



*Old
Habits*
A MESSY ROMANCE

LAURA LOVETT

Old Habits
By Laura Lovett

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About the book

Ours was a wild, ravenous, all-consuming love.

Crazy.

Irrational.

Toxic.

Dangerous.

But unstoppable.

Nothing could come between us.

Not even the truth.

Warning: Please note, this book is spicy and contains mature adult content some readers will find troubling. There is a content warning page at the front of the book. Please read it if you have triggers. **This is not a safe read.** If any sort of cheating in a story triggers you, I would skip this one. There's nothing on-page, but you will see pretty quickly in the first chapter why there's a cheating trigger warning. If you're into messy drama and toxic book boyfriends who keep it spicy, cool. If not, this book probably isn't for you. Please find your way to my much safer Seahorse Tavern series instead. ;)

Author's note/content warning:

I know some readers desire trigger warnings, and this love story is messy and toxic so I want to make it very clear: Kai and Harper fight and they fuck. They have a relationship that runs hot. Eminem and Rihanna would sing songs about them. They are not a lovely couple. If you're looking for a safe read, please look elsewhere. I'm telling you now, this isn't one. This story contains all manner of sexy depravity and I only recommend it for those who enjoy drama in their books. If you're looking for flawless people who only make excellent choices, Harper and Kai are not for you.

But if you're looking for a toxic couple with a fire sex life who don't shy away from a little impact play, then I have just the story for you! Dubcon triggers too because that's just how they roll.

I hope they entertain you as much as they have entertained me. :)

If you're a safety reader, you might enjoy my Seahorse Tavern series much more than this one. Obviously, there is a warning on this book. If I have trigger content like cheating in a book, I will make that clear in the content warning so those who choose to avoid it are able to.

Happy reading!

Chapter one

Harper

I shouldn't be here.

I look up at the old yellow Victorian with the wraparound porch and debate whether or not I really want to get out of the car.

Once I step on that sidewalk, there's no turning back. I know Kai has cameras on the perimeter of her house. He might not notice me parked here across the street, but he'll definitely notice if I approach the front door.

Shaking off the impulse I've given in to far too often, I lick my split lip and taste the tang of blood, then I push open the car door and do what I can't take back.

I cross the street.

I walk up the path to the front porch.

My heart pounds so hard I can hear it as I look up at the camera angled at her door, then at the Ring doorbell that's probably throwing up a notification on her phone right now, telling her I'm here.

I try not to let it hurt seeing how well protected she is, but I can't silence the little voice in the back of my head that wonders, *why her?*

Why does she get the big, beautiful house with the front porch swing, and I get bruises on my neck and a split lip?

Why does it feel like he hates me now that I see the way he loves her?

What is so wrong with me?

Angrily, I shove that question down deep and lift my hand to press the doorbell.

Heart hammering, I wait for her to come to the door.

When the door opens, I suck in a breath at the sight of her.

She's beautiful.

Her hair falls in a glossy ebony waterfall over her slim shoulders.

She has full, perfect breasts and she's wearing a pretty sundress the color of ocean waves.

I wonder if he's ever taken her to the beach.

I can tell as soon as she smiles a warm, welcoming smile that she has no clue who I am.

I wonder if she greets him like this when he comes over.

To the house he bought her.

I bet he bought her the dress, too.

I envision him taking it off her, palming those full breasts in his big hands, and my heart aches.

I open my mouth to speak, but before I can say a word, I feel the vibration in my jacket pocket.

No fucking way.

But when I draw it out and look at the screen, sure enough, it's him.

Bastard.

Is he monitoring her in real time?

Maybe she isn't the one who gets the notifications showing who comes to her door.

Maybe he is.

Because he doesn't trust her, or because she's so fucking precious to him?

I swallow hard and shove the phone back in my pocket, my heart pounding.

I look up at the girl.

“Can I help you with something?” she asks uncertainly.

“What’s your name?”

Her brow furrows briefly, but it’s just a flicker. “Violet.”

“Violet. That’s a pretty name. I’m Harper.”

I watch for some sign of recognition, but nothing registers.

“Hi, Harper,” she says, attempting the smile again, but I’m being weird and it’s freaking her out a bit. I notice the way her grip on the door tightens. I imagine she’s considering slamming it shut and locking it, but she doesn’t want to be rude.

We’re nothing alike. I think that’s what stings most.

Well, we both have dark hair, so I guess at least I can glean the asshole isn’t into blondes.

“How do you know Kai Weber?”

Her blue eyes brighten ever so slightly at the mention of his name. Her lips tug up naturally. Thinking about him brings her a spark of happiness.

Maybe she loves him.

My chest aches and I feel a wave of jealousy wash over me.

And that’s before she holds out her left hand and shows me a sparkling diamond ring.

My mouth goes dry, my heart stutters in my chest.

It’s the biggest diamond I’ve ever seen and it’s on her ring finger.

“He’s my fiancé,” she says, driving the last nail into my heart.

Engaged.

He’s engaged.

I can't breathe.

I came here thinking she was the other woman, but...

I think I am.

The phone in my pocket has stopped vibrating so he's given up on me answering. He probably tried to call her, too, but she doesn't have her phone on her.

Suddenly, his voice comes through a speaker on the doorbell camera. "Violet, close the door and go back inside."

I can hear the malice in his tone clear as day. It's not new to me, but her eyes widen in alarm and she stares at it for a moment like he's never spoken to her that way before.

Maybe he hasn't.

Maybe he saves all his malice for me.

Her gaze flickers to me and my impulse is to grab the door to stop her from closing it. To force it open and force my way into the house. I could take her, no problem. She's delicate and I'm strong. I could pin her against the wall, see the terror leap to her pretty blue eyes, and choke the fucking life out of her before he could ever get here to save her.

But I don't.

I bite down hard on my lip to keep from crying out like a dog being forced to submit to a master, and I wait for her to shut that door in my face.

She doesn't.

Her eyes narrow on my face, linger over my split lip, then return to my gaze. "How do you know Kai?"

I smile bitterly. "I guess I don't."

She frowns, but it's not her response that gets me.

It's Kai's.

He doesn't bother to say anything to me, doesn't bother to say anything else to her, either. He knows I'll leave, and he's right. He's fucking right.

“Who are you?” she asks seriously.

I know I could fuck him up if I just told her the truth. She doesn't know about me, but if I told her, I think she would believe me.

My lips tip up, but I'm not amused. “I'm nobody.”

I flick a look at the camera knowing he's watching, then I turn around and head back to my car.

Chapter two

Harper

I wait for him all fucking night, but he doesn't come.

That means he went to her.

Of course he did.

Since I'm home alone and I'm fucking sad, I skip dinner and drown all my sorrows in a bottle of wine.

I obsess over what they're doing, what he's probably saying to her, when or if I'll even see him again.

He knows I know now, so what happens next? Where do we go from here?

I'm so drunk I can hardly stand when I hear something scrape against the door.

He's the only one I've given a key to my shitty fucking apartment, so I know it's him.

"Son of a bitch," I curse, my voice slurring as I rise up off the couch.

The door creaks open, and I hear his heavy footfall.

I know it's him by the way he walks, and the achingly empty cavern where my heart used to be swells with pain that should be impossible since he's fucking killed the thing.

I manage to pull myself up to my full height even if I wobble a bit on the way. He saunters around the corner and my heart throbs with pain.

I guess I expected to see him differently, but I don't. He's still the most handsome fucking asshole I've ever seen.

His dark hair tempts me to run my fingers through it same as yesterday, the same goddamn sexy smirk sits on his lips.

I'm a fucking masochist because seeing him just makes me miss him more.

He's standing right here, but he's not mine anymore.

I guess he never was.

"Get the fuck out of my apartment," I say.

His smirk isn't cocky tonight, it's tinged with malice like *I've* done something wrong, *I'm* the one who has some explaining to do.

Un-fucking-believable.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he demands.

My eyes widen as he comes closer. "What was *I* thinking? You're engaged!"

"Yeah, I'm fucking engaged," he says, not even bothering to sound sorry about it. "Would you have fucked me if I told you that up front?"

"Of course I wouldn't have!"

He grabs my wrist in a hard grip, but I try to yank it away.

"Let go of me, asshole."

"You better watch that mouth, baby. Remember who you're talking to."

His gall fucking floors me. "I'm talking to a cheating asshole, that's who I'm talking to."

He grabs my throat hard and throws me back against the wall. "Try again," he says silkily, bringing his body close to mine.

"Okay," I say, struggling with his tight grip on my throat as I glare up at him. "I'm talking to a *slimy fuck*, a worthless fucking loser who cheats on his—"

He cuts me off with a slap across the face.

It's not hard enough to bruise, but it's enough to shock me into losing track of what I'm saying. My eyes narrow and I

shove at his chest. “Get off me, you fucking psychopath.”

“Make me.”

“I will,” I say, shoving him again and struggling to breathe under the hold he has on me. “I’ll kick you so hard in the balls, you’ll never be able to give that bitch—”

My words cut off as he interrupts and just about stops my heart. “Don’t talk about her.”

My eyes widen, fury pouring through me. “Do not tell me what the fuck to talk about, you piece of shit. I’ll fucking kill you.”

He smirks, this time with amusement. “You can try.”

Before I can say anything else, he grabs both my wrists in one hand and pins them above my head. With the other one, he unbuttons my jeans and roughly shoves his hand down my pants, forcing it between my legs.

“Don’t touch me, you son of a bitch.”

“I’m *your* son of a bitch,” he reminds me, his eyes fierce.

That’s so fucking mean. “No, you’re not,” I mutter resentfully.

He pushes two fingers in my pussy and hateful pleasure burns through me, bringing with it an icy trail of guilt.

I still fucking want him, but I don’t want to.

“I hate you,” I tell him.

“So what?” He leans in close, the masculine scent of his cologne wafting my way. God, he smells so good. “You love me, too. You always will. You know it. I know it. Don’t fucking lie, baby. You want this.”

He releases my wrists so he can shove a hand up my shirt and grab my tit.

I bring my knee up and try to ram him in the balls. I miss my mark and he shoves my leg aside, dodging the blow, but in order to do that, he has to pull his fingers out of me.

I take advantage of the chaos to break free, shoving him away, then turning and taking off down the hall toward my bedroom.

My heart thumps as I hear him hot on my heels. I throw myself into the bedroom and try to get the door closed before he can come inside, but I'm not fast enough.

"Get the fuck away from me," I say as he forces his way in and grabs my arms, walking me back toward the bed. I'm so pissed, I spit at him.

He stops for a split second and stiffens, then his eyes narrow dangerously. The room is dark, but there's enough light spilling in from the hall that I can see the fury sparking in his pretty hazel eyes.

"I'll make you fucking regret that."

I know he will, but who cares? I already regret everything.

He throws me down on the bed and climbs on top of me before I can roll away.

I scream at him, bite him, and try to kick him, but he doesn't care. He shoves me back against the bed, pinning me down and then slapping my face hard enough to make me cry out. I try to shove him away as he shoves my pants down my legs and wrestles them off me. Ignoring my struggles, he pulls my shirt over my head, baring my breasts, and giving them a possessive squeeze.

I try again to knee him, but he easily evades me and yanks my legs apart, planting himself between them and shoving his cock inside me with punishing force.

"You fucking love me," he says, slamming into me with his cock so hard the headboard bangs against the wall.

My pussy craves the punishment, but I'm so fucking hurt and angry, all I can think about is how he must fuck her. Never like this, I bet. I bet she gets the nice shit, the tender neck

kisses instead of bruises, flowers and words of love instead of fuck yous and hate sex.

Maybe he needs us both, but I don't fucking care what he needs.

I want to leave marks on him that she'll see, so I bloody my fingers clawing at his handsome face and feel a thrill of fear and satisfaction when he grabs my hands and slams them down, pinning them to the bed. "You fucking cunt."

"You love my fucking cunt," I spit as he pulls his hips back and drives into me again.

"You bet I fucking do."

He fucks me hard, not even trying to pleasure me, but his words are enough to make my pussy pulse with lust. His actions. The way the selfish bastard uses my body so roughly for his own pleasure.

I'm sick to get off on that shit, but I can already feel myself getting close.

"Tell me you love me," he demands, eyes locked on mine, his hand wrapped around my throat.

"I fucking hate you."

It's the truth, but what he said was true, too.

I love him as much as I hate him. Crave him as much as I want to rip his dick off.

I want to sink my claws in and carve out his heart, but the truth is, I would miss him too fucking much.

Chapter three

Harper

In the aftermath, I lie naked in my bed with Kai's strong arm slung around my waist.

I'm a little sore from the relentless pounding he gave me, but that's not why I'm awake.

I don't think he's asleep, but I keep my back to him so I don't have to initiate a conversation I'm not ready for.

I lie there feeling like a spineless coward until I notice the sky brightening and know it must be early morning.

I wonder where she thinks he is.

That depressing ass thought is the one that kicks me into gear.

I roll off the bed and snatch his T-shirt off the ground. I pull it on over my head and walk around the bed without looking at him, but I can feel him stirring.

I guess I was wrong about him not sleeping because his voice is rough from sleep when he asks, "Where you going?"

"I have to pee and then I'm making coffee. You need to get the fuck out of here so I can get ready for work."

The bedding rustles as he sits up. "You wanna talk about this shit?"

"Nope. Nothing to talk about."

He doesn't ask what that means, but then I don't really give him a chance to. I slam the bathroom door shut and lock it just in case he tries to come in.

