



LOVING A

writer

SHANI HAIM

THE WRITER series book 2

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DREAM BIG.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Not everyone gets to live out their dreams...right?

I know I'm not talented enough to succeed as a writer. That's
the one thing I learned from my past.

So, I let my manuscript languish and became a marketing
manager for a publishing house. I'm...content. Mostly.

But Kyle thinks I deserve more.

As an agent, he's relentless. He says I have the light it takes to
become a writer.

He wants to draw me from the shadows and help me chase my
literary dreams. But that's not all he wants.

See, Kyle wants me.

The scary part? I want him, too.

But how can I be with him when I don't know if he loves me
as I am, or for what I could be?

PLAYLIST AND PINTEREST BOARD

Just a few extras to give you the full Elsie and Kyle experience.

Their Pinterest Board: <https://bit.ly/3Q5L94G>

Their Playlist on Spotify: <https://spoti.fi/3Q4jl0q>

Absolutely Zero – Jason Mraz

Girls Just Want to Have Fun – Cyndi Lauper

Brooklyn Baby – Lana Del Rey

Habits (Stay High) – Tove Lo, Hippie Sabotage

Lady – Lenny Kravitz

Too Hot for Words – Sweet Megg & the Wayfarers

Out of Nowhere – Sweet Megg & the Wayfarers

I Belong to You – Lenny Kravitz

Learn to Fly – Foo Fighters

Hope is a Dangerous Thing – Lana Del Rey

Starry Eyed – Ellie Goulding

Roar– Kary Perry

Cold Water – Major Lazer, Justin Bieber, MØ

Movement – Hozier

Wide Awake – Kary Perry

Firework – Kary Perry

STILL CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF THESE TWO?

Sign up to my newsletter to gain access to Members Only area, featuring deleted scenes and Kyle's love letter to Elsie

<https://www.authorshanihaim.com/newsletter>

PROLOGUE

Kyle

FOUR MONTHS AGO

A FULL head of thick, auburn hair, sparkling blue eyes, a mesmerizing smile, and blushing from the compliment I gave her.

Beautiful.

No, not beautiful.

Freaking perfect.

I'd seen her somewhere, I just couldn't place it. How the hell could I have not remembered with an aura like hers?

"The reading is about to start." My friend Noah's voice was a blur. From the corner of my eye, I registered him nodding his head forward. "Let's grab a seat over there."

Tearing my eyes from her took an effort. I felt drawn, like fate struck an invisible lightning bolt between us. A literary agent meeting the perfect woman in a bookstore—what are the odds?

Noah elbowed me when I didn't so much as wink, and that stirred me from gawking at her.

I looked toward the direction he signaled, five available spots one next to the other. "Yeah, there is fine."

Our small group wandered over, Noah sat at the far end, next to him his girl Alda, then her friend Justine. And, as fate would want it, Elsie sat last.

On the chair at my side.

She glanced at me, resting her delicate chin on her shoulder.

Her lips curved up. “Hi again.”

“Hey.” I returned the smile, regaining some of my composure. She didn’t seem like a woman who’d consider dating an ogling creep, so I tried to not come off as one.

“I have a good feeling about Hunter.”

For a moment I’d forgotten anything existed but her. “Who?”

“Hunter.” She chuckled, soft and sweet. “The one reading today. Ridge, the owner, said I should check out his work, so I’m here.”

“Oh yeah, the author.” I raked my hand through my hair, masking my embarrassment. “How do you know Ridge?”

“I’m a marketing manager at a publishing house, and we distribute our books here.”

The perfect woman also works with books. Sign number three, check.

“So, sometimes Ridge invites me to see authors he thinks have that something extra.”

“Shhh.” Justine gave us a meaningful stare as Hunter appeared behind the reader’s table.

Elsie’s blush returned to her cheeks, equally beautiful as before. “Oops. Well, then nice meeting you, Kyle...?”

“Turner.” The lump in my throat swelled. I gulped, shoving it down, then offered her my hand. “You?”

“Jenkins,” she whispered a name I vowed I’d never forget. A beautiful name like the beautiful woman she was.

Elsie Jenkins.

CHAPTER ONE

Elsie

WHENEVER MY boss rapped on the glass door of my office, my insides churned. With each knock, my guts twisted.

Two reasonable reactions to any boss other than Ben. Despite his status as the Head of Marketing at Frost's Publishing House and the next in line to run the company after his father, he was compassionate and very down-to-earth. Not to mention that at the young age of twenty-seven, two years older than me, he possessed the maturity and patience of an old soul.

He'd hired me as an intern four years ago and taught me the ropes, making me his loyal protégé. The boss everyone dreams of.

And yet a constant concern gnawed at my heart every time he walked in. That this would be the day I fucked up, the day I disappointed him beyond repair. The day he'd send me packing for good.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Ben asked, popping his head inside my office.

I put my work aside and beckoned him in. My years-long practiced smile didn't betray the unease that settled in my stomach and fought to break through, another lesson I learned as a marketing manager—appearance was everything. "Yes."

"I just read the reviews and the reports you sent me for Bailey Rae's *Love the Pain*'s release tomorrow." He occupied the seat opposite of me, brushing back a lock of his shoulder-length black hair. "Looks like another hit from her. You did well, forwarding me her query letter two years ago."

No firing today, it seemed. I drew in a long breath, a genuine smile replacing my rehearsed one. “Thanks, but I didn’t really do that much.”

“Don’t be modest, Els. She was this house’s first dark romance author. You gambled on her, and it paid off.” He raised a hand when I opened my mouth to object. If he hadn’t, I would’ve pointed out how I simply read the market and engaged with our list of influencers on what they’d like to see.

“I’m satisfied with your work, always am. Though that’s not what I came here for.”

The walls I’d lowered a moment ago shot straight back up. “Something wrong?”

“I wouldn’t call it *wrong*. More like a minor issue. An easily solvable one.” Ben grinned, seeing through my nerves. “It’s about the *Meeting My Heart* re-release from two months ago.”

“Hunter’s?” I clarified, sliding back to my computer and opening his file. My throat dried at the data that I neglected to follow up on for the past month. “It...um...there’s room for improvement, sure. I’m so sorry for letting it slide; I promise I’ll find a way to fix it.”

His warm smile stopped me from babbling on endless apologies. “I’m not upset. It was his first release, and a re-release at that. In my opinion, it did okay. As expected.” He cleared his throat, smoothing over his white dress shirt. “His agent, however, isn’t so pleased.”

“What agent?” I nearly shrieked. Not from aggravation though. From disappointment.

Hunter signed by a professional to look out for his interests was the best news. I would’ve rooted for the talented writer to receive the recognition and guidance he deserved. We talked often, so he had to know that.

Except...I ran back dates in my mind, realizing we hadn’t so much exchanged an email the past two weeks. Not since I

worked my butt off on Bailey's release and a bunch of other requests came in for Christmas releases.

"Hunter signed with an agent I'd prefer to keep satisfied." My boss still didn't seem mad. Odd, when the work I'd done clearly hadn't satisfied said agent.

Nevertheless, he smiled, stood up, and buttoned his tan suit jacket. "We got off the phone not a few minutes ago, and he said they'll be here in less than thirty minutes. They want to discuss what we can do from this point forward. I read his file while we talked, so I'll be in my office returning phone calls until they show up. We'll reconvene in the conference room in twenty."

A light coat of sweat broke out on my forehead. I could barely breathe. Frozen.

"Elsie." Ben placed both palms on the oak flat-top surface of my desk. Not too many people had seen me like this—paralyzed by the fear of failure. Ben did. The one person I had something to prove to, and after four years, he'd recognized that anxiety a mile away. "It's important, but it's not the end of the world. They need clarifications and a plan moving forward. That's all there is to it. Think about it as any other meeting we've had, and know that I'll back you up every step of the way."

I nodded, my lips pinched into a pale line.

"See you soon." He knocked twice on the desk and stalked out the door.

Only when the door closed behind him did I release the air that had been suffocating my lungs. There wasn't a spare minute to dwell over the brief amount of time I had to fix this. I threw myself into Hunter's file—his sales, reviews, and the running ads—checking for any holes in my marketing.

I might've missed an ad that wasn't running well, a market I hadn't addressed, bookstores that needed more pushing. I read the documents and any related emails in record speed,

storing away my personal struggles with inadequacy. Ben might've had my back, but I had to be worthy of it.

A plan—the best one I could come up with in twenty minutes—formed in my head as I printed the file, organizing the papers in a neat, blue folder. I pulled out the pencil from my hair, letting the auburn waves unfurl from the makeshift bun until it was down to my waist, and ran my fingers through the strands to untangle the knots.

I gave my outfit a quick once-over. My burgundy pants could've used some straightening after a long day at the office. I smoothed them, then proceeded to check that no button on my cream blouse had popped open by accident.

Everything was in order, my regained confidence in my ability to fix this included, and I left the room. The high heels of my short ankle boots clattered on the concrete floors, passing by other offices similar to mine.

Ben's words rang over and over in my head, their logic soothing me. We attended countless meetings and never failed to find a solution for our authors and their agents. Today wasn't going to be an exception.

When I reached the conference room, I saw Hunter and his agent. They'd arrived early, sitting with their backs to the door. Coffee and sweets were spread on the large white oval table before them.

It hit me that Ben hadn't mentioned the name of the agent. I paused at a safe distance, trying to make out the man so I'd get his name right once I joined them.

Strands of his thick black hair were styled at the top of his head, the sides and the back trimmed short and leading down to his exposed neck. The bare skin, just above his dark gray Henley shirt that clung to his bulging muscles, bore the top of a tattoo.

Wings of a butterfly marked in black ink. An oddly familiar tattoo.

A tattoo I berated myself for not recognizing on the spot.

Ben who sat across from them noticed me and waved, causing the two men to turn in my direction. A bucket of dimes rattled inside my head, the realization as painful as it was shocking.

The man who came here to scold me was the man who looked at me with nothing but admiration at Hunter's first reading months ago. His dark eyes bore holes into me from beyond the thick glass wall. They examined me, as wise and kind as the handsome person they were attached to.

And with everyone's attention focused on me, I had no other choice except to recover. I pulled myself together from the confusion, shock, and scant amount of lust that nestled in me. Wearing another mask, that of fake confidence, I marched inside the room where Ben, Hunter, and Kyle waited for me.

CHAPTER TWO

Kyle

“THERE SHE is, early as usual,” Ben said. “Elsie.”

The three of us, Ben, Hunter, and I were wrapping up the short formalities stage, when Ben began telling me the name of the employee that would be joining us. The name I hadn't let Hunter mention because I'd told him we didn't need her anyway, since we had Ben. The name of the woman who told me herself that she worked here. Probably more than once.

Thing was, concentrating whenever Elsie Jenkins talked to me had been...not easy. Between her crystal blue eyes, mane of red hair and generous curves, I hadn't stood a chance at concentrating on what she'd said.

And I wanted to.

I wanted to get to know her more than I ever had in my entire twenty-six years. I didn't understand it, but I couldn't fight it either. It was just there.

Like she was now.

“Good evening,” Elsie greeted us, the cadence of her voice smooth.

Her smile, as radiant as her hair, warmed the cold conference room at Frost's Publishing House. Just like Elsie had on every occasion we got to hang out. We might as well have been outside in the cold fall of Brooklyn. It didn't matter. That smile would've thawed my chilled skin, easily.

“Hey, Elsie.” I rose to shake her hand. I didn't quite stutter, but it wasn't elegant either.

“Hi, Kyle.” She accepted it. A brief touch that sunk well under my skin.

“Hunter.” Elsie turned to him. Waves of thick, long, auburn hair filled my vision, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from doing something I’d end up regretting. Like touching them.

You get A plus for being a creep, Kyle.

“Elsie, I’m sorry,” Hunter, the considerate and apologetic man rushed to say. “Everything happened so fast and I didn’t even know how to explain it to you.”

“That’s okay.” She aimed her smile at him. A genuine smile. “You should always do what’s best for you and your career. I’ve told you that from the start.”

Hunter’s blue eyes melted the same way I had around her, defenseless against her kindness. At around five foot four she commanded the room as if she’d measured the tallest of us six-foot-plus men, and in my case, six foot three.

She circled the table to take the seat next to Ben, with my eyes trailing her. If not for Hunter calling for my attention, they would’ve never strayed.

“You didn’t tell me you worked with her.”

I blinked, turning to him. “That’s because I don’t.”

Ben had been my only liaison for the three years I’d worked with this publishing house. When your main client was as huge a name as Noah Lear, an author and screenwriter who made millions off his stories, you received special treatment. Such as having the sharp and intelligent son of the owner on top of your business. He cared for my authors as much as I did, and so far, I had zero complaints.

Hunter didn’t have me as his agent when he signed here, and I couldn’t hold his inexperience in the marketing world against him. I did hold it against *them*. Even before I took on Hunter, I researched his online presence. I didn’t like what I

saw, so I demanded answers, preferably from the person responsible for these unacceptable results.

“But—” Hunter stared at me, suspicious.

“Hunter,” I whispered when we sat down, using the short time frame we had while Elsie showed her boss something in a folder.

I couldn’t have my new client thinking I lied or hid truths from him. My entire reputation relied on trust. “We’re acquaintances. I haven’t worked with her, not directly. And in any case, you have nothing to worry about. I’m here as your representative and I’ll get you the best contract and personal attention from now on. For your book and future ones.”

Okay, he mouthed and we turned to our hosts.

“Now that we’re all here,” Ben started, adjusting his cuffs. “I’d like to start by apologizing to Mr. Owen for giving the impression we did anything intentional to neglect his book sales. I hope it’s clear to all of us that your success is our success.” He directed that sentence to Hunter.

“It’s Hunter, and thank you.” The twenty-three-year-old who wasn’t accustomed to people calling him by his last name blushed and tucked a strand of his blond hair behind his ear.

His modesty was sweet, but I’d have to work on that. He deserved all the praise, and there was absolutely no need to shy away from it.

Elsie leaned back, raising two thumbs at him from where her boss couldn’t see. My heart swelled. Fucking swelled, if you could believe that. Not an hour ago I thought the person who handled his account couldn’t have given two shits about him—then came this endearing gesture?

It threw me off my game for a second. Made me reconsider laying out the accusations and demands I’d prepared for Frost’s. But one look at Hunter buried my conscience for Elsie, my friend, six feet under.

I had to do it. Didn’t mean I liked it.

“We’re aware, Ben,” I started. “What we think happened is that other people’s success played a more important role for you.”

The warm smile on Elsie’s face froze, her full lips snapping into a thin line.

“We apologize if you feel that way, it wasn’t our intention, see...” Ben spun the folder Elsie brought in toward me and pointed at a stats table.

“Before you show me any of that.” I unlocked my iPad, the research I had prepared at home summarized into neatly organized graphs and on display. “Here’s a quick overview of the reviews and presence of *Meeting My Heart* in comparison to other debut books published by you. Far less engagement, far fewer reviews even though the book is equally good.”

Ben and Elsie scanned the data I showed. She whispered something to him, then he said, “Kyle, we never said we weren’t going to continue putting our efforts into him.”

Elsie watched Ben in silence. I hated myself more for bringing her down like that. Every fucking bit of myself hated it. Her truly caring for Hunter only worsened it. I tamed further criticism on them, using other methods to get my message across.

“I have producers in Hollywood showing interest in turning his book into a movie.” Colton and Dylan, the producers of Noah’s films agreed to read it. Maybe one day something would come out of it, maybe not. For now, no one needed to be privy to the extent of their involvement.

Elsie’s eyes shot to Hunter’s. The cold detachment vanished, in their place pure enthusiasm. “Hunter, wow, that’s amazing news.”

I continued talking to her, acting as if she wasn’t ignoring me. As if that didn’t hurt. Or was my fault. “Nothing’s final yet, but I can assure you they love it. It wouldn’t hurt that his publishing house showed an equal level of enthusiasm.”

My heart stopped as Elsie's head whipped to me. Her cheeks flushed as red as her hair, her eyes glistening under the low lights of the room. I fucked up, ended up going too far. Too fucking far.

"You..." she started, her eyes glistening.

"You're right," Ben hurried to defuse the situation. "Absolutely right. Even without the mention of the feature film, we arrived here prepared to tell you that we'll work together to accommodate your needs and come up with a solution that'd fit Hunter."

"I appreciate that." I sighed, happy to see this conversation through. I vowed to get my clients the best deals and put their names out there, and yes, I sometimes had to be harsh when I did it. It was part of the job.

But Elsie... nice, sweet, unearthly beautiful Elsie. I hated hurting her in the process.

I needed this discussion to end, as in yesterday. A shot of whiskey wouldn't hurt, either.

"Elsie has her ideas on how to improve Hunter's status," Ben added while Hunter and I were halfway standing. "This time it'll be to your satisfaction. That's why she'll be your point of contact going forward."

A smirk emerged on my lips. Maybe this conversation wasn't such a clusterfuck after all.

Elsie, on the other hand, showed less enthusiasm. Stammering, she said, "Ben, what, why?"

He faced her, talking more like a father figure than her boss. "Elsie, I trust you to take this project, our young client, and make him a star." Then he glanced between Hunter and me. "I'll be here if you need me, though I don't believe you will. Elsie is talented and invested in the publishing world. She'll make the final judgment on every decision. Budget, resources, hours spent, you'll decide this over a meeting without running it by me."

With this finality, Ben shook our hands, wished us good night, and stalked out. Hunter took off after him, mumbling something about how he had to get to his evening radio show on time.

And then there were two.

Elsie stacked the papers back in the folder in rushed, inelegant movements. I tilted my head, trying to catch her gaze. Throughout the meeting the confident woman who I'd seen earlier, the smiling woman I remembered from our numbered get-togethers with Noah and Alda, slowly withered. Silenced.

It felt unnatural, watching her unnerved, battling insecurity and in tears instead of telling me exactly what was going on in her head. As much as I was confident in my reason, I had not one bone in my body that was after shaming her.

"Elsie," I whispered more than vocalized.

It went over her head. She tucked the folder under her arm and marched straight to the door. Reflexively, I lunged forward when she passed by me, catching her arm. The light pull released the folder from her hold, the papers dropping to the floor.

We both crouched down and started piling the stack from where it laid on the concrete.

"Elsie."

Nothing.

"I'm a asshole. Sorry."

"You're a what?" That caught her attention. She raised her head, pinning me in place and sucking the air out of my lungs.

The world ceased to exist other than an invisible cord drawing me to her, my gaze drifting down to luscious, pink lips.

"Kyle?"

I shook my head, reminded of where and who we were. “Masshole. Asshole from Massachusetts.”

“You’re not wrong about that,” she mumbled under her breath, leaning her hands on her knees to get up.

“We need to talk.” I rose with her, holding back from grabbing her again.

“We will,” she replied, halfway to the door.

The relief I felt had been fleeting at best.

Her hand gripped the handle. “About Hunter, only Hunter. Email the office’s administrator and she’ll schedule a meeting.”

“Elsie,” I said, controlling my tone.

“Yes?” Not bothering to turn fully, she twisted her head.

Fuck me, that perfect button nose and the fire in her eyes hitting me like a freight train.

“You’re supposed to be our uh—point of contact,” I blurted out, grasping at straws. “That means dealing with you directly.”

Her eyes closed and for a brief moment, I could see her telling me to go fuck myself.

“Fine.” She returned to the conference table, withdrew a pencil from the penholder, and scribbled on an empty space of one of the papers in Hunter’s folder.

“Since we obviously don’t need anything in this folder.” Her annoyed tone accompanied the tearing sound of paper. She approached me, holding out the *Fuck you* I’d expected. A civilized *Fuck you*, but a *Fuck you* nonetheless.

“Here, Mr. Turner. My personal email.”

“Thanks.” I took it from her, resolving to hold a strong front. As much as it pained me to hurt her. “I’m still Kyle, by the way.”

“I’ll stick to Mr. Turner. Wouldn’t want you to think that here at Frost’s we don’t treat our clients with the utmost respect.” She glued her folder to her chest, glimpsing at the door before walking out. “Have a great rest of the evening.”

“You too,” I said to a closed door.

Frustrated with what I said even though I wouldn’t have done anything differently, I picked up my leather jacket from the back of the chair where I had hung it and made the fifteen-minute trip home by foot.

CHAPTER THREE

Elsie

THE SOUNDS of music from the inside of my apartment uplifted my shitty mood after meeting with Kyle. A fun night with Justine Sutton, my roommate, could cure anything.

“Elster, you’re home!” She stopped her dancing to Katy Perry’s “Roar” that blared inside the house, suffocating me in a tight hug.

“That’s usually what happens at the end of a workday.” I laughed into her long, brown hair and hugged her back.

She drew away, her cheeks nearly torn from her wide, radiating grin. “Yes, yes. Like the ones I’ll have come Monday.”

After a short beat of processing, I understood what she was talking about. “You got the job?”

“I did! They called an hour ago.” Justine hopped, dancing her way into the living room when “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” by Cyndi Lauper blasted through the speakers. She danced to the beat, shaking her head from left to right. “Stuart can shove his archaic forced marriage concept up his ass.”

Stuart, who happened to be her dad, was also a Wall Street tycoon and one of the wealthiest men in Manhattan. They came from old money, so ancient it grew white hair.

And while there was plenty of it, Stuart hadn’t given it to her for free.

After paying for her college tuition, he’d demanded that in return she’d marry Roman Gallagher, her former best friend, and the son of his business partner.

When Justine refused, he cut back her budget. After that, the patient Stuart Sutton waited, expecting his daughter who was accustomed to living in lavish penthouses in New York City to be over our little Bushwick apartment pretty quickly.

In fact, he'd waited for nearly three years until he'd had enough and cut her off completely a few months ago. He'd counted on her not being able to hold a job and instead emptying out her bank account so she'd have to come running to him and accept whatever he demanded of her.

But she fought him, fought his demands, and it paid off.

“Let’s dance!” She outstretched her arm, her silk floral Gucci pajamas swaying over her slim body. “I haven’t felt this happy in years. Finally, a job in copywriting! Assistant copywriter, but hey! Not tutoring and not random.”

I hung my bag and joined her. “Yay! August Hooper’s Jewelry will adore you and your creative mind.”

We slowly ceased our gyrating when a new, slower song started, and Lana Del Rey’s “Brooklyn Baby” played.

Justine kissed my cheek and went to our mini-sized kitchen. I called it mini, because we redesigned the apartment to have another room from what used to be the kitchen. We were *that* desperate to live together.

She fixed herself a glass of red wine, waving an empty wineglass in front of me. “Wine is better in twos.”

“Not today.” I slid around her to my special drawer on the right side of the stove, pulling out my Skittles packet.

Her mouth gaped. “I completely forgot tomorrow is Bailey’s release.”

Besides being a continual source of optimism, Justine was also the kind of friend who listened, who cared, who remembered. I loved her to pieces.

“Yup. No early celebrations to jinx it.”

We sat on the short, wood, and brass dining bench in front of the matching table we bought secondhand. Unlike her, I had to work hard for a scholarship and taught her, as much as she'd allow, about savings.

My friend sipped from her wine while I arranged the candy in my *good luck* set, one of each color—green, red, orange, yellow, and purple.

Always in that identical order, always eating them one at a time.

“Join me?”

“I'd never refuse contributing to good luck.”

I set them up for Justine too, and we chewed on them in silence. It was superstitious and some might say silly. But hey, if it worked for our exams in college, it made sense for real life.

When we were done, Justine placed her elbow on the wooden top, resting her cheek in her palm. “How does it look? From what you can tell so far.”

“Promising. Readers have been going crazy for the second part of this duet.” I returned the candy to their drawer. Until next time.

“Well, duh. That freaking cliffhanger nearly killed me.” She followed me with her gaze until I flopped down next to her, kicking my shoes off. “Though how lucky am I to have a friend who got me an early copy.”

Her exaggerated wink was a nice touch, cracking a smile on my face. Until I remembered the day I'd had. “As long as this friend doesn't get herself fired.”

“Fired?” Justine quit making weird faces at me. “Why would Ben fire you? He loves you.”

“He loves me as long as I do my job.” I painted invisible circles on the table, unable to look my friend in the eye. “Which apparently I don't.”

Justine set the glass aside and shook my shoulder gently. “Hey. Ben’s not like that. He supported you through everything, even the tiny, miniscule, barely existent mistakes you make once in a blue moon. You’re a perfectionist and he knows that. Everyone does.”

“It wasn’t a small mistake.” I bit my lower lip.

“Tell me.” Her tone was soft and caressing, her hazel eyes beseeching me to share my burdens.

I did. I told her everything from Ben walking into my office to Kyle doubting the commitment and reprimanding the efforts I made for Hunter’s campaign. How throughout the entire meeting my palms were clammy. How the anxiety about potentially being let go after what Kyle portrayed as plain incompetence clogged my throat.

“I seriously can’t believe this is Noah’s friend.” She scrunched her lips, tapping her fingers on the table. “He’s *so* nice, and he has it B-A-D bad for you.”

“Well, not anymore.” I groaned. I had it bad for him too. Without capital letters though. I just liked him.

“Oh, who cares. Fuck him. The more important thing was that you had Ben on your side.” Her warm palm rubbed my arm. “You need to get out of your head. No more of this I’m-on-the-brink-of-failure every freaking day.”

“I guess so, but that didn’t make Kyle dislike me any less.”

“You want me to talk to Alda for you?”

“What? No!” My head reared back so fast that I wrenched myself from her caress. “That’s my job we’re talking about. I don’t need to go and cry to her.”

“I’m sure she’ll find time between her and Noah’s four years of catching up to do in every single corner of their new LA home.” Justine grinned behind her second wine glass.

“Jeez, spare me the mental image. Even if they’re hot. Nope. No, thanks.” I pulled my friend into a quick hug. “I love you, Justine.”

“Love you for forever and a day. Rest up, have the best release day on Friday, and then we’ll have the next two days to go out and have fun.” She pushed off the bench and brought a plate from the fridge. “I totally forgot to give you this.”

By the time we’d finished talking it was around nine. I hadn’t had any dinner, and the cream cheese bagel had my mouth watering. “Thanks. Do you mind if I eat it in my room?”

She waved me off. “Sure, go do what you gotta do. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, girly.”

“Night, Els.” Justine yawned and we each went our separate ways.

I placed the plate on my bed, showered, and got dressed in my old flannel pajamas. Inside my heated room, I picked up my phone. A ton of messages and emails flashed on it like they normally did. I browsed through them quickly to check no crisis had happened in the hour or two I’d sat in the kitchen.

Dad, plus Floyd, Alexander, and Hayley—my triplet brothers and sister—each sent a text to wish me luck. Warmth spread throughout my body from having their names on my screen, and I thanked my sweet family.

Scrolling down, I opened a text from Ben saying *Sorry I had to run, family stuff. You did great today. I trust you fully with Hunter’s account.* Having him not mad at me made breathing easier and I thanked him too.

The list of unread emails I had weren’t urgent, either from coworkers or clients, and...shit. From Kyle. The topic read *Hunter Owen’s Marketing Plan.* The content consisted of a short message asking me for a 10 a.m. meeting Monday, just him and me.

Plain, professional, disappointing. Not that I’d expected an apology, since he didn’t act as if he had anything to apologize for. But for a man who at least tried being my friend, a man

who proclaimed my hair was like the sun or something the first time he saw me...I imagined it could've been a touch more personal.

Then again, I could've been nicer too when we were alone in the conference room. I rolled my eyes at myself and pressed *accept*, promising myself to fix this on Monday.

Until then, I settled for my bagel while watching random videos from whatever the YouTube algorithm suggested to me. I propped up the laptop, fully intending to go into my browser when my finger navigated the cursor to an entirely different part of the screen. To the folder I named *I Am With You*.

Hesitating, because seriously the day could not get any worse, I wondered if I should open it. My mouth went dry, the food losing its appeal. I placed the plate aside and in a bold, maybe stupid, move, clicked on the folder and loaded my manuscript lest I chicken out and retreat to the safety of YouTube.

The file opened where I last left it, at the end of chapter six.

Why am I doing this to myself? Another read through that would end up with me hating what I wrote. A waste of time. Maybe this time though, this time it wouldn't be terrible. Maybe I'd read it and like it.

Laughable.

Then again... What would a quick read do? I'd known the cycle by heart, reading, being reminded of how crappy it was, then storing it away for another two to three months until I'd have a case of amnesia again.

I harbored this batch of optimism, scrolled down to the beginning of chapter seven, and read it from Enzo's point of view.

"After you." I held the company car's door open for Sabrina.

The hot and humid July afternoon became even more unbearably stifling by the presence of Sabrina in the small space next to me. A presence I could no longer avoid, despite my best efforts to steer clear from her this past year.

I couldn't avoid her smiles that froze me in place, staring at how her expensive silk blouses clung to her body, outlining her luscious curves as she walked the halls. I couldn't look away from the gleam of the office's lights on her bright black hair.

Most of all, I couldn't steer clear from her violet eyes that penetrated my soul. Eyes, that if I wasn't careful, would've seen through my inconsolable attraction to her. I first felt it on that early morning when she'd sat in my office and interviewed for the opening, her intelligence as hot as it was now. It had bloomed ever since, and it scared the living fuck out of me.

"The meeting went well, I think," she said, her tone confident, her lips curving up.

Unlike mine. "It went very well, thanks to you." I flipped through my phone, replying to emails instead of meeting her expectant look.

"You've done thorough prep work over the past two months. They would be fucking idiots to say no to that."

The silence boomed inside the Lexus. I angled my head up, to find her wringing her hands in her lap, glancing from them to me.

An itch formed in the back of my neck, which I did nothing about. Showing weakness to my employees was one rule I refused to break. "Sorry for the language."

"That's okay," she lied, and we both knew it. The impressive woman who came from a wealthy family in California hadn't had too many people around her who used these words so flippantly, least of all her boss. Nevertheless, she preferred to stay on my good side.

What she failed to notice was, she'd always been there. And that was the reason behind why I hadn't taken her on

other cases earlier. Her experience and intelligence stood out among her coworkers, employees who'd worked with me side by side while I'd given her scraps.

Because for ten fucking months, I couldn't shake the feeling that being inside a room alongside her for weeks and days at a time would result in me asking her out on a date.

Which bore a brand-new rule, one I hadn't needed up until that moment seeing our firm was comprised of male lawyers and one elderly administrator. An easy rule to follow, unless your employee was Sabrina fucking Hill, and it went like this—don't date your employees. Don't fantasize about them either.

"I appreciate the opportunity to work with you on this one, sir."

My body flinched despite my attempts to control the reflexive reaction. Fuck me, I should've been the one appreciating her for not quitting on me.

"You deserved it." I gave in to the incessant itch and reached back to scratch my neck. "You've proved yourself over the past year and earned your place."

Blush rose from her neck up her cheeks, complementing the wine-colored button-down blouse she wore today. "I'll keep doing my best. Anything to uphold the reputation of MacQuoid Lawyers, anything to make you proud."

These words, spoken from her lips, were enough to ruin me. I rearranged my pants, being as conspicuous as a man of my height could be.

"You don't have to do anything." I gazed at her with what I prayed conveyed assertiveness. "Just do your job, Sabrina. You do it well."

You excel at it, I thought, but that was for me to know and for her to never find out.

"I appreciate it, sir." She uncrossed and crossed her legs.

My heart thumped in my chest, loud, steady beats. It thrummed not because of her skirt hiking up her thigh, though that undoubtedly contributed to my messed-up state. It fluctuated in an erratic pulse because of her exquisite beauty, and that goddamned smile she threw my way.

To me and to no one else.

“Oh my God,” I mumbled to myself, closing the screen and making gagging sounds.

That piece was just as dull as I remembered it. Sleazy, cheap, unworthy to see the light of day. I sighed, placing the laptop on the rug beneath the bed and the untouched dinner on top of it. Reading my manuscript, my miserable, awful heap of unrelated words, had cost me my appetite completely.

My eyes drifted shut when I reached over to turn off the lamp.

The darkness enveloped me with serenity I lacked in my waking hours, quiet and peaceful and free of judgment.

It didn't care for my horrible writing abilities, and I in turn didn't have to fake my intention of releasing my work one day. I put this act on for everyone else—friends and coworkers who believed that one day, I'd be a published author.

If it were up to me, this trash would stay on my computer for eternity. As it should.

I stuck the disappointment and sadness in the back of my mind while I pulled the covers up to my ears, succumbing to the sleep that never failed me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kyle

I WRAPPED my leather jacket tighter around my body, shielding myself from the autumn air. The walk to Frost's Publishing House that Monday morning was refreshing, yet it did nothing to relieve me of the unsettling feeling that remained.

Throughout the years of working as a literary agent, I interfaced with Hollywood producers, bookstore owners, CEOs of publishing houses. Sure, we had our disagreements—that's the nature of negotiations—but I quickly pinpointed that delicate balance between being cool and being demanding. That way, I always ended up getting exactly what I wanted.

With Elsie, however, I failed. I read her all wrong, and had to rethink my strategy over the weekend to keep me from repeating my earlier mistakes. I might even resort to apologizing for the how I addressed her. She might even like me for it. The man, not the agent.

Yeah, that sounded good, I decided as I stood at the entrance to the old building, I expanded my lungs, pulling my shoulders back. I focused on what mattered—constructing a plan that'd make *Meeting My Heart* a *USA Today* best seller.

I pushed the glass doors inside the lobby, taking the elevators up to Frost's entrance floor. Their offices took up an entire floor, elegantly designed with concrete floors, iron-wrought elements and light blue furniture. And in the middle of their vast entrance, sat Isabelle, the office's receptionist.

She greeted me with a smile and ghost doll on her desk.

“Not ready to let go of Halloween?” I commented, amused by the mini plastic pumpkins and the fake cobwebs she hung

around her computer screen. Two weeks into November.

Isabelle's dark green eyes shimmered conspiratorially. "Same as last year. I'm leaving these babies up until told otherwise."

Even though Isabelle commanded the office like a receptionist with years under her belt, she was only twenty, and it was great to see that side of her, her spark.

I sighed dramatically, saying, "To be young and rebellious."

"Yup." Isabelle winked and diverted her attention back to the screen. "Should I call Ben too?"

"Not today." I tapped my fingers on her desk, feigning nonchalance. "Elsie."

"Even better." Her hand slapped over her mouth the second she finished the sentence, her eyes boggling. "Crap. Don't tell him I said that. Ben is awesome, totally, totally awesome." She shot a glance to either side before whispering, "Elsie is my favorite though."

I nodded solemnly, not betraying how deeply I empathized. My feelings, my business.

Isabelle punched in Elsie's line and talked into her headset. "Elsie? Your 10 a.m. has arrived. Kyle Turner, yes. Mm-hmm. Okay. No problem. Bye."

The call ended and Isabelle looked back at me, grinning. "She'll be here soon to pick you up, so you can wait on the sofas. Would you like your regular latte? Lots of milk, no sugar?"

"That'd be great." I started walking toward the waiting area.

"You're not asking what I want?" A man who was approximately my height, with light brown hair and green eyes appeared from the hall. I didn't recognize him, though I could tell by his striped expensive suit he was probably management.

While I hadn't seen him around, Isabelle seemed to know him pretty well.

“Get your own fucking coffee, Tyler.”

In the two years she'd worked here, Isabelle hadn't addressed anyone like that. Not a single soul. I stopped where I stood, studying him anew. He was slightly older than me, and definitely older than Isabelle. One wrong word out of his mouth, something that'd hint to why she had such a reaction to him, and he would have had me to deal with. Not a kid.

Neither the comment nor my suspicious gaze put a dent in his cocky smile. Hadn't bothered pretty boy's casual stance of leaning an arm against the wall in the slightest.

“Black, no milk, no sugar.” He shoved himself from the wall and called over his shoulder, “I'll be waiting for you in my office.”

“Richard makes the coffee,” she scoffed. “Talk to him.”

“You'll make it, and you'll bring it.” His bass voice boomed even when he vanished from our sight.

“Then you'll be waiting a long time,” she yelled after him.

I kept glaring daggers at him when I heard the click-clack I recognized as Elsie's heels echoing from the opposite hall.

“Mr. Turner.”

Not that again. I nearly groaned, the exasperation at the unnecessary formality rising to the surface. We were in this situation for a reason and yet I couldn't bring myself to be okay with it.

Not to mention it practically eviscerated any hope I had of wiping the slate clean, to be on good terms with her.

Good thing I was a hopeless optimistic and irreverently resourceful. Refusing to let it get me down, I turned around. I willed myself to use any of my numerous lines. It could have been the charming *Let's start over* or the more relatable one, *I'm sorry for being a jerk, but I'm passionate about my clients.*

It should've been easy, those sentences that I'd said a million times in the past. It would've been a walk in the park, too. Had it been anyone else.

Her beauty sucked the air out of my lungs again, the look in her eyes causing the words to die out, painfully.

She stood just outside the hall, taller by three inches in her black ankle boots, dressed in plaid black and white pants and a white button-down shirt. Her hair cascaded from either side of her shoulders, hot lava draped on a pale garment.

She raised an eyebrow at me. The gawker.

Wake the fuck up.

"Elsie, good morning." I didn't sound like myself, but beggars couldn't be choosers. At least I said *something*.

"Isabelle, can you have Lydia make Mr. Turner his coffee? I'd like mine black, thank you."

"Mister?" Isabelle's nose wrinkled.

Thank fuck I wasn't the only one who thought it wasn't right. I'd have to fix it.

