



Silver Fox
ENEMY'S BABY

LISA RYAN

SILVER FOX ENEMY'S BABY

An Age Gap Forced Proximity Romance

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PROLOGUE MALLORY

My sister is so cool. Literally, the coolest person on the planet. She wears the ‘angry blue haired feminist’ look like a badge of honor, and it truly does suit her in every way. I’ve always wanted to be like her, but now even more so than ever.

She’s escaped our hellish home life and really started to make something of herself in this cool little town of Beaufort. Working for Wyatt Macauley at the motorcycle store, and doing the most amazing custom paint jobs I have ever seen in my life. She’s blooming and has never seemed happier.

I’m jealous. Yep, very jealous.

I want to escape too. I want to find something that suits me as much as this new life clearly suits Liss.

“I won’t be long.” Liss says brushing her hair out of her eyes. “Let me just finish this, then we can have a cup of coffee. You want to go grab one?”

I nod awkwardly, because I’m still not used to the layout of this building, and I definitely don’t want to get in anyone’s way. But I also want to emulate Liss a little. She wouldn’t let shyness get in her way. With her head held high, she would storm into the office and stroll over to the coffee machine like she owns the place.

I might not be quite ready to do *that*, but I can get the coffee. It’ll be fine. Plus, Lexi, the receptionist, seems really nice so I’m sure she will give me a hand.

“...so, I think that’s going to be the best price we can do for him, Lexi. Let him know and he can get back to me if it

works. I'm not going to cut him a deal just because he's royalty..."

The breath whips out of my lungs completely, and not just because I heard the word 'royalty' mentioned at the place where my sister works – although I have to admit, that's really cool – no, it's because of *him*.

The Wyatt Macauley. Liss's boss and best friend. He might just be some guy to her, but to me he's so much more. I personally don't understand how she isn't more than a little intimidated by him. He's cool, sexy and dangerous looking. The fact that he doesn't flaunt his wealth just adds to the charm and mystique. I was pretty convinced that I was heavily crushing on him.

It isn't just his sea blue eyes and broad shoulders that makes my heart race just a bit faster. There's something about his presence, and his aura, that turns my knees to jelly. I'm sure he must have this effect on every woman. I can't work out how Liss stands to be around him on a daily basis. How has she not fallen in love with him yet?

"Ah, so there she is." Wyatt catches sight of me and beams at me, smiling from ear to ear. "Liss' infamous sister. Mallory, right?" All I can do is nod silently like a dummy. "Well, we're glad to have you here. I hope you're coming out to lunch with us today."

Again, all I can do is nod. I bet he thinks I'm a real idiot! I cringe hard, feeling a heat burn in my cheeks as I turn away from him. The intensity of his gaze burning through me is too much to handle, thankfully my eyes land on the coffee machine. I make my way over to the machine and sigh in relief.

Thank God it's just a couple of buttons to press because I'm now trembling all over. He's just too much. I *know* he's a lot older than me, and way out of my league, but I could still appreciate his sexiness from afar, right?

Everything is a bit of a blur as I grab the coffee, thankful that it's finally run, and I rush outside to Liss. Gratefully, she snatches the cup out of my hand and glugs the coffee back as

if it's an oasis of water in the desert. I do the same, but only because I'm still knocked off kilter by Wyatt.

"So, what's going on?" Liss finally asks me, with such a softness to her voice, that I forget about Wyatt for a moment. "At home, I mean. How's *Derek*?"

She spits out our stepfather's name as if it's poison, which it basically is. Neither of us can stand Derek, but since he's now been married to our mom for five and a half years, I guess we needed to accept that he wasn't going anywhere.

"Not great." I can't be honest about my home life with anyone but Liss. We never actively made the decision not to share it with anyone. It somehow became one of those things we've both silently accepted. But sharing things with Liss feels like a weight off my chest. Even if there is a part of me that feels bad about dragging Liss back into it. "Worse, I would say."

Liss sighs heavily and hangs her head low. "I'm so sorry, Mallory. I hate you being stuck there. Is the arguing with Mom still really awful?" I bite down on my bottom lip and nod. The less said about all of that, the better. "And he's still being a dick to you? Urgh, I hate that nasty piece of work. I just wish I had more space for you to come and live with me."

I shake my head. "No way, you can't do that for me. This is your life here, not mine. I don't want to step on your toes when you're doing so well for yourself."

Liss tuts and slings her arm around my shoulder. "You will *never* be stepping on my toes, Mallory. I always want you around me. You know that, right? But I understand you want to make your own path in life. I will help in any way I can though."

I don't want things to get too heavy. I didn't come here to spew out all the shitty stuff going on in my life, I came here to escape it for a little while. I need to change the subject, so I let the words fall out of my mouth without really thinking about them.

“So, I just walked in on your boss... he’s smoking hot, isn’t he?”

I try to let out a bit of a strained laugh, but Liss doesn’t join in. Her face falls and her cheeks stain a funny shade of pink. “You are joking, right? Because he’s *much* too old for you...”

“Oh no, I know. I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just kidding.”

“You better be, because Wyatt is *not* the man for you. He might be my best friend, but that doesn’t mean I want you guys together. That would just be weird...” She shudders in horror. “He might be good looking, but he’s arrogant which I’m sure you wouldn’t like. When we all go to lunch, you’ll see.”

Whoa, okay, Liss really overreacted here, didn’t she? It makes me take about ten mental steps back. Not that anything was about to happen between me and Wyatt anyway, it was just a silly little comment. Not one I’m going to make again, that’s for sure.

I sip my coffee silently for a little longer, now feeling even more nervous about lunch with Liss and this dangerously sexy man who I *know* is too old for me. But now that I *know* he’s off-limits... Hmm, Liss might have just turned him into the hottest fantasy I could ever have...

She’s right.

Liss, I mean. Eyeing Wyatt across the table and seeing that twinkle in his eye definitely shouldn’t make my heart skip a beat. He’s definitely made some comments that make him seem arrogant... but he’s just so hot and dreamy.

I’m sure that’s why he’s featured in my dreams as I relive the lunch we had earlier today. Only this time it’s just me and him. Liss and everyone else has vanished, and now Wyatt is basically crawling across the table to claim me. This hot older

guy is a predator coming to devour his prey, and I'm *more* than willing to be consumed by him.

You shouldn't, I tell myself as a smile spreads across my face.

But I can't help myself...

By the time Wyatt cups my cheeks with his hands and crashes his lips to mine, I'm aching to cave to the temptation and do what I shouldn't, because it's *taboo*. He slides off the table between my thighs and presses himself up against me. I can feel his rock hard cock yearning for me, and fuck my core is throbbing for him too.

I don't quite know how it happens, but I'm grateful that our clothing melts away. The scenery shifts and changes too. We're no longer in the restaurant, we might be in his office, leaning against one of his amazing motorbikes.

I hop up onto one of the bike seats sideways and spread my thighs wide. He buries himself deep inside of me, thrusting hard and fast, knocking the air right out of my lungs. I'm breathless and dizzy, swallowed up by Wyatt completely, and it feels phenomenal.

"Fuck, Wyatt," I cry out as his kisses run all over my throat. Every so often he nips my skin, and a shudder of desire tears down my spine. "That feels so good."

His hands are everywhere too, touching me all over, feeling every part of me. It's like he's addicted to me, and needs to hold every single fucking part of me. Maybe because he knows that he shouldn't.

Liss probably warned him off me too. That only makes me want him more.

Each thrust brushes against my clit and hits all the right spots. I toss my head back in desire, allowing my hair to spill down my back as the nibbles on my nipples intensify absolutely everything. The pleasure builds up within me, curling my toes, making my heart thunder like crazy against my rib cage.

I reach out and cling onto Wyatt because I'm afraid to let him go. My nails dig deeply into his shoulders because the

pleasure is too much to handle. It's utterly overwhelming, and I'm frightened of him slipping through my fingers like grains of sand.

I need him, I *have* to hold on to him, it's the only way I'll feel all this pleasure all at once. He's shoving me to the peak of the mountain at the speed of light, I want to savor every single second of this bliss before it knocks me off my feet, I want to be here with him for as long as I can... but he's too good, his touch is too expert. He knocks me over the edge into a spinning abyss of pleasure rapidly.

Screams ricochet so hard from my vibrating chest as I drown in the intensity of the orgasm. Never have I ever felt anything quite so powerful before. Wow, this is phenomenal, incredible, and overpowering. Every fiber of my being reacts to this man, every cell in my body screams out for more.

I want him, I need him, I ache for him.

The throbbing is all of me, every damn inch. No man has ever made me feel like this before, and I can't imagine anyone else will ever again. Wyatt Macauley is extraordinary in every single way. Just as I suspected when I first laid eyes on him. This is why I can't imagine spending every single day with Wyatt without falling head over heels in love with him.

It would be impossible.

The waves of pleasure don't stop rolling over me. They are more like a tsunami than waves because they are so intense. Wyatt holds me close to his chest as the pleasure shatters through me, I can hear the pounding of his heart smashing against my ears. It's a sound I never want to let go of, a noise I shouldn't be hearing, but that I don't want to end...

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Chapter One

WYATT

One Year Later...

This is crazy, I think to myself as I glance around Mom and Dad's backyard to see the most beautiful wedding set up I have ever seen in my life. All for my youngest brother, Luke, and his lovely bride to be, Belinda. We haven't seen them for a while, they've been traveling the world and doing all kinds of cool charity work, which is what I think they'll continue doing after they're hitched, and their baby is born.

If anyone could make that work, it'll be the pair of them.

It isn't just my youngest brother and the way his life progressed way ahead of mine that has me a little strained today. It's all of my younger brothers. Josh and his wife Lexi have their kids; Mya and Peter, plus another one on the way. They look exactly like what they are, a beautiful, happy little family.

And then there's Grayson.

Rock star Grayson who's completely turned his life around for Lillian and his two little boys; James and Max.

I'm happy for them, of course I am. I guess I'm a little jealous too because I've realized I want that for myself. I don't like to admit that out loud, because it's never been something I've actively yearned for, and it's also not something I felt like I deserved given the past I've had. But now I found myself

wanting it pretty badly and it makes me sad that I don't have it.

Thank God Liss will be here soon. My permanent plus one, just as I am hers. She'll make sure I have a great time at this wedding, as always.

"You good, Wyatt?" Luke asks as he hands me another beer. That will also help.

"You shouldn't be asking me that," I say with a laugh. "I should be asking you, because this is your wedding day after all. Are you nervous?"

"Nervous about marrying Belinda?" he scoffs. "No way. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me. Nothing can make me get anything like cold feet today."

I have to admit, I can see it in his eyes. He really is the happiest he's ever been with this woman. Which is wild considering the roller coaster it took for them to finally end up together.

It's been a real whirlwind, but I guess it was worth it because everything is good now. Better than good.

"Nah, I really meant just about the wedding." I laugh. "Are you nervous about today? Mom and Dad have gone all out to make it amazing for you, haven't they?"

Luke nods, full of gratitude. "I know, I'm so grateful. We just didn't have the time to come back and plan everything. We were too busy in Haiti."

"I saw the photos of you guys there. It looked like you did some incredible things."

I love hearing about Luke's travels, especially because he's so passionate about it. It's clear it's what he needs to do with his life for his joy. Just like Josh found his place in the world with his tech company and as a father, and Grayson found with teaching music.

Of course I have that with my motorcycle store, it makes me really happy and fulfills me professionally, but I'm definitely missing something in my personal life. Something all these weddings are making me crave.

"So, when are you going back?" I ask Luke. "Traveling, I mean?"

"Well, we have to wait for the baby to be born and then make some decisions," he replied with misty happy eyes. "We might settle down here for a little while, wait until the baby is a little bit older. Who knows? Everything is up in the air at the moment, but I don't mind not knowing where we're going next. Me and Belinda are fine with that."

"That's great. I'm really happy to hear that. It seems like you've finally gotten your shit together. It's really awesome." I pat him on the shoulder. "Proud of you, Luke."

He mumbles something similar in response, but doesn't say too much about how I have ended up where I am. I know he feels it, but he doesn't want to drag it all up. Thank God, because I don't want to even *think* about all of that right now.

Not on this happy occasion.

My past is something I'm sure no one wants to talk about.

We're beyond that now, right?

"So, where is your date?" Luke finally asks me. "You marked Plus One, right?"

"Liss, of course. Who else would I bring?"

Luke eyes me curiously, and I already know what's going to come next before he even says it. "So, there still isn't anything going on between you and Liss?"

It's always that way. No one can ever accept that me and Liss are just friends and that we will never be anything more. It just wasn't like that with us, it never has been and never will be. I don't know how to get that across to people.

“She’s just my best friend. That’s it.”

Luke nods slowly. I can almost see the million and one questions floating through his mind, but I’m really hoping he doesn’t land on any of them. This isn’t the time and place; this is his day. We need to be concentrating on the massive life changes that are about to happen.

“I might give her a call actually, see where she is.”

It’s just an excuse, and I’m sure Luke can see right through it but he lets me slip away to call Liss. What’s annoying is that she doesn’t answer my call, which isn’t like her since her cell phone is always pretty much attached to her hand. I wait for her to call me back within minutes, but she doesn’t.

Which is also odd. I debate calling her again and leaving her a voicemail message...

“Wyatt?” A small voice calls out to me, grabbing my attention from the phone. “Hi...”

It takes me a couple of moments to realize who I’m looking at. She looks vaguely familiar, but definitely not someone I would recall if I didn’t have Liss on my mind.

“Oh, Mallory. Hey.” Confusion floods my face. My eyebrows knot together as I try to work out why Mallory is here. I didn’t know she and Luke knew one another. I suppose it could be Belinda, or she might even be someone else’s plus one. If so, it really is a small world. “It’s been a long time. Like, a year, right? Something like that...”

“Yeah, right. It has been about that long.” Her cheeks flame red which brings out a strange discomfort within me. I can’t pinpoint why I’m so awkward, but I can’t shake it off. “Erm, I’m actually here instead of Liss. She’s not feeling well and she panicked about leaving you at the wedding with no one. She thought we might have a good time.”

“So... wait, Liss isn’t coming?” It takes me a couple of minutes to process what she was saying to me. It didn’t make

any sense. “She’s still at home?”

“Right, yeah. She can’t come. So, I guess I’m your plus one.”

Okaay. I glug my drink back quickly, hoping it might calm down the pounding of my pulse. Having a laugh with my best friend at Luke’s wedding is one thing, but having to entertain someone who I didn’t really know is something else completely. I won’t be able to relax with Mallory at my side, because I’ll have to be *on*. This sucks, I would have much preferred being abandoned by Liss than having to play host.

“Err, right.” There was me thinking that she looked nice as someone else’s date. I sure as hell didn’t know she would be mine. We’re going to look odd together, aren’t we? It’s obvious we’ve got at least a decade between us, and we’re definitely not comfortable around one another... argh, I need another drink.

“Would you like one?” I angle the beer bottle towards Mallory. “I think they have champagne and other things. Anything you prefer?”

“Err... champagne, please. Thanks.” She mutters quietly.

I glance back as I walk towards the bar area to grab a drink for Mallory. She sure as hell isn’t looking back at me though. She has her face buried in her phone. I wonder if she’s messaging her sister, asking how she ended up in such an insane situation. Actually, I kinda want to speak to Liss as well, to give her a piece of my mind. She better pick up the phone this time around though because I needed to speak my mind.

“Wyatt, is Mallory at the wedding?” The phone barely rings before she picks up this time. I know now she was ignoring me before. “Did she make it there alright?”

“Yeah, she’s here. What the hell is wrong with you, Liss? Why aren’t you here?”

That came out a little harsher than I had intended. But Liss needs to know this isn’t okay. She’s really dropped me in it

and I'm sure she knows that.

“You *know* I would be there if I wasn't at death's door, Wyatt,” she warns me, acting like I'm the one in the wrong. “And I *really* didn't want to leave you there alone because I know your brothers are going to be there with their families. I just wanted you to have company. Mallory has been... well, she's been having a hard time. So I thought this would be the perfect way to give you both a laugh. You can look after one another.”

I grit my teeth together. I can see her logic, but that doesn't mean I like it. I guess I really am going to have to look after Mallory tonight and make sure she enjoys the wedding. Especially since I can only assume I'm the only one she knows here. She isn't Belinda's secret friend, or the date of an old schoolmate or something like that. It might actually just be me, and we hardly know one another at all.

“Let me know how you get on,” Liss continues. “And don't forget to put her in a cab at the end of the night, just so I know she's going to get home safe. That's my little sister, and I need to make sure she's okay. I worry about her; you know that about me.”

“Yeah, of course.” I deflate because there's no point in getting wound up about things I can't change. This is how it is now. “You know I'll look after her.”

We talk for a couple more minutes, before there isn't anything else I can do but get on with this. My best friend really is unwell, I know she was looking forward to the wedding and she wouldn't not be here without a really good reason, I get that.

I don't know much about Liss's home life, she doesn't talk about it, but I know there's *something*. I can only assume that's what she meant when she said that Mallory was going through a rough time. I guess if that's the case, the best thing I can do is *try*.

I catch sight of Josh and Lexi sharing a little kiss. I see the love burning between them. I spot Grayson spinning James around in the air, looking like the happiest father in the world. Then of course, there's Luke who's the happy groom to be...

I could do with getting blind drunk so my own insecurities about all the life goals I haven't yet achieved don't flood to the surface, but I guess I'm going to have to be a baby sitter instead.

How can I make that fun? Who the hell knows at this point, but I'll do what I can...

Chapter Two

MALLORY

What am I doing here? Seriously?

I cannot believe I let Liss talk me into this, honestly. She kinda made out that it would be a lot of fun for me, but I don't think that's the truth of it. I'm starting to get the impression she just didn't want to let her best friend down.

Damn it, I *knew* this would be a disaster. How could it not be when I'm at the wedding of someone I don't know, on a date with my sister's boss and best friend, who just happens to be a super-hot older guy I've had *way* too many sex dreams about for my liking?

I text Liss to let her know that I want to come home already, but she doesn't respond. I'm sure she's going to pretend like she was asleep which is why she ignored me, but I know she just wants me to stick it out.

For Wyatt.

“Here I got you a glass of champagne. I hope this is alright...”

“Oh, right, thanks.” My eyes run up his body and my mouth runs dry. If I was attracted to him while he was working in that scruffy, oily tee shirt and jeans when I saw him at work last year, then I can't even begin to explain what I feel right now. He is way too hot in a suit, especially because I can see his tattoos poking out underneath his sleeves. “That's... nice.”

I take a sip, blanching a bit because the taste isn't something I personally love. I find anything alcoholic a bit

bitter. But I'm not going to complain right now. This stuff probably cost a fortune, and having a glass in my hand gives me something to focus on.

“So... you probably don't know anyone here, do you?” he asks, there's a weariness to his voice. Yep, I'm definitely more of a hindrance than a help. I don't think this is what Liss had in mind at all. “I'll take you around and introduce you to everyone when the time comes.”

I shake my head hard. That sounds too awful for words. “I don't need to meet everyone. Today isn't about me. I'm happy to keep in the background.”

He gives me a bit of an odd look, probably realizing I'm the opposite to Liss. She's more of a life of the party type girl. Our shitty lives have seemed to bring out more of a confidence in her, whereas it's done the opposite to me. I'm more of an introvert, deep in my shell, and that's the way I'm happy to remain.

Although I might have said the wrong thing, because now me and Wyatt don't seem to have a word to say to one another. I rack my brain desperately, trying to think of *anything* we might have in common, but there isn't anything, is there? We don't have anything in common *at all*.

He's an older guy, a biker, and I'm a sheltered girl. Basically polar opposites.

Urgh, I hate this. I hate knowing that I'm not being the best company. I wonder if I will loosen up a little when I've had a couple of drinks. I sure hope so...

“Oh, this isn't Liss!” A guy pats Wyatt on the shoulder. “Who's this?”

I burn hot, knowing I'm bright red which only makes this whole situation feel even more awkward. I *hate* being center of attention, even if it's just from one person.

“This is Mallory, Liss’s sister,” Wyatt fills in for me. “She’s here because Liss is sick.”

The two men share a look. I can’t bear it. I glance at my feet as if my shoes have just become the most interesting thing on the planet. My heart thunders in my ears as I wait for whatever this is to be over.

Why hasn’t Liss rescued me already?

“So, Mallory, this is Luke, the groom.”

I glance up and smile awkwardly. “Luke, good to meet you. Congratulations.”

We shake hands. Luke seems like a nice person but I can’t give him all my attention. Not when I’m freaking out over here. Is it all in my head or is Wyatt going out of his way to make it obvious that he doesn’t want me here? I need to make my excuses so I can get away...

But I can’t. Not when a bunch of other people have started to surround us. Wyatt’s brothers, I eventually find out, and their families.

Again, lovely people, but I’m feeling very overwhelmed.

I try to join in with the chatter and keep up with the energy, but I don’t know if I’m able to make that happen. I feel lost, and a little like I’m drowning. I *know* Wyatt wasn’t expecting me to be here, so he doesn’t exactly owe me anything, but it would be nice to have him a little on my side.

To know I’m not completely by myself.

But to him, I might as well not be here at all. He hasn’t even looked my way which makes me feel even more like an inconvenience to him.

Eventually though, I sort of get pushed to the side of the conversation because I don’t have *anything* to contribute to it. That’s when I send off another message to Liss letting her know that as soon as the ceremony is over I will be in a cab

heading back. I'm sure she's expecting me to hang around for the reception party afterward, but that definitely isn't for me. Wyatt will have a much better time without me here, and I'll probably enjoy myself more at home...

Well maybe I won't have *fun* at home. I can't ever have a good time when I'm forced to live in the same house as Derek, but better the devil I know, right? This is just dreadful, even in this gorgeous dress that Liss lent me.

I need to get out of here...

I don't know why I'm still here.

I was going to leave right at the end of the wedding ceremony, but it was *so* beautiful that I got caught up in it a little. There is something intoxicating about seeing a couple so desperately in love, even if I don't actually know them. Luke and Belinda make a wonderful couple, I can see how much they love one another. I haven't really been around love my whole life, only my mom and her husband because I don't even know my biological father, so this fairy tale ending feels delicious.

I guess that's how I ended up sticking around just a little bit longer, to see more of it. To soak it up and to keep hold of it and maybe some of it will rub off on me too.

I don't spend my time daydreaming that some white knight is going to ride along on his horse to sweep me off my feet and rescue me from the dungeon I'm trapped in... but it would be nice to be looked at by a man in the way Luke stares at his wife.

I guess the delicious smell of the food lured me in as well. Wow, the Macauley family really knows how to throw a party, don't they?

Everything is so awesome. I think they fed me the nicest meal I've ever had in my life. If that's what Liss wanted for me, then she's right. I was definitely having a good time. But the fact that she hasn't texted me back yet means I might not know.

Wyatt is the only issue. He still hasn't met my eyes properly, and I'm guessing he won't now. I keep thinking a few more drinks will bring his barriers down, but that hasn't happened yet. I'm guessing he didn't treat Liss this way. She wouldn't keep a man like this in her life, much less as her best friend.

She's way too cool for that.

Maybe that's why Wyatt doesn't like me, because I'm nowhere near as cool as my sister. I'm sure he would be having a much better time with her...

