait until I can drink again. I miss wine.” Everyone laughs, and Ansley leans forward.

“Liv and I get the honor of taking you out and getting you drunk once you have the little peanut.” I watch on in amusement as Bass frowns. Caroline glances up at him and rolls her eyes.

“You’ll have to fight him for it.” She responds, and Ansley arches an eyebrow at Bass. He shakes his head and wraps his arm around Caroline, pulling her into his side. After everyone gets done eating, we walk out to the parking lot. Ansley gives Caroline and Liv a hug.

“I’ll see you in a few weeks.” She promises them, and they nod. This has been an adjustment for them, but I hate how sad Ansley looks. I’d like to know if she’s made any friends here. Dylan hasn’t said anything, but I’m determined to find out. After they leave, Ansley turns to Dylan and me, eyeing me warily.

“I have to go to work,” Dylan states, and we both look at him in surprise.

“What?” You said you were off all weekend.” Ansley whines, and Dylan shrugs.

“I was, but apparently, one of the scenes we filmed Friday didn’t look right, so we have to film it again, so we’ll be on track tomorrow.” He explains, and Ansley huffs. But it causes anticipation to rise in my stomach.

We'll have uninterrupted alone time. Ansley glances at me and then away like she realizes this. I took tomorrow off, a rare occasion, and I plan on taking full advantage of it. I'm not leaving until tomorrow afternoon to go back home. Dylan tells us bye and leaves.

Ansley stands awkwardly next to my car. She rode over with Dylan thinking she might drink some mimosas, but she never did. I motion to my car.

"Come on. We'll go back to your place and hang out." I walk to the passenger door and open it for her. She stays at the back of my car for several long seconds before taking a deep breath and walking toward me. She stops in front of me, her eyes full of anxiousness. I bring my hand up and rub her cheek with the back of my knuckles.

"Don't look so scared. I won't bite." I motion for her to climb in, and she does. Then I lean down, pull the seat belt over her, and buckle her in. She huffs, but I ignore it as I bring my lips to her ear.

"Unless you want me to." Her breathing stutters, and her tongue licks her lips quickly. I smirk and close the door. I'm going to have fun with her today.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ANSLEY

I SHIFT uncomfortably in Lincoln's car. My panties are wet from all our touching at the restaurant, and anticipation stirs in my stomach. Since the conversation I had with Liv and Caroline last night, I've wondered if I overreacted at the baseball game.

"Do you have any friends here?" Lincoln asks, and I turn my head toward him. I swallow as he glances at me before looking back at the road. You have to drive defensively in Atlanta. Moving from a small town here has been a bit of a shock. I clasp my hands in my lap as I stare out the windshield.

"No. Not really." I reply. I try not to sound sad, but it's hard. He slows to a stop at a traffic light and looks at me.

"Why not?" I shrug and look at him.

"Everyone is so fake. I'm nice to everyone but going out with them is out of the question. I like my job, but..." I trail off, and he arches an eyebrow.

"But?" He encourages me to continue. How do I tell him about the strange guy at work? The odd looks he gives me and how uneasy he makes me feel. Or how do I tell him I'm homesick? I thought I'd love everything about the city. My entire life, I couldn't wait to move out of Mississippi and

somewhere with more energy. But it's not as great as I thought it would be. The newness is beginning to wear off.

"I don't trust the people I work with. They keep asking me to have drinks with them, and I keep saying I will, but I never do." Lincoln raises his hand to brush my hair out of my face and grip my neck. There's only one person I don't trust, but I don't want to think about that right now.

"Trust your gut, sweetheart. If they don't seem like good people, they probably aren't." He says, and my heart begins to beat rapidly. God, I've missed him. He begins to lean forward like he's going to kiss me again, but someone behind us is honking their horn. We break apart, and Lincoln turns to see the light has turned green.

The remainder of the ride to my apartment is done in silence, but it's not uncomfortable. He lets me be the DJ and laughs at me as I sing to him. As he pulls up to my apartment complex, I give him the security code, and he parks next to the Corvette. Butterflies take off in my stomach as we make our way to my door. He hasn't been here since the day he helped me move in.

I unlock the door, and his body heat engulfs me as he stands close. Opening the door, I let him in, and he glances around, a smile forming.

"Wow, Ans! This place looks great." I smile at his praise. It's a small apartment, but it's mine, and I'm proud of it.

"You could use a little bit more color at your place." I admonish him, and he rolls his eyes as he leans against the bar that serves as my table.

"How about the next time you come to town, I'll let you add some color?" He suggests. I break out into a smile and clap my hands.

"Really?" He nods as he pushes away from the bar and walks toward me. "Either blue or red," I tell him. Everything in his house is black or dark gray. I've been telling him for years that he needs more color. He comes to stand in front of me.

“Definitely red.” He says as he brings his thumb and forefinger up to rub a piece of my hair between them. I swallow as I stare at him. He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me close, leaning his forehead against mine. “I missed you so much, sweetheart.”

Why is he so hard to resist? He’s like a drug that I keep coming back to. I can only go without him for so long, but I’m addicted to him, and he’s the only one that satisfies my cravings.

“I missed you too.” I finally admit. It’s like handing my heart over and not knowing if it will be returned in shambles. His hands move from my waist to my ass, pulling me closer. His hard length presses against me, and I want him to kiss me again, and then I want him to fuck me. His lips brush mine lightly, almost imperceptibly. When he doesn’t move, frustration builds along my spine.

“Lincoln!” I breathe out. As if that’s all the encouragement he needs, his lips come down on mine, and he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth. I gasp, and then his tongue explores my mouth.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, holding on to him as he pulls my shirt out of my waistband and touches my bare skin. He pushes one hand up my shirt and rubs it along my spine, stopping at the clasp of my bra. He unsnaps it; then he rubs his hand along my ribcage and cups my breast in his hand.

My hips buck against him, and he puts his knee between my legs, and I shamelessly ride his thigh, looking for friction. His thumb flicks against my nipple, causing me to moan. His thigh is pressing the seam of my jeans into my clit, and I may come like this. My hands come to his shoulders, rubbing his pecs and then unbuttoning his shirt.

Our mouths never part; it’s like we went so long without this now we can’t get enough. He’s like a cup of water after walking through the desert. I push his shirt off his shoulders impatiently, and then he lifts my shirt off me, our lips parting from each other long enough for it to clear my head.

I let my bra fall to the ground, and then he's guiding me to the couch. He sits down as I stand in front of him. He stares at me as his hands grasp my breasts, massaging them. He kisses my stomach and flicks his tongue into my belly button, causing me to gasp. I didn't know I'd like that.

He unbuttons my jeans and pushes them down my hips along with my thong. I stand before him naked, his eyes traveling from the top of my head to the tips of my toes and back up again. He goes to lie down, but I stop him. He arches an eyebrow at me.

"I want you naked too," I tell him, and he smirks as he stands, brushing his naked chest against mine, and I shiver. His hands go to the button of his jeans, but I bring my hands up to stop him. I move his hands, and they come to my hips, massaging me as I unbutton his jeans and then pull the zipper down.

I push the jeans down from his waist and boxers and watch as his cock springs out. I lick my lips at the sight of the red tip. He replaces my hands with his to push his jeans and boxers off and kick them to the side. I almost drop to my knees, but he stops me.

"Oh, no, sweetheart. I've been dreaming of tasting this sweet pussy for weeks." He expresses as he brings his hand between us to cup me, and I groan as his finger slides through my folds. I lean my head back toward the ceiling and moan at the feel of him. He brings his other hand to grip my chin and make me look at him.

"I've told you more than once that you're mine. I'm going to remind you again. You. Are. Mine." He shoves two fingers into my pussy, and I gasp. "This pussy is mine." He pulls his hand back and slams his fingers back into me. My hands grip his shoulders so I don't crumble to the ground. He leans forward as he continues to thrust his fingers into me.

"For every week, you ignored me." He says as he licks my neck causing goosebumps to break out on my entire body. "I'm going to make you come that many times." He tells me, and I shake my head.

I'm already so close, but there's no way. I lay my forehead on his shoulder as he thrust his fingers into me.

"Oh god, Lincoln." I swallow, trying to catch my breath. "I can't. I won't be able to." I tell him, and he chuckles as he brings his thumb up to press against my clit, bringing me that much closer to the edge. "Fuck!" I whisper.

"You can and you will." He tells me as he makes me fall over the edge; my legs give out, and he catches me as I come around his fingers. I cling to him as I ride it out. It's so intense. When I loosen my grip, he leans back, still holding me, but removes his fingers, brings them to his mouth, and licks them clean.

"So sweet." He moans, and all I can do is stare at him and pant. He lays down on the couch and motions to me.

"Come on, sweetheart." I arch my eyebrow at him. He wants me to ride his face, but I also want his cock in my mouth, so I turn and straddle him backward. I glance over my shoulder, and he arches a brow at me with a smile playing on his lips.

"What are you doing?" He asks. Even though I know, he knows. I smirk at him.

"I'm about to suck your cock." I tell him, and the smile that is playing on his lips shows itself. He grabs my hips and pulls me up his chest until I straddle his face. Before I can lean down and take his cock in my mouth, he's pushing me down and licking up my slit. I fall forward and grab his thigh.

"Oh god!" I feel him chuckle more than I hear him. I lose myself in the feeling of him licking me and sucking me for a few seconds before I focus on his cock.

When I do, I see him leaking, and I love it. I love that I affect him as much as he affects me. I lean down and lick him clean, loving his salty taste. His hands tighten on my hips, but he doesn't stop.

He moves one hand from my hips, brings it to my pussy, and holds me open as he dives in, making me groan. I feel

close to the edge again, which seems impossible, but with Lincoln, I'm learning it's not.

I suck his tip into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it, causing him to begin licking and sucking harder, pushing me closer to the edge. I try to hold it off as I drop my head down his entire length until he hits the back of my throat.

That causes him to stutter in his ministrations, and I hum in victory. But it only lasts for a brief second before he thrusts two fingers into me and my nails dig into his thighs.

I'm determined to make him come before me. I begin massaging his balls, causing him to stutter again. He moves his other hand and begins to rub my ass as he licks and sucks and finger fucks me. I pull off of him and place my forehead on his upper thigh.

"Lincoln." I moan out. He pulls his mouth away from me for a moment.

"Come on, sweetheart. Stop fighting it." Then his mouth lands on me, and his thumb rests on my puckered hole. I stiffen for half a second before relaxing, realizing he's not going to penetrate me. He rubs his thumb around the ring, and I swallow.

I wanted to make him come first, but I couldn't focus long enough to do it. There are so many sensations. He sucks my clit into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue. Then he pulls his fingers out of me, slamming them back in, and pressing his thumb into my hole, almost penetrating me, and I lose it.

I ride his fingers and his face. Many words come out of my mouth, but I don't know what I'm saying. I'm a blubbering mess. It keeps going and going, and finally, I fall limp. I can't move. I've died and gone to heaven.

Lincoln removes his fingers, and somehow he lifts me and maneuvers me so my head is on his chest and not his thighs, but I still can't move. Lincoln rubs my hair down to my back and then back again. He whispers sweet nothings in my ear, but I don't quite grasp them. After a few more minutes, I stir, and his mouth comes to my forehead and kisses me.

“You back with me, sweetheart?” He asks as his arms wrap around me and hold me tight.

“Mmmm....” It’s all I can vocalize at the moment, and he chuckles.

“Do you need anything? Want some water?” He questions and I shake my head as I burrow into his chest. His arms tighten around me for a second before loosening, and I lift my head to look into his eyes.

“That was amazing,” I tell him, and he gives me a satisfied smile. One hand comes up to brush my hair from my face as he cups my jaw. He leans up and gently kisses me, and I relish his lips on mine. I’ll never get tired of it. “It wasn’t very nice of you not to let me make you come, though.” He snorts.

“We have all night, sweetheart.” I hum.

“According to you, it’s going to be a long night with how many orgasms you plan on giving me,” I tell him and lean up so I can look at him. He gives me a soft smile.

“We can stop if that’s something you’re uncomfortable with.” I tilt my head thinking about it. I’ve never been a multiple-orgasm type of woman, but I don’t say that.

“So, I can just say no more at any moment, and you’ll stop.” He begins to nod immediately.

“Yes. Absolutely. I only want to make you feel good. Even if it’s pain, it will make the pleasure much better.” He explains, and I stare at him in confusion.

“Pain?” I ask.

“Like spanking.” He states, and my mind immediately goes to the night I climbed into his bedroom window when I attempted to kiss him.

“You’ve thought of doing that?” I question. “Have you done that with other women?” I mumble and bite the inside of my cheek. I don’t know if I want to know the answer to this. His hand comes up to cup my jaw.

“No. I haven’t. I’ve always wanted to experiment, but I never found anyone I wanted to experiment with.” I stare at

him as I suck in a breath. His hand runs along my jaw to my nape, pulling me in until our lips almost touch.

“I want to experiment with you.” He whispers. And I stare at him, my eyes wide.

“I want that too,” I admit, and his lips land on mine. I wrap myself around him. I didn’t know it could be like this.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LINCOLN

FINALLY, HAVING my hands on Ansley after her ignoring me for six weeks is like being lifted out of my own personal hell. My cock is aching to be buried in her, but I ignore it. I wrap my arms around her waist as I drink her in.

My tongue massages hers, and I can't believe it took me this long to give in to this. I pull back a little, and I'd be lying if I said my ego wasn't being stroked with how long it takes her to come to her senses. When her eyes open, I push her hair back.

"Let's go to your room," I whisper, and her eyes widen a little.

"A bed is the only place we haven't had sex yet," I explain, and she chuckles. She lifts, and I help her stand as I admire her. She is gorgeous. Her tits are big enough to fit in the palm of my hands, and her hips are the perfect size to grab hold of while I'm thrusting into her. When my eyes meet hers, she arches an eyebrow.

I smirk, bringing my thumb up to rub over her bottom lip. I stand, grab her hand, and lead her to the bedroom that's only a few steps away. She stands at the foot of her bed and turns to me. My cock is angry and tired of being ignored. I grasp it and begin to stroke. Her eyes fall to it, and she watches as I stroke myself. She licks her lips, and one side of my mouth tips up.

“Like what you see, sweetheart?” I ask, and she nods. She starts to walk toward me, but I shake my head.

“As much as I’d love to come in that pretty mouth, I need to bury myself in your pussy.” I growl, and she gasps. “Get on the bed on all fours.” She hesitates, and I step forward, still grasping my cock.

“Later, we are going to establish some rules,” I state to her, watching her swallow.

“Rules?” She squeaks out. Taking another step, I explain,

“Yes. Rules. Limits. Such as every time you don’t follow my instructions, immediately, I get to spank that pretty perky ass of yours.” Her hand moves up to the base of her throat, and she exhales shakily. She rubs her luscious thighs together while tugging her bottom lip between her teeth. Her reactions proved that my girl was a dirty one, and I fucking loved it.

I smirk and continue, “Does that idea make you hot, gorgeous? Do you like the thought of my hand reddening that perfect ass?” She remains quiet, shrugging her shoulders as the red creep up her neck; she looks away.

I stroke myself and demand, “Eyes on me, Ansley.” She turns back, eyes wide, pupils were blown with need. Oh yes, she is definitely my dirty girl.

“Communication is key here. So when I ask a question, you answer it. Honestly.” I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her close, trapping my cock between us. I’m two seconds away from forming into a caveman, but I hold it together long enough to finish this. “Okay?” She nods.

“Okay.” She responds, and I smile at her, leaning down to kiss her.

“That’s my good girl,” I tell her, and she practically purrs from my praise. “Now, do you like the idea of me spanking you?” I ask her again, and she takes a deep, shuddering breath.

“Yes.” She looks down like she’s ashamed, but I put my fingers under her chin and lift until her eyes meet mine. “I’ve fantasized about you doing that to me since I was eighteen.” She admits, and a rumble escapes from my chest as I think

back on the night she climbed through my window. I run my lips up her jaw.

“Is that why you’re always such a brat?” I ask her, and she giggles.

“Maybe. But I also like to piss you off.” I lean back, shake my head at her, move my hand to the back of her neck, and wrap her hair in my fist, pulling it slightly.

“Well, you can be a brat all you want from here on out but expect to be walking around with a permanently red ass,” I warn her, and I see excitement light in her eyes. This will be fun, but I’ve had enough of the talking. I need to be inside her in the next two seconds. Turning her around, I slapped her on the ass, and she yelps.

“That’s just a teaser. Now get on the bed on all fours. I believe I still owe you four more orgasms.” I tell her, and she shakes her head but still crawls onto the bed on all fours.

“Lincoln, there’s no way I’m going to be able to come again.” She tells me. I crawl onto the bed behind her, making her spread her legs so I can fit between them. I wrap one hand around her throat and the other around her waist and pull her up, so her back is against my front. I put my lips against her ear.

“You’ve said that several times sweetheart. Why?” I ask her as I hold her in place. She places her hands on my arm around her waist, clutching it.

“I...” She trails off.

“Ansley...” I warn, and she tries to shake her head.

“I want to tell you, but you may not want to hear it.” She whispers, and I hold her tighter as I turn my head and kiss her right below her ear.

“You can tell me anything. I promise. I may not always like it, but I will listen.” I exclaim, and she swallows against my hand.

“Other men I’ve been with could barely get me off. I always had to finish the job. You’re the only guy that’s ever

been able to make me come.” She pauses like she’s trying to gather her courage.

“I’ve never been able to make myself come more than once. I thought it was physically impossible until you. I heard women could have multiple orgasms, but I thought it was lies until you.” She sighs against me after she finishes talking as if glad she got that off her chest.

“It’s because you didn’t have someone in tune with you,” I tell her, gently pushing her back down so she’s on all fours again. She looks over her shoulder at me.

“And you’re in tune with me?” She asks as I grip my cock and line it up with her entrance. She’s still glistening.

“Absolutely. I’ve been in tune with you for years, sweetheart.” Then I slam into her, and she falls forward; catching herself on her elbows, she grips the blanket. I rock my hips against her, and we both moan. She feels so good around my cock. She turns her head to look back at me again.

“What about...” She trails off when I pull out and push back in, making sure I roll my hips to hit all the right spots. But she doesn’t give up. “What about me?” She finally gets out. I lean forward and mouth her ear.

“You get to in your head, sweetheart. I help you relax and get out of your head.” I say and roll my hips into her causing her to clutch at the blankets more.

“Lincoln.” She moans out, and I love the way it sounds. I lean back, rub my hands down her spine to her ass, and massage her ass cheeks, pulling them apart so I can stare down at her hole. I’m obsessed. I bring my thumb to it again and circle it, causing her to sputter.

“I want to fuck this ass so bad,” I exclaim, and she moans. I slip my thumb down, gathering some of her wetness, and then bring it back up to rub around her. She whimpers, and I pause.

“Do you want me to stop, sweetheart?” I ask her, and she shakes her head. “That’s my girl.” I praise her for her immediate answer.

Licking my lips, I gather more of her wetness, rub again, and press the tip of my thumb into her. I don't move it; I hold it there and continue to roll my hips into her. I tip my head back and moan. God, she feels so good.

"Ansley, you're doing so good at taking all I've got, my cock, just everything I give you." I praise her, and she whines as she presses back against me. I feel her walls flutter, telling me she's close.

"Lincoln." She gasps out. "I need..." She starts rocking against me harder. She's in her head, so I put my hand on her hip and stop her.

"Stop thinking, sweetheart. Just let it happen." I encourage her, and she moans as I angle her hips, so I rub right against her g-spot.

"I love being inside you, Ans. It's like you were made for me." I rub my palm up her spine, gather her hair into my fist, and pull it, so her head tilts back.

"So fucking beautiful," I declare. I look down at my thumb inside her and my cock moving in and out of her. "So fucking sexy." I move my thumb, and she whimpers again.

"Touch your clit, sweetheart." She adjusts herself so she can move her hand down her body. When she touches her clit she begins to moan.

"Oh god..." I feel her tighten around me. "Oh my god. Lincoln." She's chasing her orgasm, and then she's exploding around me. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." She says over and over again. I slowly take my thumb out of her, gripping her hips, and pound into her chasing my orgasm. At the last second, I pull out and come all over her back.

She collapses on her stomach, and I fall to her side, landing on my stomach. I wrap my arm around her, not caring that it's landing on my release. I pull her close, nuzzling my nose into her neck and shoulder. She turns her head so she's facing me.

"I think you killed me." She whispers, and I chuckle. "My tombstone will say death by orgasm." I snort, and she grins at

me. I lean forward and kiss her on the nose.

“I’ll give you a little reprieve so we can shower and hydrate, but you still owe me three more orgasms,” I tell her, and she smirks as she leans forward and kisses me. It’s a lazy kiss, and I love it. When we pull apart, I push up from the bed.

“I’ll be right back. I’ll go grab a washcloth to clean off your back.” When I return, she’s sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands bracing her, and her head is down. I sit down next to her and gently wash off her back.

“You okay?” I ask, scared I’ve hurt her in some way. She looks up at me, and I notice the tears in her eyes. “Ans?” I place my hand on her jaw and wrap my arm around her, discarding the washcloth.

“I’m fine.” She sniffs. “It’s just...” She sighs and looks back down at the ground. “I’ve wanted this for so long. I’ve wanted you for so long.” At her words, I pull her onto my lap, her arms immediately go around my neck, and I lean forward, kissing her jaw and throat wherever my lips touch.

“Me too, sweetheart. Me too.” I kiss her softly and pull back, keeping my forehead against hers. “I’m never letting you go,” I tell her, and she smiles at me lazily. I pat her ass, encouraging her to get up. She slides off my lap, and I lead her to the bathroom. We shower together, washing each other, and I love every second of it.

Ansley doesn’t let her guard down often, but I have the privilege of seeing her just as she is. When we’re done showering, she throws on my discarded shirt, and I pull on my boxers. We walk to her kitchen, and she pops some popcorn while I grab us a bottle of water. As we wait for the popcorn to finish, I pull her against me so she’s standing between my legs.

“The fact that you’re in my shirt and not wearing any panties makes me wonder if I can get an orgasm out of you before the popcorn stops popping.” The microwave beeps as soon as the words are out of my mouth, and she arches an eyebrow. She leans forward and gives me a peck.

“That would be a no.” She chuckles, and I tickle her. She swats at me as she pulls the microwave open and grabs the popcorn. I shake my head at her. “Will you grab a bowl? It’s in that cabinet.” I grab it and place it on the counter for her to pour the popcorn in. We walk into the living room and sit down on the couch.

She turns on the TV and pulls up Hulu. “Want to watch *The Golden Girls*?” She asks, and I throw my head back to laugh.

“Hell, yes. I haven’t watched that show in years.” She beams at me as she turns it on. I wrap my arm around her, and she leans into my side as we share the popcorn. This day couldn’t be any more perfect.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ANSLEY

I MOAN at the feeling building in my core. My breathing hitches when I feel fingers spread me open and a tongue lick up my center. I don't know how I got here, but I don't want it to stop. I suck in a breath, and my eyes fly open when I realize I fell asleep watching *The Golden Girls*, which is still playing in the background. The mouth leaves me.

“You awake, sweetheart?” Lincoln asks, and I make an obscene noise when he sucks my clit between his lips. My hands fly to his head. The last thing I remember was laying my head on Lincoln's chest and him wrapping his arms around me, and now here I am. What a way to wake up. He inserts a finger into my pussy, and I can't hold back anymore. I begin to thrust my hips. He inserts another finger and hooks it just so.

“Oh!” How is this even possible? He sucks and licks, and I want him to come up here and kiss me and then fuck me. “I'll never...” I trail off when my orgasm hits me like a freight train. “Lincoln! Oh god!” He sucks and licks through it to prolong it, but then I'm squirming away because I'm so sensitive.

He slowly crawls up my body, pushing up my t-shirt. He kisses my thigh and then my stomach and breast as he makes his way up to kiss me on my mouth. I thread my fingers through his hair and kiss him back with enthusiasm. When he pulls away, he lays his head on my chest.

“You’ll never, what?” He asks, and I lay there trying to figure out what he’s asking.

“Huh?” I question. He leans up, placing his chin in his hand.

“You said you’ll never, and then you were coming.” He tells me, a grin on his mouth, and I feel my cheeks heat at his bluntness. I wrap my arms around him, holding him tight.

“I was going to say I’ll never get enough of you,” I say as I look up into his hazel eyes. His mouth tips into a larger smile, and he leans down to kiss me softly.

“I’ll never get enough of you either, sweetheart.” After a few moments of silence, he leans over, grabs one of the water bottles from earlier, and hands it to me, helping me sit up. “You need to hydrate.” I arch an eyebrow at him but take several gulps of water because I am thirsty.

“I’m going to need you to be my official alarm clock and do that every morning.” He chuckles and takes the water back when I hand it to him as he places it back on the coffee table.

“Don’t tempt me. I’ll do that in a heartbeat.” He states as he lays back down and rests his head on me. “You owe me two more.” He says, and I laugh.

“If this is your idea of punishment, I may ignore you longer next time,” I tell him, and he pinches my nipple, causing me to squeal. I love this side of Lincoln. I’m the only person who gets to see it. He rests his chin on me as he looks up at me, and I brush his hair back from his forehead.

“Please don’t do that to me again, Ans.” He begs, and I cock my head at him before glancing away.

“I didn’t like ignoring you, Lincoln,” I admit, and his hand comes up to cup my cheek, forcing me to look at him.

“Then, why?” He asks, and I exhale in frustration pushing him off me; standing from the couch, I begin to pace before looking back at him. He’s sitting on the sofa, his elbows on his knees and his hands steepled as he watches me.

“You’re honestly telling me you don’t know why I ignored you,” I exclaim, adrenaline rushing through my body. I’ve been avoiding this fight, but it’s about to happen.

“I understand why you were angry at me, but you’ve never ignored me before.” He explains, and I scowl at him. I feel tears build in my eyes, and I hate it.

“I ignored you because I wanted you to fight for me. I wanted you to tell Dylan and his promise to go to hell, and I wanted you to choose me. Instead, you shut down on me like you always do and let me leave.” The tears fall freely now, and I swipe at them in frustration.

“I lived for years in Dylan’s shadow,” I whisper and take a deep shuddering breath. “I can’t do that anymore. I’m not asking you to choose me over him. But he would get over it eventually. Dylan can be oblivious sometimes, but he does love both of us.” I pause, not knowing what else to say.

“I talked to Dylan last night.” He says, and my eyes widen.

“You did?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He replies.

“I kind of hoped you had with the way you were acting at the restaurant,” I mumble. “But I didn’t want to get my hopes up.” I bite my lip and look away. Lincoln sighs regret in his eyes.

“Well, I did, and he was pissed.” I run my hands through my hair as anxiety stirs in my stomach. “Not because of what you think.” He assures me. “He was mad because, as he so eloquently put it, I fucked you and didn’t kiss you.”

“What?!?” I screech and begin pacing again.

“I wasn’t sure how it was going to go a few times. Bass had to referee at one point.” I cover my face with my hands.

“Oh god! Bass heard that.” I say in horror.