"Yes, our esteemed agent." Elsie nodded and waved me over. "We'll be in my office."

"Alrighty." Isabelle shrugged, already reciting our coffee requests to the marketing department's secretary.

"Hey, Elsie, wait up." I raised my hand on an instinct to grab her shoulder, dropping it instantly. Screwing up the once was bad enough, and I needed to work on not making it a second time.

"We're here." She opened the door for me, her eyes veils of detachment.

We held each other's stare, neither of us saying anything. Me due to not having a fucking clue as to what to say. Elsie just didn't want to speak. Eventually, I accepted her invitation and walked inside. Her office reminded me of her boss's, though a tad smaller, naturally.

“Please sit, make yourself comfortable.” Elsie sat behind her desk, her tight-lipped smile condemning us as two strangers.

Achieving any comfort seemed impossible. I tried, anyway, hanging my jacket on the back of the gray lounge chair opposite of her, and sitting down. She organized a clutter of papers, allowing me a spare minute to get it together. We were having this meeting not for my benefit, not for hers. For Hunter’s.

Neither of us could afford to act anything less than professionals when we were responsible for his career. Even if I liked her, a lot, and even if she couldn’t stand the sight of me. We had to stay in our professional lane. But first, I had to break the barriers between us.

“Could you *please* not call me Mr. Turner?”

“What would you prefer then, Mr. Turner?”

I thought I saw a glint in her eyes. Or maybe my insistence on improving our situation made me imagine things. Probably the latter. “Call me like you would have a week ago.”

“Kyle, okay. Duly noted, Mist—sorry, Kyle.”

She gave me a taste of my own medicine, hanging a mirror of my detached behavior for me to see. To know what it felt like when a friend from real life made a one-eighty change in the office environment.

The fucker stung.

“Elsie, I apologize.” My resolve pushed the words forward, burying my shock down. “Not for asking your company to invest more in Hunter. For making it sound like a personal attack on you.”

The more I talked, the more the real me resurfaced. I bent forward, resting both hands on her desk and flashing a smile that conveyed my sincerity. “I’m here to listen, to examine the data, and make an educated marketing plan. Not to blame. But to cooperate.”

A motorcycle roared down the street outside the building, the wind intensified and whistled, a man yelled on the phone just below us. In the small space of her office, even our breaths weren't audible. Complete silence.

“Nothing? Not even Mr. Turner?”

She bit the inside of her cheek, the cold behind her eyes thawing. Seeing the summer in her stare was all the positive reinforcement I needed to go forward.

“Well then, Miss Jenkins, if you don't want to be a part of Hunter's work, it'll break my heart.” I struck my palm dramatically over my chest. “What a fatal loss for him and me it'll be to lose a vital, crucial, member like you.”

“Okay, okay. That's enough.” She chuckled, the soft sound erasing any tension my shoulders had held. “Quit the flattery. You're forgiven.”

An instantaneous smirk shot up my lips. I finally crossed that bridge of talking to her like a normal person, and on top of that, my apology got through to her. Our coffees arrived, and I took a sip from mine. The foamy, hot drink tasted ten times better now that the bitterness in my mouth had been washed out.

Elsie twirled a lock of her hair, her tone turning serious. “I'm not jumping ship. I want to see Hunter succeed. I apologize for letting it slip from me.”

“You're all in because you asked him to sign with you or because you really care for him?”

After seeing her enthusiastic response to Hunter's movie news, I assumed I knew the answer. Still, I had to ask. Because *I* cared for him, and for me his success was everything. I needed to hear it from her—that we were in the same headspace.

She left her hair, curling her fingers around the white porcelain mug and staring at it. “Both.”

Her affirmation ticked the final box on my checklist. I could trust her intentions, which was that she'd be as invested as I was. Satisfied, I kicked back, pausing a moment to appreciate the living coffee commercial I sat across from.

Elsie raised the brim to her lips, blowing gently before taking a slow sip. Her eyes were aimed at the coffee while steam billowed around her nose. I would've bought whatever coffee she was selling.

Then I mentally punched myself. This wasn't a date. We had a problem on our hands: Hunter.

"Perfect, so I don't have to convince you of how talented he is."

"He did that all on his own."

"We'll do everything necessary to make that talent soar."

The sweet chuckle from earlier rang in my ears again. "No, no need for convincing. Seems like I need to convince you that I care."

"Nah, we're settled there." I licked my lips, leaning my forearms on the desk. "Let's start from the beginning. Walk me through your files. I want to see our strengths and weaknesses, to understand the general idea of where we can improve."

Elsie peeked at me from under her long lashes, hesitant and untrusting. I deserved it, given my earlier dismissal of her work. My drive blinded me, and I needed to act in order to make amends.

"Again, I was an asshole."

"Masshole."

"Yeah, I was." I huffed a laugh, liking it that she remembered. "But what did that poor piece of paper ever do to you?"

"You're the one responsible for it." She snapped right back. This time I didn't imagine the glint of amusement in her expression. It was there.

I rolled with it, my hands raised defensively. “Hey, I’m willing to take the blame for a lot of crap, but not for this. *I* wasn’t the one opposed to using these man-made machines called *phones*.”

She cocked an eyebrow. I shrugged. The room quieted, the silence amicable. Pleasant.

Our staring contest reached its peak, and Elsie slid Hunter’s folder across the desk. I had to hand it to her, she’d organized it meticulously and I couldn’t come up with one single question. Not when she explained the logic behind her original strategy in such great detail.

“That’s it.” Her expression was stripped of its earlier defenses. “What do you think? What more can we do for him?”

“Truth?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Do you know anything else?”

I smiled. “Yeah, no. Anyway, I wouldn’t have done anything differently.” I slouched back in my chair, running my fingers through my hair. “Ben said you had ideas, so I guess the question is what more would *you* have done. Pretend I’m not here and Frost dropped this on you out of nowhere.”

“I’d say the key word here is *more*.” Elsie grabbed a pencil from her desk, curled her glorious auburn locks in a bun on top of her head, and stuck the pencil inside diagonally. “Push bookstore owners harder, reach out to more influencers, stay on top of our ads’ performances. More of everything.”

I shook my head, refusing to believe this was it. She had the experience and the commitment to Hunter, so why not do any of it earlier? “Solid suggestions, agreed. What were your original ones?”

Her jaw dropped, then snapped shut. It surprised her I could see it in her. I chalked it off to years of reading people.

“Two things, actually,” she started. “Can we at least agree that social media is a must?”

“One hundred percent. I’m already on it. I thought about scheduling a meeting for Hunter, me, and Natalie Bonham this week.”

“Natalie from Books Beat Flowers PR?” Elsie’s face lit up, just like it did when she heard of his possible movie deal. “That’s incredible.”

“That’s her.” Her adoration was a blow I hadn’t expected, and I cursed for my cheeks burning like a school girl. I played it off, grateful more than ever for my beard. “The second suggestion?”

“The second one...” Her excitement withered, her lips twisted to the side, my guts twisting with them. “How’s Hunter’s next book progressing?”

“What next book?” My brow furrowed, rummaging through my head for something I might’ve missed.

A sigh left her. “He didn’t tell me anything, and that’s what worries me. He has to start writing a new one, like last month. I want him to think how long it’d take him, then give us a release date for us to run promos on, to get traction, to build a backlist. Otherwise, and it pains me to say that, who’ll talk about him? For long?”

“*Meeting My Heart* stands on its own merit.” I flexed my fingers under the desk, shaking off the growing irritation.

“It does. I was very clear on emphasizing that.”

“See, here lies my confusion. A lot of it.”

“What’s confusing?” Her eyebrows knitted together, as if I were talking about elephants while she was talking about sharks. “It’s a show of faith. That we’re interested in having him as our client in the long run. We’re not inventing the wheel here, Kyle.”

I pulled at my short beard, considering my words carefully. Not because I was upset, because they sounded weird even to my own ears. “Noah released his second book over a year after his debut.”

Elsie barked a laugh, clasping her hands in front of her. “Look, I adore Hunter, I truly do. But he’s no Noah Lear, not yet. Noah’s writing style and books are like a once in a lifetime kind of talent. His words grab your insides and twist them until you’re a melted pile of emotions on the floor. He’s had it from day one, and people, myself included, had to read and reread it just to scratch the surface of his complexity.”

Elsie praising Noah, who I loved like a brother, sounded like fucking music to my ears. And yet I didn’t come here for Noah. I came here for Hunter. He needed me to stand up for him, to fight for the timid and talented author as if he were my own family. No amount of Noah flattery could fix that, not even if it came from a woman like Elsie.

“I’ll be honest—Hunter and I haven’t discussed another book. I won’t bring it up either, not for a while.” As I started to speak, resentment and annoyance erupted, my explanation turning into a tirade. “Not until you prove you’re as committed to his debut book as you would to any of his future ones. Not until we have these reassurances from you that every fucking one of his books will be shoved down the audiences’ throats. Otherwise, we’ll go somewhere else.”

“You just said we did everything.” Her voice remained calm. The tick of her jaw, that gesture implied the complete opposite. “Look, you asked for my opinion. At this juncture, that’s what I believe—no, I know—is in Hunter and the book’s best interests.”

For a minute there, her fire and passion rattled me. I even considered swiping her desk clean from its neatly organized folders and laptop, bending her over and taking her. Angry sex never sounded this tempting.

I sucked in a sharp breath, collecting myself and sifting through my words. Something that would actually be useful.

“You demand him to write a book like it’s so fucking easy,” I gritted out the accusation, the opposite of how I intended to approach it.

Just fucking perfect.

She cringed at my harsh tone. What she didn't know was that the need in it equaled my indignance. My mounting attraction to her burned as hard as my defensiveness for Hunter; neither of which were containable at that point.

“Ben trusts you and believe it or not, so do I. Now, prove to me that you know something about the writing process, and are not just good at sending emails and handing out orders. Give us a viable solution. Make. It. Work, Elsie.”

Blue eyes glared daggers at me, the curtain behind her eyes shutting down, the flames extinguished. No longer defiant, but...guarded.

She stood up, pulling out the pencil from her hair and rolling it between her fingers, speaking as she paced to the door, “I'll increase the efforts on our end. Other than that, you're right. I don't understand shit. Glad to have had this talk, Mr. Turner.”

Blood rushed through my veins, booming between my ears. I couldn't believe I had reverted us to fucking *Mr. Turner*. That my impassioned speech closed her off instead of getting her to realize how important this was.

That I set up Hunter and me for failure.

That somehow my, albeit in-your-face, show of faith hurt her. Which, as we stood there in seconds of a silent duel, thrust me into an action I'd promised myself I wouldn't repeat.

I crowded her space. It happened so fast, an instinct more than an intentional movement. My fingers clamped around her arm, my face lowered to find her. Up close and personal, delving into the mystery that was Elsie.

CHAPTER FIVE

Elsie

NOT HERE. Again.

Kyle leveled his eyes with me, his minty breath wafting on my skin, his dark brown eyes piercing mine. Bolts of electricity coursed through me at his proximity, an undeniable attraction. He was so handsome, so authoritative, so...alive.

And it grated my nerves, because I was supposed to be upset at this man. Resenting him for talking to me like I was an evil paper-pusher who couldn't care less about the emotional journey behind writing, indignant about him not being able to read my mind.

For not knowing how achingly I wanted to write, and how epically I failed at it.

I sighed inwardly at my lack of logic. Honestly, I couldn't be mad at him in the slightest.

Because what did I share with him, really, in the short amount of time we'd spent together? Not much. Our conversations had been short, him—a little mumbling, me—doing a lot of blushing.

What we were able to communicate was stuff like what we liked to drink, and our favorite writers. So basically, besides him liking W. B. Yeats' poems and me reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's stories, we were strangers who were attracted to each other.

I definitely didn't tell him I had ever, in my life, written anything. I had no problem mentioning it, convincing myself and my surroundings that one day I'd be a published writer.

Mainly due to the fact that lying to them about it materializing someday soon didn't keep me up at night.

There was an indulgence to it, to living in a dream world where I didn't have to be held accountable. However, while I repeated these half-truths to anyone else—I mean, I did *write*, it wasn't a total lie—I couldn't deceive Kyle.

Which brought us to this moment, where unbeknownst to him he'd stepped on a thousand big-ass landmines, the biggest one of them being how little he thought of me. It put a dent in my heart, and I had to find the space to regroup.

“Get your hand off me,” I ordered with a ferocity I hadn't felt. I did feel remorse at losing his touch as he dropped it.

“Elsie, don't go.”

My lips were parched, my throat tight, preparing to say the opposite of what I craved. “*I'm staying, it's my office. You're the one who's leaving.*”

Kyle ignored me, his strong legs like his resolve holding steadfast in place. His gaze bore holes into mine, delved inside the caverns of my brain, probing me.

Other times when our eyes met, he had either this dreamy look as if it were just us, or he was plain friendly if another friend was around. Not today. Something piqued his interest, and he seemed resolute on having his answers.

“Kyle?”

His expression cracked, his mouth quirked. A small breath huffed from his lips. “Ha. For a second there I thought I'd offended you.”

I feigned indignation, grasping hard onto the mask I wore for him. “It wasn't what I'd call being nice.”

“Fuck nice, Elsie,” he breathed. His fierceness gripped me harder than his hand, jarring me, surrendering me to him.

“I hit a nerve, but not about your marketing skills, no. It was the writing comment. I'm sensing that”—he shook his

head, not releasing the mental harness he latched on my brain —“you do know. In fact, you know too much.”

Every nerve ending in my face worked diligently to conceal the surprise from my expression, when he concluded, “You write.”

“So?” I forced myself to stare straight ahead. I could not for the life of me figure out how his opinion changed from seeing me as the person who thought that writing was as trivial as brushing your teeth, to this. “It’s not a secret. I told Alda and Justine and here, now I’m telling you.”

“Why not me?” He paced back, seeing me anew.

I crossed my arms over my chest, hoping I conveyed my disinterest. “It never came up. So what?”

While my interest in my own writing took a dive down that familiar hill, his somehow soared to its goddamn peak. “Wrong question. It’s not a *what*. It’s a *why*.”

Oh, shit. Did folding my arms send him a sign I was remotely into this discussion? Something in my eyes? Did I even understand body language, at all? Of course not. Otherwise, I could’ve probably been a...say, a writer?

Fuck my life.

“I haven’t published anything.” I flipped my hair back, the universal symbol for boredom. At least I thought so.

Kyle hadn’t flinched, not even showing his usual appreciation of my hair. “You will, though,” he persevered, more of a statement than a question.

In a split second, a swift instant, I considered going against my instincts and lying to him to save face. To recite my *Yes, I will, of course I will* speech, which everyone ate up from my hand. A reassurance that would’ve appeased this gorgeous man who, unlike what I’d believed earlier, was keen on thinking the best of me.

If I’d gone in that direction, the lips that were partly hidden under his groomed beard would’ve curved up and his eyes

would've held a similar praise to the one he reserved for Noah and Hunter. He wouldn't have questioned me.

Yet I couldn't fucking lie. Not to him.

"No."

"Why not?" he shot back. My reactions weren't the problem, evidently. The lackluster approach I chose hadn't repelled Kyle. It spurred him on, as if he uncovered a mystery.

Only there was no mystery. I buried my material where it wouldn't see the light of day and cause people to yawn their way to sleep. Case opened, case closed.

"I don't want to," I replied, translating the tediousness I felt toward my writing into my tone.

Kyle rubbed his beard, considering me. "For how long?"

"How long what?" If his good cop bad cop attitude was meant to throw me off, he succeeded.

"You've been not-wanting it." He emphasized the *not-wanting* so I'd know he didn't even consider believing it.

When I imagined Kyle's and my first real conversation, I'd had many scenarios playing out. None of which were this unsolicited therapist session.

"None of your business." I sighed, my shoulders sagging. "Not something that's worth wasting your time over."

"Why won't you let me decide?" Being undeterred by me seemed to become a pattern. Kyle's brown eyes softened, digging their claws deeper into mine, edging to carve out the truth. "Look, I was out of line. And wrong. Can I have a do-over?"

A knock on the door had our heads swinging to its source. Jean, my friend who did the illustrations, popped her head into the room. The parts of her forehead that weren't covered by platinum locks were etched with concern. "Hey, is everything okay?"

I glanced at Kyle, at his nearness, then down at my impatient stance. We must've looked like we were either about to suck each other's faces, or draw invisible guns at one another. Rearing one step back, I smiled at her. "Sure. What's up?"

"Nothing." She bit her bottom lip, contemplating my honesty. "Just dropped by to see if we're still on for lunch?"

"Definitely."

A quick peek at my watch informed me we'd scheduled it thirty minutes ago, five minutes before Kyle arrived. I pretended not to notice, and in any way, I appreciated her for dropping by. It allowed me the reprieve I'd needed to regroup, to put things in perspective.

With one more appraisal of Kyle, she gave me a brief nod. "Cool. Later, then."

"Later."

We were left on our own.

"Please?"

My fight left me completely with the authenticity of his request. I motioned for him to take his place, and walked to sit in front of him on my white office chair.

"So, Els." Kyle paused when my head jerked up from the file on my desk. "Wait, can I call you Els?"

The name didn't startle me, but the change in his tone did. He sounded smooth and sexy and seductive and was totally trying to bulldoze his way into my personal life. The short flare of anxiety I'd experienced faded, but by no means could he charm me into a stupor. He'd have to learn patience.

"No."

"Okay, Elsie."

That promise I'd made myself a second ago? Gone out the fucking window. Kyle's eyes brightened, sparkling as the set of his white teeth flashed at me. The genuine approach that

went in tandem with the more casual grin that adorned his lips were the end of me.

My idiot of a heart went rogue, fluttering, sending heat waves to my cheeks.

A change of color a perceptive guy like him undoubtedly noticed. “You can call me whatever. Ky, K, The Beard Man, anything goes. Wait, no. Not Mr. Turner. Anything but that.”

“I’ll stick to Kyle.” I surrendered to his charm, the one I felt was aimed at me and me alone.

“That works.” His victorious smile lacked arrogance. A tinge of happiness we got to a solid ground, not that he’d outmatched me. “So, Elsie, what are you writing about? Loch Ness monster smut? I’d read that shit any day.”

Thank fuck I’m done with my coffee was the thought that coursed through my head as I choked on air, gasping loudly. I massaged my chest to ease the burn, although it did nothing to relieve me. Not a fucking thing.

Kyle rounded the desk and rubbed my back, whispering, “Not Loch Ness? Then about the girl and the priest from *The Exorcist*?”

I angled my head up, suddenly curious. “That would actually make for a great book. I’m kinda bummed that I didn’t think of it earlier. But why would you ask that?”

“Because there’s no other explanation for why you’re doing practically everything to avoid my questions.” His face was dangerously close for the second time today.

Close but not demanding. Intrigued, and maybe mildly thrilled.

Once my throat let air pass through and my brain resumed functioning, it dawned on me that Kyle thought I’d been writing smut. From the look in his eyes, he seemed to like that idea plenty.

I flattened my palm against his chest, forcing him away, more than an inch, to give me room to think without the

proximity of his lips and that sandalwood fragrance of him that short-circuited my brain. He got the message and strolled back to his seat.

“I’m okay,” I reassured him after he relaxed back in the chair. “It’s not that. I don’t write taboo, or erotica, or taboo erotica. Which, I love by the way.”

His chin lowered almost immediately, his eyes drowning with lust. “You do?”

I might have been ashamed about what *I* wrote, but never in what I read. I was a proud reader of all things with words in them. “Yes, I do. You got a problem with that?”

“No, I don’t see why not.” The dark, predatory gaze in his eyes left no questions of what that piece of information provoked in him. It would’ve aggravated me had I not been attracted to him for months. And that he’s our client. Small detail.

“Back to our subject.” I watched him stroll to his chair, then busied myself with Hunter’s file. Anything but his lean muscles flexing under that black long-sleeved T-shirt. “Like you said, whatever writing means, it’s beyond me. Wouldn’t have a fucking clue if it smacked me over the head.”

His response arrived as soon as I finished my sentence. “No, no. I said I take it back. I was wrong. It happens.”

When every piece of paper sat neatly inside the folder and he no longer sounded like he had plans to have me in my office, I glanced up. “You weren’t wrong.”

“I was wrong before, not now.” He scratched his head, his tone growing contemplative. “How did I not see it sooner?”

Because you were busy staring at my hair?

“See what?”

“That you were meant to write.”

“No.”

This whole interrogation had to stop. A soul of a writer was such a stretch. To have one, I would've needed a basic talent or a sense of purpose, neither of which described me. Not in the objective eye, anyway.

"Modesty isn't necessary." His long fingers tapped the desk, entrapping me in the repetitive motion. "Moving on."

"Moving on to what?" I could barely keep up with that extra version of him.

Kyle ignored my now very real befuddlement and charged forward. "You have every tool here to gauge the market for what works and what doesn't, besides your talent."

"There's no talent," I said, only to be ignored again.

"You approached Hunter. You *felt*, more than analyzed, that his writing was special. That means you already know what to write as well as how."

He offered me a free pass from explaining why writing wasn't for me in the form of Hunter, and I took it for all its worth. "Hunter is a combination of rugged and sweet, an old person with the rawness of youth. He's almost out there, just needs a tiny push."

"That's how I felt about him. I asked Ridge for his number a day after." Kyle mussed up his hair, peering at me through eyes filled with regret. "Then Noah and I flew to LA to negotiate his movies, and I got to Hunter too late."

I quieted, tired of defending my position.

"Shit, Elsie, I didn't mean it like that." He reached forward and covered my hand, his big one swallowing mine. "I meant we could've planned ahead together. The social media, heck, even a next book release date like you suggested."

"No, you were right." I cleared my eyes from any sign of disappointment, reverting to being a professional. "That's why we normally don't take on authors without representation. But Ben trusted me when I said I saw potential. I guess he shouldn't have."

“Please don’t go there.”

Despite the self-reproach that waged in me, I heard Kyle’s Boston accent slip and I loved it. Just as much as I loved the soothing circles his thumb ran on my palm.

“I said it before—he has every reason to trust you.” His earnest stare drew me in like the strongest embrace, a pull and a stroke. “Hunter is fucking awesome and he’ll be famous one day, if not in Noah’s league, then somewhere close. I promise you that his writing and my efforts will lead him to where he belongs. You weren’t wrong.”

“Thanks,” I answered meekly.

His warm eyes inspected me, affirming that his words made the impact he intended them to have. Apparently, he’d found what he’d searched for, leaning into his chair and placing his hands in his lap.

“That’s why I’m here. Besides your company, that is.” At that he blushed, caught off guard to hear himself say that. “Like, yeah, since we hang out together, and it’s always, ya know, fun.”

“It is.” I applied my sternest tone, somewhat triumphant to see him flustered like I was.

“Yup.” My assurance reassured him. His blush faded as his eyes cleared. “Anyhow, Ben trusted you with your choice of Hunter. Why don’t you trust him with your manuscript?”

I arrived at this round more prepared, deflecting instantly. “What makes you think I haven’t approached him already?”

“Nah. Nah-ah. When a boss assigns his employee to a client like me.” He chuckled, scrubbing his face. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to sound like a tool, but it’s the truth. When they assign them to someone like me, it means there’s a deep level of appreciation for your work. If you’d have brought up your book to him, no matter how crappy it was—which by the way I seriously doubt it is—he would’ve done everything—editors, marketing, the whole nine yards—to polish it until it was marketable.”

“Fine. I haven’t. I haven’t shown it to anyone.” Nor did I dare call it a book, because a heap of sentences definitely did not qualify as one.

“Why?” he persisted.

“It’s dull, nothing new really.” Why couldn’t I lie? Why did he have to hear for himself that what I wrote could put a teething baby to sleep?

“Sorry, Elsie, I don’t buy it.”

Also, why the hell didn’t he believe it? I told him the truth. He stared at me and I at him, two stubborn individuals each for their own reasons.

“Let me ask you another question then, and I’ll leave it if you’ll answer it with a no.” He lowered his voice, inching closer. It drew me to imitate him. “Do you want it?”

My crippling weakness, the inability to lie to this man, was reinforced by the sincerity in his eyes. “Yes.”

Kyle’s initiatives to help me, push me, save me from myself ran rampant in his mind. I observed intently at his thoughtful expressions as they unfolded, the small wrinkles in the corners of his eyes, how his pupils moved from one side to another pensively.

Thoughts he had to put to rest. “I won’t do anything with it, regardless. It’s just a dream. Marketing is my job.”

“First of all, who said you can’t have both?” His ideas manifested into words. As he went on, despite my reluctance, I felt something awaken in me. “Second, *my* job is to make dreams come true. And I’m nothing if not insistent, persistent, and consistent about it, however long it takes.”

Kyle’s charm, more like the sincerity of it, lodged itself in my heart. His blind trust that I didn’t write a complete snoozefest aimed a light at me. It dipped beneath my eyelids and wedged them open, if only by a centimeter.

I rose to my feet, afraid he would change my life if we spent another minute together. “You might be all those things.

For now, though, I'm staying reticent."

He draped his jacket over his shoulder, following me to the door. "I see my spiel backfired."

"I'm just messing with you." I held on to the pull handle. "I'll think about it. After I—we focus our energies on Hunter."

"Hunter, right," he commented, his gaze somewhat lost in my shoulders, distracted.

"Yes, Hunter." I suppressed a smile and moved back to pull open the door. "Give that second book a thought?"

"Don't need to. I'll talk to him about it."

The surprising rush of joy I felt when he agreed with me only intensified when the unexpected happened. Kyle found the courage to not just ogle or be in my face.

He kissed me.

Actually kissed me.

A polite kiss on my cheek, and miles from anywhere near my lips, but still.

That tingle on my face lingered until very later on that day, long after Kyle left my office and disappeared down the hall.

CHAPTER SIX

Kyle

ME: *Nat-Alert. Please and for all that is holy, can you see Hunter and me today about the plan we talked about?*

My lips still buzzed from pressing my lips to Elsie's cheek during the ride down the elevator. I bit down my lower one, adamant to focus on the task at hand and text Natalie before my foot hit the pavement outside of the Frost building, instead of daydreaming.

Aside from owning one of the top boutique PR companies, she was one of my closest friends. We met years ago when Noah and I moved to Brooklyn when she interned at the PR company that handled this side of the business for Noah as his first book *When You Took My Heart* exploded nationwide, then worldwide.

She was loyal, prioritizing Noah and then newer clients of mine over everyone else. I returned that loyalty by following her when she quit and opened her own business two years later. Finding someone my age who shared my passion for getting authors out there didn't come by often, and I never planned on entrusting my writers elsewhere.

Natalie: *Let the almighty rest. We can work through lunch.*

Me: *You're a lifesaver.*

Natalie: *Don't thank me. You're buying.*

Me: *That's the least I can do. Seriously, thank you.*

Natalie: *Stop sucking up and let me get back to work. See you at Avocadini Café, noon.*

Me: *Be gentle with the kid.*

Natalie: *Since when am I not fucking gentle?*

A smirk broke on my face, because we both knew the answer to that. Neither her nor I were fucking gentle, another aspect we shared aside from choice of clothes.

The next message I sent out went to Hunter, forwarding him the details of our business lunch while heading to the subway. My apartment in Williamsburg wasn't that far, about twenty minutes away, less than the time it'd take me to wait for the Monday morning train that passed through Manhattan.

But I wasn't in a rush. I had three hours to burn, plenty for the longer drive plus a workout before going over the list of unanswered emails.

The jammed station overflowed with men and women in suits. They held their coffees, scrolled through their phones or talked on them, all set for a hectic new week. I stood as the odd man out, watching them curiously, a habit Noah had ingrained in me. People, even doing their most mundane errands, were fascinating when you imagined all their untold stories.

Eventually I reached my stop, my favorite neighborhood I was proud to call my home. In a way it had changed since Noah had moved to LA, but it was my home nonetheless. The vast streets, fresh air, low buildings, and serenity provided me the ultimate grounds to analyze and make sense of my life on a regular basis.

A comfort at any other time, yet it couldn't save me today. My mind deviated to Elsie and my fucked-up relentlessness that blinded me into making wrong assumptions about her.

I resented myself through the walk for not showing more interest for months in a woman that latched onto my soul from the minute I laid eyes on her. Ten miles on the treadmill then a million reps on the weights didn't help. Even torn down, I couldn't get past the fact that I missed out on the truth that stood in plain sight.

Everything about Elsie screamed poetic. I saw that now. She'd been born to be a writer. I could tell without reading a word she wrote, and despite her repeating that her work was shit.

She just needed someone to believe in her, to guide her and show her how incredible she was. A challenge I accepted, whether she asked me to or not.

That conviction calmed the reeling mess I was, a blessing when I had emails to reply to and Hunter's plan to work on at Avocadini's. I arrived there at a quarter to noon, pleasantly surprised to recognize my client had gotten there ahead of me, occupying one of the tables at the café.

Nicely done, Hunter.

I pulled out a wood chair next to him, taking in the effort he made to impress Natalie—his damp blond hair, plaid blue shirt, and blue jeans devoid of creases. His face and the light shade of green that colored it reflected his social media anxiety.

“Hunter, you okay?” It was obvious he wasn't, but I couldn't just blurt it out, not when I didn't have to. The combination of his sensitive character and the repentance I had after the meeting with Elsie guided me toward a more tender approach.

He plastered on a meek smile, worsening his grim appearance. “Yeah, totally fine.”

“Not so fine from where I'm sitting.”

Our waitress poured us two glasses of water. I pushed Hunter's closer to him.

“Ready to order?” she asked, her cheery voice going right over Hunter's head.

Poor man stared blankly at the table, saying nothing.

“We're expecting someone,” I replied for the both of us.

She nodded briefly and strode off to other customers.

I glimpsed at my watch, then at Hunter. “Natalie will be here in ten, meaning you have less than ten minutes to tell me what’s going on.”

His lips twisted to the side as he placed down his water glass. “I’m not cut out to be on social media.”

I raised a brow, not applying my sternest tone. Not yet. “Why? It works for literally everyone.”

“Look at me.” Hunter gestured at himself. “I’m not show-your-face material. The few readers I have would run off.”

“Hunter, there’s nothing wrong with you.” I didn’t have to reexamine him to be sure of my assessment. “And they won’t run off. They want to connect with you.”

My supposedly encouraging words had the complete opposite effect. Hunter bowed his head, scratching his neck. “Why?”

“You really are a handsome dude,” I joked, trying to get him out of his own head.

He groaned.

That sounds like a no.

“No issues with my physical appearance.”

“Then?”

He dumped his face in his palms and mumbled.

“Hunter, raise your voice.” And there went the coddling approach. When a client took on the path of a pity party, especially today when we didn’t have much time by ourselves, I was there to shake them up. “I need to hear you so I can help.”

His tortured, blue eyes lifted to mine. “I’m an introvert, in case you haven’t noticed. I work as a graphic designer, from *home*. I read books and write, at *home*. Just the thought of talking to a camera... I can’t.”

“You read in front of a full bookstore, real people. Here”—I raised my phone—“you don’t see anyone here. It’s nothing but a screen.”

“Kyle, I can’t. I tried.” He stared at his water glass and drank, anything but speak. “The homework you assigned to me, I did it. Browsed through other authors’ accounts for hours. I love it, I really do. I envy them for putting themselves out there.” He released a shaky breath of defeat. “Like I never could.”

I did not accept defeat. Not ever. “That’s why I brought Natalie on. She and the girl who runs the social media for her accounts, Jada, are pure geniuses. They convinced Noah to cooperate with them, and let me tell you, he’s not a fan either.” Hunter’s face fell, while mine remained adamant. “It’s not that scary once you get used to it.”

Hunter faltered, his eyes flickering to the sides. “Elsie didn’t say I had to.”

I braced myself, hating to throw her under the bus. “Elsie actually supports this idea.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

He contemplated it. “And you trust her? Because it really felt like you didn’t on Thursday.”

“I was wrong,” I admitted for the second time today, wishing that evening could be erased from history.

Elsie’s dedication to him spoke volumes. It made a bigger impact on me now that I understood that marketing wasn’t her dream job, not if it were up to her. She could’ve said *Fuck it* when I launched my verbal attack on her idea of a second book, to let Hunter’s future suffer or to let us move to another publisher.

Yet she hadn’t. She cared, begged me to reconsider.

It showed a lot about her character, and as I reiterated to Hunter, proved that I was in the wrong.

“I analyzed Elsie’s work, and aside from your nonexistent online presence, I wouldn’t have done anything differently.”

It seemed as though his whole face scrunched, horrified at the final sentence. “Then you think I should do this?”

“One hundred percent.”

Natalie waltzed into the café, her wicked smile bright as she scanned the room for us. I waved her to our table.

“You can ask Natalie anything you want. It won’t seem as intimidating once you have your answers.”

She approached us, her blondish-brown hair bobbing up and down with every decisive step she made in her high boots. “What’s up, bitches?”

Hunter glanced up and chuckled, her direct tone lifting the cloud of dread off him immediately. “Good, good, bitches are good.”

“Love the attitude, Hunter.”

Sometimes, especially with me around, Natalie forewent the need for niceties like *How are you* and the like. She raised her sunglasses up to her head, scanning Hunter from head to toe. Instead of blushing, he returned her gaze, unwavering.

I couldn’t believe my fucking eyes, barely two sentences in and she plucked out the shy boy from his shell. His color returned to his face, free from that horrible shade of green. Who could’ve guessed he just needed to hear the word *bitches*?

“Jada is gonna have fun with you.” Natalie laughed, sat down, and moved her taunting gaze to me, her light brown eyes sparkling. “I’m starving. And you said you’re paying. So, where’s the food?”

“Nat, I’d order the whole freaking menu if you asked.” I beckoned the waitress over, more than ready to get this started. “Let’s fucking start already.”

“I think you just might; there’s not a thing I don’t *love* here.” She pulled her laptop out of her bag, placing it on the table between her and Hunter, winking at him. “Until then, I’ll show boy wonder here that social media isn’t as scary as he might think.”



Later that evening Natalie and I shared an Uber down to Bushwick. Jamie, a mutual friend, was hosting a start-of-the-week party, because why not, and we were attending because, again, why not. That and I preferred not being a loner since Noah’s move.

“When can I expect you to finally become an Angeleno?” Natalie asked, bracing her leather jacket tighter from the burst of wind that threatened to knock her over.

I opened the door to the building for her. She hopped inside, rubbing her arms furiously.

“Stop being such a baby, Nat,” I teased her, taking advantage of the opportunity to get under her skin and skid around the question she’d badgered me with for the past month. “It’s not like it’s freezing.”

“Says the man who has layers of muscle to keep him warm.” She twisted her head to me, her brows low on her eyes. “Wait. You’re doing that avoiding thing.”

“Not avoiding.” I walked in after her, the brass door shutting behind us and leaving most of the cold outside. “The answer won’t change no matter how many times you bring it up. I don’t plan on a move to LA anytime soon.”

We called the elevator, waiting while another couple walked up next to us. The second the elevator doors slid open, they slipped inside and started making out like we weren’t there.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Natalie started when the very hands-on couple toppled out on the third floor. “I love having

you here; you're one of the few people I can tolerate—”

“Call 9-1-1.” I clutched my chest, talking in a choked voice. “Can’t. Handle. All. This. Love.”

She shoved my shoulder. “Dick. You know what I mean. Anyhoo, don’t you miss Noah? You’re traveling for work either way so why not live next to your best friend, make more connections in Hollywood, and maybe you two can start your own production company?”

“Whoa there.” The elevator reached the top floor, and we streamed down the hall. “He literally signed the contract as a *screenwriter* two months ago. A production company is a huge fucking stretch. At the moment.”

Booming music seeped from the inside of Jamie’s apartment, the slow beats of Tove Lo’s “Habits” booming throughout the floor. The place was packed with people, some dancing, others deep in conversation over red plastic cups.

We maneuvered our way to the kitchen, saying hi to a few faces we recognized.

After ten steps that dragged for about ten minutes, we made it to the kegs. Natalie accepted the beer I handed her, clinking it with mine. We each swallowed a big gulp, browsing the crowd.

Just as I thought my reply had satisfied Natalie and the subject was dropped, she said, “When did you stop aiming high?”

Natalie’s insistence reminded me of myself, of the good intentions behind her insistence. She also had no idea he moved there with his long-lost love, a secret I had to keep under wraps until his movie came out. Only then, when he’d prove to the world his lady wasn’t as bad as she was portrayed in his books due to their misunderstanding, the rest would be in on it, too.

“You bet I’m aiming high—when the timing’s right,” I answered, not a hint of irritation in my tone. I rested my back against the fridge, since there was almost no other place to

stand. The party was filling up, the more people, the hotter the room got. “Noah just signed multiple movie deals; let him enjoy that for a while.”

Natalie’s advice made sense, and I might’ve considered it in three to four months once Noah and Alda settled, if not for another reason, someone who lived right here in Brooklyn to make me stay. A woman who knocked me out whenever I saw her, that took a place inside my heart.

The mysterious redhead who was climbing the stairs to the rooftop right fucking now. I would’ve recognized her anywhere, her bright auburn hair brilliant even under the low purple LED lights attached to the walls, shining brighter with her white turtleneck sweater.

She was the Pied Piper, and I followed.

“Excuse me.” Natalie poked my arm, reminding me we were in the middle of a conversation. “You could at least say you’re going?”