"Oops, sorry. Shit, I didn't mean to..."

Oh God. Trust *this* moment to be the things that forces us to talk. Wyatt drags me from my idle thoughts by knocking into me and spilling beer all over my dress.

"Fuck!" I leap up from my seat and glance down in horror at the stain spreading across my chest. "Oh my God, this stuff... it stinks. How the hell did that happen?"

I stare at Wyatt in horror. He's meeting my eyes now, in wide eyed shock, but the fact this clearly wasn't something he meant to do on purpose does nothing to calm my mood down. With the beer spilling down me, a red mist has descended and fury burns in the pit of my stomach.

I can't *believe* this is the first time he's really spoken to me all evening.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I didn't mean to drop the beer..."

"No, you didn't?" He must be able to see the rage dancing in my eyes. "You didn't mean to, sure. I believe that, because

that would mean you having to be close to me. Since I'm your plus one, I would think you'd want to spend *some* time with me, but I guess not."

Oh shit, now burning hot tears are threatening to fall.

Not a good look!

"I *know* I'm not the date you wanted for the evening. I know I'm nowhere near as cool or fun as Liss, I get that, but I don't think there's any need to be so unsufferable and rude!"

"Whoa, where did that come from?" He holds his hands up in a surrendering gesture, which only makes me madder. Has he been that blind he doesn't even know I'm upset? "I didn't mean to spill my drink, and I also have been next to you all day long."

I roll my eyes dismissively. "But you haven't talked to me. We might as well be strangers."

"We *are* strangers."

I think everyone might be looking at us. I don't dare look in case I crumble and fall apart. This is bad enough as it is without me making it worse.

"Right, well then there isn't any point in me being here."

"You don't have to go, Mallory," he calls out as I turn on my heels and start to walk away. I feel sick, and not from the gross tasting champagne, but because of Wyatt. Liss was *definitely* right when she talked about his arrogance last year.

I can really see it now. "Stay here. You don't have to act childish."

What the fuck?

My fists curl up by my side as my temper rolls upwards. I can't resist turning back to yell out one last insult.

"I might be childish, Wyatt, but at least I'm not a grumpy old man who doesn't know how to treat a woman."

Fuck.

Yep, everyone is definitely looking. I hope I haven't ruined Luke and Belinda's wedding because they are amazing people who deserve the world. But if I have, then the best thing I can do is just walk out of here and go home *finally* get into that cab, so I can't make things worse.

I need to go to see Liss to give her a piece of my mind. However sick she is, she should never have put me in this position. Even if she thought she was doing a good thing, she never should have done it. I'm the idiot for agreeing to it all, but she's the one who made this happen.

But as the tears start falling, the anger starts to give way to hurt, and insecurity as well.

I feel horrible for just being *me* and not being good enough.

For a man like Wyatt, I will never be good enough.

Chapter Three

WYATT

“What the fuck was that, Wyatt?” Grayson elbows me in the side hard. “There was no need for that. Are you drunk? That’s not how you treat someone.”

Guilt washes over me in a painful wave because I know he’s right.

About all of it. Just because I haven’t really known what to say to Mallory, doesn’t mean I should have just avoided her. I hadn’t done it on purpose, but I still feel awful about it.

“What do I do?” I groan as my head falls into my hands.

Yep, I’m definitely a little too drunk for this. Maybe I should have laid off the beers for Mallory, because I did promise Liss that I would look after her.

Oh God... Liss is going to kill me.

“Go after Mallory, you idiot.” Grayson nudges me one more time. “Go on, get out there. You can’t just let the poor girl leave like this. She’s so sweet.”

That makes me groan some more, because I’m sure there is a sweet side to Mallory, but like an idiot I pushed her away and acted like she was an annoyance to me. It’s only taken a tiny bit of hindsight to see what I’ve been like all day long.

“Yeah, okay.” I rise up uncertainly. I *know* this is the best move for me, but I don’t know how Mallory is going to react to me. “Urgh, I’ll try and make this right.”

I did go too far. I shouldn't have called her childish, that was shitty of me when I don't even know her. It makes me cringe inside to imagine Liss's reaction to this.

"Mallory!" I cry out when I don't immediately stumble across her. If she's dived into a cab already then I am screwed. "Mallory, where are you? Mallory..."

Shit. As soon as I catch sight of her, my heart sinks. She isn't in a cab, but she also isn't alone. In fact, the guy talking to her is someone I recognize, and someone I definitely don't want to cross paths with today.

Not here, not in front of Mallory, and not with Luke's wedding happening in the background. This isn't good...

"SK?" I call out cautiously. I kinda hope I'm wrong, and this isn't the blast from the past that I don't want it to be, but I'm not about to be that lucky. Of course it's him. "What are you doing here, SK? It's been a long time since I last saw you."

I take a step closer as he flashes me a golden toothed smile. I had heard he changed his teeth in jail, but I wasn't expecting to it to be quite so dramatic.

There are some new tattoos on his face as well, including teardrops by his eyes...

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Wyatt." There's an edge to his voice, which fills me with discomfort. "Good to see you, buddy. It *has* been a while, hasn't it? Looks like you've changed, but then I suppose we all have, am I right?"

I nod slowly, unsure which way this is going. With a man like SK, it can always go either way. He's one of those men who acts like he has nothing to lose, which makes him dangerous... just as it used to make me dangerous. Once upon a time, when I was a lot younger and deep in my addictions to drugs and gambling.

“Yeah... we’ve all changed. So, erm, what are you doing here? I can’t spend a lot of time out here talking to you, because it’s my brother’s wedding...”

“Oh I know. Your lovely friend here just told me all about it.”

I glance over to Mallory, spotting the ice cold terror in her eyes.

Fucking SK, I can’t even imagine what he’s said to her, but haven’t I done enough damage? I don’t need him making her feel even worse.

Shit, this is a Goddamn nightmare.

“But me and you, we have some unfinished business, Wyatt.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t have any unfinished business with anyone.”

He rubs his fingers together, suggesting money.

Shit. I have to be honest; I don’t know if I paid off *everything* in the old days. I have been happily going through life assuming it’s all behind me, but maybe my past has caught up with me a little bit.

SK has been locked up for a while, and he’s always been the ringleader of our old gang of friends.

So if it is going to come back to haunt me, I guess now is the time.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I reply with an icy cold tone. “But now isn’t the time to discuss it. Like I said, it’s my brother’s wedding, so I can’t deal with any of this.”

SK was never the best at taking hints. He edges closer to me, trying to scream ‘danger’. I’m sure that works on a lot of people, but I know SK and I know what he’s capable of as well. I’m sure I can deal with him if it comes down to it. But

my past fucked up so much, and tormented my family so much, that the last thing I want to do is bring it back here now.

Luke will never forgive me.

Belinda will never forgive me either, and I wouldn't blame them. This is *their* day.

“SK, you need to go,” I warn him. “Seriously, if this is something we have to talk about, then fine, I will agree to meet with you. But not now.”

“Hmm, yeah. See I don't think that's going to work for me,” SK snarls. “I came to get what I've been owed from you for years, right now. And don't fuck with me, Wyatt, because I know you're good for it. Look at your life, fucking hell. It's always shone like a diamond.”

He reaches out and grabs Mallory before I can even think to react. I thought he was coming for me, and that's where I've been foolish. He yanks her towards him and starts to fiddle with the hemline of her dress.

That's the exact moment, I forget all about the wedding going on behind me. I snap into action and race towards SK, fire practically burning out of my ears.

“Don't touch Mallory, she has nothing to do with this and nothing to do with you.”

I drag SK off of Mallory and toss him on the ground. Adrenaline burns through me as I slam him down because I'm pissed that I had to be in this situation in the first place. I'm pissed that SK is here, and then for him to touch Mallory without consent like that... it's fucked up. She really isn't involved with any of this at all.

“Don't ever bring anyone else into this,” I warn SK as he starts to roll himself over to get to his feet. “I just told you, quite reasonably I might add, that I would meet you at another time because it's my youngest brother's wedding, and I can't have

you here now. You don't get to come here and drag shit up just because you're out of jail."

"Fuck you, Wyatt," he spits out as he rises to his feet. His cheeks burn red with anger, and probably a bit of embarrassment too. "How dare you fucking treat me like that when you're the one who owes me money. I won't take this shit from you."

He shoves me back, which results in a scuffle. I don't know who's winning and who is causing the most damage but I can't stop myself from attacking him. I keep seeing him in my mind's eye, SK with his hands all over Mallory when she's innocent in all of this.

"Fuck you, SK," I blurt out as I sling another punch. "You can't be here."

He mumbles something incoherent under his breath, but I can't pick out his words because there's a strange screaming sound coming from somewhere... it takes me a couple of minutes to realize it's Mallory screaming, and she's in a state of panic.

"Fucking bitch," SK yells at her as he breaks away from me. "Shut the fuck up, will you?"

"Just get the hell out of here," I shout back. "You aren't welcome. Seriously."

"You don't think this is over, do you?" he sneers as he backs away from me. "Me and the boys won't let this go. You *will* be hearing from me another time."

Asshole.

What an asshole, how could I ever have been friends with someone like him? It's good to watch him leave, and relief floods through me as I hear the roar of his motorcycle engine, but I can't let go of the fear completely.

My past really is creeping back up on me, isn't it? Which doesn't feel fair at all. I've moved on and improved myself. I'm in a much better place, and that's where I want to stay. I don't want to be dragged backwards...

But now that SK is back out in the world, what can I do? I can only hope he winds up landing himself back behind bars sooner rather than later. He's definitely a career criminal who belongs in prison, but how long will that take? He shouldn't even be out!

"Shit, Mallory, are you okay? I'm so sorry about that piece of work."

She has a true look of horror plastered all over her face. I need to get Mallory out of here before everyone comes out looking for us and she feels like she has to talk. I might not know Mallory, but I can sense she doesn't need that right now.

"Let's get a cab. Get away from here."

"I... I need to go," she half whispers, while wrapping her arms around herself protectively. "I can't be here anymore. That was... horrible."

Fuck.

I've given her the worst night of her life, haven't I? I hate myself for it. And not just because of Liss, but because I should have been better.

Just in general. She has been my plus one all night long and I barely paid any attention to her. That was a shit thing to do.

"I'm sorry about SK, he really is an asshole. That's why he isn't in my life anymore, and he won't be again. He's someone from my younger days..."

I trail off because I don't think Mallory wants to hear my history. I don't think she wants to hear anything from me. I'm going with her in the cab though just to make sure she's safe. I don't think I can go back to the wedding after the fight anyway, because I look like shit.

If I return, it'll lead to a bunch of questions, making this even more about me.

Fucking hell, why can't this day just be about Luke? For real?

Thank goodness the cab doesn't take long to arrive because I don't think I can stand the tension much longer. There isn't anything I can do to make this right. All I can do is get Mallory home and hope she recovers from this nightmare.

"Where do you want to go?" I ask Mallory once we're inside the cab. I'm basically asking for her address, or if she wants to head to Liss's place. I'm certainly not expecting her to respond the way she does.

"Can we just go to your place for a moment? I can't go home like this."

"Oh... err yeah, sure." I give the cab driver my address, wondering what's going to happen once we get to my place.

But right now, whatever she wants, I'm there for it.

If I have the chance to send Mallory home with something resembling a smile on her face, then that's what I will do.

Chapter Four

MALLORY

What the hell am I doing?

I lean into Wyatt, needing some warmth and comfort. Just because he hasn't exactly been the nicest person to me so far, doesn't mean I have to keep punishing him. I mean, he *did* come after me and save me from that horrifying experience with SK.

Before Wyatt turned up I was absolutely terrified because he was clearly an unhinged person and I had no idea what he was going to do. He was asking me all these weird questions about the Macauley family, and not taking *I don't know* as an answer.

Wyatt had saved me from that. Even though he's an asshole and he's been a villain all night long, right in that moment, he was my hero.

That's what has me drawn to him.

I hope he doesn't think it's weird that I wanted to go to his place, but I couldn't face the wedding again after what happened.

All of it. It's just so embarrassing. But I also can't face Liss or Mom. I sure as shit don't want to see Derek, who has definitely gotten worse in the last year.

His drinking is out of control now, and at this time of night he's usually wasted and nasty.

I just want a moment before I decide where I'm going next.

Wyatt instinctively knows what I need and he wraps his arm around me. It's intimate actually, and odd after the day we've had, but in this moment, in this cab it feels perfect for us to be intertwined with one another.

A sense of safety envelopes me as we drive. I don't know *what* the truth is about SK, I don't know what that situation is or how Wyatt got involved with that man, and nor do I want to know. I don't want to put the jigsaw pieces together from the snippets of conversation I overheard because it's not for me to know.

Wyatt has always had that dangerous edge, and clearly that hasn't come from nothing. There is *something* that's come from and it's best for me not to be aware of it. Especially as I nestle in closer to him and rest my head on his shoulder. He starts to gently stroke my arm, sending a shiver down my spine.

Who is *this* Wyatt? Why haven't I been able to hang out with him all night long? This would have made the wedding so much more fun.

My eyes flicker a little, because I'm so comfortable here I could actually fall asleep on Wyatt's shoulder. Definitely not how I thought this night would end. I might have actually drifted off as well if we hadn't arrived at the bike shop so fast.

Is this where he lives? I wonder as he pays the driver. *At the office... really?*

I got the impression tonight that the Macauley's were all fancy pants and rich with very comfortable homes and lives. I didn't think Wyatt would live here. Maybe there is more to him than initially meets the eyes.

I'm intrigued, I have to admit.

I say nothing as we walk inside, because I can't find the words. I remain pretty speechless as he leads me up what seems like a secret set of stairs hiding behind a door, and we make our way to his apartment. Instantly, I start to think this might have been a big mistake.

“Would you like a drink?” Wyatt doesn’t even wait for me to answer. “I’ll get you a drink.”

This place is quite small and understated, definitely not what I was expecting. It’s not that much bigger than Liss’s studio apartment actually, although there are at least a few rooms in here.

Liss sleeps on her couch because there just isn’t room for a bed...

Actually, this is much bigger. It just isn’t anywhere nearly as large as I thought it would be.

“I’m so sorry about that nightmare,” Wyatt says with a sigh as he hands me a bottle of beer. “That was a real shit show, wasn’t it?”

“Just that bit at the end, or the whole wedding?”

I probably shouldn’t have said that. Those words just kinda came unexpectedly. I think I might have been trying to make a little joke, but that isn’t how it’s received.

“The wedding wasn’t the best,” he admits. “But I still think you massively overreacted to the drink spillage. I obviously didn’t mean for that to happen. It wasn’t on purpose.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You did ruin my dress though, look.” I point at the stain which is still feels a little sticky. “And you *know* my outburst wasn’t about that. It was about you ignoring me all night long, just because I’m not Liss.”

“You think that’s why I wasn’t speaking to you?”

“Obviously.” I roll my eyes. There’s no point in beating around the bush here. “Because I’m not as cool and attractive as my sister. Of course you aren’t going to be happy about me.”

“That isn’t it at all.” He strides closer to me, closing the gap a little. I hold my breath in my lungs while he speaks. “I just don’t know you, that’s all. I don’t know what to say to you.”

I force my eyes to stay on his, even though I'm now tilting my head back to stare right up at him.

All the way up this tall, muscular man... "So, you just act like you hate me? Is that it?"

"Hate you?" His hands grip my shoulders. Every part of me sets on fire. Is this one of the wild, sexy dreams I've been having about him? "I certainly don't hate you. I can't hate you; you don't seem like the sort of person anyone could hate."

Shit, I know I should say something back. I'm sure he's expecting me to, but I can't do it. Something has lodged in the base of my throat and I'm shell shocked.

"Let me show you how much I don't hate you..."

Okay, this is madness. I definitely must be asleep somewhere, because there's no way Wyatt just crashed his lips to mine to prove that he doesn't hate me. That doesn't make any sense at all. Although the delicious taste of his lips definitely feels real, as do the flames licking all over my skin. I'm engulfed in the flames and consumed by him.

"Why don't we get this ruined dress off of you?" he murmurs with a naughty twinkle in his eye. Somehow, Wyatt has transformed the hate surging between us into a passionate chemistry which has pretty much knocked me off my feet. "Since I destroyed it?"

Obediently, I raise my hands above my head and he practically tears the dress from my body. In a heartbeat, he presses himself up against me, kissing me once more. Eagerly, my fingers prize open the buttons of his shirt so I can really feel those crisp, defined muscles that have been making my mouth water from the very first moment I laid eyes on him.

His body is incredible. Wow, he really is smoking hot! I can't wait to unbuckle his trousers so I can really feel him. Because this feels just like one of my intense dreams, I don't hold back, I do whatever I want to without even thinking about it.

My bra flutters to the ground right at the moment I tug him free from his underwear. I let out a groan of delight the moment I wrap my hand delicately around his angry, throbbing cock. I toss my head back as his lips kiss and lick my throat, down to my nipples, already standing to attention for him. I lean back against the wall, thankfully waiting there to hold me upright, and I roll my hips against him, trying to feel *all* of him.

I shouldn't want him because I've been hating on him all night long, but I do.

There's a pulsing in my body that craves him, needs him, all of him.

"Fucking hell, Mallory," he grunts as his fingers nudge my legs apart. "You have no idea what you're doing to me right now."

He yanks the lacy material of my panties out the way to spear me with his fingers. Instantly, I cry out so loudly I'm sure I must be vibrating the walls of the apartment.

Fucking hell, that feels so good, he seems to know exactly how to set me on edge. I continue to stroke him, trying to match his pace as he plunges his rough, calloused fingers inside of me over and over, finger fucking me until I can hardly stand it any longer.

"I want you," I call out, although I don't know if I form the words properly, much less if he can actually hear me.

But thankfully, he follows my commands.

My panties go first. They shred from my body, going God knows where. I don't even know if they've survived that, but it hardly matters. I need them gone so I can really explore him. The passion sizzles and flames as he steps back to shake the clothing off of his body.

Is this really happening?

I know it is, there's still a rational side of me that's completely aware of what's going on, but I can't resist leaning

into the fantasy, dream like quality of this. He looks like he wants to hate fuck me, and my God I want that too.

I hate him, but that kiss has made me ache for him too.

I wrap my entire self around him as he cascades into me once more.

Arms, but legs too. He lifts me off the floor and pushes me hard against the wall as he kisses me frantically. His tongue invades the depths of my mouth as he finally gives me what I yearn for.

I want to cry out as his thrusts surge intense bliss through me but he swallows up any sound I make. Thank goodness the wall behind me is cool, because my skin is flushed and my body is burning intensely. I don't want to erupt into a volcano of lava.

I cling to Wyatt as his thrusts send my head spinning. If I'm holding on to him too hard, he doesn't complain. He's a madman on a mission, sinking into bliss as well. We're drowning together, the pleasure is sweeping us off our feet and connecting us in a way I never thought would happen. The more he builds up pleasure in the pit of my stomach, the more I lose myself.

My heart thunders, I'm dizzy because I truly can't breathe, I'm slipping away into a deep pit of pleasure and loving every second as I sink. Wyatt Macauley has all the control over me, and I'm willing to give it over to him.

How crazy is that?

A scream finally erupts from my chest so loudly my head tosses back wildly. Of all the fantasies I've had about this man, all the times I've dreamt about him, *none* of it compared to the reality.

Fucking hell, the intensity of this pleasure is mind blowing. The orgasm swallows me up whole, exploding fireworks in every single organ of my body.

Wyatt holds me hard so I don't fall every time my body bucks and writhes.

Even as he loses himself, he manages to make sure I remain tightly in his arms. This heats me up a little and allows my icy outer shell to thaw towards him.

Just because he hasn't been the best all night long, doesn't make him the worst person in the world. At least he hasn't totally ruined my fantasies and I can keep having my dreams.

They are my only escape from my shitty life...

Chapter Five

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WYATT

She is going to kill me.

I'm jumpy. I've been this way all morning. It doesn't help that I've dunk a whole bunch of coffee. I thought that might calm my body down a little, but that definitely hasn't happened. I'm jittery and every sound has me acting like I'm the lead actor in a horror movie.

This is *not* good. Where the hell is Liss?

Part of me wants her here already, so we can get this out the way and she can kick my ass. But the longer Liss isn't at work, the more time I have to keep living.

She *definitely* didn't want me to end up having sex with Mallory. That's so obvious she didn't even need to say it.

Truth be told, early on in the night, I never would have thought we'd end up intertwined with one another naked. I really did just think that she was childish and kind of just *there*. It was clear we wouldn't get along, and that was that.

I really can't pinpoint the moment it all changed.

The moment the heat became something else and we started stripping one another down. It's my fault though, I know it, because I'm the older guy, I'm the one who should have had my head on straight. I'm the idiot. I should have known better.

The front door dings once more, and of course I jump.

“My God, what the hell is wrong with you?” Lexi laughs from behind the reception desk. Since her role has become more part-time now because she has my niece and nephew to look after, I don’t always expect her to be there. Trust this embarrassing moment to be the second she’s sitting there, staring at me like I’ve lost my mind. “You’re acting crazy today. What the hell have you done, Wyatt? Should I be worried?”

“I... no, of course not.” Yeah, that wasn’t convincing at all.

Lexi drops her pen and rises to her feet to glare at me. “Is it true you ended up in a fight at the end of Luke and Belinda’s wedding? Because I heard you did, but I thought that would never happen. I just assumed you left early to take Mallory home since you were an ass to her.”

I cringe once more. Does Lexi *have* to bring that up right now? As if I’m not freaked out enough that Liss is going to rip me apart for what I did.

“There was a bit of a scuffle.”

There’s no point in denying anything if she already knows. “But nothing to worry about. You don’t need to panic at all.”

“Who did you fight with?” Lexi clearly isn’t about to let it go. “Because I think we should all be worried if you have some enemies out there.”

Shit, I forgot she was around during my darker days. At least for some of them. She might not have seen much, but she’s obviously seen enough to know I might actually have something hanging over my head. I guess SK really is someone I should be thinking about too, because I don’t think that drama is over.

But I can’t worry about any of that, when I’m focused on Liss. She’s a much more terrifying, more imminent threat. I *know* SK and what he’s capable of, but Liss... well, I’ve never been on her bad side before, and truthfully, I’m scared.

“It’s just someone from my past, but it isn’t anything I can’t handle...”

“Wyatt, don’t just dismiss this,” Lexi insists. “This could be something we all need to know about. Who from your past? What do they want from you?”

I don’t have to answer any of Lexi’s questions, but I also can’t say that I feel saved by the bell because here she is.

Liss. My worst nightmare has just walked through the doors and I am petrified. My blood runs cold as I think about all the lines I’ve crossed over the weekend while I stiffen up, trying to brace myself for the worst.

“Hey guys.” Liss sounds like her voice might be on the verge of giving out. It’s kinda ragged and raw, and actually she really doesn’t look great at all. I guess she was very sick after all. “Good to see you all. I think I’m feeling a bit better now, I’m hoping...” She narrows her eyes at me and Lexi. “Uh oh, what the hell is going on here?”

Why hasn’t she killed me yet? I’m not going to succumb to a false sense of security. I’m sure death is coming for me no matter what.

I can’t even find my voice to answer her.