“Bass also said you wanted me to choose you, and it seemed like I hadn’t done that completely yet.” He reaches for me and pulls me between his legs. He wraps his arms around my thighs and lays his cheek against me, hugging me.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, returning his embrace. He lets me go, and I sit on the coffee table. Our legs are intertwined, and he takes my hands, playing with my fingers.

“Then he said you were a grown woman who could make your own decisions. If you wanted me, then Dylan needed to get over whatever promise I made, and I needed to get over it before you moved on.” He explains, and I shake my head. I’ll never move on. Lincoln is it for me, always has been, and always will be.

“So, Dylan finally told me he wants us to be happy, and he hadn’t thought of the promise in a while.” I shake my head and give him a small smile.

He pats his thighs. I narrow my eyes but move from the coffee table to him and straddle his lap. He wraps his hands around my hips and pulls me closer as he stares at me.

“He also said if I hurt you, he’ll kill me.” I snort but lean forward, wrapping my arms around his neck. His hands travel up my spine and tangle in my hair.

“What does this mean exactly?” I ask him.

“I want you, Ansley, in every way. I want your body, but I also want your mind and heart. I need to earn that, and I will. I promise.” My heart beats uncontrollably in my chest from his words. This is all I wanted. I wanted him to admit how he felt for me, and I wanted him to stand up to Dylan.

“So, Dylan is okay with us?” I ask him, and he shrugs.

“Yes. I’m beginning to realize the promise was probably a bigger deal to me than it was to him. I needed that promise to keep you at arm’s length until I couldn’t anymore.” He pulls me closer as if he can’t stand the idea of having any space between us. I squirm against him, trying to adjust, get comfortable, and feel his hard length. I lean my forehead against his.

“The way I feel for you is so intense,” I admit, and he smiles.

“You have no idea, sweetheart. You’re inside me all the time. I hated not seeing and talking to you every day when you moved here. It has been pure torture.” My tongue comes out to lick my lips, and it grazes against him because we are so close. He stills, but I ignore it for now.

“Why didn’t you try to stop me?” He leans up and brushes his mouth against mine like he can’t take it anymore but pulls away.

“As much as I missed you, I knew you needed to do this. You needed to know you could do this on your own. And you have. I’m so proud of you, Ans.” He says, and I sigh.

“I didn’t, Linc. Dylan helped me.” I admit.

“What do you mean?” He asks.

“The apartment complex wanted the first month’s rent, last month’s rent, plus a substantial deposit because of my credit and eviction, so I was going to sell the Corvette.” Lincoln comes to a complete standstill beneath me.

“I was talking to Dylan one night, and I finally came clean to him about everything. He agreed to put the apartment under his name, so I’d only have to pay the first month’s rent and the required small deposit.”

He cups my face and kisses me, “I’m proud of you for asking for help. I’m also proud of you for telling Dylan about what happened.” I sigh at his praise, and I smile at him.

“Dylan requested one thing last night.” He tells me. I stare at him, waiting for him to continue. “He wants us to tell him what happened that day. And he wants us to come clean about how things were very different for us growing up.” My mouth pops open thinking this through. I lean my forehead against his.

“He deserves to know,” I whisper, and he nods. “I don’t want to think about that right now, though.”

“Okay.” He agrees, and his hand comes up to brush my hair off my shoulder, then wraps his hand around the back of my neck. I suck in a breath and rock my hips against him. His

finally choosing me and how he's touching me has me wanting him again. I feel like I'm in heat.

I bring my hands down to his waist and push his boxers down. He lifts his hips to help, then I slide down on him, and we moan together. I'm swollen and sensitive, but I want more. I roll my hips and gasp, but then he's wrapping his arms around me and holding me still. I close my eyes at the feel of him. He's so deep and thick in me, and I love it.

"You still owe me two more orgasms." He growls, and I chuckle, opening my eyes to stare at him.

"I know. You already told me." I give him attitude, and he arches an eyebrow bucking up into me, causing me to groan.

"Don't be a brat." He scorns me, and I smirk, bringing my lips to his.

"I've told you before, and I'll tell you again you like it when I'm a brat." My lips land on his, and I begin to ride him as he wraps me up so tight. With how close I am to him, my clit is rubbing against his lower abs, and I begin to shake. But it's not enough.

He senses it, so he loosens his hold on my waist and brings his hands up between us to cup my breasts, his thumbs running over my nipples. He pulls his mouth from mine and leans down, taking my nipple.

"Keep moving, baby." He encourages me, and it takes me by surprise. I was about to stop so I could focus on his mouth. But I keep moving, and now my senses are being assaulted. I didn't realize how sensitive my breasts could be. He moves his lips to the other breast but begins to massage the one he abandoned. When his teeth pull my nipple into his mouth, I fall over the edge with a shout.

I collapse into his arms, but then I'm flipped over onto my back, and he begins to move in me, chasing his orgasm.

"Are you on birth control?" He asks through gritted teeth, and I nod. "I need to come in you." He grunts out. "Fill you up." He moans, and I grab his hips, ensuring he stays where he is.

“Come on, Linc.” I moan. Before I can say anything else, he’s thrusting harder. One hand is above my head, and the other comes to my leg and lifts it so it’s wrapped higher around his waist. It’s a minor adjustment, but he’s hitting the spot in me that I didn’t realize I had. He thrusts, and then he comes with a shout.

His head lands into the crook of my neck, and he nuzzles into my hair as he kisses anywhere his lips can touch.

“One more baby. I owe you one more.” His voice sounds like rocks, and I smirk.

“You do know I can count,” I say, and he stills. I bite my lip, trying to hide my smile as he leans up to look down at me and arches an eyebrow. My tongue comes out to lick my lips as I wait to see what he’s going to do.

“I do know you can count. Brat.” He replies, and my mouth pops open as he chuckles. “I’m going to grab a washcloth.” He pulls out of me and walks to the bathroom, returning quickly. He cleans me, and I can’t stop myself from squirming. I’m so sensitive. I have no idea how he will pull another one out of me.

When he’s done, he offers his hand, and I accept it. He pulls me up and walks us back to my bedroom, disposing of the cloth in the laundry basket. He gets on the bed and leans against the headboard. He pats between his legs.

“Come here, sweetheart.” He instructs, and I hesitate.

“We need to discuss how we want to experiment with each other.” He says, and I climb onto the bed. He pulls me between his legs, and I lean against his chest. He kisses me on the shoulder and grabs the throw blanket I have on the bed, spreading it over me.

“So you don’t get cold.” I sink even more into him, and he wraps his arms around my middle, holding me tight. He leans his chin on my shoulder and begins to speak softly.

“The idea of spanking excites you.” He states. It’s not a question. He saw how turned on I got earlier from him talking about it, but I speak up anyway.

“Yes.” He hums, and the fingers of his left hand begin to draw circles on my skin, causing me to suck in. “That tickles, Linc.” He chuckles and stops moving his hand.

“That’s good, Ans. I want you to communicate with me. You will be in control when we do a spanking scene the entire time.” He states, like I should know this.

“Will I?” I question, and he runs his lips over my neck again.

“Yes, there’s a color code system we will use. Red means you’ve reached your limit and need to stop; yellow means you’re beginning to reach your limit and slow down; green means you’re okay, and I can keep going. Throughout the scene, I’ll check in with you and ask you for your color, and you’ll respond immediately and tell me.” He pauses, and I ponder what he just told me.

“Okay. That works great for a spanking scene. But what if I’m unable to talk?” I ask.

“Can you give me an example?” He replies, and I swallow. I’m going to have to say this out loud.

“What if you’re fucking my face, and I can’t talk?” His cock twitches behind me, and I bite my lip. Well, that’s something he’s interested in.

“In that case, you could either pinch my thigh or tap my thigh, and I would stop immediately.” I nod as I rub my thighs together. Just talking about this is turning me on. “So, you’d like that?” He asks, referring to my question. I pull my lips between my teeth and squirm, feeling him harden against my back.

“There’s not too many things I wouldn’t like with you, Linc. But, yes, I would.” He moans in my ear and kisses my neck.

“Fuck, baby.” He takes a deep breath and pauses as he imagines it. I rub my hands down his thighs, but he catches them and traps them between his arms and my stomach. “Not yet.” He warns, and I whine.

“What about anal?” He asks, and I stop moving and thinking about earlier. I must be quiet for a while because he prods me. “Ans?”

“It’s not something I ever thought about before. When you did that thing with your thumb earlier, it felt good, and I liked it. But that’s not the same, is it? I may not have been a virgin, but I don’t have much experience, Linc.” I admit to him, and I can feel him preening. Men.

“That’s something we’d probably need to build up to. I’ve done a lot of research on this. I can send you some things I’ve read about it because the last thing I want to do is hurt you. Unless the pain leads to pleasure.”

I rub my thighs together again. This is turning me on so much.

“So, how would that be pleasurable?” I ask. He removes his arms around my waist and rubs them down my thighs, and I move my hands to his thighs.

“Well, I’d get to fill you up from behind.” He says as he rubs his hands back up my thighs, dipping them between my thighs and spreading my legs a little. I suck in a breath in anticipation, but he doesn’t touch me where I want him to the most.

“Then we’ll take a vibrator or toy and fill you up here.” His fingers come to my pussy but just barely. I arch into his fingers, but he doesn’t give in.

“Do you happen to have one for demonstration purposes?” He questions, and I take in a gulping breath.

“In my nightstand.” I choke out, and he leans over, holding me so he doesn’t knock me over, and grabs it out of my drawer. He sits back up and turns it on, causing me to jump. He rubs it up and down my arm slightly, and I pull my bottom lip between my teeth.

“Do you think about me when you use this?” He asks. He turns it back off, and I almost kick my feet in frustration. “Answer the question, sweetheart.”

“Yes,” I say, and he hums in approval.

“That’s my good girl.” He rubs it along the top of my thigh to my knee. “Spread your legs wider for me, baby.” I do as he says immediately. I can’t believe I’m practically begging for this.

“As I was saying. I’ll be filling you up from behind. Are you picturing it?” He asks, and I close my eyes to envision him behind me filling me up, and an obscene noise escapes me. His empty hand comes up and rubs circles along my collarbone. “Me too.” He rocks against me, proving his point.

“Then we can take a dildo or vibrator and fill you up from the front.” He turns the vibrator back on and rubs it along my inner thigh. He circles it around my pussy, then inserts it, pumping it once, then twice. He then brings it out and rubs it up my slit, and barely touches my clit. My fingernails dig into his thighs.

“I’m going to come,” I tell him. I was near the edge from all of the talk, and the vibrator is about to push me over. He begins to thrust the vibrator in and out again and then repeats the action of running it up my slit, and this time when it hits my clit I detonate. I’m clawing at his thighs; my eyes are squeezed so tight I see stars and scream.

He turns it off immediately and gathers me into his arms, bringing me down from that bone-shattering climax. He massages my arms and back as I lay against him like dead weight.

“Six.” He whispers, and I chuckle, which is the only response he’s getting from me. I feel his hard length against my side, and I grunt.

“I’ll suck you off in a second. But my pussy is destroyed for today.” He chuckles as he pushes my hair off my shoulder.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. I know that was a lot.” He encourages me, and I snuggle in closer to him, feeling my eyes begin to droop, but before I can fall asleep, he nudges me.

“Come on, baby, let me wash you off again quickly. I wish you had a bathtub to soak for a little bit.” I shrug, unable to

give much of a reply. He must realize I'm not going to move because he lifts me in his arms and carries me to the bathroom.

He sits me on the toilet as he gets the shower started and warmed up. Once it's warm, he lifts me again and carries me into the shower. He slowly lowers me to my feet as he gazes down at me.

"Are you okay?" He whispers, and I nod, giving him a satisfied smile.

"More than okay." He smirks and grabs my loofah, putting body wash on it and washing me. He doesn't have his stuff here since he's been staying at Dylan's, so when I'm clean, he uses my body wash to clean himself, and I notice he's still hard. I go to wrap my hand around him, but he stops me causing me to frown.

"You don't want me?" I ask, and he scoffs, crowding me against the shower.

"Hell, yes, I want you, but you've had enough for today. I'll be okay. I got you to come six times, and you are currently standing in front of me naked and wet, so..." He trails off and waves his hand at his cock, causing me to laugh. I tilt my head and kiss him lightly on the lips.

"Maybe I'll be your alarm clock in the morning," I tell him, and he stills.

"You want me to stay the night?" He asks, and I wrap my arms around his neck.

"I do. Do you think Dylan will get upset?" I ask, and he shrugs.

"Fuck if I know, and I sure don't care." He leans down and gently kisses me, ensuring it doesn't go any further. "Once you're settled in bed, I'll run over there, get my stuff, and bring it back." I nod as he finishes rinsing off and then helps me out of the shower. He dries me off even though I tell him more than once I'm more than capable.

He guides me into the bedroom and kisses me on the forehead, promising he'll be right back, leaving a bottle of

water on my nightstand. As I wait, I grab the water and take a few gulps, then text Liv and Caroline in our group chat.

Me: Lincoln and I made up. Several times.

I chuckle, knowing they'll understand what I'm trying to tell them. They both respond immediately.

Caroline: What?!? How many times are several times?

Liv: I knew it! The way he was looking at you during breakfast. Swoon!

I bite my lip, trying to decide if I want to answer Caroline's question, and then I go for it.

Me: Six! I didn't even know that was possible.

Caroline: Holy shit! I'm going to have to tell Sebastian. Maybe it'll bring out the competitive streak in him.

I laugh at her comment and wait for Liv to answer. She does, but it's right as Lincoln is coming back in the door.

Liv: I'm so jealous!

I shake my head, grinning, and look up at Lincoln as he walks into the bedroom, discarding his clothes again but keeping his boxers on as he climbs into bed.

"What are you smiling at, pretty girl?" He asks, and my heart flips in my chest.

"I was texting with Caroline and Liv," I tell him, and he hums as his finger runs down my spine and back up.

"I ordered pizza. It should be here in just a few minutes." At that exact moment, my stomach grumbles, and we both chuckle. Today has been a dream and the thought of him having to leave tomorrow leaves a brick in my stomach. I snuggle into him more, and he holds me tighter.

"I wish you didn't have to leave tomorrow," I admit, and he leans down, kissing the top of my head.

"Me too, sweetheart. Me too." He sighs, and I plant a kiss on his chest. We can do this.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ANSLEY

LINCOLN AND I are sitting on Dylan's balcony. All of us awkwardly staring at each other. We decided to do this before Lincoln drove back home today. I sip at my coffee, unsure how to start, but I've had enough of the silence.

"What do you want to know, Dylan?" I question, and his eyes volley between Lincoln and me.

"What happened that day? You don't have to tell me the details, but no one talked about it. I know Ivy drowned, and you almost drowned, and Lincoln was able to save you." I exchange a look with Lincoln before squeezing my eyes shut.

"Ivy and I were jumping off the two big rocks into the lake. She jumped off and never came back up. So I jumped in, and I could feel her but couldn't get her to come up. I kept screaming for help and pulling at her. I finally realized it was because her foot was stuck between the rocks, so I tried to swim down to get her foot out. The next thing I knew, I was in the car being taken to the hospital." I say it all robotically because it's the only way I can. I open my eyes again, and Dylan stares at me in horror while Lincoln has detached.

This is how we used to handle things but not anymore. I want to sit in Lincoln's lap, but it's still weird, even if Dylan does know. So, I sit next to him and grab his hand. Life returns

to his eyes, and he brings my hand to his lips, kissing my knuckles. He takes a deep breath and tells his side of it.

“I heard Ansley screaming. So I ran to the water as fast as I could. She must have gotten Ivy’s foot loose because I didn’t have a hard time getting Ivy out. I grabbed Ansley first and threw her up on the rock. I wasn’t sure if she was okay, but when I got Ivy. Well, I knew.” Lincoln states, and a sob catches in my throat. Lincoln runs his finger up my arm, and Dylan watches us with a hand over his mouth.

“After that, I wasn’t allowed to step foot in the Holloway house again,” I tell him, and Dylan tilts his head in confusion.

“You always hung out in Lincoln’s room with us,” Dylan states, and I huff.

“Yeah, because I’d climb the terrace and crawl through the window.” I remind him, and Dylan rubs his jaw like he’s thinking back.

“I never realized that’s why you did that.” He admits, and I shrug.

“Yeah. And if you and dad went to one of your football games or something, mom would usually leave me home by myself. At the same time, she’d see Ms. Holloway, and I hated being home alone. So, I’d hang out in Lincoln’s room even if he wasn’t there. He always kept his window open for me.” Lincoln’s hand tightens around mine.

“As I got older and started talking back, mom would grab me, scream at me, and leave bruises on my arms. Dad just ignored me altogether because he couldn’t control me.” Dylan stands and begins to pace, running his hand through his hair.

“How the hell did I not see this? And you had bruises? Why didn’t I notice?” He looks up at the sky in frustration. “Rose was right.” Lincoln and I exchanged a look but decided not to comment on that.

“I have a theory,” Lincoln states, and we both look at him.

“You do?” I ask. Lincoln looks at Dylan.

“Your dad kept you running ragged. You played football and baseball. You were in so many extracurricular activities it was ridiculous. He pressured you to take as many AP classes as you could. On top of that, Ansley and I weren’t very forthcoming with any information, so it was easy to keep you in the dark. It’s not that you were self-absorbed. It’s that you were completely overwhelmed. You were trying to survive just as much as we were.”

I think of Lincoln’s explanation. He’s right. My dad knew what he was doing.

“That may be true but to not notice my sister and best friend being miserable.” He pauses and shakes his head. “What about you, Lincoln?” He asks, and Lincoln sighs.

“Well, the first time my dad ever hit me was the day after Ivy drowned. My parents blamed me for not saving her even though there was nothing I could have done. But they never forgave me. My dad was usually pretty good about not leaving marks on my face, but it did happen occasionally.” Lincoln explains.

“Ansley tried to explain it to me at her sixteenth birthday, but she dropped it, so I figured things got better. When it slapped me in the face at the reading of the will, I was so pissed. Our parents had just died in a car accident, and I went from grieving to angry in minutes. I’m not sure I ever got over it, but listening to you two, I realize I need to let it go, or I will turn into them.” Dylan states.

“I hate what happened. I still blame myself for what happened and wish I could change it.” I wipe a tear away, and Lincoln leans over, kissing the side of my head.

“I don’t blame you, Ans. You both knew how to swim. It was an accident.” Lincoln replies, and I take a deep breath.

“I wish I had been there. I don’t know if the outcome would have been different, but at least I could have supported the two of you since then. But I will be now. You two can count on me. I want you to know that.” Dylan tells us, and I smile at him.

“I know, Dylan. You’ve proven that repeatedly since I moved to Atlanta. You’re a good brother, and I love you.” I encourage him, and he gives me a small smile.

IT’S BEEN TWO weeks since I’ve seen Lincoln in person, and it feels like an animal in my body trying to claw itself out with how much I miss him. I’ve considered visiting him, but we have been so slammed at work I haven’t been able to.

We’re about to finish the season, so everyone is working crazy hours. I’m exhausted. I just got done dressing several people for their upcoming scenes, and I need to be mending a torn skirt, but right now, I’m hiding so I can rest my eyes for a second.

Unease crawls over my skin, and my eyes fly open to see Chad staring at me. This guy gives me the creeps. He constantly asks me to go out with them and always stares at me. I stand from where I’m sitting. I don’t like him hovering over me.

“Hey, Chad. Is everything alright?” I ask as I grab the skirt I was supposed to be mending and take it to my station, where people are walking around. Chad has never done anything outright with me, but I’ve heard rumors about him. He follows me and stands too close for my liking.

“Yeah. I was just coming to check on you. I know we’ve had a lot of long days and nights recently.” I give him a tight-lipped smile and grab my needle and thread. I won’t need my sewing machine for this. “And give you this.” He hands over a cup of coffee from Starbucks, and I eye it warily.

“Thank you.” I take it from him and sit it on my table. I will not be drinking it. He’s about to say something else when my phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket and smile at the screen. I show it to him. “I need to take this. It’s my boyfriend.” I tell him, and he scowls. I ignore it and answer the phone.

“Hi, baby!” I answer enthusiastically. I’ve never called Lincoln, baby. I usually call him Lincoln or Linc. I watch Chad as he walks away, and I can’t help the sigh of relief that leaves me.

“What’s wrong?” He asks, knowing something is not right. I bite my lip, trying to decide whether I should tell him. “Ansley.” He warns. Reminding me, I agreed to be honest with him. Chad walked away, but he was still lingering close by. I walk away so he can’t hear me.

“Hey. Sorry. There’s this guy I work with that gives me the creeps, and he was talking to me when you called, so I was making a show of letting him know I have a boyfriend.” I explain to him, and he lets out a huff of air. I glance over my shoulder and see Chad watching me. I quickly look away, trying to ignore him.

“That’s my good girl.” He praises me, and I melt. I’m not sure if he’s praising me for telling him what’s going on or making it known I’m taken. I sit at a random picnic table.

“I miss you so much,” I tell him, trying to ignore the unease creeping up my spine, knowing I’m being watched.

“I miss you too, sweetheart. Want to switch to facetime?” He asks, and I agree immediately. When his face comes over the screen, I bring my finger up to trace his jaw. He’s still in his suit.

“How’s your day going? Will you be working late tonight?” He questions and I nod.

“Yeah. There’s one more scene I have to help with, and then I can go.” I sigh as I stare at him.

“How did your meeting go today?” I ask him. He has a new app he is launching at the end of the year, so they are preparing for that. He smiles.

“It went well. There’s a lot of work to be done, but we have a road map.” He tells me, and I break out into a smile.

“That’s great! Is it another dating app?” I tease, and he chuckles.

“Nope. That was a one-time thing.” He runs his hand through his hair and shakes his head. “I’m honestly surprised no one said anything about that.” He admits, and I scoff.

“Really? No one is going to question you.” I admonish. He laughs, and I shake my head.

“Dating sites do make some money, though.” He says, and I smirk at him.

“Trust me, I know.” I wink at him. He scowls, and I smile sweetly. Man, I miss him so much.

“Ansley!” Chad is yelling at me, and my head snaps up. “They’re doing the next scene in fifteen minutes.” He sounds pissed, but I’m not sure why. I sigh and look back at my screen.

“I have to go, but I’ll call you later,” I promise, and he smiles.

“Okay, sweetheart. I’ll talk to you in a little bit.” I blow him a kiss and hang up. I hate this; me living here and him living there. I did not anticipate this. I walked over to my area and mended the skirt I was working on when Lincoln called while I waited.

“So, how long have you been with your boyfriend?” Leslie asks, and my head pops up. I didn’t realize she had wandered over, and not far behind her is Chad. I clear my throat as I return my focus to the skirt.

“We’ve been official for a few weeks,” I tell them. “But I’ve known him my whole life.” When I give them that information, I look at them to see their response. Leslie covers her heart and has hearts in her eyes while Chad scowls.

“That’s so sweet!” Leslie exclaims, and Chad scoffs. Leslie turns and glares at him.

“Wouldn’t you want to explore your options, though? Instead of going for someone you’ve known your whole life.” He barks out, and I smirk. Oh, we do a lot of exploring and will do a lot more. But I’m not going to tell him that. Leslie rolls her eyes.

“Shut up! I think it’s sweet.” She exclaims.

“So what does your boyfriend do?” Chad asks mockingly, and I narrow my eyes at him. I’m going to enjoy telling him this.

“He works in technology. His main source of revenue is creating applications for people to trade stocks on. But he also creates websites and applications for local businesses.” I explain. Leslie looks impressed.

“Wow! So, your boyfriend is smart.” I know I have a goofy look, but I’m proud of him. His dad wanted him to go to school to be a lawyer and join his law firm, but he went to school to learn technology and business, and now look at him. He started from scratch, and now he’s doing great.

Chad is about to say something else, but the actress I’m supposed to work with walks up, and I’m saved. They both walk away. Leslie gives me a small wave, and Chad has a dark look on his face.

I’M LYING IN bed, staring at my ceiling, feeling incredibly lonely. I haven’t visited Lincoln, Caroline, or Liv in weeks. Although Dylan and I do have lunch or dinner together a few times a week. His schedule is crazy like mine, so we often call each other in the middle of the night to grab snacks.

But filming finished today, and I get a break for a few weeks. I want to call Lincoln. It’s after midnight on a Friday, but he may already be asleep. I talked to him briefly earlier today, but he was about to go into a meeting, so we couldn’t talk long, and I was busy the rest of the day.

That didn’t stop me from texting him around lunch time letting him know Leslie was begging me to go out with everyone tomorrow night for drinks. She wants to go, but Chad makes her just as uncomfortable as he makes me, so I promised her I’d be there. I stare at my phone, looking at the last text I sent him.

Me: I wish you could come.

He never replied, which isn't like him. Even when we were arguing, he always responded to me. There's a knock at my door, and I jolt up in bed. I climb off my bed and head to the door; it's probably Dylan. He's done this a few times. I glance out the peephole, and my heart stops, then begins pounding. I rip the door open and throw myself into Lincoln's arms.

He catches me staggering backward but holds me tight like he isn't entirely surprised by this reaction. I lean back to look at his face, and he's smirking at me.

"You're here!" I exclaim, my mouth landing on his. He kisses me enthusiastically, one hand making its way into my hair and the other firmly planted on my waist. We kiss until we're out of breath and then separate.

He rests his forehead on mine. All the loneliness and anxiousness I was feeling seep out of me, and I relax in Lincoln's hold. He prods me, guiding me toward my open door.

"Come on, baby, let's get inside." I walk into my apartment as he leans down to grab his bag and walks in. He drops it on the ground and closes my door, ensuring it's locked, before turning around and pulling me back into his arms.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him.

"You told me you wanted me to come." He whispers as he leans down and kisses me on the nose.

"And you came," I say in awe, and he tilts his head at me.

"Of course, I came. I'll do anything in my control for you, Ans." He says, and I melt. His hands come up to brush the skin showing where my crop top is, and then his hands go under it and cup my breasts, and I gasp.

"I want to talk, but I need to be inside you now." He growls, and I nod in agreement. We tear at each other's clothes as he lifts me. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he carries me to bed. He swipes his fingers through my folds and inserts them in my pussy, and I moan.

“Are you ready?” He asks, and I nod vigorously. Then he’s lining up with me and slamming into me.

My head falls back as we both moan. His mouth lands on my neck, and he sucks, bites, and licks as he pumps into me. He adjusts his hips, hitting the spot he knows will have my eyes rolling into the back of my head. I have no idea how he has me on the precipice of falling. But I haven’t come since he was here almost a month ago.

Since I got a taste of Lincoln, I haven’t even desired to touch myself. And I’ve been too busy to think about it. He leans back to watch as his cock goes in and out of me.

“Fuck! Ansley. I missed you and this pussy.” He grounds out as he brings his thumb down to press against my clit, and then I fly over the edge. A few more thrusts, and then he falls with me. He collapses on top of me, and I hold him close for a few seconds before rolling off and pulling him close to kiss me.

“I promise I’ll go slower next time.” He proclaims, and I laugh softly.

“I’m not complaining. Trust me.” I bring my hand up and rub it along his jaw and down his neck to his bicep. “I’m so glad you came. I was going to force Dylan to go with me tomorrow.” I say, and concern flashes across his face.

