



# ROCK STAR'S

## *Secret Triplets*

A BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND,  
SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE

ELSA DUKE

# ROCK STAR'S SECRET TRIPLETS



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ELSA DUKE

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# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

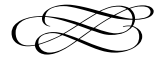
[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Epilogue](#)

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# CHAPTER 1



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*Nacogdoches, Texas*

Huck Chapman is both the reason that I almost lost my life on my first day on campus *and* the sole reason I escaped such a fate tracked, honestly. Looking back through the twenty years I'd been alive, Huck was always there in the background but somehow central to every decision, and change, and is the driving force in my life.

My mother had always liked to say that men were like outfits—they needed to be cleaned often and changed whenever they got too old. There was only ever one exception, she'd laugh as my father cracked the dish towel at her from the kitchen sink. She'd always called him her favorite cotton t-shirt, claiming that no matter how old and worn he got, she'd never thrown him out.

If my father had been her cotton t-shirt, then Huck Chapman was my favorite pair of leather boots. God only knew I couldn't compare him to anything so ordinary as a shirt.

I'd been in love with Huck before I could remember even knowing what the word meant. He'd been the boy next door with wild brown curls and naturally blonde highlights most women would have killed for, and a grin that bought him whatever it was he set his heart on.

He'd also been my brother's best friend and twelve years older than me. But at five years old, that had hardly been important to me.

By the time I had turned fifteen, my heart had long since decided.

He'd grown from an angelic-eyed teen with wild curls to a young man my mother was more likely to warn me away from than ask to watch me for ten minutes while she put up the groceries. His blue eyes were like where a glacier met the ocean, icy and impassible one minute and the deep of the waves the next trying to pull you in. He'd come back from school during holidays with a new tattoo, a new girlfriend, and a reputation that screamed bad boy.

At seventeen years old he'd sat with me at the picnic table where I'd been carving stars into the wood and asked me what I planned to do with my life.

In my head, I'd cozied up to him and seductively told him all I planned to do was him, kissed him, and made him mine then in there.

In reality, I'd shrugged and mumbled something about music. I knew that was what he was going to school for, just like his rock star father before him...

And he'd spent the next hour talking to me about programs and avenues that I could take to pursue that, warming me up and engaging me until I was speaking back...

And then my brother had swanned in and pulled him away to set off more fireworks leaving me kicking myself for being so slow.

"Moiiiiiraaaa," Layla whined in my ear, dragging me back to the present as I stepped over an abandoned bag on the lawn.

"God, Moira, what are you even doing? Did you hear anything I said?" My twin demanded, laughing even through her petulant prodding.

I shrugged, even knowing she couldn't see me.

"You were looking for Huck again, weren't you?" Layla huffed and I just knew she was rolling her eyes when she did.

Of course, I had been. At twenty years old, I wasn't about to make the same mistake seventeen-year-old me had done.



“I’m going to my communications course, Layla,” I reminded her without actually answering her question. “I still think it’s nonsense that I need a communications course for a Bachelor of Music. What do I need communication for?”

“Nice subject change,” Layla snorted. “I’ll take that as a yes. I’m surprised you haven’t just tracked Huck down already.”

“I won’t have to track him down,” I said confidently. “Stephen F. Austin State University Nacogdoches Texas (SFA), isn’t that big of a campus, you know.”

“No,” Layla drawled sarcastically, “I didn’t grow up in Nacogdoches with you at all...”

I grinned. “Huck is destined for me. He always has been.”

Typing answered me at first, my sister’s long, drawn-out sigh heavy. “So, what? He’s just going to fall in your lap then?”

*Wouldn’t that be nice?*

“Stop working on your brainchild long enough to ask me that and I might answer you,” I said haughtily. I was teasing her... mostly. That computer software system that she’d been working on since high school was only annoying for how much time it ate up the attention that Layla could have been giving me.

I turned the corner, cutting through the parking lot off the west end of campus and trying to remember which building communications was supposed to be in.

“I am asking,” Layla chuckled. “I can do both, you know. Just like you can go to school because you actually enjoy music *and* have only chosen SFA because Huck is still inexplicably there.”

“It isn’t inexplicable, he’s getting his masters,” I defended instantly, the rest of my argument dying in my throat at the sudden blaring of the horn from my left.

My whole body froze as I realized that I had stepped right in front of the car that had been pulling out, my throat going dry as I lifted one hand in a hurried apology and scurried across to the sidewalk a few feet away.

“Is it fate that made you save your virginity for him?” Layla teased laughingly, the clicking of her keys having covered my near-death experience.

My heart was still racing as I adjusted my bag on my shoulder, rolling my eyes again at my twin. “Of course it is. Fate may want us together, Layla, but I know I have to play my cards right too. Life doesn’t just *hand* you things.”

“Oh, God,” Layla groaned. “You sound just like dad when you say that,” she accused with a giggle. “Which is really awful, if you think about it. You going all virgin-with-a-plan and using dad’s words to justify it...”

“What’s so bad about that?” I asked, ignoring her pointed words.

So what if I was?

“I-” I stopped as I caught sight of dark messy curls in the distance.

My racing heart was something completely different then.

It had been three years since I’d even seen him, but even with all that time between us, my skin heated at the thought of ‘running into him’ again.

“Moira?”

“Sorry,” I muttered, shaking my head as I looked around the tree I thought I had seen him walking past. “I thought I saw something.”

There was no curly head in sight though, no glacial blue eyes glittering from a distance... There was only the same crush of students walking across campus as there had been in the minutes prior.

“You mean you were looking for Huck,” my twin surmised. She still sounded amused, but I didn’t care.

“I thought I saw him,” I corrected her easily, shrugging as I stopped and looked around campus with a frown.

Growing up in the same town SFA was in hadn’t better prepared me to be a student. I’d only ever been on the campus

itself a handful of times before orientation and that had always been with someone else in charge of where I was going and when.

For a college in such a small town, it did suddenly seem *massive* with all its pink and purple crape myrtles and huge expanses of lawn between buildings. I had to have been walking from the far parking lot for at least ten minutes already and I was only just coming up on another parking garage.

“Moira, why don’t you just find out which apartment he’s in? I’m sure if you called-”

“Don’t you say it!” I cut her off before she could mention our brother, my cheeks flaming despite all my certainty. I knew fate had me. I knew that Huck would find me when he needed to... her talking about tracking him down made it feel...

“Okay, okay!” Layla laughed, the clicking of her fingers on her computer keys finally stopping as the sound of her office chair squeaking preceded a soft exhale. “Leave it to fate or whatever.”

“I’m not *just* leaving it to fate,” I defended, my lips twitching. “I just know that we’ll find one another, after that it’s up to me.”

“And what is ‘you’ going to-”

“MOIRA!”

It wasn’t my name from the phone this time that caught my attention, the deep bass and frantic worry that it was yelling in made me stop midstep to look across the street I had just been stepping off the sidewalk to cross.

*Huck.*

My stomach dropped at the sight of him, my heart hammering in my ribs as I watched his too-handsome features morph into an expression of horror as he looked at me.

My brows furrowed, my chest tight as I watched his eyes flick from me to my side-

And just like that the world fell from under my feet.

The bus's horn was loud, ringing in my ears only a few feet from me and the screeching of the brakes was too little too late.

Even as I tried to step forward, I knew I couldn't move fast enough, my happiness at seeing Huck turning to horror at the sight of the front grill of the bus barreling towards me.

I could see the bugs twisted up in the grill of the bus.

I shouldn't have been able to see the bugs in the grill of a moving bus.

Something slammed into me, hard, knocking the breath out of my lungs and forcing my whole body to jerk as I shut my eyes.

Pain flooded me as I felt my cell phone drop from my fingers and the air rush around my air-borne body.

The world moved both impossibly fast and slow at the same time like I was in suspended animation above my body without even being able to see it.

I'd been so full of hope and plans. It had been two years of waiting for Layla to be ready to go to SFA with me before I'd finally given up and gone on my own... and on my very first day, a bus decided to run me over?

I felt my entire body crushed against the ground, the weight surprisingly less than I expected, but the blow to the back of my head was the worst of it.

The asphalt scraped against my head, my already darkened vision going even darker as I felt the world slip away. Color and sound seemed to become one, the world spinning and my breath leaving me in a giant, forced *whoosh* of air.

Was this death?

It wasn't what I had expected.

There was no white light, no giant door ushering me into the great beyond...

There was only a dull throbbing pain, my body still feeling just as crushed and disoriented as it had when I'd been hit and the bus had taken me down.

I suppose I should have been thankful for the pain not being as great as it could have been. Maybe I should have appreciated being able to see Huck that one last time,... But, honestly, I was just disoriented.

My thoughts felt like they were eeking in, disjointed and chaotic, with no real linear logic behind them. Maybe if I'd been Layla, I would have made sense of it- she'd always been the more left-brained twin.

“Moira?”

Was that God?

The worried, honeyed voice in my ear coaxed me out of the blackness, soft warmth against my cheeks pulling me back.

“Fuck, Moira, wake up... Come on...”

Did God say fuck? And sounded like Huck?

Of course, he did.

What version of heaven to me wouldn't have Huck in it?

“That's it. There you go. I've got you. Open your eyes, look at me.”

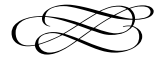
Light splintered beyond the cracks in my eyelids, my brain sloshing about as I felt my torso lifted off of the ground.

Huck's face swam into focus, the light billowing out behind him making his face even more in focus, his oceanic eyes swimming only centimeters from mine.

If dying was what it took to end up in Huck's arms... maybe it wasn't such a bad trade-off after all.

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## CHAPTER 2



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

Warm, willing female bodies were nothing new to me.

Maybe it was arrogant but I'd never had a problem finding a girl on campus... even before I'd been old enough to attend myself.

I had no shortage of women in my bed, but on campus in the middle of the day and with everyone able to see us so plainly?

That was a new one.

It was because my having to tackle her from the path of a bus was a new one too.

Everyone on campus knew to be careful by the parking garage that the bus had been coming out of. The curve right after leaving was so tight that it was impossible to see the crosswalk, much less the street before the crosswalk that so many students tended to use to try to save time.

And it being Moira....

Looking up at her I could feel my breath caught in my chest, the idea of having to call her brother and tell him that I'd somehow injured her while trying to save her life like a dull thud in the back of my head as I waited for her to answer me.

How long had it been since I'd seen her? Two years? Three?

Fuck, she'd grown up in that time.

I'd had to do a double and triple-take when I'd spotted her across the street.

I'd been checking out the leggy blonde who had been on her phone, appreciating the view and the enthusiasm in the way she'd gestured and laughed at whoever was on the other end of the cellphone pressed to her ear. It was only when she'd tossed her hair with a roll of her eyes that my attraction had been overridden long enough to recognize her for who she was.

*Moira Snow.*

“Huck?”

Her voice was breathy and soft, her eyebrows furrowed in a way that went straight to my dick, thanks to how firmly she was pressed into me.

God, rolling with her to keep from injuring her and letting her lay on top of me had been a fucking mistake.

The last time I'd seen Moira she'd still been underage... but nothing about her toned, tight body screamed underage now.

“Oh, good,” I huffed, forcing myself to laugh as I rolled her off of me to keep her from realizing just how strongly my body had reacted to hers. “I was worried there for a second that I'd given you a concussion or something.”

I had to fight to keep my hands off of her as I rolled up onto my knees and then to my feet, helping her up as I went.

“You saved me from being hit by a bus,” Moira laughed, looking up at me as I helped her to her feet and smiling in a way that did nothing to help with my dick's current predicament.

*Christ, she'd grown up well.*

“The bus might have stopped in time,” I lied, looking over my shoulder at the traffic that hadn't so much as paused since I'd tackled her back out of the road. “Everyone knows you don't cross the street here though. That parking garage sucks.”

Her eyes broke from mine momentarily, looking over at the parking garage with a frown. “No one said anything about it at orientation,” she joked, her lips twitching as her gaze slid back to mine.



Her eyes were like warm, amber honey, pulling me in and trapping me in their depths in a way that made it difficult for me not to become enraptured.

“Orientation?” I repeated stupidly, my eyes falling to her lips and jerking back up again almost guiltily as her grin grew.

“Oscar didn’t tell you?” she asked innocently, blinking up at me in surprise. “I started school here this semester. I figured I would look you up after I got settled...”

I needed to stop looking *her* ‘up’ the way I was and fast. Oscar’s name should have been a bucket of ice water and an erection killer in one, but all it did, in reality, was make me feel faintly guilty as I fought to keep my eyes on hers.

“Consider me looked up,” I teased, enjoying the way that her cheeks flushed just a little too much when I said it.

“Ha,” she muttered, looking down with a blush before dragging her honey eyes back up to mine with a shake of her head. “How are you doing, other than saving girls from buses? I feel like it’s been ages since I’ve seen you!”

Long enough for her to have grown up and become a problem, that was for damn sure.

“I’m good. I just had my thirty-second birthday here not too long ago. Finishing my Master of Music degree by the end of the semester, you know, same old, same old.”

I felt impossibly old standing there in front of her saying my age out loud like that, but she didn’t even flinch from it, just grinning wider as she nodded.

“You always did have music in your blood,” Moira laughed knowingly.

I blanched, my tongue hitting the roof of my mouth as I fought the grimace that such an expression usually brought.

Thirty-two years later and even the barest mention of my father was still hard to overcome at times.

“I’m so sorry, Huck,” Moira breathed quickly, seeing past my facade and reaching out to grip my forearm apologetically.

I waved her apology away, rolling my eyes at myself. “It’s nothing,” I reassured her with a snort. “Muscle memory, really. My old man and I aren’t on such sour terms anymore, you know? He actually recently reached out and said he wanted to get to know me. I guess age finally caught up with him now that he’s hitting his ‘golden years’,” I joked.

Moira smiled understandingly, her honeyed gaze glittering as she shrugged. “A nice reference to his stage name,” she snorted.

Chapman Goldenrock was by no means subtle... in name or actions as it turned out.

“It’s actually what he’s calling his farewell tour,” I muttered, amused despite how tacky I found it. “Golden Rock’s Final Golden Hour, a farewell tour.”

His face had haunted me in newspapers and magazines growing up, the man I’d never met but that had so many similarities to the face I grew up seeing in the mirror. To be developing a relationship with him thirty-two years later? It felt almost as insane as having to talk myself out of eying the blonde bombshell in front of me that used to be my neighbor.

“It’s gotta be weird, huh?” she asked knowingly, pulling the thoughts right out of my head.

I snorted, nodding. That was putting it lightly.

“He’s got a concert tonight, actually,” I found myself saying.

I didn’t know why I was telling her.

I hadn’t said anything about it to anyone else. I tended not to talk about my dad, but something about the tension in the air between us mixed with that familiarity that was so sweet it almost felt like I could crack a tooth on it put me in flux.

“I’m going to be watching it live tonight. You should too. No matter how weird it is, the old man has a voice, I’ll give him that.” I grinned, trying to take the weirdness out of my words.

Moira smiled back, but there was something in her honey-colored eyes I couldn’t quite grasp.

“I’d love to listen to him,” she said slowly, shrugging with a slight grimace. “It’s really cool he’ll be live tonight... but I don’t have a tv in my dorm room, you know? My roommate didn’t have one like she said she would before I moved in and I only just got here...”

“You live on campus?” I didn’t know why that pleased me as much as it did.

Actually, I did.

I knew how hard it was to sneak guys into the all-girls dorm, and for reasons that I wasn’t quite ready to face the idea of her *not* having the sweaty, just-out-of-highschool boys that campus was full of in her room alone with her was more appealing than the alternative.

But fuck if I didn’t want to be in that room with her.

“Yeah,” Moira huffed. “Layla wasn’t ready to move with me quite yet.”

The mention of her twin was brief, but I saw her eyes widen as she looked to the ground suddenly.

Panic set into her expression, her eyes wild as she searched about.

“My phone...”

I laughed despite the situation, suddenly understanding her worry.

Moira and Layla had been inseparable growing up. I could still remember her mother running their names together when she called them because she knew where one could be found the other would only be feet away.

Her animation on the phone when I’d been watching her earlier made a lot more sense knowing she had been talking to Layla, and her looking for it so avidly did as well.

“What happened to that twin intuition?” I teased, ducking down to grab her phone from where it had been hidden next to my boot.

“Huh?” Moira looked confused as she spun back to me, relief filling her features as she caught sight of her phone in my hand.

“I’m guessing you were on the phone with Layla right?” I asked, surprised to find her phone unlocked and without a passcode to open it. Layla wasn’t still on the phone at least, although I wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing. “And now you’re worried about her worrying over what she must have heard?” I prompted.

Moira exhaled heavily, half-laughing as she nodded. “I mean, yeah,” she admitted. “I’m sure she knows I’m not dead, but I’d be so pissed if I heard all of that and she never called me back!”

“I seem to remember how long your regular twin conversations took,” I joked, tapping on the screen and watching amusedly as she craned her neck to see what I was doing. “So I’m not going to stick around and wait for it to take place.”

“Oh…”

Did she look disappointed?

I hoped she was.

It was fucked up, but my dick still hadn’t gone down, even with as every day of a conversation as we were having.

“I’m putting my number in before I give you your phone back though,” I told her confidently, grinning at the instant smile that filled her lips.

I pressed call as soon as it was entered into her phone, her number lighting up my screen just long enough to make sure I got her number too.

“I’ll text you the address to my place. You can come to watch my dad’s concert at my place tonight. Gets you the free tv access and gives me company for it,” I joked, handing her her phone back and delighting again in the way her cheeks flushed red.

Fuck, I wondered just how far down that blush went.

“You know, Huck, normally someone *asks* if you *want* to,” Moira teased.

I could see how pleased she was with the offer though.

“Oh, I’m sorry, *freshman*,” I teased. “What plans am I interrupting?”

“Just a hot date,” she tossed out with a nonchalant shrug that didn’t let me know if she was joking or serious. “No biggie though, I guess for an old friend...”

My lips twitched at her grin, my head shaking as I dramatically put my hand over my heart. “Oh, you wound me. Old, really?”

“Ancient even,” she giggled, her phone screen lighting up from a call that wasn’t mine.

Her twin’s face flashed on the screen and she pulled a face as she took a step back. “Tonight?” she verified.

“Tonight,” I agreed, waving as she went to turn and walk off, answering her phone before she was even a few feet off.

If I was staring at her ass at least she didn’t see me doing it.

Fuck, she’d grown up so fucking well...

And I was going to have her... alone... in my apartment...

Christ, I hadn’t thought that shit through...

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## CHAPTER 3



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*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I'd never spent so long getting ready in my life.

I'd tried on outfit after outfit in front of the narrow mirror my roommate had pinned to the wall outside of our tiny, shared bathroom. Each one had been too boring, too modest, too casual. By the time Huck was opening the door to his apartment, I was already five minutes past when he had asked for me to come over, jumping to stop from pulling at the bottom of my black dress as Huck came into sight.

"Hey, what happened to 'is it cool if I come early'?" Huck asked laughingly, as he stepped back, his eyes running up and down my body appreciatively.

I could see the surprise in his blue eyes, his hand lifting to ruffle through his already messy curls.

"I got distracted," I lied, grinning as I passed him into the apartment, the heat of his gaze almost like a caress as I did.

"And here I thought I was peak entertainment," Huck muttered jokingly, a huskiness to his voice that hadn't been there before.

Appreciation warmed my belly right along with desire at the sound of it, pleased that my dress was so obviously having the effect that I had wanted.

"I thought that's what the concert was supposed to be?" I teased, turning with a twitch of my lips at the sound of him closing the door behind us.

Huck looked every inch the bad-boy rock star he'd always embodied standing in front of the door behind me. His hair was tousled, and the shirt he wore was somehow baggy and form-fitting all at once. Somehow, the necklace he'd worn from his mom since she'd given it to him at seventeen sat just where it would stand out against his shirt the most. The rings on his fingers glittered from the fluorescent lights overhead, the leather bracelet on his wrist tying it all together... but it was the heat in those glacial eyes that burned me all the way through.

"You grew up mean," Huck laughed, looking away quickly once he realized my eyes were on him. He averted the very obvious way he had been checking me out as he passed me into the kitchen, moving around with enviable grace.

"Or I just grew up," I said pointedly, turning to take a chance to look around his apartment.

It was sparse, much more so than I had expected. Band posters and musical memorabilia littered the walls, but the furniture was your average run-of-the-mill college student making do with whatever was cheapest.

"If you're going to ask about the couch," Huck called from behind me as I wandered into the living room, "don't." He chuckled as the sound of clinking ice accompanied his words and my eyes were instantly drawn to the lack of the indicated couch.

It was evident that at *one point* one had been there, but the space was empty now.

"You can't just lead with something like that and expect me not to," I answered with a snort, tilting my head as I turned back in time to see him opening what looked like a bottle of whiskey.

"My ex-roommate took the couch and the tv out here. They were both his." Huck shrugged, grinning at me. "I just never bothered to buy my own. I don't spend a lot of time out here anyways."



My eyebrows rose at the innuendo behind his words, a combination of jealousy and heat settling in my belly all over again.

I hated the idea of him having another woman back in the bedroom that I could only just barely see through the cracked door.

But the idea of it being me back in that bed while he did God only knew what with those talented fingers of his?

“Here,” Huck interrupted my fantasy as he appeared by my elbow almost making me jump.

He handed me a glass of whiskey and coke, jerking his head for me to follow him back to that bedroom I’d been trying to peer into.

“It’s almost like a real concert experience... if you overlook the lack of people, noise, and the fact that we’ll be watching it from bed,” he laughed.

His eyes trailed me again as I moved past him into his bedroom, my stomach in knots at the realization that I was really about to be in his bed. Maybe not how I wanted the most... yet... but the night was still young.

“If you wanted to get me into bed you should have said so,” I teased, sitting on the edge of the bed and crossing my legs as delicately as I did slowly.

Huck’s blue eyes followed the movement, his adam’s apple bobbing from the sexually charged joke just as much as the sight of my legs rubbing so slowly against one another. I could see his brain short-circuiting as he sank onto the mattress next to me.

“I-” he stuttered, his lips twitching as if he couldn’t tell whether he was supposed to laugh or tell me to stop.

I enjoyed the way he shifted his hips away from me too much, knowing just what that meant.

“Relax,” I muttered, giggling again as I reached over to put my hand on his arm. “I’m used to making the first move.”

“Right,” he huffed, rolling his eyes and obviously choosing to believe I was just joking. His eyes darted to my legs again briefly, his eyes a warzone of indecision as he shook his head and cleared his throat. “You might be even worse about pushing the limit than your brother is,” he said distractedly as he turned the tv at the end of his bed on.

The blue light from it flickered, casting the both of us in a strange shadow that made me focus too much on that dark shadow underneath his too-defined jawline.

*God, I wanted to lick the skin there.*

“I was going to ask how many girls you’ve lured to your bed with the promise of a concert, but if you’d rather talk about my brother...” I pushed, the butterflies in my stomach fluttering at the way the muscle in his jaw jumped.

“Lured?” he repeated with a shocked laugh, turning to look back at me more fully.

And I knew that I was pushing it, I did.

The minute he turned to me, I shifted along with him, uncrossing my legs and allowing my knees to open just enough that I knew he’d see the black lacey thong that I’d spent so long choosing to go under the dress I’d worn.

It was overkill and forward and God only knew what else...

But the way that Huck’s eyes widened as he caught sight of it and desire filled his gaze was worth it.

“Moirra...” he warned, his voice dark and throaty, a growl beneath the words that promised me all I’d ever wanted and *more*.

“Are you going to make me be any more forward?” I asked breathlessly, my heart pounding in my ears. “I wore them for you, but if you don’t like lace...”

“I fucking love lace.” The words were clipped, his drink set down to the side of the bed and forgotten as he closed the already very limited distance between us, his body tense and just barely hovering just in front of me.

“So you don’t like lace on me then?” I pushed, arching my back so that the pointed tips of my already very hard nipples brushed just against the front of his chest.

“Fuck.” His eyes closed as he groaned the word, taking my drink from me and putting it off to the side the same way he had his. “You don’t know what you’re doing here Moira...”

*Oh, but I did.*

I laughed, the noise more a gust of air than anything else as I leaned forward just that little bit more, my lips only centimeters from his. “I know what I’m trying to do,” I argued in a heated whisper.

That last bit of control seemed to leave him as I leaned in, his eyes snapping to mine one last time before he closed the whisper-thin distance between us.

His lips were hard and demanding as they finally closed over mine, his hands rough against me as he hauled me across the mattress until there was nothing left between us but our clothing and our desire.

I’d dreamed about kissing Huck my whole life, but nothing could have prepared me for the reality of it. He was everywhere all at once, his tongue sure and confident as it traced the outer shell of my lips. I could taste the whiskey and coke on his breath, just a hint of it under a taste far more intoxicating.

My head spun, my hands hesitating as I lifted them to his face, running my fingers across the jawline I’d fantasized about for so long.

He groaned at the contact, a heady feeling for me that I only half got to focus on before he dipped me back, my shoulders pressing into the mattress as he laid me down and half-laid over me.

“Fuck, Moira, I don’t know what the hell you’re doing to me,” Huck ground out, his voice a dark growl as he pulled back from me to look down at me.

For half a moment I worried he was having second thoughts, but the way that his oceanic eyes poured over me laying back

on his bed quickly quelled any such fears.

He drank me in, his hands never ceasing their movements, his fingers finding that tie at the nape of my neck and undoing it so that my dress fell away from my front.

I'd never been so bare before a man before and I could feel the gooseflesh prickling over my skin, my already pointed nipples standing even further to attention... but the way Huck looked at me, the way his eyes ran over my bare chest only moments before his hands followed warmed me through more than any clothing ever could have hoped to.

“Not enough if I can still talk,” I finally managed to breathe, giggling at the way his eyes flashed at my challenge.

His hand gripped my hip hard, the other running over the expanse of my now naked chest and tweaking my nipples with his fingers.

“Oh, God,” I whispered, moaning around the words as he lowered himself once more.

His lips didn't recapture mine right away though, instead running down the length of my jaw and into my neck, his chuckle so darkly promising that I felt my toes curl into his comforter.

“That's right, keep talking. You've got it all wrong, Moira,” he nipped and licked at the skin of my neck between his words, driving me even higher up that fever pitch. His voice was low and seductive, like lyrics he whispered only for me... “I don't have to make you stop talking... I'm just going to make you louder.”

I inhaled sharply at that promise, opening my lips and shutting them again quickly as I felt his hand at my hip pushing the skirt of my dress up to reveal the lacy panties I'd flashed him earlier.

“Huck,” I moaned, his name a plea and a warning both as he pushed my panties to the side and ran his fingers up the line of my pussy in one fluid move.

Whatever I'd been about to add to his name died on my lips with a shuddered, heavy exhale, my eyes slamming shut at the

feel of my desire growing even more. I felt like I was about to explode, clinging to him and pulling at the curls at the base of his skull as he found my clit with his thumb and forefinger.

He groaned at the way I said his name, his erection pushing into my hip as he slid one finger inside of me, his teeth more insistent against my collarbone as he shifted down.

When I dared to peek at him I could see him watching his fingers disappearing in and out of me, his eyes rapt and so dark they almost looked black for how intensely he was enraptured by the sight.

It was too much, my whole body tensing and shuddering again as I came apart under his fingers alone.

But Huck didn't stop.

He slid a second finger in as I came down, his thumb moving in broader circles, and it was almost too much.

"Huck," I breathed, my voice thready as I pushed into his hand. "God, Huck, please. Please, I need you. I need you now. You have no idea how long I've waited for this..."

I was begging and a part of me knew it. What little of my brain still existed could acknowledge as much, but I was too far gone.

My words had the opposite effect of what I wanted though, Huck freezing above me with his pants halfway down his hips as he looked down at me.

