



SARAH BLAKE

ROCKSTAR

Daddy

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT BOOK ONE

rockstar daddy

The Butterfly Effect

Book One

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author's note:

Ana, our heroine, has a rough past. She's been abused by her ex and her trauma and fear still haunt her.

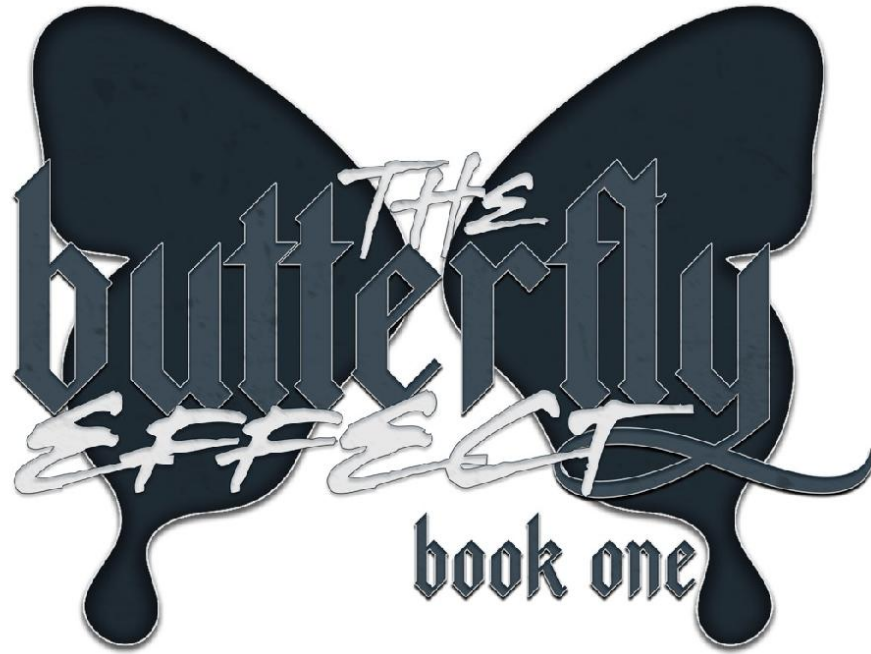
Rhys, our hero, luckily is the best man to take care of her.

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there are trigger warnings for:

Domestic violence and general violence.

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chapter one

The loud streets of New York usually calmed Rhys. They usually brought him a sense of peace nothing and no one else ever could. The city was his happy place, the place he called his home.

He'd loved it as a struggling musician, and now that he'd made it, he loved it as a successful one. When he was stressed, he knew a walk would make him feel better.

Despite the ridiculous amount of people, dirty streets and sidewalks, tourists, and eye watering stench, he wouldn't want to live anywhere else but New York City.

And if the city couldn't calm him, he'd head to the club to play with a sub. Sometimes only a sub bent over a bench, her ass bright red from his paddle was all he needed to calm down.

Today, however, the city didn't bring him peace. His walk didn't bring him clarity or inspiration. The smells were worse, the people were more annoying, and the filth was making him itchy.

He couldn't even think about going to the club without his stomach twisting into a tight knot.

His cousin had called him to tell him his mentor's mother was dying.

Rhys was angry. He was confused. He hated the world; he hated God.

How could a sweet woman like Linda be dying? She'd taken him and his friends in when no one else did. Her son, Felix, became like a father to him. He'd believed in him and

his band when everyone told them to give up, that becoming a rockstar was a pipe dream.

If it wasn't for Felix and his mother, Rhys didn't know where he'd be. He didn't know if he would've ever had the courage or confidence to ignore everyone else and keep pursuing his dreams. He didn't know if his band would've kept pursuing their dreams.

But because of Felix, they were The Butterfly Effect, one of the hottest rock bands at the moment. Everyone knew them; everyone loved them. They were at the peak of their careers right now, and they only had Felix and Linda to thank for that.

He stomped into the apartment he shared with the guys and tossed his keys on the entry table by the door before shrugging his coat off. He just wanted to turn his mind off for a bit, but he couldn't. Not with the guilt, anger, and anxiety warring inside him.

He didn't want to tell the guys. He didn't want to see Kody's face, or feel Tate's upset, or get angry at Vincent for showing no emotion. He didn't want to argue with them about paying for her treatments.

Linda wouldn't take his money. She wouldn't take any of their money. They'd tried for years, but the woman was more stubborn than her son. They wouldn't take any of the band's money, and it wasn't from a lack of trying.

Rhys ran his hand through his dark blond hair, tugging lightly on it as he made his way to the kitchen. The high ceilings and tall windows usually helped him not feel claustrophobic, but today he felt trapped. Like he was drowning. Like he was lost.

He abruptly stopped when he saw Tate sitting at the island, a million take-out containers scattered in front of him. He scrolled on his phone, seemingly oblivious to Rhys' presence.

His stomach twisted as he forced himself to step forward.

How did he start this conversation? He couldn't just come out and say she was dying, could he? Maybe he just didn't

want to say it. Saying it made it real, and he didn't want it to be real.

He moved forward, keeping his eyes averted from Tate. His dark skin glowed under the low golden light of the kitchen, and his dark eyes stayed trained on his phone. Rhys pulled open the stainless-steel fridge and scanned the contents.

Take-out containers, Kody's meal prep, some random leftover pasta from the other night...he pushed all of it aside and found the beers he'd stashed in the back. Pulling a bottle out, he popped the top as he shut the door.

Turning, he leaned against the counter, one hand gripping the bottle, the other gripping the edge of the counter. He knew Tate knew he was there, that he was staring right at him, but he didn't look up. Did he know what was happening?

Rhys opened his mouth, trying to find the right words, as Kody stalked in. His face was uncharacteristically angry, and Rhys' mouth snapped shut again.

Kody stopped and looked between Tate and Rhys. Tate was still ignoring them, and Rhys was looking anywhere but at his friend.

"You know," Kody said in a low, accusatory voice. "You both know." He could be talking about anything, but Rhys knew in his heart it was about Linda. He turned his eyes to his oldest friend, and the anger and sadness in Kody's gaze gutted him.

Vincent stomped into the room, his usual scowl on his face. He paused and looked around at the group and pursed his lips tightly together.

"You know, too?" Kody asked him.

"Know what?" Vincent asked, stepping forward.

No one said anything.

No one wanted to be the one to tell him. He'd been closer to Linda than anyone else, but after his last relationship ended, he began shutting everyone out, including Linda.

When no one answered, he took another step forward, his glare and growing anger palpable.

“Know what?” he asked again.

With his head still down, Tate muttered, “Linda’s dying.”

Tension grew thick around them, and Rhys braced himself for the blow up. He waited for Vincent to scream, for him to smash something, for him to accuse them of keeping this from him. But he didn’t.

Instead, he just stared at them, at his best friends, an unreadable expression on his brutal face. Rhys could see his pulse throbbing in his neck, at the strain on his face.

“Dying?” Vincent repeated, his voice a low rasp. Rhys straightened and cleared his throat, drawing his attention.

“Riley called to tell me,” he said. Vincent’s gaze was intense. “She said it’s breast cancer. It’s still in the early stages —”

“So, she can still have treatment,” Vincent interrupted. “She’s not dying. We can get her the best fucking treatment in the world. She’s not dying.”

“She won’t take our money. She’s too proud,” Kody said, and Vincent whirled on him.

“I don’t give a shit about her pride,” Vincent snarled. “I’ll force her to take the damn money and I won’t stop throwing money at her until she’s better.”

“Money doesn’t solve everything,” Rhys said, and Vincent slowly turned his head toward him. If looks could kill, he’d be a pile of dust on the floor. But Rhys wouldn’t back down. He wouldn’t let Vincent bulldoze his way into getting what he wanted. Linda wouldn’t take their money.

“She will take the money and be happy about it,” Vincent growled. Rhys set his bottle on the dark butcher-block counter.

“She won’t,” he said again. “You know she won’t take it.”

“This is about her health, damnit!” Vincent shouted, banging his fist against the counter.

“What if it’s not our money?” Tate interrupted, his voice hoarse. Vincent and Rhys didn’t stop glaring at each other.

“Who would give it to her then?” Kody asked. Vincent’s eyes seemed blacker, but Rhys wouldn’t back down from him.

They always backed down when Vincent was in a mood, just to avoid conflict. But he wouldn’t this time. This was too important.

“We could raise the money,” Tate said.

That drew Rhys’ attention.

He turned toward him, finding Tate finally looking at them. His eyes were red and puffy, and Rhys knew he’d been crying.

“We don’t need to raise it,” Vincent said, but they ignored him.

“How?” Rhys asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“We could put on a charity concert for her at Nightcap,” he said. “You know people would pay a shit-ton of money to see us in a small venue like that.”

Rhys chewed on his bottom lip. He knew people would come from all over to watch their show. Tate was right, they would pay a lot of money to get to see them play at the bar that started their career.

People paid an outrageous amount to see them play from nosebleed seats. They would pay that, or more, to get an intimate concert from them.

He looked at Kody and Vincent. Kody’s expression had shifted. Hope flickered in Kody’s eyes, even if he still looked sad. Vincent’s face was still unreadable. But at least he didn’t look as ready to beat the shit out of them anymore.

“A charity concert,” Kody repeated. He glanced at Vincent, then at Rhys, a smile curving his lips. “That could work.”

“We wouldn’t be giving her our money,” Tate continued. “It would be donations specifically for her.”

“She won’t go for it,” Rhys said. “She hates people being in her business.” He thought it was a great idea, but he didn’t think Linda would willingly take the donations.

“She won’t have a choice,” Vincent grumbled.

“I’ll call Felix,” Kody said, bouncing on his toes. Rhys clenched his jaw.

“Wait,” Rhys said, holding his hand up. “You really want to go back to Sawyer?” He looked at the group. When they left twelve years ago, they’d vowed to never go back. Did they really want to go back now?

They looked at each other before looking back at him. He knew the answer without anyone verbalizing it.

Yes. Yes, they’d go back.

They would go back for her and Felix. There wasn’t much they wouldn’t do for them. And even if it meant going back to that God forsaken town, they would do it.

For Linda.

“She needs us,” Kody said, shrugging. Rhys nodded and glanced at the other two. Tate gave him a firm nod. Vincent stared at him for a long moment.

It was him Rhys was most worried about.

He cleared his throat and lifted his chin. “She needs us,” is all he said before he turned on his heel and left.

chapter two

The bell above the door chimed as Ana slid a book onto the shelf. She glanced at her watch and sighed before turning around.

Riley strolled into The Book Garden, Ana's bookstore, an iced coffee in hand. She paused when her eyes met Ana's. A smile lit her face as she slid her purse off, tossing it on the counter.

"You're late," Ana said, lifting her brows.

"Traffic," Riley said, shrugging a shoulder. "So much traffic."

"We live in a town with less than five thousand people," Ana deadpanned. "What traffic?" Her lips twitched as Riley groaned.

"Okay, there wasn't traffic," she admitted. "But the line was super long at the café. That's the same thing, isn't it?" Ana laughed and rolled her eyes.

"The exact same thing," she said as she rounded a couch. "We have slam night tonight." Riley sat on the emerald couch and rested her feet on the coffee table. "And tomorrow is—"

"The school's read-a-thon," Riley finished before taking a sip. Ana folded her arms over her chest.

"And Friday is—"

"Book club," she said. "I know the schedule." Ana took a deep breath. She knew she was being overbearing, but there was just so much happening at the store lately. So many promises and responsibilities. "You need a break."

Ana waved her words off as she stepped behind the counter. She tidied the stack of notebooks by the register before adding more pens to the mug beside them.

“I’m fine,” she muttered.

She wasn’t fine, though. She was exhausted. It seemed like there was always something going on, something else to do. Some event she needed to attend or host, a new popular book she needed to stock up on, or an obscure author a random person asked for. She was being pulled in every direction, following demands left and right.

She knew she needed a break, but she couldn’t take one. Who would run the store for her? Riley was her best, and only, employee. She was loyal, and a hard worker. But Ana couldn’t trust anyone with the store.

It was her baby, the thing that pulled her out of her downward spiral after Josh. Even though he’d ended up in prison and far, far away from her, she was still terrified of him. She was terrified of running into someone he’d worked with and ending up dead.

So, she’d put as much as she could fit into her little car and drove from New York to Texas to start her new life as a bookstore owner.

And she did it.

She’d spent the last two years fixing the place up and becoming an active member of the community, and she’d done it all by herself.

Even though her fear of him still lingered in the back of her mind, she would choose this life over the one in New York any day.

Here, she was still afraid, but she was living. If she was still back home, she’d be afraid, and locked in her house, a shut-in, scared of the world.

“I’m fine,” she said again. Riley gave her a knowing look as she took a long drink of her coffee.

“Are you at least making time to go to Nightcap Saturday night?” she asked. Ana rested her forearms on the counter and leaned forward.

“I never go to Nightcap,” she said. “Why would I go?”

“Well, for one,” Riley narrowed her eyes, “I bought you a ticket. And two, it’s for a good cause.” Ana rolled her eyes.

“I donated to Linda’s fund as soon as it was posted online,” Ana said. “And it doesn’t matter if I go to the show or not. The money for the ticket was already donated, it’s not dependent on if I’m there or not.”

“Yeah, but it’ll still be a fun night, and you need to let loose,” she said. “When was the last time you saw the girls?” Ana bit her lip as she tried to remember the last time she’d seen Harper and Audrey.

“I saw Harper just the other day, and Audrey came over for dinner a few weeks ago,” she said, and Riley shook her head.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” she said.

Ana knew what she meant, but honestly, she couldn’t remember the last time they’d all gone out as a group and done something fun. They used to do it all the time, but then the store opened, and things started getting hectic.

She rubbed her forehead, sighing loudly. The store was closed on Sunday, so it’s not like she’d have to be up early anyway. But did she want to spend her Saturday night at a crowded concert with a bunch of drunk, sweaty people screaming along to The Butterfly Effect’s songs?

They were from Sawyer, and everyone from the town made it known how proud they were of the guys. They’d rooted for them from the beginning, and now, butterflies were strewn everywhere throughout the town.

It made her heart warm knowing the band had so much support while they were trying to make it. But it also annoyed the shit out of her that once they had made it, they forgot about Sawyer completely.

They never came home. They seemed to completely disown Sawyer, which felt like a giant slap in the face. She didn't even want to think about how entitled they must be to feel like that. And Rhys Turner, Riley's cousin and the lead singer for the band, had said in a million interviews how they hadn't had any support growing up. How everyone in their hometown had told them to give up, and how they'd ignored it and persevered anyway.

Despite Riley promising her Rhys wasn't an entitled prick, Ana didn't believe her. Of course, she wouldn't talk badly about her cousin.

But she knew guys like him were insufferable. And she knew going to the concert would mean having to meet him since Riley would no doubt introduce her. She didn't want to meet him. She'd had to deal with stuck up, entitled pricks her entire life. She was done.

Rockstar or not, she had no interest in meeting him.

But she had to admit, it was sweet they were putting on a charity show for Linda.

"I think Rhys is throwing a little after party too," Riley said, pulling Ana from her thoughts. "It's super exclusive, but you're in since you're my bestie." Riley smiled prettily at her, and Ana huffed out a laugh.

"I don't want to go to an after party," she said, and Riley rolled her eyes again.

"Go to the show then," she said. "You just need to have some fun. Maybe you'll meet someone there and you can fall in love and have a real happily ever after. You won't have to read about it in books anymore."

Ana's stomach twisted painfully. She didn't want to meet anyone. After her last boyfriend, she swore off men completely. Even if she read nothing but romance books—books about alpha Daddies who took care of their girls, protected and cherished them—she didn't want that in real life.

Sure, it would be nice to have someone like that in her life. But she couldn't open herself up to a man again. It was too much of a risk and Ana was many things, but she was not a risk taker.

She stared at Riley's hopeful expression; at the way she was trying to hold back her excitement and sighed. When had she become such a grouch? She used to go out with her girl friends every weekend and have dinner with them every night. But now she couldn't remember the last time they'd done something as a group.

"No after party," Ana said, pointing at Riley. "I'll go to the show, and that's it. Okay?" Riley squealed as she clapped, bouncing on the couch.

"Oh my God, this is going to be so fun!" She jumped from the couch, nearly tripping over the rug on the floor, and bolted across the room to Ana. She wrapped her in a tight hug, and Ana laughed as she hugged her friend back. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me," Ana said, pulling away from her. "Will there be a lot of people?" She scrunched her nose, making Riley huff out a laugh.

"Probably," she said.

"I hate crowds," Ana groaned.

"Just have a few drinks and you'll be fine." Riley waved dismissively and turned back to get her coffee.

Anxiety filled her chest. She hated crowds. She always got sucked into an awkward conversation with someone and never knew how to get out of it.

Even though she owned a bookstore and hosted events all the time, she still felt like the same awkward, shy girl that had left New York two years ago. It didn't help that Josh's hurtful words had embedded themselves into her soul.

How much longer could she keep up this façade?

But she'd go for Riley and the girls. She'd put up with the loud music, and asshole rockstars, and uncomfortable conversations for her friends.

She could sacrifice a few hours of her night to make her friends happy.

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chapter three

Rhys and Kody sank onto the couch, Tate, Vincent, and Felix sitting in other spots around the room. Linda smiled brightly at him, and he forced himself to smile back.

But it was hard.

She was thinner than she'd been the last time he'd seen her. Her smile was still big, and her eyes were still sparkling, but for how much longer? How much longer did she have before her disease took her shine away?

"I haven't seen y'all in...how long?" She looked around the room, and Rhys noticed the way Felix averted his eyes, like he couldn't stand to see her like this either.

They were being ridiculous. Despite the weight loss, she didn't look sick, and she wasn't acting sick. But just knowing that she was sick was killing him.

"It's been a while," Kody agreed. Rhys glanced at him, finding him smiling. If he was feeling anything Rhys was, he hid it well. "We're going on tour next week."

"Another one?" she beamed. "Where are you headed first?"

"NYC is our first show," Tate said, and she shifted her head to look at him.

"How exciting." Her smile hadn't fallen since the moment the guys arrived. She didn't know they were coming, even though Rhys thought Felix should've told her, he understood why he didn't.

He wanted them to be the ones to tell her about the concert, to tell her that they were raising money for her.

“Are you going overseas again?” she asked, and Rhys cleared his throat.

“Just The States,” he said. His gaze met Felix’s from across the room, and he subtly shook his head, telling him it’s not the time to tell her about the show. But if not now, when? This was the perfect opening to bring it up. “We’re kicking things off here, actually. At Nightcap.” Her dark gray brows rose.

“Oh?” She glanced at Felix, and Rhys stifled a laugh at the look she sent him. The *why didn’t you tell me about this* look. “You haven’t played in Sawyer in over a decade.” She stared at Vincent, but his eyes were trained on the floor.

“It’s for you,” Kody said. “We thought we could raise the funds—”

“Funds?” she asked, her voice tight. Her smile had fallen completely, and guilt ate away at Rhys’ stomach. “For what?”

“You,” Rhys said quietly. “We knew you—”

“For what?” she asked again, her voice tight. “Why do I need funds?” Kody and Rhys looked at each other, confused. Rhys cleared his throat.

“Your treatment,” he said. When he looked at her again, her lips were pressed into a thin line. “Lin, we know about—”

“I don’t need money,” she said tightly. “I don’t need treatment.”

“Ma,” Felix said, his voice raw. “Yes, you do. The doctors —” She waved him off.

“Agh, I don’t need treatment,” she said again. “I’m fine.”

“You’re sick,” Vincent said darkly, his voice almost inaudible. “You’re sick and you didn’t tell me.” His dark eyes rose to meet hers. Betrayal burned bright in them.

“Vince,” she soothed. “I’m fine.” Vincent shook his head. Rhys glanced at Kody again, and the usually upbeat man

looked gutted.

“You’re not,” Rhys muttered, and she turned her eyes to him. “Riley called and told me everything. We know how bad you’re off and if you don’t start chemo soon—” He cut himself off, not wanting to even think the words. “We’re getting you the best care—”

“I do not want your money,” she snapped. “I’ve never wanted a penny from you boys, and I’m not about to start asking for any now.” She shot an accusatory look at Felix, but he didn’t look apologetic.

“You’re not asking,” Rhys said, and she waved dismissively again. “We raised the money, it’s not ours.” Her eyes narrowed.

“You know what I mean, boy,” she said.

“You’re taking the money and getting help,” Vincent growled. “It’s not up for discussion.”

“I haven’t seen you in years and y’all come barging into my house to tell me—”

“We talk almost every day,” Vincent said, trying to keep his voice even. It was hard for him, controlling his temper. “Don’t act like we’re strangers. You’ve been in my life—in all our lives since we were born. Come on, Lin.”

“I don’t want a handout.”

“Stubborn woman,” Felix scoffed under his breath. “I told you it wouldn’t work.” He stared at Rhys, but Rhys wasn’t backing down. With a deep breath, he turned his attention back to Linda.

“Do you want to die?” he asked flatly. Felix inhaled sharply, Vincent looked like he was ready to kill him, Kody and Tate glanced at each other, but Rhys only focused on Linda.

Her jaw tensed as she glared at him, her thin brows bunching slightly.

“No,” she gritted out.

“Then you’re taking the money we’ve raised for you,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “You’re not taking our money, just the money people have donated.” She opened her mouth, but he continued. “They’ve donated money to you, Lin. They want you to get better. A lot of people in town didn’t even know you were sick, and they all want you to get better. You’re a pillar in the community and everyone would be lost without you.”

She let out a long breath, still glaring at him, but her expression softened enough for him to know he’d gotten through to her. He hated being like this with her, but how else could he get her to agree to anything?

He opened his mouth to say something more, but a knock at the front door silenced him. His gaze darted to it, and he saw a short shadow on the other side of the frosted door window.

Linda made to stand, but Felix waved her off, giving her a hard look to stay put. She sank back to her chair with an inaudible grumble as Felix opened the door.

Rhys and Kody exchanged a look at the soft feminine voice.

“Tilly?” Linda clambered to her feet, and Rhys jumped up, his hands out ready to catch her in case she went down.

“Mama!” Tilly pushed past Felix and rushed forward, her dark hair flying behind her. She came to an abrupt stop when she saw her mother.

Tilly lived a few hours from Sawyer, but she was a free spirit, always traveling to find where her soul was happiest.

Rhys always wondered if she was a sub. Her natural submissiveness and freeness made it seem like she was. Her bright smiles, and the way she averted her eyes, the shyness and sweetness of her...or maybe he just saw her as a sweet thing because she was like a little sister to him.

“What are you doin’ here?” Linda asked, gathering her daughter in her arms.

“The show.” Tilly pulled away, her eyes wide as she stared up at Lin. “I didn’t know—” She gave Felix an accusatory look over her shoulder. “I didn’t know the guys were here already.”

Rhys knew that’s not what she was going to say. He knew she was upset because she hadn’t known how sick Linda looked.

“Hey, Til,” Kody said, grinning. She smiled broadly as she launched herself at him, letting him pick her up and spin in a circle.

She laughed, filling the once tense room with joy. Rhys smiled to himself as he watched Kody set her on her feet. Her smile was wicked when she turned toward him.

“Hey, kid,” he laughed. He grunted out a breath as she squeezed his waist, but he held her just as tightly back.

“I’m not a kid,” she said, pinching his side. “I’m twenty-two.”

“That’s most definitely a kid,” he said, tapping her nose as she scowled.

“Whatever. Not everyone can be so old like you.” She drew the word out before spinning and running toward Tate, who was already on his feet and ready for her.

Rhys held his breath, waiting for her smile to fall when Vincent didn’t stand, or even acknowledge her. She just tapped his shoulder, and surprisingly, he let her.

“Okay, so what’d I miss?” she asked as she sat on the floor. “What’s everyone talking about?”

Linda’s smile immediately fell.

“Nothing,” she said tightly, giving the guys a hard look. “The boys were just leaving.”

“Actually,” Rhys said, sliding his hands into his pockets. “Your mom won’t take the money we raised for her.” Tilly put her fists on her hips as she glared up at her mother.

“Mama,” she said, shaking her finger. “You better listen to them.”

“I’m fine,” she said, waving her off. Rhys helped her sit back in her chair, wincing at the faces she made. “I don’t need any money.”

“So, you have the money then?” Tilly asked. Linda’s jaw clenched, but she didn’t reply. “That’s what I thought.”

Felix was smiling softly down at her—everyone was. It was impossible not to when she was around.

“I don’t need money,” Linda said again, groaning.

“You need help paying for treatment,” Felix said. “Just take it—”

“I don’t—”

“Are you not getting treated?” Tilly asked.

The room went silent as her words settled over them.

Rhys waited for Linda to say something, to deny it and say of course, she was. But she didn’t say a word. She kept her lips clamped tightly shut.

“Mama,” Tilly croaked. “You’re getting help, aren’t you?”

“I’m fine,” she said, but it lacked her previous fire. “I don’t need treatment. I’m not that sick. The doctors think—”

“The doctors think you need chemo,” Felix snapped. “They said they’ve caught it soon enough that you probably won’t die. But that’s only if—”

Tilly choked out a sob, and Felix stopped talking. Rhys felt that sound to his fucking soul.

“It’s okay, Til,” Linda said, scooting to the edge of her seat. “I’ll be okay.”

“No,” Tilly cried, wiping her eyes with her hand.

“She’ll be okay,” Vincent said, surprising everyone. Under his breath, he added, “If she gets the damn treatment.”

Rhys watched Linda carefully, waited for her to snap at everyone or tell them to get out. But she just stared at Tilly,

and Tilly stared back.

With a deep breath, Linda looked at Felix, then turned her attention fully to Rhys. He felt himself straighten under her scrutiny.

“This isn’t some trick to get me to take your money?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“No, ma’am,” he said as he shook his head. “We raised the money. We didn’t contribute.”

Okay, that was a lie. They contributed more than anyone else had, but he wouldn’t tell her that and he knew no one else would either.

She continued to stare at him like she didn’t believe him. He felt guilty for lying, but it was about her health, so he didn’t feel sorry about it.

“Okay,” she finally relented. “Fine. But I don’t want to hear anything about how crazy I’ll look when I lose my hair.” She laughed, but no one else did.

Her words made it all too real, and Rhys swallowed hard.

Vincent shot to his feet and stormed outside, not listening to anyone when they called for him. Tilly stared after him, her lip between her teeth before she got to her feet.

“Til, leave him—”

“He doesn’t need to be alone,” she said, waving Felix off as she passed him and followed Vincent outside.

Rhys met Felix’s gaze and shook his head. Leave it—leave them. He knew better than anyone to leave Vincent alone when he was in a mood. And even though Tilly had followed him, Rhys also knew she’d known Vincent long enough to know he just needed a presence with him, even when he didn’t want one.

“Are you going to the show tomorrow night?” Tate asked, bringing the conversation back to a less tense place. Linda cleared her throat as she reclined back in her chair.

“An old woman like me at the bar?” She shook her head. “I’ll stay home.”

“You can still keep up with us, I’m sure,” Rhys laughed.

“Oh, I know I can,” she grinned. “I just don’t want to embarrass you in front of all the little girl’s when I drink you under the table.” She winked at him, and he laughed again.

“I’d pay good money to watch that happen,” Kody said. “Rhys can put his liquor away.”

“Who do you think taught me?” he asked, shooting Linda a conspiratory look.

“Trouble,” she said, shaking her finger at him. “You’re trouble, boy.”

“Another thing you taught me.”

As the conversation dwindled and the hours passed, Rhys began to wonder why they’d left Sawyer in their rearview mirror all those years ago. Could they have had this, time with Linda and her family, this entire time?

He didn’t want to think about all the other people in town and what they meant to him—or what they didn’t. Maybe he should’ve been coming home this whole time, just for Linda. He should’ve put his hatred for this place aside and been here for her.

He roughly cleared his throat.

Not anymore. After the tour, he’d be back, they all would. They’d come back for Lin and spend as much time as they could with her.

He just hoped they had years and not months left with her.

chapter four

The bar was the most crowded she'd ever seen it. People were lined up around the block, all eager to catch a glimpse of one of the guys from the band. The only reason she made it in before everyone else was because she knew Felix, the bar owner. And being friends with Riley, the lead singer's cousin, had its perks.

Felix helped her elbow her way through the crowd—not that she'd had to do much elbowing. People seemed to part like the Red Sea when they saw giant Felix coming toward them.

“You gonna be good here?” he asked over the loud chatter and blaring jukebox music.

“Yep!” She gave him a bright smile, one he didn't return, and nodded toward her friends. It was a silent order to stay with them. She hadn't ever seen him smile and absently wondered if he was even capable of it.

She stepped up between Riley and Audrey, and Riley squealed after doing a double take. She wrapped Ana in a tight hug, and Ana had to stifle a gag at the thick, warm alcohol scent wafting from her mouth.

“I'm so happy you made it!” Riley shouted, her words slurred. Harper and Ana's gazes met and held, an unspoken question—how much had she had to drink?

“She's on her fifth beer,” Harper said, sliding her brown eyes toward Riley. Her dark halo of curls swayed with her movements. “Had three shots, and a few cocktails before the

bar started filling up.” Ana tried to keep her face even as she nodded.

“You gotta catch up!” Riley shouted, and Ana shook her head.

“You know I don’t drink,” she said. “I’ll just grab some water.” Riley cupped her hands around her mouth and cheered, “Boo!”

“No booing,” Audrey scolded, swatting at her. She nursed her beer, her red-tipped fingers tightly gripping the bottle. Ana chewed her lip. She knew better than to ask about Tate, but she knew seeing him was bringing up old feelings for Audrey.

Their breakup was messy, and even though Ana had never met him, she hated him. She hated all of the band, if she was being honest.

Any one of them could’ve stopped Tate, but none of them did. None of them even tried. They didn’t talk any sense into him because to guys like them, women were replaceable.

“Show’s about to start,” Harper called, and Ana took a deep breath. She could still leave. Pretend that she was sick, or had a headache, and leave. But she knew the disappointed look on her friends’ faces would wreck her, and she couldn’t do that to them...even if she really wanted to.

They locked arms together and worked their way through the crowd until they were standing pressed up against the stage. It was so packed they were standing shoulder to shoulder, squeezed so tightly together she could barely move.

She tried to look around for an exit, just in case. When she couldn’t immediately find a clear path, she began to panic.

She was fine, she reminded herself. Nightcap was safe. Felix would have a conniption if anyone in his bar got hurt.

The thought of Felix losing his mind over a mosh pit opening in the center of the crowd made her smile to herself. She’d be fine.

She was safe.

But she still wanted her stuffed bunny, Buns.

Before she could think about it anymore, the backdoor swung open, and everyone around her screamed. She squinted in the darkness, trying to make out who it was as they climbed the few stairs to the stage.

She was pressed against the stage, the jeering crowd shoving her forward until the old wood dug into her front. She was so close to the metal mic stand she could reach out and grab it.

Ana tried to catch her breath, tried to push back enough so she had some room to breathe, but with every step the man made onto the stage, toward the drum set at the back, the crowd cheered louder, pushed harder.

He sank onto the drum throne, keeping his eyes averted as he grabbed his two sticks and twirled them in his hands. Two men stalked up the steps, working the crowd into a higher frenzy.

The bassist and guitarist grabbed their instruments and slung them over their heads, gripping the necks as they turned their backs to the crowd to look at the drummer.

He gave them a wicked grin, one that made Ana's stomach tighten. His black hair hung in his eyes, his golden skin glowing in the dim light of the bar. She watched him, watched that smile disappear, and shuddered at the brutal beauty of him.

She recognized Tate as the bassist, glared at his back as his powerful muscles shifted with his movements. Audrey was a vibrating ball of nerves beside her, and Ana wanted nothing more than to shield her friend from her ex. But she couldn't do that.

The drummer, she couldn't remember his name, banged on his drums and the crowd went wild. The guys strummed, a loud, screeching, melodic sound that made the entire room erupt louder.

Then every light in the bar turned off, bathing the room in total darkness.

Panic clawed up her chest. She felt trapped, like the room was too dark and too small, and she just needed out.

But then a spotlight hit the stage, right where the lead mic was, and she winced at the sound the crowd made. At the unnatural loudness of them.

Movement from the side of the stage caught her eye and she turned, her breath catching as she watched Rhys, the lead singer, slowly take each step up. His head was bowed, his dark blond hair shielding his face.

His black ripped jeans were plastered to him, showing his sculpted thighs even through the thick, dark fabric. His plain black shirt was so tight across his chest and biceps it was lewd. A silver necklace glinted from around his neck, swinging with every step he took.

She hated the way her mouth watered as she watched him. Hated how he affected her. She was no better than the simpering, screaming women around her, all drooling and lusting over a Rockstar.

He slid his guitar easily over his head, adjusting the strap on his broad, muscled shoulders as he nodded toward the drummer. He banged three times, making the entire bar roar with excitement.

Rhys rolled his shoulders and tilted his head side to side, loosening his muscles before he turned to face the crowd. Everyone quieted as he stared out at the sea of people. They waited with bated breath for something to happen.

Then he strummed, hard and loud, piercing the air with a thick, low thrum of a note. The rest of the band followed, and they flowed into their first song.

She'd listened to the band only a handful of times, having never been a fan before moving to Sawyer, but it was impossible to completely stay away from their music. Everyone played their music, and when a new album dropped, it was all the town seemed to listen to and talk about.

But this—this was a song she'd never heard before. They played heavy rock, with loud guitars and banging drums,

Rhys' raspy deep voice floated over the instruments, while Kody let out rumbling screams that made the hair on her arms stand.

This song was different.

It was slow, and methodical. It was a waltz of notes, of heavy intense strums and bangs. She'd listened to their mainstream hits, but never something like this. Never something so...so *beautiful*.

Truthfully, she hadn't known they would be capable of creating something like this. Something that made her want to scream and cry and claw at herself until her aching soul was free.

And he hadn't even begun to sing yet.

Rhys flashed the crowd a cocky little grin, and she hated the way her stomach tightened at the sight. Hated the way her breath still hadn't evened out as she watched him slowly approach the mic.

He lazily draped his hand over it, his eyes scanning the crowd. They stopped when they met hers, and his brows barely lifted.

For a moment, everything fell away. For a moment, it was just the two of them. The bar, the music, the people didn't exist around them. It was just Rhys and Ana, Ana and Rhys.

And then he looked away.

His voice was strong and smooth, a little raspy, but filled with so much emotion it felt like he was pouring everything he had, everything he was, into those words. He squeezed his eyes shut and leaned forward on the mic, his hands clasping tightly around the top.

The song built and built, the heavy beat of the drums pounding in her chest. Suddenly, the music stopped, and only the sound of Rhys' voice filled the room.

Then everything dropped.

The music was heavier and louder than before, the crowd was more restless, but she was transfixed on him.

She'd never seen him in person before, and even though she always hated the band for her friend's sake, she couldn't deny the otherworldliness of him. The way he held the rooms full attention, the way he seemed to grow ten feet tall as he sang, it was too much. It was all too much.

Rhys stepped away from the mic, his head bowed as he strummed his guitar. He bobbed his head in time with the music, his eyes still closed.

Slowly, they fluttered open and slid right to hers. Her heart lurched into her throat as they shared another secret look—a look only between them. One that no one else knew about, one that no one else could take from her.

The corner of his mouth tucked up, and she had the ridiculous urge to sob. Sob for him, for this music he was creating, for this feeling he was creating.

She jumped when Kody began to scream into his mic. Audrey gasped beside her, and when Ana tore her eyes away from Rhys to look at her friend, she saw tears lining her eyes as she stared up at Tate. He stared right back. This was the first time they were seeing each other in over a year.

They stared at each other as Kody screamed, his voice raw and filled with so much passion behind his words, it made Ana breathless.

Ana's eyes snapped back to Rhys as he stepped back to the mic, his smoother voice layering over Kody's screams. She didn't know who to look at, who to focus on, what to think, what to feel.

So, she just stared up at Rhys, letting Audrey stare at Tate in peace. Rhys' eyes stayed on hers as he sang. He didn't scan the crowd; he didn't look at his bandmates. He stayed locked on her, like she was the only person in the room, like she was the only person in the world.

The music built more and more, the bass rattling the walls of the small venue. Sweaty bodies swayed and pushed, making her press closer to the stage. Rhys lurched forward, his hand dropping away from the neck of his guitar to reach for her, as

if he could steady her or help her from getting completely squashed and hurt.

She gripped the edge of the stage and smiled shyly at him. His voice didn't falter, his band didn't falter. He could still do what he needed, still create what he needed, and watch her. Focus on her.

She'd never felt so special in her entire life.

People sang along as the song reached its bridge. She hated that she didn't know the words, but with the way Rhys kept staring at her, she wouldn't have been able to sing along anyway. She could barely breathe.

Finally, he stepped back as the song ended, dropping his head with the final notes. And when he lifted it, he gave the crowd the biggest smile she'd ever seen.

Everyone cheered and clapped, but she was still too shocked to do anything other than grip the edge of the stage and stare at him.

He gripped the mic and tilted it toward him as he rocked back on his heels.

"Hey, sweets," was the first thing he said. He gave her a boyish grin, and butterflies erupted in her belly. "I hope you liked that." She found herself nodding, a slow, broad smile splitting her face.

Sweets?

She was sweets?

Was she dreaming? Or hallucinating? Was she really in a coma and making this all up?

He winked before tearing his eyes from hers to look at the crowd.

"I'm Rhys," he said, and paused as they screamed. He gestured toward the guitarist. "This is Kody." He strummed hard as everyone shouted. "Tate." Rhys gestured to his other side, and Tate lifted his hand in a casual wave, jerking his chin at the crowd. He wasn't smiling, not with his eyes latched onto Audrey's. "We have Vincent on the drums." He banged on the

drums a few times, then the guys began strumming as another song began. “And we’re The Butterfly Effect.”

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chapter five

She bounced on the balls of her feet, her hands wringing together in front of her. She still couldn't believe he'd been staring at her for most of the set, and she'd stared right back.

Her face hurt from smiling so much, but it was a good ache. A welcomed ache.

He played the crowd effortlessly, and she found herself completely enamored by him. By the way he moved, the way he sang. He was just so cool, and casual, and talented. She'd never seen anyone like him.

People swarmed the band as soon as the show ended, shoving things at them to sign. Women threw themselves at the guys, at Rhys. They touched his arms, his chest, him. He didn't push them away, but he didn't encourage it, either. He just let it happen, with a cocky smile on his face the entire time.

She wanted to leave. She wanted to go home and sleep, and not wake up until at least noon. But when Riley asked her to stay, to go to the afterparty, Ana made a split-second decision to stay.

She didn't know why. They'd just looked at each other. Maybe she was just an anchor point in the sea of people for him, and he always chose one person to stare at during every concert. But there was something in his eyes, something that burned her alive, and she wanted to meet him.

She just wanted to touch him, shake his hand, talk to him, something. She just wanted to be near him, just for a second.

Finally, by two in the morning, the bar had cleared out. She and the girls stood at the bar, sipping water. Her nerves were shot, and anxious butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

Riley swayed, catching herself on the bar before laughing to herself, her sweaty blonde hair now twisted up in a messy bun. She was wasted off her ass, and had easily been the loudest in the crowd, but she was fun and hilarious. She couldn't make herself get annoyed with Riley. She knew she had her own demons to deal with, and alcohol and men were the ways she chose to deal with them.

“How are you doing?” Harper asked, her eyes on Audrey. Audrey stared at the back door where the guys had disappeared out of half an hour ago.

“Fine,” she said, but her voice was tight. “He did—they did a good job.”

A door opened, then slammed shut. Anxiety erupted in her body with every step she felt them take toward their group. Harper opened her mouth, but quickly clamped it shut when she saw the band making their way to them.

Ana didn't turn to face them, she kept her body loose and casual as she leaned against the bar. She stared at her friends, at the way Harper glared at Tate, at the way Audrey seemed to shrink in on herself, at the lazy, drunk smile Riley had plastered to her face.

“Hey, girls.” Ana's blood heated. His voice was raspier than it had been when he first spoke earlier.

“Rhysie!” Riley shouted as she drunkenly pushed off the bar. She staggered around Ana, and Ana followed her, turning around to face them—to face him.

Their eyes met and held, and she felt her face heat.

“You did so good,” she slurred as she threw her arms around his waist.

“Thanks, Ry,” Rhys laughed, patting his cousin's back. His eyes met Ana's again, that smile still on his face. “How drunk is she?”

It took her a moment to realize he was talking to her, and another moment to find her voice.

“I don’t know,” Ana rasped. “She’s been drinking all night.” Rhys’ smile faltered as he glanced down at his cousin.

“She’s fine,” Audrey said, her voice lethal. “Can we go now?”

What was she doing?

How could she even be looking at someone in that band, knowing they all covered for Tate when he cheated on her best friend? They were all the same.

Her wall came up, and she took a step away from him.

“I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of meeting,” he said, oblivious to her inner thoughts. “I’m Rhys. Rhys Turner.” He held his hand out, the other still wrapped around Riley as she laughed to herself. The guys had dispersed, Vincent behind the bar pouring himself a drink, while Tate and Kody were on stage, grabbing their equipment.

“This is Ana!” Riley shouted. “She’s my bestie. And my boss.” Rhys blinked at her.

“You’re Ana?” He sounded shocked, and Ana didn’t know why.

“The one and only,” she said awkwardly. Audrey and Harper locked arms, and she gave them both a helpless look.

“Are you going to the afterparty?” he asked, never taking his eyes off her.

“Of course!” Riley said, swaying on her feet. “We all are!”

“Yeah,” Harper said tightly. “We’ll meet y’all there.”

“Ana?” Rhys asked, calling her out directly.

“I—” She let out a breath.

She’d said she didn’t want to go, and she knew if she went tonight, Rhys would use whatever snake-charming, rockstar magic he possessed to lure her into his bed. And even if he

wasn't her best friend's ex, he was best friends with him, and she couldn't do that to Audrey.

"I don't think so," she finally said. His smile fell, his eyes flicking between hers. He opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, and a part of her knew if he pushed her just a little bit, she'd give in. She'd go to the afterparty and spend hours and hours with him, and she'd never be the same after it.

She turned toward Harper, and Harper gave her the slightest nod. She knew she'd have her back. Of all of them, Harper was more of a homebody than she was.

"You did great," Ana said, taking another step away from him. "The show was great, I mean."

"Ready?" Kody called as he jogged toward them. Their eyes briefly met, but it didn't have the same electric charge as it did with Rhys.

"You're really not coming?" Rhys asked, and Ana shook her head. He let go of Riley and stepped toward her. "Then can I see you tomorrow?"

"I—" She looked at her friends again. How did she turn a man like him down?

"She's busy tomorrow," Harper said. "She's helping me with—something." If Rhys could see through the lie or not, he didn't make it known. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, his eyes boring into her.

"The next day then," he said. "I'm here for a few days."

"Work," she said, wincing slightly.

Would Audrey even care if she talked to him? If she hooked up with him? Did she even want to do that?

"After work." His voice felt urgent, and she bit her lip.

"Rhys," Audrey said, her voice low. He glanced at her, finding her face unyielding. "Drop it." His lip twitched as he glared at her. He opened his mouth to say something, but glanced at Harper, then Ana, and must've thought better of it.

He pushed out a hard breath and stepped back next to Riley, his head dropping forward.

“It was nice to meet you,” he said. Ana’s stomach twisted with a weird mix of anxiety and dread. Anxiety because she was disappointing someone, upsetting them, and she hated doing that. And dread...she didn’t know why.

Maybe because somewhere deep down she felt like she was making a mistake.



THE MORNING SUN STREAMED IN THROUGH THE WINDOW, AND she pulled her pink, ruffly pillow over her head, groaning at the brightness. Why hadn’t she shut the curtains?

And why had she let the girls convince her to go out last night? She hadn’t stayed out that late in months, and even though she hadn’t had any alcohol, she still felt hungover.

Her eyes protested as she forced her lids open. Her body ached from fighting the crowd to stay upright last night, and her head was pounding. It was too early for her to even think about waking up.

But here she was.

Awake.

Groaning, she sat up and rubbed her forehead.

Embarrassment rushed through her as she remembered last night, as she remembered her weird encounter with Rhys, and the weird way they’d stared at each other all night.

It *was* weird, right?

She fell back onto her pillows, throwing her arm over her eyes, wincing at the impact. Her head throbbed, and her mouth felt too dry, but her embarrassment kept her in bed.

There was no way she could leave her house until she was positive Rhys had left town. She didn't want to run into him and have that awkward conversation she knew they'd have.

With a deep breath, she sat up and braced her hands on either side of herself. It wasn't her fault he'd acted weird. And it was totally just him being weird, not her. He'd been too pushy when he asked her if she was going to the afterparty.

She didn't think all that highly of herself. She knew she wasn't a supermodel, and that most people saw her as the cute, funny, chubby bookstore owner.

And because of that, she knew that he'd been pressuring her into going to the party as a joke. It wasn't even that she thought he thought she was pretty or that he'd wanted to sleep with her. Maybe it had been a case of mistaken identity. He thought she was someone she wasn't, and he wanted to catch up with her, thinking she was some girl he'd known when he lived in Sawyer.

That sounded ridiculous even to her, but she had to hold onto something that made sense because a literal rockstar being even slightly interested in her made absolutely no sense.

She sighed as she stood, ignoring the way the room spun around her as she stumbled her way to the bathroom. She rested her hands on the counter, breathing deeply before risking a glance at herself in the mirror.