“Tell me about this Chad guy.” He demands, and I spill.

“He makes my skin crawl, Lincoln. Whenever he looks at me, I feel like he’s undressing me with his eyes or imagining doing unmentionable things to me.” I suck in a breath.

“He’s never actually touched me or tried anything with me. But he always asks me if I’ll go out with everyone. Every time I say no, he seems to get increasingly infuriated.” I burrow my face into Lincoln’s chest, and he holds me tight.

“Leslie begged me to come tomorrow night. It’s the last get-together, and she wants to go but feels uncomfortable around him, too, so I told her I’d go.” He wraps his arms around me and holds me tight.

“Well, I’ll be there and won’t let you out of my sight. If the asshole tries one thing, I’ll knock his ass out.” I sigh at the protectiveness in his voice.

“I wish you could be here all the time,” I state, and I feel him exhale, causing strands of my hair to move.

“Me too, sweetheart.” He replies, and I feel the depth of emotion in those three words down to my core.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ANSLEY

THE NEXT day Lincoln and I have a lazy morning. We make breakfast together. I convince him to make chocolate chip pancakes that turn into regular pancakes because I eat all the chocolate chips. As I pop another chocolate chip into my mouth, he pinches my side and nuzzles my neck, causing me to squeal and squirm at the same time.

“What is it with you and chocolate chips?” He asks as he lays his chin on my shoulder. I share a chocolate chip with him, and he hums.

“See. They’re good!” I exclaim, and he chuckles.

“But then you’re missing out on all the chocolaty goodness in the pancakes.” He says as he wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me in tight. I flip the pancake and shrug.

“You just get to experience it beforehand.” He shakes his head and watches as I pour some more pancake batter.

“Do you want me to make some eggs? We should probably have something else besides carbs.” He tells me but not convincingly. I shake my head.

“It’s Saturday. Let’s splurge.” He hums again as his lips come to my neck and begin to kiss the sensitive spot where my neck and shoulder meet. There’s a knock at my door, and our heads pop up. Both of us are in pajamas, but this could still be

awkward if it's Dylan. I turn to look at Lincoln, a question in my eyes.

He said he was okay with Dylan knowing that he even talked to Dylan about it, but I haven't said anything to Dylan yet, and he hasn't brought it up to me. Mainly because we've been so busy, and when we've hung out, we've both been, so bone tired we haven't felt like a meaningful conversation. Lincoln wraps his hands around my neck, gently pushing my hair behind my shoulders and kissing me.

"It's okay, sweetheart." He encourages me, and the anxiety I didn't realize was bubbling beneath the surface subsides. I walk to the door and glance out of the peephole making sure it is Dylan and open the door. His eyes travel over me; it looks like he just woke up.

"Hey, Ans. I wanted to come to see how you were doing. I haven't seen or talked to you all week." He hugs me and then pauses. "Is someone here?" He asks, and I take a step back, eyeing him warily.

"Yeah. Lincoln is here." I tell him, on guard to see what his reaction will be. He stands still, staring at me for several long seconds before relaxing and running his hands through his hair.

"Okay." He sighs. "This will be weird, but I'll get used to it. I promise. I'm so used to the two of you being down each other's throat." He tells me, and I roll my lips between my teeth at that comment.

"To be fair, I was down her throat," Lincoln says from behind me, and a bark of laughter leaves me as Dylan's face contorts into a look of disgust.

"Jesus, man! I said I was okay with it. I did not say I was okay with hearing the details." Dylan yells. He rubs the balls of his hands over his eyes. "I do not need that image in my brain." He paces back and forth in front of us, and I shake my head.

"I can't believe you said that," I whisper to Lincoln, and he shrugs.

“Anyway. How are you doing, Dylan? Want some chocolate chip pancakes without the chocolate chips?” I ask him. And he turns on his foot to stare at me.

“I’d rather have them with chocolate chips, but it seems like you ate them all.” He accuses me, and my mouth pops open as we walk to my kitchen.

“How do you know it was me? Maybe it was Lincoln!” I exclaim. He and Lincoln exchange a look.

“Just like every other time?” Dylan asks, and I shake my head with a slight smile. We all grab some pancakes and sit down at my bar to eat.

“What are you two doing today?” Dylan questions, and it seems weird. It used to be him and Lincoln going and doing things. Lincoln glances over at me, and I shrug.

“Not much of anything. We’re going to a work thing that Leslie begged me to attend tonight. Want to hang out until then?” I ask him, and he breaks into a grin, nodding. After we finish eating, Lincoln and I throw on some comfortable clothes.

It’s October, but you never know what the weather will do in the south, so I pull on a long maxi dress and grab a cardigan just in case. Lincoln is wearing jeans and a black long sleeve henley shirt. He looks good enough to eat.

“I need you to stop looking at me like that,” Lincoln growls, causing my eyes to pop up to his, and I see they have darkened with desire. I arch an eyebrow at him as I walk backward out of the bedroom.

“Or what?” I challenge him, my tongue coming out to wet my lips. He cants his head at me as he stalks toward me.

“You know what, gorgeous.” He reminds me, and a thrill runs through me. We haven’t been able to explore this since we talked about it. This excites me. He grabs me, but I elude his grasp and quickly walk to the living room, where Dylan waits for us. Dylan turns and smiles at us.

“Ready?” And I nod as I grab my purse and avoid Lincoln’s eyes. We exit, and I close the door, locking it. Dylan

begins to walk down the stairs, and Lincoln crowds me from behind, pressing into me.

“You’re going to pay for that, sweetheart.” He says into my neck as his lips run across my skin, and he bites down on my ear, causing me to shiver. I turn in his arms and wrap them around his neck, giving him a small peck before pulling back.

“I’m counting on it.” I wink at him. His eyes widen slightly, but then he smirks.

“In that case, I’m looking forward to seeing that pretty ass of yours pink for me tonight.” He brings his hand up to my throat and then kisses me hard before stepping back and following Dylan down the stairs, leaving me wanting.

WE GO TO the Coca-Cola Museum and Centennial Park. There were a lot of vendors selling Christmas items, and I got sucked in. It’s only October, but I’ll be decorating for Christmas as soon as it’s November. I glance at Lincoln and wonder what he’ll be doing for Christmas. Of course, he’ll be spending it with Dylan and me. We usually meet early on Christmas morning to exchange gifts and then have lunch together.

Maybe this year, he’ll wake up with me on Christmas morning. I stop at a booth that has ornaments. I spot one that says *First Christmas Together* and brush my fingers over it. I don’t want to be presumptuous, so I move on to another booth with various wines and purchase a few bottles. After I’m done, I catch up with Lincoln and Dylan, who are sitting at a bench waiting for me.

“Hey. You guys could have come to get me.” I tell them, and they both shake their heads. I want to step between Lincoln’s legs, but I’m nervous about being over the top in front of Dylan. Like he can read my thoughts, he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me down on his lap. I watch Dylan for a reaction, but he doesn’t give one; instead, he digs

into a bag of popcorn he must have bought from one of the booths he visited.

“I believe that’s number three,” Lincoln whispers in my ear, and I still, slowly turning to him.

“Three what?” I ask him, and he arches an eyebrow waiting for his meaning to dawn on me; when it does, I scowl.

“What’s number three?” I know what the first two are for; I did those two on purpose. I give Dylan a side glance, but he’s not paying us any attention. He’s enthralled with his popcorn.

“You hesitated to sit on my lap.” He tells me, and I huff.

“Because I wasn’t sure how Dylan would react.” I snarl, and he arches an eyebrow. The way I said that probably earned me another spanking but seriously. Lincoln pulls me in tighter and shifts us away from Dylan so we can have a semi-private conversation.

“I’ve talked to Dylan, baby. He knows about us. From here on out, how he deals with it is on him, not us.” He explains to me, and my mouth pops open at how simple he makes it sound. I glance back over at Dylan, seeing he’s watching us now. I wait for him to say something, but he doesn’t.

Lincoln pushes me off his lap and grips my upper arm firmly but not where he’s hurting me.

“Dylan, we’ll be right back, okay?” Lincoln tells him, and Dylan nods. I’m not given much choice as I’m practically dragged to an area where there aren’t many people. He releases me.

“What the hell, Lincoln?” I rub my arm and take deep breaths. He glances from it to me and then steps close to me.

“Did I hurt you?” He asks. The concern is evident in his voice. I shake my head as he lifts my arm and brushes his lips against where his fingers were.

“I’m fine. You just surprised me, is all. Why’d you do that?” I ask, and he stares down at me as he rubs his hands up and down my arms.

“Ansley, baby. I know it took me a long time to admit my feelings for you and to admit them to Dylan. But I did it, and now I’m all in. I don’t give a fuck if it bothers him if we’re together. Once I make a decision, that’s it. Now, you have to decide if you’re all in too.” He tells me, and I stare at him in shock.

“Of course, I’m all in. What do you mean?” I ask, feeling uncertain. He takes a step back and runs a hand through his hair.

“I mean, you have to stop worrying about how Dylan will react if you sit on my lap or if I stay the night.” He grabs my hands and pulls me close to him. “This is between us now, and that’s all that matters. You hated being put in his shadow for all those years. Please don’t turn the tables and start doing that to me. Okay?” My heart rate picks up at his comment, and I throw myself at him wrapping my arms around his neck. I kiss him wherever my lips can land.

“I’m sorry, Linc. I didn’t realize I was doing that. He’s my brother. I don’t want to upset him, but I never want you to feel like you’re in his shadow. You have always been my number one choice; as much as I love my brother, I have always loved you more.” As soon as the words come out of my mouth, I wish I could retract them. He stiffens, and I wonder if I said too much. He has to know.

He leans back slightly, gripping my chin between his thumb and forefinger.

“What did you just say?” He demands, and I swallow. I try to pull away, but he wraps his hand around my waist and pulls me in tighter. He lets my chin go and slides his hand around my neck, gripping it. He’s not hurting me, but he is letting me know he’s in control.

“Answer my question.” He commands, and I think back to our conversation about when he asks me a question, I need to answer honestly. So, I square my shoulders and gather my courage.

“I love you, Lincoln,” I whisper. His hand flexes on my back and moves up to grip my hair. He brings his mouth down

until his lips are barely touching mine.

“I love you too, Ansley.” He replies. My eyes widen before his mouth is on mine, and he’s devouring my lips. His tongue licks inside my mouth, and I meet him with as much hunger. I wrap my arms around his neck and hold him close as we stand in the park and make out for everyone to see. But I don’t care, and he doesn’t either.

“Seriously? You two can’t wait until you get back to Ansley’s apartment. No one wants to see this.” Dylan exclaims, and we pull away. I laugh and hide my face in Lincoln’s chest as he pulls me close. Lincoln turns and looks at Dylan.

“Sorry, man. We’ve been apart for a while, so we have a lot of catching up to do.” Lincoln tells him, and I turn to face Dylan. A look of sadness washes over his face for a brief moment before it vanishes just as quickly.

“We can go back to Ansley’s. I could go for a nap. It’s been a crazy week anyway.” Dylan says, but his voice is off. I shake my head.

“No. You and Lincoln go hang out and let me go home so I can start getting ready for tonight. I have to do my hair and makeup. It’s going to take me a lot longer than Lincoln.” I tell them both. Lincoln cocks his head and glances back at Dylan. Understanding transforms Lincoln’s face, and then he nods.

“Yeah. We can tour the baseball stadium. You said you wanted to do that but haven’t had a chance yet.” Lincoln suggests, and Dylan’s eyes light up with excitement.

“Really?!? That would be great.” Dylan turns to me. “Are you okay going home?” He asks, and Lincoln turns to me with concern on his face.

“Oh yeah! I’ll call an Uber.” I tell them, but Lincoln grabs my hand and shakes his head. He pulls his car keys out of his pocket and hands them to me.

“Take my car. We’ll take an Uber.” He instructs, and I stare down at the keys in my hand.

“Why?” I ask, and he pulls me into a hug.

“It will make me feel better knowing you’re not alone with a random person.” He explains, kissing my forehead. Dylan nods in agreement.

“Okay.” I give Dylan a hug and Lincoln a lingering kiss.

“This isn’t over, sweetheart.” He whispers in my ear as he releases me, and I smirk at him. I wave at them and tell them to have fun. I head to Lincoln’s car to drive back home so I can get ready for tonight. I wonder briefly how many spankings I earned today before pulling out of the parking lot.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LINCOLN

WE CLIMB into our Uber and head toward Truist park. The season is over, so there won't be any games. Dylan claps me on the shoulder, and I smile at him.

"It's been a while since we've hung out," Dylan exclaims, making me feel like a complete asshole. "How's business going?" He asks, and I settle back in my seat, giving him my full attention.

"Good. We started working on a new app. It will go live by the end of the year." I tell him, and he smirks.

"So, no more dating apps?" He asks, and I snort.

"No. No more dating apps." I respond.

"You doubled down on that because of Ans, didn't you?" He questions, and I exhale deeply.

"Yes," I admit. "But it turns out I didn't need to worry about it." Dylan scoffs at my comment, and I arch an eyebrow at him.

"That's how she met Zack." He tells me, and my hands ball into a fist. Dylan glances down at them and shakes his head with a big grin.

"You didn't know that you almost set my sister up with her potential future husband." He starts laughing, and I can't help but smile along with him shoving him in the shoulder.

“Shut up. She’s with me now, so it doesn’t matter.” I tell him, and he gives me a sideways look.

“It’s so weird seeing the two of you together.” He pauses as he glances out the window. “Although, you two always had a weird relationship. You were either at each other’s throats or thick as thieves. There was never any in between.” He says, and I have to agree with him.

“Not much has changed. We don’t argue quite as much, but she’s still a brat.” I can’t help the grin that takes over my face, and Dylan grimaces.

“I don’t need to know about how you like that.” He blurts out, and I stare at him in confusion. He points at my face. “Your face. It’s not hiding anything.” I throw my head back and laugh.

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” I scold him, and he gives me a look that says he knows exactly what I was thinking. I decide to change the subject because it will make him uncomfortable if we keep discussing Ansley and me.

“So, how’s it going for you? Do you like being a camera guy?” I ask him, and he rubs his hands down his thighs.

“Yeah. It’s exhausting, though. The hours are crazy. I worked almost sixty hours last week.” He tells me, and I can tell he doesn’t look like his usual healthy self. He has dark circles under his eyes, and his hair isn’t perfectly combed. It makes me wonder briefly about Ansley and if she feels the same way. I turn my attention back to Dylan.

“What are you going to do? Will you keep doing this?” I ask him, and he sighs, looking a little defeated as we pull into Truist park.

“Yeah. My ultimate goal is to become a film producer. I have to start somewhere. Right?” The Uber driver stops, and we give our thanks and exit as we make our way to the park entrance. “I have some contacts from the few acting jobs I’ve done. But working my way up is my priority right now.” He sounds determined, and I admire him for that.

“I know you’re exhausted right now, but it’ll be worth it in the long run,” I tell him, and he nods in agreement. We pay for our tour and wait for the next one to start, leaning against a wall.

“I met someone.” He tells me, and I arch an eyebrow at him.

“Really? Who is she?” I ask him, and a grin forms on his face.

“She’s a recurring extra on the show. Nothing has happened, but I really like her.” He tells me, and I turn toward him, leaning my shoulder against the wall. The only woman Dylan has ever been serious about was Rose. After his parents died, they slowly drifted apart, probably because Rose saw how his parents treated Ansley and got frustrated that Dylan was oblivious until cold hard evidence was given to him.

“What’s her name?” I ask him.

“Callie. She’s very quiet and reserved, but she transforms into a completely different person when she acts. It’s kind of amazing to watch.” He leans back against the wall with his arms folded. If this had been months ago, I’d tease him about the goofy look on his face, but I understand that feeling now. It’s exactly how I feel about Ansley.

Our tour guide arrives and begins to show a few other people and us around the stadium. It’s a fun tour, and it’s fun hanging out with Dylan. It has been a while. I make a mental note to make sure I dedicate time when I visit to hang out with him. We call another Uber to take us home when the tour is done. I’m a little nervous about the time. With Atlanta traffic, Ansley and I may be late for her event.

I KNOCK ON Ansley’s door, waiting for her to let me in. She swings it open, throwing herself in my arms again. I love this side of her.

“I need to get you a key so you don’t have to knock every time.” She says as her lips land on mine. I wrap my arms

around her, kissing her back. I walk her back into her apartment and kick her door shut. After our confession in the park, I need more. I spin her around, so her back is against the door.

“Lincoln.” She moans as my mouth moves down her neck. I glance down at her body; she’s wearing a low-cut red dress with her hair up.

“You look gorgeous, sweetheart. I promise not to mess up your hard work too much.” I tell her as I yank her dress up and pull her panties down her legs. She doesn’t fight me, stepping out of them as they land on the ground. Her hands go to the button of my jeans, and she undoes them, and I help her push them down. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I lift her, and she wraps her legs around me. I line myself up with her.

“Are you ready for me, baby?” I ask her. As much as I want her, I don’t want to hurt her. She nods, biting her lip. I bring my fingers to her center and run them down her fold. She’s so wet.

“Always.” She whispers, and I groan at her comment as I line up with her and push into her. We both moan as I bottom out. My head falls to her shoulder, and I nip at her.

“You feel so good, Ans.” I stay still, enjoying her tight heat around me, until she starts to whine, and I smirk. I love to tease her.

“Say it,” I demand, and she lifts her head from where it fell back against the door to look at me, trying to figure out what I mean. Realization hits her, and her mouth lands on mine softly before she pulls away.

“I love you, Lincoln.” At her words, I pull back and slam back into her. She gasps, but her eyes never leave mine.

“I love you,” I tell her. “So much.” Our eyes stay connected as we rock against each other—her different-colored eyes on my hazel eyes. I don’t know how we went so long without this. She has always had a piece of my soul, and she always will. Her eyes flutter closed, and her nails dig into my shoulders.

“Eyes on me, gorgeous,” I command, and they pop back open. “I want to watch you as you come all over my cock.” I tell her, and she moans at my words. She gasps as I roll my hips into her.

“Don’t stop. Keep doing that.” I smirk, listening to her as our eyes never leave each other. My arms are burning, and I’m gritting my teeth to stop myself from coming before she does. When I think I can’t take it anymore, she cries out my name and comes. She clings to me as I thrust into her three more times, and then I moan her name and coat her pussy with my cum.

Holding her tight in my arms, I turn and lean my back against the door, sliding down to the floor. We sit in silence for a while before she finally raises her head. I grasp her jaw gently and bring her mouth to mine. Kissing her softly. I love this woman. Through the turmoil we both grew up in, we were each other’s anchor in the storm. I’ll never be able to live without her. When I pull back, she has a glazed look in her eye, and I love that I put it there.

“I don’t think I’ll wear my hair up tonight after all.” She whispers, taking me by surprise. I chuckle as I take in her appearance. She did have her hair up when I came in. I’m not even sorry about it.

“You debauched me, sir.” She says, causing my cock to twitch inside her. She arches an eyebrow at me, and I grasp her hair to tilt her head back. I run my nose up her jaw.

“We’ll explore that another time. We need to leave soon.” I growl into her skin, and she moves slightly over me. “Ansley,” I warn, and she moves again.

“I don’t even want to go.” She whispers as she rocks against me again. I bite into her skin, causing her to whimper.

“What about your friend?” I jerk my hips once, then pull myself back under control; I bring my hands to her ass and grip it tightly, holding her still. “She told you she doesn’t want to be alone with that asshole Chad.” She groans.

“You’re right.” She admits. I help her off me and give her ass a sharp smack. “Oh!” She gasps out, and I chuckle darkly. I tuck myself into my jeans before standing. Following her to the bathroom, I help her clean up and quickly change into black slacks and a gray button-down shirt.

Ansley pulls the pins in her hair out and runs her fingers through it, so it flows past her shoulders. It’s gotten longer since she moved to Atlanta. I lean against the door, putting my hands in my pocket as I watch her apply lipstick. When she’s done, she turns and leans against the counter as she stares at me.

“You know it’s not fair.” She says. I take my hands out of my pockets and cross them over my chest.

“What’s not fair?” I ask her. She motions to me, waving her hand up and down.

“It took you fifteen minutes to look like that.” She motions to herself. “It took me a good hour before you got here to look like this and then another thirty minutes after our adventure to look like this.” She complains. I bite my lip, grinning at her; pushing away from the door jam, I stalk toward her.

The pulse in her neck begins to beat rapidly, making me want to bite her again. Stopping in front of her, I put my hands on either side of her caging her in.

“You know I always appreciate your effort to look like this. I also love how you look in pajamas, a tank top, and no makeup on. Whether you’re all dolled up or not, you’ll always be the most beautiful woman in the room. Always.” I lean in and kiss her just below her ear.

“I’d kiss you on those pouty lips, but I don’t want to ruin all the work you just went through putting your lipstick on.” Her hands come up to grab at my hips, and she melts into me.

“Linc, you could mess up my lipstick anytime you wanted, and I’d never complain.” She utters. I wrap my hand around her waist and pull her into me, slowly rubbing it up her spine and into her hair. I pull her head back so she’s looking at me.

“I plan on messing up your lipstick later when you’re on your knees for me, baby.” Her eyes widen, and her nipples harden just the response I was looking for. I kiss her on her forehead and then pull away from her grabbing her hand and pulling her to the door so that we can leave. We’ll arrive late, but at least everyone will see my girl is taken.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ANSLEY

I LOVE walking onto the rooftop bar on Lincoln's arm. Knowing I'm his and he's mine causes the insecurities I was experiencing to leave. His hand rests on the small of my back as he guides me through the crowd. As soon as Leslie spots me, she jumps up and skips over to us.

"You came!" She says excitedly as she hugs me. She's a lot shorter than me, so I must lean down to return her hug. She has silver blond hair that is cut into a long bob. She's wearing all black, her usual go-to color, but it works for her, and bright red lipstick. She eyes Lincoln. I'm about to introduce them when Chad walks over, and I stiffen.

Lincoln pulls me in to him as he watches him closer. Chad scoffs.

"You came." He moves in for a hug, but I sidestep him. I don't want him touching me. Lincoln darts his arm out to shake his hand.

"I'm Lincoln. Ansley's boyfriend." Chad's eyes narrow, but he places his hand in Lincoln's, and they shake.

"You're Ansley's boyfriend?" Leslie exclaims. "She told us all about you!" She says, and I feel my cheeks heat. Lincoln looks at me and grins. Leaning in, he kisses me on my jaw.

“Good. I want people to know she’s taken.” He says. He’s saying it for Chad’s benefit, but it causes butterflies in my stomach.

“I make sure people know I’m taken too.” He says, and I turn to look at him. The look in his eyes makes me want to drop to my knees for him. He smirks like he knows what I’m thinking. Chad opens his mouth like he’s about to say something else, but one of the producers calls out for everyone’s attention.

Chad saunters off, and Lincoln guides me to the other side of the bar. He leans against a stool and pulls me between his legs. His hands rest on my upper thighs possessively, and I love every second of it. After everyone gives their speech, people begin to mingle again. Leslie comes over, and we go to the buffet that’s been set up. We grab a plate and load it up.

“Chad is coming over this way,” Leslie tells us. “I swear he creeps me out,” Leslie says, and I look at Lincoln with an, I told you so, look. Lincoln turns and blocks Chad from approaching us.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Chad sooner?” Lincoln asks me in a stern voice. I look up from my plate to him, guilt stirring in my stomach. I look at Leslie, and she arches an eyebrow. She walks down the line giving us a moment of privacy.

“I did tell you,” I tell him, and he shakes his head, dissatisfaction showing on his face.

“You told me last week. You’ve been in Atlanta for weeks.” He replies, and my mouth drops open.

“Lincoln. We haven’t been on the best terms.” I huff out, and he shakes his head.

“Did you tell Dylan? Or Caroline and Liv?” He asks, and I bite the inside of my cheek. Heat crawls up my neck as I shake my head. I hate feeling his disappointment. Being a brat is one thing, but this is different. I glance down, trying to avoid his gaze, but he tips my chin with his finger.

“I know we weren’t speaking. I know we weren’t on the best terms. But there is something not right about that guy. I’ve known him for thirty minutes, and I can tell. You should have told somebody. Even if it wasn’t me.” I stare at him as guilt takes root in my stomach. I look over his shoulder and see Chad watching us. Stepping closer to Lincoln, I swallow.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him as I lean in and rub my lips along his jaw. “He’s watching us,” I whisper, and he stiffens. He nods once and takes the plate from my hand. We walk to a booth that Leslie is at. We sit next to each other, and Leslie sits at the edge to discourage Chad from coming over. She glances at the two of us.

“Everything okay?” She asks as she pops a shrimp in her mouth. We both nod, and she smiles. Her eyes dart around, and then she leans forward. “Chad makes you uncomfortable too.” It’s a statement, not a question. Leslie knows Chad makes me as uncomfortable as he makes her. Lincoln’s hand comes down on my thigh under the table, and I lean forward.

“Yes. I’ve wanted to ask you about him, but he won’t leave us alone long enough at work for me to ask you.” I tell her. She pops another shrimp in her mouth and takes a sip of her cocktail.

“Rumor is he moved here from California.” I wait for her to continue as I push some food around my plate. “Apparently, he’s had several accusations against him from women he’s previously worked with.” I have a grape halfway to my mouth when she says that, and I pause before slowly putting it in my mouth and chewing.

“What kind of accusations?” I ask, even though I’m sure I already know. Lincoln is like a statue next to me.

“Sexual assault. One came forward, and then several came forward after she did.” She whispers like anyone can hear her over the noise in this bar. My skin breaks into a cold clamminess at her revelation, and I turn to Lincoln. His jaw is ticking. He’s either pissed or worried or both.

“Is that why you won’t leave me alone with him?” I ask her, and Lincoln’s hand flexes on my thigh, his fingers digging

into my skin, causing me to flinch. He releases me, rubbing small circles to soothe the pain like he didn't mean to hurt me.

"Yeah." She glances at Lincoln warily and sighs. "This will probably piss your boyfriend off, but I see how Chad looks at you. I'm not leaving him alone with you. Us girls have to look out for each other." She says, and I give her a small smile.

"Thanks, Leslie." I feel like a jerk for not coming out when she asked me to. Maybe that's why she's asked, so she didn't have to face Chad alone. "I'm sorry I haven't come with you before now. I won't leave you alone with him either. I can't promise I'll come to hang out, but if you want to hang out, you're always welcome to come to my place." I tell her, and she nods at me. I look at Lincoln again, and I can tell he is barely keeping it together. Leslie stands and grabs her plate.

"I think I've had enough socializing for one night. I'll see you in a few weeks." She walks away with a wave, and I sit there staring at my plate. Unease rolls through me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Chad approaching, and I grab Lincoln's hand on my thigh. His head pops up, and he scowls at Chad.

Lincoln maneuvers out of the booth and grabs my hand pulling me behind him.

"Leaving so soon!" Chad calls out, but we ignore him as Lincoln drags me out of the bar. He bypasses the elevator and heads toward the staircase pushing the door open. Pulling me around, I'm in front of him; he wraps one arm around my waist and the other around my neck. He walks me into the wall protecting my head so I don't hit it.