Natalie’s voice fractured through the intense trance I’d been under. I turned around to explain then make a beeline for it when I spotted Justine walking toward me, sans Elsie. I snuck another glance at the stairwell to see where she was, but couldn’t find her anywhere.

I bit the inside of my cheek, contemplating being a jerk, ignoring everyone and walking up the stairs. Then decided against it. “Hey, Justine.”

“Kyle, hi.” Her usually optimistic attitude showed in her smile.

Natalie nudged herself in front of me, always eager to make new friends. “I’m Natalie, Kyle’s evil twin.”

“Twin?”

When neither of us spoke, she studied the two people who looked nothing alike, aside from our similar outfit choice of black denim and leather. “Really?”

“No fucking way. Nine months in the same womb as him? I probably would’ve ended up being one of those twins who ate the other in utero.”

They both stared at me shaking my head, then cracked up. Since that moment they acted like they’d known each other for years, chatting as Justine directed them to the beer. I watched as Justine grabbed two cups, assuming the second one was meant for Elsie and jumped on the excuse it offered to be with her.

“Let me help you with that one.” I outstretched my arm for Justine. Her attention shifted, tilting her head. “For Elsie, I mean. I saw her. Before. Going to the rooftop.”

Justine scrunched her nose and squinted her eyes. A full minute of observation passed as she contemplated if I was worthy or not to carry the cup to her friend. “Yeah, she’s here.”

Natalie’s face lit up. “Elsie’s here? Where?”

I wondered how anyone could miss her, regardless of the size of the crowd. Or maybe she was my beacon alone. I preferred that thought.

“She went upstairs to get some *fresh air*.” Justine used air-quotes for that one, handing me the cup conspicuously. “Freezing air more like it. We could wait for her here. Besides, you were just telling me where you got these cute jeans.”

“Oh, that.” Natalie narrowed her eyes. Judging from the look of her, Natalie hadn’t brought up her jeans or anything close.

Justine’s grin widened, signaling me with her hand behind her back to beat it. “You got them from Rag & Bone, right? I’m obsessed with their stuff.”

That wiped out Natalie’s suspicions, allowing me to spin back to the living room and trail up to where Elsie went. Having Justine on my side could mean Elsie told her about today. It gave me hope that I didn’t go too hard, and for something more. That the kiss had done something to her.

Hopeful, I finally placed my right foot on the stairs when Jamie called me from across the room. I whirled my finger in the air, implying that I'd see him later. I'd be polite later. Squeezing past people, I climbed to the rooftop, pushing open the door to the chill of the night. Justine, albeit making excuses for me, wasn't exaggerating.

The sixth's floor roof felt ten degrees colder than it did in the street.

Seemed like a plausible explanation to why only two brave smokers ventured outside, their feet up on a couch, knees hidden under their oversized sweatshirts.

Them and Elsie.

She stood with her forearms lying on the rail, her jean-clad legs crossed at the ankles. I couldn't move a muscle, stuck at the door, fascinated by her. Her whole body remained immobile while gusts of wind played with her hair, flapping it around her, wild flames growing wilder.

"Hey, man, do you mind closing the door?" someone commented from behind me.

It woke me from my silent admiration. I stepped forward and the door slammed behind me. The noise roused Elsie, who twisted, flashing a grin that was more likely than not intended for Justine.

A grin that morphed into a coy smile when it was met with me instead.

Kind of like mine, but not really. Seeing her now brought back the memory of her skin under my lips this morning, and saying I felt coy didn't scratch the fucking surface. I was wanting. So much so that I hadn't voiced any of it, regrouping myself one breath at a time.

"You're here," she said first, more of a statement than a question. A content statement. Not asking for Justine either, just...content from having me there.

The realization snapped me out of my daze and from the pattern we treaded on before this morning, when we'd started officially working together. Because if I could talk to her in the office without stuttering, I sure could do it here.

I moved slowly to her side, rather than talking to her from three feet away. "I am. And so is your beer."

"Thanks." She glanced up at me, our fingers brushing briefly when I handed her the cup. The skin on my arm rippled at the touch, leaving me disarmed against her.

The silver light from the moon turned her light blue eyes a shade of gray, her scent traveling over the wind, musky, sweet, and goddamn overwhelming. Way too overwhelming. I turned to face the neighborhood, raised my cup to my lips, and drank, needing the distraction to concentrate. To be a little less shell-shocked.

"So, Elsie."

"So, Kyle."

Not Mr. Turner, I thought. *Progress*. "I have a question."

Her chuckle sounded like a soft caress, warmth in the face of the cold. "Sure."

"Have any of your friends who, unlike me, were kept in the loop about your book, read it?"

She shifted from one foot to the other. I noticed it even as I stared ahead, when physical heat zapped from her to me in the single brief moment her arm grazed mine. "No."

The simple reply bothered me, flipping on my agent-mode switch. I turned to her, focusing on something far more fascinating than the view.

"What makes you think it's boring?"

"I don't *think*, it's a fact." She hugged her arms, her teeth slightly chattering. "I'm really not into starting this discussion all over again. We should head back inside."

"No."

Seeing her like that, feeble and unsure of herself, it wretched me. I resolved to treat her as I would any other author, as I treated Hunter this morning. Serve her a bucket of tough love.

“No?”

“No.” I placed the half-empty cup down, stripped off my jacket, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“We’re not leaving until you agree to show me your work. To your good friend”—that wasn’t the fucking word, but saying the guy who’s had a crush on you sounded substantially worse—“who’s read hundreds of romance books, and who’ll offer his two cents on it.”

“No.”

And just like that, the tables had turned.

“What about an excerpt?” I tilted my head, resolved not to lose her. “Your favorite part.”

“There aren’t any.” Her bluish-gray eyes found mine, the fight returning to them. “I don’t have it on me anyway. It’s on my laptop at home.”

“Then that’s where we should be, not downstairs,” I said, the consequences of being in her apartment alone at night not registering fully.

Until I’d seen the uncertainty on her face. How was I supposed to say I didn’t mean to sleep with her when deep down that was exactly what I wanted to do? Just not today, and definitely not by conning her into it? All that without sounding like an asshole?

“I’ll make you a deal,” I rushed, hoping to conceal any sign at all that I did, in fact, dream about sleeping with her. “There must be at least a few lines that you like. I’ll read them and leave. Doesn’t matter if I liked them or not, and it’s up to you to ask me for my opinion, because I won’t volunteer it. Today, next week, next year, never. Your call.”

My instincts told me she'd ask me what I thought long before *never*. She'd been sitting on that manuscript for a while, and she must've realized I wouldn't be callous with her heart, that I cared for her as a person first and foremost.

That was why I was willing to wait, but not to back down.

For her. To smash down her walls, to emphasize her inherent wonderful qualities. To make everyone see the brilliance I did.

"Fine," she complied, a tinge of a smile forming on her cherry-red lips. "Am I allowed to tell Justine we're going, or are we that goal oriented?"

Her sarcastic tone brought back the fiery girl I remembered from our nights out with our group, from the first meeting in her office. The girl whose eyes were wide open and could take on the world. If I could keep that fire alive when we'd read her book, my job would be considered half done.

"You go find her and I'll find Natalie; I came with her tonight."

Even though I tried not to be too flattered when Elsie's brow furrowed, a nearly nonexistent twitch, I fucking did. I held the door for her, then descended the stairs to the main floor of the apartment, scouring for our friends.

I spotted Nat all over some unknown guy. "I see her." I pointed in her direction and Elsie's downcast eyebrows shot up in understanding. "Going to make sure she's okay and then we'll leave."

She nodded, her cheeks flushing. The sight hypnotized me, and it cost me an insane amount of willpower to detach myself from her beautiful figure, even as she walked to the other side of the room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Elsie

WE WERE in the doorway of my apartment. A soft glow emanated from a lamp in the living room. The round, sphere-shaped amber light served as the only source of illumination in the apartment, save the light from the hallway.

The one Kyle blocked with his tall frame.

My hand went reflexively for the switch by the door, when it was stopped by him.

He gripped my wrist, tender and very much unlike the hold he had on me in my office. More intimate, his fingers molded into my skin. I didn't resist him, but peeked up, curious what would surprise me there. The sharp edges of his face softened, the shadows obscuring the strong lines of his jaw. His eyes held mine, the connection between them burning hard for all the softness he'd shown me.

It thrilled me, acknowledging each other like that after the silence that accompanied us during our short walk to my apartment. Not that the silence was a bad thing by itself—the fresh air and the overall quiet helped me arrange myself, mollifying my concerns about him reading my manuscript.

It worked, to some extent. Up to the moment where Kyle touched me. I gulped on air, pushing down my beating heart. We were here about the book I wrote, which shouldn't entice feelings like attraction. It should breed fear and dejection, yet the emotions that rose to the surface were pure, carnal attraction.

“Don't.” Kyle's voice was gruff. He licked his lips, swallowed, slowly releasing me. “Don't.”

“Why?”

“I might be wrong.” He breathed a laugh, shaking his head subtly. “Wouldn’t be the first time this week, so feel free to call me on it. You’re uncomfortable letting me read your manuscript.”

When he didn’t elaborate, I corrected his observation. “I’m not uncomfortable; I straight up don’t want you to.”

“Potato potahto. What I’m saying is, I’m not sure it’d help seeing my expressions with the lights on.”

In the four years of working at Frost’s, I had yet to encounter a more driven agent than Kyle. Every other agent, once we were done negotiating, would revert to being her or his kind, unassuming self. Not Kyle. His job lapsed over into his personal life, pushing me like he would a client, relentless as if I were a project.

And if neither of us were attracted to the other, it wouldn’t have bothered me as much, wouldn’t have scared me, but it did. I liked him, a sentiment that terrified me, because in less than a few minutes he would read the excerpt I didn’t particularly *hate* in my book.

After that, there he’d know I had zero talent; he’d see for himself how unreadable and unmarketable my work was.

Goodbye smoldering looks, adios irresistible desire.

I rolled my eyes at myself, inwardly, for ever agreeing to put myself in this messy situation. I turned to close the door, disentangling our eyes and hands from each other, and moved to my dark kitchen. “Beer?”

“Tea, please,” he answered, sitting down on my blue suede couch.

I half expected him to follow me around, but I guessed he truly meant it when he said he sought to put me at ease.

“Tea? Really?”

“I want to stay sober for what could be the best manuscript I’ve read since Noah’s books.”

Or not.

“Not so sure that you do.” I busied myself with putting the kettle on the stove and making the tea. Anything except concentrate on Kyle sitting in my apartment, his expectations, and their imminent plummeting.

The kettle whistled and I poured the boiling water in both our mugs. Some, or a lot but let’s not be petty, spilled out and I wiped the counter clean. Right below the counter my Skittle bags sat silently. I contemplated whether doing my good-luck ceremony, conspicuously of course, would work in my case too. Would my material miraculously morph into something mildly interesting?

Pfft, as if. Nothing, including my beloved candy, held that power.

With a short sigh, I brought our mugs to the coffee table, then the laptop from my bedroom. Kyle watched as I propped it on my lap, hiding its contents from him.

“That’s weird—a blank computer. I pictured you as the stickers type.”

I eyed him, applying the fake confidence I normally erected as my shield. “There’s a lot you expect from me, Mr. Turner.”

“Miss Jenkins.” The name I called him didn’t vex him anymore, not when it was mingled with my smile. “The stickers were just an assumption. The quality of the writing—that I don’t *expect*—I’m confident it’s there.”

This time I rolled my eyes straight in his face.

He took a drink of the herbal tea I served him in silence while I uploaded *I Am With You* and scrolled directly to chapter thirteen. The black letters over the blank screen had Enzo’s name on them, directly below the chapter number.

“Would you mind if I browse through it before I hand it over?” I asked.

I’d read it a hundred times, and still I opted for another quick scan of the part I cut out of the document for Kyle to read. To remember just what I was up against.

He got up, admiring the space Justine and I assigned for our shelves on the other side of the room. “Not at all. Pretend I’m not here.”

It was hard. But I did.

I breathed.

And then I started.

At night, under the Coney Island Wonder Wheel’s colorful lights, Sabrina’s violet eyes gleamed brilliantly. She glanced up for a few wondrous moments before aiming those powerful purple sapphires at me. “I can’t believe I’ve been living in Brooklyn for almost a year and no one has taken me here, not once.”

Her cheeks flushed at the admission that she had had other dates, a brighter red than those that shone from the rides around us.

A slow grin emerged on my face, an attempt to soothe her. I didn’t mind her seeing other men. As long as it was in past tense. An immense certainty told me that now that I’d had her, I’d be the last.

“Somehow, yes. I can believe that.”

Nothing about Sabrina hinted it’d be a good idea to take her on a date to a theme park. Not the solemn expression she wore, not the expensive outfits. Neither did her manners, how she carried herself, or how her black silky hair and makeup were always done to perfection.

Dating a woman like her demanded you go all out—rooftop dinners, galas, operas, concerts. No place too luxurious, no amount of money spent would be enough to be worthy of having the pleasure of spending an evening with her.

So, you did not, definitely did not, show her a night out where the dress code was plain jeans and a T-shirt. Or even worse, where you had to wear sneakers.

Any man whose vision wasn't impaired could see that. Any man with basic common sense would've taken her to a place intended to impress her.

I, however, wasn't any other man. If I had been, I would've missed out on these arresting purple diamonds glinting at me with adrenaline and sheer joy. I wouldn't have witnessed the childlike elation that no amount of money thrown around could've afforded. And fuck me, they were a sight.

Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined they'd ever look like this. I caught glimpses of the other side of her that time I invited her to my office and told her we'd be working on our first project together, and again when I commended her for her excellent ideas and sketches on what to do with it. I'd even thought they beamed at their brightest last night when I'd decided to flip the finger to all of my rules and ask her out.

They didn't. Not the way they were tonight.

"Did I get it wrong? You don't like it?" I asked, controlling the urge to tuck away a strand of black hair that flailed in the wind. It would've been soon, too soon. Even a guy who didn't date like I did knew that.

And in any case, I loved seeing her in any shape or form.

She shook her head, flashing me a broad smile she gave to no one. "Not at all. I fucking love it."

I raised an eyebrow, not accustomed to hearing this beautiful mouth that spoke so elegantly curse. Not bothered by it either.

"Sorry, boss." Her smile became devious when she ventured a step toward me. "It slipped out."

The wide-open space and skies above us did nothing to my dysfunctional lungs. They choked, suffocated by the electricity

that poured from her, that intensified tenfold when she nearly wiped out any remaining distance between us.

Sounds of kids running, adults having conversations, people screaming from the roller coasters, all but faded away when she said those words. The smells of cotton candy, popcorn, and hot dogs mingled in the background when the sweet scent of her perfume carried to me the closer she got.

“I—you shouldn’t call me that anymore,” I stuttered. I, the owner of one of the largest law firms in the state of New York, had lost my fucking balance.

She batted her thick, dark lashes, sensing my weakness and drifting impossibly closer. Sabrina floated instead of walked, sang instead of spoke. “You’re not my boss?”

She placed her hand on my black T-shirt, the lights behind her fading into large bokeh circles. My chest burned beneath her touch, my skin blazing from the unbearable heat.

“I am.”

I was that and more. Much more. I was the man who considered her as more precious than any fortune, than any business, than my past or future. The man who was ready to set it all ablaze if it stood between him and being with her. The certainty of it jarred me.

Sabrina clung to me, not caring about any-fucking-thing. “But?”

“But not this evening.”

Her hand slid to mine, intertwining our fingers. She spun swiftly, tugged on my hand while glancing over her shoulder. “Too bad, because I really, really, really wanted to kiss my boss.”

Stifling some of the filthiest curse words along with a rumbling laugh, I got carried away by the gorgeous woman to wherever she decided to take me.

When I finished reading, my heart lurched forward, galloping and pounding, spreading heat fervently throughout

my veins. I took off Kyle's jacket and folded it neatly on the arm of the couch. The room spun, but I forced it back in its place.

"Elsie?" Kyle's worry was evident in his tone and careful inspection of me. A concern that didn't translate into giving me a way out.

I rubbed my face, feeling the blood rush back to my cheeks. "I'm fine."

"Is it..." He paused, uncharacteristically apprehensive. "Can I read it?"

For Kyle, reading my manuscript would've been another day at the office. For me, it was nothing short of monumental. A horrible, terrible monumental moment. It reminded me of the True Crime documentaries where an intruder slipped into a young woman's bedroom late at night, planning to do the worst things to her.

Except Kyle's invasion would've been different. Sure, he was inches away from peeking into my innermost private of rooms, the one I never showed anyone. And yeah, he kind of twisted my arm into doing it. But the similarities ended there, and I recognized every bit of good in what Kyle was trying to achieve.

Too bad he didn't believe me when I said the room he so desperately wanted in on was as vacant as they come. But he was bound to find out soon.

I spun the computer and placed it on his strong thighs, releasing it as if it burned my fingers. "Go ahead." Then another thing occurred to me. I yelped, "Wait, Kyle."

"What? What happened?" His eyes snapped up, his hand casting the screen down instinctively. My heart took note of that, how despite his perpetual persuasions, he wouldn't do anything unless I okayed it. It took note, and it swelled.

But it had nothing on my anxiety. "Just—don't read it aloud."

“Okay.” His gaze turned quizzical, his lips twitching to the side.

“Promise?” I needed the reassurance more than anything at that moment, even though I trusted Kyle. I wouldn’t have let him near my manuscript if I hadn’t.

“Yes, I promise.” His warm eyes grazed mine.

“Swear?” I hid behind my palms.

“Miss Jenkins.” A rough hand peeled mine from my face, revealing a warm, kind, and compassionate man. “I promised you not to say a word. Under no circumstances will I break it.”

He dropped my hand, and it fell to my lap softly. Every instinct in me was summoned in that moment to hold myself from leaping on Kyle and demanding he touch me again. Not only because he left my skin bereft and missing him, but because drawing back meant he could start reading, and the thought on its own crippled me. I was not, could not have been prepared for that.

Some emotion must have crossed my face, to stop Kyle from returning fully to the computer. “Elsie, I’m going to start to read. Is that okay?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nodded, chewing the inside of my cheek like it was dinner.

Kyle’s eyes landed on the screen.

Breathe.

His eyes skimmed the text, his finger scrolling down.

Breathe.

My stomach churned.

Don’t forget to freaking breathe.

My hands flew back up, leaving tiny slits open to watch him, though I really, truly couldn’t bear it.

Words. He’s only reading words.

Suddenly, the unbearable became impossible.

I could still make out Kyle's face, and if I concentrated, I could even catch his smile.

For a whole five seconds.

He and the computer and the entire background blurred together into one pile of nothing. The room spun and my hands fell to the sides, unable to stay in place.

Then the spinning stopped, and as if having a veil thrown over my eyes, I blacked out.



“Elsie.”

Someone shook my body. Not too rough, nothing painful. A light jolt that repeated itself over and over and over.

“Elsie, please, talk to me.”

My eyelids were heavy as if the *Titanic* itself decided to sink on them. Not without effort, I pried one open, then the other. Kyle sat next to me, his head crowding my vision. An immediate smile was painted on his lips, a stark contradiction to his grave and worried eyes.

“Thank fuck,” he rasped, bending down to kiss my forehead.

I nearly closed my eyes from the solace it brought me. I would've too, if I hadn't needed answers.

“What's going on? Where am I?” In the midst of my questions, I realized my feet were propped up on the backrest of the couch. “Why am I lying like this?”

“You don't remember?” He smoothed my hair from my face to where it dangled to the floor. I could swear the first caress caused his hand to tremble.

“No. Yes. Some of it. I remember you reading my book.” I flinched. That was one memory I would really rather not have

had. “And I remember the dizziness. Wait”—I stirred, needing to sit up—“did you...did you drug me?”

“What? Fuck no.” He recoiled from me, pulling back the hand that had been stabilizing me in the chaotic mess that were my movements.

My whole body moved, about to topple backward and fall to the floor, if not for Kyle who caught my shoulder.

I brushed my hands down—or up, depending on how you looked at it—my body, verifying that I had my clothes on. “Then why can’t I remember?”

Kyle sighed and balanced me carefully as if I were made of glass, then helped me straighten. “You fainted.”

“I did not.” I frowned. “I don’t faint.”

Which was sort of a lie. I fell asleep when the world became too overwhelming. Never fainted, though.

“You do now. Welcome to the club.” He shrugged, his palms facing up.

“You faint too?”

“No. I just figured it was a thing you say, since you really are in a fainters’ club now. With someone. Who’s not me.” My frown hadn’t budged, so he waved his hands in front of his face. “Forget I said anything. I’m venting. It was a lot to take in. One second my eyes were on the laptop, the other I witness you tumble. At least I reacted on time to catch you.”

“Shit.”

Awareness prickled in. He’d read it. He’d read everything. I wanted, no, needed desperately to know his thoughts on it. Then again, no. I didn’t. In fact, one part of me preferred that Kyle left the apartment this minute.

“Let’s go to the hospital.”

“No, I’m fine. You can leave.” I pushed off from the cushions, picking myself up on wobbly legs.

He grabbed my elbow, this time to save me from flopping to the floor. “No, I can’t. Gotta make sure you get to bed in one piece.”

I gave up fighting him and leaned my weight on his side. The immediate burst of heat that sparked from the point where his arm wrapped around me coursed through my body, landing at my core. A mixture of confusion, attraction, and nerves made it painfully hard to speak.

“The room ahead of us, Els?” He flexed his bulky muscles ever so slightly.

“Yeah, but listen, I’m really okay. I can walk by myself.” Another second of this and I would’ve fainted for an entirely different, non-book-related reason.

“First, you implied I roofied you.” He chuckled as we started walking with me pinned to his side. “Then, you suggested I’m capable of leaving here after you fainted and you’re swaying like a branch in the wind. My parents would have me hanged for the impression I give.”

We stopped in front of my door, my fingers curling on the handle. “Ugh, it’s not you. This whole evening has been too much.”

“I get it.” He signaled with his head for me to push open the door. “Go on inside.”

Any hesitation I had about being roofied by him vanished, revealing itself in all its ridiculousness now that I’d regained my bearings. He guided me to the bed, kneeling to help me out of my boots. I swatted him away, removing them myself.

“Get up, Mr. Turner.” My voice was husky, partly from the whole ordeal and partly from having him this close.

The air around us was charged with electricity as he got closer, pulling the covers over me once my feet were up on the mattress. It didn’t startle me. Something about the whole experience we shared tapped into a side of me I hadn’t woken in years—a courageous one.

“What did you think?” I asked, my resolve keeping my eyes glued to his. The room shook, nothing more than a mild quiver. Not as bad as when I’d actually watched him read.

He chuckled and shook his head subtly, like he’d guessed I wouldn’t have been able to resist.

“Miss Jenkins, I love your writing. More than love. I don’t want to say any more, not now. What I would say is I’d be honored to read the rest of it.” His Boston accent slipped out again, sounding so hot that I shifted under the sheets.

My head and my heart were in a complete mess, refusing to either believe or process this information, the sensory overload uncanny. “Maybe you will.”

I followed him as he bent down, brushing his lips against my forehead, his breath tickling my skin. I clenched my hands, crumpling the sheets for them not to rise up like they’d wanted and hold on to his beard-covered cheeks.

His chin was in my line of vision, not his dark, piercing eyes, which made talking infinitesimally easier. “Kyle?”

“Yeah?” He withdrew from my face, his hot touch replaced by his even hotter gaze.

It was a miracle my lips were able to move. “Thank you.”

“Sure. Sleep tight, we’ll talk.” He brushed my hair one final time, and walked out of the room.

“Yeah,” I replied dreamily, mumbling to myself. “We will.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kyle

“EARTH TO Kyle, you there?” Noah called my name all the way from Los fucking Angeles.

Let the record show, I had no issues with the city itself. I took offense that my best friends lived there, instead of here.

The phone showed it was way past eleven, East Coast time, not too late to be an excuse for me spacing out during our conversation. I’d called Noah as soon as I’d returned from Elsie’s, told him about the party, about seeing her, ending up reading her book.

After that, I spaced out.

Couldn’t concentrate on anything else, unable to shake off the dread from having her drop like a log in front of me earlier. In my brief experience as an agent, I’d witnessed every type of reaction that existed. From obnoxious cockiness to those who practically held my hand in meetings with publishers—each person acted differently. No one like this.

I had to talk it out, had to understand what was it I did that triggered it in her. And I trusted Noah and his advice. I might’ve hung out with writers, but Noah was the real deal. If anyone had insights on what a starting artist went through, it’d be either him or Alda. One of them had to help.

“I’m here.”

“That’s debatable.” He scratched his head. Noah lay sprawled on a lounge chair in the backyard of his Hollywood Hills home, lanterns decorating the space behind him.

“You look off. From reading a book, which is kind of offensive to be honest.” His lips curved in a smile, amusement

coloring his tone when he added, “How come mine don’t get you worked up like this?”

“Glad this whole situation entertains you, man,” I shot back. I kicked my sneakers off, propping my feet on my coffee table. “Anyway, the book’s not the issue.”

He rolled up the sleeves of his light sweatshirt, exposing his sleeve tattoos and making me jealous in the process. California and its warm weather, sheesh. “It’s Elsie? You asked her out and she said no? Fuck, sorry to hear that.”

“I...she...no. Argh, yes. It’s Elsie.” I groaned, struggling with how to start this conversation. I’d never stated that I liked her. It wasn’t like I’d been that subtle, either, the way my mind kept returning to her. “Not like that though.”

“I get it.” Noah cracked a smile, glancing at the sky, then back at me.

My brow furrowed, not as amused as my friend. “What now?”

“You’re in love. And whipped.”

“I’m telling you it’s not that, you just caught me off guard.” I ran a hand through my beard, veering us back to the main topic. “It’s about me wanting to do right by her, to get that book and her out there. Readers are gonna love it.”

The line quieted, Noah staring at me and vice versa. We kept at it until I heard the French doors creaking, transforming Noah’s solemn expression to a wide grin he saved for Alda and no one else.

“Hey, beautiful. I’m on the phone with Kyle.”

He turned the phone in her direction. Alda’s wild curls and bright green eyes came into view, waving at me. “Hey, Kyle. Are you guys planning your visit?”

“I’ll be there the second you two decide on a date for a formal house party,” I threw back, treating her as any one of my friends.

“We’ve been um...busy.”

Noah turned the phone back to him, his smirk intact. “Dinner smells great, my busy woman. I’ll be right in.”

Her soft chuckles were followed by the doors closing. “Okay, so while my wonderful girlfriend’s quiche Lorraine is baking in the oven, tell me what put you in a worse mood than when Kade’s not available to ink you.”

“Ha-ha, hilarious.” I bent forward to shrug off my jacket, feeling the heater taking effect in the apartment. “I’ll summarize it so you can go back to your beloved quiche.” I inhaled deeply. Letting the air out. “Elsie fainted while I was reading.”

“What?”

“Yes, what. The thump she made when her head plopped down on the couch and how she almost rolled off it...” I shut my eyes, the memory vivid in my brain.

I wondered if it’d ever disappear.

“And you’re still not willing to leave her to do whatever the fuck she wants? She’s not happy about it, so why?” His fingers disappeared in his dark blond hair when he ran his hand through it. “Another question. Why does it have to be around work? Why can’t you...I don’t know. Ask her out?”

“It’s not about work, it’s about her.” I sighed. “I like her, I want her to succeed.”

“It’s because you like her that you need to respect her wishes.”

I rolled my lips in, reining in my temper. Elsie wasn’t *work*, true. However, the protective side of me couldn’t let it go. I did everything in my powers to achieve the best results for my authors, so why not her?

“Listen, you remember my first book, right? I wrote it in under three months, put it out there the second I was finished. For me, and I repeat, *for me*, it was more of a compulsion than a conscious thought.” He raised his brow, making sure I was

listening. “Not everyone’s wired like that; each person has their own path to travel. Alda worked on hers for four years. When she decided to put it out, thanks to her sister, she printed a limited number of copies and went to a limited number of bookstores. Didn’t matter that her book was a fucking masterpiece. It was *her* process.”

“And her first reading turned out to be in one of your stores.” An idea spurred at that, taking shape in my head. “At Delia’s.”

“It did, but she didn’t know it was mine back then, remember?” His words were rushed as he realized he set me off onto a completely wrong path than what he intended. “Kyle, it’s really beside the point now.”

It might’ve been beside the point, yet I felt like it’d gotten me to a better conclusion. If I managed to convince Hunter in less than a day to agree to interact on social media, I could try to convince Elsie to do something much less intrusive.

Something where her privacy would be guarded, where she could gauge readers’ reactions from the sidelines. Something that would possibly bring us a step closer together too.

“Heard you loud and clear.” My forefinger hovered over the *end* button. “Go to Alda, and hopefully you won’t be so *busy* that I’ll see you both soon.”

“Kyle—”

“Gotta go.” I hung up, stripping off the rest of my clothes and climbing into bed where after long hours, my mind finally turned off.



I called Elsie’s office the next morning. Sending an email was for people who handled attributes like patience well.

Not me. Not when my brilliant idea kept me up at night, pounding inside my brain, begging to be let out. I already had

one surprise I'd been bottling up the past couple of days, waiting another moment with a second one wasn't an option.

Isabelle transferred the call to a hesitant-sounding Elsie. "Kyle?"

"It's me." I leaned back in the wooden chair of my dining area, overlooking the neighborhood through the paned window. Most of my time in the house was spent sitting in this very corner, absorbing the sun as it cast its light on me.

With Elsie on the other line, it seemed special, like talking to her slowed time. Like it was all I needed.

That was, before she charged on, giving me a string of unneeded apologies. "I'm sorry about last night, about fainting then accusing you of drugging me. What a fucking shitshow. You know how things usually feel better in the morning? Well, for me, they felt worse. Much worse. I can't believe the fucking scene I made."

Hearing her curse every other sentence or ramble was new. The contradiction of her sweet voice spitting out cuss words came off strange, and yet a sick part of me liked it.

What I liked less was why she said them.

"Time out." I raised my hand to stop her, not caring that she couldn't see it. "You did nothing wrong. I was kidding yesterday, no need to apologize. You can't be too careful these days."

"Kyle, I didn't mean to—"

"And another thing, if I would've woken up like that after you convinced me to go to my apartment at night, I probably would've come to a similar conclusion."

Her casual laughter wafted through the phone. A relief. "I do give out predator vibes."

"Yeah, you do." She had no idea how true that sentence was, how even though I wanted to pounce on her, I'd been the one to be the prey. The fish she caught in her net.

“So, what did you call about?” After clearing up the situation, the nerves nearly evaporated from her tone.

However, I changed my mind about delivering my plan like this, over the phone. There were subtler ways to handle it. “I’m calling because I forgot to tell you that Natalie, Hunter, and I met yesterday.”

“That was fast. Perfect. How did it go? Jada wasn’t there?”

“No, she had personal business.” I heaved a breath, coming up with an excuse to see her. “Want to do lunch? I can tell you about it then.”

“I’d love to, but I can’t. I’m juggling a buttload of upcoming releases, and I’ll be eating at my desk until Thanksgiving.”

A challenge. I thrived on challenges.

“Dinner then?”

“Late dinner.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Miss Jenkins.” The mashup of what remained of my Boston accent and the Southern one I tried to achieve brought on another bout of Elsie’s soft laughter. “Text me when you’re done; I’ll come by the office.”

I glanced at the screen, checking the call hadn’t been disconnected, when her voice said, “See you later, Mr. Turner.”



Elsie nearly staggered into me when I appeared in the doorway of her office. “Weren’t you supposed to meet me in the lobby?”

She hadn’t seen me coming, not even through the offices’ glass doors. The entire floor was dark, the rest of the employees had gone home. I wore an all-black outfit, which explained why she walked into me head-on. Though she didn’t

look scared—no gasp, no yelp, no quickened breaths. Like she made out it was me without seeing my face.

In the short days we'd spent in each other's company, a shift transpired between us. I liked her just as much if not more minus the stumbling on my two left feet part, and she... I thought it was safe to say she liked me back.

"I figured since it was late, you'd rather eat in."

I held up the takeout bag, expecting a happy response since she must've had lunch hours ago. There was none coming from her. Elsie gnawed on her bottom lip, eyes cast down to the floor.

Some unresolved feelings from last night must have lingered. Another reason why we had to have this meeting in person. Here, beside her, I could study her mannerisms, resolve her apprehensions instead of bombard her with my ideas.

"I'm not complaining about the hour, Els. It just made more sense to cut short the time of walking to a place, waiting for our order." I tilted my head, applying a teasing tone. "Having you admire my spectacular taste in restaurants."

"Okay. Very efficient of you." The spark reappeared in her eyes, alleviating my worries. "What's for dinner? I'm starving."

She turned the lights back on, the harsh fluorescent not bothering me in the slightest. On the contrary, seeing more of Elsie, the soft curve of her nose, her pink full lips, her flawless skin, all of her, was something I didn't think I'd ever get enough of.

She removed her faux-fur leopard print coat, staying in an AC/DC faded black T-shirt and a black miniskirt that if not for her tights would've exposed her shapely legs. As if that outfit needed anymore sexy as fuck elements, she paired it with high-heeled black boots that brought her another four inches or so closer to my face.

When she turned to walk to the desk, I was once more struck by the sight of her hair flipping back. She wore it loose down her back, every step swaying her locks from one side to the other.

“Are you going to keep me guessing?” She cut through my thoughts, the sound of her lowering to her chair jolting me to the present moment.

“Ramen,” I blurted out, praying my quick response would conceal the tension in my silence.

“Love it.” She hadn’t acknowledged me staring at her, sitting behind her desk casually.

She cleared the wooden top of books, bookmarks, and other book-related accessories. I waited for her, then placed the bag on top of her desk, taking out the paper containers.

What was left of the steam rose from our bowls. A low hum of approval poured from Elsie’s closed lips. “I’ve been dreaming about a hot dinner. You read my mind.”

“It’s part of the job, to anticipate what my”—I caught myself from saying clients. Calling a woman I liked a client, especially when she had no desire being one, ranked low on my list of romantic gestures—“friends’ dreams are.”

Elsie played around with her chopsticks, scooping up noodles then letting them drop to the bowl. “Yes, you do.”

We ate in an amicable silence for a while as I stared deep into my bowl. The alternative, looking at Elsie sucking on those noodles turned me on in ways it really shouldn’t have.

When I’d downed half the meal, positive the soothing effects of the food had calmed her down, I said in an indifferent tone, “So. As a person who can read his friends, I think there’s more to your dreams than a hot meal.”

She sighed, her chopsticks clanging on the desk as they fell from her fingers. “Please don’t. We’re here to talk about Hunter.”

“We will.” I implemented my most reassuring stare, placing both palms flat down on the desk. “Hunter is great. He’s in the most capable hands. When Natalie sets her sights on a goal, she’ll stop at nothing.”

“Reminds me of someone,” Elsie murmured.

“Hear me out for a second.” With her walls up, I pushed back, accommodating a less threatening stance. “I have a suggestion on how to prove to you that more people will love your work without you being exposed.”

Her hands worked on pinning her long waves into a bun using a pen froze in the air. “More—more people?”

“Yes, they won’t see you at all and—”

“M—more?” The pen, like the chopsticks, was released from her hold, diving to the floor.

I barely noticed it. Elsie’s face draining of color took up my entire focus.

No, no. No. Not again.

Yesterday’s memories sprung me to my feet, shoving my chair behind me and to the floor. I rushed to her side and supported her, holding her shoulder, and swiping away strands of hair that clung to the beads of sweat on her forehead.

“Elsie? Elsie, I’m here. Breathe.”

I massaged her back, rubbing calming circles over the tight muscles. I didn’t apologize. Didn’t lie to her that I wouldn’t bring it up in the future. If anything, it propelled me to dig deeper, find every way possible to take her out of this loop.

She drew in a lengthy breath, the blood returning to her cheeks slowly. “I’d like to go home.”

“I’ll call an Uber.” My fingers worked on their own while my gaze remained fixed on her.

“Don’t.” She craned her neck, finding my eyes. “I’ll walk. A walk would do me good.”

“Sure,” I answered, immobile.

“And Kyle?”

“Yeah?”

We were inches apart. The dark blue rim around her eyes vibrated, a crackling ring of fire, sparkling and turning. Her pupils dilated. She parted her lips, sweeping her tongue on the lower one and fuck me, I craved to be that tongue.

“I’m sorry.”

I slid my hand up her spine, wrapping my fingers around her gentle, soft neck. Elsie’s pulse thrummed wildly, throbbing against my fingertips. A heavy haze of arousal clouded my senses, and in that moment, Elsie transformed from a person into *everything*.

Everything I wanted to touch, everything I dreamed of feeling, everything I desired to attain.

I found it all in her.

Life advanced in slow motion as I placed my other hand on the arm of her chair, spinning her toward me. She glided up, not needing the tug of my hand around her nape to encourage her.

I pulled her to me inelegantly. My manners were stripped off me, leaving me with an all-consuming need to have her.

The attraction commanded my movements. I was incapable of holding back. Lost in the mere existence of her, my self-control wilted away. I lowered my head, cupping her cheek, feeling her velvety skin heat beneath my callous fingers.

My lips brushed hers. Her following gasp sounded as sweet as it was so fucking erotic.

“Don’t be, ever,” were my final words before I devoured her mouth. I inhaled her like a man taking his last breath—dire, tumbling. Famished.