I could see the conflict in his eyes, his jaw ticking as he battled whatever internal fight he had going.

"I want you so fucking bad Moira," he finally admitted, his voice throaty and raw. "Fuck, I want you so fucking bad... but Oscar..." My brother's name was like ice water for both of us, but the heat between us was thawing it even as he spoke.

His fingers twitched against my pussy and I knew I needed to do something, to take charge.

I moved my hand, despite my lack of knowing what I was doing, and gripped his dick between us, running my fingers down the length of him in question.

Huck shuddered with the contact, his eyes wild as he hesitated still on that precipice.

“Don’t put Oscar between us,” I begged, my voice dropping as I ran my thumb over the very tip of him.

*Fuck, he was so big. How was I supposed to fit all of that?*

“I need you,” I continued, looking up at him and feeling that desire swell all over again.

I needed him inside of me. Right then. Fuck Oscar, fuck waiting, I’d done more than enough of it.

“I need you inside of me, I need to feel you,” I moaned, feeling his fingers pull out of me.

But Huck wasn’t pulling away.

His eyes were dark with the same need pulsing inside of me as he shifted on the bed, pulling my legs up until my feet were flat on the bed and my knees were bent. He shifted purposefully, crawling on his knees up the bed and ridding himself of his pants the rest of the way as he did.

“You’ve got me,” he promised, something inside of those words filling me in a way I couldn’t even begin to explain.

His blue eyes burned into me as he lined himself up, my hands still on his dick as I led him to me, inhaling sharply as I prepared myself for how big he was...

*Brrrrrrrr.*

*Brrrrrrrrrrt.*

*Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrt.*

The long vibrations from the bedside table next to my head were so loud they should have been criminal, both of us freezing all over again as they started.

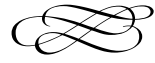
*“Pick up the phone asshole. Pick up the phone. Hellllo! PICK UP THE PHONE!”* The mechanical voice got louder and louder with each sentence, the ringtone so insistent that I could feel Huck pulling away from me before he actually, physically did.

He looked at me one last time, flinching before he rolled off of me entirely to grab the phone aggravatedly.

“Hello?”

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## CHAPTER 4



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I almost didn't pick up the phone.

I should have known, as soon as the ringtone went off, who was calling. I only had three people who had that particular ringtone saved to their number.

*It just had to be Oscar.*

It was as if by mentioning him I'd summoned him.

I had his sister half-naked on my bed with her cum still sticky on my fingers and my dick inches away from being inside of her... and he called.

I knew that if I didn't answer the phone and Oscar really wanted to talk, he would just show up though. His apartment was on the other side of town, closer to where his parents had lived before they'd bought their retirement home in Florida, but even still it was all of a twenty-minute drive at most... and that was if there was traffic.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

"Hey!" Oscar's voice was loud in my ear as I winced again, looking over at Moira and immediately looking away again.

I wanted to fuck her still.

My dick was heavy and insistent, so hard I felt like if I touched it, it might shatter, and just the sight of her was enough to make it ten times worse.

I'd never been as turned on as I had been just by what little foreplay we had accomplished before being interrupted.

"Are you busy? Do you want to grab some beers? I just had the worst date of my life," Oscar continued, unperturbed by my silence on the other end. "You remember that girl from the coffee shop the other day? The one I got the number of? Well, I took her out tonight, as planned... and you know she didn't even know what Ghostbusters was? Like, not just the old movie... but I mean... the entire franchise. At all."

I hummed noncommittally, rubbing my hand over my face at Oscar's movie-buff outrage.

He was loud. He was always loud. I just usually didn't mind it.

When he was loud enough for Moira to hear though, her face flushing at the sound, and for her to quickly push herself up off of the bed and start covering her flawless tanned skin though, it was suddenly a problem.

I wanted him to shut up.

I wanted him to disappear.

"Listen, Oscar, I have company-"

"Oh, shit. Of course, you do," Oscar laughed knowingly.

Not that he would if he knew who my company was...

"Listen, that's fine. I'll let you go here in a second. Fuck! I almost forgot to tell you that Moira was going to SFA now too. I meant to warn you. You'll probably run into her, I was going to tell you last week but that was when we had that concert we had gone to and... well, you know the rest."

I flinched, glancing at Moira again just in time to see her tying her dress back up.

The dress now covered her perfectly pink, dusky nipples.

I'd never hated Oscar as much as I did at that moment.

Or felt as guilty about doing so.

"You're uh... You're a little late on that warning," I coughed, scratching the back of my neck and wincing again as Oscar

laughed.

“Go figure. Whatever, you’ll take care of her, right?” Oscar asked distractedly.

It was as if he knew to stoke the fires of my guilt. It was an inferno in my chest then, warring with my still painfully hard erection as Moira pointed to the tv.

The tv that I had forgotten we had even turned on.

The tv where my father was wrapping up his show and waving to the host of the show he’d been starring on.

Everything felt like it was moving in rapid motion around me, my head spinning as Moira pointed to her wrist as if to indicate timing and then to herself and the door.

She was leaving.

God, I was a fucking tool.

I nodded, my mouth was dry as she waved and hurriedly ducked out of the uncomfortable situation we’d found ourselves caught in.

“Huck!” Oscar demanded loudly, pulling my attention back to the phone.

“Yeah?”

“Did you hear me?” he asked, annoyed, but only for a second. He laughed again right after. “Shit, you’re probably distracted. Whatever, I’ll let you go. Just promise you’ll take care of my sister.”

“Yeah, of course,” I mumbled, my eyes closing as I tried not to picture just how I’d wanted to ‘take care of her’ moments before.

“Great. Go get in good with your ‘company’ and ignore that I called,” Oscar chuckled. “I’ll be going out of town this weekend for that convention I told you about, but I’ll be back on Monday or Tuesday and we can catch up then, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t make myself sound any less distracted or more enthusiastic as I opened my eyes again. I was staring

after where Moira had left, my dick still throbbing and discomfort I didn't want to face settling in my gut as I did.

The call disconnected before I could even lower my phone, my chest tight as I stood and half-snorted at the state I was in.

Hard dick and only my shirt and jewelry left on because I'd been in such a rush to get inside of her.

Fuck.

I couldn't stop thinking about how wet she'd been as I fingered her. The smell of her arousal was still thick in the bedroom and I pulled my jeans back on in aggravation. No matter how hard I tried, I could still feel her pulsing around my fingers, still, seeing her face screwed up tight in ecstasy as she writhed on my sheets.

I left my bedroom irritatedly, trying to get a hold of myself and failing as something thudded from upstairs.

Vida was pissed again from the sounds of it.

Probably another failed date, just like Oscar. I snorted as I ran a hand frustratedly through my curls, considering how I should probably introduce the two of them.

Although my long-standing relationship with fucking her brains out when it suited the two of us might put a damper on things for Oscar.

Although...

As I heard the unmistakable thud of her heels being kicked off across the floor above me I frowned up at the ceiling.

It wasn't her who I was picturing naked, it wasn't her hands who I wanted... but she was obviously free. And it would hardly be the first time we'd used one another in such a way.

I looked down at my phone for only a moment, barely thinking about it before I quickly typed out a text to see if she was free.

I just needed the release.

Or at least that was what I kept telling myself.

I'd barely put my phone down on the counter before I heard the knock at the door, my steps quick as I went to answer it, and my disappointment at finding Vida standing there swallowed as I waved her in.

"It's like you read my mind," she purred, her lips matching her red hair in vibrancy and allure as she smirked up at me, one hand on my chest as she pushed me back and walked into my apartment.

"More like heard your shoes," I corrected, smirking as she kicked the door shut and allowed her to take the lead for now. "Bad date?"

"Oh, the worst," she faux-moaned, rolling her eyes.

She'd always been pretty. She looked like my match with her multiple ear piercings and heavily accented eyes. Usually, I relished in how different she looked from whatever recent conquests I'd had, but tonight? I was regretting how fun and 'punk rock' she looked with the image of tan and blonde stamped so irreplaceably in my mind's eye.

"What about you? Bad date?" she teased, her lips quirking as we paused in that junction between the living room and kitchen.

"Maybe I just missed you," I lied, my dick insistent as I replayed Moira's gasps and moans in my head.

I was too far gone as it was, the red of Vida's hair and the paleness of her skin too different from what I wanted. I bent my head, cutting off her laugh with my lips and closing my eyes so that I could pretend that it was Moira tangling her fingers in my hair and Moira grinding into my too-obvious erection as I fucked her mouth the way I'd wished I'd been able to her on my bed.

The taste was all wrong, vodka and sprite instead of the cinnamon mouthwash Moira had tasted of.

She smelled like cigarettes and musky perfume too- but Moira was in my head, still stuttering and gasping and writhing, and it was enough to push through it.

“Oh, fuck Huck,” Vida laughed as I broke away from her lips, opening her thighs and going to wriggle out of her tight jeans.

Even the way she said my name was wrong.

I pushed my face into her neck, trying to ignore the *wrong* of it all and get it out of my system. God only knew I shouldn't have been so focused on my best friend's little sister.

“Moira,” I groaned, my dick twitching as I felt the button of my jeans being loosened by small hands.

“Moira?” Vida's hands fell from me faster than mine had Moira at the mention of her brother, her green eyes flashing as she took a quick step back and pushed me off of her. “Who the hell is Moira?”

*Shit.*

I ran my hand down my face, inhaling sharply and trying to come up with the explanation that would cause the least amount of issue- and stopped at the sound of another knock on my door. *When it rained it fucking poured.*

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## CHAPTER 5



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*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I was halfway back to my dorm room, mortified and still all wound up when I realized that I didn't have my keys on me.

It was late and dark, and I was overly aware of how scantily clad I was walking back toward campus. Every shadow felt like reaching, angry hands, and every whisper of the wind in the trees sounded like approaching footsteps.

I'd never been good with the dark. I'd never been good with being alone.

But being in the dark alone after how close I'd come to filling my every desire with Huck was like a nightmare all its own.

And somehow I'd lost my fucking dorm keys.

I stood on the edge of the sidewalk by Pearl St, my hands frantically digging through the little black purse I'd taken, my heart racing a mile a minute.

I didn't even remember knocking my purse over while I'd been at Huck's, but I knew I must have. There was no other explanation for the keys not being in my purse where I'd left them.

"God," I groaned, finally giving up. *Maybe I'd just knocked them out of my purse on the way rushing from Huck's apartment...*

I had to hope I had. God knew I didn't want to face Huck after the way I had run off.



My stomach tossed and turned uncomfortably as I retraced my steps, my eyes peeled for any sight of the glimmer of metal along my route back the way I had come... but there was none.

“Come on,” I whispered pleadingly to the universe, my stomach dropping the closer and closer I came back to the apartment complex.

Facing him was *mortifying* after allowing Oscar’s call to chase me off. I’d barely made it down the stairs of his building before I’d been hitting myself upside the head about how stupid I’d been.

Oscar was on the *phone*. It wasn’t like he’d been able to see through it and see me on Huck’s bed. If I’d been smarter or braver I would have stripped the rest of the way down so that Huck just hung up on him or something.

But I’d gotten scared.

And I’d run. And now... I was running right back.

I paused at the bottom of the stairs leading to his second-floor apartment, my embarrassment warring with my need to find my keys.

It wasn’t like there were any other options.

My parents didn’t live in town any longer. Layla lived too far out into the country to just *walk* to. And Oscar? No way would my staid older brother come to pick me up without asking a million questions as to how I could have lost my keys and then demand that I take him back to retrace where I’d been that night.

And Jane...

I inhaled sharply, taking the steps two at a time and knocking on his door before I could talk myself out of it again.

For a long moment, there was nothing and I worried that he’d fallen asleep, my hand lifting again-

And Huck opened the door before I could knock a second time.

He barely swung the door inward, only a sliver of him visible through the crack as he stood in what little space he'd opened the door.

"Moira?" He looked disheveled and confused, his blue eyes searching me as if worried that there was something wrong.

I felt even more stupid standing in front of him, my cheeks burning as I forced an awkward smile. His keeping the door so closed made me feel as if I shouldn't have come back, but ... again, options...

"I'm sorry, I know I said I had to go. I did, well, no I didn't," I admitted, my mouth running quicker than I could stem the words. "I actually just got, you know, well, hah," I laughed, my blush spreading from my face down my neck as I exhaled sharply. "I think I lost my keys here. Have you seen them? It's on a little green keychain, it's only my dorm room key and my mail key..." I trailed off nervously as Huck checked over his shoulder.

When he looked back at me he looked even more conflicted than he had when he'd answered the door and I could have kicked myself for having ruined my chance with him all over again.

"Jane is just out of town," I continued explaining dejectedly. "She's gone to her parents for the weekend and I have no way into my dorm without it, you know? I just need to find it. If I could just come in and check I'd be out of your apartment in no time..."

Huck groaned, his forehead hitting just over his hand where it held the door cracked before he looked back up at me with an apology written in every line of his too-handsome face. The metal of his necklace clanged against the doorframe.

"You can come in," he finally sighed. "You should just know that my friend Vida is here."

I heard what sounded like a feminine huff on the other side of the door and my blush finally abated. Where I'd felt hot and uncomfortable before suddenly I felt cold and alone. His

words wooshed about inside of my skull as I stared at him, hurt filling me.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Huck begged, remorse filling his words. “Vida and I have been ‘friends’ for a long time,” he explained. “We help one another out when things get ... slow, but that’s all it is. The way you left earlier,” he looked at me, a heat simmering in the depth of his eyes before he shook his head and looked off, the muscle in his jaw jumping. “I called Vida. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, but-”

“Oh, God!” the voice from behind the door cried.

The door was flung open by the girl Huck had been hiding, her red hair as mussed as Huck’s clothes were, but still in place thankfully.

“Enough of this. You’re Moira?” she asked, looking me up and down curiously.

Vida was beautiful. The kind of girl that rock stars proudly displayed on their arms, all curvy and dressed as if she’d just come back from some concert. Everything about her screamed confidence and sex appeal. Standing in front of her I felt suddenly out of place and drab in my little black dress.

“Of course you’re Moira,” Vida said knowingly before I could answer. She looked at Huck as if she weren’t sure whether to hit him or laugh. “I knew when you called me Moira it wasn’t just some slip of the tongue. I guess I’ll have to find someone else for the night, friend.” She shook her head, settling on laughing as she set her clothes to rights and squeezed past Huck and me to get out of his apartment.

I was torn between looking at Huck, who was staring at me, and trying to watch Vida leave- but Huck didn’t so much as call a goodbye after her... and I was still stuck on the whole her having been in his apartment thing... and why...

*He’d called her Moira?*

His eyes were heavy on me, heated and centered as he stepped back, gesturing inside his apartment reminiscent of the way he had earlier that night.

“Come on in. You can look for your keys or you can just... stay,” he offered, his voice catching on the word.

Something about the way he said it caught me.

We had been interrupted by my brother, I'd run off, and I'd come back to find another girl in his apartment, but...

*He'd called her Moira.*

That fact just kept repeating in my head as I followed him inside, closing the door behind me and feeling my heart race all over again.

Maybe it was stupid, maybe I was being foolish again, but all I could think about was how close I'd come to losing my chance.

And how much I didn't want to again.

I didn't know what seized me but suddenly I was in front of him, my hands fisted in his shirt and my toes pressed into the floor as I pushed myself up as tall as I could. I hauled him down to me, kissing him this time as I closed my eyes and gave over to the impulsivity of it all.

It was like no time had passed at all.

Oscar and Vida were forgotten as Huck responded, his hands going to my hips and pulling me into him as he nearly bent me backward.

I could feel his dick hard and insistent against my stomach, his lips hard and hungry as he started to walk us both back towards the bedroom without once breaking his lips from mine.

But he was impatient as I was.

I hummed happily into his lips as he picked me up off of the ground, spreading my thighs and slamming me against the just-closed front door instead.

I eagerly wrapped my legs around his waist, the lace of my panties already soaked and rubbing against me with delicious friction as he pushed into me. I could feel the denim of his jeans through the lace, his rings indenting the skin of my

thighs from the hold he had on me, but all I could focus on was how good it felt and how badly I wanted him.

Every single part of me vibrated like a live wire, my moan trapped in the back of my throat as he reached between us to pull my panties to the side.

I could feel the lace stretch, the noise of the fabric ripping filling the apartment over our heavy breathing even as I tried to reach around his hand to undo his jeans.

There was no foreplay this time.

There was no waiting.

Our hands were hot and hurried, his kisses sloppy and full of a need I was only too ready to match. Even without all the build-up, there had been before my stomach was tightening, my hips wantonly circling against him even before his jeans were off.

“Fuck, Moira,” he gusted as he pulled away from my mouth, his eyes wild as he looked down at me.

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” I said pointedly, grabbing his face and pulling it back to me as I finally pulled his dick out of his jeans.

His chuckle was dark as he pressed it into the skin of my collarbone only seconds before his teeth nipped me there, his tongue darting out to run over the marks he’d left even as my head fell back against the door behind it.

“Oh-” the word was choppy, cut off in the back of my throat as Huck lined himself up...

And pushed right on in.

I could feel myself stretching, the skin hot and slick as he groaned into my throat.

Each press of his hips against mine put him a little bit closer and despite the slight pain of it all, I couldn’t get past the heady feeling of knowing he was in me. That I had him. That he was finally mine.

“Oh, God- oh, fuck- Huck,” I moaned, delirious as I tried to keep up with my rapidly cycling emotions and the fullness

between my legs.

“That’s it,” he encouraged breathlessly, an edge to his voice that made my eyes want to roll into the back of his head. “Just like that,” he whispered, biting the shell of my ear. “But louder.”

His hips finally pushed against mine, his dick fully inside of me, and I felt my stomach clench all over again.

Just when I thought I’d gotten used to it he pulled back, his fingers falling between us and circling my clit just the moment before he slammed back into me, driving me up the door.

“Oh, FUCK,” I screamed, pain and pleasure pulsing right alongside one another as I held onto his shoulders for dear life.

“God, yes,” Huck ground out in my ear at the way I shouted, his hips picking up the pace.

All I could feel was his lips disjointedly pressing into my skin, his hips driving into me, and his fucking talented fingers pulling and tugging and rubbing at my clit.

All I could see were stars.

He pushed and pushed, making that pleasure climb until I was sure I was going to explode.

And then he captured my lips, his teeth nipping at the bottom one.

And that was just what I did.

In the front of his apartment, still wearing my dress against his front door, I lost my virginity to Huck Chapman and came so hard that I nearly blacked out. On a Tuesday evening in the middle of spring.

And I wouldn’t have changed a single thing.

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## CHAPTER 6



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I'd slept with plenty of women.

Sex was nothing new to me.

Even the four hours we had spent fucking wasn't new.

What was new was how intense it had felt and still felt that four hours later laying on my side staring at Moira in my bed.

The black dress was long gone- lost somewhere between when we'd had sex against the front door and when we'd made it as far as the kitchen island to start over again.

Moira was on her back beside me smiling happily at the ceiling, her face still flushed and her expression dazed.

"I think we conducted a pretty thorough search of my apartment," I joked, tracing my fingers lightly over where the carpet had 'burned' her thigh.

She turned to me, her honeyed eyes squinting in confusion before comprehension dawned.

Her giggle was breathy as she rolled into me sighing as she threaded her legs through mine. "I didn't see them," she agreed, kissing her way across my chest which had my heart racing all over again

I'd never been so turned on by so simple of actions.

I'd also never laid around as long after finishing.



“Clearly, you’ll have to stay here,” I teased, running my hand over the curve of her hip and marveling at how smooth the skin was.

She was like some work of art in a museum. A perfect sculpture brought to life and so warm to the touch that it almost felt unnatural.

“I really don’t have anywhere else to go until Monday,” she admitted with a laugh. She looked amused but tired, and I paused at the way she flinched as she adjusted on the bed again. “Jane wasn’t planning on driving back until just in time for her first class then.”

“Stay with me for the weekend then.” I offered it before I could think it through, though as soon as I did I knew it was what I wanted.

There was a strange comfort in her laying next to me, the smell of her green apple shampoo wafting through the heavy notes of sex still lingering in the room and teasing my nose with each shift, and turning on the bed.

“Are you asking?” she checked, her lips twitching before she winced again.

It was only as I looked down at her body that I realized that she was shifting because of discomfort. For half a moment I worried that maybe I had injured her with how enthusiastic I had been, but I’d no sooner had the thought that I was forced to remember that resistance when I’d first started pushing inside of her.

“I am. I’m also asking if you’re a virgin. Not that the two are connected...” But I was asking anyways.

She grinned, the very tips of her cheekbones heating as she shook her head. “Not anymore.”

Fuck. I didn’t know why it hit me as hard as I did.

If we hadn’t just stopped my dick would have already been hard again. As it was I could feel it twitch against her thigh, my hand tightening on her hip momentarily as I reminded myself that she was probably sore and stiff.

*But, fuck, if I didn't want to be inside of her again already just knowing that she'd only ever been with me.*

"Is that a problem?" she asked after a moment, her grin faltering slightly in the face of my silence.

"Fuck, no," I breathed out, closing my eyes and trying to get the image of rolling her on top of me out of my head as I exhaled heavily. "I tend to avoid sleeping with virgins, though."

"Why?" she still sounded unsure as she looked at me, her teeth worrying her bottom lip slightly and I felt like an ass for making her think it was a problem.

"Because I don't normally like keeping girls in my bed this long after fucking them," I teased, pinching her hip playfully and appreciating the way she smiled at hearing it. "And because virgins typically aren't on birth control."

The laughter in my voice abated as I got to the crux of the issue, my expression sobering as I looked hopefully at her.

She seemed to catch the drift of my question, her shoulders lifting slightly as she stared back at me. "I never had any reason to be on it," she admitted with a fuller shrug.

"I didn't use a condom," I said heavily.

The words almost stuck in my throat, a shadow coming between us and the afterglow I'd been enjoying so much.

"Look, I know it's a lot and it's really soon to be worrying about it, but, fuck, Moira... I don't want kids. I won't want to be a dad. I'm afraid I'll end up like my own old man and you've seen how much his lack of interest and absence has fucked me up."

"You aren't fucked up," she defended quickly, her brows furrowing protectively as she flattened her hand out against my chest, tracing the music note I had tattooed right over my pec.

I snorted. "That's the afterglow talking," I muttered as I half-rolled onto my back.

The severity of the situation I'd walked myself right into loomed like a storm in my head, the repercussions of how easily I'd lost control staring me in the face even as I closed my eyes.

Moira moved with me though, rolling onto her side more fully and balancing her elbow on my chest to prop herself up. "Look, I'm in the 'safe' period to have sex right now anyways, okay? I'm not ovulating, I'm nowhere near even close to it! You're freaking out for nothing."

"The what period?" I repeated, my eyes cracked open to stare at her in open confusion.

She grinned, rolling away from me and gingerly swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "God, Huck. For someone who has as much sex as you do, you should know what that means," she giggled, not even bothering with finding clothes before she left the room and headed out of my room.

I sat up in bed, both annoyed by the fact that she was no longer beside me and curious as to what she was doing. My necklace thudded against my chest as I readjusted.

I didn't have time to get out of bed myself though before she came back into my bedroom, the light glinting off of her still glimmering skin and drawing my eyes far too easy to just how naked she was... and just how good she looked being that naked.

I could feel the stirrings of that desire building again... but, just like before, the wince she pulled as she crawled back into bed talked me out of trying to act on any of it.

"Look," she muttered, clutching her phone and tapping away on her screen before flashing it at me.

A calendar on her phone was opened, various shades of pink forming it, and symbols that didn't make a lick of sense to me.

"This is my period," she explained, pointing to a week's worth of days on the calendar that had been shaded a dark fuchsia all the way through. "And this is when I'm ovulating," she continued, pointing then to another week with little circles in the top corner. "And this," she pointed to the Tuesday that

coincided with the current time, “is when we had sex. See, I’m not even due to ovulate until two and a half weeks from now! It’s the ‘safe’ time of the month for me to have sex without getting pregnant.”

I looked over the calendar with raised brows, thankful that I’d been born with a penis.

“You have to track your period?” I found myself asking, surprised that I was only learning such a thing at my age.

“I don’t have to,” she giggled. “I like to because it saves me from any surprises.”

I snorted, shaking my head and taking her phone so that I could toss it away from us and drag her back down onto the bed.

I wasn’t the biggest for cuddling after sex but something about sitting so far away from her with both of us still naked didn’t feel right to me.

Laying back down with her did though.

“Well, I suppose that’s a relief,” I admitted. “Another one of those ‘you learn something new everyday moments for me though. I’ve dated how many girls? How many friends have periods? I’ve gotten them tampons and pads, bought their pain midol shit, but I’ve never thought to ask them about tracking or safe periods.”

“I’m surprised you don’t just use a condom every time,” Moira admitted, stretching out until she was laid out over my chest once more.

“I usually do.” I usually didn’t display such a stunning lack of control. I wasn’t about to admit that much though. “I keep meaning to get a vasectomy.” I paused, snorting. I’d been considering it off and on for years, but there was always something that came up before I could commit to it.

Moira seemed pleased with my answer though, interlocking her fingers together on my chest and lowering her chin to rest on her joined hands. “You don’t have to be so worried though, you know.”

“I do know, you just explained why,” I quipped teasingly, allowing myself to run my hands over her bare back and down into the dips that her dimples made in the small of it.

“No,” she giggled. “Not about that. About being a dad. I think you’d make a great one.”

She sounded so sincere, her honey-colored eyes flashing as she looked so seriously at me.

The words hit me in a way I hadn’t been expecting, worming their way into my chest and making it difficult to look at her and keep myself as aloof as I was supposed to.

The thought of having a kid was foreign and terrifying to me, something I’d spent my whole life promising myself I’d never do. I’d grown up watching my mother struggle as a single mom, dismissed because she was some rock star’s baby mama and forced to work three times as hard because of it. She’d tried protecting me from it, she’d sacrificed so much... I’d promised myself to never do that to a woman.

Still, Moira’s words sent a strange emotion curling through me.

Unconsciously, I found myself pulling her closer, my thumbs brushing over the dimples in the small of her back more insistently.

She flinched as I went to roll her on top of me, her whole face flushing as she tensed.

“I’m so sorry,” she mumbled. “Ignore it. Please? I’m fine. I don’t know why it feels so weird, but it felt so good earlier...”

I laughed, unable to help myself as I rubbed my hands soothingly up and down her back.

“Relax,” I urged, lifting to kiss the corner of her jaw. “It’s normal, you’re just sore. Let me take care of you. We don’t have to jump right back into bed. You waited so long for me, you said, maybe it’s my turn to wait for you.”

I was joking, but something about the words rang truer than I’d like to admit.

“We’ll have time for more later,” I promised her, rubbing the tense muscles in her back and just enjoying being with her. “I want to spend all weekend taking care of you.” I surprised myself with how much I meant it. Her skin tasted like sunshine and salt as I kissed her again, sealing the words.

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## CHAPTER 7



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MOIRA

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

One weekend with Huck turned into two, two into three, and three somehow eventually into fourteen.

Three and a half months later and somehow, we had fallen into a routine.

I stayed at his apartment more often than I did in my dorm room, everything but my furniture somehow slowly migrating over with me over the repeated overnight stays. Out of the entire time, there was only one weekend that we were apart and that had been because my brother had wanted to have a guy's night out with him before moving to Conroe for work.

Oscar had wanted to spend the following day with me and Layla too, meeting us in Lufkin to take us to the mall and out to see a movie before finally leaving town. He'd shown up hungover and with bags under his eyes, warning me that I would find Huck in the same position...

And I had when I'd finally gotten back to his place that night.

Somehow, without even discussing it, we decided to keep our arrangement and the shift in our relationship to ourselves.

Maybe it was the memory of the call with Oscar and what it had almost ruined... but, I thought it had more to do with how happy we were with just the two of us around his apartment.