Even in his frustration and anger, he is trying to protect me. Before he can say anything, I speak up.

"I'm sorry, Lincoln. I should have said something to someone." I breathe out, and his forehead lands on mine.

"Yeah, you should have, and you will get punished later." He tells me, and a thrill runs up my spine. "While I may have been an asshole, you should have told someone. This is a

serious issue, and we must keep an eye on this guy, sweetheart. I'm over five hours away, so we need tell Dylan what's happening." The agony in his voice makes me want to crawl inside him and comfort him. I hold on to him tight.

"Linc?" I start, and he cants his head waiting. "This is hard. I hate being so far away from you." I admit, and his lips find mine. He's unhurried, taking his time but completely devouring me. When he breaks away, he exhales slowly.

"Me too, sweetheart." I swallow and close my eyes, leaning my head back into his hand that's still gripping me. I've had an idea forming in the back of my mind for the past several weeks, and I wonder if I should bring it up to him but decide against it for now. He plants another kiss on me before pulling away and then leading me back to the door we came through. "We'll figure it out. I promise."

He guides me to the elevator holding me close the entire time making sure everyone knows I'm taken.

I STAND IN the middle of my bedroom, facing Lincoln, waiting for his instructions. We talked again on the drive home. He reminded me of the colors. I can say red at any moment, and he'll stop. I was squirming in my seat the entire time we talked, and he knew it.

It takes all I have to stand still and wait for Lincoln to speak. When I'm about to break, he crooks his finger for me to come to him. I don't hesitate. I walk to him, and he wraps his hands around my thighs and rubs them up to my ass and back down.

"We didn't discuss how often I get to spank this pretty ass of yours." He states, holding my ass cheeks in his hands, and I bring my hands up to his shoulders, trying to focus on him and not what he's doing.

"You were being a brat earlier today too." He reminds me, and heat travels up my neck. He runs his index finger up my crease, and I jump, causing him to smirk.

“But this is the first time we’ve done this, so I thought six. Two times for being a brat earlier and four times for not telling me about that fucker.” I stare at him, thinking about getting spanked six times.

Can I handle that? I’ve never been spanked, not even as a child. My mom would grab me and leave marks but never spanked me.

“Ansley, this doesn’t work unless you tell me your limits, sweetheart.” He reminds me, and I bring my hand up to my throat.

“I was thinking. Ummm... I think I can take that. Besides, I can always say red. Right?” I tell him, and he smiles at my response.

“That’s my good girl.” He gives my ass a tight squeeze and then releases me, leaning back on the bed.

“Take your dress and undergarments off. Keep your shoes on.” He instructs, and my heart stutters as I take a step back. I have on black Louboutin heels. It’s the only thing I’ve splurged on since moving to Atlanta, and apparently, Lincoln likes it. They were on sale, and I couldn’t pass them up.

I reach down and lift my dress over my head. I let it fall to the floor. Reaching behind me, I unhook my bra and let it fall off my arms as it joins my dress on the floor. I watch Lincoln watch me, and I breathe shakily as I push my panties down my legs and step out of them.

I stand in front of him naked as his eyes peruse me. His hand comes up to adjust himself as he gets his fill of me.

“I will never get tired of looking at you, gorgeous.” He says, his voice gruff. I rub my thighs together, needing something, and he smirks. He tips his chin at me.

“Come here, sweetheart.” I walk unsteadily to him. I stop between his spread legs, and his hands grasp my hips. “If I were to dip my fingers into that sweet pussy of yours, would you be wet?” He asks, and I swallow. He arches an eyebrow waiting for me to answer.

“Yes...” I trail off, and one hand comes up to cup me, and his finger slides easily along my folds. I moan and bite my lip but release it. I reapplied more lipstick on the way home, and I don't want to mess it up.

“So wet.” He whispers as he slides his finger in and out of me, and I'm beginning to question if I'll be able to remain standing much longer. After a few more strokes, he removes his fingers and then brings them up to his mouth, licking them clean. My tongue comes out to wet my lips at the sight.

“Lay across my lap.” I swallow and nod, following his instructions. I don't know how hard he will spank me, so I think six is enough for tonight. Once I find out how this feels, we may push the limits further next time.

I lay across his lap, and he situates me, so the upper half of my body is on the bed. He brings his hand down and massages my ass, then dips his fingers into my pussy again, and I squeak.

“Don't forget your colors.” He reminds me, and I bite my lip as he thrusts two fingers into me.

“Oh god!” I whisper, and then he's thrusting three fingers in me, and I fist the blankets. I feel so full. He removes his fingers, and then his hand lands hard on my right ass cheek. I gasp at the unexpectedness of it.

“Count Ansley.” Before I respond, it takes me a moment to comprehend what he's saying.

“One,” I grunt, and he rubs the spot he spanked and leans down.

“That's my good girl.” He whispers, and I push back into his hand.

“Lincoln.” I moan out. Then he moves his hand and brings it down on my other cheek. I grunt at the sting but remember quickly I need to count.

“Two.” He massages that spot, dips his fingers back into my pussy, and moans.

“Such a dirty girl. You love this, don’t you?” He asks, and I can’t stop from pushing back into his fingers. He pulls his fingers out and spans me again. Each time he spans me is in a different spot. “Answer the question.”

“Yes. I love it.” I cry out and then suck in a breath, remembering I need to count. “Three.” He massages my ass again and thrusts his fingers in my pussy again. I’m going to come. Tears seep from my eyes at how overwhelmed I feel by all the sensations. “Lincoln,” I whisper, and he pauses.

“Color, sweetheart.” It’s a demand.

“Green,” I say without even thinking, and he pulls his fingers out of my pussy and spans me again, this one landing where the top of my thigh and ass cheek meets, causing me to cry out.

“Four.” My ass is so sensitive, but as he massages it, I feel tingly all over. Who knew pain could turn into pleasure? He swipes his thumb up my slit, and I spread my legs, trying to get more, but he moves up to my anus and circles it.

I’m beginning to tremble. He uses his other hand to rub up my spine and back down. When I relax, his thumb breeches my hole, and I moan. My throat feels so raw from all the moaning and crying out.

“Color?” I hesitate at his question. I don’t know if I’m ready for him to go further than having his thumb in my ass.

“Yellow?” It comes out as a question, and he stops.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” He asks. I swallow and turn my head so that I can look at him.

“I don’t mind your thumb there, but I don’t know if I’m ready for anything else,” I explain.

“That’s so good, sweetheart.” He rubs his hand up my spine and back down. I nod, and he removes his thumb. Then his hand is coming down on a different spot, causing me to cry out again.

“Five,” I say, pushing my head into the mattress. I swear I’m about to come. If he shoved his cock in me now, I would

come instantly. I'm almost sobbing as he rubs his hand over my ass.

"Color, sweetheart?" He asks.

"Green!" I shout. I need him to make me come. I expect him to shove his fingers in me again, but it's like he knows I'm on the brink, so he brings his hand down on my ass one more time, causing me to cry out.

"Six!" I scream out in relief. He massages me for a second before thrusting his fingers back in me with one hand and spreading my legs open even wider with his other. I scream out as he pushes into me fast and hard, hooking his fingers. Before I can comprehend what's happening, I'm coming all over him and squirting everywhere. I am so loud in my release that I'm sure the entire apartment complex hears me and knows exactly how great of a lover Lincoln is.

He pulls his fingers out of me and leans forward, kissing along the top of my back and shoulders. But my whole body is complete jello. I couldn't move right now if I wanted to. I can't believe that turned me on so much that he made me come so hard and fast. I feel his lips against my ear.

"Are you okay, baby?" He whispers, and I moan, unable to answer him. He chuckles, giving me a moment to collect myself. When I do, I climb off his lap and kneel before him. I can't lean back on my heels because my ass is a little sensitive, but I bring my hands to his slacks and unbutton them.

I look at him under my eyelashes, and his pupils are blown with desire. He pushes his pants down as his cock springs out then I'm leaning forward and taking him in my mouth. I make sure my red lipstick rubs off on him as I go down, and then when I'm coming back up, I glance up at him again. When he sees it, he moans.

"I'm going to fuck that pretty little mouth of yours." He warns me. "Don't forget to pinch my thigh." He reminds me, and I nod once; then, he grabs my hair in his hand and shoves me down on his cock until it hits the back of my throat. I love how rough he is with me—taking his pleasure from me, using me. I love that I'm the only one who sees him like this. To

everyone else, he's put together. For me, he comes undone. I suck and lick as much as possible, but Lincoln guides the movements.

After a few more thrusts, he keeps himself at the back of my throat and thrusts, causing me to gag slightly, and tears stream down my face. I'm sure I look like a mess, but I don't care. He releases me when I think I can't take another second, and I breathe deeply through my nose.

"I'm going to come." He growls, and I rub my hands up his thighs, letting him know it is okay. I take a deep breath, knowing what's about to happen as he pushes me back down on his cock.

He shouts his release toward the ceiling as he comes in hot spurts down my throat. I swallow him down, and when he releases, I wobble and fall back, wincing as I land on my sore ass.

He immediately gathers me in his arms and holds me against him. I lay my head on his shoulder and drape my arms around him.

"How are you feeling, baby?" He asks, and I sigh in contentment.

"My ass is sore, but that was amazing," I admit, and I feel him grin against my forehead.

"Can I take my shoes off now?" I ask him, and he chuckles. He leans down and helps remove my shoes, laying them gently on the edge of the bed so they don't get scuffed from falling on the floor.

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's shower, and I'll put some aloe on your ass." He stands and carries me into the shower. He lowers me to my feet slowly as he turns the water on. I grab a hair tie and pull my hair up; not in the mood to wash my hair right now. He helps me into the shower, and we both shower quickly. Exhaustion begins to take over, and I'm ready to lie down.

Lincoln helps me dry off by being careful not to irritate my sore skin. He grabs the aloe he found and begins to rub it on

gently.

“You did so well, Ansley.” He tells me, and I practically purr from his praise. He places the bottle of aloe on the counter and wraps his arms around me, holding me gently.

“You said your colors when I asked and counted without me having to remind you continuously.” He leans down to kiss me. “So good.” He says into my skin, and I arch into him.

“I didn’t realize how much I’d like it,” I admit, and he pulls back slightly to study me. He kisses my forehead and leads me back to the bedroom.

“Anal still makes you nervous, though?” He asks, and I nod.

“I haven’t had a chance to read the stuff you sent me because of work. I want to be prepared.” I explain as he pulls back the blankets, and I climb in as he follows me. He pulls me into his side. We’re both naked, and I don’t mind much since I’m still sensitive.

“That’s great, sweetheart. I want you to be prepared. And we don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.” He reminds me. I snuggle in closer to him and rub my lips over his pec.

“I love you, Lincoln.” His hand flexes on my waist as he holds me close.

“I love you too, Ans.” He whispers into my hair.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LINCOLN

I SIT at my desk, staring at my computer screen but not seeing it. After leaving Ansley, I can't stop thinking about that asshole Chad. She's off for the next few weeks, and I'm hoping she'll come home for a little while instead of staying in Atlanta, but today she had to go clean out the area she was using.

She promised Leslie would be there with her and that she'd text me when she got there and left. And she did that, but that was several hours ago, and now she's not answering any of my texts or phone calls. Picking my phone up, I call Dylan.

"Hello?" He answers on the second ring, which is unlike him, but I think he's on a break too.

"Hey! How's it going?" I ask him, and he grunts.

"Alright. I'm grabbing something to eat and then going home to sleep for the next three days." He tells me, and I chuckle.

"Have you heard from Ansley? She sent me a text when she was done with whatever she had to clean up, but I've been trying to text her and call her since, and she hasn't been answering. You don't think this guy would follow her home, do you?" I tell him.

“Yeah. She texted me too. She might be asleep. She’s just as beat as I am. And that’s one of the reasons why I got her into a gated apartment complex. I know you consider yourself older and wiser, but I do have some sense about me.” He tells me, and I snort. I run a hand through my hair. He’s right. I don’t know how I’m going to do this. I hated it before but now, knowing this guy seems to have a thing for her. I briefly wonder if anything can be done about him.

“You’re probably right. I’m worried about her. I wish there were something I could do about this guy.” I catch movement and glance up to see Caroline standing at my door. She waves apologetically, and I hold my finger up, asking for a minute.

“I know you’re tired. Do you mind checking on her before you go to sleep and text me? I hate to sound like a stalker boyfriend, but...” I trail off, but Dylan is quick to reassure me.

“That’s my sister, man. I’ll check on her. I promise.” He replies, and I exhale in relief. We say our goodbyes, and I look up at Caroline. She has a worried expression on her face.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I came here to ask about some emails, but I overheard you. Is Ansley okay?” She implores, and I motion for her to come in.

“Yes. She sent me a text earlier, and I’m probably being the overbearing boyfriend.” Before I can continue, Caroline gasps.

“Boyfriend?” She asks, and I glance up at her. I rub my hand over my neck.

“When’s the last time you talked to Ansley?” I ask her. She shrugs.

“We’ve been texting a little, but it has been a few days. She sent us a text that you came this weekend, so we left her alone so you could have some time alone. I didn’t realize it had become official.” She beams, and I feel awkward talking to my employee about my girlfriend, even if my girlfriend is her best friend.

“Well, yeah, we did. And I met one of her coworkers who is a creep, and now I’m worried about her.” I blurt out. I’m not one for telling Ansley’s business, but I’m still a little pissed at her for not telling the people she loves about this guy. Caroline plays with her necklace and rubs her palm over her belly; that’s beginning to show.

“Sebastian knows someone,” Caroline states, and I stare at her.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I tell her, and she laughs, motioning to her head with her hand.

“Sorry. Pregnancy brain. Sebastian knows someone that could maybe do some digging into the guy.” She explains, capturing my attention. I lean forward and motion for her to continue.

“His best friend Connor has a brother that used to be a detective or something. He’s a professor now, but he still has connections and apparently can dig into people’s past and stuff.” I rub my hand along my jaw, thinking about what she told me.

“What information would he need to do some digging?” I ask her, and she shrugs.

“I don’t know. I can ask Sebastian and let you know.” She pauses, bringing her hand up to play with a piece of her hair.

“We’re all going to hang out at Connor’s house Friday night if you and Ansley want to come along. Bec’s grandfather passed away recently, and we’re trying to cheer her up as much as possible.” I have no idea who Bec is, but I nod anyway. Before I can respond, Caroline is talking again.

“I’m sure Ansley will probably want to go anyway. She always liked Bec.” I tilt my head.

“Who is Bec?” I ask her, and she smiles.

“Bec works for Sebastian at his gym.” I shrug.

“If Ansley’s going to be there, I’ll be there, and I wouldn’t mind talking to this guy. What’s his name?” I ask her. A slow smile forms on her face. “What?”

“That’s so sweet!” She exclaims, and I shake my head. “His name is Julian. There will be a lot of people there. Connor, Julian, Bec, my sister, Liv, Ansley, Sebastian, you, and me.” She tells me, and I stare at her waiting to see if that’s supposed to deter me. She lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “You just don’t seem like a people person.” She explains. I’m not. Not really.

“Like I said, if Ansley is going to be there, I’ll be there.” I’ve gone way too long, caring what other people thought about me having a relationship with Ansley. I don’t care anymore. I change the subject to find out what her questions are about the emails and answer them. She makes a weird squeaking noise when she gets to my door, and my head pops up.

“Sorry!” She exclaims. As she covers her mouth and exits, closing my door. I shake my head and look back at my phone, grabbing it to see if maybe Dylan has sent me a text. Nothing. I want to throw my phone across the room, but I stop myself because then I won’t be able to receive any notifications if I do that.

I’m this close to driving back to Atlanta to find out what the hell is going on when my door opens. My head pops up to see who the hell just walked into my office without knocking. There Ansley stands with a smile on her face but nerves in her eyes. I lean back in my chair and tighten my hands into fists, imagining turning her pretty ass a shade of pink. She closes the door and leans against it.

“Hi.” She whispers nervously. I stare at her for several long moments; she’s okay. She probably did this to surprise me, and that’s okay. Taking a deep breath, I exhale slowly.

“Get your ass over here,” I order, and she immediately walks around my desk. I push my chair away and pull her into my lap, wrapping my arms around her tight. I pull her against me and bury my nose in her hair.

“Ansley,” I growl, and she wraps her arms around me.

“I wanted to surprise you, Lincoln.” She bites back, and I can’t help but smile into her hair. There’s my girl.

“And I am surprised, but I have been so worried today. I even called Dylan.” She buries her head in my neck.

“He called me and told me I better hurry my ass, or he would call you back and tell you.” She mumbles, and I pull back.

“He knew?” I ask, and she nods, twisting her lips.

“I begged him not to say anything to you. You surprised me the other day, so I wanted to surprise you.” She explains, and I pull her into a brief hard kiss.

“I should still spank that ass of yours.” I declare, and she chuckles huskily.

“I’m still sore, so I’m not sure I can handle that.” She glances away before meeting my eyes, and I see hesitancy in them. I cant my head at her.

“What?” I prod, and her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink. This should be interesting.

“I’m going to be home for a few weeks. So, I was thinking...” She trails off, and I wait patiently even though I want her to hurry up and tell me whatever she’s thinking. She clears her throat.

“I was thinking you could fuck my ass.” She whispers, and my cock goes on full alert. It was already half hard with her sitting in my lap, but now it is at full attention. I have to reach down and adjust myself, and she giggles.

“Fuck Ansley. You need to warn a guy before you say shit like that.” She cackles, and I scowl at her.

“One, I didn’t realize you were staying for three weeks. That makes me very happy. Two, you will be staying with me. If you want to have a girl’s night and stay at Liv’s or Caroline’s, I think I can be away from you for one night tops. Three, I’m definitely fucking this ass.”

I punctuate it by grabbing her ass and pulling her close. She laughs again, making me want to hear her laughter every day for the rest of my life. I gently push her off my lap. She stands, and I crowd her until she’s perched against my desk.

“I don’t know how I’m going to do this. With you there and me here.” I exclaim. I push her shirt off her shoulder, run my teeth along her neck and shoulder, and then follow it with my tongue. She shudders, and I do it again until she’s panting.

“Me either, Lincoln. I could barely sleep last night.” She confesses, and I sink my teeth into her shoulder and then kiss the pain away. She tilts her neck giving me better access.

“I have something I’d like to run by you. Do you want to go grab dinner?” She asks, and I pull back at the seriousness in her tone. I wrap my hand around her neck and massage the base of her scalp.

“Is everything okay?” She moans as I massage a particularly sensitive spot.

“Yeah.” She hesitates, and I arch an eyebrow. “I’d rather wait and go somewhere I know we won’t be interrupted.” She explains, and I try to figure out what she could be talking about. I glance down at my phone, picking it up to see it’s almost five o’clock. I fix her shirt so it’s covering her shoulder again.

“Let’s go.” I turn my computer off and pocket my phone grabbing her hand. She grabs her purse she dropped on the floor when I pulled her into my lap. Caroline and Liv are there when we get to the elevator, and they eye us. I can tell by the look on their faces that they want to hang out with my girl.

“I know you two haven’t seen Ansley in a while, and I promise you can have her tomorrow, but she’s mine tonight. Okay?” I try my best to say it politely. Their eyes arch, and Ansley leans into me, kissing my cheek.

“Wow!” Liv exclaims. She looks from Caroline to Ansley and then back to me. “I didn’t realize you had it in you to be that polite.” Ansley snorts. Caroline covers her mouth as she laughs, and I scowl.

“I’m still your boss Liv, and I could fire you.” I remind her, and Ansley scoffs.

“No, he won’t.” She says as the elevators open, and we all pile inside, and I pull her in close. She turns to me. “Tell her

you won't." She demands. I snarl into her ear but turn to Liv.

"I won't." They all giggle, and I roll my eyes as I hide a smile in Ansley's hair. I've always liked Caroline and Liv. Ansley and Liv have been friends a little longer, but Caroline was brought into their fold several months ago, and they all clicked. Ansley deserves to have people who love her, especially when she grew up lacking that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LINCOLN

WE FOLLOW the host to our table, my hand on the small of Ansley's back. When we arrived at our booth, the host told us our server would be with us soon. Ansley slides into the booth, and I try to slide in beside her, but she stops me.

"Can you sit across from me? At least until I tell you. I'm nervous and need space, and I want to see your face completely." She rambles. I don't like it, but I agree and move to the booth across from her.

She assured me on the way here, it has nothing to do with us, but I'm still curious about why she's so nervous. Our server arrives, and we both order wine as we glance over the menu.

"Alright, Ans. Please put me out of my misery." I plead, and she takes a deep breath.

"I don't want to do costume design anymore." She blurts out, and my eyebrows shoot up as I lean back in my seat, placing my menu on the table. I'll order what I usually do anyway.

"Okay. What do you want to do?" I ask her. She runs her hands through her hair and places them on the table, fidgeting with the silverware.

“I want to open my own boutique and sell clothes.” She announces, and my mouth lifts into a smile.

“That’s a great idea, Ans!” I encourage her, and she breaks out into a smile. She clears her throat again.

“I want to move back home and open the boutique here.” She explains, and relief washes over me at the thought of her moving back here.

“When?” I ask her. She fidgets more with her silverware.

“That’s where the problem is. I have a contract at my building, and I don’t want to break it, so I have to stay until that’s up. I’ve already told my supervisor that I’d be on set for next season because of that. So, for at least six more months.” She sighs in defeat. I can’t stand sitting across from her any longer. I stand and slide in next to her. As I do, our server arrives with our wine and takes our order. I glance at her.

“Do you want what you usually get?” I ask her, and she nods. I order for us, wrap my arm around Ansley’s shoulder, and pull her into me.

“How much does it cost to get out of your contract?” I question. She huffs.

“Three months rent. I am not living paycheck to paycheck anymore like I was. I have some money saved up, but I’m not using it to get out of my contract. I want to use it to open a boutique.” I hum, thinking through numbers but not commenting right now. I’m not sure if she’ll accept my help or not. Maybe since we’re in a relationship now, she will.

“Let’s talk about the boutique. Will you be making your own clothes? Or buying clothes?” Her whole face lights up at my questions.

“So, Atlanta has these events where boutiques can come in and purchase items for their stores. On the days I had off if there were one of those events, I’d go to check them out. I want to design my own clothes, but I won’t be able to make stuff quick enough. So, I could open a boutique, purchase from these vendors, and make my one-of-a-kind stuff.” She takes a breath. “By then, all this mess with the identity thief and my

credit should be resolved, so I should be able to lease a small place downtown.”

She gazes at me, hope shining in her eyes, and pride swells in my chest. I lean down and give her a gentle kiss.

“That sounds like a great plan, sweetheart. I think you’ll do great at that. I can help you find a place downtown. I know a lot of the owners. We can look around while you’re here.” I tread lightly, but she beams at me.

“That would be great, Linc. I’ll probably need a lot of help. You know so much about starting a business, and I know nothing.” She agrees. Before I can respond, our food is being brought, and we dig in. I think about her situation with her apartment and job. Starting a business doesn’t happen overnight, so she can’t just quit. But when she opens her boutique, it may take a while for her to start making money.

“When you move back.” I start but then pause. She turns to me, waiting for me to continue. “Would you want to move in with me?” I ask her, nerves settling in my stomach. Her mouth pops open, but then she’s smiling.

“Yeah.” She whispers. “Yeah, I would.” I lean forward and kiss her forehead. I have to make this happen. I need her back home as soon as possible. I don’t want to live without her anymore; I can’t live without her anymore. It is not an option.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK flies by, and I hate it because Ansley will return to Atlanta soon. I’ve been with her every night and woken up to her every morning. It’s been a breath of fresh air.

On Friday night, we arrive at Connor’s house fashionably late because, as Ansley would say, I can’t keep my hands off her. She’s not wrong. She rings the doorbell as I wrap my arm around her, pulling her close. A girl with pink hair swings the door open, and her face lights up.

“Ansley! I haven’t seen you in forever.” She exclaims, and Ansley claps her hands before going in and hugging her.

“Hey, Bec! I’m so sorry to hear about your grandfather.” They hug one more time before breaking apart; Bec doesn’t respond to Ansley’s statement. She gives a slight nod and then looks at me. Ansley turns to me and smiles brightly.

“This is Lincoln, my boyfriend.” Ansley introduces me, and Bec’s face breaks out into a huge smile, and I eye her warily as I extend my hand to shake hers. She takes it and pumps it.

“I have heard a lot about you,” Bec says just as Caroline comes up behind her and pushes her away.

“No, you haven’t, Bec.” Bec walks away, laughing her ass off, and I look back and forth between her, Caroline, and Ansley. Ansley and Caroline are sharing a look, and I glare at them.

“Have you two been talking about me?” I ask, and Ansley throws her head back with a cackle. Caroline ushers us inside and closes the door, but I turn on them both. Caroline has a guilty look, while Ansley has an amused look. Caroline huffs.

“Lincoln, you are not the easiest man to work for. And then when Ansley gave her two weeks’ notice and left....” She trails off, plops her hands on her thighs, and then points her finger at me. “You’re lucky half the office didn’t quit.” She reprimands me, and Ansley rolls her lips between her teeth, trying to hide a smile. I shake my head, putting my hands in my pockets.

“I’m working on it,” I state, and Caroline’s eyes widen before she looks at Ansley. She points at me.

“He’s working on it,” Caroline says in exasperation, and Ansley chuckles, shrugging her shoulders.

“Listen, I’ve dealt with this my entire life. Welcome to my world.” She states. I growl and pull her into my arms, but she comes willingly. Caroline’s mouth pops open, and she stares at us like she doesn’t know what to do with us. Before she can respond, Liv and another woman I’ve never met before walk up.

“What did we miss?” Liv asks. Caroline turns to her and points to me.

“He’s working on it.” She states, and Liv gives her a confused look while Ansley giggles.

“Huh?” Liv and the other woman asks. Caroline shakes her head.

“Never mind.” She points to the woman I don’t know. “Lincoln, this is my sister Bailey. Bailey, this is Lincoln.” Bailey’s eyes light up, and she breaks out into a grin. Before she can say anything, Caroline points at her.

“Don’t!” She exclaims. Ansley breaks out into laughter, and I shake my head. Caroline glares at both of us but then leads us further into the house. Ansley explained to me that Connor works in construction and builds homes. I glanced around, expecting to see more than what I do. I assume it’s because he’s single and works long hours.

His house screams bachelor pad, but I keep my opinion to myself. I see a large television on the wall when we enter the living room. Bec is playing some dance game with Bass and two other guys watching on. They’re obviously brothers, but one is wearing jeans and a t-shirt while the other is wearing slacks and a button-down shirt. Ansley wanders off with Liv to grab a drink, and Caroline stands beside me.

“Connor is the one in jeans. Julian is the one that looks like you.” She states, and my head snaps to her and then down to what I’m wearing. We are similarly dressed.

“Do I just approach Julian?” I ask Caroline. Bass notices me, and he comes over to shake my hand before standing behind Caroline and wrapping his arms around her rubbing his hands over her belly.

“Care told me you needed some information on a guy that might be bad news for Ansley. I can introduce you to Julian. Have you told Ansley what you’re doing? Do we need to keep this a secret?” He asks, and I glance at Ansley as she laughs with Liv.