“Oh, well Wyatt has done something stupid, so now we all might be in trouble.” Oh great. Lexi’s assumptions don’t make me look much better, do they? “He had a fight at the end of the wedding. Did Mallory tell you about it?”

The mention of *her* name makes the chill even more intense. It feels like an egg yolk trickling down my spine.

“Mallory didn’t say a thing.” Liss casually makes herself a coffee as we talk, like this is just some normal morning and I’m not about to explode like a pressure cooker. “Wyatt, how the hell did you end up getting in a fight at Luke’s wedding? Man I wish I was there.”

“I just...” I rasp, sounding about as fearful as I sound. This is *not* going well. “I ran into someone that I didn’t want to see. Someone I thought I had left behind years ago.”

Oh God, now both women are staring at me like I’ve grown an extra head. I wouldn’t be surprised if Lexi calls Josh and he came down here to kiss my ass. I don’t even think I can confide in him because this is just so complicated.

“It doesn’t matter though,” I continue, so quickly my words are almost tripping over themselves. “It’s not going to be an issue. It’s just one of those things that happened, that’s all. I don’t need anyone to freak out or anything.”

I’m basically trying to warn Lexi to keep Josh out of it, but I don’t think she hears my hidden message. My brother probably already knows. He’ll probably be here soon.

“I can’t believe Mallory didn’t say anything to me,” Liss laughs. “I asked her if there was any drama, but she said nothing. She just told me she had a really good time.”

The world stops spinning for a moment. It really doesn’t seem that Liss even knows about the fight me and Mallory had, never mind anything more. Lexi has no idea about what happened when we got back to my place, but she could ruin things by telling Liss that I was an ass...

Please don’t do anything crazy, I silently try to communicate with Lexi.

This she does seem to pick up on because she keeps her lips tightly sealed.

For now.

“Thank you, Wyatt, for looking after Mallory, by the way.” Liss looks sincere as she stares at me, but I honestly don’t have a clue what’s going on behind her eyes. “Like I said to you before, she’s not been having the best time. I think you cheered her up.”

Guilt blows up within me like a freaking bubble. I certainly didn't do anything to ensure that Mallory had fun at the wedding, so it must have been everything that happened after which put a smile on her face.

Fuck, it was amazing being with her, I found myself totally intoxicated by her in the heat of the moment, but we fucked up.

I fucked up. It definitely shouldn't have happened.

“Well, it was fine.” I offer Liss a one shouldered shrug, trying to disguise any feelings surging through my veins at the speed of light. “But I would have preferred it to be you.” Shit, did that sound bad? I don't want to be an asshole. “Or at least for you to tell me that you weren't going to join me in advance. Me not finding out until Mallory turned up was weird.”

Liss glares at me like I've just spit in her face. “What's wrong with my sister?”

I sigh heavily. “No, that isn't what I mean. Nothing is wrong with Mallory, I just didn't like the surprise, that's all. I didn't really know how to deal with Mallory.”

“I thought you guys would be fine. If I get on with you both, then you should be okay too, right? I didn't think it would be an issue...”

Lexi sneaks out the room, I guess because she doesn't like knowing what I did and not telling Liss. I still don't think this is over yet. I'm sure Lexi will drop me in it at some point, which I deserve, but for now she knows nothing and Lexi doesn't want to change that.

“Well, we don't have anything in common, so it was hard.”

Liss's face falls. “Shit, I'm so sorry. I guess I shouldn't have done that. You're right. I wasn't thinking clearly. I did just drop this situation on you which isn't fair. I just thought that you had a good time, because Mallory said she enjoyed herself.”

I'm making this so much worse, aren't I? I don't know how I can reel it all back in now. I need a time machine to take words back.

This isn't the only time I've found myself in this position.

"It was fine, I think I'm just tense because of the fight." I glance over to where Lexi had been standing earlier, grateful that she was still gone. "I don't want Lexi to go running to Josh about it, because I can handle shit, but this SK just got out of jail and thinks I owe him money."

That isn't a total lie, I am stressed about that. But it's also a good way to deflect from everything else. I figure the faster we get off the topic of Mallory, the better. It'll be better if we don't ever talk about her again. I'm sure Mallory feels the same way. I don't think she'll be hanging out with Liss here any time soon. In fact, she might not even come to town again just in case she bumps into me. I don't think either of us is keen for that uncomfortable reunion!

"Shit. Wyatt, that's worrying," Liss insists. "Isn't he one of the drug dealers you used to hang out with? Doesn't that trouble you? *Do* you owe him money? And why the hell don't you just pay him so he'll leave you alone? You can afford to..."

"You don't give money to a man like SK. Instead I'm just going to hope he gets locked up again. I'm sure he'll be in trouble soon enough."

It seems like a logical explanation to me, but Liss doesn't look convinced. What she doesn't realize now is that eventually I'm sure she's going to be the one to kill me.

"Well, I will cross that bridge when I come to it." I shoot a thin smile her way but I don't think there's anything I can say to pull her back from this panic. "I'm not going to focus on SK when he isn't here. I have a business to run and we have some big contracts coming up..."

“Ooh, more royalty?” Liss smiles, a genuine one this time. She adores her job, same as me. “Or a celebrity? Something wild?”

“Let’s go through the book and take a look. See what we have coming up. I think we have a *lot* of excitement to deal with.”

Thank God. She’s distracted.

Somehow, I’m still alive and Liss doesn’t hate me. But I’m still going to be on edge until this all explodes, because it *is* going to explode.

Secrets never stay secret, do they? Especially not when it concerns my best friend.

Chapter Six

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MALLORY

Derek has been drinking way too much. Again.

“Fuck you, Cindy, you stupid bitch. I hate you. You’ve ruined my life. You and those idiot girls of yours...”

I roll my eyes. This shouldn’t be normal, but listening to Derek speak to my family in this way really has become the norm. I desperately wish Mom would leave him, but I don’t know if it’s too late. I don’t know if she’ll *ever* get the strength. What I find really irritating is knowing that the cops know what’s going on behind closed doors here. Derek has been reported a number of times, but nothing ever comes of it.

He has that sort of charming personality that works with strangers. He manages to get away with it always, and remains here, tormenting my mother and me as well.

Asshole.

I hate him. I could kill him, truly. But Mom prefers me to remain quiet because she hates it most of all when Derek turns his attention on me. She can’t stand that, so she stands up to him, and then he’s worse to her, so it’s a vicious cycle that can’t be ended.

I don’t like it at all, but for my mother, I do as she wants and I stay silent.

“I should just *leave*.”

Oh, he loves these threats. If only he would follow through. “Yeah, I should get out of here, Cindy. Far away from

you. Go and live in New York City or something. Somewhere I can actually make something of myself.”

I quietly slide my bedroom door close, trying to block out the sounds. Sometimes, I switch my music on to drown it all out, but I don't bother today. Just in case his violent streak comes out. It doesn't happen too often, that definitely isn't a daily occurrence, but I don't think it needs to be. The constant threat of it is more than enough. It keeps Mom 'in line'.

I sigh to myself and slide my eyes closed as Derek continues on with his endless rant we've heard a million times before. About all the things he can do with his life if he left here. Ha! He'd have to lay off the booze first, and there isn't much hope of that. And even if he did, I'm not convinced he'd be able to do anything decent. He's just a scum bag, nothing more.

It's times like this when I'm torn between missing having Liss lying on her bed on the other side of the room, and grateful she no longer has to suffer through this shit. It was always harder on her, she couldn't stand it, and it wasn't even that bad then. She would never be able to stomach this now.

It would make her anxiety unbearable.

I don't like it either, but until I have enough money saved up to make a proper escape, this is where I'm stuck. So I have to try and ignore it as best I can.

Where shall I go? I ask myself, playing my favorite game.

Where shall I start my new life?

When I *do* escape, I can go anywhere in the world. If I *really* save up, then maybe I can leave the country. Go to Europe or somewhere like that. As far away from Derek as I can.

Okay, so I don't *really* want to leave Liss behind, or my mom, but it's fun to daydream while I block out the yelling as best I can. I picture myself on a white sandy beach, dipping my toes in the turquoise water. Or in some deeply historical

city with cool architecture where I can learn more about what built the world.

Anywhere but here...

Although my imagination doesn't remain in these places this time. I can't seem to stick to one daydream. Instead where I wind up in my head is somewhere much closer to home, a place I can never go again.

Not in real life anyway. But here, in my head, I suppose it's safe...

Wyatt Macauley...

I still can't quite work out how I ended up in his arms like that, at his home, naked and up against the wall. I guess I really did think of it as a dream and nothing more, I wasn't panicking about the real world consequences at all. When his hands were all over my body and he was kissing me with more passion than I've *ever* felt from someone before, I was in the midst of a fantasy I truly didn't want to wake up from.

I still wish I was there with him.

However naughty a thought that is. However much I shouldn't ache for him, I do. I really can't help myself, it's like I'm addicted to him.

With my eyes still closed, his face is close to mine.

One deep breath means I inhale him, all of him and immediately I'm weak at the knees. His head rests on my forehead, his eyes fix on mine, I can truly sense how badly he wants this. He's trembling all over, just as I am.

Now *this* is a place I want to be. Wyatt feels as far away from the yelling and toxicity of my home than anywhere can possibly be. With his arms around me, making me feel safe and desired, reminding me that I'm a real person who he actually *sees*.

No one really sees me. Or I don't feel very seen anyway. But I did that night. Not during the wedding or anything, I was as hidden away as ever, but afterwards...

The yelling slows down outside of my room. I guess Derek must be on his way to passing out. Or he might be on his way out to another bar or something.

Either way, it allows me to sink deeper into the daydream that I'm back above the motorcycle store, in Wyatt's apartment, with him, with his hands cupping my butt and tugging me closer to him.

As the passion we experienced that night floods through me, my fingers idly slip down my body. I stroke my breast, loving the way my nipple brushes over my hand. It's rock hard all over again, just like it was when he touched it. The electricity he had surging through my system returns and sizzles once more, the lower my hand slides between my legs.

I moan with delight as I lightly brush my fingers over the cotton of my panties. They aren't anything like the sexy lacy panties Wyatt literally ripped from my body, but the way they make me feel is the same.

With Wyatt, I was a sexy goddess, and I truly do crave that feeling again.

It isn't my fingers hungrily pulling my panties to one side, it's his. His fingers grazing my soaking wet slit and massaging my hyper-sensitive clit. My imagination is so good I can almost feel the weight of his body pressed against me, his hips grinding into mine, his teeth lightly nibbling on the exposed skin of my throat and collarbone.

I plunge my fingers deep inside of me, while my thumb continues to circle endlessly around my clit. I wonder what it'll feel like to have his tongue devouring me like this, tasting me, inhaling me. I just *know* he'll be expert with his mouth, won't he? Because his fingers alone were almost enough to make me explode.

“Wyatt,” I whisper softly, just because I love the way his name feels on my lips. I shouldn’t, because he *is* still awful, but in this context it heightens the fun. “Oh, Wyatt.” I moan as my imagination takes flight once again.

We’re in his living room once more, pressed up against the wall, as he plunges inside of me, making my body sizzle and scream with pleasure. That night was truly phenomenal, and I fear Wyatt might have unleashed a dragon of desire inside of me that I can’t shut down now.

I want him again, I need him, I think I might die if I don’t get to experience him another time. That sensation only intensifies as I touch myself. Given half the chance, and if I didn’t think he would hate me for it, I’d run back to him now for another wild night. The sort of night that Liss definitely wouldn’t find out about ...

I roll over onto my front as I push myself to the peak of the mountain so I can scream out my pleasure into the pillow. Whether the yelling is going on out there or not, the last thing I want is to be overheard. My body bucks hard against the sheets as the orgasm shatters me, I lose all control of my limbs and my voice as well. Just as I had lost control when I was *really* with Wyatt. There’s something about that man which just drives me crazy...

Bang!

The loud, smashing sound wakes me from the sleep I must have drifted into without even realizing it. I rub my eyes hard, trying to shove the sleep away, which is when I notice how dark it’s gotten. A few hours must have passed.

“Don’t you fucking *ever* speak to me like that,” Derek is screaming at the top of his lungs. Either he’s back from the pub, or he’s woken up again. “Cindy, I will fucking kill you.”

I fly to my feet and race out of my bedroom, my heart thundering loudly. I know Mom doesn’t want me involved in

any of this, but how can I just hang back when there are threats?

The moment I get to the living room, all the rules fly out the window. The scene unfolding before my eyes makes my heart sink. Mom has a bloody nose, and is on the floor begging and pleading, while Derek looms over her with a cruel look in his eyes.

He's been violent, again. I can't stand for this shit.

"No, Derek," I yell at the top of my lungs. "Stop."

Fuck knows what he's been throwing around, but I can see new dents on the walls. Even when he's sloppy drunk, he can still do all this shit.

"Mallory, get out of here," Mom screams through her tears. Her worry for me is clearly worse than any worry she has for herself. "Go to bed, you can't be here right now."

But I'm not listening. I race over to her and wrap her in a protective hug. She doesn't really respond, but I don't care because I'm not going to let her shield me now.

"Mom, come on. We need to get you to the hospital. Look at your nose."

"She isn't going anywhere," Derek growls.

"I'm not," Mom whispers weakly. "My nose is fine. It's just a bit of a bump, that's all."

I shoot her a look of horror.

Is she for real right now? She can't still want to be here with Derek, surely? I know she's stayed through all kinds of crap, but this is horrible.

"Please, Mallory, you go," she whispers to me, her eyes wide with terror. "I know this looks bad right now, but it'll be fine in the morning. It always is, isn't it?"

"I don't want to go, Mom. Not without you." Derek scoffs nastily, but I ignore him. He doesn't exist to me. "Please come with you."

Her hand slips out of mine. I'm losing her, not that I ever really had her. That asshole has always had control of everything and he knows it. "This is my place, Mallory. This is where I belong. I can't go anywhere with you. I love him."

This isn't love.

How can she not see this isn't love? I might not have experienced love myself before, but I *know* this isn't it.

But what can I do here?

Chapter Seven

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WYATT

Bang, bang, bang!

What the hell is that? At this hour? God damn it, what time is it? My eyes are full of sleep and my head is foggy, but I swing my legs out of my bed and pad across the apartment anyway. Someone is knocking hard on the door to the store, which I guess means they want me. Urgh, after the emotionally draining week I've had, I don't want to deal with anyone in the middle of the night, but it doesn't seem like this person is going anywhere.

It could be Liss. I mean, this could be the moment I've been dreading all week long. The reason I'm on edge all the time is because I've been waiting for her to come at me... and this might be it.

Liss might finally know what I did to her sister.

"Who's there?" I lean out my window first to call out to my unwelcome visitor.

"Yo, where the fuck are you?" A figure steps out of the shadows and into view.

Oh fuck. It's SK.

Great, like I really want to speak to *him* right now. "Come down, Wyatt, let's talk."

I don't have to. I could technically just shut this window and be done with the conversation. But I don't want to put my shop at risk because of him. This could be the way he gets

locked up again, but I'd rather avoid any vandalism if I can help it.

“Okay just wait there. Give me a moment.”

I let out a deep sigh of frustration as I slam the window closed. I grab a sweater to keep me warm as I head down the stairs to face SK.

This won't go well. I wouldn't be surprised if he's come with a bunch of threats and dudes I can't be bothered with.

But I'm not going to let SK intimidate me. Back when we all used to be friends, I cared a lot about what the gang thought of me. But those days are long behind me now. Drugs, gambling, and the opinions of others... yeah, I'm over it.

“SK, what's going on?” I ask wearily as soon as I swing the door open. “You good?”

He tosses his head back and lets out a manic sounding laugh. “Oh God, Wyatt, you are so boring these days. I would never have caught you in bed at this time of the night back in the good old days. You'd be out getting fucked up and having fun with me.”

“Hmmm, yeah,” I shoot back wryly. “But that was a long time ago. I'm not that person anymore, as you can see. I don't want to get all fucked up and party.”

SK rolls his eyes with irritation. “Sure, whatever. But you can't erase what happened in the past, even if you want to. And you owe me money.”

I rest my hands on my hips. “Go on then, SK, explain to me how.”

I don't know if it's because he's spent a lot of time stewing in jail and winding himself up, or if he's just trying to get something from me now, but I'm not going to fall at his feet and give him whatever he wants. It isn't happening.

“You owe me money for drugs... and I lent you a ton to play at the casino. I want it back.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, clearly this is something that happened years ago, and our lives have all been different since then. I think it’s better for us all to leave the past behind because we all did shit I’m sure we regret now.”

SK scoffs. “Don’t try and downplay things because you don’t want to pay me back. Look at what you have now. I knew you were always going to do better than us because you come from a privileged family. I get that, but you have all of this and I have nothing. *I’m* the one who went to jail. I’ve been locked up for years and now I come out to nothing. You won’t even pay back what you owe me just to give me a chance at life. It’s fucked up.”

“You got locked up because of the crimes you committed.” I point out rationally. SK was always the worst out of all of us. I don’t like having to be so straight with him, but I don’t think he will get it otherwise. “I know that sucks, I get it, but I don’t see why I’m the one who owes you a good life now.”

“Because you’re supposed to be my friend, Wyatt. You keep going on about how we’ve all changed, but it’s really just you. The other guys are still the same.”

Doesn’t he see how sad that is? That kinda breaks my heart a little bit. They really should be trying to make something more of themselves, trying to improve their lives. But I’m not about to make that argument because I really don’t think I’m the one who should fund that.

I *did* come from a wealthier family, but my motorcycle store is something I did alone. I had to, to prove to myself that I could.

To prove it to others as well.

“I’m not going to be able to go back though...”

“Just come and hang out with us, Wyatt. Just for a little bit. Maybe we can sort this out some other way. It doesn’t need to be complicated and messy.”

I just about manage to resist the urge to roll my eyes. How the hell can SK think that I would want to put myself back into a shitty situation? I don't *think* I'll ever want to put another drug in my system, and I'm pretty sure I'll never gamble another dime... it's much easier for me to keep my distance from that.

Just for my own sanity.

"I have work in the morning, so I can't go anywhere tonight..."

"Then what about another night?" SK presses on. He's wired, possibly even strung up on some kind of drug which makes him even more dangerous to be around. Oh God, is this what I used to look like all the time? "It doesn't have to be right now. I *really* think we all need to spend time together to sort things out."

There's something too insistent about his tone.

I don't like it at all. What the hell is his plan when he gets me with all the other guys? I haven't really seen any of them in years, only in passing if anything. They don't have any loyalty to me anymore.

If SK is planning something, they could really all be on board with it.

Yeah, even if it wasn't for all the other reasons, I wouldn't want this.

"I don't know. We'll have to see, SK. See if I get some time..."

His expression darkens. There isn't any rational conversation that I can have with him, is there? Not when he's high and fooling around. I definitely don't want to fight him again, because that will only have him coming back for more, so I need to de-escalate the situation before it gets out of hand.

It's all on me.

“Wyatt, I don’t know why you won’t just fucking pay me back,” he hisses through gritted teeth. “Don’t you think it would just be easier to give me the ten grand?”

“Ten grand?” I gasp in shock. Okay, well now I *know* he’s lying. Even at the height of everything, I never got myself in that much debt with anyone.

“You can afford it, you don’t need it, and then we can just go our separate ways.” He’s changed his tune! I thought he wanted to meet up and be friends again! “I don’t want to have to keep approaching you like this, but I always believe that a man should pay his debts. I don’t think it’s right for you to leave me behind in the dirt like this.”

I back away ever so slightly, because this isn’t going to go anywhere. “I never want to leave anyone anywhere. All I want to do is keep living my life...”

My words trail off the moment SK digs his hand into his pocket and out comes a glint of metal. Something I don’t want to see outside my store. Surely SK is still on probation and isn’t allowed a weapon?

Much less a gun? God damn it, why hasn’t he gotten himself locked up again already? He’s a danger to everyone, not just me!

“There’s no need for that, SK.” Now I’m a little more anxious, but I don’t let that show in my voice. “We’re friends, like you said. So put that away...”

“Friends don’t leave each other high and dry, Wyatt. I’m starting to think you were never a friend to me. Just fucking pay me my money.”

My heart races. I don’t know how to calm him down. I kinda want to contact the cops, but I don’t know if that will just make things a million times worse. I hold my hands up in surrender instead. I just need to play this game until I can get rid of SK.

“Okay, so I think we should all have a meeting then, right?”

“What do you mean? We’re meeting right now.”

“No, a meeting with everyone.” I’ll get out of it.

At some point, I’ll make my escape. As long as I can get rid of SK now, everything else can be dealt with in the morning. “We can have a proper hangout, a bit like in the good old days. I will sort out the money then.”

SK remains silent for a beat too long. My heart races as I wait for him to reply. I don’t know if I’ve ever had such a tense moment in my whole damn life.

“Right, a meeting.” Finally he nods slowly, but the gun remains upright. “Yeah, I think we can do that. Because I have to admit, I don’t think I’m the only one who wants to talk to you. Some of the other guys have beef with you as well.”

Oh God, well that’s just great, isn’t it?

More drama, just what I need. Although I’m sure that’s come from SK’s rants than anything else. If any of them really had an issue with me, then we’ve had a long time to sort through it all. Years, while SK has been locked away.

This is all him, but then I suppose it only takes one little spark to ignite a fire.

“Okay, well I would love for us all to have a talk and straighten everything out.” I smile thinly, trying to keep the peace. “But for now, I need to rest because I have a lot to do in the morning. So, can we put an end to this now?”

Thankfully, SK lowers the gun and backs away, but he’s giving me an untrustworthy look. This definitely isn’t over. I’m going to *have* to find a way to sort it out. Maybe I should even take Liss’s advice and just give SK some money in the hope he will be gone for good.

I don’t head back inside until SK is well and truly out of sight. I’m wide awake now and unsure if I’ll be able to get any

sleep for the rest of the night. But thank God he's gone. That could have ended badly.

Fucking hell, I didn't think my past would come back to me like *this*.

I never thought my stupid behavior could end with me getting killed.

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Chapter Eight

MALLORY

I stare at my bedroom door as it hangs off the hinges, almost broken off completely. I guess me going back to my room wasn't enough for Derek. He wants me *gone*. Even if the timing isn't right and I don't have the money I need to get away, now is the time.

"I'm so sorry, Mallory," Mom whispers at me as she wipes the blood away from her nose. I really wish she'd let me take her to the emergency room, but I know now Mom isn't going to come with me tonight or any other night, no matter what I want.

"I do think you should go."

Derek is screaming loudly in the background now; I can't even pick out any of his words anymore. Not that I think it matters. It's all just a string of nonsense at the moment.

"Where am I supposed to go, Mom?" I ask through thick rolling tears. "I can't leave you here, like this. I don't want to go; this is too hard."

"I can't calm him down while you're here. I just can't." Mom has shut off her emotions. I don't like it, but I also can't blame her for it. I'm sure that's something she's had to do for years. "Maybe your sister can put you up for a while."

Our parents don't know exactly where Liss lives, because she doesn't want Derek to find out. They also don't know that she lives in a studio apartment with no room for me, or I would have been there already. But I'm afraid Derek will hurt Mom if I don't get out of the way.