He helped me with my coursework, I wrote little musical pieces for him to play me on the guitar or on the electric



keyboard that he kept in his closet, and we ate way too many take-outs...

And we ‘christened’ nearly every inch of his apartment and then a good deal of his car and various places around campus as well.

“You’re thinking about something big,” Huck laughed, bringing me out of my thoughts as he reached over to push my hair back from my shoulder.

We were naked and in his bed. It wasn’t novel any longer, but that didn’t stop a thrill from going through me at the fact that it was *reality*.

“I’m not,” I admitted, shrugging with a grin as I rolled back into his side.

“Your forehead was all furrowed,” he pointed out, running his index finger down from my hairline to my eyebrows so softly that I couldn’t help but lean into the touch.

His fingers were magic, on a musical instrument or my body, it didn’t matter.

“I was just thinking about how nice the last three months have been,” I confessed, warm and happy as I smiled up at him.

His brow creased with my words, the blue depths of his eyes deepening as he glanced away from me and towards the ceiling with a small frown.

For the first time in a long time I felt my stomach drop, worry filling me as I tried to figure out what I could have said that would cause such a reaction.

“Now you’re the one thinking about something big,” I accused, trying to keep my tone teasing despite the very real worry that gripped me.

“I am,” Huck said solemnly.

He didn’t add anything else and that worry became a leaden weight in my belly.

“Are you going to share what that is or are you going to make me guess?” I joked my laugh flatter than I liked.

He took another moment to answer, finally looking back at me with a look in his eyes that I couldn't quite decipher.

It was as if waves were crashing against a shore I couldn't quite reach, his eyes the middle of a storm in the midst of it.

"Huck?"

"I finished my master's program today," he finally told me, his voice devoid of the excitement I thought such a statement would have held.

"That's great!" I exclaimed, forgetting my worry for a moment as I flung myself over his chest to hug him. I knew just how hard he had worked for it and how many hours he'd spent chasing his dream. "I'm so proud of you," I gushed, kissing his cheek and feeling that leaden weight in my belly harden at how stiff and still he was even after my excitement.

"Why is this not great?" I asked in confusion, my mouth going dry as I pushed myself up off of him to look down at him with an anxiety-filled wonder.

Huck pushed my hair back from my face from how it had been hanging around it, his thumbs sweeping over my cheekbones as his stormy gaze traced my features almost hesitantly.

"My father asked if I would come out to Las Vegas this afternoon when he called to congratulate me," he explained slowly, dropping his hands almost as if expecting me to be upset with the news.

I didn't understand how either thing he had told me was cause for such careful wording with me.

We'd spent nearly every day the last three months together, but that didn't mean every minute of every day. And we'd survived the two days that my brother had claimed our time just fine.

Did he think I'd be mad that he was going to visit his dad? Or that I'd be upset that I hadn't been invited?

"You two have been talking a lot more," I said, keeping my tone as positive as possible despite all my confusion. "I know he'd said he wanted you to come to see things out there- and

he said he'd introduce you to people in the right circles. That sounds like a great thing, babe."

*So why was he being so weird about it?*

Huck's adam's apple bobbed, his eyes searching my face even more carefully as he pushed himself upright in bed.

I followed suit, grabbing a pillow and putting it in front of myself to curl my arms around.

"He's not just asking me to come to visit," he said slowly. "He's saying that he wants me to come and stay with him... like come live with him so that he can show me around and give me a leg up in the industry."

"Full-time?" I felt stupid asking such a question. Like Huck was just going to go live there on weekends and spend the rest of his time in small-town Nacogdoches, but my mind was reeling at the implications of it all.

"Full-time," he acknowledged, his voice solemn.

I could hear the faint note of excitement there though.

Why wouldn't he be?

Over the last three months, he and his father had been talking more and more, finding that they had more and more in common, and it had settled something in Huck for that to happen.

But I hadn't missed the wanderlust in his eyes after a conversation with the famous rock star about his travels or the more exotic, exciting elements of the business.

I just... hadn't ever considered Huck actually leaving.

"You want to go." It wasn't a question. I could tell by the way he was staring at me that it was what he wanted. Even if I hadn't been able to see him or hear his voice, I would have known because it just made sense. It was the next step in Huck's life, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. *Of course, he wanted to go.*

"I do." He said the words almost apologetically, that same hesitant look in his eyes as he met mine.

Like he was afraid I was going to be upset with him.

My heart felt like it was barely beating, my stomach a mess of knots as I forced myself to smile through all of my worry-filled thoughts and disbelief.

“You’ll have so much fun,” I enthused, trying to stay sounding upbeat and force it to look like I wasn’t upset at all.

Huck frowned, seeming surprised, his eyes widening as he looked at me silently.

“God, I’m going to be so jealous of all of the things you’ll get to go do,” I laughed, my fingers tight around one another as I squeezed the pillow to me tighter to hide my anxiety and disappointment. “And think of all the people you’ll get to meet!”

“You’re not mad?” He asked after a moment, ignoring my blabbing and tilting his head slightly.

His curls fell to one side of his face, messy and imperfect, and so beautiful it hurt my heart to see it. But I had to push that aside.

“Why would I be mad?” I laughed as if my heart weren’t sinking in my ribcage. “You’re going to your dad’s. It’ll be hard to see each other as often as we have been, obviously,” I rolled my eyes, joking as I shoved the hurt down as deep inside of me as it could go. “I doubt you’ll even be able to get a flight out here every couple of weeks-”

“Moira,” he warned, the apology in my name like a dagger to my heart. “We’ve got the memories of the last three months, I want you to know how special they’ve been to me-”

“Stop making this sound like a goodbye,” I teased. If he kept it up I was going to lose my ability to make it seem like I wasn’t breaking into a million pieces as we spoke. ““We’ll always cherish this time together’, God, Huck, that’s such a middle-school year book signing!”

“I know how long you waited for me before, Moira,” Huck said seriously, ignoring my attempts at humor. “I don’t want you pulling that shit again. You’re still so young, and this is

your first year in college! You have no idea what is out there for you. You need to live your life too and-”

“Aw, you won’t be here for my sophomore year,” I pouted, interrupting him again and swallowing the lump in my throat before he could tell me that I needed to see other people.

I was going to wait for him.

That was all there was to it.

“I’ll never be able to move out of the dorms now,” I joked, tossing my hair over my shoulder and appreciating that at least that got a smile.

“I’m leaving you my apartment, you dork,” he snorted. “It’s paid for for a year already. I figured with how little you’d been there so far this semester you’d do better living here anyways.”

“Awwww,” I threw the pillow at him, exposing my naked front and making my boobs jiggle as purposefully as possible. “You do care!” I couldn’t keep talking about it. Not like we were. If he said anything else, I was going to lose all my faux sense of bravado.

I could see the way he eyed my chest and I could see the way he was fighting to ignore it, swallowing like he meant to keep having a serious conversation.

“You gotta be careful, being a future rock star,” I continued, crawling across the bed and stretching out so that I knew he could see my ass as I swayed it back and forth while closing the distance between us. “Someone might think you were paying me off...”

The storm in his eyes seemed to have shifted, his gaze molten as he watched my body moving lithely across the mattress.

“Someone would have to be a fool to try and pay you off,” he said roughly, clearing his throat as my hands moved to either of his thighs, my body lowering slowly and purposefully as I kept his gaze on mine.

“Or just really, really appreciative,” I hummed, lowering my torso slowly while keeping eye contact.

Huck's breathing picked up, his dick standing to attention before I was even within touching distance of it.

I could see it jump, his chuckle strained.

"I'm always that," he promised huskily, putting his hands in my hair and looking at me with such rapt attention that I used all of my focus on that instead of the conversation we just had.

"We'll see," I hummed, lowering myself the rest of the way and taking him in my mouth.

I didn't want to talk about Las Vegas anymore. Or school. Or apartments. Or goodbyes.

I just wanted to show him how much he'd be missing out on not being here.

And give him something to want to come back to as well.

"Fuck, Moira," Huck breathed, tangling his hands in my hair.

I'd never understood the draw of blow jobs before. They had always seemed so one-sided to my virgin mind. But with Huck? I loved how powerful I felt, rolling my lips along the sides of his dick and flicking the tip of it with my tongue.

Every movement brought a new noise from him, his eyes heavily lidded and his groans traveling straight through me and down into my already wet pussy.

"This," he murmured, guiding me up and down his dick with sure, steady hands. "This is a good memory." He sounded torn, with desire, and that same sadness at leaving coming between us again.

I hummed, smiling around his dick as he reached forward, palming my breasts in a way that had me almost gasping near immediately.

"And you'll always cherish it," I teased, pulling my mouth off of him and running my lips in feather-light kisses up the side of it.

"Yes," he agreed instantly. His voice was dark and throaty and it sent a thrill through me, even if I wanted him to change what he was saying.

“And I’ll always wait for you,” I promised, going against what he had asked me not to do as I climbed on top of him, sinking myself slowly down onto his dick and taking away his chance to get onto me for my promise.

I could see the war in his oceanic eyes, the blue-greens flashing like waves hitting against a rocky shore, but there was a possessiveness there too.

He rolled his hips up into me, reaching up to pull me down to him and claim my lips in a hot promise of his own.

Pleasure curled in the pit of my belly and I tuned out the awareness of his leaving, focusing instead on the ripples of pleasure curling through me.

Fuck, I loved him. And I loved fucking him too. If this was going to be the last chance I got for however long... I was going to make it one to remember.

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## CHAPTER 8



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*Las Vegas, Nevada*

“Bernie, I’ve told you a thousand times. If you invite that schmuck and his agent there’s no point inviting me,” my father griped.

His eyebrows were furrowed and his lips set in a straight line as he glared at his agent, pointing accusingly across the recording studio to the equally aged rock star standing across the room laughing too loudly not to be noticed.

I had to bite back a grin.

In the two weeks since I’d moved to Las Vegas, my father had only shown any hint of temper or irritation twice before... and both of them had to do with the guy across the room.

From what I’d heard from Bernie and some of the band Eddie and my father had been friends once. But a few competitive shows, a shared love, and some really bad 80s rock parties had all gone down the drain.

“And I told you, Chapman, you can’t just expect him not to be invited,” Bernie soothed, shaking his head and waving off my dad’s irritation. “He’ll be gone in no time. There’s not enough whiskey at this event for him to stick around.”

“He’s going to try recording something,” my dad grouched.

“And what do you care?” Bernie answered with a snort. “You’re retired, remember?”

“My son isn’t,” my dad pointed to me. “He’s supposed to be breaking into the biz-”

“And an old, nearly retired 80s rock star isn’t going to be any competition for him,” Bernie laughed. “Come on now, Chapman.”

“He’d be less competition if you’d sign me already,” I joked, taking a sip of the whiskey and coke I was drinking and grinning around the rim as my dad turned pointedly to Bernie.

Bernie only grinned though. He’d been talking about signing me ever since I’d shown up and he’d heard me play with my dad that first night.

“Yeah, well, let’s see how this demo we’re about to drop of yours does first,” Bernie reminded me, pointing over to the DJ table where we’d dropped the CD off earlier.

“That’s *if* Eddie doesn’t hog the damn spotlight all night,” my father grunted. He was glaring at Eddie all over again.

I would have answered, and probably made it worse by teasing him more, but I could feel my phone vibrate in my hand before I could.

And Moira’s number was the one that flashed across the screen when I checked.

I held up a hand, letting Bernie and my father silently know I was stepping aside before I ducked out of the main room and out into the much quieter hallway.

“Hey,” I greeted enthusiastically, surprised she’d called so late. “What’s up?”

“Hey,” Moira answered softly, something hesitant about the way she said the one word. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Nah, nothing yet,” I joked. “Just my dad griping about some old rival.”

“Oh... So you’re with your dad?”

I frowned, not sure why her voice sounded so off. “No? I mean, yes, but not right at this moment, why?”

“Are you alone?”

She was being cagey.

It wasn't a word I'd ever thought to associate with Moira before.

"Yeah, right now," I said after a short pause, my voice trailing off so it sounded almost like a question.

"Oh. Okay." Moira paused, a soft crinkling of what sounded like a foil wrapper sounding in the background. "So... How are things?"

"They're good," I told her distractedly, still trying to figure out why she was being so weird. "What about there? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," she muttered. "But good how? Like... how are things going?"

"I mean, it's new," I admitted. I didn't know quite what she was asking. It wasn't like I didn't call her every handful of days and keep her up to date with all the new shit happening. "They're going to be playing my demo tonight I think, Bernie thinks I have a shot of making it out here. My dad's great. The same stuff I told you last week."

"So nothing new?" Moira asked, her voice sounding far away, even through the phone. "You're happy?"

"Yes?" I didn't know why I made it sound like a question.

I was happy.

I missed her, but she knew that.

"It's a good thing I wasn't tied down by anything when I came out here, you know?" I tried joking, trying to lighten the mood and make her laugh- but her silence only grew more poignant after I said the words.

Fuck.

"Look, I didn't mean it that way," I amended quickly, grimacing at how stupid of a joke that'd been.

"Oh, God, Huck, did you think you just bothered me?" Moira laughed. But it was off. It was too loud, too sudden. "I understand what you meant. I was just teasing."

She sounded like she meant it, but there was still something in her voice...

“Oscar said that he’s coming to visit,” she added after a moment, trailing off again.

Maybe that was what her problem was.

“Yeah, he just booked the tickets two nights ago,” I admitted. “He seems to be doing well working at that novelty film store.”

“Yeah, sounds like it,” Moira said softly. “Well, good... I’m glad you’ll get to see one another.”

That hitch in her words made me pause.

I shifted, moving out of the way of the door as someone else came out of the recording studio and went to go down the hall. The conversation felt so off, so heavy despite how little we were talking about. I shifted the phone from one ear to another, looking around helplessly as I tried to find a way to fix that strange gap between us.

“Did you want to come to visit?” I asked finally, wondering if that was all the issue was.

Moira was dead silent again for too long of a period.

“Not now,” she finally whispered.

I frowned, looking down at the toes of my boots and trying to keep myself from reading too much into it.

“Maybe soon?” she added after a moment, but the words sounded forced. Like she was saying them just to placate me.

Maybe she was pulling away from me after all.

It wasn’t like I could blame her. I’d worried it’d happened as soon as I told her that my dad had invited me out.

Moira was young.

Fuck, she was so young. And beautiful, and talented...

She was my best friend’s little sister. I’d reminded myself so many times over the time we’d been together. But every time

she'd looked at me, her honey eyes full of promise and her lips quirked the way that they did I forgot all about Oscar.

I'd been with a lot of women, but something about Moira had been different.

And I knew it damned me to hell.

She was too young, Oscar's sister, I'd known her my whole life...

But hell seemed worth it for even just twenty seconds between her firm thighs with her hands in my hair and my name on the edge of her lips.

"It's great out here," I said woodenly, my dick aching just at the thought of being between her thighs again.

Fuck, I missed her.

But if she was pulling away.

"I bet," she said, unenthusiastically.

I'd known she was going to try and promise to wait for me when I first told her I was leaving. I'd even tried to prevent it. I'd thought I was sparing her at the time, but feeling the jagged hole in my chest listening to her breathing on the other end of the phone, not trying to continue the conversation, I knew that I'd been trying to protect myself.

I couldn't ask her to wait for me forever.

I'd been lucky she had as long as she had the first time.

"Well," I cleared my throat, fighting the pain as I exhaled heavily. "I've got to get back inside. I'll talk to you later?"

"Yeah," Moira said after a minute, making it sound like she'd been about to say something else, but then deciding against it.

"Yeah. That's fine. Have fun, and good luck with your demo!" Even that didn't sound as enthusiastic as it once had.

"Thanks."

There was an awkward silence, the sound of the two of us breathing the only sound on the call before she finally hung up.

I felt even more hollow now that the call had finished than I had had it.

She hadn't shared anything about her day. Nothing about how her week had gone. She'd only asked a very few, limited questions.

Maybe she'd already met someone else.

My stomach flipped, my jaw clenching at the thought alone.

Fuck, I hated just thinking that.

But it would make sense.

I'd been gone two weeks. It had probably finally set in that I'd moved away. Maybe with me not being there, she'd finally started hanging out with other people on campus.

God, I hated the idea of any of those assholes touching her.

But...

I'd moved out here.

I couldn't ask her to wait for me.

"Fuck," I muttered, lifting my whiskey and coke and downing the rest of it in one go as I pocketed my phone.

I was supposed to be celebrating my demo getting played tonight.

I'd never felt less like celebrating in my whole damn life.

"Huck!" Bernie called, waving me over to the group of people in the corner where he stood with them as I re-entered the studio.

I tried putting Moira out of my head.

I needed to just stop thinking about her.

She was moving on.

It was a good thing.

So why didn't it feel like one?

I grimaced, holding my hand up and turning to grab a drink off of the nearest serving tray passing me. I didn't care that it was

straight vodka. I didn't care that it wasn't even a vodka I liked.

I downed the whole glass in one go, relishing in the burn the alcohol brought.

And then I grabbed another.

The conversation with Moira and the realizations it had brought had been hell.

I needed to put her out of my mind, damn it.

But that was going to take a shit ton of alcohol...

And a lot of determination.

I downed the second drink without even pausing to see what it was, grimacing at the straight cognac that poured down my throat before I put the glass back down.

I was supposed to be mingling. Being seen. Being heard.

Somewhere in the background, I could hear the guitar intro to my song.

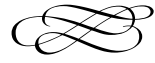
Even if Moira was all I was thinking about, it needed to at least look like that wasn't the case.

"Bernie!" I called back as I approached, my arms wide and my grin the most charming I could manage as I approached him and the people he was with.

*I just wished I could reclaim any of the excitement I'd been feeling before Moira had called...*

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## CHAPTER 9



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MOIRA

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

At first, I thought that the puking was a reaction to Huck being gone.

I thought it was stress.

I lost weight, I slept all the time, and food was something that just held no interest for me.

A google search told me it was depression, and I had no reason to doubt that it was. Of course, that lasted all of a week of Huck being gone. He left and behind him, he left a hole that nothing seemed able to fill, not even the intermittent phone calls he managed.

Little by little, I felt him pulling away.

When I first realized the box of tampons I'd been keeping at his place while we were 'dating' had been left unopened I attributed that to stress too. But then I sat down and thought about the last time I'd had my period and that conversation we'd had after the first time we'd had sex played in my head like a brass marching band.

I'd had sex with Huck, lost my virginity to him even, and then... just never gotten my period.

"I still don't see how you didn't notice," Layla chided me for what had to be the millionth time in the two months since Huck had left, huffing as she rearranged how she was sitting on the chair in the waiting room we were in.

Everything was so ... stark. Every woman in there seemed to have a partner with them, their smiles jubilant but just as uncomfortable looking as I was.

My fingers were tight around Layla's as I sighed. "Because I was busy with other things," I answered robotically.

"How do you not notice your period missing though?" Layla pressed, looking sideways at my belly and how I'd just started to show.

"How did you not know when you had Isla?" I muttered, wincing as another cramp hit me.

I just hadn't thought about my period while I'd been with Huck. And the symptoms I was having? Felt so much worse than what I'd heard pregnancy would be like. I'd *lost* weight in the first three months from all the puking. Granted, I'd gained it all back and then some since then, but still.

"Fair enough," Layla sighed. I could hear the worry in her voice and tried not to take her constant questions so personally. "Are you sure you don't want to call Huck?" she added after a moment, glancing at me as if I might have changed my mind too.

I couldn't answer her there.

Because, no, I wasn't sure. And that was the whole damn problem.

"You're five months pregnant now Moira," Layla pointed out, again glancing at my abnormally large belly. "It's been two months since you took that pregnancy test... That's a long time to not tell him, you know."

"Huck doesn't want kids," I muttered.

It was the same phrase that had kept me quiet all the times I'd considered calling him myself.

It was too easy to remember the look in his eyes when he'd first worried about not wearing the condom that first time. The *only* time he hadn't worn a condom the whole time we were together.

And I'd promised him it was fine and that we were safe.

“Well, sure, he said that before,” Layla pushed. “But that was also before the two of you-”

“Do *you* want to be the one to tell Oscar, Layla?” I asked, my voice as pointed as the look I shot her.

Layla stopped, inhaling sharply and finally falling silent beside me.

The silence was almost worse than the questions.

“When’s the last time Huck called?” Layla asked after a few minutes, her brown eyes soft as she looked over the way I winced at the question.

“It’s been a month.” The words were sour in my mouth, the rotten taste they left behind like rotten eggs and ash all at the same time.

It made me want to puke.

“Rat bastard,” Layla hissed, pulling her phone out and typing furiously.

Normally, I would have been upset she was calling Huck that, but honestly, right at the moment... I agreed.

He’d been so good about calling at first. Not every day, not even on a schedule, but still... calling... and then he’d just... stopped.

I didn’t realize what was happening until I heard the sound of Layla’s phone, my eyes darting to her just in time to see her putting it on speaker with Huck’s name on the screen.

“We’re sorry,” an automated voice clicked on the call, “you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. Please, check the number dialed and try again.”

Whatever I might have said to Layla was forgotten as we both stared at the phone, the acid that had already been churning in my stomach turning into high gear.

Disconnected?

What did that even mean?

For how long?

“Moira Snow?” a nurse called from in front of the door leading to the back, her eyes on the clipboard in her hand, and her voice rushed.

I couldn’t answer her, my body was stuck somewhere between numb and violently ill.

“Moira Snow?” the nurse called again.

“That’s us!” my twin yelled, grabbing my hand and hauling me to my feet before the nurse could call my name a third time.

“Fuck Huck,” she whispered fiercely as she held my hand, leading me toward the nurse. “We’re going to go see your baby today. Don’t let him ruin this!”

She was right. I knew she was right. I just had a hard time following her advice.

“Nurse-” Layla started, only for the woman to cut her off.

“Not a nurse,” she explained, grinning hurriedly. She was brisk, from the way she talked to the manner she moved, but there was a friendliness there too, especially when she looked over and saw how nervous I was. “I’m the ultrasound tech. The doctor said you’re starting this a little later than he’d like so he wants us to start with an ultrasound to confirm dates and then have you do the routine check-in. They’ll have you pee in a cup, take your weight and vitals, and then the doctor will see you.”

I appreciated her frankness almost as much as I did the amount of information, my stomach still doing somersaults as she lead us into a small, dark room.

“You’re wearing a dress so I don’t have to ask you to get out of your pants,” she laughed. “And it looks like you’re far enough along we can just do the stomach scan too.” She patted the bed in the center of the room, sitting down in a chair in front of what looked like a computer with alien attachments as I nervously listened to her.

Layla grinned, already familiar with everything, and happily settled into the chair nearest the bed with my hand still in hers.

“So I just...?” I hesitated, sliding onto the bed, still sitting up and looking around in wonder.

“Lay back and lift your dress,” Layla encouraged, snorting at my wide eyes. “Oh, you better get used to it. There’s no such thing as privacy and modesty with these appointments.”

I frowned but did as I was told, jumping as the tech squirted something onto my belly the minute it was bared.

She moved a wand onto it attached to the computer next, pressing it just above my pubic bone and at the bottom swell of my belly as the screen in front of us crackled to life.

It was strange, just as alien as the equipment, and for a long moment I couldn’t make heads or tails of what I was seeing.

The two identical gasps from the tech and Layla let me know that it wasn’t normal though.

And the multiple heartbeats that came through the monitor quickly let me in on why it wouldn’t be.

“Those- that’s- how-” I couldn’t get a full word out, much less a full question, my stuttering dying out as the tech moved the wand over my belly and further showed the little hands and feet moving on the screen.

“That’s triplets,” the tech confirmed carefully, not showing emotion one way or another as she eyed me for my reaction.

“Fuck,” Layla breathed out, her hand holding mine even tighter than it had been out in the waiting room. “What the hell are you going to do Moira?”

Triplets.

Three.

Babies.

I’d barely wrapped my head around the fact that I was pregnant at all, and now I was having *three* babies?!

“Obviously, I’ll need to defer my course,” I muttered, shock filling my voice as I stared at the three little bodies on the screen.

Suddenly it was all real.

I was pregnant.

I was going to be a mom.

I didn’t think I’d fully grasped it all until just that moment.

“Do you want to know the genders, mama?” the tech asked softly, trying to be respectful of the sudden silence in the room.

Did I?

“Yes,” I found myself answering more surely than I had any right to.

“Baby A is a boy, see here?” the tech pointed to where he was pulling his legs above his head.

“David,” I breathed, something filling my chest that I couldn’t quite describe.

“And this one here? Baby B? Also a boy,” the tech chuckled.

“Carter.” I didn’t know how I knew their names or why I was so sure that’s what they’d be, but I did. And watching Carter sucking on his thumb made my heart race in a way I hadn’t been ready for.

“And Baby C.... Aw, look. Baby C is a girl.”

My eyes filled with tears, my breath catching in my chest. “Sofia,” I whispered, clutching Layla’s hand even tighter.

God, I wasn’t ready to be a mom. I was only twenty years old. I hadn’t talked to Huck in a month, he didn’t even know... he’d probably run if he did...

And I loved Huck.

God, did I love Huck.

But I knew, then and there, that I loved the three babies that I could see on that screen even more. And, more than that even, they needed me more than Huck ever had.

They hadn't asked for this any more than I had.

Less, even.

I loved Huck, that was true.

But the babies on that screen deserved all the love I could give them... and they didn't deserve to grow up feeling unwanted and unloved the way Huck had. Especially if it meant proving to Huck that his worst fear was a real possibility. I'd promised Huck we were safe...

Now, even though I had been wrong in how we were, I was going to have to make sure that he and my babies were... even if it meant giving up everything I thought I'd ever wanted.

Even if it meant giving up Huck.

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## CHAPTER 10



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*Lufkin, Texas*

*3 years and 5 months on*

Lufkin was known for three things: Angelina Brewing Company, having the only mall for God only knew how many miles, and Angelina College. And not necessarily in that order.

When Layla had moved into a small house with a little bit of land on the outskirts of Lufkin, I'd teased her for only being able to go far enough away from home to be in one county over. When I'd moved in with her three years ago, right after the lease for Huck's apartment had finished and right before giving birth, I'd thought of those three things much more seriously than I'd ever thought I would.

During the winter, our property was like a barren, brown, windy horror movie set. But in the spring? The spring always made it obvious why Layla had chosen this house over all the others.

Crape Myrtles bloomed in pinks and purples up and down the drive, the lilies in the front planted amongst the rosebushes burst to life, and the grass seemed to glow so green it almost looked fake. It was warm and welcoming, and the cicadas sang happily from the trees around the property as if to announce it.

"Mmmm- Maaaa- Mammaaaa," Carter sang, humming around the spoon hanging out of his mouth and kicking his chubby little legs against the high chair he was sitting in.

David and Sofia giggled from where they ate their yogurt in their chairs on either side of their brother, the warm spring sunlight shining through the wall of windows behind them and illuminating the dining room in an array of oranges and golds.

I grinned at my toddlers as I paused in setting up the family calendar I was trying to organize for the month, my finger still on my keyboard as Carter grinned proudly at me.

He was the most animated of my children- and the most likely to throw that yogurt all over me and my laptop if I didn't stop to acknowledge him too.

"Carter," I said back liltily.

"Oh, the blueberry festival in Nacogdoches this year is getting a band!" Layal interrupted from the other side of the dining room, sounding shocked.

I didn't blame her. "Really?"

"Really," she muttered, shaking her head. "You think you might want to go this year?"

She wasn't paying attention to me, typing away at her computer program and only half-asking.

I knew if she had been paying attention she wouldn't have even asked, but that didn't stop me from staring at her as if she'd grown horns though.

"Oh, yes, let me take the triplets to a well-known festival in the town I avoid taking them to," I answered dryly. "If I was okay doing that don't you think we'd be living there instead of out here in Lufkin?"