Her dark curly hair was sticking up in random directions, sleep lines creased her pale cheeks, and dark circles sat under her eyes. She knew she was close to having a flare up and knew that if she didn't take it easy at the store, and if she stayed out all night again, she'd have one.

After brushing her teeth and washing her face, she stumbled out of the bathroom. She needed coffee. Well, she needed food, she wanted coffee.

She searched her kitchen, looking for any bit of coffee she had left to make it herself, but she couldn't find any grounds anywhere. She glanced out the window, knowing it was still

early enough that hopefully no one would be out, and if they were, it was because they were driving to church.

The likelihood of running into anyone, into him, was slim. He was probably still recovering from a long night of partying, probably tangled with some beautiful woman in his hotel room.

Her stomach twisted.

She didn't want to think about that.

She threw her hair into a bun, slipped into a pair of leggings and an oversized sweatshirt, and slid giant sunglasses on her face before locking up and heading toward the café at the end of the street.

This was the best thing about living above her store—she lived on Main Street, which meant most things were within walking distance.

The rising sun warmed her clammy skin as she walked down the sidewalk. She waved at an older couple as they drove past, and her smile stayed on her face as she pulled the door open.

“Hey, Ana,” Iris, the barista, said, smiling. “Your usual?”

“Please,” she said, stepping up to the counter. “And can I pay for the next customer, too? Just put it on my tab.”

“Of course,” Iris said, tapping on the screen in front of her.

“How's Austin?” Ana asked. Austin was Iris' six-year-old son, and he was Ana's most active and excited member of her children's book club.

“He's great,” Iris laughed. “He's already finished the book for book club and is waiting for the next one.”

“I can't believe he's already finished it.” She rested her hip against the counter. “I just assigned it a few days ago.” Iris shrugged.

“The kid doesn't do anything but read.” Ana snorted. That was true. She'd never seen anyone so happy to be around books than when Austin was in her store.

“I’ll bring you a few books for him later,” she said. Iris’ mouth opened, probably to object, but the little bell above the door chimed, and Ana moved to the pickup counter.

Absently, she heard people talking, a deep rumbling voice, a higher pitched, happy voice, but she stayed focused on Liam’s movements behind the counter as he made her coffee.

It was like watching a ballet—his movements intentional and coordinated, but somehow free flowing and elegant. She couldn’t look away. She never could when Liam was making her latte.

“Thanks for the coffee,” a deep male voice said behind her. It pulled her from her daze, and she blinked, shaking her head as she spun.

“You’re wel—” Her breath caught as a pair of blazing blue eyes clashed with hers. “You’re welcome.” She finished, her heart beating wildly in her chest.

What were the odds of this? Of running into him here?

He smirked, and a little dimple showed above his full upper lip. “You—what are you doing here?” He choked on a laugh.

“What? I can’t come get myself a cup of coffee and a muffin?” Rhys folded his arms over his chest, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

“No,” she blurted, then shook her head. “Yes.”

He was fully grinning now, showing off his stupidly straight white teeth. She roughly cleared her throat, trying to look away from him, but he was magnetic, and her eyes kept drifting back.

“So, I can’t?” he teased. “Or I can?”

“I just can’t believe you’re up early enough to be here,” she said, trying to mimic his posture by folding her arms. He chuckled, his throat bobbing.

“I went back to my hotel after we left Nightcap.” Her eyes narrowed. She wasn’t sure if she believed him. “The girl I wanted to spend my night with ran home.” He gave her a

teasing accusatory look, but there was something else with it. A hint of truth? Hurt?

“I’m busy today,” she said, even though she wasn’t, and he hadn’t asked. Her only plans, besides stocking a few new books around the store, was to eat her weight in gluten-free pizza.

“Yeah?” His smile never fell, like he knew she was lying and could see straight through it. “What are your plans? Maybe I can tag along.”

She opened her mouth to protest as Liam slid her latte and gluten-free blueberry muffin across the counter to her. Her eyes dropped to it before glancing up at Rhys. The other barista, a new girl Ana hadn’t learned the name of yet, pushed Rhys’ coffees across to him.

She tried to not look at him, but her face was bright red and Ana could tell she was starstruck. For whatever reason, it made Ana jealous. Not possessive, like she wanted Rhys all to herself, but *jealous*.

Jealous because he’d turned that smile to someone else. He wasn’t looking at her anymore. He was giving the barista a genuine, mirthful grin, and Ana wanted it back. She wanted him to look at her like that again.

What was wrong with her?

“Thanks,” he said, his voice silky smooth. Impossibly, the barista flushed even more and stammered a few words that didn’t sound like words at all. Ana just stared at her, at him, before grabbing her order.

“It was nice seeing you,” she blurted, drawing his attention. When they’re gazes met, it felt like she could breathe again. They stared at each other for another heartbeat, and Ana waited for him to say something.

Deep down, she knew if he pushed her just a little bit, she’d give in and spend time with him. If he asked her to hang out today, she knew she’d say yes. She knew she didn’t have the resolve or discipline to say no.

So, she waited.

She waited for him to invite her to the park, or to sit with him while they drank their morning coffee. Butterflies erupted in her stomach at the thought of spending genuine time with him. That she could get to know him was something she never thought she'd ever want.

But here she was—wanting to know him. Wanting to know everything about him.

His lips parted, but it wasn't his voice that she heard. It was a light, feminine voice that made her spine stiffen.

A small woman with dark hair and bright green eyes sidled up beside him, reaching past them to grab one of the cups on the counter.

“Thanks for the coffee,” the girl told Ana, her smile beautiful and bright. *She* was beautiful and bright. And exactly the type of woman she could see Rhys with.

Ana knew her jaw was on the floor. She knew that she was staring at the woman like she'd seen a ghost, but real shock was coursing through her.

He had just been flirting with her, hadn't he? He'd been teasing her, and—maybe he wasn't flirting. Maybe that's just how he was, and she misinterpreted it. It wouldn't be the first time something like that had happened to her.

Embarrassment filled her.

“Not a problem,” she rasped. Her gaze zeroed in on the way the woman leaned against Rhys. It was so casual, like she'd done it a million times before. Like they were comfortable with touching each other.

Ana's throat seized. She didn't know why she felt emotional about it, it wasn't like he meant anything to her. She'd played up whatever had just been happening in her head. It wasn't like he was on his knee asking her to marry him.

He'd just been teasing her.

“Well, um, I'll see you around,” she said, stepping back.

“Wait,” he said. He leaned away from the girl, but not enough to stop touching her. “Wait. Let me drop Tilly off, then we can do something—” Ana shook her head, trying to hold back her scoff.

Drop off one woman to spend time with another?

Was this guy for real?

“It’s fine,” she said, sidestepping them. “It was nice meeting you.” She nodded politely at the girl, and she smiled tightly back, looking confused.

“Wait,” Rhys said again. He reached for her, but she was too far out of reach. Their eyes met and held for a beat too long, then she turned and headed for the door.

She heard the woman’s soft voice but couldn’t make out what she’d said. Then Rhys’ deep rumble, but again, she couldn’t really hear them past the ringing in her ears.

Ana glanced over her shoulder as she rested her hand on the glass door of the café. Rhys was staring right at her, the girl’s eyes wide as she stared with him.

He didn’t try to stop her as she pushed it open and raced out.

chapter six

She stared down at the text from her mother, her hand clutching her anxiously twisting belly.

MOM:

He's out.

He's out. Josh's out of prison. Will he come looking for her? Will he find her? Will he take her back home, kicking and screaming, and then—what would he do then? Lock her away? Kill her?

She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to know.

She hated her past self for ever getting involved with him. She should've known better than to get involved with a guy like him. He was trouble. She knew that beforehand, and still let herself fall for him.

He hadn't even gone to prison for everything he'd done to her. She'd been too scared to tell the police, afraid of risking a trial and having to testify in front of him. She'd just been so scared.

And now...

Even though that fear still lingered in the back of her mind, she'd thought she'd worked through it, that she wasn't letting him have power over her anymore.

She was wrong.

She was still letting him control her, and she needed to stop. She needed to take back control of her life—she'd done

it once when she decided to buy the store and start over, she could do it again.

The door of the bookstore jiggled and she let out a small yelp. She dropped to her knees behind the counter and pressed her back against it, her heart racing. The door was locked since it was Sunday, and they were closed until tomorrow morning. But the windows and door were all glass—she couldn't hide.

They could break it.

The thought drifted into her mind and sat heavy.

Oh, God.

Could it actually be Josh? Or one of his cronies? Had they found her?

Ana clutched her knees to her chest and slid her thumb between her lips, sucking on it as she tried to calm her breathing. The door rattled again, and she let out a small whimper, squeezing her eyes shut. She repeated the mantra she'd said for the last few years.

I'm safe.

I'm safe.

I'm safe.

She really wished she had Buns.

There was a pause, and silence filled the empty store. Maybe it was just a customer, and they realized the shop was closed and they left.

But then they knocked. Hard.

Her chin began trembling and she sucked harder on her thumb. She felt herself spiraling into a panic attack. She knew she needed to calm down before that happened, but how could she? How could she calm down when someone, probably Josh, was standing outside her door, trying to get to her?

Slowly, Ana shifted to her knees and peeked over the counter, scanning the area outside her shop. A man had his hands cupped against the glass door and was peering inside. It took her a moment to recognize him, and when she did, she

ducked down with a small squeak, her thumb popping out of her mouth.

What the heck was he doing here?

“I saw you, Ana.” His voice was muffled through the glass, but still loud enough for her to hear. He knocked again, and she tightened her grip on the counter. “Come on, sweets. Open the door.” She didn’t move. She wasn’t even breathing. “Ana, please. I come bearing gifts.”

Slowly, she peeked over the counter again and looked around him, making sure he was alone. There was a black truck behind him, and when she looked at him again, he waved a white paper bag around.

With a deep breath, she pushed herself to her feet and moved through the store to the door. Their eyes locked through the glass, her hands on the doorknob and lock.

She could just leave him out there.

“Sweets,” he growled, a warning in his tone. How had he read her thoughts? “Please open the door.” She huffed out a breath as she unlocked and shoved it open.

“Come on,” she said, waving him in. He hurried inside, not giving her a chance to second guess herself or decision. She locked up immediately, still scanning the street outside.

She still felt shaken from the news about Josh and couldn’t help but look around, anticipating him to jump out of nowhere and come after her.

“Expecting someone?” Rhys stepped behind her, pressing his firm chest against her back. She glanced up, finding him scanning the empty street with her, looking a lot more alert than she felt.

“No,” she breathed, slumping forward. “What are you doing here?”

“I brought lunch,” he said, lifting the bag.

“Not hungry,” she lied. He lifted his brows like he didn’t believe her, and she rolled her eyes.

“You lying, sweets?” He dropped his voice in a way that sent goosebumps rippling over her skin. She hated the effect he had on her.

“No,” she mumbled, pushing past him.

“Ana,” he growled.

“Fine, I was about to go upstairs and make lunch,” she said. She rounded the counter and found him smirking triumphantly at her. She glared at him.

“You have a tell,” he said, bracing his hands on the counter as he leaned forward.

“What?” She blinked, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“You have a tell,” he repeated. “You do something when you lie.”

“What do I do?” She folded her arms over her chest, and he grinned broader.

“That’s for me to know.” Her stomach tightened, and she pressed her lips together.

She had to get away from him. She needed to cut whatever she felt for him off. It was ridiculous to feel anything for a literal stranger, especially one who seemed to already have ties to someone in town.

Just the thought of him with that girl this morning made her stomach drop.

“But now I know your tell, so I’ll always know when you’re lying to me. Which is a very naughty thing to do, by the way.” He gave her a pointed look and she rolled her eyes. He let out a laugh—one that sent a shiver down her spine.

It wasn’t a sadistic laugh like Josh’s, not his *I’m about to beat the shit out of you* laugh, but a genuine one. One that she loved the sound of.

“You’re a bit of a brat, aren’t you?” He shook his head, a smile still stamped on his too-handsome face. He pulled two sandwiches from the bag before smashing it flat and dropping

the food on the make-shift plate. “Eat.” He pushed the bag forward.

Her stomach took that moment to growl, and he gave her another one of his smug grins. She stared at the sandwich and sighed.

“Is it gluten-free?” she asked, feeling embarrassment rush to her face. He tilted his head to the side, his brows pushing together.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “You on a diet or something?” His jaw tensed as he scanned her.

She knew what he was thinking. It was what everyone thought.

Good. She needs to be on one.

“I have Celiac disease,” she muttered. “I can’t have gluten.”

“Oh,” he said, straightening. “I didn’t know that.” Of course, he didn’t know. Why would he? “What all has gluten? I’ve heard people talk about it, but honestly, I have no fucking clue what it even is.” She huffed out a laugh.

“It’s a protein found in wheat,” she explained. “It’s not just bread that has it, though. A lot of stuff does.” He nodded as he pulled his phone out and tapped on the screen.

She stopped talking, her lingering smile falling.

His dismissal hurt.

With a small breath, she turned away from him and busied herself with straightening books. She blinked back the burning in her eyes, trying to gather enough strength to tell him to leave, when he interrupted her thoughts.

“The menu online says they offer gluten-free bread,” he said, and she paused. Slowly, she turned back to him, finding him scanning his phone. “But I don’t think that’s what I got.” He looked up at her as he sat his phone down and ran his hand over his head. “I’m sorry, sweets. I fucked up again. Give me ten minutes and I’ll go grab you something you can eat.”

He pushed off the counter and she believed him. She believed that he really would go hunt down some stupid gluten-free bread for her.

Her eyes burned for an entirely different reason.

“You looked it up?” she croaked as he turned away. He looked back at her, his brows bunched. She couldn’t remember anyone ever doing that for her. “You—you looked it up.” He faced her fully again, his head tilted to the side.

“Yeah,” he said, like it wasn’t even a question. “I don’t want you to eat something that’ll make you sick.” He was speaking slowly, like he was confused and unsure if he was saying the right thing.

“No one’s ever—” She cut herself off, not wanting him to think she was too pathetic. “Thank you.” The same confused expression stayed on his face.

“Of course,” he said, his eyes searching hers for answers she knew she’d never give him. “Why’d you run off this morning? And leave last night?” She blinked a few times and cleared her throat.

“I—I had to work,” she muttered, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. Their eyes met and held, and her breath caught.

She couldn’t do this.

She couldn’t keep letting this happen.

Turning, she grabbed one of the books and put it in the bag she was readying for Iris. She felt his eyes on her, staring at her, assessing her.

“The store is closed on Sunday,” he said. “You could’ve saved whatever you had to do today for tomorrow.” She let out a hard breath, trying to ignore him. Maybe if she did, he’d leave.

His hands rested over hers, and she stiffened. She hadn’t even heard him move, hadn’t heard him step up beside her.

Swallowing hard, she slid her hands out from under his. He turned and rested his hip against the counter, keeping his

hand flat on the stack of books as he stared down at her, waiting.

“Why did you leave?” he asked again, softer.

“I had to work,” she said, and he shook his head. Annoyance filled her, and she let out a humorless laugh. “What do you want me to say? Why are you even here? That girl you were with won’t like it.”

Okay, that shouldn’t have come out. She hadn’t meant for it to, but it did, and she couldn’t take it back.

His brows flew up. “Who?”

“The girl from this morning,” she mumbled, looking down at the floor. She toed the rug with the rounded tip of her shoe. He chuckled.

“Tilly?” She shrugged. She didn’t know her name, didn’t want to know it. “She’s Felix’s sister—he’s the owner of—”

“I know who he is,” she snapped, and looked up at him again. “I didn’t know he had a sister.”

“She doesn’t live here. She moved away as soon as she turned eighteen and hardly ever comes back.” His eyes flicked between hers. “She’s just a friend. Like my little sister.”

Ana rolled her eyes.

How many times had she heard that line? It had been one of Josh’s go-to’s. They’re always *just a friend*.

“Sure,” she said, folding her arms over her chest. His jaw flexed as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

“You know what?” He broke eye contact long enough to tap on his phone again. His gaze found hers again as he slid his phone onto the counter between them.

“Hey,” the girl’s voice from this morning was impossibly sweeter over the phone. “What do you want? I just got rid of you.” She laughed, and Ana’s stomach twisted.

“Are you or are you not like my sister?” he asked.

“What?” Tilly laughed again.

“Have you now, or ever, wanted to fuck me, or date me, or do literally anything with me other than just annoy me?”

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Are you having a fit? These things happen in old age.” Rhys’ lips twitched, and Ana bit her lip. “No, I’ve never wanted to do anything like that—ew.” She made a gagging sound. “Why would you put that image in my head?” She gagged again, and a small smile broke on Ana’s face.

“Sorry, kid,” Rhys mumbled. “Thanks.” He hung up on her mid-gag. “See? Just a friend.”

She tried to swallow her embarrassment. He stared at her, still waiting for an answer. When she stayed silent, he sighed and asked her again.

“Why’d you really leave, Ana?” He took a small step closer. “Is it me?”

“I thought—maybe—” Her breathing was shallow as she stared up at him. “She was—”

“I’m single,” he blurted. “If that’s what you’re asking. I haven’t been remotely interested in anyone in years.” For whatever stupid reason, disappointment filled her. “But you’ve piqued my interest.”

“Really?” she whispered before she could stop herself.

“Yes,” he chuckled, but his smile slowly fell. “From the second I saw you in the crowd, I felt—something.” Her heart shot into her throat.

“I think you’ve piqued mine too.” She cringed. Who said that? Why would she say that?

Here she was, talking to this Rockstar who was insanely hot and had women lined up around the block, and she was tripping over her words.

“You think?” he teased. His voice was low again, and her insides melted. “What do I need to do to make you know you’re interested?”

She opened her mouth to answer, but nothing came out. He was staring at her so intensely she couldn’t even remember

how to breathe, let alone speak.

“I’ll think of something,” he said softly, leaning forward more, bringing them closer. “How about we start with a date?”

“A date?” she breathed. He nodded and slid his hand over hers on the counter. Every thought she had left in her head drifted away at his touch.

“I’ll pick you up at six.” He trailed a small circle on the back of her hand, and she inhaled sharply. “Wear one of your pretty little skirts. I love them.”

“You do?” She clenched her jaw at the sudden wave of emotion that rose inside her.

Of all the people in the world, she never thought a man like him would be the one to make her feel like this. She never thought *this* man would make her feel like this.

All her life, people had always wanted to change her, make her smaller, make her into a mold of what they wanted. But Rhys...he was looking at her like he saw through all the layers she’d built up around herself and saw the real her beneath it all.

And that terrified the shit out of her.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll wear one.” He flashed his teeth in a grin and took a step back. Suddenly, she could breathe again.

“Can’t wait.”

chapter seven

Was it pathetic to wait for your date fifteen minutes early? She didn't know. She'd never been on a real date. Josh never asked her to be his girlfriend, it just kind of happened. Just like he never took her out on dates, they just did things.

Kind of.

If you could call her sitting next to him while he got high and drunk doing things.

Her stomach was a ball of nerves. She hadn't told anyone about the date, mostly because she didn't want to be teased relentlessly by Riley, and didn't want Audrey to feel like she was taking the band's side on her drama with Tate.

Not that there were sides. And not that Rhys should be hated because of his friend's fuck up...

But she still felt guilty.

Since it happened, she'd told herself and Audrey that all the guys were terrible. That they had let Tate go home with some girl knowing they were together. Even though Audrey hadn't ever explicitly said she didn't like Rhys, or any of the other guys, Ana had taken it upon herself to hate them.

But then she met Rhys and now she didn't know what to think or feel.

What if this date went well? What would happen then?

Would they be dating? Would he be her boyfriend? He hadn't promised that, but she didn't know if she could do the whole *casual dating* thing. And a rockstar would want to be

casual, right? He wouldn't want to be tied down when he was on the road.

And could she trust him while he was away?

Audrey hadn't been able to trust Tate, and Tate was Rhys' best friend. Was Rhys just like him? Was he only putting in this amount of effort with her because he liked the chase? Was he only infatuated with her because she'd told him no, and someone like him wasn't used to being told no?

She tugged at the bottom of her skirt, feeling even more anxious than before. As promised, she'd worn a white pleated skirt with a baby blue top tucked into it with white sandals. She wasn't sure what he had planned for this date and felt like the outfit was dressy enough for somewhere nice, but still casual if they weren't doing anything special.

Was she overthinking this? Probably.

She paced in front of the store, her hands wringing together in front of her. She'd debated coming downstairs from the apartment she lived in above the store, or waiting for him to knock on the door. But what if he didn't know she lived up there? What if he thought she'd stood him up?

Plus, if she was already waiting for him, she had a built in excuse for him to not see her place. Because her place was a wreck. She hadn't known what to wear, and when she'd decided on the shoes, she couldn't remember where she'd put them so she had to tear the place apart.

She found them in her closet, right where they were supposed to be. Which...was embarrassing.

She glanced at her phone again. Ten minutes.

God, she felt like she was going to throw up. She was so nervous. Had she ever been this nervous for anything in her entire life? Probably not.

Her phone began to vibrate, and she nearly threw it across the road. She needed to get it together and stop being so jumpy, but shit, she was just so damn anxious.

Glancing at her phone, she let out a long sigh. She contemplated not answering, but it was her mom and what if something was wrong? Likely, it was nothing more than her checking in, but she knew if she didn't answer, guilt and worry would eat at her all night.

"Hey," she said, pressing the phone to her ear.

"Hey, honey." Her mother sounded tired and she frowned.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

"Oh, I'm fine," she said dismissively. "I just wanted to check in after...the news." Her stomach dropped.

"I'm okay," she said. "It's not even a big deal." There was a beat of silence, and she could feel the tension build between them. "I'm about to go on a date. So, really, everything is fine."

"A date?" her mother repeated, her voice flat.

"Is that so hard to believe?" Ana laughed, tucking her hair behind her other ear.

"What? No, of course, not!" she all but shouted into the phone, and Ana smiled at the panic in her voice. "No, no. I'm just glad you're getting out there." Another beat of silence, then she cleared her throat. "So, tell me about him."

"His name is Rhys," she said, her voice breaking when she saw his black truck turn onto her street and head straight for her. "He's the lead singer of a band."

"Ooo," her mother sang. "A singer. Sexy."

"*Mom,*" she groaned.

He parked in front of the shop and slid out effortlessly. Her mouth went dry at the sight of him. Jeez, he was pretty. Tall and gorgeous, with jeans that sculpted perfectly to his thighs and ass, and a black button-down that left no room for imagination. It was tight across his chest and shoulders, rolled up to his elbows to show off his corded forearms.

"Ana?"

She shook her head.

“Sorry,” she muttered, feeling her cheeks heat. “He’s here.” Rhys leaned into the truck before turning toward her. He had a small bouquet of flowers in his hand, and when their eyes met, he gave her a bright smile. “He brought flowers,” she whispered.

Her mother squealed, and she bit her lip to keep from laughing. His smile turned sly as he approached, his brow lifting in a silent question.

“My mom,” she mouthed, pointing at the phone. He stepped beside her and the smell of him made her dizzy.

“Hi, Ana’s mom,” he said, leaning down toward the phone. Her eyes went wide, and she playfully swatted at his chest. He laughed and plucked the phone from her hand before putting it on speaker.

“Hello, Rhys,” her mother laughed. “You know, just because I’m not there doesn’t mean I won’t be on the first flight to Texas to kick your ass if you hurt my girl.” Ana covered her face with her hands.

“I’d never dream of hurting her,” he said seriously, and her fingers parted to stare up at him. He searched her eyes, and her breath caught at the sincerity in them. “And if I did, I’d want you to kick my ass for it.”

“Glad you see it my way,” her mother said. Ana’s hands fell away from her face, and he grinned down at her. “So, tell me. What do you have planned?”

“Mom,” Ana groaned again. “We have to go.”

“I just want to know,” she said, sounding more awake than she had earlier. Ana made a mental note to call and check on her when she got home.

“It’s a surprise,” Rhys said, laughing softly.

“Eek!” Her mother squealed again. “So exciting. Send me photos!” Ana groaned again, dropping her head against his arm. He shifted and slid it around her waist, holding her and the flowers against him.

“We’ll take one now,” he promised. “Say bye to your mom, sweets.” She took the phone off speaker and pressed it to her ear.

“Okay, I gotta go,” she rushed out.

“Alright. Sweets,” she laughed. “Have fun! Be safe!”

“Okay, okay!” she said, giving him an apologetic look. “Okay. Love you, too. Okay! I know. Oh my God, Mom. Okay! Bye!” She hung up before her mother could give her any more advice, like remembering to use protection.

Yeah, she wanted to crawl in a hole and die, too.

“Sorry,” she breathed, but he didn’t seem annoyed in the slightest. She realized he was still holding her, and maybe she should’ve pulled away, but she liked it.

“You know, usually the girl waits for the guy to knock on her door. She doesn’t wait downstairs for him,” he said, squeezing her slightly. She looked away, feeling like she’d already disappointed him.

“I thought it would be easier for you,” she muttered. “I didn’t think you’d want to go up and down the stairs.”

“There’s not a lot I wouldn’t do for you,” he said so softly she almost didn’t hear. She lifted her eyes to his, finding him staring intensely down at her.

“You don’t mean that,” she said, trying to pull away. “You don’t know me.” His jaw tensed, and he held her tighter.

“I don’t need to know everything to know I like you,” he said. “And, for the record, I do know you. I know you have Celiac, which I’ve spent the last few hours researching, and Jesus, is there a lot to learn. I had no fucking idea you couldn’t have certain gummy bears. I was going to bring fun snacks, but I didn’t want to fuck up so I’ll wait until you can show me which are your favorites and safe for you to have.”

Tears burned the back of her nose. She didn’t know what to say or think. No one, other than her mom but she didn’t count, had ever taken the time to actually look into her disease. And if they had, they hadn’t taken hours to research it.

“I know you like your little skirts—you look adorable, by the way,” he continued, winking at her. “And I know you love books. Riley has told me that you’re the best boss she’s ever worked for, and that’s high praise from her. I know you like coffee, and that you have the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen, and the sweetest doe-eyes in the world. Don’t get me started on your laugh—”

“Stop,” she whispered. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to drown out his words. She couldn’t let herself get attached to him. She knew once she did, he’d leave, and it would destroy her. But it was hard not to fall for him when he said things like that.

“Why?” He gripped her chin lightly, and tipped her head back to look at him.

“You really researched my disease?” she whispered. His brows knitted together as he flicked his eyes between hers.

“Of course, I did.” He said it like there was no other option, like it hadn’t even been a question.

Josh couldn’t even remember she’d had a disease, and they’d been together for years.

“If I want to take care of you, I need to know what you can and can’t eat, right?”

“You don’t need to take care of me,” she said. She pulled away, and this time, he let her. “I can take care of myself.”

“I do,” he said, nodding.

“Why?”

“Because you’re mine, and it’s my job to take care of you.” He said it so seriously she nearly laughed.

“I’m not yours.”

“When you agreed to this date, you agreed to being mine,” he said, shrugging a shoulder. “At least for now. We’ll make it official later.” She blinked at him. He was serious. He sounded so sure of himself, so confident, that even she believed him.

She knew he'd easily shatter this wall she wanted to keep up between them, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

He glanced at the sky and cursed under his breath. He held his hand out to her, and she hesitated before sliding hers into his.

"We're gonna be late," he said, tugging her toward the truck. They paused when they got to it, and she swallowed awkwardly. It was a lot taller than it looked on the other side of the parking lot. "You're such a little thing. I didn't think about this."

"It's okay," she said, waving him off.

Shock took her when he opened the door for her. He tossed the flowers onto the center console, and turned toward her.

"Come on, sweets. I'll help you up."

Her eyes widened.

"No," she said, taking a step back. "You can't. I'm—you'll hurt yourself. I'm too heavy." His brow lifted.

"I feel like you're insulting my strength," he said, and she shook her head.

Foot, meet mouth.

"No," she rushed out. "It's just—I'd be too heavy for a bodybuilder." She tried to laugh at the joke, but his face shifted into stone.

"I don't like that," he said, his voice low.

"What?"

"I don't like the way you're talking about yourself." She swallowed, her forced smile falling.

"It was a joke," she mumbled. His face didn't shift.

"It wasn't funny," he said. Her gaze fell, and she wrapped her arms around herself. His scuffed boots came into view, and she hesitated before lifting her eyes. "Now, be a good girl and let me help you."

Her mouth opened to protest, but nothing came out. Before she realized what was even happening, he scooped her into his arms and set her on the seat. She hadn't even had time to panic.

She clutched the edges of her seat as he set her down, her eyes wide. Without a word, he slid the seatbelt across her chest and clicked it into place. He did it as if he'd done it a million times, as if they weren't literal strangers, as if they'd been together for years. He stepped back and quickly scanned her.

"All good?" he asked, meeting her gaze. She still couldn't speak, so she just nodded. He winked at her and let the door shut.

What the heck was happening?

She still hadn't found her voice when he slid into his seat and started the truck, so she took the time to look around. It was new and still had that distinct leather smell. The dash was shiny—everything was shiny.

"Is this your car?" she asked, running her finger along the door panel. He cleared his throat as he shifted in his seat.

"It's Felix's," he muttered. "The bar owner—"

"I know Felix," she laughed. "We're friends." His brows lifted as he pulled from the parking spot and headed down the street.

"But you didn't know about Tilly?" Her smile completely fell.

She was still embarrassed about that. And she hated to admit that she was still a little jealous of the other woman for being so close to Rhys. Which was ridiculous. She believed him—they were just friends.

"We've never talked about her," she mumbled as she looked out the window. Houses passed as they soared down the road. He turned onto the old highway and she sat a little straighter. "Where are we going?"

When he didn't answer, she looked at him, finding him giving her a wicked grin.

“It’s a surprise,” he said, turning his eyes back to the road.

It would be night soon, and he was taking her out here? There was nothing on this highway for miles and miles. Wherever they’d end up, they’d get there when it was already dark. Like, pitch black dark. There were no streetlights, and she did everything she could to avoid driving on this highway. Day or night, she hated it. It was too small and felt too unsafe.

“So, you’re friends, but haven’t talked about your families?” She blinked at him.

“He helped me get settled when I first moved here,” she said. Again, his brows lifted in surprise. “I met Harper at the hardware store, and she introduced me to Riley and Audrey. We went out to Nightcap one night, and I had a little too much to drink and Felix helped me home. After that—” She shrugged as she trailed off. “I guess I told him about my past and he’s looked out for me ever since.”

She could see the questions in his eyes, but he didn’t pry. She knew he wanted to ask her about her past, why her past would cause Felix, the grumpiest man in Sawyer, to look out for her. But he didn’t.

They sat in silence for a while, both of them staring out the window at the road, at the trees and tall grass. Her stomach twisted with every passing second. She didn’t know where they could be going. All the side roads he could’ve taken that lead them back into town or into another town, he hadn’t taken. He kept cruising down the highway toward the unknown—toward her *surprise*.

Surely a famous man wasn’t a serial killer?

The thought clashed through her, and she subtly shifted her eyes to look at him again. It would be one of the best covers, she thought. If he was famous, no one would suspect him and he could easily get his victims to trust him.

More anxiety filled her.

Her breathing became ragged and she turned forward again. She could call Harper, and she knew her best friend would come to her rescue. She knew she would.

“Hey, you okay?” His hand landed on her bare knee and she jolted at the contact.

“What? Yeah, fine,” she said breathlessly. His brows knitted together as he searched her face. “I just—where are you taking me?”

“It’s stressing you out not being in control, isn’t it?” he asked, a wry grin twisting his mouth. He squeezed her knee, but it did nothing to settle her nerves. “I promise you’ll love it.”

“You’re not taking me to some barn to kill me, are you?” She hadn’t really meant to say it, it just came out.

He blinked at her, genuine shock and confusion filling his face.

“What are you talking about, sweets?” he asked quietly. “You think I’m taking you somewhere to kill you?” He pulled onto the shoulder of the road and twisted to look at her, resting his other hand on her headrest.

“No,” she blurted, shaking her head.

Jesus, when had she gotten so shaky?

She knew it was because of Josh. She knew that if she hadn’t gotten the news that he was out of prison, she wouldn’t be so jumpy and anxious. Logically, she knew that.

Anxiety and logic didn’t mix, though, and she was already spiraling.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” he said slowly, searching her face. She knew she must look ridiculous, and he was probably rethinking this entire date. “I’m taking you to this open field I used to love to come to when I was in high school. It’s the best spot in town to see the stars.”

She hadn’t realized she was holding her breath until she let it out in a hard whoosh. His confusion had morphed into concern, and he shifted his body more toward her.

“Oh,” she whispered. His face didn’t shift as he stared at her. “I just—I started spiraling.”

“You do that a lot?” he asked quietly. Goosebumps rippled across her body as his fingers brushed against her hair. He twirled a lock of the dark strands around his finger. The gentleness of his touch calmed her. Grounded her.

“Yeah,” she admitted, looking at her lap. “When I think about something, sometimes it’s hard to stop going down that road, you know?”

“And you thought I was taking you out here to kill you?”

“I thought you might be a serial killer,” she explained, risking a glance at him. The corner of his mouth tucked up as he watched her, and she felt her face flush. “And that being famous was a good way to lure victims in.”

He choked on a laugh and she couldn’t help but let one of her own out. Saying the words aloud made her realize how ridiculous they sounded—how ridiculous *she* sounded.

“That would probably be an easy way to find victims,” he agreed. “But I can promise you I’m not a serial killer.” He sounded amused, like he was indulging her, but also taking her anxiety seriously.

“You’re probably second guessing your decision, huh?” she laughed nervously. He tilted his head to the side, but didn’t say anything, so she continued. “You know, for choosing me to ask out.”

“I’m definitely not second guessing myself,” he said softly. “I’m thinking I made the perfect choice. And I’m really fucking happy I kept annoying you until you said yes.” He winked at her, and her entire body turned into molten lava. “I wanted to get out there before nightfall, but I’m not sure if we’ll make it.” He looked out at the sky, a deep crease between his brows.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Not your fault, sweets,” he said, turning back toward the wheel. He kept his hand on her knee, his thumb gently stroking the outside of her thigh. “You good? Ready?” She nodded, and his hand barely tightened.

They took off down the road again, and this time, she didn't feel as anxious about what was to come.

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chapter eight

He backed into the field, grateful that the sun hadn't set yet. He parked out in the middle and looked around. It was the first time he'd been there in over a decade, and it looked the same as it had all those years ago.

This field used to be the place he'd go when he just needed to get away. Get away from school, and responsibilities, and his parents—just life. He had the club back home in New York, but here, he had this field.

He'd written some of their most popular songs out here. Just him and his guitar under the stars, that was how he'd spent countless nights. Before he could even drive, he'd walk the miles it took to get here and just sit in the grass for hours, sometimes until the sun came up, then he'd head back into town.

“Stay here, okay?” he said, turning toward Ana. He didn't know what to think of that little anxiety attack she'd just had. Did he give off serial killer vibes? Or was there a lot more to her than he initially thought?

“Okay,” she said. Her big eyes took in everything. She looked around, and he could see the confusion about the empty field, void of any trees or obstructions. He couldn't fucking help it, he grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the back before sliding from the truck.

He didn't miss the look of shock on her face as he opened the back door to pull out the bag he'd filled with everything he needed to set up. Their eyes met and held before he shut the back door.

His heart was in his fucking throat as he tossed the few blankets down in the bed of the truck. He made sure to tuck them in every corner before throwing the pillows down. There were too many, he knew six was too many, but Tilly had insisted the more pillows the better.

He sighed, smiling to himself as he found places to put all the pillows to cushion the hard bed. He didn't mind so much about his comfort, but he cared about Ana's. He wanted her to feel comfortable—comfortable in the bed of the truck, lying beside him as they stared up at the stars, but also just around him in general.

It was too soon for her to trust him, and he knew that, but he still wanted to work his ass off to prove to her she could.

As he threw the final blanket down, the one for them to cover up with if it got too cold, he felt the full weight of this date hit him. He'd never brought anyone to this field before. It was his place. The guys hadn't ever even been out here with him. They knew about it, everyone in town knew this was his spot, but no one ever came to bother him.

He didn't know why he'd chosen this as their date, why he thought she'd even enjoy something like this. Something told him she wouldn't care about being wined and dined. He thought she'd like this, something thoughtful and meaningful.

He hopped out of the truck and pulled the back door open again to grab the little cooler full of drinks and snacks, before he opened her door. Her seatbelt was already off, but otherwise, she was exactly as he'd left her.

Her hands were twisted in her lap, and her eyes were like saucers as she stared up at him. Did he really scare her? He'd do whatever he could to make himself smaller and less intimidating.

He never thought he was a scary or intimidating man. He was tall, but not built like a wall the way Felix was. He didn't have a face like Vincent, one that looked bloodthirsty, but he also didn't have the happy-go-lucky attitude Kody or Tate had either.

“Ready?” He held his hand out for her and watched as her full chest rose and fell with a deep breath before she slid her hand into his. He helped her out of the truck, trying to hide his smile at the long drop. She smoothed her hand over her skirt, but, surprisingly, didn’t pull her other hand from his.

Instead, she let him lead her to the back of the truck. Her mouth parted as she stared at the overflowing blankets and pillows. She looked up at him, and he smiled at her.

She didn’t return it, but he thought she was too shocked to. It was fucking adorable, her reactions to everything. But something about it broke his heart, too. Like she’d never experienced something as simple as a picnic under the stars, or someone looking into her disease.

He kissed her forehead, and he felt her body stiffen. But he just pulled away as if nothing had happened, and hopped up on the tailgate again. She stared at it, then down at her skirt and legs, and when she turned her head up to him, there was the cutest little scowl on her face.

“What?” he laughed.

“You wanted me to wear a skirt,” she said, waving her hand at herself. “How am I supposed to get up there in a skirt?”

“Well, first,” he said, holding his hand out. “Put your hand in mine, and I’ll pull you up.”

“You know what I meant,” she mumbled.

Yeah, he knew what she meant, but liked teasing her.

He shook his hand slightly, his brows raising expectantly. She let out a huff and slid her hand into his. He easily pulled her up, laughing at the little squeak she let out.

“I brought a few snacks,” he said, guiding her toward the head of the bed. They sat, and he rested the cooler on his outstretched legs. He tried not to stare at her while she adjusted her position a few times, trying to find the best way to sit in a skirt.

Maybe he hadn't thought it through, but those little skirts she wore drove him fucking crazy. She'd been wearing one at the concert, and he couldn't stand it. The things that went through his mind when he saw her would definitely scare her away.

"I thought you said you didn't get any."

"I brought some, but they're not as fun as junk food," he said, winking at her. He pulled out some fruit, cheese, and a bottle of wine. Her brows lifted.

"I don't drink," she said. He froze.

Fuck.

Why hadn't he thought to ask her about that?

"Oh." He slid the bottle back in the cooler, and she rested her hand over his. Their eyes met, and she took a small breath.

"Is the seal broken?" His brows inched together. "On the wine. You haven't opened it before?" He handed it to her, letting her see for herself. She inspected it closely, twirling it around and running her finger along the foil. She read the label, her face so intense, it took him by surprise.

He silently watched her, questions whirling through his head, but he didn't voice any of them. He wanted to know what she was doing, why she was doing it, but when she handed him the bottle with a firm nod, he chose to keep quiet.

"I'll have a glass," she said softly. "Just one."

He wasn't about to argue with her. He just nodded and pulled a little mason jar out, handing it to her while he grabbed the wine opener. He held the bottle between his thighs while he opened it, feeling her eyes on his every move as he did it.

The cork came out with a pop, and he turned toward her, finding her face pale.

"We don't have to drink this," he said, and she shook her head.

"No, no, I want to," she said, and sucked her bottom lip between her teeth. "I just don't drink often." He shrugged.

He wasn't about to tell her about his drinking habits. Not that he had a problem or was an alcoholic, but he definitely liked having a few drinks with dinner.

“So.” He poured some wine into her glass, making sure to only give her a little bit. “Tell me about yourself.” She laughed softly, tucking her hair behind her ear as she stared down at the dark red liquid.

“I’m not all that exciting,” she said. “What do you want to know?” After pouring himself a glass, he reclined back on his elbow and took a sip.

“Let’s start with your name.” She blinked at him.

“You don’t know my name?”

“Not your last name,” he said, flashing her a grin.

“Bardot,” she said quietly. “Anastasia Bardot.” He nodded, giving her an appreciative smile.

“Fancy.” She rolled her eyes and leaned against the side of the truck bed. “What else? Where did you grow up?” She sighed, her eyes still on her glass as if she was contemplating a sip. Finally, she took a small one, letting the wine sit in her mouth for a long moment before she swallowed.

“I grew up in upstate New York,” she finally said. “Syracuse.” He nodded encouragingly, still reclined casually, and watched her. It looked like she was struggling to find the right words, but must’ve given up because she let out another long sigh. “Born and raised in Syracuse. Dad left before I was born, so it was just my mom and me. She married my step dad, Joey, a few years ago, right before I moved here.”

“And why did you move here?” He couldn’t take his eyes off her. The setting sun made her skin glow golden, and bring out the slight red hue to her dark hair. She extended her short legs and tugged the hem of her skirt down, smoothing it along her thighs.

“After my ex—” She stopped herself, her eyes snapping to him. “After things ended with my ex, I saw the shop for sale and decided to take my life back, you know? So I packed as much as I could fit in my car and came here.”

She looked around the empty field, as if this was right where she wanted to be. He took a bit of pride in that, knowing that she was happy and comfortable enough with him to actually *want* to be here.

He downed the rest of his glass and set it beside him. She smiled down at him, her glass still mostly untouched and clutched in her hands.

“What about you?” Her voice was a soft caress against him, and he sighed, feeling her fill him in ways he’d never felt before. He knew she shouldn’t have this amount of control over him, but he didn’t care. He already knew he’d raze cities and countries for her, but for some reason, the intensity of his feelings didn’t scare him. If anything, the way she looked at him, the things he felt, felt right. Everything just *fit*.

“I grew up here,” he said. “The guys and I left on our first tour when we were nineteen—no, we were twenty, I think. It was our first tour, and we never came back.”

“The town loves you,” she said, smiling softly. He tried—he really fucking tired to hold in his snort, but he couldn’t. He let it out, and her smile slowly fell. “What?”

“They didn’t love us when we were here,” he said, trying, and failing, not to sound bitter. “We were a joke to most of them. After we graduated, everyone told us to grow up, to get real jobs.” He scoffed as he shook his head, looking out at the field that could’ve been his life. “My dad wanted me to work on the ranch with him, but I didn’t want that life. We had a falling out when I left.”

“Are you in a better place now?” she asked, sounding hopeful. He gave her a sad smile.

“He died a few years ago,” he muttered. “We never fixed our relationship.” She opened her mouth, but he continued. “Not that I regret it. He was a bastard, and I hadn’t planned on him ever being in my life again.” She rested her hand over his, her thumb mindlessly stroking his skin. He felt a shudder rip through his body at the tender touch.

When was the last time someone had done this? Touched him without expecting anything in return? Or talked to him as a person, not as a celebrity? Treated him like the man he was, not the man the tabloids made him out to be.

“I know that sounds bad,” he continued, feeling a bit of that usual sorrow fill his chest he always felt when he talked about his father.

“You don’t need to defend yourself to me,” she said. “I understand. Sometimes the best thing you can do is leave people behind.”

He wanted to ask her who she’d left behind, but he couldn’t. The words wouldn’t form, and when she didn’t offer him any information, he cleared his throat, trying to grab onto the first thing that came to him so he could change the subject.

“So, books,” he said, inwardly cringing. She withdrew her hand, laughing softly as she tucked her full hair behind her ear. “What made you decide to open a bookstore?”

“The town didn’t have one,” she said, shrugging slightly. “But I also love books.” Her face lit as she said the words, and he found himself mesmerized. That smile alone made him even more enthralled with her. “I was a shy kid, so I didn’t have a lot of friends. Books kept me company, though. And later, when I was with—” Again, she gave him a wary look, but he forced his face to stay neutral. “Nevermind. It’s weird to talk about my ex while I’m on a date.” She smoothed her hand over her hair as she gazed out at the darkening field around them.

“I don’t mind,” Rhys said, even if it was a bit of a lie. He wanted her to tell him everything, but he had to admit that he didn’t love hearing about her ex. But if she needed to get it out, he’d listen.

She eyed him like she could see through the lie, but took another sip and looked out at the field again.

“Josh, my ex, was...” She trailed off, biting her lip, as if she was trying to find the right words. “He wasn’t nice, so I spent a lot of time reading when I was with him. Books were

my escape, you know? I could read a book and forget about everything that was happening. I could let myself get lost in the story for a while. He always hated that I read, but now, looking back, I think I kept reading as a small rebellion. I just —” She rubbed her forehead, her eyes sadder than he’d ever seen.

“What did you need to rebel against?” he asked. His hands curled into fists to keep from touching her. He hadn’t been shy about it before now, but right now, while she told this story, he felt like he needed to keep his hands to himself.

“Him,” she said, huffing out a small laugh. Her lips curled in a smile, one that broke through the sadness that had overtaken her face. “He hated that I gave my books more attention than I gave him. But I think without them, I’d be dead. They gave me...hope. They gave me hope that things would get better. Eventually.”

His stomach dropped at her words. What the fuck had she gone through?

He didn’t know who her ex was, but he knew that if he ever saw that motherfucker, he’d bury him. He’d destroy him for whatever he’d done to take that spark out of Ana’s sweet eyes.

“Hope,” he repeated. It was all he could say, the only word he could manage. She turned fully toward him, nodding as she smiled brightly.

“I read so many stories that were similar to my own, and the women always had a happy ending. I like to think, maybe one day, I’ll have one too,” she said softly. A deep blush settled in her round cheeks, and he couldn’t help it anymore.