I'm not the issue, but I have become the focus of hate.

I can't stay here without my privacy now anyway, and Derek is far more likely to tear that door off completely than help me to put it back up.

"Yeah, I'll call Liss." I grab Mom and hug her tight. I pray hard to whatever deity might be up there that Mom isn't killed. If I walk out and then she dies, I will *never* be able to forgive myself. "She will take me in."

We hold one another for as long as we can, but with Derek's yelling in the background we can't exactly enjoy our embrace. It's been years since my relationship with Mom has been as good as it can be, and it's all because of *him*. If I can one day get rid of Derek, Mom can get herself back to normal and life will be good again.

That's my dream anyway. That's all I want. For that asshole to be a distant memory.

"Okay, you go." Mom pulls back and smiles at me thinly. She has just as many tears streaming down her face as I do mine. "Get out of here, get yourself some calm and peace. You deserve it, Mallory. You deserve so much better than this."

"So do you, Mom," I remind her, but to no avail. "One day you will see..."

She backs away from me, about to go and distract Derek as best as she can while I pack up as much stuff as I can carry with me. I really hope she manages to calm him down, because this is the worst I've ever seen Derek. I know it never takes much to set him off, but this feels excessive.

There is something horribly wrong in his brain.

I rush around my room, throwing whatever I think I can take in a hurry in the backpack I'm bringing with me. This definitely isn't the way I thought I would finally move out, but that's on me. I should have known it would end up like this.

With Derek shrieking and smashing up the place, and me running off in the hope that it will help my mother.

This better help Mom, that's for sure. There's no telling what I'll do otherwise.

Once I have everything packed, my heart hammering against my rib cage, I sneak out the door. To be fair, Derek isn't screaming anymore, so I guess whatever Mom's doing might actually be working. Not that it makes any of this any better! I climb into my car and pause for a moment, listening to the mad thumping of my heart and my sharp, ragged breaths.

What I really want to do is call the cops in the hope that Mom's bloody nose might be enough for them to lock Derek up, even just for the night, but she begged me not to. Mom doesn't want the police coming because it just makes Derek feel invincible.

They don't arrest him, and he gets worse.

I can't be responsible for that. I just can't.

I resign myself to doing what Mom wants, because it's her who is still in the firing line, and I start my car. I roar away from the house quickly, not even really glancing back because I don't want to see what I'm moving away from.

Once I'm safely on the road, I grab my cell phone and make the dreaded phone call I don't want to make. I don't know how welcome it will be. Sure, Liss will do whatever she can to help me, she has always said that, and I know she'll look after me in my time of need. But I'm about to impose on her life, to make things challenging for a while. Somehow, I'm going to have to gain the independence to get out of there as soon as I can.

Ring, ring... Ring, ring... Ring, ring...

"Hello?" Liss sounds sleepy, which reminds me it's actually the middle of the night. Guilt races through my veins even more. "Mallory? Is everything okay?"

I sigh heavily with tears pouring down my cheeks. “No, Liss. It’s a long story, but the short version is no, everything isn’t okay. Far from it actually...”

Seeing Liss’s front door, makes me feel relieved, because I know I’m safe at last. Away from Derek and the horror of my life. I hate the way I had to leave, and I especially hate the way I was forced to leave Mom behind. But going was the only way to keep her safe. If I had stayed, the violence would have only gotten worse.

Knowing I did the right thing doesn’t make me feel any better.

Liss races out the door the moment she lays eyes on me and envelopes me in a deep hug. The tears start flowing again. I crash into the sobs and lean into her, weeping like a freaking baby. I can’t believe my life has become this.

“Oh, Mallory, don’t worry,” Liss coos. “You’re safe now. Come in, come on.”

I know my poor sister doesn’t have the space for me, but she’s made up a bed for me on the floor already. Gratitude surges through my body because I have a bed for the night. This might not always be the case, not with the way things are going.

Now I really need to get my life going. I have to snap into action and sort out where I’m going next. I can’t put it off any longer because I have nowhere to go back to.

But I don’t need to panic about that right now. At least not until the morning anyway.

“Oh, Liss, thank you so much. You don’t know how much this means to me...”

“Please, don’t worry about it. Mallory, you know I’m here for you, no matter what. Let me get you a glass of wine, and you can tell me what happened... if you want to.”

I don't want to. I don't want to remember it, never mind talk about it ever again, but I know I need to let Liss in on everything because that's the only way she will truly be able to help me. Plus, it's her mom as well. If we are *ever* going to be able to get her out of there, we need to be on the same team.

But I definitely need a glass of wine first.

Liss hands me a glass and we sit on her couch together, with the low hum of her TV playing in the background. Some old black and white film is playing and while I don't have any clue what's going on, it's calming to get lost in the action on the screen for just a moment. The escapism helps me to drift away from the awful crushing reality surrounding me.

But I can't do so forever. Not when I know that Liss is really panicking about me. I can feel her piercing gaze shooting through me, her anguish almost eating her alive. Knowing that it's never quite gotten this bad before is terrible for us both.

"So, Derek has gone too far," I finally manage to spit out. My eyes remain firmly fixed on the screen, even though I'm not watching the movie anymore. I just can't look at my sister, because I'm afraid I'll start crying again. Once those floodgates open, I might not be able to reseal them. "I honestly don't even know what started this outburst, but it got bad fast. He started smashing up the house, focusing all his rage on me, tearing down my bedroom door."

Is this what trauma feels like? It's horrible. "And telling me to leave."

Liss pulls me a little closer to her, not saying anything else because she knows what it's like. I'm sure she holds on to a lot of guilt as well, even though none of this was her fault.

"And the only way I could keep Mom safe, was to go," I declare loudly, because I really need that to be heard. "I didn't want to go, but I had to."

“Shh, shh, you don’t need to defend yourself to me,” Liss reassures me. “I promise you; I completely understand. I lived with Derek; I know how it is. Until we can get Mom away from him, all we can do is try and keep her safe. I’m sure she’s happy you left because she *never* wants Derek to harm one of us. I’m sure that’s her biggest fear.”

I nod, knowing she’s right, but it still makes me feel ill. This whole situation makes me feel sick to my stomach. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to recover. The tears start coming, and they’re painful. Thank God I have Liss to care for me. If I was on my own, I don’t know what would happen to me now.

I would lose it.

The sad thing is, I don’t even have any close friends. I’ve kept most people at arm’s length so they won’t see how horrible my life is. But now, that’s a problem, because my poor sister is the only person I can turn to. I don’t want to intrude on Liss and her life, but where else can I go?

It won’t be for long; I tell myself firmly to make sure I don’t get consumed by the guilt. *I will make something of myself, I will make something of my life.*

Right now I’m in the middle of a thick black cloud, but there has to be a silver lining somewhere. I just need to find it. Somehow I have to make this work for me. I *will* eventually make Liss proud, and my mom too. I’ll make Mom see she can escape Derek and make something of herself too.

Because her getting hurt by Derek, is *my* biggest fear. I can’t stand the idea of anything *really* happening to her.

That would kill me.

Chapter Nine

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WYATT

Knock, knock, knock..

Urgh, who the hell is here *now*? And not just at the front door of my building. This is someone who has come inside the workshop and is at my apartment door. This better not be SK. I'll lose my freaking mind if he's somehow gotten a key to get in.

“Wyatt, it's me. Can you let me in, please?”

Oh! It's a relief that it's Liss, but I'm also a little confused. What the hell is she doing at work so early? I stumble out of bed, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, wondering at what point my life got so chaotic. I had such a simple existence not so long ago, no one bothered me. But now I can't seem to sleep without someone hammering on the door.

“What's up?” I swing the door open. “Come in?”

I head to the kitchen to pour us both a mug of coffee. I don't know what this is yet, but I'm sure we're both going to need some caffeine to get us through it.

“Wyatt, I need to talk to you.” Liss doesn't take a seat. She's pacing up and down in my living room, which is weird because she's normally really comfortable here. “About what's going on with us. Like, you don't seem your normal self.”

Uh oh. My heart stops beating. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you're being cold with me. I can't exactly explain why I feel this way, but I'm worried we aren't friends

anymore. Everything just feels off.”

Shit, I know it’s my fault. I haven’t meant to be cold; I’ve just been keeping my distance because of what happened between me and Mallory. In my desperation to keep our *moment of weakness* a secret, I’ve inadvertently created a distance.

“I’m sorry.” I hand her the coffee and wait for Liss to sit down, which thankfully she does. “I didn’t mean to seem that way. Of course we’re still friends. You’re my best friend, Liss, and you always will be. That’s always going to be the case.”

She eyes me curiously. I can feel her prickling gaze trying to work out just how honest I am being. I hope she knows I really mean this. Our friendship is never going to be something I put on the line... although I suppose I did, didn’t I?

When I slept with Mallory.

God damn it, I should *never* have caved to temptation like that. Internally, I curse myself for everything that happened at the wedding. It was all such a dramatic whirlwind.

“I hope so. Because I really appreciate our friendship, Wyatt. It means a lot to me.”

“Well, you mean a lot to me as well... but why are you being so pensive? You don’t seem like yourself, Liss. Somethings on your mind. Spill it.”

She isn’t the most open of books, but she doesn’t normally dance around the most difficult of subjects once she’s decided to start talking about it. I have never seen her like this, and I have to admit it has me on edge. If she confronts me about Mallory, I might have to be honest about everything. However bad shit gets between us.

“Well, actually, I do have something that I want to talk to you about.” She wipes her hands anxiously on her jeans.

This isn’t good, is it? I can feel a bombshell is about to be dropped on my lap, and I don’t know if I like it one bit. “I

have a favor to ask you.”

“Oh...” That isn’t what I was expecting her to say.

A favor I can do. “Sure, what is it? Ask me anything. You know you can, Liss.”

She doesn’t look one hundred percent sure if I’m telling the truth or not. But she must know. Me and Liss have always done whatever for one another, just like best friends do.

“Well, actually, it’s a favor for my sister, Mallory. You remember Mallory, right?”

I don’t respond because this feels like a trap. She knows I remember Mallory, the wedding wasn’t that long ago, even if everything didn’t go as planned.

“My stepfather got violent last night. To the point where she can’t live there anymore.”

“*What?*” I gasp in horror. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t think he hit her. He was more tearing doors off in the house and things...”

In my opinion, this wasn’t any better.

Yes, no one is getting hurt, but the threat is well and truly there. There’s a fear that it could be me next.

Asshole. I want to fucking wring this guy’s neck. I know a little about him from Liss, but this seems way worse than usual.

“She got out to protect Mom, but needs somewhere to stay now. I would love for her to be able to stay with me while she gets her life on track, but it just isn’t possible.”

“Yes, because you insist on living in a tiny hermit apartment.”

“I know.” Liss offers me a small smile. “I regret that now. I’m starting to think I might have fucked up a few things along the way. I’ve been thinking more about myself than anyone

else. I need to move somewhere bigger. But that isn't something I can do right now."

"So, what are you and Mallory going to do?"

This is such a problem for them both that I easily forget about any awkwardness.

"Well, I feel a bit shitty about all of this, but I need somewhere for Mallory to stay while I get things sorted. And I know you have a spare room here..."

It takes me a couple of minutes to understand what she's trying to say here. Liss might not be asking me directly but she's hinting that she wants Mallory to stay here while they figure out what's going to happen next for them.

While they get a plan in place...

So she really doesn't know anything, does she?

My mind reels at the speed of light, trying my hardest to think of ways I can turn this offer down. Not because I don't want to help, because of course I do. I don't want to do this because it'll be really uncomfortable for me and Mallory.

"Does... does Mallory want this as well?"

Liss offers me a one shouldered shrug. "Mallory knows she doesn't have any choice in the matter. She just needs somewhere to live right now. I can't think of anyone I trust more with Mallory while she's in this vulnerable situation. Plus, if she's here then I can see her every day and keep an eye on her."

She sighs deeply. "I don't really want her to run back home because she has nowhere else to go. I'm scared for her."

Shit. Well if I don't agree now, whatever my reasoning might be, then I'll be a real piece of shit, won't I? I don't even want to *think* about how that will make me look. Plus, I really do care enough about both Mallory and Liss, to want to keep them safe.

It isn't going to be forever, I tell myself, in an attempt to try and make this better. It will just be a short while.

However uncomfortable I am about the idea of being around Mallory, I was sure I could manage it. *We both can, I'm sure of it.*

“Well, err, just give me a bit of time to tidy this place up and make some room for Mallory.”

“You'll do it?” Liss lights up like a Christmas tree. “Oh my God, you're so perfect, Wyatt. I don't know what I would do without you.” She leaps up and wraps her arms around me in a grateful hug. “You're a savior, truthfully. Mallory will be so happy to have somewhere to stay for a while. And I swear it won't be forever. I promise you, we'll have something sorted out really soon. Like, a few days at most.”

I already regret everything. I can just tell this isn't going to be the best idea, but it's too late now. Mallory will be walking through that door and coming to invade my personal space. The chemistry that neither of us wants to feel is going to circle around us, we're going to really struggle with just being in the same place. But then the alternative for Mallory is so much worse.

She wouldn't be doing this otherwise. I can confidently assume she wouldn't want to come and live with *me* unless she really had no other choice.

I guess all I can do now is make it as painless as possible. I will be responsible for overcoming any awkwardness and just making this easy. Mallory is clearly going through enough,

“You don't have to worry about clearing too much space though,” Liss declares as she pulls back from me. “Mallory didn't run away with much. She didn't get a chance to pack properly.”

Urgh, well now I feel like an even bigger asshole for trying to say no. I wasn't trying to be a piece of shit, but that's how I

feel. I can't even begin to imagine what it would be like to try and live in a situation like that, with the constant worry that your mother is in danger. I hate it. I hate every part of it. If there is anything I can do to help, I will.

“Okay, well if you need to take the morning off to help Mallory, you can. I know you must both have a lot of things to deal with. It sounds like it's been a terrible time...”

Liss's eyes fill with tears. “Are you sure? I can definitely catch up on everything later on. Obviously, I'm not going to let you down. I really appreciate it.” She leans up and kisses me on the cheek. “You really are my hero, Wyatt. I will make sure I pay you back for this somehow. I will be there for you, whenever you need me.”

I nod and let her leave, watching her rush out. I can't believe this is what Liss turned up with this morning. It's almost worse than if SK appeared again because that bombshell was way bigger. Now, my eyes run critically all over my home and I know I have to work quickly to make sure the place is nice for Mallory when she comes.

She probably isn't feeling very safe and secure at the moment, which is something I want to at least try and help with as best I can. I almost want to call up my brothers to ask them what the hell I should do in this situation, but they all have their own things going on and I don't want to overcomplicate anything.

I'm the oldest Macauley anyway, so I shouldn't be pushing my issues on anyone else. I should be the one there to help out others. Although I have never been very good at that, have I? I missed a lot of times when I could have been there for Josh, Grayson, and Luke, because I was deep in my own shit. I hate the guilt which comes with that knowledge. I hate knowing how much I fucked up, which is why I won't do it again and why I depend on myself to solve my own shit.

Seeing SK again has dragged up all these feelings, right when I don't need them. I hate him for that. It really pisses me off.

Chapter Ten

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MALLORY

“*What?*” I stare at my sister in horror, blinking furiously because I’m pretty sure there’s no way she said what I thought she said. “What did you just say?” I ask, just to be sure.

Liss’s smile stretches from ear to ear. She’s clearly delighted with her insane plan, but that’s probably because she has no idea what lion den she’s sending me to. “Wyatt has way more room than me. And since you’ll be living at my workplace, I can see you all the time. It will make you far more comfortable while we sort this out.”

I can’t argue that I’m comfortable here because my back is killing me from the night on the floor. I also don’t have money to put myself up for a while, and the alternative just doesn’t bear thinking about. I *cannot* go back home. Derek has made it very clear that I’m not wanted there, and that Mom will be in trouble if I reappear.

It really seems like this might be my only option, as terrifying as it is.

I can’t picture it though; I really can’t imagine living in the same space as Wyatt. My chest gets tight, imagining what my future looks like. Thinking about the wedding doesn’t help. The whole night was a nightmare, from the way he refused to acknowledge me all night long and treating me like shit, to the danger we found ourselves in.

And then... well, there was the chemistry that came afterward.

The night we shared together was phenomenal. Better than any fantasy I could have come up with. It was the sort of night that will stay with me forever. I honestly don't know how we'll be able to *be* around one another without succumbing to that again.

Although we can't, can we? Because of Liss. I don't want to wreck my sister's friendship. I already feel like I'm a burden to her. I've got in the way of her life when she's doing great. I can't fuck things up for her with Wyatt as well.

That's a friendship she clearly treasures.

But I really don't have anywhere else to go, do I? So somehow I'm going to have to suck it up. I nod at Liss, trying to show my gratitude, because she's helping me. I know she's doing her best, and for that I am grateful.

"Well, that's great," I reply through gritted teeth, trying my hardest to smile. "As long as Wyatt doesn't mind me being there. I don't want to be in his way."

"You won't be in his way," Liss insists enthusiastically. "He's keen to have you there. Wyatt basically said that he will do anything to help us, and I'm sure he will."

"Mom as well?" I find myself asking before I really think about what I'm saying. I guess I can't stop thinking about the awful situation our mother is in.

It just isn't right.

"Erm, well I didn't exactly bring up Mom, but maybe," Liss admits. "For now I just want to concentrate on keeping you safe, okay? I have to take this one step at a time, otherwise I'll get overwhelmed, and I'm no good to anyone when I'm overwhelmed."

I nod, allowing that last conversation to properly sink in. Did Liss say that Wyatt is *keen* to have me stay with him? Maybe just to help, but what if there's more to it? What if Wyatt has been thinking endlessly about *that* night as well?

What if he wants to pick things up where they left off? I know it isn't wise, especially when my life is already horrendously complicated, but I can't seem to stop myself from sinking into that fantasy all over again. Maybe we could have a little more secret fun and I could *really* take my mind off of what's happening around me...

No, don't be so selfish, I snap at myself internally. I'm not going to have time for that anyway, am I? I have to figure out a job with a decent pay check, and find an apartment of my own. I wasn't planning on any of that being here anyway, so I need to research other towns...

Although I don't know if I can actually imagine being away from Liss and completely on my own. I would love to think of myself as brave as my sister, but I don't think I am. I fear loneliness, and the idea of it creeping up on me is terrifying.

Urgh, one problem at a time. Let's see how it is with Wyatt first.

"So, we should get you moved in and organized," Liss declares.

"Right." I swallow hard. This is easier said than done, but Liss doesn't need to know that. "Yes, I'll get my stuff packed up so I can move and get settled..."

My stomach starts to churn, I fear I might actually be sick. This is why I haven't just upped and left before without a plan in place. I need that plan because uncertainty is killer. I can't wrap my head around it; I definitely can't cope. I'm starting to understand that I didn't just stay at home to protect Mom, it was to protect myself as well.

Not from Derek, but from *this*. This feeling that the world is spinning way too fast and I can't find my footing however hard I try.

Burning hot tears ball up behind my eyes, but I do my best to blink them away. Losing myself here and weeping won't do me any good. Haven't I done enough crying anyway? Just

because I don't feel ready for this, doesn't mean it isn't happening. I need to catch up with the speed that the world is whipping around me. I need to remain upright, no matter what.

He won't look at me.

I'm trying my hardest not to get too caught up in that, but it's worrying nonetheless. I get it. Liss is here and we don't want her to catch on to whatever has happened between us, but the fact that he won't even meet my eyes is destroying me from the inside out.

If he would just shoot me one look, *one* secretive glance so I can have him *see* me, then I would feel so much better. This is way too freaking awkward for words.

“Right, well I guess we should get back to work, huh, Liss?” Wyatt focuses solely on my sister. “Let Mallory settle in, make herself at home.”

Hmm, I don't like that. I don't like the way those words make me feel.

Not at all. He's talking like I'm not even here.

“Yeah, sure thing.” Liss shoots me a grin. “Well, I'm just down the stairs if you need me, okay? Anything at all, I'm right there. You know that, right?”

I nod silently, pursing my lips together to stop an endless flow of questions from spilling out. What I really want to know is why Liss said that Wyatt was eager to have me when it really doesn't seem that way. It looks like he would rather be anywhere else in the whole damn world.

This sucks. It really does. I nod and wave them away, but my heart is sinking like there's no tomorrow. I try and tell myself it'll be different later on when we are alone, maybe then we will sort things out, but I can't be sure.

A strange resentment begins to course through my veins as my hands curl around into fists. I don't want to go back to how we were with one another at the wedding. I don't want to just be a fly he wants to swat away. It was bad enough before, when he was just my sister's hot best friend, but now we've actually had sex and it's a million times worse.

Fuck that, I won't take it. I'll confront him about it if I have to. He can't just keep getting away with it. I've already been through way too much shit, I'm not about to put myself through more.

Not a chance, not for someone who doesn't give a shit about me.

Thankfully I can't stew on this for too long because I have work to do. I want to look out for some organizations that might be able to assist me with Mom, or who might be able to give me some advice. I haven't escaped just to do nothing, and I want to begin immediately. I will deal with Wyatt later on, when the time is right...

What is going on? What the hell is happening here?

I was ready to confront Wyatt, I really was. But how can I say anything when he's been thoughtful enough to come back with takeout for us to eat. He seemed sweet when he first arrived and I decided, naively, that all was going to be okay.

But then it got weird again. So it isn't just when Liss is around.

Huh. How do I take this? I keep parting my lips, trying to find some words to break the silence, but I can't.

Wyatt is taking me on this emotional roller coaster and I don't know how to handle it. I want to get off, but I don't have anywhere to go. It leaves me wondering why he's doing this to me, why he's trying to make everything so much worse.

Tears prick in my eyes *again*. I feel like I've been fighting back sadness all day long. Talking to the domestic abuse

hotline I managed to find in the area, only made me feel worse. They basically said I can't make Mom leave unless she wants to. And yes, that counts even if her life is in danger. I can't do anything to prevent Derek from hurting her all over again. Even contacting the police will only help if Mom wants to press charges against him, which I don't think she'll do. Why would she when there is no guarantee she'll end up getting justice? All that will do is put her life even more at risk.

I'm already frustrated so all of this only makes it worse. I should say something. The anger is brimming on the edge of my tongue, but I can't let it all out, can I? He might be acting like an icy-cold asshole around me, but he's done me a favor. He's looking out for me in a way. This is all way too complicated.

My heart races, pushing boiling hot blood all the way around my body. I kinda want to get out of here. I have the odd urge to jump on one of those bikes down there and take off. I don't know how to ride a motorcycle and I've never had the same interest in them that Liss has, but right now those bikes symbolize the sort of freedom I crave.

This is hard, much harder than I thought it would be. I can't stand this. I really do need to get out of here, sooner rather than later.

I rise from my chair, muttering something about needing to go to bed, and I get the only escape that I can. Once inside the bedroom, I try my hardest to keep the tears in check because I'm sick of crying, but the tears don't stop coming. I can't keep my emotions inside. I'm a mess.

Chapter Eleven

WYATT

“How is everything going?” Liss asks me, just like she has been for the past week. Ever since her sister moved in with me. I know she isn’t really asking about me, she’s focused on Mallory. That’s why I always play down the awkwardness between us. “Is everything alright?”