My thumb rubbed her jawline, my muscles clenching, pinning her to me. Never stopping, never ending, an infinite

well of want I could no longer restrain.

She parted her lips for me, and I sunk deeper into her. I growled when her tongue lapped over mine, savoring the sweet taste of her. Being with her like this was too much, yet not nearly enough.

Every stroke of her tongue got me harder, greedier, insatiable. I reached back, knocking the chair to the side, the sound of it clanging on the floor barely registering over our moans and grunts.

She paced back, kissing me harder as I followed her. We were inseparable, her fingers digging into my biceps, mine roaming through her hair. The long, thick strands of red waves that drove me nuts were nothing like what I'd imagined they'd be like. They were silk, unfurling over and over, under, and all around my rugged fingers.

We banged into the wall of her office in a few short steps. Before Elsie's back hit the glass, I slid my palm to the back of her head, shielding her from the blow. I tugged lightly on her hair, angling her head up higher while not breaking our kiss, not for anything.

My body pressed into hers, aware that she could feel me hard beneath my jeans, how my cock ached for her.

And I couldn't stay still. My hips started rolling into her in measured, deliberate strokes. I controlled the pace, thrusting slowly to find the spot where it rubbed against her clit and made her moan. Her hands responded, shoved inside my jacket, fisting my shirt.

It set me off to give her more of that friction she'd asked of me. My hand, the one that wasn't protecting her head from the wall trailed down her body until it closed around the hem of her skirt.

Her very, very short skirt.

I hiked it up, settling between her legs. Elsie moaned in my mouth, arching her back and leaning deeper into my touch. My palm coursed from her hips to her waist, skimming the side of

her breasts, flexing my fingers on the clothes I wished to tear off her.

My erection fucking hurt with how much I wanted her, but not just to fuck her. I wanted to *have* her. And that made me stop everything.

I broke our kiss in the middle, pressing my forehead to hers, our breaths hot and shallow.

I couldn't go on, not when I fully understood that kissing Elsie meant much more to me than the physical aspect. Kissing her was the pinnacle of what began as attraction, grew to fondness, and what could very well be the gate to real intimacy.

That was some heavy shit. And I wanted her to know it. Somewhere where we didn't have to hurry, where I could take my time with her. Where I could talk to her.

Her eyes fluttered open halfway, her palms massaging my pecs. "Something happened?"

If I planted my lips on her mouth again, my resolve would fail. It barely hung on a thread as it was. I adjusted myself and kissed the tip of her nose. "Too much. All good things."

She jutted out her lip, testing my willpower. It was adorable, and it was meant for me.

My heart freaking soared.

"We have all the time in the world." I brushed the space between her eyebrows with my lips, kissing away the wrinkles. Releasing her hadn't been easy, but it had to be done.

"This isn't a one-off thing, I promise you."

That seemed to appease her. She nodded. "Okay."

My hands straightened her skirt, my eyes holding on to hers for a while longer.

"Thank you, Mr. Turner." Her mouth curved up in a rueful smile.

I smiled back, the name growing on me. It stopped being the wall between us; it changed into a term of endearment. Something completely ours.

“Let’s take you home, Miss Jenkins.”

“Yes.” She pulled me in for a brilliantly suffocating hug, making my heart implode from in my chest. “Let’s.”

CHAPTER NINE

Elsie

JUSTINE PULLED open the door to our apartment while I worked on turning the key inside the lock.

“You’re late,” she exclaimed then leaned her head forward, examining me. “Your lips are swollen. Explain, please.”

My fingertips explored my sensitive mouth, recalling as well as feeling the mind-blowing kiss Kyle and I shared less than fifteen minutes ago. A smile snaked on my face when I remembered the other things he’d done to me.

“Kyle,” I spoke against my fingers, unable to let go of the memory of him.

“Eeep! Finally!” She jumped up and down, her messy bun bouncing along with her. “Tell me every single detail.”

I sidestepped her into the apartment, hung my bag, unzipped my boots, kicking them off as I treaded into the kitchen. “We kissed, that’s all.”

“Wait.” She appeared by my side, her silk pajamas grazing my arm as she stood so close. “What about yesterday? You said you didn’t do anything here. Or did you...?”

The colorful Skittles packet caught my eye among the rest of the candy in the drawer and I withdrew it. “We didn’t.”

“Elster...”

Putting the Skittles on our clean white counter, I turned my head to her. “In the seven years we’ve been friends, what have I ever hid from you?”

“Nothing. Wait.” She paused, scratching her chin. “Yes, there was something.”

Ah, yes. That one time. I moved us both to the dining table, adamant to return the focus to my ritual. “It doesn’t count. I was shocked, and I told you the next day. Can we not bring him up?”

“Fine, fine. No mentioning the asshole.” She sat after I did, motioning to the candy. “Count me in. Wait, whose release is tomorrow?”

Green, red, orange, yellow, and purple in a row. Two of them.

My phone rang as I opened my mouth to answer. My sister Hayley’s number flashed on the screen, one of the few people in the universe I’d allow to come between me and my ceremony.

I accepted the video call, happy to see not just her but all three of my siblings sitting in their shared apartment in Chicago. “Hydra.”

Floyd sighed; Alexander rolled his eyes. Hayley tossed a strand of her strawberry blonde hair back and said, “Els, you have to stop force-feeding us this joke.”

“Who said it’s a joke?” Justine and I snickered at her comment.

Floyd spoke as I made my way back to the table. “So mature.”

“We are.” Justine stuck her tongue out at my brother.

“Then act like it,” Alexander threw in wryly.

Out of the four of us siblings, he claimed the role of the sullen one. His serious character was part of the reasons he did so well in college and got accepted to med school.

It was also why Justine enjoyed fucking with him. “What’s that, Alexander? A new pimple on your forehead? Do you need Elsie to fly over and rock you to sleep when senior year gets too overwhelming?”

She hit her mark. Alexander filled the screen, his hand swiping at his short blond curls, the only one who took after our mother completely in the hair department. His eyebrows lowered, his frown deepened, searching for that nonexistent zit.

He elbowed Floyd whose laughter had him shaking, then his own lips twitched. “Hilarious. So, what are you two witches doing? Another one of your book release voodooos?”

“How did I miss the Skittles?” Hayley pushed her glasses up her nose and zoomed in, her blue eyes lighting up. “Hold up, you sent me an advanced copy. It’s that sex on a stick, Gabriel Brown.”

“Hayley!” We yelled in unison. All four of us.

“I’m entitled to my own opinions. And my words.” Her mouth scrunched in determination, glancing from our brothers to us. “He is very”—Alexander gave her a harsh stare and she waved him off—“hot.”

Gabriel was, in fact, handsome. And talented. And very close to perfect. Justine and I tried pairing him with Alda this summer, which ended up in an epic failure. No one stood a chance where Noah was concerned, not for Alda who’d kept it a secret back then.

“What sort of journalist are you planning to be with that language?” I scoffed.

Floyd came to her rescue, like he always had. “It’s not her, it’s Suri.”

“Oh, come on, Floyd.” Hayley turned to him, rolling her eyes. “We’ve been friends since sophomore year, it’s not that. You’re just...upset she’s dating someone.”

“He’s not good for her.”

“Neither is a guy who can’t bring himself to ask her out for two years straight.”

My little brother blushed.

“Burn.” Alexander took his turn in mocking his brother.

Alex, unlike Floyd, didn’t bother suppressing laughter his brother. I watched their interactions, entranced. I had no idea Floyd liked this girl, and we were close.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Floyd switched his focus to me. “Elsie, I’m right, aren’t I? Since she’s not talking like herself, it has to be *her* influence.”

These three were more or less my children. Thus, I never took a side. Better yet, I diverted us back to the topic that conjured this whole mess, leaving Hayley’s *sexy* comment out.

“To answer your question, Hayley, yes. It’s Gabriel’s launch.”

“Ugh, this *Raptured, Fractured* book broke my heart. Out of the other two books he wrote, that one hurt so, so good.” She placed a hand dramatically over her forehead and flopped on her bed.

“I pretty much figured you liked it from the gazillion texts and GIFs that said *Send help*.” I snickered. “And the gushing review. Theatrical, but I loved it.”

Justine gasped. “It’s *that* one? Seriously, I have the worst memory. Fuck Skittles, this guy might’ve needed them in the past but this one, nope. Dude had God on his side while writing it.”

I narrowed my gaze at her. “Don’t blaspheme thy Skittles.”

“I won’t,” Floyd chimed in. “Not when one of the agents I sent my anthology to picks it up; we’ll all sit here quietly and eat any candy you like.” He then lowered his voice, his expression turning soft. “Like we’ll do when you release your book.”

Anger boiled in me, bemused as to why he’d mention it. Out of the three of them, Floyd, the poet, was the only one who I thought could relate to my issue. I confided in him, confessing that this book had zero chances of seeing the light of day. And what did he do? Played manipulation games to

coerce me to do it. It upset me, yet for whatever reason it didn't drain the air from my lungs like it did whenever Kyle and I had discussed it.

Strange.

Justine, the other person who knew my book issues, acted with a tad more sensitivity, rubbing my arm. "Yeah, when you're ready."

"I will be," I said through clenched teeth, bottling inside the rest of the sentence that held the words *never* or *not in this lifetime*.

"It's okay, Els." Hayley comforted me far away from the Windy City. "Floyd meant someday, not tomorrow."

"Exactly," he agreed.

"Take your time, Elsie," Alexander chimed in, foreign warmth tainting his voice.

Tears welled behind my eyes, any semblance of anger I had for these little monsters who weren't so little anymore was thrown out the window. I missed being around them under one roof, missed hugging them until they'd push me off.

I couldn't let them see me break. I'd been the caretaker of the three, and no matter how old they were, I refused to have the roles reversed. "Have you talked to Dad lately? I'm already counting down the days until Christmas."

"Can I join this year?" Justine squeezed my hand beneath the table. I peeked at her and she winked. "I haven't seen Daddy Lester in person since we were in college."

"Ew," came from Floyd.

"Please don't," was Alexander, covering his eyes.

Hayley grunted. "I'm going to have nightmares. Daddy Lester."

And while these three were busy gagging, I shot my friend a smile, mouthing *Thank you*.



“Elsie, stop worrying, I’m okay,” Gabriel calmed me from his end over the phone.

Me, worrying. On his release day. The irony.

I called him as soon as I reposted a bunch of favorable reviews on our Instagram account and checked that the ads we ran were working as planned, expecting to hear worry or excitement. I heard neither. Instead, he sounded blasé, and blasé on such a monumental date usually implied things weren’t right.

Kyle’s insinuation that I’d been slacking off of my job still burned, even if he’d apologized for it. It nagged at me, continuously keeping me alert.

I refused to have Gabriel dissatisfied with me, so I insisted, “You can tell me if something doesn’t sit right with you. There’s plenty of time to fix it. I can do it.”

His clipped and melancholy laugh didn’t quiet my concerns. “You’re great, really. I’m impressed and grateful, and there’s nothing more you can do.”

A message lit up my phone, one of many today, a consecutive one flashing a second after. While I tended not to text while talking, the content of these two succinct notifications virtually forced my hand to check them out.

Unlisted Number: *Good luck today with Gabriel!*

Unlisted Number: *btw it’s Kyle. Hi.*

My eyes squinted as I rummaged through my thoughts, trying to remember when I’d given him my number. The gray matter of my brain held nothing except blissful memories of lips, and breaths, and pressed-together limbs, followed by me being starry-eyed up until the moment he dropped me at my door. No numbers.

And when I considered it, I arrived to the conclusion that I didn't care how he obtained it, I only cared that he wrote. I typed out a quick reply, just to show a sign of life and return to Gabriel.

Me: *Hi!*

"Elsie, you there?" Gabriel asked when the line went silent.

"Yeah, I'm here, sorry." My hand and eyes were glued to my cellphone. I programmed Kyle's number into my contact list, about to put it aside when another message arrived.

Kyle: *Isabelle gave me your number.*

I dumped my head into my hand. Did the whole office really have to be in on the fact that we were dating? Or starting to date? How unprofessional would that make me look?

Almost as unprofessional if I zoned out during a conversation with one of our authors.

"Maybe," I talked in a haze, then blinked away the Kyle-induced excitement. Gabriel was troubled and I'd wanted to see what I could do for him. "Maybe you can drop by later? We'll have celebratory lunch, wherever you choose."

"Not in the mood today."

Another message courtesy of Kyle's mind-reading abilities came through.

Kyle: *Which I asked for about work related stuff.*

"Listen, I appreciate it. There's no need though." Gabriel cut through my thoughts, stopping me in time from exhaling a relieved sigh. "I'm going to take the rest of the morning off. Will post the stuff you sent me in the afternoon."

Leaving him to cope on his own didn't sit well with me. However, there was only so much coercing one could do to a twenty-seven-year-old man. "Okay, I'll be available if you need me."

"Okay."

As soon as we hung up, I texted Kyle.

Me: *Great, sorry for the delay, was on the other line.*

I hit *send*, unsure what else to say. A knot formed in my stomach, nervous he might approach the idea of the reading from last night again, not while there was no one there to catch me.

“Morning.” Ben knocked on my door, shooting me one of his excited grins.

Promptly, I flipped the phone on its screen. “I’m guessing you’ve seen the sales?”

“I’m seeing them spike, yes.” His lips nearly tore at his cheeks when he occupied the seat in front of me.

Besides the pleasing news about the numbers, I had to reassure him that I was on top of everything else. “I got off the phone with Gabriel a minute ago and I’m answering emails as fast as I can. If anything goes wrong, I’m here.”

“That’s why I trust you.” He tugged at the sleeves of his pale blue shirt. “Brief me on Hunter Owens and Kyle.”

Good thing he said Hunter’s name first, or I would’ve blacked out for sure. How could I have been so careless, so absorbed in that feeling of Kyle that I’d conveniently put aside the fact that we were mauling each other at my workplace. Never again.

But alas, Ben hadn’t come here to reproach me for my late-night kissing session. He wanted to discuss a client’s progress. I smoothed over any creases in my ivory long-sleeved T-shirt and plaid skirt, pushed back my shoulders, and treated this like any other meeting. Ben nodded and seemed pleased as I relayed Kyle’s and my strategy, only clenching his jaw once at the mention of Natalie. He didn’t elaborate, and I chose to ignore it since she and I had worked well together in the past.

“Hunter will get very far.” My boss interlaced his fingers, tapping one thumb over the other. “Do you like working with

Kyle? Aside from agreeing on a plan of action, are you getting along with him?"

As if with the snap of a finger, the room's temperature spiked. In a desperate attempt to fend off the surge of blush creeping up my neck, I curled my hair in a bun, then reached for a pen to lock it in place. "Why do you ask?"

"Last week, he was somewhat...how do I say it?" Ben tucked his black hair behind his ear. He glanced up and to the side, tapping his thumb over the other one absentmindedly, then averted his gaze back to me. "Assertive with you."

My thighs were caught on fire where Kyle laid his palm yesterday, shoving my skirt up my leg where I'd needed him. "He's okay."

Ben leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Elsie, you need to tell me if someone, anyone, is not treating you right. I know you can handle anything I throw your way. However, I won't tolerate anyone being aggressive toward my employees."

"No, don't worry. That's not the case here." I shook my head fiercely, hoping the movement would disperse the heat that had settled up to my ears. "He apologized for Thursday; I'm good, I swear."

Kyle was more than okay. He was a powerful man who worked his sinewy muscles to pin me against the wall. A skillful expert of touch who just from stroking me above my clothes had me wet and ready for him.

An otherworldly kisser who...oh for fuck's sake, how did the room get even hotter? I picked up the lightest folder on my table, fanning my scorching face.

"Finally, someone agrees with me on the offices being overheated. I'll go talk to them today."

If he only knew.

"Anyway, I'm glad you two are getting along. I'd hate to lose Kyle."

“Because of Noah?” I despised the saying *special client*, dreaded the idea that Ben favored Kyle because of Noah alone and not for his virtues.

“Having him sign Noah’s book and future ones was great, I won’t deny it. It’s not just that, though. I wouldn’t praise Kyle if he was a one-trick pony. This guy is more like the author’s Midas. I’ve seen firsthand how his belief in an author guarantees they’ll be a success.”

My eyes widened of their own accord at the unexpected answer from Ben. An outsider who wasn’t in on Kyle’s persuasions, who trusted him blindly. His confidence in Kyle made mine falter, not so sure anymore that he’d said he loved my writing because he liked me.

Ben stood, his wise, black eyes smiling before his lips parted. “All right. I’m off to a one-on-one with my father. I hope I don’t need to explicitly say it to you of all people, though it never hurt to repeat myself—my door is always open for you.”

“Thanks. Give Mr. Frost my best.”

“Will do.”

The door hadn’t even closed behind Ben when I reached for my phone, keen to see if Kyle had sent me any messages. He had.

Kyle: *No worries. Can I pick you up when you’re done for dinner and a celebration?*

I stared at the screen, scanning and rescanning it. The uncomfortable blush that rose to my cheeks when Ben sat before me transformed into the sweetest stimulus that burst from my forehead down to my toes.

The message shouldn’t have thrown me into such a spin, not when Kyle showed me he cared about more than just helping me tap into my inner author, and yet it did. It absolutely did, and I loved every second of it. My fingertips ran across the phone, typing the easiest answer I ever had to give.

Me: *I'll wrap up at 9. C U then.*

CHAPTER TEN

Kyle

“FUCK ME.”

Elsie fucking Jenkins stepped out the elevators like she owned the building. Each stride in her high heels, each sway of her hips, the look she gave me—they were enough to force me to stop in their place at the entrance.

Add to that her sensuality, the casual way she reached behind her head, plucked out the pencil that’d held her hair in a bun and let it flow to her shoulders. Waves undulated from left to right as she shook her head, the scent of her perfume wafting through the air the closer she got...

Fuck me.

“You said something?”

At that moment, in that place, with that girl whose aquamarine eyes stared right back, I refused to repeat the words or say another fucking thing before I kissed her.

I gripped her wrist, walked us out into the cold street, and turned to face her, hovering over her. Her cheeks were hidden by my hands when I cradled her beautiful face, my fingers digging into her scalp, feeling her hair part for me.

With the minimum amount of pressure, I tilted her head up and dipped my lips to Elsie’s.

She gasped and gripped the lapels of my leather jacket, tugging me to her as we moved in unison. I took another step toward her, biting and pulling lips, sucking tongues, finding each other each time anew. I tasted her, nipped her, took whatever she had to offer.

In the twenty-four hours we'd been apart, I'd missed everything about her. My desperation showed through the growl that reverberating in my chest in contrast to her softness.

She responded by fastening her hold on me, drawing me in further even when we were attached from our hips to our heaving chests. Her needs were mine. Her longing was mine. One day, she'd be too.

With a final stroke of her tongue over my bottom lip, she released my mouth. We breathed heavily, puffs of condensation exchanging between us. Her hands moved to the inside of my jacket in an embrace, my thumbs stroking her skin in lazy circles.

My eyes were trained on hers, my nose nuzzling hers. "I said, fuck me."

"That's um—well—very forward."

"Not that kind of fuck me."

It made sense that she'd think that. As I still worked on leveling my racing pulse, my tone sounded flat, a command. I smirked, stealing another kiss from her and correcting myself, "Like, you're fucking beautiful."

Her eyes shimmered, reflecting streetlamp above us and then some. Heat brewed in my stomach, traveling up my chest and encircling my heart. I brought on that glint.

"Less forward," she said eventually. "I still like it, though."

There were a fuckload of forward and inappropriate suggestions from where that came from, ranging from sweet to downright filthy. All of which would have to wait until after dinner.

I slid my hand down her arm, linking our fingers as I hailed a taxi that drove past us.

Talk about a lucky night. I gave the driver the name of the place, asking him to take us to the JazzBrazz.

Elsie squeezed my hand, eyeing me suspiciously once the taxi started driving. “I get how you found my number from Isabelle—”

“You’d rather I hadn’t?” I cocked an eyebrow, unable to stop myself from teasing her.

But Elsie played the teasing game way better than I ever could. She leaned forward toward me, her breasts pressed into my arm, the tip of her tongue gliding inside the shell of my ear.

Hot breaths wafted to my skin. I nearly cracked my jaw in half I clamped it so tight.

“Does it look like I don’t like it?”

Consumed by the need to fuck her, I slanted my eyes to the side. I could do nothing but shake my head in response.

“Because I do.” Her low laugh tumbled out of her as she settled back into her seat, sexy in that aura of confidence she wore.

Sharing a vehicle with another person was the one thing that restrained me from leaping to her and kissing her lips to infinity.

“What I was trying to say is there’s no big mystery there. How did you know I love JazzBrazz?”

“Call it a lucky guess.”

It was. It was also romantic without being over the top, and exactly what I’d been looking for today. Lucky.

“Umm, duh. I’m a Chicago girl. I risked faking my ID to get inside the clubs and listen to live jazz music when I was in high school.”

I couldn’t contain my laughter if I tried. “No shit?”

She bit her lip, her head bobbing up and down.

My short laugh quickly simmered down. “Didn’t realize I was dating an outlaw.”

Her head ceased its movements; her eyes grew unbearably large.

I placed a soft kiss on her forehead, then locked her gaze to my very serious one. “I’m not playing, Miss Jenkins. I plan on giving us a serious chance to become a very serious thing.”

She pursed her lips, opened them, then snapped them shut again. I hadn’t moved, hadn’t breathed, expecting her response to a declaration I’d been dying to say.

Her voice was shaky when she found herself. “Awesome, we’re dating. Awesome.”

I lowered my voice, cloaking my features in a somber expression. “We’re not talking marriage.”

“Not marriage.”

“No.” I lowered my chin, fluttering my lashes, the last remainders of my seriousness lost. “Although, in case you change your mind, ever since I was a little boy, I’ve been dreaming of a pear-shaped diamond for when a girl finally proposes.”

That comment wiped off the flabbergasted look she’d had, and earned me a punch in the arm. The air in the cab lightened just as he’d pulled over outside the bar-restaurant. I got out first, holding out my hand for her, keeping our fingers entwined even after the taxi left.

We made it there after the show had already started, upbeat jazz tunes spilled into the quiet street. The hostess led us inside, passing through the vast entrance, the bar, and then to the sitting area.

I caught a glimpse of Elsie mouthing the words to the song in tandem with the singer, her grin immovable. Someone bumped their shoulder into me and I couldn’t bring myself to care. Probably wouldn’t have given a damn if the hostess would’ve told us she had no tables and the remaining option was to stand.

Elsie looked happy and that was why we came here. That was all I'd wanted.

Although it never came down to that. We did have seats. The intimate space that housed the show at the back of the bar had a small stage and three rows of low tables. We were directed to the last available spot in the back, the menus landing on the wooden top. I pulled a chair out for Elsie who glimpsed at me, and if her eyes glinted before, they sparkled now.

She definitely wasn't lying about loving this place. Her attention diverted back to the stage once I sat down, fixated on the singer, on her smooth voice and how the saxophone, trumpet, and drums complemented it.

Our waitress returned a while later. "What can I get you?"

Elsie replied, foregoing checking the menu, "I'll have the JazzBerried Fizz."

I, unlike her, didn't have a favorite. I skated my eyes across the names of the drinks, searching for the one Elsie ordered. There it was—a mixture of champagne, vodka, cranberries, and lime juice.

"Make it two."

"Anything to eat?"

"We'll need a few more minutes."

The waitress left us, and I tilted my head at Elsie. "Bold choice."

She reenacted that predatory lean into my ear, her palm enveloping my thigh, fingers digging into me. "The release went as planned today. I wanted to celebrate and that's their only cocktail that has champagne in it."

We were concealed by the darkness and the location of our table, allowing her to place it high away from sight. Her deliberate touch was too close to my groin, her sweet fragrance making my eyes roll in their sockets.

The dimly lit and loud locale ensured no one saw the shift in my jeans or heard my grunt when she inched her hand higher, not one person except Elsie.

Any remnants of my self-control evaporated. I seized the back of her neck, pinning her cheek to mine. Her surprised gasp felt like silk traveling down my neck, the sound I remembered hearing when I'd kissed her pulsating in my spine.

My lips were pressed to her ear, my face drowning in her locks. I inhaled deeply, taking in her musky scent, reveling in her. "Is that all you're celebrating?"

From beneath the table, I mirrored her move, flexing my hand on her thigh, riding it under the hem of her plaid black and blue skirt. She shivered, her palm loosening her hold on me. Mine, in turn, gripped harder.

"Maybe something else." Her eyelids fluttered on my temple, setting it aflame.

Venturing higher beneath her skirt, I felt the lace at the top of her black thigh-highs. Not tights like she had on yesterday. Black fucking thigh-highs with fucking lace. Warmth coiled in my stomach, a hot ball of fire. My dick strained harder against my jeans, plagued by vivid images of her in them and nothing else.

That and the garters I'd traced my fingers over.

"Something at the office? Someone?" I spoke through clenched teeth, in physical pain. But we were here, and playing with her was the sole source of relief I'd had available.

"Someone," she played along, indulging me in this game.

The singer laid off the mic to give way for the band to improvise, the timbre of the saxophone sounding louder than those of the other instruments. It reached high notes as I reached the hem of her panties, caressed our ears as I did the lace edges of it. Elsie pressed her legs together and clung to my shoulder, her tiny palm surprisingly strong.

“There you go.” The waitress placed our drinks on the table, her presence breaking our connection.

Tearing myself from Elsie could’ve been torture if not for the lust-filled eyes that welcomed me as I drew from her. They were gentle yet greedy, and never stirred away from mine as I placed the cocktail in her hand.

“To someone,” she said when our glasses clinked together.

“To someone,” I reiterated, downing half the drink in one gulp.

The champagne’s bubbles contrasted the smoothness of the vodka, the cranberry juice delicious as it went down my throat. The whole drink was some kind of an analogy to Elsie’s character, but I was getting too poetic for my own good so I shut that thought out.

Elsie sipped hers slowly, wiping off the sweet residue. I got rid of my own glass, setting it down and rising to my feet. I cradled Elsie’s jaw in my palm, running the pad of my thumb on her lips. Upper one first, then the bottom, watching the fullness of them stretch beneath me.

“Let’s dance,” I asked her.

I wasn’t much of a dancer. Slow dances though, in line with the changing tune of the band, I could try. It’d bring me closer to her, and I wouldn’t pass on that.

We maneuvered through the tables to the thin strip between the stage and the seating that the restaurant allotted for dancing. I watched another couple close by, figuring out hand placements when Elsie saved me the trouble.

She interlaced her fingers behind my neck, the trust in her eyes telling me what I’d needed to do without words. My arms found their place around her small waist, pressing her to me as we moved our hips slowly from side to side.

“This is nice.” I bent lower to brush my lips to the tip of her nose.

“You say it like it’s a surprise.”

“It’s sort of a surprise. I’ve never slow danced until now.” I dipped her lower, giving her neck an open-mouthed kiss, then murmuring in her ear, “You basically deflowered me.”

“Not even on prom night?” She attempted talking through the growing need, the words coming in spurts in a form of a breathy voice.

I returned to my full height, admitting a part of my younger years that I wasn’t proud of. “Nope, got too drunk to go.”

“Ah-ha.” She pulled her lips in, suppressing a short giggle that escaped her mouth. “Then I guess I’m dating a criminal, too.”

Hearing *her* say we were dating, free of her earlier hesitation, twisted my insides, heating my skin. Our kiss ended fast, given we were front and center, leaving me wanting more. By the look on Elsie’s eyes, she’d wanted it too.

She applied pressure on my nape, her grasp pulling me to her and pinning our bodies together. Her movements stilled, her eyes mirroring my ravenous ones, the burning desire that poured from them.

“We can resume your slow-dance classes at your place.”

I settled the check as the waiter passed us by, not interested in change for a hundred, not minding the dinner we skipped.

As it did before, and as I’d hoped it would in the future, what mattered most was Elsie.



We didn’t actually get to the private dancing class.

I did, however, have a short time frame where I managed to put on music in the background. Lenny Kravitz’s playlist came on, a list I used to hear at the end of a long day to calm me down from my intense line of work. They were also sensual as fuck, as if I needed the incentive.

Elsie observed from where I'd left her beside the door, her gaze warming me even with my back turned to her. I connected my phone to the Bluetooth speakers in the living room, letting the beginning of "I Belong to You" wash over us.

I placed the phone down, almost being knocked over when I turned to her. Deep in need, the girl was beautiful.

As much as I craved giving her what she wanted, what I wanted, that skin on skin right there on the floor, I waited. For her. Elsie deserved to be cherished. I wanted us to feel it together, to go slow so that she'd feel each and every cell in her body ignited as I'd light them up from the inside out.

And when she'd come...fuck, I intended for half the neighborhood to wake up from her screams.

"Can I offer you more champagne? Continue the celebrations?"

Silently, she shook her head. Shoving herself from the wall, Elsie moved toward me. Her black wool coat came off and she slung it on one of the barstools without breaking eye contact.

"That means we're dancing?"

She covered the short gap it took to get to me. Three seductive steps, one foot in front of the other, thighs scraping as she gravitated toward me.

I held steady as she slid her hands under my jacket, relieving me of it. Didn't budge an inch when she glided her palms up behind my neck, stroking my short hair. Held really fucking steady after feeling her chest pressed to mine.

No one touched me from the first time I'd laid my eyes on Elsie months ago. Didn't want anyone else. And now I knew why.

"Do *you* want to dance?" she shot back, tugging me to her, taking my bottom lip in her teeth and scraping it lazily.

"Fuck no." I grunted, drowning out any inch of air between us, crushing her mouth with a searing kiss.

The weight of my craving for her was unleashed as my lips bruised hers, my tongue devouring her slowly, tasting her in a leisurely rhythm, having her desperately close while letting her absorb everything I did to her.

My blood ran hot for her, my hands slipping under her shirt, exploring, teasing. I dug into the flesh of her soft stomach inch by inch. The curves of her waist molded into my palms, her back bowed, her soft, impatient whimpers feeding the desire in me, tearing at the thin rope of want I'd been treading.

She possessed me completely the more I knew her, the more I touched her, the more she gave in to me. It went beyond logic, this burgeoning feral need, this deep understanding that I'd do anything for Elsie.

To be this captivated by another person, by this woman, it made no sense at all, but I was. I was hers. I'd give her pleasure. I'd give her all my fucks. I'd give her my goddamn heart.

By the time I'd tossed her shirt, my soul and my cock were in pain. I didn't waste a minute admiring her low-cut lace bra. I licked and nipped and bared my teeth down her tender neck as I snapped her bra open.

When I moved, it was just to let it slip to the floor. To have one less barrier between us, to feel her pebbled nipples when I dragged her back to my chest.

The songs changed in the background, and in a short moment of clarity, I thought why in the world did I think there was anything more erotic than Elsie's moans. They grew in urgency whenever I touched her, which was perfect because I had no intention of stopping to look for ways to pleasure her.

I grasped her neck, trailing the fingers of my other hand down her spine, landing at the top of her skirt. The zipper gave in easy, the skirt making a soft whooshing sound as it keeled to the floor.

My fingers flexed, getting a fill of her round ass. The garters, those that had me losing it back at the bar, scraped the inside of my palm, sending me into fucking oblivion.

Before I surrendered to it, I withdrew from her neck, leveling my gaze with her.

The epitome of beauty gazed at me from below, her eyes bathed with lust, her hot, swollen lips begging me to take them. I intended on offering her something even better and much, much hotter.

I placed a finger under her chin, tilting her head higher. “Don’t move. Even when you squirm, even when you’re desperate for me, I need you to not move unless I tell you to. I’m going to make you come so hard, Els, but you gotta stay still.”

She shuddered, breathing rather than saying, “So confident.”

“You know I am.” I sucked her lips one last time.

She nodded reflexively, her hands limp and willing when I brought them to my mouth, kissing the gentle insides of her wrists. I curled my fingers around her neck, her hot pulse thrumming beneath me. I spread them apart, sliding them down her chest, getting off on how wild her heart beat from what I did to her.

From there I kneaded each pink, taut nipple, feeling them harden the more pressure I applied. Elsie’s jaw slackened, her slightly agape mouth becoming the source of arousing, clipped gasps as she looked at me. Her eyes were unruly, the rest of her immobile for me.

The heat in my stomach intensified, raking at my chest, clawing at my throat, lashing out in my actions as I continued my exploration of Elsie. I flattened my hand on her belly, rounding her to the right, my hand trailing her naked body as I went.

Her shoulders rose and fell when I cradled the bottom of her breasts, a thin layer of goosebumps appearing on her

smooth back.

I traveled my other palm up her back, adjusting her hair to the front, leaving the right side bare for me. With the hold I had on her front, I pressed her whole body to me. I reeled from being pinned so fucking tight against her, from how she angled her head to the left, giving me access to reach her. I responded, kissing and suckling her shoulder, all the way up to her jawline.

Elsie's eyes snapped shut, her hands balling into fists and hitting the front of my thighs.

“You're doing so good that I'm willing to allow this one.” I growled into her neck, taking a bite from her, eliciting another choked, needy cry that was music to my ears. My hips swayed, driving into her, when an idea came to me. “I want you to do another something for me.”

Her head twisted, eyes opening in wonder. I moved my hand from her breasts to one of her fists, covering her palm and guiding her to her chest. She figured out what I'd wanted when I took her thumb and forefinger, massaging her nipple with them, but she hadn't moved before I spoke.

“Take care of them while I take care of your ass, baby,” was the last thing I said while I attached to her back, then drew away, firming my hands on her hips. “Now open up.”

She did as I asked, each leg inching away from the other, her arm flexing ever so slightly from rubbing herself. For a minute, or a whole lot fucking more, I gaped at her.

Her garter belt and thong were plain black and did absolutely nothing to cover her behind.

I'd felt it earlier, how little it left to the imagination, but there was no comparing to seeing it with my own two eyes. To watching the straps as they stretched on her butt, digging into her skin, the place where it clasped on her thigh-highs, it was better than any manmade art.

I ran my hand along her ass down that thin strap, slipping a finger right beneath the band and lifting it. Not too high so the

clasp wouldn't snap open, not too low either, so when I wrenched my hand, I'd hear that slapping sound on her butt.

This time, the growl didn't come from me. It came from her.

"You liked that," I stated.

Her hair bobbed lightly, her thighs squeezed as a response. I searched between her legs for just the right answer that I'd wanted, rubbing a finger over her thong.

"Fuck. Me."

Her panties were soaked, her legs clenching even tighter at the touch. I stroked her once, then again. But I had to stop, retreating from her heated center so I wouldn't lose my fucking mind. Not before I gave her more of what she wanted. I returned to her ass, circling the other cheek, curling a finger around the strap.

Lift. Hold. Snap.

Another sensual moan emanated from her, guttural and raw and slicing me down to my core. I rounded back to the first side, my palm warming the one I'd just left.

Lift. Hold. Snap.

More moans from the jolts of pain, more goosebumps breaking out on her skin.

Lift. Hold. Snap.

"Kyle, I need you."

Her hushed pleading was all it took for me to go to her. I circled over to her front in a slow, measured pace that didn't reflect the raging beat of my heart. I removed her hand from her chest, pulling her to me in one swipe, kissing her as if I missed kissing her for years.

As if I'd been waiting for her my whole life.

Leaving her sweet lips, my mouth traveled down her collarbone to the swell of her breasts. I caught Elsie when she

shivered, enveloping her with one arm while slowly dropping to my knees on the rug. Her hands moved to my shoulders, steadying herself.

Her tremors hadn't quieted completely, and I firmed my eyes on her while my palms closed on her inner thighs, my thumbs stroking the sides of her thong.

"Hold me tighter," I demanded, my nose a hairsbreadth from her pussy.

"Mm-hmm." Her clear eyes stared back at me, her fingers flexing on my shirt.

The tiny, black, cotton thong was the last clothing article in the way, physical *and* emotional. The sight of it collapsed my restraint, driving me into tearing it off her. I grabbed her butt and parted her lips, licking her from her wet slit up to her clit.

Elsie's head bowed forward, her hips jutting despite her attempts to grip me with everything she had. The pressure she applied on my shoulders felt like someone pressing the gas pedal, my tongue responding by tasting more of her, swirling around her swollen nub, sucking it between my teeth.

Her grip tightened, almost cutting through my shirt, exactly the response I'd been aiming for. I penetrated her with two fingers, her pussy tightening around me as I worked them inside her walls, searching for that sweet spot, the one that would make her come all over my face.

Elsie, the beautiful, all-consuming woman, unraveled under my touch. Watching her orgasm from my place on the floor was like watching a flower unfurl, opening to receive the sun, a gentle force of nature. I stayed on my knees, fascinated, until the final wave subsided.

Swiping from under her, I lifted her up, cradling her in my arms and kissing her forehead.

"Again." Her quiet voice contradicted the conviction of that one word.

“Just so we’re clear,” I started, walking us to my bedroom. “I did not roofie you at any point during the evening.”

“And that if it looks like I’m going to faint, it’s only because you made me come so hard.”

“Miss Jenkins,” I warned, feeling every muscle in my body tense in the doorway. “Kinda liking that dirty talk.”

She glanced up, biting her lower lip to hide a smile. “I kinda like you.”

Inside my bedroom, I lowered her to the floor, bowing forward to snap open her garter belt. I wanted to see her, all of her, the first time we were together. With much care, I pulled them down, helping her out of her heels.