It had been the whole reason I'd moved in with Layla. I'd wanted to avoid anyone in Nacogdoches finding out about my pregnancy, and later my triplets. Gossip spread like wildfire in a small town and the gossip of me being pregnant was something I kept from as many people as possible.

I just knew if even one person from back home caught wind of the triplets, Oscar or Huck would know by the end of the day.

"I'm going to excuse it since you're spending quality time with your 'brainchild'," I teased. "Even if that brainchild is

taking longer for you to birth than your real, actual child.”

Isla giggled from where she was eating her pretzels, dipping them in yogurt and keeping her prettily braided blonde hair back from the mess of it all.

Layla only rolled her eyes. “One day this will be the source of my financial freedom, twin, you wait and see,” she mumbled.

It was the same thing she’d been saying since she’d first had the idea back in high school.

“Your job as a makeup artist is financial freedom,” I reminded her, tucking my hair behind my ear and smiling at her. “You’ve been doing so good with your appointments and bookings lately... I doubt you’ll need to be doing any side work after this next month.”

She had made a whole business out of it.

In the three years since she’d opened her makeup career, she’d capitalized on the market, making a name for herself in those circles so strongly that people were consulting with her now too.

“And your singing career will be the same,” Layla teased, looking up at me with a frank appreciation for my compliment.

Isla, unbidden, began singing just at the mention of the word.

Her little voice was soft and sweet, and much more harmonious than mine had been at her age. Both Layla and I grinned at her as the triplets all paused in their yogurt adventures to clap for her.

“Oh, David,” I sighed as I saw the yogurt splatter between his palms and paint his face and hair. But David only giggled at it.

And then, seeing why I had said it, so did the other four bodies in the room.

Before I could say something about cleaning him up though, my computer chimed.

I stopped, frowning and looking at the notification jumping at the bottom of my screen.

“Was that your email?” Layla asked, her voice suddenly tight. “Is it Oscar trying to come to visit again?”

He’d been emailing a lot lately, I knew why her mind went to that, but it wasn’t his face in the icon.

We’d both pushed him off every time he tried coming to visit us where we lived, always for some reason or another why we could only meet him out and about and why he couldn’t ever stay with us.

He still didn’t know about the triplets.

“I can’t open this thing,” I muttered, clicking the notification in frustration. “It’s that thing you set up...”

“The website for your singing?” Layla asked confused. She moved her computer software aside and typed into her laptop, her eyebrows climbing her forehead and her lips parting in disbelief.

“Is it Oscar?” I asked, suddenly worried I’d somehow misread the notification.

“No,” Layla whispered. “God... Moira, check your email.”

I clicked over to the email icon quickly, worry filling my gut.

“What is- Oh.”

I stared at the email I’d opened, my stomach flipping about like it had jumping beans thrown into it.

“There’s no way that’s real,” I whispered, my voice shaking.

It was a job offer, sure enough. I figured it must be, coming from the website Layla had made me. It got more traffic than any of the other means I had for booking, but none of them had ever made me think they were a scam as the one open in front of me did.

“That’s real,” Layla assured me, shaking her head.

“They had to have added a zero on accident,” I whispered, opening the booking to make sure that they had.

But every field asking for the price was the same.

“Thirty thousand dollars?” I muttered. “For a wedding?!”

“A wedding in Nacogdoches,” Layla pointed out.

I’d done so good about staying out of town since I’d started showing with the triplets...

There’s no way I could refuse that kind of money though, even if it meant I had to face everyone I’d ever known.

“I’ll watch the triplets for you,” Layla said eagerly, still sounding shocked, but excitement leaked through that too.

“I haven’t been back to Nacogdoches since that last doctor’s appointment,” I whispered my throat tight.

Everything there had reminded me of Huck anyways.

“I don’t recognize the name of whoever this is booking you,” Layla offered encouragingly, her words hesitant.

I hadn’t either.

It wasn’t like it mattered.

The last time we spoke, Huck’s career had shot up the minute his demo had been released. He was off God only knew where living the high life of a famous rock star like he’d always wanted.

It wasn’t like anyone else would recognize anything about me anyway... Oscar still lived in Conroe... and if Layla had the triplets...

I looked at my twin, my heart in my throat.

“This is a big deal, Moira,” Layla said softly, her brown eyes shining.

“Well, yeah, it’s thirty thousand dollars,” I breathed back, snorting.

Layla laughed, shaking her head. “It’s more than that! This is proof to show you how good you’ve gotten and how recognized your talent is. You deserve this break. I know going back there hurts and that you’re worried people might see you...”

“I doubt anyone would remember what I looked like,” I admitted. “And even if they did...”

“You being back isn’t that big of a rumor for people to go about spreading,” Layla reassured me.

“Even if they did...” I trailed off. It wasn’t like I was trying to pretend I didn’t exist. It was just that I’d been hiding the triplets.

“You deserve this, Moira,” Layla repeated emphatically.

“You Gunna sing at a big wedding?” Isla asked, looking excited at just the prospect.

I paused, looking between my niece and my three kids.

Thirty thousand dollars would go a long way for a family of six and two of us being single mothers.

The list of things we needed for the kids got bigger every year, and I knew that Layla had covered half of the things more than once just to try and help get me back on my feet after having the triplets.

“I’m going to do it,” I decided, my voice shaky.

It was the scariest thing I’d ever agreed to, bar having the triplets itself, but Layla was right.

“If you can keep David, Carter, and Sofia...”

“Of course, I can!” Layla insisted. “Isla and I will make blanket forts and have a movie night! It’ll be so much fun. And then you can bring us all back ice cream or something when you finish.”

My heart thudded unevenly in my chest, and my throat felt tight.

It wasn’t like the event was even on campus. Whoever the couple was had booked the most expensive wedding venue available. The Fredonia was mired in history and sought after by nearly every bride in the area, but usually far too expensive for ninety percent of them.

No one from the circles I’d grown up in would be there.

It was just another gig.

One that paid a lot of money...

“I’ll have to buy a dress,” I muttered.

I sure as hell didn’t have anything fancy enough to fit the Fredonia.

“We can go shopping tomorrow,” Layla promised.

“But I don’t think I can afford one nice enough yet,” I admitted, frowning.

Layla waved the confession away. “I’ll cover you, you pay me back after your big gig,” she teased. “And I’ll do your makeup and hair.”

She spoke so easily about it she was making it easier for me to accept, even if my stomach still felt like it was trying to turn itself inside out.

I looked at my triplets, my heart suddenly feeling hollow.

I thought about Huck all the time.

How could I not? Carter had his eyes and David had his smile... Sofia had his soft, perfect curls. My triplets all looked something like their daddy.

But normally I was good about compartmentalizing it.

Going to Nacogdoches, even by myself, was going to make that hard.

I thought of Huck all the time. I saw him on TV, I saw him in magazines... Even in Lufkin, a whole town away from his hometown, his name was on everyone’s lips. He was Nacogdoches’ unofficial hero, the hometown sweetheart who had gone off and become a rock star.

I looked at David, Carter, and Sofia, reminding myself why I’d made the decisions I had and swallowing the hurt that came with thinking of that time in my past.

I could do this.

I just had to ignore the longing in my heart for things to be different.

And put Huck back into the box I’d shoved him and the memories of him into.

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# CHAPTER 11



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MOIRA

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I wasn't one for wearing dresses.

I'd never been one for them. You couldn't run in them, you had to be careful about how you stood, any sudden movements could result in a sudden 'oops' accident and everyone and their mother could see right up your dress and into the parts of you that you were supposed to save for behind closed doors.

I'd worn a dress to lose my virginity...

And then I'd worn a variety of maternity sundresses throughout my pregnancy too. As it turned out, during pregnancy, pants were difficult to get on and off all of the time. Being pregnant with triplets just made it twenty times worse seeing that my toes had disappeared from my sight and my belly had swollen to the size of a planet well before I'd been ready.

Since then I'd sworn off them.

In so much as I could anyways.

My job didn't always allow for it. Weddings usually required them, depending on the venue. I'd gotten pretty good at finding pants suits or skirts that could fit the bill- and when they didn't? I had a little blue dependable number that cinched at the waist and fell somewhere below mid-calf.

But no one wore sundresses or pantsuits to the Fredonia.

And the wedding I'd been booked for was listed as formal.

The midnight blue dress that Layla and I had found was the most formal thing I'd ever owned. The sales attendant had called it a mermaid fit, but I thought that was just another word for incredibly tight. It hugged my every curve down to just above my knees before the fabric started loosening, making the appearance of the 'tail' of the mermaid. The sleeves were gathered off the shoulders, the neckline a soft dip that made my boobs look bigger than they were.

Which was impressive considering how big they'd gotten from pregnancy.

Still, even in such finery, I felt out of place as I walked into the Fredonia and caught a look at all the glitz and glamor and the other guests making their way to their seats inside the ballroom.

Sally Cage and Harry Camberton had to be filthy rich. There was no other explanation for it. From the venue to the crystal sculpture of a swan that had been placed in front of the entrance to the ballroom with the guest book signing in front of it, everything about the wedding screamed money. And I hadn't even stepped inside yet.

I swallowed my nerves, holding my head high and heading toward the attendant at the door to let them know I was here.

I didn't need to, apparently.

I'd no sooner joined the queue to enter than the wedding planner, who I'd met with the week before to finalize details, popped up in the doorway, speaking into a headpiece and waving me over hurriedly.

I didn't know what she wanted me to do. Did she expect me to push people out of the way to get to her?

I shrugged helplessly, following the line of people in, and glanced away from her to try and peer into the ballroom for my first look.

The chalkboard greeting people off to the side blocked my view though.

‘Welcome family & friends to the wedding of Stella Ingman and Huck Chapman. April 15. A day of love and happily ever after.’

It was your basic welcome sign to a wedding, chalky white letters are done in the style of calligraphy and big enough to be seen from yards away.

But it was the names that stopped me short.

Sally and Harry had been who had booked me. Sally and Harry had been who I had been expecting.

Huck Chapman.

I blinked, hard, as if to change the name there on the board, my stomach bottoming out and my knees going weak.

Suddenly I was sixteen again, sitting with my best friend on the back of her dad’s truck’s tailgate, watching Huck and Oscar throw a football back and forth and run around the July fourth barbeque laughing and shirtless.

*“You’re starting again,” Stella had pointed out, grinning at me as she leaned forward and waggled her eyebrows up and down.*

*She was a beautiful girl, and not just because of how close we were. Stella was the kind of girl who made people stop and stare. She was built like a model and had long, brown hair that fell nearly to the small of her back in beach waves that she never had to manipulate. She was stunning, confident, and laughing at me so hard she was nearly falling forward off the tailgate.*

*“He’s just so beautiful,” I’d whispered, my eyes on Huck’s messy curls as he lifted the football and let it fly over the heads of the people he was playing with.*

*“And your brother’s best friend,” Stella reminded me for the millionth time.*

*Her grin was amused as she shook her head, looking at me knowingly as my shoulders sank.*

*“I’m well aware of that fact, thanks,” I’d muttered, fixing my braid and how it hung over my neck as Huck and Oscar*

*jogged nearer.*

*“Your brother will never let it happen,” Stella had continued, oblivious to how much I didn’t want to hear it. “You’re off limits to him, you know. Why not set me up with him instead?”*

My vision swam, my chest tight as I stared at their names and the word wedding above them. I’d thought she was joking back then, that it was just more of her teasing me, but a part of me had to admit that I’d seen the way she watched him too.

It hadn’t ever mattered to me because everyone looked at Huck like that... and I’d trusted Stella to never act on it.

I got to the front of the line entering the ballroom somehow, my feet carrying me forward despite how many years back my brain was stuck.

Through all the finery and the guests I could see the flowery altar at the front of the ballroom, the white and red flowers decorating it making the man in front of it all stand out even more.

If I’d been frozen before I was completely floored then.

Huck Chapman.

I couldn’t look away from him, my heart in my throat as I took him in.

He didn’t look like he’d aged at all. His hair was longer, his clothes far nicer, but other than that it was the same man who’d kissed me at the airport almost four years before with his hands framing my face and the promise of a call when he landed.

He was just wearing a tuxedo, the all-white and red accented fabric so different from anything I’d ever expect him to wear that it looked instantly out of place.

His oceanic eyes met mine almost as soon as I finished looking him over and whatever thoughts I’d had of running were forgotten again.

It had been years.

So much had happened, so many things that lay between us that he didn't even know about, but my heart leaped at the connection of our eyes all the same.

"Miss Snow," the wedding planner hissed, grabbing my elbow and pulling on it as if to lead me inside. "Miss Snow! Come on, we need to get you into your place. The bride's ready and she wants you to start the song before she starts down the aisle!"

I could hear her, I could even understand what she was saying...

But all I could see was Huck.

The instrumentals to the song Stella had picked to walk down the aisle started low in the background, soft and sweet, the words in the back of my head from all the practicing I'd done, but I still didn't move.

Huck was the groom.

Huck was marrying Stella.

Grief filled me in a way I'd never experienced before. I didn't know if I would ever see him again, but not in his leaving, not even in giving birth to our triplets by myself had I ever been so hurt and betrayed.

Tears swam in my vision, a choked noise escaping me as I pulled my arm out of the wedding planner's grip and turned on my heel.

I couldn't do this.

Not for thirty thousand dollars, not for thirty million.

The fact that he and Stella had hired me under false names, inviting me to their wedding this way, was worse than any nightmare I ever could have conceived.

"Miss Snow!" the wedding planner whisper-shouted as I ran from the entrance to the ballroom back out into the hotel lobby.

Around the corner, surrounded by a flurry of attendants and wearing a cloud of white, Stella stood - her blue eyes on me

and rounded in surprise as I came to a stuttered halt in front of her.

She opened her mouth, stepping forward, but I shook my head.

She was beautiful. She looked like some princess, her wedding gown so extravagant that it looked like it belonged in some museum surrounded by a glass casing.

And I'd never been more upset by such a fact in my life.

Tears ran down my face, finally escaping my eyes as I darted around her and ran out of the front of the hotel.

The sunlight was too bright and jarring as I stumbled outside, the air warm against the tears on my face and my eyes shutting to try and adjust to the sudden change in light.

I didn't know where I was going.

I didn't know how I was getting there either.

I'd Ubered to the Fredonia and the car had long gone, the parking lot stretching in front of me full of everyone else's vehicles.

For a desperate, harried moment, I considered trying to steal one and peeling it out of there.

But I recognized it for how ridiculous a notion it was before I even began toddling forward on my heels through my tears down the steps leading to the parking lot.

I was unsteady on my feet as I pulled the skirt of my dress up, trying to powerwalk despite how impossible it seemed to accomplish.

I couldn't steal a car, I didn't have time to order an Uber... I was just going to walk until I couldn't walk anymore. Then I'd order an Uber, then I'd make a call, or... I didn't know. I just knew I needed to get as far away as fast as possible.

“Moira!”

My name was loud in the empty parking lot, with only the sound of nearby traffic and the happy calling of birds for it to disturb.

I didn't turn.

I couldn't.

I told myself I was imagining my name. I told myself that it was a figment of my imagination trying to make me stop and trap me in the nightmare hell I'd just escaped.

“Moira!”

I didn't want to be Moira.

My name didn't even sound like my name in my grief, my chest shuddering as I tried to swallow another round of sobs.

“MOIRA!”

I froze, finally, my ankle almost giving out at the suddenness of my stopping.

I was twenty-four years old. I was a mom to three beautiful children. I had a successful business, I didn't have any drama in my life...

And the father of my children, Nacogdoches' famous hometown rock star was marrying my best friend, back in town for the first time in more than three years.

Nothing made sense.

It was as if my quiet, boring life had been picked up and dropped in the middle of some fast-paced, impossibly dramatic telenovela.

And I couldn't turn around to save my life, my heart caught between my ribs and my throat as I tried to breathe normally.

“Moira...”

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## CHAPTER 12



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I'd never imagined getting married.

It was a strange thing, maybe, but the marriage had been like kids in my eyes, a commitment I just couldn't make with what I wanted out of life.

And then Moira had crashed into my life my last semester at SFA, her tan, lithe legs, and honey-colored eyes luring me into a dreamworld that existed somewhere out of reality.

I'd thought about marriage then.

I'd considered it, even, in the weeks after she had started pulling away. I'd thought about flying her out to Las Vegas and demanding that she marry me on the stage after one of my numbers. I'd had all sorts of juvenile, impossible fantasies run through my head.

But reality had won out... and Moira had faded into a selection of memories that I avoided unless I was completely alone.

It had been more than three years... I'd lived a whole other life time in that time.

And it was standing in front of an altar, waiting on my fiancée, that Moira popped back up.

I hadn't expected to see her.

Even with everything that had happened, even with the tuxedo I was in and the reason for it, the moment my eyes connected

with hers, I felt something rush through me.

It was as if none of the years existed, as if no one but she and I were standing in that ballroom, the space between us too big and nonexistent all at the same time.

She looked like some glamorous movie star, her golden hair falling down her back and the blue of her dress emphasizing her perfectly tanned skin.

It was the wrong color.

Standing at that altar she should have been wearing white walking down to me, and the certainty I felt at that had everything else fading into the background as I took a half-step forward.

Moira's eyes widened, hurt filling her gaze, and the situation she'd walked in on suddenly dawned on me.

Before I could take another step toward her, she'd run away, her tears only just escaping her eyes as I hurried to rush after her.

Somewhere behind me, I could feel hands grabbing for me. I could hear my name, a rush of confusion filling the room, and the silence that had fallen as the music starting the wedding had started suddenly been punctured by many hushed, hurried voices.

I didn't care about any of them though.

Not the press that had been allowed to attend, not the friends and family that had been invited, not even the industry professionals that were in attendance.

All that I could think about was Moira and the hurt on her face as she'd run.

"Moira!" I yelled after her, trying to catch up to her as she darted out of the hotel.

"HUCK!" Stella shouted, stepping quickly in front of me with a hand out to push into my chest as if to push me back.

She sounded horrified, her blue eyes full of condemnation as she tried to cover my eyes.

“You aren’t supposed to see me yet!” she screeched. “It’s bad luck! Go back inside. I can’t believe Moira would just run off like that! We’ll have to find tracks to play instead of her singing. BethAnne, can you-”

“You hired Moira?” I asked, my voice hollow as I looked at Stella in disbelief.

She smiled, her lips wavering slightly. “I thought it would be a nice surprise,” she murmured, again trying to cover my eyes.

I slapped her hands away, something cold filling my chest as I took a sharp step back from her.

“Huck, we need-”

“Not now.” My words sounded far away, even to my ears, ringing in my head as I side-stepped where Stella had tried to stop me. “I don’t want to talk about it, Stella.” I couldn’t soften the harshness of my tone, or pause long enough to have any real conversation. “The wedding is off.”

It was blunter than I had wanted, the words leaving me as I left Stella and her shocked cry of disbelief behind me.

I could spend the rest of my life apologizing to her. I likely would.

Stella would understand, eventually, even if she didn’t now.

Leaving her like I was would only hurt her ego, it was Moira that I was worried about.

“Moira!”

I all but ran out of the Fredonia, chasing after her and continuing even when she didn’t respond.

Even when she stopped, though, she didn’t turn to face me.

“Moira...” Her name felt caught somewhere between a prayer and a plea, reaching out to grab her wrist so that she couldn’t just take off running again.

“Hey.” My voice was choked, foreign to me as Moira hesitated in front of me. “I didn’t expect to see you here.” It was an empty explanation, the words hollow as I tried to find anything to fill the tense silence between us.

She finally turned, tears still falling down either side of her face and her honeyed eyes so pained that it stopped me dead in my tracks.

“I wouldn’t have come if I knew,” she admitted hoarsely, her voice raw.

I didn’t know how she could have not known, being that she was here, but it didn’t matter. The whys and the details were secondary, my eyes drinking in every line in her face as I felt my heart pound unevenly in my chest.

“I’m glad you did,” I admitted honestly.

More than three years. It had been almost four years since I’d talked to her last, almost four years since I’d heard her voice, and even with the circumstances being what they were I couldn’t deny how happy I was to hear it again, to see her again.

“How can you say that to me?” Moira demanded, jerking her arm out of my grip and pulling it to her chest with a look of betrayed hurt filling her face. “How can you tell me that with a woman waiting to marry you on the other side of those doors!?” Her voice rose as she spoke, gesturing to Fredonia behind us accusingly.

I grimaced, running my hand through my hair aggravatedly as I fought the wave of disappointment that came with that reminder. “I didn’t want to get married,” I muttered, the explanation a sorry one. But true.

Moira’s eyebrows climbed her forehead, a plethora of questions chasing one another across her face as she stared silently back at me.

“Stella...” I snorted, looking away from Moira in shame as I tried to think of the best way to explain it to her. To make her understand. I knew she and Stella were friends... but Stella had told me Moira had disappeared on her the same way she had everyone else.

“Stella showed up in Las Vegas a little over a year ago,” I said hoarsely. I could still see her tripping backstage with her backstage pass, confident and laughing at my surprise. “She

was from home, a reminder of .... Everything.” I couldn’t say to her, I couldn’t tell Moira that seeing Stella had made me miss her even more, the words seemed cruel given what she had just walked into.

“We got drunk.” I skipped past all the catching up, the way we’d talked about Moira as much as we had. “It’s fucking stupid, Moira.” I knew that it was. “Stella was a connection to you though. And it had been so long since I’d seen you, so long since I talked to you... You had already moved on with your life without me, I wanted to give you the space for that.”

“I moved on?” Moira echoed, the words full of a kind of stunned disbelief.

“You were pulling away,” I explained, remembering that last real phone call and how stilted it had been. “You didn’t call back after my demo dropped...”

“You didn’t call either,” Moira reminded me, her words even rawer than the expression in her eyes.

The sunlight shone off the honey of her irises, the emotions were there unfiltered and so evident that they almost knocked the breath out of me.

“I was waiting,” I shrugged. It sounded stupid now, all these years later.

“And you disconnected your number,” Moira whispered, rubbing her forearm nervously.

My chest burned as I nodded. “You hadn’t called or texted in two weeks,” I muttered. It had been a split-second decision, as alcohol-induced as my night with Stella had been.

She stared at me, her expression suddenly unreadable.

“So, Stella showed up all that time later... and we just... spent the weekend together.” It had been three days, only the nights which I had spent with Stella, alcohol and reminiscence fueling most of it.

“And now you’re getting married,” Moira pointed out, her voice uneven.

We were getting married. I nodded all the same. “She got pregnant.” Those words still felt as unreal and frightening to me as they had when she’d called me a month after our weekend together to tell me.

I’d barely accepted the news myself before Stella was showing up in Las Vegas, talking about moving in and trying to plan my going to appointments and rental showings with her.

“She’s pregnant?” Moira repeated, swallowing thickly. Something danced behind her honey eyes, but she didn’t add anything to it.

“She was,” I said in a monotone. “We have a four-month-old daughter, Vera.”

Her name was the only source of inflection in my tone.

Despite my fear of becoming a father, despite everything that had driven me to not want kids... Vera had stolen my heart the minute the nurse had put her into my waiting arms, her eyes so similar to mine that it had been like a punch to the gut.

“I couldn’t make Stella a single mother,” I explained, swallowing hard past the emotions cycling between us, begging her to understand. “I know how hard that is on someone, I know what it would have done to my daughter... I couldn’t just leave Vera to be raised without me either.”

“So... you just... get married?” Moira asked with a frown.

I could see how ridiculous it sounded, phrased like that, but I shrugged.

“We talked about all the options.” Well, I’d talked, and Stella had laughed. Nothing had ever seemed to phase her, not the pregnancy, not my misgivings, not even my insistence that we weren’t dating those first few months. “And Stella suggested we just get married.”

It had made sense.

But Moira was staring at me as if she thought the exact opposite.

“How can you stand there and try to justify this to me?” she whispered after a long pause. Her voice shook, her tears

building along her lash line again. “After I promised to wait for you, after everything... How can you think that anything you’ve said just makes it better?”

“You-”

“You knew,” she interrupted me quickly, shaking her head. “How long did I wait for you before? I promised to wait, I told you how much I loved you... I never moved on,” Moira laughed, the sound harsh and unforgiving. “That you could even think I did...”

“I didn’t know you were waiting.” I’d never even entertained that idea.

If she’d been waiting why hadn’t she called? Why hadn’t she texted?

It had been years...

“I can’t hear about you happy with someone else, Huck,” Moira admitted in a pained voice.

“I’m not happy.” The words flew from my lips before I could consider them. “I saw you and I knew I couldn’t go through with this, Moira, you have to know-”

“Huck!”

Oscar’s voice cut off my explanation just like it had so many things all those years before.

He was jogging down the steps of the Fredonia, absolute confusion filling his features as he looked between me and his little sister in front of me.

“Moira!?” he added as his steps picked up.

I couldn’t face Oscar yet.

I couldn’t handle the drama of everything else when there was still so much left unsaid between Moira and me.

I’d gladly go to hell for the chemistry that still sang between Moira and me, I’d gladly let Oscar beat my face in blood... but I damned sure was going to make sure I had a reason to before I did.



“I’m going to go sit in my Bugatti,” I said hurriedly, looking back at Moira pointedly. “If you want to come with me...” I stopped, clearing my throat. “I want you to come with me,” I rephrased carefully. “Talk to Oscar and then... come with me. I’ll explain everything.”

It was all I could offer her, breaking away before Oscar could reach us and pulling the ridiculous red silk tie Stella had chosen angrily from my neck as I left.

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## CHAPTER 13



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*Nacogdoches, Texas*

In the four years since my brother moved out of Nacogdoches to chase his dreams, I'd seen him all of a handful of times. Layla and I arranged it so carefully, only ever agreeing to meet him somewhere that was in public and always with an excuse as to why we had to leave and why he couldn't stay with us.

It had put a strain on our relationship, at least in person, but he still called every week. Texted nearly every day.

Seeing him rushing towards me after all the confusion of the last handful of minutes had me wanting to cry all over again, though.

Oscar didn't pause when he reached me, picking me up off of my feet and spinning me around even as he hugged me tightly to him.

"Woah there," he chuckled, squeezing again as he went to go set me down to my feet. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming to the wedding? Why are you crying at the wedding? Did something happen? Did-" he cut off suddenly, looking around with wide eyes, "Layla?"

I could hear the frantic worry in her name and I was quick to put my hand on his chest while he started wiping the mascara that was tracked down my cheeks from my tears.

"Layla's fine," I reassured him hesitantly. It wasn't like I could tell him what she was doing and why she wasn't here... Not without telling him about the triplets.

“I didn’t know whose wedding it was,” I laughed, the noise disjointed as I tried to swallow the hysteria I could feel building again. “I was supposed to be paid... I was hired to come sing...”

“And you didn’t know it was Huck’s?” Oscar asked, surprise filling his features. He glanced to where Huck had disappeared, frowning as he looked between him and me. “Did he tell you why he called the wedding off?”

A flicker of hope built in my breast despite everything that had happened.

It was stupid and insane, but hearing all that your friend Huck had been trying to tell me...

“Maybe you should ask your best friend that,” I said carefully. “Not me. It isn’t my wedding.”

*And if admitting that didn’t hurt like a bitch...*

“Oh, I will,” Oscar huffed. “But Stella is in there beside herself. Maybe you ought to come in with me to-”

“No,” I spoke more quickly than I meant to, the word harsh and final.

“Sorry,” I said more slowly. “Stella and I haven’t talked in years,” I explained. “I’ll leave calming her down and being there for the people who know her now.”

Oscar frowned, but didn’t argue, looking back and forth between the hotel and where Huck had disappeared to.

“I have to go,” I hurried to add, swallowing as I tried to decide if I was going to go after Huck or if I was going to try and call for an Uber.

“Yeah, right, I need to get back inside too,” he muttered, running his hand through his blonde waves and sighing. “You’ll meet up with me soon though and explain what the hell all this was, right?”