Reaching out, he saw her eyes shudder as his hand moved closer to her face. He moved slowly, letting her see all his movements before brushing his thumb along her smooth cheek. God, her skin was so soft, like a rose petal.

“You’ll have one,” he promised. He’d make damn sure of it.

He didn't know if she even realized what she was doing as she leaned into his touch. Her eyes closed, as if savoring him, and he rested his palm flat against her cheek, cupping her face, letting her feel his warmth. His safety. His protection.

Ana's eyes fluttered open, and when he looked into them, she looked calmer. Settled.

Peaceful.

"Do you read?" she asked, reaching up to grip his wrist. She gently tugged his hand away, but kept both of hers wrapped around it, holding it in her lap.

"Not often," he admitted, wincing slightly. "I don't hate it, but I'm just so busy—" She nodded in understanding, and he stopped talking.

She'd said he didn't need to defend himself to her, and he believed her.

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chapter nine

As the last of the sunlight disappeared and night fully took over, Ana looked around. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done this, just sat with someone and talked like this. Everything with Rhys was effortless. He made her feel seen in a way she'd never felt before.

They'd finished their glasses of wine and were sipping water. Rhys turned on music from his phone, and with the nature sounds around them, the night air cool and dry, she felt herself settle.

"So, why this place?" she asked, tipping her head back to watch the stars. He laid fully on his back, tucking one hand under his head and resting the other on his flat stomach.

"I used to come here all the time," he said. She shifted her head to watch him. He looked so *unrockstar*-like, so unlike who she thought he would be, that she felt her chest tighten.

A part of her still felt guilty for not telling Audrey about the date, but everything she'd thought about him was wrong. There was no way this man who listened to her and looked at her with the gentlest eyes and touched her softly, would do what Tate had. She didn't know if she even believed that he didn't try to put a stop to it anymore.

Had he tried to stop him? He seemed like a good man—a genuinely good one.

"I used to come out here when I lived here, just to get away," he said. "It was my—" His eyes shifted to hers, and for the first time that night she saw wariness in them. Like he wasn't sure how much to tell her, what to say. But she just

nodded, willing her face to stay open and neutral, hoping he'd understand that he could tell her anything. "It was my safe place. I know that sounds ridiculous—"

"It doesn't," she said. His chest fell as he let out a long breath. "Books are my safe place, this place," she looked around, "is yours. Don't you miss it?"

"Sometimes," he sighed. He took another deep breath before extending his arm. "Come here."

She froze.

She hadn't anticipated laying with him. Beside him was one thing, but cuddling? That was different.

But he just patiently watched her, and she was sure he was reading every emotion that flickered over her face. He didn't push her, but he didn't move his arm either. He was giving her the choice to lie with him or not.

She hesitated before laying down, resting her head against his chest. Her body was stiff as he wrapped his arm around her and put his hand on her shoulder, letting his thumb absently stroke back and forth.

The steady thump of his heart settled her, and she relaxed into him with a small sigh. His arm barely tightened, holding her close.

"There's the little dipper," he said, pointing at the sky. She tried to follow his finger, but couldn't find it.

"Where?"

"There." He pulled her closer as he moved his hand, helping her find the constellation. "See those two stars?" She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth as she found the stars, and nodded. "That's the right side of the cup."

She squinted, then smiled to herself as she found the constellation, following the invisible lines all the way to the North star.

"The big dipper must be close, right?" she asked, searching the sky.

“There,” he whispered, moving his hand. She followed where he was pointing, and excitement built in her chest. “There’s Orion.” Her brows knitted together, and she pushed up on her elbow, as if she could get closer to the sky. “The three stars. Do you see them?”

She stared intently, trying to find them. Disappointment flooded her when she couldn’t. But he just smoothed his hand down her back in long, soothing strokes.

“I haven’t looked for constellations before. I just know them from pictures.” She didn’t know why she told him. Maybe so he could understand why she couldn’t find them as easily as him. When he didn’t say anything, she looked down at him to find him staring at her. “What?”

“You’ve never—” He shook his head, like he couldn’t believe it.

“I lived in a city for most of my life, so it was hard to see the stars. And when I moved here, I just never thought about it.”

She shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. And before this moment, it hadn’t been. She’d never given it a second thought, never wanted to do this before. But now, she felt like she’d missed out, that maybe she should’ve been searching the stars every night.

He blinked a few times and took a deep breath as he pressed his hand on her back. Not to pull her toward him, just as a comforting weight.

“It’s been years since I’ve looked for them, so I’m a little rusty,” he said, giving her a lopsided grin. “But give me a few minutes and I’ll try to find them all.”

She didn’t lay her head back on his chest; she didn’t move. She just stared at him, and he stared back.

Before she realized what she was even doing, she lowered her mouth to his. His lips were soft as they pressed lightly against hers, his touch on her back unwavering. She let the kiss linger for only a moment, then began to pull away.

His hand moved to the side of her face, cupping it as he brought her mouth back to his. Slowly, his other hand slid down until it rested on her lower back, pressing her closer against him. His kiss was harder, more passionate than the sweet one she'd just brushed against his lips.

She fell into the kiss, into him, whimpering as his tongue traced the seam of her lips. His growl ripped through her, and he shifted them, forcing her to roll onto her back. He pulled away long enough for her to stare up at him, the bright, full moon a backdrop to his aching beautiful face.

She couldn't believe she was doing this.

"Can I kiss you again?" he asked her, his breath brushing against her mouth. She nodded, unable to say anything.

Slowly, he kissed her again, and she slid her hands onto his chest. Not to push him away, but just to feel him, his heart. It thundered beneath her touch, and for just a second, she wondered if he was freaking out as much as she was.

His tongue teased her lips again, and she opened for him, letting him sweep his tongue into her mouth. It'd been so long since the last time she'd been kissed, and her movements felt awkward and jerky, not fluid like his.

She jolted at the light brush of his calloused fingertips against her thigh. Her breath became ragged as he slowly trailed them up to the hem of her skirt. He played with the fabric, teasing her.

"Rhys," she breathed.

"I've got you," he whispered, kissing her again before trailing his lips down her jaw to her neck. He was gentle as he sucked on the sensitive skin above her pulse. She couldn't hold in her moan as he licked that spot before moving lower to the base of her throat.

His hand slid under her skirt, and she gasped. She knew if he slid higher, felt her between her legs, he'd find her soaking wet for him. She wanted him—she wanted him more than she'd wanted anything else in her entire life, but she didn't

know if she was ready for this. For anything more than a few stolen kisses.

He kissed down to her chest, stopping at the low neckline of her shirt. He gently nipped at the swell of her breast, and her hand clenched into a tight fist, bunching his shirt.

He was too much. He was doing too much to her. She didn't know where to focus, on his hand or his mouth?

She pressed her thighs together, making her clit throb harder. He noticed the movement and lifted his eyes to hers, looking wicked in the shadowed night.

“You okay, sweets?” he asked, grinning. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” she squeaked. “I’m fine.” He kept his eyes on her as he trailed his fingers higher. “Wait.” He paused and she scrambled to push herself up on her shaky elbows. “I’m not—we’re not—”

“Relax,” he soothed. “We only go as far as you want.” She forced herself to swallow past the dryness in her throat.

“It’s just—I haven’t—in a long—”

“It’s okay,” he said in that same soothing voice. “You’re okay.”

The words settled her. She was okay. Everything was okay. She was safe, and she knew Rhys wouldn't force anything to happen.

She trusted him.

Even though she'd only known him a short time, and everything that had happened to her in her past screamed at her that she shouldn't trust him, she did. Everything he'd done, everything he'd proven to her so far, showed her she could trust him, that he'd take care of her.

He snaked his body back up hers until his mouth hovered over hers. She held her breath, waiting. When he didn't kiss her, she hesitated before leaning up and pressing her lips against his.

She felt him smile before taking over again. She felt more comfortable now, less stiff as she laid back on the bed of blankets he'd laid out for them. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she gently pulled him closer, letting the full weight of him calm her.

His hand roamed over her body, and she shut the anxiety out as he gripped her hip, digging his fingers in. Now that she knew she had some control, she wanted more. She needed it. Needed him.

"You can touch me," she whispered. "If you want." He grinned again and slid his body more over hers. Her legs parted for him, and he settled against her.

Her eyes flew wide open at the feel of his thick, hard cock under his jeans. He ground his hips against hers, smiling at the moan she let slip out.

"Rhys," she whimpered, and he stroked the hair from her face, gently kissing her again.

"Shh." He ground against her again, and her back arched. "Does that feel good?" She nodded, her lips parting on another moan. "Fuck, the sounds you make." He buried his face in her neck, his breathing heavy as he jerked his hips forward, harder.

She wanted to rip his jeans off him and beg him to fuck her. All her previous anxiety about how far they were about to go was gone. She just wanted him inside her.

"I need to taste you," he rasped against her skin. Her stomach tightened at the guttural way he sounded.

Were things going too far? Would he think she was a slut for doing this with him on their first date? Was this all he really wanted?

His hand slid up her side and roughly cupped her breast. He growled low in his throat as he kissed her again.

At the moment, she didn't think she cared about if it was too far or not. She'd deal with everything tomorrow. If he never called her again, never wanted to go on another date with her, at least she had this moment with him.

“Please,” she breathed. He pulled away to look down at her.

“Please what?” A slow grin spread as he watched her squirm. “Please taste you?” She nodded, her chest heaving with her breaths. He lowered his head closer, brushing his lips against hers. “Let me hear you say it, sweets. Tell me how badly you want my face between your legs.”

Her eyes rolled back at the words. “Please,” she said again. “I want it—I want you—” She gave him a pleading look. How did she say it? She didn’t think she was capable of saying the words. “I want—”

“My face,” he prompted.

“Your face,” she repeated.

“Between your legs.”

“Between my—” She stopped, her breathing so ragged she could barely speak. “Legs.”

“Good girl,” he said before kissing her again. She watched him slide down her body, stopping periodically to kiss her over her clothes.

He sat back on his knees and slowly flipped her skirt up, exposing her light pink panties. Her face burned when she remembered they weren’t sexy at all. They had little bunnies on them, frilly lace lining the band with a little bow right in the middle. But with the feral look on his face, she didn’t think he cared.

His fingers gripped the inside of her thighs and he pushed her legs apart. The cool air hit her, and she bit her lip to keep her shudder under control.

“Pull your panties to the side,” he said. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out, not even a breath. “Do it, sweets.”

She hesitated before reaching down and hooking her fingers under the wet fabric, and tugged them to the side, exposing all of herself to him. He ran his thumb over the seam of her lips, pressing just hard enough to graze her swollen clit.

Her body jerked, and his eyes snapped to hers.

“Like that?” he asked, slowly circling her clit with his thumb again. She nodded, spreading her legs wider for him.

Slowly, he lowered himself fully between her legs, his broad shoulders shoving her legs apart more. She was obscenely spread for him, and a part of her was embarrassed, but a bigger part needed to come so badly she didn't care.

He spread her apart with his fingers before giving her a long, slow lick. Her back arched as she gasped. She'd never had anyone do this to her before and the feeling was unlike anything else she'd ever felt.

She gripped the blanket at her side in her shaky fist as he did it again, drawing out a small moan from her. Roughly, he sucked her clit into his mouth and rolled it between his lips.

“Let me hear you,” he said, the vibration of his voice shooting through her.

He stopped holding back and began eating her faster, harder, using his lips and teeth and tongue. She cried out, her shoulders lifting off the blankets as she shuddered. He hummed approvingly, and she rested her hand on the back of his head. His eyes lifted and met hers, and the sight of him between her legs, eyes on hers, mouth against her, was sinful.

“More,” she whimpered. He slid a finger inside her, and her hand tightened in his hair. Slowly, he pumped it in and out, teasing her. Her body shook as she barreled closer to her release.

He added a second finger, and curled them, lapping faster at her clit until her thighs began to shake. When he pressed his tongue flat against her, she exploded. She let out a long moan as her body convulsed and her thighs clamped around his head, but he didn't stop. He didn't stop feasting on her until she'd collapsed back to the blankets, breathless. Even then, it didn't seem like he wanted to stop.

He pressed gentle kisses to her inner thighs as he slid his fingers from her. She watched him sit back on his knees and

suck his fingers clean. She'd never seen someone do that, but God, did she want to see him do it again.

His cock strained against his jeans, but he didn't reach to undo them. Maybe he was waiting for her? She hesitantly reached her hand toward him, but he gently pushed it away before laying back beside her. He wrapped his arms tightly around her, holding her close.

"Not tonight," he said, kissing her temple. She snuggled into his chest, inhaling his scent until she felt herself begin to drift. He began to hum quietly and rocked her back and forth, soothing something in her soul she didn't even know was aching.

In that moment, she knew losing him would absolutely destroy her.

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chapter ten

A knock at the door drew his attention, and he set his phone down on the bedside table. Rhys swung his legs off the bed and strolled across the room, a little pep in his step after last night.

He hadn't planned on doing anything with Ana, but he didn't regret it. At all.

Pulling the door open, he rested his forearm on the frame and smiled at Vincent, who scowled back.

"What's up?"

"You almost ready?" Vincent asked, his voice irritated. Rhys' brows pushed together in confusion. "Today's our flight. We need to go." His stomach fell. How had he forgotten that today was when they were going home?

"I'm staying here for a few more days," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. Vincent's scowl deepened.

"What do you mean, you're staying here?" He folded his arms over his chest to *really* glare at him. "We're going on tour in a few weeks."

"I know," Rhys rushed out, then sighed. "I just need a couple more days with Ana."

"Ana," Vincent repeated. Rhys held his stare, silently daring him to say something. "Whatever. You'll be home this weekend? We have shit to go over."

"Yeah," he said, waving dismissively. "Absolutely." Vincent didn't look convinced, and honestly, neither was Rhys.

If he had it his way, he'd stay here until he could convince her to move back to New York with him. But he knew it was too soon. Despite the intense draw he felt toward her, he knew she'd never agree to it.

And he couldn't ask her to give up her store, could he?

Rhys jolted as Kody suddenly jumped beside Vincent, appearing out of nowhere. He slung his arm over Vincent's shoulders, oblivious to his scowl. Well, Rhys wasn't really sure if Kody really was oblivious to it or if he just chose to ignore it.

Probably chose to ignore it.

"Ready to get the fuck out of this place?" Kody asked, shaking Vincent slightly.

"He's staying," he grumbled, and Kody whipped his head to him.

"What?"

"For *Ana*." Rhys gritted his teeth at the way he said her name, like it was a joke.

"And? Is that a problem?" Rhys asked, folding his arms over his chest and standing at his full height. He was the tallest in the band, but Vincent was the most muscular. Being a drummer did that.

"Nope." Again, he really hated his tone. He wanted to push him, but he thought better of it and took a step back into his room.

"Whatever. I'll see you next week." He grabbed his door to shut it, but Kody slapped his hand against it.

"Next week? You're seriously staying." It wasn't a question. It was definitely an accusation.

"Yep," he said unapologetically. "Gonna spend the rest of the week with Ana."

"I didn't know you've spent any time with her," he said slowly. "Wasn't she the one who ran out after the show?"

"We went out last night."

Rhys hadn't told anyone about it, mostly because he didn't want anyone to say anything and it get out. It was a part of the reason he'd taken her to the field instead of a restaurant. They could be away from peering eyes, and away from anyone who would try to take their photo and post it online.

He didn't know Ana that well, but the little bit he did know about her told him she wouldn't appreciate having her picture plastered on every gossip magazine and website.

It's not that he didn't trust his friends, he did, but he also knew that Kody had a big mouth when he drank and he wasn't sure where the guys were going last night. He also didn't know how Tate would feel about him going out with one of Audrey's best friends. Not that he'd say anything, but Rhys would be able to see it in his face.

The shit that happened with them wasn't any of his business. He didn't even know what really happened, so he chose to stay out of it. Way, *way* out of it.

Kody and Vincent glanced at each other, exchanging a look that made Rhys bristle.

"What?" he demanded.

"It's just..." Kody let out a long breath. "You haven't gone out with anyone in years. And now you're jumping in head first with some girl you don't even know?" He shook his head. "It's not like you."

"I haven't had a reason to jump in with anyone," he countered. "And Ana is sweet. She's different."

"Is she?" Vincent challenged. Rhys opened his mouth to tell him to go fuck himself, that of course Ana was different, but he paused.

Was she different?

She had to be.

She hadn't once mentioned his fame, or money, or status. She hadn't seemed like she even cared that he was famous. She hadn't asked him about his job, which he felt was a breath

of fresh air. He spent so much time talking about himself, it was nice not having to answer someone's questions.

He just wanted normal, and Ana was normal. She was a bookstore owner, for fuck's sake. She didn't want her fifteen minutes in the limelight. She just wanted—he sighed. He didn't know what she wanted.

Was he looking further into this than she was?

“Give me at least another day,” he said. “I'll go talk to her when her store closes, and if things are weird, I'll catch the first flight home in the morning, okay? But if everything is fine, I'm staying for the rest of the week.”

The guys exchanged another look, and Rhys' hand tightened on the door.

“Whatever,” Vincent grumbled, shoving Kody's arm off and stalking down the long hallway back to his room. Kody stared at him for another moment, and Rhys lifted his brows expectantly.

“What?”

“Make sure she's really in it for *you* this time,” he said. “Last time—”

“I know,” he said, cutting him off. He didn't need a lecture about his poor track record with girlfriends. “Everything went really well last night.” He tried to block out the memories of the way she sounded, the way her mouth parted on a silent moan, the feel of her clenching around his fingers.

He cleared his throat.

“She's a good girl, man,” he said. Kody eyed him speculatively, but nodded and stepped back.

“Well, I hope I'll see you in a week and not tomorrow,” he said, knocking his fist against the wall.

“Me too.”



AFTER THEIR DATE, RHYS DROPPED HER OFF, AND SHE WENT straight to bed, still exhausted after that mind shattering orgasm he gave her.

But she could barely look herself in the eye when she woke up. She couldn't believe she'd let him go down on her. In public!

“So,” Riley said, resting her forearms on the counter. Ana didn't look at her. Instead, she busied herself with straightening books that were already straight. “What'd you do last night?” Ana's eyes snapped to hers and widened.

“Nothing,” she squeaked, then cleared her throat. “Absolutely nothing.” Riley was quiet, her brows pushed together as she watched her. “What?”

“You didn't do anything?” she asked, and Ana groaned.

“Did he tell you?” She folded her arms on the counter and dropped her forehead to them.

“Did who tell me what?”

Ana barely lifted her head to glare at her friend. Was she really going to make her say it?

“Rhys.” She winced on his name. “We kinda sorta had a date last night.” Riley's mouth fell open.

“What!” she screamed. “You had a date! And you didn't tell me? Oh my God. Tell me everything!” Ana groaned and dropped her forehead back to her arms.

“There's nothing to tell,” she said, her voice muffled.

“I take it it didn't go well then?” Her voice was hesitant, and Ana let out a long sigh.

It went well. *Really* well. Maybe too well. But she hadn't heard from him all day. It was nearly noon, and he still hadn't called, or texted, or come by the store.

"It was fine," Ana sighed. Had she done something wrong? Was that why he wasn't coming around?

"What did y'all do?" Riley asked, and Ana peeked up at her again. She took a long sip of her iced coffee, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Just looked at the stars," she said. Riley's brows shot up, but she didn't say anything.

"So last night was your goodbye? Or are you going to see him before he leaves?" She glanced at her phone. "Actually, he's probably already on his way to the airport." Ana blinked at her.

"What?"

"He's going back to New York today," Riley said cautiously. "He didn't tell you?"

No. He hadn't told her.

Why hadn't he told her?

Was it not as good for him as it had been for her? Did he wake up this morning regretting their night together?

He'd been so sweet, and she'd felt so safe with him, but knowing that he left without saying bye stung. It made her chest ache.

This was why she hadn't wanted anything to do with him. She should've known he wouldn't think about her or her feelings, that he'd do whatever he wanted and leave her as the last thing on his list of priorities.

Sighing, she pushed off the counter. Maybe tonight she'd have a giant bowl of pistachio ice cream and read one of her Daddy books. That always made her feel better.

"Come on, we have a lot of work to do," she said. The bag of books she'd promised Iris caught her eye, and she sighed again. The weight of everything hit her all at once. She was

spreading herself too thin, and she knew it, but she didn't know how to fix it. "Shoot. I need to take Iris these books."

"Go on," Riley said. "I'll hold the fort down."

She knew she could trust Riley, it's why she'd hired her in the first place, but leaving her alone in the store made her itchy with anxiety. She hated leaving in the middle of the day, but she worried if she waited until they closed, she'd miss Iris.

Rubbing her forehead, she flicked her eyes between Riley and the bag of books. It would take her ten minutes to run the books to the café. She bit her lip, glancing at Riley.

"You sure you'll be okay by yourself for a bit?" she asked. Riley waved a dismissive hand.

"No problem." She grabbed her iced coffee and sunk down onto one of the sofas.

There were five sofas around the store, all in different spots so people could relax while reading, or sometimes, some of the high schoolers would hang out around one and do their homework. She loved having a community driven space, and she loved that people felt comfortable enough to want to spend their free time here.

Apart from the sofas, there were armchairs everywhere as well as a few high top tables by the windows for better concentration while working. Plants hung from the rafters, as well as industrial-looking lights. She'd drilled holes into the brick walls to hang up shelves for more plants, books, and other decor, as well as posters for popular books.

If there was a Heaven on Earth, The Book Garden was it.

"I'll be quick," she promised, slinging the canvas bag on her shoulder. "If you need anything—"

"I won't," Riley said. "No one comes in before noon, anyway. Everything will be fine."

Ana took a deep breath.

She knew that. She knew she was being overbearing, and there was no reason for it. Riley had worked for her since she opened the store, so she knew the store as well as Ana did.

But giving up control was hard.

She walked the few minutes to the café, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in her stomach with every step. Had Rhys really left town without saying goodbye? She knew she shouldn't dwell on it, and knew that he had no reason or obligation to say bye, but it still hurt.

She'd stupidly thought there was something between them, especially when he'd rocked her gently until she dozed off, her head on his chest. The steady beat of his heart under her ear had been a welcomed and surprising comfort, and the moments before she'd finally given in to her exhaustion, she'd absently thought about their future, and how she could get used to him if that was how she'd go to sleep every night.

But knowing he was gone now made her feel like a fool. Maybe she'd looked too much into it. Maybe she was so starved for love and affection that she hadn't noticed any of the signs that he wasn't interested in her.

She was stupid to think that a famous, insanely hot rockstar would want anything to do with her after leaving Sawyer. She was probably a distraction for him while he was in town, and now that he was heading back to New York, he had no use for her anymore.

She didn't want to believe it, but she knew what she was worth to people, and it wasn't much.

chapter eleven

After taking the books to Iris, her day had been truly awful. It dragged on and on, and every smile felt more strained than the last. From being upset over Rhys, to exhausted from running the store, she barely made it two steps into her apartment above the shop before she felt her knees go weak.

She collapsed onto her well-loved sofa and threw her arm over her eyes, breathing deeply. Her apartment was similar to the store, with the same dark wood floors, brick walls, and overflowing books and plants.

It was sometimes hard to know where her workday ended.

Ice cream—she'd promised herself ice cream. But that meant getting up off the couch, changing clothes, getting a spoon, and finding the tub of ice cream at the back of her freezer, and that felt like too much work. So, she just laid there, her arm still over her eyes, her chest heavy with exhaustion.

The only good thing about being so busy all day was that she'd been able to ignore her sadness about Rhys leaving. She hadn't had to confront all of those emotions that boiled up to the surface when she'd walked to the café, but now that she was alone and things were quiet, that voice of doubt and self-hatred came back tenfold.

Books.

She needed to read something to drown out her negative thoughts.

Groaning, she pulled herself off the couch and shuffled to her room to find something comfy to wear for the night. She pulled open a drawer and searched through it for her not-so-cute-but-insanely-comfy PJs.

Was she a cliché? Upset over a guy so she was turning to ice cream and a romance novel to forget him?

She ignored that thought as she pulled on her clothes. A worn pink sweatshirt with a little bunny rabbit on the front, and a matching pair of pink shorts, also with bunnies on them. After throwing her hair into a messy bun and washing all the makeup from her face, she grabbed Buns and her eReader before heading to the kitchen.

With her stuffed toy held under her arm, she grabbed a spoon and her ice cream and made her way back to the couch. She dropped everything on the coffee table before hunting down her favorite pile of soft blankets.

After she was content with the insane amount of blankets around her, she clutched Buns in her arm, laid back against the arm of the couch, propped her eReader on her bent thighs, and dug into the ice cream.



HE PACED IN FRONT OF THE STAIRS, HIS STOMACH IN A TIGHT knot as he contemplated knocking on her door. He'd meant to come over earlier and ask her to dinner, but he'd gotten lost in writing a new song that he lost track of time.

Was it too late to ask her to dinner? Should he just return to his hotel room and come back tomorrow?

He scrubbed his hand over his mouth.

He knew he was trying to find an excuse not to talk to her. He'd been giving her space all day, thinking that she'd needed it after last night, but he was still shocked that he hadn't heard

from her at all. It was probably unfair of him to expect her to text him first, but he was hoping she'd do it. He was hoping she'd had a good enough time with him that she didn't need the time he was giving her and would make the next move. But when she didn't...

He stared up the stairs to her door. There were lights on, so he knew she was home—or at least hoped she was. Maybe she was the kind of person to leave lights on when she was out so she wouldn't have to come home to a dark place. Maybe, but unlikely.

She was up there, inside, doing *something*. Probably having dinner. Without him.

He hated that she was doing anything without him. He wanted to be there for everything she did, even the boring stuff like brushing her teeth or eating breakfast. He just wanted to be around her, no matter what.

And it was that thought that sent him up the steps. When he got to her door, he paused. What if she didn't have a good time last night, and that's why she hadn't reached out? Had he gone too far?

She didn't seem uncomfortable or like she regretted anything when he'd dropped her off last night, but he also left so quickly he wasn't sure if he would've even noticed the discomfort.

With a deep breath, he knocked on the door. His first few knocks were soft. Hesitant. He wasn't sure if he would be a welcomed guest when she opened the door, so braced himself for rejection and the door being shut in his face.

But when she didn't open the door at all, he knocked again, harder this time. He held his breath as he waited, straining to hear anything on the other side.

Footsteps, soft and unhurried, came closer and his heart jumped into his throat. He glanced at the stairs, contemplating just running down them and hiding, but he was a man—a famous man who played in front of thousands of people and

didn't get nervous. He wouldn't let some little girl with a too-tight hold over him make him run and hide.

Even if he wanted to.

The door slowly opened a crack, and he met Ana's eye as she peered up at him. Half of her face was hidden, but he still read her expression perfectly. Her eye widened, and her lips parted.

She was surprised to see him.

It was real shock on her face, and he let out a breathy laugh.

"Hey, sweets," he said, bracing his hand on the doorframe. She didn't say anything. She just stared at him, then looked down at herself and slammed the door.

He blinked.

So, that could've gone better.

"Oh my God. Oh my God." He heard her muttering to herself on the other side, and he smiled to himself.

Maybe she wasn't rejecting him. Maybe she really was freaking out. So he knocked again.

"Sweets?" He heard a small squeak, and he laughed again. "Please open the door."

Nothing.

He was going to count to ten before he knocked again. He couldn't go full Dom on her, even if he wanted to. He didn't want to terrify her or make it seem like he was some controlling, crazy asshole. So he kept it tight underwraps.

He'd gotten really good at hiding that part of himself. Being in the limelight made him second guess his preferences, mostly because he knew if it got out that he liked to dominate women, the media would have a field day with it. But he couldn't ignore it completely.

And right now, with her on the other side of the door not listening to him—it was making him grit his teeth and want to command her to open up.

“Ana,” he growled. “Open the door.”

Everything seemed to stop as he waited, his breath still held, and both of his hands now on the doorframe to hold himself back from barging into her home.

Slowly, it opened again. It was still a small crack, but he wanted to see her. All of her.

“More,” he said. She shook her head, keeping it open just enough for her to glare at him with her one eye. His brows bunched together. “Why not?”

“You—why are you here? I thought you were leaving today.” Her words were angry, but her tone—she sounded sad. Betrayed.

“I’m staying for another week,” he said. “Unless you decided you hate me, then I’ll leave tomorrow. But I wanted to be with you—” He cut himself off. He didn’t want to scare her away, but she needed to know how he felt. “I wanted to be with you until I had to get ready for tour.”

“You’re staying,” she repeated, and he nodded. “But why are you here? Now?” He stared at her exposed eye, trying to read her thoughts. “You didn’t come to the store today. And you didn’t call or text. I thought—”

“I still want you,” he blurted. “I still really fucking want you.” Her lips pressed into a line. “I was giving you time.”

“Time.” She narrowed her eye, and she looked so fucking cute like that, glowering up at him while hiding behind the comfort of her door, that he smiled. “Why?”

“I didn’t know if last night freaked you out,” he said.

“It didn’t.” Her lips folded between her teeth, like she hadn’t meant to say it.

“Have you had dinner yet?” he asked. He wanted to rip the door off its hinges so he could scoop her into his arms.

“I’m not hungry.” His head tilted to the side.

“What did you eat?” She shrugged, and put his hand on the door. “Open.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, and was shocked when she stepped back and opened the door all the way for him. He was expecting her to put up more of a fight. He didn't let her second guess herself as he rushed inside, closing the door behind him and leaning on it.

He scanned her little apartment. Everything was in one room—the kitchen led into the living room, and a small round dining table covered in papers and books sat between the two spaces. The couch was overflowing with blankets, and a pint of ice cream with the spoon still in it sat on the coffee table.

So, that was dinner.

“Let me change,” she muttered. “Make yourself at home.”

He finally took all of her in and noticed what she was wearing. She looked adorable in her little bunny shorts, and just the sight of her legs had him remembering his face between them, the taste of her, the sounds she made. His cock twitched, but he cleared his throat as he nodded.

“You don't have to change for me,” he said. “Stay comfy. You look cute.” Her face flushed a deep red as she shook her head.

“Give me a second,” she said, rushing past him. He unashamedly stared at her ass as she walked to her bedroom, uncaring if she caught him or not. He wanted her to know how attracted he was to her.

When she disappeared into her room, he looked around again. It was a cute little place, decorated similarly to her store downstairs. He roamed into her kitchen, but nothing caught his eye, so he made his way to the living room. He was going to sit on the loveseat, but an eReader on the other couch grabbed his attention.

He didn't know why he did it, why he even cared, but he grabbed it, curious to know what she was currently reading.

His brows shot into his hairline as he read.

He didn't know how long he stood in the middle of her living room, but when she finally came out of her room, he

hadn't heard her. Not until she stepped in front of him and gasped.

"What are you doing?" She reached for the eReader, but he held it above his head.

"What are you doing, reading something like this?" he asked, waving it around. "Who knew you were so naughty?"

"Rhys," she groaned. "Give it back." She held her hand out, but he didn't. Instead, he turned his attention back to the tablet.

"She calls him Daddy," he said. "And he calls her his baby girl." He glanced at her, finding her face crimson. "And she's sucking his cock right now, and he's loving it." She covered her face with her hands, quietly groaning. "Is this what you want, sweets? To be on your knees for Daddy?"

Her eyes snapped to his, and he saw the truth and desire swirling in them. He'd just been teasing her, but seeing her expression, the longing, he knew it was what she wanted.

Kody was a Daddy Dom, so he was aware of the lifestyle, but he'd never thought much of it for himself. He had a few other friends who were Daddy Doms too, and sometimes seeing them with their Little's made him curious. It always tugged at something in his chest, but he was always so busy he didn't think he'd be able to take care of a Little. But if Ana was, he'd figure out a way to make it work.

He thought about her bunny PJs, the little skirts, the innocent way she looked at life, and everything clicked.

"Are you a Little?" he asked seriously, handing her back her tablet.

"No," she said, but she didn't look at him. Her nose twitched—her tell if she was lying.

"Don't lie to me, sweets," he said, and she glanced up at him from under her lashes.

"How do you know what a Little is?" she asked, completely avoiding the question. He grinned at her as he picked up the pile of blankets and plopped them on the other

couch before sitting. He patted the spot beside him and she hesitantly sat.

“I’m a Dom,” he said, clearing his throat. “And I have a few friends who are into ageplay. A few who are Daddies.” She stared at him, her eyes giant.

“Are you really? But last night—” She cut herself off.

“I didn’t want to terrify you by being a control freak,” he laughed. She gave him a small smile, but he could tell she was uncomfortable. “So,” he prompted, “is that the first book like that you’ve read?” She bit her lip, and she was just so fucking adorable, he smiled.

“No,” she admitted. “I’ve been reading them for years.” His brow lifted.

“And you’re not interested in living that lifestyle? Only reading it?” he asked, and she shrugged, her eyes still on her lap.

“I doubt real life would be how it is in the books,” she mumbled. “Everything is better in books.” He didn’t disagree with her.

Of course, everything was better in books. Only the most perfect things happened in books. Even conflicts were perfect, because everyone involved in them were somehow perfectly equipped to take on that obstacle.

It wasn’t real life.

Real life was messy, and difficult, and people couldn’t read each other’s minds the way they seemed to in books. People fucked up, and said the wrong things, made the wrong decisions.

“Even if you’d find a less than perfect Daddy, you’re still not interested in it?” he asked. He must’ve sounded too eager because she looked at him—really looked at him. *Scrutinized* him.

“Why?” she asked. “Does it matter? You’re not a Daddy.”

“I could be,” he blurted. He hadn’t really meant to say it and hadn’t totally thought it through, but after the words came

out, he realized how right they felt. “I could be yours.”

Her mouth parted as she stared at him, probably as shocked as he was at the words. But he’d been around Kody when he played with his ex-Little, and he’d seen the guys at the club in the Little room, and he’d be lying if he said it wasn’t something he’d thought about more than once. He’d watched them and sometimes longed to have a Little girl of his own.

But playing with her, coddling and spoiling her? That was the easy part. It was the emotional stuff that fucking terrified him. He was a lot of things, but he wasn’t emotionally vulnerable.

Then he thought about last night and how he’d opened up to her about his father. While he hadn’t gone too into it, he’d still talked about him, which was more than he’d done with anyone in years, including his brothers. It had been easy to talk to her, to tell her about his strained relationship, about what that field meant to him.

Maybe, if anyone could bring out his emotional side, it was her.

“Would you want that?” he asked hesitantly, terrified to hear the answer. She chewed on her bottom lip, and he tried not to reach over and tug it free. He wanted to give her the time and space to decide.

For whatever reason, he felt ready to do this. He barely knew her, didn’t have a fucking clue how to be a Daddy, but he wanted to do this with her, be this for her.

“I don’t know,” she muttered. “I don’t even know if I’m even a Little.” Maybe she wasn’t. But he thought she was definitely a sub.

“So let’s try it out, see if it fits for us, and if it doesn’t, we can explore other dynamics.” He shrugged like it didn’t matter to him either way, but it did.

“That scares me,” she laughed, giving him a nervous look. He hadn’t realized she’d grabbed a stuffed bunny, but she held

it tightly in her lap, her fingers flicking the dangly ears back and forth.

“What does?”

“Trying that out,” she said softly. “With you.”

“You’re scared of me?” he rasped. She shook her head, still not looking at him.

“I just don’t want to disappoint you,” she whispered. “That’s what scares me. What if I’m not what you want? What if I’m not the right Little for you? Or what if I’m not one at all? Or what if I am but you hate being a Daddy? What if—”

“Hold on,” he said, sliding his hand onto her thigh. Finally, she looked at him. Tears swam in her eyes and he didn’t know why. “Come here, baby.” He held his arm out, wanting to snuggle her close.

Her chin trembled, and it fucking gutted him. He didn’t understand why she was crying, or why she was upset, but he scooted closer, his arm still outstretched along the back of the couch as an open invitation.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, wiping a tear away with his thumb.

“I just—I haven’t been with anyone in a long time, and—and I like you and don’t want to lose you,” she said. She turned her attention back to the stuffed bunny, but he gently gripped her chin and forced her to look back at him.

“You’re not going to lose me,” he said, stroking his thumb along her chin. “Even if you realize you’re not a Little or a sub, it’ll be okay. I just want you, Ana. Your submission would be a gift, but I’d never force you to do something you didn’t want to. And I’d never leave you or be upset or disappointed that you weren’t into something I was.”

She tucked her legs under herself as she cuddled into the crook of his arm. He rested it around her shoulders, holding her closer. He couldn’t ignore how fucking perfect it felt to have her in his arms, comforting her, holding her.

“How will it work with you on tour? And living in New York?” she asked, and hope filled him. Was this her saying yes?

“We’ll figure it out,” he said, resting his cheek on the top of her head. She relaxed into him, and he felt like that was a win in itself. They sat in silence for a few moments, their breathing evening out to match each other’s.

“You won’t think it’s weird that I might be...” She trailed off, but he kept quiet, wanting her to say it. He didn’t want to put words in her mouth, and if this really was something she wanted to do, he felt like she needed to get comfortable around it. And no better time than the present. “A Little?”

“Of course not,” he murmured against her hair. Her lips twisted to the side, and he squeezed her. “Will you think it’s weird that I’m your daddy?” He waited with bated breath when she didn’t immediately answer.

“I don’t want diapers or anything like that,” she said, and he nodded.

“We’ll go over limits later,” he said, pulling away enough to look at her face. She finally looked up at him.

“No, I don’t think you’re weird,” she whispered.

“Well, I didn’t ask if you thought *I’m* weird. I asked if you thought me being your daddy is weird,” he teased, and she rolled her eyes. He dropped his hand to her side, digging his fingers in as he tickled her. She squealed and nearly jumped into his lap. “Is that a yes then? You want to try this?”

“Yes,” she said, biting her lip. “But if you hate it—”

“I won’t.”

“But if you do—”

“I won’t,” he said again. “I won’t hate it.”

“But—”

“Anastasia,” he said, and her mouth clamped shut. “I promise you I will not hate it.” She reluctantly nodded, and he squeezed her closer to him. He flicked his eyes between hers

as he tucked her dark hair behind her ear. “Will you say it?” His voice was a near whisper.

“What?” she asked, shifting closer to him. He didn’t know if she was consciously doing it or if she felt the same magnetic pull he felt for her.

“Daddy,” he murmured. “Will you call me—” He felt foolish asking her, but he wanted to hear it. Her face flushed again, and she shyly looked away. “Only if you want to.”

“Daddy,” she breathed, and a small smile tugged at her lips.

He felt something click into place in his chest at the title. It felt...good. It felt right.

She bounced her stuffed bunny on her leg, her eyes trained on it. Slowly, he reached out and flicked its ear.

“What’s his name?” he asked.

“Buns.” She rested her head on his chest and he nearly melted. “I’ve had *her* since I was a kid.” That explained why it looked so worn.

“That’s a cute name, sweets.” He kissed the top of her head, and she sighed, nestling closer to him.

Fuck. She did things to his heart.

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chapter twelve

Ana stared at Buns, her mind still reeling. It wasn't that she didn't want to be with Rhys, or that she didn't want a Daddy—him as her Daddy, specifically—but it all happened so fast. He'd come in and flipped everything upside down. It was a whirlwind and she was still trying to get her feet under her.

She couldn't deny how nice it felt to be snuggled against him, though. Or how good he smelled. How comfy he was.

“So, dinner,” Rhys said, tightening his arm slightly.

“Not hungry,” she mumbled. He was silent for a moment, then he cleared his throat.

“Okay, this is the first Daddy test, isn't it?” he asked, and she tipped her head back to look at him, her brows furrowed in confusion. “You're bratting me, right?” She gasped.

“I'm not a brat,” she said, and he snorted.

“Whatever you say, baby girl.”

She dipped her head to hide her smile. Her face flushed at the words, and her stomach did a stupid flip. God, how could he do that?

He leaned forward and tapped the almost empty ice cream container. “This isn't a meal,” he said, turning to look at her, his brow impressively arched. She almost asked him if he could show her how to do it.

“But it filled me up so I'm not hungry,” she said, shrugging. “Plus, I have ice cream for dinner all the time.”

“Sweets,” he groaned, dramatically slumping back on the couch. “You’re killing me here.” She laughed as she turned toward him, resting her hands on his leg.

“Why?”

“Here I thought you were this good little girl, and now you’re telling me you have ice cream for dinner?” He shook his head, his eyes sparkling with humor. “That’s not what good girls do, is it?” She shrugged.

“I think it is,” she grinned. “I think good Daddies have ice cream for dinner, too.”

“Do they?” He tapped his finger on his lips, watching her.

“Yep.” She gave him a hard nod. “I’m the expert. I’ve read at least a million books about Daddies and they all have ice cream for dinner.” He laughed and shook his head.

“I guess I’ll need to start reading these books, huh? So I can learn how to be the perfect Daddy.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, sliding closer to him. “Just listen to me. I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

“Oh, I have no doubt.” He kissed her temple before standing and holding his hand out. She stared at it, then looked up at him. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“To get some food,” he said, and she huffed out a breath. “*Ana.*” Goosebumps rippled over her skin at his tone. His brow rose again, and she tilted her head to the side. Seriously, how could he do that with his eyebrow? “What are you doing?”

“Trying to lift my eyebrow like you just did,” she said. He blinked at her.

“This was not how I saw this going,” he muttered. “I’ll show you how to do it at the diner.”

“But I don’t like the diner,” she mumbled, but slid her hand into his and let him pull her to her feet.

“Do they have anything gluten-free?” he asked, resting his hand on her back.

“Jackie started getting gluten-free bread for me,” she said.

“And you don’t like the diner?” He directed her to her bedroom so she could find her shoes. “Even after she went out of her way for you?”

Ana’s shoulders slumped as she made her way across her tiny bedroom to her closet. She slid on her pink sneakers and decided to slip her bunny sweatshirt over her plain white t-shirt. She changed into a pair of black leggings and socks earlier, which weren’t as cute or comfy as her bunny pajamas.

“I love the diner,” she admitted, turning toward him. “Just not at the moment because I’m not hungry.” She put Buns down carefully in the center of her bed before moving back to Rhys’ side.

“I like your room,” he said, looking around. She looked with him.

It was a lot of pink.

It was the only space she had that she felt could be totally her. There were books, but not as many as there were in the other rooms. Stacks of blankets sat in a woven basket under the window, her white linen curtains hanging around them. Her bedspread was pink, and her pillows were white lined with frilly pink lace.

She’d never been able to have her room the way she wanted when she was growing up since they moved so often, and when she was with Josh, he hadn’t even liked her to wear the clothes she liked. He said she looked too girly, too childish, so she definitely didn’t try to decorate like this.

“Thanks,” she whispered. “Me too.”

It was just a room, but it still made her feel emotional when she took the time to really take it all in.

When she was with Josh, she hadn’t thought she’d ever get out. She never thought she’d have this life, one full of friends, and happiness, and so much color it hurt her eyes sometimes.

Even though the store could be hectic and stressful, and her friends could drive her insane sometimes, she wouldn't trade it for the world.



SHE HAD NEVER FELT AS SELF CONSCIOUS AS SHE DID IN THIS moment, sitting with Rhys in public. Everyone stared at them. They were whispering and taking discreet photos of him. People gasped when they first saw them enter, a few teenage girls asked for selfies.

Ana stood awkwardly to the side, letting Rhys do his rockstar thing. It all seemed so effortless for him. He smiled easily, his arms around his fans as they took a photo. And the way he listened to them. He seemed genuinely excited about what they were saying, like he was hanging on their every word.

She hadn't expected anyone to have this reaction, and if she had, she would've changed into a nicer outfit and actually done something with her hair and makeup. She had just expected a quiet dinner at the diner like she'd had a million times with her friends.

But she should've known.

She probably embarrassed him dressed like this. He probably only wanted her Little side to come out when they were alone, behind closed doors. Never in public. Never where anyone could judge him for it.

"You okay, sweets?" He looked at her over his menu, and she forced herself to stop sinking into the booth. Giving him a bright smile, she nodded.

"Great."

"Sorry about that," he said, huffing out a laugh. He set the menu down and rested his forearms on the table, leaning

closer. “I should’ve warned you something like that could happen. I know it’s a lot.”

“It’s okay,” she said, waving dismissively. He tilted his head to the side, watching her. She turned her attention back to the menu, pretending to scan it. If Jackie, or her daughter, Bree, were working tonight, they’d take one look at her and already know her order.

“You handled it really well,” he said, and she reluctantly tore her eyes away from the pictures she was looking at.

“You did too.” He flashed her a grin, one she could tell wasn’t real, and sank back in his seat.

“It comes with the job.” He shrugged. “You get used to it after a while, but it can still get overwhelming.” She twisted her lips to the side.

“Does it happen a lot?”

“Not so much in New York,” he said, sighing softly. “I think everyone is just so worried about themselves they don’t notice or care when a celebrity is around them, you know?”

“But when you’re on the road—” She trailed off, leaving her question open-ended.

“We get noticed more,” he finished. “Don’t get me wrong, I love meeting our fans. Talking with them and hearing how much our music has changed their lives has always been my favorite part. Not because my ego is so big I need it constantly stroked, but because I never thought we’d get here. I never thought my words could impact someone so much, but when you see someone crying because a song touched them so deeply,” he shrugged, “it’s an amazing feeling. I know it’s not important work, but I feel like I’m helping people.”

She softened at his words. “It’s important,” she said, reaching her hand toward his. She stopped before she touched him and pulled it back, unsure if he wanted to be touched in public. “The world has always survived off the artists and creatives. Without you, society wouldn’t progress.”