I pee and then look at myself in the mirror while I wash my hands. I look like shit. My face is puffy and there's smudged eye makeup caked beneath my eyes. I cried so much

last night they're swollen, and my head is killing me after consuming all that wine.

I run my fingers through my dark hair, then pull it up in a messy-ass ponytail, then I unlock the door and pad out to the kitchen.

I get the coffee brewing and grab one of the to-go cups I bought for when I need to take coffee on the road. I hear the bathroom door close again, so I guess Kai went in there.

I grab myself a mug from the cupboard and wait for the coffee to finish brewing, then I pour myself a nice hot mug, and pour some into Kai's cup so he can take it with him.

You shouldn't make him fucking coffee.

That's true, but I do it anyway. It's only one last time, it doesn't mean anything. If he slept as shitty as I did, he'll need the coffee to get home alive. I'm mad as hell at him, but I don't want the bastard to die.

At least, until he comes sauntering in shirtless with just a pair of fitted black sweats on his incredible body. I've seen the tats covering his shoulder and arm plenty of times, traced the ridges of his cut muscles with my tongue, but the sight of him standing here in my kitchen like he has so many times before...

I'm tempted.

He knows it.

Maybe the only way to escape this temptation is to kill it.

I swallow and pop the lid on the cup, then I hand it to him. "Here."

"Thanks."

"You need to go."

He nods at me, his lips tugging up. "I'm gonna need my shirt."

I reach for the hem, then pull it off over my head and toss it to him.

His hungry gaze travels over my naked body, but I ignore it and my nakedness and grab my mug of coffee, bringing it to my mouth and taking a careful sip.

“What time do you work ‘til?”

“Don’t fucking worry about it,” I tell him.

“I’m coming by after you get off so we can talk this shit through.”

“Like I said, we’ve got nothing to talk about.”

He puts the cup down and walks over, sliding his lean, muscular arms around my waist. “Come on, baby, don’t be that way.”

I push his arm away, but he’s too strong to fight off, so he pulls me into him and nuzzles my neck.

“I’ll take you out,” he murmurs, kissing the curve of my shoulder and causing goosebumps to erupt across my skin. “Got a surprise for you.”

“I’ve had enough surprises.”

His hand moves down my abdomen and he grabs my pussy. “Don’t be like that.”

I shrug him off and shove him away. “Stop it.”

When I fight him, it just makes him more determined to grab me, so he does, pulling me in front of him and pinning me to the counter. “You don’t want me?” he murmurs, kissing my jaw and pushing his fingers back between my thighs.

“I’d have to be stupid to want you after last night,” I mutter.

He smirks. “Intelligence is an overrated quality in a woman.”

“Oh my god, you’re the worst.”

He's still smirking. He knew he'd get a rise out of me with that one. His mischievous bullshit shouldn't still charm me today, but old habits are hard to break.

I need a reminder, so I ask about the bucket of ice-cold water that fell on my head last night. "What's her last name?"

His finger stills in my pussy, but only for a second. Then he curls it and I gasp as his finger brushes my clit in that expert way that's always made my knees weak. "Don't worry about her. That's got nothing to do with us."

"You went to her last night before you came to me."

His other hand moves to my neck, and he squeezes. "You don't want to get into this right now, baby. It's a separate thing. You've just gotta trust me."

"I did trust you," I say, my heart cracking as I look up at him. "It was a crazy fucking thing to do, everyone told me so, and I trusted you anyway."

He slides his fingers deep into my pussy then pushes his thumb against my clit and I grab onto the edge of the counter.

"Kai, stop."

A dark glint flashes in his eyes. He smiles and kisses my jaw. "Make me."

I grab his hand, but I lack the conviction to follow through. It feels too good.

I sigh and close my eyes. "Fuck."

His fingers start moving faster and I'm too weak to fight him. Hell, I'm too weak to fight against my own body. He's caused me so much pain in the last 24 hours, I might as well let him give me a little pleasure.

He's fucked me enough times to feel the moment I submit to him without needing any words, so he grabs my ass and lifts me, planting me on the counter and spreading my legs.

I moan as his expert fingers bring me close to the edge. Cry out when he pushes me over and I come, pulsing around

his fingers and feeling vulnerability wash over me like an ocean wave.

He pulls me off the counter and back on my feet, but he pulls me into his arms and locks them around me. He's so big and strong, but also dangerous and unreliable. It's absurd how safe I've always felt in his arms.

Absurd how safe I still feel.

Doesn't matter, though.

I can handle a lot of shit, but not this. I'm not playing second fiddle to some other girl. He always laughed off his asshole friends who had side chicks, always acted like that life wasn't for him.

Maybe he was laughing because he knew the joke was on me.

I was the fucking side chick, I just didn't know it.

That sobering thought helps me pull out of his loving embrace, but I still feel cold.

Some people might not think a street thug is much of a score, but since the night I met Kai, I thought he was perfect for me.

I always knew I needed a certain kind of man to handle me, and I really thought I'd hit the fucking jackpot when I found him.

It hurts to be this wrong.

So fucking disappointing.

Makes me feel dumb as hell for falling for his shit.

I push him away and turn around to grab my mug of coffee. It's a lot cooler now, so I take a greedy sip and savor the bitterness.

He rubs my ass. "I'll see you later."

I don't answer him. He pulls his shirt on and the smell of his cologne wafts my way.

Makes me sad.

He grabs his to-go mug and leaves, and me?

I stand here wishing like hell I liked good fucking men.

Chapter four

Harper

Obviously, I don't meet Kai for whatever date he had planned.

I expect to hear from him when I don't show, but he doesn't even text me.

Then he doesn't show up at my place pounding on my door like he usually would, and that makes me inexplicably sad.

I always had this feeling of security because of how obsessed with me Kai was. He's not the kind of guy you picture going all in on a girl, but he was all in on me. I was sure of it.

I down more wine like a grown-ass woman handling her shit, then I go lay in bed alone and try not to imagine he's with her.

The more I agonize about it, the more I feel stupid for being surprised.

I'm not some dumb little girl who believes in fairytales, it's just when I met Kai, it was like looking into a mirror in the weirdest ways. We both come from rough beginnings and single moms, we both spent a lot of time learning how to survive on the streets.

He was just as fucked up as I was and every time things got bad, he'd pull me in closer.

No other guy has ever managed to do that.

Some part of me is tempted to believe he's still that guy, but that guy would never cheat on me.

Although, in a twisted kind of way, I even feel confused about whether he has been cheating on *me*. I guess it's her he

cheated on. If she's the one with the ring, she's the first one he got with. I came after. And he said as much, didn't he? That if he told me he was engaged, I wouldn't have fucked him.

I wonder how long they've been engaged.

That sounds like since before I met him, and we've been together for eight months. Don't people usually get married in like a year?

Oh my god, is he going to *marry* her?

How was he even planning to handle any of this? Right now, he doesn't live with either of us so I guess we were easy to play, but surely once they were married, she would have expected to move in with him.

I hurl my phone against the wall to punish it for being so fucking quiet.

He hasn't called.

Hasn't texted.

I should be glad.

I should hope he falls off the face of the planet because that's the only easy way to get him out of my life.

—

The next morning, I'm nursing another headache after a night of drinking too much wine.

Thankfully, I'm out of it, but I'm also out of food and in desperate need of a grocery stop where I will almost certainly buy more.

Once my fridge is fully stocked, I shower and get myself ready for work. It's unfortunate that I work at a club one of Kai's friends owns because that means the whole time I'm at work, I can't stop thinking about him.

His friend who owns the club avoids me tonight just like he did yesterday. Makes me think he knew all along what was going on, and he doesn't want to face me.

Bro-code, my ass. Who's supposed to be looking out for the girls?

Well, I guess Celeste was looking out for me. She's loyal as hell to Zane, so it must have taken a lot for her to go behind his back and rat out his friend the way she did when she slipped me that address.

My shift ends when the club closes, and I can't get out of there fast enough. I'm singling out my key on the key ring as I approach my car, but when I look up, I stop dead in my tracks.

She's standing there by my car.

My guard goes up, my first thought that she's here to sabotage me and put something in my tank or cut a fucking brake line or something.

Can a girl who looks like her cut brake lines? Probably not.

Violet offers a faint, almost apologetic smile. "Sorry if I startled you."

She's apologizing to *me*?

"Sorry I've been fucking your fiancé."

Her smile drops.

"Sorry," I say again, meaning it this time. "That was an asshole thing to say."

She shrugs one shoulder, tucking her fingers into the back pockets of her jeans.

"How'd you find me?" I ask since I never gave her my last name.

"I asked one of Kai's friends about you."

"Which one?"

She mimics zipping her lips.

I crack a smile. “Fair. I guess I wouldn’t trust me, either. Not that it probably means anything, but I really didn’t know about you. When I found out about you, I thought he was cheating on *me*. I was there to confront you, then you showed me the ring.”

I look down at her hand, but I notice the ring is gone now and my heart drops.

She looks down at her hand, too, then smiles sadly. “I took it off. Didn’t feel right to wear it. I needed... answers. He said it was over between you, but... I needed the truth.”

That fucking sucks to hear.

I guess it shouldn’t.

I’m the one who wanted to end things, who told him to fuck off and get out of my apartment, but while he didn’t call and I didn’t show up last night, he did ask me to meet him. Does that mean it’s over?

I don’t know, but I’m sure not going to cover for him. “Maybe, but he did fuck me after I confronted you at your house. Just in case that helps.”

She swallows. I feel a bit bad for being so blunt, but it’s hard not to hate her a little, even if she doesn’t really deserve it. I’ve been fucking her man, but she’s been fucking mine.

“I probably shouldn’t have let him,” I add, drawing her gaze back to me. “But we don’t really have that kind of dynamic. We fight a lot and then we fuck about it.”

“Great. Thanks for the details,” she says dryly.

“Sorry,” I say again. “I’m really not trying to be a bitch, but I haven’t slept much the past couple of days.”

“I get that,” she says, tucking hair behind her ear. “I haven’t, either.”

“I thought he was the one,” I say, and I feel tears prickling in the back of my eyes.

“Me, too,” she says softly.

“I feel like an idiot.”

Her lips quirk. “Yet another thing we have in common.”

I scoff, blinking back the tears and regaining my composure. “Yeah. We should start a club.”

She licks her lips nervously, then she asks, “Do you want to... get lunch or something?”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“I still have questions, and I figure you probably do, too. And unless he has totally different relationships with both of us, I imagine you have some level of financial dependence on him, so why don’t you let me buy you lunch.”

That stings. “Not really. It seems like you’re the one he’s been taking care of, I’m just...”

His whore.

It’s hard to breathe, and as nice as she’s being, I can’t be around her anymore.

“Anyway, I have to be getting home.”

“Are you meeting him?” she asks.

“Not that I’m aware of. I told him to leave me alone, but he swears you’re nothing I have to worry about and that our thing is completely separate.”

She sighs. “What a bastard.”

“You can say that again.”

I just wish I didn’t love him so damn much.

I don’t say that part.

“Well, if you change your mind about lunch...” She holds out a little square of paper.

I take it and look down at it. It’s her phone number.

“I’ll text you.”

“Can you call?”

I look up questioningly.

“He... monitors my texts.”

I scowl, angrier for myself than her. He’s never monitored *my* fucking text messages.

Fucker.

Now I’m really curious *why* he feels the need to monitor hers, but I feel like I need more than the next minute or two to get the answers I want.

Dammit.

“All right. You know what, you’re right. Let’s do lunch.”

“Yeah?” she says brightly.

I nod, not half as enthusiastic. “Sure. I want the truth, too, and he’s damn sure not going to give it to me.”

She smiles. “Great. Tomorrow at Dante’s Grille, one o’clock?”

“Sounds good.”

Chapter five

Harper

I'm on the road home when I hear the familiar roar of Kai's Dodge Viper as he pulls up into the lane beside me.

This isn't a road with two lanes for traffic heading this way, so my eyes widen and then I toss a panicked look ahead to make sure no one is coming.

Pushing the window button, I don't even wait for it to go all the way down before I holler, "What the hell are you doing? You're gonna get killed."

He's looking at me, not the road. "Pull over."

"Fuck you."

I feel my heart start to race as I turn my attention back to the road, keeping an eye on my side, but more on his side of the road if I'm being honest. I'm not the one driving in the wrong lane.

"I'm not fucking with you, Harper. Pull off. We need to talk."

"It's not happening," I snap, not looking at him. "Go home to your fiancée. You already told her it was over with me, anyway, right? So, what could we possibly have to talk about?"

His voice is hard and cold. He's losing his patience with me. "Pull the fuck over. I won't ask again."

He's crazy enough that he might run me off the road if he's confident he won't ram me into a tree or something, but that's not the most pressing issue.

Up ahead, I see an SUV appear over the hill heading toward him.

They lay on the horn but don't slow down, surely expecting Kai to fall back and get in his own lane.

But Kai doesn't fall back. He doesn't even slow down. I look over at him and find his fierce gaze locked on me. He knows the SUV is heading straight for him, but the crazy bastard doesn't look away from me.

My heart does a somersault. "Kai, you're gonna get fucking hit!"

"You know what I want, baby. What happens next is up to you."

Ugh, fucking emotional blackmailer.

He pisses me off *so much*, but I cut the wheel and hit the brake, pulling off on the shoulder and killing the engine.

I can breathe again when he follows me off the road.