“Yeah. Good.” I smile thinly. “Everything is really good.”

I desperately wanted to make it comfortable for Mallory but I’m not doing a good job at all. Me and Mallory don’t even know what to say to one another. Things are so weird and strained between us. There are so many things I want to say, but I just can’t do it because it’s hard to look at Mallory without remembering what it was like to have sex with her.

It shouldn’t have happened.

The wedding night should *not* have happened at all, and now I really have to live with the consequences of my actions. I don’t know how to cope.

“Do you think Mallory is doing okay?” Liss glances upwards as if she can see her sister through the ceiling. “I’m worried, I can’t get much out of her. She seems to be lost in her own little world and I can’t get through to her.” She pauses thoughtfully for a moment. “I don’t know what she’s even doing up there. She says she’s applying for jobs and looking at apartments, but I don’t know... I just feel like there is more.”

“Well, she’s on her laptop a lot, so she must be doing something.”

I'm pretty sure she's trying to avoid me, and that's why she always has her face buried in her computer, but I'm trying to keep Liss away from the truth. I don't want her to catch on to anything. This is all a mistake, but it's one I really can't take back.

"Yeah, I hope so." She purses her lips thoughtfully. "I don't know, I'm sure Mallory will open up to me when she's ready. I'm just concerned she's struggling with everything more than she's letting on. I hate it, I feel so bad for everything."

"Go up there," I say. "Go and see Mallory. I'll cover down here. That's the whole reason she's living with me, isn't it? So you can keep an eye on her."

The stress rolls out of Liss's shoulders a little. "You sure? I don't want to be a problem."

The tension might be gone from her, but it's flooding me. What if Liss heads up there and Mallory confesses I'm not a great roommate? But I nod anyway and watch as she leaves. Every single day, I promise myself I'm going to be better at helping out Mallory through this horrible time of her life, but every evening I'm an asshole again.

If only the wedding night had never happened. Everything would be so much easier.

Anyway, I can't focus on that, because it's too late now. It happened, it's done, and now we have to make the best of it somehow. I just don't know how though...



A weariness surges through me as I climb the stairs to head home. I kinda need to just crash tonight. I'll try and be a good host, but I don't know if I'll be able to do it. I don't know if I have the strength in me to make Mallory's night better.

Especially when she isn't giving me anything back.

I kinda think she even hates me, and I don't blame her for that.

Oh! But Mallory isn't anywhere to be seen. Maybe she's gone to sleep too. Or perhaps she's gone out for the evening. Maybe to meet up with Liss, I don't know. I'm not always one hundred percent sure where everyone is at all times. It's been a while since I've had a night to myself, so I fully intend to take advantage of it.

I flop back onto the couch and close my eyes for just a second. It's nice to block the world out and to just sink into the darkness. Although I sure as hell don't want SK to pop up the way he has before. Urgh, he's a freaking nightmare, isn't he? He's popped back up into my life and now I can't stop worrying about when he's going to show up again. Thank goodness it hasn't happened again, he seems to have forgotten about me and vanished, but I can't guarantee that he will stay away. He's always on my peripheral vision, just in case.

I don't actually know if I drift off to sleep as I sit there. I certainly feel so relaxed that I must have slipped into dreamland for a while, but a sound eventually snaps my eyes back open once more. A little thump has me bolting upright in the chair.

"What are you...?"

Fuck, the words fall apart on my lips the moment I lay eyes on Mallory. She *is* in the house, in the shower. Or she was, because now she's wandering through my living room in a towel so skimpy I know just one slip would have her fully nude. I wouldn't have to rely on my memories to think about her body. I'd have it right here in front of me again. That has my mouth running dry with intense need.

Oh my God, I might be about to fuck things up all over again.

"What are you doing?" I hear my voice snapping at Mallory before I know what I'm doing. "This is the shared space of the house. You can't just walk around like that?"

I cringe internally as a redness of sheer humiliation burns washes over Mallory's skin. What the hell is wrong with me?

Because I can't control my desires, now I have to be a nasty piece of work? I open my mouth, waiting for the apology to come spilling out, but nothing happens.

"Oh, s... sorry," she stammers back awkwardly. I hate the way Mallory tries to kind of fold over on herself, to hide her body away. I've made her feel ashamed because I can't handle how beautiful she is. I can't stop looking at her long, luscious wet legs.

I'm the one with the problem, yet I've made Mallory feel like shit. I know that, so why can't I make it right? Why do I feel my eyes still burning into her? What is it about Mallory that leaves me completely unable to behave like a normal person? I can't think of anyone else who has ever had this effect on me before. It's wild.

"We just need to... to..." What the hell am I talking about now? "To find a way to live around one another, you know? This isn't the biggest space and it's hard for us to live together."

Well, if I thought that my explanation was going to make things better, then I was wrong. It's like I've stuck the knife in harder and twisted it a bit. Because I can't trust myself to say another word, I rise up from the couch and march into my bedroom.

Fuck.

I slam my bedroom door and lean against it. Shame washes over me, and not just because I spoke out of turn and made Mallory uncomfortable in her own temporary home. No, it has more to do with the stiffening in my pants. I can't help myself. I want her so badly that it freaking hurts. I just want to rip the door open, run out there, and take her up against the wall. I want to pick things up where we left off. It takes every scrap of willpower and self-control that I have, not to follow through on that urge.

“No, no, no,” I whisper frantically to myself. “Don’t do this. Don’t fuck things up.”

But my thick, throbbing erection isn’t going anywhere. The intensity is growing within me, and I can feel it expanding wildly by the moment. So if this can’t happen in real life, for so many reasons, I allow it to happen in my imagination instead.

With my eyes closed, I see Mallory once more, in that tiny little towel and her gorgeously flushed skin. Only this time, I don’t yell at her like an idiot. I stride towards her, closing the gap, and I kiss those desperately plump lips of hers. I already know exactly how they feel against mine, how her body easily curls into mine and fits perfectly, so it’s no strain to make this fantasy feel real.

The towel slides off her body and she presses up against me. I can feel every curve and, every dip of her gorgeous frame. My hand slips into my pants and I grab my cock, but in my head it’s her fingers delicately clutching onto me, sliding up and down my shaft in perfect rhythm while she whispers sweet nothings into my ear.

“Fuck,” I burst out as those gorgeously plump lips of hers take hold of my cock. I can really *feel* the wetness of her mouth surrounding me. “Oh fuck, Mallory.”

Just saying her name heightens everything. My heart thunders against my rib cage as the burning hot bliss circles my veins. I start to envision fractures of images. Just little scenes of me fucking Mallory in all different angles and positions, setting me on fire.

It isn’t long before these intoxicating images send me flying over the edge. I lose my shit, grunting and crying out in pleasure, as I erupt like a volcano. The fantasies of Mallory are all consuming. It’s like she’s my brand new drug and I’m an addict all over again. That’s why I want to push her away, why

I don't think anything should happen, and perhaps why I'm acting like an asshole. Because I'm scared.

I'm terrified of where this might take us and where we might end up. There are other people involved, and I know we can't risk it. There is too much at stake.

I sink downwards, falling to the floor, feeling like I'm in a terrible mess now in so many ways. An urge to call my brothers to get some advice overcomes me, but again I do what I can to swallow my emotions down.

I *need* to figure this shit out by myself. That's the only way...

No, I can't do that anymore. it's bull shit. I can't do this on my own. I've been trying and it hasn't gotten me anywhere. Doing this alone is killing me. I have to see my brothers. Even if I don't end up confessing everything to them, it'll be great to be around them. To loosen up and have a good time for the first time in ages.

Thank God we all have a group text and I can message them all at the same time. I type out the words rapidly, half mentally heading for the shower so I can clean up before we go out. Presumably for drinks because I think taking the edge off might be good for all of us.

It doesn't take them long to text back positively, looking forward to drinks with me, which reminds me that I am never alone, even if it feels that way sometimes. I will always have my brothers there for me. No matter what is going on in any of our lives, us Macauley brothers will always be there for one another.

That helps. I have to admit, it drags me out of my own head a little, which can only be a good thing.

Chapter Twelve

MALLORY

What the fuck was that?

God damn it, I didn't *mean* to walk out in just a towel with Wyatt right there. I thought I was alone. Since he's been acting like I can treat this place as my own while I'm here, I don't see the issue really.

Weirdly, I don't think it was seeing me half-dressed that upset him, I think it's the way my body made him feel. He's been trying to ignore his emotions, just as I have, but there are times when I can still feel them.

The intensity of the chemistry sizzling between us.

We can't deny it, but I know we also can't address it. It's a freaking nightmare to be honest. Him seeing me coming out the shower just heightened that intensity, so I can understand why he freaked out. But that doesn't mean I like it.

This is why I need to get out of here as quickly as I can. But it isn't so straightforward. I *want* to move forward with my life, so I can get a fresh start, but I'm stuck. I don't feel right just *going* while Mom is still with Derek. I spent so much time trying to figure out how I'm going to rescue her that it's hard to concentrate on the job hunt. I know Liss is worried about me, which is why I haven't told her what I'm up to. I think it'll freak her out to know that I'm deep in this hole, and it'll be hard to get me out.

Once I have a plan of action, I will fill her in. Until then, this can remain my little secret.

With the heat of embarrassment still burning through my body, I hurriedly grab some clothes. I need to get out of here, as fast as I can. There's no way I can stick around in this place with Wyatt when the tension is so high.

Since I only really know one other person here, I call Liss.

"Hey, Mallory, are you okay?" Guilt settles in the pit of my stomach as I realize that Liss is happy to have me calling her. I guess I've been way too distant recently. "What's up?"

"I... I wondered if you want to go out tonight. For dinner and drinks."

"Oh my goodness, *yes!*" Liss jumps on this, only piling bricks on the guilt. She's been talking about this for days, but I guess I haven't responded properly. "Yes, just give me a few minutes to get dressed and I'll be over there to pick you up. Where do you want to go?"

"Err, I don't know. I don't care." I shrug even though my sister can't see me. "I don't really know many places here. I haven't been out much at all."

I haven't really wanted to either, I've been flying under the radar as much as I can, not wanting to be seen by anyone.

"Yeah, ok, that's true. Well we can change that tonight. I swear I won't be long."

She hangs up on me, which means she's eagerly picking out an outfit to wear. I might have to try and look a little nicer as well. I don't have many clothes with me, so I guess it'll be my hair and make-up I'll concentrate on. I'll do what I can with what I have. At least that will keep me busy. The last thing I want to do is sit around and listen to what might be going on the other side of that door. If Wyatt is out there, I don't want to know.

Actually, it might be better for me to get out of here before Liss arrives. I think I'd prefer to meet her outside the shop so she doesn't run into Wyatt. She has no idea how strained

things are between me and him, and I'd prefer to keep it that way.

I listen more than I plan to, and there is a moment when I hear Wyatt crossing the apartment. But since I can hear the shower running from here, it has me wondering how he didn't know that's what I was doing. He was on the couch, not far from the bathroom so he must have been able to hear everything.

Was he just being an asshole for no reason?

Urgh, I really don't know. I can't work him out *at all*. I want to give up, to be honest. I don't want to spend any more time worrying about Wyatt because it's giving me a headache. Especially when I have so much else going on. I'm actually even more thrilled about the idea of going out for some drinks with my sister. I need something to chill me out because I can't remember a time when I've been this tightly wound, not even with Derek around. Maybe because I really am out of control here, aren't I? I can't make anything work out the way I want it to.

A few drinks should help me with that. It has to, right?

I look in the mirror critically, this is best that I can do, which definitely won't be anywhere near as good as Liss, but I'm not worried about that. I don't need to look good to have fun, do I?

No, it isn't like I want to have guys coming and talking to me, I just want to be with my sister. The last thing I need to do is add more complications in my life. Everything is messy enough. The moment I'm absolutely sure Wyatt is locked away in the bathroom, I tip toe through the apartment and creep down the stairs.

I feel like a teenage girl sneaking out, but without all the excitement. Without all the anticipation of what's about to come. I just need a break, that's *it*.

“It’s so good to see you smiling.” Liss clutches onto my shoulder, trying to steady herself on the bar stool. I don’t know why she’s holding on to me like I’m the one who’s going to stop her from falling. I’m not really steady myself.

“I’ve been so worried about you. I don’t like seeing you upset, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m sorry I’ve been keeping to myself.” Oops, my lips are much looser than they probably should be. I don’t want to end up saying *too* much. But the alcohol is making the words just fall out of my lips. “It’s just been a little rough, you know? Leaving Mom like that. I can’t help worrying about what’s going on at home.”

I wish she had a cell phone. I know Derek always breaks whatever phone she has, and I’m pretty sure it’d infuriate him if I tried to contact him. All the research I’ve done into the charities and the advice that they give suggests not to distance myself completely, but also to not directly reach out to him for fear of him hurting Mom.

“I heard her in the background of a call,” Liss admits. “Your worry made me panic, so I made a call just before we came out tonight. She sounds... okay.”

Hmm, her tone isn’t convincing. “I don’t think we need to do anything too drastic.”

I bite down on my bottom lip, trying to prevent myself from speaking. I even take another sip of my drink in an attempt to shut myself up, but I’ve been trying to shoulder this by myself for far too long. I don’t know if that’s something I should keep doing because it isn’t getting me anywhere. Perhaps she *wants* to help me.

“I want to get out of here, Liss,” I say in a half whisper, not that this is a secret any longer. “But I can’t do anything until I get Mom away from that man. I can’t stand the idea of her being stuck there under Derek’s control any longer.”

Liss lets out a little sigh of frustration. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I don’t like it either. I’ve been begging her to go for

years, but she always says no. Sometimes she makes the excuse that she loves him and that's why she wants to stick around, but I wonder if it's more that she can't afford to leave him. She doesn't have anywhere to go."

Oh shit. I hadn't really thought of that before. I know financial abuse is definitely something these narcissistic abusers use to make sure they have their victims stick there with them. If that's the case then me and Liss can help her...

"So, what do we do?" I ask Liss glumly. "How do we save our mother?"

"I've been trying to work it out for years. I don't know."

A glumness overcomes us. Neither me or Liss have an immediate answer, which is really frustrating. It's so hard to try and save another person from a situation they may have gotten themselves into. Especially when they don't know how to get out themselves.

"Oh look!" But all of a sudden, Liss jumps up like she's delighted by something. "I didn't know the Macauley brothers were out tonight. Did you know that Wyatt was coming to the bar? That's cool, we can share a drink with them. It's been *ages* since Wyatt and I went out. I'm going to wave them over..."

I want to tell her no. I want to say, *please don't bring Wyatt over here because I'm way too drunk to deal with him.* The whole point of me sneaking out tonight is *not* to see the man who constantly overwhelms me with stress.

But it's too late.

Liss has jumped up and waved the Macauley brothers over here, so I guess I need to plaster on the same fake smile that helped me survive the wedding. The other brothers were really nice to me then, to be fair, so I don't have to be fake with them, but I'm sure Wyatt isn't going to be happy to see me here. Especially after what happened at the apartment.

I hang my head low and don't meet anyone's eyes for a little while. There is chattering around me, but I can't pick out any words because I'm lost in my own worries. My heart is pounding, my stomach is flip-flopping, and all the booze is sloshing around in me. I don't think I should have drunk quite as much as I did...

But then Josh calls out to all of us, asking if we want a drink. Since Liss is ordering another one, and I don't want to be the awkward person here making this uncomfortable for everyone, I ask for another of the same.

At least I'll have something to do with my hands.

That's the moment I lift up my gaze, I catch Wyatt's intense eyes glaring at me. Oh great, so he hates me, he really does. Even now when the argument about the shower and the shared space is over and we're out having drinks with our siblings.

If that hasn't chilled him out and warmed him to me, then nothing ever will.

Great. Well this night just got a hundred times worse. I thought that opening up about my fears over Mom would be the hardest thing for us to tackle, but I guess I was wrong. Now I have to act like Liss's best friend and my roommate isn't making me want to scream.

Liss grabs my arm as she's talking excitedly about something, causing me to focus on her instead. I try and laugh along with whatever anecdote she's telling Grayson and Luke, but I can't seem to activate my vocal cords properly. I guess silence for the rest of the night, it is...

Chapter Thirteen

WYATT

This was supposed to be my night, Goddamn it! I want a rest from everything pissing me off, I don't want to have to face Mallory head on, knowing that life is a shit storm with us. How the hell are we going to hang around with one another like this, without Liss picking up on what's going on between us.

I'm *sure* everyone can sense the tension burning.

Urgh, and I was having such a good night. Me and my brothers were really blowing off some steam. Not that I was telling the truth about everything, instead I was enjoying listening to my brothers talk about their lives. Josh moaned about never getting any sleep anymore because of the kids and Lexi's pregnancy. Grayson, laughing about the way his kids are either fighting or the best of friends, and how Lillian can't stand the constant roller coaster. I was even loving listening to Luke and his excitement about his and Belinda's baby...

I wasn't even thinking about how all their lives are headed down the same, positive path, while I'm here, single, struggling with my feelings for my best friend's sister, who is way out of my league and who I shouldn't go *anywhere* near ever. Add to that my constant worry that SK might come back at any given moment. It's starkly different, isn't it? Yes, I know I have a very successful motorcycle business and I'm endlessly grateful for that, especially knowing the way my life could have gone. But there is also a part of me that definitely feels like I'm being left behind.

Urgh, this sucks. I don't like this sensation because while I wasn't thinking about it before, I'm definitely thinking about it now. I guess sitting across the table from Mallory is making all of that come into view. She's making everything hurt because despite myself, I still want her.

"What do you think, Wyatt?" Liss suddenly digs me hard in the side. "Huh?"

Shit, I haven't been paying attention. Everyone is looking at me expectantly, waiting for an answer, and if I don't give one, if I admit that I wasn't listening everyone will want to know what's on my mind. I love my family, but I know my brothers will turn into a pack of wolves trying to find out what's wrong with me.

Even if they're doing it for my best interest, I don't need it tonight.

"I need the bathroom."

Shit, I panicked. Now, with a fake smile on my lips, I bolt up from my chair and scoot backward. "Back in a moment."

Thankfully, Liss is far too tipsy to notice that I'm being weird. She's diving right back into whatever the hell she was talking about before, so enthusiastically that her hands are waving all around the place. She's a great distraction for everyone else, so I really can get a moment.

Maybe this is my cue to go home. The night is over, right?

"Hey, Wyatt, what's going on?" Oh God, well I guess my escape wasn't so smooth after all. Luke rests his hand on my shoulder and stops me in my tracks. "You seem off all of a sudden, and I'm pretty sure I know why..."

Oh no. I think I'm going to puke. I clutch my stomach and try and stop myself from throwing up. I *knew* it was obvious. I've been burning with the chemistry ever since we sat down at the table with Liss and Mallory. I stare at my brother in horror.

“It’s Liss, isn’t it? You’ve finally realized you’re in love with your best friend, and now it’s super awkward. You don’t know what to do about it.”

Oh. Really? Is that what he thinks? I don’t know how to take this, but my chest loosens a little as I realize I’ve somehow managed to get away with it. Luke hasn’t picked up on the sizzle between me and Mallory, although I don’t know how.

“Me and Liss?” I scoff. “No way. It isn’t like that with us, and it never has been.”

“But you want it to be,” Luke insists. “And that’s fine. We can work through this together. If you want to tell Liss how you feel, then I will help you, and if you want to get over your feelings, then I’ll be there for you as well.”

I shake my head no. “That isn’t what’s happening here. It isn’t Liss...”

“Not Liss?” Luke furrows his brows in confusion. “So, it’s...”

As the realization hits him, and the right one this time around, I watch him go through a range of emotions. He’s never been great at hiding how he feels, and this isn’t great. It only makes my heart sink further. He knows this is a bad plan, he knows my feelings suck, and that they’re going to cause endless trouble. And he has no idea how deep this has gone.

“Mallory?” he checks. “But isn’t she staying with you at the moment? Isn’t that really hard?”

I nod. “Yeah, it is. It keeps leading to all kinds of weird moments.”

“Do you think it might just be because you’re too close to one another? Like, living in the same space. That might be enough to make you think there are feelings there. It might just be the claustrophobia.” He shakes his head. “That might not be the right word, but you know what I mean. She is beautiful, so you might just *think* you like her.”

I sigh heavily. If only it were that simple. If we hadn't hooked up on the night of the wedding then I might be able to trick myself into believing that, but I know it's far more than that. Mallory infuriates me, she drives me crazy, and yet I can't stop looking at her, and daydreaming about her, and that's what sends me mad.

These feelings are too much...

Although maybe that's why everything feels heightened. Because we are too close, living in the same house. I wonder how it would be if Mallory lived somewhere else.

"I don't know." I offer Luke a one shouldered shrug. "But I do know that if Liss found out, she would kill me. There's no way she'd be happy about this, she'd hate me forever."

Luke can't reassure me because he knows every word I speak is the truth. Liss is crazy awesome, and she will do anything for her friends, so I can't even begin to imagine how much she'll defend Mallory. Knowing that her boss and best friend, a guy who's way older than her sister, likes Mallory and has slept with her already... yeah I'd be dead.

"Hmm yeah, I don't know what to say."

Oh God, is my youngest brother looking at me like I'm a fool? I don't want his sympathy because it makes me feel small and pitiful. But maybe I deserve that. "I don't know, but this is a very complicated situation."

I sigh once more, deflating like a balloon. I might not want Luke's sympathy, but telling me it's complicated is not helpful. I need him to tell me what the hell I should be doing here. Someone needs to know how I should handle this because I am *not* doing the best job.

"Right, well I need to go to the bathroom," I repeat even though that isn't the truth. "I need to get myself sorted out before I head back to the table."

“Yeah, right, okay.” Luke pats me on the back. “Well, I will have a think about it and see what advice I can give you. Because this is hard.”

I give him a thin lipped smile. I am grateful, I won't lie, but he doesn't know what to say to me because there isn't anything that can be said. There isn't any advice that he can give me apart from keeping the hell away from Mallory. I *know* that's what I need to do, but it sucks. I want her, I crave her more than anything in the world, I need her.

But I can't have it. I can't have Mallory just because I want her. It should never have happened in the first place, and it definitely can't happen again. Even if she's beautiful and I like everything about her. Even in the confined space where we can't really escape one another. None of that matters, because Liss will kill me, and I don't want to lose her. I don't want Mallory to lose her sister either. She's been through too much.

It won't be forever; I try to remind myself again. This isn't how it'll be for the rest of my life. All I need to do is get through the next few weeks, that's it.

I can do that. I have to do that. There's nothing else to it.

Oh God.

This night has gone from bad to worse.

I kept trying to leave. I really did want to go home about a million times, but no one would let me. If it wasn't one of my brothers forcing me to stick around, then it was Liss and she's not one to take no for an answer.

So now, here I am, trying to help a really drunk Mallory up the stairs. I don't know how I missed her getting absolutely wasted. She seemed to do so quietly until it was too late. I only realized when everyone else too drunk to do anything about it.

Even Liss, she just sent me away asking me to make sure Mallory got to bed safely.

Great.

Easier said than done.

“I can... I can walk on my own,” Mallory stammers, slurring and tripping over her words. “I don’t need you to hold me up. I’m doing fine.”