“I don’t know about that,” he laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. Redness crept up his neck, and she couldn’t hold

back her smile at the sight. “But it’s rewarding work.”

Before they could say anything else, Bree came to their table. She tried not to gawk at Rhys as she took their order.

“Hi,” she said, her voice shaky. “I’m Bree, and I can take your order.” She looked to Ana, and she relaxed enough to take a deep breath.

“Is Jackie here?” Rhys asked, and Bree slowly slid her eyes back to him.

“No,” she said, wincing. “I can call her if you want—”

“Oh, no,” he laughed. “I was just wondering if she was around.” He squinted at Bree, searching her face. “Are you related?”

“I’m her daughter,” she said, laughing nervously. His brows rose.

“I didn’t know she got married.” He smiled broadly. “Good for her. I’m happy she’s finally happy.” Bree’s smile faltered.

“She never got married,” she winced. His smile slowly fell, and he glanced at Ana, giving her a *please help me* look.

“The place is really busy tonight,” Ana blurted, and Rhys slumped back in the booth. It wasn’t that busy, but for a Monday night it was. Bree blinked as she turned back toward Ana. She glanced over her shoulder at the mostly empty diner and shrugged.

“I guess,” she said. “Anyway, your regular?” She looked at Ana, and Ana nodded as she closed her menu. With a deep breath, Bree turned her attention back to Rhys. “And you?”

“Whatever she’s having.” He grabbed Ana’s menu and handed them both to Bree. She gave them a tight smile as she took them and hurried back toward the kitchen.

“You don’t even know what I’m having,” Ana said, and he shrugged.

“I’m sure you have good taste.” He tapped his fingers against the table as he looked around. “We used to come here

every day after school and Jackie would make us these giant sandwiches. I've never found a place that can make better food than she can."

He was right. When Ana first moved to Sawyer and came to the diner for the first time, Jackie found out about her disease and immediately started researching gluten-free things she could add to the menu for her. Ana had begged her not to go through so much trouble, but Jackie seemed to love the challenge. It was something new, she'd said. And Ana couldn't complain too much, because she was the guinea pig for everything Jackie tried making. Some were great, some were...not so great.

"Ana?" She blinked as she turned her attention back to Rhys, not even noticing she'd zoned out.

"Sorry," she breathed, feeling embarrassed heat rush into her cheeks. He chuckled as he leaned toward her.

"I asked if you've ever been to New York City," he said. "Would you want to come visit me?" His eyes searched hers, and her breath caught.

He was already talking about her going to visit him? That was a big step, wasn't it?

But she guessed it wasn't much bigger than agreeing to him being her Daddy.

"I've been a few times," she said, twisting her hands in her lap. She'd gone once with her mom when she was a kid. She couldn't remember much of the trip, but she remembered it being a fun day. She went again with Josh.

She tried to shut out those memories.

It had been a sleazy part of Brooklyn, and she'd hated every second. Josh said he needed to talk to someone, to some guy he was buying drugs off of, and when she said she wanted nothing to do with it, he'd beat her. He'd been so pissed she didn't follow along with what he wanted, that she'd tried to *back talk* him.

She never made that mistake again.

A shudder ran through her at the memory. She'd stayed with him until her bruises healed so her mother wouldn't see them. At the time, her mother thought they were just young and in love. She had no idea what he was really doing to her.

"Ana," Rhys said again, and her eyes snapped up. She hadn't realized she'd been sinking further into her booth, trying to disappear. "Where'd you just go?"

"Nowhere," she breathed. Her heart was racing, and she felt sweat coating her skin.

The diner was suddenly too bright and too loud. The smells were too much for her to handle. Every one of her senses felt overwhelmed. Her chest tightened, and she tried to take a breath, but she couldn't. When no air filled her lungs, real panic set in.

Rhys must've noticed her spiral because he shot out of the booth, reaching for her. She let him take her trembling hands in his and lead her toward the door. He spoke to someone, but his voice was muffled in her whirling ears. She couldn't focus on anything but trying to breathe through the panic.

The cool night air assaulted her as they stepped outside. It was quieter, and she couldn't feel anyone staring at her. But hands were on her. Touching her.

She tried to take a step back, no longer seeing Rhys, but Josh, seeing his glazed dark eyes, his pale skin gaunt as he sneered down at her. It was the same look he always had before things got really bad.

"Ana."

She stepped away and tripped over something that nearly sent her tumbling to the ground. She whimpered as the hands that tightened around hers. She'd long since learned not to cry. It only made things worse.

The hands moved to her arms, gripping her, and she tried to shove them away, but she was too weak.

"Sweets. Hey, look at me."

Sweets.

Josh never called her that. She clung to that word, letting it ground her in this moment, letting it connect her to Rhys. His hand found hers and gently squeezed, and when she blinked, she was outside the diner, her eyes boring into his.

“I’m sorry,” she immediately said, trying to jerk her body back. He kept a tight hold on her, not letting her go.

“Don’t apologize,” he murmured. He crouched slightly to search her eyes. It was the first time she’d ever seen him this serious. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” The word just came out. She was so used to saying it, downplaying her actual feelings to not bother anyone, that it was an automatic response. She expected him to move away, to drop her arms and forget this had ever happened. But when he stayed crouched, his eyes still on hers, she felt another shudder work through her.

He glanced back at the diner, and guilt hit her. He must be starving.

“You can go back,” she said softly. “I’ll just walk home.” He whipped his head back to her, his brows raised and an expression on his face that told her she definitely *wasn’t* walking anywhere.

“I asked if they could pack our food to-go. Then I’m taking you home, and taking care of you.” He gave her a stern look, and she lowered her eyes.

“I’m fine,” she whispered. His fingers gripped her chin and he tilted her head back, forcing her to look at him.

“You’re not, but that’s okay.” Slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her gently. “I’ve got you.”

chapter thirteen

Rhys stared down at Ana as she slept. Her thumb was tucked in her mouth, her full lips parted around it. She looked so sweet and peaceful in that moment, and it equally killed and enraged him that she'd been so fucking anxious earlier.

They hadn't been able to eat when they got back to her place. He was still so fucking worried about her. He'd never seen anyone so pale before. She was physically with him, but mentally, she was somewhere far away. He didn't know what triggered it, or how to stop it, and it made him feel so fucking helpless.

Barely a night in and he was already fucking this whole Daddy thing up big time.

Softly, he stroked her hair from her face, smiling to himself at the way she nestled deeper into her pillow. She sighed and hugged Buns closer to her chest, her lips wrapping tighter around her thumb.

His heart squeezed. She looked so soft and young while she slept. He couldn't imagine what she'd been through that made her react like she had tonight.

Her brows furrowed together, and her eyes moved back and forth under her lids. The room was dark, but she had a night light plugged into the wall so he could still see her face.

He'd decided he needed to stay with her. He wouldn't be able to sleep, or eat, or fucking think when he was so worried about her. She was reluctant, but was too tired to fight him on

it. When he went to tuck her into bed, she gave him a look like a wounded animal and he immediately backed off.

She already didn't trust him to be her Daddy. And why would she? She didn't know him. He thought he knew her, but he didn't, not really. He knew he liked her and never wanted to live a life without her in it, but did she feel the same?

Sighing, he scrubbed his hand over his face before sliding out of bed. He hesitated before leaning over and brushing a light kiss over her forehead, then made his way out to the living room where his sandwich, now probably soggy, sat on the dining table.

He pulled his phone from his pocket as he sank onto the chair and unwrapped his food. Mindlessly, he ate as he scrolled through his social media. He hated using it, but his manager, Jensen, made sure he stayed on top of it.

Fuck, *Jensen*.

Rhys rubbed his forehead. He hadn't told him he was staying in Sawyer longer. He hadn't even thought about it, truthfully. All he'd been focused on was spending more time with Ana, not what his manager might or might not think.

The guy could be a world class prick, but he was good at his job.

His attention caught on a post someone tagged him in, and he opened it. He didn't do it often, look at what people wrote about him, but something about this one told him to look.

As soon as the article opened, he wished he would've just ignored it.

At best, The Butterfly Effect was mediocre, and at worst... well, let's just say the CIA could use their music as a torture method—a successful one. Rhys Turner, the lead singer, sounded like a dying cat—no, that's an insult to dying cats.

He set his phone down, the sandwich sitting like a brick in his stomach. Who said that? *Why* would they say that? It wasn't true. He'd taken so many fucking singing lessons in his life he knew he sounded great, but beyond that, it was just fucking mean.

Tate McCoy was nothing more than nails on a chalkboard, the only sound emitting from his throat raw screaming. It didn't take talent. It wasn't music.

*Don't waste your time with *The Butterfly Effect*. Your ears will bleed and you'll have no one to blame but yourself—well, and Rhys Turner and his band.*

He slammed his phone screen-side down as he huffed out a breath.

Such bullshit.

It *did* take talent and practice to scream the way Tate did. Sure, rock wasn't for everyone, and since they'd begun dipping their toes into metal, they'd had even more scrutiny, but to say Tate wasn't talented?

This lousy reporter could say whatever the fuck she wanted about him, but Tate? That was where he drew the fucking line.

Rhys was a lot of things, but protective of those he loved was at the top of his list. He'd been in more fights than he could count when it came to protecting his friends—when it came to protecting anyone he thought needed it.. He'd fought off creepy fake Doms at the club when they tried to scene with a sub without negotiating first. And he'd fought off other men when they tried touching whoever he was dating. He'd fought crazy fans away from his friends, and he'd fought men who'd tried to fight them, too.

He wasn't a violent man. Generally, he thought of himself as pretty laid back.

But if someone he loved was threatened? He couldn't be held responsible for what he'd do to protect them.

Sighing, he looked at the phone again, his stomach twisting tighter as he skimmed the rest of the article. Luckily, it looked like it was published on a small, no-name website.

He doubted anyone actually read it.



“WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN YOU’RE NOT COMING HOME?” Jensen shouted into the phone. Rhys winced, pulling it slightly away from his ear. “Your tour starts next fucking week, Rhys!”

“I know,” he said as he leaned against the brick wall behind The Book Garden. “I’ll be home before we leave. It’ll be fine.”

“Fine,” Jensen repeated, scoffing. “Fine?”

“Yeah, fine,” Rhys said. “I’ll be totally ready for the road ___”

“We have so much to do,” Jensen breathed, cutting him off. Rhys felt a little guilty about springing this on him last second. But it wasn’t his fault he met a cute Little girl and fell head over heels for her.

“What can I do from here?” Rhys asked. “Lola and the guys have our outfits planned and ready. You’re getting the last second shit done with the venues. What do you need me for?”

He could picture Jensen pacing his high rise office, his black hair standing up as he raked his fingers through it. Jensen always said the guys took ten years off his life, which was probably closer to fifteen with Rhys’ absence.

“I don’t fucking know,” Jensen groaned. Rhys smiled to himself.

“It’ll be okay, man,” he said, and Jensen let out a sound that sounded like a growl. “Hey, I meant to ask you earlier, but have you seen the article some journalist from The Note wrote about us?”

He hadn’t been able to get the words out of his head since he read them. He told himself he couldn’t sleep because he

was uncomfortable on the couch, but he knew the truth. That fucking article had gotten to him.

“Yes,” Jensen sighed. “I hoped you hadn’t seen it.”

“Have the guys?”

“Not that I know of,” he said, and Rhys let out a relieved breath. He knew Vincent would get pissed beyond belief, and Tate would get too in his head about it. Kody would totally retreat, and Rhys would try to be the glue that held everyone together.

It would be a fucking disaster before a tour like this.

“You’ll be home before Monday?” Jensen asked.

“Yes,” Rhys said. There was a beat of silence, then Jensen cleared his throat.

“Is she coming with you?”

Rhys stared down the alley as if he was expecting Ana to round the corner, a shy smile on her pretty face as she headed for him. But she didn’t, and he sighed.

“Probably not,” he said. The words felt like a stab in the chest. He wanted her to come. He wanted to finish a show every night and come back to his hotel room with her, then fuck her until all his pent up energy was spent.

He wanted to do it again and again, for the next six weeks.

He knew she had commitments and she couldn’t just up and leave the store. But maybe if he asked her now, she’d have time to get her affairs in order before leaving with him.

Hope filled him as he pushed off the wall.

“Maybe,” he said, and Jensen huffed out a breath.

“Which is it?”

He thought for a moment. Would she want to go on tour with him? Would it be too much for her to be surrounded by the guys every day? And touring was hard on him, how would it affect her?

He'd rub her back and make sure she felt safe and cared for every day she was with him. Maybe that would help her anxiety. If he could promise that he'd take care of her, maybe she would agree to it.

"She'll be there," he finally said. They said their goodbyes, and Rhys headed back to the front, ready to ask Ana right then if she wanted to go with him. His footsteps slowed as he rounded the corner, nearly running straight into Riley.

"Oh my God, what are you doing here?" she asked.

"What are you doing here?" he countered, and she rolled her eyes as she pulled the door open.

"I work here, dummy, did you forget?" He held the door as she walked inside, him following behind her.

"You're a little late, aren't you?" She glared at him over her shoulder before tossing her purse on the counter and slumping onto a couch, an iced coffee in hand. She slung her long blonde hair over her shoulder before taking a long sip.

"I get here when I get here," she said, shrugging. Ana wasn't there, and panic shot through him as he scanned the small store for her. "In her office in the back." He stepped forward, but her words stopped him. "You better not break her heart, Rhys."

He turned toward her, his jaw tense as he glared down at her. She stared right back, not backing down even a little bit. He knew she wouldn't, so he didn't know why her defiance annoyed him so much.

"I'm not going to hurt her, Rye," he said. "You know I wouldn't."

"Not intentionally, maybe," she said before sipping her drink. "But she hasn't given a man the time of day in years. Fucking *years*, Rhys." He glanced over his shoulder toward the back where Ana's office was before sinking onto the couch beside Riley.

"Why?" he asked quietly. "What's her story?"

“She hasn’t told you?” He shook his head, and she sighed, glancing at the direction Ana would come from any moment. “I can’t tell you everything, but her ex was an abusive piece of shit. He really did a number on her, and she has a hard time trusting people, especially men.”

“She’s friends with Felix,” he said, and she shook her head.

“She was drunk and Felix brought her home,” she explained. “It still took him a year to win her over. She’d told him some shit, but I think she just needed to get it out, you know?” He twisted his lips to the side as he nodded. “She’s a totally different person than she was when we first met. I don’t want to see her timid and afraid of her own shadow again.” He opened his mouth, but she continued. “All I’m saying is to make sure you really want her, baggage and all, before getting in too deep.”

“I’m already in deep, Rye,” he said softly. He glanced toward the space he was expecting Ana to be. “Her anxiety—”

“Is not as bad as it was when she first moved here,” Riley finished for him. He ran his hand over his face. How was that possible? She was so skittish and anxious about everything. *This was her better?*

A fucked up part of him felt no small amount of pride that she’d trusted him enough to not only go on a date with him, but agree to him being her Daddy. Not that he’d been all that fucking good so far.

But he’d figure it out.

“How do I help her?” he whispered. Riley took another sip of her drink before leaning toward him.

“Be consistent in her life. Don’t come and go like you’ve been known to do.” She gave him a pointed look.

“It’s different with her,” he said. “I want to ask her to come on tour with me.” She shook her head as he spoke.

“She’ll say no.” She leaned back, draping one leg over the other. “Getting her to leave this place is impossible.”

All of his earlier hope shattered. Maybe he'd get lucky, and she'd say yes. Or maybe she'd tell him she was second guessing everything, and she didn't want to be with him at all.

She had been distant this morning. Was this her way of trying to lessen the blow when she told him she'd made a mistake?

Dread twisted his gut.

Did she see him as a mistake? Had he pushed her too far too soon?

He sighed and rubbed his hands down his thighs, the denim rough under his hands. "I'm going to talk to her," he said as he stood. He didn't move, though. He couldn't.

Had he fucked everything up already?

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chapter fourteen

Ana didn't know why she felt so off. It always took a few days to get back to normal after a panic attack like the one she'd had last night. But she felt different—things felt different.

It was nice not having to worry about putting herself to bed. Rhys did that for her. He'd rubbed her back until she drifted off. At first, she'd been hesitant. It was too soon for him to stay the night, wasn't it? And she was sure he'd try to sleep with her, or at least try to have her return the favor from the other night. But he didn't.

He just laid beside her, gently rubbing her back and humming softly. When she woke and he wasn't there, a tiny bit of panic shot through her, but then she heard his deep, rumbling voice as he sang to himself. She'd just listened for a few minutes, smiling to herself as she stared up at the ceiling.

It sounded like he was working on a song because he kept repeating the same variation of lyrics. When she finally got up, he stopped and she didn't have the heart to ask him to keep going. She loved listening to him sing, especially when it was in moments he thought no one was listening.

There was no show boasting, it was just his raw voice and his music, and she loved it.

A knock pulled her from her thoughts, and she turned toward her office door. Rhys leaned against it, his arms crossed as he watched her, a soft smile on his face.

"You almost ready?" he asked. She glanced back at the stack of books on her desk, then back at him. "I can help." He

stepped forward, but she shook her head.

“It’s fine.” She got to her feet, grabbing her purse slung on the back of her chair, and smiled up at him. He bent and gently kissed her. Her eyes widened.

She guessed they were technically together, but his casual touches and kisses were going to take a while to get used to.

“I was thinking about something,” he said, resting his hand on her waist.

“About?” Her voice was breathless, and he let out a soft chuckle, his hand tightening.

“We could have Daddy/Little Ana time tonight,” he said, watching her carefully. Her stomach twisted with anxiety.

“I don’t have anything.”

“We could go to the store and get you everything you want.” She just stared at him, unable to say anything. Finally, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Sorry.” She’d never heard him apologize, and she wasn’t sure why he was now.

He dropped his hand back to his side and stepped away from her. Had she already ruined everything? Had he come to his senses and realized she’d be the worst girlfriend and even worse Little?

She lurched for his hand, grabbing it with both of hers. She didn’t want him to give up on her, even though somewhere in her heart she knew he should. She knew he should just find a real Little, someone who could easily give him everything he wanted. She couldn’t do that. He wanted to be a Daddy, and she knew he’d be a good one, but she wouldn’t be a good Little.

But she wanted to be selfish and hold onto him. Just for a bit longer.

“Can we talk?” he asked. Her throat tightened, and she forced herself to blink back the tears. She couldn’t speak, so she nodded, and let go of his hand.

He looked around, running his hand through his hair. An emerald couch sat against the back wall in her office, and he made his way to it, sinking into the deep cushions. She hesitated before sitting beside him.

She didn't want to have this talk. She'd only had him for a few days, and she was already losing him. That shouldn't be surprising, but it still hurt. Josh had been right. He'd said no one would put up with her, and he was right.

"What's wrong, sweets?" Rhys scooted closer to her, wrapping his arm around her and resting his hand on her hip. She hadn't realized she'd started crying. He gently wiped a tear from her cheek, and she rested her head on his shoulder.

"I didn't mean to mess up already," she whispered. He kissed the top of her head and held her close. His steady presence calmed her, but she still felt anxious about the conversation they were about to have.

"You didn't mess anything up, baby," he said against her hair. "I think I did." She squeezed her eyes shut, anticipating the next words. "I think I pushed you too hard too soon, and I'm sorry."

Those were not the words she'd been expecting.

She pulled back to look at him, and he cupped her face with both of his hands, wiping her cheeks with his thumbs. Slowly, he kissed her again, as if he couldn't help himself. She let herself fall into the kiss, savoring him.

Finally, he pulled away and leaned against the back of the chair, letting out a long, ragged breath.

"You didn't push me," she said, remembering what he'd said. "I wanted this, too." He tilted his head to the side, his eyes flicking between hers. He scooted back more and patted his thigh.

"Come here."

Her eyes widened. "What?" Was he about to spank her for something? Mentally, she went through everything she'd done and she couldn't think of one thing that warranted a spanking. Not that they'd even talked about it, but she'd read enough

books to know when a Daddy patted his lap, that usually meant a spanking.

“Sit on my lap, sweets,” he said, the corner of his mouth tucking up, as if he’d read her thoughts. “One knee here,” he patted the spot beside him, “the other here.”

He wanted her to straddle him. Oh, God.

She shifted onto her knees, and hesitated. Her eyes lifted to his, and he patted his thigh again. With a deep breath, she slid her leg over his, surprised at how wide her legs were forced apart.

He grinned up at her as he rested his hands on her soft hips, his fingers gently digging in. She rested her hands on his stomach, trying to ignore how hard his abs were.

“I like this,” he said. “I think this is how we need to talk from now on. No matter what it’s about, you sit on Daddy’s lap like this.” She dropped her eyes as a deep blush crept up her chest into her face. “You’re so fucking cute.” The words were barely audible, and she sucked on her bottom lip. “Stop distracting me.” He squeezed her, and she huffed out a laugh before lifting her eyes back to his.

She was comfortable like this, so maybe he was on to something. She liked how close they were, how small and safe she felt.

“Talk,” he breathed. “We need to talk.”

“Okay,” she said warily. His mouth tucked up, and his eyes softened. It took her a second to realize why he was looking at her like that. Her voice had sounded higher pitched, smaller, sweeter.

She’d never fully slipped into Little space before, so she didn’t know what to expect. Was this it?

“Did I push you too much?” he asked, softly tucking her hair behind her ear. She shook her head, letting the piece fall back in her face, and he huffed out a laugh. “So, you still want me to be your Daddy?” She nodded. “Words, baby.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “If you do.”

“I do.” His arms wrapped around her waist and he gently tugged her closer. “But this isn’t about me right now. I need to know you really want to be in this. With me.” She rested her head on his shoulder as he rubbed his hand up and down her back. His shirt was so soft against her cheek. “Even if you don’t want to be my Little girl, I’m not going anywhere, Ana. Not until you tell me to. But even then, I don’t know if I could really leave you.”

She turned her head and nestled deeper into the crook of his neck, her hands bunching his shirt over his stomach. He smelled so good, so clean and whatever cologne he was wearing made her head swim in the best way. She inhaled him deeper, letting him ground her.

She was anxious as hell, but if he was able to calm her mind with just a little bit of cuddling, what would happen if she gave herself fully to him? But she couldn’t, not until she’d talked to Audrey. If she didn’t want her with Rhys...she didn’t know what she’d do.

Audrey was still friends with Riley, and she was Rhys’ cousin. Maybe she’d take it easy on her if Ana told her how much he meant to her. Audrey wasn’t a monster, she was probably too nice for her own good, and somewhere deep down Ana knew Audrey would put her feelings aside for her. But could Ana do that to her? See him knowing her friend was hurting, regardless of what she said?

With a deep breath, she pulled away to look at him. His eyes were guarded for the first time, and it was like a stab to the heart. She stared down at her hands, still twisted in his shirt.

“I need to talk to Audrey,” she said quietly. There was a long pause, then he shifted his hips as he cleared his throat.

“Okay,” he said, drawing the word out. “Why?” She chewed on her lip.

Surely he knew about Tate and Audrey. Surely he knew what Tate had done, and how much he’d wrecked Audrey.

“Everything with Tate,” she mumbled. “I don’t want to hurt her.” He tilted his head to the side, looking confused.

“What happened with Tate?”

She blinked at him.

Of all the things she’d expected him to do, playing dumb wasn’t it.

“He cheated on her,” she said. “He totally broke her heart.” His head jerked back as if she’d hit him.

“He didn’t cheat on her.”

“Rhys,” she said, huffing out a disbelieving laugh. “Yes, he did. I was with her when she found out.” He shook his head.

“Tate is a good guy, sweets. And he loves Audrey more than fish love water. He didn’t cheat on her.” She just stared at him.

“She saw pictures of him,” she said. “They were leaked online.” His brows bunched together, then they lifted in understanding.

“The photos of some girl kissing him, right?” he asked, and she nodded. “He wasn’t hooking up with her. She was a fan, and asked for a selfie with him. When he leaned in to take it, she kissed him. He didn’t want it. And after it happened, he got furious. Tate is an easy going guy, I’ve never seen him as pissed as he’d been that night.”

The new information was making her mind whirl. She’d seen the photos. It was a blurry selfie of a girl kissing him, but there had been two others that were taken from a distance. They’d been grainy and blurry, but you couldn’t mistake Tate for anyone else.

He was a big guy, covered in tattoos and had the blackest hair she’d ever seen. She recognized him, but more than that, Audrey had recognized him.

He’d said the same thing Rhys did—that it was a total misunderstanding and that the fan had blindsided him. No one had bought that bogus story. It was too convenient. It was too perfect.

Ana had never seen anyone so heartbroken before. The way Audrey had silently cried had broken something in Ana that still hadn't been repaired. That day, she started hating The Butterfly Effect. She'd hated Tate most of all, but hated the rest of the band for not doing anything to stop it.

But if Rhys was telling the truth and it wasn't an ongoing affair, then they wouldn't have known they had to stop anything.

"He wasn't in a relationship with her?" she asked, and he scoffed.

"Of course not," he said. "Tate would rather saw his fucking arm off than ever hurt Audrey."

"He didn't fight to keep her," she said.

"He respected her boundary," Rhys countered. "She told him to never contact her again, and even if it totally destroyed him, he respected it."

Well, shit. She couldn't fault Tate for that. She couldn't fault any of the guys for that. She'd been there for that phone call. She'd heard Audrey cry into the phone and tell him to never contact her again, that she never wanted to see him again.

And seeing the way Rhys was ambushed by the few people in the diner last night made her realize it was totally possible for a random person to take advantage and kiss him unwittingly.

But is that *really* what happened to Tate?

"I still need to talk to her," she said.

"You need her permission to be with me?" he asked, and she narrowed her eyes.

"I don't want to be a bad friend."

"Or it's a convenient excuse to not be with me."

They stared at each other, her words caught in her throat. Rhys had never used a tone other than gentle, or teasing, or

sweet with her. But just then, he'd sounded upset. Genuinely hurt and upset. With her.

"It's not an excuse for anything." She tried to slide off his lap, but his hold on her tightened.

"You don't trust me, and I get it. We just met. But you'll never trust me if you never open yourself to me. To us." His eyes flicked between hers, pleading with her. "Come on tour with me. It's only six weeks. You can get to know the guys. You can learn Tate isn't a cheating monster, and we'll get to spend more time together."

"I can't leave the store for two months," she said. "Even if I could—that's crazy, Rhys. I can't go on tour with you. I—I'm not the touring type of person. I like quiet. And I like to be home. And I like books, and—"

"It'll be quiet everywhere except for the shows," he said, cutting her off. "We can stay in the hotel room, you won't have to go anywhere or see anyone. You can still read. Bring all the books you want. Bring your eReader and download a million of them."

"Rhys," she breathed. "I don't know."

"Think about it," he said. "Just think about it, sweets. Don't tell me no." She took a deep breath.

She could think about it, but that didn't mean she'd ever agree to it, even if she wanted to.

chapter fifteen

“**Y**ou can’t stay the night again.”

Rhys folded his arms across his chest, his brow raising. “And why not?” he asked. She’d already gotten off his lap and was grabbing her purse and a stack of papers she said she needed to work on. If it were up to him, she’d leave her work down here for the night.

If it were up to him, she’d do a lot of things.

Like go on tour with him.

“I have a few things to do,” she said, hiking the stack of papers higher.

“And you can’t do them with me there?”

“You’re distracting,” she muttered. The corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk.

“I’m only here for a few more days, don’t you want to spend them with me, not working?” He knew it was a manipulative question, but he really just wanted to spend time with her, just the two of them, no distractions. “You still never said no to some Little time.”

“Not tonight,” she breathed. His lips tightened, but he dropped it. He couldn’t push her or he’d lose her, he knew that. But he also really fucking wanted to get her in a little onesie and play with her. He just wanted to see her carefree and happy, not so bogged down by responsibilities.

“Okay,” he said. “Then I’ll go grab us dinner. That’ll give you plenty of time to get what you need done, then we can spend some time together.”

She looked like she wanted to argue, but didn't. A part of him almost wished she would. At least then he'd know she was comfortable with him.

"I need at least an hour."

"Thirty minutes," he countered. "Working too much isn't good for you."

"Says the man who's constantly working on songs," she shot back. He blinked at her. How did she know that? The question must've been clear on his face because she smiled softly. "I heard you singing this morning. It sounded like you were trying to work some lyrics out."

"I was," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. He wasn't used to having anyone hear his writing process. It was messy, and far from perfect. He never wanted anyone to hear his songs until they were done.

"It sounded good," she said, and he tilted his head to the side. Her face flushed a deep red. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop. But the apartment is small, and—"

"All good, sweets," he laughed. He still didn't want her listening to him write any more songs, especially ones he was writing about her. Did she know that? Is that why she looked so embarrassed? "Half an hour, then we're doing something for Little Ana." She looked like she wanted to tell him no, but, again, she held it in.

He knew he couldn't force her into Little space, that it was definitely something she had to do on her own, and it was a vulnerable place for her to be, but he just wanted to Daddy her. And he wanted her to let him Daddy her.

"I don't know if I can be Little," she admitted. "I've never done it. And I don't totally know how to get there. What if I do, and I'm younger than you want? Or older? Or what if you realize I'm too much work? What if I'm not really a Little?"

He moved across the room to her and wrapped her in a tight hug. She immediately melted into him. As much as she was trying to keep a wall between him, he knew she felt the same attraction to him he felt for her. It would be impossible

for her to keep him at an arm's length forever. He just had to wait her out. Eventually, she'd welcome him with open arms.

"None of that will happen," he said, rubbing his hand over her back the way she liked. "You're perfect as big Ana, you'll be perfect as Little Ana. And if you realize it's not what you want, then you're still perfect." If he had to reassure her for the rest of their lives, he would.

He paused.

For the rest of their lives. He couldn't be thinking that long term, could he? She hadn't put her barriers down and he was already picturing them with gray hair and a million grandkids running around, a book in Ana's hand and a guitar in his.

He could see that life so clearly, and he wanted it. He fucking craved it.

The stack of papers were wedged between them, so he couldn't hold her as closely or as tightly as he wanted. He kissed the top of her head before taking a step back.

"Stay here and finish up," he said. "I don't want you climbing the stairs at night by yourself." She blinked, her lips parting.

"I've been climbing the stairs at night by myself for years," she said. "I'd argue I've been climbing steps on my own since I could walk." He flashed her a grin.

"You didn't have a Daddy to walk with you before. Now you do, and Daddy says no walking up the stairs alone." She huffed out a disbelieving laugh. "Humor me, sweets. Just for tonight, let me be Daddy." Her smile slowly fell and she glanced down at the floor.

"Okay," she finally murmured. Her face flushed a bright red as her lips twisted to the side. Then, so quietly he barely heard her, she whispered, "Daddy."

He nearly fucking died.

Hearing her call him that made his knees weak and his heart race. Nothing had ever felt or sounded so good. So perfect.

He roughly cleared his throat, and nodded toward her desk. “Finish up. I’ll get everything set up for dinner upstairs then come get you, okay?”

She nodded as she dropped the papers back on her desk, letting her purse fall beside them as she sank into her oversized office chair. He moved to her side and kissed the top of her head.

“Be good,” he said against her hair. Her breath hitched, and he smiled to himself as he pulled back.

He had thirty minutes to get everything he wanted set up. He’d need some help.

As he left the store, he pressed his phone to his ear and smiled as Tilly answered.



SHE WAS DEAD ON HER FEET AS SHE CLIMBED THE STAIRS TO her apartment. Rhys was behind her, practically buzzing with excitement for whatever he had planned. She tried to make herself as excited as he was, but she was just so tired.

After Rhys left, she’d gotten distracted online searching for a rare copy of *Wuthering Heights* for Mrs. Deeds, one of the regulars at The Book Garden. She’d been asking Ana about it for months, and when Ana had any free time, she was scouring the internet for it. But because she was doing that, she hadn’t gone through the store’s finances, like she was supposed to.

She knew she’d have a huge pile of tasks on her plate in the morning, and a part of her wanted to just stay in her office downstairs and finish working, but she knew she couldn’t. Not when she could barely keep her eyes open.

Rhys slid past her, reaching the door before she could.

“I have everything ready,” he said, and she blinked at him. “Little Ana time starts now.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” she mumbled, barely covering her mouth as she yawned. He cupped her cheek, his eyes warm as he stared down at her.

“It works however you want it to,” he said. She pressed into his touch before he pulled away and pushed the door open.

She stepped inside and gasped.

It wasn’t anything fancy, but she knew it had taken him a lot of work, even if he’d done it quickly. A blanket fort was set up in the living room, a small slit in the front for them to enter. Fairy lights were strung around the fort, and excitement finally flooded her. She couldn’t wait to get in there and see it from the inside. Their dinner sat on the table, but it was the clothes he’d set out beside it, and all the cute bowls and utensils she was positive she didn’t own that made her throat tighten.

He hadn’t had a lot of time, but he’d done something special. *For her*. He’d done all this for her.

“Come on, sweets,” he said, resting his hand on the small of her back. “You have to eat first, but then we can play.” She turned her eyes up to him, finding him smiling so broadly, she wanted to cry.

Why had she thought he wasn’t genuine? Or that he was just using her to kill time? Why had she ever feared that he’d be the type of person to cheat, or cover for his friend cheating?

Someone like that wouldn’t do this. They wouldn’t take the time to do anything this sweet for anyone—for her. But here he was, standing in front of her, smiling, and waiting for her response.

“Play?” she whispered. She wasn’t sure how it was even possible, but his smile grew.

“I bought you a few things.” He kissed the top of her head, sliding her purse off her shoulder as he did. After locking up, he led them to her little table. She stared down at the pink bowl with pictures of bunnies on it.

She'd never thought much about Buns or her bunny sweatshirt, but now that he was surrounding her with them, she couldn't help but love them.

Without a word, he pulled a chair out for her, and she slid into it, watching as he pulled out a meal she recognized from the diner. Carefully, he poured some soup into her bowl before pouring juice into a little pink cup she was absolutely positive she didn't own.

He dragged his chair closer to hers and sat, pulling his own meal out as if this was a totally normal night, like they'd done this a million times before. She stared at him, at the way he seemed so comfortable and content. And if he felt that way, why shouldn't she?

She turned her attention to her bowl, her eyes tracing the little flowers framing it, and felt something in her stir. Curiosity, maybe. But could she go into Little space? She didn't even know what it really meant, and if she was being a thousand percent honest with herself, she knew she was so reluctant because it meant tapping into a vulnerable part of herself she never touched. It was a part that she purposefully ignored and avoided.

"Eat a bit, then it's bath time, and then I'll show you all your surprises," Rhys said, pulling her from her thoughts. He nudged her with his shoulder, and she felt her lips pull into a reluctant smile. "Unless you're too tired."

"Nope," she blurted, forcing her spine to snap straight. She snatched her spoon up and slurped some of the soup. He chuckled, and her face heated at what she'd just done. "Sorry." She set the spoon down and grabbed a napkin to dab her mouth.

"Don't apologize," he said before taking a long, loud slurp of his soup. "It's cute."

"Bad manners are cute?" she asked, and he grinned.

"Everything you do is cute, sweets."

She couldn't stop her smile, even if her face heated for an entirely different reason. He nudged her with his shoulder

again, and watched as she took another bite, giggling to herself when she slurped.

She felt his eyes on her, and the more she ate, the more she sipped her juice, the more she felt the anxieties and stress from the day slip away. Her feet swung back and forth, the bottoms barely scraping along the old wood floor. He cleared his throat, and she glanced at him.

“Do you want to sit in my lap?” he asked quietly. Her brows pushed together, but before she could shake her head, he rested his hand on her back, making her forget how to speak altogether. “I thought I could feed you the rest. You only have a little bit left.” She stared down at the remaining soup, knowing it was only a few more bites.

It wouldn't take that long to finish, and he'd asked if she could at least try with him. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself as she nodded. She could practically feel him buzzing with anticipation as he scooted his chair back.

Her throat was dry as she got to her feet and let him slide her onto his lap. His body was stiff for a moment, and she immediately thought she was too heavy. She tried to slide off, but he wrapped his broad arm around her stomach and hauled her back against his chest.

“Where are you going?” he rumbled. Goosebumps rippled over her skin as she took a deep, shaky breath.

“I don't wanna hurt you,” she whispered, and his arm tightened.

“Do you think Daddy is weak?” he asked, and she shook her head. “You must think so, because you're always worried about hurting me.”

“Because I'm too heavy,” she said.

“So you do think I'm weak.” She turned to look at him over her shoulder, finding him frowning at her.

Try, she reminded herself.

“Of course not, Daddy.” His eyes barely widened with shock, but he quickly schooled his features, forcing himself to

stay calm. She smiled, seeing the whirlwind that one word had put him in. She wrapped her smaller hand around his bulging bicep and squeezed. He flexed, so she dug her fingers in harder. “Maybe a little.”

He barked out a laugh, and she giggled at the way his fingers wiggled against her ribs, tickling her. Her head rested against his shoulder as she laughed. He dipped his head, putting his face in the crook of her neck. His hot breath made her shiver, and his tickling slowly stopped. They breathed heavily, and she could’ve sworn he shifted her away from his hips, but not before she felt something hard brush against her ass.

“Rhys,” she breathed. His stubble scraped along her sensitive skin, and she took a shuddering breath. “*Daddy.*” He groaned, and she felt his jaw tense against her.

“Fuck, sweets,” he growled. “Don’t do this to me. Not right now. I’m trying to be good.” She tried to turn to look at him, but he wouldn’t move his face away. It stayed buried in her neck, his breathing ragged.

“Sorry,” she whispered, and his arm tightened. She searched for something to say to make things better. Her eyes flitted around the room and finally landed on the bowl in front of her. “Soup?” His arm stayed tight around her for a few more harsh breaths, then he slowly pulled away.

He cleared his throat before readjusting her on his lap again. Her body was still molten, and she could feel the outline of his against her, but she tried to ignore it. She wondered if she wiggled and ground her ass against him if he’d lose control and bend her over the table.

She blinked.

Where the hell had that thought even come from?

Before Rhys went down on her the other night, she hadn’t even thought about sex in years. After Josh, she hadn’t wanted anything to do with men at all. But Rhys kind of forced his way into her life, and she wasn’t entirely upset about it. She

hadn't exactly fought him on it, and she hadn't tried to stop him.

"Soup," he repeated, pulling her from her thoughts. He scooped some of the soup into the spoon and slowly brought it to her mouth. "Open wide." She nearly combusted at the words.

What the heck was with her tonight?

Well, she knew what it was. It was him. He was making her brain mushy and her body horny.

Her lips trembled as she parted them. He slipped the spoon into her mouth, his eyes burning her alive as he watched her swallow. He scooped up another bite, his arm around her middle tight as he brought it to her lips again. She swallowed, and watched him scoop the last bite.

Their gazes met as the little plastic spoon slid between her lips. His eyes were hooded, his pupils dilated so much she could barely see the blue, his breathing ragged.

"Good girl," he rasped. Lava coursed through her body. He was going to kill her. She was positive of it. Her chest heaved with another breath.

"Thank you," she said, her hand moving to his forearm banding across her stomach. "No one has—done *that* before." She looked at the empty bowl, the hopping bunny now staring back at her.

"I'd do it for you for every meal if you let me," he said, and she grinned.

"Could I feed you?" She tilted her head as her eyes slid back to him. "Maybe you could sit on my lap." He snorted.

"Not a chance, sweets." He pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek, and she sighed as she leaned into him. When he pulled away, she rested her head on his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart, letting the sound comfort and soothe her. "Do you need help in the bath?" The top of her head nearly slammed into his jaw from how fast she whipped it back to look at him.

“No,” she all but shouted. “I—I do not need help.” He chuckled and wrapped his other arm around her.. “And I’m taking a shower.”

“Little girls take baths,” he said.

“I only have a shower,” she mumbled, flicking her finger back and forth over his arm.

If it had been up to her, she’d have only a tub, not a standing shower. She missed hot bubble baths desperately, but the place was old, and the man who’d lived there before her had been old and had a shower stall installed. It had a bench, which made it nice when she needed to shave her legs, but every time she sat on it she couldn’t help but think about the old man butt that had also sat on it, so she rarely used it.

“Then leave the door open,” he said. She opened her mouth to protest, but he continued. “So I can hear if you need me.”

“I won’t.” He shrugged as helped her slide off his lap. He grabbed his plate and stacked her bowl on it before grabbing their cups in the other hand..

“Humor me, remember?” She rolled her eyes, and he snorted. “Such a little brat.”

“Am not,” she huffed. His mouth tucked up in a small smile, his eyes soft as he stared at her. He cleared his throat, gently shaking his head as he stood.

“Are you going to keep arguing with me?” he asked over his shoulder. He put the discarded plate, bowl, and cups in the sink, and turned to face her, his hands braced on either side of himself on the counter.

“I’m not arguing,” she said, and he huffed out a laugh.

“You are,” he countered. “Now, go take a shower before I pop your ass.” Her eyes widened.

“You—you can’t do that.”

“Watch me.” He took a step forward, and she shot out of her chair. His laughter followed her through the apartment and into the bathroom.

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chapter sixteen

She stepped out of the bathroom, her hands twisting together in front of her as she looked around. Rhys had put her new pajamas in the bathroom while she was in the shower, and when she grabbed them, they were warm. Which, of course, made her melt because he'd put them in the dryer for her.

She didn't question how he knew she liked her towel and clothes warm after a shower. She'd bought a towel warmer online and always made sure to put everything in it before she got in. But she had to admit she liked having someone warm the clothes for her instead. It made her feel cared for in a way she'd never felt before.

Rhys' head popped out between the two blankets making up the entrance to the blanket fort. He grinned at her, his eyes scanning her and taking in the cute pink shorts and cozy, soft sweatshirt with a picture of a cartoon bunny holding up a peace sign on it.

"Good shower?" he asked, and she nodded. "Wanna play for a bit?" She leapt toward him, and he choked out a laugh as he gently tugged a blanket to the side.

Her eyes widened as she ducked her head, entering the fort. She didn't know how he'd done it, how he'd gotten fairy lights strung up inside, or how he'd been able to have the blankets hang perfectly from the ceiling.

The coffee table sat in the middle of the floor, the cushions and pillows from her couches sitting around it. She gasped at everything scattered on the surface.

“You bought all of this?” she whispered. He just kissed her temple as he moved past her and sank to one of the cushions.

“Come on, sweets,” he said, patting the cushion beside him.

Slowly, she made her way to him, trying to swallow past the thickness in her throat. It wasn't that she'd had a terrible childhood, but she'd grown up with a single mom who worked two jobs. Ana didn't blame her for never being around. But she grew up a lot faster than most kids her age. She'd learned how to cook and clean and care for their little house while her mother worked, and she'd spent most of her time alone.

And when her mother was home from work, or on the off chance she had the day off, she was always too tired to do anything with her. She'd taken her to the city once, but other than that, they hadn't had time or money for vacations.

Her mother had worked hard to give her things she wanted as a kid, but she'd never done anything like this. Nothing this thoughtful. She just threw books at Ana when she learned she loved them, and thought that was good enough.

Before this moment, Ana had believed it was.

But now that Rhys had set up something as simple as a takeout meal at the dining table, and put together this pillow fort with toys, and Crayons, and soft books scattered on the table, she'd realized her mother could've tried a little harder for her.

This had taken Rhys thirty minutes. That was it—just half an hour.

She wished her mother would've taken half an hour for her.

“Hey.” Rhys grabbed her hand, forcing her to sit on the cushion. She hadn't realized tears were streaming from her eyes. “What is it? What's wrong?” She shook her head as she wiped at her cheek.

“This was just really thoughtful,” she said past the lump in her throat. He tucked her hair behind her ear, his eyes boring

into the side of her head. “Maybe the nicest thing anyone has done for me.”

“That breaks my heart,” he said quietly, almost as if he hadn’t meant to. Roughly, he cleared his throat before kissing her temple again. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, resting her head against his chest. This was quickly becoming her favorite thing. She liked how he smelled, and how warm he felt, and the beat of his heart soothed her.

“Do you want to go to bed? We can play tomorrow instead,” he said, rubbing his hand down her back. She shook her head as she grabbed the soft toy book. “How did I know you’d reach for the book first?” His laugh rumbled through his chest and she smiled to herself as she slid the book off the table to her lap.

She pressed into the soft fabric, listening to the soft, satisfying *crunch* of whatever was inside the pages. There were different fabrics making up the picture of barn animals on the front, and she ran her fingers over all of them.

As she touched the textures, looked at all the colors and pictures, she began to feel lighter and her worries from the day began to drift. She sighed, feeling content.

“Which is your favorite animal, sweets?” he asked, lightly tracing the felt pig. She shook her head, and nudged his finger toward the glitter cow. He chuckled. “Bunnies and cows, huh?” She nodded.

She cuddled closer to him, almost sitting in his lap, her head still on his chest as she trailed her fingertips over the other animals, the grass, the barn, and sky. Finally, he adjusted himself and pulled her back toward him, his long legs and arms on either side of her.

“Read,” she whispered, and pressed the book into his hand.

“You want Daddy to read?” he asked, and she nodded as she curled her knees up to her chest. He wrapped his arm around her as he flipped the book open. Her thumb slowly slid

between her lips as she listened to him read, his voice vibrating through his chest, into her body.

After he read the few sentences on the page, he stopped and let her touch all the different textures before moving onto the next. His voice was soft and soothing, and her eyelids became heavy.

She sucked harder on her thumb, her fingers pinching and flicking the thick fabric of his jeans as he read the book twice more. He stroked her hair as he read the last time, his voice a near whisper.