I threw my black Henley to the side; she unbuttoned my jeans and shoved them down. My socks and sneakers were gone next, until both of us were completely exposed to the other. I pulled out a condom from the nightstand, tearing the foil and was ready to put it on when Elsie covered my hand with hers.

“Let me do it.” That glint in her eyes shone the brightest.

I didn’t hesitate, handing it to her. She sat on the bed, her slender hands rolling the rubber down my erection. I towered over her when she was done and scooted back on the bed, waiting for me. Her legs were spread, thick waves of hair surrounding her like a crown of red flames.

I caged her between my forearms, tugging and nipping on her lips as I sunk into the hilt in one shove. She gasped, the hands that nestled my face gripping onto me.

Stilling, I allowed her to adjust to my size, then slowly started thrusting into her. Elsie’s wet pussy enveloped me in its warmth, Elsie’s warmth, her legs swinging around my waist to force me into her.

My uncontrolled desire took over everything, a tornado that had only one end—fucking Elsie and satisfying her until she’d have had no more *agains* left in her.

We kissed, biting and sucking on each other's lips while I rocked in and out of her as if it were the last thing I ever did. I buried myself deeper each time, pulling back just to plunge forward harder.

Her thighs clenched, a tightness that I recognized as the one that encompassed my fingers before her orgasm, a tightness that made it excruciatingly difficult to hold back. But I waited because every bit of it was fucking worth it.

Seeing her eyes roll to the back of her head and having her pant and scream as I guided her over the edge for the second time, it was worth everything.

My release followed her, a show of blaring lights behind my eyes. It left me electrified, fucking her harder and emptying myself into the condom.

Coming inside of her hadn't been just a physical relief, though.

It had been thoroughly and wonderfully transcendental. And so was spooning her to my chest in the aftermath.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elsie

KYLE'S SHEETS smelled of his cologne and of sex, evidence of our multiple times together. The man couldn't deny my third request in the form of *Again*.

When I perched up on my elbows, lifting off the bed, the strong, mouthwatering smell of grilled cheese and slightly burnt toast wafted into the room. I wrinkled my nose to sniff it, my stomach gurgling.

This scent and the image of him working around the kitchen in gray sweatpants trumped my post-orgasm drowsiness. Truth was, the idea of Kyle doing anything with his chest on display would beat sleeping any day.

I pulled his shirt over my head, basking in the warmth of being enveloped by him and keen to set my eyes on him. My feet hit the floor, the hem of his Henley dropping just above my knees. The soft padding of my feet alerted him I'd gotten up as I moved from his bedroom toward the open kitchen.

"Food's almost ready." He shot me a quick smile, just as sexy as I'd thought he'd be, then returned to the skillet. "You didn't have to get up though; I was going for the concept of dinner in bed."

He flipped one sandwich then the other. While they sizzled on the pan, my bare-chested lover pulled out glasses and water bottles from the fridge. His bulky muscles flexed under his tattoos as he moved, the full magnitude of his sleeves and wings on display. I got lost in them, in him, for a while.

"And miss out on this?" I gestured at him when I snapped out of my daze, stating the obvious of the appreciation I had for him.

Although it was obvious right now, it hadn't always been that way. Actually, it had never been that way. Not one guy I'd dated or had casual sex with made being so...myself this effortless, natural. Kyle did. Through his bold speech and actions, Kyle showed me how fun life was when I was being myself, unapologetically so. What I'd previously considered intimidating, grew to be the side of him that put me the most at ease.

From where he stood near the stove, pressing the metal spatula to the toast, Kyle cocked a playful eyebrow at me. "See anything you like?"

"I do." I strode over to him, caressing his beard. "I like that somber expression when you focus on making dinner." Grazing my hand down his neck, I continued, "I like the broad shoulders where your wing tattoo starts..." He kept his attention on slicing the sandwiches on the plates when I traced a finger down his arm, though I felt him straining beneath me. "And these insanely impressive arms with these stunning tattoos...you can say I like it. I like it a lot."

When I concluded my inventory list of all the things that I far-more-than-liked about his body, Kyle's breathing became labored. So did mine. Another thing that hadn't occurred ever—a profound, unquenched attraction after so. Much. Sex.

"What about the rest?" He finally raised his eyes from the food to look at me, his pupils dark. He liked me touching him.

"All of you." My attempt at exaggeration was ruined by the gruffness of my voice.

I cleared my throat, placing one of his hands on my hip to reach a better angle for his chest. He all but forgot about the food, his focus fixated on me as I scratched the front of his body. "My big, sexy beast."

"Come here." He swept me off the floor like I weighed nothing, striding with me in his arms to the dining area, his smirk far from containable. "Insolent woman."

“I wouldn’t dream of ridiculing you, you big, burly, sturdy machine of a man.”

Faster than I realized, he hoisted me up, nibbling at my exposed leg. Uncontrolled giggles burst forth from me. Having him carry me around was enough to be considered hilarious, not to mention Kyle’s completely false ego demonstration.

He lowered me on the blue rug in the intimate dining area, cradling my face in his palms. His lips tantalized me with a kiss that had me grasping at his waistband, saving me from trembling on my weak knees. “Don’t ever change.”

“No?” Confusion struck me, my lip jutting out in a pout. “I thought you wanted me to.”

“Because I want you to publish your book?”

I removed my hands from his sweats, tugging at the ends of my hair. “A book I don’t want anyone to read. I can understand that this comes from a good place. Still feels like an attempt to change me.”

His thumbs stroked either side of my face, listening to me thoroughly until I was done. He inhaled deeply, conveying a wide range of emotions from his eyes. “Elsie, I’m sorry.”

“For wanting to change me?” My confusion quickly turned to embarrassment.

Even in his short *I’m sorry* he’d validated there was something that needed changed. Floyd and Justine had said similar things before, that I needed to stop living in the past, but it didn’t sting, not like this. In an attempt to mask the tears that had begun to brim behind my eyes, I blurted out any words that came to my mouth at the speed of light. “Don’t answer that. Forget it. I’m aware I’m a flawed person. You’re probably right, too.”

“No, goddammit.” He shook his head once. His dark eyes landed on me again with enough force to hurl me to the floor. “I’m not sorry for thinking that, because I don’t. What I’m sorry for is how it came out. I. Do. Not. Want. To. Change. You.”

My chin wobbled. “Then to *better* me, in case the negative connotation of the word *change* doesn’t sit well with you.”

“I like you, Elsie, and I love hearing you talk. Just this once though, shut up for a minute and let me explain myself.” Kyle brushed his lips on my forehead and spun me to the dining table that sat next to a large window overlooking the street.

On the windowsill were photos of him and two older people who looked so much like him they were probably his parents, and below it the back of the table had tens of manuscripts piled up in heaps, one on top of the other.

“See these?” Hugging me from behind, he rested his chin on my shoulder and pointed at the mountains of paper. “These are dreams waiting to be shared with the world. People who hope I find their book unique, their talent something noteworthy. Authors who want me to assist them to spread their light. The wings on my back are a constant reminder of that, the tattoos that you love so much on my arms are a token of every author I represent.”

He rotated me back, holding my arms. “These people and the ones to come are why I love what I do. Yes, I got huge and fucking lucky with Noah as my first client, but I would’ve gone down that path even if I had to work twice and three times as hard. That’s my calling. And you, Elsie, I would’ve been blind not to recognize the supernova inside you, even before I read a single word from you. What I was trying to tell you this past week and failed miserably was that you have this beauty in your words and in *you* that should be shared, not changed. Fuck no.”

Kyle’s soft lips kissed the tears that burst forth and ran down from my eyes. I hadn’t registered the moment they started pouring out, not when I’d endeavored making sense of what I’d just heard.

The missing explanations for Kyle’s pushy, assertive behavior were revealed, unveiling what a tender heart this bulldozer of a man had, airing his true motivations about me.

And it was beautiful. I marveled at him when he pulled out a chair for me, not taking my eyes off him as he sat in the adjacent one. “As selfish as I am at the moment, wanting to keep you all to myself, it would be a fucking travesty to hide you from people whose day you can brighten. You’re just as capable of that like the other writers whose books you read or promote.”

More than five years had gone by since I harbored that tiny fraction of faith about being a writer. Maybe Sabrina and Enzo’s book was a bust, but who was to say I couldn’t start over?

“Don’t give me that look.” Kyle enveloped my wrists, massaging the inside of my palms.

I closed one eye and scrunched my nose. “What look?”

“The one that says *Fine, I’ll just write something else then.*”

What the fuck? “How did you know?”

“I had a hunch. I veto that idea. I mean, I’ll be the happiest to hear you wrote more, but keep that one, please.”

Relaying my insecurities got through to him, and his tone bore more patience than earlier. Regardless of his well-intentioned efforts, I couldn’t commit to anything. We were treading on new ground, where my insecurities were still prevalent.

He pressed his thumbs on my hands. “I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t have a plan. I thought about you”—the sweetest coy smile grazed his lips at that—“and it’ll be something you’ll approve. Let’s discuss it over my culinary brilliance.”

“A discussion is okay.”

His infiltrating gaze prodded at my soul, assessing if I was really okay, if I believed him. He must’ve seen what he’d searched for, nodding briskly and striding to the stove. My eyes followed his path, in awe as if I were meeting him for the

first time all over again. For him, his wings meant lifting people up; for me, they symbolized the angel I took him to be.

Kyle set the water glasses and sandwiches on the table, then proceeded to flip the switch next to the door, lighting up the apartment.

I shielded my eyes from the sudden onslaught. “Mr. Turner, is this an attempt to shock me into agreeing to whatever you propose?”

“The drama, I love that. See, you already control the basics of romance.” He flopped down in his seat and dragged the wooden chair until our knees touched.

Softly, he removed my arm from my forehead and kissed my wrist from the outside in. A kaleidoscope of butterflies flurried in my stomach, batting their wings forcefully at the intimate gesture.

“To answer your question about my sadistic lighting methods, no, I didn’t mean to shock you into agreeing to anything. I want to be on the lookout for the color draining from your face to catch you in time.”

“Hmm.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Did I mention how beautiful you look in my shirt?”

“No.”

“You are.” He came close to kiss my lips, feeling up my waist to make his point come across. It did.

I felt the loss of his warmth as soon as he leaned back in his chair. He plucked one of the greasy and mouth-watering triangles from the plate, tearing a large bite off it. “Too bad my plan means no one will get to see the beautiful face I see now.”

A flashback of our conversation in my office reemerged, the one where he mentioned more people reading my stuff. Today though, instead of being consumed by panic, his prelude piqued my interest. “I’m listening.”

He nodded at my uneaten dinner. “Try it, it’s really good.”

The food’s appetizing smell and the late hour made accepting his suggestion a no-brainer. I picked up one piece without averting my gaze from him, taking a bite far smaller than his ravenous one and reiterating while chewing, “Still here listening.”

“Okay.” His chuckle brightened his brown eyes. “Remember the first time we met at Readge’s?”

His endearing enthrallment of me and my fascination with him made sure it would be a day I wouldn’t forget. Without confessing what I truly felt about that day, I chose the shorter version of, “I do.”

“So, I’m thinking of popping up into one of the shop’s reading evenings.” He sipped from his water, elaborating further on his master plan. “I’m sure he’d clear me a spot to present material that I liked, even if it wasn’t mine.”

Kyle’s voice sounded soothing, similar to his laid-back posture. But neither his voice nor his posture assuaged the dizziness that attacked my head as the oxygen left it.

“Els?” He inched toward me, his arm engulfing my waist and scooping me to his lap, leaving my feet dangling in the air.

The bite I swallowed not too long ago traversed up my throat, clogging my air path. “There were—there were twenty people, I think, when we were there. There are always around twenty people there.”

“Sounds about right.” His soft lips kissed my temple, lingering there as he talked, “And only one out of the twenty would know it’s your book.”

“You’ll be reading.” My trembling hand rose to my neck.

Without breaking contact, Kyle reached for the water and held it to my lips. I sipped from it, then returned it to him.

“Kyle?”

“Yeah?”

“The room is spinning a little less.”

“Good.” His grip on me tightened. “I’m here for you. Never forget that.”

We sat there embracing, while I processed what he asked of me. I weighed the pros and cons, considering how awful it would really be to sit in the back unnoticed, and consequently unharmed.

If people dozed off, they’d fall asleep on Kyle. If people decided to complain to the person next to them, they’d be complaining about Kyle. If they hated it so much and decided to throw tomatoes at him, well, at least I would get some form of entertainment.

The room settled slowly, my breaths flowing in and out with less effort. I’d grown accustomed to the idea of hearing him reading my text to complete strangers who I might not even recognize the following day on the street.

“Okay.” I sighed, sagging into his arms when exhaustion hit.

He comforted me by covering my face with kisses, from my forehead to my nose to my lips and chin. When his lips finished their journey on my lips, he broke from me, setting a finger under my chin to turn me to face him. “Can I push my luck with one more request?”

Nothing could be harder than what I’d agreed to. “You can try.”

“I’d like you to send me a different excerpt than what I read, for the readings.”

The wide grin on his face contrasted my frown. “See, you didn’t like it.”

He kissed my lips, full of intention. “I loved it. I want to read more, all of it, but I’d settle for one chapter of your choosing. In fact, I’ll get down on my knees to beg for it.”

This crazy, sweet, adorable man lifted his butt from the seat, planning to act out his promise. I slapped his bare arm,

my giggles pouring out. “Stop the insanity, you can sit back down. You have my permission to edit it so you won’t embarrass yourself.”

“Won’t be necessary.” He nuzzled my nose. “Now the only thing left is to figure out how we’ll fend off the herds of screaming fans.”

I slapped him again, leaving my hand on his warm bicep. “You’re so full of shit.”

“And so comfortable, too.” He gazed down at me, warmth spreading on his features. “Want to spend the night like that?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “I have an early morning with Alda tomorrow. We’re starting to plan her launch of *Even in the Dark, I Love*.”

“Promise to make you the best breakfast at whatever hour your alarm goes off.”

Lightning flashed in the already lit dining area before thunder boomed in the quiet of the house. Rain followed, the drops pattering softly on the glass sounding like the slow beats of a metronome. They added to Kyle’s soothing voice and adoring gaze, and I caved, very willingly so. “I love my eggs scrambled and my coffee dark.”

“Noted, Miss Jenkins,” he said as he paced the short distance to his bedroom. “Noted.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kyle

THERE HADN'T been any more rainy days throughout the week, until of course now the afternoon Elsie and I were due to go to the reading.

The outbreak of rain surprised me on my walk over here, and I protected my messenger bag that held my iPad with her excerpt in it, covering them under my leather jacket. It prevented the water from soaking through the fabric, shielding my black hoodie as well. A thin layer of precipitation slithered down my sleeves, but other than that, I was safe.

I took notice of the water not because it upset me to wipe it off my jacket—I had nothing else to do as I waited outside of Elsie's door.

When I'd been standing there for more than a few minutes and neither she nor Justine opened the door, I assumed they were in either of their rooms. The sudden rain thrashing loudly could've been a likely explanation of why they hadn't heard me knock.

I removed my cell from my black jean pocket and phoned Elsie. The other line rang and rang and rang. I neared my ear to the door, listening for footsteps or her phone ringing. Nothing. Just the rain.

"Elsie?" I rapped on the door, another set of three taps like before, louder this time.

Though I tried to convince myself that everything was okay, at that point I began to worry. We'd talked yesterday, had a video call where she looked okay. She hadn't paled when I mentioned that I'd finished reading what she sent me,

hadn't fainted when I said I'd loved it. She smiled, a grin that widened when I'd told her I'd be here at five.

All positive signs.

Which made me wonder if I'd missed anything. Or, even worse, someone could've broken inside their apartment. As crazy as this thought was, as far away from me worries of this kind had been since I moved Mom and Dad to a nicer area of Boston, they were ever present now. My heart pounded in my chest, the rain that coated my forehead mingled with sweat.

I balled my hand in a tight fist and pounded on the door.

After a few seconds, the reaction I'd been praying for arrived. The unmistakable sound of feet running against the hardwood floor had me blowing out a long, relieved breath. I leaned one hand on the doorframe, my head hanging low as the tension poured out of my body. When the door unlocked and was cracked open, I fully expected to find Elsie there.

"Kyle." I raised my eyes, finding Justine in the doorway, pale as a ghost. "It's Elsie."

Not concerned with being polite, I slipped around her, barging inside the apartment. My nerves were shot to the roof, and any sort of relief I might've felt was snubbed out, gone.

Life moved in slow motion as I covered the living room, walking through the mass of thick, heavy air. Blood deafened me as it roared behind my ears, overpowering any other noise from the rain.

Her bedroom door was open. I stepped in, ready to find her passed out, my phone in my hand ready to dial nine-one-one.

"Kyle," Justine said behind me.

Elsie lay on her bed, flawless makeup on and fully clothed in red-plaid pants, a long, black T-shirt, and black sneakers. Her palms rested one on top of the other on her stomach, looking peaceful.

Alarmingly peaceful.

“She won’t wake up.”

These four words put a firecracker up my ass and I plunged straight to Elsie’s bed. I sat by her side, checking her pulse. The low drumbeat from beneath my fingers. I sunk my teeth into my bottom lip to suppress the grunt of helplessness.

Justine treaded inside, standing next to me, talking between sobs. “I was in my room listening to music when you knocked. I went to get her, and she wouldn’t wake up.”

“Does she usually sleep this deep?” I asked, though I already had my answer. When she slept over at my house, she’d woken up from the alarm before I had a chance to crack an eye open.

“Never. Or maybe...”

I stopped listening.

“Elsie.” I leaned closer, stroking her hair and doing everything in my power not to lose it. “Elsie, please, wake up, baby.”

“I tried that,” Justine murmured, her voice muffled by sniffing and the fear that latched on to me.

I caressed Elsie with care and tenderness. Going batshit crazy and shaking her like I’d wanted to wouldn’t help anything. And I was running out of options with each minute that went by.

Out of my mind with concern and on the verge of carrying her to the hospital myself, I chanced another round of begging. It helped when I asked her about this reading; it could help again.

“Els.” I cradled her beautiful, serene face, pressing my lips to her temple and pleading like my life depended on it. “I really need you, and I need you to wake up. I promise that if you wake up, I’ll be here every morning to make you the scrambled eggs you like.”

Elsie stirred beneath me. “God, I hope not,” she said in a husky voice, talking slowly. “There’s only so many eggs I can

take.”

My head shot back to meet her eyes. The sight of her eyelids stirring hit me like a bucket of ice water to the face, squashing part of the terror. She woke up and I couldn't afford losing it while she recuperated.

“Hey.” I smiled to soothe her.

“Hey, you.” Elsie looked at me through thin slits, her eyelids droopy. “Why the threats? I was just napping.”

“Hey, beauty, how are you?” Justine hovered over her.

“My head,” Elsie mumbled, raising her hand.

I caught it midway, draping a sea of kisses on her palm. “Don't move.”

With some effort, she opened her eyes wider. “What's wrong? Why are you two like this?”

“You wouldn't wake up.” Justine crouched on the floor, taking Elsie's other hand in hers. “This wasn't *just a nap*.”

“Was too.”

“Was not.”

In my previous life, I was willing to bet money that these two were sisters. Their banter was adorable, calming my nerves by a notch. Not enough to let the subject go.

“I agree with Justine.”

Both their heads swiveled in my direction. Justine smiled triumphantly while Elsie gaped at me, unbelieving.

“We should go to the hospital,” I elaborated, my thumb brushing hers in repetitive motions. “You wouldn't wake up. It's not okay. I want someone to see you.”

Elsie twisted her lips to the side, turning her head away from me.

I lowered my voice, summoning every ounce of sensitivity in me. “If money's an issue, I have plenty. Don't worry about it.”

“Money isn’t the issue, Kyle.” Slowly, she dragged herself up on her forearms and slid to lie against the headboard. “My job has health insurance. It covers practically everything.”

The only other viable explanation to her refusal to go see a doctor dawned on me. “You know you didn’t just nap.”

“I do.” She grunted, pulling her hand from mine and rubbing the space between her eyebrows. “I fall into really deep sleep when I’m overwhelmed. Like unbearably overwhelmed.”

I glanced at Justine who turned oddly silent. She offered Elsie a sad smile, stood up, and kissed her cheek. “It’s been so long since the last time. At least now it’s positive anxiety.”

Their clipped answers hadn’t brought clarity; they buried me into a much larger pile of questions. “So you didn’t faint here the other day?”

“You didn’t tell me you fainted,” Justine yelled.

“I’m sorry. It was a one-time thing and I didn’t want to worry you.” Elsie turned from Justine back to me. “It wasn’t like that. With you I was just, one minute here, the next gone. When I fall asleep, I can feel it coming. Like when you’re up all night and you’re too tired to yawn. But I always have a couple of minutes before I pass out.”

“And you saw a professional about it? They ran tests?”

“Thanks to this one right here, yeah.”

Justine scoffed. “The only good thing that came out of my dad.”

“Not true. He made you.”

“Two things, then.” Justine patted me on the shoulder. “All right, lovebirds. I’ll leave you to it. Kyle, break a leg, kick some ass. Give Elsie’s book the respect it deserves.”

“You’re not coming?” That was strange, given how much she loved Elsie.

“I wanted to.” She lingered at the door. “*She* didn’t.”

Even stranger. I tilted my head as in *seriously*, she raised her palms, like, *what can you do?*

“One less groupie, then.” I winked at Elsie, acting calm despite the unease I felt. “You sure you’re okay? They said it’s fine that these things happen? We can stay here and rest.”

“They said it’s fine, and these things don’t *happen*. It happened once, and really, it wasn’t a big deal.” She fumbled with the covers, looking at her fingers as they wrinkled the fabric.

“You want to talk about what happened that first time?”

“Not now.”

Rising from the bed, I offered her a hand and brought her up with me. “Gotcha.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck, a world of sadness coating her eyes. “Kyle, look, about the reading today, you don’t have to do it to prove that you like me. I believe your offer to do this for me means more than you’ll know. It’s enough for me.”

I sealed my lips to hers, drawing her in from her soft cheeks. If my explanations hadn’t sufficed in proving to her how passionate I felt about her work, then showing would have to do. I preferred that path anyway, especially when it came to Elsie.

Unlike my other clients, showing her involved kissing one of the most wonderful women I knew, a woman whose soul attracted me every bit as her looks. A woman I couldn’t wait to know better, and kiss a whole lot more.

The show of affection escalated, or ascended as I saw it, and I was an inch from ripping her clothes off. Instead, I pulled my lips away, by less than a hairsbreadth, and opened my eyes to find that hers were sealed, the corners of her mouth curved up.

“You didn’t fall asleep on me, did you?”

She pried one of my hands from her cheeks, pressing it on her breasts. My palm was met with her taut nipple, protruding through what felt like a lace bra. “Does it feel like I’m sleeping?”

The hairs at my nape stood upright, my muscles strained from under my clothes.

“Not in the fucking slightest.”



Even though the rain stopped, I didn’t risk it and we rode to Redge’s. We arrived an hour early, the front doors still locked.

Elsie’s palm went limp in my hand as I searched for him behind the glass door. I squeezed it, holding on to her, assuring her I wouldn’t let anything happen to her. Her gaze darted up, eyes wide.

“It’ll be fine.” I kissed the top of her nose. “I promise.”

She blinked slowly. “Okay.”

“I’ll be just one person among the seven that’ll read here tonight, remember?”

The number of authors at Redge’s Romance Reading Evening had been pure luck. A lot of readers meant less pressure on Elsie.

That reminder seemed to comfort her. She returned my squeeze and said louder, “Yup.”

“In case it gets to be too much, I promise I won’t be offended if you fall asleep during my reading.”

My cocky smile and tease were reciprocated with a blow to the ribs. “Asshole.”

I kissed her nose again, and turned to knock on the door. Ridge showed up from within the store, letting us in.

The store looked exactly as it did on every other reading night. The lights were already dimmed, the space empty of bookstands, the small tables had hot coffee, tea, and other refreshments spread across them. Three rows of folding chairs were aligned around the center table in the corner, waiting for guests to arrive.

Ridge's brows knitted together, seeing our joined hands. "Since when?"

"Mind your own business." I smirked at my friend.

"Fucker, I thought we were friends." He dusted his palms on his blue jeans, looking at Elsie with whom he had a working relationship. "Sorry, Elsie."

"I've heard worse." She chuckled, giving me a side-eye.

"I bet." Ridge got her not-so-subtle hint, taking a jab at me. "Anyway, congrats to you two."

"Do you need help around the store?" The place looked fairly organized, though it never hurt to ask.

He wiped the presenter's table with a cloth, sticking it in the back of his light jeans. "You can start by telling me who's the mystery author you took on."

Elsie's grip tightened, and I pretended to not acknowledge it. Any sign of stress would've equaled a flat-out admission. One I had no intention of giving him or anyone else. From the corner of my eye, I peeked at Elsie. She stared straight ahead at Ridge who looked perplexed by the sudden silence.

I had to do something. Throwing Ridge a smirk, I teased, "Thought I just told you to mind your own fucking business."

"Yeah, yeah, and I thought we were friends. Asshole." He chuckled and retreated to the back.

Elsie's fingers spread, letting go of my hand that held on to her. The fear she'd collapse had me spinning to her, reaching out my other arm to catch her.

"I'm okay," she reassured me in a small voice. Too small.

Standing here and absorbing the warm, familiar, and welcoming atmosphere hadn't helped where her anxiety was concerned. I pulled out the presenter's chair from behind the desk, sat on it, and egged her to sit on me. I folded her in my arms when she landed softly in my lap, acting as her shield.

"Look." I signaled with my chin toward the chairs in front of us, murmuring in her ear. "It's the same store. Nothing scary."

Her eyes followed the path I gestured to, then quickly returned to me. Blue, wide, frightened. "It's not scary when I'm with you."

"I won't be far. Actually, I'll be right here reading a chapter from a woman's point of view." I pulled her closer, lowering my head to rest my chin on her shoulder. "I love that that's the part you chose for me."

"Really? Why's that?" Her lips curved up, turning to face me.

"For starters, I got a glimpse into her side of the story. I was curious."

Elsie reared back, slapping me with a *what the fuck* look. Her refusal to believe I saw something interesting in her work drove me to try harder. "It's like Enzo's was clear about what he wanted. Obviously he changed when he met her, but that was the only change in his life. Sabrina though..."

Elsie flinched, her face contorting.

I reflected on what I'd said, if in my enthusiasm I'd blurted out something inappropriate, I came back blank. "What did I say?"

"It's their names."

"You don't like their names?"

Elsie tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, sucking in a sharp inhale. "I like them, but when *you* say it, they're suddenly real"—another pause—"and it's weird. They were only names and now it's like they're alive. It's like it's real."

Not being a writer myself, I couldn't grasp what other people talking about your book did to you. What I could offer was the emotions I'd witnessed in other authors. "Isn't it the best part, though?"

"I'm not sure anymore." Elsie lowered her chin, peering at me through her eyelashes.

"You said your book would be so boring I wouldn't be able to read it without falling asleep. What happened is, I can't stop thinking about it, even the short excerpt you let me read."

I had to consciously lower my agent-extra-motivated tone. "And that's why I loved getting acquainted with Sabrina, to learn about her. She came out of nowhere, changed her whole life to work in a male-dominated firm. Why? And why date her boss? I get that he's attractive and the age-gap must play a part in all of this, but it's also a risk. People could view her poorly. So why would she do that?"

Elsie flattened her palm over my mouth. "Okay, okay, I get it. Not boring."

"Those are just some of the questions." I peeled her hand from me, curling my fingers around her. "So, thank you for letting me read one of her excerpts today."

Ridge returned carrying water bottles and placed them by the coffee where the drinks were set up. "Help yourselves." He went to the door, flipping the sign from *closed* to *open*.

Elsie made no move to stand, so we stayed there. When the first couple walked in, her shoulders tensed and she tried placing her feet back on the floor. I held her firm.

"You know"—I rubbed her back, bringing my lips close to her ear—"we could go to the back alley to decompress."

"Not helping, Kyle," she grated, her thighs clenching, her eyes turning a shade darker.

Aroused and not worried. Mission accomplished.

More people entered the store, and Elsie and I removed ourselves from the presenter's area. I poured us some tea,

placing my hand on the small of her back as we wandered inside the store, browsing the books that were displayed on the walls.

I tried to lighten the mood by making a joke, albeit a poor one, pointing at a shelf full of encyclopedias. “Great plot twist in that one. Loved it.”

She nodded blandly, looking without seeing the books. “Totally. Loved it too.”

My heart wrenched for her. I was about to draw her into my chest when Ridge cleared his throat in the middle of the room.

“Let’s sit.” I caressed her hair, the top of her head to the bottom, twirling a loose strand around my finger. “Or, FYI, we have about twenty minutes. My offer to unwind in the alley stands.”

“Kay,” she mumbled.

Draping an arm over her and hugging her to my side, I spoke into her ear. “It’s going to be all right. Trust me, I practiced my reading at home.”

“Kay,” she repeated.

With a great deal of care, I guided us to two vacant seats, looking forward as the first reading commenced.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Elsie

“HI, EVERYONE. Like Ridge said, my name’s Kyle and I’ll be reading from a book called *I Am With You*.” He waved his tablet, a genuine smile spreading on his face. Unfazed as if he were talking to a bunch of old friends. “Not mine. The book, not the iPad. That one’s mine.”

From my acquaintance with Kyle, he aimed the humor more at me than to be agreeable to the audience. To send me a message that everything would be fine. And it would’ve been, if not for the crowd breaking into murmurs. For them he’d represented something more than just another reader like we’d predicted he’d be.

Nope, he became a mystery as soon as the words left his mouth, moreover when some people recognized him as Noah’s agent. Phones were extracted, and I watched Kyle be recorded on their screens.

I clutched the bottom of my chair, the edge of the seat digging into my skin. Once these videos would be on their phones, my small piece of boring and unimpressive work would hit a scope far larger than the attendees here today. Everything ached, from the top of my head down to my toes—a numbing, draining kind of pain that surrendered me helpless.

Kyle’s eyes zoomed in on me, sending another promise that he had it under control, then scanned the crowd. “I apologize. The only one who’ll be holding an electronic device for this one is me.”

Low grunts, disappointed whispers, *whats* and *whys* echoed around the store. The over-secrecy and precautions

taken skyrocketed everyone's curiosity, making them more disappointed when Ridge collected their cellphones.

"Sorry." Ridge offered me an apologetic smile when he reached my seat, his palm open for me to hand him my cellphone. "He asked me over the phone to take everyone's phones if even one person reached for it. No exceptions."

"I understand." The tight knots inside my stomach unfurled, the temporary surge of panic abated. As I handed Ridge my phone, warmth swathed my body as my trust in Kyle surmounted my fears. He insisted that today happened, yes, but he made sure it would be on my terms.

The room settled, sort of, and Kyle sat down. His broad shoulders and tall frame gave him a formidable aura, not to mention his intent stare at the iPad, like he was holding a treasure instead of a book. Instead of my woman.

My Sabrina.

For everyone to hear, to analyze, to judge.

The breathing I had somehow regulated suddenly slowed, my eyelids growing heavy. The muscles in my body relaxed, and I slumped lower in the chair. My foot grazed the leg of the chair in front of me, and that stirred me for a second from completely falling asleep.

That second had been what Kyle needed.

As I forced myself to stay awake, blinking my way back into the room, I felt his loaded attention placed on me. Seeing me and no one else, as I saw him. Solely him and his eyes that smiled at me.

"Okay, now we can start. I'll be reading from the heroine, Sabrina's chapter. It's about seventy percent into the book, and it comes after a PG-13 scene."

He approached it so casually, like it was an everyday thing for him. I latched on to that confidence, rolled my shoulders, and opened my eyes wider to steer off the sleep.

“Why the censoring?” a man in the front asked, half joking.

Kyle barked a laugh in response. “Trust me, no one wants to hear a sex scene read by me. I’ll botch it. Your perverted ears will have to do with this.”

The crowd joined in on his laughter, and even I managed a smile. He discussed my book freely, with humor no less, didn’t make me want to run for the mountains, befriend a black bear, and hibernate. There was no greater proof that he liked what I wrote than having him standing here, reading from my excerpt, and I trusted that logic, I trusted Kyle with my work and with my heart alike.

Even when he softened his approach toward me, he consistently showed me I had nothing to be afraid of. He burst through my coping mechanisms that shielded me so well that they blocked out the dream I once had. He helped me regain my hope.

My smile hadn’t waned during the rest of his light chat with the audience. They reacted to him in such a way that they’d forgotten he’d confiscated their phones, forgotten about the secrecy behind the book. When their small talk died out, Kyle took a swig of the water bottle by his side and swiped open his iPad.

He hadn’t looked at me, his eyes trained on the screen, but he didn’t have to. I felt him. His unspoken energy was an energetic sphere, enveloping me in a halo of safety. All I had left to do was kick back and listen to his voice.

“You don’t understand.” I gave Enzo my back, reluctant to offer him explanations. Refusing with everything in me to unveil how vulnerable saying them made me. Unwilling to expose my frustration.

I wouldn’t be weak again. Ever.

Enzo’s fingers moved over from my shoulder down my wrist. They remained there, not holding, not forcing. Resting.

“Cara.”

One word, the nickname he'd given me, was all it took for my insides to melt. My resistance withered and died, my soul accepted his comfort. I didn't intend to need anyone, and yet I'd needed him.

"Cara, I swear I'll understand. If I won't, I'll ask you a million questions until I do. I want to know everything about you."

To hear that big, imposing lawyer the whole firm quaked from pleading me for anything was incomprehensible. I hadn't witnessed this side of him with anyone else, and I had to wonder, why me?

"I thought you trusted me," I whispered.

"I do. I'd sign off any fucking thing you'd present to me, blindly." He sighed, propping on one arm and pulling me to him with the other. "This, you telling me we can't be together in public, that I can't show the world how much I love you. I can't agree to that. I won't."

My head snapped up so fast, my forehead clashed into his chin. His teeth clinked, his grunt audible. Real loud. And though my head was inflicted with the same contusion, I hadn't suffered any pain. I suffered shock.

"You...you love me?"

The short hairs of his stubble were flattened when he rubbed his chin. "Tell me what do you think, Cara? Tell me what we're doing here."

His eyes were relentless. Those harsh, captivating, brown pools of light and darkness that drew me to him every single time. They weakened me, crushed my resolve each and every time I'd tried to walk away from this. By the way he was aiming them at me now, he knew all that and had no qualms about using it against me.

Or for us.

In that moment I realized that I loved him despite it. That I simply loved him.

“We’re a couple,” I answered meekly.

A flash of light fired through the intensity with which he was looking at me. “We are.”

“You love me.”

He laughed. A low, rumbling sound that drowned out any hesitation, only to have it return when he stopped. All good things eventually were meant to end.

“I do.” He placed a thumb on the corner of my lips, a gesture he resumed when he wanted to kiss them. To communicate he’d be my guard, that I could lower mine. “I love you and I’m tired of hiding it.”

My chin wobbled. A tear slid down my cheek and onto the white sheets. “I’ll have to quit.”

“Why?” His smile disappeared, a frown tainting his face. He placed a firm finger under my chin. “Look at me, Sabrina, don’t run. Explain.”

We were back at square one. Knowing Enzo, had I told him the mountains of damage being with him publicly would cause him, me, and his firm, he’d want to fix it. I couldn’t have him do that, not if I ever wanted to be respected in my own right.

Not as Sabrina Levine, the daughter of the real estate mogul from the West Coast. Not as a pretty face. Not as a socialite, a word I despised but was groomed to be. Not a trophy woman who’d climbed the ladder by sleeping with her much older boss.

As myself.

A person I couldn’t be if I became the girlfriend of Enzo Conti.

In a perfect universe where there was no prejudice, I would’ve been both.

In our fucked-up one, where I had to elbow my way to a place in my career where people recognized me for me, I couldn’t. Not as Enzo’s employee. I would be ridiculed,

rumored of having used my body to advance, of having daddy issues.

Enzo would only prove it to them by firing or suing every person who mentioned it, even if it meant he'd have an empty firm, even if it meant he'd spend all of his hard-earned fortune on lawsuits.

And then what? I didn't know. I did know one thing. "I love you."

The color drained from my lover's face, my declaration leaving him stumped.

He'd expected a fight, an argument to counteract his demand. A chance to win.

Instead, he'd gotten an I love you.

Surprise.

"You see, it's easy." He ran his hands over my waist, lowering himself to kiss my breasts. "Love makes everything easy."

Enzo didn't even begin to comprehend how wrong he was. Love made everything painfully, agonizingly, unbearably hard.

A hardship I ignored while his hands roamed my skin, while his lips marked me wherever they went, while his heat promised me oblivion as we lived on the island that was his apartment.

Isolated from the outside in a space where Enzo wasn't my boss but my lover, and where I was nothing but his Cara.

Kyle finished, laying down the tablet and wetting his lips.

"He can read me a sexy scene any time," a woman around my age whispered to her friend. They both giggled.

People clapped, and I didn't care. Didn't care if they liked it or not, if these were polite claps or enthusiastic ones. Didn't give one single fuck.

All I cared for was Kyle. How he hadn't changed a thing I wrote, left the text just as I remembered it. He read it with so much soul, his deep masculine voice narrating my Sabrina to perfection. Through his reading, they didn't sound so awful. They sounded convincing and hadn't made me cringe once.