The moment I slip my hands away from her, she staggers backwards proving she isn’t able to walk on her own. Because of course she isn’t. I grab her once more, silently cursing the world for putting me in this position. I was supposed to have a good night with my brothers without worrying about all my issues. I’m not supposed to be freaking babysitting the person I needed some space from.

“Okay, come on.” I get her through the door and inside. “Let’s get you to bed.”

She slumps to the side, leaning against the wall. It’s hard for me to pull her upright so she doesn’t tumble over and make this messier than it already is.

“I don’t think I want to go to bed. Not yet.”

I roll my eyes. Well, that’s just freaking great isn’t it? I don’t know how much more of this night I can take. It’s been pretty hellish for me. Luke’s reaction to the news that I like this woman has me worried about doing anything. I just can’t.

“Okay, well I’m going to sleep, so I’ll see you in the morning.”

I don’t want to stay standing around talking to her, because who knows where that could lead. I’m desperate to keep myself out of trouble, I don’t want to dive head first into it.

“Don’t you think we need to...” She pauses to hiccup. “To talk about everything?”

“Err, I don’t think now is the best time to talk.” I don’t dare turn around to even look at her because I know she could easily draw me in once more. “Maybe in the morning.”

She’ll forget by then, won’t she? I’m sure of it.

“But I...”

The words fall apart on her lips, and something about the sharp cut off in her sentence has me spinning around with worry. She’s gone pale, almost green. I think the alcohol might have finally caught up with her and now she can’t contain it.

Fucking hell, she’s going to vomit.

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Chapter Fourteen

MALLORY

Oh God. What am I doing? I feel horrible. I drag my head off the couch cushion and blink furiously around the room trying to piece together the memories of the previous night which led me to this place. In the living room of Wyatt's home, the shared space which I'm definitely supposed to be staying away from ever since our argument yesterday.

"How are you feeling?"

Whoa, that's Wyatt and his voice is all soft and caring. But he hates me, right? That shitty argument is still rolling through me. "Do you need any more water?"

"Err, what?" My stomach is flip-flopping still and the room seems to be spinning around me. This isn't good, not at all, but I can't change my surroundings. I'm too weak to do anything.

"Are you ready for something to eat yet?" Wyatt continues. What happened to him? This complete turnaround of personality is really confusing.

"I don't think I can. Erm, should I just go to bed?"

Wyatt smiles. The image of him is very blurry, but that only makes him look more angelic.

Shit, in this vulnerable state, I can't deny my feelings for him. I'm overwhelmed with how attracted I am to him, and how much I like him, how much I really wish that he would just

lean down and kiss me already so we can stop trying to ignore one another.

But he doesn't. Of course he doesn't. That would be a terrible idea.

"You are more than welcome to nap some more right where you are."

I sink deeper into the couch cushions. I probably shouldn't take him up on this offer, but I can't help myself. I don't want to even try and move for fear that last night might wash over me in an uncontrollable tidal wave. Urgh, I really am sick today, this sucks.

"I'm going to get you another glass of water," Wyatt insists even though I didn't ask for it. "It was a bit of a wild night last night, wasn't it? You need as much liquid as you can."

I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to recall it all, but the only stark memories that come back to me, involve me sitting on the bathroom floor with Wyatt rubbing my back like he's caring for me, with me spilling the beans about my sadness with regards to my mother.

I was way too vulnerable with Wyatt and now I'm not sure how to feel about it all. He's the last person I want to get closer to when I'm trying my hardest to get away. When I want a life away from the complicated way he makes me feel.

And now he's in the kitchen getting me water to help me to help with my hangover. Urgh, I don't even want to think about how terrible I look.

I don't know *everything* that I said, I might have even confessed my feelings for him, as I tried my hardest not to be sick, and that's even more humiliating. I don't know what I'll do.

Wyatt's presence floods the room as he comes back to me with water. There's a warmth that comes with him which reminds me of the wedding night when he was my hero. It's

this side of him that I really like. When he's being kind and sweet, the butterflies in the pit of my stomach become utterly unbearable.

"Thank you," I rasp out as I take a sip of the icy-cold liquid. "That's nice."

"Are you feeling a bit better now?" I nod this time. "Yeah, I think so. It really did get a bit wild, didn't it? Sorry I drank so much. Was I a nightmare?"

Wyatt shakes his head and chuckles, but I'm not convinced. I'm sure I ruined his night out by being someone he needed to look after. I feel bad about that, he might have needed a break from me, just as much as I did from him. If so, then I really fucked that up badly.

"You weren't a nightmare at all. I just felt bad for you, Mallory. I've had nights where I've gotten more than a little carried away, plenty of nights actually, and as the oldest Macauley brother, I've also had to care for my brothers when they have gotten carried away."

I push myself up into a sitting position, glad that I manage to steady my stomach as I do. I stare at Wyatt in shock, trying to work him out. He really is complex, isn't he? I wish I didn't find that so intriguing, it's very frustrating.

"Did Liss get home okay?" I ask instead, trying to change the subject to something safer.

"Oh yeah, she texted me as soon as she was in the house, she's fine."

Yeah, makes sense. Of course she messaged Wyatt because she's his best friend, which is exactly what the issue is. I shift uncomfortably in my seat, changing the thickness of the air.

"You know what, I'm actually going to pour you a bath," Wyatt suddenly declares. "Because I have a feeling that will make you feel so much better."

“A bath?” Oh God, is he *really* going to do that? It’s so nice. Although I don’t know if he’s just doing that to get away from the weirdness in the air now. “Yeah, that would be amazing, thank you. I think that will help me.”

I watch in shock as he walks away from me. It doesn’t matter what his reasoning is, this is really sweet. It means I don’t have any hangover anxiety at all, because why would I when he’s going out of his way to make me feel okay about everything?

Sometimes it’s like he wants to repel me, other times I’m sure he wants me to fall for him. I’m more intrigued by the latter, and despite myself I fear that might happen.

Wow. Today has been insane. Actually crazy. I’m definitely looking at Wyatt in a different way. Or in a more honest way, because my eyes have been opened. My gorgeous hot bubble bath really did make me feel a million times better, and the day just got better, with snacks and pajamas and old movies. The perfect cure for a hangover.

More than anything, we’ve been talking. Just chatting about nothing in particular, but I liked it. The awkwardness we’ve been existing in has just melted away into nothingness which is great. The wall has come down and we’re just being ourselves.

If only we’d been this way the whole time. It would have been so much easier.

“Do you want takeout for tonight?” Wyatt asks me with a soft smile. That smile really gets my pulse racing. I can hardly catch my breath as I grin back.

“Erm, yeah that sounds great actually. I don’t know what though.”

“I’ll sort something out. Don’t worry. I have some menus in a drawer.”

He shoots me a wink as he rises up from the chair which flashes all the way through my body. Fuck, how is that so intense? I'm pretty sure Wyatt feels it too because he averts his eyes quickly. Not that it changes a thing, of course. The feelings are very much blooming. This is maybe a time where I should clear my head a little, maybe I should call Liss to remind myself exactly why me and Wyatt have to maintain a distance, but I don't. I remain right where I am, filled with anticipation, waiting to see what's coming next.

Food suggestions reel off of Wyatt's tongue as he brings me take-out menus, but honestly I'm no longer listening to the words he's saying. Instead I'm fixed on the movements of his lips, the way his dimples pop when he talks, and how he makes my body tingle with need. Shit, I'm sinking way too deep into my feelings. Is that desire dancing behind his eyes? Is he caving to temptation just like me?

I know I shouldn't do anything. I could quickly skim through the take-out menus and talk about food with him. Keep things light. But I have the urge to do something else. I don't often cave to my urges, but right now I don't know if I can hold back.

The closer Wyatt gets to me, the deeper I get sucked into his web. The more I want to consume him whole. I want to taste him and feel him. I don't want to keep ignoring the blissful crush I have on him, the intense passion that consumes me every time I meet his eyes.

I lock my gaze on his and slowly bring myself up to him. Wyatt doesn't move, even if he thinks this is a great idea, he remains right where he is and allows me to brush my lips lightly against his. The tingle instantly runs all the way through my body, curling my toes.

Shit, I want him. I want him so badly it hurts. Now that I've had a little taste of him, I ache for more. My core throbs with the passion I've been trying my hardest to lock away. I

meet his eyes again to find out instinctively that he feels the same way.

The next time our lips crash together, Wyatt's the one making the first move. He drops the menus as his hand curls around the back of my neck. I can see he doesn't want to let me go, not that I want to move either.

Kissing him feels new and exciting. It's thrilling and honestly makes me buzz all over, but there's a familiarity as well.

He feels like *home*. This is something we should have been doing the whole time because it just feels *right*. He's right, and in this moment, so am I.

Wyatt climbs down onto the couch with me as the kiss deepens. Our hands start to run all over one another as we peel the clothing off of each other. God it feels good to have those rock-hard abs pressed up against me again, to be able to stroke the inside of his thighs. His cock nudges against my leg, showing me just how badly he wants me, and fuck, I want him too.

I need him, I ache for him. Every part of me craves this man. He is just perfect, and I *know* he can set me ablaze. I don't know how this can be wrong when it feels so right.

"Oh wow, Mallory," Wyatt murmurs as he massages me over the top of my panties. "What are you doing to me? Do you know you're going to kill me?"

I nibble down on his bottom lip as a response and curl my fingers around him. As I stroke him, sliding my hand up and down his firm, steel shaft, my mouth waters with need. Shit, I really need to taste him. I've never experienced such an intense desire with anyone before. This man is different, he sets me free in ways I never expected, and shit I want to roll with that. While I have him here in my arms and we're both happy to ignore the real world.

I twist around until Wyatt is on his back on the couch. Then before he can even blink his eye, I slide down his body,

running kisses all over his skin as I go. If his chest tastes this delicious then I can only imagine how phenomenal the rest of him is. I truly can't wait to wrap my lips around him and consume all of him.

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Chapter Fifteen

WYATT

What am I doing?

I want to scream with frustration because I know I'm about to overstep yet another boundary here. On a day when me and Mallory have actually been getting along well too. It's been easier today, we've had a good time, but now...

Well, she started kissing me, didn't she? And I truly can't resist her. Mallory is absolutely intoxicating. Especially as she slides down my body, her lips grazing over my hyper-sensitive skin as she gets nearer to where I absolutely crave her.

"Fuck," I mutter as my head slams back against the couch cushion, but I quickly pull it back up because I don't want to miss a moment of seeing this beautiful woman. She looks so hot I want to fucking lose my mind as finally, after what feels like an agonizing amount of time, those pretty plump lips of hers press lightly against my tip. It's only a sweet, chaste kiss, but the effect it has on my body is naughty. She's so bad, I love it.

The next expletives that come flying out of my mouth are out of control. Mallory turns into a sex kitten, practically purring as she parts her lips wide to drink me in. The wet heat of her mouth surrounds me as she slides all of me to the back of her throat. I can almost feel her throat opening to envelop more of me.

A guttural cry vibrates in my chest and explodes out of my mouth as she slides her lips up me once again, tangling her

tongue around me. My God, she really does want to taste every inch of me, doesn't she? I really don't think I stand much of a chance of holding myself together though if she keeps doing this to me.

Holy shit.

I'm already on maxed out on what I can handle as Mallory's fingers glide up my thighs. I'm so busy focusing on her rough hot tongue as it glides over my shaft, that I don't notice her fingers until they glide over my balls, making my whole body shudder.

Fuck, she's so good, everything about her feels phenomenal. It's no wonder I'm addicted to her. I reach out for her, but all I can reach is her hair. I knot my fingers up in her locks, adoring the sensation of her movements.

She looks so sweet and innocent, but she seems to know my body better than I know it myself. Fucking hell, I'm stiffening up with desire, sizzling as Mallory sends me ever closer to the edge. I could easily just lean back and lose myself like this, it would be so easy, so fucking amazing, but I also know I'm not going to do that.

I want her, all of her. I shouldn't have her which is why I need her. We're in too deep now, there's no going back on this. Once we realize again that this was a mistake, we'll keep away from one another, so we need sating now. I can see the same desperation in her eyes.

So even though it kills me to do so, I lift up myself enough to tuck my hands underneath Mallory's armpits. I drag her up to me so our lips crash together once more. Much as I miss the intense sensation of her lips wrapped around me, now, as we kiss, Mallory straddles me and I ache to plunge deep inside of her.

My hands cup her breasts, I groan with pleasure as I tweak her nipples. I can see how breathless Mallory is as she tosses her head back, flinging her hair over her shoulders, but she isn't giving me everything I need just yet. Mallory is hovering

above me, teasing me, making sure my head is well and truly fried before she takes me and claims me as her own.

At least for a moment anyway...

I scream out her name like it's the only word I ever want to say again as she thrusts onto me, giving me all I yearn for. It feels even better than I thought it would, being buried deep inside her again. I know it's wrong, so fucking wrong, we *have* to get better at keeping away from one another, but as she presses her hand to my chest to rock back and forth on me, I don't want that moment to be right now. Now, I just need to lose my head with her.

I grip Mallory's hips, not because I want to guide her hip thrusts, but because I just want to hold on to her, to feel as much of her as I can. Her gorgeous, slim, curvy body looks phenomenal as she rides me. Her pert breasts bounce in time with her movements. My chest is tight as I look at her, I can feel my heart pulsing in time with her pussy as she clamps around me, over and over again.

God damn it, Mallory's eyes. I can't get enough of the intensity of her gaze, which is exactly why I find it so hard to look at her usually. But now I can't get enough. Especially when her gaze is dark and hooded, filled with need.

I adore the delicious purring moans flying out of her mouth as she fucks me, as she greedily chases her own pleasure. I love seeing that, it gives me more pleasure than anything else. The sight of her vulnerable, pleasure filled face, means I can hardly contain myself. Luckily, we lose ourselves at the exact same moment, clinging to one another as we do, kissing each other to swallow up one another's screams. That connects us in a way that I didn't think was possible. Something has shifted now, it's changed. I don't know where this will lead but as the burning hot pleasure ricochets through my body I'm intrigued to find out...

Knock, knock.

What the fuck is that noise? Urgh, I don't want any disturbances today. This is the first morning in a very long time that I haven't woken up feeling cold and shitty. Probably because of the lovely, warm body I have curled up next to me.

Knock, knock.

Wait. Reality hits me like a slap in the face. The lovely body beside me can only be one person, and this is the one person I'm supposed to be keeping away from.

Knock, knock.

"Wyatt? Are you in there?"

Holy fuck. My blood runs cold as I bolt up into a sitting position. That's Liss's voice. She's here, at my apartment and me and Mallory are tangled up together on the couch, stark naked. She could walk in on us at any moment.

"Er, hold on," I cry out, trying my absolute hardest to keep the sheer panic from my voice. "Just give me a moment."

I shake Mallory awake while trying to keep her quiet at the same time. I wish she didn't look so damn beautiful with her bedhead and the soft smile on her lips. But I can't get lost in her eyes now, I can't even give her a kiss. Silently, and frantically, I mouth to Mallory that she needs to get out of here now, but it isn't until Liss calls out my name again that she realizes the severity of the situation.

Her eyes pop wide and she grabs a blanket before sneaking off into her bedroom and closing the door behind her. I blow out a breath of relief as I drag my clothing on, covering up as much of myself as I can just in case.

This is close, really close. Me and Mallory are aware that everything that's happened between us has been a risk, but I don't think either of us has truly understand just how much,

until now. My heart is thundering as I glance around the room, trying to find any traces of what happened last night. I don't immediately spot anything though, which I hope is a good sign. I *really* can't handle Liss screaming at me right now.

"Hey." I swing the door open rapidly, wondering how to act in a nonchalant manner. "What's going on, Liss? You're here early."

"Yeah well I wanted to check in on my sister." She slides into the room and I can't stop her because that would be weird. I hold my breath, praying to whatever deity might be out there and listening to me, that she doesn't see a thing. "Plus, I found this letter taped to the front door, so I thought I should bring it up to you."

"Taped to the door?"

Huh? That's weird. "What does it say? Who is it from?"

"Well, I didn't open it. It isn't addressed to me. Is Mallory in her room? I'll go and check."

"I don't know if she's awake..."

Shit, I tried to save Mallory from a visit but I guess I'm too late. Thankfully from what I can hear, she's had enough time to gather herself up. I can at least relax in the knowledge that we've gotten away with it... for now. That might not always be the case though. Me and Mallory need to have a talk at some point, so we can work out how we're going to handle this, and how we're going to keep away from one another from now on.

I honestly don't know if it's possible, but we need to try.

Now that little issue has been sorted, I tear the envelope open to see what's inside. But it immediately becomes clear this isn't a normal letter. There's a reason it was taped to the door and not slipped through the letter box. Because it's a threat from SK.

"God damn it," I mutter as I run my eyes over the rambling words that are still demanding money from me. "What am I

going to do?”

I can't go to the cops about this. They aren't going to be on my side because of my past. Plus, I don't think that's the best way to deal with SK and the old gang. But I don't actually know how I'm going to face them. I don't want to give them any money, because then it won't end. But I also really don't need to have my life threatened any longer. I don't want this to get worse.

My past needs to stay in the past where it belongs.

This letter wants me to go to a meeting place tonight. Not something I particularly want to do because I'm sure it'll be a trap and I'll have to face all the guys from the gang. That can end really badly for me. Worse than bad, I don't even know at this point

But if I don't go, it could end up a whole lot worse. They might come here and mess up my business. I've worked too hard and for too long for that to happen. I can't risk all of this, or the loved ones in my life. This could go far, and I don't know how far.

“I'm going to work,” I call out to Liss, because I need a moment to collect my thoughts and to work out what I'm going to do now. “See you down there, okay?”

I don't know if she answers me, I'm not listening closely enough to figure it out. My head is all over the place because threats keep coming my way. I can't seem to stop them no matter what I try. Fucking SK and the whole gang, God damn it, I hate everything that I did in the past which led me to this moment. To this hell. How am I ever going to get out?

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Chapter Sixteen

MALLORY

I blow out a breath of relief the moment Liss leaves and heads back down the stairs so she can get to work, because *that* was worrying. That was hard. If Wyatt hadn't locked his door then she would have walked in on us naked. She's always in Wyatt's home, so why wouldn't she just walk in? It doesn't bear thinking about, honestly.

But she hadn't seen us. Me and Wyatt got away with hooking up again... at least from getting caught. I don't think we're going to get away from our feelings though. It was weird and complicated enough, but now it's even more complex.

We've made it worse.

"Wow." I flop back on the bed and shake my head. "What a fool."

What now? What do I do from here? I still want to get the hell away from here to start a life for myself, but I definitely can't go now. I've opened up to Liss about what I want to do with Mom, and it would be cruel of me to just walk out.

I want to speak to her today. I remember Liss telling me that she had a chat with her... no, she had a chat with Derek but she could hear Mom in the background. That makes me determined to do the same thing. I just need to wait until I'm in the right frame of mind to handle Derek properly. I got used to *handling* him when I was at home. I could speak to him, disguising my hatred for him, and I knew how to speak depending on what mood he was in.

But I've been away for a little while now and I don't know if I'll be able to do it in the same way. I need to put myself back in my old frame of mind. Not the easiest thing to do when I just had that terrifying moment of almost being caught.

Eventually, I haul myself out of bed because I *know* I can't just lounge around the bed all morning, sleeping on and off. I pad around the apartment, grabbing a coffee, and trying my hardest not to look at the couch so I don't remember everything that we shared last night.

God it was good. It's always amazing being with Wyatt. The connection, the chemistry is on fire. When we're good, we're *really* good. It's just a shame that we have so many external factors against us. Things we can't ignore, or turn our backs on. Liss, my sister, is my main concern. The deeper I get into this with Wyatt, the more upset I get about her reaction when she inevitably finds out the truth.

I hope and pray that doesn't happen, but I'm not confident.

"What is that?" I murmur to myself as I spot something left behind on the coffee table. It's tightly folded into a square which piques my curiosity. I know I probably shouldn't allow my curiosity to get the better of me, but it does. I'm definitely not thinking straight. I don't even think about the consequences of my actions as I peel the paper apart to read what's inside.

Wyatt, you haven't paid me back yet. You have to pay. You, more than anyone, knows what happens to people who don't pay their debts. Don't become one of them, none of us want that. You have to meet us at the casino tonight. 8pm. Don't be late. SK.

What the hell is this about? It sounds dangerous. I don't know much about gang life, but doesn't that sound a bit... criminal? Threatening at the very least. What the hell is Wyatt all tangled up in? My blood runs cold as I realize that I could be in danger here as well. I have run from one dangerous

situation to another. Only I don't know the danger here, I don't understand it. I certainly don't know how to handle it.

“Shit,” I whisper under my breath. Should I speak to Liss about this? She could be in danger as well, right? If she doesn't know about any of this, she should be warned. The motorcycle store could get attacked if Wyatt owes dangerous people money.

I swallow hard, trying to keep my terror inside. I can't deal with Wyatt's problems as well as my own. Not today. If I allow myself to get sucked into this, then I won't be able to focus on Mom. I *am* going to pull Liss aside though when I get the chance, to make sure she really knows who her best friend is. I also might need to confront Wyatt himself. We cannot keep fooling around if he's involved in something messy.

Urgh, we shouldn't keep doing this anyway. It's bad, and only getting worse. I fold the letter back up and leave it where I found it, hating that my fingerprints are even on that thing. I don't know if Wyatt can pay off whatever the debts are, but I hope he sorts this out soon.

As for me, well I don't want to sit around in this house now. I don't want to be in the apartment any longer. I was going to try and call Derek, to see if I can speak to Mom, but now I decide to take it one step further. I decide to visit.

I know he hates me and this goes against all the advice that I have read, but I want my mom back. I want to lay eyes on her and know that she's okay. I can't keep sitting around and doing nothing anymore. I *have* to act; it's really stressing me out. This is something I can physically do, so I'm going to. I hope I have more luck with this than I have had here.

Surely it can't be worse.

I have been gearing myself up the whole drive here, but now I'm not sure I can ever prep myself for this. I'm still determined to face Mom and to lay eyes on her so I can really *see* her, but I'm way more anxious about how this is going to go.

Derek might be drunk and he might snap into instant violence again. I've seen it more than enough times to know how quickly it can get ugly. I *really* don't want to face that now.

But I've made it here. I'm sitting outside the house, and now I need to finally be brave.

It still takes me a couple of minutes to gather myself up though. I take a moment to catch my breath, and to slow down the thundering of my heart before I slip out the car and make the anxious walk to the front door.

You know how to do this; I try to convince myself as I reach up and knock on the door. *You can... you can do this. Just face him, be polite, even if you want to kill him...*

But much to my surprise, it isn't Derek who opens the door.

It's *always* Derek who answers the door. Immediately, I throw my arms around Mom and I hold her tight.

"Oh my goodness, Mom, I have been so worried. Are you alright?"

I let out a little tear as I hold her close to me. At least I can see that she's alright, but I don't feel good about this. I can tell Mom isn't herself, she isn't doing well, that's for sure. But then when was she herself last? It's been a lifetime, honestly. Derek has chipped away at her for years, and now she's nothing but a shell. But at least it seems like she's alone. Somehow I managed to pick the perfect time to make this trip down to see her. I'm so grateful.