After her eyes had drifted closed, he gently tugged on her wrist, trying to pull her thumb from her mouth, and she whined, holding it in place.

“I bought something else for you,” he whispered. She shook her head, her brows scrunching together. “You’ll like it more than your thumb.” She pried open one eye and peered up at him. He held up a pacifier with a bunny on the front, tilting it back and forth enticingly. “Wanna try it?”

She wasn’t sure about it. She liked her thumb. She was used to the size, feel, and taste. Something new? She didn’t think she’d like it. It was rubber, and wouldn’t it taste bad? And it looked like it would be too big for her mouth, and it would feel weird.

He tugged on her wrist again, and she jerked her arm away, letting out a frustrated sound. He froze, his brows lifting.

“Sweets,” he said, his voice low. She glared at him, and his brows rose higher. “I think you’re in Little space, aren’t you?” She continued glaring, and he choked back a laugh. “Listen to Daddy and take your thumb out of your mouth.” She didn’t move. She just kept glaring at him. “*Ana.*”

She rolled onto her side away from him, still cuddled close to his chest, and continued sucking. He gripped her wrist harder and jerked. Her teeth dug into her thumb until pain shot through her body.

Ana let out a screech, her thumb flying out of her mouth. Tears pooled in her eyes as she stared at her teeth indents.

“What happened?” Daddy demanded. She lifted her hand for him to see, and he gently took it, bringing it closer to his face. “Oh, baby girl. Did you hurt yourself?” She nodded, sniffing hard.

“Kiss,” she said, moving her hand closer. His lips twitched, but he kissed the indent marks that were already fading.

He dropped her hand and gripped her sides to haul her to a sitting position between his legs. She looked up at him, her expression pitiful. He smoothed her hair away from her forehead, and she leaned into his touch.

“Daddy won’t pull on your hand when you’re sucking your thumb again,” he said, and she nodded, feeling triumphant. “*But*,” he gave her a stern look, and she sighed, “you’ll listen when I say to take it out.”

Her brows lowered, her eyes narrowed, and her lips tipped down in a tight frown. He grinned at her.

“Are you okay?” He took her hand to look at it again. She nodded, and he shifted his eyes to her. “You don’t like to talk when you’re Little, do you?” She shrugged. He kissed the faded marks again, and butterflies swarmed in her belly.

She rested her head on his shoulder, pressing her body closer to him. He chuckled and wrapped his arms tightly around her, squeezing her, and holding her tightly to him. He gently rocked her back and forth, softly humming.

“Will you try the paci for me, sweets?” he whispered. Her lips twisted to the side. Did she want to try that thing? She didn’t know. She figured she could try it for him, but when she hated it, she didn’t want to hear him complain.

She let out a long sigh and nodded, keeping her head pressed against his chest. He took the pink paci from the table and held it to her lips. She barely let them part before he slid it in.

It felt weird, and different from her thumb. She didn’t know if she liked it. But then she sucked on it, and hummed. It felt bigger than her thumb did, and it felt better on her teeth. She bit down, liking the way it felt to chew on it.

“Is it okay?” he murmured, and she nodded.

She nestled closer to him, and tried to say around the paci, “Thank you, Daddy.” But the words came out garbled and slurred. He chuckled and slipped it from her mouth.

“Try again, sweets.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

His breath hitched, and she peered up at him. They stared at each other for a long moment, and distantly, she was fully aware that she’d effortlessly slipped into this mindset because of him. She opened her mouth and he slid the paci back into it.

“Ready for bed?” he whispered, and she nodded, rubbing her cheek against his soft shirt, her eyes drifting shut. “We can sit here for a few more minutes.” He began rocking her again, his humming lulling her to sleep.

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chapter seventeen

Rhys spun the beer bottle in his hands, his eyes trained on the neon lights reflecting off the amber glass. He was barely aware of Felix moving around behind the bar, restocking bottles and cleaning glasses. Nightcap wasn't open yet, but it would be in a couple hours.

He couldn't believe Ana had slipped into Little space last night. He'd been reluctant to leave her this morning in case she felt raw, but she'd promised him she was fine. She went straight to work, and after spending his morning helping out around the shop and talking with customers, he decided to come to Nightcap.

He wasn't entirely sure why.

"You gonna actually talk, or just sit there all afternoon?" Felix grumbled. Rhys lifted his eyes, finding Felix glaring down at him, a white towel slung over his massive shoulder.

"You were busy," Rhys said, shrugging.

"Since when has that stopped you from annoying the shit out of me?" Rhys' mouth tucked up in the corner.

Despite being in his thirties and only about a decade younger than Felix, he still felt like a dumb kid around him. Like he was still unsure of life, and needed Felix's guiding hand. His smile slowly fell.

"I asked Ana to come on tour with me," he said, his gaze dropping back to his bottle. Felix was silent for a long moment, then he cleared his throat.

"And?" Rhys shrugged again.

“And nothing,” he said. “She didn’t say yes.” But she hadn’t said no either. Not entirely, right?

“She’s a smart girl.” Rhys snapped his head up, his eyes narrowed as he glared at Felix. His brow lifted, a silent dare to argue with him. “She knows better than to run off with some strange man.”

“I’m not a *strange* man,” Rhys snarled.

“To her you are,” he shot back. “How would she know you’re not?” He opened his mouth to tell him Ana knew him, that she’d been with him every day this week, but that had only been a few days. Did she really even know him?

She had to at least trust him, otherwise she would’ve never shown him her Little self. And she would’ve been a lot less likely to touch him—but did she ever touch him first? No, she did.

He forced himself to think back on all of their interactions. She *had* to have touched him first. She did last night. When else?

“You’re impulsive,” Felix continued. “When you want something, you do any and everything you can to get it. You have blinders on and won’t listen to anyone until you have what you want.”

“What are you saying?” Rhys asked, his voice low.

“Nothing.” He shrugged and crouched back down behind the bar. “Just make sure you’re who she wants, too.”

If she didn’t want him, she would’ve made it known. It would’ve been obvious. He knew when girls didn’t want him. It was rare, but he knew when it happened, and he knew Ana was attracted to him.

But being attracted to him and actually wanting to be with him were two different things.

He shook the thought from his mind, and reminded himself that if she didn’t trust him, or if she didn’t want to be with him, she wouldn’t have agreed to be his Little, she wouldn’t have gone into that space last night.

Before Ana, he'd never thought much about being a Daddy or wanting a Little. He hadn't even thought about having a real relationship with a sub. He thought he'd be too busy to give them the time and attention they deserved, but with Ana, he decided he'd figure out how to make it work.

From the second he first saw her, he'd known he wanted her.

She couldn't deny their connection. She couldn't ignore it any more than he could. They had a bond, and he knew she felt it, too.

He wasn't going to let Felix get in his head about this. He'd been positive about his feelings for Ana, about this relationship with her, and he wasn't going to let Felix try to make him think Ana didn't want him.

Felix didn't know her, not the way Rhys did. Even if Felix had known her longer, he didn't know her better. Riley had said it'd taken Ana a year to really open up and trust Felix, and it had only taken her a few days before she was in Little space for Rhys.

"How's Lin?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Still stubborn," Felix mumbled. "But scheduled an appointment with a doctor in Houston. I'm taking her next week." Rhys let out a relieved breath. "Tilly's staying behind to watch the bar."

"What?" Rhys barked out a laugh. "Since when do you trust anyone with this place, let alone Til?" Felix lifted his head enough for Rhys to just see his shaggy hair and glaring eyes.

"I trust her," he said tightly, and Rhys snorted. "She's not an idiot."

"Never said she was," he countered. "I just know you'd rather cut your arm off than leave your baby with anyone else. And Til—" He held his hand up placatingly. "She's sweet, and smart, but she can't run a bar."

Felix pinched between his eyes, and Rhys felt a twinge of guilt at the tired way he sighed.

“I know,” he said. “But I need to go with Ma, and I can’t afford to close this place.” He shrugged. “Who else can I ask?”

Rhys racked his brain for anyone in town that had any experience with running a business and could hold their own at the bar. He stared up at the ceiling, going through every face and name he knew.

“Harper!” He snapped his fingers. “Harper has helped her dad out with his business since she could walk. She knows the ins and outs.”

“You think she could run this place?” Felix lifted his brow, and Rhys shrugged.

“Have you ever known anyone to give Harper shit and live to tell the tale?” Felix snorted.

“Yeah, alright, fair enough.” He braced his meaty hand on the bar as he pushed himself up. “I’ll call and talk to her.” He scrubbed his hand over his face, looking tired. “Til will wanna help, though.” Rhys shrugged.

“Let her help. But I don’t think she could handle everyone yelling at her every night.” Felix nodded his agreement. Even if he’d only be away for a day or two, it was still too long to leave Tilly in charge. She didn’t have an *in charge* bone in her little body.

“When are you heading home?” Felix asked, using the towel still slung on his shoulder to dab his brow.

“Saturday,” Rhys shrugged, “maybe Sunday. Never, if I had it my way.” He flashed Felix a grin, but the other man didn’t smile like he thought he would.

“You really asked her to go with you?”

Rhys dropped his gaze back to the bottle, and clutched it tightly in his hand.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “I’m not ready to give her up, you know?”

“You don’t have to give her up,” Felix said quietly. “You just have to give her time.” Rhys nodded.

Logically, he knew that. He knew she probably needed to take a giant breather away from him so she could actually process her feelings, especially after last night. But he didn't want that. He wanted her to just be with him. He wanted her to know that she didn't have to worry about anything ever again. He would take care of everything for her. She could spend all her time reading, and she could live closer to her mother, if she decided to move to New York with him. And if she missed her friends, he'd figure out a way to move them to the city to be close to her, too.

He'd do anything for her.

“Or,” Felix said, and Rhys lifted his head. “If you're serious, *truly* serious, make it known. Don't push her or force her into loving you. But show her she can.”

“I've done that,” Rhys countered. “I've shown her everything. I took her to the field, and we went to eat at the diner. Last night—” He cut himself off before he could tell him the whole truth. “Last night she shared something vulnerable with me, and—”

“Share something vulnerable with her,” he said, cutting him off, and Rhys sighed. “I know you, kid. I know you'll push and push until something breaks, even if you don't mean for it to. I'm just saying, Ana is a sweet girl, and she's been through Hell. Don't make her life harder.”

“I would never do that,” he said.

But he knew what Felix meant. She didn't need the added stress of him constantly begging her to be Little with him. She'd accept him and their dynamic, their relationship, whenever she was ready, and he couldn't force it. No matter how much he wanted to.



THE BELL CHIMED ABOVE THE DOOR, AND SHE GLANCED AT THE clock on the wall. Vines from her plants surrounded it, nearly covering the numbers, but she could still tell what time it was.

“Please tell me you brought me a coffee, too,” Riley groaned. Ana turned from where she stood, finding Audrey and Harper strolling from the door, heading to the little lounge area in the middle of the store, each holding two coffees.

“You’re addicted,” Harper laughed, sliding the plastic to-go cup toward Riley. She snatched it up, ignoring Harper’s comment, and drank deeply. She’d just finished her last coffee less than an hour ago, there was no way she *needed* any more caffeine.

“What are you doing here?” Ana asked, taking the cup Audrey offered her. She took a small sip, sighing at the warmth.

“Just wanted to come see you,” she said, shrugging as she and Harper sank onto one of the couches. Riley and Ana moved to the opposite one to talk with them for a bit. It’d been a mostly slow day, so she hadn’t had a lot to do.

They sat in silence for a few moments, all sipping their drinks and looking around the store. Ana felt tension build, but she wasn’t sure if it was just her feeling weird, or if there really was something else going on. She wanted to talk to Audrey about Rhys, but she didn’t know if she wanted to do it with Riley and Harper around.

Finally, Harper sighed.

“Are you going to make us beg you to tell us what’s going on with Rhys?” she asked. Ana’s mouth went dry.

So, the tension *wasn’t* all in her head. They definitely were there for a reason other than just to visit. Ana glanced at Riley, then Audrey, finding the latter staring down at her cup.

“Nothing is going on with Rhys,” Ana shrugged. Riley barked out a laugh, and Ana winced. “He decided to stay in town for a few more days.”

“Why?” Harper prompted, raising her dark brows. She already knew the reason, she just wanted Ana to say it.

Ana knew she wasn't being malicious. She knew she was just trying to be helpful but she couldn't help but feel attacked. She sank deeper into the couch, clutching her cup tighter.

"He just wanted to hang out," she mumbled. Palpable silence filled the little bookstore. She risked another glance at Audrey, finding her still staring at her cup. Was she really that torn up about Ana spending time with Rhys?

This was why she'd wanted to talk to Audrey before getting close to him.

A part of her knew she'd been avoiding Audrey so she wouldn't have to talk to her about it, and risk her telling Ana she didn't want them together. She didn't know what she'd do. She wanted to be a good friend, but she was also falling hard and fast for Rhys.

She tried to find the right words to begin. She looked at Riley, finding her just staring at her, and let out a long sigh. She knew Riley was silently yelling at her to just rip the bandaid off and get it over with.

"We're kind of together," she said, looking back at Harper and Audrey. Harper nodded like it was obvious, but Ana kept her attention on Audrey. "But I wanted to talk to you before I made anything official."

"Why?" Audrey asked quietly. "It seems like you already made your decision."

Everyone stopped talking, they stopped breathing, at her words. Guilt twisted Ana's stomach. She didn't know what to say, how to tell her friend everything. So she started with what was maybe the worst thing to say.

"Tate didn't cheat on you," she blurted. Audrey's head snapped up.

"What?"

"He didn't—"

"You saw the photos," she said.

"Rhys explained—"

“Oh, Rhys, his best friend who’s also known as the band’s man-whore, explained,” Audrey said, throwing her arm at Ana. “Oh, by all means, continue.”

Her words hit Ana deep. Was that really Rhys’ reputation?

“He’s not a man-whore,” Riley said, and Audrey rolled her eyes. “He hasn’t been publicly seen with anyone in over six years. And he hasn’t privately dated anyone, either. He’s far from—”

“Just because he’s not dating them doesn’t mean he’s not sleeping around,” Audrey shot back. Ana’s mouth went dry.

“You do know I talk to Rhys at least, like, a million times a week, right?” Riley said in that condescending way she perfected. Audrey glared at her.

Riley and Audrey always argued and never saw eye to eye on anything. They’d kill anyone for each other, but they bickered more than anyone. They could call each other names, be mean to each other, yell at each other, but God help the poor idiot who insulted one of them. One would go to war for the other.

After they argued about the best plan of attack.

“Like he’d talk to you about his sex life,” Audrey muttered.

“He has before,” Riley shot back. “A million times.” Ana absently wondered if he’d told her about their dynamic, if he told her that Ana was a Little. But Riley hadn’t made any comments like she knew, so maybe he hadn’t.

“He said a fan basically forced herself on Tate,” Ana said. “He said he didn’t want it, but she still did it for a photo.” Audrey glared at her. “Tate didn’t tell you that?”

“No, he did,” she said. “But that’s a ridiculous fucking story.” Ana blinked at her.

“You didn’t tell me he told you that,” Harper breathed, looking at her. “You said he admitted to cheating.” Audrey flicked her eyes between the group.

“Not in those exact words, but—”

“Wait,” Riley held her hand up, “you’re saying he *never* told you he cheated?”

“He didn’t try to stop that girl from kissing him,” she said, and Ana shook her head.

“Just seeing the way Rhys was swarmed here at the diner, I think it’s totally possible she kissed Tate in the midst of the chaos,” Ana said. She glanced at Riley, who was staring at Audrey with an unreadable expression.

“I fought with Rhys for weeks over this,” Riley said quietly. “I didn’t talk to him for almost six months because of this. Because you told us—”

“I know,” she said. “I know.” Tears lined Audrey’s eyes, but she quickly blinked them back. “He didn’t apologize for it. He didn’t say he didn’t want it, or that he’d tried to stop her.”

“Rhys said he’d never seen Tate so upset,” Ana said, and Audrey wiped roughly at her cheek. Audrey shrugged, looking away as more tears slid from her eyes.

“I asked if he cheated, and he just—” Her voice broke. “He just didn’t say anything. He stayed silent, so I thought that meant yes. And when Rhys said that it didn’t happen, I just assumed he was covering for him.”

Ana could feel Riley vibrating beside her. She remembered when it happened, Riley had been furious with Rhys. Even though Ana hadn’t met him, she felt bad for him, being on the receiving end of Riley’s wrath.

No one said anything for a moment, the only sound Audrey’s sniffing. “I think I just wanted out,” she finally rasped. “I think we’d outgrown each other and I was looking for a way to end things without being the bad guy. But it was a mistake, and I wish—” She wiped her face again, and Ana stood.

She crouched beside the couch, taking Audrey’s free hand in hers. She watched her friend wipe tears away, and desperately wanted to take the pain away. She just wanted Audrey to feel better, to stop crying, to be happy.

“I wish I would’ve done things differently,” she finished.

Riley squeezed between Harper and Audrey, and threw her arms around both of them. They comforted Audrey as she cried for Tate again, just like they'd done two years ago when her pain was fresh.

“Do you like Rhys, Ana?” Harper finally asked. “And I mean really like him. Like, you can see this relationship going somewhere and lasting?” Ana bit her lip.

She didn't have to think about it. It was an immediate yes, but with Audrey still sniffing and wiping the last of her tears off her cheeks, she didn't know if she should say it. She slid her eyes to Audrey, and Harper snapped her fingers, drawing Ana's attention.

“I'm asking you, not her,” she said.

“Yes,” Ana replied. “I care about him, and I like him. A lot.” She tried not to wince as Audrey stared down at her. “He's really nice to me, and he's funny, and sweet. And he helps pull me out of my shell. And—” *And he's my Daddy*, she wanted to say. But she couldn't. Not to them. They didn't know about the books she read, or this part of herself. They didn't know about that side of Rhys.

Audrey's eyes were soft when Ana risked a glance at her again. Harper and Riley had similar expressions.

“You've never wanted anything to do with any men in town,” Harper said. “Felix is one of the best men I've ever known, and he was head over heels for you when you first moved here.”

“What?” Ana laughed. “No, he wasn't.”

“Yeah,” Riley said, grinning at her. “He was so obviously into you, it was painful.”

“But he's my friend,” she said.

“Yeah, and he knew if he tried to pursue anything with you, he'd lose you as a friend,” Audrey said. “But he did like you.” Ana opened her mouth to say something, shocked at the information, but Riley continued.

“He’s moved on. Don’t worry about unrequited love.” She flashed her a sly grin that told her exactly *how* he moved on, and who he moved on with.

“So, if I wanted to keep seeing Rhys, would you hate me?” Ana asked Audrey. She took a deep breath before answering.

“No,” she sighed. “If you like him, go for it. But—” She narrowed her eyes. “If he hurts you, I’ll hunt him down—”

“I already threatened him,” Riley said, and Ana blinked at her. “He’s in it for the long haul.” Ana’s face burned, and she tried to hide her smile, but she couldn’t. Knowing Riley had already threatened him, but not only that, that he’d said he really wanted to be with her, possibly forever? It made warmth shoot through her body.

“You’ll really be okay with it?” She squeezed Audrey’s hand, and she nodded.

“You deserve to be happy,” she said, her voice still tight.

A weight lifted off Ana’s shoulders, and she let out a long, relieved breath. She hadn’t realized how much Audrey’s approval had meant to her until this moment. She’d been holding back from Rhys because she was waiting for Audrey, but had been terrified of talking to her about it.

This conversation could’ve gone so much worse, and she was thankful it hadn’t. She liked to believe she would’ve sided with her friend, but a part of her knew she would’ve chosen Rhys. She would’ve figured out a way to keep them both and make it work, because she cared about them both. She loved Audrey, and knew she could love Rhys one day, and she couldn’t stand the thought of losing either of them.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Even though Audrey smiled down at her, Ana could still see the tightness around her mouth, the hurt in her eyes. She wanted to promise she’d figure out a way to make things right between her and Tate, but knew she couldn’t be the one to do it. She knew they had to be the ones to repair the damage, not her.

It still sucked she couldn’t do more to help, though.

“I can’t believe you like Rhys,” Riley laughed. “Of all the men I thought you’d finally fall for, I never once thought it would be him.”

“Why?” Ana asked, pushing to her feet. She moved back to the other couch, grabbing her cup on the way, and taking a long drink. Riley shrugged.

“I know he’s into wild shit,” she said. “I didn’t think you’d be into it, too.” Ana’s face flushed red.

“What wild shit?” Harper asked, and Ana shook her head, feigning innocence.

“No idea,” she said. Riley gave her a knowing smirk.

“You don’t know?” she asked, and Ana shook her head again. “Apparently, he’s a member at a really exclusive BDSM club in New York.” Riley carefully watched her, but Ana’s shock was genuine. He hadn’t told her he was part of a club. “Kody told me he’s a Dom. Well, I think they all are.” She glanced at Audrey, and her face was bright red, confirming everyone’s suspicions.

“He’s your cousin,” Ana said. “Stop talking about his sex life. It’s weird.” Riley threw her head back and laughed.

“It’s not weird,” she said. “Not when he’s the one who tells me this shit. So, you really didn’t know he was a Dom?”

“Nope,” Ana squeaked. Harper’s mouth hung open.

“You are such a slut!” Riley squealed excitedly. “I knew you were into freaky shit!”

“Oh my God, shut up!” Ana covered her face with her hands. Riley cackled, Harper still looked like she was about to pass out from shock, and Audrey was giving her an understanding smile. Ana guessed she already knew about Rhys, if Tate was into the same things as Rhys.

But did this mean they knew that he was friends with Daddy Doms? They couldn’t know he was, since he said he’d never explored this before. But what if they knew she was a Little and put two and two together?

Would they even know she's a Little? She hadn't told them. She hadn't even known she was for sure until last night.

She didn't think her friends would make fun of her for something like this, but she was still terrified of anyone knowing something *this* vulnerable about her.

The bell above the door chimed, and Ana sunk deeper into the couch, not wanting to face any customers. But when Riley's laughter grew louder and someone sat beside her, she didn't need to open her eyes to know who it was.

"Hey, girls," Rhys said warily. He kissed Ana's head, since her face was still covered. "What did y'all do to my girl?" He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, gently tugging her closer.

"We didn't do anything," Harper said, laughing. Riley was nearly hyperventilating from laughing too hard.

"What happened, sweets?" he asked, leaning closer.

"They know," she whispered. There was a pause, then he cleared his throat.

"Know what?" She turned to glare at him. His head was tilted to the side, and he genuinely looked confused.

"That you're a Dom," she hissed too loudly. His lips twitched as he stared at her, then slowly, he slid his eyes to the girls. Riley was finally calming down, but still chuckling. Ana peeked at them over her fingertips, finding them all staring at her.

Great.

"Ah, yeah," he said, huffing out a small laugh. "Kody thought it would be funny to tell Riley one year to get back at me for pranking him. I'm not ashamed or embarrassed by it." His smile slowly fell. "Are you?"

"No," she said immediately.

She glanced at the girls again, not loving that they had an audience for this conversation. He must've felt the same way, because he cleared his throat and scooted closer to her.

“Good,” he said. He leaned over, brushing his lips against her ear. “We’ll talk more about this tonight.” She nodded, her eyes on her friends, who were all grinning ear to ear at her.

Subtly, she lifted her middle finger at them.

“What did you just do?” Rhys asked, resting his hand over hers, forcing her finger down.

“Nothing,” she said, and Riley laughed again.

“Oh, you’re in so much trouble,” she said. More embarrassment burned Ana’s face as she glared at her best friend.

“Stop looking at her like that. She’s right,” Rhys purred. Goosebumps rippled over her skin at the tone, at the unsaid words and promises. “Such a naughty little girl.” He said it so softly only she could hear, his nose tracing along her jaw. She tried to swallow past her suddenly dry throat, but couldn’t. Harper clapped her hands on her full thighs and stood.

“Okie dokie. That’s our cue to leave,” she said. “Do you need condoms? Lube? I can run to the store—” Ana groaned, cutting her off, and sinking further into the couch.

“We’re good,” Rhys laughed. “Thanks, though, Harp.” She nodded and held her hand out to help Audrey stand.

Ana’s eyes met hers for a long moment. She was scared she’d see the truth in them, that Audrey hadn’t meant it when she said she wanted her to be happy, but instead, she found her friend softly gazing back, a genuine smile on her pretty face.

“See you later, Rhys,” Audrey said, standing beside Harper. “Be good to her.” He dipped his head, his face serious.

“Of course.”

He said it the same way he had to her mother—like it wasn’t even a question. Like there was no other option than to be good to her. Like he hadn’t even considered the alternative. And that made Ana melt a little more for him.

chapter eighteen

“How about you close the store early?” Rhys said, resting his arm along the back of the couch. Ana watched through the window as Audrey and Harper piled into Harper’s little car.

“I can’t,” she sighed.

“I can take over,” Riley offered as she stood. “It’s a slow day anyway.” Ana shook her head, feeling unsure. “I think you should take off.” She gave her a look before pointedly looking at Rhys.

She knew Riley was trying to push her to spend time alone with Rhys. But they’d already had time alone, and they were spending the night together again. Even though he still had a hotel room and went back to it for his clothes and things every day, he’d been sleeping on her couch every night. Not that she was complaining. She liked having him around, but still hadn’t worked up the courage to ask him to sleep in her bed with her, and he hadn’t pressured her.

“We need to talk,” Rhys said quietly. She chewed on her bottom lip.

Even though Riley had offered to take over, Ana had never left the store with her before. A part of her knew she needed to talk to Rhys about everything. She didn’t know if he’d been serious about her being in trouble or not, but she didn’t really want to find out.

She stared at Riley, contemplating.

Finally, she sighed and nodded. “Fine,” she breathed. “But we’ll just be upstairs, so if you need anything call me and I’ll be right down.” Riley nodded as she spoke.

“I’ve been working here for how long? I know how to run this place.” Riley folded her arms over her chest, and Ana sighed again.

It’s not that she didn’t trust Riley—she didn’t trust anyone with The Book Garden. But if anyone loved this place as much as she did, it was Riley. And if anyone was a bigger book lover than her, it was Riley, too.

“I know,” she said. “Just promise me you’ll call if you need any help.”

“I will,” Riley groaned. “Go.” She waved her hands at them, shooing them. “Don’t come back until the morning.”

Rhys chuckled as he stood, not letting Ana have the chance to second guess herself. He held his hand out for her and Ana took it, letting him pull her to her feet.

“Y’all be good,” Riley said over her shoulder, laughing at the way Ana groaned.

Rhys followed behind her as she grabbed her bag and put away the last of the books she’d been stocking earlier, then they made their way to the stairs outside.

He was unusually silent behind her as they walked inside. She dumped her bag on the dining table before running her hand through her hair, tugging at the tangles.

“So,” he said, pulling a chair out to sit. “What was that about?” He tilted his head to the side to watch her. “Wait. First, come here.” He patted his thigh, and she hid her smile as she sat on his lap.

He gently pressed his lips to hers, and she let herself fully give in. The kiss was hotter than any of their previous ones, maybe because now she wasn’t holding back, she was choosing to not have a wall between them anymore. After Audrey gave the okay, in her own way, Ana was fully ready for Rhys.

Even if it terrified her, she was ready.

He pulled away before things could get too hot, and she forced herself to hold in her whine of protest. She wasn't ready to stop. If anything, she was ready to go further. All the way.

“Okay,” he breathed, brushing her hair away from her face. “What happened?” She sighed and rested her head on his shoulder. Absently, she played with the thick denim of his jeans, pinching and rolling it between her fingers.

“The girls came to the store and Harper asked what was going on with us,” she began. She relayed everything that had happened, everything that Audrey had said, and everything that she'd felt and thought. When she got to the end, she let out a long breath. “So, when you got there, they were telling me about you being a Dom, but I didn't realize anyone knew that about you. I didn't know if you wanted anyone to know that about you.”

“Like I said, it doesn't embarrass me. I am who I am.” He entwined their fingers together, gently squeezing her hand. She wished she could be that kind of person—the kind of person who didn't care what anyone thought or could proudly tell everyone who she was deep down. But maybe that's why Rhys was so good at being famous, because he didn't care. She couldn't do what he did. She couldn't live in the spotlight.

But if things worked out between them, would that be where she ended up anyway? Whether she wanted it or not?

Being with him meant the public knowing about her, and picking her apart. She didn't know if she could handle that kind of scrutiny.

“So you didn't tell them about you?” he asked, and she shrugged slightly. “Because you don't want them to know, or because you're embarrassed?” She shrugged again.

“Don't you think they'd think I'm weird? Or that something is wrong with me?” she asked, and he snorted.

“I don't think there's anything you could tell those girls that would make them think anything is wrong with you,” he

said. “The things Tate told me he did to Audrey—” Ana’s eyes went wide before she smacked his shoulder.

“Erase that from your memory,” she hissed. “I don’t want you to think about my best friend’s sex life.”

“Hey! It’s not like I wanted to know that shit,” he said, holding his hand up placatingly. “He told me without my consent.” She let out a small giggle that made him smile and brush another kiss to her lips.

“She told me a little bit, but nothing about him being her Dom,” she said, and he shrugged.

“I don’t think they defined it, but I think they were into some shit.” He ran his fingers through her hair, gently combing the tangles out. He couldn’t stop touching her, and she had to admit she never wanted him to.

She chewed her lip as a question danced on her tongue. She knew they’d already agreed to the whole Daddy thing, but apart from just calling him Daddy a few times, things hadn’t progressed. Even when she slipped slightly into Little space, when she came out it still hadn’t felt like the dynamic she thought they should have.

She wondered if he’d been holding back, too.

“Are you my Dom?” she blurted. Rhys blinked, and his hand fell away from her face.

“I thought that’s what we agreed to?” he said slowly. “I thought you wanted me to be your Daddy.”

“I do.” She gripped his rough hand between hers. “It’s just —” She let out a long breath. How did she explain this? “In the books I’ve read, the Daddy would’ve already gone over limits and punishments. And—I don’t know.” Her shoulders slumped.

“I didn’t want to terrify you by discussing punishments,” he said. “And I thought when you were ready to talk limits, we could. I wasn’t planning on forcing you into anything sexual before you’re ready.”

“I know,” she sighed.

He was silent for a long moment, his eyes burning into the side of her face. Finally, he tapped her leg and she ungracefully slid from his lap.

“First, let’s come up with a safe word,” he said. She bit her lip as she thought. “Something that you’ll remember, and something you wouldn’t naturally say during sex, or a punishment, or regular conversations.” Her lips twisted to the side.

“Sprinkles,” she said, and he chuckled.

“Alright, sprinkles. If you say that, everything stops. It doesn’t matter what it is, it stops. And if you say it while we’re out somewhere, I’ll take you somewhere else immediately.”

“Is there a limit on how many times I can say it?” she asked, and his brows rose.

“Of course, not,” he said. “Say it whenever you’re hurt, or scared, or anxious. If you’re uncomfortable, or feel sick. It doesn’t matter the reason, if you’re unwell, say it.” She took a deep breath as she nodded.

“Alright. Let’s talk limits now.”

“What?”

“Limits,” he repeated as he stood. “What are yours?” Her mouth opened and closed. She stood frozen to the spot as she watched him stroll across her little apartment and sink onto the couch. He watched her, his brows raised expectantly.

With a deep breath, she made her way to him, sitting on the other end of the sofa. She kicked her shoes off before folding her legs under herself.

“What are yours?” she asked, not wanting to answer first. He tilted his head to the side, as if he was contemplating telling her or not. Finally, he nodded and turned more toward her.

“I don’t like blood play,” he said, then shook his head. “Actually, I don’t like most play with bodily fluids.” She scrunched her nose in agreement. “I don’t like being restrained, but I like restraining someone else. I don’t like

intense breath play. A little light choking is hot, but when water or plastic bags are introduced, I'm out." She nodded her agreement. "But honestly, I'm open to most things. Those are the few I can think of off the top of my head. Your turn, sweets." He flashed her a grin, and she huffed out a laugh .

Her smile slowly fell as she thought about all the things she knew without a shadow of a doubt were her hard limits, everything she'd already gone through and never wanted to experience again.

"No degradation," she said quietly. "It would hurt my feelings if you called me names, made fun of me, made me feel worthless, or were mean to me."

"I don't think I could do it even if you wanted me to," he admitted, and she dropped her eyes as she smiled.

"No hitting," she whispered, her smile disappearing again. "Nothing with fire. No drugs. No yelling at me. Don't touch me when I'm sleeping—I mean, cuddling is fine. But don't—I don't like—"

Her chest tightened, and she rubbed her hand over it in a small circle. She tried to breathe through the rising panic, but it was hard with all the memories rushing in.

"Hey," Rhys cooed as he slid toward her. "Baby, hey. Stay with me." He rested his hand over hers on her chest. "I'm here. Daddy's here, sweets. You're okay. You're safe."

He couldn't know what those words meant to her. Tears filled her eyes, and she tried to blink them away.

She moved closer to him, until she was almost sitting on his lap. She just needed to be close to him, to feel his warmth, listen to his steady heartbeat.

"My ex used to do that," she croaked, her eyes glued to the floor. "I used to wake up to him on top of me, inside me." Her voice broke, and she dug her face further into Rhys' chest. He was silent, but his arms around her tightened. "I didn't like it. I didn't—he wouldn't stop, though. But I didn't want him to—" She roughly wiped at her face. "I didn't—"

“Shh,” he soothed. He rested his hand over her head, holding her closer. He held her as she breathed through the memories flooding her. “If I ever see your ex, I am going to fucking kill him.”

She pressed her body harder against his, needing to be closer.

“I hope you never meet him,” she said. “He’s a monster.”

“I’m a bigger monster.”

But he wasn’t.

He wasn’t scarier than Josh had been. He was abusive, strong, and wasn’t afraid of anything. He didn’t have anything to lose. He didn’t care. Rhys cared. He had people relying on him—she relied on him.

She didn’t want to think about what would happen if Josh ever got his hands on Rhys. Rhys was taller and broader than Josh was, but Josh liked weapons and she knew he’d shoot or stab Rhys before Rhys could even lift his fist. And if he died or got hurt, it would be her fault. She couldn’t live with herself if anything happened to him.

“Did he do those other things to you?” Rhys asked quietly, almost like he didn’t want to hear the answer. She swallowed thickly before nodding.

“He was mean,” she whispered. “He called me names all the time, and hit me sometimes. Sometimes he’d put drugs in my drinks without me knowing. That’s usually when I’d wake up to him above me.” Rhys let out a low sound in his chest, his arms shaking from how tightly he was holding her.

“The fire?” he growled.

“It happened once,” she winced. “By accident.” He stayed silent as he waited for her to tell him the story. “He was lighting a cigarette, and my hair got too close to the flame and singed. He got mad, and—” Her eyes squeezed tightly shut as she took a deep breath. “And he pressed his cigarette against my arm because he was mad that I was so stupid.”

Rhys didn’t say a word.

His body was taut, nearly vibrating from how much he was trying to hold himself together.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said, his jaw clenched. He pressed his lips to her head and held them there for a long time. She breathed him in, trying to keep the memories at bay and stay in the present with him.

Even if Josh was out of prison, he didn’t know where she was. He wouldn’t find her. He might not even care about her anymore. It’d been two years since he got locked up. Maybe he’d grown up and moved on with his life. She desperately wanted to believe he’d turned over a new leaf and was a good person now.

Deep down, she knew the truth. She knew he was still just as monstrous today as he’d been years ago.

“What else?” Rhys finally asked, his breath brushing against her hair. She chewed on her lip as she thought.

“Nothing,” she said. “Well, nothing else for limits. I could write a book about everything Josh did.” She felt his throat bob as he swallowed.

“I really am going to kill him,” he said. The dark promise in his voice made goosebumps rise over her skin, and she shuddered. He kissed her head and pulled away enough to look down at her. She tipped her head back, and he brushed his fingertips along her cheek before tucking her hair behind her ear. “I was going to talk about punishments tonight, but—” He took a deep breath as she shook his head. “I can’t even think about it.” He searched her eyes, his hand still cupping her cheek.

“We can talk about it,” she said. Honestly, she just wanted to get it over with. She just wanted to move on, and have everything out in the open. At least, where limits were concerned. She wasn’t ready to tell him everything about her past, and she didn’t think he really wanted to know.

He stared at her for a long moment. “You sure?” he asked. She nodded and tried to give him a reassuring smile. Of course, he didn’t buy it. “I don’t want to spank you. Not since

you've already had to deal with a boyfriend hurting you. I can't—" He cut himself off, the muscle in his jaw feathering.

"But it's not the same," she rushed out, but he shook his head.

"I'd be no better than him if I hurt you," he said.

She didn't want to argue or push him if he felt uncomfortable. But she also didn't want him to treat her any differently. This was why she didn't tell anyone about what happened to her. They treated her with kid gloves, and it made her feel like even more of a victim. And even if it didn't seem like she'd done a lot of work since Josh left her life, she had.

She was way better than she'd been when she first moved to Sawyer, and she wasn't as afraid of men anymore. She'd worked hard to not think of herself as a victim, but when people looked at her the way Rhys was looking at her, it was hard to forget that's what she was.

"Please." She searched his eyes. "I can't stand you thinking I'm broken."

"I don't think that."

"But you think I'm fragile—"

"You are," he said. "You *are* fragile, baby."

"No," she whispered, her chin quivering. "I'm strong." His face softened.

"Shit. Of course you are, Ana." He wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly to his chest. "I know you're strong, baby. I know that. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

Tears slipped freely from her eyes. No matter how hard she tried, they wouldn't stop.

"I meant you're precious to me," he murmured, squeezing her tighter. "And the thought of you ever going through any pain in your life makes me irrationally angry. I can't stand the idea of hurting you further."

She felt all the emotions she'd held in over the years boil to the surface. She tried to push them away, tried to ignore the

questions she'd always asked herself blaring in her mind, but she couldn't keep them away.

"Why would he do that to me?" she cried.

Rhys froze.

"What?" he croaked. She pulled away again.

"How could he do what he did?" More tears streamed from her eyes. "Why would he do it? Was I that bad?"

"No," he said. "You were never bad."

"But—"

"There was never a reason for him to raise his hand to you," he said fiercely. "*Never*, Ana. It was never your fault. I wish I could take your pain away, baby, but I can't." Her chin trembled further. "I don't know how or why he did it. I wish I could give you a reason. But I can't. I can't fix this. I can't—" Tears lined his eyes. "I can't do anything to make you feel better. I can't make you forget what happened to you. I can't go back in time and save you from ever meeting him. I just can't, Ana. And I'm so fucking sorry. Knowing you were there, in fucking New York, only a few years ago and getting hurt? You were so close to me. I should've known. I should've found you sooner. I should've saved you."

She crumbled against his chest, and he held her.

"It's not your fault," she said, sniffing hard.

"I should've protected you," he rasped.

"You didn't know me." He roughly shook his head.

"Doesn't matter—" He cleared his throat. "I don't know if I can ever spank you." She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand.

She didn't know if it was a terrible idea to have him spank her. She didn't know if she was clinically insane to *want* him to spank her.

But she did.

She wanted to try. She didn't want him to hold back. If he was going to be her Daddy, she wanted all of him—punishments and all.

“If I'm naughty, I want you to spank me,” she finally said, pulling away from him again. He stared at her, his eyes shifting between hers. Slowly, he reached up and cupped her cheek, gently stroking his thumb along it and wiping the wetness away.

“I don't want you to think I'm like him,” he murmured. Her throat tightened at his words, and tears burned the back of her eyes.

“I would never think that,” she whispered.

He stared at her, and she desperately wished she could read minds. She wanted to know what he was thinking. She wanted him to know what she was thinking, what she was feeling.

“Please.” They stared at each other, the room thick with tension. Finally, he let out a long breath.

“You really want me to spank you?” he asked.

“I really do,” she whispered. He ran his fingers through his hair, making it stand on end.

Reaching out, he grabbed her hand, and stroked his thumb along the back of it, his eyes trained on it. “I don't know if I can do it right now.”

“That's okay.” She squeezed his finger, and he cracked a small smile. “I can wait until you're ready.”

“I saw this conversation going very differently,” he said, huffing out a laugh. “I really thought I was going to have to walk you through a spanking, not the other way around.” She sighed as she rested her head on his shoulder again.

“I guess you should start calling me Daddy, huh?”

There was a beat of silence, and she almost wondered if she said the wrong thing. Was the joke stupid? Did he not want to be teased about that? Before she could spiral completely, he barked out a laugh.

“Yeah, not a chance, sweets.” He kissed the top of her head again, and she nestled deeper into him.

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chapter nineteen

He felt weird after Ana told him about her past. He couldn't stop thinking about everything she'd endured, and wondered how she was still so sweet. How could someone go through that and not hate the world?

He felt like the luckiest bastard in the world that she wanted anything to do with him—he felt even luckier because she actually fucking trusted him. And in that moment, when he saw the way she looked at him like he'd given her the fucking moon on a string, he silently vowed to never break that trust. To never, ever do anything that could possibly make her question her faith in him.

She glanced up at him, and he tried to give her one of his usual smiles, but he couldn't. Not when images of her bruised and burned were playing on a loop in his mind.

“Wanna play?” she asked. He blinked a few times, her words not registering for a moment. When they did, the corner of his mouth tucked up.

“Play what?” he asked, and she looked back at the coffee table. He'd cleaned up their blanket fort after he helped her to bed last night, but he left the things he'd bought her on the coffee table.

She slid from the couch onto the floor and crossed her legs. He waited for her to reach for the book, but she didn't. She grabbed one of the little activity books instead—which was still a book, but different. He chuckled to himself as he watched her flip through the pages.

Finally, she stopped on one and looked up at him.

“Tic-tac-toe,” she said, tapping the paper. “I’m really good at it.”

“Are you, sweets?” He maneuvered himself into a sitting position on the floor beside her, but had to keep one leg stretched out. How the fuck she was so flexible, he didn’t know.

She handed him a yellow marker and kept the pink one for herself. He stared at her for a moment. After she told him about her trauma, he’d expected her to want to be alone, or that she would close herself off, but she wasn’t doing that. Instead, she looked lighter. Her smile was brighter—it seemed more genuine. It was like the weight of her past had been lifted from her shoulders.

“I’ll go first,” she said, and he grinned. He rested his arm along the back of the couch behind her, absently twirling her hair around his finger as she marked a heart on the center square.

“I think that’s supposed to be a circle.” He tapped the heart, and she shrugged.

“I like hearts and stars.” He chuckled before drawing a star in one of the boxes. He knew she was already ten steps ahead of him, that she was anticipating his next move, and the move after that. He knew she’d win, whether he was trying or not.

Finally, she drew a heart, and leaned back against the couch, her eyes still darting around the page. He scanned the board before drawing his star. She let out a hard huff, and he glanced at her.

“You were supposed to put it here,” she mumbled, tapping another square.

“Was I?” he teased. “I didn’t know you were playing for both of us.” Her eyes shifted to him, and if looks could kill, he’d be dead. “Wipe that look off your face, sweets.” He leaned closer to her, and she pressed her shoulder into his side. “If you’re a sore loser, we won’t play competitive games anymore.” She rolled her eyes—really fucking dramatically rolled her eyes.

And damn him, it was fucking adorable.

“Sweets,” he growled, but she ignored him as she drew her heart. He didn’t know why she was pouting; all she had to do was put her heart in the final box and she’d win. He watched her from the corner of his eye as he drew his star.

“*Daddy*,” she groaned. “You weren’t supposed to put it there either.” He still wasn’t used to hearing her call him Daddy, but fuck if he didn’t love it. Lightly, he gripped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and turned her head toward him.

“Where was I supposed to put it?” he asked. “Here?” He kissed her forehead. “Or here?” He kissed her nose, and she giggled. “Here?” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it. “Where?”

“Here,” she laughed, pointing at another box on the paper.

“Oh.” He hit his forehead, and she giggled again. It was like music. “Silly me.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Silly Daddy.”

He kissed her cheek as she drew her final heart before slashing a line through the three of them. She smiled triumphantly up at him, and he couldn’t help but smile back.

It was that moment he realized what she was doing. She was making him feel better—*her*, the one who’d suffered the abuse, was making *him*, the one who just had to sit and listen to it, feel better. It should’ve been the other way around. He should’ve been comforting her; she didn’t need to comfort him. He hadn’t gone through anything like that, but she had. And she still managed to put a real smile on her pretty face, but more than that, she managed to put a smile on everyone’s face.

“There’s a crossword, too,” she said, flipping the page. He put his hand over it, stopping her, and she looked back at him. “What?”

“Do you wanna get out of the house for a while?” he asked, and she shrugged. “We could go to the store and you could pick out some real toys. Or some more books, and I can

read to you again tonight.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “Or we could look for some big girl toys.”

“In Sawyer?” Her eyes widened. “There’s not a store like that here.”

“There’s one in Greenpine,” he said. Impossibly, her eyes widened even more. “Have you ever been to one?”

“Never,” she breathed, shaking her head. “Are they gross?” She scrunched her nose, and he threw his head back, laughing.

“No, they’re not gross,” he said.

“I thought they have those weird back rooms where men go to—to—”

“To what, sweets?” he asked. Her face was bright red, and he leaned closer. “What do they do there?”

“You know,” she mumbled.

“I don’t know.” He nudged her cheek with his nose. “Tell me.”

“You know,” she said again, groaning. “They—*touch themselves*.” She whispered the words like she was afraid someone would overhear. He let out a breathy laugh as he pulled away.

“I don’t think they have rooms like that anymore,” he said. “Maybe. But I haven’t seen one.”