“No. I haven’t talked to her about it. But I don’t want to keep it a secret. She’ll be pissed if I do.” Like she senses my eyes on her, she glances over and catches my eye. I motion for her to come over. She says something to Liv and then walks over to us. When she’s close enough, I pull her against me. She probably won’t like this, but I need to protect her.

“What’s going on?” Ansley asks, looking between us as we form a circle making it known we don’t want to be approached right now. Caroline bites her lip as she looks between Ansley and me.

“Caroline told me that Connor’s brother Julian was a private detective and had connections where he could look into people,” I explain. Ansley’s eyebrows cave in as she tries to follow along. “I’m going to talk to him and see if he can find out any information on Chad,” I confess, and she stiffens.

“Lincoln.” She pauses before her eyes turn to Caroline, but Caroline speaks before she can say anything.

“I’m sorry, Ansley. I should have said something to you. This week has been....” She trails off. “There’s no excuse. It would have taken five minutes, but it scared me when I overheard Lincoln’s conversation, and I wanted to make sure you were okay.” Ansley runs her hands through her hair and exhales a long breath. She glances toward Liv, and I notice Liv is watching but not approaching.

Ansley motions for her to come over, and Liv approaches cautiously. I wait to see what Ansley will say, but she stays quiet until Liv joins our circle.

“Is everything okay?” Liv asks, and Ansley rolls her eyes causing me to flex my hand on her waist. She turns her head to me, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, Lincoln is trying to fix things without talking to me first in pure Lincoln fashion.” Disdain drips from her voice, and I want to grab her by the throat and show her exactly why I’m doing what I’m doing. She is my world, and I will do whatever it takes to ensure she is safe. She huffs and leans into me.

“But I should have said something sooner, so I guess I understand.” She admits, and my head snaps in her direction so fast my neck pops. She smirks at me.

“I know. Shocker! My stubborn ass is admitting I’m wrong.” She exclaims and I snort.

“That doesn’t mean you’re off the hook for doing this behind my back. You could have talked to me before bombarding me in front of everyone.” She admonishes, and I don’t give an inch. I have to ensure she’s safe whether she likes it or not. Instead, she turns her attention back to Liv and Caroline as Bass stands there, taking everything in.

“There’s this guy, Chad, I work with on set that is a total creeper. I’ve felt uneasy about him since I started working in Atlanta, but I’ve ignored it. Which is unlike me, but I blame it on all the changes and how exhausted I am all the time.” She motions to me.

“We found out over the weekend that he used to work in California and recently moved out here. Apparently, he’s had charges brought against him of assault.” Liv shifts, and her hand goes to her throat.

“What are you going to do? You have to stay away from him, Ansley.” Ansley reaches out and rubs Liv’s arm.

“There’s not much I can do. I work with him. But there’s another woman I work with, Leslie; we made a pact that we’d never leave each other alone. We told Dylan, so he knows about him too.” She tells them. I kiss her neck.

“That’s not good enough for me. I had to jump on it when Caroline told me about Julian.” I state, and Ansley sighs.

“I wish you had told us, Ans,” Caroline says. “I didn’t mean to overhear Lincoln’s conversation, but it made me worry about you.” Ansley bites her lip and nods. Bass kisses the top of Caroline’s head, comforting her.

“I know. I didn’t want you all worried.” Ansley admits. “So, what’s next?” She asks, and I look at Bass.

“We’re going to start grilling in about thirty minutes. Come hang out with us, and I’ll introduce you to Julian, and

then we'll go from there." He states, and I nod. Ansley pats me on the chest.

"Let's get a drink so you'll loosen up a little. And we need to chat." She winks at Caroline and Liv. "I'll be right back." She grabs my hand and pulls me away.

"I know a way I can loosen up," I tell her, and she snorts.

"We already did that before we left your house. Besides, I'm not too happy with you." She responds as she stops in front of a table with alcohol. She grabs the bottle of bourbon and pours me some. When she sits it down on the table to put the bottle up, I pull her against me and move her hair out of the way, kissing along her neck.

"Hmm... Well, obviously, I need another round. It could be an angry fuck." I tell her. She presses back against me, and I grunt, feeling my cock get hard.

"I'd rather not go to the bathroom and walk in on that." Both of our heads snap to our right to see Bec standing there staring at us. Ansley laughs, and I give her a tight smile. Bailey walks up, giving us all a smile.

"Ansley, you should do the dance game with us. It's fun!" Bailey encourages, and I turn to glance at her. Ansley lifts one shoulder but then glances down at herself.

"I did not come dressed to do that, but if I take off these heels, I'm sure I can manage," Ansley replies, surprising me. "I haven't worked out in so long. I'm going to be completely out of breath." Bec snorts.

"According to Lincoln, you worked out before you came here. So..." Bailey's mouth drops open, Ansley starts laughing again, and I want to be rescued from this group of girls.

"Lincoln!" I hear Bass call my name. Thank fuck! I turn to him, and he motions for me to come out on the back porch with them. I lean in and kiss Ansley.

"Saved by the bell." She whispers, and I chuckle.

"Not even sad about it," I tell her, and she smirks as I grab my bourbon and walk away, leaving the giggling girls behind

me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ANSLEY

I PLOP down on the couch between Caroline and Liv, out of breath after doing the dance game twice. I look at Caroline.

“Those two have gotten close,” I state, and Caroline nods as she sips her sweet tea.

“They’ve bonded over the fact they’re convinced they’ll be sister-in-laws one day.” She states, and my mouth gapes open.

“What?!?” I exclaim, and Liv breaks out in laughter next to me. Caroline motions to Bailey.

“Mainly, my sister has convinced Bec that she will marry Connor, and Bailey will marry Julian. Now they need to convince the guys.” Caroline explains. My mouth pops open as I look between Bailey and Bec and then out the back door to Connor and Julian on the back porch.

“How old is Bailey?” I ask Caroline, and she snorts.

“She just turned twenty-one, and Julian is her professor. It was fun finding that out. She had been talking to me about this professor she had a crush on, and I knew Connor’s brother was a professor, but I didn’t put two and two together. Connor was having a get-together at his house one day, and Bec told me to invite her, so I did and...” Caroline trails off. “Well, let’s just say things got interesting.” She motions to Bec and Bailey to do the dance game.

“Now they’re both doing this to annoy the shit out of Julian and Connor.” She takes another sip of her drink.

“Why will this annoy them?” I ask, and Liv chuckles next to me.

“Because they want to watch college football.” She states, and I grin, shaking my head. “I think they’re doing it for attention too. Bec is used to Connor looking at her as a little sister, but when Bailey wants something, she’s like a dog with a bone. Of course, Julian has some hang-ups because he’s a lot older than her, and he’s her professor.” Liv looks over and smirks.

“Has he finally admitted he has a thing for her?” Liv asks. Caroline scoffs.

“Oh! He has a thing for her.” That’s all she says, so we drop it. At the lull in the conversation, I tell them about my boutique idea and the possibility of me moving back home. They both hug me, excited at the thought. Liv lays her head on my shoulder.

“I want you away from that guy Ansley.” She murmurs, and I pat her knee as Caroline curls into me. I’ve missed my girls so much.

“Me too.” Caroline mumbles. I sigh.

“Yeah. Now that I know about those accusations against him, I dread returning to work. On Monday, when I went to clean up my area, I was on guard all day. By the time I left, I was so tense my body was actually sore. I don’t know if I can handle that every single day.” I admit. Wanting to change the subject, I turn to Caroline.

“How are you feeling? Have you felt the baby kick yet?” Caroline beams.

“I’ve felt flutterings, but nothing anyone else will be able to feel yet. Sebastian is jealous, but I promised him I’d let him as soon as I thought he could feel it.” She chuckles and shakes her head. “We’re going to one of those gender reveal places the week before Thanksgiving, so we’ll know what we’re

having before you return.” She sits up suddenly. Liv and I stare at her.

“What’s wrong?” Liv asks.

“Nothing. We should do a Friendsgiving at my and Sebastian’s house. We finally cleaned up the dining room. There’s enough space in there for all of us. Ansley, you can invite your brother. It would be fun!” She sounds so excited I find myself nodding. I go back to Atlanta the week after Thanksgiving.

“That sounds like fun, Care,” Liv responds before I can.

“Yeah.” I agree. “I’m not much of a cook, though....” Caroline scoffs.

“Me either. I am trying to learn, but Sebastian does most of our cooking. On Thanksgiving day, we’re having dinner with his parents, my mom, and Bailey. Maybe we could do Friendsgiving on Friday and have it catered.” I nod along. Bec and Bailey overhear our conversation, so they come over and sit on the floor in front of us. Liv looks at them.

“What do you two think? Want to come?” Liv asks, and they both nod.

“Sounds like fun to me!” Bailey states as she pulls her strawberry blond hair over her shoulder and begins to braid it. Caroline claps her hands.

“This could become a new tradition. I’m actually looking forward to the holidays this year. Sebastian, let me start decorating for Christmas already.” Everyone goes silent at her admission, and my heart breaks for her all over again. Her face falls, and Bailey reaches out and intertwines their fingers.

“Hey, sis. This year is going to be the best Christmas ever.” Bailey encourages her, and Caroline nods.

“Sorry. Sebastian is nothing like Brandon. I didn’t mean for it to sound like I needed his permission.” Caroline mumbles. I wrap my arm around her shoulder and hug her.

“You’re unlearning a lot, Care. You don’t have to apologize. That jackass did a number on you, and now you’re

learning what it's like to be in a healthy relationship. I can't wait to come to see your decorations." I tell her, and her smile returns. She rubs her shoulder against mine.

"You and Liv should come over tomorrow for a girl's day. Sebastian and Connor have a guy's day planned." I glance at Liv, and we both nod eagerly.

"SO, WHAT DID Julian have to say?" I ask Lincoln as I watch him unbutton his shirt and shrug it off. He smirks at me, and I shrug as I begin to undress. I turn around and motion to the zipper on my jumpsuit. He unzips it but runs his fingers down my spine, causing goosebumps to break out along my skin. He pulls away, and I let the jumpsuit drop to the ground, bending down to grab it, giving him an ample glance at my thong-clad ass.

I stand and turn around to face him, enjoying the look of desire on his face. He unbuttons his slacks and pushes them down his hips as his eyes run over my body. My tongue wets my lips.

He leans down and grabs his pants, and I walk forward, taking them out of his hand. I place them on his dresser along with my jumpsuit, and he comes up behind me, crowding me and planting a kiss on my shoulder. I turn in his arms and wrap my arms around his shoulders.

"Well?" I prompt him.

"How do you expect me to concentrate when you're teasing me like this?" He asks, and I bite the inside of my cheek. I turn like I'm about to walk away, but he grabs me.

"I was just going to grab my pajamas so I didn't distract you anymore," I tell him, and he grunts as he buries his nose in my hair. I chuckle and hold him close.

"He said he's not sure how much he can help because it's across state lines, but he has contacts in Atlanta, and he'll reach out to them. He also said, more than likely, whoever

hired him knows about the accusations, and they won't do anything about it." My mouth gapes at that.

"What about sexual harassment in the workplace?" I ask him, and Lincoln sighs.

"It's messed up, but Julian says they have their own rules and cover for one another. If Chad is good at his job and sought after, he'll be protected, and people will try to push these cases against him under the rug." Anger boils under my skin at hearing this, and I begin to pace.

"What about those girls? Will they get their justice?" I ask him. Lincoln shakes his head.

"Julian is going to look into it. He knows a lot of people, and if he can find out anything, he'll do it. He did suggest having your phone on you at all times and if Chad ever starts saying inappropriate things to you, record it." Lincoln runs his hand through his hair. "I'll kill him if he gets out of line with you."

"Will I get in trouble for recording him without knowing it?" I ask him, and he shakes his head.

"The law says as long as one party knows they're being recorded, it's okay. You'll know, so that will be okay." He explains. I take a deep breath.

"Okay. I don't like that you did that behind my back, Linc." I admonish him. He walks over, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"I'm not going to lie. I did it because I thought you'd get upset at me for trying to protect you at all costs. I'm kind of surprised you didn't." I shrug.

"You're my boyfriend now. It's a little bit different." I tell him. He nods and kisses me on the forehead.

"I'll tell you everything I find out from Julian, okay?" I take a deep breath and give him a small smile.

"Okay. I don't want to talk about it anymore. I'm going to take a shower. I did that dance game so much that it made me

sweat and feel gross.” I tell him and start for the bathroom with him right on my heels. “What are you doing?”

“I’m assuming that was an invitation to shower with you.” He replies, and I laugh as he continues to follow me. He turns the shower on, and we get in, cleaning each other. I keep expecting him to take it further, but he doesn’t, and I’m not sure how I feel about it.

I told him last week about wanting him to fuck me in the ass, and he hasn’t brought it up since. I’ve even read the articles he sent me, and I went to a store and bought a couple of butt plugs to begin getting myself ready.

I’m beginning to wonder if he wants to. We dry off, he pulls on some boxers, and I pull on a nightshirt. When we climb into bed, a knot has settled in my stomach.

He’s usually all over me but pulls me into him so my back is to his stomach, and he kisses my neck. I feel him against me, but he’s not doing anything about it. Why?

“Good night, sweetheart.” I squeeze my eyes shut. I’m being stupid. I know I am, but I can’t shut my mind off. I’m eighteen again and being rejected. I feel him push my hair off my neck.

“Ansley?” Huffing, I roll over, push him on his back and straddle his waist. He smirks up at me, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

“Why haven’t you tried yet?” I blurt out, and he stills, his eyes narrowing as he tries to figure out what I’m talking about.

“I need you to be more specific.” He replies. I grind my teeth because he’s going to make me say it out loud again.

“Why haven’t you tried to fuck my ass?” I say bluntly. His eyes widen a little before he sits up, wrapping his arms around my waist and flipping me over on my back so he’s above me and settling between my thighs.

“It’s not because I haven’t thought about it every single day since you brought it up.” He tells me. He grinds his stiff cock into me, arching an eyebrow at me as if to prove his point.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay after I spanked you. That was the first intense thing we’ve done. I needed to know you were okay. I sent you those articles. Have you read them?” He asks. I realize now the mistake I made. I never told him I read the articles.

“I did. And...” I trail off and look away, but he grips my chin and makes me look back at him.

“And what?” He asks. I inhale deeply before answering.

“I bought a couple of butt plugs and have been wearing them to help stretch me out,” I tell him. His whole chest rumbles against mine.

“Holy fuck, Ansley! Are they here?” He looks around the room like they’re going to appear magically. I clear my throat.

“Yes. They’re in the drawer you gave me under my stuff.” Before the words are barely out of my mouth, he’s out of bed and opening the drawer. He holds them both up and eyes me as he climbs back in the bed and kneels between my thighs. He looks between them and me.

“So, you’re telling me you’ve been walking around my house with butt plugs in, and you haven’t told me?” He sounds affronted, and I laugh.

“Only when you’re not home. Each day I try to see if I can go longer than the previous day. I had just taken it out right before you got home today.” At my words, he balks, and I bite my lip.

“I was pretty turned on, so I didn’t complain one bit about being late to Connor’s.” He gapes at me.

“I’m proud of you for taking this seriously, but I can’t believe you haven’t told me about this. Did you happen to bring your vibrator or buy one?” My shoulders slump, and I shake my head.

“No, I was a little nervous about buying the butt plugs. I was so focused that I didn’t think about anything else. I did get the lube, though.” He smirks and shows it to me. I didn’t see him grab that from the drawer.

“We can go to a store tomorrow and look around. If we find something, we’ll do it tomorrow.” He tells me, and I immediately feel better.

“Yeah. Okay.” I whisper. He brushes the hair out of my face.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, pretty girl?” He asks, and my eyes meet his.

“You haven’t said anything about it since I brought it up. I thought you didn’t want to anymore.” I whisper. He brings his hand up to cup my jaw.

“What else?” He asks, knowing I’m not telling him everything.

“And we’ve had sex every night since I’ve been back. So, I started feeling like you didn’t want me since we were going to sleep. All those old insecurities were creeping in.” I admit. He brings his nose down, running it along my jaw.

“Baby, I was on you the moment I walked through those doors when I got home. You just said we were late getting to Connor’s. I had to have you.” He assures me. And I nod.

“I didn’t say my thoughts were reasonable,” I mumble. He chuckles as his hand runs down my body and to the bottom of my nightshirt. He leans in and brushes his lips against my mouth.

“I can guarantee you that I will be ready to go anytime you want me, baby.” He rubs his hard cock against me again, hitting my clit, and I gasp.

“Want to test out one of the butt plugs while I make love to you?” My heart begins to beat rapidly, and I nod.

“Roll over, baby.” I roll over onto my stomach, and he pulls my panties down. His hands come up to my ass as he spreads my cheeks.

“Ansley, you are so beautiful and sexy.” He moans out.

“I’m going to pour some lube on, okay?” It takes me a moment to answer because my heart is in my throat, but I

squeak out an okay. The liquid is surprisingly warm. He must have been preparing for this so it wouldn't be cold.

His thumb begins to rub lazy circles around me. I push my forehead into the mattress. I have learned over the past week how good this feels. I want more. I need more, but he doesn't give it to me.

"Lincoln!" I groan.

"Impatient, are we?" He questions. All I can do is push back. I don't care if I look desperate; I am ready. He removes his thumb. Then he rubs the tips of one of the plugs around me, and with each circle, he pushes it in. When he breaches me, he slows down, and I want to scream.

"Color, sweetheart."

"Green!" I shout, and he chuckles. I am desperate. I need him to finish so he can make love to me as he promised. He pushes my nightshirt up and rubs his other hand along my spine like he's comforting me. It works a little.

Then he pushes the plug in, and I sigh in relief. He leans over and rocks against me, causing it to move inside me, and I moan.

"How do you feel?" He whispers against my neck. I push back against him, causing the plug to move in me again. I can't fucking wait until tomorrow night.

"So good." I breathe out as he turns me over. I squeeze my eyes shut at the sudden movement. Not because it hurts but because my senses are heightened. I wonder what it will feel like with him inside me.

Before I can think any longer, his mouth is on mine, his tongue sweeps against mine, and his hands are everywhere. He lifts my nightshirt, and I raise my hands, but instead of pulling it off, he twists it so my hands are caught.

"Can you keep your hands here and not move them?" He asks, and I gulp.

"I can try," I tell him. He leans in, giving me a sweet kiss different from the one we just shared.

“Try hard.” He murmurs against my lips, then moving down my body, he kisses and sucks and licks. Without warning, his mouth lands on my clit, sucking it hard. This is so different. I’m clenching around the plug, causing sensations everywhere.

I arch my back. Without me thinking, my hands come down to his head, but he stops. When I realize I moved my hands, I move them back and look down at him and see him watching me.

He doesn’t even have to say anything. I know if I move my hands, he’ll stop again. He winks at me like he’s proud; I understand without him having to speak the words, then he’s on me again. I grab the pillow under my head to keep from moving my hands as he sucks, licks, and bites.

He inserts one finger and hooks it just so, and just like that; I’m on the edge.

“Oh my god! Lincoln!” This is unlike anything I’ve ever felt or experienced before. I swear this man knows how to play me just right to make me come precisely when he wants me to and how many times he wants me to. I fucking love it. He starts licking and I begin to ride his tongue; he doesn’t stop me, so I keep doing it. I feel the orgasm building, but I don’t want to come on his tongue.

“Lincoln!” I cry out. As if he understands, he climbs up my body and pushes down his boxers.

“Are you okay?” He asks. I nod fervently, unable to speak. He doesn’t slam into me as I expected, but he wouldn’t, would he? Not with me about to be filled to capacity. He eases into me. The more he eases in, the more I grip and tug at the nightshirt around my wrists. I hold onto my pillow, but I need to touch him. I have to touch him.

“Please. Please let me touch you.” I cry out. He pulls the nightshirt off my hands and guides them to his back, and I cling to him as I ride the wave I’m about to crash on.

“Oh god!” I cry out as he rocks into me. He leans back, looks down, and watches his cock go in and out of my pussy.

“So fucking hot!” He grinds out as he lifts my hips and thrusts into me. I cling to his forearms and sputter words. He brings his thumb down and begins to circle my clit applying pressure. I clench around his cock and the plug, and my eyes roll back as I dive head-first over the cliff.

I cry out, but he doesn't stop. He keeps rocking into me until he comes too and collapses on top of me. I wrap my arms around him, holding him tight as I rub his spine. He plants kisses wherever his lips can touch.

“You're my addiction, Ansley. And I'll always come back for another hit.” He murmurs into my skin. Tears prick at the corners of my eyes at the thought of returning to Atlanta.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ANSLEY

CAROLINE HAS Christmas decorations in every room and is giddy about it.

“Look at this.” She holds up what looks like moose glasses, and I tilt my head.

“Are those the glasses from *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*?” I ask her, and she nods with a big smile.

“I used to have some, but they were broken. I told Sebastian about it, and he bought me some more. He surprised me with them yesterday.” She tells me, and I smile at her excitement. Liv picks up one of the glasses and examines it.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen that movie.” She says, and Caroline gasps. I roll my lips between my teeth.

“Well, we will remedy that this Christmas.” She exclaims, and Liv’s eyes widen. I chuckle.

“You’ll like it, Liv; it’s pretty funny,” I tell her. “Lincoln, Dylan, and I watch it every Christmas. It’s one of Lincoln’s favorites too.” Caroline takes us on a tour of the rest of the house and shows us the dining room they’ve spent the past couple of months cleaning to prepare for the holidays.

“Do you want to see the nursery?” Caroline asks. Liv and I gasp.

“You already have the nursery ready?” Liv questions, and Caroline shakes her head.

“No. We have a crib and a changing table, but we’re not going to start painting or anything like that until after we do our gender reveal.” She leads us upstairs and shows us the room down the hall from their room, and for once, I feel a little jealous. She and Bass know where they’re headed. While Lincoln and I are finally together, I’m unsure about our future.

He said he wants me to move in with him when I return home, so I guess that answers my question. I really hope that doesn’t change over time, though.

We make our way downstairs and to the kitchen, where Caroline attempted to make taco soup. Her words, not mine.

“Sebastian says the only way I’ll learn is if I try. So if it’s gross, we’ll order pizza.” She tells us, and we laugh. “It’s chilly today, so I thought this would be perfect. I got wine for you two if you want some. It’s in the fridge.” I open the door and pull it out to pour Liv and me a glass while Caroline scoops soup into bowls for each of us.

We all sit at the table in her breakfast nook, and she takes the first timid taste. She hums and takes another bite.

“It’s actually good. Yay me!” She exclaims. We chuckle and dig in. We plan out our Friendsgiving, figuring out the food and cost for everyone. Then we settle in and watch a lame Christmas movie on Hallmark that I don’t mind so much. Yes, the plots are predictable, but they’re sweet and get me in the Christmas spirit.

“Care, I’m home, and Lincoln is here to pick up Ansley,” Bass yells from the kitchen. Liv and I glance at her and laugh. She fell asleep just as the movie was starting. We both walk to the kitchen. He looks over our shoulders with a question in his eyes.

“She’s asleep.” Liv states, and Bass chuckles, shaking his head.

“I thought she’d get a little more energy once she was out of the first trimester. That’s what my mom and her mom keep

saying.”

Lincoln walks in and comes to me, wrapping his arms around me and giving me a kiss that I return.

“Seeing as I’ve never been pregnant, I have no comment,” I tell Bass, and Liv nods in agreement. He peeks into the crockpot where the leftover taco soup is.

“How was the soup?” He asks.

“So good!” Liv and I both say. He breaks out into a smile.

“Good! She was so worried.” He tells us. I smile at him, glancing around the kitchen at the decorations.

“She showed us the moose glasses you got her,” I tell him, and he chuckles.

“She was thrilled about those glasses.” He states. He and Lincoln share a look. I look at Liv and roll my eyes.

“All men are the same,” I tell her while Bass and Lincoln laugh. “Tell Caroline I’ll call her later.”

“Me too,” Liv says, and we say our goodbyes as we walk outside. I tell Liv bye, hugging her. Lincoln waves at her as we walk to his car. He opens my door for me and then walks around to his side.

I run my hands down my jean-clad thighs, nerves settling in my stomach. Lincoln’s hand comes down on my thigh, and he squeezes.

“Do you still want to do this?” He asks, and I nod.

“Even if I can’t take it, toys are always fun,” I tell him. He laughs as he pulls out onto the street.

“That’s true. And toys with you will be....” He trails off and glances over at me.

“Fun?” I ask. He chuckles.

“I was trying to think of a word better than fun, but yes.” I grin. He intertwines our fingers as he drives us to the sex toy shop.

LINCOLN DUMPS THE bag of items on the bed as I stare. He spent so much money, but I can't say I'm surprised. I purchased a few pieces of lingerie, which I plan on wearing tonight. I refused to let him see, wanting him to be surprised. He walks over to stand behind me and wraps his arms around my waist.

"We won't use all of that tonight." He kisses my neck. "Unless you want to." He states, and I laugh. I turn in his arms and wrap my arms around his neck.

"Going to punish me with multiple orgasms again?" I ask him. He smirks, bringing his hand up to wrap around my neck.

"You haven't been much of a brat lately, but I'll give you all the orgasms you want, sweetheart." He murmurs into my skin as he runs his lips along my jaw.

"Hmmm... I'm going to have to remedy that. Aren't I?" I ask him as I tilt my neck to give him better access. He bites down in response to my question, but it only makes me moan.

"My dirty girl likes a little pain, doesn't she?" He whispers in my ear as I tilt my head further. He chuckles darkly before pulling away and walking back to the bed. He grabs a bottle of lube and the vibrator he purchased just for tonight, placing them on his nightstand. Then he grabs the butt plug we used last night and puts it beside them. While I'm still nervous, I'm also excited.

Walking through the store with him and having him tell me all the dirty things he would do to me had my panties soaking wet. I watch as he grabs the rest of the items, placing them on his dresser, so they're out of the way for now. When satisfied, he opens the package with the vibrator and ensures it turns on.

The lady who sold everything to us said it probably wouldn't be fully charged, but it would work for close to an hour. He turns to me, and flutters take flight in my stomach. He places the vibrator back on his nightstand.

"Come here, sweetheart." He directs. It only takes me two beats of my heart to obey. I stop in front of him and wait for

his instructions. He brings his hand up and pushes my hair behind my shoulder.

“Do you remember your colors?” He asks.

“Yes,” I respond, and he rubs his thumb over my bottom lip.

“That’s my good girl.” He praises me, and I sigh. He leans in and kisses me deeply before pulling back.

“Get on your knees, sweetheart.” He commands. I swear I feel my heartbeat in my clit. He takes my hand and helps me as I kneel before him.

“Take my cock out.” He instructs. I move my hands to the button of his jeans, undoing them and pushing them and his boxers down his hips. His cock is hard and long and leaking precum. I lean forward and lick it, causing him to moan. I look at him before sucking his tip into my mouth as he gathers my hair in his hand.