I watched him scanning the rows slowly, a bit disoriented. He looked from far left to the middle where I'd sat.

Then he found me. And smiled.

The girls' glares bore holes in my profile. I smiled lazily, mostly at Kyle. "I wouldn't mind it either."

Kyle pushed to his feet, only breaking our eye contact when he went to Ridge to retrieve my phone. He slung it inside his jacket pocket and returned to my seat, offering his hand.

"We're going?" I placed my palm in his, tiny versus huge.

He gestured at the front row, keeping his voice low as the next presenter took her place at the table. "Told you this reading would be the start of my fan base. We need to make a run for it or the women and possibly one man will tear my clothes off."

I stifled a laugh at his serious face, got up, and whispered in his ear, "This row doesn't seem too safe either."

He slowly tugged his hoodie out of his leather jacket, put it over his head, and started walking. Seeing him stride with his head down as if he were Justin Bieber making his way in a throng of Beliebers was too much. I cracked up, holding my belly while being led out by him.

The cold evening enveloped us, the drop in temperature contrasted the warmth inside of Redge's. Kyle shielded me from that as well as from so many other things, tugging me into the comfort of his body, the intensity of his stare eviscerating my giggles.

A car pulled over. At the sound of the brakes, Kyle twisted his head. He kissed my forehead, tucked me under his arm,

and led me to the curb. “Let’s go celebrate.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised he ordered a ride in advance, considering the rain and all. Kyle’s resourcefulness and effectiveness extended to every part of his life. So did his gentlemanly manners. Kyle held the door for me, getting in behind. He patted on the leather seat beside him. “Come here.”

The car took off, the streets of Brooklyn passed us by, and me, I went to him. Drawn, captivated, unable to do anything else except what he asked of me.

Our thighs touched, and Kyle kissed my entire palm from my fingertips to my knuckles to my wrist. He held them over his lips, his light breaths prickling my skin. Sensual, intimate, toe curling.

“How are you, Els?”

That was a loaded question. Between the exposure he’d subjected me to, and the sexual tension that revolved being around him, I couldn’t say what or how I was. “I’m...okay?”

His lips twitched, a glimmer of mischief glinting in his eyes. “You haven’t fainted. Or fallen asleep.”

“Nope.”

My heart hadn’t slowed one bit. It galloped, springing forward like a racehorse; it threatened to break out of its cage, pushing against my ribs. And it was desperate to reach Kyle.

From where his lips met my knuckles, I pulled his hand lower. I removed my fingers from his, wrapped them around his wrist and pressed his palm beneath my throat, in the center of my collarbone.

He swallowed. “That’s fast.”

We were practically nose to nose, the invisible bridge between our eyes growing ever shorter. Not leaving my sight, Kyle mirrored my actions, lowering his sweatshirt so I could feel his pulse.

Combustion.

“Reading for you has been the single most exciting thing I’ve done in a long while, Miss Jenkins.” He flicked his tongue out, swiping it over his lower lip. “I hope I did you proud.”

“You did much more than that.” A tear stained my cheek at the memory of him sharing my work. His deep voice relaying the story I wrote, the sincerity in it. It felt like a box of chocolates detonated inside my soul. “You made me not hate it.”

He moved back as the Uber pulled to a stop in front of his building, cocking one eyebrow.

“Okay, that’s not entirely true.” I signaled with my eyes for him to step out of the car. We were out on the street when I added, “I think you might’ve just made me like it.”

In a split second my world flipped, what was up now was down, the down was up. My boots dangled in the air, nearly kicking him in the stomach from the speed in which he spun me.

“Kyle!” I called out, laughing in disbelief at this whole situation. “Why this carrying thing again?”—giggles, tons of breathless giggles—“I can walk by myself.”

Somehow, we crossed the pavement and were inside the building, going up the staircase to the first floor, flying up.

“Your legs are shorter than mine, and I’ve got no time to waste.”

“Oh.” I had an inkling as to why he was in such a rush. An inkling that set fire to my core, that made my nipples pebble through my faux-fur leopard coat. A feeling I shared with him.

When we made it to the third floor in front of his door, Kyle angled himself to take the key out of the pocket of his light jeans. My body moved along with him, though not falling thanks to the stronghold of his arm behind my knees.

The lock gave in and inside the house we went. I heard the keys, then phones clinking into a wooden bowl, observing from my reversed point of view how the dining area’s lamp lit

the cozy apartment, until we whirled into the direction of his room.

He slowed enough to set me down on the rug next to his bed and to kick off his sneakers, a movement which I followed. That pause hadn't lasted long. Kyle laid his ass on the bed, pulling me to him. My hands circled his neck for support, though I didn't have to when his hands were gripping my hips, arranging me so I'd straddle either side of him.

We were in each other's faces, forehead to forehead. I felt him everywhere, felt him hardening beneath me, felt his fingers as they ran up my body, digging into my hair, parting through each strand, rugged and demanding.

“Elsie, there's one more thing I'm going to ask you to complete my plans for tonight.”

My head ceased its whirling, nervous he might repeat his request for more of my book. I supposed I would've done it, someday. I still needed to adjust to the idea that it might not have been a complete failure, and that was already a huge step on its own.

Kyle tightened his grip faster than I could withdraw from him. “Stay with me. And listen. This isn't book related.”

The moment I stopped squirming, Kyle crashed our mouths together. I completely relaxed, the addictive exploration of his tongue in my mouth slow and meditative like the ripple of the waves. The more he kissed me, the more I yielded to him.

“So,” he started, his voice gravelly, breathing hard from our kiss. “I want you to do whatever the fuck it is you'd like to do with me. Last time I gave you all of me. Tonight I'm begging you to *take*. What's burning inside here”—he flattened his palm to my chest where I led him on the ride over, the touch searing me through the fabric—“let it rip. Hold nothing back. Can you do that for me?”

This freedom frightened and exhilarated me all at once. It created a turmoil that I was sure manifested on my face. “And

you'll sit here and do nothing?"

Kyle's smirk returned, sly and full of intentions. I released his neck as his hands trailed lower, allowing them to glide down my breasts. He kneaded my nipples over the shirt, relieving the ache from needing him while creating more. So much more.

"I couldn't even if I wanted to." He leaned forward, levitating an inch above my jawline. "But the reins are in your hands, Elsie. Just like they were the entire day."

I arched my back, my body reacting to the words and sensations Kyle unleashed on me. My logic wasn't quite as convinced. "I didn't do anything," I whispered between fervent gasps.

"Fuck yeah, you did. Even if it was vicariously through me, you overcame your paralysis, your fear. You sat and witnessed people hearing your work"—he bit down on my lip—"which they loved by the way, in case the murmurs from the first row hadn't reached you."

I shook my head once.

"They sure talked, like I said, mainly about tearing my clothes off. I didn't make that shit up. Because of what you wrote." He relaxed back on the headrest, leaving me bereft. "Now, no more books. No more opinions. No more anything except you and me."

He outstretched his arm to dial down the light on the nightstand. Stripped of its harshness, the room was bathed in a soft glow. It took me a few restless breaths to realize that the engulfing tenderness that seeped into my cells emanated from the man whose eyes were trained on me, even more so than the atmosphere that surrounded us.

The intention behind them altered, from sweet and gentle and anticipating, to smoldering hot. They caused turmoil to stir in me. Kyle said he wouldn't ask for anything tonight, and as the silence lingered, as his gaze revealed his restraint, I understood the power he put in my hands.

And I loved it. Adrenaline pumped through my veins as I climbed on Kyle, eradicating the distance between us. My mouth claimed his, my breasts shoved against his taut chest. A low guttural sound vibrated from him, his tongue answering my searching one, the rest of his body holding steady.

A sense of urgency to have him naked struck me. I moved back, beckoning him with my finger to follow and sit in the center of the bed. Without the headboard to get in my way, I stripped Kyle of his jacket, hoodie, and Henley, admiring the rigid planes of his naked torso. The veins that coursed down his arms. How they blended and stood out along the branches upon branches of his tattoos and the figures that were etched into them.

A sculpture more than a man, really.

A sculpture who'd been making an immense effort to stay still. Kyle wrinkled the blue sheets in his powerful hands, his muscles clenching, his breaths shallow. A movement from his face caught my attention and I gazed up to find his jaw ticking, his eyes resolved, flaring with tamed passion.

"Take off my clothes," I ordered and just like that, my coat, black shirt, and matching bra went flying somewhere in the room.

Kyle worked on my pants button, opening it and unzipping me. The knuckle of his forefinger brushed the front of my black lace thong. A fleeting, barely discernible graze of the fabric as to not go back on his word, but more than enough to spark a violent shock of electricity that blew all the air out of me. I gripped his shoulders, my head dropping, hair cascading to my sides.

I brought his head to the top of my chest, my breasts caressing his cheeks as they rose and fell from my labored breathing. His hands were on top of his thighs now, balled into fists, his abs flexing. I watched his perfectly etched six-pack, the V-shaped muscle that led to his low-rise jeans begging my fingers to trace it.

I resisted the urge, holding on from having him fully naked until I had him how I wanted him. I lifted my butt, taking his hands and directing them to my hips. Kyle sucked in his lips, pulling down my pants and thong, mumbling *fuck* when I descended so very slowly to his thighs. He looked at me from the bed as if he called on every restraint possible to withhold from trapping me under him.

Heady, enticing, and fucking empowering was a short list of descriptions to articulate what it felt like.

When I lowered to the bed, I kissed his lips, holding my butt above his jeans. He angled his head up, his mouth coaxing mine wide open, his tongue lashing against mine forcefully. The ardent dance of our lips had been the sole indicator of how much he wanted me, caged by unseen shackles. All of it for me.

I pushed him to the mattress, toppling down onto him. I wrenched my lips from his, leaning on top of him and marveling at his callous gaze. Air rolled out of us in waves, slow and heavy. The arousal he'd ignited in me rampaged through every cell, every pore, every goddamn molecule in my body.

“Tell me you’re clean,” I said, crawling down his torso.

He propped up on his elbows, his voice gruff and laden with lust. “I am, you?”

“Yeah, and on the pill. Though you shouldn’t be concerned with it right now. In fact, I don’t want you to think about anything. Any-fucking-thing.”

I worked his buttons, encouraging him to raise his ass from the bed. I released him from his jeans, his boxers and socks, carelessly tossing them in a pile on the floor. My hand fisted his thick cock, my mouth lowering to lick the hint of precum on his throbbing head. The consuming heat from tasting him like that made me want more of him. I parted my lips wider, my lips rolling down his silky erection.

“Elsie,” he said my name in reverence as I licked and sucked the length of him. “Elsie, fuck, hold on. Is that what you want?”

He didn’t know how much pleasure I took from sucking on him, how wet it got me. Seeing his muscles coil with each stroke of my hand, his hot eyes growing hotter the more I took him in, at that moment there was nothing I’d wanted more.

To make my point, I relaxed my throat muscles, bringing him as deep down my throat as I could get him.

“Motherfucker,” he growled when I repeated the motion, sinking deeper into the bed.

I did it again and again as a succession of incomprehensible curses rolled from his lips.

Kyle’s hips jerked up and he covered my cheek with his palm. “Get up.”

“What about me being in control?” I slithered myself up his body, rubbing my slick entrance on his throbbing erection.

“You are,” Kyle tried talking while I teased his cock. I let an inch in, my lips spreading for him, then pulled out. “But I almost came in your mouth, and fuck”—a desperate growl rose from Kyle when I sunk him deeper, feeling him opening me from the inside, only to withdraw once more—“I’m not coming before you do.”

My lips hadn’t provided a reply. They scattered a mix of small bites and kisses from his jaw to where a hint of his wings showed instead. My teasing was the last straw, which was exactly what I intended it to be. He yanked me down just when he jutted his hips up, stretching and filling me to the brim.

A fierce current of electricity shot up my body. As though he’d felt it, Kyle slid a hand from my ass up my back, tracing the skin that tingled with aftershocks. He fastened his palm around my nape, tilting his head so his lips were at my ear.

“That it? That’s what you want?” His whisper had been harsh and caressing and *God, yes*, that was everything I craved. Precisely that.

His hips remained up until I bobbed my head, my forehead scraping the mattress. Kyle dragged his mouth across my ear, his lips landing in my hair. He started thrusting from under me, slowly, drawing in and out in an unrushed rhythm. Our chests were slick from sweat, our hearts beating frantically, running into each other.

The arduous storm of being with Kyle, in a way, diminished the magnitude of the emotions that coursed through and ravaged my body earlier this afternoon. We burned together and yet it felt pacifying, a calm that carried me closer to an orgasm that swelled inside me.

A climax I refused to release without having Kyle’s handsome face in front of me. I shifted, pushing up slightly. It didn’t take much more than that for Kyle to immediately free me from his hold.

He observed me, his attention rapt on my features. I lay both palms on his stomach, felt his lungs gasp for air, his muscles contracting and releasing. I absorbed the sensations that undulated through me, how they intensified as I adjusted myself to this new position.

Applying the slightest pressure on Kyle, who hadn’t flinched, unyielding no matter what I did, I pressed my breasts together. The ache for him, for movement, for even more friction was a unique, painfully delicious kind of torture. I swayed back and forth, changing angles to have him so deep and grinding against every inch of my walls.

He blew out air like he’d been keeping it locked tight. His eyes, apart from desire, held admiration for me. They hypnotized me as I rode him, and I couldn’t look anywhere else. The myriad of emotions that streamed from either of us was overwhelming, but not close to those that drove my body to sleep. Kyle and this experience had been the awakening

he'd craved me to have, the desire to stay awake and not miss even the tiniest of things.

My thighs clenched around him, my eyes battling to stay on his and not snap shut as the euphoria nearly overpowered me. Kyle sensed my impending orgasm, prying one of my hands from where my fingers sunk into his front. He sucked two of my fingers, licking them, dampening them, his skilled tongue pushing me further over the edge.

He guided them back to my swollen nub, silently instructing me to pleasure myself. I glided the wet fingers on myself, moving them in circular movements then up and down. Kyle opened his palms, placing them at the front of my breasts, creating an intoxicating arousal on my already hypersensitive nipples.

My existence twisted and turned around me, winding my stomach into a tight knot. It curled and curled and curled in my belly until it snapped so loud its echo thrummed behind my ears. I came, wrecked by shivers, devoured by ecstasy, magnificently transformed.

Kyle assumed charge of the quivering mess I'd become, grasping my arms and pulling me to him for a kiss. Our moans vibrated in each other's mouths as he released inside me, hot and fierce and deep. I collapsed on top of him, sated, purified, cleansed. He turned us to the side, cocooning me in his arms.

"Thank you," I mumbled into his warm neck.

"Thanking me?" He withdrew from me by a little to look in my eyes. "I should be the one thanking you. For trusting yourself with me. That's what I was talking about all this time, not to change you, to have your light shining"—he pressed his lips to mine, soft, tender, with so much grace it melted my heart—"and it's fucking spectacular. You're fucking spectacular. Thank *you*."

He pulled the duvet over us, reaching for the lamp behind me. The room darkened, and it was only us. Surrounded by

our hushed breaths, Kyle's monotonous strokes, and most importantly safe and blissed out of my mind, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Elsie

THE SUNDAY we spent in Kyle's apartment after the reading recharged me in more ways than one. We ate and slept, and as much as I liked his sweats, clothes became redundant after a while. It was everything I needed before the two and a half short and extremely hectic days prior to the Thanksgiving's holiday—Ben would let us leave early the Wednesday before, so I really had to rush everything until then. I stayed in the office until midnight, ensuring no stone was left unturned, emotionally drained by the time the day ended for more sleepovers.

Kyle had as busy a schedule as mine, mainly focusing his efforts on Hunter. Jada's genius marketing plan worked, attracting many new followers to Hunter's accounts after revealing his face along with an announcement for an upcoming book. It resulted in an increase in sales and as a side effect, a very stressed young author.

As his agent, and a man who learned the efficiency of a pull and not just a push, Kyle maneuvered through Hunter's struggles with proficiency. He visited him at his apartment, kicking back together, chatting about nothing in particular or answering emails and making calls alongside him when Hunter had to put in the hours at his graphic design job. In the in-betweens, when Hunter had relaxed some, they worked together on new posts.

That didn't mean we didn't see each other at all. Kyle dropped by for lunch on Monday and Tuesday, and made me promise to text him when I got off work so he could walk me home. On both of those walks he'd held my hand, asked me about my day, and shared his. He hadn't pressured me about

my book, hadn't so much as mentioned it. At the end of the walk that always felt too short, he'd give me an earth-shattering kiss at my doorstep, and I'd be left to float into my room to have the best dreams about the best man.

On Wednesday though, I received a different text from him, a change of plans.

Kyle: *Morning, Els. I can't make it today. I'm on the flight to LA. Need to fix another producer crisis for Noah.*

Kyle: *Will call you from LA. X.*

My chest constricted as a pang of disappointment shot through it. What held me above water over these two insane days was the thought we'd share the holiday together. But traveling had been a part of Kyle's job, I was aware of that. We'd have plenty of time for ourselves when he'd return.

Me: *Np. Give Alda a huge hug for me.*

A brief moment of hesitation passed. I chewed the inside of my cheek, contemplating whether I should add something more personal, then decided to go for it. If Kyle could have confessed he wanted to give our dating a serious chance early on, I shouldn't have issues reciprocating the honesty.

Me: *Will miss you.*

The *Me too* I received an instant later was the solid proof of that.

Kyle's short message brought a smile to my face as I returned to answer emails on my computer. The holidays at Frost's started half a day early, so by 1 p.m., I wrapped up all of my unfinished business and left the office.

Dense clouds covered the skies while I strolled to my apartment. The typical fall day had wind gusts blowing all around me. Most of my outfit choices kept me warm from the assault—my coat, jeans, and boots covered my body. I accessorized well too, shielded behind an emerald green scarf that reached over my lips, protected with a black beanie and hidden behind large sunglasses. My nose remained

unprotected though, frozen and most probably giving me the appearance of a clown.

Looking comical hadn't bothered me, not when I had the afternoon all to myself. Justine had a full workday and I hadn't expected to see Kyle for a few days. As I turned the corner to our street, I pictured the hot bath I'd take, the steaming water that would soothe my tight muscles. Combine that with a book and a glass of wine and any memory of a red nose would be long gone.

Carrying that pleasing mental image in mind, I ascended the stairs to my apartment, fitting the key inside the lock. It didn't turn. Didn't need to. The unlocked door pushed inside easily. Justine, albeit the sweetest person I knew, had a tendency to forget to lock the door once every two, three months. Only by some divine intervention we hadn't been mugged. Yet.

And even as I suspected this was one of those cases, one could never be too careful. I poked my head inside when a man dressed in black came to view. The shriek I let out added to my terror and I jumped back, hearing my sunglasses crash to the floor.

Even when my eyes made sense of the man I thought was heading to LA, even when Kyle held his palms up in surrender, my hammering hadn't gotten the memo. I placed both hands on my knees, forcing myself to slow down my breaths as I focused on the floor.

"I'm sorry, so, so sorry." Kyle rushed to me, straightening me up slowly and pulling me into a hug.

My defense instincts were still on high alert, my fists shoving against his chest. He kept crooning *I'm sorry* into my hair until the spike of adrenaline abated, swaying in a hypnotic rhythm as my arms dropped to my sides.

My voice was muffled from talking into his sweatshirt. "Aren't you supposed to be on a plane?"

He pulled back to encapsulate my face in his palms. His lips curved into a kind smile. “Surprise.”

“Surprise?”

“We’re going to Chicago. At least, I hope you agree to join me.” Kyle’s eyes brimmed with anticipation, searching mine. I gaped at him in complete shock, silent as a mouth, when he added, “There’s a potential client, a poet I’ve been talking to for a while. I want to go see him in person before I sign him. I thought, why not take the Chicago girl and make a surprise vacation out of it? Justine signed off on it, and so...here I am.”

“Of course,” I mumbled, my brain edging slowly to understand what he was saying. Then it clicked, making my smile unstoppable. “Chicago! My family!”

I threw myself at Kyle, wrapping my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck. He captured my thighs from beneath, not staggering a single step at my surprise attack and my long and hard kiss.

Kyle did have a work trip, but he’d included me in those plans, wanting me alongside him as much as I wanted him. His consideration made the excitement of seeing them ahead of my planned Christmas trip that much sweeter.

We withdrew from our kiss, nuzzling noses, eyes locked. While I gazed at the depths of Kyle’s stare, I couldn’t help to think about another poet I knew all too well, my brother, Floyd. He’d been sending queries to agents for a while now, so could it be that this was the poet Kyle had planned on meeting?

Nah. I tossed the thought aside. Floyd and I had a close relationship. I would’ve been his first call if something as huge as an agent coming to visit him were to take place. But maybe now one would.

“Can we go see them? Did I tell you about my brother Floyd, he’s a new poet and maybe...” I trailed off, biting my lip and wondering whether this was a good idea.

Kyle and I had been dating for less than a month, after all. The thought of asking him a professional favor had me cringing and taking back what I'd said. "Or never mind, I'll drop by when you're working."

Kyle brushed his lips on the area between my eyebrows, his smile spreading. "Don't go there. I'd love to meet your family. And before you ask, yes, I'll be glad to see his work. Text him we're coming and have him set out his best poems so we can go over them together."

A foreign larger-than-life happiness that mingled with hope overflowed me, starting from the heart and bursting out like a detonation of million rays of sunshine.

"Kyle, you're the best." My brows lifted high, my voice shrill with excitement. I couldn't wait to tell Floyd.

He slid me down to the floor, his face flushing. "Like I said, we're already there. It's nothing. Now, let's go, we'll be late."

"Go? I haven't even packed anything."

Kyle rolled a small black suitcase along with a medium silver one from behind the dining table. "Justine signed off on this, remember?"

His phone buzzed and he swiped to see the message while I gaped at him, for the second time today, in complete and utter shock. The best kind of shock.

"Our ride's here." He kissed the top of my head, taking our suitcases and walking out the door.

As for me...I floated.



In the hotel's bathroom, Kyle and I were in our towels after a very, very thorough encounter with the hotel's shower. So thorough that it left us less than half an hour to head down to the hotel's restaurant to meet his client. He'd asked me to join

since the dinner was more of a formality than business. Regardless, tagging along felt off, but I agreed to go.

“I still feel bad for Olivia,” I said, standing in front of the vanity’s mirror and drying my hair with a towel.

Kyle walked from behind me and lowered his chin to my shoulder. The air in the room became thick and not from the lingering steam from the shower. My movements came to a halt.

And while my body froze in place like a statue, my insides quivered when he pressed his lips to the hollow of my neck and whispered, “Who?”

It took me longer than it should’ve to gather myself enough to remember what I wanted to say. “Olivia, our flight attendant. I can’t shake off the look of horror she had on her face when she spilled the water on me.”

That wide-eyed look and vehement stream of apologies had been all-too familiar. I knew exactly what fear of failing at your job felt like, and it upset me to see another woman, especially this young, going through that.

“She’ll be fine.” He draped another kiss on my shoulder, parting the towel slightly to snake his hand to my stomach. “Everyone goes through adjustment periods in their first jobs. If anything, I think she appreciated you being so kind about it.”

“I hope so.” I didn’t argue.

I couldn’t argue when my mind wandered from the conversation again. Kyle trailed his hand lower, his erection pressing into the small of my back. I sighed, lust-filled yet knowing we were short on time, twisted my head, kissing his bearded cheek and making my escape to my suitcase.

His chuckle followed my jogging across the room, walking over to his own suitcase to get dressed.

Justine packed way more clothes than anyone would need for a short vacation. I was grateful for the wide variety of

some of my favorite outfits my friend chose for me.

Eventually I opted for the cream blouse that had a cute black bow tie on it, black skinny jeans, and the blazer I had on me from the morning. I piled the folded outfit and my underwear in one arm, my makeup bag in the other, and returned to the bathroom.

Aware of time limitations, I got ready in a hurry and stepped out into the main room to meet Kyle. The plush rug silenced my steps, preventing him from hearing me approach. He hadn't seen me either, his phone holding his attention captive.

The distraction allowed me to appreciate his choice of clothes in private, admiring how he looked wearing dark gray slacks and an off-white dress shirt. He changed from what he normally wore, yet he was just as handsome.

“Anything interesting?” I asked.

He met my eyes, his lips parting in a charming half smile that melted my insides. “Everything, but it'll wait. Want to read my favorite poem from the batch he sent me? Just a sneak preview—he'll show you the rest.”

“Sure.” I sat on the high bed, snuggling up to Kyle's side. He wrapped an arm around me, handing me the phone, the short lines displayed on the screen.

Wild heart.

Mostly called savage,

by those gray, black, and bland people who know nothing.

Unlike me who can see you,

touch and smell,

reach deep and feel through your

bones.

Who's allowed a glimpse into the eye of the storm.

*A glimpse of how free you truly are.
Fierce as lightning that pierces through the clouds and
adorns the sky when it's the darkest.
A hurricane you whirl me into.
A tornado that I
adore.
With you it's a strange sort of together,
all-consuming and burning and whole.
But it's also something else.
Your wild is my
home.*

I shivered, tilting my head up to Kyle. It read so much like Floyd's poems, though it couldn't have been his. My baby brother sent me all his material as he wrote it. Gently, Kyle took the phone from me, placing it on his other side, his eyes never leaving mine. He wiped the tears I hadn't noticed were flowing, one from each cheek, and kissed the top of my head.

"I had a feeling you'd like it."

"That's how I get when I read Floyd's poems. Raw emotions in a bottle."

Kyle squeezed my waist. "Can't wait to meet him."

"Me too." Months had gone by since my last visit here in the spring, and being in the same city made missing my siblings more real.

Until then, we had a dinner to attend. I patted underneath my eyes with my knuckles for any remaining mascara smudges, put on my high-heeled boots, and accepted Kyle's palm as he led us out of the room. The elevator took us from the twentieth floor to the expansive lobby of the hotel. We crossed the black and white marble floors, catching a draft

from the main doors as guests entered, shaking the cold from the outside.

They served as a reminder that I was a guest too, a tourist in my own city. It hadn't dawned on me until that moment, not when Kyle's affection chucked out any non-bliss-related emotions. I clung closer to him as we stood in front of the host's desk, beaming brighter than all the candles that decorated the restaurant's tables.

Kyle gave Mel, who introduced herself as our hostess our name, and we were directed to a secluded section of the place behind an earthy-toned stone fireplace.

Among a lot of other things I'd missed around Kyle, I'd forgotten the name of the person we were bound to meet. "What did you say the poet's name is?"

Kyle's lips curved to the side. "I didn't say."

When the tall, red-headed guy rose from his table to welcome us, I fully understood why.

"Floyd!" I yelled, oblivious to the other diners swiveling their heads at the sound of my shriek and my clinking heels.

My brother was about to be signed by Kyle, which thrilled me beyond what I believed possible, and nothing could've stood in my way from rushing to the source of my pride and joy. I crashed into him, wrapping my arms around Floyd's slim waist, squishing him with everything I had.

"I can't believe you managed to keep this a secret."

He returned the embrace, patting my back lightly. "Kyle wanted this meeting to be a surprise."

The initial excitement waned, his admission making me double back and inspect Floyd. "And you hid a poem from me."

"It was just the one." His face flushed, his eyes sliding to the side.

Knowing my brother, the red hue on his freckled cheeks had nothing to do with not sharing his poem and everything to do with its content. More accurately, the woman in his poem.

The only woman who'd ever done that, and she didn't even have to be physically around him to awaken that in him. I clamped my mouth shut about Suri, Hayley's friend, storing it for later. We were siblings, yet this was, for all intents and purposes, a business meeting for him.

I stepped back, looking over my shoulder at Kyle who'd waited patiently for our bonding to end, then at my brother. "He liked it best."

Kyle took that as a sign to come close, pulling out a chair for me, and the three of us sat around the table.

"I have to ask"—I glanced from Floyd to Kyle—"how long have you two been planning this?"

"Not long." Kyle sipped from the water glass, he and Floyd exchanged a conspiratorial look. "His query letter popped out from the mess that's my inbox, and said, *I'm going to be your next client.*"

"Floyd!" I exclaimed for the second time today, astounded. My brother's confidence, unlike mine, was genuine and slipped into every area of his life. This much in-your-face attitude, though? I hadn't seen that side of him. But I loved it.

He shrugged while Kyle laughed. "I meant it, and it happened. So..."

"He's not wrong," Kyle added, the smirk not leaving his cheeks.

It was my turn to smile. Floyd leaned in his chair, casually playing with the hem of the cloth napkin. "I had to. I lied to you when I said I'd approached a few agents; it was only Kyle. I didn't think anyone could represent me better, and I needed to give him every reason to take me on."

A waiter arrived at our table, and we paused our conversation for a moment to give him drink and food orders.

The easy bond that had formed between the two men altered the narrative of this meeting from official to affable. From a signing that normally consisted of coffee at most, to a friendly dinner.

Kyle picked up the conversation where we left off, “Yeah, you definitely had some solid points. Which, for the record, wouldn’t have mattered if you’d have sent me crap.”

“It’s far from crap.” Unwavering in his blue gaze, Floyd defended his life’s work.

The response from Kyle arrived, equally assertive. “True.”

I ticked an eyebrow up at Kyle, struggling to believe this spur-of-the-moment decision. Considering the heaps of manuscripts that were waiting for him, in an area he did an amazing job representing, this choice seemed odd. “So, what, you’re going into poetry? Just like that?”

“Like I said, I loved what I read, and your brother is very convincing.” Kyle’s grin widened. “It was the final argument for me, *You only live once.*”

My eyes squinted into slits.

Kyle’s expression sobered, clearing his throat. “No, I didn’t show interest because he’s your brother. He used a pen name. I only found out he was a Jenkins when I asked him for the details of the official contract.”

“Yup, I didn’t want any special treatment because I was family,” Floyd, who heard Kyle’s name in passing in a few of our talks, offered. “And I like the new name.”

The suspicion that unsettled me quieted at that, a slow wave of joy replacing it. Kyle chose him for him. Completely unbiased, he considered Floyd’s talent worthy. My heart couldn’t have gotten bigger if I wanted it to.

Or so I thought.

“What did you choose instead of Jenkins?” I asked, curious.

Floyd twisted his hands, staring at them before raising his piercing blue eyes at me. “Knight.”

“Mom’s maiden name.” I gaped, momentarily immovable.

“I figured it was a good way to honor her memory.” The weightiness of the subject showed in his meek smile.

I reached over, covering his wrought hands. “She would’ve been so proud of you, Floyd, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“I agree.” I heard Kyle say quietly, his voice consoling the bare parts of my soul. The softness of it touched me so deep, it brought on an onslaught of tears.

“Holy shit,” I murmured, using the napkin to dry my damp cheeks. “I’m going to be a fucking sobbing mess before this evening is over.”

In an instant I heard a chair scratch the floor. Kyle draped his arm around me, pulling me to his chest. “Cry all you want, Els.”

I sniffed. “Sorry. She passed away, complications after giving birth to the triplets. I was four back then, so my memories are more like glimpses. From what I do remember, she was a wonderful mom.”

Kyle rubbed my arm, his comforting fingers squeezing it. “I’m sure she was.”

“Yeah.” I patted Kyle’s hand when I felt lighter, signaling he could let me go.

“You know what else Mom would be proud of?” Floyd asked. “I bet she would’ve loved you giving your book a chance.”

“Floyd,” I sighed, tired. Wrung out. Mentally drained from the flight, the excitement, from everything. “This meeting’s not about me.”

“I don’t care.” He bent forward, sparing a short glance to Kyle. “I mean, I care, but for the next few seconds I don’t.”

“No problem over here.” Kyle stroked my knee beneath the table, silently reassuring me that everything was okay.

Our drinks arrived, and yet neither Floyd nor I made a move for them.

“It feels freaking incredible, writing from my soul and sharing it. You used to be like that too, asking me to read your drafts as soon as you’d finish them. I’m not even going to repeat the question of why you dropped it in college, why you changed majors, it doesn’t matter. Just...I wish you’d return to it. I want the best things in life for you, sis.”

A tsunami from the past came crashing back at Floyd’s speech. I peeked at Kyle. He knitted his eyebrows together, tilting his head and soaking up the entire conversation.

“Kyle told me he read parts of your book.” Floyd raised a palm to silence me when I opened my mouth. “No, he didn’t let me see. He said he loved it. Why can’t you believe him? Why can’t you believe in yourself?”

Ever since Mom passed, I’d acted more as the triplet’s mother than their sister. I took care of them, helped with their homework, lent a hand around the house whenever Dad worked late hours, listened to them at any hour of the day. I sensed what they needed before they even made a peep.

Today the roles had reversed, and my baby brother, who wasn’t such a baby anymore, saw what *I* needed. Over the years, I’d learned to put my life-long ambitions into a deep hibernation, to be kept under lock and key. The one man who’d slowly coaxed me to stir them awake had been Kyle. If not for his persistent and tender approach, Floyd’s rude awakening would’ve fallen on deaf ears.

But it didn’t.

I fluttered my eyes shut, listening to the drums of my heart. They beat at a steady pace. It hadn’t asked me to log off the planet, hadn’t slowed in fear. My heart screamed at me to *live*.

Kyle’s fingers curled around my wrist, pulling it to his lips and kissing it. “We don’t have to discuss it now.”

“No!” I exclaimed. My gaze shot to Kyle, my whole being fueled by a force I hadn’t recognized I had in me. “Fuck it. I’ll send you everything at home. I’m done hiding.”

Kyle’s eyes were set ablaze, an uncontrollable roaring fire aimed at me and no one else. It didn’t scald me, it didn’t hurt. It warmed me. This time, his fire matched mine.

He got up, pulling me with him and drawing me to his chest. Both of his palms cupped my face, and right before he crushed our lips together, he said, “Yes, you are, baby. Yes, you are.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kyle

ELSIE AND I rode a taxi back from LaGuardia Airport on Sunday evening. She linked her arm in mine, her head resting on my shoulder, her voice sounding peaceful. “I haven’t forgotten about the book.”

I kissed her hair, the kick to my senses from drowning in it very much alive. It hadn’t worn off, even after days of basking in it, in her. “Hold on to that email for a few more days.”

She stirred, apprehension clouding the light blue of her eyes when they met mine. Her mouth twisted, nose twitching. “You’re having second thoughts, right? Ugh, I’m sorry if the dinner with Floyd and me pressured you into it. Let’s...just forget the whole thing happened.”

Elsie’s speech poured out of her at a speed that made it impossible to cut in. She let out a tormented sigh at the end of it, the sound so strained I had to cup her cheek for reassurance before I allowed myself to say a single word. I needed her to feel my sincerity, not just hear it.

“No, definitely no second thoughts.” I waited for her to nod in agreement, ready to explain in case she wouldn’t.

She did, my heart swelling with every bob of her head. “I have an...*activity* I’d like to do together. To make this process not just tolerable, but wholesome.”

She lowered her tone to barely a whisper so the driver wouldn’t overhear her. “We already did a lot of *activities* this weekend.”

I couldn’t argue with her on that. There were plenty of non-business-related activities once Floyd signed his name on the

dotted line, the moment the business part of our Chicago trip ended.

We carved out Thursday for both our families, starting by FaceTiming my parents to wish them happy holidays. Since I hadn't introduced them to a girl since high school, I prepared them for it in a text early in the morning while Elsie was sleeping in, though it wasn't necessary. The genuine smiles and laughs the three swapped throughout the conversation confirmed that my parents would've liked her regardless.

Later that afternoon we headed to Thanksgiving dinner at Elsie's dad's home in the suburbs of Chicago. Elsie inherited Mr. Jenkins's fiery auburn hair and fun character, and he and the rest of the triplets, Hayley and Alexander, treated me as family instead of a guest.

It was that easy embrace as one of them that overrode the recurring pang of sadness that used to pierce through me in these social gatherings. Not having siblings sucked, but with them I felt at home. A true reason to be thankful.

We returned to our hotel that night, knocked out by the enormous amount of food. The following day, we gave the outside a shot, though none of us were too eager to get out of bed. It had nothing to do with Chicago, its urban magic, and the almost-dinner we had at the quaint Italian restaurant, and everything to do with Elsie.

Nothing compared to having her all to myself. No museum or route we traveled held my interest more than her face, no food satiated me as profoundly as making love to her, as listening to her stories and sharing mine into the early hours of the morning.

And even though it bothered me the entire time, I hadn't brought up the bomb Floyd had dropped on our first dinner. Didn't feel the need to rush it, to push her. She taught me the importance of space, how you couldn't always apply tough love to achieve a desired end result. How life had more to it than *results*.

So, I took a step back, trusting the process, marveling at her, and nothing else. As simple and as right as that.

Even now as we were back in the real world, nothing in my plans for her included prying. They were centered around helping her, not throwing her into publishing her book unprepared.

There had obviously been an underlying painful event that triggered this whole thing, which brought on such strong physical reactions. I wanted it addressed and removed from her soul, in a way that wouldn't involve sharing with me if she'd prefer not to. And I knew exactly how to do it.

“Miss Jenkins, we're going to have a ton of these activities, before, during, and after your book release, you can count on that.” I winked and pulled her even closer to me. “And then it'll be this activity in between.”

The hesitancy in her question pained me. “You're sure it's not because you hate it?”

I kissed her forehead, adamant to wipe her doubts away for good. “As sure as I'll ever be. You'll see.”