“Have you looked?” She narrowed her eyes as she watched him.

“I mean,” he shrugged, “I am part of a sex club, sweets. I’ve seen a lot of men jacking off in my life.” Her mouth dropped open.

“You’ve watched?” she hissed.

“It’s hard to ignore,” he said defensively. “I don’t just stare at them. That’s rude. And weird. How did this get so turned around?”

“You’re the one who said you watch men—doing that,” she said.

“I didn’t say I watch them.”

“But you’ve seen them—”

“Which is *very* different from watching them,” he said. She was trying to hide her smile, and it was then he realized what she was doing. “You’re trolling me, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t do something like that, Daddy,” she said innocently.

“Sure.” He gave her a look, one that said he didn’t believe her in the slightest, and pushed to his feet.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he held his hand out.

“We’re going to the sex store,” he said. She froze. “Did you think I was kidding?”

“Well, I didn’t think you were serious.”

“Oh, I’m dead serious, sweets.” He grinned down at her. “Come on.”



THE SEX STORE WAS NOT WHAT SHE’D BEEN EXPECTING. IT WAS nice. And clean. And she didn’t see any weird men in corners or heading off to the back rooms to do their business.

She tried to stop herself from making a face at the thought.

How could Rhys casually see men doing that and not be scarred for life? She’d seen Josh do it once and couldn’t get the image out of her mind, not even if she scrubbed it with bleach.

Her face had been bright red since the second she stepped into the store. Rhys seemed comfortable, which she guessed

after going to a sex club in New York City, most things probably didn't faze him anymore.

"What about this?" Rhys asked as he held up a massive pink dildo. "It's even your favorite color."

"Oh my God," she groaned. "Please put that down." He chuckled to himself, looking oh so pleased that he was embarrassing her.

"Okay, this one then." He reached for an even bigger dildo and she grabbed his wrist.

"Stop it," she hissed. He just flashed her a grin and continued guiding her down the aisle.

Despite being a literal famous rockstar, no one had bothered them. No one had even looked in their direction. To be fair, though, other than the two of them, there was only the worker and another customer in the store. Maybe they had no idea who he was.

Which was probably good.

She'd have to find the nearest bridge to jump off if photos of them looking at dildos leaked to the tabloids. She wouldn't have a choice but to become a shut-in and never leave her house ever again. There was no way she would ever be able to show her face in Sawyer.

"What about—"

"Rhys," she groaned. He nudged her, and she leaned into him.

"I don't think that's what you're supposed to call me, sweets," he said in a low voice. She glared up at him, and he wrapped his arm around her, bringing her closer to his side.

Lowering his mouth to her ear, he whispered, "Wipe that look off your face or Daddy will take you into one of the gross back rooms, bend you over, and spank your cute little ass."

She gasped and jerked away from him, her eyes wider than they'd ever been.

“You can’t do that,” she said, her hands covering her bottom. “And—and there are no back rooms.”

“There aren’t?” He looked over her head, then shrugged. “I guess I’d have to do it right here, out in the open, then.”

“You wouldn’t.”

He dropped his hand to her ass, and she squealed as she ran away. His laughter followed her down the aisle, and she smiled to herself.

When was the last time she’d felt this free? Or happy?

Even though the girls were her best friends and she loved them dearly, the freedom and happiness she felt with Rhys was different. Not better or worse than what she felt with her friends, just different.

She couldn’t remember a time in her life when she didn’t have to worry about something. Something about being with him made her forget her troubles because she knew he’d take care of it, that he’d take care of her.

“We have to buy something,” he said, stepping beside her. She took a deep breath as she looked at the wall of vibrators. There were a million different ones—different sizes, colors, shapes. All the choices overwhelmed her.

She watched as he reached for a little pink rabbit vibrator. Her throat was tight as he inspected it, then held it up to her.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Think we could have some fun with this?” He waved it around, and she felt her face heat.

“Can you stop playing with it?” she asked, grabbing his arm and trying to force him to lower it.

“You do know we’re in a sex store, right?” he teased. “I think you’re the only one here that’s embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” she huffed. He smiled at her, his eyes soft and gentle.

She knew he was just trying to get her out of her head and help her loosen up. She didn’t mean to make his life harder,

and she didn't want him to think she was a prude, but this was still so new between them—sex was still new to her.

Even though she wasn't a virgin, she hadn't had the best experiences around sex. In the beginning, Josh had been gentle with her. She liked sleeping with him. But then he got rougher, and started doing things she hated, and she started to hate him—she started to hate sex.

With Rhys, she trusted him enough to know he'd take care of her and not make her feel uncomfortable, and she knew if she asked him to stop, he would. She hadn't known him long, but she trusted him.

And even though he was teasing her, she still felt herself growing wetter and wetter at the idea of him using any of these toys on her.

“You don't want anything for yourself?” she asked, grabbing the vibrator from him.

She'd never held one before. Riley showed her her collection, but Ana had never wanted to touch any of them. Not after hearing all the things Riley did with them, all the places she put them.

“Like what?” he asked, tilting his head to watch her. She shrugged as she looked at the rows of toys.

“This?” She grabbed a metal thing, tapered at one end, flared at the other.

“I'm definitely not wearing a butt plug,” he laughed. “I'll buy it for you, though.” She threw it back at the wall.

“No thanks,” she squeaked.

“Is that a hard limit?” he asked quietly. “You'd never be interested in anal?”

“Can you not talk so loud?” She looked around to see if anyone had overheard them, but no one was around.

“No one here cares,” he said. “Answer me.”

“I've never done it,” she whispered. “I don't know.”

He thought for a moment, his eyes trained on her before he grabbed the butt plug she'd just discarded. It had a little pink gem on the flared end, and it made her cheeks flush even more.

There was no way he actually thought she'd wear that.

He didn't try to hide it. He was holding it almost proudly, and a part of her wanted to laugh, but a bigger part wanted to find a hole and hide in it.

“What else?” He tapped his finger against his chin. “Oh, this.” He grabbed a weird looking thing and held it up to her. Her brows twitched together in silent question. “Vibrating cock ring.”

Her lips parted, shocked. She didn't know why she was shocked. She'd seen cock rings—again, thanks to Riley—but she'd never seen one that looked like *that*.

“You'll wear it when we—when we do it?” she whispered the last words, and he laughed, his white teeth sparkling under the dim lighting.

“Yeah, sweets. I'll wear it when I fuck you.” Her mouth opened even more, and his eyes dropped to it. “Not when I fuck your mouth, though.”

“Oh my God,” she breathed. She wanted to cover her face, but didn't want to bring the vibrator she was holding anywhere near it, so she squeezed it tightly in her hand. “I think three toys are plenty. Can we go now?”

“Eager to try them out?” he teased, laughing at the way her face flushed even more.

“*Please,*” she whined. He pressed a light kiss to her forehead before grabbing her hand and leading her toward the check-out.

She couldn't believe she was buying sex toys—well, she couldn't believe the hottest man she'd ever seen was buying her sex toys. And that he was her boyfriend.

That part was still throwing her through a freaking loop.

chapter twenty

After they got in the truck and Rhys helped buckle her in, he started heading home. It was only a half-hour drive, and on the way to the store, it seemed to drag on. Now they were walking into Ana's apartment, but he felt like they'd only just left the store.

He thought it was fucking adorable how embarrassed she'd been while they looked at everything. If she was really uncomfortable, he would've taken her home immediately. But he saw how she stared at everything in wonder and curiosity. He knew she wanted everything they'd bought, and he knew she was as excited as him to try everything out.

Even if she felt awkward about it.

But he'd show her how fun it could be to play with toys in the bedroom, and how they'd only improve their sex life. Not that he didn't think he could please her without them, he knew he could. But he wanted to make her come over and over and over, and knew he'd need something to help him out.

Plus, who didn't want to watch their girl writhe as they got fucked with a vibrator on the most intense setting?

"I'll clean these," Rhys said, holding the bags up.

"We're using them right now?" He loved the way her eyes widened when he said things that she couldn't believe. He let out a breathy laugh.

"We can," he said. "But it's nice when they're already clean and ready to go. We won't have to stop in the middle of whatever we're doing to do it." She nodded like she agreed,

but her eyes were still wide as she stared at him. “Unless you want to use one right now?” He took a step toward her, and she backed up, hitting the table. “I could watch you fuck yourself for hours.”

“Rhys—”

“What’s my name, sweets?” he growled.

“Daddy,” she breathed.

“Good girl.”

He loved watching her melt at those words. They were just two simple words, and when he said them, she became a puddle for him. He knew if he reached between her legs, he’d find her soaked. She’d probably been soaked since the second they stepped into the sex store earlier.

While he quickly cleaned everything, she curled up in the corner of the couch with her eReader. She was lost in her own little world while she read, she hadn’t even sensed him sitting on the other end of the couch and watching her. She skimmed the words quickly, and she had such a cute little scowl between her brows, like she was concentrating *really* hard on what she was reading.

“What’s this book about?” he asked. She nearly threw the eReader in the air, her chest heaving as she clutched it against her.

“Make some noise,” she said breathlessly.

“I’ve been sitting here for a few minutes,” he laughed. “It’s not my fault you don’t pay attention.” She was still breathing hard, and the screen was still pressed firmly against her chest. “What are you reading?”

“What? Nothing.” Her fingertips were white from how hard she was pressing against her eReader. He tilted his head to the side as he watched her.

“What is it?” he asked again, scooting closer.

“Nothing.” She shook her head and leaned away from him.

Okay, now he had to know what it was. If she was hiding it from him, it had to be good.

He reached for it, and she pushed back against the arm of the couch, her back sliding up until her ass was planted firmly on it. Whatever was on her screen, she really didn't want him to see.

"Give it to me," he said, holding his hand out. She shook her head.

"Nuh uh."

"Anastasia," he growled, but she shook her head again. "Let me see."

"No way."

"Is it dirty?" he asked, and her cheeks reddened. "Is your book Daddy doing something really depraved and perverted?" She gasped, looking horrified.

"He's not a depraved pervert," she said.

"Not the point," Rhys laughed. "Are you reading something naughty?" She stared at him for a long moment before finally dipping her chin in a slight nod. "Read it to me."

"I can't do that!" She looked even more horrified at that.

"Why don't I read it to you, then?" He flashed her one of his famous grins, and her breath hitched. "Why don't I read it, and you try out that new little toy you bought today?" She blinked a few times, still looking thoroughly shocked.

"I can't do that," she breathed. "Not with you watching."

"When else will you use it?" he asked, tilting his head to the side. "You're not allowed to use it alone. Unless Daddy tells you to, of course."

"You can't be serious," she said. "You can't tell me when to—" She shook her head. "I can't do it in front of you."

"Sure you can. I'll fuck my fist in front of you," he said, his voice dipping. "And you'll let me watch you fuck yourself until your throat is raw from screaming."

He wasn't entirely sure if she was breathing.

Her eyes dropped to his crotch, and he subtly lifted his hips, trying to adjust himself. He'd mostly been kidding when he said she could use her toy tonight, but now that she was looking at him like that, like she was fucking starving, he didn't want anything more than to sit here and watch her fuck herself for the rest of the night.

He made his way across the little apartment, feeling her eyes boring into his back the entire way, as he grabbed her little rabbit vibrator. She carefully watched him as he held it up, his brow rising in silent question.

"In here?" she whispered, looking around her living room. He didn't see why they couldn't do it here. It's not like she had a roommate they had to worry about walking in and seeing them in the middle of anything.

"Yep," he said, giving her a firm nod as he sat in his spot again. He eyed her outfit, the little pastel green and white plaid skirt was fucking killing him. "Leave your skirt on. Just take your panties off."

He watched her throat bob as she swallowed thickly. But, surprisingly, she stood, putting her eReader on the coffee table before slipping her panties down her soft thighs. She stepped out of them, and he tried not to palm his cock over his jeans at the sight of the wetness on them.

She sank back to her side, her back pressed against the arm of the couch facing him, and knees pressed tightly together. Her lip was between her teeth, her cheeks already flushed.

"Open your legs for me, sweets," he rasped. He gripped the vibrator in his trembling hand. Slowly, she let her knees fall apart. She was bare, and dripping, and his mouth watered at the sight, at the memory of how she tasted. He'd originally wanted to hear her read to him, or read to her, he didn't care. But now, that book and idea was long forgotten. "Keep them open, baby. Don't close them until I tell you to." She nodded, and he shook his head. "Say, *yes, Daddy.*"

"Yes, Daddy."

“Such a good girl,” he praised. She tried to hide her smile, but failed. He scooted closer to her and ran his hand up her shin to her knee. Goosebumps rose over her skin as he stroked her leg, up and down, up and down. “You ever use one of these?” He held the vibrator up, and she shook her head.

“No, Daddy,” she breathed. She was a quick learner, or maybe calling him Daddy just turned her on as much as it turned him on.

He pressed the button to turn it on, and watched as her breathing became shallow. It was only on the first setting, but he knew it would still drive her wild.

Slowly, he slid it up her inner thigh, stopping before he touched her dripping pussy. She let out a soft, breathy moan and let her legs open wider.

He wanted her wetter. He wanted her so out of her mind with desire that she cried and begged him to fuck her.

He kept her skirt down, letting his hand disappear underneath to tease her. There was something about doing it like that that made him even more turned on, like they were sneaking around, doing something naughty.

Slowly, he dragged the tip over her mound, and she whimpered. He let the blunt tip run along her seam, never pressing hard enough to give her any relief. Teasing, and teasing, and teasing.

“Please,” she groaned, dropping her head back. She lifted her hips, silently begging him, but he wasn’t ready yet. “Daddy, *please*.”

“Please what, sweets?” he asked. “Tell Daddy exactly what you want.”

It wasn’t that he liked to watch her squirm—okay, maybe a little, but he wanted to make sure they were on the same page, that he was about to fuck her with this toy until she thought she couldn’t take anymore.

“More,” she whimpered, and he shook his head. Not good enough. He continued teasing her, dragging it around and around, making her wild. “Can you—” She looked like she

was really struggling to get the words out—maybe he should've felt bad about it. And he did. Kind of.

“Can I do what, baby?” he asked. He pressed the tip of the vibrator right above her slit, close enough to her clit for her to feel, but still far enough away to not give her enough stimulation to come.

“Can you put it inside me?” she whispered, her face flushing bright red. He smiled proudly, as he lowered the vibrator to her clit. She cried out, bunching the cushions into fists at her sides as she threw her head back.

“Lift your skirt, sweets. Let Daddy see.”

Her hands shook as she brought them to the hem of her skirt. Slowly, she dragged the fabric up her thighs, exposing herself fully to him. She really was dripping for him—a small wet spot appeared on the fabric under her, and it made him feral to know she was that turned on by him.

Slowly, he slid the vibrator down, gathering her wetness on it as he positioned it at her entrance. He'd never been so fucking jealous of an inanimate object before.

He pressed into her, and her back arched.

“Fuck,” he breathed, flicking his eyes from her pussy to her face, unsure of where he wanted to look. She slid her hands onto her thighs, her fingers gripping the soft flesh as he pressed further inside of her. “That's it, sweets. You're taking it like such a good girl.”

She moaned at the words and dug her fingers into her thighs harder, her nails biting the skin. Finally, he bottomed out and pressed the rabbit ears firmly against her clit before turning the vibrations up a few notches.

Her eyes flew open and she stared at him. “Oh my God,” she breathed. He thrust the toy shallowly, knowing it was rubbing against her g-spot and making her feel things she'd probably never felt before.

“Does that feel good?” he asked, and she frantically nodded. He palmed his cock over his jeans, digging the heel of his hand into his bulge. He'd never been this hard in his

fucking life. It was painful. He just wanted to take his cock out and bury himself inside her, not coming out until he'd filled her with his cum.

Her eyes dropped to his hand, and he thrust his hips up, grinding into his palm. He'd never thought he liked being watched, but right now, with her eyes burning him alive, he wanted to give her a show.

He clicked the button a few more times, until it was on its highest setting, and watched her mouth hang open, no words or breath leaving her. He forgot about himself for a moment while he fucked her harder with the vibrator. Her pussy stretched around it, her lips hugging the toy tightly.

Pre-cum leaked from his tip and soaked into his boxers, probably through them to his jeans. But he didn't care. He just gripped his length over his jeans again, letting out a low groan at the feeling.

Ana's breath stuttered, her mouth opening more. "Too much!" she cried, moving her hands to his forearm. Her nails dug into his skin, and he growled at the pain. He ground harder into his hand, the rough fabric and harsh grip edging him.

"Not too much," he growled. "Come for me, sweets. Come for Daddy."

Her legs clamped together as she screamed, her entire body convulsing as she came. He forced the toy to keep moving, forced her to ride out her pleasure until she was totally spent.

"Daddy!" she screamed. "No more. Please. I can't. It's too much!" Her words were clipped and breathless. She shoved at his arm, but he kept it there.

"One more," he said.

"No!" Her head thrashed back and forth.

"Is that your safe word?" he asked, thrusting the toy in and out harder. He knew she must be dying. The vibration was shooting up his arm and it was intense, so it had to be a lot for her poor, sensitive pussy.

She whimpered, but finally shook her head. He pushed the toy in as far as it would go, making sure the two long pieces were rubbing on her clit, sending her toward the edge again.

“Fuck, baby. My dick is about to snap in half,” he muttered. There was a beat of silence.

“Will you put it in me?” she asked, her voice shaking. “I want to feel you. Not the toy anymore.” His breath caught.

“You want me to fuck you, sweets?” His voice was guttural, one he’d never heard before.

“Please, Daddy.” Her legs began shaking again, and he moved the toy faster.

“Come one more time,” he said. She held her breath as her back arched. Her nails dug deeper into his forearm before her thighs trapped his arm between them. He couldn’t move anymore, but he didn’t care. He just watched her come undone in front of him again, listened to the sounds she made, and nearly ripped the toy out and plunged his cock inside her. But he waited until she collapsed back to the couch.

Slowly, he pulled it out and turned it off. He’d clean it later, but right now, he needed to fuck his girl.

“I don’t have any condoms,” he said. “But I’m clean.”

“I haven’t slept with anyone in years,” she said as she tried to catch her breath. “I’m clean too.”

“Are you on birth control?” She bit her lip and he knew the answer before she said it.

“No,” she breathed.

Something about that turned him on even more.

“Do you care if I fuck you raw?” he asked, and she shook her head. He leaned forward, wedging himself between her legs and pressed a hard kiss to her mouth. “Come on. I’m not fucking you on the couch for our first time.”

He helped her stand, but her legs wobbled too much, so he scooped her into his arms and hauled ass across the apartment. He tossed her on her bed, and she stared back at him, shocked.

“Ready, sweets?”

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chapter twenty-one

Anna's mouth went dry as she watched him slide his shirt over his head. She hadn't seen him shirtless, and now that she had, she was even more self-conscious. How would a man who looked like *that* want to be with a girl who looked like her?

He had muscles in places she didn't even know someone could have muscles. And he had a tattoo on his pec she'd never seen before. Fuck, she was in way over her head with him.

He unbuckled his belt, but she could barely focus on his movements. She was too distracted by the deep V that disappeared into his jeans, and was anxiously waiting to see what it pointed to.

She'd seen the bulge in his jeans, and it wasn't exactly small.

"Stop looking at me like that," he said as he tossed the belt to the floor.

"Like what?" she breathed.

"Like I'm a piece of meat." Her eyes snapped up to him, finding him grinning down at her.

"Aren't you?" she asked.

She had no idea where she'd found the audacity, but she was kind of glad she did because the look on his face was *so* worth it.

He barked out a laugh before kicking his boots off. "You're such a little brat," he said, shaking his head. "You're

lucky you're so fucking cute." She couldn't help the stupid smile that spread across her face.

She hadn't realized he'd unzipped his pants until they hit the floor and he was standing in nothing but his boxers. Her gulp was audible—and so fucking embarrassing.

"Your turn," he said. He didn't move onto the bed, or move any closer to her. He just stood in the same spot, watching her. "Take everything off. Let Daddy see what he owns."

"Oh good God," she muttered. Who knew such a possessive statement could be so hot?

Slowly, she shifted to her knees and kneeled on the bed before him. It must've been the two mind-shattering orgasms that had her lose all her filters and inhibitions, because she slid her shirt off over her head, tossing it to the floor with his discarded clothes.

"Jesus," he breathed, his eyes dropping to her chest. His hands bunched at his sides, like he was forcing himself to not touch her. She reached back and unhooked her bra, hesitating for only a moment before letting it fall away. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "The skirt."

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth before lowering the zipper on the side of her skirt. Her hands shook the entire time, either from her body recovering from the back-to-back orgasms, or the anxiety of sleeping with Rhys for the first time.

Finally, it fell to the bed, and she was fully naked before him. She wrapped her arms around herself, hiding the bit of squishiness she had on her belly.

"Don't," he grabbed her wrist, stopping her, "hide from me." Their gazes met and held, and her breath caught. The fierceness in his eyes, in his tone, made her lower her arms back to her sides. "That's my girl." He kissed her forehead, and even though she was naked and they were seconds away from having sex, she felt cherished.

She felt loved.

She pushed that word and thought way away. Now was not the time to think about that, it wasn't the time to say it, or feel it. It was definitely too soon, and she was definitely insane for even letting the word slip into her mind.

Her spiral stopped when he stood straight and hooked his thumbs under the waistband of his boxers. Her entire mind went silent when he shoved them down his legs and gripped his cock tightly in his fist.

She'd been trying to mentally prepare herself for him, but jeez, nothing she'd imagined was like the real thing. Big wasn't the right word. Pretty was weird, but accurate.

Without thinking, she reached forward, but stopped herself before she touched him. She lifted her eyes to his, finding them hooded as he watched her.

"You can touch me," he murmured. With her eyes still on his, she slid off the bed and kneeled in front of him on the floor. "I didn't mean—" His words cut off as she wrapped her hand around him, her fingers barely able to touch. "*Fuck.*"

"Can I put you in my mouth?" she asked, gently stroking him. She'd always liked giving head. She preferred it to fucking Josh, and before him, she'd always enjoyed the feeling of making her partner feel good. There was just something about it that she thoroughly loved.

"Fuck yes," he hissed. She kept her eyes on his as she leaned forward and hesitantly licked the fat, pink head. He made a sound low in his throat as he rested his hand on the back of her head. "That's it, sweets. Lick Daddy's cock."

His words encouraged and emboldened her. Slowly, she ran her tongue along the underside of his cock until she reached his balls. She sucked one into her mouth before moving onto the next one.

Veins in his neck stood out as he strained to hold himself together. She loved seeing him like this. It was so unlike his usual self. He was always so calm, and carefree, always teasing and smiling. Right then, he was intense.

“In your mouth, baby,” he rasped. His fingers dug into her scalp, but he didn’t push her head or force her to move faster than she wanted.

She moved her mouth to his tip and slowly slid her lips around him. His cock was thick and heavy, and filled her mouth completely. Her tongue rested against the underside, and she ran it back and forth, making his eyes roll back.

“Just like that,” he groaned. “Fuck, baby. Your mouth feels so good.” She took him deeper into her mouth, smiling around him as he let out another low groan.

His hand finally bunched her hair into a fist as he guided her along his cock. She gagged when he hit the back of her throat, but she didn’t care. Not when he looked so close to losing himself.

“Okay,” he breathed. “Okay, baby. You’re going to make me come, and I’m not ready to yet.” She hollowed her cheeks as she slid her mouth off him. She still couldn’t believe she was on her knees worshiping this man, but she wasn’t complaining.

She didn’t know if she’d ever get used to being with him.

He held his hand out for her, and she took it, letting him help her to her feet. Bending nearly in half, he pressed his lips to hers. It surprised her enough that she stood frozen. She didn’t think he would kiss her after his dick had been in her mouth, but it didn’t seem like he cared.

His tongue swept between her lips, into her mouth. She knew he had to be tasting himself, and it was maybe the hottest thing in the world.

“Lay down,” he said against her mouth. She stumbled back a step, her head still spinning after that kiss. But she sat on the edge of the bed and stared up at him as he stroked her cheek.

He towered above her, and even though he had muscles on muscles, and a sternness in his eyes that made her press her thighs together, he was gentle with her. His gaze was soft, his touch feather light.

She scooted back along the bed until her head hit the pillows. He stayed staring at her for a long moment, then he climbed onto the bed and slowly slid his body over hers.

“Are you still with me, sweets?” he asked, softly brushing her hair from her face. She nodded, but she knew he wanted her to say it.

“I’m here,” she whispered. “I’m with you.” He lightly kissed her, but it quickly turned into something *more*. Something harder and hotter. Something more urgent.

Her legs parted further, and he settled deeper between them. His hard length rested against her thigh, and her stomach twisted. With anticipation or anxiety, or a weird mix of both, maybe.

She hadn’t thought about how big he was, how big he would feel inside her.

“Daddy,” she whimpered, but he kissed her again, silencing her as if he knew where her mind had wandered.

“It’s okay,” he said against her lips. “I’ve got you.”

He lifted himself on one forearm as his other arm snaked between their bodies. The ceiling spun as she stared at it, waiting for him to slide inside her.

Josh never warmed her up or made sure she was ready. He just stuck it in and pulled out before he came, usually spilling on her tummy or back.

But Rhys wasn’t Josh, and he didn’t just shoved his way inside.

She knew she was wet for him, that she had been since the second she’d met him. God, how had they only met a few days ago? It felt like she’d known him her entire life.

He rubbed his head against her clit before moving lower and pressing it against her entrance. She sucked in a sharp breath and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Don’t do that,” he breathed. “Look at me, sweets. Let me see you.” It was nearly impossible, but she managed to open her eyes and stare up at his achingly pretty face.

“You’re so big,” she said, and he nodded.

It wasn’t because he was arrogant about it, but he was aware and was trying to make this as good for her as it was for him. She realized he was trying to ease himself inside her so he wouldn’t hurt her, and tears sprang to her eyes.

She tried to blink them away before he could see, but with him only an inch from her face, he saw them. The pressure against her entrance eased as he lifted himself off her slightly.

“What is it?” His voice sounded frantic as he searched her eyes. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she said, sliding her hand up his bicep. “It’s just—” This was the worst possible time to have this conversation, and yet she couldn’t stop herself from speaking. “No one has been this gentle with me before. I wasn’t expecting you to be so—” She trailed off, feeling ridiculous.

“That kills me,” he said softly, almost like he hadn’t meant to say it.

Rhys was always gentle with her, sometimes frustratingly so. She shouldn’t have expected anything different now, but it still shocked her.

“We don’t have to do this if you’re not ready,” he said. She strained her neck as she reached up to kiss him.

“I want to,” she murmured. “Please don’t stop.” He searched her eyes like he was trying to find a lie in them. But he wouldn’t find one.

He hesitated for only a moment before he lined himself up again. “Eyes on me, sweets. Stay with me.” Slowly, he pressed into her. She gasped as she stretched around him. “Look at you. You’re taking Daddy’s cock so well, baby. Such a good girl for me.”

She was positive she stopped breathing.

Between the feel of him slowly sliding inside her, the feel of his body pinning her to the bed, and his softly spoken dirty words, she was about to die.

“Daddy,” she whimpered, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“I know, baby.” He kissed her forehead, and she cried out as he forced himself deeper. She knew he wasn’t all the way in, and she held her breath, anticipating his final few inches. “Breathe for me, sweets. Breathe.”

But she couldn’t. Not when he was filling her so completely.

He paused when he was fully seated inside her, his chest heaving with each of his breaths. Softly, he brushed her hair from her face and lightly kissed her. She lifted her hips, sucking in a sharp breath as his cock slid deeper.

“Fuck,” he grunted. “Don’t move.”

She totally froze.

“I’m trying not to embarrass myself and come in five seconds,” he choked out. “You feel so fucking good.” He dropped his face to the crook of her neck, taking in a huge breath, and she tightened her arms around him.

She waited for a few seconds—a few of the longest seconds of her life before she shifted her hips again. The slightest bit of friction caused her eyes to roll back.

“Please,” she whispered. He groaned low in his throat before he rose himself onto his forearms again.

Slowly, he dragged himself out, his jaw clenched and neck straining as he watched her. She lowered her eyes between their bodies and watched his long, thick cock slowly reveal itself before he pushed back inside.

“Oh God,” she breathed. She glanced up at him, finding him watching where they were joined with a desperate hunger on his face. “Faster.” Her word was barely a breath, but he didn’t go faster. He kept going at that same achingly slow pace. “Faster, Daddy. *Please.*”

He finally tore his eyes away from their bodies to look at her. “Faster?” he repeated, and she frantically nodded.

“Harder, too,” she added, and he flashed her a grin.

“Such a greedy little thing, aren’t you?”

The words barely left his mouth before he shoved back inside her, her loud cry drowning out the sound of his moan. He moved harder and faster, forcing her body to coil tighter around him. Her back arched deeply as she dragged her nails down his back, making him groan.

His movements became frantic as he slammed into her. She was riding the edge, so close to toppling over when he lowered his mouth to her nipple and bit down. She cried out at the mix of pain and pleasure coursing through her body, and her nails dug deeper into his back. He lapped at her nipple, soothing the bite before sucking roughly on it.

He kissed his way from one breast to the other, his movements never faltering. Her legs spread wider, letting him hit deeper.

So close. She was *so close*.

“You’re squeezing my cock,” he breathed. “Fucking Christ, you feel so good.” He slid his hand between them, and she screamed as he found her clit. Roughly, he stroked her. It was too much, she felt too much, she was about to explode.

“Wait—” She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think past the way he was making her feel.

“Come for me,” he grunted. “Come on Daddy’s cock.”

She screamed as she came, squeezing tighter around him. He forced himself to keep moving, forced his fingers to move faster over her clit.

It was all too much.

“That’s it,” he groaned. “Such a good fucking girl.”

This was how she was going to die.

His words, his body, the most intense orgasm of her life... it was going to kill her.

Finally, she collapsed back to the bed, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. He braced himself on his forearms again, thankfully giving her poor overly sensitive clit

a break, and began fucking her harder into the bed. Her fingers dug into his hard muscles as he dipped his head into the crook of her neck, his breath hot against her.

“Beg me to come inside you,” he breathed.

Her breath caught, but she forced the words out. “Come inside me, Daddy,” she said, her eyes rolling back as he hit a spot inside her over and over. “God, please come inside me.” She screamed the words, and he thrust harder.

She could barely take it. Her body was spent, but the way he was slamming into her, the spots he was stroking inside her, she felt another orgasm growing.

“Don’t stop,” she pleaded. He growled, never letting his movements falter.

“Are you coming again?” he asked breathlessly. She moaned her response, and he swore under his breath. “Come with me, baby.”

He slammed into her a few more times before stalling. She screamed as she fell over the edge, feeling his cum shoot deep inside her. He held himself there, waiting until they both calmed enough to pull his face from her neck.

His eyes were wide as he stared down at her, and she knew hers had to be just as wide. She’d never in her life experienced anything like that. She didn’t know it was possible to feel *that* good from sex.

“That was amazing,” he breathed, and she nodded, too tired to speak. “Fuck, I—” He cut himself off abruptly, but continued staring at her. Finally, he took a deep breath as he slid out and rolled beside her. “I’ll clean you up in a second,” he breathed as he wrapped his arms around her, “just give me a sec. I’m about to die.”

She giggled as she nestled into his side, letting his warmth settle around her. She barely closed her eyes, and when she opened them, her room was dark, Rhys’ arms were still around her, and his steady, deep breathing was the only thing filling the small space.

chapter twenty-two

She jolted out of bed, barely able to untangle herself from Rhys' arms before she barreled toward the living room. When her phone began ringing earlier, she ignored it. After it rang four times, she had a weird mix of annoyance and anxiety at who it was and why they were calling.

Her phone stopped ringing as she rummaged through her purse, trying to find it. It started again, and she snapped her head around, looking for the bright phone in the dark room.

"What's going on?" Rhys groaned as he stumbled into the room, his hair sticking up and sleep lines on his face. He'd put his boxers back on, which was good because she didn't have the mental capacity to see his dick right now.

"My phone," she said, turning toward the living room.

"Kitchen." He stumbled into the wall before straightening and moving forward. She beat him there, finding her phone in one of the bags from the sex store. She forgot she'd put it in there.

Stupid.

She pulled her phone out as it stopped ringing. Five missed calls from her mother. Shit.

"Who was it?" Rhys asked, resting his hands on her bare hips. She realized she was still naked and groaned. God, she was so out of sorts.

"My mom," she said. "Could you get me some clothes while I call her back?" She looked at him over her shoulder.

“It shouldn’t take long. She was probably panicking because I didn’t answer.”

“I’d freak out too,” he said before brushing a kiss to the top of her head. She tried not to stare at his perfect ass as he walked back to the bedroom.

Focus. She needed to focus.

Ana turned her attention back to her phone. As she unlocked it, her mother called again. Jesus. Was it really that panic inducing she hadn’t answered the first time?

“Mom—”

“Oh my God, Ana,” she sobbed. Ana froze at the sound of her mother’s voice. “God, I thought something happened to you.”

“What would happen to me?” she asked, glancing at Rhys as he made his way toward her, carrying her bunny shorts and his t-shirt. “We fell asleep earlier. It’s okay.”

“No,” her mother cried. Ana’s brows pinched together, her eyes on Rhys’. He gave her a questioning look, and she put the phone on speaker as she set it on the counter.

“What’s going on?” she asked warily. “Rhys is here with me.”

“Hi, Ms. Bardot,” he said as he crouched. She stared at him, but he just patted her leg as he held the shorts out.

“Rhys,” her mother repeated. “You’ve been there with her all day? Are you staying tonight too?” She took a breath as she lifted one leg, then the other, and let him drag the shorts up.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he slid the shirt over her head. “I haven’t left her side since Monday.” Her mother let out a long breath. “Is everything okay?”

“Ana?”

“I’m here, Mom,” she said, stepping closer to Rhys. He wrapped his arm around her as they stared at the phone. “What happened?”

“Josh is out,” her mother said. Ana’s stomach twisted, her breath caught.

“I know,” she muttered. “You told me days ago.” She felt Rhys’ gaze on her, but she couldn’t look at him.

She hadn’t told him because she didn’t want him to know about her past, but she should’ve told him when they were talking about limits. That was her opening, but she’d kept it to herself.

“He knows where you are, baby,” her mother said, her voice breaking.

The words barely registered.

He knows where you are.

They repeated in her mind on a loop.

“What?” she breathed, then shook her head. “No, he doesn’t. He doesn’t know I’m in Texas.”

“How does he know?” Rhys asked, his voice harder than she’d ever heard. She finally glanced at him, finding his eyes hard, his jaw tense, his lips pressed into a thin line.

He looked upset.

She knew he was upset with her. He was angry she’d lied to him.

Tears sprang to her eyes and she roughly wiped at them. His gaze shot from the phone back to her, but she dipped her head, hiding the tears.

“Joey—” Her mother’s voice brought her back to what was important. Josh knew where she was. “He didn’t mean to. He didn’t know the full extent—”

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” Joey’s raspy, gruff voice filtered through the phone.

“What happened?” Rhys asked again, harsher. He tightened his hold on her, anchoring her to his side.

“He came by the house the other day,” Joey sighed. “Said he’d changed, that he’d found Jesus while he was locked up.

Said he was in a better place. He looked good—cleaned up, his hair wasn't long anymore, he didn't have that damn beard, his tattoos were all covered up. He didn't look like the same kid you showed me photos of."

Ana's breath was caught in her throat. Panic clawed at her chest as her body flushed hot then cold. The room spun as black dots danced in her vision.

"Sweets?" She could barely hear Rhys over the roaring in her ears.

Josh knew where she was.

He had been at her mom's house. Had he been looking for her? Was he coming for her now?

She needed to leave immediately. What if he was already in town? What if he was outside waiting for her?

"Anastasia," Rhys said. "Shit. Hold on."

She wasn't on solid ground anymore. Instead, she was soaring through her apartment. He set her gently on the sofa and crouched between her legs in front of her.

"Baby, you with me?" She stared down at his shadowed face, into his bright blue eyes, and nodded. "You sure? It doesn't seem like you're with me." He rested his hands on her hips. "Ana, stay with me. Can you breathe for me?"

She hadn't realized she was shaking her head until he pressed her hand against his warm chest. She felt it expand as he took a deep breath, and she copied him.

"There you go," he whispered. "Good girl. Again. Breathe with me again."

Again, his chest rose, and she forced a breath into her lungs. He nodded encouragingly, his eyes trained on hers.

"You've got it," he said. "You're doing so good, sweets. One more time. Can you breathe for me one more time?" She nodded and watched his lips tuck up at the corners.

She breathed with him again, feeling her panic subside. Well, subside as much as it could when she was still terrified

for her life.

“Stay right here. I’m going to get your phone,” he said as he stood. She latched onto his hand, panic shooting through her at the thought of not being with him. “I’ll be a few feet away, baby. You can see me the whole time.” He pointed to the kitchen, and she followed, seeing her phone still lit on the counter.

“Okay,” she rasped. It was a struggle to force herself to drop her hands away.

“Brave girl,” he whispered, cupping her chin. She leaned into his touch for just a moment, then he hurried across the apartment and grabbed the phone. She watched him the entire way there and back, her eyes on his until he sank onto the couch beside her.

“So, he came to your house the other day,” Rhys said.

“Ana, are you okay?” her mother asked frantically.

“Fine,” she rasped, resting her head on Rhys’ shoulder.

“She’s a bit shaken up,” Rhys said, giving her a look. “But I’m here. She’ll be okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Joey said again, sounding just as broken as she felt.

“It’s okay,” Ana murmured. “What happened?” There was a brief pause before he let out a long breath.

“He said he wanted to get in touch with you to apologize for everything,” he said. Rhys’ arm shot around her, pulling her closer to his side. It felt like his body was vibrating. “Said he wanted to send you a letter—”

“You gave him her fucking address?” Rhys ground out. Ana buried her face in his chest.

“I thought—”

“Her address,” Rhys repeated.

“It’s okay,” Ana said again.

“It’s not,” he hissed. “He put you in danger—” He cut himself off, shoving his free hand through his hair. “So, what happened after that?”

“Nothing,” Joey said, sounding defeated. “He just said thanks and went on his way. I—I told him how proud of you I am, for moving on and making something of yourself.” Rhys let out a humorless laugh.

“I’m sure he really cared about her achievements,” he said sarcastically. “Why would you even entertain him?”

“I thought he changed—”

“Abusers never change,” Rhys snarled. Ana tilted her head back to look at him. The way he said it felt personal, like he knew firsthand that they don’t change. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down.

“I didn’t know what all had happened,” Joey said.

And that was true.

Ana made her mother promise not to tell anyone, including Joey when he came into her life, what had happened. Apart from the girls, her mother, and Rhys, no one knew. But they didn’t even know the full extent of everything that had happened. She hadn’t wanted to tell anyone.

“I thought things ended badly because young love always ends badly, you know? I didn’t know he was—was hurting you the way he was, Ana. If I would’ve known that, I would’ve shot him the second he stepped onto the porch.”

“I know,” Ana said quietly. “I don’t blame you.”

“I do,” Rhys said under his breath.

“But he knows where I live?” Ana asked, and was met with silence.

“He does,” Joey finally said. “I gave him your store address, forgetting you lived right above it. I—I’m sorry, kiddo.”

She began shaking again, and Rhys swore. She curled in on herself, away from him, not wanting to be touched, not

wanting to drag him under with her.

“It’s okay,” she said again, but her voice sounded far away. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

“What else?” Rhys asked, his voice muddled. It sounded like he was underwater—or maybe she was underwater. She felt like she was drowning.

She clutched her knees to her chest and buried her face in them as he spoke. She didn’t know how to anchor herself to reality. The past and present were bleeding together in her mind.

This was how she sat when Josh got angry, when he’d yell and rage and break things. She curled up in a little ball and waited for it to end.

Sometimes it felt like it would never end.



“I’M TAKING ANA ON TOUR WITH ME,” RHYS SAID, STARING down at her. He hated the way she’d pulled away from him and closed in on herself. He hated that she was shaking and scared, and he had no way of making her feel better.

He hated her fucking ex.

How had he not known he was out of prison?

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” her mother said warily. “She needs stability. She doesn’t need to travel.” He clenched his jaw.

Another thing he hated, being questioned. Especially when it had to do with how he was going to take care of his girl.

“I’m not leaving her alone,” he gritted out. “I’ll hire more guards for her. Traveling will give her a reason to not think about what’s happening. She can’t relax at home anymore, but she can relax on the road.”

Truthfully, he didn't know if it was the best idea. But he couldn't leave her alone, and he couldn't cancel the tour. They were sold out in every city they were playing in. He couldn't just cancel on thousands of people across the country.

He would if he had to, though.

His girl came before everything and everyone. Her being safe, healthy, and happy was all he cared about.

"I don't know—"

"It's not your choice," he snapped.

Shit.

Wrong thing to say.

He pinched between his eyes as he took a deep breath. "Sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"Let me talk to Ana," her mother said coldly. He glanced at Ana, finding her with her thumb in her mouth.

"She's not really in a place to talk right now," he muttered.

"Have you asked her about going on tour? She won't agree to it," her mom said, and he sighed again.

"I'll discuss it with her later," he said. "Look, our first show is Saturday night in the city. I'll send you and Joey tickets. Or you can hang out at my apartment, I really don't care. But it might be good for Ana if she could see you before we leave."

There was a hushed conversation on the other end before Joey came back on the line. "Alright," he said gruffly. "We'll be there."

Rhys didn't let them say anything else. He hung up and turned his attention to Ana. He'd never seen her like this—he'd never seen *anyone* like this.

She was checked out, her eyes glazed and her skin pale. He didn't know what to do or how to fix it. He just wanted her better. But how?

“Want your paci, sweets?” he asked. She didn’t reply, not that he’d been anticipating her to. He grabbed the paci from the coffee table and held it up to her, but she completely ignored it.

Gently, he wrapped his hand around her wrist. It was ice cold, and he clenched his jaw tightly, forcing himself to stay calm. How the fuck was he supposed to make her feel better?

“Want to read while Daddy packs some things for you?” He reached for her, hesitating before placing his hand on her leg. She flinched but didn’t push him away.

Her eyes slid to him and a shiver snaked down his spine at the emptiness in them.

“Sweets?” he murmured, scooting closer.

“Is he going to hurt me again?” she whispered. It was like a fucking knife through the chest.

“No, baby. He’ll never come near you again. I won’t let anything happen to you,” he promised.

He meant every damn word. He’d sooner burn the world down before letting anyone harm her.

“Do you want Daddy to hold you for a bit?” he asked, bracing himself for rejection. But to his surprise, she shifted to her knees and slid one leg over his, straddling him.

She buried her face into the crook of his neck as he wrapped his arms around her. He scooted back, making them more comfortable as he smoothed his hand down her back.

“How are you feeling?” he whispered against her hair. She didn’t answer. Of course, she wouldn’t answer. He should’ve known that. “Do you want your paci?” He hated bothering her, but he didn’t want her to bite on her thumb again.

She shook her head, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder.

“Do you want some water?”

Again, she shook her head.

“Do you want Daddy to stop talking?”

She paused, then nodded.

He smiled to himself and held her tighter. He could give her silence for a while. He could give her peace and safety.

Then he'd have to deal with this threat head-on. He didn't know how much of a fight it would be to get her to agree to go on tour with him, but he was hoping she'd give in easily.

He just wanted her close.

If it was possible to carry her around with him everywhere, he would. He never wanted her out of his sight, and he already knew he'd be thinking about nothing but her when he was on stage every night.

But he could give them both this peace and quiet for a bit. He'd hold her until she was ready to let go, then he'd figure out what to do.

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chapter twenty-three

“Ready to go?”

Rhys crouched beside Ana and watched as she continued to scribble on the paper she was drawing on. He was surprised she'd agreed to use her paci without complaint while he packed her things and loaded them into the truck. He wasn't sure what all to pack, but made sure to get Buns and the clothes that had pictures of bunnies on them.

And her skirts.

He didn't forget those.

She ignored him and continued drawing. Her colors were all over the page, not in the lines in the slightest, but he didn't think she cared. She didn't look like she was even paying attention to what she was doing. Her eyes had a faraway look in them that made his chest tighten.

“Sweets?” He rested his hand on her back, and she jolted, snapping her head toward him, her eyes huge. “Sorry. I thought you heard me.” She just shook her head, her eyes still wide.

He could feel her heart pounding, and guilt twisted his stomach. Poor thing. He hated how scared she was.

“You ready?” he asked again, more gently. Her head cocked to the side as she watched him. “To go to the hotel. We're staying there tonight.” Her eyes shuddered, as if remembering why they were staying there and not here. “I have everything in the truck, ready to go.”

She looked around the apartment, and he followed her gaze, making sure he'd grabbed everything. If she needed something, he'd buy it for her. Hell, even if she didn't need it, he'd buy it for her.

"Come on, sweets." He held his hand out for her as he stood. She was still too pale. "We can stop at Jackie's on the way." She shook her head and turned back to her picture. "Sweets." He ran his fingers through her hair, gently tugging the knots out. "Let's go, baby. It's getting late."

Should he be worried she slipped so easily into Little space? The other night it had been a miracle she'd felt comfortable enough to dip her toe in, but now he thought she was fully Little, and he hated to think she was only in this mindset because of how scared she was.

"You can finish your picture at the hotel," he said, but she continued ignoring him.

Maybe he should call Kody and ask him what the fuck he was supposed to do in a situation like this.

He'd never had to really worry about anyone else but himself, and now that he was fully responsible for Ana, he was terrified of fucking it up. He didn't want to say or do the wrong thing. But he'd taken care of subs before—just not like this. He'd given them all the aftercare they wanted, but this? It was new territory for him.