I throw open the car door and stomp toward him, my heels getting lost in the roadside gravel. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He's standing there in his black leather jacket with his perfect lips and that killer jaw. I want his hands on me, but I also want to hit him, so I give in to the latter impulse and shove him hard.

He's strong enough that he hardly budes, but my shove is an invitation for him to dole out a little violence of his own, so he grabs me and throws me back against the door of the Viper.

My pussy throbs but I ignore that shit and shove him again.

"Quit," he says.

"You told her it was fucking *over* between us," I snap, trying to hit him again, but he catches my hand and grabs my wrists, restraining them as he uses his body to push mine back against the car. "Is she the only one you've been fucking, Kai?"

Am I the biggest fucking idiot in the world? You were my *everything*. Am I just one of many to you?"

Tears sting my eyes admitting that to him. Kai's not a soft guy, but I see something soften in his gaze when I hurl that line.

"Of course not, Harper. How could you think that?"

"How could I not?" I ask brokenly.

"Baby, I love you. You know that. Nothing has changed between me and you. There's no one else."

"And I'm just supposed to believe you?"

"Why would I lie? When would I even have time to see some other bitch? Come on, baby."

"I hate you so fucking much," I whisper, shaking my head.

He grabs me and pulls me into his chest, locking his arms around me protectively.

I hate myself for it, but I wrap my arms around his middle and press my face into his chest, breathing in his familiar, masculine scent. Soap, leather, and a hit of something I can't quite put my finger on.

God, I'll miss his smell.

I don't cry, but I want to.

It's hard for me to imagine he and this Violet girl could possibly have the intense, passionate connection we have. It's volatile and toxic as fuck sometimes, sure, but I've never loved anyone the way I love him, and I really felt like he felt the same way.

It's tempting to believe him when he tells me he does.

I'm dressed for work as a hostess at his friend's club, so I'm dressed sexy in a low-cut black top my tits are practically spilling out of and a short tight skirt. I feel him peeling up the

back of my skirt until the night breeze hits my ass, then he runs his hand over it and gives it a firm, possessive squeeze.

“I fucking love you, Harper.”

He tears me away from him just so he can pull down my shirt. My tits spill free, and he grabs one, squeezing it in his palm, then bending to take my nipple in his mouth.

I hiss as he sucks hard then bites me, shoving my shirt down so it's around my waist and my tits are all the way out. Here on the side of the road where anyone could see us.

“And I fucking love you like this,” he rumbles against my tits. “Pissed as hell but so fucking sexy, I swear to god. I'd sell my fucking soul to have you, Harper. Don't you get it? I was hers, but I had to fucking have *you*. No future I planned with someone else could stop me.”

His words are so tempting.

Just like his touch.

His hands are rough and demanding on my sensitive flesh. He makes me hurt, but he makes it feel so fucking good at the same time.

He's always had a thing for my tits, and I love when he touches them. As much as I feel like a dumb slut right now, I can't bring myself to stop him as he licks and sucks on me, then shoves his hand in my panties and starts fucking me with his fingers.

I clutch him tight as he pins me against the car door and finger fucks me so hard, I could cry.

I *want* to scream and cry and slap him, but I can't stop. I want this. He's my drug. I'm crazy for him.

Maybe I'm crazy, period.

He has me on the verge of coming when he frees my wrists and spins me around, grabbing me by the hips and bending me over the hood of his car.

He spreads my thighs and drags my panties down to my knees, then he smacks my ass hard, making me cry out and grab the hood for support.

I hear the metallic clink of his belt buckle and then his zipper. He shoves down his pants just enough to get his cock out, then he slams into me, making me cry out. I'm wet and throbbing, but his cock is so thick and his entrance is so violent, it makes me flinch.

"Fuck," I say, adjusting my grip on the car.

"If you think I'm gonna stop using this perfect fucking pussy because of some bullshit, I'm afraid you're mistaken, Harper. Sadly... fucking... mistaken," he says, punctuating each word with a punishing thrust. "God himself couldn't keep me out of this pussy."

It feels so fucking good, I'm ready to climb on top of the car. Crawl out of my skin. Lose my fucking mind.

I wish he didn't have dick so good it makes me lose my fucking mind. That would make this so much easier.

My pussy clenches around him when he shoves deep, begging him not to leave, but he does every time. He comes back, though, and the sensation is so sweet, I'm crying literal tears as he fucks me on the hood of his car.

It hurts, but I love it. I spread my thighs wider, trying to give him better access so he can go deeper. I want him so deep inside me, he can never leave.

"I'm never letting you go," he says, his voice strained as he drives his cock into me. "You're mine, and I know I fucked up not being honest with you. That was my bad, but you're not fucking going anywhere. I won't let you."

I feel a tear run down my face, but I'm so close to coming, I can't speak.

"Say it," he demands, hammering into my pussy as hard as he can. "Say you're fucking mine."

Absolutely not.

I hold onto the hood and take his cock's abuse, so fucking hungry for it. I'm afraid he might stop, but since he fucked up so big this time, he doesn't. He drives into me until I'm crying out for more and begging him to stop at the same time, coming all over his cock and convulsing as violent pleasure rips through me.

"Fuck, yes, baby," he says, driving into me as I come and groaning as my pussy squeezes him. He comes deep inside my pussy, practically growling as he pumps me full of cum.

It feels like I'm going to float away.

I couldn't move off this car hood if it caught on fire. I'd just lie here and let the flames consume me.

He recovers first and pulls out of me.

I feel empty, then I feel his cum drip out of me and make its way down my thigh.

His palm slides along the same path. He scoops up the cum that leaked out of me, then uses his fingers to push it back in.

I'm breathing heavy and still boneless, but I muster the will to mutter, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

We can't be trusted to bother with condoms most of the time, so I'm on the pill, anyway.

Still, it's fucking weird.

We're teetering on the edge of a breakup, and he's pushing his cum back in me like a fucking insane person.

Once I can trust my legs again, I push myself up off the car and pull my panties up. I fix my skirt and yank my shirt back up to cover my tits.

I turn around and look at him, my gaze wounded, but he just wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me against him.

Fuck, I missed that.

I lean my head on his shoulder and watch him draw out a pack of cigarettes and work one of the cancer-sticks free.

I hate that he smokes.

I don't smoke, but sometimes I take a few puffs of his after a good fuck.

I watch him light it up and take a long drag. I can't help but think how fucking beautiful he is.

Then he has to go and ruin it by saying, "You're not going to lunch with Violet tomorrow."

I take his cigarette and take a drag of it myself. "Yes, I am."

"That's fucking sick. Why would you do that?"

I shrug, exhaling and watching a ring of smoke float through the air. "I want the truth, and I think she'll give it to me."

"I already told you the only truth that matters."

"That's such toxic bullshit." I shake my head. "You're the fucking worst." I miss a beat. "How do you even know about that? Did she tell you?"

He shakes his head. "Didn't have to. The two women in my life were talking to each other outside my friend's club. You think I wasn't gonna find out about that?"

The two women in his life.

Man, does that piss me off.

I'm not going to stand here and pretend it doesn't, so without another word, I head back to my car.

"Did I say you could leave?" he calls out, but there's no heat behind his words. He's just saying it to piss me off.

I spin around and hold up both middle fingers, earning a chuckle and a, "That's my girl," before I turn around and open my car door.

Chapter six

Harper

When I meet Violet at Dante's the next day for lunch, I'm feeling a touch more human than I did the two previous times we met up.

I'm not sure what to expect, but she's already here and waiting for me at the table.

She's dressed in a pair of snug jeans and a white sweater today. She's absolutely gorgeous just like the last two times I've seen her.

I can't decide if it's more intimidating or flattering that Kai cheated on such a beautiful woman with me.

"I ordered us both waters," she says as I sit down. "I wasn't sure what you'd want to drink."

Of course she wasn't. We're total strangers. I flash her a smile as I set my purse down on one of the two empty chairs at our table. "Thanks. Gotta stay hydrated."

"For sure." She smiles again, trying so hard to be polite.

I don't get it.

Maybe it's all an act and she invited me here to poison me or something, but I don't think so. She seemed genuinely nice the night I met her, and I get the same vibe from her now.

I just don't get it.

If I were in her shoes, if I were the one with the ring sitting across from some chick I know he cheated with who openly admitted to fucking him *after* finding out he was engaged? I'd smash her face against the goddamn table, not order her a water.

I try to picture Kai with this woman, but I can't. Maybe it's a mental block because I just don't want to, but I can't help thinking she's just... well, too good for him.

“So,” I say, hoping to break the awkwardness, “what’s good here?” I look at the menu, but I’m not actually reading it. I’m just keeping my eyes busy so I don’t have to look at her.

“Oh, everything. I haven’t had a meal here I haven’t enjoyed,” she says, her gaze dropping to the menu.

We both take a minute to look over our menus while we have an excuse not to talk to each other. I grapple with my sanity coming here and my anger that Kai didn’t want me to. I remind myself of the night that feels like a fucking year ago but was just earlier this week when I showed up on her doorstep and he tried to chase *me* off.

He tells me he couldn’t be without me and makes me feel chosen, but then he does all this shit to keep her, so I don’t really know what I’m supposed to believe.

My gaze drifts to her ring finger and it’s still empty. I don’t know why that feels like such a relief. They’re still engaged, right?

They are if she wants to be, and that’s the shittiest part.

There’s so much I don’t know about their relationship and call me a masochist, but I want to know.

When the waitress comes over, I expect Violet to just order a salad—she really *looks* like a “just a salad for me, thanks” kind of girl—but she surprises me by ordering chicken parmesan with penne pasta and a salad on the side with cheese and extra ranch.

The waitress looks at me. “I’ll have the chicken Caesar wrap with fries. Can I get chili cheese fries, or is that weird?”

Violet laughs and the waitress smiles. “Not weird at all. It’s just an upcharge, is that all right?”

Remembering Violet’s paying, I glance at her across the table. “Of course.” She hands the waitress the menu. “Thank you. Oh! Harper, didn’t you want something to drink?”

“I’ll have a lemonade when you get a chance.”

The waitress nods, takes my menu, and then leaves us alone.

I don't feel as tense as I did when I first got here. Violet maintains her friendly vibe so I don't clam up.

"So, where should we begin?" she finally asks, unfolding her cloth napkin and draping it over her lap.

"We probably should have done this over alcohol," I point out.

"Probably. Next time," she jokes.

"Um, how long have you guys been together?"

She bites down on her full bottom lip. "Five years engaged, seven years together."

My jaw drops. "Oh, my god."

She nods, looking down at the table. "You?"

"Eight months."

"Where'd you meet?"

"Zane's club. I work there as a hostess," I mention casually, since she clearly knows I work there. "He came in one night with the guys and... sparks flew." I finish that sentence with muted enthusiasm since I feel bad saying it out loud.

It's hard to shake the feeling that *she's* the other woman no matter how many times I tell myself logically that I am.

"Did it start right away, or...?"

I sigh, unrolling my silverware just for something to do. "I mean, it didn't take long. A couple of weeks?"

She nods, her pretty blue eyes dim.

"He's obviously an idiot," I state. "I mean, look at you. Look at me. I'm no fucking troll, but who would pursue me when they have you waiting at home?"

I think she appreciates my attempt to make her feel better, but I can see it doesn't work and I'm not surprised. Whether he's an idiot or not, it's a thing that happened, and they had clearly been together for a long time. She must have trusted him.

"Did he ever cheat on you before?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Not that I'm aware of." Her gaze returns to mine. "How old are you?"

"I'm 24."

She nods. "Four years younger than us."

So they're the same age.

I almost ask if they met in school, but then I do the math. They met at 21 and Kai didn't go to college, so they definitely didn't meet in school. It's hard to imagine how they could have crossed paths when they're so different, but...

I don't ask how they met. It's not my business.

I'm kinda dreading the next question even though I think I know the answer. I've thought a lot of things lately, and I've been wrong about most of them.

I need something to drink so I take a quick sip of my water, then I ask, "You guys don't have any kids, right?"

She shakes her head. "Not yet."

That's like a knife to the gut.

"I mean, I guess not ever now," she says, absently smoothing her lap napkin. "We planned to have kids someday, but he wasn't ready to start a family yet."

I feel like I have a mouth full of lead.

I grab my water and take another sip through the straw. "Are you... um... I don't really know how to ask this without seeming like I have ulterior motives, but are you officially leaving him then?"

She gazes at me across the table and it's the first time I think she might be thinking I'm an idiot. "Yes, of course I'm leaving him. I can't stay with a man who's cheated on me. We aren't even married yet and he's already straying." She shakes her head, grabbing her lemonade off the table. "Nope. No thanks. I deserve a more loyal man than that."

I'm tempted to feel relief, but a hateful little voice in my head tells me he won't accept that. He's Kai, he doesn't tolerate things going a different way than he wants. And she's a catch. He'll try to convince her to stay, and how could she possibly resist him?

I think again how different their relationship is, though.

With her blue eyes that sparkle with something almost like innocence, I can't imagine him slapping her across the face when they're fucking. I think if he did, it would be the last time he ever saw her. She doesn't have fuck around and find out energy like he does, but she *does* have the energy of someone who doesn't *entertain* anyone fucking around.

Fuck around and fuck off energy, that's what she has.

But in the nicest way possible. Like, she might make you a sandwich to take with you, but don't get it twisted. She never wants to see you again.

"What are you smiling at?" she asks, her eyes narrowed playfully.