Elsie crumpled the wrapper, the bagel she had for dinner gone. Her smile was so fucking sated, so genuinely at ease, that I wanted to imprint the feel of it on my lips.

I bent over the table, wrapping my fingers around her neck. We stared at each other, my eyes drawing lower, my breath hitching in my throat. And then I kissed her.

“You guys are so cute it's borderline disgusting.” Justine's face contorted.

We really were. See if I gave an ounce of a fuck.

My main priority that Friday afternoon revolved around swathing Elsie with warmth ahead of our date, the one I hoped would sow the seeds of her getting rid of her past. It wasn't a

quick fix, in life there hardly were any. However, it would be a start.

I cradled her face, dotting on her with even more care and affection. Some might even call it *love*. This falling feeling, the impulsive need to make her happy like she'd been since last week on Thanksgiving. It was that.

Not without effort, I withdrew from her to clear the table. Elsie and Justine resumed their conversation, fawning over Alda's upcoming book and her lifestyle blog. They had only known her for a brief period, and yet they loved and supported her in whatever she did, just like she loved and was there for them.

"I gather we have a trip to LA in the near future?" I pushed from where I lounged against the counter, marveling at Elsie's smile and enthusiasm. Elsie glanced up when I returned, relaxing into the circles I rubbed on her back. "Because I was promised a housewarming party and I think it's high time I collect."

Justine practically bobbed up and down from the chair. "Oh my God, yes! Oh. Wait." Then she paused, her face calculated, gaze slanting up. "How long do you need to be in a job before you can get time off?"

"There's no rush." Elsie waved her hands, getting up to put on her dark gray coat and scarf. "I'm going to Chicago for Christmas; we can talk after that. In the meantime, just maybe focus on not hating your boss?"

"*Hate* is such a strong word. I'm strongly opposed to her not-so-bright vision."

Elsie hugged her friend from behind as she scoffed. "Hang in there, and go back to writing. You haven't done that in a while."

"I haven't done it in forever." The advice and Elsie's warmth mollified her. Justine rubbed her eyes, patting Elsie's hand. "Now off you go, lovebirds. Don't let me hold you back."

Elsie moved to where I stood, her eyes darting between me and her friend. They held a silent plea not to leave Justine like this.

I recognized that loyalty in myself, and I adored her for it, for her heart. “No rush, we can stay as long as you need.”

The snort that came from Justine made her opinion of us known. “As much as I love seeing you two smooching in front of me, I think I’ll pass today. Go, shoo, out.”

“Okay then.” Elsie tied her hair in a messy bun, calling out to Justine who stood at the doorway of her bedroom. “See you later, Justine.”

“Hopefully not until late afternoon tomorrow,” she shouted behind her in a teasing tone, shutting her bedroom door after her.

“Shall we?” I asked, holding the door for her.

While the rest of my body reflected my usual swag, my tremulous smile betrayed the crack in my confidence. The evening could go very right or very wrong, and I prayed hard for the former. That it would bring Elsie peace and give her a real chance to start over.

To rediscover her dreams and chase them like the badass she was.

“Can’t wait.” She returned my smile, taking the hand I’d offered her.

Her happiness made me happy, though nothing about tonight would revolve around me. I watched as the precious lady who turned me into a mush of a man looked at me, barely containing her giddiness.

Once she was up, I put on the black peacoat I’d draped on one of the chairs earlier, and we were out on the street. Both of us had beanies on, though fortunately the wind hadn’t blown so hard, the skies clear from rain-foreboding clouds.

I took it as a good omen, glancing to the heavens and thanking them as I waited for Elsie to enter the Uber.

Fifteen minutes into the ride, long silent minutes where Elsie stared out the window trying to decipher our destination, she said, “What’s with the mystery, Mr. Turner? First Floyd, now what? Don’t tell me you’re hijacking me to see one of your authors so they’ll tell me releasing a book isn’t scary?”

“Thanks for the plan B in case this one fails.” I chuckled. “And no. Dinners don’t require comfortable clothes and sneakers.”

She diverted her attention from me to the leggings and white sneakers she wore. When she glanced up again, her eyes were hungry with curiosity.

“Another fifteen minutes and you’ll get your answers.”

Her reply came in the form of scrunched cherry-colored lips and a tapping sneaker on the floor of the car. The buzzing restless energy accompanied us until vivid lights filled the inside of the car, emanating from where I sat.

Elsie leaned on my thigh to get close to the window. Her eyes were wide, jaw slack, fingers lying flat on my leg. “What the actual fuck?”

I reveled in her surprised expression, the happiness and confusion and every other emotion that passed across her face. She remained equally stunned when I led us out of the vehicle and onto the pavement. It sunk in, yet it hadn’t dropped.

She, this moment, the carnival music, they were precisely as I imagined them to me. We should’ve absorbed it, lived it, experienced it without words to ruin the feeling of it all. However, I knew why we were here, I had everything figured out.

Elsie didn’t, and she deserved explanations.

“I’m no author. What I do know is you all pour a little, or a lot, of yourself into the story and write what you know,” I commenced. Comprehension dawned on her, yet the surprise was ever present enough that she couldn’t say anything. “And Sabrina liked this place. It made her feel like herself more than any other place did, so I assumed that...”

Elsie flung herself on me, her arms strangling me, her legs tight around my waist. I watched her smile for a brief second before she crushed her sweet lips to mine.

“I assumed right?” I supported her by holding her from under her thighs, walking toward the gates. Four circular shapes were lit in purple, red, and blue colors, the smell of cotton candy wafting over to us from a nearby stand.

She examined the very empty Coney Island Luna Park, the wheels of her brain working. “It’s supposed to be closed in November. How is this possible?”

“I know a guy who knows a guy.”

“A guy doesn’t call in all of Luna Park’s staff because he knows the other guy.” She released her feet, while I pretended to be dumb and held on to her. “Put me down.”

I lowered her to the ground, watching her shake her head, walking from side to side. She stopped eventually, placing her hands on her hips.

“This is crazy, Kyle. I like you, I like you a lot. I would still like you if you hadn’t blown so much money on me. The flight and five-star hotel in Chicago...”

“That’s work. Deductible.” I suppressed a smile.

Despite the reproach in her tone, I fucking loved hearing she liked me. A lot.

Elsie groaned, punching my shoulder. “...then renting an entire park.”

“When I represent you, I can write this off as a business deduction.”

“Kyle!” she scoffed, raising her hands and letting them fall to her sides. “These are huge expenses. Even if you had the money, I wouldn’t want you to do all of this. I. Don’t. Need it.”

“I appreciate you caring about my finances.” I kissed her nose. “Don’t worry, I’m good.”

Standing there felt awkward, so I offered her my arm to start strolling inside. She interlaced hers with it gingerly, the wrinkles between her eyebrows unchanging.

I understood why she assumed that I didn't have a ton of money, and her not caring whether I was loaded or not meant a lot to me. Mainly because money, as a luxury for myself, never interested me either.

But I repeatedly asked for her honesty, even more so today. Honesty I couldn't not reciprocate. I wet my lips, thinking how best to delve into this personal part of my life, then dived right in.

“You know Noah's obsession with his bookstores?”

“A little. Alda likes to keep his private life private.”

Elsie waited for me to elaborate. She didn't pry, letting me be, allowing the space to explain at my own pace. She made sharing easy. I wasn't above admitting I'd have to take lessons from her in the future.

“Well, he is. His dream is to own a network of bookstores that'll be approachable for novice writers. That's what fuels him to earn money and to accept changes to his movie scripts to accommodate the movie producers' wishes.”

She nodded. The lady who stood at the popcorn stand offered us a bag, and we each took one. We dropped our butts on one of the benches, staring ahead at the long and red Cyclone roller coaster. We were glued together from shoulders to hips, just how I liked it.

“Since childhood, I've had two goals that revolved around my parents. The financial one is I wanted to buy them a nice home in a safe neighborhood. They're good people, and they loved me the best they could even when we struggled and we barely had any money to eat. The second”—I paused, inhaled, seeking strength from Elsie's warmth—“is that I'm fiercely passionate to help people like them not to find themselves in that position in the first place.”

“People like them?”

A slow smile spread on my lips, hearing her take offense on behalf of my parents.

“Poor choice of words. People who are artists, unrepresented ones. Like my mom who had aspirations to be a writer and my dad who used to love painting. They weren’t able to follow those dreams.” I sighed. Not even the magical lights and cheery music could overcome the heaviness from relaying this sad story, whose ending was so fucking depressing.

“Coming from poor homes, they had limited options, back when self-publishing and social media weren’t a thing. Eventually, they needed money, conformed to society’s standards with regular jobs in a factory. They destroyed anything they did prior to that. Their dreams were gone, just like that.”

Elsie gripped my arm. I turned to look at her and she was clutching the popcorn bag with the other hand, her eyes unmoving, stuck at the view ahead. I placed my bag aside, then hers.

“What about now?”

“They haven’t quit their jobs, so they don’t have time, or don’t make time. Either way, they asked me long ago to shut up about it.”

Her eyes met mine. I cocked an eyebrow.

“And you listened to them.”

“There was only so much smacks to the back of the head I could deal with.”

“So simple, yet so genius.”

I breathed a laugh, briefly imagining what our first meeting at her office would’ve looked like had she taken their approach. I’d say pretty fucking wicked.

“For other authors, my authors, I put up a fight. Once Noah told me he trusted no one else to manage his career, I threw myself into it headfirst. We earned a bunch of money together,

enough for a decent place for my parents, and more than enough to take on unknown authors. Big house, a car, any car, I don't care for any of that."

She swallowed, turning a shade red. "I think I underestimated you, Mr. Turner."

Hearing her say it, my woman, made me feel more like James Bond than anything. It didn't matter that I hadn't done anything monumental, hadn't cured cancer or flown to the moon.

Didn't matter that I didn't see myself that way. She did.

"And I think I love you, Miss Jenkins."

The air became thick around us. I'd never said these words to another woman, never understood the meaning behind them.

Until now.

Now that it became crystal clear what putting another woman's needs ahead of mine entailed. Now that I'd found someone to confide in, freely. That despite being in a city miles away from Boston, where I'd spent most of my life, I felt like home next to her.

I cleared my throat, dropping my lips close, so very close to hers. "Let me rephrase that. I fucking know. I love you. I love you, Elsie."

Which one of us moved first to kiss, I couldn't tell. We collided into each other, locking lips, mouths dancing in a rhythm that belonged to us alone. That breathtaking urgency, that connection of souls, it spoke volumes. It spoke truths.

"One more stop." My voice was hoarse as I brought her knuckles to my lips, the view of her a reminder of why we're here. I could kiss her later. I'd have a lifetime of kissing her after today. "One more stop to give you your closure, so the past has no control over you anymore."

Determination flared in her eyes. "Okay. Let's do this."

My chest puffed, pride stretching it from the inside. Elsie's fight, her vitality, every single part of her was living, breathing, and present. It was my intention from the very start, to have her living her best life. Not to someone else's, hers.

We traveled by the Wonder Wheel she described in her book, and I paused to dip her in another kiss. She made a sap out of me.

"Hello, Kyle, Elsie," the operator of the stand where I intended us to go welcomed us, handing Elsie a red plastic ball. I specifically asked not to be referred to as Mr. anything. It would've sounded wrong from any other lips but Elsie's.

"What is...this?"

I hugged her from behind, placing my chin on her shoulder. We faced the pyramid of tin cans, the physical exercise I figured would be the most beneficial. It didn't involve talking, didn't require her to share anything she preferred not to. It let my fierce woman suck out the poison all by herself.

"*This* is where you get to express your anger. Throw it as hard as you can, take that pyramid down." I stepped back, allowing her to use her whole body as leverage.

She barely reared her arm back, swinging so meekly it fell to the floor. The pyramid remained untouched.

The operator handed her another one and she shook her head. "I...Kyle, I feel silly. I don't have the strength to reach, let alone aim."

Determination kept me from moving, standing firm for her. "One more go. For me."

The intake of sharp breath expanded her lungs. She accepted the ball, swung back, threw.

To the floor.

"Another one...?" I asked for his name.

"Gus."

"Thanks, Gus."

Since Elsie hadn't budged from her place, not even to look at Gus, I picked up the ball.

She laid her palm up when I handed it to her. "Kyle, I really don't understand what we're trying to do here. I'm not angry."

"Elsie." I wrapped her cheeks with my palms, my thumbs stroking her gently. "There are two polar emotions I'm experiencing right now. One is love, for you, if that wasn't obvious by now. The other is hate, for whoever hurt you and derailed you from your destination. Tonight, we'll kick this person's ass by removing the power he holds over you. Is that clear?"

Her eyes were rooted to the floor. "It was so long ago. It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," I claimed, angling her head high. She gazed at me through impossibly blue yet haunted eyes. "You matter to me. I'm begging you to return to that wall and scream that person's name as loud as you can. You don't have to tell me what he did and why, just punch the fucker's lights out. Figuratively."

After releasing her, she shifted her attention from me to Gus. He raised his palms facing up. "Hey, it's a free country, scream all you like."

Like a butterfly batting its wings, her long, dark lashes fluttered. She turned away from me, prepared, and threw. This time though, she said, "Professor Evans," in about a decibel higher than her usual voice. The ball hit the top tin.

My teeth ground, my jaw ticked. I remained still. "You're doing great, Els."

Without sparing me a look, she outstretched her hand for Gus.

"For bullying me for months when I worked as your assistant."

Aim. Throw. Two more cans dropped. My heart collapsed with them. Hearing someone treated her like shit tore at my stomach, almost blinding me with rage.

Her breaths heaved, color rushing to her cheeks. She threw again.

“For calling me names when I offered my opinion in staff meetings.”

The whole pyramid vanished. Containing a string of curses that day nearly cost me my sanity.

“For firing me and...” She turned to me, quivering.

I could see Elsie collapsing in slow motion. I leaped forward, swathing her in my arms, being that wall for her. The support I’d always be. She sobbed silently, my fierce warrior, digging her fingers into my coat.

Then she voiced words, silent and only for my ears. Words that boiled my blood. That made my muscles contract in rage. That almost slashed me in two.

“For telling me my work was so useless I’d be doing myself and the world a huge favor if I quit English Lit altogether.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Elsie

ALIVE.

Screaming my secret ripped away the shame.

Using every bit of anger I had in me to take down the tin cans purged the sentiment from the caverns of my soul.

Crying released the heaps of self-loathing that I'd allowed to reside in my body for years.

Fucking years.

I was free.

Unfortunately, I hadn't sent this slew of negativity into the atmosphere. I'd transferred it onto the man that loved me. The man that I loved. I'd admitted it to myself, though the emotional turmoil prevented me from articulating the words.

I knew I would, but I had to soothe him first. Kyle seethed as he held me, flexing his fingers repeatedly on my coat, and try as he might to restrain himself for my sake, I heard a *Motherfucker* slip out once.

When my cathartic crying episode faded to a couple of sniffles, I spoke into his chest, "Thank you. Thank you so much for doing this for me."

"I'm. Not. Done." Chopped words that exposed who exactly he had unfinished business with.

"Kyle." I wiggled in arms that were reluctant to acquiesce. When his grip loosened, it was barely enough for me to look up at him. "I don't need revenge."

"I need something. To punch someone's face in, for example." His eyes were set on me, his thoughts skidding into

a territory of violence.

A faraway land where he considered himself a knight who had to save this bawling damsel in distress. I wiped the tears from under my eyes, then said his name.

Once.

Twice.

Nothing. Didn't even flinch.

So I did what anyone else would've done. I stepped on his foot. Hard.

His eyes cleared by a fraction, and I stomped into this window of opportunity.

“Listen to me. You said we're here to unburden my past, to help me regain control of my life.” The animosity in his stare retreated, though nowhere close to being gone.

I refused to allow any shred of bleak to sabotage the miracle he'd materialized for me. “We did it. You did it. Not just now. I mean, sure, screaming it felt liberating as fuck. There was something else that helped me too, even more: your conviction, how you sucked out the poison from me, it was you. Meaningless hate would defeat the purpose of all your hard work.”

He snarled in disgust, his fingers flexing on my coat, crumpling it. “How can you say it's meaningless? I loathe any man who'd treat another human like that. Piece of garbage.”

“I agree, and that's exactly why we're not spending another second discussing him.” I slipped a hand into Kyle's coat and dipped it into his jeans. I rose on my tiptoes, whispering in his ear, “What we are going to do, is go to your apartment and make love. Because, Mr. Turner, I'm insanely in love with you.”

I barely breathed out the last word when Kyle scooped me up in his arms, my legs locking around his middle. It felt like home. It felt like *us*. That, and he ordered an Uber without me

noticing he ever took the phone out, all while striding toward the exit.

Once he tucked his phone in his jean pocket, Kyle captivated me with his gaze, the full effect of his adoration landing on my face. The untarnished tenderness his expression held before I told him my story disappeared, the love in his eyes intense and somewhat fierce.

Hearing that I love him did that to him, dulled the sharp edges of fury, and yet he hadn't forgotten about the wrongs that were done to me. I could tell it pained him, simmering alongside our I love yous.

And I couldn't have that. I bombarded him with my light, nuzzling the hollow of his neck, and murmuring the words that prevailed over the darkness all the way to the car.

Kyle pulled me into his lap from my place near the window, running a hand through my hair.

“Excuse me, could you please each sit in your own place?” The driver, unaware of Kyle's primal necessity for warmth, seemed less than pleased from the show of affection.

Kyle's strokes paused. “No.”

Our driver peered at us through the rearview mirror at a very uncompromising Kyle.

The rest of the ride passed quietly.

“Tell me again.” His eyes jumped from me to the staircase, carrying me to his apartment.

“Tell you what?” I played dumb, nibbling his bottom lip. Might as well enjoy the perks of my human-elevator. Who bit back.

Outside his door, when the bobbing movements from climbing the stairs stopped, so did he. Kyle positioned me up against the door, pressing the length of him between my thighs. In the hallway. In plain sight.

It felt liberating.

It felt like love.

It also felt fucking hot to have Kyle groaning into my hair, sucking on my earlobe, his shaft grinding into me, the force of him pinning me impossibly deeper into the wooden door.

“I love you,” I finally managed to say among hushed moans and labored breaths. My nails dug desperately into his nape, dragging beneath his coat in search of his skin. “I love you.”

These three Ls, lust, love, and liberation clashed in my soul, an undeniable force driving me to have Kyle inside me, to be as one. I pushed from the door, frantically searching for it. Kyle answered my desperation, his muscular figure thrusting into me, making the door creak.

He detached his mouth from mine, his sweet exhales caressing my lips, his inhaled taking a part of me with them.

“I love you, Elsie,” he groaned, before returning to be completely and fully mine.

His lips locked on mine, kissing me thoroughly. One of his hands released, groping me under my coat. He slid his demanding fingers further inside, raking my body from the waist up, kneading my puckered nipples through my sweatshirt.

Inebriated from having him all over me, I arched my back, giving him more access. I detached my butt from the door, sinking the heels of my sneakers into him. We were immersed in each other, me scraping at his neck, him stifling my untamed moans of pleasure by kissing me harshly.

He slammed into me strong enough to make me whimper in ecstasy that verged on pain, arduously to the point nothing was audible but Kyle’s rugged grunts, the door creaking, and the blood rushing behind my ears.

Almost nothing.

A lock turned in one of the doors, the hall lighting up. Kyle helped me down quickly, already taking out his keys when the

door next to us opened.

One of Kyle's neighbors who seemed to be the same age as us peeked out from his apartment, his black hair tousled and his chest exposed. "Kyle?"

"Hey, Ari." Kyle rubbed the back of his neck, casting his eyes from Ari to the floor.

"No judgment. Just thought you were some drunks from the street." Ari's lips curved in a playful grin. "You should've heard how we rocked the building ten minutes ago."

"Ari!" His lady friend, or girlfriend, tossed a throw pillow at him.

"That's her way of saying she wants another round." He picked it up from the floor, winked at us, and shut the door behind him.

Kyle and I contained our laugh until we were inside his place. In the confinement of the closed apartment, we cracked up at this entire bizarre scenario.

"You have interesting neighbors." I leaned my forearms on the kitchen island, facing him.

He stayed by the door, watching me intently, his laughter simmering down. "Yeah."

Retrieving the phone from his pocket, he scrolled it, connecting it to the speaker system. When the start of "Movement" by Hozier reverberated in the house, he tossed his cell and his keys into the bowl by the entrance. The sounds were alluring, downright freaking cosmic.

But as seductive as they were, they had nothing on Kyle's impassioned, all-absorbing glare. The darkness in his eyes cascaded out like a waterfall, sensuous waves I couldn't see but could *feel* enveloping me from head to toe.

Every pore in me sensed it, every particle of flesh was at his mercy. Kyle reined in a force that lured me to him, and I glided toward him. Kyle bent down, a rugged breath leaving

him. We were drifting in rivers and lakes and oceans of bottomless need.

He threw off each of our beanies, dragging his fingers from my ears into my hair. “You’re so fucking gorgeous when you laugh.”

After that, we didn’t have any use for another single word. Kyle possessed my lips, kissing and sucking, his tongue tasting mine, his lungs breathing in my air. I gripped the lapels of his coat, stripping it off him as I forced his hands from my face.

Kyle shoved my coat from my shoulders and tore away at my blouse, the fabric hanging loose around my waist. His lips trailed from my cheek to my ear, his hands ripping the remainder of what used to be my shirt, snapping open my bra in one swift movement.

It felt like a race to get the other person naked, spurred by insane heat and something so feral I couldn’t even name it. I clawed at his Henley, pulling it over his head, my greedy hands rummaging through the stone hard ridges of his chest. They scratched, dug, consumed him as if he were the most exquisite work of art they’d ever touched.

I traveled higher, tugging at his beard, drawing his face to my lips. He growled, capturing my mouth, enveloping my back to yank me to his front. My arms were jammed between us, sensing the fire in his sculpted torso and wanting everything from him.

He traced his fingers along my exposed back, my shoulders, the sides of my breasts, easing his grip on me. It hadn’t been much, but I was able to shift my hands, lowering them to his belt, unbuckling it. I undid his buttons, shoving my hand inside his boxers, fisting his cock, stroking him slowly, feeling him swell from my touch.

The sound that emanated from this man, my man, thundered in my mouth, my whole existence dragged to a halt. His thunder of a roar was raw and visceral and so very real,

growing in intensity as he kissed me, biting down my bottom lip whenever I rubbed the tip of his pressing erection with my thumb.

He pushed into my hand one last time before he snapped, ripping himself from me. I followed when he kicked off his sneakers and socks, even the unheated floor feeling hot beneath my feet.

One look from Kyle was all it took to incinerate me to the ground, which was exactly what he did. Kyle tilted his head, eyes boring into me as he pushed two fingers down my panties.

My mouth hung open, trying to speak although it sounded more like a plea, “Kyle.”

The pressure he applied with the base of his palm on my clit pulsated throughout my body, the high from having his fingers penetrating my entrance nearly ruining me altogether.

“You should see yourself now, the fire in your eyes.” He gripped my ass to keep me upright, his fingers of his other hand curling inside of me, rubbing my walls in search of the point that’d make me squirm. “Seeing you alive, Elsie, it’s everything. Every-fucking-thing.”

As he spoke, low, harsh, and admiring, something happened. All at once my hips clenched, my palms flung to his face for support. My knees buckled, surrendered by the enormity of the pulse of heat that burst from the place where he connected to the rest of me.

Our eyes were still bound together when I came undone in his hands, shuddering, taken by tremors, a series of orgasmic waves pulsing through me one after the other.

Kyle slowed the pace of his strokes, delivering slow kisses. But I didn’t want slow, didn’t want to stop. I wanted him. I shoved down his jeans, and he helped me shimmy out of mine. Knowing what came next, greedy for it, I offered him my arms.

He smirked, sexy and dark, pulling me up. His heart raced under his muscles, his chest a wall of steel. I sucked hungrily on his neck, getting infinitely more aroused as he carried us to his room. Our bodies were flush one against another, the friction of my sex rubbing on his stomach making me cling to him as if I'd fall without it.

By the time he sat us on the bed the urge was uncontainable, uncontrollable, all over the fucking place. I straddled him, caressing his bearded cheeks, a ravenous need to taste him encompassing me.

“Elsie.” His voice stopped me a breath away from his lips. A cherishing voice, one that didn't match the strong hold he had on my hips, or how he brought me down on him in one powerful thrust.

The thrust of his dick inside me pierced me in the most delicious way possible. My grip on his shoulders tightened, my mouth begging him for more reverently. My breasts were heavy with lust as I started rocking on him, rising and falling, the pace of my sways dictated solely by the rhythm of the seductive song.

I shut my eyes, giving in to the sensations, to my pulsating heart, to having Kyle fill me. A cry escaped me when he swiped his tongue on my erect nipple, a loud moan when he sucked on it. My head dropped back when he scraped his teeth on the sensitive nub, his hips jutting up to meet me on every thrust.

When Kyle's palm pressed against my breastbone, my eyes fluttered open, laden with desire. His dark gaze, pupils turning black, waited for me, devouring my reaction to him. Air left him in short and shallow puffs when I rocked my hips to find a better angle, having him so deep inside I was sure I'd lose it. Just when I couldn't take any more, his palm wandered lower to where our bodies met.

He parted my lips, rubbing my throbbing clit in tantalizing circles.

“Fuck,” I let out, clenching around him, riding him, marking him with my fingernails as I came again.

I was quickly caught by him as my limbs went limp. Kyle’s arms rounded my back, allowing me to lean all my weight on him. My lips were next to his ear, my swollen and wet pussy being thrashed by his hips as he plummeted into me. He rocked faster, deeper. He was mine.

Kyle’s teeth bit down my neck, almost drawing blood as gravelly sounds that emanated from him swallowed up the background noise, his hot cum releasing inside of me.

“I love you. I love you,” he repeated as slowly and carefully as he stroked my hair.

“And I love you.” I kissed his shoulder, sated and blissed and one with him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Elsie

“YES, NATALIE, I’ve seen the stats you sent me,” I reassured her while juggling a million other things. Emails, texts, calls from the office line, and five last-minute holiday releases Ben insisted we had to clear space in our schedules for.

So that was my Monday morning, less than three weeks before Christmas. A complete madhouse. One in which I tried to navigate through my files and send Kyle my book.

I hadn’t had the opportunity to do it over the weekend. Nothing took precedence over staying in, taking long walks, drinking boiling coffee, or eating all the yummy things. It wasn’t that I’d avoided it due to fear.

I just didn’t think about it, period. It ceased being an issue. Once I released the anxiety, the knowledge that Kyle would read Sabrina and Enzo’s story didn’t do anything to me.

But on Monday morning, when we were apart, it excited me. I uploaded the book to my cloud right after our short getaway, ready to send it to him whenever he revealed his grand plan.

Which was indeed, nothing short of genius. The file sat there when I logged in from work, and I downloaded it, composing Kyle an email during a phone conversation with Natalie, who was more of a friend than a work partner.

She sighed on the other line. “You don’t sound excited about how Hunter hinting about his new release sent him over the ten thousand followers mark.”

Hey, I typed, keeping it short, so this is the full manuscript I wrote...

“Why aren’t you excited?”

“I am excited.”

I typed faster just to have it mailed out to him. ...*I hope you like it. Elsie.*

And *Send*.

Veering my eyes from the screen, I gave her my full attention. “No one is happier than I am that this panned out well.”

“Good, for a second there you sounded like you...wait.”

“Wait what?” My eyebrows lowered as the silence stretched.

“Now I get it.” Her voice sounded thrilled and full of life. “That is one hell of a way to break out your debut. It’s fucking brilliant, Els.”

While she talked, Ben paused by my office door, an unmoving tall man in a gray suit. His hand was seemingly glued to the handle, his whole face scrunched. What were the odds that both of them received the same disconcerting email at the same time? Slim, but not impossible.

Just as I opened my mailbox, Natalie added, “Shit, why didn’t I know you planned to publish so soon? Why have you been hiding this gem for so long?”

Blood drained from my face, the ground beneath my feet felt unsteady, and my heart was on the verge of quitting on me. I shook my head, refusing to let the darkness consume me, not after the breakthrough I had thanks to Kyle.

I put to use the new powers I’d found from within. Even though my hand quivered on the mouse, I dragged it, painfully slow, to hover above the *Sent* folder. The sliver of hope I had that I might’ve forwarded it to the *Close Contacts* list died the instant I clicked on the contents of the email.

The horror that engulfed me the moment I realized who I’d sent it to made the air whoosh out of my lungs. In my rush to

get the email sent and return to Natalie, I must've accidentally checked the box of all my contacts.

All.

My.

Contacts.

It's because I didn't do the Skittles ceremony. I know it. Too late now.

“Natalie, I'll have to call you back.”

“No, Elsie, wait—”

I hung up.

Ben recovered. Not frozen anymore, he turned the doorknob, venturing cautiously into my office. We exchanged a look. A look that could've meant one thing, and one thing alone—I'd fucked up.

During the four years I'd worked for Ben, I feared getting sacked for such stupid reasons. I recognized their source now, I knew better. Professor Evans' abuse and eventual surprise firing of me had me constantly doubting myself over nothing and everything.

This wasn't some clerical error like those I did at the beginning of my career, nor was it a medium-sized mistake like not paying close enough attention to Hunter's sales. Nothing as simple as an oversight that Ben could teach me how to avoid in the future. No *lesson learned* that he could write off with one of his favorite Ilka Chase quotes, “*The only people who never fail are those who never try.*”

This colossal, unprofessional fuckup would cost me my job. He'd for sure think I'd orchestrated the whole thing behind his back, that I'd betrayed his trust. And now that he'd read parts of a book I still wasn't one-hundred percent sold on myself, he wouldn't want anything to do with it, either.

Or with me.

I have to fix this.

“Ben, I can explain.”

He sat down, placed his hands in his lap. He didn't wring them, just let them rest there. “Okay.”

My phone pinged nonstop, texts and phone calls, the landline ringing like crazy. From the corner of my eye, new emails flashed again and again on my computer screen. I ignored all of it, blocked it all out. I listened to the thrums of my heart, how it rattled inside the ribs that protected it. I was alive. I could deal with it.

“I didn't mean to send it to everyone.” I pulled my lips in, hating myself for being so careless. “Only to Kyle, we're, uh, dating”—Ben's brows rose and my cheeks went aflame, tears of anxiety prickling behind my eyes—“yeah it's uh, new. Anyway, this wasn't some publicity trick; I would never even consider publishing something without your advice. I'm so sorry if you feel like I double-crossed you or embarrassed you. So sorry. I'll understand if you want me to hand in my resignation. In fact, I'll do it now.”

Ben raised his arms when I turned to the computer. “No. Fuck no. You're not quitting.”

“Am I being fired?” My voice was little, so little.

“What?” His whole face manifested shock, appearing slightly horrified. “I don't cuss often, but fuck. No. You're not going anywhere. Just... Give me a second. It's a lot to take in.”

“Are you mad?”

“Also no.” Ben ran his fingers through his longish hair, tilting his head at me. “I knew you had something written. I haven't asked about it, didn't want to pry. I let you be, because I always thought you'd come to me with it when you're ready.”

My jaw slackened, surprised when I shouldn't have been at the kindness of my boss. “I'm sorry. I really messed up. Ben, you're like a mentor to me. I shouldn't have blindsided you like this.”

He shot me a grin. “About Kyle, or about sending a mass email of your manuscript?”

I tugged at the sleeves of my burgundy dress, glancing from the desk to him. “The first. And the second. Both.”

The memories of the last weeks reemerged. How things hadn’t happened the way I thought they would, yet they went down exactly like they needed to. How I wouldn’t have changed a thing. Besides spamming my entire contact list and not giving Ben a heads-up, that is.

“Well, it doesn’t matter now. I’m happy for you, Elsie.” He reached out to cover my fiddling fingers. It felt friendly, comforting. “About both. From the few pages I read, it’s good, very good. I can’t wait to read everything and have it published here.”

The phone ringing was a constant reminder of people demanding my attention, the sound hammering in the small office. In my complete and utter shock, I barely registered them.

“Um. Wow.”

“Yeah, wow.” Ben chuckled, unfolding his limbs from the seat. “Great things are coming for you. *Life* is coming for you.”

I sagged into my chair when he left, the majority of the tension leaving my body. The air I lost returned to my lungs, my limbs no longer numb. Over the past few weeks all the emotionally crippling possible outcomes I had conjured in my head evaporated one by one.

The people closest to me, like Ben, supported me even when I thought I messed up. They weren’t out to get me; they offered a hand just as I wanted to help them. And if by chance anyone did treat me like shit, I knew it was on them, not me.

Ben’s support proved to be the ultimate push in that positive direction. Now I needed to prove to him I was worth his praise. With nothing more to do about the mass email I sent besides answer to whoever replied to it, I told Isabelle to

hold my calls and refuse any visitors, and turned my cellphone off without giving it a second glance.

A few of my coworkers passed by the glass door, sneaking glances, but not knocking. Jean power-walked, her hand reaching for my door. I wagged my finger, signaling I'd talk to her later. I swiveled back to my computer, my lips curving up. I reveled in the serenity that encompassed my small haven, my office, the complete silence matching the equanimity I felt.

Nothing could harm me anymore.

Resolute to ignore the book-related emails, I started filtering through the long list of unread ones when a new email notification popped up.

The name of the sender stunned me, a powerful, albeit metaphorical slap in the face. The subject line, the deceptively benign title of *Your Work* shook me to my core. A plethora of questions assaulted me, questions so terrifying they could've hurt me. Could've made me curl into a ball and cry myself to sleep.

They would've, for sure.

But not anymore.

"Fuck it," I muttered, shaking off my fears.

I clicked on it. And then I cried.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kyle

THROUGHOUT MY four-plus years of living in Brooklyn, I hadn't once regretted not owning a car.

Not until that day.

The notification of an email from her reached me as I made my way out of the gym. The smile that grazed my lips turned to a scowl in the blink of an eye, my chest tightening, heart rate picking up faster than it did on the treadmill.

I scanned the very, very, very long list of recipients on the email Elsie meant to send solely to me, growing alarmed by the minute. I walked with the phone pressed to my ear, unable to shake the ominous feeling that smothered my lungs.

She'd achieved this huge progress, gained so much confidence, yet it was still fragile.

This error happened because of her trying to please me, because she believed sending it as soon as she could would satisfy *me*. I couldn't stand the thought of having it traumatize her further.

I'd never be able to forgive myself.

When instead of ringing, her phone went straight to voicemail, I lost it. I sprinted to her office, fueled by the spike of adrenaline that shot through my blood. The cold wind batted at the sweat that broke out on my forehead, my calves protested after today's workout, yet I noticed nothing.

Nothing but the need to find Elsie safe.

My eyes were trained on the street ahead, my anxiety fixated on the woman I loved.

On the harm I might have caused her. Because fuck me, no one just sent mass emails by accident. Her nerves must've been shot when she prepared the email.

Although everything about her said sending me the book had come from somewhere within her and not because I twisted her arm, I couldn't not blame myself for pushing her.

My. Fault.

Fifteen minutes of this torture went by. Fifteen nerve-wracking minutes of my sneakers hitting the pavement, of admonishing myself for what I'd caused. Fifteen minutes of pushing past people, running through red lights, until I entered Frost's Publishing House.

I took the stairs two at a time and did my best at appearing somewhat less unhinged at Isabelle's desk. Whipping off my hoodie, I asked, "Elsie here?"

Isabelle's eyes rounded, filling with compassion. "She said she doesn't want to see anyone."

"Thanks." I charged into the hallway that led to her office.

"Kyle, hold up!" she'd called behind me. "I can call you later when she's ready."

I ignored her, drawing strength from the fact that if she was in the office, if she asked not to be disturbed, at least she was physically well, hadn't fainted or fallen into a deep sleep.

Waiting and resting were out of the question until I had Elsie in my sight.

In a few long strides, I stood in front of her office. She sat behind her desk, her face hidden behind the computer screen. She didn't look like she was going through a meltdown.

A positive sign.

My tight muscles unclenched in relief, my eyelids draping like blinds over my eyes.

A minute passed, maybe more. I raised my hand and knocked. Elsie rolled her chair to the center of the desk to get

a view of the hall. Dread settled in the pit of my stomach as I watched her tear-stricken face through the glass door.

Her bloodshot eyes gazed back at me, blotches of mascara coloring her cheeks.

I barged in as she pushed to her feet. Her back straightened, yet the urge to protect her from the worst of this world, myself included, overpowered me.

Sheathing her small body, I mumbled into her hair, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I’m a shithead, fuckface, asshole for being all over you about sending it. For rushing you, for not insisting we just read at your place. I fucked up. I’m sorry this happened, baby, I’m so incredibly sorry.”

She grasped my baggy sweatshirt, silent. Her chest expanded, a watery sigh heaving from her lips. “It’s not your fault. The book’s not why I’m crying.”

“Then?”

Detaching from my chest, Elsie gazed up at me. “It’s finally over. I got the last word.”

Her wonderful red hair clung to her damp cheeks. I tucked the strands that hid her eyes from me behind her ears. Right side, then the left.

Wide, vast oceans stared back at me from under her thick lashes. They were free of panic, despair, or blame. Sheer brilliance of life brimmed in them like the sun’s sparkling rays on a river.

“Professor Evans, Oliver. He emailed me.”