"If you're a good girl, Daddy will buy you a new bunny," he said. Her hand stilled, but she didn't look up at him. "Do you think Buns wants a new friend?" She didn't look up, but she didn't start coloring again either. Maybe he was getting through to her. "Maybe a little moo-cow instead?"

That got her attention.

Slowly, she turned to look up at him. "Moo-cow?" she repeated, and he nodded, giving her a bright smile.

"Would you like that?" he asked quietly. She nodded warily, the marker still clutched in her hand. "Well, Daddy will only get it for you if you come with him right now." He held his hand out for her, waiting.

She hesitated before dropping the marker on the table and slipping her smaller, colder hand into his. “Wanna take your picture?” He grabbed the paper and markers before she answered, but when she reached for it, he let her take it.

Kissing the top of her head, he wrapped his arm around her and guided her toward the front door. Before they made it outside, she dug her heels in, forcing him to stop.

She pulled her paci from her mouth, her eyes teary as she stared outside. “Do you think he’s out there?”

Her words shattered his heart.

“No, baby. I checked.” He pulled her closer to him. “Daddy won’t let anything happen to you, okay?” She nodded, but still looked terrified to walk outside. “Can you be my brave girl, just for a bit longer?”

She took a deep breath and slid her paci back into her mouth. Gripping the paper tighter in one hand, she nodded.

He hated how strong she had to be right now, and hated the reason why. He hated that he couldn’t just take the fear and pain away. And he really fucking hated he couldn’t just kill Josh for everything he’d done and continued to do to her.

Rhys kissed her head, then led her outside.



SHE SAT ON THE FLOOR AS SHE DREW A NEW PICTURE. THE hotel was nice—well, the nicest you could find in Sawyer. Felix and Tilly dropped food off for them, but she was still too anxious to eat.

Instead, she decided to color some more. She hadn’t realized how much she enjoyed it, or how much it would relax her until she started doing it earlier. Apart from her fear about Josh finding her, the only other thing causing her anxiety was Rhys’ pacing as he talked on the phone.

She didn't know who he was talking to. All she knew was he was upset and trying to find more bodyguards. Which she guessed made sense. If Josh knew where she lived, he'd learn about Rhys sooner or later, so of course he'd want to protect himself.

A part of her wished she could go with him, but he hadn't asked again and she was too nervous to bring it up. What if he rejected her? Or what if he didn't want to be with her anymore because her life was too messy and she had too much baggage?

She wouldn't blame him if he left. If she could, she'd leave her too.

"Two more guards, Jensen, that's all I'm asking for," Rhys said. She glanced at him over her shoulder, finding him with his hand in his hair, his other holding the phone to his ear. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, his lips pressed into a thin line. "I don't care how much it costs, or who you get. Just find two more fucking guards. I'm not leaving her unprotected." He began pacing again, shaking his head with every step. He stopped abruptly. "Either find more guards, or I'm calling the tour off. I'm not leaving her alone."

He threw his phone onto the bed and scrubbed his hands over his face, breathing deeply. She hesitated before she rolled onto her hands and knees and crawled toward him. His chest heaved with each breath, his hands still hiding his face.

She wrapped her body around his leg when she got to him, hugging him close. He tensed before he looked down.

"Hey, baby," he murmured, gently running his fingers through her hair. "What are you doing?" She nestled her cheek against his thigh, holding onto him tighter. "Are you sleepy?" She nodded.

He tried to pry her hands off his leg and she let out a small whine. Immediately, he stopped, and went back to stroking her head.

"I just want to see you," he said softly. "Can you let go so Daddy can see you?" She held onto him tighter, and he let out

a small sigh. “Alright, sweets.”

She sucked harder on her paci. She’d almost forgotten she even had it in her mouth, but was grateful he’d gotten it for her. Honestly, she didn’t think she’d want it, but now that she had it, she never wanted to get rid of it.

“Wanna take a bath and go to bed?” he asked.

She didn’t say anything, but a bath did sound nice. There was a tub in the bathroom, and it was huge, and she really wanted to use it. But she was just so tired, she didn’t think she had the energy to wash herself.

Tipping her head back, she stared up at him. He smiled softly, his hand still gently stroking her hair.

“Daddy can bathe you if you want,” he murmured. She thought about it for a moment, then nodded.

The smile he gave her was the brightest smile she’d ever seen.

“Can you let go so I can get everything ready? I don’t have any bubble bath or toys...” He rubbed his jaw. “I’ll call Jensen and tell him to make sure I have everything at the penthouse when we get there.”

“Penthouse?” she mumbled around her pacifier, her eyes widening. He chuckled as he stepped out of her grasp and crouched in front of her. Gently, he took the paci from her mouth and ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

“Yeah, sweets,” he laughed. “I share it with the guys, if that makes you feel better.”

She scrunched her nose at that. She didn’t really know how she felt about sharing space with the guys—wait a second.

“I’m going with you?” she asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

“Of course, you are,” he said. “What? Did you really think I’d leave you alone? I was already planning on wearing you down and convincing you to come on tour with me. But now with—” He cut himself off, his throat bobbing as he swallowed thickly. “Now with everything going on, there’s no

way I'm leaving you alone. I won't let you out of my sight, and when I'm on stage, you'll have multiple guards on you at all times. I'll make sure you're safe, Ana. I swear."

She trusted him. She knew he'd take care of her and protect her. But she still felt guilty that he even had to.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping roughly at her eyes.

"For what?"

"For bringing you into my mess," she sighed. "I didn't know he was getting out, and I didn't know he'd come looking for me. I'm sorry for making your life a mess." She swiped the back of her hand under her nose. "If you don't want to be with me, I understand. I know I'm not worth the trouble. You don't have to feel obligated to take care of me. I understand."

He was silent for a long moment, but she couldn't look at him. She didn't want to see whatever was in his eyes.

"I never want to hear you say that again," he said in a low voice. Her brows pushed together.

"What?"

"That you're not worth the trouble," he gritted out. "That you want me to leave you because you have an asshole ex. This isn't your fault, Anastasia. It's his." She shook her head as he spoke.

"But it is mine," she cried. "If I hadn't dated him, this wouldn't be happening—"

"And if I wouldn't have agreed to a damn charity concert for Linda, we wouldn't have met," he said softly.

"This is different," she said, finally looking up at him. "You're in danger now, and it's my fault."

"I'm not in danger, baby," he said.

"He'll hurt you for being with me."

"Let him try," he growled. "I'll fucking kill him." He gripped her chin in his hand, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to force her to look at him. "I'm never leaving you. You're never leaving me. We're going to be together for-

fucking-ever, and I don't want to hear any arguments." She tilted her head to the side.

"What if I gain a bunch of weight?" she asked. He blinked.

"What?"

"What if I gain weight and you hate the way I look?"

"Okay," he breathed, using his free hand to pinch between his eyes. "That will never happen. I don't care about your weight. As long as you're happy and healthy, I'm happy. There will never be a moment in our lives that I'll stop lo—" He roughly cleared his throat. "I'll never stop being attracted to you, Ana. No matter what you look like on the outside, it's your heart I fell for."

Her breath caught.

She knew he didn't mean *fall for her* like he loved her. That would be crazy, right? Even if that word had been echoing in her head since the second he'd slid inside her, she knew it was insane to actually believe it, and even more insane to say it.

No, he didn't mean it like that.

It was just a figure of speech, right?

"No matter what, I'm not going anywhere, Ana," he said again. "I swear it."

She held her pinky between them and watched his throat bob.

"Pinky promise?" she whispered. He wrapped his pinky tightly around hers, his eyes boring into hers, his face as serious as she'd ever seen it.

"Pinky promise." He leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to her lips before pulling away. "Do you want to do a blood pact, too? What else can I do to prove it to you?"

"Ew." She scrunched her nose. "A blood pact? That's disgusting. And unsanitary." He choked on a laugh as he nodded.

“You’re right,” he said, kissing her again. “Ready for your bath?”

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chapter twenty-four

She stared down at the filling bathtub, her hands twisted tightly in front of her. Rhys watched her carefully, trying to figure out if she was anxious about letting him bathe her.

He didn't fully understand why he had this intense need to take care of her, but he did. Maybe he just needed to know she was safe. He didn't really care about the reasons, he just knew he needed her.

Crouching, he turned the water off and looked up at her. "Need some help?" he asked, gesturing to her clothes. Her eyes shifted to him, but she just stared.

"Yes, please," she finally whispered. He tried to hide his relief as he reached for the waistband of her shorts. She gripped his shoulders, and he paused. "I'm not—we're not doing anything—I'm not in the mood—"

"Don't worry, sweets," he murmured. "Nothing happens that you don't want it to." She let out a relieved breath as she nodded.

Ana turned fully toward him, watching as he dragged her shorts down her legs. He held her hips as she stepped out of them, and he tried to ignore the tremors still wracking her body.

"You're safe, Ana," he whispered as he stood. She nodded again, her throat bobbing. He didn't think she really believed him. Maybe after she had guards on her she'd feel better.

It still hurt that she didn't think he'd do anything to protect her.

But he understood it.

Gently, he kissed her before pulling her shirt off over her head, leaving her naked. She moved to cover herself, but he caught her wrist.

"Don't," he breathed. "You're perfect. Don't hide." She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, inhaling sharply. Before she could say or do anything else, he stepped back, still holding her wrist. "Get in."

She looked from him to the bath. It felt like his heart was about to beat out of his chest. He knew she was uncomfortable, but she finally stepped into the bath, and he helped her sit.

He kneeled beside the tub and ran his hand through the warm water.

"It's kind of cold," she muttered. He didn't think it was. He'd made it as warm as he could without burning her. But he turned the hot water back on, smiling to himself as she sighed contentedly.

Instead of reclining back and relaxing, she sat stiffly, her arms snaked around her. He hesitated before running his hand down her back, letting the warm water wash over her chilled skin.

Shit.

She was cold.

And he didn't have a way to warm up her towel or clothes for her. He glanced around the bathroom, his lip between his teeth as he thought.

"I can use the blow dryer to try to warm your towel up before you get out," he muttered. When she didn't answer, he looked back at her, finding her staring at him with her mouth open, eyes wide.

"What?"

“You like for your towel to be warm,” he said slowly.

“How did you know—” Her voice broke. “I thought you did it just to be nice the other day.”

“I saw your towel warmer,” he shrugged. “I forgot it, though. But I’ll grab it before we head out. I’m sorry, sweets.”

“You’re sorry?” she choked.

“Yeah, I fucked up.” He was really confused.

“No one—” She pressed her lips together in a firm line. “Thank you, Rhys.”

He loved when she called him Daddy. Like, he *really* fucking loved it. But hearing her say his name like that did something to him. It melted a piece of his heart.

“You’re welcome, sweets.” He pressed his lips to her shoulder, letting his kiss linger for a long moment before pulling away.

It killed him every time she was shocked he did something for her. He hated that she hadn’t had anything decent in her life—maybe her mother had been good to her, but never an ex.

Especially not an ex.

Just the thought of Josh threatened to send him into a blind spiraling rage. He still couldn’t believe her stepfather had thought it was okay to give her ex any information about her, let alone her fucking address.

He took a deep breath.

Getting upset in front of Ana would do nothing but make her even more anxious. He forced himself to calm down. But if he ever saw that fucker—

Water splashed him in the face, and he sputtered, shaking his head. He ran his hand over his face, wiping the water off before looking at Ana. She was staring down at her hands in her lap, but he could see the smile she was trying to hide.

“Did you just splash me, sweets?” he asked.

“No,” she giggled.

“And now you’re lying.” He let out a long, mock-disappointed sigh.

“I’m not lying, Daddy.” She turned her big eyes up to him, but that little smile was still playing on her lips. “I would never *splash* you.”

“No?” She shook her head. “Then who did?” She shrugged.

“Water goblin.” She said it so matter-of-factly, he almost believed her.

“Water goblin,” he repeated, and she nodded solemnly.

“Pesky little suckers.” She made little pinchers with her thumb and forefinger.

“Do they pinch people, or splash them with water?” She froze, her eyes narrowing as she thought.

“They do everything,” she finally said, and he chuckled.

“Wanna know what I think?” he asked, and she nodded. “I think a naughty Little girl splashed her Daddy with water, then lied about it and invented little water goblins.” Her eyes widened innocently.

“I would never do something like that,” she said, shaking her head. “You must have mistaken me for another Little.”

“Did I?” He tapped his finger on his chin, then looked around. “I don’t see any other Little’s around, do you?” She searched the bathroom with him, like she really was expecting to see someone else there beside the two of them.

He’d noticed she did this earlier, too. When she thought he was upset, she seemed to slip into Little space a little easier. It was obvious she wanted him to feel better, and his heart ached at the sweetness of her. But he didn’t want her to make a habit of doing this. He didn’t want her to feel like she had to fix him, or that the only way he’d ever be happy was if she was Little.

They’d have to talk about this later. He hated to bring it up with everything going on, but he also didn’t want to let it keep happening.

Another idea came to him.

He'd been anxious about spanking her earlier because of her past, but maybe she needed to see that he could take care of her. Maybe she didn't feel as protected because he hadn't had to be stern with her yet. He hadn't had to do anything to show that he would follow through.

"Sorry, Daddy," she mumbled.

"We'll talk when you're all dry and warm later," he said.

"But I said sorry." She shot up straighter, her spine stiffening.

"I know," he said. "And I said we'll talk about it."

"About what?"

Was she really this anxious about it?

"I think there should be a punishment for splashing me, don't you think?" he asked. Her mouth fell open.

"But I was just playing!"

"Would you like it if I splashed water in your face?" He rested his forearms on the edge of the tub and leaned toward her.

"Well, no," she huffed. "But I wouldn't spank you for it."

"Damn right you wouldn't." He gave her a hard nod, the tightening in his chest loosening at the smile she tried to hide from him. "Only Daddy spansk."

"I think we need to renegotiate that," she said, and his brow rose.

"I'll tell you what," he said, smoothing his hand down her bare back. "If there's ever a time you're bathing me and I splash you in the face on purpose, you can spank me."

"But when would I ever bathe you?" Her head cocked to the side, and he gave her a wicked grin.

"Never."

"Hey!" She folded her arms over her chest, but he just laughed and brushed a kiss to her shoulder again.

“Lay back, sweets,” he said softly. Her face fell slightly. “I’ll clean you up, then we can chat for a bit.” Her eyes tracked his movements as he poured body wash on the washcloth, then started lathering it over her arms.

“Fine,” she mumbled. “Still don’t think I need a spanking.”

“Such a little brat.”

“Am not,” she muttered. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her cheek before finishing bathing her.

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chapter twenty-five

Rhys hurried through his shower and night routine before coming out of the bathroom. She sat in bed, watching cartoons while she waited for him. Even though it was late, she wasn't tired. Probably because of their extra long nap earlier.

Being bathed by him wasn't as awkward or weird as she initially thought it would be. She hated the way his face had gone dark, though. It was the same expression he'd had when she told him about the terrible things Josh had done to her, and the same expression he'd had the whole time they were on the phone with her mom and Joey.

His expression had softened only when they were safely in the hotel room, but even then, it was still edged with that anger.

She just wanted him to feel better. She wanted her fun-loving, joking Daddy back.

He stepped out of the bathroom, his hair wet and skin still glistening from the shower.

"Hi," she said, turning the TV off.

He tossed his clothes onto his open suitcase as he made his way to the bed. He was shirtless, only a pair of low-slung sweatpants on his narrow hips, that taunting V disappearing into the waistband. She loved the way his muscles shifted as he walked, the way they flexed with every movement.

He pointedly cleared his throat, and she snapped her eyes to his.

“Sorry,” she breathed, feeling her face flush. His gaze was heated, and it made her clench her legs together. It was the same way he’d looked when she took him into her mouth—

“Sweets,” he groaned. “You gotta stop.”

“What?”

“Looking at me like that,” he muttered. She glanced down, finding his cock straining against the black material. Her tongue snaked out along her lips, and he groaned again. “You’re killing me here”

“Sorry,” she said, then shook her head. “You don’t want to—you know. What we did earlier?” She flashed him a grin, and his bare chest rose as he took a deep breath.

“Oh, I definitely do,” he said. “But we need to talk first.”

Right.

She hoped he’d forgotten about that.

He sat on the edge of the bed and patted the spot beside him. She shoved the covers back and crawled her way across the bed and kneeled at his side. He kissed her lightly, but there was something in it, something that made her stomach tighten.

“What?” she breathed as she pulled away. “You’re really mad about the water? I’m sorry.”

“I know you are,” he said, tucking her hair behind her ear, his eyes flicking between hers. “But it was still naughty, right?” She nodded, narrowing her eyes to study him.

“Wait,” she said, scooting back. “You were serious about that?” He just stared at her.

She couldn’t believe this! It was just a little water. And he took a shower anyway, so it’s not like he wasn’t going to get wet.

“What happened to you not wanting to spank me?” she asked.

“Changed my mind,” he said, shrugging.

“You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to his side.

“Because—” She didn’t have a good excuse as to why he couldn’t, she just knew he couldn’t. “Because you can’t.” He chuckled.

“Okay,” he said, shocking her. “What punishment do you want instead?”

“I don’t want a punishment.”

“Corner time,” he said, pointing to the corner. “Spanking.” He patted his thigh. “Or…” He thought about it for a moment. “No reading for a week.”

“What?!” she shouted. “No reading for an entire week? You’ve lost your mind!” He grinned at her.

“Which will it be, then, sweets?” She glanced at the corner. That didn’t seem so bad, but she didn’t feel like standing there for however long.

But did she really want to be spanked?

Maybe this was like a bandaid. They just needed to rip it off and move on. Plus, it couldn’t be that bad. She’d never been spanked in her life, but she didn’t think he’d spank her that hard.

Surely, he’d only give her a few light swats. She was positive the authors in her Daddy books were just exaggerating at how badly it hurt. There was no way a spanking hurt the way they described it. She couldn’t picture herself sobbing and throwing herself around like that.

It was just for entertainment.

Right?

“Spanking,” she grumbled. “But don’t hurt me.”

“Sweets,” he said, huffing out a laugh. “That’s kind of the point of a spanking. It’s not supposed to tickle.” She glared at him, and his smile fell. “Keep looking at me like that and I’ll add five more.”

She immediately smiled.

“That’s my good girl,” he said, kissing her cheek. “How do you want to do this?” She just stared at him. “Want over my lap? Or do you want to bend over the bed? Want to put your hands against the wall? Or you can lay on your back and I can lift your legs—”

“Over your lap is fine,” she squeaked.

Jesus. She did *not* want to be in a diaper position for a spanking.

“Alrighty,” he said. “Come on, then.” He scooted back slightly and held her arm as she laid across his lap. She couldn’t believe she was doing this.

She glanced at him over her shoulder. “You’re really gonna spank me, Daddy?” She stuck her bottom lip out, trying to pout her way out of this.

“I’m sorry, sweets,” he said, but Ana didn’t think he looked sorry in the slightest. “You ready to get this over with? I want to get to the cuddling part.”

“We get to cuddle after?” she asked.

“Of course,” he scoffed. He rubbed his hand down her back. She was wearing one of his band’s tees, and she loved it. It smelled like him and was worn out just enough to be cozy. “You know I’m not abusing you, right?”

This time when she tried to turn to look at him, he let her.

“I know,” she murmured. “I wouldn’t be here if I thought that.” He searched her eyes for a long time before he nodded.

“You know I’m not hurting you for fun?”

“I know,” she said again. “I did something naughty and shouldn’t have.”

“Maybe this is too harsh a punishment.” He pinched between his eyes. He was really torn up about this. “How about fifty lines instead? *I will not splash Daddy during bath time.*”

“Fifty lines?” She shook her head. “My hand would fall off.”

“I doubt that.” He took a deep breath. “Ten spanks, twenty-five lines.” She stared at him.

“How many without the lines?” she asked.

“Twenty.”

“Twenty!” she shouted. “Just for a bit of water?”

“It was a really naughty thing,” he shrugged. “What will it be?”

Twenty freaking spanks for a bit of water to the face. Sheesh.

“Spanks and lines, I guess.” She pressed her face into the bed. She couldn’t believe she was doing this.

His hand rested on the curve of her lower back and she jolted.

“Shh,” he soothed. “I’m not starting yet.”

“When are you starting?” she blurted.

“When I’m ready.” She rolled her eyes. That wasn’t an answer.

His hand slid over her ass, and she clenched her cheeks together, forcing herself to breathe through her growing anxiety.

“What’s your safe word?” he asked.

“Sprinkles.”

“Good girl.” He ran his hand down the back of her full thighs, gently massaging the soft flesh. Slowly, he dragged it back up, pulling the shirt up and over her ass as he went. His fingers hooked under the band of her panties, and she took a deep breath as she lifted her hips, helping him drag them down her legs to her knees.

She’d read enough books to know how this thing went.

No panties.

A few smacks.

She was supposedly going to scream and cry—she still doubted it was going to be *that* bad.

They cuddled.

Everything was over and forgiven.

“Why are you getting punished?” he asked, his voice a low, soothing murmur.

“For splashing you with water,” she said.

“And why is that naughty?” She paused at the question.

“Because...” She glanced at him over her shoulder, finding him staring down at her ass. Her face flushed, and she pressed it back into the bed. “Do you have to look at me there?”

“What?”

“At my butt,” she mumbled, her voice muffled from the blankets.

“Where else am I going to look?” he asked, like it was a reasonable question.

“Anywhere else.”

“I can’t see your face,” he said, running his hand over the curve of one cheek. “Can’t see your tits.” He gripped it tightly in his hand, making her whimper. “But I *can* see this perfect ass.”

Her face heated even more. She couldn’t believe he was doing this—saying these things and touching her like this while he was about to spank her. Was he trying to confuse her body? Did he want her a wet horny mess before he started?

Because that’s what was happening.

“Now, why was it naughty, sweets?” he asked again, his voice firmer.

“Because it was rude?” she said, unsure if that was the right answer.

“Mhm.” He continued rubbing her bottom. “And being rude is never acceptable, is it?”

“No, Daddy.”

“Because you’re my sweet girl, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Daddy.” She bit her lip, trying to stifle her moan as his fingers dipped between her thighs, brushing over her mound.

“Someone’s a little wet,” he said huskily.

“Sorry.” Her face was about to catch on fire, she was so embarrassed.

“Don’t be.” His fingers parted her lips and found her clit. Slowly, he circled it and she let out a low groan, lifting her hips to put more pressure on it. “Uh-uh. Naughty girl.” He brought his hand down on her ass, and she let out a loud, surprised squeak.

Okay, that hurt.

It really freaking hurt.

“That one didn’t count,” he said, his fingers still lightly and slowly stroking her pussy. She couldn’t stand it.

“Daddy, please,” she whined.

“Please what?”

“More?” She glanced at him over her shoulder, finding his eyes hooded. “It feels so good.”

“Sorry, baby. But bad girls don’t get to come.” He pulled his fingers away, and she cried out, lifting her hips again to chase his touch. “Ready?”

No, she wasn’t ready.

Her pussy was dripping and begging for him to fuck her. She wasn’t ready for a spanking, unless it happened while he was buried inside her.

But she didn’t say any of that.

“Yes, Daddy,” she breathed.

“I’ll check in with you after each one.” She didn’t think that was entirely necessary, but still appreciated it. She just wanted to get it over with.

One hand rested on her ass as the other lifted. She tightened her body, anticipating the blow.

“Relax, sweets,” he murmured. She stayed stiff until she was sure he wasn’t about to spank her. As soon as she relaxed, his hand came down.

The smack was loud in the room. Her breath caught in her throat at the sharp bite of pain, but no tears came, no sound escaped.

“You good, Ana?” he asked. She forced herself to take a breath and slowly let it out.

“Good, Daddy,” she breathed. He let out a relieved breath and rubbed his hand over the sting, soothing her.

“Nine more,” he said, and she nodded, rubbing her forehead against the blanket. “Ready?” She nodded again, and braced herself for the next one.

Smack!

“Sweets?” he asked, and she nodded again. “You can use your safe word if it becomes too much.”

“I’m okay,” she said. Her breath was still caught somewhere in her lungs, and her eyes were still dry. But it hurt.

Oh, it freaking hurt.

He wasn’t holding back, and that shocked her more than anything.

He’d been so apprehensive, and now he was spanking her at full force? She couldn’t believe it. But a part of her felt relieved to know he wasn’t treating her like a breakable doll anymore.

Smack!

Okay, that one really hurt. Tears finally burned her eyes, and she squeezed them tightly shut.

“How are you doing?” he asked. When she didn’t immediately answer, he gripped her shoulder. “Anastasia?”

“Okay,” she croaked. Tears didn’t slip out, but she felt them lingering there. One or two more smacks, and she’d be one of those sobbing messes she read about.

“We can stop,” he said, but she shook her head.

“Keep going.”

There was a brief pause, then he cleared his throat. His hand lifted and she held her breath, waiting.

Smack!

This time, it happened. The tears came. Not in ugly, panting sobs like she’d expected. Instead, they just leaked from her eyes like a faucet had turned on.

“Sweets?”

She held her thumb up, unable to talk.

“These will be fast,” he warned. “Let’s just get it over with.” She nodded her agreement. Only a few more. She could do it.

Smack!

Smack!

Smack!

She was fully sobbing now, her face pressing further into the bed. She wasn’t rolling around or begging him to stop. It was just like someone had turned on her tears, and she didn’t know when or how she’d ever turn them off again.

“Baby, we can stop here.”

She shook her head. She just needed him to finish it. Drawing it out was making it worse.

“Ana,” he said, sounding pained.

“Keep going,” she sobbed. His body was tense under her. In any other circumstance, she’d probably be worried she was crushing him, but right then, she didn’t care. Not when her ass was on fire.

Smack!

Smack!

Smack!

She let out a piercing wail on the last one. He'd barely pulled his hand away before he shifted her up. She straddled his lap and buried her face in his neck as she cried.

"I'm so sorry, baby," he said, holding her tightly to his chest. His arms were a comfort around her. "Was that too much?" She continued crying. She didn't know why she was crying so hard.

It hurt, yes, but it wasn't unbearable. She'd had worse and never shed a tear, she'd never even choked up at the impact. But a spanking was the thing to send her over the edge?

Maybe it was the person who was giving it to her. Maybe because she knew it was just Rhys and he'd never truly hurt her, she felt different. Or maybe it was because this pain was different entirely. It was cathartic, like she'd opened up a well deep inside her and everything was flooding out.

Finally, she began to calm down.

"Ana," he choked out. "Say something."

"I'm okay," she rasped, and his arms tightened.

"Are you sure?"

"It wasn't that bad." She pulled away from him, finding his face pale and eyes wide. "I'm fine."

He blinked at her.

"It wasn't that bad?" he repeated, and she shrugged. "If anyone heard that, they'd definitely think I was murdering you." Her lips twitched.

"I wasn't that loud," she said, wiping her face.

"You were screaming for your life."

"I was not."

"Nearly busted my eardrums," he teased. She rested her head against his shoulder, breathing him in.

She was happy he could joke about it, and she was happy they'd gotten it over with. They were playing it up in their heads to be something it wasn't, and she was happy they finally knew she wouldn't break, and he wouldn't be an abuser.

"Want to write your lines tomorrow or tonight?" he asked. Her head jerked back, nearly hitting him in the jaw.

"You were serious about that?"

"Sorry, sweets," he chuckled.

"Twenty-five is a lot," she tried to reason, and he shrugged.

"You got my favorite shirt wet," he said. "It's a fair trade." She huffed out a long, sulking breath.

"It was just a little water," she mumbled.

"I'll remember that," he said. "Next time you're wearing one of your cute little skirts, I'll pour water all over you."

"You wouldn't."

"It's just a little water," he grinned.

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chapter twenty-six

She really didn't want to have this conversation with Riley. She hated disappointing people, and she knew telling Riley she was closing the store for a bit would definitely disappoint her.

Not that she'd ever say that. Riley was a lot of things, but selfish wasn't one of them. She was probably too understanding, even if she hid it under a pretend layer of not caring.

The bell chimed as Rhys shoved open the door to The Book Garden. When she didn't move, he held his hand out and waited for her.

"Do I have to tell her?" she muttered, wincing slightly. He propped the door open with his foot as he stared down at her.

"How about we tell her together?" he asked. She thought about it for a moment. That would be better than doing it alone.

"Alright," she sighed. "But you're leading."

"Whatever you want, sweets." With a deep breath, she slid her hand into his and made her way into the store. "You've got this. You're doing so well."

"I'm just walking," she hissed, glaring up at him. He wasn't helping her nerves.

"And you're walking really, *really* well," he said, grinning at her.

She wasn't totally sure why she was so nervous about this, but she was. Maybe it was because Riley was already here

when they showed up. That was probably a bad sign. Riley was never here on time, and if she was, it was usually because Ana was moments from a meltdown and needed help.

Had something happened with the store yesterday? Panic twisted her tummy. If something had happened—she didn't know what could've possibly happened, but something could've—Riley definitely wouldn't have called her. Not unless it was a fire or something equally as permanently damaging.

She lurched forward, but Rhys' hold on her hand tightened.

“Calm down,” he soothed.

“When has that ever made a woman calm down?” Riley drawled. Ana's head snapped to her, finding her leaning against the counter with her arms folded across her chest. “You don't look as relaxed as I hoped you'd be.” She shot an accusatory glare at Rhys.

“It's not his fault,” Ana blurted, drawing her friend's attention.

“Then why would he tell you to calm down if he didn't do something to make you *not* calm?” she asked, lifting her brows.

Rhys and Ana looked at each other. Her shoulders slumped as she let out a small sigh.

“Will you lock the door and turn the sign to closed? I don't want anyone coming in right now,” she said.

“Sure thing,” Rhys murmured, squeezing her hand. She watched as he jogged across the store, her heart in her throat.

“Ana?” Riley asked warily. “What's going on?”

“Wanna sit?” She gestured to the couches in the middle of the store. Riley's eyes slid to them, then back to her. Rhys made it to her side as they sat on the couch, Riley on the opposite one.

She held herself tightly, her eyes darting between the two of them.

“Well, it’s too early to know if you’re pregnant,” she joked, but her laugh was tight. “And I don’t see a ring on your finger, so you’re not engaged.” Ana pinched between her eyes, and Rhys rested his hand on her back.

“Josh is out of prison.” Rhys spoke quietly, but they felt like a sonic boom in the tiny store.

Riley sat quietly, her eyes widening and face paling. “What?”

“My mom told me the other day,” Ana muttered. Rhys shifted slightly. He didn’t love that she’d kept it from him, but in her defense, they’d still been practical strangers.

Technically, they still were. But so much had happened that she felt like she’d known him her entire life.

“So, he’s out of prison,” Riley said, swallowing thickly. “So what?” Ana glanced at Rhys, her lip between her teeth. She really wanted Buns. Or her thumb. Or her paci. Just something to ease some of this anxiety.

She rubbed at her chest, and Rhys scooted closer to her, wrapping his arm tightly around her.

“He knows where she lives,” he said quietly. “I’m bringing her back to New York with me.”

“The tour—”

“She’s coming with us,” he said, cutting her off. “I’m not letting her out of my sight.”

“When you’re playing—”

“Jensen hired two extra guards,” he said. He’d thought of everything. He had everything planned.

She didn’t doubt that he’d protect her and keep her safe. But besides her solo road trip from Syracuse to Sawyer, she hadn’t traveled. She didn’t know what to expect, especially not with the group of guys.

“So, he’s on his way here,” Riley said, and Ana let out an involuntary whimper.

“I don’t know,” Rhys ground out. “But I’m not taking any chances.” Riley watched Ana carefully, her eyes narrowed.

“And this is what you want to do?” she asked, ignoring Rhys’ grumble. Ana glanced at him, and Riley snapped her fingers. “I didn’t ask him. I asked you. You want to go with him?”

Rhys’ spine stiffened.

When he asked her at the beginning of the week, she’d said no. And he hadn’t totally given her a choice when he brought it up again.

She thought about it for only a second before she nodded.

“I have to be with him,” she whispered. Riley slid her eyes to him, and if he was a lesser man, or anyone but her cousin, he’d probably run for the hills with that withering look. But he calmly held her glare.

“If you hurt her, Rhys, I swear to fucking God I will kill you.” She’d never heard Riley sound so...serious. She wholeheartedly believed her threat. “If you let anything happen to her, I won’t hesitate.”

“I understand,” he said. “She’ll be safe. Between me, the guys, and our guards, she’ll be more protected than the fucking President.”

“I hope for your sake that’s true,” she said, folding her arms over her chest. “Otherwise—” She slid her thumb across her throat, and a chill went through Ana’s body.

“Since when did you become so bloodthirsty?” Rhys teased.

“Since my best friend was put in a position to get hurt.” Rhys’ smile fell.

“I won’t hurt her,” he said. “I told you that the other day.”

“I know.” She continued looking down her nose at him. Ana wanted to hide under a blanket at the intense scrutiny, but she forced herself to grow a backbone.

“You both know I’m an adult, right?” she said. Both of them snapped their attention to her. “I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it most of my life.”

“Not the point,” Riley said.

“Not anymore,” Rhys said at the same time. They glance at each other, then back at her.

“Josh probably just wanted to scare me,” she said. “I doubt he’d actually come to Texas.”

“He might,” Riley said, scrubbing her hand over her face. “My friend, Maya, is tied up with some shit. Apparently, her on-again, off-again boyfriend is running drugs for some cartel in South Texas and they’re expanding.” Ana’s brows pinched together.

“Why does that matter?” Rhys asked, and Riley shrugged.

“Josh was into drugs,” she said. “Maybe he has ties to Texas you don’t know about.” Ana shook her head.

“He was just a low-level dealer,” she said.

“*Before* he went to prison.”

Silence fell over the little group. Could she be right? But the chances of Josh having ties to some random cartel in some random place in Texas was slim.

The more she thought about it, the more she thought it seemed like one of his mind games. He probably just wanted to scare her. He didn’t actually care where she was, or who she was with. He just wanted her to know he was out, and he wanted that to fuck with her.

He was probably banking on her running away from her home.

That made her pause.

Is this what he was expecting? Should she just stay here?

But when she looked at Rhys, her heart ached. She couldn’t imagine not waking up beside him, or not seeing him every single day. He belonged to her as much as she belonged

to him. There was no way she could ever imagine her life without him again.

“We’re heading to New York tonight,” Rhys said. “We have a show Saturday night, then we’re heading to Chicago.” She twisted her hands together.

After she got on that plane and landed in New York, there would be no turning back or second guessing. She knew there would be millions of fans and paparazzi there to take photos of Rhys, and when they saw her, she knew her face would be plastered all over every tabloid in the world.

“Wait.” She gripped his arm. “We can’t fly into JFK. If we do, they’ll take my photo and Josh will know I’m in New York.”

“Shit.” Rhys scrubbed his hand over his mouth. “*Shit*. I’ll call Jensen. He’ll get something sorted.”

He stood, already pulling his phone out as he strode across the room. Riley hurried to his spot and sat practically in Ana’s lap. She gripped both of her hands.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asked, her eyes flicking between Ana’s.

“I’m sure.” She tried not to shy away from Riley’s intensity.

“And you’re sure about him? You want to be with him?” They both glanced at Rhys, finding him with the phone pressed to his ear, his other hand resting on his hip as he paced.

“I think I love him,” she whispered, and Riley’s head whipped around.

“*Love?*” she repeated. “You’ve only known him—”

“I know,” Ana sighed. “I know it’s crazy. But I can’t explain it. Something about him just feels right.” Riley stared at her for a long moment, then nodded.

“I’m happy for you,” she murmured. “But if you ever change your mind, I’m only a phone call away.”

“I know.” She wrapped her arms around her best friend and hugged her close.

“What about the store?”

“Oh my God.” Ana shoved her back but kept her hands on her shoulders. “That was the entire point of telling you about Josh.” She rubbed her forehead. “I was thinking about closing it while I’m on the road—”

“I could run the place,” Riley said, looking around. Ana chewed on her lip.

“It’s a lot of responsibility, Rye,” she said softly, and Riley shrugged. “I’ve been working here since day one, I know what to do.”

“You’d really want to take over for a while?”

“I’d actually love it.” She looked around, and Ana saw it, the spark in Riley’s eye that she recognized. It was the same spark she’d felt when she first opened The Book Garden.

It was love. And passion. And hope. And excitement.

“Okay,” she breathed. As the word left her lips, a massive weight lifted from her shoulders. She took a deep breath, and for the first time in a long time, she felt like she could finally breathe again.

chapter twenty-seven

The flight had been mostly uneventful. Jensen found them a private flight, and the only people on it had been a few of Rhys' colleagues—other rockstars. He hadn't freaked out like Ana had.

She met Roxy Bandera and her band.

Roxy. Freaking. Bandera.

Rhys had assured her Roxy was just a normal girl, but she wasn't. She was one of Ana's favorite musicians—scratch that. She was Ana's favorite human in the history of humans. And she's freaking met her!

Roxy had her blue hair picked up in a messy top-knot and wasn't wearing her signature black smokey eye and plum lipstick. It was weird to see her out of her usual outfits, and in just sweats and a giant t-shirt. But it humanized her.

And she'd hugged Ana when they got off the plane. She was still shaking from it. She'd even invited her and Rhys to one of her shows.

She still couldn't believe that he was friends with Roxy. Like, actually friends. They hung out together, and she even featured on one of The Butterfly Effect's songs. They weren't just acquaintances, or two people with the same job. They had each other's phone numbers and talked regularly.

She was still freaking out.

Now they were riding the elevator up to Rhys' penthouse he shared with the band. Her nerves were shot from talking to

Roxy for hours—okay, she hadn't actually talked that much. She'd just kind of stared.

“Does she think I'm a weirdo?” she asked again, and Rhys let out a breathy laugh.

“I can assure you, your reaction was one of the most normal reactions she's ever gotten,” he said, wrapping his arm tightly around her. “You get used to people screaming and fainting when they see you. But when someone just tells you that they love your music, it stays with you. I don't know how to explain it. But I promise you didn't freak her out.”

“Oh God, I didn't even think I'd freaked her out.” She covered her face with her hands. “That was so embarrassing.”

“At least you didn't break out in song or something,” he said unhelpfully. She separated her fingers enough to glare at him.

“Thanks,” she said flatly, and he winked at her.

Before she could say anything else or spiral further, the doors opened. They stepped into a short hallway with a set of double doors at the other end.

“Home sweet home,” he said, grabbing her hand and dragging her toward the door. “You'll love it. I had Jensen get a bunch of stuff for you so you'll feel at home.”

“You didn't have to do that,” she said, bunching her shirt in her fist. “He didn't need to go through so much trouble for me.”

“It was no trouble,” he said as he shoved the door open. “It's his job.”

“Isn't he your manager?” she asked.

“Manager, errand boy, same thing.” When she didn't say anything, he just grinned at her.

A man with dark hair and golden skin rounded a corner, a deep scowl on his face as he rolled up the sleeves of his white button down. His jaw was more chiseled than any statue, and his eyes were brighter than any blade of grass.

“There you are,” he breathed, coming to an abrupt stop.

“Here we are,” Rhys grinned. The man’s eyes shifted to Ana, and she gave him a small smile. “This is Jensen, my errand boy.”

“Errand boy?” he snarled. “Is that what you think I am?”

“Of course,” Rhys said, waving his hand dismissively. “Errand boy, this is my girlfriend, Anastasia.”

She blushed at the title. He’d introduced her the same way to Roxy and her team. It was a shock then, and it was a shock now. She didn’t think she’d ever get used to him calling her his girlfriend.

“Hello,” she said softly.

“I am not your fucking errand boy, Rhys,” he said, ignoring her.

“And you’re not going to be my manager much longer if you don’t say hello to my girl.” Ana’s head whipped around to stare at Rhys. He was glaring at Jensen.

“It’s fine,” she hissed, but he ignored her. He just kept staring at his manager, waiting. Jensen took a deep breath.

“Hello, Anastasia.”

“Ana,” she said, looking back at him. She forced a smile to her face, but he didn’t seem to notice or care.

“You’re finally back.” Kody rounded the same corner Jensen had, a bright smile on his face as he headed toward Rhys.

But it wasn’t him he hugged.

To her shock, Kody wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug, nearly lifting her off the floor.

“Back up,” Rhys barked. “Jesus. I knew we should’ve gotten a room.”

“Why?” Kody asked, finally letting her go and taking a step back. “You didn’t want to see me?”

“I didn’t want you touching my girl.”

“Such a possessive little caveman,” Kody cooed as he pinched Rhys’ cheek. She let out a small giggle, then covered her mouth. No one seemed to notice the sound she’d just made.

“I’m not a caveman.” Rhys swatted at Kody’s hand, but he just lifted his other one and pinched his cheek again. “Fuck off.”

“Hey,” Kody said, shaking his head disapprovingly. “No cussing in front of Little girls. Already told the guys not to. Vincent told me to fudge off.” Her eyes widened.

“He really said fudge?” she breathed. Finally, Kody shifted his gaze to her and winked.

“Not that exact word,” he said, shrugging. “But that’s what he *should’ve* said.”

She knew her mouth was hanging open.

“Fucking finally.” Vincent came barreling toward them, stopping a healthy distance away. She peered around him, but Jensen was gone. She hadn’t even seen him leave.

Sneaky man.

“We’ve been rehearsing without you,” Vincent said.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve managed just fine,” Rhys said. “You hungry, sweets?” She glanced at him, then at Kody and Vincent.

“Where’s Tate?” she asked. They looked at each other.

“He thought he’d hang out in his room for a bit,” Kody said. “Let you get all settled.” Her brows pushed together.

“Why?” she asked.

“Probably because you’re friends with his ex,” Vincent grumbled, giving her an accusatory look.

“Watch it,” Rhys growled.

“I don’t want him to feel uncomfortable in his own home,” she muttered, glancing up at Rhys.

“I’ll talk to him, sweets,” he promised. “Don’t worry.”



SHE LIKED KODY. SHE LIKED KODY A LOT.

He was funny and was the best person to have on your team when playing Jenga.

Rhys was her partner for the first round, and that's when she learned he was awful at the game, but Kody was great. She didn't know how she did it, but she weaseled her way into getting Kody as a partner. And she was glad of it because so far, they'd won four games, and Vincent and Rhys hadn't won any.

Which meant...

"I am *not* doing that," Vincent grumbled, his arms folded over his chest.

"But you have to!" she laughed. "Come on, Vinny. Don't be a sore loser."

"Don't call me Vinny."

"Vin-Vin?"

"Vincent," he grunted. "That's my name." She shrugged.

"I like Vinny," she said. "Don't you like Vinny?" She glanced at Kody, finding him lounging on the white couch, his arms behind his head and legs stretched out in front of him.

"Oh, I *love* Vinny," he said, grinning.

"I think it has a nice ring to it, too," Rhys said.

"Why are you joking about this?" Vincent snapped, glaring at Rhys. "You have to do it, too."

"Daddy *loves* wearing makeup," she said.

Everyone turned toward her and it took her all of two seconds to realize why they were staring.

Daddy.

Shit.

“Oh my God.” She clamped her hand over her mouth. “Oh my God!” She shot off the couch, aiming for the hallway that led to Rhys’ room.

Her foot hit the coffee table, and she cried out as she fell. She landed on the floor, luckily only hitting a chair and not the hardwood floor.

Hands slipped under her armpits and someone yanked her to her feet. Stormy dark eyes met hers, black hair hanging in them.

“Are you okay?” Vincent demanded. He crouched lower, forcing her to look into his eyes. He was too intense. “Anastasia, are you okay?” He turned toward Rhys. “What’s wrong with her? Why isn’t she talking?”

“Sweets?” Rhys said, resting his hand on her back. She hadn’t realized her hand was still covering her mouth.

“Why aren’t you talking?” Vincent snapped. “What’s wrong?”

“Give her a second, man,” Kody said warily. “You okay, little one?”

She hated being the center of their attention, but she was too embarrassed to speak, or drop her hand. She just stared back at them, wide eyed.

“What happened? I heard someone scream.” Everyone looked above her head, and she closed her eyes.

Great.

Just what she needed. Another set of eyes on her.

Surprisingly, panic wasn’t clawing its way up her throat, and she wasn’t entirely sure why. She should be freaking out—well, she *was* freaking out, but this should be sending her into a panic attack and it wasn’t.

Progress.

“Sweets,” Rhys said again, and she snapped her eyes to him. “Are you okay?” She nodded. “Can you put your hand down?” She shook her head. “Why not?”

“I might say something else embarrassing,” she said, her voice muffled. His lips twitched.

“Oh God,” Vincent groaned, rolling his eyes. “I forgot how fucking dramatic chicks are.” Kody backhanded Vincent’s chest, and Vincent glared at him.

“Shut up,” Kody hissed. “And don’t cuss.”

“You’re telling me I can’t say fuck when she’s around?” Vincent threw his hand at her.

“I’d like you all to shut the hell up,” Rhys snapped.

“What happened?” Tate stepped beside her, his hands shoved in his pockets. “Are you okay?”

“She tripped and fell,” Vincent grumbled. Tate looked at the ground, then slowly scanned her body before meeting her eye again.

“I don’t see any injuries,” he said slowly, glancing at Rhys.

“She’s a little embarrassed,” he muttered, and Tate slowly nodded, but still looked confused.

“Because you fell?” he asked.

She wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

“Because she called Rhys Daddy, like anyone gives a fuck,” Vincent huffed. She squeaked and covered her face with both hands.

Did he have to just come out and say it like that?

“Oh, that’s it?” Tate asked.