I shake my head. "I just like your energy. You seem cool. Our boyfriend's a fuckhead."

A burst of laughter shoots out of her. She covers her mouth and glances around, then lowers her hand, but a smile is still on her face. "Yeah, he kind of is."

"I'm sorry he cheated on you. I know that shit sucks."

She nods. "I'm sorry he did it to you, too. I think we both deserve better."

I nod, but I can't quite meet her gaze.

She's probably right, but I'm not as sure as she is that I can kick this habit. I haven't loved him for as long as she has, but his claws are in me deep.

I like to think I have fuck around and fuck off energy, but... maybe that's wishful thinking. I don't feel impenetrable and firm in my resolve.

I feel hurt and sad and to be perfectly fucking honest, afraid I'm going to lose the best thing I've ever grabbed onto.

Maybe it's sad that he's the best thing that's ever been mine, maybe Violet can't relate to that, but she hasn't lived my life.

She hasn't loved him the way I have.

"Can I ask you a question that might not be any of my business? Feel free to tell me to fuck off, but when I ask him anything about you, he completely shuts me down, so I feel like you're my only possible source."

Violet nods. "Sure."

"Is there a reason he watches you so closely? It's one of the things I keep coming back to. The things he says to me... but then the way he is with you... It's difficult knowing what to believe. Also, I'm just shamelessly curious. If there were a book about your relationship, I would have to read it through tears and I'm sure I'd throw it against a wall a bunch of times, but I'd read every page. I'd have to."

She smiles sympathetically. "Yeah, I know the feeling."

Do you?

Maybe she's just better at putting a pleasant mask over her true feelings.

"Um, a few years back, one of his guys kinda tried to kidnap me."

My eyes widen. "What?"

She nods. "He thought he was in love with me. He would sort of... stalk me. Follow me places. Um, he would send me

texts from burner phones. Every time I blocked one, he got another one. It was this whole thing, and ever since then, Kai has been even more protective than he was before.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah, it was scary.”

“What did Kai do? I can’t imagine he put up with that.”

“No, he’s not really the forgive and forget type. He... handled it.” Her eyes glint as she speaks, and I can tell there’s more to the story that she’s not sharing. “Let’s just say that guy won’t be bothering me again.”

The mood feels a lot heavier now. For her, probably because she’s thinking about whatever happened with that guy Kai fucked up (or killed, let’s be honest. He probably killed him) but for me, it’s the selfish ache imagining Kai so protective over another woman. No one’s ever been obsessed with me, so I guess there was nothing to trigger that in him with me, but it still leaves me feeling less important than her.

I had hoped this meeting would show me giant holes in their relationship and his feelings for her, that there was some other explanation for him being with her for so long. Hell, if he wanted me so damn much when he met me but he knew I wouldn’t be his side chick (on purpose, anyway) he could have started things up with me and as soon as he knew it was solid, he could have ended it with her.

Yes, he still would have been a cheater, but at least then it would have felt like he was picking me.

Now she’s leaving him, so I don’t know how it ever will.

Maybe Violet is right.

Maybe we *both* deserve someone better.

Chapter seven

Harper

It's been a long ass time since I sat at a bar by myself.

Before I met Kai, I had more friends. All but one fell off along the way. They said he was bad for me, that we amplified each other's worst impulses. They said we were toxic together, that they worried I wouldn't even make it out of the relationship alive.

They didn't get that's what made it so fucking hot.

Living life on the razor's edge.

Not everyone's built for the safe road.

And they didn't see the way we loved each other. The way we needed each other to fucking breathe once we breathed the same air.

I won't feel that with somebody new, and I'm not at all eager to swim through the cesspool of available men. I fucking hate dating, the bullshit small talk, the time wasted "getting to know" some asshole who doesn't know how to kiss you let alone fuck you.

The bartender walks over, and I gesture toward her.

"What can I get ya?" she asks.

"A shot of tequila and a glass of water. Actually, why don't you make it a double."

"I got you, girl. Rough day?"

"Rough few days."

She pours my double, then once I throw them back and empty the glass, she pours me one more and winks. "On the house."

“Thanks,” I murmur, grabbing it and throwing that one back, too.

That should do the trick.

She fills a glass of water, then slides it across the bar at me. I gulp down a bit to chase all that tequila and immediately feel a little better.

It’s not long before some guy wanders over and drops into the empty seat beside me.

I feel his gaze sweep over me, lingering on my cleavage in this tight low-cut top. I know I look good, so I’m not surprised when he tries to get my attention.

“You’re not here alone tonight, are you?”

“Sure am,” I answer, lifting my glass and taking a sip.

“Is that water? Let me buy you a real drink.” He signals the bartender before I can stop him, so I look over at him. “I’m Jack,” he says with a smile.

He’s an okay-looking guy. I’m not interested, but I’ll let him buy me a drink. “Hey, Jack.”

“And who are you?” he asks since I didn’t bother offering my name.

“Harper.”

“What do you do, Harper?”

Like he gives a fuck what I do. He’s probably just making sure I’m not a hooker he’ll have to pay. “I’m a hostess.”

“At a restaurant?”

“Club.”

That’s not clear enough that I’m not an escort, I guess, because he asks, “What kind of club?”

Mercifully, the bartender comes over and interrupts this boring fucking line of questioning. “What can I get you?” she asks.

“I’ll have a Budweiser. And the lady will have...” He looks to me.

I smile faintly at the way he ordered a Budweiser so I’ll order something cheap, too. Just to be an asshole, I tell her, “How about a Long Island? Top shelf.”

The bartender smirks at me and I notice Jack’s eyebrows rise, but he doesn’t say anything about it. “Coming right up, hun,” she says before turning away.

Now that we’re finished ordering and I’ve cost him a good \$14, he’s feeling a little more entitled. “Why don’t you turn this way so I can look at that pretty face while I’m talking to you?”

Why don’t you fuck off, Jack?

I don’t say that, though.

I came here tonight planning to go home with somebody, and while I think Jack’s a fucking imbecile and I’ll surely never see him again after tomorrow, I guess I can let the guy fumble around between my legs tonight.

I do as he requested, turning in my seat so I’m facing him and crossing my legs. His lustful gaze sweeps over my legs, but his gaze snaps back to mine when I ask, “You want to fuck me, Jack?”

His jaw inches open, but he catches it quickly and recovers coolly as if he’s asked that question by beautiful women all the time. “I might.”

His answer annoys me, but my heart isn’t in any of this. I’m not looking for a husband, just someone to plant his cock in me and wear me out enough that I can get some sleep. “How long do you last, Jack?”

He’s surprised again.

The bartender slides his beer to him and he quickly takes a sip. “Um, that’s a bold question.”

“I’m a bold girl.” I smile. “If I ride you tonight, will it be a nice long ride, or more of a quick jaunt? I’m just trying to get a feel for what I’m signing up for.”

He looks at my cleavage and I can tell he’s second-guessing what he’s getting into with me. But he also really wants to touch my tits, so he looks up at me and smirks. “Only one way to find out, isn’t there?”

The bartender puts my drink on the counter in front of me. I grab it without looking away from Jack, then I wrap my lips around the straw and take a good long sip.

He shifts and I can see he’s already getting excited. What an eager boy.

I’m going to chew him up and spit out his mangled bones, but I guess he’ll do for a night’s entertainment.

Not a chance in hell he’ll give me what I need, but I’m used to that. That was every fucking man I was with before I met Kai.

I refuse to be a sad bitch tonight, so I put down the drink I only had one sip of and slam my palm down on the bar top. “I’m gonna go pee, Jack. Why don’t you pay the bill so we can get out of here.”

He watches me grab my purse and slide it on my shoulder, then he watches my ass as I strut away.

The scene when I come back out of the bathroom is a little bit different. I hear skidding tables, a falling chair, and someone say, “Oh, fuck.”

Then I hear glass breaking and look up to see Kai has just busted Jack’s Budweiser bottle on the bar top. I gasp as he locks his arm around Jack’s neck and brings the sharp jagged edge of the bottle up to his throat.

“Did you look at my fucking girl, motherfucker?”

“Kai, stop!” I try to grab him and pull him off, but before I can, two of his guys grab me and pull me off to the side. I

glare at them, yanking my arms to free them. “Get your fucking hands off me.”

“Did you let him touch you?” Kai asks, his dark gaze hot and angry. “Did you let this fucker lay a goddamn finger on you?”

He’s such a fucking hypocrite. Rather than tell the truth, I say, “So what if I did? You’ve been fucking someone else the whole time we’ve been together!”

Jack cries out as Kai jams the bottle into his neck—not deep, but definitely enough to hurt. “I didn’t touch her, man. I swear to God I didn’t!”

Kai twists the neck of the broken bottle and Jack cries out again.

“Stop it,” I snap. “He didn’t touch me, okay?”

“You weren’t just about to leave with him?”

“Yeah, I was about to leave with him. I was going to let him fuck me all night long, and don’t you dare say a goddamn word about it. You don’t have a leg to stand on.”

He unlocks his arm and throws Jack away from him. The guy hits the floor, but I’m not paying attention to him. My gaze is locked on Kai as he crosses the distance between us and grabs me by the throat. “You better watch what you fucking say to me, Harper.”

I want to spit in his face, but I know better than to pull a stunt like that in front of his men. When it’s just us, that’s one thing, but in front of his guys would be too far.

I shouldn’t still fucking *care* about that. My heart has more bruises on it than my body ever has, and every single one bears his fingerprints.

“I know I hurt you,” he says seriously, his voice low but not the least bit secretive. He’s just talking to me, but he doesn’t care who hears. “I told you I’m sorry about that. I meant it. But there will be no fucking retribution, do you understand me? If you ever let another man put his hands on

you, you better make him dig a nice deep hole first so I can bury him in it afterward, because that's what will fucking happen. I will not look the other way. I will not call it even. I will fucking bury him."

My heart leaps. I don't know whether it's from the jolt of fear or arousal that I feel at the menace and solemnity in his words. I know Kai. He's not just running his mouth. He means every word.

I want him to kiss me, so when his mouth slants over mine hard and possessive, I don't have it in me to resist. I try for my pride's sake, shoving at his chest, but I only do it once before I let my hands slide over his shoulders.

I hold onto him and pull him closer, my heart soaring and my stomach twisting with perverse need as he brutally claims my mouth right here in front of everyone.

Fuck.

His free hand slides down to grab my ass, and when I can no longer breathe, he breaks free and looks down at me. "Come on," he says simply.

His guys stay behind to deal with the mess he made, but Kai takes my hand and leads me out of the bar.

I pull my hand free as soon as we're outside because I don't want him to fucking touch me. Sure, part of me does, but that part's dumb as hell and I'm ignoring it right now.

I glare at him as he opens the passenger side door and stands back expectantly. "Get in."

"Some gentleman you are," I mutter, just standing there.

"You know who you're with," he says evenly, then he nods at the car. "I won't ask again."

He didn't ask the first time, but I don't bother saying that. With a huff, I drop into the seat and sling my bag on my lap just in time for him to slam the door shut.

I wish I didn't feel so goddamn secure sitting here in the passenger seat of his car, but it's the first time in days things have felt refreshingly familiar. Comfortable. Maybe a lot of people would look at this life and think I'm out of my fucking mind to call it that, but that's what it is to me. When I'm in this seat and Kai's behind the wheel, it feels like no matter what else is wrong... none of it really matters. None of it matters because we have each other. If the car went off the side of a fucking cliff, I'd be sort of okay with it as long as I could reach over, grab his hand, and know we were going together.

The familiarity of the moment ends because I feel the sting of tears and remorse over all we've lost, and I never felt that shit before.

I always felt safe with him. Most dangerous guy I've ever been with, but I knew he'd never really hurt me. He plays rough, but I do too sometimes. I would've been the most toxic girl that guy back at the bar ever took home, I'd have ruined his fucking life if he let me and I was bored enough, but it's not like that with Kai. We're like two venomous snakes, lethal to everyone else, but our poison doesn't work on one another.

I'll never find that again.

I'm not being sentimental or anything, it's just a fucking fact. They don't make a lot of guys like him. He's not like all the loser guys around here that are a dime a fucking dozen. He can't be easily replaced.

Yeah, I can survive on my own just fine, but with him... I've never lived like that before. I won't be able to do it without him.

I watch out the window as we drive through downtown. I don't ask where we're going. I don't really care.

It's silent between us until all of a sudden, he breaks it.

"Is that what you fucking needed?"

I look over at him, but he keeps his gaze trained on the road. His jaw is locked and I can feel the anger radiating off him.

“What?” I ask.

“To fuck some other guy. You wanted to even the score? Is that what you needed to get past this shit?”

“No, that’s not what I fucking needed,” I snap. The question’s so fucking stupid, I can’t control myself. “That wouldn’t *even the score*, Kai. This isn’t about sex. You fucking *sucker punched* me. Me fucking someone else wouldn’t be anything like what you did to me. You’d know about it, you’d see it coming, you’d be able to get your fucking revenge, and it would be an isolated incident. What about that seems like it would even the score between us, Kai?”

He doesn’t answer me.

“And there’s not supposed to *be* a score between us,” I state. “That’s not how it ever was between us. We aren’t fucking competing against each other. We’re not on opposite teams. We were supposed to be teammates, and teammates don’t betray each other. If they do, they’re off the fucking team. That’s how that works.”

“I *am* your fucking team, Harper.”