His brown eyes searched mine insistently, letting me know that he was serious enough about it that I wouldn’t be able to

wiggle my way out of it.

“Yeah, I promise,” I agreed softly.

I didn’t know what I’d tell him but meeting up with him I could do.

He grinned, the expression brief as he took a step back and turned on his heel to jog back up to the church. No doubt he was going to try and smooth things over for Huck, playing his role as best man and then some.

Huck...

I looked over to where he had gone and found myself walking that way before I’d even fully decided whether or not to go to his car or not.

Of course, I would though.

When it came to Huck it was never a question.

My heart raced as I opened the passenger door, slid into the bucket seat, and felt the power of the car beneath me as I closed it behind me.

Huck didn’t say anything, putting the car into gear and looking at me with an expression that made me want to melt right into the seat.

“You came,” he said slowly, pulling out of the parking spot with an ease that was almost difficult to believe.

The car thrummed beneath me, the power of the engine traveling into my very bones as the electric tension between Huck and I built.

“You asked me to.”

It was the simplest explanation I could give, and I could see the words register with him as he reached across the space between us to put his hand on my thigh.

My whole body froze, my breath catching as I looked from his hand back to him, a million questions and emotions racing through me.

“I should have asked you to come out to Las Vegas.”

The words were like an incendiary bomb between us, my heart leaping at his just saying them and the air in the car becoming impossibly thick as I tried to see past that haze of *need* that suddenly seized me.

“I would have come,” I admitted softly, my thigh jumping as he moved his hand up it.

I didn’t know if he was even paying attention to what he was doing at first, his fingers tracing the seam on the side of my dress absentmindedly while he looked between me and the road, the numbers on the speedometer climbing and everything outside of the car and the way Huck was touching me at that moment forgotten.

“I want you to come now,” he admitted, his voice rough and low.

A shiver went down my spine, knowing he wasn’t talking about actually moving anywhere. It had been so long...

My knees unconsciously parted, my inhale sharply as he pulled at the expensive fabric of my dress carelessly, hauling it up my legs despite how tight it was above my knees.

“You used to have a bra this color,” he muttered, desire so deep in his words I could feel it like a physical caress against my skin. “Fuck, Moira.”

He yanked the dress up further, his hand finally connecting with the skin and his other gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles blanched white.

“It was my favorite goddamn bra. The blue against your skin... You walked into the ballroom earlier today and it was one of the first things I remembered. You freshly fucked after you’d first bought it stretched across the hood of my old Miata after we parked on that back road...”

His words brought the memory he was talking about with them, my cheeks flushing as my breath came quicker.

I could see it too, his eyes sliding over to me, running down my body in the impossibly tight dress I wore and undressing me with every flick.

But it was his hand...

“Oh, fuck, Huck,” I moaned as he spread my thighs with his hand, running his thumb over my clit through the panties I wore even as he pulled them to the side with his fingers.

“There you go,” he encouraged darkly, something shifting in the way he sat at the sound of his name. “Just like that, baby.”

I wasn't even doing anything. I was helpless, restrained by the seatbelt that was rubbing my too-hard nipples with each turn of the speeding vehicle, my chest heaving as Huck slid his fingers into my wet folds.

“I've thought about you every damn day,” he cursed, his words tight as he slid two fingers inside of me and hissed. “Remembered just how hot and wet you always were for me, compared every woman that came after you to you...”

“I don't want to hear about other women,” I said breathlessly, trying to widen my thighs as he started circling his fingers in and out of me at an opposite rhythm to the way his thumb rolled and rubbed against the apex just above that.

“Neither did I.”

The words were like kindling to a fire.

My whole body arched as he added a third finger to the two inside of me, pushing and pulling as my eyes rolled back in my head and I clung to the seat of his Bugatti for dear life.

“Every body in my bed that wasn't yours was a waste,” he continued, a promise in his words that matched the maelstrom of emotion in his oceanic eyes as he stared hard at me. “Every hand that touched me that wasn't yours was a regret.”

It was too emotional, too physical- everything about it was overwhelming as I stared back at him, the car whipping around curves and down roads as Huck took me right to the edge... and switched the way he was fingering me every time he did.

“Every night I'd work on my music and remembered you sitting between my thighs, correcting the notes on my sheet music as I worked. Every morning I'd wake up thinking that it

was your head on the pillow next to mine and cursing when it wasn't."

I gasped from a combination of his words and the way his magical fingers had started to pump in and out of me, his strokes against my clit becoming faster and faster.

"I dreamed of your body. Of your pussy tight around my fingers, around my dick, the way it tasted against my tongue. You ruined everything for me, Moira."

The words were harsh, but the way he said them was reverent, my very name like a prayer on his lips as he finger-fucked me in that seat.

"You ruined me," he said more simply, the words like a growl as he twisted his wrist and sent my universe over the edge.

Colors danced behind my eyelids as they slammed closed, my lips pressing tight to try and hold in the noises that left me as he worked my body up and over that frenzied need. The moans that escaped couldn't be helped, my hips lifting into his hands as he continued, more slowly, to stroke and finger me until I came back down.

Out of the crack of my eye, I could see us pulling into a hotel across town.

The whole car smelled like sex and desire, but as he pulled his hand from between my thighs his eyes were only on mine, even as he parked.

"You tried to be quiet," he accused, lifting his thumb to his mouth and running it across the seam of his lips in a way that had me clenching my thighs all over again.

"Pull your dress down, Moira." He paused at the disappointment that I knew flashed across my features, his grin dark and promising as he opened the door of his Bugatti. "Don't worry. I'm not done with you yet. I have almost four years of fantasies to live out with you still..."

*Christ.*

I'd barely survived him four years ago... I'd barely just survived him fingering me in the front seat of his car... But I



was following his direction anyway, eagerly pulling my dress down and following him out of the car with my heart in his hands where I'd left it last.

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## CHAPTER 14



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

Booking a penthouse in a hotel on the other side of town from my wedding without telling anyone about it as an escape plan should have been my first clue that I shouldn't have been going along with the wedding.

But I'd felt obligated.

I'd wanted to do right by Stella, by Vida... and, in a way, by myself and my mother.

Looking over at Moira as we rode the elevator up to the top floor though I knew that none of that was worth it.

Fuck, it was like being a teenager all over again.

Just looking at her was painful, my dick so hard that it felt like it was going to break the zipper on the tuxedo pants I wore.

"Maybe we should slow down," Moira suggested as the elevator dinged, climbing up the hotel to the penthouse I'd paid for. "Maybe we ought to to-"

I knew, logically, that I should let her finish speaking.

She was trying to present an option that was very likely smarter than what was happening, but I didn't care about smart.

I didn't care about taking my time or working out the years of misunderstanding and hurt between us just yet.

"I've been without you for almost four years," I told her seriously, stopping her midsentence and stepping forward until

my chest almost touched hers.

I could feel the quick inhale she gave at my nearness, see the pinpricking of her pupils- and the animal in me enjoyed it far too much.

I wanted her shaking and screaming my name, I wanted to see just how badly I affected her and push her even further still.

“I don’t care about what happened, I don’t care about who you’ve been with or what decisions you’ve made. I want you. I thought about you with every single woman in the last four years, I wanted you more every single time.” There was no hesitation to my words, no pause as I took that further step forward and felt my chest hit hers.

I could feel the fabric of her dress against the front of my tuxedo, the pointed peaks of her nipples rubbing against me and making my dick all that much harder.

“There was no one since you for me,” Moira whispered, her voice breathy and almost stuttered.

The words were almost too much, a dark thrill running through me at them.

There had been no one before me and no one since.

Moira had only ever been with me, only ever been mine, and it was unfair knowing that I had been with as many women as I had... but I was more pleased with the information than I could explain.

The elevator dinged again, the doors sliding open and stopping me from bending down and claiming her mouth just in time.

I pulled her to me, my arm banding around her hips as I walked us out of the elevator and into the hallway leading to the room.

“Do you know what knowing that does to me?” I asked her roughly, looking down into her honey eyes. “Do you know what it does to me knowing that I’m the only one to have ever had you like that?”

She shook her head, her eyes wide and her lips just barely parted as I finagled us into the penthouse, uncaring of the

setting or the scenery as I kicked the door shut behind us.

“It’s like a livewire straight to my dick, Moira,” I growled, walking her the rest of the way back to the wall of windows overlooking the hotel square down below.

The afternoon sun was glaring through the glass, glinting off the blonde of Moira’s hair and making her eyes almost golden.

“I couldn’t be with anyone else,” Moira whispered, running her hands over my shoulders as I deftly slid my hand around to undo the zipper at the back of her dress.

Just like before the words went right through me, my lips finally claiming hers.

Nearly four years.

It had been nearly four years and she still tasted like sunshine and spearmint mouthwash, the sweetness of her breath so familiar that I couldn’t help but groan into the contact.

“Fuck, I missed you,” I admitted, the words broken and my voice low as I pulled back from her to run my lips down her jaw. The dark blue fabric fell away from her like paper, fluttering down to the floor and leaving her standing in front of me in nothing but a matching blue pair of underwear all too reminiscent of that bra I’d mentioned before.

“Fuck,” I exhaled, my eyes drinking her in.

She was older, curvier, the gentle slopes of her hips more defined, her muscles softer... and still just as beautiful as the first day I’d pulled that little black dress off of her in the bedroom of my apartment off campus.

Her hands were as eager as mine, pulling the all-white tuxedo from me with hurried movements that paused only for her to run her fingers wonderingly against the skin as she exposed it.

“I want to taste you,” I groaned, walking her back just that furthest bit more.

She lifted her face, but that wasn’t what I was talking about.

My hands gripped the little pieces of fabric at her hip, pulling them down even as I lowered her into the chair in front of the

window, her gasp of surprise igniting something foreign and full of need within me.

Sitting on the chair with her knees spread, completely bare before me, I could see every inch of her. Every line of muscle, every scar that differentiated her from her twin sister, the little mark just above her knee that she'd nicked herself shaving recently.

She wasn't overly made up and plastic like so many of the women I encountered in my industry. There was no botox, no implants, only the raw beauty she'd been born with- and only my hands had ever explored it before.

"Huck," Moira whispered, going to push her legs back together, but my hands stopped her.

I pushed her knees even more widely apart, spreading her thighs as I fell to my knees in front of her.

I could *smell* her, that musky scent from where she'd come apart with my fingers before in the car, and that sweeter, more poignant scent of her current desire too. They intermixed, filling my senses and driving me wild as I lowered my head and ran my mouth over that heated, center apex of her thighs.

"Oh, fuck, *Huck*," Moira cried out, her hands going to tangle in my curls.

"That's it," I encouraged again, running my tongue along the entrance of her and sliding one hand down so that I could rub the sensitive bundle of nerves right above where my tongue devoured her. "Don't hold back on me this time," I growled, nipping at her thigh before I turned my head so that I could thrust my tongue more deeply inside of her.

"Fuck, fuck, oh, shit, oh-" she stuttered a curse with every breath, writhing in the chair as I used my free hand to pull her thighs further apart.

I worked my mouth and fingers in tandem, watching her face flush and that color creep down from her cheeks to her breasts.

"Oh my God, Huck, please," Moira cried, her thighs starting to twitch next to my ears.

I'd had so many plans, so many intentions, but hearing my name on her lips called the way she was calling it was almost too much.

Almost four fucking years...

"Do you have any idea how fucking beautiful you are?" I demanded raggedly as I pulled back from her, standing in one fluid motion and dragging her up with me.

She made a noise of protest, trying to catch me before I spun her around.

Looking into her eyes was going to be too much.

Her naked body fell forward with the motion, her hands catching the windows instead, as I pressed her up against them, her nipples flattening against the glass.

"Look down at that square," I commanded, my desire making my voice low and dark. "Look at all those people. I wish any one of them would look up Moira," I slid into her with my words, tensing as I fought against the near-instant-release that wanted to come from that alone.

"I wish any one of those fucking men down there would look up and see you against this glass. Your perfect body, your face all fresh-fucked like it is. I wish they would see you, want you, and know that you belong to me and only me." I couldn't have stopped talking even if I wanted to, my words a growl as I pulled back and slammed back into her again.

I could feel her internal muscles, fluttering and gripping me in a way that let me know just how close she was.

"Huck," she breathed out, her cry half-beg, half-exclamation.

"Louder," I demanded, increasing my pace in time with those flutterings of her pussy and reaching around her hips to pinch her clit between my forefinger and thumb. "Tell me and all of them down there, Moira. Who do you belong to?"

"Fuck," she cried, her thighs vibrating as she fell further forward, her whole body shaking as she struggled to hold herself up. "You, Huck," she cried, the pitch of her voice

climbing higher and higher as she neared her peak. “It’s only ever been you!”

I almost lost it then and there.

Moira did.

She fell apart in front of me, calling out wordlessly as she climaxed.

I pulled out of her, flipping her back around and gripping her chin between my fingers to drag her face back up to me.

Her tongue against mine was soft and sweet, opposite the frantic motions that had come before as *she* walked us back to the bed.

I hadn’t cum with her, but everything about the way I was touching her gentled, something shifting in my chest as I lowered her down to the bed.

It was just as heated, just as intense, but ... softer.

Her lips parted as she wrapped herself around me as I crawled between her thighs, sliding over her and balancing on her forearms over her.

Entering her again was just as slow and sweet as the rest of my motions had turned, my hands pulling her up into me as she started moaning again.

“There’s never been anyone but you,” I found myself saying, the truth of the words settling down into my bones as she gasped and allowed her head to fall back against the pillows.

Her hair was like a golden halo around her, only a sliver of her honey eyes visible with how heavily lidded her eyes were as she stared back up at me.

She met each thrust of my hips with her own, our rhythm building slowly as she lifted her hands to frame my face.

“I love you,” she whispered as she started to shake again, her whole body tensing and taking me right along with her over that peak at last.

I couldn’t have stopped myself if I’d tried, cumming so hard and powerfully that my vision blurred as I finally fell into



Moira below me.

For a long handful of moments, the two of us just lay there, our bodies still joined and our breath all that could be heard in the room as we came down.

I knew I had to have her in my life, no matter the cost.

I couldn't do another four years without Moira. I couldn't even do another six months.

I rolled onto my side, pulling her with me and curling around her as I felt sleep overtake me.

At one point I thought I felt the bed dip, but I was too relaxed.

I didn't see Moira roll out of the bed or find her dress.

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## CHAPTER 15



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*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I wanted to be able to say that I didn't wait by the phone following the disaster of a wedding at the Fredonia and the resulting night in the penthouse... but I would be lying.

I checked my phone more often in the three days following my sneaking out of bed next to Huck than I had in probably the entire last year alone.

I relived every touch, every word, every kiss... and repeated it at least six times over to Layla as well every time she asked.

But the phone never rang.

At least not with Huck on the other end of the line.

I'd been in a bubble of happiness following Huck falling on top of me, the both of us coming down from our shared climax. It was as if everything was right with the world, my body happily limped as I started drifting to sleep.

It wasn't the wedding that I'd interrupted that kept me up. It wasn't Stella or how many women Huck might have been with that made my eyes shoot open right before I'd drifted off...

It was the thought of him having another child while not knowing about our triplets. It was the three years my children had gone without knowing their father and the comments that Huck had made regarding not wanting to make anyone a single mother that stood out in the back of my head like a glaring warning sign.

I'd considered waking him up.

I'd laid there, watching him sleep, trying to find the words to break the news to him, but none had come.

Shaking him awake to tell him about the babies that I'd gone to such lengths to hide for the past three years seemed like a bad idea.

Waiting around, driving me crazy, for him to wake up in the morning and explain it all- or at least try- was equally nerve-inducing.

I'd felt a large variety of emotions over the years regarding, and with, Huck... but scared had never been one of them.

At least not until I had been laying there.

"You could call him, you know," Layla interrupted my thought process, throwing a balled-up napkin across the couch at me.

I jumped, looking from the blank computer screen I'd been staring at to my twin, and then quickly across the room to where our four kids were playing across the room.

"Oh, please," Layla huffed, kicking across the cushions to nudge me with her toes. "Stop acting like they know what we're talking about."

"Isla might," I argued weakly, hating that we were having this argument all over again.

The minute she'd found out what had happened that night I'd come stumbling in the back door she had been quick to insist that I turn around and go back to him.

And then, consequently, over the last three weeks remind me to do the same still... and remind me that Oscar had called.

I knew Oscar had been calling.

He'd left plenty of voicemails that I hadn't listened to, texted, he'd even emailed...

All more than Huck had done.

"Isla doesn't know who the hell Huck is," Layla snorted. "Now, again, you can call him..."

“And he could have called me,” I muttered, giving up on the pretense of working and closing my laptop.

I’d worried about me leaving. I’d wondered if I’d messed up somehow, but his lack of getting in contact with me was the only answer I needed.

Or at least it should have been.

“I don’t think-”

My phone rang, my eyes instantly darting to the display screen despite how nonchalant I was trying to pretend to be.

I didn’t recognize the number on the screen and there was a small voice in the back of my head that wanted to believe it was Huck.

Logic knew that it wasn’t, but my heart jumped into my throat anyway as I waved Layla off to answer what I knew was probably a bill collector.

“Hello?”

Silence met my greeting, the only noise that of the triplets and Isla playing quietly on the other side of the room.

“Hello?” I tried again, sighing as I got ready to end the call.

“Moira?”

Fuck.

Even over the phone, just saying my name, Huck’s voice sent a thrill through me.

“You ran out on me again,” he accused with a low voice, a hint of amusement in the words that made me blink quickly.

“I-”

“Relax,” Huck chuckled, cutting off my stuttered attempt at an explanation as easily as if there had been no month-long pause between our encounter and now. “I was upset at first, but I knew I couldn’t blame you. My life was a fucking wreck. You’d just come into my ruined wedding, found out I had a baby, and God only knows what else, I would have been shocked if you hadn’t run.”

“You didn’t call, either,” I pointed out as calmly as I could, pulling my legs up under me and waving my hand furiously at Layla to stop her sharply whispered questions.

“I didn’t. I fucked up a lot of things, Moira. I wasn’t about to fuck up again and drag you into the middle of everything without it sorted. I owed you at least that much.” He sounded so grown-up and serious, with no hesitation to his words.

I, however, was leveled by them.

Try as I might, I couldn’t find my voice.

“Stella and I are officially separated. She had to admit it didn’t come as much of a surprise, she was well aware of my reasoning behind agreeing to get married. And we’ve relocated to Nacogdoches.” Huck was listing it all as if it were just commonplace conversation, but my brain was struggling to keep up.

“You what?” I squawked, sitting up straighter and shoving Layla away from how she was trying to lean in to listen to our conversation.

“I’d already been planning it for a while,” Huck explained patiently. “It took some doing, finding the right house to buy, but...”

“You’re in Nacogdoches?” I repeated, still stuck on that point.

“He’s what?!?” Layla hissed, scrambling to try to get across the couch and closer.

“My mom helped. She’s been bugging me about it since Vera was born anyway.” I could practically hear Huck’s shrug over the phone.

*His mom.* Memories of the woman who had always been affixed to my own mother’s hip growing up popped into my head making it all that harder to focus on what Huck was saying.

“But... your work,” I finally managed to eke out, my voice small even to my ears.

“I’ve got a private jet for that,” Huck dismissed easily, unbothered by even my mention of it. He said it so casually as

if a private jet was something that everyone just kept in their backyard for personal use. Like any other person would talk about owning a car. “When I need to leave I can just fly out, but that’s part of why I was calling you.”

“Your private jet?” I asked, confused as to how the two things were connected.

“In a way. More like the reason for the needed one. With Stella and I splitting up, we’re going to be splitting custody of Vera. I don’t want to have her on some kind of unpredictable schedule and my mom had brought up the possibility of hiring a nanny... I know it’s a strange situation, but I couldn’t think of another person I’d trust to take that much care of Vera other than you.”

“You want me... to be your nanny?” I couldn’t help how fractured my sentence was, dumbfounded to the point that I was impressed I was even getting as much as I was out.

“I want you, period,” Huck answered seriously. “But, I’m going to need the help with Stella, and this way I get to keep you close. Two birds, one stone, and all of that,” he laughed.

How could he be so sure? His confidence blew my mind, and my stomach flipped as I tried to calm my racing heart and thoughts.

“So I’d come help out with Vera?” I asked slowly, trying to wrap my head around what he was suggesting.

“I’d pay you,” he assured me evenly. “Three hundred thousand a month. You’d be her nanny. I want to hire you, not just in name. I do need you to do the job... I just... thought that it might make it easier for the two of us to spend more time together too.”

“You want me to work for you,” I repeated, struggling to grasp the concept.

My eyes flickered to where my triplets were terrorizing their cousin, my stomach flipping for a whole other reason entirely then.

“I want you to be here,” Huck amended. “I don’t know where you are living. Your brother mentioned somewhere between

Nacogdoches and Lufkin, but he didn't seem too sure either..."

*Oscar.*

A pang of guilt hit me as I realized just how many things were all embroiled in this one.

"Can I have time to think about it?" I finally broke the silence to ask.

"Of course. This is my number," Huck replied affably. "Call me back at any time."

I lowered the phone from my ear almost hesitantly after the call ended, staring at David, Carter, and Sofia with a mountain of butterflies swarming about my belly.

Or hornets.

"He wants you to do what for him now?!" Layla demanded, but I could see from the gleam in her eye that she'd finally gotten close enough to eavesdrop on my call.

"You heard him," I repeated numbly, staring at my blank phone screen and trying not to wince at Layla's loud laughter.

"Well, obviously, you're going to go do it," she concluded without so much as waiting to see my reaction.

My eyes lifted to her sharply, my eyebrows climbing my forehead.

"What? You are," she defended, rolling her brown eyes and settling back into the couch with a huff.

"Am I?" I challenged. "He doesn't know about the triplets. He literally waited a month to contact me. And going to nanny for his and Stella's child? That would mean I would have to interact with Stella eventually... and his mother. Did you not hear that? I've avoided Beth more than anyone else this last handful of years."



“And now you don’t have to.” Layla shrugged. “I’ve been telling you this whole time that you needed to tell Huck about the kids-”

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” I mumbled, but there was no real venom to the words. “You know as well as I do that it is not as easy as it seems.”

“Well, no. Private jets and rich people,” Layla laughed, changing the subject as she sank back onto the couch behind her. Her brown eyes danced, and her sense of adventure and romance was piqued.

“Right?” Emotion made the word burst from me, almost a bark as I felt leaned forward. “Who has private jets like that?! And did you hear him? He bought a house in Nacogdoches... You know it isn’t a regular house or we would have heard about it by now. It’s probably some hidden castle or something.”

“More likely a mansion,” Layla giggled. She eyed me amusedly, far calmer than I was as she reached across to take both of my hands in hers. “Breathe, Moira.”

“I’m trying,” I complained, sighing heavily. “I just... I don’t want to lose Huck again, you know? But if I go to him and tell him I hid his kids from him? Or if I force him further into fatherhood when he only just now made himself okay with it for his one daughter?”

*What if he ran?*

The words were silent, but they hung heavily between the two of us anyway.

“Breathe,” Layla repeated. “Take the job, Moira. Spend time getting to know Huck now. Get to know who he’s become, find out what kind of father he is... and then break it to him after you know one way or another where he’d stand.”

I nodded, my heart still pounding but my breath less choppy.

“I don’t want to introduce him to the kids and then...”

“I know,” Layla assured me, her voice soft as she squeezed my hands. “There’s no reason to involve them yet. “I’ll watch the triplets. You find out where you stand.”

Tears pricked the back of my eyes staring at my twin so calm and sure.

I knew she was offering a big favor, watching the three of my toddlers for who knew how long along with Isla.

“Moirra,” Layla interrupted firmly. “Do it!”

I nodded jerkily, slowly pulling my hands back from my twin and reaching for my phone.

I needed to call Huck and get his address.

I needed to tell him that I was taking the job.

...And, eventually, I needed to get around to calling my brother back too.

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## CHAPTER 16



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I made it ten minutes into Moira's first day before I was imagining fucking her over every square inch of the mansion my mother had helped me find in Nacogdoches, trailing behind the two women with my hands in my pockets and my eyes trained on Moira's ass in the skin-tight jeans she'd worn to come over in.

"I didn't even know they made mansions like this here in Nac," Moira told my mother, looking around her in awe and spinning so that I had to drag my eyes up before she saw me.

By the way, my mother was looking at me out of the corner of her eyes it hadn't been fast enough.

"You just have to know someone in real estate," she said easily, waving one hand and adjusting Vera on her hip as we came to a stop in the dining room again.

"I'm afraid I don't know much of anyone anymore," Moira answered, shrugging.

Just that movement pulled the fabric of the snug sweater she was wearing tighter across her chest.

Since when did she dress in so tight of clothing?

Since when was she *that* curvy?

"Yeah, word around town is you pulled a disappearing act," my mother laughed, glancing sharply at me in warning as I dragged my eyes up from Moira's chest.

“Not disappearing,” Moira said uncomfortably, taking Vera as my mother handed her off to her. “Just busy I guess.”

“So busy you don’t go visiting people,” my mother chided, running her hand down Vera’s head as she stepped back. “But I know where to find you now. I’m glad Huck got you to come nanny for him. I would do it, but I’m still teaching.”

“That’s what Huck said,” Moira murmured, glancing quickly between me and my mother. She held Vera with the kind of natural ease that I hadn’t dared to expect. Her hip jutted out, Vera balanced on top of it and her face unbothered as Vera pulled and tugged at the blonde strands in her reach. It was as if she didn’t even notice her hair was being pulled.

“Mhm. Couldn’t quit on my kids before graduation. Even if Huck did go and make it big,” my mother laughed, nudging me as she grabbed her purse off of the counter. “Speaking of my kids. I do have a basketball game to get to like I told the two of you earlier.”

“Go, mom,” I laughed, rolling my eyes as she hesitated there, looking between me, Moira, and Vera.

“I’ll be fine, Ms. Beth,” Moira added. “I’m good with kids.”

It didn’t sound like an empty promise either, her smile turning to Vera as Vera started cooing.

I was the only one who saw my mom look between Moira and me pointedly though, her eyebrows raised as if to let me know that it wasn’t Vera that was making her hesitate on leaving. I could practically hear her lecturing me, despite how silent she had been.

I bit back a grin, agreeing with her to be on my best behavior with my eyes alone as she left the room.

Even if being on my best behavior was going to be a new kind of hell....



It was nearly nine pm before my mother showed back up at the house, the sound of her opening the garage echoing through the silent house as I leaned against Vera's nursery door and watched Moira.

I'd spent five hours watching Moira interact with Vera- from feeding to bathing her.

I'd never wanted kids. I'd made that readily apparent my whole life, but seeing Moira with Vera? It filled me with something I hadn't been ready for or expected. Outside of even how attractive I found it.

"Do you-"

"Shhhh," Moira spoke from across the nursery, her eyes cutting to me sharply as she rocked from side to side.

Vera's dark curls rested on one arm as she swayed, her little fist that had been holding to Moira's hair had fallen limply to the side.

Moira had gotten her to sleep...

She bent over the crib, carefully putting her in it, and then waved for me to leave the room silently, tiptoeing behind me.

Outside of Stella, I was the only one who had ever been able to put Vera down for her first five-hour stretch of sleep at night.

"You've got to -" Moira was whispering to me as she went to shut the nursery door, the monitor in her hand-

But I didn't wait to find out what it was that I was supposed to do.

I'd played nice all day, keeping my hands to myself and ignoring the heated tension between us.

Asking me to go another minute was asking too much of me though.

I backed her into the wall beside the door, my lips on hers and my hands on her hips as I pulled them into mine.

"Fuck, I waited all day for this," I murmured against her lips, nipping at the plush round of her bottom lip hungrily.

“Why’d you wait?” Moira asked, sounding honestly confused.