“That’s it,” Kody confirmed.

“Remember, I told you these guys are in the lifestyle, sweets,” Rhys said. She shook his head as he spoke. She didn’t care if they were in the lifestyle, they knew she was now. And they knew Rhys was her Daddy!

“You were going to be basically living with us for the next two months,” Kody said. “Did you think you could hide it forever?”

“Longer than a couple hours,” she mumbled, and Kody chuckled.

“Can you put your hands down, sweets?” Rhys asked again, his voice as calm as ever. Why wasn’t he freaking out too? Did he not care?

Maybe not in front of these guys, but what if Jensen had been here? Or the guards? Or fans! What if she said it in front of his fans?

“I need to go,” she said. She kept her hands on her face as she shuffled around.

“Um, Ana?”

She ignored whoever spoke as she shuffled across the floor, ignoring the stab of pain when she bumped into another piece of furniture.

“Ana.”

She made it to the steps that lead to the hallway. There were two. Or was it three?

“Anastasia.” Okay, that was Rhys’ voice—his Daddy voice.

Her spine stiffened, and she stopped moving, but she didn’t turn around.

“Come here.” She shook her head. Nope. No way was she going back over there.

“Pizza’s here,” Kody announced. That grabbed her attention. They’d gone out of their way finding a totally gluten-free pizza place, and she was excited to have some.

But she couldn’t have any now. She couldn’t show her face in front of the guys ever again.

“Anastasia,” Rhys said in a low voice. His hand landed on her back, and she jolted. “I’m not gonna hurt you.” She knew

that. “But if you don’t drop your hands, I am going to spank you.”

Her hands immediately fell to her sides.

“Thought that would get your attention,” he muttered. “Where are you going?”

“To hide,” she said. “Or to jump off the roof. I haven’t decided yet.”

“You’re doing neither of those things,” he growled.

“But I called you the D word,” she whispered, not daring to look over her shoulder at the guys. Actually, she wasn’t sure if they were still around or if they’d gone to the kitchen to eat. But she didn’t want to find out.

“And you’re freaking out about it, why?” he asked. “Am I not your Daddy?”

“Well, you are,” she said, and he lifted his brows in question. “But I said it in front of your friends. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“You didn’t,” he said. “They don’t care. Kody is a Daddy. Tate is a Dom, at least. But I think he has Daddy tendencies. And Vincent—I don’t know about him.” He pinched between his eyes. “No one cares.”

“I do,” she whispered, and his body tensed.

“Are you embarrassed?” he asked. “Do you not want anyone to know?”

“I don’t know,” she breathed. “It just—I don’t know.”

And she was serious, she didn’t know what she was feeling. Did she care? Yes, because she hated being the butt of a joke. But also, no, because she loved Rhys being her Daddy.

“Are you embarrassed of me?” he asked quietly. Her mouth fell open.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked, and he shook his head. “Of course, I’m not embarrassed of you.”

“Then why don’t you want them to know I’m your Daddy?” She chewed her lip as she thought about it.

“It’s not that I don’t want them to know that,” she said. “But I didn’t know if I wanted them to know I’m a Little.” Understanding and relief filled his face.

“I promise, they don’t care,” he said. “Kody loves Littles. He goes to the club just to have tea parties with them.” Her eyes widened.

“Really?” Rhys nodded, and she looked around his body toward the kitchen. “Would he have a tea party with me?” The words came out before she could stop them.

“If you ask nicely, I’m sure he’d love to,” he chuckled.

“You’d be invited, too,” she added quickly. He kissed the top of her head and wrapped his arm around her.

“Thanks, sweets. You okay?” He studied her for a long moment, his eyes searching hers.

“I’m fine,” she whispered. “But they won’t make fun of me?”

“No,” he said. “And if anyone ever did, you tell me and I’ll kick their ass.” She giggled at that, and rested her head against his chest.

“Pizza,” she whispered, and he squeezed her tighter to his side.

Slowly, they made their way across the apartment. She still hadn’t taken the time to fully take it in. Floor to ceiling windows lined one wall where you could look over the city, a large living room with all bright whites and grays. She was surprised to see hardly any dark colors in the home of a rock band.

She’d expected more black. And skulls. She didn’t know why she’d expected so many skulls, but she had.

Instead, it felt homey and cozy. She could see herself spending all her time in the living room, or reading by the windows. Even Rhys’ room, as massive as it was, was cozy.

She'd loved it in there, especially because it smelled just like him.

It was like coming home.

They stepped into the kitchen and she froze. The guys sat at the table in the corner, bickering and eating.

"They won't bite," Rhys told her. She took a deep breath.

For whatever reason, the lack of spiraling into a panic attack gave her more courage than she'd ever had in her life.

She took a step forward, drawing Tate's attention. He gave her a small smile and scooted his chair over, making room for her. He didn't have to, there were plenty of other spots available, but she took the olive branch and headed straight for the spot next to him.

"Cheese, or pepperoni?" he asked. "Vincent got weird pineapple pizza." She gave Tate a guilty look. "Oh, God. Don't tell me you like that?"

"I do." She wrinkled her nose at him, and he gasped dramatically.

"We have another weirdo in the family," Kody said around a mouthful, nudging Vincent with his elbow.

Rhys slid a bottle of water in front of her as he sat beside her. He reached for a slice of the cheese and set it on her plate, then grabbed the pepperoni for himself. She stared down at it, then glanced at him, then the others.

"You can have some of mine," Vincent grumbled, even though it sounded like he didn't really mean it.

"It's okay," she said, lifting her pizza.

Gluten-free pizza was always hit or miss. She was nervous, but as she took a bite, she nearly moaned. It was amazing.

They ate in companionable silence for a bit, thankful no one brought up her Daddy slip. She just wanted to forget about it and move on. Even if no one cared, and she'd probably slip up again, she didn't know if she was ready to call Rhys Daddy in front of anyone on a regular basis.

“So, you own a bookstore,” Tate said. Her brows bunched together.

He knew she did.

“Yep,” she said.

“And Riley works for you.”

Mhm.” Where was he going with this?

“Is she running the place while you’re gone?” he asked, and she nodded.

“You trusted her to not burn the place down?” Kody asked. “Brave girl.”

“She’s really good at her job,” Ana defended. “I’d trust her with my life.”

Okay, that was dramatic. But she did. Kind of. Sometimes.

It depended on the situation.

“Why a bookstore?” Vincent asked. “No one reads anymore.”

“A lot of people read,” Tate said.

“Yeah, nerds like you,” Vincent shot back.

“I don’t have a reason other than I just love books,” she interrupted, not wanting them to bicker. “You read?” She turned her attention to Tate. Why didn’t she know that about him?

But after her talk with Audrey, maybe there was a lot about Tate she didn’t know.

“All the time,” he said, turning toward her.

She glanced at Rhys, finding him just watching her, his expression soft. She loved when he looked at her like that. He slid his hand onto her thigh under the table. Not to tease her, but to just let her know he was there.

“Who’s your favorite author?” she asked.

“That’s a tough question.” Tate rubbed his chin as he turned his gaze to the ceiling. “Tolkien, probably.”

“Oh, I love Lord of the Rings,” she said excitedly.

“You do?” Tate and Rhys said at the same time.

“I was Bilbo for Halloween one year.” Her face heated. Why did she tell them that?

“I was Gollum one year,” Tate said, his cheeks staining the same shade of red.

“No way!” She turned more toward him. His smile turned genuine as he pulled his phone out.

“I was Sirius Black another year,” he said.

“Oh my God, I was Hermione three years in a row!” she squealed.

“God,” Kody groaned. “There’s another one.”

“I can’t stand any more Harry Potter marathons,” Vincent said.

“Me either,” Kody agreed.

“Neither of you are invited,” she said, waving her hand at them.

“Why not?” Vincent asked.

“Because you just said you can’t stand anymore,” she said, giving him an exasperated look.

“It’s still rude to not invite us,” Kody grumbled. She giggled to herself as she peered at Tate’s phone as he flicked through photos from a Halloween party.

“What about you?” she asked, glancing at Rhys.

“He hates it as much as we do,” Kody answered, flipping Rhys off.

“I can bring the snacks,” he said, and she laughed again.

“At least she didn’t say Twilight,” Vincent muttered.

“Oh, I *love* Twilight.” She grinned at him as he groaned.

She hadn’t expected to feel so at home with them, but she did. She was an only child, but she thought this was how people who had siblings felt.

She could see herself becoming best friends with them all.
Even Vincent.

Maybe.

One day.

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chapter twenty-eight

Awkward tension filled the room, and Rhys shifted uncomfortably. Ana's mother, Tanya, stared at him, and her stepfather, Joey's eyes flitted around the room. Ana had changed the second they entered the room. Not in a bad way, but he'd noticed that spark was gone. She was more reserved, and had her Little under tight wraps.

They'd arrived an hour ago and came straight to the penthouse. The guys promised they would make themselves scarce, but now Rhys was regretting it. He'd give anything for Kody to say something stupid to break the tension.

"So, Rhys," Tanya said, drawing his attention. "You're Riley's brother?"

"Cousin," he corrected. "But she's practically my sister." He cracked a small smile.

He didn't know why he felt so weird. Parents usually loved him. But these weren't just any parents, they were Ana's parents and he really didn't want to fuck up.

"You've met Riley?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," Joey said. "Sweet girl."

The conversation immediately died again. Rhys cleared his throat, and glanced at Ana, finding her already watching him. She winced slightly, but he just smiled reassuringly.

Meeting the parents was always awkward, right?

"Tonight is your first show?" Tanya asked. He knew she was just being nice and trying to converse. Which he appreciated. But it was still awkward as fuck.

“Yes, ma’am.” He gave a firm nod. “New York tonight, Chicago in a couple days. Denver after that...” He trailed off, stopping himself before listing every city.

“Are you excited to see the country?” She turned toward Ana.

“It’ll be a lot of fun.”

Fuck.

She didn’t even sound like herself. Even if she was usually quiet and reserved, there was always a childlike spark to her. But now it was gone. She’d completely smothered it.

Rhys glanced at his watch and cleared his throat. “We should head to the venue. Brock and Cam will want to meet you.” He directed the last words to Ana, and she nodded.

She still hadn’t met her guards. He knew it was because she was scared and he felt terrible about it, but Brock and Cam were some of the best agents King’s Security had to offer. Which was why he asked Jensen to hire them.

“Do we really have to go so early?” Joey asked. “We can meet you there closer to showtime.”

“I’d feel better not being separated from Ana,” Rhys said. He felt Ana sink into his side, like she’d been anxious he would leave her.

Crazy girl. Didn’t she know she was never getting rid of him?

Tanya and Joey exchanged a look but didn’t argue. Wisely.

He was more than ready to fight them over this. Even if the penthouse was safe and Cam and Brock could come to them, he still didn’t want to leave her.

Being so close to Syracuse again was making Ana jumpy. He’d had to reassure her there was no way Josh could somehow break in. Even if he did manage to climb up the side of the building, there was no way for him to open a window. And if he snuck past security and somehow made it to their front door, there were so many locks on the door he couldn’t

open it. But if he did, the security system they had installed was the best money could buy.

They'd dealt with their fair share of crazy fans and stalkers that they knew not to mess with their safety. They spared no expense when it came to that. Only the best of the best. And if they hadn't already been hiring and using the best of everything, Rhys would've started.

He didn't care how much time or money he spent keeping Ana safe. He could sleep easier knowing nothing would happen to her.



ANA SANK ONTO THE SOFA IN THE GREENROOM BACKSTAGE. Rhys and the guys were out front, going over the set list a final time. It felt awkward having her parents around, meeting Rhys. She was anxious her mother would just know about their dynamic, but she hadn't seemed to notice his overprotectiveness.

“So,” Ana said, her eyes flicking to Cam at the door behind her mother. He had dark hair cropped close to his head, and was easily the biggest man she'd ever seen. Well, apart from Brock, who was equally as big.

Things felt awkward, and she knew it wasn't because Cam was in the room with them. It was awkward because no one had brought Josh up. She knew her mother didn't want to hurt Joey further, and neither did Ana, but she still felt like there was a conversation lingering just in the distance that they needed to have.

She guessed she could be the one to rip the bandaid off.

“Have you heard from Josh again?” she blurted. Joey's dark brows lifted, and he glanced at her mother, who paled.

“No,” he said gruffly. “He hasn’t been back around.” Ana let out a relieved breath at that. She was glad he wasn’t trying to weasel his way into her life again.

“We’re so sorry,” her mother breathed, and Ana slid her eyes to her.

“It’s okay.” Ana shook her head softly.

“It’s not,” her mother said. “You’re in danger now, and it’s our fault.” She glanced at Joey, finding him looking at her guiltily. She felt bad she was so upset with him, but what had he been thinking?

Another pang of guilt hit her.

She knew better than anyone how manipulative Josh could be. If he wanted something, he had a way of weaving a believable story and pushing until you finally gave in. She couldn’t totally blame Joey for that. But she also couldn’t totally forgive him, either.

“I saw a little café down the street,” Ana said. “Let’s just go grab a coffee and forget about this whole thing. I’m safe.” Her mother didn’t look convinced and Ana knew this would be something they talked about for years to come. She didn’t blame her mother though.

“We can’t forget—”

“What’s done is done,” Ana interrupted. “The only thing we can do is move on.” She held her mother’s gaze.

God, she wished Rhys was with her. He’d give her the strength she didn’t have.

“Cam?” She stood, and his spine stiffened.

“Ma’am.” He gave her a tight nod. This was so weird, asking her guard to accompany her to a stupid café.

“My parents and I wanted to get some coffee,” she said, walking toward him.

“I’m afraid you can’t leave the property.” He didn’t look apologetic as he said it.

“It’s just down the block,” she said, but he shook his head. “If Rhys says it’s fine, can we go?” She hated pulling that card for a million reasons.

At her core, she knew it was fucked up for Cam to ignore her requests until her boyfriend okayed it. She understood why, but it still irked her.

“He won’t agree to it,” Cam said slowly, and she smiled at him.

If she asked nicely and promised not to leave Cam and Brock’s sides, she knew Rhys would say yes. Well, she hoped he would, anyway.

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chapter twenty-nine

“**Y**ou sure you didn’t want anything?” She looked up at Cam, then Brock. Neither of them looked at her.

“No, ma’am.”

“Can you stop calling me ma’am?” she mumbled. That made Cam blink, but that was the extent of his reaction. Her mother snickered, but covered it with a cough.

Embarrassingly, Cam and Brock stood guard in front of the table instead of sitting at it with them. Easier to protect them, Brock had said. She still felt it was unnecessary but humored both men and Rhys.

Rhys has been reluctant, but agreed. He’d promised if she didn’t stay with Brock and Cam, her ass would pay for it later. So, not wanting a spanking was incentive enough to keep her in check.

Her phone vibrated and she flipped it over, sighing at the text.

RHYS:

Everything okay?

ANA:

Yep.

He’d checked on her every ten minutes since she left the venue. She thought it was overkill but understood he was worried.

And she was too. It wasn't like all her fear suddenly disappeared, but she felt better with her guards.

“Oh, look at this,” her mother said, drawing her attention. “You both look so cute.” She slid her phone toward Ana and she grabbed it, her eyes widening at the picture.

It was of her and Rhys leaving the airport yesterday. She didn't know how this photo had gotten online when they hadn't seen any paparazzi anywhere.

She was smiling up at Rhys, his arm wrapped tightly around her as they made their way to the car Jensen sent for them.

She remembered that moment. He'd just told her about the prank he'd pulled on Jensen when he first started working for Rhys. He'd somehow managed to put Nair in Jensen's body wash. After that, the guys called him Rufus—like the naked mole rat from *Kim Possible*—for months.

She couldn't believe Jensen had stayed working for the band after that. She definitely would've quit but Jensen was made from tougher stuff than her, apparently.

“You look happy,” her mother said, and Ana blinked a few times, turning her attention to her mom.

“I am.” She smiled shyly. She couldn't remember a time when she'd been this happy.

Her mom slid her hand across the little table and gripped Ana's hand, blinking back tears as she stared at Ana.

“Don't cry,” Ana groaned.

“I didn't know if you'd ever put yourself out there again,” her mother said. She glanced up at the guards, but if they were listening, they didn't make it obvious.

“Mom,” she sighed. She didn't want to have this conversation with her right now. After years of her telling Ana she needed to live life again, that she needed to enjoy her twenties, and she hoped she could find someone to enjoy it with, Ana was tired of the conversation.

“I know,” she said, holding her hand up. “But I really am proud of you. You’re living your dream. The Book Garden is thriving, and now Rhys? Your life is taking off.” Ana pressed her lips together.

Yeah, she’d thought about that too. She never thought she’d get to this point when she was with Josh. Not when she thought he’d kill her someday. But he was just a ghost now.

“Speaking of,” Joey said, cutting her mom a look. “How’s the store?” Ana’s stomach twisted. It wasn’t a question she was ready to answer.

“Good,” she said. And it was the truth. The store *was* good. It was really good. It was her who’d changed.

Somewhere along the way, she’d lost her love and passion for it. She thought the amount of stress owning a business put her under made her not love books the same way, and a part of her resented the store for it. But she still loved what she’d created and she loved that it was an important part of the community.

But now that she was with Rhys, she’d thought about how it would work once the tour was over. Would he move to Sawyer? Likely not. But could she move back to New York? She didn’t know.

It wasn’t because she didn’t want to give up the store, she thought she could come to terms with it and if she could sell it to someone she knew would take care of it, she’d sleep easier at night. But she didn’t know if she could live this close to Josh again.

She’d constantly be looking over her shoulder, waiting for the day she’d inevitably run into him. And then what? It wouldn’t be a pleasant encounter, she knew that.

But was she really going to let him control the rest of her life? Was she really going to let him dictate if she could live with her new boyfriend or not?

She took a deep breath.

Her phone vibrated again and she glanced at it.

RHYS:

Show starts in an hour.

Cam glanced at his watch and she wondered if he'd gotten a similar text, or if he was just hyper aware of the time.

"We should get back," Ana said as she pushed her chair back. Her mother and Joey exchanged a look she chose to ignore, and got to her feet, sliding her phone into her back pocket.

"Wait for us," Brock barked, and she froze.

Jeez, the big man was intense.

People stared at them, mostly annoyed Ana and her little group were getting in their way. Cam pushed his way in front of her, while Brock took the spot behind her parents.

She thought it was overkill.

Cam shoved the door open and scanned the street before ushering her out. Panic sat heavy in her chest, but she forced herself to stay calm and she was proud of herself for it.

Her mom's hand wrapped around hers, and she looked back, smiling softly. But her mom wasn't smiling back. Her eyes were wide, and her skin was pale. She looked like she'd seen a ghost.

Everything happened quickly, but also in slow motion.

"Get down!"

A gunshot rang out around her, and everyone on the street screamed. They scattered like ants, but she stood frozen, her eyes locked on a dark pair she thought she'd never see again.

Another gunshot, and her mother screamed.

She spun, finding Joey holding Mom, Brock standing in front of them, guarding them, his gun up and aimed.

"Ana!"

She didn't know who shouted her name, or where they were. She couldn't stop staring at the blood staining the

sidewalk.

“Down! Now!”

Another gunshot, and she swore she could feel the bullet whizz past her head.

Brock went down, landing heavily on the concrete. He groaned at the pain, but kept his gun raised in his shaky hand.

She stared at him.

She knew she needed to move. She knew she needed to get down, or back inside the café, or in the car. But she couldn't move. She couldn't leave her parents lying on the ground like this.

Anger like she'd never known spiked in her chest. She hated that this was her life—that she had a psychotic ex who thought he could do this to her. How could he ever think this would be okay?

How could he ever think any of what he'd done was okay?

She spun, finding Cam trying to wrestle the gun from a man she didn't recognize. Had she just thought it was Josh? Was her mind playing tricks on her?

But then a hand slid over her mouth, her eyes went wide, and her entire body froze.

“There you are,” he seethed in her ear. “I've been looking for you.”



SHE DIDN'T FULLY KNOW WHAT HAD HAPPENED AFTER JOSH silenced her. All she knew was that she'd been dragged a few feet away and thrown into the back of a black van. All she knew was Josh was driving, and he was alone. Whoever Cam had been fighting with must've been his partner, and Josh just left him.

Not that he'd had much honor to begin with, but that was cold, even for him.

"Where are you taking me?" she croaked. He ignored her as he took a turn too sharply. She banged into the side of the van, her head knocking painfully into the metal. "Josh?"

He bounced in his seat, his eyes wild as he drove, weaving in and out of traffic. She didn't think they were in the city anymore, and if they were, it was a part she didn't recognize.

She wanted to cry. She didn't know how the hell she was going to get out of this. Why did he have to ruin everything?

All she wanted was to be back at Rhys' place, in his bed, wrapped in his arms while he hummed to her. That's all she wanted. She wasn't asking for a lot.

Tears sprang to her eyes.

How was Rhys going to find her? How was Cam or Brock going to find her?

Oh, God. *Brock*.

Was he dead?

Was Mom dead?

She choked on a sob. Why did she think it'd been a good idea to go to the café? She should've stayed at the venue with Rhys.

She should've stayed right by Rhys' side and never left it.

Another sob worked its way up her throat.

"Can you just shut the fuck up?" Josh shouted, making her jump.

She hated his voice. She hated the way he looked, and the way he smelled. She hated everything about him.

But Joey had been right.

He looked different.

He was more muscular than he'd been before going away. He looked more clean cut now, despite the new tattoos. He didn't look like the same lowly kid she'd once loved.

He looked like a man now. A terrifying, still abusive, man.

Ana's eyes flitted around the dark van, trying to find something to use to escape. He hadn't tied her up, which she hoped was a good sign. She didn't know what to do. There was nothing.

She shifted and felt her phone dig into her ass in her back pocket and she inhaled sharply. She knew he would see the light if she tried to use it, so she'd have one chance and she'd have to be quick.

With shaky hands, she pulled her phone from her pocket and held it between her legs, trying to hide as much of the light as she could. She glanced up at Josh, finding him still concentrating on the road.

Quickly, she turned her location on and sent a text to the only person she could think of.

ANA:

Sprinkles!

“What are you doing?” The van lurched to a stop, jolting her forward. Her phone fell to the floor, and she scrambled for it. “Fucking bitch.”

He slung his seatbelt off, letting the metal piece bang into the window as he slid from his seat. Slowly, he came toward her, his eyes shadowed. He'd never looked so terrifying.

Before she could reach her phone, he kicked it, sending it flying to the front of the van. She didn't know if she had service, or if Rhys had gotten the message, she only hoped he did.



ANA:

Sprinkles!

He stared at the text, dread pooling in his stomach. Ana and her parents should've been back by now, but they weren't, and it was making him uneasy. And now with this text, he knew he hadn't been overreacting when he'd told the guys something was wrong.

Jensen had assured him everything was fine and that she'd be back before they went on stage. But they were about to go on and she still wasn't back.

None of them were.

Why had she sent him her location, too?

Something wasn't right.

He was going to fucking kill Jensen if anything happened to her.

Rhys pressed the phone to his ear as the door to his dressing room banged open. Cam stood there sweaty and bloody, his chest heaving and eyes wild. Rhys' phone clattered to the table as he dropped it.

"What happened?" he asked. Cam swallowed, but didn't blink. He didn't take his eyes off Rhys.

"I tried to stop him," he said. "But there was another one shooting at us, and Brock got shot—"

"What happened?" Rhys asked again, his voice angrier.

"He took her," Cam rasped. "He—I don't know how he got past me, but he did." Rhys glared at him, his body vibrating.

"Where is she?"



ANA WAS SCARED. AND TIRED. AND REALLY FREAKING UPSET.

She didn't like the dark, and she hated yelling. She wanted Buns, or her paci, or Daddy.

Preferably Daddy.

She clutched her knees to her chest and pressed her back harder against the wall as she watched Josh pace back and forth. She didn't know where he'd brought her. All she knew was that it was a house that smelled terrible, had dust and cobwebs everywhere, and was falling apart. It was probably a random place he found, there was no way anyone was living like this.

He ran his hand through his hair before he whirled to face her.

"I can't believe you tried to run from me," he snarled. "You left me when I needed you most. Just turned your back —"

"You were in prison," she said, her voice shaking.

"Yeah, and a real woman would stand by her man no matter what," he shot back.

She felt queasy.

"But you left the first chance you got, didn't you?" He scoffed as he shook his head. "I can't believe I ever thought you loved me."

She took a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut. His words didn't affect her anymore. She wouldn't let them.

"Then you manage to bag a rockstar?" he sneered. "How did you do that? Why the fuck would he ever want *you*?" Her chin trembled.

"He'll come for me," she whimpered. That was the only thread of hope she was clinging to. If she believed nothing else, she believed that Rhys would come for her, and he'd destroy the world to get to her.

She felt that truth in her bones. All she had to do was wait until he got to her, then she could break. But right now, she

needed to be strong. She needed to burrow deep inside herself and find the strength she knew she had.

Josh threw his head back and barked out an ugly, mocking laugh. “You’re delusional if you think he’ll come,” he said, shaking his head. “He might send a guard, but that’s if he even remembers you exist.”

She bit down on her tongue until she tasted blood.

Rhys *would* come. He’d come himself. He wouldn’t send a guard, and he wouldn’t forget about her.

But had he gotten her text? Or her shared location? Was he already on stage? Did he have his phone?

If he was already starting the show, no one would pull him off on the first night of their tour. That was the other thing... would he really come for her tonight? He had an obligation to his fans.

She had a sinking feeling in her tummy.

“Why did you move to Texas?” he asked, his voice low. She blinked at him.

“What?”

“Texas,” he snarled. “Why did you pick that state to move to? You working with the Feds?”

“What?” She blinked at him. What was he talking about? “I’m not—what?”

“You knew all my contacts,” he said. “Are you helping hunt them all down and send them away like you did to me?”

“I didn’t send you away,” she breathed. Sweat trickled down her face, it soaked her back, and her hair stuck to her neck.

“You think I didn’t know it was you who called in that anonymous tip?” His brows lifted. “I’m not a fucking idiot, Ana.”

“I know,” she whimpered. “But I didn’t tip anyone off.” He scoffed.

“You were the only person who knew about that meeting that day.” She shook her head.

She was genuinely confused and shocked. She’d never told the cops anything. Ever.

“I didn’t,” she repeated.

“You can stop lying—”

“I really didn’t,” she said again. “I would’ve never done that.” Out of fear, not loyalty. He stared at her for a long moment. She felt like a bug under a microscope, and she always had when he stared at her like that.

“Who did?” he asked. She opened her mouth to answer, even though she didn’t have a freaking clue, but tires on gravel sounded outside and she snapped it shut.

“Shit.” Josh ducked below a boarded-up window, the gaps in the wood panels filling with bright light. Hope filled her. “Shit. Shit. Fuck!”

He turned his head toward her, his face shadowed by the halo of light around him. A car door slammed, and she sucked down her whimper.

By his reaction, she knew it wasn’t some of his friends, so it had to be someone for her.

He frantically looked between her and the door that was barely hanging on. Her body was shaking.

She strained to hear voices, but couldn’t hear a thing. Their footsteps were barely even audible.

She shouldn’t have stared at the door. She should’ve paid more attention to Josh.

The door slowly opened, and a tall, muscular shadow entered the doorway. She knew that shadow—that body. She knew it. She loved it.

She opened her mouth to call out for him, but Josh slapped his hand over her mouth. Something hard and cold rested against her temple, and a tear silently escaped from her eye, down her cheek.

Now she wanted to scream for him to run, to get out of there before it was too late and he got hurt. God, if he got shot because of her, she'd never forgive herself.

Her mom.

Brock.

Joey.

Cam.

Were they okay? Were they still alive?

“If you don't leave, I'll shoot her!” Josh shouted. The figure stood frozen in the doorway. Ana scanned him and forced herself to hold in her shock when she saw Rhys clutching a gun at his side.

A larger shadow formed behind him. Was it one of his guys? Or one of Josh's?

Dread coiled inside her.

Rhys took a step forward, letting the door close behind him. The bang was soft, but felt like a sonic boom in the house. His head swiveled, and she knew the moment he saw them because his shoulders straightened and he stood at his full height.

He took another step toward her, and she let out a small whimper.

“Don't come any closer,” Josh ordered, pressing the gun harder against her head. Rhys' face was lit by the blinding lights seeping in through the cracks on the windows.

He didn't look like himself.

She'd never seen anyone look so incredibly pissed.

“How about you let her go and we can deal with this like men, hm?” Rhys drawled. He sounded so calm, like he wasn't staring at his girlfriend's ex holding a gun to her head.

He leaned against the wall, looking bored.

“Deal with what?” Josh shouted. “I have no business with you!”

“But I have business with you,” Rhys growled. “You took her from me. You’ve hurt her. You’ve scared her.” He shook his head, his jaw tensing. “I’ll kill you for it.”

There was a brief pause, then Josh barked out that same mocking laugh.

“No, you won’t,” he said.

“I won’t?” Rhys’ brows lifted.

“You think I’m dumb enough to believe some rich fuck like you gets his hands dirty? You’d never take a chance at killing me. You have too much to lose if word got out.” Rhys flashed him a smile, his teeth blinding in the light.

“I can promise you,” he said, pushing off the wall, “I don’t give a fuck if anyone finds you. You’re fucking dead.”

With that, Ana was tackled to the ground. She screamed as a giant, heavy body pinned her to the dirty floor.

A loud gunshot rang in her ears, deafening her. She thought she was still screaming.

Who’d been shot?

Rhys?

She tried to lift her head, but the body on hers kept her pinned. “Stay down,” he hissed. But she couldn’t stay down. Not when there was a scuffling, like Rhys and Josh were fighting.

A grunt.

Then heavy footsteps as one ran away, the other chasing.

A door opened, then slammed shut twice, and she squeezed her eyes tightly shut. What was happening? Why was Rhys chasing Josh? Because she had no doubt in her mind that that’s what was happening.

“Shit,” the man grumbled. He climbed off her and manhandled her into a sitting position. “You good, Miss Ana?” She stared into Cam’s dark eyes as she nodded. “Good girl. I have a few friends outside. I need you to go to them while I

chase your man down, okay? I need to stop him from doing anything stupid.”

She numbly nodded.

“Ana, you with me?” he asked, gently squeezing her arm, and she nodded again. “What did I tell you to do?”

“Find your friends outside,” she breathed.

“That’s right. Go. Now.”

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chapter thirty

He'd never been so happy that his trainer had made him run almost every day. If it wasn't for Miles, he'd be fucked right now.

But he wasn't. He was chasing, and keeping up with, this asshole, Josh. Who knew a guy fresh out of prison and likely on drugs was a fucking track star?

Rhys hated leaving Ana behind, but he knew if he didn't chase Josh, he could come back to hurt her in the future and he'd die before he ever let that happen. The fact she'd even been taken in the first place, that she was hurt and terrified, was too much for him to handle and if he didn't take this anger out on the man who caused it, he knew he'd explode.

His feet pounded on the pavement. He slipped on rocks, but he never went down, his sights still set on Josh.

Josh looked over his shoulder, and Rhys grinned. He was close to him, probably too close for Josh's comfort.

"Rhys!" Zayn, his personal guard, shouted from behind him. He knew this was way against protocol, and would likely end in a lecture of a lifetime, but he didn't really care. All he cared about was destroying the person who'd hurt his baby girl so fucking badly she'd have trauma for the rest of her life.

He didn't give Zayn any attention as he closed in on Josh. He pushed himself harder, pumped his arms faster, forced his feet forward until he was right behind him. In one motion, he leapt and tackled Josh to the ground.

They tumbled, Rhys' skin shredding as they skidded along the pavement. Josh groaned as Rhys rolled on top of him, straddling his chest. One hand wrapped around his throat as he lifted the other.

Bringing it down, Rhys punched him in the face over and over, until he heard something crack. Blood poured from Josh's nose, his eyes hazy as he stared back at Rhys.

Rhys could barely hear Zayn calling his name again, could barely register that he'd stopped beside them and was trying to pull him off Josh. Everything had faded to black, and the only thing he could focus on was Josh.

The only thing he could think was that he needed to kill him.

"Cops are on their way, man," Zayn panted. "Get off."

Arms wrapped around his middle, but he anchored himself harder against Josh, pummeling his face, hit after hit. Sirens blared in the distance, but still, he didn't stop.

All he could see was Ana's terrified, wide eyes, the way her body had trembled as Josh held a fucking gun to the side of her head. All he could feel was the fear that had slashed through him from the second he'd gotten that text from her.

Everything that he'd felt for this fucker was coming out in every punch he landed. He'd never been so furious, so full of hate, than he'd been when Ana had told him what had happened to her. And knowing this was the man responsible for it?

He couldn't stop.

He *wouldn't* stop.

Arms wrapped around him again and yanked him. Hard.

Rhys slid off Josh's body and bucked, trying to get back to him. He needed to finish what he'd started. He needed to kill him with his bare fucking hands. He let out an animalistic snarl as he writhed in Zayn's arms.

"Cops are almost here!" Zayn shouted again, shaking Rhys roughly. Zayn shoved him back onto his ass before he wiped

as much blood as he could off Rhys' hands. "I did this. You hear me? I did this to him." He pointed at Josh's broken, swollen, bloody face. "I fucked him up. Understand me?"

Rhys blinked at him, then turned his attention to Josh.

He felt sick.

He'd done that? Josh was unrecognizable. And he'd done that to him, with just his fists.

That wasn't the thing that made him sick. The thing that made him feel sick was the intense need he still felt to climb on top of him and finish the fucking job. He didn't want to stop until he was dead.

And that was terrifying.

He didn't know he could be capable of violence like this, but then again, he'd never had someone he'd loved so much he'd do this for.

"Understand me?" Zayn shouted again. Rhys nodded numbly.

He didn't know how they were going to explain his bruised, bloody, and split knuckles to the police. They'd never believe that it was Zayn who did this.

But as police pulled up to them, their doors flinging open and their voices filling the silent night, Zayn muttered, "You hit him for self defense. I did the rest." His dark eyes were hard as he stared at Rhys.

Rhys nodded again.

The cops swarmed them, some of them swearing at the state Josh was in. He looked worse under the harsh light of their flashlights.

"Ana," he rasped, looking around. It felt like he was coming out of a haze, and all he could think about now was her. "Is she—where is she?"

"At the house with Cam," Zayn said, jerking his chin the direction they'd run from. "Go. I'll talk to them."

Rhys glanced at the few cops standing around them. Some were talking on their radios, some were taking notes, others were taking photos. Zayn strolled to one and began talking, probably relaying his version of the story. The new truth.

He turned, his stomach tightening into knots as he stared at the blue and red flashing lights in front of that death trap of a house. It made him queasy knowing she'd been in there, that she'd been so close to her ex, that he'd nearly lost her.

As he walked down the street, he scanned the outside of the house trying to find her. When he did, his breath caught.

Sitting on the curb, Ana had a heavy blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Cam and two cops stood above her as Cam relayed the story.

Rhys' heart jumped into his throat at the sight of her. She looked so young. So lost. So fragile. So scared.

He hadn't hurt Josh enough.

But then she looked around, and their gaze caught. It felt like the first time he'd seen her. Like he was free falling from a plane.

"Sweets," he rasped as he stopped in the middle of the road. They were ten feet from each other, but they might as well have been thousands of miles apart.

Her full lips parted as she stared at him. She wasn't crying anymore. She wasn't shaking. He knew she was in shock, and the events of tonight would come back to haunt her in the future—they'd probably come back to haunt him, too.

Slowly, she clambered to her feet, swaying slightly. Every instinct in him was screaming at him to go to her, to run and steady her, to take her in his arms and never let her go.

But he didn't move.

He couldn't.

They stared at each other for another long moment. She let the blanket fall to the ground behind her before she took off in a full sprint toward him.



THE COOL AIR SLASHED AT HER FACE, DRYING THE STREAKS OF tears on her cheeks. His eyes were wide, and he was covered in blood and sweat, but she didn't care. He launched himself toward her, running faster than she ever could.

They met somewhere in the middle, and he threw his arms around her, burying his face in her neck as he lifted her off the ground. Her arm wrapped around his neck, squeezing tightly as she lifted her legs around his waist.

He held her, both of them breathing heavily, their hearts pounding wildly. She'd never felt so scared than she had when she realized Rhys had taken off after Josh. She knew Josh had a gun and was sure he'd use it on Rhys and she'd lose him forever.

But here he was, in one piece.

"Never do that again," she sobbed, and his arms tightened. "Don't leave me like that."

"I'm sorry, sweets," he rasped. "I'm so sorry." She squeezed him tighter, wanting his body to absorb hers.

He finally pulled away to look at her. His fingers were gentle as he brushed the hair from her damp forehead. Fresh tears formed in her eyes as she stared at him.

"I'm sorry for taking off after him. The only thing I could think of was killing him to protect you. And I'm sorry." She tried to swallow past the lump in her throat.

"You killed him?" she croaked, and he shook his head.

"Zayn pulled me off before I could," he said, sounding put out about it. "But I hurt him." His eyes searched hers warily. "Are you scared of me now? Knowing I could do that to someone?"

Oh, he was going to break her heart.

“You did it for me,” she whispered, and he nodded. “You did it to protect me.” He nodded again, still looking at her with guarded eyes. “I could never be scared of you for protecting me.” She cupped the side of his face, the rough stubble of his beard rubbing against her palm.

“I love you,” he whispered, tears filling his eyes. “I love you so fucking much it hurts to breathe.” Her chin trembled as she leaned forward, pressing a light kiss to his mouth.

“I love you, Rhys.”

His kiss was harder, more demanding and possessive. And she let him. She let him take whatever he needed to calm down, to know that she was safe. Safe because of him.

“I hope you know you’re never leaving my sight ever again,” he said against her mouth, and she smiled as she nodded.

“I know,” she whispered. “I didn’t want to, anyway.”

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epilogue

Eight Weeks Later

“**Y**ou’re sure about this?” Rhys asked again. Ana sighed exaggeratedly as she side-eyed him.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said. *Again.*

“We can figure it out if you don’t want to give this place up.” He eyed her warily, and she folded her arms over her chest as she turned to glare at him.

“Are you saying you’re having second thoughts? Because it’s a little too late now.” She waved her left hand at him, the diamond on her finger glinting in the sunlight.

“That’s not what I’m saying and you know it, brat.” After dropping the box in the moving truck, he grabbed her and pulled her toward him, pressing her body against his. “I just want to make sure you’re really ready for this.”

She rested her hand on his chest, comforted by the steady beat. They’d been on tour for six weeks, engaged for two, and back in Sawyer for one. Ana had decided that she was ready to move on from The Book Garden.

It wasn’t an easy decision, but halfway through the tour, she’d figured out there was a huge market for books about ageplay, and decided to open an online bookstore specifically for them.

Surprisingly, she’d met a lot of Littles on the road, and was shocked to learn Roxy Bandera was one too. Oh, that was the other thing that happened. Roxy and her were now friends—like, real life, texting every day friends.

She was still positive she was dreaming.

“I am,” she said. “I’m ready to start our life together.”

“And you’re going to be okay in New York?” His eyes searched hers.

Everything that had happened with Josh still haunted him. It was hard for Rhys to come to terms with the fact he’d been more than ready to kill him, and that he still didn’t regret anything he’d done. In fact, more than once, he’d said he’d do it again, and if he could change the outcome, he wouldn’t have let Zayn pull him off.

It didn’t scare her, though. The only time he’d ever shown that amount of anger was always toward Josh, never anyone else. If it wasn’t for the split and bruised knuckles, no one would’ve believed him that he was the one to beat Josh up.

“I will be.” She smiled up at him. “You’re there to protect me. And I’ll be happy being close to Mom.” He tucked her hair behind her ear.

Her mother had been shot, but the bullet barely grazed her arm. It had been a quick recovery, but Ana still had flashbacks of the blood on the concrete, and the way she’d screamed. Brock had been shot fully through the shoulder and was just now getting back to work, but was still on light duty. Which he wasn’t happy about.

She’d sent him cookies, and he’d sent them back, saying he didn’t eat sugar.

Poor guy.

He must’ve been miserable, not eating sugar.

“And you’ll be close to Roxy,” he said, giving her a look.

That was the other thing.

They’d found an apartment right down the block from Roxy. She’d promised Rhys she was fine still living with the guys, but he said he wanted them to have their own space. She couldn’t totally disagree. But being on the road with them for a month and a half made her more than comfortable around

them. Even more, her Little had grown comfortable around them.

Vincent was still closed off, but had surprisingly stopped cursing. Tate and her spent most of their time together watching movies. And Kody? He was her partner in crime. The pranks they pulled on everyone during the tour were legendary. She felt bad he'd taken the brunt of the retaliations, but not bad enough to tell anyone to retaliate against her.

Oh, and Jensen. She'd learned that he hadn't been in a bad mood the first time she met him. That was just who he was. He was the grumpiest grump she'd ever met, but, for some reason, it was endearing. She'd learned he was only that way toward people he cared about, and when he started fussing about her, she'd never been so happy.

That was the thing that really made her feel like she was a part of their family.

"And the girls promised they'd come visit," she said excitedly.

"God, do you think they were serious?" She swatted playfully at his chest. "A house full of you girls? I don't know how I'll survive."

"You can stay with the guys," she said, and he laughed.

"And let you get into all sorts of trouble? Don't think so, sweets." He kissed the top of her head, and she melted against him.

She didn't know how, but she fell more in love with him every day. It sometimes freaked her out how well they fit together.

"Are y'all all packed up?"

Ana turned in Rhys' arms, pressing her back against his front, and smiled at Riley. She somehow still looked perfect, even though she was in dirty clothes and covered in sweat.

"That was the last of it," Rhys said.

"Are you really sure about this, Ana?" Riley asked, chewing on her bottom lip.

Reaching into the pocket of her shorts, her breath caught as she felt the warm metal keys against her palm. She gripped it tightly, giving it a final squeeze before pulling them out and tossing them to Riley.

“I’ll keep everything the same, and—”

“It’s your store now, Riley. You can do anything you want to it,” Ana said softly, stepping out of Rhys’ arms. He cleared his throat and made some excuse to check the apartment one more time. When he was gone, Riley gathered her in for a tight hug.

“Thank you,” she whispered, and Ana squeezed her tighter as she closed her eyes. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” she rasped. “But you’re all coming to visit next month, right?”

“Of course.”

“And for dress shopping?” She pulled away but kept her hands on Riley’s shoulders.

“I’d be the worst Maid of Honor if I wasn’t there for that,” she teased.

Ana’s throat felt tight. She’d only let Riley be there to see them off. It would’ve been too hard to say goodbye to everyone all at once, so they spread their goodbyes out over the last week.

But she was wrong. It didn’t make it any easier.

“We almost forgot this,” Rhys said, jogging back to her. He held up the pink vibrator she’d hidden, positive he’d never find it. “It was in the pantry, though. Weird.”

“Why would that be—you know what? I don’t even want to know what kind of freaky shit you’re into.” Riley clapped her on the shoulder as she took a step back.

“We’re not!” Ana said. “I—I don’t know how it got in the pantry. Maybe you misplaced it. I hear that happens in your thirties.” He shook his head, a hidden smile on his face.

“Oh,” Riley sang. “You’re in trouble.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Girls,” Rhys laughed. “You’re sure you don’t need help moving your stuff in?” Riley waved him off.

“I’m all good,” she said. “Holden said he’ll help.”

“Holden?” Rhys gawked at her. “Why the fuck would you ask him? He doesn’t even live here.”

“He’ll be in town this week,” she shrugged. “We’re trying to fix things.”

“Holden?” Ana asked, looking between them.

“My brother,” she answered. Ana blinked at her.

“I didn’t know you had a brother.” Riley looked uncomfortable as she slid her hands into her pockets.

“He was, um, estranged. He left home at sixteen—it’s a whole thing.” She waved Ana off. “I’ll explain some other time.” She glanced at Rhys and he shook his head, so she dropped it. She couldn’t believe she didn’t know her best friend had a brother, but Riley must’ve had a reason to keep it from her. “Okay, get out of here!”

“She’s trying to run us off,” Rhys said, throwing his thumb at her.

“I know,” Ana huffed. “Rude.” Riley rolled her eyes, but still smiled at them.

“Go.” She turned Ana toward the truck and swatted her ass. “You too.”

Rhys hurried around to open Ana’s door, not letting Riley get anywhere near him to swat his ass. She laughed as Riley ushered her toward the passenger side. Before she climbed in, she gave her friend another long hug.

“Text me later,” Ana said. “And if you need anything, I’ll be here as soon as I can.”

“I know,” Riley said, squeezing her tightly. “Same for you.” Ana nodded a few times, but kept her hold on her. She

wasn't ready to let go yet.

They hugged for another few moments, then Riley pulled away, blinking back the wetness in her eyes. She'd known Riley for years and had never seen her cry.

Not sober, at least.

"Take care of her," she said to Rhys. "Or you know what'll happen." She dragged her thumb across her throat, and he nodded, as serious as ever. "Go." She gently shoved Ana toward the truck.

She took a deep breath before climbing up. Riley patted her arm a final time before Rhys shut the door. She watched as they gave each other a quick hug, Riley smacking him hard on the back, before he pulled away. He said something that made her face tighten, but he gently shook her, and she nodded.

Riley stepped away, her hand on her throat as Rhys climbed into the driver's seat.

"What was that about?" she asked, and he shook his head.

"I just told her to call if Holden gives her any trouble," he said, waving dismissively. "Ready, sweets?" He reached over to grab her hand. She waved one more time at Riley, then looked ahead.

She took a deep breath.

"Ready."

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