“I love your mouth, sweetheart. Seeing those bright red lips wrapped around my cock is one of my favorite things in the world.” He says as he thrusts in my mouth. I hum around him as I suck and lick. I love doing this to Lincoln because he loses control, and I love seeing Lincoln lose control. But he doesn’t lose it this time. After a few more thrusts, he pulls out of my mouth and helps me to my feet.

“I love seeing you on your knees.” He says, then his hands lift my shirt over my head, unhooking my bra, and pushing my jeans and panties down my legs until I’m standing naked. He lifts his shirt over his head and guides me to the bed.

He sits so his back is against the headboard, then pulls me between his legs, trapping his cock between his stomach and my back. His lips tease and suck at my neck and shoulder as his hands roam over my body. He massages my breasts and then pinches my nipples, making me moan.

One hand massages my breast while the other travels down my stomach to my pussy as I anxiously wait. His finger glides along my slit, teasing me briefly, then moves to the top of my thighs, massaging them. My head falls on his shoulder. He’ll

almost touch my pussy and then back off. I'm panting wildly, and my hips are moving of their own accord, looking for something.

"Lincoln! Please!" I beg. I feel him smirk against my neck.

"It took you long enough." He states but instead of moving his hand where I want it most; he moves it away. I groan in frustration. But then he's moving back and inserting something in me. I realize what it is just as he turns the vibrator on; I arch my back and come with a shout of his name.

The vibrator is rubbing against my g-spot and my clit simultaneously. My nails are making divots in Lincoln's thighs, but I can't stop myself. He doesn't turn it off as one orgasm turns into another, and my voice grows hoarse.

"Lincoln! Yellow!" I shout. He immediately turns the vibrator off and removes it from me. I take a breath. That was a continuous orgasm, and it was amazing, but I needed him. I turn in his arms.

"Are you okay?" He asks. I nod as I impale myself on him. He grips my ass tight.

"Fuck!" He growls in my ear. I move up and down on him as I whimper. "Ansley." There's a warning in his voice.

"I needed to feel you and not that vibrator. That's why I said yellow and not red." I tell him. He grunts as I swivel my hips. He lets me ride him for a few more seconds before stopping me and helping me off.

"Get on all fours, baby, and put your hands on the headboard." He instructs, and I do what he says. He grabs the lube and butt plug and kneels behind me. I feel him drip some lube down my ass crack, making me moan. I am so sensitive.

"I made you come that many times to get you loose. We'll do what we did last night first, okay?" I swallow.

"Okay." He rubs his thumb around me a few times. Like last night he replaces it with the plug and begins to work it in. When it's entirely in, I sigh. I love it.

"You okay, baby?" He asks, and I swallow.

“Yes.” I gasp out. His fingers are still on the plug; I moan as he twists it. My knuckles turn white as they grasp the headboard. “Lincoln.” I choke out.

“Feel good, baby?” He murmurs as he kisses up my spine. I nod and push back against him. He slowly begins to pull it in and out, and I need more. As if he senses it, I hear the vibrator turn on, and he runs it up the inside of my thigh. I want. No. I need him to make me come.

“Please, Lincoln. I need...” I trail off, and he leans over me, his chest against my back.

“Tell me what you need, sweetheart. I’ll give you anything.”

“Make me come. Please make me come.” He leans back, moves the plug in and out, then puts the vibrator directly on my clit, and I’m screaming my release as I collapse on the bed. He turns the vibrator off, lays on his stomach next to me, and rubs his finger along my spine. I turn my head toward him, and he pushes my hair out of my face.

“That was...” I trail off. “There are no words.” He chuckles and leans over to kiss me. The plug moves inside me, making me gasp. I’m still sensitive.

“You okay? Do you want to keep going or wait?” My mouth tilts up at him as he checks in with me. I love him so much and how he’s always looking out for me.

“I’m okay—more than okay. And I definitely want to keep going. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about this.” I admit. He scoots closer to me, his hard cock rubbing against my thigh. He pulls me in close; I moan again as the plug moves. I move my hand down between us, grasping him and causing him to moan.

I guide my hand up and down his length, and he places his forehead against mine, enjoying how I’m making him feel good. He begins to thrust into my hand and moans before pulling back and opening his eyes.

“You ready for round two?” He wiggles his eyebrows at me, and I bite my lip as I try to hold back my smile. He

smacks my hip, and I groan, causing him to smirk. He did that on purpose.

“On your knees, baby.” I waste no time getting back up on my knees but instead of grabbing the headboard, I bend my elbows and place my head on my hands.

He grabs my ass cheeks and spreads them. I close my eyes at the sensation. I wonder if I could come just from this. He begins to move the plug again, and after a couple of minutes, I can't stop myself from pushing back against him.

“I'm going to take it out now.” He warns. I give a slight nod. I'm ready for it to be him. He slowly pulls it out, and I can feel myself staying open for him.

“Fuck.” He breathes out. I hear the cap of the lube being opened, and I imagine him rubbing it over his cock. And then his tip is at my entrance. “You ready?”

“Yes. God, yes.” I whisper.

“The vibrator is next to your hand if you need to use it.” He tells me. I reach out to grab it, so I'm not searching for it if I need it. He begins to push into me, and there is a slight sting, but it feels so good. He is bigger than the plug, but not so much more that I can't handle it. He enters me slowly. When he's about halfway in, he stops, and I want to yell at him in frustration.

“Color, sweetheart?” He asks.

“Green,” I say immediately. When he hears how sure I am, he pushes all the way in, and we both moan. He stays still for several long seconds before he begins to rock back and forth, needing a little friction. I groan as I rock back against him. He feels so good.

“Can I move more?” He asks through gritted teeth.

“Yes.” I moan out. He grasps my cheeks and holds them open as he makes sharper thrusts. I clutch at the pillow and shake my head. I need more. Turning the vibrator on, I bring it down to my pussy.

“Yes, sweetheart. That’s my good girl.” He moans out. I touch it to my clit, causing me to clench and making him moan. I rub it down my slit, teasing my pussy, and back up again. Every time I bring it to my pussy, I notice Lincoln’s hands on my hips tighten, and I realize he can feel the vibrator. The next time I bring it down, I put the vibrator in my pussy and allow the extension to rest against my clit. His grip on my hips tightens, and he begins to rock harder into me.

“Fuck Ansley. I’m going to come.” He moans out, but I’m coming before I can say anything. Lincoln bellows my name, pulls out of me, and comes all over my back. He collapses on the bed beside me, and I collapse beside him.

We both lay there, wholly spent staring at each other. After a few minutes, he leans down and takes the vibrator out of my pussy. It died right after that last orgasm which is good because I don’t think I would have had the strength to turn it off if it hadn’t. He kisses me on the shoulder and tells me he’ll be right back, but I’m still jello and will not be moving anytime soon.

When Lincoln returns, he lifts me out of bed and carries me to the bathroom, where he helps me into the bathtub he filled with water. He gets in behind me, and I lean into him.

“How are you feeling?” He asks.

“Completely blitzed out,” I tell him. He chuckles, and I turn to glance at him over my shoulder. “I’m being serious.” He sobers, trying to wipe the smile off his face.

“I believe you.” He tells me, making me smile.

“I think I came more tonight than the night of the orgasm punishment.” He chuckles and kisses my shoulder. “Although I wasn’t keeping count, and they all ran into each other, so maybe it only counts as one,” I tell him, and he scoffs.

“There was more than one.” He says, sounding offended. “Would you do it again?” He asks. I wait ten seconds before answering, wanting him to think I have to think about it.

“I would definitely do that again,” I exclaim. He grins as he turns my head so he can kiss me.

“I’ll let you rest, but we’ll be doing it again soon.” He tells me. I smile, looking forward to whenever that will be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ANSLEY

WE'RE ALL seated at the huge dining room table at Sebastian and Caroline's house. Dylan got in late last night and stayed at Lincoln's house. Chatter and laughter are going on all around me, and it makes me sad that I have to leave in just a couple of days to return to Atlanta. Lincoln leans over and kisses my jaw like he can hear my thoughts and I smile at him. I've considered several options for getting out of my lease and quitting my job in Atlanta.

I could sell all my furniture; that would give me enough money to pay off at least one month's rent, maybe more. Especially since I'll be moving in with Lincoln, I don't necessarily need furniture anymore. After eating, we all pile our dishes into the kitchen. Bass points at Caroline,

"Don't do the dishes; I will help you do them later." With a hard kiss on her mouth, he follows the guys into the living room to watch some football. Lincoln kisses me, and follows him as well. Bailey climbs up onto a kitchen stool and huffs.

"If anyone else said that, I wouldn't believe him, but that man is damn near perfect, and it's not fair." Caroline smiles. Bailey pulls her in for a hug and kisses her on the cheek. "But you deserve it, and I'm happy for you."

Liv grabs some wine and pours us a glass, except for Caroline, who is still sipping on her water. She comes to stand

next to me and bumps my shoulder with her shoulder.

“So you’re leaving on Sunday to go back to Atlanta?” She asks. I don’t even try to hide my disappointment. I’ve missed so much in the month since I’ve been away. Bailey and Bec are now part of our fold, and I missed it. I wonder how much more I’ll miss when I go back. Liv wraps her arm around me and lays her head on my upper arm. I lean into her accepting her comfort.

“I thought it was going to be different,” I tell them. “I always wanted to get out of this town because I associated it with my parents, but I don’t anymore, and now I can’t wait to come back.” Everyone leans against the kitchen island listening to me.

“If anyone can find out anything about that guy, I know Julian can,” Bailey says. “He can be a total ass, but he is useful when it comes to that kind of stuff.” As the words leave her mouth, Julian walks into the kitchen, and everyone goes silent as Bailey sits up straighter. I bite my lip to stop myself from outright laughing.

Julian obviously overheard Bailey, and he’s trying to decide if he wants to call her out on it. Julian has sandy brown hair with groomed facial hair. This is only the second time I’ve seen him, but both times he’s been dressed in dress pants and a button-up shirt. Today his shirt is rolled up to his elbows, showing he has a tattoo sleeve on his arm.

He walks further into the kitchen, and my eyes volley back and forth between him and Bailey. I see Caroline smirking. I’m assuming she’s seen this happen before.

“Talking about me, Ms. Rhodes?” Julian asks. Liv clutches my arm, so this is the game they play. Bailey rolls her eyes so hard I’m surprised they stay in her head. She’s doing it to aggravate him; it works because his hands ball into fists.

“I have better things to do than talk about my professor on my Thanksgiving break, Professor McMillan,” Bailey replies with so much sass that if Lincoln heard her, I’d get spanked for it.

I cover my mouth with my hand because I can no longer hide my smile. Caroline doesn't bother trying to hide her smile, nor does Bec; this is definitely a regular occurrence. Julian walks until he's only a few feet in front of Bailey.

"You better watch yourself. I'll give you an extra assignment after the break." He warns her. She shrugs one shoulder.

"As long as it's an oral assignment, I'll be fine." She replies. My mouth pops open, Caroline snorts, and Bec walks out of the room, trying to contain her laughter. Julian's face turns to stone as he and Bailey enter a stare-off.

After several long uncomfortable minutes, Bailey shifts, rubbing her thighs together and looks away. Julian smirks, turns on his heels, and exits. He didn't even get what he came in here for. I slap my hand down on the island, and Bec returns to the kitchen.

"What the hell?" I whisper-yell, and Bailey starts giggling as we all lean further into each other.

"It is so much fun getting under his skin," Bailey says.

"Just wait until he's getting under yours, though," I tell her and her head pops up.

"What do you mean?" She asks.

"I was like that with Lincoln. Still am to a certain extent because the consequences are fun." I explain. A sad look comes over her face as she shakes her head.

"I've tried capturing his attention." She motions to Caroline. "Ask Caroline. He won't bite. At least now he's finally being a little nice to me, but I think that's because his brother's best friend is my sister's boyfriend." She sighs. I pat her hand.

"Give it time, hon. Trust me. I promise he enjoyed that little exchange." I encourage her. She sighs but nods. After a few more minutes, we all migrate to the living room. Caroline climbs on Bass' lap, and I do the same with Lincoln.

Liv sits next to Dylan on the small couch. Bec sits on the floor between Connor's legs, and Bailey sits on the floor between Liv and Dylan's legs and leans her head against the side of Dylan's knee. I shake my head at her antics, smiling to myself. I lay my head on Lincoln's shoulder, feeling perfectly content.

I SIT IN my car and wait for Leslie. A few minutes ago, she texted me and said she was right down the street. Chad arrived about ten minutes ago. I ducked down into my car so he wouldn't see me. When she arrives, I meet her and walk to find our location.

"How was your Thanksgiving?" I ask her. She sighs, followed by a sneeze.

"It was alright. My family has a lot of drama, so..." She trails off. She looks tired.

"That sucks. I'm sorry. Are you feeling okay?" She shrugs and waves me off.

"I'm fine, and I'm used to it by now. How was yours?" She asks, and I smile.

"It was good. I miss Lincoln already." I admit.

"Lincoln? Your boyfriend?" Chad says from behind us, and we twirl around. I scowl at him.

"Yep!" I tell him, popping the p. He narrows his eyes at me, but before he can say anything, the wardrobe supervisor begins talking through things.

As she's talking, I'm standing between Chad and Leslie, and I swear I feel Chad rub his finger down my arm, but when I look over at him, his full attention is on Anita. Maybe I imagined it.

When the day is over, I text Dylan, and we meet at a diner to have dinner.

"How was your first day back?" He asks, and I huff.

“That guy Chad started to give me a hard time, but thankfully Anita saved me.” I almost tell him about the touching thing, but I’m still unsure if it was my imagination. Dylan’s eyes squint in concern.

“Please make sure to keep your phone close to you.” He reminds me.

“I will. I promise. How was your day?” I ask him, and he shrugs.

“Alright. It will be a lot of long hours again, but I keep telling myself it won’t be like this forever.” He says. I watch him. I’ve never seen Dylan this determined to achieve something before. Growing up, he always tried to please our parents, but he wasn’t passionate about it, so he didn’t give it his all. This. This is different. I put my hand on his.

“I’m proud of you, Dylan. You’re really working your ass off.” I encourage him, and he smiles and flips his hand over so he’s holding mine.

“I haven’t always been the best brother Ans. But I’m trying. I’m glad Lincoln has been there for you, and even though I’m still getting used to it, I’m glad he’s there for you now. You deserve to be happy, and he makes you happy.” I stare at him in shock after he gets done with his speech.

“Wow, Dylan! Thank you.” He nods once and takes his hand back to dig into his food.

“If you need anything, Ans, please tell me. I’m not as perceptive as Lincoln, so you literally have to hit me in the face with it. Okay?” He insists, and I chuckle.

“You helped me get into my apartment.” I remind him.

“After you hit me in the face with it.” He jokes. I shake my head laughing.

“Okay. I never mind hitting you in the face, so you don’t have to tell me twice.” I quip back as I pick up my cheeseburger and take a bite.

The next day when I arrive at work, I wait in the parking lot for Leslie, but she never shows up. It’s not like her, so I

text her. Anxiety swirls in my gut when the clock shows it's time to head to my trailer. I try to text Leslie again, but she still doesn't respond, so I pull up Lincoln.

Me: Hey, Linc!

Lincoln: Hey, sweetheart! Everything okay?

Me: Leslie isn't at work and isn't answering my texts.

There's a long pause as I walk through the parking lot, dread filling my stomach.

Lincoln: I just sent a text to Dylan. Keep your phone on you. Text me as often as you can. I'm sure you'll be fine, but it will make me feel better.

Me: Okay. Love you.

Lincoln: I love you, baby.

I smile down at my phone.

"Texting your boyfriend?" My head pops up at Chad's voice, and I berate myself. I need to be on guard today since Leslie isn't here.

"As a matter of fact, yes," I reply as I go to the rack of clothes I'll be working with today and begin sorting them. He walks over and stands too close to me, so I move away.

"Have you heard from Leslie?" I ask him, but he shakes his head.

"No." He responds, coming close again; my phone vibrates in my hand. I pull it up to my face seeing Leslie's name flash across.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Ansley?" Leslie whispers, and I pause.

"Leslie? You sound awful!" I announce, keeping my eyes on Chad as he watches me.

"Yeah. I'm so sorry. I think I have the flu. I won't be in today." I bite the inside of my cheek at her words. She probably won't be in tomorrow, either. The flu isn't something you just get over.

“That’s okay, hon. You take care of yourself and get better soon. Drink lots of liquids.” I advise her, trying to keep my voice neutral.

“If that asshole tries anything, poke him in the eye with a hanger.” She jokes, and I chuckle.

“Yeah. I’ll try that.” I respond. “You get some rest, and I’ll talk to you later.” We hang up as I eye Chad warily.

“What’s wrong with her?” He asks.

“She has the flu,” I tell him and pocket my phone. I swear I see excitement in his eyes, but it’s so brief I’m not sure if I imagined it. I grab a shirt off the rack and take it to my area to begin steaming it for the actress that will be wearing it today.

I keep my eyes on Chad the entire time. My phone vibrates in my pocket, so I grab it.

Dylan: Are you okay? Lincoln sent me a text.

Me: Yeah. Leslie is out sick today. So it’s pretty much just him and me. Hopefully, Anita will come by today.

Dylan: You 911 me if I need to come.

Me: Okay

I put my phone back in my pocket. My hair moves like when Lincoln rubs it between his fingers, and my head snaps up. I notice how close Chad is to me now. I take a step back and glare at him.

“Have you ever heard of personal space, Chad?” I snap at him. And his eyes fill with anger.

“I was looking at the shirt to make sure adjustments didn’t need to be made.” He states angrily.

“That’s fine, but you don’t have to stand so close to me.” I protest. I’m not going to allow him to bully me. In response, he takes a step closer to me, and my heart rate picks up.

“What will you do about it?” He asks. Many responses go through my head, but I don’t say any because I can tell it will only piss him off more.

“I can go to another trailer if I need to,” I answer, and his eyes narrow as he backs off.

“No need. The actress wearing this will be here in just a few minutes.” He says and walks out of the trailer. A whoosh of air leaves me as I sit down on my chair. I pull my phone out and call Lincoln.

“Hey, sweetheart.” He greets me.

“Lincoln. I don’t know what just happened.” I blurt out. I hear him bark at someone, and then a door shuts.

“What is it, baby? Are you okay?” I swallow and put my head in my hands.

“Yeah,” I explain what happened, and he curses.

“I’m going to kill him. I’m going to fucking kill him.” He seethes.

“He didn’t actually do anything. I don’t think. I’m not sure if he touched my hair or not. But I feel like he was trying to make me scared.”

“He probably was. Does he know about Dylan?” He asks. I try to think back.

“No. I don’t think so.” I reply.

“Good. Keep it that way. Can you call Dylan and tell him what happened?” He asks, but the actress I’m working with just walked into my trailer.

“I can’t. The actress I’m working with just walked in.” I reply.

“Okay. I’ll call him. Call me when you get done. Okay?”

“Okay. Love you, Linc.” I whisper.

“Love you too, sweet girl.” He replies. I hang up, giving the girl I’m working with a small smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ANSLEY

THE NEXT day Dylan brings me to work. He's tired, but he said one of his connections told him there was a trailer nearby that wasn't being used for another set. He's going to nap there, so he's close.

"If you need me, call me right away." He reminds me. I nod before we separate. "Don't forget about the text feature on your watch!" He shouts at me, and I turn to give him a thumbs up. Sighing, I enter the trailer, and Chad is working on a suit. His eyes trail over me like he imagines me naked, and alarm bells go off in my head. I grab a dress I'm working on today and ignore him.

"Not going to say hi." He says. I grit my teeth.

"Hi," I reply.

"You sure can be a bitch." He proclaims.

"I'm not trying to be. I'm just trying to do my job." I respond. I remember the conversation Lincoln and I had about recording him. I downloaded an app to do that. So I grab my phone discreetly and turn it on; something in my gut is telling me to do it with how he was looking at me and now with how he's acting.

"You know I'm not sure what you see in that boyfriend of yours." He expresses, stalking over to me. I move around the

table, trying to keep space between us.

“It’s none of your business Chad,” I reply, and he bares his teeth.

“I’m making it my business. You have no idea what you’re missing.” He grinds out and comes around the table.

“What are you implying?” I question.

“What am I implying? I’m not implying anything. I’m saying I can give it to you better than he ever can or will.” I scoff.

“I love him, Chad. I don’t want to be with you or anyone else.” I explain, and he throws his head back, laughing maniacally. My eyes widen, and my heart beats in fear. I grab my phone to call Dylan but can’t get rid of the stupid app.

“That’s what all of those other girls said too. But I proved them wrong.” He yells, causing me to pause.

“What other girls?” I ask him. He takes two giant steps toward me, crowding me into the wall.

“The girls in California. They kept saying their boyfriends were better, but I proved they weren’t. I was better. Me!” He screams, spit flying from his mouth and landing on my cheek. He is crazy! Certifiably crazy!

“They asked you to do that? To prove you were better?” I ask him. I need him to say it. To say he forced himself on them. He rolls his eyes.

“Ha! They never ask for it. Never at first. They walk around acting like they don’t want it. Just like you.” He grabs my throat, applying pressure while wedging his thigh between my legs, pinning me against the wall. My whole body is trembling with fear causing me to be paralyzed. He reaches down and unbuttons my jeans.

I try to move away, but I can’t. *Oh god. Oh god.* Chad leans in close, running his nose up my jaw and inhaling. I force myself to stay calm, though instinct drives me to pull away. He brings his mouth close to my ear.

“You will, though. Just like them, you’ll learn. And once my dick is inside you, you’ll be begging for it.” I bring my hands up and try to push him away.

“I won’t. Just like they didn’t. They said no. Just like I’m saying no.” He doesn’t budge. For such a skinny guy, he’s surprisingly strong. I try to grab my phone again but can’t move my hands enough to see it. Trying to think quickly, I decide not to fight him, and instead, I bring my hands up to wrap around his neck.

It catches him off guard, but then he’s on me sucking my neck, and I’m biting my tongue so hard I taste copper in my mouth. My watch catches my eye, and I remember Dylan reminding me I can use it to text. I pull up his name while Chad is distracted and text him 911.

Please hurry. Please hurry. Please hurry.

I try to push him away again. My breathing increases as the calm I’m trying to keep is fading.

“Chad, let’s not do it like this. At work. Let’s wait until we’re somewhere more private.” I try to reason with him, but he pulls back, looking at me skeptically. I try to smile sweetly at him.

“We don’t want to get interrupted.” The words feel like ash coming out of my mouth, but it makes him back off enough for me to shove him. I maneuver myself out between him and the wall and take off.

As I reach the door, he yanks me by the hair and pulls me back into his chest. Instead of fighting it, I let myself fall back into him, causing him to falter and fall to the ground. I fall, too, hitting my elbow hard, but I roll off and attempt to run for it again.

He grunts, and I moan, rubbing at my elbow. My whole body aches, but I ignore it. I have to get out of here; before I can get off the ground, the door to the trailer flies open, and Dylan barrels in.

I watch him as he runs straight for Chad, behind me, about to attack me again. He roars as he tackles him to the ground

and punches him several times before I scramble up and over to him.

“Dylan!” I scream. He turns to me, his eyes glossed over. “Stop! We need to call the police.” He scrambles off of Chad and over to me, checking me over.

“Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” He asks. His eyes hone in on the bruises, I’m sure that are on my neck then his eyes rake over me. His fingers touch my unbuttoned jeans. “I’m going to fucking kill him!” He screams out.

“He didn’t.” It’s all I can say before all the adrenaline and everything I was feeling flow out of me. I’m shaking, and tears begin to well. Dylan gathers me into his arms and holds me close.

“Oh, Ans! I’m so sorry! I should have come to the trailer with you. I shouldn’t have gone to the other trailer.” He laments, and I shake my head.

“I...” I break off, sobbing, and Dylan holds me close as he rocks me. Chad moans, and we both look over at him. I disentangle myself from Dylan and grab my phone, seeing that the program is still going. I stop it and make sure that it saves. I sit down on the couch to call the police, and Dylan sits next to me, wrapping his arm around me to comfort me. I turn to Dylan once I’m done.

“Dylan, I recorded everything he said. I got him to admit everything about those girls.” I tell him, and he rubs my shoulders.

“That’s great, Ans!” He exclaims. The door to the trailer opens. Anita walks in; she gasps when she observes the scene before her.

“What happened?” She exclaims. I give her the run down and tell her we’ve called the police. She fires Chad on the spot, and I tell her it’s possible whoever hired Chad may have known.

“I didn’t hire him. One of the producers suggested him. I’ll get to the bottom of this.” She walks over to me and gives me a quick hug.

“I am so sorry, Ansley. I will handle costumes today. You take the rest of the day off. If you need tomorrow off, too, let me know, and we’ll figure it out.” She tells me.

“Thanks, Anita.” Before continuing our conversation, the police show up and take our statements. I save the file and send them a copy to the email they give me. Once everything is done, Dylan walks with me to the parking lot.

“Call Lincoln, Ans.” He instructs. I grab my phone as I slip into the car.

“Ansley? I’ve been trying to text you.” His voice sounds panicked, and I start crying again.

“Baby? What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” I take several deep breaths to calm myself and then tell him what happened.

“I’m on my way.” He states, and my mouth pops open.

“What?” I ask.

“I’m sure Dylan won’t leave you alone tonight, but there’s no way in hell I’m sleeping in Mississippi, and you’re sleeping there. I need to hold you. I’m so sorry that happened to you, and I’m so glad you’re okay, but I need to see you.” He says earnestly.

“Okay,” I whisper. “I can’t wait to see you.” Tears trek down my cheeks, and I wipe them away. “I love you, Lincoln.”

“I love you, Ansley.”

I WAKE UP to a warm body pressed against mine. His smell hits me first, and calmness seeps into my bones. I roll over in his arms and am met with his hazel eyes.

“You’re awake,” I whisper. His lips tip up into a smile.

“So are you.” He replies and leans forward to kiss me gently, but I want more. I want him to replace the awful feeling Chad left with me. I push on his shoulder, forcing him

to roll over on his back, and I straddle him. His hands come up to grip my hips as I kiss him harder.

“Ansley.” He whispers.

“I need you to take it away, Lincoln. Please.” I beg. He brings my forehead against his.

“Are you hurt?” He asks. I swallow. I am a little sore from where he pulled my hair and gripped my throat, and I think he bit me. Tears seep out of my eyes.

“I need you to make it better,” I tell him. He hesitates again. I climb off of him, angry, and turn on him. He stands to his feet, staring at me; his eyes roam over me. When he sees the mark on my neck, they grow dark with anger.

“Are you going to stand there and look at how another man marked me?” I ask him.

“Ansley.” He warns. I walk up to him and get in his face.

“Yes, he hurt me. Yes, he scared me. I need you to make it better.” I poke him in the chest. He grabs me behind the legs pulling me up and making me wrap my legs around his waist.

“I will make you feel good, baby. But we’re doing this my way. Do you understand?” He says. I nod as he sits on the edge of the bed. I keep my legs wrapped around his waist. He kisses me soft and sweet. Turning, he lays me on my back. He climbs over me and lifts my shirt over my head. I lift my arms, and he pulls it off, throwing it somewhere in the room.