It was the right response.

I chuckled under my breath, bending my head to recapture her lips again as I started working my fingers between the space between the waistline of her jeans and the hem of her sweater.

Her little moan was like gasoline thrown on the fire, her back arching off of the wall and forcing her tighter into me.

I was so entranced I almost missed the sound of a throat clearing.

I didn’t miss the ‘ahem’ that followed it though.

I pulled back, taking a quick step back at the sight of my mother standing at the end of the hallway, her reading glasses on the top of her head and her eyebrows raised so high they almost touched her hairline.

“Did either of you want some night-time tea?” my mother asked evenly, despite her expression as she looked between the two of us.

Moira was bright red, her flush so deep it almost looked like she was choking.

“I- what-”

“Come on,” my mother insisted, not waiting for her to be able to form a response as she waved for us to follow her.

I laughed, putting my hand on the small of Moira’s back and leading her after my mother with a shake of my head.

“I already put the water on the stove,” my mom announced as she rounded the corner to the kitchen, gesturing to the ancient kettle rattling on top of it.

“I told you I have an electric one of those, mom,” I pointed to it on the counter with a sigh.

“And I told you I know how to work this one,” my mother answered evenly. “I’m exhausted. Don’t start getting after me about gadgets and gizmos, Huck. I’m only staying up long enough to make my tea and keep people honest.”

Moira colored even more at her words, but I just rolled my eyes.

“Huck says you were working as a wedding singer?” my mom asked Moira as she pattered around the kitchen, glancing at her with patented her no-nonsense questioning stare.

“I am, yeah,” Moira responded after a half of a second pause. “Or ... was.”

“Your mama mentioned you were going to school for music like Huck had,” my mom mentioned idly, glancing at me then in a way that made me wonder how much of everything she’d worked out there. “Before her death, of course. I can’t tell you how sorry I was to hear of that. She and your daddy both. I can’t imagine what you kids went through, but Oscar said y’all decided on no funeral?”

Moira’s blushing faded with the mention of her parents, a slight nod was all she managed right away.

“It was hard,” she admitted in a choked voice. “They’d only just retired to Florida...”

“I told your mama it was going to be the gators that got her,” my mom muttered, shaking her head. She spoke briskly, but I knew it was out of shared grief. “Had to go and be in a car accident.”

“Daddy said the drivers down there could be a little frantic,” Moira sighed, leaning against the counter and crossing her arms over her middle.

“Well, that was the last I heard of anything with you, you know,” my mom paused, tilting her head as she looked Moira up and down. “What happened to you getting that degree of yours?”

“Oh... I guess with everything up in the air I was just focusing on making ends meet,” Moira answered uncomfortably, glancing at me as if she didn’t quite want to answer with me there.

“Makes sense. You do what you gotta do,” my mom muttered, turning as the kettle started whistling and taking it off of the



stove. “What about where you’re living? Oscar said he wasn’t quite sure...”

Moira blanched but didn’t back away from my mother’s insistent round of questioning.

“Oh, well, yeah. Oscar has never been out to our place,” Moira half-laughed, although it sounded forced. “We live out between here and Lufkin.”

“Our place? We?” my mom asked before I could.

“Oh, yeah. Layla and I,” Moira shrugged.

She answered my mother’s every question and, for the most part, my mother seemed satisfied with her answers... but I could tell that she was leaving things out too.

My mom nodded, putting two mugs of tea down in front of me and Moira before grabbing her own. “We’ll have plenty of time to catch up later, honey. I’ll be more nosy then,” she laughed, winking at Moira as she walked over to kiss my cheek. “You two get some sleep before that baby wakes up.”

“Night, mom,” I muttered, snorting at the way she whirled in and out of the conversation like her own special brand of a tornado.

“Night Ms. Beth,” Moira echoed, staring after her with a look of wonder as my mother bustled out of the kitchen as quickly as she’d led us in.

I hadn’t liked being interrupted- but my mom had reminded me of just how little I knew about Moira now. I hadn’t known she hadn’t finished her degree, I hadn’t known that she had moved out of Nacogdoches- but they were things that I should have known.

“Hey, what was that about-” my words died in my throat as I turned to continue my mom’s round of questioning.

Moira was standing closer than she had been when my mom left and the look in her honeyed eyes had me swallowing every question I’d even thought of asking.

There was a heat there, like sriracha in honey, and my dick immediately jumped to attention as she lifted onto her toes and

took the initiative to kiss me in the silence of that kitchen.

My mother was forgotten.

The tea was forgotten.

I groaned as Moira worked her hand between us, her fingers pushing down into my jeans and finding my dick ready and waiting, twitching in her hand as she went to go pull it out.

The questions could wait.

The catching up could wait.

My hands pushed and pulled at the fabric covering her, lifting her onto the counter in front of me so that I could devour her mouth as I hurriedly undressed her.

We were just going to have to hope that my mother didn't need a nightcap of something.

If she did she was going to be seeing more than Moira and I than she ever could have wanted.

That knowledge just wasn't enough to stop me as I stepped between Moira's open thighs and pushed into her waiting, wet heat.

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# CHAPTER 17



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*Nacogdoches, Texas*

Officially I'd been working for Huck for three days.

Only, it didn't feel like working.

Huck didn't go anywhere and the longest he was away from Vera or me was to go work on his music in the recording studio he'd had built into the house before he officially moved in.

We spent our days playing with Vera, talking about everything and nothing while I steered the conversation away from any dangerous topics... and our nights having unbelievable sex.

And I felt *guilty*.

As long as Huck was there and my mind was occupied I was fine, but the minute he went to go and work on his new songs? I was left with Vera and my thoughts.

The Vera portion of things wasn't so bad.

She was an adorable baby, sweet and cherubic. I think I would have loved her even if she wasn't Huck's, but I knew I loved her *more* because she was.

And because she looked so much like my triplets when they were babies, it socked me right in the gut.

She and Sofia could have been twins.

And I *missed* my triplets.

From the time they'd been born until the last handful of days the longest I'd been away from any of my kids had been to do a gig and then go home. I hadn't done overnight stays, I hadn't gone out and had a vacation without them, hell I hadn't even gone home when they'd all been admitted for the flu when they were two. I'd slept between the cots in their hospital room, hunkered down in a chair.

I looked down at Vera in my arms, pushing a stray curl back off of her forehead and almost smiling at the way her lips puckered in response.

“Moira!”

And I froze the minute I heard my name said in that faux-happy-to-see-you tone.

Stella swanned in from the door to the nursery, grinning at me as she whipped her bug-eyed sunglasses off of her face and tossed her dark hair over one shoulder self-importantly.

If there was one thing I'd hated in the last three days it was Huck's open-door policy for Stella coming to visit during his custody time. They'd agreed to week-on, week-off as far as custody went, but Stella and Huck had also agreed to allow one another to visit whenever they wanted during that period with as young as Vera was... which was awesome and lovely... and very annoying for me.

“Stella,” I heard myself saying, politely but not nearly as warmly as Stella had said my name. “You're back again today?”

She'd come by that morning too, although she'd only popped in the nursery long enough to let me know she was there... same as the visit before it.

“I just missed my girl,” Stella said easily, her large purse sliding down her arm as she peered over my arm and made no move to take Vera from me. “Is Huck around?”

So, the same as before then.

I nodded, one shoulder lifting in a half-shrug. “I think he was working on his music...”

“Good! Oh, I’m so glad. I’m so pleased you were able to come work for him, too. I don’t think I can tell you enough about what it means to us! We were so worried about Vera with strangers...” Stella smiled, but I didn’t miss the subtle way she emphasized the ‘we’ and the ‘us’ when referring to her and Huck.

I didn’t answer, only smiling politely as I shifted Vera for Stella to take her...

But, again, Stella didn’t.

“You know, I told him when we get married we would have to look for a nanny,” Stella laughed, her blue eyes glittering as she tilted her head.

I didn’t miss the ‘when we get married’, but I didn’t respond to it either.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind taking a break if you have something you need to ask him about Vera,” I said nicely, standing and moving to Stella to hand Vera off.

“You have questions about Vera?”

Huck appeared in the doorway as if he’d been summoned, his curls a mess on top of his head and a friendly smile on his face as he came and took Vera from me.

He always did whenever he had been away from her for too long.

He was a doting dad.

*And fuck, if seeing that didn’t hurt...*

“Oh, no!” Stella laughed and leaned into Huck, suddenly cooing over Vera and petting her more like she was a cat than a baby. “I just wanted to drop in and check on her. You know how I hate this whole being away from her thing! Maybe we could consider a few shared overnights...” She trailed off suggestively.

It was more than I could take.

Suddenly I was reminded of the capacity I was there in.

I was a nanny, not a girlfriend. Huck and I had done no talking about the future or about the roles we were playing. We'd just been existing in our bubble, and that knowledge was all of a sudden so much heavier than it had been before.

"I'll let you two talk about what you need to," I muttered, reigning in my irritation as I ducked past Stella and headed out of the nursery.

"Moira!"

Huck sounded exasperated, saying a few things I couldn't hear as I hurried away from the stress of it all.

More than ever, I wanted to be back in the little house that I shared with Layla, surrounded by my triplets in bed so that I could finally have a good cry and let it all out.

"Moira," Huck caught up to me as I went into the room he'd made for 'me' while I stayed with him. I'd only been inside of it a handful of times since I came, the room serving as more of a catch-all for my things than anything else considering that I was sleeping with Huck every night.

"Don't let Stella get to you," Huck muttered as he closed the door and pulled me into his chest. "She's just-"

"Being Stella," I sighed, resting my forehead against his as he leaned down. I knew that. I'd known her longer than anyone else had. She'd always gone after what she wanted full force, leaving no room for anyone to get in her way. I'd just never been on the other side of that before.

He pulled my face up, catching my lips with his and kissing me so soundly I almost forgot why I'd stormed off in the first place.

"Forget about Stella," he whispered, walking me back to the bed. "She'd taken Vera for the night. You and I need some time just you and me."

I huffed, going to roll my eyes, but Huck was already busy undoing the belt that held my dress to my frame.

"You didn't have to do that," I murmured, distracted as the wrap dress fell from my frame and Huck made quick work of

working my body into a frenzy.

“I wanted to,” he said, dismissing it even as he framed my boobs in his hands, his thumbs brushing over my nipples even with the fabric of my bra covering them. He used it to his advantage, creating friction and sliding his thigh between mine so that he could spread them without using his hands.

“Well, in that case...” *Who was I to argue?*

I was still so emotionally raw, the seesawing back and forth from the last month making it impossible to stop and think anything through. Huck’s lips were like a balm to the haze in my brain, my body leaning into his willingly as he stripped me of my bra and panties too.

“I want you,” he promised, finding my nipples again with his calloused, magic fingers. “Don’t you know that by now?”

No. Yes. No.

When he touched me like that I could believe it.

His hand fell between my thighs, running over the wetness of my folds and circling the already sensitive bit of flesh between my thighs until I was moaning all over again.

“I only want you. You’re the only woman I want. In my bed, in my house, in my arms.” The words were impossibly sweet, contradicting the firm hold of his hands and how savagely he bent me back onto the bed.

I kissed him for all I was worth, flipping when he went to lay me back onto the bed so that I was straddling his thighs instead.

My hands rested against his chest, my nails digging into the skin there as I lowered myself onto his naked hips, his dick filling me and my breath catching in the back of my throat.

“Whose pussy is this, Moira?” he asked gruffly, grabbing my hips and lifting and lowering me at a pace I couldn’t have matched on my own.

“Yours,” I promised the very word a moan.

A thrill filled me at being able to admit it.



“Whose are you?” he demanded. One of his hands left my hips, grabbing my shoulder to hold me in place as he thrust up into me as well.

“Yours,” I cried wantonly, feeling my muscles vibrate and constrict around him.

“Oh, God,” I screamed, my head falling back from the way his hips brushed against my clit with each push of his hips up into me. “Oh, fuck. Oh, shit. Oh, Huck.” I was helpless as I surrendered to it, falling down into Huck as he shuddered up into me.

I was naked, sweaty, and spent as I rolled off of him, watching the way he watched me so obviously. He didn’t even try to hide it anymore, his hand rolling over the curve of my hip possessively and following me so that we were facing one another.

“I love you, Moira,” he promised, his voice heavily laden with sleep as his eyes drifted closed.

I’d waited so long to hear those words again.

So why did they taste ashen in my mouth as he fell asleep?

All I could think about was David, Carter, and Sofia.

All I could picture was them laying in their beds at home, wondering where I was.

I missed them too much to stay.

The happiness his words had filled me with evaporated as I stared at Huck, grief building in the back of my throat as I rolled out of bed.

I couldn’t keep doing this.

I couldn’t keep lying to Huck, lying to myself... being away from my babies.

I packed in silence, my heart so heavy that it felt as if it would fall clean through me to the soles of my feet.

But Huck didn’t wake up as I got my things together.

He didn’t wake up as I got the packed bags and went to leave.

It wasn't until I was actually at the door itself that the sheets even began to rustle.

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## CHAPTER 18



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I'd fallen asleep with Moira and thought it was the end of it.

That seemed to be the way things were going between us though. Things were good, they were great... and then she tried sneaking out of bed.

I couldn't even be positive that's what she was doing right off the bat, my eyes cracked and a yawn stuck behind my jaw. I saw her dressed and heading to the door, but I didn't automatically assume she was running again.

I thought she might have been going to the bathroom, maybe going downstairs...

It wasn't till I caught sight of the suitcases she'd come with clutched in her hands that I understood just what was happening.

I'd been relaxed, happy, and spent, but my brain jolted awake at the realization.

"Moira," I called, grabbing my boxers and jumping into them as I heard Moira's steps falter and then pick up.

"Shit."

She didn't stop, she didn't answer other than to curse under her breath, and I didn't bother with my jeans or anything else as I took out into the hallway after her.

"Moira!" I repeated, confusion and frustration layering my tone. "Where the hell are you going?"

“Home,” she called over her shoulder, her voice tight with a mixture of emotions I couldn’t quite identify.

She hitched her suitcases up in her arms, all but running for the door, and I cursed under my breath as I lengthened my strides to better follow her.

“Would you slow down a damn minute?” I demanded, catching up to her and grabbing her wrist to keep her from actually darting off.

“I can’t,” Moira answered, her voice choked as she looked anywhere but at me. “Huck, please...”

I didn’t understand how we had gone from making love in bed to her running out on me again, even with what had happened before... it had been so minor.

“Listen, if this is about Stella I’ll fix it,” I muttered, pushing my curls back up off of my forehead aggravatedly. My rings scraped at the skin of my forehead, my eyebrows furrowing as I watched tears build in Moira’s honey eyes.

“I’ll tell her she can’t just come into the house whenever she wants, I’ll have her call and ask first or some shit. Maybe we can arrange times... If you don’t want to see her, you don’t have to. Just slow down and talk it out with me.” I gestured between her and me with a frown.

I couldn’t just kick Stella out of my life completely, surely she knew that. But I wasn’t saying there weren’t some compromises that could be made. I didn’t even know what the fuck Stella could have said to her before I came in to warrant this kind of reaction, but I could make it work.

“It’s not about that,” Moira muttered, pulling her arm out of my grip and refusing to even put her suitcases down.

“Then what’s it about? I told you, we can work this shit out.” I didn’t like how desperate I was starting to feel. I didn’t like that she wouldn’t meet my gaze like I was somehow abhorrent to her all of a sudden. “I want you to stay and-”

“I can’t stay!” Moira interrupted, her voice catching. “I can’t stay regardless. It doesn’t matter what custody shit you figure out, okay?”

No, not okay.

I stepped forward, cutting her off as she went to walk away again.

“Moira, come on. I love you, please just take a second and calm down, tell me what this is about. Stella-”

“This isn’t about Stella!” Moira shouted. Those tears at her lash line wobbled, leaking out of her eyes as she jerked away from me again. “This isn’t about your *second* baby mama, Huck, it’s about your first.”

It was my turn to jerk back, my eyes widening as I stared at her in shock.

I didn’t know what Stella had put into her head, but she wasn’t even making sense.

“I only have one baby mama, Moira,” I argued, shaking my head. “And that’s Stella. I wouldn’t lie to you, you’ve gotta know that.”

Moira’s eyes flashed, her tears coming faster as she looked away from me again, finally dropping her suitcases and sighing so heavily it looked like it took the effort of her whole body to do so.

“Look, I don’t know who has been putting things in your head,” I continued more calmly, pissed that someone would even stoop to that level to try and come between us. If it was Stella, she and I were going to be having a few choice words past just this custody shit. “I’ve always been careful, Moira, you know that. I know for damn sure I don’t have any other babies out there, I would have known. And I’m not a liar.”

I had a lot of faults. Lying just wasn’t one of them.

“You aren’t the liar,” Moira whispered, her voice breaking as she finally looked back at me.

I didn’t understand the guilt in her expression then, or the way that she seemed to grow suddenly smaller in front of me, her arms wrapping around her waist and her breath hitching as she visibly tried to slow her tears.

“Okay...” I drew the word out slowly, trying to think how to ask her what the hell she meant then.

“I’m the liar, Huck, okay?” she spoke quickly, almost blubbering as she took a shaky inhale. “I’m the one who lied before, I’m the one who has been lying.”

I fucking hated lying, she knew that, but the way she said it made it sound like she was confessing to murder, and that brought me up short.

“Okay,” I repeated, slower, trying to wrap my head around her sudden mood shifting. “We can work through that Moira, just-”

“No we can’t,” she muttered before letting out a short burst of hysterical laughter. “God, no, Huck- we can’t. The first baby mama? That’s me. I’m your first baby mama. And I’ve been hiding our children this whole time. How in the hell are we supposed to work past that?”

I reeled in the face of her words.

And then I reeled some more.

My mouth opened, a slight grunt all I managed as I ran what she had said by again. Baby mama. First. Second. They were all just words, but put into a sentence like that?

“Are you trying to tell me we have a kid?” I finally asked, my voice catching at the absurdity of it all. She couldn’t be. I’d misheard or she’d misspoken.

Her watery laugh made either option seem further and further from the truth though.

“A kid?” she repeated, laughing again.

It was a harsh, dissonant sound and her honey eyes were tight with worry, a wild light in them as she met my gaze almost defiantly. “One? Try three, Huck.”

Three?

I shook my head, unsure if I was trying to argue with her or just stop the sudden ringing in my ears.

There was no way we had three children, no way I would have missed her having a baby... much less three times.

“We were safe,” I said dumbly, thinking back to the three months we had been together.

I’d always been careful. It wasn’t like with Stella where it had all been a drunken haze to, I wasn’t paying much attention to.

“Safe?” Moira repeated, her snort so derisive it echoed.

“You remember that ‘safe’ period I told you about?” her voice was harsh, raising with every word until she was almost yelling. “You remember fucking me without a condom that first night? Don’t you remember the box of tampons I bought for your place that just... never got opened?”

I did.

I remembered all of those things, although the tampon thing I only realized because she was pointing it out to me.

I’d never stopped to wonder why she hadn’t had a period during those three months, so used to different women and their different forms of birth control that I just hadn’t thought to ask.

“I never had a period, that whole time, because I was pregnant!” Moira shouted, her tears so thick they clogged her voice. “I was pregnant the whole time we were together and I was pregnant when you left!”

She hadn’t shown.

There hadn’t been any morning sickness that I’d noticed.

I ran through every scenario in my head, but looking at her I knew she was telling the truth. She was distraught...

And she would have only been a little over three months pregnant when I’d left.

“We have a kid,” I whispered, half-question as I stared at her still in shock.

“God! Huck! Aren’t you listening?! We have *three* kids. Triplets!”



I stumbled back, my back hitting the wall as two gasps came from down the hall.

My mother and Stella stood at the other end of it, Vera in my mother's arms and Stella's hand lifted to her mouth.

Triplets.

I considered myself a steady sort of person.

I had fans throw panties at me on stage, braved crowds of half-naked women trying to get me to sign body parts...

And I was almost knocked dead off my feet by Moira and her confession.

*Triplets...*

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## CHAPTER 19



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*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I considered myself an honest person, usually.

Fairly honest.

I did my taxes on time, I didn't go around embellishing stories too much, and I always answered questions as well as I could.

But I'd been lying for almost four years. And coming back from that? Was like pulling teeth.

Huck's kitchen was huge, with gleaming marble countertops and stainless steel appliances everywhere you looked... But there were about to be a lot of people in it. A lot of people had all come together to hear the last of my lies put to rest.

And my stomach was churning with acid because of it.

I didn't look any one person in the face as we all waited around the dining room table, my skin clammy and my palms itching. Miss Beth was still holding Vera, bouncing her on one knee while Stella stared avidly between Huck and me, drinking up the strife between us. Huck was the only one not sitting, pacing back and forth as the doorbell went off.

I checked my cell phone with a grimace, knowing which sibling it was by the lack of warning text I'd received before their arrival.

The sound of Huck and Oscar speaking in the entryway carried back as they came back to us, Oscar's brown eyes sweeping the kitchen worriedly.

“Moira?” He sounded almost hesitant as he came in, although that didn’t stop him from grinning at Vera as she, the only unaffected party by the tension, cooed at him upon his entry. “Anyone wants to tell me what all this cloak and daggers is about? Y’all ask me to get the hell out here with no warning, send a jet for me- which, by the way, who does that? It’s a two-hour drive, I don’t see why I couldn’t have just driven here...” He looked back and forth between Huck and me in askance.

Huck only shrugged. “Moira was the one that wanted you here,” he said blandly.

His face was a mask of control, his oceanic eyes the only window into the tumultuous storm of his real emotions.

“I wanted to get it all done at once,” I muttered, sighing as I saw my phone screen finally light up.

“What are we waiting on now since Oscar is here?” Stella asked impatiently, her voice just barely on the wrong side of snarky. “I want to know about what we heard-”

“There’s more to it than that,” Ms. Beth snapped, glaring at Stella in a warning.

“Get what all done at once?” Oscar asked, looking more and more uncomfortable as he realized just how far out of the loop he was.

“We have to give the backstory for it to make sense to anyone else,” I whispered, trying to catch Huck’s gaze.

He frowned, his nod clipped. “Aren’t we waiting on Layla?”

“Layla’s about to be here. And I’d rather-”

The doorbell going off again stopped me and I grimaced as Ms. Beth stood with Vera to go and answer the door.

I had been hoping to get most of it out of the way before she got here, but... Lufkin was still so close to Nacogdoches and, it being a school day, she didn’t have to worry about Isla being part of who she had needed to cart over here.

“Mama! Mama! Mama!”

The three voices chorused before my brother could ask any other questions and, despite the situation we were in, I found myself sinking to my knees in instinct.

It'd been days and I couldn't even pretend not to be just as excited to see David, Carter, and Sofia.

Their little hands pulled at every inch that they could reach as they crowded me to hug me, their toddler excited babbling filling the previously silent room.

Behind them Layla came into the room, her gaze worried and trained only on Oscar.

Oscar was staring at me as if I had grown an extra set of heads.

Which, with the way the babies were wrapped around me, I kind of had.

"Mama," Oscar repeated, his voice higher pitched than usual.

"These are my triplets," I answered slowly, standing and lifting David with me on my hip. The other two were content to play around my legs, tugging on my pants and giggling-oblivious to the absolute shock that had spread through the room.

"David, Carter, and Sofia," I explained, nodding to each one in turn and swallowing hard as I finally allowed myself to look at Huck.

Huck was staring at our children with an unreadable expression filling his gaze.

"Our kids," I amended, whispering the words.

Oscar looked between me and Huck again, his face twisting as he put two and two together.

"Our... You son of a bitch!" He yelled, lunging for Huck as it finally dawned on him.

I was quicker, though.

I put myself between the two of them, David still on my hip as I glared at Oscar.

“He didn’t know, Oscar!” I whisper-shouted, trying to keep the volume down with the four kids that were now in the room. “And watch your language!”

“He didn’t know!?” Oscar repeated, his voice not lowered in the least as he tried to step around me, murder on his face as he stared over my shoulder at his best friend.

“No one knew,” Layla echoed from behind him, her voice much softer. “Just me. Moira has been keeping it a secret.”

Oscar deflated, but only a little, his eyes wild as he looked at me again, shaking his head. “You can’t tell me he just didn’t know there was a *possibility* of you being pregnant,” he hissed. “And what? How old are they? Two?”

“Three,” I answered, my throat bobbing as I looked at Huck again.

He was crouched in front of Carter and Sofia then, his hands gentle and his emotions still completely hidden from me as he ignored my brother and me entirely to focus on the two children in front of him.

“Three,” Oscar repeated hollowly. “Wait, that would have made you-”

“Twenty,” I snapped. “God, Oscar, would you stop! It was my decision. I wanted to be with Huck. I’ve always loved him, you can’t be so blind not to have *known* that!”

“He’s twelve years older than you!” Oscar muttered, rubbing his hand down his face and pacing away from me. “Everyone knew about your crush, but he’s -”

“I went after him,” I insisted, my voice firm.

“He has every right to be mad,” Huck finally interjected, his voice still curiously calm. “We were together for three months back then and never told him. I’d be pissed if I were him too.”

Oscar sank back against the counter, mouthing three months as he furiously rubbed his eyes as if he could erase us from in front of him by doing so.

“How do you even know the babies are Huck’s though?” Stella butted in her words a sickly kind of sweet.

My jaw clenched, my eyes sliding to her as I bit back a host of unsavory things I wanted to say in response.

“Because I’ve only ever been with Huck,” I said simply instead.

Oscar groaned, muttering something about things he didn’t want to hear.

“You still haven’t explained why you didn’t tell me,” Huck murmured, standing and leveling me with a gaze that reminded me too much of his mother at that moment.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, grimacing as I suddenly felt just as young as my brother had been trying to make me out to be.

“Because you didn’t want kids,” I answered simply. “I didn’t know I was pregnant when you left. I wasn’t showing, I wasn’t sick... I wasn’t paying enough attention to not having a period. You left and I was sick. I thought it was missing you...”

Huck looked concerned as I admitted as much, finally telling him after all those years how his leaving had gutted me, but I didn’t stop to let us focus on that.

“You could have told me over the phone,” he said simply, his eyes dark as they traced my features as if searching for something.

“I didn’t know,” I murmured. “Not at first. I called you to tell you right after I found out, you know? I took the test, I called your phone... and you were at a recording studio. All I could think about was how you’d said you didn’t want kids. I was worried you’d be mad since I told you I was safe from getting pregnant, I was worried you’d freak out and lose out on your opportunity by rushing back and then never forgive me for me taking your dream away- God, Huck.” I let out a stuttered sigh. “I was worried about so many things...”

“That was the night they played my demo, wasn’t it?” Huck asked, his eyes widening slightly as I watched him put the pieces of the puzzle together.

“It was.” And then he’d stopped calling as regularly... he’d stopped reaching out...

“I thought you were pulling away,” Huck whispered, his voice catching slightly, and tears filled my eyes all over again.

“I thought-” I cut off, swallowing the grief of those years and trying to calm my racing heart at the same time.

Everyone around us seemed lost, but I could just see the splintering of emotions starting through the shell of indifference Huck had been wearing.

“I want a DNA test,” Huck said solemnly, breaking the stunned silence around us.

And just that quickly the fissures of hope that I’d started to dare to allow myself to fear died out like snuffed candles.

I nodded numbly, unable to meet Stella’s pleased gaze as I swallowed the bitter hurt and betrayal that came from the words. I wasn’t going to argue.

Ms. Beth and Oscar both opened their mouths to start.

“Calm down,” Huck said quickly, holding a hand up to stop the both of them in their tracks. He turned to face them, stopping only as Carter reached up and tugged on his shirt.

My throat closed over at the way Carter lifted his little arms above his head, standing on his toes in clear askance of being lifted- and my throat closed up even further as Huck bent immediately to comply.