"Mallory, I didn't think you would ever come back, I didn't think I would ever see you again." I pull back to look at

her in the face, to try and work out why she's saying this. "I thought you hated me when you left because I wasn't able to protect you."

Oh God, well now I'm really crying. This isn't good. "Mom, I never thought badly about you. You were never the issue. It's him."

As I say that, I glance over her shoulder to see the state of the house behind her. It's been ransacked, and trashed, there are holes in all the walls. Derek has really done a number on this place. What the hell happened since I was last here?

"Mom, oh my God, how have things gone so badly? Look at this place?"

Mom's eyes are brimming with tears. "I know, it's terrible, isn't it? Derek got into such a rage two nights ago that I didn't think we would have a life left at the end of it. I didn't know if I was going to come out of this alive, it was horrible. The worst."

I stare at her in open-mouthed shock. I have so many questions, I don't know where to even begin. My worst fears have almost come true, Mom might not have made it out of this alive. That really does make me feel sick to my stomach.

"So, where the hell is he now?" I demand. Mom watches as my fists curl up by my sides. Anger is well and truly starting to get the better of me. I might destroy him. "Derek, I mean."

"I don't know." I'm confused by Mom's shrug. How can she not know? He never leaves her side. "He went out to a bar after this massive show and I haven't seen him since."

"So, he's on a bender?" My heart pounds now. Derek's drinking could end in something even worse than what's already happened. "He could be back at any time."

"Or he's met another woman. He has been saying that he's done with me and he wants to move on. Maybe he's really met someone, I don't know. That's what I keep thinking."

Well, much as I would like to believe that's the case, not for the sake of the other woman, but for Mom's sake, my gut tells me this asshole will be back soon, and worse than ever. If I'm going to do anything, then it has to be now.

"Pack up your things, Mom. I'm getting you out of here."

"I can't do that." She says, immediately defensive. I brace myself, waiting for her to tell me she loves that nasty piece of work. I don't know if I can stand hearing it again. "He'll kill me if I go. I won't ever be able to come back here again."

"You don't need to," I insist. "Me and Liss will take care of you. You will never have to come back to this place again. You can have freedom, Mom. Don't you want that?"

I'm pleading, I can hear myself begging and I'm worried it will push Mom into a corner. But I have to make sure she really hears me this time.

"I... I don't know..." The color drains from Mom's cheeks. She wants this, I can see it in her eyes, but she's scared. That *want* alone is enough for me to snap into action. I'm determined to make this happen. "Mallory, I'm scared..."

"Okay, well you can be scared for a little while, Mom, but I'm going to get you away from that fear. I'm going to show you there is a life away from this. You'll see."

I have focus now, I have something that I need to do. I snap into action happily because at least this gives me something concrete to do. I've been aimless for way too long...

Chapter Seventeen

WYATT

I don't know if I should be here. Especially because I haven't told anyone where I'm going. I half wanted to tell Liss, just so someone would be able to talk to me about this. But I didn't. I kept my lips firmly closed and said nothing.

Then I planned to tell Mallory at home, but weirdly she wasn't in the apartment when I finished work. I guess she must have snuck out at some point. Probably because she doesn't want to face me after the near miss this morning. I don't blame her, truth be told, I know it's going to be difficult to have a talk about everything, but we have to do it at some point.

I guess it's better I get this over and done with first. It's not great that I'm here alone and no one knows where I am, but if I can get SK and the other guys off my back about this stupid debt I don't even owe, then I can concentrate on everything else.

"Come on," I mutter under my breath as I look around the room. This fucking casino is a nightmare. All flashing lights and noises. Triggering sounds since I used to love gambling way too much. "Come on, SK, where the fuck are you?"

The fact that he made a point to tell me not to be late, but then he isn't on time himself is a power move. He wants to have me on edge, to have me standing here like an idiot, worrying about him.

Well, goal achieved, idiot.

If he makes me wait much longer then fuck it, I might as well get out of here. I'm still not fully convinced that succumbing to SK's whims is a good idea anyway. I *know* this is designed to trap me, but even having that upper hand doesn't make me feel any better.

I can't even pass the time by playing games because that can quickly become a very slippery slope. I fought too hard and for too long against my addictions. I'm not going to allow SK to be the reason I go back there.

"Well, well, well."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes at the scene as SK finally appears, of course he's not alone. He has Bill and Tuddle with him. Guys I haven't seen in years, time clearly hasn't been kind to them. Although I think that might have more to do with the drug use than anything else. That could have been me, very easily. Isn't that horrible to think about? "You finally made it. I didn't think you would, Wyatt, since you seem to have turned your back on all of us."

"What are we doing here, SK?" I'm not messing around; I want that to be obvious.

"You know what we're doing here. It's time for you to pay up."

I sigh wearily. "SK, we have discussed this. I'm not giving you any money."

Now I'm feeling glad that we're inside, because we're in a public place, with witnesses all around us. I know for a fact every inch of a casino is covered with, so if anything goes down, I will have evidence. I feel less worried.

"Well that's a real shame." SK clucks his tongue with irritation. "Because you're my friend, Wyatt, and I never wanted things to get ugly with you. Never ever."

"Well I can assure you there's no reason for things to get ugly."

SK steps closer to me, closing the gap between us, I can see he wants to be intimidating, because he has his boys behind him, but I jut my chin out and hold my head up high. I won't allow him to intimidate me. It isn't going to happen. Not when I haven't done anything wrong.

“It wouldn't get ugly, Wyatt,” he spits out pointedly. “If you would just give me that money. We all know you're good for it, so why don't you just pay up. Get me off your back. If that's what you really want. If you want to go back to your perfect little life, then why not put a stop to this today. Then we can both go our separate ways.”

“What, and that will be the end of it, will it? Nothing else will happen?”

I don't buy it. I'm not a fucking idiot. I know what people like SK will do for money because I was once like that myself. He will bleed me dry until I am no longer of any use to him. “You won't *ever* come to me for money again, huh? Is that what I'm supposed to think?”

SK smirks and shrugs. “I don't know. What do you think? Why don't you tell me all about what you think? I would be fascinated to find out. I'm sure you have a lot of interesting *facts* and opinions about me. Let's do it here. In this casino. Right now.”

When he makes a sweeping gesture with his hands, I know where he wants this to go. Unfortunately SK wants this to turn ugly, he's itching for a fight. I don't know if I'm going to be able to keep away from violence, however hard I try. My actions might not matter. I take a step back, lifting my hands up in a gesture of surrender. I'm definitely not here for trouble. There's no need for anyone to overreact.

“I don't have any facts about you, SK, I'm just trying to talk through this with you...”

My sentence doesn't stand a chance. Nor do I, because three things happen all at the same time. SK's fists seem to come from nowhere and slam hard into the side of my face,

someone lets out the loudest shriek I think I've ever heard in my life, and a gun goes off nearby.

How am I in the sort of chaos that I had worked so hard to get away from? How am I in hell? *Again?* More importantly, how the fuck do I get out of here alive?

Ring, ring... Ring, ring... Ring, ring...

I rest my head against the ice-cold wall of the jail cell I was shoved inside, trying to will my headache away, but I don't think it's going anywhere. I'm not sure if it came from the whack SK gave me when he was trying to start a fight, or the pretty violent arrest that came afterward.

Either way, everything hurts and I'm sick of being here.

"Hello?" Josh sounds confused as he picks up the phone. I don't think he was expecting a call from the jail today, but then I wasn't expecting to make one.

"Josh, it's me." I can't keep the weariness from my voice because everything is *way* too much for me. I'm so overwhelmed I can hardly stand it. "I've been locked up, but I'm getting out now. Is there any chance you can come and pick me up?"

"Whoa, wait, what?" Urgh, this is exactly what I didn't want. To have to explain myself. "What did you just say? You're in jail, Wyatt?!"

"Yeah, wrong place, wrong time." I hope that's going to be enough of an explanation, but I quickly get the sense that isn't going to cut it. Josh's pregnant silence speaks volumes. "I met SK, to try and stop him from threatening me..."

"I thought SK was serving time."

"He got out."

Maybe I should have told my family about this sooner. “And he came to me saying that I owe him money. I don’t, but he wants to extort me because he *‘knows I can afford it’*. He’s been giving me a lot of shit, and tonight I met with him hoping I could end this shit show once and for all. Unfortunately, it happened on the same night as a police drug bust and I basically got caught in the middle of it. It’s a nightmare and I just want to go home.”

“What about SK? What’s going to happen with this?”

I sigh heavily. “I think he’s going back inside, so I won’t need to worry about him anymore. If only I’d known that sooner, I wouldn’t have bothered to go to the casino.”

“You were in the casino?”

Shit, I didn’t think about how that would sound.

“I’m not gambling again; you don’t need to worry about that. I just went to see SK.”

“Urgh, this is a spiral. I don’t like this. I’m coming to get you right away. I need to understand what the hell is going on in your life because I thought everything was going so well for you, Wyatt. I didn’t know you were struggling with anything at all.”

Those words stay with me long after I hang up the phone. I guess I’ve been showing everyone what I want them to see. That I’m strong and that I have my shit together. I wanted to keep up that image because I like being seen in that way. But is there any point in putting across a fake façade when I’m crumbling behind the scenes? I don’t know if that feels right anymore.

Maybe I really do need to try and open up more, even if it feels uncomfortable.

When Josh finally arrives, I’m shocked to see that he’s not alone.

Grayson folds his arms across his chest and gives me a pointed look. Since it hasn’t been too long since he’s been

through a range of issues himself, I expect more sympathy from him than anyone else. But I guess since I haven't asked for help, he isn't about to let it go.

Luke is with Josh too, and that really worries me, because my youngest brother knows way more than anyone else. Drunkenly, I mistakenly told him about my feelings for Mallory. I don't know if this is something he's kept to himself or if the others know.

"Come on." Josh points to his car. "We've got a long drive home. We can do all the talking we need to do then, right? Let's not fight in front of the jail."

I feel heavy as I climb into the car, wondering how my brothers see me now. Are they going to worry about me because I've been problematic in the past? Because I've sunk into addiction before? I definitely think I've hurt their feelings by not going to them first and asking for help. I don't even think my *'I usually like to tackle everything on my own'* attitude will fly today. My suspicions are confirmed almost immediately.

"Okay then." Grayson turns to face me as the car drives out of the jail parking lot. "It's time, Wyatt. Time for you to talk to us about everything. You've been trying to handle way too much on your own and that isn't right. Look at that fucking black eye you have. I hate that. We could have been there to look after you."

"I didn't want to do that to you guys, you all have families now."

"No way," Luke joins in. "You're still our brother. We still want to be there for you."

"Yeah, that's why we came here without Mom and Dad," Josh jokes. "Can you imagine what Dad would have to say about all of this?"

I shudder. I don't want to think about that at all. Not when I've been enough of a letdown to my parents. I can't do that again, no way.

“Okay fine. I’ll talk.” I hold up my hands in a surrendering gesture, hoping this time it will actually work. “But it’s a messy tale. Everything got really complicated all at once.”

“Isn’t that always the way?” Josh laughs. “But we always stick together, don’t we? I don’t think that’s going to be any different here. We’re family.”

Wow.

I’m really not alone.

It makes me wonder why I’ve handled all this in such a shitty way when all I needed to do was reach out for help.

I’m an idiot.

Obviously.

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Chapter Eighteen

MALLORY

I'm sure she's freaking out. *Really* freaking out. It's actually a miracle that I have her in the car beside me as we drive away from the house. The thickness clinging to the air is palpable, I can actually hear the ragged breaths falling out of her mouth. It sounds like her lungs are hurting, but eventually she'll see this is for the best.

Getting away from Derek will be the best thing for her, I'm sure of it.

I keep trying to think of things to say, but nothing comes out of my mouth. My brain isn't connecting properly, it all feels like such madness that I can't quite wrap my head around it. But it's good. I have to keep reminding myself that this is good.

"Do you need to go to the hospital?" I ask Mom in a taut voice. "How hurt are you?"

I know what I can see, but I also know Derek and I might not be able to see all the wounds.

That asshole, I want to fucking kill him.

It's probably for the best that he's vanished into thin air. I don't know if it's too much to hope that he'll never come back, but I really do.

"I don't think I need to see anyone," Mom replies in a voice that's barely above a whisper. "I'm pretty sure I'm okay, I just need to get as far away from here as possible."

I reach across and hold her hand. Not the easiest thing to do when I'm trying to drive, but I need her to know that I'm here, I'm not going anywhere. I left her for a while, because I thought that was what I needed to do, but now I know better.

Now I know that saving Mom means keeping her with me. Keeping her away from Derek needs to be my main focus. Now if I leave town and get a new job and an apartment of my own, I want Mom to come with me. I'm sure Liss will feel the same way...

Liss. The moment I think of my sister my blood runs cold. She's going to be so upset with me, isn't she? Because I acted alone when I know that she wanted to help me. But I didn't plan for things to go down this way. All I wanted was to see Mom. Mostly because I didn't want to think about the danger that Wyatt might be in, or how it might affect me because I live with him.

Urgh, there is still a lot that I need to do isn't there? This isn't the end of everything. I hope my own drama doesn't affect Mom because she has been through enough.

I squeeze Mom's hand, holding her tightly, silently praying that everything will be better now. That saving Mom will be the first step in everything getting better.

“So, this is where Liss lives.” Mom can hardly contain her anxiety. It's rolling off of her in waves. She's making me nervous as well. I understand the emotional roller coaster she's going through but it doesn't make it any easier to witness. “Do you think she's going to be happy to have me here? I don't want to upset her.”

“Mom, trust me, Liss wants you away from Derek as much as I do. She's going to be so happy.” I'm right, aren't I? I'm sure I am. If Liss is going to be upset with anyone, it will be me. “Come on, let's go in and see Liss now.”

I can't help but notice that my hand is shaking as I lift it to press the doorbell. I even press my ear to the door to make sure my sister is in there. Footsteps walk towards the door, so I take a step back and wait for her to swing it open.

"Mallory... Mom..." Liss darts her eyes curiously between us. "What is happening...?"

"I've left him." Mom says before bursting into tears, it seems like she's been holding back the tears for a very long time. "I'm not going back to Derek, Liss. I'm done. I'm here."

Liss immediately wraps Mom in a warm hug pulling the both of us inside. Relief floods me as the sense of family overcomes me. We're back together, none of us know what the future holds, but it has to be more positive than it has been, right? Us women can make sure we have a good future somewhere, all of us.

This is the dream.

"What happened?" Liss finally asks once more. "How did this happen?"

"I... I went to visit Mom," I admit, bracing myself for an argument as I do. "I just went on a whim because I wanted to see her. I've been worried, you know? And I found that Derek wasn't there. He wrecked the house and left. So I got Mom out while I could.

Liss opens and closes her mouth a couple of times. I'm sure she has a whole load of questions, but I hope she sinks into the happiness that I'm feeling just to be here.

"Wow, this is amazing, Mom. I'm so glad. Now we can all start to get you back on track."

She glances around her apartment, wondering where she can fit Mom in. This isn't like me turning up out of the blue, I know she's going to want to set something up this time around. I guess that's for the best because I can't exactly bring her to Wyatt's place, can I? How rude would that be? He's already doing us a favor by allowing me to stay there so I

don't want to make it worse. I guess I wasn't really thinking about this during the rescue.

I wasn't thinking about anything. Only trying to save my mother.

"I will get you a bed," Liss insists. "I will put you up here because I want to keep you safe. No one knows where I live, least of all Derek. I made it like that on purpose. So there is no chance of him finding you here while we sort things out."

"What about you?" Mom's inquisitive eyes meet mine. "Where are you staying? I haven't thought about that. Sorry, Mallory, how are you doing?"

"She's staying with my friend." Liss's lips turn down into a frown. "Oh, and about that, Mallory. I don't know the details of what happened, but Wyatt got locked up. I think his brothers went to bail him out, but..."

"What?" I gasp, bending forward to clutch my stomach before the panic gets the better of me. I knew this was coming, but I didn't think it would be this quick. Shit, another drama is upon me already. Whatever Wyatt is into, it's come for him,

And now I have to go back to the house alone, because Mom will be here with Liss, so whatever might come, I will have to try and tackle it by myself.

"He'll be out soon; I wouldn't worry about it too much." I glare at Liss, wondering how she can speak of this in such a simplistic, calm manner. Has she been aware of Wyatt's criminal involvements the whole time? In which case why has she kept me away from him? "What is going on with you, Mallory? It's nothing to worry about."

I wish I could be as confident as her about this, but honestly my head is all over the place. I'm spinning, sinking lower by the moment and I don't know what to do. Tears start cascading down my cheeks before I can really think about what's happening and what I'm doing. I shouldn't be allowing any of my emotions to shine-free, but it's too late.

Liss doesn't pay my tears any attention, but Mom's eyes practically pierce through me. She moves closer to me and embraces me, allowing me to weep against her. Now that the crying over Wyatt and everything that's happened has started, I don't know how to switch it off. This really sucks. I feel like my heart is shrinking and it'll never recover.

"Did Wyatt mean something to you?" Mom asks intuitively. "I can almost feel your love for him right now. Was there something happening?"

I should deny it, mostly because this isn't the time to face the consequences of my actions, but I can't seem to get the denial out. I can't get anything out, which causes a brand new thick silence to fill the room. I don't think Mom knows what's going on here, what she's unleashed. The drama of her day is nowhere near over, which I know isn't fair. I know it, but it's too late now.

What the hell can I do? Ever so slowly I lift my eyes up to meet Liss's but I immediately regret it because of the rage flaming in her eyes.

"You have feelings for Wyatt?" she snaps so harshly that even Mom jumps. "You can't have feelings for Wyatt. He's my boss, my best friend. He's way older than you and just... just no."

The horror seems to strike her bit by bit as she realizes she has played a part of this, without even meaning to. She sent me to the wedding, although she probably hasn't clocked on to how far back this goes, and she asked him to put me up.

"Well, this is really embarrassing." She rests her hands on her hips and narrows her eyes angrily. "I don't know how we're going to overcome this. Obviously you can't stay with Wyatt anymore in case he picks up on the fact that you have a crush on him. That will be really humiliating for me, but you can't stay here either because I don't have the room."

Oh God. She thinks I just have an unrequited crush on Wyatt. It would be so easy for me to let it stay like this, but truthfully I'm sick of being alone in my confusion. Especially if Wyatt really is a dangerous man who's going to jail and leaving me in the shit.

I need Liss to know the truth because I'm sick of the loneliness lying is giving me.

"Liss, it isn't like that," I tell her quietly. Mom grips my shoulders, sensing where this is going even if Liss hasn't yet. "Wyatt feels the same way about me."

He might not have said it out loud, but his actions have shown me as much. We wouldn't be drawn to one another the way we are if it was a one-sided thing. It wouldn't be so complicated if I was the only one who felt things. We wouldn't keep putting so much on the line.

This is the one thing that me and Wyatt have been fearing. Liss finding out and her reaction. But it's time. The secret has been weighing on me too much. I need it out there now.

Who knows, Liss might even be open to it. She might even be understanding and this could be the thing that brings us closer. Since other things have gone so well today...

"You are *fucking* kidding me," she screams at the top of her lungs, instantly shooting down any hope of getting her blessing. "You *cannot* be telling me that you've been hooking up with my best friend? No way. Do you know how messed up that is? From both of you? I can't even look at you right now, Mallory. Get out. Get out of my house."

I glance at Mom who's lost all her color once more. I guess since I've done what I needed to, I can go. At least I'll know that Mom is safe. Me though, I'm not so sure. I might drown in this pool of loneliness if nothing else happens...

Chapter Nineteen

WYATT

I don't know if I feel any better getting that off my chest. I thought I would, but honestly sitting here in the car with my brothers who all now know what's happened, has me feeling deflated and sad. I kinda feel like it's obvious that I'm stuck in a corner and I can't get out.

“Do you know that your phone is ringing?” Grayson asks me as he nudges me in the side. “It's been going off for ages. Don't you think you should answer it?”

It can't be SK but it could be one of the other guys, I don't know how far his reach stretches so I immediately panic. It's almost a relief when I check the screen to see Liss's name.

“Hey, Liss.” I sink comfortably into the chair, ready to tell her all about the shit show of an evening that I've had. “Have you heard?”

“What about you being locked up?” Her strained tone bolts my spine. Instantly I know she's pissed off with me. I guess she's mad for the same reason my brothers are. Because I didn't let her know what I was going through.

“Yeah, I don't give a shit about that anymore, Wyatt. I don't know what the fuck you're doing at the moment. What are you playing at? My God, is it necessary to be such a fuck up all the time?”

“Err...” I have no idea where this is coming from and I'm too shocked to reply.

“What I've actually just found out about, is your sex life. You know, that you've been fooling around with my younger

sister, who I asked you to protect.”

No. Oh no! This cannot be happening. Not now, no way. I’m emotionally drained from everything else I’ve been through. Why does my life never stop being a drama? I can’t catch my breath long enough to form a reply.

“I can’t believe you would do this, Wyatt. Does my friendship mean nothing to you? I trusted you; I put my sister’s life in your hands and this is how you repay me? I thought that you were capable of keeping it in your pants. I didn’t know you were such a pig.”

The venom filled words falls off her lips. This might be the angriest I have ever heard Liss and I feel horrible about it. This is exactly what I wanted to avoid. I love Liss, having her in my life is amazing, I don’t want to lose her. But I have fucked up so much of course that’s going to happen.

She’s never going to want to have anything to do with me again.

“I... I...” I stammer awkwardly, my whole body flushing.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Liss snaps. “I sure as shit don’t want to talk to you about it over the phone. If this is something we’re ever going to talk about, then you need to come and see me. I need to look you in the fucking eye when you tell me why you did this.”

I glance at Grayson who can definitely hear everything that’s being screamed. He nods and leans forward to sort this out with Josh who’s driving.

“Okay, Liss. I’m coming to your place now so we can discuss it.”

“Be warned, I’m fucking fuming. This isn’t what I want to deal with tonight.”

“Have you got something going on? We can make it another time?”

“Don’t try and pretend like you give a shit about what’s going on in my life, Wyatt. If you cared, you would *never* have done something like this.”

How can I explain myself? I really don’t know how I can make Liss understand what happened here. I wasn’t just fooling around with Mallory because she was there and I thought that she was hot. No, it’s always been more than that, I might have tried to deny it, even to myself, but there has always been feelings there.

She’s gone now anyway. Liss couldn’t hang up the call quick enough because she hates me so much, which leaves me with nothing but time to think. My brothers don’t seem to have any advice to give me, because they remain awkwardly silent.

“Shit,” I mutter to myself. “She’s going to kill me, isn’t she?”

“You can’t help who you fall for, Wyatt,” Luke tries to remind me. “I think Liss will understand that once you explain it to her. She will hear Mallory’s side as well.”

I nod along, hoping he’s right, but I don’t know if he is. I’m scared of how much I’ve upset Liss. I’m worried about Mallory as well. Losing my best friend is one thing; I will always still have my family here with me. If Mallory loses Liss then I don’t know where that will leave her. This is fucked up, and I feel sick about it.