“Not anymore, you’re not.”

The words are out before I can stop them, and they stop my heart. The soft parts of me want to press rewind and go back to before I said that, to suck all the words back in and say something different, but it’s too late. They’re out there now.

There’s no going back.

For either of us.

It tears me apart saying it, but it’s the hateful truth, so I do anyway.

“You can’t fix what you’ve broken here, Kai. I trusted you with my heart and soul. I felt safe with you, and I don’t anymore. I felt fucking valuable to you, I felt loved for the first time in my shitty fucking life, and now... I don’t. And you can’t change that. She left you. There’s not even a chance for you to pick me now. How do I ever feel like more than

some sad fucking consolation prize after this?” I shake my head, looking down at my lap. “It’s not about being pissed, it sure as hell isn’t about getting even. I just can’t be in a relationship that’s a pathetic shadow of what it once was. Or, what I *thought* it was,” I correct. “Obviously, I was delusional about it all along, but it was real to me, even if it wasn’t to you.”

“How could you say that?” he asks, his tone low and dangerous.

“How could you give me a reason to?” I ask softly, leaning my head back against the seat and staring out at the empty night stretched out ahead of us.

I feel him look over at me, but I don’t meet his gaze.

This feels more like the end than any of the anger has.

I hate to admit it. I’m no quitter, and if I saw a way back to where we were before this, I’m not ashamed to admit I’d hold on. Pride has never come between us before. We went into this relationship knowing we both had a whole lot of it, but for some inexplicable reason, we instinctively set shit like that aside so we could connect on a level most people couldn’t. A level without egos and walls meant to protect us. We trusted each other to do that instead.

At least, I did.

I guess he didn’t need my shelter as much as I needed his.

He had a whole fucking fiancée at home waiting for him each night, and now that I’ve met her, I can’t even imagine she was some inferior version of me.

I’ve met her and she’s lovely.

I’m sure she gave him love and safety and all that shit I thought he only got from me.

I guess he’s just fucking greedier than I ever realized.

Guess he’s learned a valuable lesson about being a greedy, two-timing bastard because now he’s lost us both.

Chapter eight

Harper

I'm relieved when Kai pulls up in front of my apartment and stops without saying a word.

I'm relieved when he doesn't follow me inside.

At least I think I am.

It's too hard to tell what I'm feeling anymore besides fucking sad.

If he came inside, though, it would be too tempting to let him fuck me one last time, and I know what a slippery road that would be.

Nah, it's better this way.

Doesn't hurt any less, but if it's over, then I need to start acting like it so my heart will get on board. The more I fuck with him, the more confused it will be.

Besides, he doesn't deserve to keep fucking me after what he did.

I know that's true, but as I down another bottle of wine and strip off my clothes on the way to my bedroom, all I can think about is what comes after this. His life and mine are so completely interwoven, there's no natural separation anymore. We hang out with all the same people at all the same places. Hell, I work for his friend.

Ending our relationship won't get him all the way out of my life.

Now I know I won't see him with her, but there will be other girls. I'll have to see him move on, and I know myself. I know I won't be able to take that shit.

I've gotta get out of here.

It's the only way.

Probably the smartest way if I'm being honest.

There's plenty of the world I haven't seen, and no, I don't have much money, but I don't have shit keeping me anchored here anymore, either. If anything, I've got plenty to chase me away.

Maybe someday when I look back on this, it won't hurt so much.

Maybe I'm wrong about how fucking irreplaceable he is and someday when I look back, it will be with the love of my life in bed beside me, and I'll only be looking back to think, "Thank God that asshole cheated on me because I never would have left that shithole town otherwise."

I'm not sure I genuinely believe any of that, but it's a nice fantasy to think about as I drink to dull the pain.

Unfortunately, there's just a few sips left in the wine bottle when I hear my apartment door hinge whine followed by footsteps down the hall.

Maybe someone's here to murder me. I don't care. Better finish my wine first, though. I grab the bottle and tip it back, laughing at the absurdity of my impending doom.

I wait for some criminal to round the corner and come into view.

Unfortunately, when he does, it's the one who stole my heart, not the one who wants to steal my life.

"Not you," I mutter.

He pushes the door shut behind him. "Yeah, it's me."

"That's fucking disappointing."

His lips tug up without much humor. "Yeah, I know." He peels off his jacket and drops it on the ground, then he lifts his shirt over his head and makes his way toward the bed.

I try to focus on him, but I've had *so* much to drink. If I don't squint one eye, I see two of him. "You're blurry."

He climbs on the bed and pushes me back on the mattress. "You're drunk."

"Yep."

I scoot back on my elbows, but he grabs my legs and drags me toward him as he unbuckles his belt.

"You can't fuck me."

I don't say it like it's a rule, more something I just fished out of the murky waters of my wine-soaked memory.

"Wanna bet?"

I roll my eyes as he tosses his belt off the bed. "It wasn't a challenge."

I'm wearing a pair of black lace boyshorts and an oversized T-shirt. He hooks his fingers into the waistband of my panties and tugs those down first.

All my responses are a bit delayed since I'm so drunk, but when he slides a hand up my thigh and it makes me sad, I remember why he really *isn't* allowed to fuck me.

He's not braced for resistance, so I manage to push him off of me before he gets all the way between my legs. "You need to leave."

"Why?"

"Because I fucking can't and we can't be together anymore."

"Why?"

"Because you ruined everything."

He can't say 'why' to that one, so instead he grabs my legs in a firm grip and parts them. "Maybe I did. But that doesn't mean we can't be together anymore, and it damn sure doesn't mean I can't fuck you."

“No?” I ask, just to see what ridiculous thing he’s going to say. “What’s it mean, then?”

“It means we’ll have to build something else.” He moves between my legs. “My fault and not a bit fair to you to have to put in more work because *I* fucked up, but if the alternative is us not together anymore, it’s the best way forward that I can see.”

“Why would I build something new with some jerk who’s already proven he’s a shitty contractor?”

He smirks. “That’s a good question. Because, unfortunately for you, you love his sorry ass.”

I roll my eyes, hating that he’s right. “What’s love got to do with it?” I mutter. “I’m getting a new building partner.”

“Not an option. The old shitty one is territorial. He’ll fuck up any new guy that tries to come on property he considers his.”

“Then I’ll build it myself.”

He shakes his head, sliding his hand up the inside of my thigh. “Afraid not. He’ll just start working without you telling him what needs done. You’re getting his help whether you want it, or you don’t.”

“This guy sounds shady as fuck. I should’ve screened better when I hired his ass.”

He cracks a smile. “Yeah, you probably should have. Too late now. He’s got all the keys.”

“Then I’ll change all the locks.”

“You could, but it’d be a waste of your energy. He knows how to pick them.”

“You’ve got an answer for everything, don’t you?”

“If there are two things I don’t lack, ingenuity is one of them.”

“What’s the other one?”

He drags me down the bed so he's notched between my thighs with no gap between us, like a puzzle split into two imperfect pieces. "Audacity."

I smother a laugh. At least he *knows*, I guess.

He quits arguing and finishes undoing his pants so he can shove them down and take his cock out.

I'm still pretty sure this is a terrible idea, but when he grips the base of his cock and guides the swollen head to my entrance, I don't try to stop him.

"I've missed you," he says, sinking into me inch by inch.

Maybe if I were sober, I wouldn't say, "I've missed you, too."

But I'm not, so I do, and he takes the admission to mean I'm on board.

He repositions himself since it seems like he won't have to fight me this time. The distance closes between us, and he captures my lips with his when he slides home. I'm too sad not to kiss him back. I want to be full of him. I want to turn back the clock to undo the damage, but where would I turn it back to? Our entire relationship has been a lie.

His kiss is more insistent than usual as his hand roughly cups my jaw and his tongue invades my mouth. I've missed his taste. I kiss him back greedily as if every stroke of his tongue meeting mine might be the last.

The passion is more potent because it might be.

He moves his hips in time with the kiss, and my arms twine around his neck. I gasp against his mouth when the pressure builds. I'm on the edge, and he teases me closer with each thrust. Just before I get there, though, he pulls out. Frustrated, I claw at the sheets and shoot him a look.

He smirks at me in the dark. "Something wrong? I thought I had to convince you to fuck me."

"Keep talking and I'll finish myself," I threaten.

“The fuck you will,” he murmurs, grabbing me and flipping me over on my tummy.

This time when he enters me, he isn't gentle.

As he slams into me, he slides his hand up under the big white T-shirt I'm still wearing and palms my tit. He pinches my nipple and pulls hard, but that's not what makes me tremble. It's the way he leans close and presses his face against my neck, breathing me in like I'm the air he needs to survive another day.

“I fucking love you, you know that?”

He doesn't give me time to answer. He drives his cock into me and detonates the powder keg of passion he readied inside me when he stopped right before I came. The sensation is dizzying and so intense I can hardly breathe as he rams into me.

I come on a high-pitched cry, and he fucks me through the orgasm, through the aftermath, until he can't hold on any longer and he shoots his load inside me.

I'm hot and sweaty and so fucking satisfied when I get enough strength back in my muscles to curl up against him. I slide my arm around his back and lay my face against his chest.

He tightens his arm around me, then starts petting my head. A tired smile crosses my lips. I used to do that to him, and he used to pick on me for it. One day, he did it back to show me how it felt, but I didn't balk at the petting. I liked it.

He's done it ever since.

He caresses my hair now and smooths his hand down the side of my head, pulling me in close. His breath is warm against my ear as he rumbles, “You're my fucking soulmate.”

He's mine, too.

“I think we should've picked different ones,” I mumble.

“Bullshit,” he says but there’s no heat behind it. “Besides, I already tried that.”

I rear back and look up at him, shocked that he would seriously bring that up now.

“What?” he says, holding steady, our gazes locked. “It’s out there now, isn’t it? We’re talking about it. No point lying anymore.”

I guess he’s right, but it still feels weird.

“I liked the lies,” I say softly. “Turns out our whole relationship was one, but... it was a lie I loved.”

“Well, now we can build something true you’ll love just as much.”

“And how do I know you won’t fuck it up again?”

“I won’t. You have my word on that. I didn’t do any of this because I felt like it, Harper. I was in a tough situation, and I didn’t know how to get out of it. When I met you... I had no fucking idea if we’d burn out. As hot as the fire was, it seemed like we had to.”

“And what if it would have?” I ask. “You were just okay with having an affair and her never knowing about it?”

“No, I wasn’t okay with it, but if it wouldn’t have lasted with us, I wouldn’t have told her. What good would it do? Cheaters confess to make *themselves* feel better, not the person they cheated on. I wouldn’t have felt good about it, but why hurt her? She never did anything to deserve that.”

“Then you should have kept your fucking hands off me,” I state, pulling away from him.

He grabs me before I can get far and pulls me back. “That wasn’t an option.”

“If she’s so fucking perfect, then what did you need me for?” I ask.

He can hear the pain beneath the anger, so he grabs my arms to keep me still and holds my gaze. “She is perfect,

Harper. For someone else. Not for me. Only you're perfect for me."

I want so badly to believe him, but I can't.

Because he could have ended things with her anytime, but he didn't. I don't know if he ever would have.

What he feels for her isn't what he feels for me, but he feels *something* for her. Whatever it was, it was enough to keep him from reassuring me when I stood on her front porch. She's the only one he was trying to protect. Sure, maybe he believes I can fend for myself, but if I'm his woman, I shouldn't have to.

I've never been his woman.

All along, I was just his whore.

His *clueless* fucking whore.

He must be able to tell by the look on my face my thoughts are not in his favor.

"You can fight me if you want to, baby. I know you like to fight. But the truth is, this is already a done deal. You have to forgive me and give me another chance. You can't exist without me any more than I can exist without you. You're twisted up the same as I am. Who would ever fit you like I do?"

The words rub a raw spot because they're so fucking true.

No one.

That's the answer.

It's him for me, or it's no one.

"What if you're wrong?"

His tone is even. "I'm not."

"What if you hurt me again?"

How would I forgive myself then, when this was the warning I should have heeded?

He grabs my chin and tilts it up, forcing my gaze to meet his. Even in the dark, I can tell his gaze is fierce when he swears, “I won’t. Not like this. I can’t promise I won’t do some dumb shit along the way, but never something like this, never something... deliberate. You do not have to worry about me cheating on you, Harper. It’s not my MO, you know that. *You* were the one I broke that rule for. I met my soulmate when I’d already promised forever to someone else. Was it an asshole thing to do to try and have my cake and eat it, too? Of course. But that’s over now. It’s me and you, and no one else. Well, no one else we don’t create ourselves,” he murmurs, sliding his hand down to rub my stomach.

“You can’t just tease babies to get out of trouble,” I tell him.

He smirks. “No? Are you sure?”

I pout as he snuggles closer, but it’s a bullshit pout. The bastard knows I’m a sucker for those big gummy grins, and when they try to shove their little feet in their mouths? Babies are a weakness and he’s probably remembering the time I had that pregnancy scare. I wasn’t actually that scared. I mean, we’d only been together for three months so it would have been a wildly bad idea to have a baby together already, but if I would have been pregnant... I would have been happy.

He did not feel the same way. He was utterly panicked. I figured it was because we weren’t together long enough, but knowing what I know now...

He was panicked because *that* is something he would have had to tell Violet.

And if he’s not bullshitting me and I’m all he really wanted, then why wouldn’t he have seen that as a perfect opportunity to get out of an engagement he didn’t want anymore? Sure, “I got someone else pregnant” wouldn’t have been an amicable end to the relationship, but it would have been the end.