He’d always been good with kids, despite his not wanting to have them.

Even before he’d moved back I couldn’t have gone to any store in the area without seeing it plastered with his face on a newspaper or a magazine advertising something he’d done for the youth in Nacogdoches. From opening up that amusement park a year and a half ago and making it free to children under the age of sixteen to making scholarships for single-parent households in the area he was always there.

It had driven me mad seeing it all the time and listening to all the women in line gushing about it.



Now it just made me sad.

“I know that they’re mine,” Huck continued surely after lifting Carter in his arms. He smiled at our son, resting their too-similar curls against one another almost as if to showcase it. “So don’t anyone go jumping down my throat,” he added for his mom and Oscar’s benefit.

I thought I heard Stella snort, but Oscar spoke too soon for me to be sure.

“Then why the DNA test?” he asked pointedly.

“Because legally it’s the smartest option,” Huck answered levelly. “I set my shit up airtight after Bernie signed me. You have no idea how many women pop up claiming to have your kid after your name starts hitting headlines. I didn’t *plan* on having kids, but I did make trusts for any children that could come.” He paused, looking over at the triplets and then to Vera still in his mother’s arms almost with an amused glance.

“Unless you’re fixed there’s no guarantee it won’t happen,” Ms. Beth agreed, nodding with a small smile.

“I put in a clause that anyone claiming their child was mine needed a DNA test to prove it to keep from any lies coming about from some woman wanting a rock star child support payment... It isn’t because I doubt you.” Huck’s eyes slid back to mine and I felt my heart skip a beat in my chest as David kicked at my side.

Just out of the corner of my eye, I could see where Sofia had wandered over to Vera, standing on her tip-toes to see her in Ms. Beth’s arms and her brothers seemed to have caught sight as well.

Both Carter and David struggled to get down and run over, something I watched with a lump in the back of my throat.

The world spun as I saw the four children gathered in front of their grandmother and then spun again as Huck walked to my side, taking my hand and pulling me to him as he lifted my face to meet his eyes.

“I love you, Moira. That didn’t change with this. As mad as I want to be... I can see why you did what you did. There’s a

hell of a lot to work out still, but I love you ... and I want this family that I didn't even know I had or wanted. Watching you with Vera these last few days has made me realize that maybe you were right that first night and that my insistence on not having kids had more to do with my trauma than anything else. I want to be a father to all my children... but I want to build a family with you."

I inhaled shakily, staring up at him even as I felt myself melt into his chest.

"I want that too," I admitted in a small whisper, my eyelashes wet from the tears I was refusing to cry.

"I want them to get the DNA tests for their trust funds alone. That's it," he promised, sweeping his thumbs under my eyes and brushing the unshed tears away before they could fully fall. "Go with me tomorrow, get them done and sent off... and then figure this out with me?"

"How am I supposed to say no to that?" I whispered, forgetting the audience we had as he ducked his head to take my lips with his own.

It was only the chorus of laughter and Layla's joking 'ew' that reminded me at all.

And even then it took a moment before I could pull back.

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## CHAPTER 20



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I didn't know how I'd gone from a man who never wanted kids to having four of them in less than a week, but I had.

Or, at least, that was what it felt like.

Everything after Moira and I had agreed to figure things out that day in my kitchen had been kind of like a round of twenty questions in which no one knew who was supposed to be leading the inquisition and who was supposed to be answering.

Oscar had, predictably, wanted to know everything that had come before the triplets.

And ... we'd given him a condensed PG-friendly version of it.

My mother and Layla had peppered the rest of the 'family' discussion with any number of questions as to either side's involvement or plans and Stella... Well, Stella had left somewhere between Moira and me setting the triplets up with ice cream and my mom putting Vera down for a nap.

The four days following all of it had been absolute chaos.

We sent the DNA tests off but, after that, it had all been a guessing game of all the guests in my house and everyone trying to get to know one another.

My mother was ecstatic.

Layla split her time between hers and Moira's house and sporadically came to visit during the day.

And Oscar was still getting over everything.

Although having his niece and nephews around seemed to be helping with that.

At least when they were in a good mood.

He sat in front of Sofia at the table with a spoon held out just like he had been trying for the ten minutes previous, his face screwed up in concentration as he tried to convince her to take a bite.

“It’s good,” he promised. “You just have to try it!”

“Sofia doesn’t like yogurt,” I reminded him for what had to be the tenth time.

I could just see Moira grinning at me from where she was helping David eat his for remembering as much.

“She hasn’t tried it!” Oscar complained, huffing as the sound of clacking heels echoed following his words.

Moira flinched, just barely, right before Stella swanned into the room.

“Who doesn’t like yogurt?” she asked importantly, looking around and frowning when she realized that it was everyone but my mother and Vera in the room. “And where is Vera?”

“With me,” my mother interrupted, following Stella into the room with a stack of mail in one hand and Vera balanced on her other hip. “We went out when we saw the postman at the end of the drive.”

I grinned at her, my brow furrowing only slightly as I noticed how excited she looked.

Stella, though, only gave a tight smile, taking Vera from her arms and looking from her to me and back again as if she was waiting on something.

“Oh, good,” Moira sighed as she looked up from the finished yogurt cup in front of David. “I was supposed to be getting a change of address form in there, did you see it?”

“No, but I did see something better,” my mother said dramatically, pulling a large envelope from the stack of mail and holding it out importantly.

Everyone looked up as she did, but I was the first to realize what it must be.

I snorted, walking over to take it from her and laughing as eyes turned to me in askance.

“It’s the lab results from the DNA test,” I explained amusedly.

“Oh, I thought it would be a call,” Oscar muttered, his attention already starting to divert.

I cleared my throat, grinning as I pulled the sheaf of papers from the stack of them. I was familiar enough with it all, having already gone the route before. “Not a call. Just a paper with a bunch of numbers.”

I flipped through to the right sheet, scanning it idly to look for the numbers I knew to find.

“In the case of Huck Chapman and triplets David, Carter, and Sofia,” I announced dramatically, reading like that over-the-top court shows my mother always liked putting on. “You, Huck Chapman are...” I paused, my eyes narrowing as I read the results I was looking at again.

“Not the father,” I muttered, my heart plummeting in my chest.

I scanned the numbers again, looking them over before flipping to the bottom of the stack of papers to read the statement. A less than one percent chance that I was a biological match to any of the three children?

Chaos erupted around us, voices raised on top of one another, but my eyes were glued to the paper and the typed words and charts that just didn’t feel like they added up.

Carter giggled at something, drawing my eyes to him, and I couldn’t help but focus on the curls that looked so much like mine- the eyes that so closely resembled my own contradicting the evidence I was reading.

“There’s a mistake,” Moira insisted, speaking over my mother and Oscar’s grumbling.

I wanted to believe her.

I did believe her.

Didn't I?

But, if she was telling the truth, how could the DNA test read as it did?

"Check the names on the test and the date it was sent in," my mother suggested calmly, taking the washcloth Moira had been using to clean David up to take over wiping him down while Moira stood there with tears in her eyes.

I eagerly flipped the papers again, hope building beneath my ribs ...

And falling just as quickly as I read through everything.

"It all matches up," I said woodenly, my throat tight.

"Well, that's ridiculous," Oscar groused, pushing his chair back and looking between his sister and me worriedly. "Right? Moira wouldn't have lied." He paused after he said it though, the whole room silent in remembrance over the lies she'd told to hide the triplets in the first place.

Moira made a choked sound, but Oscar turned more fully toward her.

"There's no way they could be anyone else's, right Moira?" he asked softly, almost as if he were afraid to hear the answer.

"No," she muttered, sounding startled. "I've only been with Huck!"

"You got it tested at Trust Care, right?" Stella interrupted her eyebrows raised as she looked pointedly only at me. "The same as we did for Vera, right?"

I nodded shortly.

She shrugged, looking unbothered by it all as she adjusted Vera. "They've got a really good reputation," she said evenly, ignoring Oscar's grunt of irritation as she looked at me with a 'well, what can you do?' kind of expression.

She wasn't wrong.

Not that I wanted to hear it from her, or anyone else in the room.

“Maybe they tested the wrong DNA,” Moira mumbled, taking the paperwork from me and flipping frantically through it. “Or they made a mistake testing it somehow. Maybe we got an inaccurate swab.”

“It’s more than ninety-nine percent accurate,” Stella told her airily, busying herself with getting Vera ready.

Moira turned the papers over and over again, staring at them as if they might change.

I couldn’t look away from her.

I’d already accepted so much over the last month, been through so many changes...

It was as if my entire world had tilted on its axis when she’d walked into the hotel ballroom while I’d been up at the altar... and it had never tilted back. Things just kept spinning crazier and crazier and crazier until they were out of control.

I didn’t know which way was up and which way was down.

Moira and I had only just started working through the past and all of the ways that we had hurt each other and now this?

“I don’t want to interrupt this late-night tv program,” Stella continued sweetly as she secured a cap onto Vera’s head, “but I need to take Vera to get some new clothes. Huck, can I have the card?”

Blindly, I reached into my pocket, pulling my wallet and the credit card I’d opened specifically for Vera’s needs out and handing it numbly over.

“You and I should talk when you aren’t so... busy with your messes,” Vera continued, smiling smugly at Moira as she spoke.

Normally, I would have interjected, but my voice was trapped somewhere in learning what all I’d thought was real might not be.



“You don’t have to be so ugly!” Moira snapped, tears streaming down her face as she threw the papers away from her. “This is a mistake! There’s enough drama here without you adding to it!”

Stella’s brows lifted, her head tilting slightly. “I’m not adding to anything, Moira.”

“Yes, you are!” Moira gestured wildly between them. “With all your comments and your remarks!”

“I only said that it was an accurate test and that Trust Care is a reliable hospital. How you take those remarks is up to you.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder, shrugging nonchalantly. “I’m just here to pick up my daughter.”

“And I’m trying to sort things for my kids,” Moira answered sharply. “You’re just bitter because Huck didn’t go through with the wedding.”

Stella’s eyes flashed, something mean and nasty moving behind her features as she straightened. “No, he didn’t,” she said slowly. “But at least, when my DNA test for my daughter came back there was a hundred percent certainty as to who the father was... and I didn’t lie about it beforehand either.”

“Enough!” I growled, their back and forth finally wearing on me.

I lowered my voice as I put my thumb and forefinger on either side of the bridge of my nose, pinching it to try and calm myself down. “The back and forth isn’t helping anyone,” I snapped.

Stella huffed, whirling on her heel to take Vera and leave.

The room was deadly silent other than the toddler’s giggling back and forth after that, everyone in it waiting with bated breath.

“Huck,” Moira whispered, coming up to my side with tears still leaking from the corners of her eyes.

But it was too much.

“I can’t,” I told her honestly, stepping back as she reached up to touch my arm.

She flinched at my refusal, hurt filling her honey eyes, but I couldn't.

"I need..." the list of what I needed ran through my head, each more ridiculous than the last. I needed air, I needed quiet, I needed- "I need a minute," I muttered, walking backward until I was going through the same entryway Stella had just left through.

I could hear both Moira and my mother calling after me. And I could hear Oscar trying to calm them down.

But none of that mattered.

All I could hear was my voice ringing in my ears telling me that I was not the father.

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## CHAPTER 21



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*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I read the results of the DNA test for what had to be the five hundredth time, my stomach settled somewhere in my knees as I stared at them.

There was no way they were accurate but Huck still hadn't come back.

Oscar had called Layla after he left and the two of them sat at one end of the table, pouring over research and information on DNA testing while Ms. Beth held my hands at the other end of the table and kept an eye on the triplets as they played with blocks on the floor.

"There's no one else that could be their dad," I cried, trying to stop my tears with the fingers of one hand, and sniffing as Ms. Beth squeezed my hand.

"Oh, honey, I believe you," she reassured me again, patting the hand she still held. "We're looking into it, we'll find out what happened."

"I haven't been with anyone else," I said again, my stomach flipping at even the thought.

"Even if you had," Ms. Beth snorted, "those babies are the spitting image of their daddy. Those Chapman genes are strong, baby, I can see him in them clear as day. And I'm his mama!"

Her certainty had tears building in my eyes all over again.

How could she be so sure but Huck not be?

Huck who had been gone for hours.

I clenched my teeth, trying to hold back another round of sobs.

“Did you read the thing on alleles?” Oscar asked Layla from across the table, breaking his silence as he looked up from the book in front of him.

Layla shook her head, shushing him, as she opened her laptop.

My stomach sank all over again.

Layla wasn't even paying attention anymore, her fingers flying across the keyboard and that look of single-minded focus I was so used to twisting her expression.

“Is now really the time to be working on your brainchild?” I demanded of my twin, more hurt than I wanted to admit. “Can't you ever take time away from it!? Can't we focus on this!?”

Beth's fingers tightened around mine, but Layla didn't even look up as she sighed.

“I'm not working on my programming, Moira,” she said patiently, her frown deepening as she put in another long moment of typing. “I'm looking up who ran your DNA testing at the hospital.”

Guilt smacked me faster than my upset with what I'd thought was her preoccupation.

Layla had been there for me so much over the last handful of years, in so many more ways than I had the words to explain. She'd walked me through labor and being a new mom, held my hand through every step along the way...

And even after all of that, I'd as much as accused her of being selfish and insensitive.

“Why are you searching for that?” I asked, subdued, my apology somewhere behind the words.

Layla didn't have a chance to answer as the sound of the front door closing echoed through the house though.

The rest of what I had been going to say caught in the back of my throat right along with the apprehension and fear that came

with that sound.

Everything other than Layla's furious typing seemed to come to a stop as we all turned toward the entry to the kitchen apprehensively.

Huck entered much more slowly than he'd left, his keys jangling against the rings in his hand and his oceanic eyes sweeping the room and all of us still in it almost apologetically.

I could feel the tears threatening again, my breath catching as I tried to read from his expression alone where he stood on everything now.

"Lord, this all is too much for me," Ms. Beth exclaimed with a huff. "You young people might be for all of this drama, but I'm going to tell you right now it doesn't solve a lick of anything. You all need to remember that."

She exhaled heavily as she looked between Huck and me.

Huck looked back at her with a snort. "You young people," he muttered. "Like I'm sixteen and not in my mid-thirties."

"Coulda fooled me," Ms. Beth muttered, making Oscar snort in amusement.

Huck looked affronted, but it only lasted for a minute.

His eyes fell on me again, studying how my expression had changed and no doubt seeing just how awful I looked after crying off and on the entire time he had been gone.

His expression softened, his eyes burning as he ignored everyone else in the room to crouch in front of me.

"I know that the triplets are mine, Moira," he promised, his voice heavily laden with certainty that I'd been so sure he lost that I almost burst into tears all over again. "I know you wouldn't lie to me, about any of this. I shouldn't have run off, but it was just-" he sighed raggedly, running his fingers through his hair and scrubbing them along his scalp.

"It was a lot," he finished lamely, looking up at me in a way that made it clear he was begging for me to understand. "I

don't know why the DNA tests got messed up, or how, but clearly something happened-”

“Something happened alright,” Layla snorted, popping up from behind her computer and looking between us pointedly. “You two good now? Or is one of you going to go running again? Because I gotta tell you, watching the two of you take turns running off is getting old.”

I snorted, and Huck made a noise that almost sounded like a choked laugh.

She wasn't wrong.

In the last, nearly four years we had taken turns going back and forth running from one another.

Huck turned to look up at me again, his eyes searching mine as he reached forward to take both of my hands in his. His rings indented the skin of my fingers, the necklace his mother had given him all those years ago swinging back and forth like a pendulum as he rocked back on his heels still crouched in front of me. “I still want to make this work.”

It was a simple sentence but it was enough to unleash those tears I'd been holding in.

Huck lifted his hand, brushing my tears away as I nodded emphatically. “I do too,” I assured him, hating how weak I felt and how much relief came from such a short reassurance.

I was so relieved that he trusted me, even with all the evidence that made it seem like he shouldn't, but none of it made any sort of sense.

“I love you, Moira,” Huck said solemnly, his right hand letting go of mine to reach up and flatten his palm against the side of my face. “I promise, I'll stop fucking up eventually.”

I laughed through my tears, the apology so fully him that it was impossible not to take it as genuine.

“You don't fuck up nearly as often as you think,” I told him belatedly.

It was just that when he did, just like me, we seemed to make a whole marathon of it.

“Okay, so, we’re all good now?” Layla interrupted, her voice brisk as she clapped her hands together.

The noise echoed, our eyes turning to her as she looked between us as if she needed verbal confirmation to continue.

She had her ‘busy’ face on though, so I bit back my teasing and nodded. “Yeah, Layla, we’re good.”

“Well, as good as we can be,” Huck amended, looking at me with a twitch of his lips.

Even if everything else was fucking up and made no sense I was glad, at least, that I had him. Doing it alone had been harder than I ever wanted to admit to him.

“Good. So, I did some digging through these orders,” she flicked her fingers derisively at the DNA results with as close to a sneer as I’d ever seen her wear. “And then I looked some stuff up on Trust Care’s website. Does the name Roderick Ingman mean anything to anyone?”

Ingman?

Alarm bells went off in my head, but Huck only frowned, shaking his head.

“No one? Not even any guesses?” Layla asked, sounding disappointed.

Oscar rolled his eyes, looking at her in exasperation, but Ms. Beth, Huck, and I were all staring waiting for her to get to the point.

The name spun throughout my head and I frowned as well, trying to put into place why I felt my heartbeat quicken at the name.

“It sounds familiar,” I admitted after a minute, my brow furrowing.

I just couldn’t place *why* it did, and I felt like I should be able to.

“No one?” Layla asked again, exhaling heavily through her nose. “Not even just Ingman? Jesus, guys... Ingman.... Come on...”



“I only know one Ingman,” Oscar said with a shrug. “But Roderick doesn’t sound like a name Stella would willingly go by.”

He was joking, I knew it, but the minute he said it, I felt my heart drop down into my belly, my mouth going dry as I stared at Layla.

Her brown eyes met mine pointedly, a look of knowing in them as she nodded.

“That’s because she wouldn’t. But Roderick Ingman is Stella’s uncle.” Layla said it very carefully, clearly not trying to make any sudden accusations or offend anyone, but I could see the anger simmering there beneath the surface.

And I could feel Huck’s fingers tighten around mine, his body going so still that the still swinging necklace was almost ironic.

“And Roderick Ingman had what, exactly, to do with these results?” Huck asked, his voice low and dangerous.

Oscar’s eyes widened as he caught up to the rest of us, his grimace quick. “Fuck.”

My sentiments exactly.

“Roderick Ingman is the lab technician who was in charge of running the DNA tests,” Layla answered matter-of-factly. “He’s the one who generated this report and ran the samples.”

Her words hung heavily in the air between the five adults, the tension so thick it could have been cut with the edge of a paper.

“Lord,” Ms. Beth breathed finally, surprise and disappointment coloring that one word so strongly it almost sounded like a curse. “And you’re sure?”

“I am,” Layla shrugged. “I told you I did some digging. Their familial connection is confirmed online and his name is all over these DNA results. A quick look at Trust Care’s employee website shows him as working there too. I’m fairly certain these aren’t *fake* results. At least, they came from the hospital... But I’m willing to bet my whole next commission

that if another DNA test is run and Roderick Ingman has nothing to do with it we'll learn the truth right quick in a hurry."

My chest felt as if someone had taken it in a death grip, my heartbeat almost sluggish as I tried not to let my emotions get the best of me again.

Huck had no such temperament though.

He let go of me roughly, standing and pacing away from me with short, angry strides. I could see the effort it took for him to keep himself as controlled as he was, and the violence breathed off of him in waves.

"I want it rerun," he said, his words clipped and tense. "Right now. I want to go and have it rerun."

"What about the cops?" Oscar asked, his voice betraying his anger as well.

Huck was careful as he held his hand out to me, helping me to my feet. I could see him going to pull back as if he were afraid he would hurt me but I gladly took his hand in mine, squeezing his fingers back just as hard.

"We'll call them on the way," Huck said determinedly. "I'm too mad to call the hospital right now. I don't know what I'll do..."

"I'll call the hospital," Ms. Beth said with her lips set in a grim line. "And I'll go with y'all so that when the twins are done being swabbed I can get them out of there before anything gets too ugly." she was in constant motion as she talked, and for once I appreciated it.

Layla closed her computer, looking at the clock and then at me with an apologetic frown. "I have to go..."

I knew she had to get Isla. I nodded as Oscar started trying to quietly argue with her, ignoring them as Huck tossed me the keys to his Bugatti.

"Ride with me? My mom will take the kids." I could see the effort he was still using to keep himself in control.

The violence and heat radiating off of him from it all didn't bother me in the slightest. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was just as evenly matched as him there.

Looking at my children being made ready to leave by their grandmother all I could think about was the lengths someone had gone to break up our family and deprive my children of their father.

"I'm with you," I told Huck seriously, my hands closing tightly around the keys.

And I meant it in every way I could mean those words.

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## CHAPTER 22



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

My mother had scared the hell out of me growing up.

Hell, my mother had scared the hell out of me regularly no matter what my age. In the last five years, I'd formed a relationship with my dad, one that I never thought I'd have after his having abandoned us when my mom had been pregnant with me, but my mom...

My mom was the reason behind every choice I'd made.

My father had been a famous rock star but my mom was the one who helped me become one before I ever got any help from within the industry through my dad.

My mom had worked a second after-school job to pay for my music lessons as a kid, paid students to give me rides when she couldn't and gone to bat for me just about every damn time she needed to, and quite a few times she didn't.

There was a comfort in having her be the one calming the triplets down after they'd been swabbed... again.

I didn't know if it had been her or Oscar who had called the police, but I knew my mom had called the hospital because a representative was waiting for us with the two detectives when we arrived.

And that was just what my mom did. She got shit done.

I was just about spitting nails myself, my phone still in my hand from where I'd texted Stella asking her to meet me up at the hospital.

“And you found this out how?” Detective Abrams asked again, writing in his notepad and glancing at the hospital representative that looked like she was about to launch into another political gambit to protect the hospital.

“By looking it up,” I answered sharply, speaking before Moira could go into the same explanation we’d already given three times. “What does how we found out matter if the man did what we’re accusing him of?”

“I can assure you, nothing like this has ever been-”

“Reported at this hospital before,” I finished for the representative sharply. “Yeah, we know. You said that already. I don’t care about what has or hasn’t been done here before though, I’m telling you what happened now.”

The second detective, Detective Marty, nodded. “We understand your frustration, but we have to ensure we have everything correct. Now-”

I stopped paying attention at the sight of the brunette exiting the elevators across the hall though.

I’d never noticed Stella before. Not growing up, not when we had become adults. I’d meant what I said to Moira when I told her that if it hadn’t been for them having been best friends at one point and my missing Moira so badly, that first drunken night and subsequent drunken weekend never would have happened.

Stella was a beautiful woman, but she was cold.

Her eyes were blue ice, and her perfectly manicured nails and straightened hair were like something out of a magazine.

It’d never made me angry before either.

Seeing her, with Vera in her arms, did just then though.

I broke away from the detectives, striding over to her to take Vera from her before she could fully grasp what was going on.

“I thought you wanted to talk about our future?” Stella asked slowly, her gaze nervous as it skittered between the detectives talking to Moira and back to me.

I'd almost forgotten I'd included that line in my text.

"We have no future," I said coldly, my shoulders tight as Moira and the detectives made their way over to join us. "We could have been civil. We could have remained friends," but that was going to be hard to do with her in jail. "They're rerunning the triplets' DNA right now," I bit out, unable to offer her any more explanation than that.

Stella shifted, inhaling sharply through her teeth as more of her icy facade cracked. She looked at Moira worriedly, her hands shaking as she lifted them to press into the front of her purse and glanced over at the elevators.

Without thinking about it I stepped to the side, blocking off her exit with a grimace at even feeling like I needed to do so.

"You don't need to rerun the DNA," she finally whispered, the words breaking up as tears filled her eyes. She looked between Moira and me again before finally looking at Vera.

It was the most emotion I'd seen her show our daughter in front of anyone else before, her lips shaking as she looked down at her hands. "I suppose you know about my Uncle Eric?"

"You know, maybe this conversation-" the hospital representative started, looking worried, but Moira cut her off with a quick gesture.

Her honey eyes were hard, her jaw set as she took a step forward and forced Stella to focus on her.

"I don't want to sit here and go back and forth about what we do and don't know, Stella. I can't believe you'd be a party to this. I let go of you chasing after Huck as you did, I haven't said a damn thing, but this? These are my *children!*"

Stella made a noise that almost sounded like a whimper, her jaw clenching. "You weren't with him at the time," she defended, although she didn't sound convinced at all. "I didn't steal him from you! You were the one who showed up to our wedding-"

"And thank God I did!" Moira snapped, her eyes blazing as she stepped forward, her body vibrating with her anger.

“Thank God you tried tricking me into being there so you could rub you having him in my face. Thank God he saw me first and my being there prevented you from trapping him with marriage! You’ve always been headstrong, but this? This is evil, Stella. I don’t even know who you are anymore. The Stella I knew would *never* have gone through so much trouble just to hurt me. And she sure as hell wouldn’t have dragged kids into all of this!”

Stella flinched at that, glancing at me as if expecting me to step in, but Moira said it more eloquently than I ever could have managed.

“I didn’t ...” she inhaled sharply, closing her eyes. “I didn’t know he was going to do it,” she finally whispered. “I called my uncle about the tests because I was pissed. I was mad that Vera was going to be losing out on so much. God, don’t you think I know how much more he loves you?”

Stella’s laugh was hard and bitter, her eyes raw with her pain. “I know he loves you. I know that means he’ll love your triplets more. You forget I was the mistress baby too, not the child that was wanted, and now Vera has to be that too?!”

Stella hiccupped, shaking her head. “I don’t know how to be a mom. I’m not good at it and you are, but I could at least give her Huck and give her stability, and you’re trying to take that away too! All I did was tell my Uncle Eric that I wished I could do something to change it. That’s it. It was wishing out loud, not asking him to do anything!”

I blinked, putting Stella’s words together with a frown.

I’d forgotten that she’d had such a strained relationship with her parents.

From the way Moira was looking at her, she had too.

“So, what, you just happened to be at the house at just the right time for the DNA results to come in?” Oscar asked from where he had wandered over, his disbelief evident.

“No,” Stella admitted with a sullen frown. “My Uncle Eric called me and told me that they’d been delivered. He didn’t tell me what he had done yet. He just told me that I was going



to want to be there when they got the results. I thought, maybe, that finally, perfect Moira had messed up.” Her voice shook, her eyes dropping to her feet as she struggled to get the words out.

Moira snorted, tears filling her eyes, and I knew that her grief and anger went hand in hand in a way mine couldn't. I was just friends with Moira, I'd never been all that close to her.

“I thought the babies weren't Huck's when I left,” Stella continued in a small voice. “And I was happy. Sue me! I was happy that it meant that Moira had finally messed up. I was happy because it meant Vera was safe and didn't have to worry about being pushed out. It wasn't until I left and called my uncle about it that he told me the truth about it. I was too scared to go back and tell anyone.”

Stella was a small, sad woman standing there before us.

I could see the cops looking back and forth between themselves, the hospital representative hanging her head in defeat as Stella so clearly implicated the hospital's employee.

“I would have never pushed Vera to the side,” I said firmly, my chest burning with even just the implication. “Vera has *nothing* to do with my relationship with you or Moira. My relationship with any of my kids is just that- my relationship with them. I would never-” I cut off, my throat closing up.

“Ms. Ingman,” Detective Marty cut in, “are you saying that Mr. Roderick Ingman acted of his own accord?”

“Yes,” Stella muttered, still staring at me as if she was trying to figure out if I had just told her the truth or not. “I mean, he did it *for* me, but I hadn't asked him to.”

The hospital representative sighed, the heartfelt sound echoing as she shook her head. “I need to make a call upstairs then,” she murmured, excusing herself.