He pushes my leggings and panties down my legs, so I kick them off as I lay under him naked. His eyes roam over me, and he grimaces as his eyes land on the few bruises.

“I hate that I wasn’t here. I hate it wasn’t me that didn’t punch that bastard until he blacked out.” He leans down and kisses every bruise and mark he sees. His mouth moves over to my breast, and he circles my nipple with his tongue. I arch into his mouth as he nips and sucks. I moan.

“I need you.” I cry out. I grab the hem of his shirt, pulling it over his head. He yanks it off and pushes his boxers off his hips quickly. I look between us as he grabs his cock and rubs it

up and down my slit. I cry out as he circles the tip of his cock around my clit.

“Oh god! That feels...” He looks up at me and arches an eyebrow as he keeps doing it.

“You ready, baby?” I nod; he lines up and slowly sinks into me. He wraps me in his arms. I can’t tell where he begins and I end. We are so interconnected. He rolls his hips hitting all the right spots as he keeps his eyes on mine and never looks away.

“Thank you,” I say. He doesn’t have to respond because he knows. He leans down and kisses me deeply as my orgasm builds in my core. He kisses the bruise on my neck softly.

“I love you so much, Ansley. I’ll always give you what you need even when you don’t realize what it is.” He picks up the pace, and we’re both coming together. It’s soft and beautiful, and he was right—everything I needed.

“I love you too, Linc.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LINCOLN

I LAY wide awake with Ansley in my arms, wondering if there was something I could have done differently to prevent what happened to her. She did everything right, but she still wound up getting hurt. I want to force her to go back to Mississippi with me. But this time, I will let her make her own decision. I can't keep pushing myself on her. Eventually, she'll come to resent me.

I brush a kiss over the bruise on her neck, anger stirring in my gut. And head into the kitchen for a glass of water. I start looking through her cabinets for a snack when there's a knock on the door. I'm not surprised when I come face to face with Dylan. He had to go to work as soon as I got here.

"How is she?" He asks

"She's pretty shaken up, but she's resting," I reply. Dylan runs his hands through his hair as he walks in, and I close the door. He walks into the kitchen with me and begins pacing.

"I should have been there!" He exclaims. "I should have gone with her to her trailer." He berates himself. I thought the same thing when I discovered that Dylan went to a nearby trailer, not Ansley's. But after giving it more thought, I realized that he was running on empty and doing his best. At least he was close by and able to stop Chad from hurting Ansley any more than he could have.

“Dylan, stop.” Dylan stops pacing and comes to lean against the counter next to me.

“I screwed up, man.” He says in defeat. I bump his shoulder with mine.

“No, you didn’t; you saved her.” I admonish him. He crosses his arms over his chest.

“I feel like I keep screwing things up with her. I didn’t know our parents treated her differently. I didn’t realize she was having financial trouble. Have I really had my head so far up my ass all these years?” He asks, and I exhale.

“How much of the truth do you want?” I ask him. He leans his head back to stare at the ceiling.

“I need it all.” He says.

“You’re not a bad brother. You love Ansley. But sometimes, I think you did have blinders on, so you didn’t notice everything that was going on around you. To be fair, Ansley’s stubborn and refuses to talk and ask for help. If she had done that, you would have in a heartbeat. And Ansley and I kept you in the dark about how we were treated growing up, so that’s not entirely your fault either.” He rubs the back of his neck and takes a deep breath.

“That’s one of the reasons I’ve tried so hard since she moved to Atlanta and why I didn’t push her to move in with me. I knew she needed her freedom, so I helped her move here. She refuses to take anything else from me, so I figured I could at least do that.” He tells me. I snort, knowing that side of her all too well. He pushes away from the counter.

“I think I’m going to head back to my place and try to get some sleep. How long will you be staying?” He asks.

“I’ll be staying until at least tomorrow. She said she was off tomorrow, and I don’t want her to be alone.” He nods, saying he’ll call later to check on her, then leaves. I take one more sip from my glass and ensure the door is locked before climbing back into bed with Ansley. I pull her against me and bury my nose in her hair; what I wouldn’t give to fall asleep like this every night for the rest of my life.

THE NEXT DAY feels awkward and stilted between Ansley and me, and I'm not sure why. We're sitting on her couch watching TV; even though she's lying against me, I feel she's far away. I try to give her space, though, because she went through a traumatic experience yesterday, so I don't push the issue.

"Are you hungry? We can get out and go grab something to eat." I ask, and she sits up, nodding.

"Yeah. We can walk down to that Italian cafe." She recommends, and I nod, remembering when I went with her and Dylan. We put our shoes on and begin the trek there. She's still reticent, and I've about met my limit.

"I'm sorry about last night." She blurts out. I turn to her in confusion, trying to figure out what she's talking about.

"Last night?" I ask her. She nods, pushing a stray hair behind her ear.

"The way I practically attacked you." She says, and I gape at her. When has she ever apologized for wanting me?

"Why are you sorry?" I ask, my guard going up. She shrugs as we make it to the cafe.

"It seemed like it bothered you." She replies. I grind my molars so hard I'm surprised they don't crack. Instead of responding, I gently grip her elbow so I don't hurt her and guide her inside.

"We'll talk about that when we get home," I tell her. We glance at the menu and decide on a pizza like last time, so I place the order. I turn to her, seeing she's withdrawn into herself. I walk over to her and crowd her against the wall.

"Ansley, I will always want you; however, I can have you. And I will always give you what you need. You asked for rough, but I was not giving you rough last night, not after what happened. So, I made love to you. That's what you needed, so

that's what I gave you." I explain. She blinks back, tears, and looks away.

"You hesitated." She chokes out. A tear slips down her cheek. I did not want to do this in public. I wrap my hands on both sides of her neck, mindful of her bruise. I bring my thumb up and wipe the tear away. I lean down and give her a gentle kiss.

"You had been attacked. I did not want to hurt you. That's why I hesitated." I try to make her understand, but I can tell it's not getting through to her. Before I can say anything else, our name is being called, so I grab our stuff, and we walk back to her place. When we get there, Dylan is pacing in front of her door.

"I tried to call you both!" He exclaims. I pat my jeans and realize I didn't grab my phone before we left.

"Sorry. I left my phone. We grabbed a pizza." I motion to the pizza in my hand. Ansley opens the door showing him she left her phone too. Dylan joins us, and we all eat.

"Chad was arrested. And whoever hired him got fired." Dylan tells us. I nod in response. Earlier this morning, Julian texted, telling me what was going on. His connections informed him the recording Ansley got was golden and would help the girls he attacked in California. If they chose to, the evidence would go a long way to get them justice. Ansley hums. Her phone buzzes, but she ignores it. She's been doing that all day.

"Who is that, Ans?" I ask her.

"Probably Leslie; she's been texting me all day." She responds, and I arch an eyebrow.

"And you haven't responded?" I ask her. She shakes her head. Dylan glances between us.

"Why not?" He asks.

"Because I don't want to talk about what happened yesterday." She says. I grab her hand and begin to massage her palm.

“That’s understandable, but at least let her know you’re okay. Have you done that?” I ask her. She shakes her head, and I share a look with Dylan. I’ve had enough.

“Text her right now and tell her you’re okay and you’ll talk to her later when you’re ready.” Her eyes connect with mine for several seconds before she snatches her phone, types out a message, and then places it back on the bar.

“There.” She says and takes a sip of her wine. Dylan glances at me, his eyes wide. He stands and cleans up where he is sitting.

“I think I’ll go. I wanted to stop by and check on you before I went to sleep.” He throws his trash away and then stops beside Ansley giving her a peck on her head.

“Try to get some rest Ans.” He encourages. “I’ll call you tomorrow.” I’m not sure if he could be saying it to her or me. He leaves, and I start cleaning up the kitchen.

“Why don’t you go lay down, Ans? Take a nap.” I tell her. Part of me wants her to fight back to shake herself out of whatever funk she’s in, but she nods and walks to the bedroom. I stare after her, at a loss of what to say or do.

I think about doing a spanking scene with her, but I can’t, not after what she went through yesterday. Then I think about what she said at the cafe. This isn’t the first time she’s voiced insecurity about feeling like I didn’t want her. I walk into the bedroom and see she’s on her side with her knees to her chest.

I climb onto the bed and hover over her pushing her gently onto her back. I settle between her thighs as she stares up at me. I bring my index finger to her face and trace her forehead, nose, cheekbones, and slender neck. Then I follow that path with my lips.

“Do you know how much I love you, Ansley?” I ask her. She gives me a response by arching against me. “How much I love looking into your beautiful eyes?” I tell her as I stare down into her soul, and she returns my stare, her eyes shining with tears. She brings her hands up to my face cupping my jaw.

“I love you, Lincoln. So much. I’m sorry about today. I’ve been in a terrible head space today.” She says. I lean down, giving her a gentle kiss.

“You don’t have to be sorry, baby. I understand. But people worry about you, so don’t cut them off. Let them know you’re okay.” She nods and wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me down, so I’m flush against her.

“I need you, sweetheart,” I say against her neck. She whimpers against me, and I kiss her jaw. She pushes her hands under my shirt; I sit back, lifting it over my head, and then pull her up so I can remove her shirt. Before she can lay back down, I wrap my hand around her neck and tilt her head back so she’s looking up at me. Her eyes are filled with desire.

“You’re mine. Do you understand?” I remind her, and she nods as her tongue comes out to lick her lips. “Don’t ever forget that,” I order. She nods again. “Say it.” She stares at me for a long moment.

“I’m yours.” It comes out weak, and I shake my head.

“Try again,” I tell her, and she swallows.

“I’m yours, Lincoln.” She says with more conviction. I lean down, my lips brushing against hers.

“And I’m yours. Always and forever.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ANSLEY

I FEEL more normal today. Anita called to check on me and told me she was handling everything, and if I needed to, I could take the rest of the week off. Part of me felt terrible because Leslie was also out sick, leaving them short-staffed, but I knew I needed at least one more day before I could face the real world again. And honestly, the whole situation made me want to return to Mississippi with Lincoln.

Lincoln took another day off work to spend the morning with me, but he's leaving now to get back into town tonight. He has some crucial meetings tomorrow that he can't miss. I kept hoping he'd ask me to come with him, but he never did. Things still feel off between us, and I'm not sure why. He grabs his bags off the bed, and I follow him to the living room.

"Why haven't you asked me to go back home with you?" I ask him. His head turns toward me as he drops his bag on the floor next to the front door.

"Because you told me you need to finish your lease and work this next season. I didn't think that was an option." He replies. I stare at him, and he runs his hand through his hair. "And to be honest, you've been very agreeable with me lately." He says.

"What? What does that mean?" I ask him. He sighs and looks away for a few seconds before turning back to me.

“You’ve changed since moving here.” He states, and my mouth pops open.

“What?!? No, I haven’t!”

“Come on, Ans. You’re not as argumentative or snappy. Even in front of Liv and Caroline, you’ll do it a little but not as much as you used to.” He replies. I plop down on the couch, rubbing my hands over the fabric.

“You always seem so frustrated when I get snappy with you.” I express, and he arches an eyebrow.

“Yeah, maybe a little. But then I always wind up fucking you because it turns me the hell on. I love it when you challenge me and tell me to fuck off when I get too controlling.” He exclaims, and I bite the inside of my cheek. “I feel like I’m losing the Ansley I fell in love with.” He states, and I blink back the tears.

“I was just trying to be perfect for you,” I explain, my voice shaking.

“You were perfect just the way you were, and I never asked you to change.” He walks over to me and kisses me on my forehead. “I have to go. I’ll call you when I get home to check on you.” He grabs his bag and leaves as I sit on my couch, staring at my wall. I curl into a ball and lay down, thinking about what he said.

Growing up, I tried hard to be the perfect daughter to capture my parent’s attention the same way Dylan caught their attention, which never worked. Nothing I did was ever good enough. Even with Dylan, I tried to be the perfect sister so he’d see me. The real me, but ultimately I hid everything from him so he wouldn’t be hurt by how awful our parents really were.

Caroline and Liv see glimpses of me but not the entire story. I still keep things from them even when I shouldn’t. But with Lincoln. Lincoln has seen everything. He’s seen me laugh so hard I’ve peed on myself.

I was seven, but still, I was embarrassed. He held my hair back while I threw up after drinking too much alcohol. Not to

mention all the times he's made me come over the past several months.

There's a knock at my door, and I practically throw myself at it, but I slump when I see it's Dylan. He chuckles at my reaction.

"Nice to see you too." He comments as I wave him inside and go back to the couch. He closes the door and locks it, then settles down on the other end of the sofa, watching me warily.

"Still not feeling good?" He asks, and I exhale.

"Lincoln and I had an argument," I confess, and he tilts his head.

"About what?" He asks, so I tell him everything. When I get done, he rubs his hand over his neck. "Ans, Lincoln loves you." He states. I'm a little shocked he said that so easily.

"I'm not going to lie when he told me about his feelings for you, it freaked me out, but you two have been through a lot of shit, so it only seems fitting that you'd wind up together. And I've never seen Lincoln happier than when he's with you. Do you drive him crazy? Yeah. But that's what he loves about you. You don't take his shit. He doesn't want you to bend over and be his whipping board." When he gets done, I lean back against the couch and bite my lip.

"Wow, Dylan! That's deep." I tease, and he rolls his eyes.

"Shut up, nugget." I chuckle and shake my head.

"Well, since we're talking all deep and stuff, I have a confession to make," I tell him. He leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees, giving me his full attention. "I hate living here." Saying the words out loud feels like unlocking chains.

Dylan doesn't respond; he nods, giving me the impression that he already knows this.

"Not because I'm away from Lincoln." I pause. "Well, it might be part of that. But the city isn't all I thought it was going to be. I hate the traffic, I hate the noise, and I hate my job. Even before Chad attacked me, I enjoyed the moments I got to design something or mend something but the long hours

and not knowing sometimes what hours I'll be working." I stop and take a deep breath studying Dylan's expression.

"I kind of got the vibe you weren't happy here," Dylan replies. "I thought you were staying because you were trying to prove something to Lincoln." He states, and I chuckle.

"Maybe in the beginning. And honestly, at first, I loved this apartment because I finally had something that was cute and mine, but I'm barely here. I never get to enjoy it." I stop talking, pull my legs onto the couch, and hug them to my chest.

"So, you want to move back to Mississippi?" He asks, and I nod. "What will you do there? Work for Lincoln again?" I shake my head and then tell him my plan for the boutique and how I want to start my business. When I'm done, he shakes his head and chuckles.

"Mom and dad were stupid having me as their favorite." He says in irritation, and I scoff. He leans back on the couch and puts his foot on his knee. "Will you accept my help again?" He asks. I watch him for a long moment before thinking.

"Dylan, you already did so much helping me get into this apartment." He's shaking his head before I can finish my sentence.

"All I did was sign the paperwork so you wouldn't have to pay an ungodly amount to move in, and you wouldn't have to sell your Corvette." He tells me, and I sigh.

"Okay. Yes." I reply.

"Are you sure? Because I've offered this before, and you wouldn't take it." He says. I shrug. I'm pretty sure I know what he's going to say.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure. Before, I was young, dumb, and hurting so badly. It still hurts, and it probably always will. But I know now that wasn't your fault. It wasn't on you, and you tried to make it right, so I am sure." He grunts and taps his hand on his knee.

“I put three-quarters of the inheritance in investments. I consider half of that your inheritance because it should have been. I have doubled it since then.” My mouth drops when he tells me that.

“What?” I exclaim.

“As angry as I was. Dad had connections, so I used them, and they taught me what to do, so I followed their instructions, and it paid off.” He explains.

“Why are you working your ass off then?” I question, and he chuckles.

“Because I’m doing what I want. I’m exhausted, yes. But I won’t be doing this forever. Here’s what we’ll do.” He changes the subject, and I lean in, listening to his plan.

I CALLED CAROLINE and Liv to tell them I was coming home. Lincoln and I have been texting but haven’t talked much. I miss him so much, but I want everything to be perfect when I see him. I turned in my notice at work. Anita was understanding. Leslie was devastated, but I told her I’d be coming to Atlanta regularly to visit my brother, so I’d make sure to see her.

Dylan helped me break my lease and sell all of the furniture in my apartment. The only thing I kept was my big fluffy chair. It was going back with me to Mississippi. I just hadn’t figured out how. If it were up to Lincoln, he’d rent a huge UHaul. For now, it’s staying at Dylan’s, and we’ll come back to get it.

I’ve been staying at Dylan’s for two weeks and working hard on Lincoln’s Christmas present. I’m currently Facetimeing with Caroline and Liv while I put the finishing touches on it.

“So he has no idea you’re coming home tomorrow,” Caroline asks, and I shake my head.

“It seems very unlike him not to knock down your door.” Liv states, and Caroline snorts.

“He says he’s giving me my space.” I sigh. “He said he didn’t give it to me when I moved here, which forced me to ignore him, so now he’s trying not to be overbearing.” I groan, and they both laugh. Caroline leans into the phone.

“Are you wishing he’d knock down your door?” She asks.

“Yeah. And then throw me against said door and fuck me.” I state bluntly. They both start cackling.

“Ansley!” They say together.

“Look, I’m just trying to be completely and totally me. So there ya go.” I roll my hand at the phone.

“Well, when you show up tomorrow, I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what’s going to happen,” Liv says, and I raise an eyebrow at her.

“That’s the plan.” I pull the thread and hold the dress up for them to see. “What do you think?” They ooh and aah over the dress, and I smile at them. Part of Lincoln’s Christmas present is me. Tomorrow night is his company’s annual Christmas party, and I’m going as Liv’s plus one.

Lincoln loves me in green. He says it looks great with my red hair. So, I made myself a sequined dark green dress with cap sleeves with a slit in the leg that goes all the way to my upper thigh. I can’t wait to see him, and I hope he’s happy to see me. Because, like it or not, he will have a new roommate tomorrow night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ANSLEY

THE CHRISTMAS party is at the Trade Center downtown, and I can't stop fidgeting in Liv's car. Liv grabs my hand as she gets in line for the valet.

"It's going to be okay, Ans." She encourages me, and I swallow.

"I know. I haven't seen him in over two weeks. He's not bringing a date, right?" I ask for the thousandth time. Liv snorts.

"There's no way in hell he's bringing a date," Liv assures me. When it's our turn at the valet, we get out, and Liv hands her keys over. We start to head to the elevator, but I stop her.

"What if we run into him before I'm ready?" I ask her, and she shakes her head.

"He's already here. He said he was going to get here at six. It's six thirty." She reminds me. I'm driving her crazy, but I need this to go off without a hitch. We ride the elevator to the floor where the event is being held. I look around the room to make sure I don't see him.

We quickly make our way to the balcony that is blocked off for him. It's a routine for him to come out here before giving his speech to prepare and have a minute to breathe. We have to maneuver around the rope to get outside, and when I

see Caroline, she shrieks and throws her arms around me. I hug her back tight and then push her back to look down at her stomach.

“How have you gotten so big in such a short amount of time?” I ask her, and she chuckles.

“I know! Right?” She rubs her stomach. “The dress I planned on wearing, I couldn’t wear. We had to go find another one earlier this week.” She points at Bass, and I smile at him.

“Hey, Bass! Thanks for helping with my conniving plan.” He shrugs.

“I’m just along for the ride.” He states as he wraps his arms around Caroline. I pull my phone out of my clutch purse and hand it to Bass.

“Can you take a picture of us?” I ask him, and he smirks.

“Of course! You ladies look beautiful.” He takes several pictures. I return the favor by taking pictures of him and Caroline. Music starts playing, and they all turn to look at me.

“Alright.” Liv claps her hands. “He’ll be out here in just a few minutes to prepare for his speech.” She informs the group. I force myself not to bite my lip, so I don’t mess up my lip gloss.

“If he shows up all hot and bothered, we’ll know the plan worked.” Caroline states, and my mouth pops open. Liv throws her head back and laughs. Sebastian grabs her ass and begins to push her toward the door.

“You’re such a dirty girl.” He growls in her ear, and she giggles. Liv looks at me, rolling her eyes, and I chuckle as I stand to the side where Lincoln won’t notice me right away when he comes out here. I lean back against the railing and wait. I try to ignore the chill that’s beginning to set in now that I don’t have anyone out here to keep my attention off it.

What seems like forever, but I’m sure is only a few minutes, the door slides open, and Lincoln steps out on the balcony. He doesn’t notice me immediately, and I take the opportunity to admire him. He’s wearing a black tux with a

black shirt and tie. He looks absolutely delicious. I push off the railing, and that movement has his head snapping in my direction.

His eyes connect with mine for a second, then they travel down my body and back up again. When his eyes connect with mine again, he begins to stalk toward me again.

“Ansley.” He breathes out.

“Hey, Linc.” I greet him. He stops before me but doesn’t touch me, and I hate it. His eyes travel down my body again.

“You look fucking gorgeous.” He tells me. I smile and lean forward so my mouth is right beside his ear.

“I’m not wearing any panties,” I whisper. And that’s all it takes. His hand comes up to my throat, and he twists me so he can push me back against the building. He uses his other hand to lift my dress where the split is; his hand finds my naked pussy, and then his mouth is on mine.

I wrap my arms around his neck and take everything he’s willing to give me. His finger runs up my slit, pulling his mouth from mine.

“You’re so wet for me, baby. Have you been thinking about this all day?” He asks as he plunges one finger inside me. My knees buckle, and he has to wrap one arm around my waist to hold me up.

“Yes. I’ve been thinking about this all week.” I confess. He sucks and nips on my neck, his finger hooking just so.

“And you came out here to distract me from practicing my speech?” He asks as he continues to move his finger in me. My mouth is open as I gasp for air then he’s putting two fingers in me.

“Take the cards out of my coat pocket and read them to me.” My eyes fly to his when he stops moving.

“What?” I ask, not sure I understood.

“Take the cards out of my coat pocket and read them. If you stop, I won’t let you come.” He tells me. I groan, pulling his jacket away and searching inside his pocket to find them. I

bring them in front of my face so that I can read. He still hasn't moved his fingers, so he's telling the truth.

"I want to start...." He begins to move his fingers, and I choke on the words. He stops moving.

"I can't. I can't do it, Linc." I plead. His mouth lands on the sensitive spot just below my ear.

"You can and you will." He instructs. I pull the cards in front of my face again and reread them as he moves his fingers. I get two sentences this time, but he adds a third finger. I'm going to come, and I stutter again, causing him to stop.

"Please, Lincoln!" I beg, and he chuckles darkly in my ear.

"You did this, sweetheart. Now you have to suffer the consequences. I'll give you exactly what you want, but you're going to give me what I want." I whine, but I start rereading the card, and he moves his fingers again. I can't help it, but I start riding his hand to hurry him along, but he doesn't allow me.

"You're going to read the whole thing. Then I'm going to fuck you, fill your pussy up with my cum, so that you will be dripping wet when we go back in there, and my release will paint your thighs." I moan at the visual and bring the cards in front of me again.

This time I make it all the way through. On the last sentence, he increases the speed and pressure, but I'm a good student and will make it through this time. On the last word, he presses his thumb against my clit, and I'm coming so hard I see stars. He covers my mouth with his other hand because there's no way I can be quiet.

He takes the cards from me and puts them back in his coat pocket, then he unbuttons his pants and pushes them down, so his cock springs free and lifts me. He lines himself up with me and sinks into me. We both moan together, and he rests his forehead against mine.

"I've missed you and this pussy so much." He whispers. Then he begins to move.

“I missed you so much, Linc.” I kiss him, and he returns it with enthusiasm. He rocks into me, and I hold onto him for dear life as he ruts into me.

“I want you to go in there a little dirtied up,” I tell him, causing him to stutter.

“I want people to know the put-together Lincoln was sullied by his best friend’s little sister.” I gasp out.

“Fuck Ansley! Keep talking like that, and I won’t be going in there at all tonight. I’ll be worshiping this pussy all night.” He says, and I chuckle huskily.

“Oh, that’s the plan anyway, Linc.” I bite his neck. He picks up speed, twisting his hips just right, making me barrel straight toward another orgasm.

“Come on, baby.” He encourages me as I cling to him.

“Don’t stop! Please don’t stop!” I whisper over and over.

“Not a chance in hell.” He responds, then I’m catapulting over the precipice, and he’s catapulting with me. He moans in my ear, and I feel him pulse in my pussy. We stay like that for several long minutes until he pulls out and drops me to my feet, ensuring I’m steady. He fixes my dress, then adjusts his pants and tucks himself back in.

But he doesn’t make himself look impeccable like he did when he came out here. His shirt isn’t tucked to the Lincoln standard, and he doesn’t comb his hair just right. He arches an eyebrow at me.

“Do I look completely debauched?” He asks, and I chuckle, nodding my head. I wrap my arms around his shoulder while I feel his cum seep out of me. He leans in and rubs his lips along my neck.

“I’m so glad you’re here, sweetheart.” He murmurs into my skin, and I melt into him.

“Are you going to dance with me?” I ask him. He leans back to look at me.

“All night long.” He replies, and butterflies erupt in my stomach.

“But we need to get back inside because they’ll be announcing me soon.” He pulls me into his chest and gives me a hard kiss. “We’re going to talk later.” He tells me.

“I know. I have a lot to tell you.” I reply. He tilts his head, giving me a small smile. He leans in and gives me one more kiss before leading me through the door.

“I have to go stand by the stage.” He lets me know.

“I’ll be with Liv, Caroline, and Bass.” I point toward where they’re standing.

“I’ll find you after.” He kisses me on the forehead, and I make my way to my friends. Liv bumps her head into my shoulder, smiling.

“I see you were successful,”

I smirk as I watch Lincoln take the stage. He still looks impeccable, but anyone who knows him will notice the small tells that he’s not entirely put together.

“He didn’t even put up a fight.” I tell them. Bass snorts, and all three of our heads turn to him.

“He wouldn’t, with him being a red-blooded male and all who hasn’t seen his woman in over two weeks. And the first time he sees her, she’s dressed to the nines.” Caroline looks up at Bass and pats his cheek.

“So profound.” She murmurs. Bass shrugs and pulls her in closer to him.

“Just telling it like it is, baby.” He replies, and Caroline snorts.

“So what’d you say to him?” Liv asks, and I bite my lip, trying to hide my smile. I glance at Caroline and then at Bass, unsure if I should say it in front of him. But she shrugs, nodding slightly, letting me know it’s okay.

“I told him I wasn’t wearing any panties,” I whisper so other people don’t hear. Bass doesn’t respond other than his eyes widening slightly.

“Holy shit, if you had said that to me, I would have been on you, too,” Caroline says, and we all laugh. Bass leans down and bites her ear.

“You really are my dirty girl, aren’t you?” He mumbles only loud enough for us to hear, and we shake our heads. We all stop talking and turn our attention to Lincoln as he begins speaking. I bite my lip as he stares at me while reciting his speech. Not once having to use the note cards, he had me read.

LINCOLN DANCES WITH me all night. I’ve been to a few of these parties and never danced with him at any of them. It’s the last song, and I’m enjoying every second. My head is just under his chin as we rock back and forth. He pulls away to look down at me.

“Are you feeling sticky?” He asks. Heat travels up my neck and face as I try to hide my smile.

“A little bit.” He smirks.