He would have been free to be with me if that's what he really wanted.

I love Kai, but I'm not blind to his faults. He's an excellent bullshitter, and he is very good at making moves on the fly when he needs to.

Maybe his first-choice woman doesn't want him anymore because she doesn't fuck with cheaters, and me?

I'm just the consolation prize he's willing to settle with since my dumb ass is too in love to leave.

Chapter nine

Kai

“What the fuck, Kai?”

I’m drifting in and out of sleep, vaguely cognizant that the warm spot on the bed beside me where Harper should be is vacant.

Guess that explains why she’s standing ass-naked in the hallway, holding up her birth control case and scowling at me.

“Damn, baby, why you gotta look so good in the morning? Get over here.”

She glares harder. “Did you pop out all of my fucking birth control pills?”

“Sure did.”

She blinks, surprised I admitted it, I guess. “Why would you do that? These fucking things aren’t free, you know?”

“We don’t need ’em anymore,” I tell her, stretching. “We’re having a baby.”

“No, we are not.”

I nod, but don’t bother arguing. Instead, I pat the mattress. “Now, bring that fine ass over here so I can have a little pussy for breakfast.”

She marches her fine ass in the bedroom, but instead of sitting on my face like a good girl, she grabs my clothes off the floor and throws them at me. “Time for you to go.”

I drag the wadded-up fabric off my face as I push off the blanket and sit up. “Kicking me out without breakfast, huh? That’s cold.”

“Says the lunatic who flushed my shit down the toilet.” She’s back in the bathroom long enough to toss the now-empty

pack in the garbage can, then she turns around and disappears down the hall.

I finish getting dressed and grab my phone off the end table. Marlon texted about some shit I don't feel like prioritizing today, but I guess playtime's over and it's time to get back to work.

I take a piss and by the time I meet Harper in the kitchen, she's standing at the coffee maker with one of her to-go cups in her hand.

Brings a smile to my face.

I come up behind her, but I don't startle her. She knows when I'm in a room. Her attitude is still hanging on, but her body softens when I slide my arms around her waist and pull her back against me.

"Thank you for letting me spend the night," I say as I nuzzle into her neck.

"Like you gave me a choice," she mumbles.

I grin and give her neck a kiss, then I slide a hand up to cup one of her perfect tits.

"Kai." Her voice is resistant, but her body knows who its master is. My thumb flicks over her nipple and it hardens at my wordless command.

She's lucky I've got shit to do.

I kiss her neck one more time, then I bite down hard enough to make her gasp.

The coffee's done, so I let her go.

She pours me a cup and puts the lid down, pressing it down to make sure it's on good so I don't burn myself. I lean in and kiss her pretty pouty lips as she holds it out for me.

"Thank you, baby." I take a sip. "I've got some shit to take care of today, but I'll be by later. You want me to bring dinner?"

“Don’t bother. I work tonight.”

“No, you don’t.”

Her gaze snaps to me. “How would you know? I’m not the one you watch like the fucking Hope diamond.”

I absorb the jab without flinching. “I know you don’t really think a week goes by that I don’t know your schedule by heart.”

Her eyes narrow skeptically.

Does she really not know that?

I shake my head. “I’m bringing dinner. Be here at eight.”

“I told you, no.”

“You’re not working, so what are you really planning to do?” I ask, watching her face. It’s not unlike Harper to spew some bullshit to try to piss me off, but usually she’s all talk.

Usually she hasn’t found out about a fucking fiancée I’ve been keeping from her, though.

After the bullshit she pulled last night, I have to make sure she doesn’t have any more dumb ideas to up my body count.

Taking another sip, I ask, “You got plans to kill a man tonight?”

“If I did, it wouldn’t be any of your business.”

“You better fucking believe it’d be my business. That’s my baby oven now. You let another man touch you, we’re gonna have a real big problem.”

Harper rolls her eyes. “You’re not putting a baby in me any more than you’re gonna kill the next guy I go out with.”

I smile. “You wanna bet? There’s not a man worth fucking in this town who doesn’t know you’re mine. It doesn’t matter what a tempting little package you present. I think you’re going to find them very reluctant to cross me.”

Looking up at me as she brushes past, she says, “I’m not yours anymore.”

“Bullshit,” I say, watching her ass, but not bothering to follow since she’s probably only giving me a hard time. “I’ll be here at eight with dinner. You better be, too.”

She flips me off before going in the bathroom and closing the door.

I hear the shower turn on a few seconds later and I’m tempted to join her, but then I look at the time. If I want to get all my shit handled in time to make it back here for dinner, I should probably get going.

It’s a dreary day, but Violet’s house sits like a sunny spot on the corner of Elm and Swan Street. A lot of Victorians dot this little residential road, but they’re darker colors.

Violet wanted hers yellow, so I made it yellow.

I frown as my gaze focuses on the front door because something doesn’t look right.

Is it cracked open?

I didn’t get a notification, but maybe I missed it while I was driving.

I throw open the car door and grab my gun, but just when I’m about to start a perimeter check, I see Violet walk out carrying a box. She’s wearing light-colored jeans and a white tank top, her long dark hair blowing in the breeze.

Confusion dulls the alarm since she looks perfectly fine, then her gaze lands on me. She slows, but then resumes her path toward her car.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask, tucking my gun into the waistband of my pants.

She slides the box into the backseat next to a bag I can see she already stashed there, then she turns and heads back inside without closing the door.

“Packing.”

I follow her up the steps to the porch and see the Ring doorbell I installed is disconnected. “Are you charging the doorbell?”

“Nope. I just knew I’d be going in and out for a bit and didn’t want you to be bothered with constant notifications.”

Or she didn’t want me to see what she was doing so I couldn’t show up demanding an explanation.

Not that she owes me one, I guess.

“What are you packing for?” I ask, looking around at the changes as we walk through the house. She stops in the kitchen where a cupboard door is open and she’s packing up dishes.

Violet sighs. “I’m moving out, Kai. What do you think?”

“You don’t have to move out.”

“Yes, I do.”

“To go where? I already have this place set up for you to keep you safe.”

“And I appreciate that, but keeping me safe isn’t your job anymore.” She grabs a dish and begins to wrap it in newspaper. “I don’t have a place yet, but I’m gonna put all my stuff in storage so you can do whatever you want with the house. Move in, sell it.” She shrugs like it doesn’t much matter to her. She already considers this place not hers.

“You don’t have to put your stuff in storage, Violet. At least leave your shit here until you find a place you want to move into.”

She shakes her head. “I won’t be looking right away. I’m going to do a little traveling first.”

I scowl. “Where? For how long?”

She shrugs, but I can see the peace on her face. There’s no talking her out of this plan. She’s already completely sold on it, and once Violet is sold on something, it takes something pretty big to change her mind.

Like maybe it cheating on her and having a whole secret relationship behind her back.

Then she’s as done with it as she is this house.

She loved us both once, but now I can feel how detached she is. Pleasant, polite, even with a few remnants of affection for old time’s sake, but so fucking done, I might as well not have a dick anymore, and this house might as well not have walls.

She’s free of both of us, and there’s not a damn thing that could be said to change her mind.

I always liked how resolute she was about things.

I like it a little less now, but that’s because I can’t keep her safe if she’s God knows where. This town I have influence in, but wherever she’s going?

Hell, maybe that’s *why* she’s going.

“Well, I hope you come back.”

“I will,” she says easily. “This is home, I just... can’t be here right now.”

Regret stabs me because I know that’s my fault. I handled things the worst fucking way, and Violet didn’t deserve that. Neither did Harper. “I’m sorry,” I say, even though I know the words are useless.

With Harper, I can spend some time *showing* her I’m sorry, but I won’t have an opportunity to do that with Violet. As polite as she’s being, I know our entire relationship is over because of the way I did this. Harper might have been able to handle me being friends with an ex, but there’s not a shot in

hell she'd be cool with me staying friends with Violet after the way I've handled things.

I doubt Violet's interested in my friendship now, anyway.

Whatever nice memories we had, I paved over them with all this bullshit. She doesn't entertain fake friends, and the way Violet thinks, all this shit I've done to hurt her is all the proof she needs that I don't really care about her.

Friends care about each other, so I don't even meet the requirements of that relationship by Violet's standards, let alone anything more.

I'd like to think maybe that would change down the road once things cooled off, and they might with Harper. That's the difference between them. Harper is like a volcano. Sure, she explodes every now and then, but then she cools down.

Violet isn't like that.

She's more logical. She keeps her temper in check. She isn't ruled by her emotions. Whatever she's going through, she can look at her situation for what it is and make the best decision about it. Anger might be a thing she's feeling, but it doesn't factor in.

Because she is capable of making rational choices even when she's hurt or angry, she expects the same level of maturity from the company she keeps, and I've always run a lot hotter than that. Cooler heads prevailing isn't what leads to the life choices I've made. In the early stages of our relationship, I almost ruined things with her because of our differences, so I learned to adjust how much of my nature I really shared with Violet.

I guess that's where the end of us really started.

Can't get close the way I can with Harper if I'm holding back.

Oh well, none of it matters now.

"Why don't you let me send someone with you?"

Violet laughs, looking over at me. “What? No way.”

“He could keep his distance. Just to keep an eye on you, make sure you stay out of trouble. You know you’re a magnet for it.”

She always fucking has been. That’s how we met.

She was working as a waitress at this little restaurant I went to a couple of days a week. One night I closed the place and noticed a man sitting in his car over by hers. I didn’t know much about her, only that she was too gorgeous to be waiting tables and she had a smile that made your insides feel warm, but I knew that was her car because I’d seen her get to work at the start of her shift a couple of times, and that’s the car she got out of.

It could have been a guy waiting for his girlfriend to get off work, but since I got a bad vibe, I waited. I figured once his girl got in and they drove off, I’d leave, too, but Violet was one of the last to leave.

Her and the kitchen staff.

One of the cooks came out, checking behind him like a shady motherfucker as he did. He leaned over and spoke through the window at the guy waiting in the car by Violet’s. Then he went over and got into his truck.

Violet locked up and tucked the key into her pocket, then she headed for her car. If she thought anything was odd about the car still sitting next to hers when everyone else was gone, I couldn’t tell.

Then she got to her car door and fished out her car keys, and while she was getting the key to unlock her door, the guy in the car beside hers got out.

Every instinct I had told me to get out, too, so I did. I’m stealthier than the guy who didn’t know he had an audience, so he didn’t hear me coming.

He grabbed Violet.

She screamed before he clamped his gloved hand over her mouth and pulled her back toward his car.

Before she'd been more than pulled in the wrong direction, I was there, grabbing the fucker's head and slamming it against the hood of his shitty car.

Once I'd beaten the shit out of the guy, Violet was understandably shaken up. I grabbed her and pulled her in against my chest, and she wrapped her arms around me. I could feel the weight of her trust in me in that moment, and it felt fucking incredible. Like a drug I'd never even sampled, and I wanted more of it.

I wasn't a guy most people trusted, but she did. Implicitly after that.

Until a few nights ago, anyway.

Before that, she trusted me to keep her safe.

Kinda wish I hadn't fucked that up so much.

I could've ended things cleaner without hurting both of them so much.

"I'll be fine," Violet says, carefully putting her wrapped plate in the box on top of the others.

I know she means more than just the vacation, and I'm sure she's right. But after so many years of looking after her, it may not be the easiest habit to break.

Chapter ten

Harper

“Celeste said you wanted to see me.”

Zane Wheeler sits behind the inordinately cluttered desk, his broad shoulders hunched as he leans forward, his narrow-eyed gaze focused on his computer screen.

His gaze flickers to me when his office door opens, but he doesn't speak until I close it.

“Yes,” he murmurs, touching the mouse and dragging it across the desk. The screen was angled so I couldn't see it anyway, but he must really not want me seeing whatever he's looking at because the screen goes dark.

I smirk imagining my boss watching porn at work, but he doesn't seem the type. For that matter, Zane's hot enough that he probably never has to resort to watching other people fuck. I've never really known him to date anybody, but I'm sure he has a little black book bursting with the names of girls who'd be thrilled to play the part for him in real life.

I take a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk, then wait for him to tell me what he called me to his office for.

“How are you liking it here?”

I frown, my stomach rocking with nerves.

Maybe it's just because Zane has an intimidating air about him, but I have the oddest feeling I'm about to get fired. That makes me nervous as fuck. “I love it here,” I say, a little more passionately than I probably would have if I didn't feel like I have to earn the job I already have.

“Yeah?”

I nod. “Yeah. It's a great place to work.”

He regards me across the desk and my palms start to sweat. I don't know what he's looking for, but I hope he finds it. "I hear things between you and Kai have gotten more serious."

My cheeks burn. Even though there's no outright judgment in his tone, it's hard to feel like he's not judging me for it. "It's complicated."

"Is it?"

"I love him," I say simply. "We're not exactly sailing on calm waters right now, but... things have changed, so..."

"Yes," he says, lingering over the word. "Violet's out of the way now?"

I don't feel great saying it, but I do. "Yeah. She dumped him."

"I'm sure that makes things easier."

"You would think." A short, humorless laugh escapes me. "Maybe it makes me an asshole, but I think it would have been easier if she would have held on and wanted to keep him and he rejected her so at the end of the day, I knew he really wanted me."