Detective Abrams cleared his throat. “Ms. Snow, Mr. Chapman- I suppose all we need to know now is if the two of you want to press charges?”

I looked at Moira staring at Stella, her eyes full of tears. “I don't want anything to do with it,” she whispered. “As angry

as I am with her, I believe Stella,” she added, her voice breaking over those words.

The weight of what was being asked settled onto my shoulders.

Vera shifted in my arms, her little hands pulling at my chin, and as I looked down at her, I felt that weight grow even heavier.

Hurting Stella meant hurting Vera... and that was something I didn't want.

If Moira could look past what Stella had done, at least insofar as charges went, I knew I could too.

“I want Roderick Ingman fired and his license revoked. I want disciplinary action taken against him... but... as far as charges go, as long as we have the truth and we can protect it from happening to anyone else...” I would find a way to be okay with at least just that much.

The detectives nodded, looking off to where the hospital representative had walked off to. “We just need to verify a few things with the hospital...”

“Of course,” I muttered, nodding as they broke away from our small, disjointed group.

For a long moment, there was just silence and the truth that hung between us, Stella staring between Moira and me with tears still going down her face.

“We need time,” Moira finally whispered, her voice breaking over the words. “I know we can't just tell you to leave. I know there's Vera to think about. I can't trust you... We can't ever go back to what we were before you betrayed me... But,” she shrugged helplessly, staring at Stella with a torn expression. “We need a week. Give us a week to get settled,” she begged.

“And then we can all sit down and discuss where we go from here,” I added, reaching over to pull Moira into my side as Stella nodded forlornly.

“Vera...?” Stella asked, looking at our daughter in my arms.

“I’ll have my mom do switches for now until we can settle things,” I said simply.

Stella looked at us one last time, her gaze lingering before she nodded again and headed back to the elevators.

Her departure felt like something finally settling, my body turning so that I could kiss Moira appreciatively at my side.

“You’re too good,” I whispered raggedly, resting my forehead against hers.

I meant it.

Moira snorted though, closing her eyes and exhaling shakily. “I don’t know about that.”

“I do,” I insisted, kissing her again. “And I can’t wait until we’re home so that I can show you just how good.”

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## CHAPTER 23



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*Nacogdoches, Texas*

If spring in Nacogdoches was warm, summer was downright deadly.

The sun liked to try to play a game to see how hot it could burn the ground beneath your feet without actually singeing hair. Somehow everything stayed green and flowering, but one step outside and the sun felt like it was trying to bake itself into your pores, the humidity only a whisper of a sigh behind it.

I was glad to see summer though.

Or, at least, I was glad to see summer from inside Huck's mansion, three weeks post-disaster with no other drama looming in sight and everything finally seeming like it was calming down.

Three weeks of late nights spent talking everything out.

Three weeks of late mornings in bed giggling and rediscovering parts of ourselves that hadn't been touched in all the hustle and bustle of rediscovery.

Three weeks where we got to get to know the older, more adult, parental versions of ourselves.

Huck was amazing.

I'd seen his face plastered on all those articles of him as the hometown hero, I'd seen pictures of his signing over college scholarships and signing autographs... but going with him to the amusement park he'd opened and paid for and watching

him interact with all of those kids while still managing to give attention to our three *and* Vera?

That had been something else.

“No! Dada! No!” David squealed, laughing and squealing as he tried to bend and twist away from Huck tickling him. “Dada!”

That had started just last week.

Dada.

All three of them said it now.

And it just about made me feel full to bursting to hear it.

Vera babbled, clapping her hands and watching as her three siblings dog-piled her daddy.

The noise of raspberries being blown and kisses being smacked at random as Huck continued his tickling, kissing rampage filled the kitchen and I hate to bite back a grin as I went to go get Vera out of her highchair.

“Don’t forget that Stella’s coming by for Vera soon,” I called out, my lips twitching as I watched Huck pretend to fall dead at the hands of his insistent children.

Huck waved me off and I rolled my eyes.

I was tensed, but not as tense as I could be.

Stella’s name wasn’t a curse in the back of my throat anymore, but it wasn’t exactly friendly either.

Out of everything that had happened the last three weeks, meeting a week after everything had happened had been the most stressful thing to deal with.

Stella had been apologetic and honest... but, even still, the bad blood between us was hard to ignore.

We’d all come out of the meeting much less frigid than we’d gone into it though.

There’d been a lot of back and forth.

A lot.

But... in the end, we were only there to talk about how best to go forward for Vera's sake.

No matter what Stella's fears had been, I didn't want to keep Huck from Vera or Vera from Huck any more than Huck wanted that. It wasn't Vera's fault everything had gotten so messy between all of us.

It wasn't just Stella's either though, and that had been the hardest pill to swallow.

We'd all made mistakes.

Agreeing to work towards being as friendly as possible for Vera's sake had been easy.

Actually, doing it was harder.

It was going to take time.

I doubted we would ever be *friends* again, but that wasn't what mattered. We just had to get along well enough for Vera.

That was still hard too though.

I was pulled out of my thoughts as Huck swooped from out of nowhere. He kissed down one side of my face and up the other as he started wriggling those magic fingers of his against my sides the same way he'd been doing the kids.

I let out a bark of laughter, slapping at his hands as I went to try and dance Vera and myself away.

"Mama!" Sofia cried out, tickling a random spot on my calf like she was helping her daddy.

"Oh, stop," I cried as Huck came back to kiss all over my face the way he had been the kids, still relentless in his tickling. "Don't you have something better to do!? I thought we were getting ready to go to the amusement park for that new tutoring thing you're starting!"

I was grasping at straws.

We both knew it.

Stella still had to pick Vera up. Ms. Beth still had to get home to watch the triplets. We still had to go and get dressed. There

was a whole list of things to do to get my hometown hero ready for his charitable outing, but tickling was my kryptonite.

“I’m doing something better,” Huck promised, kissing my neck in a way that made me gasp and giggle at the same time.

“You!” I shrieked, trying to wriggle out of his grasp as I caught sight of Stella coming in.

Huck didn’t bother to put distance between us though.

He just shifted Vera from my arms to his, tucking me into his side and pulling me closer as Vera paused there in the doorway.

Three weeks had done a lot for her too.

She wasn’t showing up to pick Vera up in tight clothing and a full face of makeup anymore.

Her hair didn’t even look like she’d styled it that morning even, instead just thrown into a cute ponytail to match her jeans and t-shirt.

She almost looked... well, she almost looked like the old Stella, and that just about broke my heart.

She smiled hesitantly at Huck and me before looking at Vera, her face lighting up.

She was taking more and more time trying to figure out how to be a mom and focusing on it too. I couldn’t fault her there.

Vera lit up, clapping and reaching for her mother in a way that, even with it being Stella, made me smile.

“I hope I’m not early,” Stella apologized, looking over at me with an apologetic smile as she took Vera from Huck.

“Nah,” Huck dismissed easily, moving to stand behind me after he handed Vera over and wrapping his arms around me as he did. “You’re on time. I’ve got her stuff packed and by the door already so you can just grab it on your way out. She missed her morning nap, but other than that it’s all been normal.”

Stella rubbed her nose against Vera’s, humming to let Huck know she heard him. “I’ll get out of your hair quick then. I



saw Ms. Beth heading up the drive on my way in and I know y'all have that tutoring thing going on at the amusement park tonight."

"I think Bernie called it the musical academics alliance," I laughed, trying to force my way past the awkwardness. "It's just Huck hiring tutors for the local school districts."

"And bribing the kids with free prizes for improvement," Huck added with a chuckle. "God alone knows I wouldn't have put that much effort into something for nothing in school."

"You would have had passing grades or you would have lost out on your extracurriculars," Ms. Beth said as she bustled in from outside, fanning herself and her slightly sweaty forehead while she glared accusingly at her son.

We all laughed at that and it struck me how normal it was.

Three weeks.

I hadn't imagined things wrapping up so nicely in so short an amount of time.

If someone had asked me a month ago if I could be caught dead laughing in the kitchen with Stella and Huck, making small talk and discussing our plans I would have laughed. And it wouldn't have been a good laugh either.

"Well, I'm going to head out," Stella announced, not pushing her luck one way or another as she gave us all a nervous smile.

I shared a look with Huck, my heart jumping at the look of love so clear in his ocean eyes that I almost blushed.

"Hey, Stella?" I called as she reached the doorway.

She paused, looking back over her shoulder in confusion.

"We're going out on a date tomorrow night and leaving the kids with Ms. Beth. If you wanted to maybe keep Vera for an extra night..." Huck and I had fleetingly discussed it and I could see how happy he was that I was the one making the offer.

Just like I could see how happy the offer made Stella.

For the first time in I didn't know how many years, I saw a smile of pure happiness fill her features as she nodded. "I'd like that," she said simply.

The triplets had all rushed to dogpile their grandmother and I leaned back into Huck for that moment of silence, smiling and feeling his hands move lovingly up and down my sides.

The doorbell going off made us both jump, our eyes connecting for a brief moment before glancing at Ms. Beth who waved us on to go take care of whatever it was.

Huck was at the door first, looking out of the peephole with a frown before opening it.

The man on the other side was handsome, devilishly slow, with a slow-curling smile and steel gray eyes that seemed to stare straight through us. He was dressed nicely in a suit, put together and businesslike in a way that made Huck's rock star appearance stand out even further.

God alone knew I preferred Huck's rugged, messy charm- but it didn't stop me from noticing the other man.

"Ms. Snow and Mr. Chapman?" the man asked silkily, glancing between us carefully.

"That's us," Huck answered with a frown as he pulled me into his side. "And you are?"

"Doctor Elliot Robinson," he answered easily, his smile turning charming as he straightened. "We met briefly the other week. My family owns Trust Care hospital."

Huck froze, frowning as he reached out to take Dr. Robinson's hand and shake it. "You make house calls?"

"Not ordinarily," Dr. Robinson chuckled. "For as high a profile a patient though?" His gray eyes glimmered, one shoulder lifting in a shrug. "I could have called, I suppose, but I wanted to make sure that everything had been settled to your satisfaction... and deliver these in person."

He pulled a manilla envelope from the jacket of his suit, handing it over to Huck.

I knew without looking that they were the proper DNA results.

It gave me a strange pleasure seeing how easily Huck discarded it, not even checking the results.

“I don’t know about our satisfaction,” Huck admitted after a moment. “I suppose that depends on what you’ve come to tell us.”

“Mr. Ingman was dismissed from the hospital’s staff,” Dr. Robinson answered evenly. “He’s been blacklisted within our system and a thorough review of all of his other cases is being undertaken by our investigation department within the hospital.”

I felt slightly relieved hearing that. I’d worried that us not pressing charges might have helped him hide any other cases he might have done as dirty as ours.

“We’re on our way to a charity event right now,” Huck said slowly, looking at the doctor as if reevaluating his opinion of him.

“I heard about that,” Dr. Robinson said dryly.

“Maybe you’d like to go?”

I looked between Huck and Dr. Robinson in wonder, my lips twitching.

Maybe Huck had found a new friend in Nacogdoches after all...

Oh, Oscar would be pissed.

## CHAPTER 24



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HUCK

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

Thirteen years after the first time I'd contemplated getting a vasectomy, I was finally going through with it.

It had only taken four unplanned children, baby mama drama, and legal trouble - not to mention almost losing Moira because of it, and I'd finally decided to fully go through with it.

I was nervous, but I figured I was going to be.

Some doctor somewhere was going to be using a knife on my balls. I didn't know what there was to not be nervous about.

Moira, on the other hand, was enjoying it.

I picked up the can of nuts she had put on my dresser and sighed, shaking my head. She'd tacked some tape just in front of where it said nuts on the can and put 'no more' in black ink.

She thought she was cute.

She was lucky she was right.

"How many more of these are there?" I called into the bathroom where I could hear her fiddling with something.

Her giggle was my only answer until she came out at last, her arms wrapped around an impossibly large gift basket.

I didn't even need to see what was in there to know the theme.

I groaned, chuckling despite myself as she tripped over to put it onto the bed.

“Is this it? This is the final one?” I asked through my grin, coming to stand next to her and shaking my head at the sheer absurdity of it all.

‘No nuts’ nut cans, cream pies, ho hos, ding dongs, all with clever and cute messages taped to them. It was quirky, it was ridiculous, and I’d never been happier in my life.

Even if my balls were being massacred.

“Snip snip hooray!” She quoted, taking a sour patch kids bag out and tossing it to me. “No more surprise these?”

I snorted, watching her grin crease her features before she bent to start rummaging through the basket again.

Fuck, I loved her.

It was an impossibly silly thing to get so worked up over, but looking at her then, I wondered how I’d gone the last four years without her.

I shifted, sinking onto one knee while her back was turned and fishing around in my pockets for the ring I’d just gotten back from being resized.

“I-”

Moira stopped as she turned, catching sight of me and going pale as she looked from how I was kneeling to the ring box in my hand.

“I was going to wait,” I told her with a grin, taking her one hand and fighting the urge to laugh at the small squeak she made in response. “I know it’s not exactly normal, but nothing about us is or has been.”

I opened the box, watching her flush turn to a gasp as she caught sight of the ring.

“You got my mother’s ring!” she exclaimed, her eyes filling with happy tears.

“I did.” And I’d had to pay an arm and a leg to get it from Oscar and Layla too, but she didn’t need to know that.

I slid it out of the ring box, closed it, and put it back in my pocket as I looked up at her.

“You’re the love of my life, Moira. You loved me before I was anybody... and I want to spend the rest of my life loving you and showing you how much you mean to me.” I wanted to grow old with her and watch her blonde hair shift to gray. I wanted to watch laugh lines appear on the sides of her lips and eyes knowing that I’d given her a life of laughter to put them there.

My throat was tight as I hesitated, the ring just on the edge of her finger. “Moira Snow, will you marry me?”

Her tears built up further, and the nod of her head hurried. “Yes,” she murmured without pausing for even a second.

I grinned, sliding the ring into place and standing to my feet just in time for her to fly at me.

I caught her, kissing her soundly as she grinned happily up at me.

“I want to give you the life you deserve,” I promised her, swaying back and forth as I stared into her honey eyes and saw forever. I want to hire two nannies who can pitch in throughout the day... and I want you to be able to go back and finish your degree. SFA is a twenty-minute drive from here. You could take however many classes you think you could manage, I’ll buy you a new car, and we’ll set things up for the triplets...”

Her eyes shone, her lips quirking as she leaned into the way I was running my hands down her sides.

“You’re trying to treat me like a princess,” she accused lightly, smiling around the words to take any sting out of them.

I snorted, looking down at her and shaking my head.

“No, a queen,” I corrected, lifting her in my arms and closing my mouth over hers.

It was sweet, at first.

The sealing of our promise to forever, her hands on my face and her blonde hair tickling my wrists as I pulled her tighter into me.

Like always though, it only took a handful of moments for it to heat up.

Her tongue traced the line of my lips, her fingers tangling in my hair, and I could just feel the scrape of that ring under my curls...

Fuck, I hadn't anticipated how hot that was going to be.

"A queen, huh?" Moira asked liltily as I pulled away from her mouth to run my lips down the column of her throat. She threw her head back, her moan slow and appreciative as she spread her thighs to wrap around my hips.

"My queen," I whispered into her skin, closing my eyes at the feel of her pussy so hot and ready already burning me through my jeans.

No amount of time on stage, no amount of women throwing themselves at my feet, nothing could prepare me for the thrill of Moira's body.

She was all long, lithe muscle as I stripped her shirt and jeans from her body, her voice getting a breathy hitch every time I removed another article of clothing.

"The kids," she warned, her fingers wrapped in my curls harder as I lined my dick up with her warm, wet entrance.

"Are with my mom," I promised, biting at her collarbone as I finally pushed inside of her.

*Fuck.*

"Oh, Jesus, Huck," she breathed out, her nails sharp against my back as she pulled me closer.

I was only too happy to comply, sinking the rest of the way inside of her and balancing her against my dresser as I reached between us to tease her nipple with the edge of my thumb and forefinger.

"What are you, demoting me?" I teased darkly, biting the base of her neck and enjoying the moan I got in response a little too much.

Fuck.



We'd been so careful the past few weeks, making sure to abstain as much as we could until the vasectomy...

I wasn't going to fucking last with the noises she was making and the way she was rolling her hips so eagerly back into mine.

"Huh?" she moaned, pulling at my shoulders as I started to increase the pace of my hips. "What? Demoting?" Each word was sighed as she spread her thighs further, arching her back as I pinched her pretty pink nipple in time with her words.

"From God to Jesus?" I teased, flicking the shell of her ear with my tongue as I whispered directly into her ear.

She made a disgruntled sound, but it was distracted, her gasp cutting off her answer as I pulled nearly completely out of her and slammed back into her again.

She shifted up the dresser, her honey eyes molten as she started bouncing up and down in time with my thrusts.

"You want me to call you God?" she asked breathily.

I wanted her to call me anything.

I wanted her to lose control again, to start making those noises that drove me so wild.

I didn't even have to ask.

"Oh, fuck," she breathed as I shifted the angle of my hips, gripping my shoulders as I hit that spot that made her freeze and clenched all over. "Oh, God," she cried out, throwing her head back- and it was too much.

I pulled out of her quickly, finishing myself off in my hand and dropping to my knees before she could lose her momentum.

"Oh, Huck, you don't have to Ohhhh, Huck," she breathed as I ran my tongue up the warm, wet center of her.

She tasted like me and like that sweet taste that was special just to her. Like honey and whiskey and musk.

"I don't have to?" I pushed, pulling that sensitive nub of skin just over my lips lightly with my teeth as she clutched at my

head and let out a string of words that weren't even real words.

I grinned into the center of her, running the flat of my tongue up and over where my teeth had just been, working two fingers into her at once while she panted and moaned.

“After my vasectomy, I don't have to,” I continued, my voice heavy with renewed desire. Even having just cum, I could feel myself twitching against my thigh just from watching her wriggle and writhe above me. “After my vasectomy I can cum in you whenever and however I want,” I promised darkly, suctioning her clit again as she started to rock forward into my face.

“Oh my God, oh fuck, oh my God,” she cried out in tandem with the thrusting of her hips, her back arching as she tried to climb closer to my face.

Fuck, she was so goddamn beautiful.

I wanted to tell her, but I wanted her in my mouth more than that, her internal muscles gripping and fluttering around my fingers as I began circling them in and out of her, paying special attention to that spot that I'd only just been hitting with my dick moments before.

“Oh God, Huck, please,” she begged, her control lapsing as noises filtered out unchecked between her lips.

I grinned into her pussy, flattening my tongue against that vibrating bundle of nerves and watching as she came apart on my tongue above me.

Her whole body shook, her blonde head thrown back as she held onto my face and rode her orgasm out on top of it.

It was the most beautiful damn thing I'd ever seen, my dick rising back to attention.

One more time wouldn't hurt...

It wasn't like we wouldn't be going to the clinic anyways.

I was just getting as much in as I could before we were forced to be celibate for a few days.

I stood as she finished shaking in my arms, lining myself with her still pulsing pussy even as she looked up at me in surprise.

I didn't know why it was a surprise.

We still had nearly four years to catch up on... and I intended to catch up on as much as possible before my appointment.

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# EPILOGUE



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MOIRA

*Nacogdoches, Texas*

I'd dreamed of my wedding so many times, in so many different scenarios, that Layla had used to tease me that it would be a seven-hour affair when it came down to it.

Getting married, it turned out, was a lot more complicated than the fantasy of it.

It took months to arrange everything the way we wanted it, deciding to rent anywhere but the Fredonia for our wedding and reception while Stella moaned and groaned and covered her face in embarrassment as we teased her.

I could remember every step of the planning, the disagreements, and the stress...

But the day of?

I barely remembered squeezing into the dress or having Layla do my makeup.

The barn we'd rented as our venue was huge and packed to what felt like the rafters with our guests and all of the professionals that Huck had invited.

I didn't think Nacogdoches had ever seen so many stars in one place...

And I only had eyes for the man in the simple black suit standing in front of me, holding my hands after I'd all but floated down the aisle.

“Marriage is about giving and taking,” our officiant read aloud, her voice clear and carrying. “And forging and forsaking.

Kissing and loving and pushing and shoving.

Caring and sharing and screaming and swearing

About being together whatever the weather

About being driven to the end of your tether

About sweetness and kindness

And wisdom and blindness

It’s about being strong when you’re feeling quite weak

It’s about saying nothing when you’re dying to speak

It’s about being wrong when you know you are right

It’s about giving in before there’s a fight

It’s about you two living as cheaply as one

(you can give us a call if you know how that’s done!)

Never heeding the advice that was always well-meant

Never counting the cost until it’s all spent

And for you two today, it’s about to begin

And for all that the two of you had to put in

Some days are filled with joy and some days with sadness

Too late you’ll discover that marriage is madness.”

Laughter broke through our gathered guests, the singular ‘amen’ sounding too much like Ms. Beth for me not to grin despite how hard I found it to look from Huck’s oceanic eyes.

“But now to the bread and butter,” our officiant joked. “I now ask you, Huck Chapman, do you take Moira Snow to be your wife and best friend, from now till death do you part?”

“I do,” Huck said surely, grinning at me as my eyes filled with tears.

“And you, Moira Snow, do you take Huck Chapman to be your husband and your best friend, from now till death do you part?”

“I do,” I promised, my heart in the words.

“Before we say our vows, let’s remember this moment. Look at the love between the two of you, the three lives you’ve created. This is the life you have chosen, the gifts you’ve been given... So now, Moira and Huck, your brother Oscar wrote these vows for you to read to one another now.”

A collective amused growth filtered through the guests.

“Huck, if you can repeat after me: I promise to share the covers, to never leave the toilet seat down, to always annoy you from now until forever, to play with you, to love you, to take care of you. I promise to provide for our family and build a life that we can both be proud of.”

Huck snorted, his lips twitching.

“I promise to share the covers,” he repeated, “to never leave the toilet seat down, to always annoy you from now until forever, to play with you, to love you, to take care of you. I promise to provide for our family and build a life that we can both be proud of.”

It was silly and sweet, perfect for us in a way I hadn’t thought Oscar could capture.

“Moira, your turn,” the officiant laughed. “I promise to put the toilet seat down and only nag a little if I fall in. I promise to love and cherish you, but not to obey because that’s old and outdated. I promise to build with you and remain your partner for now and forever more.”

I grinned, my love choking me as I nodded. “I promise to put the toilet seat down and only nag a little if I fall in. I promise to love and cherish you, but not to obey because that’s old and outdated. I promise to build with you and remain your partner for now and forever more.”

“Huck and Moira, by the love that has brought you here today, by the vows you’ve just exchanged and the excited cheering

that's already started... It is my honor to pronounce you as man and wife! You may now kiss the bride!"

Huck didn't wait, grabbing me by the waist and hauling me to him as he covered my lips with his, claiming them in a way that took my breath and my laughter away.

"Family and friends, may I now present Mr. and Mrs. Chapman!"

The roar of our family and friends was deafening as Huck bent me backward, sweeping me back up with a grin as they kept hooting and hollering behind us.

I had to blink the stars out of my eyes as I looked around at our unorthodox family happily still cheering.

Huck's father and mother stood off to one side, their grandchildren between them, and the two of them amicable for the first time in three decades.

Oscar and Stella stood next to them, Layla clapping and jumping up and down beside her.

We were strange and patched together through so much drama and strife... but in that instant, I wouldn't have traded it for anything in the world.

"The bouquet toss!" Stella cried, her hands over her mouth as she eagerly stepped forward.

I looked down at my white and yellow lily of the flower bouquet, smiling to myself as I remembered the florist explaining that they stood for a return to happiness.

I'd gotten mine... It was my turn to pass it on.

Grinning at Huck I turned my back to the crowd, tossing it over my shoulder and spinning so I could watch its descent.

Predictably Stella lunged for it, her arms outstretched.

At the last moment, Ms. Beth shoved Layla forward though, the bouquet falling into her unsuspecting, surprised arms.

I joined in the laughter there, opening my mouth, but being swept away before I could say anything to my twin.



The music shifted as Huck pulled me to him, sweeping me out onto the dance floor for our first dance and allowing our guests to get caught up as he rested his forehead against mine.

“Hello, Mrs. Chapman,” he greeted roughly, desire beneath his words in a way that sent a thrill right through me.

*God, I hoped I didn't soak the garter before the garter toss.*

“Mr. Chapman,” I whispered back, not paying attention to where he was spinning me to even though the noise of the reception was lessening the more and more he edged us away from our guests.

“How does it feel to be a married woman?” he asked in a low voice, kissing me soundly before I could even answer.

His lips were heated and demanding, pulling a moan from me that had me flushing before I realized that he was closing a door behind us, secluding us in some room so far away from the music and laughter that I barely heard it at all.

“Married to a rock star at that,” I giggled as he broke away from my lips.

It was every fantasy I'd ever had as a girl come to life, my skin hot and buzzing as he lifted me off of my feet.

“You're the rock star,” he argued, his teeth nipping at my neck as he pulled my white, lace panties to the side, running his fingers over my pussy preemptively even as he fumbled with lifting my wedding skirts up and out of the way.

“You've completed my life, Moira Chapman,” he whispered raggedly, pressing the words into my skin as he pulled himself out of his suit pants. “A fucking dream come true,” he growled, nipping at my throat as I tried to keep from getting too loud.

“God,” I breathed, running my hands through his hair as I rolled my hips down into his dick pressing against me. “This is my fantasy come to life,” I whispered, gasping as he pushed into me with those words.

“Oh yeah?” he asked, his voice low and full of promise as he started rocking his hips, hissing at the way my heels scratched

against his thighs but not pausing even the slightest because of it. “You have any other fantasies you want to share?”

I shivered, letting out a little breathy moan at the way he circled my clit with his fingers while he pushed in and out of me just below that.

“Plenty,” I promised, the word long and drawn out as I felt that familiar tension building in the base of my belly. “And you’re in all of them.”

“Tease,” he accused, laughing slightly as he picked up the pace and I made a startled noise because of it.

Fuck, he felt so good.

I’d never get over his magical fingers, the way he played me as expertly as he did his guitar or his keyboard... any instrument, and I was just another in a long line of them that he had mastered.

My beautiful rock star hometown hero turned husband.

“I’m going to fuck you everywhere in Greece,” he swore, groaning as I kissed his earlobe. “I’m going to fuck you in the hotel, on the way to the hotel... I’m going to fuck you on the beaches and the verandas. I’m going to fuck you in the cars, under the monuments. I’m going to fuck you until you can’t walk straight.”

His words were darkly demanding, painting a picture that had me gasping with each new harder thrust of his hips into me.

“God, Huck, please,” I begged, my head swimming as he found that rhythm between his fingers and his hips that had me gasping for air. “Please, oh, fuck, Huck...”

“You know what else?” He whispered raggedly in my ear, grazing it with his teeth as he used his free hand to pull my cheeks apart from behind, spreading me even further and leaving me at the mercy of his fingers. “I was cleared by the doctor last week.”

I panted, unsure what he was saying, chasing that climax I could feel building.

“Which means I can cum in you whenever I want now,” he muttered, tilting his head to recapture my lips with his again.

*Oh.*

*Ohhhh.*

I moaned, feeling his body stiffen.

“I’m going to cum in you so much you’ll smell like me for days,” he swore, biting at my lips and hitting that spot inside of me that always did me in.

“Because I’m yours,” I breathed back, knowing the effect my words would have.

Huck’s blue eyes were wild as they connected with mine, savage and out of control... and all mine.

There against the door, with my skirts around my shoulders and our family and friends who knew how many feet away... our world was right.

He took my lips again as he pushed me over that edge, driving my body up the wall and my heart into my throat.

My whole world was right, there in that room.

I was finally, after all those years, living happily ever after with my rock star husband.

Together at last.

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