My hackles rose, my concern transforming into bludgeoning fury.

I pulled her ever closer, the wheels of my protective instincts put in motion. “What did he want?”

“He apologized.” She sniffed, her swollen lips forming a smile. “He apologized. For everything.”

Nothing would've made me happier than to see that pathetic excuse of a human being groveling on the floor, begging her for forgiveness while she sat on a chair, her feet using him as a stool. Yup. And that was me being nice.

Unfortunately, men like him didn't apologize, not without an ulterior motive.

Keeping my tone even hadn't been the easiest task. "Can I see it?"

"Sure." Her smile widened. It put me on edge. Maybe the bastard had done a better job than I thought. "You can read my reply while you're at it."

I loosened my grip on her, dumbfounded at the bizarre chain of events. She slipped away, intertwining our fingers and guiding me to sit in her chair. It took me a moment, in the state of my stupor, but eventually my butt landed on the seat, and my beautiful girlfriend plopped herself on my thighs.

Her body heat served as a stark reminder that this was about her, and I had to tamp down any caveman in me that wanted to throw the computer on the floor. Or punch someone, hard.

Tamp that shit down.

"Here, look." She angled her body, leaning on the desk to allow me to view the screen.

Stifling a groan, and knowing with absolute certainty I'd do anything she asked of me, I read the scumbag's email.

Elsie,

I'd start with "how are you?" although, I think we're well past that.

So, I'll get to the point. I'm sorry. This might come off as strange, and to be frank, I don't even expect you to open a

message from me. I don't deserve it. In case you have, thank you. You were always the nicer one.

This apology is way overdue, and it's a cowardly way to ask for your forgiveness. Then again, I was a coward all those years ago, why not continue, right?

Sorry, poor humor on my side.

To my point. I don't think I came off as a coward, even if I was one. I'm fully cognizant of giving the image of an abuser, of a tyrant, and I'd like to explain myself. I was a miserable asshole. Not that it gave me permission to act the way I had. I wish I could take it back. Unfortunately, I can't. I can only try to retell it from my point of view, and, again, apologize for it.

When we met, the year you worked for me, I'd been teaching for a year, the youngest professor on campus at twenty-eight years old. I had a lot to prove and that's why I took on one of my most promising students as an assistant—you.

Despite being an undergrad, you were bright and curious and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that you'd have been the perfect for the job. Throughout our meetings, I came to realize how right I'd been, and slowly, how in love with you I was.

It unsettled me, to put it mildly. Constantly scrutinized, I couldn't risk my job for a relationship with a student, not even if you'd have wanted it like I did. I couldn't let you go either.

I was truly in love. Still, you had to go. I chose the worst possible solution for my problem—bullying you for months. I hate myself for the cruelty I inflicted on someone I loved. At that point in my life, though, I felt like I had no other choice. Which was also so, so very stupid, and I regret even thinking that.

You were more resilient than I ever imagined. You didn't quit, taking each insult, working harder to prove yourself to me. Your fierceness and devotion made me love you all the

more. It also forced my hand in that unfortunate and extremely ugly day. You have no idea how sorry I am for that.

I despised myself for it...

“That makes the two of us,” I grunted.

“Kyle...”

...and the self-hatred drove me into two years of binge drinking, in which I lost my job anyway, couch surfed for a while, had to start over when I got sober. I guess the joke’s on me.

“Dumbass.”

“Kyle...”

Then faith knocked on my door, giving me the chance to repent, which I took with both hands. For some inconceivable reason, you left my email in your contact list. I received your manuscript minutes ago, the manuscript I’d called “trash.”

If anything should be called trash, it’s me. I loved that manuscript even in its early stages; I loved the soul you put into it, how between the lines I saw you. I know I’m not entitled to, but I do feel pride. Pride in you for putting it out there, where this book belongs.

I’ve been searching for it for the past four years, and now it’s here.

Well done, Elsie. Sabrina and Enzo deserve to be seen. Like you.

You will forever be my favorite student, and it has nothing to do with the love I had for you.

Take care,

Oliver

Elsie, my beautiful, gentle, delicate Elsie wrapped her fingers around my hand. “So?”

Seething, any restraint I had was obliterated from the fire that scalded my bones. “That lousy excuse for a human being, fucking idiot.”

“Kyle, you’re going to snap the mouse in two.” She massaged my thumb, the one that caused the device to creak under my hold.

I released it, hugging Elsie’s midriff, burying my head in her hair. With her scent and warmth crowding me, the anguish and indignance lost their edge. “Four years to apologize? To someone he claims he loved? Who the hell does that?”

She caressed my cheek, her back pressing deeper into my chest, the soft cadence of her voice soothing me further. “People who aren’t inherently mean, who are lost. Some take it out on others, some take it out on themselves, like I did. The endless self-deprecation and self-doubt—it was horrible. Then you found me. Your wonderful light paved the route home for me.”

Home. I was her home. “Miss Jenkins.” I twisted Elsie so she faced me, so she’d have to see how serious I was. “You’ve had everything good and precious within you all along. I just tagged along for the ride.”

Her eyes fluttered shut and her slender fingers gripped my sweatshirt. Her lips, salty and sweet, kissed me, indulging me in a quick taste of her.

“You haven’t seen the best part yet,” she whispered, her glossy eyes shining with elation. “My reply.”

Her aura held such light, such exuberance, that I reprimanded myself for ever thinking she could've fallen for this man's trap. That she would allow anyone to dim her inner sun ever again.

"Hit me." I kissed her cheek, rubbing her back as she turned to show me what she wrote.

And if that Oliver felt pride, he had nothing on me as I read it.

Professor Evans,

I'm not going to lie, the years since I changed my major did a number on me.

I felt useless, a failure, like my life goals were idiotic and meant to be kept in the dark, concealed from the light. Where no one would have to be exposed to such horrible literature.

Dreaming with my eyes open felt precarious, so I stowed away those aspirations, letting them rot.

All of that was true up until this year. Until I met a man who loves me fearlessly. A warrior who, for my happiness and mine alone, fought and navigated through the trauma I endured by you to find the real, unabused me. Find out what I'd wanted all along.

A man who brought me back to life.

I thank you for your apology, but it's not necessary.

Not anymore.

I wish you the best,

Elsie

“I’ve never been more pleased to be right.” I held her chin, drawing her to meet my gaze.

Her brow lowered in confusion. “Right about what?”

“About you.” I grazed my lips on hers. “That you’re wicked strong and incredibly fearless. You are the warrior”—another kiss captured, another smile shared—“and I can’t wait to be proven just how right I am for the rest of my life. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She laughed, pushing my hands that were hoisting her skirt up her thighs. In the glass office. “And I’ll love you a lot more later, when we’re not at my workplace.”

I brought us both to our feet, grasping her hands and kissing the insides of her wrists. “See you at home then, Miss Jenkins.”

“See you at home, my lovely Mr. Turner.”

EPILOGUE

Elsie

FIVE YEARS LATER

“KYLE, HONEY.” I covered one of his slumped shoulders gently. “Maybe you shouldn’t push her so hard?”

His dark eyes turned to me, a shimmer of hope lingering in them. “I’m going to ask her one more time, then I promise I’ll stop.” He quieted, pulling his lips between his teeth. “For an hour.”

“Mr. Turner...” I warned him.

“Mrs. Turner...”

I sighed a laugh at my husband’s persistence. “You know how shy she gets. When she feels like doing it again, she’ll let us know.”

“But...”

“Non-negotiable, sorry.” I scooped Ariel, our eight-month-old, into my arms. “I was lucky to catch her taking her first steps yesterday, and that’s all that matters.”

Our chubby girl snuggled into my chest, quick to fall asleep on my bosom, her auburn hair a stark contrast to my white T-shirt. I smoothed her soft strands repeatedly, marveling at the wildfires that blossomed from her tiny head. The day I gave birth to her was the day I understood fully the obsession my husband harbored for me.

She was so damn beautiful. Perfect.

“Besides, if these two are wreaking havoc while they’re crawling, I can’t begin to imagine what life would be like to have them walk everywhere.” Noah tickled his and Alda’s son,

Elijah, the curly haired baby's giggles filling their Hollywood Hills home.

Ariel stirred, her dark brown eyes, just like her dad's, snapping wide open.

"See?" Noah said, eyeing her. "Partners in crime."

"Soul-mates is a better word." Alda's sweet smile passed from her men to us. "They were born less than a week apart; it seems fitting."

Born a week apart from two couples who got engaged one day after the other and had a joint wedding ceremony. That was how close we were. When Kyle and I made the trip two years ago to be a part of Noah's surprise engagement proposal, I didn't know Kyle planned to propose to me the day after.

My sweet man invited my family and took advantage of having Justine and her "husband" Roman here. These days he was just her husband, no quote unquote, but that's a long story for another time.

So, while everyone flew out to LA for the engagements, including Alda's sister, Kyle's parents, my dad and the triplets—another surprise from my Kyle—we jumped on the opportunity to tie the knot. Noah called a friend who had an officiant license and ta-dah. We were two married couples.

It begged the conclusion that Ariel and Elijah were indeed meant to be. Though from the look on Kyle's face, I decided to keep that verdict, and my laugh, to myself.

"Okay, you got me, no walking for Ariel." My husband and uber-protective father moved even closer to me on the floor, whispering in Ariel's ear, "No dating, or thinking of dating, or dreaming of dating, until you're at least thirty, unless you want Daddy kicking their butts."

"Hey!" Noah's face contorted with fake indignation. "My son can do no wrong. Ever."

Kyle tilted his head toward him, his eyes narrowing. "Your son can wait, that's what he can do."

These men were too sweet. And funny. Alda and I gave up the pretense and laughed. It was light, and fun, and even the serious façade Kyle maintained broke at hearing our giggles. He opened his arms for Ariel and I passed her to her dad. He, in turn, kissed my forehead as he cradled the other love of his life.

“All I’m saying is they’re going to be neighbors. It’ll be inevitable.” Noah looked at his wife for confirmation.

During the five years since Kyle and I became a couple, life directed us forward in our careers. I stayed in my position as a marketing manager, then published my book *I Am With You* through correct channels with Kyle as my agent. We didn’t have to work a lot on promoting it.

The mistake I made at sending it to hundreds of people hyped it so much we barely had to do anything. After that I’d written two more books, my dreams became a reality. There hadn’t been a single day where I didn’t wake up grateful for my husband for always believing in me.

He had his own career leap, hiring two agents, Chloe and Quentin, to help him run his ever-expanding business, like adding poets to their portfolio after Floyd’s success. Chloe was based in Manhattan and Quentin in Boston, and Kyle had visited each location to oversee their work and never loses the connection with his writers.

We loved Brooklyn, but the universe had other plans in store for us. Fortunately, it sent us in the exact same direction, once again.

Ben’s dad, Graham, had retired two years ago, making Ben the CEO of Frost’s Publishing House. The driven man he was, he’d set his sights on branching out to LA. He’d waited until I gave birth and returned from my maternity leave to announce me as the head of the LA office.

And it just so happened it was around the time Kyle and Noah were finalizing the details of their own production

company, Breathing to Life Productions. In LA. Next to two of our favorite people and Ariel's future best friend.

Alda's eyebrows shot up, glancing between Noah and Kyle. "Why don't we worry about that when they, say, are able to speak or something?"

"I see I'll have to take more severe measures," Kyle joked, hugging our daughter, grinning at her with the mountains of love that we both held for her. "Tell you what, baby, I take that back. Daddy wants you as his gym buddy. You'll be so strong, you'll kick everyone's asses all by yourself."

He glanced up at me, dotting on me with equal levels of affection. "Your mommy though, she'll teach you how to be strong from within, because she's the best example there is for a powerful woman. Even if you don't grow muscles like me, I'll sleep better at night knowing you're wandering this planet equally as fierce as her."

My heart exploded with emotions, an endless sort of love you only experience once in a lifetime. A love that sought to raise you above everything else. A love that made you give your husband a full-on kiss in private or in front of other people, it didn't matter in the slightest.

And that was exactly how I planned to spend the rest of our lives.

Just. Like. That.

THE END

THANK YOU FOR READING LOVING A WRITER!

If Elsie and Kyle's story moved you or simply made you happy for a few hours, I'd be grateful to have a review from you :)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I always start with my husband, and breaking a tradition is bad luck, so here goes Thank you for being my rock and my dream incarnated.

To the sweetest, loveliest and most caring betas!! Thank you for always telling me where I could do better, and what for screaming about the parts you love. You light up my world, Sybil, Karina, Emily, Raluca, and Dali. A special thank you to Ana-Maria who sent me who her ideal Kyle would be, and well, let's just say it wasn't a hard sell I love you so much!!

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My ARC readers—If I could only reach out and give all of you a huge hug, I would!! Thank you for all the effort you put into helping me promote my books. Never taken for granted and always means the world to me. Always.

To my readers, last but definitely not least. Thank you is too small of a form of appreciation, and grateful doesn't begin to describe what I'm feeling. But that's what I have and I'm

sending both to you. Thank you for taking a chance on Elsie,
Kyle and me. All my love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shani Haim has been a romantic at heart for as long as she can remember.

One of her greatest passions has always been reading, and she devoured anything that swept her away to faraway places.

From reading she made the transition to writing, falling in love with her flawed, broken, and full of soul characters one happily-ever-after at a time.

When she's not swooning over book boyfriends, she's practicing yoga, drinking unhealthy amount of coffee, or watching Netflix with her husband in their Tel Aviv home.

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PROLOGUE

EXCERPT FROM WHEN YOU TOOK MY HEART BY NOAH LEAR

“PLEASE STAY,” I said.

I wasn’t one to beg, but for her I would—if it boiled down to either that or her leaving me. “I love you,” I blurted out, saying it as fast as my mouth allowed me.

In case she forgot.

My stomach was tied in knots as my mind tried to function, to remember when was the last time I told her how I felt.

Shit, shit. I didn’t share my feelings enough. I should have voiced them more often.

Or maybe she just forgot.

Nicole gasped and closed her eyes. When she opened them to look at me, the gaze in these light green gems was empty. They no longer sparkled for me. She’d checked out, already on the flight to Paris despite every physical aspect of them and her still here in my apartment.

To the naked eye nothing changed, yet through my eyes, regardless of the tears welling behind them and blurring my vision, nothing seemed the same.

Yes, the couch and the rug were where I put them the day I moved in, along with the guitar I’d been trying to play unsuccessfully for years. The hollow wooden instrument had been collecting dust since the beginning of summer, two months ago, when she returned.

With her here after four months of missing her so much it hurt, I didn’t even notice they were there. For all I cared, we were in an empty warehouse, she and I and our love.

The love I failed to show her.

Nicole let go of a tear of her own and it marked her olive skin in a smooth trail as it rolled down her cheek. A wave dying out on a sandy beach. For an instant, I craved to reach out and trace it with my finger. To taste the salty liquid on my tongue.

To be on that beach of hers.

I probably would've done it, had I not been so utterly dumbstruck by her statement. "It's done, Allan." Her words were thrown in my direction, small, sharp knives.

Each one hit me with precision, driving into my skin, slashing me apart. "I signed up to go and study abroad next year and I won't be canceling it."

Besides the visible tear she refused to wipe, her face demonstrated no sign of pain. Her lips were pressed together, hiding their fullness behind a white line. A border to keep me away from her.

She doesn't love you. The voice I had buried during her absence reared its ugly head. A bead of cold sweat ran down my spine at the thought it might be true, making me shiver involuntarily. I shoved it back to the pits where it originated. She did love me. She must have.

My Nicole's departure to Paris in less than ten days clouded my vision, my thoughts, my heart. The promises she made to return for good snapped one by one like twigs, so easily broken. If she ever truly meant them. If they weren't a mishap, thrown into space to appease my dire longing for her.

Whatever they were, I lived and breathed these promises for the past four months. They meant something to me.

And I refused to believe they meant nothing to her.

With every kiss, hug, call from near or far—the evidence of her love was scattered everywhere. The moment had come to show mine. "I'll stop investing so many hours in writing. I'll be with you as much as you want me to."

Her stern expression broke with the saddest smile I'd ever seen. "Allan, it's not that."

"Is it the money then?" I grasped at straws, refusing to believe it simply was her wanting to add more months on to her adventure. "If it's about the money then you don't have to worry. I'll work double shifts at the bar and pay back the deposits you made."

Nicole fell back on the mattress with a huff when I extended my hand to touch her. The long brown curls of hers sprawled on the pillow in wonderful disarray. "You're making it harder than it already is."

She nearly yelled, covering her eyes with the back of her palms and then looking at me. "I'm going. It's final and you'll have to accept it."

"By next year I'll be gone." I voiced a weak threat, my last resort in convincing her not to leave. "I'll move, and there'll be no us."

I regretted the ultimatum as soon as it left my mouth, wishing to take it back. Its impact, however, affected her and there was no returning from this.

A storm raged behind her eyes, a twister in a rainforest, and her brow furrowed so deep that lines creased on the smooth planes of her forehead. She spun the two gold bracelets on her left wrist furiously, the ones she received as a birthday gift from her late parents, the ones she clung to whenever something distressed her.

Heart-wrenching moments passed when even her breaths were inaudible. The only sound breaking the silence was Nicole cursing as she stumbled into my boots while collecting her clothes. Black shirt, black jeans, black underwear that I tore off of her were being placed back on in a reverse motion.

When my senses returned to me, I scrambled to my feet to help her. She shook her head and turned from me to pull her jeans up her hips.

Being mindful not to crowd her space again, I threw her name in the suffocating air between us. “Nicole?” I asked, suppressing the dire need to kiss her, erase these last fifteen minutes from our lives.

“If you want to leave, Allan, I won’t stop you.”

The ice in her tone made me freeze in my place.

Fight for us, I willed her through my thoughts as the pressure in my chest persisted, a rope cinching around my lungs.

Nicole had the qualities of a magnificent warrior and she manifested them there in my room. The slow intake of breath, the jut of her chin, the tight fists her small hands balled into. She fought her own self and for a split second I believed my mind had screamed loud enough to reach her.

When she sniffled, my hope grew. There was no telling what emotion stood behind the noise since she had her back to me. Being the selfish bastard I was, I hoped tears brought it on. Tears meant she cared.

This hope, along with the rest I held on to today, went up in smoke.

“I have to go.”

Boom. The door slammed shut.

The sound echoed in the apartment long after she went away. Even as more sounds echoed in it. Sounds of plates, glasses, and anything within my reach as they crashed into the wall.

CHAPTER ONE

Alda

“FUCK,” I hissed when the knock on the door nearly made me drop the mug in my hand.

It belonged to my recently passed *nonno*, grandpa in Italian. I wrapped my fingers tighter around it so as to not lose this memento of him.

The move to Brooklyn from my home in Boston for the last twenty-three years was long coming, though I wished it'd happened under better circumstances. When he passed and with my sister Lia living in Paris, any ties I had to the city were severed. Nor did I want to stay in a place with so many awful memories, after four long years of witnessing him slowly wither with every unsuccessful cancer treatment we tried.

We were able to afford the medical bills from my parents' inheritance, but unfortunately none of them worked against the Leukemia. On his deathbed he wished for me to chase my dreams, make the move I'd been talking about for ages, become the writer I always wanted to be.

I had every intention to make good on that promise.

But in that late afternoon, I had to protect his mug and see who might come and see me in a city full of strangers. I approached the door when I didn't hear any sounds from the hall. “Who's there?”

“Your new neighbors.” The two voices sing-songed as one.

I'd say their visit took me by surprise, though with how loud my movers were and the building being only three stories high, it probably shouldn't have.

The women on the other side sounded friendly. I cracked open the door, leaving on the chain lock just in case. A girl alone in a new city could never be safe enough.

Both ladies were young, near my age. The one closer to the door wore her wavy, auburn hair in fishtail braids and the other donned a half-up top knot as the rest of her straight, long brown hair cascaded down her back, and her large diamond earrings shone even in the dimly lit hall.

They seemed like good people, both beaming and waving at me.

“Or should I say old neighbors since you’re the new girl?” The auburn-haired one giggled. “Nice to meet you. I’m Elsie Jenkins and this is Justine Sutton.”

“Please, enter.” I returned their smiles and gave them my full name as well. “I’m Alda, Alda Ricci.”

“Alda? That’s an unusual name.” Justine perused me, her eyes flickering with interest. “But I like it, it suits you.”

“Thanks, I guess.” I tucked an unruly curl behind my ear and glanced around the house.

Cardboard boxes with my entire life packed inside them were strewn around the dusty loft. “Sorry the place is a mess.”

Elsie leaned against the door and shushed me. “Don’t be silly, we’ve all been there. We’re actually here to help.”

“Help?”

“Yes, help.” Her smile persisted at my disbelief. “This is why we rushed down here as soon as we saw the movers. So, unless you want to kick us out, we’ll be more than happy to assist you.”

With another quick look around the room, I nodded reflexively, not believing something good could happen to me. The number of boxes and amount of dust and dirt meant hours of labor, and the thought of unpacking brought on another wave of exhaustion on top of the one from the long drive.

Before we did any cleaning or unboxing, I had to thank them for their kindness. Being a bartender during my college years, I knew exactly how to do it. “Would you like wine?”

“Hello to my new favorite neighbor.” Justine’s giggles reverberated through the old loft.

“Umm hello?” Elsie elbowed her, giving her a stern glare laced with a smile.

“What?” Justine faked offense as her laugh died out. “You know I’m a sucker for wine.”

“We’d love some.” Elsie turned to me, ignoring her friend. “*Our* new favorite neighbor.”

They sat down and talked animatedly while I went through the boxes marked *fragile*, searching for tumblers. Next, I found the wine box with the bottle collection my nonno had for our evenings together. His ailment prevented us from drinking them, and a part of me felt like sharing them with other people was a betrayal.

Shaking it off, especially since I remembered how he loved me having a social life before they vanished, I headed to the dining table where my new friends sat.

“So, Alda, let me guess.” Elsie stroked her chin. “You’re either a writer or an aspiring writer. Correct?”

The hold I had on the bottle loosened before I fastened my grip on it just as fast. When I felt like it wouldn’t drop, my eyes inspected the floor around me to see if the notebook where I kept my notes had fallen out of my bag. *Nope, not on the floor.*

“How did you know?”

“Cool party trick, isn’t it?” She took the bottle from me, and Justine helped me with the glasses, placing them down on the table in front of us. “I’m not a clairvoyant or anything, but you’re at the right age, moved to Bushwick, and don’t have any paint stains, which is what a painter usually has.” She shrugged. “I made an educated guess.”

I sighed a laugh, the tension I had no idea I was holding in my chest rolling off me. Besides being a bartender and an inspiring writer, I operated a lifestyle blog with decent traffic.

It wasn't like I kept my identity a secret, but I looked forward to them liking me for who I was without prejudice about what they read online. Especially with the plethora of the online haters I had.

"Well, I'm still not a writer-writer." I opened the bottle and kept on talking while I let it breathe. Sharing the wine with others was one thing, but the tradition had to be maintained. "I majored in English and have been writing a book of short fictional stories since my sophomore year."

With the wine living and breathing and spreading its scent in my tight kitchen, I filled our glasses and sat down, then played with a splinter coming off the table. "I haven't published it yet or anything."

"You don't need to be published to be called a writer." Elsie placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "As long as you're writing."

"So true. Elsie and I are writers too, even if we do it slowly and even if what we do write ends up stashed on our laptops under a locked file." Justine raised her glass in my direction and took a sip. "Even if I'm an English tutor supported by her fart of a father and Elsie is a marketing manager for a publishing house instead of publishing herself."

"Hey!" Elsie laughed at the blunt description.

Warmth spread throughout my belly, a combination of wine and the sentiment of being a part of a group. Sitting with them brought on a flashback to my younger years when the main topics of conversation weren't hospital appointments and chemo sessions and arranging funerals. Their giddiness consoled me, and my heart felt a little less broken in their company.

Elsie checked her phone and quickly placed it facedown. "A group of friends are meeting at a someone's house this

evening for a party if you're interested."

Enjoying the company of these two in the environment of my home felt safe with the grief still scraping at my heart. A party with lots of new people while being depressed with my sob story sounded less appealing.

"My clothes are still packed and I've got nothing to wear." The excuse sounded lame even to my own ears.

"Let's get this unloading party started then." Justine poured us more wine, filling the glasses to the brim and handing them to us. "We're not supposed to drink and drive, but we most certainly can drink and clean. In fact, cleaning sober should be outlawed in my opinion."

"I second that." Elsie gulped down her drink, got to her feet, and placed her hands on her hips, inspecting the apartment. "You tell us what goes where and we'll make sure you'll have something to wear by the time we have to leave."

Their expressions implied they weren't going to take no for an answer and with a heavy sigh and no other excuses, I agreed. We unpacked, organized, and cleaned the entire place, making the house look more like a home.

When we finished, we stood at the doorway, observing our accomplishments with the front of our shirts covered in dust and dirt while satisfied smiles decorated our faces.

Elsie wiped her hands on her shirt and turned to walk out. "Meet you here in an hour?"

"See you then."



When we arrived at the party, the place was swarmed with people from the age of twenty to probably forty and over. There were so many of them that I barely saw their faces, strolling in and out of rooms, leaning casually on the walls and having conversations with plastic cups in their hands or

cramming outside on the balcony, where the cigarette smoke came from.

Their laid-back attitudes and casual outfits of jeans and plain T-shirts or flannel shirts rubbed off on me. The unnerving feeling of this being too soon to start going out all but faded.

“Creed, Jane, this is Alda, our new neighbor.” Justine addressed a couple who lounged in the kitchen, leaning against the counter as we went there to get our drinks.

“Welcome to the neighborhood.” Jane nodded at me. “Where are you from?”

“Boston.” I thanked Justine when she passed me my cup, and filled two more for her and Elsie. Thankfully, she stuck to wine instead of mixing it with the many other drinks. “It’s my first night here.”

“That’s awesome.” Her blue eyes gleamed under the orange light from the hanging lamp. “If you need friends to commiserate with over the roaches, we’re here for you.”

Justine leaned in as we left to search for Elsie. “She’s exaggerating. There’s like one, maybe two a month tops.” She raised her head to scour the room. “Where is that girl? Do you see her?”

Following her lead, I twisted my head and scanned the groups of people with squinted eyes, when I locked in on the tall man who strolled in from the balcony.

As if he didn’t have a care in the world. As if the sight of him alone didn’t make everyone else disappear, making him the sole focus of my attention.

He wore his dark blond hair longer than last time I saw him, and his tattoo sleeves covered his arms down to his wrists besides the older one I recognized on the front of his palm, the star shaped one. I’d caught on these changes on television, and yet I couldn’t get over the shock of seeing them in person.

Because other than the tattoos, nothing had changed about the brown-eyed boy who left me all those years ago.

The boy who tore out a piece of my soul.

Noah.

No air came in or out of my lungs. They were crushed under the weight of years' worth of love, abandonment, and loneliness that this man's existence brought on me. The weight felt as heavy as the day he released me, the day I understood what it felt like to have someone's boot crushing my chest.

My body was trapped in this no-breathing, no-moving limbo. Running far, far from here like I urged my limbs to do turned out physically impossible and I stared dumbly at Noah, gravitating towards him right along with every other person in the room.

"Earth to Alda." Justine waved her hand in front of me, bringing the room back to focus.

"I—I'm here."

She stirred me awake at the exact same moment Noah's head lifted slowly in my direction. The magnetic force between us worked both ways. Whatever conversation he took part in ceased and when his eyes found mine, our gazes locked, no one interrupting us.

When he looked at me, the years of stagnation were woken by his pull, a pull he and no other had on my heart. The identical all-consuming pull he had had on me since the very first eye contact we made almost five years ago.

And when his lips curved up to the side showing a flash of his teeth, I knew I was doomed.

There was no escaping Noah Lear.

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PROLOGUE

Roman

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO

“WHERE IS she?”

“Who?” My sister, Kennedy, tilted her head, gazing at me as though she had no idea what I was talking about.

Or maybe she gave me the look of *what a sweet idiot my baby brother is*, even when we had one year separating us and I was practically an adult, scratching seventeen. Because I *was* an idiot. I should’ve kept watch on where my friend who I cared for and needed to look after during our summer vacation would be. If I hadn’t been busy with other stuff.

The cool breeze that signaled the end of summer blew strands of my dark brown hair into my face. I swiped them away. They upset me almost as much as the taunting gleam in Kennedy’s eyes.

“Don’t start.” I glowered at her.

I didn’t bother keeping my voice down, seeing our parents and Justine’s had taken off on an afternoon stroll along Main Beach in East Hampton not too long ago. When I saw them wandering from the kitchen window, it’d been just the four of them. No Justine. She didn’t answer when I called from the bottom of the stairs, so where the fuck was she?

Kennedy pushed her sunglasses up her head, sitting up straighter on the lounge. “Roomie, I wouldn’t ask a stupid question, but since you asked me one first... I mean, it’s obvious she’d be in her bedroom after what happened.”

I ignored the annoying nickname, more concerned about Justine. My Justine. “What the fuck happened?”

The mounting concern made me oblivious to my sister's sigh of exasperation. "Oh, right, I forgot. You've been yoga-ing for the past two hours. Guess that's why you didn't hear her shouting match with Stuart."

Stuart, Justine's dad, has never let his only child feel good about herself a single day in her life. The number of times I'd had to pick up my best friend, my oldest friend, from the floor due to his cruel comments were so many I couldn't count them. But I loved her so much, I wouldn't have minded carrying her on my back my entire life.

That was how bonds worked. Because although I hadn't remembered being eighteen months old and waving at the newborn who'd wrapped me around her little finger, I did remember the after. The fun times of the two of us playing, or talking, or laughing until we rolled on the floor, or the fucking heartbreaking ones of Justine crying in silence and me finding her where she was.

I took my role in this friendship very seriously, especially during our yearly summer vacations. That day, however, I'd messed up. Rage boiled my blood from imagining her suffering alone in her room. The familiar anger that simmered beneath my skin sprinted me into motion. I spun on my heel, not sparing Kennedy another word, and ran into the house, past the French doors, darting up the stairs.

The hardwood floors creaked beneath my feet as I rushed past the hall of her parents' home in a flash. Less than two minutes later, I stood outside her bedroom door. I glanced down at myself, sweaty from practice, wearing nothing but sweats. We spent long days and nights of dipping in a beach or a pool together, though somehow, now, I couldn't bring myself to enter and hug her bare-chested.

Not when over the past months, maybe years, my feelings for her evolved from those of childhood friends.

I went to the room next door, the guest room they allocated for me since Justine and I were practically inseparable during

these vacations, throwing on the first T-shirt on my shelf. Decent as I could be, I knocked on her door three times.

Silence. I pressed my ear to the white wood. No noise carried from within her room, and then...a sniff.

Fuck me.

Three more knocks, more urgent this time.

“Fuck off.” Another sniff.

My lips curved to the side, the knot in the pit of my stomach unwinding just a little to allow air to flow inside. Despite her throaty, meek voice, Stuart’s torture hadn’t ruined her completely. If she could curse, she had fight in her. *You don’t get this round, asshole.* “Tina? It’s me. Can I come in?”

The painful silence ensued. I raised my fist to knock for the third time when the sound of her small feet padding on the floor echoed nearer and nearer. The key clicked inside the lock. The door slowly opened. The semblance of a smile that claimed my features vanished.

During my last junior year in high school, my growth spurt hit. From a five-foot-two scrawny kid, I jumped the impressive height of just over six foot three, while Justine stayed a foot shorter. My weight climbed as well, my bones heavier, my muscles more accentuated. Justine, on the other hand, remained the scrawny, five-foot-three kid she’d always been.

Our proportions changed, sure. Over a year. The two hours she’d been out of my sight weren’t supposed to accentuate that, to make her seem somewhat tiny inside her silk pajamas. And then there were her tear-stricken cheeks.

Fuck me.

Aside from cursing, my friend had nothing in her. Any hope I nurtured to find her with her spine straight sunk to the pit of my stomach in a bungee jump, the feeling of uselessness swallowing me whole. That, on top of the tide of self-loathing that all but consumed me for zoning out for over two hours. I got lost during my meditation and physical practice, my noise-

canceling AirPods blocking out another lash out from her dad I knew was bound to come.

I fucking knew.

If it wouldn't have scared her like it did in the past, I'd have bashed my fist into the wall. At least I wasn't an idiot bastard to conveniently let that slide.

“Ro.” Justine heaved a watery sigh, one of her hands grasping the door, the other extended to me.

Holding her hand wouldn't do it, nor would telling her she looked nice, which was our universal code for *are you okay?*—words that made her chuckle and shake off mild annoyances at her dad.

She needed more. I backed her up into the room, slamming the door behind me. She didn't put up a fight when I swept her into my arms, cocooning her. Her feeble body allowed me to shelter her as I should've earlier, and regardless of my strong hold, she clung to my shirt, same as a person who thought they might fall.

She'd known, however, that I would've never let her fall. We were too accustomed to this maneuver. It frustrated me to no end, the growl that lodged itself in my throat for Justine being broken was the proof of that. I stuffed it down, once more restraining myself from adding another stressor on Justine's already fragile state, more brittle than I'd ever witnessed her being. She needed consolation, a shoulder to lean on, someone to listen to her, things I'd pledged on giving her for the rest of our lives from the first tear she shed.

I lowered us to sit on her bed, not pushing her to talk.

“Did you hear him?” she asked after minutes of gazing at each other, her question barely audible.

Grinding my teeth, I answered honestly, no excuses whatsoever for my negligence. She wouldn't expect them, and they were worth jack shit, anyhow. “No.”

“He said he’s had it up to here with my grades dropping, with me being so goddamn rude.” Her hazel eyes glossed over. Fathomless depths reflected through a crystal. “He’s kicking me out of the house, sending me to a boarding school.”

The renewed flow of tears confused me. Her family could foot the bill for the best boarding schools New York had to offer, placing her out of Stuart’s reach for good. She should’ve been happy.

She was anything but.

“I have a driver’s license. I’d come visit every day, no matter which place in the state they send you.” My deft fingers ran over her arm, a mild attempt to stop her from crying. It soothed her before; it would have to soothe her this time.

I just have to try a little harder.

“You don’t...” Justine’s chest expanded, her eyes fluttered shut. I recognized the method she used to stop hyperventilating, to find her calm. I forwarded her the knowledge of a “Loving-Kindness Meditation,” a practice taught by Steven V. Smith. I repeated the few short sentences in my head as I waited for her, watching as she pursed her lips and focused her gaze on me. “You can’t.”

My bruised ego, my selfish ego, propelled me to ask, “You don’t want me there?”

The sadness of her smile matched the downcast corners of her eyes. She let go of my shirt, stroking the early stages of stubble with her thumb. “Ro, there’s one person in this entire universe I’d never want to be apart from, and it’s you, you idiot.”

Air returned to my lungs, quickly working on solutions. “I’ll drive to another state, not a problem either. I’ll put on a finance podcast and I can go for hours.”

“I told you, you can’t.” Another tear escaped her eye, then another one. A salty waterfall of silent tears tainted her beautiful face. I mimicked her gestures, swiping them from her left cheek, then the right. “You can’t drive to England.”

My heart ceased its beating, the trajectory of my thumb halting. The curses I tucked away for her sake flew carelessly out of my mouth. “Son of a bitch. He can’t do it. I won’t let him; I won’t let that fucker send you there.”

I squeezed her to my chest, desperate to conceal her from the world. To have her beside me. Always.

Her tears soaked through my shirt. The calls of gulls and Justine’s sniffing every few seconds provided the soundtrack to our predicament from hell. I rested my chin on the top of her head, forcing myself to concentrate on a plan instead of succumbing to the wrath that consumed me. It blinded me from figuring out a solution, and I refused to be drowned out by it before I saved her. Before I’d be without her, stranded, floating through the dull gray of a life.

And on her bed, in her bedroom, I promised myself one more thing—once this mess was settled, once I’d have found a way to keep her here, I’d quit being such a coward and ask her out. We’d be solid, we’d be together, and no one would take her from me. Not ever.

But if I was serious about any of this happening in the future, I had to get my shit together in the present.

Breathe in, breath out. In, out. In, out.

The concentration technique my yoga teacher had taught me was just as valuable to my internship at Dad’s hedge fund management firm as it was to mitigate the storm inside of me when it concerned this colossal shitstorm. The more I repeated the words in my head, the easier it became to block out the outside noise. To center. To focus.

From there it didn’t take long for me to concoct a plan to protect her, the details of which would be Stuart’s and my secret. Justine couldn’t find out about it. She’d throw herself into the flames instead of me, and I couldn’t allow for that to happen.

Until then, until the deal would be signed and sealed, I offered what I could—my comfort, my hugs, bathing her in

warmth and sealing out the bad shit that hurt her.

“Everything will be okay, I promise you.”

Her sniff was followed by a profound gaze into my eyes. What came out of her mouth next was as sweet as it was unsurprising, “Can we watch *The Princess Bride*?”

See, while she considered me her comfort person, *The Princess Bride* was her comfort movie. I never said no to that.

“As you wish.” I repeated Westley’s response that meant more than just *we’ll do whatever you like*. The answer that said *I love you*. The reply I’d offered her in the past, and held all the promises in the world on this fateful afternoon. Then, because I truly felt it, I added, “I love you, Tina.”

She snuggled closer to me, sighing, her words being what I’d wished to hear. “I love you too, Ro. I really do.”

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