"He wants you, Harper," he says simply. "His present behavior excluded, Kai has never been a cheater. Violet was never involved in his lifestyle much so there were plenty of opportunities for him to stray, but he never even considered crossing that line until he met you. If he would cheat on her for you, then he *really* wanted you."

"See, I feel like that should make me feel better."

"It should," he states.

Since he has known Kai for a lot longer than I have, I'm a little more vulnerable than I'd like to be when I ask, "Do you really think so? You think I should forgive him?"

"I do. This has all been messy because it had to be, but if I had to guess, I'd say your ship will begin sailing smoothly as

soon as you let it. Well, as smoothly as things can ever be between you two,” he adds dryly.

I crack a smile.

Before I have to say anything, though, he pushes past this topic like the expert captain he is. “Anyway, the reason I called you in here...”

I sit a little straighter. “Right.”

“I’m going to be taking some time off, and I need someone I can trust to step into more of a management role here while I’m gone. I need someone who can learn quickly, who already knows the ropes, and I thought of you.”

My eyes widen. “But what about Celeste?”

“She’ll remain assistant manager, nothing is changing there. I just need someone else in a management position to split the time and responsibilities with her. I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone, and I don’t want her to wear herself out.”

My brow furrows. “Is everything okay?”

He nods tersely. “Fine. Just taking a much-deserved vacation.”

It’s true. The man is practically a machine. He’s never not here.

“I wanted to ask, though, because I wasn’t sure if you’d need to discuss it with Kai. He didn’t like Violet working and she had to resort to secretive methods to earn any of her own money. Now that you’re his *real* girlfriend,” he murmurs, and the word sinks like a blade into my gut, but he glides right past it as if he didn’t just shiv me, “I thought he might be pushing you to give up your independence, too. Obviously, I don’t want to promote someone who will be quitting before I return and leave Celeste in the lurch.”

I shake my head. “You don’t have to worry about that. I have no intention of quitting my job. I may be the *real* girlfriend now,” I murmur a bit pointedly, “but I don’t know if

he'd ever treat me the way he did her. He was so protective of her."

"Well, he had to be. Bad men have a tendency to be drawn to her, and not just in the sense that they'll ask her out, but that they'll go to frankly illegal methods of getting close to her if she's not available or interested in getting close to them. Kai made Violet quit her job as soon as they started going out. She was a waitress who apparently caught the interest of one of her customers. A kidnap attempt was made when she was leaving work. Kai happened to still be there, so he intervened, caught the guy off guard, and bashed his face against the side of his vehicle."

My eyes widen. "Yikes. Yeah, I think Violet mentioned that."

A frown flickers across his brow. "She did? What did she say?"

"Um... I don't remember exactly, she just told me that some guy who worked for Kai had tried to kidnap her or stalked her or something like that."

"Oh. No, that was someone else."

I blink. "*Two* grown ass men have tried to kidnap this girl?"

His full lips tug up and amusement glistens in his dark green eyes. "Actually, I think the first one was a bit young. Probably why he was so clumsy."

It strikes me as a little odd the way he says that. Isn't it a *good* thing the asshole was clumsy in his kidnapping attempt? God knows what he would have done to Violet if he'd been successful.

I'm sure he didn't mean it that way, though, so I don't bother mentioning it.

Chapter eleven

Kai

I knew Harper's excuse about working was bullshit, so I'm surprised when I pull up outside the club and her car's parked there.

Irritation surges when I see her car parked all the way at the end of the fucking parking lot again.

I've told her before I better not see her fucking car parked down where some creep could follow her and get her there alone. She listened better when I only pissed her off about trivial shit, but I can see it in my head when she pulled in here tonight, knowing I might drive by to make sure she was where she said she would be since she's on this rebellious shit right now.

I bet she was so fucking proud of herself when she parked right where she knew it would piss me off, not even thinking about the danger she was putting herself in with her stubbornness.

Two can play that game, baby.

I pull up in the spot right next to hers and grab my knife out of the glove compartment. I walk around her car, stabbing each fucking tire like it insulted my mother.

We'll see how fucking smug she is when she sees what she gets for being a little fucking brat.

I pull my cell phone out of my pocket, then I text Zane to see when she works until.

"I thought Harper was off tonight."

A minute later he texts back, "She was, but I needed her to cover the tail end of a shift."

"When does she get off?"

I can feel the fucker's amusement when he texts back, "She won't tell you herself?"

Prick.

I guess I'd be amused his woman was giving him a hard time, too, if he ever stopped working long enough to date someone.

He doesn't make me answer, just baits me and then assures me, "Her shift is over. She just left my office a minute ago, so I'm sure she'll be home soon."

"Yeah, about that..." I press send, then add, "I may have hobbled her car. Might want to call someone to tow it."

"Hobbled it how?"

"She parked where I told her not to, so I took a knife to the tires."

"Why haven't I banned you from my club again?"

I grin. "You like me too fucking much."

"Hmm, I don't think so. Must be something else," he jokes.

I put the phone away and lean back against my car. While I wait, I have a cigarette. It's just about burnt out when I see the club door open and Harper's sexy ass come prancing out. Her dark hair's up in a high ponytail and her tits are spilling out of that tight little top. Her skirt is short and tight, showing off those long, toned legs of hers.

She's not paying attention to her surroundings—*yet another fucking thing I warned her not to do leaving this club*—so I enjoy the last of my cigarette checking out the goddess I'm going to fuck tonight.

When she spots me, she stiffens, but she doesn't miss a step.

"What are you doing here?"

I flick my cigarette away from me. “Maybe I’m here to rape and fucking kill you. Good thing you parked way the hell out of the way and made it so easy for me.”

Her cheeks pinken a bit but she just narrows her eyes at me. “I already told you I’m busy tonight. I’m not having dinner with you.”

“Nah, I was gonna feed you food, but the way you’re acting, all you get to eat tonight is a throatful of my cum.”

“Fuck you,” she says, but without much heat. She’s intent on blowing me off, singling out her car key so she can drive herself home.

I don’t bother telling her she’s wasting her time. I follow her around the car and lean against my passenger door to watch, but she’s too distracted by me to notice there’s anything wrong with her ride.

I watch her drop into the driver’s seat, her tits bouncing and making blood rush to my cock—*god, do I love her tits*—then she leaves her legs spread longer than she needs to so I can see she’s not wearing any underwear tonight.

“I see someone came out looking for trouble tonight.” I push off the car and stride toward her. “You’re in luck, baby. You found some.”

She tosses her purse in the seat next to her and turns her attention back to me, but when she does, I already have my hands on her shirt, ripping the material so I can free her tits. “Kai, what the hell!”

“No bra. What a bad girl you are.” I palm her tits possessively, meeting her gaze. “You know these nipples are mine. I don’t give a fuck about your tips, you don’t let anyone else see them unless you’re looking for punishment.”

Her eyes flash with anger as I fondle her. “Loving you is punishment enough,” she snaps, then she pushes my hands away.

I want more than her tits anyway, so I let her. Then I reach down, grab her hips, and pull her ass out of the car.

Harper gasps as I shove her against the car, her back pressed against the back door. “Get your fucking hands off me,” she says, but she doesn’t mean it, and I don’t listen.

I trap her body with mine and grab her neck, pulling her in and crushing her lips beneath mine.

Her mouth is hungry for the fight, the possession, but she’s still fighting me. I coil her ponytail around my hand so I have better control over her, then I tighten my grip on her throat. I tear my lips from hers and pull her head back. She gasps as I force her back against the car, then grunts and shoves at me harder when I ignore her struggles and lean in to roughly kiss her neck.

“Don’t ever forget who you belong to,” I growl against her skin. “You can fight me all you want, baby, but you’re mine and nothing’s changing that.”

I wait for her to toss back a barb about how *I* changed that with all my shitty behavior that she just found out about, but she doesn’t. I let go of her throat and lift her tight skirt, squeezing her bare ass before I wrap her leg around me, then I push my fingers into her unprotected pussy.

She moans, her tight walls gripping my fingers as I push deep, then pull out. Her cunt is wet already and I’m fucking glad because I feel like being rough. Her pussy is used to the punishment, so when I ram my fingers back into her pussy, she melts against the car, grabbing the hood with one hand and my hair with the other.

Fuck yes.

Lust pours through me at the sensation of her fingers tangled in my hair. She holds on like a good girl as I thrust my fingers in and out of her pussy over and over, my hungry gaze roving her beautiful body, watching her tits bounce with the force of my hand fucking her.

When she starts to pant, I can't restrain myself anymore. I have to taste her, so I crush my lips against hers and she cries out softly with need.

"I got you, baby," I tell her, cradling the back of her head and pulling her in close.

She lets go of the car and grabs my shoulder so I'm all she's holding onto. Her breathing is ragged, and her skin is flushed. I feel her thigh tremble as her leg curls more tightly around me. "Kai," she whines against my lips.

I know she's close, so I run my lips along the curve of her neck, letting my tongue dart out to taste her. "Come for me, Harper."

And she does.

She cries out as she crashes into orgasm, her body trembling against mine. I keep thrusting my fingers in and out of her as she rocks against me, her body milking my fingers as pleasure courses through her.

Her breathing is still ragged when she's finished, and I know her muscles are weak, so I pull her against me. She takes the support, wrapping her arms around my torso and laying her head against my chest. I kiss the side of her head, smirking at the perspiration I find there.

"You're not tired already, are you?" I tease. "We've got a long night ahead of us."

"I could never get tired of fucking you," she murmurs, but it sounds almost mournful. Something she's sad about, not a reality that makes her happy.

I get it.

In an ideal world, she would probably want someone who never would've pulled the shit I've pulled and made the moves I made to get her despite my circumstances.

But we don't live in a perfect world, and in this one, the only man she wants is me.

She knows it, and I do, too.

No matter how much she wants to run her mouth or pretend she's gonna fuck some asshole she met at a bar, at the end of the day, sure as she knows the sun will set in the evening and rise the next morning, Harper knows she's mine.

What she got confused about was thinking maybe I wasn't hers.

I've been hers since the moment our eyes met at this very fucking club, that fateful night that shattered all the plans I'd made like a jackhammer effortlessly busting up concrete.

I loved Violet, but I became fucking obsessed with Harper.

I couldn't sleep without seeing her in my dreams.

Couldn't exist without harboring her in my thoughts.

At first, I thought I just needed to fuck her and get her out of my system. I knew it was an asshole thing to do and Violet didn't deserve that shit, but I fooled myself into thinking once I got Harper out of my system, I could go back to being the man Violet deserved.

It didn't go that way.

The first taste I got of Harper's pussy was like heroin, and deep down, I knew nothing would ever be the same again.

I was hooked.

The more I had, the more I wanted, and I never got my fill. Every taste made me more ravenous. There was no way I could fuck her out of my system and then move on.

She was like poison corrupting every part of me, reprogramming all my noblest intentions so my whole system was consumed by her.

The sweetest fucking poison imaginable, though.

I'd gladly die with the taste of her on my lips.

Someday, I will.

Because I was lying to myself back then.

The carnage was inevitable.

I'm never letting her go.

Chapter twelve

Harper

“Put this on.”

I look skeptically at the silk blindfold in Kai’s hand.

“Why?”

“Because I’m taking you somewhere.” He doesn’t wait for me to take it, just drops the little scrap of silk on my lap. “Put it on. You know I don’t like to ask things twice.”

“You didn’t ask *once*, you demanded.”

He checks his surroundings on instinct, then backs the Viper out of the parking spot at the restaurant where we just had lunch.

He’s Kai, so he doesn’t bother arguing with me about it, he just waits for me to do what I’m supposed to.

I sigh, snatching the blindfold and tugging it over my head. “You better be glad you’ve got the big dick to go with that BDE, buddy.”

I see him smirk just before I slide the blindfold over my eyes.

We drive for a few minutes, but I don’t bother asking where he’s taking me. I figure if he wanted me to know, he wouldn’t have bothered with the blindfold.

After a few minutes, several winding roads, and enough turns that I got lost imagining where we were going based on my knowledge of the town, he pulls up slowly and kills the engine.

We’re here.

Wherever *here* is.

I hear him pull the latch and get out, but since I'm blindfolded, I sit here with my purse on my lap and wait for him to let me out.

He opens the door and takes my hand. I step my foot out carefully and he pulls me out of the car. I itch to rip the blindfold off, but I wait for him to tell me to.

"I know I haven't told you much about my family over the years."

I always figured he just didn't like talking about it because of what I *did* know, but after everything came out about him having an actual fiancée who wasn't me, I realized the truth.

He needed to keep that part of his life from me because his family would know about her.

His *real* partner.

It's been a few weeks since all that crap got kicked up, and with Violet gone, honestly, I've enjoyed not thinking about it so much.

"My mom was young when she got pregnant with me. It was a bad week that changed the whole course of her life. That's how fast he fucked everything up. He was like a poisonous plant, invasive and aggressive. She said he had this way of getting people to go along with things they would never even consider and he could make it feel so natural. It was easy to get swept up in his shitstorms."

I know Kai's feelings about his father are far from warm and fuzzy, so even though I think Kai has some of that magic running through him, too, I don't say that.

"Her parents were friends with his. They had lived here before and they were neighbors. They came for a visit and stayed with her family for the week while they were here."

I feel a gentle breeze blow through the air. It's not cold, but I feel a slight chill down my spine.