“I plan to make you a lot more sticky later.” He says nonchalantly, and my mouth pops open.

“Lincoln!” I whisper-yell. He shrugs, suddenly looking concerned.

“I want you to know I missed you like hell.” He says emphatically, and I tilt my head at him.

“I know,” I respond, but his eyes narrow. So, I decide to elaborate.

“You didn’t cut me off. You kept checking on me. You were giving me time, and I needed it. But now I need you.” I state. His eyes light up as he pulls me in closer. The song is coming to a close, but he doesn’t stop rocking back and forth.

“We’ll figure out a schedule to visit each other until you can move out of your apartment.” He says, and I bite the inside of my lip.

“I already moved out,” I announce, and his eyebrows furrow.

“What?” He asks.

“Yeah. I sold all my furniture except my big comfy chair and moved in with Dylan. But I moved out of Dylan’s place today, so I was hoping I could live with you now.” I utter. He stops moving, staring at me. His mouth opens and closes several times before he leans down and kisses me long and hard.

“Yes. Now let’s go home so you can explain to me how this happened.” He grabs my hand and begins to drag me to the elevator. I stop him, though; he turns on me with a growl. Putting my hand on my hips, I give him an attitude.

“I’m saying bye to my friends first.” I snap, and he narrows his eyes at me. When he sees I’m not giving in, he rolls his eyes and smirks, waving his hand at me to proceed. I take my time saying bye to everyone, spending way too much time as he leans against one of the columns in the middle of the room.

“Is he watching?” I ask Caroline and Liv. They look over my shoulder and nod.

“He’s about two seconds away from barging over here,” Caroline states, and I snort.

“I’m counting on it,” I tell her as I rub my hand over her belly. Liv squeaks, and I know he’s on his way. Without warning, I’m being spun around and thrown over Lincoln’s shoulder. His hand comes down hard on my ass.

“Enough!” He growls, and I laugh as his hand comes down on my ass again. I glance around, surprised he’s doing that in front of people, but I notice hardly anyone left. When he turns, I glance up and wave at Caroline and Liv, and they wave back. Tonight’s going to be fun.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ANSLEY

LINCOLN GUIDES me into his house, and I'm too happy to take off these heels. I sigh as I massage the arch of my foot. I follow him further into the house as he removes his jacket and hangs it on the back of the dining room chair, then loosens his tie and takes it off. I lean against the door jam watching him undress. He turns and smirks at me.

“Enjoying the view, sweetheart?” He asks as he removes the cuff links from his shirt and unbuttons it. My tongue comes out to wet my lips.

“Yep,” I reply as he removes his shirt and lays it over the chair. Unfortunately, he leaves his pants on and walks over to me, motioning for me to turn around. I do as I'm told, and he guides my zipper down.

“I'm not wearing anything under this dress, Linc.” I remind him. His lips come up to kiss the back of my neck.

“I'll give you my shirt to wear.” He replies. He finishes unzipping my dress, and the dress falls to my feet. He turns me back around and takes in my body. “But first, I need to look at you.”

And that's what he does. He steps back to where he discarded his shirt and grabs it but keeps his eyes focused on me. I grab my dress and hand it to him so he can drape it over one of the chairs. He helps me into the shirt and buttons it up.

“Merry Christmas, Lincoln.” He smiles at me.

“Was this my Christmas present?” He asks as he pulls me into his arms. I nod.

“Part of it. I made that dress.” He looks at the dress and back at me, pride shining in his eyes.

“Wow, Ans.” He wraps his hand around my neck and cards his fingers through my hair. “You are so talented.” He kisses me softly.

“I have a Christmas present for you too.” He whispers against my lips, then releases me slowly and walks across the room where a few bags are. He takes a medium-sized box out that’s already been wrapped and hands it to me. I stare at it with a smile on my face.

“Open it!” He encourages me. I tear the wrapping paper and open the box; a gasp escapes my lips as I look up at him. It’s the ornament I was looking at the day he, Dylan, and I hung out.

“I didn’t realize you saw me looking at it.” My words come out all watery. I look up at him, and he’s smiling at me.

“I notice everything you do, sweetheart.” He takes the paper and box from me, places them on the table, and wraps me in his arms again. “I can’t wait to put it on the tree with you.” I kiss him, and he takes it over for several long seconds before pulling away and leading me to the living room.

He guides me to sit against the arm of the couch. He sits in the middle of the couch, pulling my feet into his lap. He begins to rub his thumb up the arches of my feet, and I tilt my head back, moaning. He chuckles and shifts.

“Tell me what’s going on.” He instructs, and my eyes find him again. I take a deep breath.

“I talked to Dylan about a lot of things. One being I needed help, and he was more than willing to offer it. He took most of the inheritance mom and dad left, invested it, and doubled it. He helped me get out of the lease. I sold all of my furniture so I could have some money to put down for the lease on a property downtown, but he also said he’d help me with that.

And I quit my job. I probably should have talked to you about all of this before just doing it, but I needed to do this for me, and I needed to do it my way.” I explain to him. A small smile plays on his lips, and his hands massage my calves to my feet and back again.

“I’m going to need your help. I’ve never done anything like this, and you know how to run a business. So, I would like your help. Caroline said she’d help me with marketing. Liv said she’d help build a website and app for people to purchase items.” I take a deep breath after I tell him everything, and the slight smile on his lips has turned into a full-blown grin.

“I am so proud of you, Ansley. I will help you in any way I can. I know I can be overbearing, so tell me to back off, and I’ll try. And you know Caroline and Liv will do anything to help you.” He says in true Lincoln fashion, and I laugh.

He crawls up my body and settles between my legs. Pushing my hair back from my shoulder, he stares into my eyes.

“You deserve only good things.” He whispers. I wrap my hands around his back.

“You too, Linc. You’ve saved my life in more ways than one.” I utter and lean up to kiss him. He kisses me back, soft and sweet, before pulling back.

“Now, about that chair of yours.” He says.

“Yeah. It wouldn’t fit in the Corvette.” I whine. His hand comes between us as he unbuttons his shirt and moves it to the side. His hands massage my breasts, his thumbs running over my nipples. I gasp and arch into him, feeling him harden against me. I slide my hands down his bare chest toward his pants.

“I’ll call and rent a UHaul tomorrow so we can get it.” I pause in my exploration of his body.

“What? No! It’s one chair. We can ask Bass to use his truck.” I exclaim as my hands continue their downward path to the buttons on his pants. He arches an eyebrow at me.

“I’m renting a UHaul.” He states as he leans down and sucks a nipple into his mouth. I moan and unbutton his pants, pushing them down.

“No, you’re not! That’s ridiculous.” I cry out when he pinches my other nipple hard at my words, causing shivers to skate up my spine. His head pops up, and he stares down at me as he pushes his pants down further and lifts slightly on his knees.

“I’m not arguing with you, Ansley. I’m renting a UHaul, and we’re using it to pick up your chair.” He places one hand over my head to support himself while the other travels down my body. I grab his stiff cock and pump it in my hand, causing him to groan.

“I won’t go with you,” I announce. His eyes pop open at that. His hand reaches its destiny, and he cups my pussy.

“I will handcuff you to the truck and make you wear a vibrator all the way there. And then I’ll see how many orgasms I can give you in five hours.” My pussy clenches around his fingers, and he smirks.

“You like that, don’t you, gorgeous?” He removes his hand from my pussy and my hand from his cock. Then he’s lining himself up with me.

“Do you feel how hard you got me?” He asks, and I suck in a shaky breath. He leans down and licks my ear lobe.

“I owe you a spanking for being a brat tonight and arguing with me about the UHaul, but I want to be inside you too bad.” Then he’s sliding in, and I can’t breathe at how good he feels. I wrap my arms and legs around him and keep my eyes connected with his. At this moment, nothing else matters. I wasn’t lying when I told him he saved my life in more ways than one. He saved my life when I was five, and he’s saved my life multiple times since then.

He started as my brother’s best friend and my childhood crush, then became my friend, sometimes enemy, and finally, the love of my life.

I try to show him all of the emotions I'm feeling. He leans down to kiss me, and his pace picks up. I gasp when he lifts my hips just enough for him to hit a different angle. He kisses everywhere his mouth can touch, saying I love you repeatedly like he's trying to tattoo it on my skin.

I say it back between chanting his name, and then we're both falling over the edge, and he collapses on top of me, both of us breathing hard. After a few seconds, he rolls off and pulls me into him, my back to his front. He kisses my neck.

“Welcome home, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

EPILOGUE

NINE MONTHS Later

Lincoln

I sit at my desk in my home office, looking over some paperwork for the deal I made, waiting for Ansley to arrive home. It's her birthday, and she's either going to be pissed or out of her mind happy. I'm excited to find out which one it's going to be.

"Lincoln! I am going to kick your ass!" Ansley bellows. So pissed it is. I stand and roll my sleeves up to my elbows. Here we go! I slowly walk through the house. I hear her heels clicking as she paces in the foyer. I stop in the doorway and lean against it, watching her. Her head snaps up, and she stomps to me and holds up some papers.

"What the hell is this?" She demands. I cross my arms over my chest.

"It's your birthday present," I tell her. She falters as she looks from me to the papers and back to me again. Taking a step back, she huffs.

"I wanted to do this, Lincoln." She says and takes another step back. I push away from the door and walk toward her, not letting her get too far away.

“You did do it. Everything is in your name. It’s under your credit. They will use your deposit. I just did the paperwork for you. And, if you’ll let me, I would like to pay for the first six months.” I tell her. The fight leaves her, and she melts.

“I...” I eat up the distance between us and wrap my arms around her. “I don’t know what to say.” She replies. I give her a small kiss on the lips.

“I’d like you to say yes, but that’s up to you. You have worked your ass off to buy that building so you can expand. I wanted to make it easier for you. I know you didn’t expect your business to explode as it has over these past nine months, so I wanted to help you.” I tell her. She wraps her arms around my neck.

“So, everything is under my name?” She asks.

“Yes. I’ve been working with my lawyers. We have an appointment next week for you to drop off the deposit and sign the paperwork, and the building will be yours. Connor said he’d help tear down walls to make it look like you want it to, and Bec said she’d help you decorate and design it.” I explain, and she huffs.

“You’ve thought of everything.” She says. I smile at her.

“You deserve the world, sweetheart, and if it’s within my power, I’ll give it to you.” She exhales and shakes her head.

“You know, you make it really hard to stay mad at you.” I laugh and lean in to nuzzle her neck.

“My diabolical plan is working,” I whisper in her ear before biting down. She chuckles before pulling away.

“Thank you.” She says and leans in to kiss me sweetly. Everything in me wants to turn it dirty, but we’re meeting everyone for drinks in thirty minutes, so I pull away. I lay my forehead against hers.

“I love you, sweetheart. I want you to have everything your heart desires.” She smirks and rubs her body against mine.

“Everything?” She asks, and I groan.

“We’re meeting everyone for drinks in thirty minutes, baby.” I remind her, and she sighs, pulling back. “But I have something else for you.” I grab the box I had hidden and hand it to her. She smiles wide, puts the papers in her hand on the table, and opens it. She stares at the panties and looks at me.

“Put them on,” I instruct her.

“I already have some on.” She replies.

“These are special,” I tell her. She knows by the expression on her face but reaches under her skirt and pulls her panties down, handing them to me, probably to torture me. I bring them to my nose, and she shakes her head. She grabs the panties out of the box and steps into them, pulling them up her legs.

I put my hand back in my pocket as she smooths her skirt down her legs; she looks back at me and curtsies.

“Happy?” She asks. Then I click the switch in my pocket. Her eyes widen, and her hands land on my forearms.

“Fuck Lincoln!” She brings her body close to mine as she claws at my shoulder. I wrap one arm around her waist so she doesn’t fall to the floor.

“I can’t wear these.” I increase the setting, and her nails dig into the back of my neck.

“Oh my god!” I turn it up again, and her eyes roll back in her head as she chants my name. I turn them off as she clings to me, and I hold her up. After she recovers, she stares at me.

“There’s no way I can wear these all night.” She tells me and steps back to take them off, but I stop her.

“You can and you will,” I command, and her eyes widen.

“Lincoln! They’ll all know.” I shrug. All of our friends are into kinky shit.

“I won’t do it that fast while we’re out. I promise.” She knows she can use her colors anytime, and I’ll stop. She eyes me warily but nods.

“That’s one,” I tell her. She grabs her purse and glances at me as I open the door.

“What number are you going for tonight?” She asks as I lock the house up. I bite my lip as I grab her hand and walk her to my car.

“Twenty-seven, of course.” Her head snaps to mine, and I smirk at her as I open the car door for her. Instead of getting in the car, she wraps her arms around my neck, tipping her head up for a kiss. Like I could deny her. I lean down and kiss her soft and slow before pulling away.

“You know you’re crazy, right?” She asks, and I smack her ass.

“Only for you, sweetheart.” I remind her and kiss her hard.

BY THE TIME we arrive at the restaurant, I’ve given Ansley two more orgasms.

“I can already tell I’m not going to be able to walk by the end of the night.” She mumbles as I wrap my hand around her waist and guide her to the back room I reserved.

“That’s the plan, gorgeous,” I reply, and she glances at me.

“I thought the birthday person was supposed to get spankings.” She states, and I smirk.

“That can be arranged.” She snorts as we walk into the room, and her friends bombard her.

“You have orgasm eyes,” Caroline tells Ansley just as Dylan hugs her. Liv and Ansley burst out laughing at the expression on Dylan’s face, and I give him an apologetic look. He walks over to me and bumps his shoulder into mine.

“You ready?” He asks. I share a smile with him.

“Yes. I said I would wait, but I don’t think I can.” He shakes his head and chuckles.

“I expected as much, so I went ahead and ordered some wine that should be here soon, and the servers know to bring in the champagne as soon as she says yes.” I side-eye him.

“How do you know she’s going to say yes?” He huffs.

“Because she’s been telling you since she was six.” We laugh together as I watch Ansley for a moment enjoying her friends. I didn’t tell anyone else because I wanted this to be a surprise. When she makes her way back to me, I look at Dylan, giving him a slight nod. When she gets close enough, I pull her into my arms and kiss her. She wraps her arms around my neck and beams at me.

“This is great, Linc.” She tilts her head at me, and I admire her for a moment. I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful as her.

“Ans, I love you so much.” I start, and her smile gets even more prominent.

“I can’t think of a time when I haven’t loved you in some way. You challenge me, excite me, and push me. I promised you that I’d marry you if you weren’t married by the time you were twenty-six. I’m a year off, but I never break a promise.” She gasps, and her eyes widen when I release her from my grasp and take a step back.

I grab the small box from my pocket and kneel down. Her hands come up to her mouth as she watches me. Caroline and Liv have noticed, and one of them says oh my god. Dylan gets everyone else’s attention as he records with his phone.

“Ansley Marie Lawrence, will you marry me?” Ansley swipes furiously at the tears on her face and nods.

“Yes! A thousand times, yes!” I stand back up, and she jumps in my arms as I catch her and hold her tight. After a few seconds, I push her back slightly and put the engagement ring on her finger. She stares at it and then looks at me.

“It’s beautiful, Lincoln.” She gushes, and I have to kiss her again as I wrap my hands around her waist.

“Only the most beautiful ring for the most beautiful girl.” She wraps her arms around my neck as I pull her in close. Her mouth goes to my ear.

“I need more than the panties.” She whispers, causing my cock to harden.

“Fuck Ansley!” She chuckles, but before I can drag her somewhere to give her what she needs, Caroline and Liv come over to gush and offer their congratulations, along with Bailey and Bec. Dylan, Bass, Connor, and Julian are coming to congratulate me.

“Don’t forget I get to be the ring bearer!” Dylan jokes, and Ansley claps her hand laughing.

The server comes in with some champagne, and the food I had preordered gets brought in, so we all sit down to begin eating.

Ansley moves her seat so she’s leaning into me, and I wrap my arms around her shoulders. She glances down at her ring and plays with it.

“This was a total surprise.” She tells me. I lean forward, putting my chin on her shoulder and kissing her neck.

“That was the point,” I whisper, and she giggles.

“I can’t believe you remembered that about getting married when I was twenty-six.” She utters, and I shake my head.

“I don’t know why. I remember everything you tell me or say to me.” She turns to face me, and it’s like no one else is in the room. I slide my hand around her neck as she stares at me.

“We get to be together for the rest of our lives.” She confesses. I lean down, so my forehead is against hers.

“I love the sound of that.” I kiss her gently, then pull back as I gaze at her.

“I can’t wait.”

The End

Note from the author

Thank you so much for reading Ansley and Lincoln's story! I had so much fun writing their story! I think, on some level, many of us can identify with Ansley; what people see on the outside isn't necessarily what's going on in our heads. While she was strong, confident, and beautiful, she still had to deal with her own traumas and insecurities. The only person who could help her with that was the one who went through it all with her. Once Lincoln removed the stick up his ass, as Ansley so eloquently put it, he was all in with her. And that's what she needed, someone who put her first above everyone else.

Writing this book reminded me of why I fell in love with reading romance novels because of that overarching theme throughout every book. The Hero always chooses the heroine over everyone else, and I think we all want that in some shape, form, or fashion in our lives. And I hope you get it! I hope you enjoyed reading this story as much as I loved telling it!

XOXO,

Nicole



Want to be notified about future book releases of mine?

Sign up for my Newsletter today:

[Nicole Abram's Newsletter Sign Up](#)



Be the FIRST in the know and meet new book friends in my Facebook readers group. This is a PRIVATE group. Only those in the group can see posts, comments, and the like!!

Facebook Readers Group: [Nicole Abrams' Reader Group](#)

Read Chapter One from Finding Caroline below

Caroline

I'm doing this today! I sit on the edge of the couch, breathe in and out, and try to stop the tightness taking over my chest. Swallowing, I breathe in, count to five, breathe out, count to ten. Despite my heartache, I keep a smile on my face as I sip on the eggnog Laura, my mother-in-law, thrust into my hand a few minutes ago. A snort escapes me when one of the moose antlers hits me in the nose. It wouldn't be Christmas without the National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation glasses.

That movie is my favorite Christmas movie. I had these same glasses, but Brandon broke them last Christmas when he threw them in anger about something I can't remember now. I tug at the waist of my jeans pulling them up a little as they squeeze into my stomach. I side-eye Brandon to make sure he doesn't see because if he does he'll say something about me being fat. I do have what people call a muffin top, but it's hard to care when you're surviving from day to day.

I comb my fingers through my long and stringy brown hair, which I hate. The first thing I'm going to do is get a new hairdo. I need to go ahead and make the appointment. Tugging at my jeans again I jump when one of the kids screeches. The next thing I'm going to do is start running. I want to lose the weight I gained since high school, but I want to do it on my terms. I don't want to do it by exercising at a gym with Brandon and his asshole of a best friend all while being made fun of the entire time.

I turn my thoughts toward how I'm going to hand him the divorce papers. It's so loud in here I'm having a hard time thinking. I don't want to think about what I have to do today of all days. This is not how I wanted to do this, but this is the only way it will work. At least I hope it does because I can't do this anymore. I swallow down the lump in my throat and blink away the tears threatening me. This is not my fault; he's

a horrible human being who doesn't deserve someone like me at all.

I have to hold my courage close. It's not as constant as I'd like it to be, but I'm determined to work on that. Laura hands me a present, and I give her what I hope is a genuine smile. Her eyes reveal she sees straight through me. God, I'm going to miss her. We're surrounded by Brandon's family. Kids run around playing with their new toys Santa brought while I sit here and try not to let the courage I have right now slip through my fingers.

Can I do this? Will I do this? My heart beats uncontrollably in my chest. What will he do? To everyone else, he puts on a false persona like we're happy. Lately, though, he seems to be as tired of the charade as I am because he's beginning to let some of it slip out in public.

"Open your present honey. Everyone else opened theirs." Laura encourages. Brandon scoffs and rolls his eyes.

"Always the center of attention, huh?" I bite the inside of my cheek and can't help but notice Laura scowling at her son. He's always been an asshole but he's become worse since I asked for a divorce a few months ago. He still refuses to give it to me. I hope after today things will change.

"Brandon, watch your mouth. It's Christmas." He shrugs and goes back to looking at the screen of his new fish finder. I bite my lip and speak my mind for once in my life.

"Don't mind him, Laura. He can't help being an asshole it comes so naturally to him." Everyone in the room stops what they're doing, and all eyes turn to Brandon. Honestly, I'm as shocked as they are that came out of my mouth. He stands from where he had been sitting on the couch, crossing his arms over his chest as if preparing for a fight.

"What the hell did you say?" Brandon roars. I shrink a little but straighten my spine. Having other people around helps a little. I unwrap the present Laura handed me and shrug.

"I think you heard me." I open the box and pull out a beautiful bracelet with several charms on it. One is a runner

girl, and another is the Statue of Liberty, commemorating our girl's trip there a few months ago. It was one of the rare occasions Brandon let me do something without him because it was with his mom and sister.

The last charm is a heart. Leave it to Laura to know the most about me. I haven't started running yet, but I will and she knows I want to.

"I don't know where the fuck you get off talking to me like that." My head snaps up and I stand as he takes a threatening step toward me. I arch an eyebrow at him, daring him to show his true colors. He's never physically assaulted me, but about a year ago Bryan, his best friend, joked about them sharing me. When Brandon didn't defend me I knew I only had a matter of time before things went to the next level.

Although his words definitely left their mark on me. Whoever came up with the term sticks and stones may break my bones but words never hurt had never been married to Brandon Theel. I stand my ground.

"After all I've done for you this Christmas and you're going to talk to me like that?" I put my hands on my hips and cock my head.

"What exactly have you done for me?" He scoffs again.

"You know what I've done." I sigh. I went out of my way to make our house pretty, but he complains it was too girly. I work hard, only for him to spend everything I make on himself.

He never helps me out or spends any money on me at all. I love Christmas but he always makes it miserable for me. I've been asking for a divorce for over six months now. I started putting money away when the incident with Bryan happened and now I have enough to buy a house and not be on the street. I had to be secretive about opening an account without him knowing about it so I could hide money. As nervous and scared as I am, I'm ready to do this once and for all.

"No, I want to hear what you have to say," I demand, and his eyes narrow at me. I point at him and continue. "You called

me a fat pig last night because I ate the cookies my mom makes me every Christmas. And you made piggy noises at me.” Laura turns and gapes at her son; Brandon’s face turns red, and his eyebrows furrow like he wants to say something else but thinks better of it.

“Brandon! I can’t believe you said that, she’s not even close to being fat.” Laura yells at him.

“I was just kidding,” he laughs. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I guess I need to be more careful with what I say, huh? I can’t even joke around with you anymore.” The dull ache in my chest returns and I wring my hands.

“You’ve been making fun of my weight since we got married. Last week you told me you were going to make me weigh myself every day.” Brandon’s sister, Lucy, stands up from her place on the floor.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she screeches at him. He turns murderous eyes on me. I lift my lips in a small smirk. I’m going to do this now. I grab the box I was hiding beside the couch and hand it to him.

“Merry Christmas, Brandon.” I stuff my hands into the pockets of my jeans and stare Brandon down. He blinks slowly like he can’t quite understand what’s happened. Laura and Lucy exchange glances with me. I shrug. Brandon’s dad ushered the kids outside because he could sense what was about to happen. Everyone else is awkwardly quiet.

“I don’t have anything for you, Caroline.” I shake my head and look away. Of course, he doesn’t.

“That’s okay. This is a gift for me too.” I mumble. His eyebrows cave in and he glances back up at me trying to figure out what I mean. He takes the wrapping paper off the box and opens it. His face shows confusion, but morphs into rage when he realizes what it is. Lucy puts herself between me and him like she senses danger.

“What the fuck is this?” He yells.

“I need you to sign the papers. I need you to sign them today. We will not be leaving here until you do.” I rush out

because the last of my courage is dwindling. He throws the box across the room but holds the papers in his hands. Those are copies because I was afraid he'd rip them up.

"I will not be signing these." His voice simmers in a low rage. Lucy figures out what they are before Laura does and she steps toward him.

"Why not? Why would you want to stay married to someone who you think is a fat pig?" She questions him.

"You're on her side?" He retorts incredulously.

"You bet your ass I'm on her side. If someone spoke to me the way you speak to her his balls would be detached from his body." She seethes. One day I'm going to have the kind of courage Lucy has all the time, not in small doses. His eyes widen and he looks to his mom for help. Laura swallows, but she steps toward me and Lucy.

"Sign the papers. You two need to move on from one another." His mouth drops in disbelief at her words. He's so clueless. I told Lucy a while ago I was trying to get a divorce. She didn't realize I was going to do this today, but she knows how he treats me.

She's called him out on it several times. If it wasn't for me their relationship would consist of Christmases and birthdays. I've always wondered how Laura would react, she loves her son, and I never wanted her to think she has to choose. I steal my expression and stare into his eyes. His jaw is set, but he can't hide his physical response to my words.

"Fine!" He bellows. "I need a pen." I let out a sigh of relief, but I won't allow myself to rest in that relief until he signs the papers. I grab the real papers out of the bag and a pen out of my purse. He signs them angrily, then slams the door behind him as he leaves. With him, the last of my courage exits my body, but I try to ignore it as a big grin spreads across my face. It is officially over!

——continue reading here: <https://tinyurl.com/mtxhepvz>

Stay Connected

Private Facebook Group: [Nicole Abrams Reader's group](#)

Facebook Page: [Nicole Abrams](#)

Amazon: [Nicole Abrams](#)

Goodreads: [Nicole Abrams](#)

BookBub: [Nicole Abrams](#)

Instagram: [@nicoleabramsauthor](#)

TikTok: [@nicoleabramsauthor](#)

My newsletter is the BEST way to stay in contact! You'll get release dates, titles, sales, and MORE first!

Sign up here:

[Nicole Abram's Newsletter](#)

Acknowledgments

To my husband and son, you didn't expect me to release another book this quickly, but you both have been just as supportive of this book as Finding Caroline. Thank you so much for supporting my dream! I know it will pay off; I love you both so much!

Ashleigh, thank you so much for your hard work and dedication to helping me reach the point of pride in my stories. I don't know how I would do it without your help and support.

Riley, thank you for taking a chance on me and helping me build a TikTok team that absolutely rocks! Your help and assistance have been so great. You definitely are the number one hype girl!

To my Street Team and TikTok Team, thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for sharing all of the posts and videos to get the word out about this release. You all have greatly helped me, and I am grateful to you!

Beta and ARC readers!! You guys are such an invaluable part of the process! Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to meet my newest couple, especially during the holidays.

And lastly, to the readers!! Thank you for reading Losing Ansley. I hope you loved reading about Ansley and Lincoln's journey, as much as I loved writing it!

About the Author

Nicole Abrams is best known for her debut contemporary romance novel, *Finding Caroline*. Born in Georgia, she moved frequently with her military family, finally settling back into her home state as an adult. Always an avid reader, she eventually started journaling and writing short stories, which led to the creation of her first book. Nicole is a breast cancer survivor, beating her diagnosis in 2021 after undergoing surgery and radiation. She has an unhealthy obsession with the TV show *Friends* and when she is not writing you can find her spending time with the man of her dreams and their son.