“My father’s name was Katon. My mom didn’t interest him when they were kids, so they didn’t play together much before he moved away. He was essentially a stranger to her when they met that week, yet in a matter of days, he had her so sucked in that she went along with a plan to commit a pointless, heinous crime against someone she cared about purely for his amusement. She said it began as a sick joke that made her uncomfortable. That’s how he tried out the idea to see if he could get her to go along with it, pretending it was a joke.”

Sounds familiar. Kai’s done that to me before, too.

“My dad would be malicious simply because he was bored, and he got bored very easily. When his family came to stay with hers for the week, my mom was a teenager. She had this boyfriend she had an innocent, young love kind of relationship with. He was insecure about my dad being around so much that week, and he wasn’t wrong to be. My mom was attracted to my dad, but she sensed something dark in him that made her nervous. The boyfriend noticed which ramped up his anxiety about it, and my dad noticed, too. He must have decided it would be fun to fuck with her while he was in town, and the first time her boyfriend came over while he was there, he and my dad immediately got off on the wrong foot. My mom was young and she felt flattered and excited by the idea that maybe it was some kind of jealousy over her.”

I almost crack a smile thinking about the times Kai has been an unhinged maniac, like that night at the bar when he jabbed poor whatever-his-name-was with a broken bottle neck.

“Anyway, after that first night when her boyfriend pissed him off, my dad waited until everyone else was asleep and then slipped into my mom’s bedroom. She said the first night she was reluctant—she hadn’t been with her boyfriend or anyone yet, but my father was very persuasive, so...”

I nod grimly. “Yep, I know how that goes.”

“At night, when they would lie in bed together, he started telling her about his darker fantasies. At first, she thought it

was evidence he trusted her. She still thought that when he started telling *jokes* about how they should just kill her boyfriend.”

My jaw drops.

That escalated.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. “

I have a really bad feeling about this.

“So,” Kai goes on solemnly, “one day his parents and hers went out and left them home alone for the evening. He told her she should invite her boyfriend over so they could all play a game, and she was a little hesitant because at night in bed, that’s how it always started. He said they would invite him over to play a game, but they wouldn’t let him leave. My mom was nervous, but he reassured her. My mom isn’t a malicious person, and she said she didn’t know how else to explain it except that he made her feel like it wasn’t something that would really happen. She truly believed he was just trying to freak her out, that he wanted her on edge all night while her boyfriend was over because he liked to do things to scare her, just to get that response from her.”

He sounds great, I think wryly.

“So, she invited the boyfriend over. She said from the moment he walked through the door, it felt like there was a ticking clock counting down to the moment of no return. She believed she had time, though. That he wouldn’t really do anything, he was only trying to scare her. She knew there was something off about my father, but she didn’t think he was a monster.”

I swallow.

“While my father and her boyfriend were supposed to be setting up the board game, Mom went to the kitchen to get everyone drinks and a snack. She was slicing cheese when she heard a gunshot in the other room.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “Jesus.”

“He shot her boyfriend in the chest. Terror gripped her and she ran down the hall. Found her boyfriend on the ground with blood sprayed everywhere. It was on the walls and the blanket draped over the furniture. It was on Katon, too, and he was still holding the gun.”

“Oh my god, Kai.”

“She was terrified. He was calm. He made her help him clean up the mess.”

I bring a hand to my mouth and close my eyes even though I can't see, anyway.

The horror she must have felt.

“She was afraid of him then, and he didn't understand what had changed. He had talked about exactly this at night in her bed and she remained cuddled up with him, but now that it was happening, she was falling apart. It annoyed him. Now that it was all real and it had happened, she was questioning the logistics of his plan. What would they do with the body? My dad was a few years older than her and had his own car, but it wasn't there. He had come with his family. In bed, he made it sound like he would handle all the dirty work, but as it was unfolding, she began to fear he was going to leave her holding the bag.” Kai scoffs. “Maybe she was right. But my dad left the room to get something, and my mom noticed her boyfriend move a little bit. Her heart leapt. She rushed over and realized that while he'd been shot and was unconscious for a while, he wasn't dead. Immediately, she saw this chance to fix her mistake. It wasn't too late, he wasn't dead. She knew she would probably go down with Katon as an accessory to the attempted murder, but she didn't care. She was going to do what was right and get him out of there.”

“I bet your dad didn't like that.”

“He sure didn't. But she knew he wouldn't, so she didn't wait for him to come back and finish the job. He had already taken her phone when she started acting dodgy, but she found

her boyfriend's and called 9-1-1 on his phone. She was on with them when my dad walked back in, and he could tell by the guilty look on her face what she was doing. He grabbed the phone out of her hand and ended the call, then he grabbed her by the throat. She was sure he was going to kill her right then and there, but the doorbell rang. It was too fast to be the emergency response."

My eyes are wide beneath the mask. "Who was it?"

"Her parents were protective, so they had mentioned to the neighbors she would be home alone with a boy tonight and to keep an eye out. They heard the gunshot and..." He trails off, then sighs.

My stomach sinks. "Did he kill them, too?"

"No, but the interruption saved her long enough for the police to show up. They were both hauled away in handcuffs, but only my dad caught charges. Her boyfriend knew she must have been complicit to some degree, but she was so traumatized from everything that happened, he protected her. Said it was all my dad's doing, that he'd threatened her and forced her to help with the cleanup after he'd been shot. She was in fear for her life, and she knew nothing about Katon's plan ahead of time. Mom said she didn't know how he had any sympathy for her, but it's a good thing he did, because his testimony is what kept her out of jail while my father got locked up and denied bail. He was sentenced to life in prison. She found out a few weeks later she was pregnant with me, so I guess, in a way, she got life, too."

Yikes.

He has told me before that his father was in prison, but he never told me all that.

I reach for the blindfold and pull it off so I can look at Kai. He's staring off at some house I only glance at before catching his chin the way he likes to catch mine and bringing his gaze to mine.

I lean in and kiss him. A soft, supportive kiss, not the kind that starts fires.

Not big ones, anyway.

There's always warmth in my belly for this man.

His arm curls around my waist and his hand settles on my hip. He tugs me close, then turns me to face the house he pulled up in front of.

“This is the house he grew up in. His parents have lived here ever since. They've made efforts to get him out, appeals and shit, but none of it stuck. I guess prison proved to be quite the playground for his antisocial tendencies, so he likes it in there. He runs shit.”

He looks down, and I grab his hand and give it a squeeze.

Kai's not blind. I'm sure he can see the parallels between himself and his father, but I hope he can see the differences, too. It sounds like his father *was* a monster, but Kai isn't. There's tenderness and love in him, and while he would probably kill my boyfriend if I had one to get him out of the way, he'd never leave me holding any kind of bag.

I wouldn't do that to him, either.

If we ever go down, we go down together.

That thought used to fill me with a sense of pride. Ride or die. I've always been that for him.

My free hand settles on my stomach.

But it's not just you anymore.

I think about the story he just told me, about how different things would have been if Kai's mom and dad had *both* gone to prison.

She still would have been pregnant.

Who would have raised Kai?

How different would he have turned out without a mother who loved him and maybe even understood some of his less

healthy behaviors given who she knew his father was?

Kai clears his throat and looks up, bringing my attention back to him. “It’s been almost 30 years and they’re done fighting for him. They’re moving, and because he was their only son and I’m *his* only son...” He looks over at me. “They asked if I wanted the house. I’d understand if you didn’t want to live here, but the place isn’t haunted to me. I never knew the guy. I’ve never even visited. But it’s a nice house, and I just thought... maybe it could be ours.”

My tummy flutters like a swarm of butterflies have just been unleashed.

Ours?

I haven’t told him about the baby yet. I haven’t taken a test, and I want to make sure before I do, but I can feel the difference in my body. I don’t need to pee on a stick to know for myself, but I do need the test before I share the news with anyone else.

“You want to move in together?” I ask softly.

He gives my hand a squeeze, then pulls me toward the house. “I do.”

Now that I’m actually focused on the house, I see what he means about it being nice. It’s *beautiful*. Tucked in a residential neighborhood, but different enough from the other houses I think they probably had it built for them. It’s a modern house with clear Japanese influences.

A beautifully cultivated garden provides a bit of privacy to the front of the house. We follow a curved path of natural stone pavers toward the front door. A big Japanese maple is the centerpiece of the front yard garden, but on the opposite side of the path near the house is a smaller one. Rocks are strategically placed along with flowers and neatly trimmed shrubs. There’s so much harmony on the path to the front door, I feel an immediate sense of peace.

He said his father grew up here, but if the vibe I’m getting is correct, Katon’s parents were nothing like him. Their son

brought chaos and destruction, and they brought peace and harmony.

That makes me feel better about the prospect of living in their house.

I've enjoyed plenty of chaos in my time, but if we're going to raise kids, we need some peaceful corner of our life to raise them in.

I mean, he can still choke me and toss me around the bedroom, but then the next morning we'll make breakfast on an island that would make HGTV proud, and I'll pack school lunches and shit. Our kids will think we're boring because some things aren't their business.

He takes me on a tour of the house, and I love it. Four big bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms. The bathrooms have these toilets that shoot water out of them—he tells me they're bidets, and they're pretty much the standard in Japan which is why his grandparents installed them. At first, I think it seems pretty weird, but before we leave, I have to pee, and while it will take some getting used to for sure... all of this will.

Kai and I have never been the kind of people who live in fancy-ass houses on some residential street where the neighbors are probably called something like Bob and Nancy, and the most exciting thing that happens to them is missing a trash day and having overflowing cans the next week.

I'm not sure we'll fit in someplace like this, but then, we've never worried about that before.

If we like the place, we'll *make* it fit us, and I do like the place.

“So, what do you think?” he asks.

I draw a deep breath and let it out, looking around the fenced in back yard. “I think it's great.”

“Yeah?”

I nod, smiling as I meet his gaze. “Maybe we'll turn your dad's room into a storage room or something just to be safe,” I

say, and he laughs, “but yeah, I think it’s... better than anything I ever hoped for.”

He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me close so he can look down at me. “I thought you might like it.”

“I do.” I lean in and steal a kiss, just because.

He takes the kiss, but also takes advantage of the opportunity to take more. His grip on my waist tightens and he grabs my ass, tilting his head to better access my neck so he can kiss that, too. “See us making a few babies here?” he murmurs.

My heart flips over.

I really wanted to wait until I knew for sure, but it’s hard to imagine a better moment than this. “I think... maybe we already have.”

His lips freeze on my neck, and he pulls back to look at me. “What?”

I take his hand and place it on my still-flat stomach. “I haven’t taken a test yet, but I’m late, and I’ve been really tired and—”

“You’re pregnant?”

“I think so,” I say carefully, not wanting to get his hopes up just in case I’m wrong. “We really should take a test to be sure, but—”

Before I can finish, he crushes his lips against mine, reclaiming my waist and lifting me off the ground, he’s so happy.

My insides fill up and then overflow until *I’m* bursting with happiness, too. I know he was the one pushing us getting pregnant right now, but some part of me was nervous about telling him.

After all, he told Violet he wasn’t ready to start a family yet.

I guess he’s ready for one with *me*.

“We’re having a baby,” he whispers against my neck, his tone full of love but at the same time fiercely protective.

“Yeah, I think so,” I whisper back, caressing the back of his head.

He pulls back to look me in the eye. “I love you so fucking much, Harper. I hope you know that.”

My heart melts. “I do,” I tell him, bringing my hand in to caress his perfect jaw. “And I love you, too. I can’t seem to help myself,” I add, playfully rolling my eyes.

He grins, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “It’s that big dick, isn’t it?”

I laugh, playfully pushing him away. “Oh my god, Kai.”

“It’s okay, you can admit it,” he teases, walking me backward.

Most of the furniture is gone since his grandparents have moved out, but they left behind some patio furniture.

He lays me down on the outdoor couch even though the cushions aren’t on it. The frame is hard against my back, but I don’t complain as he climbs on top of me.

I look up at his handsome face as he unbuttons his pants. “You cannot fuck me on your grandparents’ patio furniture.”

“It’s our patio furniture now.”

He smirks and my heart skips a beat.

I can’t believe it still does that after all this time, all we’ve been through.

I hope it never stops.

I don’t think it will.

Kai said he’s been mine since the moment we met, and now, I get all of him. The good and the bad, the rough and the tender. There’s no part of his life that isn’t mine, too.

Maybe I didn’t end up with the perfect happily ever after little girls dream of, but I found the one that was right for me,

and honestly?

I wouldn't change a thing.

Follow Laura Lovett on Amazon, [Facebook](#), or [Instagram](#) to find out about her upcoming releases! Violet's story is up next in the *Old & New* series.

Thank you for reading!

Acknowledgments

First of all, I want to thank you, dear reader, for taking a chance on my book. I know there are plenty of them out there, and I'm so grateful you decided to read mine! It means so much to me to be able to share my stories and have you guys escape into this wonderful world of fantasy, love, drama, and emotion. I hope you enjoyed Kai and Harper's story, and I hope you continue to follow along for more! Violet's book is next, and, to close the series, I have one more story in mind. You haven't really met either character yet, so I'll mention more about that at the end of the next book.

Thank you so much for your support!

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With love,

Laura Lovett

About the Author

Laura Lovett is new to the romance writing scene, but she's a lifelong romantic with a penchant for the bad boys. Laura writes spicy romance featuring bad boy heroes sure to melt your panties.

You can find Laura on Facebook or Instagram, and make sure you follow her on Amazon so you don't miss the rest of her stories!