My God, maybe I was better off in jail. Maybe the fight with SK wasn’t the worst thing to happen to me today. I let my head fall into my hands which is where I leave it for the rest of the drive. I try my hardest to find some peace and to clear my head so I know exactly what I can say to Liss so she’ll hear me out. That’s going to be the hardest step to overcome when she’s this angry and upset with me, and rightfully so.

If she hears me out, then maybe I can explain that I have fallen for Mallory, that I might even be in love with her. I don’t know how Liss will take that, but it has to make a

difference, doesn't it? I want her to know that I wouldn't just do this for no reason. Neither of us would be so crazy.

There's something there, and it started on the night of Luke's wedding.

"We're here." Josh turns around in his seat to look at me. Worry is plastered across his face. "Are you going to be okay, Wyatt? Is there anything you need us to do?"

I shake my head sadly. "No, this is my mess. I need to be the one to fix it."

Him, Grayson, and Luke all seem to be in agreement about that. I've dug this hole, so the only way I'll recover is by pulling myself up by the bootstraps.

I slide out of the car without even saying goodbye to my brothers. I'm sure they won't be offended by this; they know my head isn't in the right place. I make my way to Liss's apartment, trembling with sadness and fear the whole time. I can still hear her voice screaming in my ear and it doesn't feel good. Especially knowing that I deserve it.

"Oh, you are here." Liss is waiting for me, outside her front door, her arms folded angrily across her chest. "I didn't know if you would actually care enough to come."

"Of course I care enough, Liss. You know I do." She scoffs, letting me know this isn't going to be easy. "Can we go inside and talk about this?"

She shakes her head no. "No, we can't go inside. My mom is in there, and since she's just escaped Derek, I don't think she needs to listen to us arguing."

What? That's a huge development in my friend's life and I don't know anything about it. That's shitty, and again something that I'm sure is my fault.

"Your mom escaped him?" I gasp, even though I'm sure Liss isn't going to want to discuss this with me. "That's incredible. How did that happen?"

“Don’t you worry about that, it’s nothing to do with you. All it means is that I need to make sure she has somewhere to live so she doesn’t feel compelled to go back. I don’t need to be having this conversation with you about Mallory.”

“Where is she?” This might not be the right question to ask, but I do so anyway. I really need to know what happened before I ended up here.

“I sent Mallory away because I don’t want to speak to her again. I can’t believe she would betray me in the same way. I’m disgusted with the pair of you.”

I hang my head low once more. “I know, it’s messed up. This isn’t something either of us planned on, and we certainly didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Yeah well I’m hurt, so you failed. You fucked up real bad, Wyatt. Can you see that?”

Liss purses her lips together. This might be the closest to crying that I have ever seen her. I hate that I’m the cause of this, I *never* wanted to be the cause of this.

“I don’t know what to say to you, Liss, only that we fell for one another. I have never felt like this before about anyone. I really think she might be ‘the one’.” I surprise myself as I say this, but as the words come spilling out of my mouth, they feel right. This is how I really feel. “I really think I might be falling in love with her.”

Liss gasps, totally unable to believe this. “No, Wyatt, no. You can’t do this.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help the way I feel. I’m sure Mallory feels the same as well.”

Liss turns even whiter. “Shit, Wyatt. Do you hear how fucked up that is? Do you actually hear yourself?”

“Yes, I know, I hear it, Liss, and I’m sorry.”

She stares at me hard and I can feel her willing me to back down. I know she wants me to, but I can’t. The feelings have been let out of the closet and I can’t put them back away. I

can't go back to denial. Nothing is ever going to be the same anyway, so what's the point?

"I know you have a lot going on, so if you want me to go..."

"Yeah, actually I do want you to go," Liss snaps. "I don't think I can stand to look at you any longer. This is just too much for me."

I hate this. Even as I back away, this is all too much. It's almost like the end of an era. Me and Liss are done for. My heart breaks. It shatters into a million pieces. I have had such a good time being friends with Liss, I don't want her to go. I don't want this to be the end. I would do *anything* to change it.

Maybe time will be the thing that changes it. I can only hope.

I guess all I can do now is go back home. I don't know if I will bump into Mallory there, I have no idea where she has gone. We obviously have a lot to discuss, but I don't know if I have it in me to talk about us.

What a fucking day. What a Goddamn shitty day. I have had everything falling down on me, hitting me from every angle for what feels like forever, and much as I knew that I would have to deal with it all at some point, I didn't know it would all hit me at the same time, on the same day. This is horrible.

A thick ball of emotion lodges itself in my throat as I walk home. It gets so painful that I can hardly breathe. I don't want to lose my shit here, but I don't think I have ever been this wound up in my life before.

This is hell.

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Chapter Twenty

MALLORY

Who is that?

Every sound has me jumpy as all hell. I can't stand it. I don't really feel like I should be here, but where else am I going to go? Now that my sister officially hates my guts, I don't have anywhere or anyone in the world. Every sound could be her coming to yell at me some more, or it could be Mom because she doesn't want to be in the middle of this... it could even be Derek.

Oh God, even though Derek has no idea where I live, and he's a drunken idiot, I wouldn't put it past him to locate me if he needed to.

I stiffen, my body going into fight or flight mode as the door swings open. Because I've gotten myself so worked up, it's almost a surprise when it's Wyatt who walks through that door to greet me. He looks like shit though, like he's had a hard day just like me.

"Wyatt?" I gasp. "I thought you were in jail?"

"I was," he confirms. "Because I went to meet some of the old guys from my past. I've been having a bit of trouble with these guys, so I wanted to sort it out. But it didn't exactly go that way. There was a drug bust and I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Wow." I widen my eyes in shock. "So, you're okay?"

“I am... but I did get a call from Liss. She knows everything.”

I hang my head low. “Yeah, I know. I didn’t mean for her to find out but she did. She went mental on me, so I bet she was pissed at you as well, huh?”

“Yeah,” He nods, but doesn’t look as affected by this as I thought he might be. I assumed that losing Liss would devastate him. “But for now, don’t you think we have something else to worry about? Something that we can actually help with?”

“Huh?” I really don’t know what he’s talking about. This seems to have come from nowhere. He must know there is nothing we can do about Liss being upset at the moment. Not until she’s calmed down a bit anyway. That’s the only problem we share... unless he is about to drop the bomb that his enemies are going to come for us. Oh God, I really don’t know if I’m prepared for that. How do you even deal with criminals?

“Your mom.” He says.

Still, I’m stumped. I guess he found out about the great escape while he was at Liss’s home. But I don’t see this as a ‘we’ problem. “She needs somewhere to stay, doesn’t she? She can’t live at Liss’s for a long time. It just isn’t practical.”

“I know. Me and Liss were going to try and work something out...”

“Well I want to help you. I want to finance this. It’s the least I can do.”

I’m blown away by this gesture. I guess Wyatt must have a lot of money, even if he isn’t the sort of person to wave it about. I don’t know why he would do this for us, but it might be an offer that me and Liss can’t refuse. I don’t want Mom to ever feel like a burden, or like she has to go back to that house, whether Derek is there or not, because of money. If we can sort this out now and pay Wyatt back later, then why wouldn’t we?

“Would you really do that?” I ask quietly. “Because I will do anything to save her...”

“I’m already thinking about apartments in town that we can rent for your mom. Nice, safe places near Liss to keep your sister happy. Places we can rent out for a while until she decides where she wants to move to.”

I swallow hard. This is almost too good to be true. It’s something I never even thought of. Wyatt wants to get Mom a place where she can live for a while and I can’t stop myself from crumbling at the seams. I leap into his arms, once again hugging the man that I honestly didn’t think I would want to go near again. When I saw that weird letter, I panicked. When I heard he was in jail, I freaked out. When I saw how much it upset Liss, I didn’t want to go anywhere near him.

But now I’m so grateful, that I need to hold him.

“Wyatt, you have no idea what this means to me. Really, I can’t explain it.”

He tucks his finger underneath my chin and lifts my eyes to meet his. I can see he really wants to do this, and not just because he wants to help me and Liss, but because he’s a good person and he wants to do this for our mom.

My heart sings in a way I wasn’t expecting today. As my eyes lock in on Wyatt’s, refusing to break the magic of the moment, I *know* that me and him are an issue. But I also know that I can’t stop myself from falling for him. I can’t stop my heart from yearning. The love I feel for this man might just overshadow everything else.

I know this is crazy, but I want him, I need him, I can’t stop myself. I lift myself up onto my tip toes, and I crash my lips to his. I claim the kiss I know I shouldn’t have, but I want it anyway. I think me and Wyatt are both too emotionally fraught to turn our back on this chemistry. We need it way too much.

“Oh, Mallory,” Wyatt whispers into my ears. My name sounding like pure sex on his tongue. “Why do you keep doing

this to me? I can't control myself around you.”

He has the same effect on me. He turns my knees to jelly, he makes my heart race faster, and leaves me wild and out of control. But when I'm with Wyatt, I love that sensation.

Eventually, Wyatt caves, knowing that neither of us can avoid this any longer. He walks me backward until my back hits the kitchen counter. Before I even realize what's happening, Wyatt sweeps me off my feet and places my ass down on the cold surface.

“Ooh,” I squeal because I definitely wasn't expecting that. “Wyatt, what are you doing?”

I cup his cheeks in my hands and bring his lips to mine as Wyatt parts my thighs further, so he can press himself up against me. The thickness of his passion presses against my core, pooling heat in my panties. I knot my hands in his hair while his fingers run down my body, tracing little patterns of trickling space dust all the way through me.

He grazes his fingers over the waistband of my pajama pants, causing me to suck in air, and pull my stomach in so his hands automatically slip downwards to where I am absolutely aching for him.

I gasp desperately, I'm almost crying with need as he finally brushes against my core. The material of my underwear is in the way, so I'm not getting *exactly* what I need, but fuck this is exciting. A thrill shudders down my spine, I roll my hips so I can feel more of him.

“I want you,” I mutter, growling with desire. “I need you, Wyatt.”

“Are you a naughty girl?” he chuckles as he edges his fingers into my panties, tantalizingly slowly. Wyatt loves doing this to me, doesn't he? Making me scream with frustration and desire. “You're always trying to tempt me, aren't you?”

I giggle girlishly. “I can’t help myself. I just want to corrupt you, that’s all.”

I lean forwards and nibble down on his bottom lip, immediately snapping into character. The sexy little nymph who’s toying with him because that’s just who I am. I think we deserve to get lost in a little fantasy after the shitty day we both had.

With a groan of desire, Wyatt finally gives me exactly what I need. He spears me with his fingers, sending lightning bolts of pleasure through my system. Every cell inside my body screams with need and passion. I edge my hips closer to the end of the counter, so when Wyatt thrusts his hand, he can massage all of me.

Every time he pumps his fingers deep inside me, they graze over my clit. The burning hot bliss is wonderous. I toss my head back and let the sounds of pleasure to erupt freely from me. The more the pressure of pleasure begins to flood me, the more my feelings swell and grow in my chest. I don’t know how I have gone this far without acknowledging it, but I really do love him. However much of a crazy whirlwind it’s been, I do.

But I don’t have a chance to express that now, because he’s actually shredded my panties. He’s ripped them from my body in the heat of passion, leaving me fully exposed to him. Wyatt groans, like he’s half in agony, half in ecstasy. A sound I am immediately addicted to.

“Fuck me, Wyatt,” I plead. “God damn it, I need you right now.”

He pauses with a smirk, but only for a second. He must be able to see that I’m a mess.

Within the next breath, he slams deep inside of me, causing fireworks to erupt. The sparks of pleasure slam into my chest, squeezing my lungs shut. I can’t get enough air into them however hard I try because I’m consumed with pleasure.

Wyatt's cock grazes against my clit with every thrust, replacing exactly what his fingers were doing beforehand. I don't even recognize the animalistic sounds rocketing out of me. Swells of pleasure fill me, and intensify as Wyatt lifts me off my perch once more. It seems like he's nowhere near done with me yet.

"I need you in my bed," Wyatt murmurs in a trembling voice as he carries me across the apartment. "I haven't had you in my bed yet."

He's determined, I fucking love that about him. He's losing his freaking mind but still wanting me in the sheets of his bed. As we crash onto his sheets together, getting tangled up in the blankets, I can feel the sizzling heat surging between us. The passion is wild and crazy, it's no surprise that within a moment I'm at the peak of the mountain and about to fall over the edge. The pleasure is dizzying, and beautiful, I love it.

"I... I..." I want to tell him how I feel, now that I'm here I want to scream out the true effect that this man has had on me, but he has me tumbling too quickly.

Pleasure ricochets through me, it shatters my organs, impacting my whole body. I'm just glad that I can hold on to this man to keep me connected to the planet as I soar in space. I see stars, I feel *everything* all at once and it's wonderful. The best sensation in the whole wide world. I want to cling to this feeling forever and never let it go.

My body is tense and scrunched up, but I feel overwhelmingly free. After spending the whole day in hell, I'm in heaven. While the rest of the world is still there and all my issues are still going to come crashing down on me, I can at least enjoy this blissful time here and now, in Wyatt's arms, and in his bed for the very first time.

This might be my first time here, but this is where I want to stay.

Right here, with Wyatt. He's my safe place, my home.

Chapter Twenty-One

WYATT

Okay, this is awkward. Really awkward. I don't know if this was such a good idea after all. As I dart my eyes around the table in this fancy restaurant, at all the faces staring at me expectantly, I don't know how this is going to go.

But we have to try, don't we? We don't have any choice in the matter. If me and Mallory ever want a shot at being together forever, then we need to make this work.

"What the hell are we doing here, Wyatt?" Liss asks warily. I'm surprised she turned up actually. I really didn't think she would. She didn't reply to my invite and I was honestly worried she was still on the edge of never wanting to see me again.

So I was really relieved when she turned up. I appreciate that a lot and I'm sure Mallory does too.

"I think we all need to talk about everything, don't you think?"

Liss glances over at her mom who nods. I'm glad, anyone who can make Liss see sense, at least to the point of hearing us out is welcome here.

"Yeah, I guess there is a lot to talk about. You're right."

I can't help but notice that Liss won't look at Mallory. That breaks my heart because I really don't want to get in the way of their bond.

That isn't right.

"Where do you want to begin, Liss?"

I ask her, because there are a lot of topics to cover, and a lot of things that need clearing up. Nothing will go right until we can all get on the same page. If I let Liss lead things for now, we might be able to speak calmly about everything. With a bit of luck, this public place will mean there will be no screaming and yelling.

I *really* want to avoid that as much as I can.

“You were in jail,” Liss pouts. “Because of some asshole guy from your past?” I nod, a little surprised actually. I really didn’t think we were going to talk about *this*. “Are they all locked up now? My sister isn’t going to be in danger because of you, right?”

Mallory lets out a little gasp. This show of love has shocked her as well.

Liss blushes a little, but doesn’t let her chin drop.

“There isn’t any danger, you don’t need to worry about that.” I just about manage to resist smiling. “Mallory is safe. SK and the other guys are going to be locked up for a long while. I don’t think I’m going to be faced with any of them for years.”

Liss nods. “Right so... there *is* something here then? With you guys, I mean? This isn’t just some...” She makes a weird dismissive gesture with her hand. This is clearly really hard for Liss to speak about, but she’s trying which is a good thing. I appreciate it. “Some short-term thing. There are actual feelings here?”

I nod and notice that Mallory is slowly mimicking my movements. We really are in this together. I hope the united front doesn’t upset Liss even more.

“Right, well I guess there isn’t anything I can do then. This is how it’s going to be.”

A thick silence shrouds us, but only for a moment. Liss scrapes her chair back and stalks off in the direction of the

bathroom. Bravely, Mallory jumps up to follow her. God knows what their conversation is going to be like, but I suppose that's out of my control.

"Don't you worry," their mother does her best to reassure me. "They will be fine. I know it all seems bad at the moment, but siblings always recover from these sorts of things. Liss will calm down once she latches on to how in love you guys are. I can see it."

A warmth spreads through me. "You can? That's so great. I'm glad you can see it because there are a lot of feelings there. Me and Mallory wouldn't want to upset Liss, I hope you know that. We wouldn't if it wasn't real."

I hope that doesn't sound too heavy. I don't mean for it to, I just want this woman to know that I'm not an asshole. I have siblings as well, obviously, and I know how complicated this is. Sibling love isn't something that anyone wants to get in the middle of.

"I know," she reassures me. "And Liss will as well. We've all just had a rough time."

"I know." I hang my head low. "That's why I wouldn't want to make anything worse."

"You haven't, Wyatt. Honestly. I have never seen Mallory this happy. I see the way she looks at you, I can see how much she loves you. I think you guys have a real chance at making this work. Liss will see that too."

I don't know if this is the right moment, but I don't know when the right moment could possibly happen for something like this. So I take the chance to dig into my pocket and pull out the key I have for this lovely woman. I don't want to make a big deal of it, but I want her to know she's more than welcome to stick around.

"This is an apartment I have," I half lie. Since I've paid the rent for the next year, it's kinda true. "And rather than having it sit empty for a while, I would rather you stay there. Make it your home for as long as you need. Please."

A flush sweeps over her cheeks. “No, you can’t do that for me, Wyatt. You have already done so much for my family; I couldn’t ask anything more from you.”

I smile brightly. “This is me asking you. Please, I know it would make your daughters feel so much happier. Especially Liss since I know she wants to do her best by you, but I’m sure she doesn’t have enough room.”

“It is a squeeze in that small apartment of hers, I will admit that, and I don’t like being under Liss’s feet. But that doesn’t mean you need to do this for me...”

“Oh come on, I’m not doing anything, just offering you a space that’s already there.”

“Are you sure? Because I *can* sort something out.”

“I know you can.” I offer her a little smile. “But until that moment, take this apartment for as long as you need. It’s just sitting there, and I’m sure it’s better than going back.”

I know it’s Mallory’s biggest fear, so as I spot the shudder running down her mother’s spine, I’m glad. No one knows it yet, but I’ve also hired a private investigator to find out what’s going on with Derek. Just so the family doesn’t constantly have to look over their shoulders.

I’ve had a taste of that life with SK, and it isn’t fun.

“Please. Take these keys. I want to do this.” I hand them over a little more forcefully this time. I don’t know how much longer we have left. “I would love you too.”

She wavers a little and I use that time to put the key in her hand. There is a little key fob hanging off the end of it with the address. The apartment is on the block just across from Liss’, and I know it’s a fully furnished place, so she will have everything that she needs.

I’m not usually one for spending my money, because there isn’t anything that I really want, but I have to admit it feels good to use the cash to help others. That’s something I wouldn’t mind doing more of. I think that would be

particularly good for me because of what I have been through. I've been at the bottom of the barrel and I know how it feels to try and bring myself out of that pit. I really am starting to feel like I have more to offer this world.

Liss and Mallory head back towards the table, preventing any more conversation between me and their mother. I can't tell from the expressions on their faces what happened in the bathroom. I don't even know if it's been a positive moment or not.

I really hope so. I would love everything to be better from here on out for all of us.

But there is more silence as they both sit down and no one seems to be making eye contact. It's actually a relief when the waiter comes over to take our orders because it gives us something else to focus on. I guess the nice part of the evening is over and it's only going to go downhill from here. At least, that's the way it will go if I don't do something, *anything* to make this work. I think ordering the most expensive bottle of wine will help a little, right?

I glance out my apartment window one last time, just to check in on Liss and Mallory again. The expensive wine didn't do the trick, because no one really drank it, but the walk home seems to have helped.

While I walked their mom to her new home, the sisters finally talked.

Only it's been about an hour now. Their mom is likely sleeping the evening off in the new home that she adores, and they are still talking. I don't know what they could have left to talk about. Not that I'm going to get in the way.

I did try and invite them inside at one point, but neither of them wanted to acknowledge me. I guess they are happy where they are going through it all.

“They haven’t killed one another,” I remind myself as I step away from the window once more. “Just take it as a good sign. Seriously.”

It isn’t very easy though to keep my distance because I’m so close to both. I want to be with them, trying to navigate this. It’s challenging for me to remember this isn’t about me. They might be talking about me, but none of this is about me.

I head to the kitchen and grab a bottle of beer from the fridge, just to give me something to do with my hands, and I wander aimlessly around the apartment. I find the stupid letter SK sent to me folded up on the table and read it once more. Only this time I can see how stupid it was of me to get caught up in any of that. I actually laugh to myself, remembering how worried I was about everything.

I guess it was scary and the gang can be frightening, I don’t really know everything they are capable of these days, it’s been a long time since I’ve been anywhere near them. But they are locked away now, I really don’t see SK bothering with me again. I’m pretty sure this is all over.

I take the letter to the garbage, reading and re-reading the words one last time, just as a bit of closure, and I finally toss it away...

Or I’m about to throw it out anyway until something stops me in my tracks. Nothing about the letter, but about another aspect of my life. Potentially. I mean, I might not *really* be looking at what I think I am, right? This isn’t necessarily what it looks like.

I swallow hard, trying my hardest to think of any other explanation for this. But there isn’t anything. Not one I can come up with in the heat of the moment anyway. I will just have to wait...

Wait for Mallory to come and explain.

Wait for all of this to make sense...

Chapter Twenty-Two

MALLORY

She's hugging me! I can't believe this is actually happening.

I can't believe Liss is hugging me. I really didn't think the night would end this way. She hasn't wanted to talk to me all night long, even when I followed her in to the bathroom she had no words. It seemed like Liss was going to hate me forever.

I don't know what Mom said to her, but she's loosened up on me at last. She's finally allowed me to explain myself. I know that things are going to be strained for a while, but this is an amazing step in the right direction.

"Well, while I will never understand your taste in men," Liss teases, actually making a joke about this. "I suppose we shall just take this day by day and see what happens from here."

I nod gratefully. There are tears pouring down my cheeks, but I'm pretty sure these are happy ones. "Thank you, Liss I appreciate you talking to me."

"Well, you're my sister, aren't you? You're my family. I'm going to be there for you no matter what. Even if I get mad sometimes, I will always be here for you."

I gulp noisily. "Yeah, I know, and the same for you, obviously..."

"Well, you better look after yourself," she says pointedly. "And I don't think standing out here in the cold is a good start. Go in, I'll see you in the morning."

I almost don't want to let her go because I'm scared she will resort back to hating me as soon as she's away from me. But I suppose I have to in the end. Luckily this isn't the end for us, we will work things out. Eventually she will forgive me for everything and we will go back to how we were. Or maybe we'll build something new and better.

I know that I did wrong. Hooking up with her best friend and boss was never going to go well, but if we can get through this, then we can get through anything.

Once Liss is out of sight, I finally turn around and head back inside. I take the stairs slowly, because I know the night isn't over for me yet. There are still some challenging conversations that I need to have.

More chats that could go either way.

"Mallory, what is this?"

Oh! I wasn't expecting to find a frantic Wyatt. This isn't what he's usually like, but then this has been a wild night hasn't it? So I will just go with the flow.

"What's the matter, Wyatt?"

Watching him, even in this slightly panicked state, makes me smile because he's so handsome, and he's mine, isn't he? I didn't think that would ever be the case, I didn't think we would ever be able to get to a place like this with Liss almost accepting us as a couple.

This is wonderful. This day is phenomenal.

"I found this in the trash."

Uh oh, this isn't how I wanted the conversation to go, I wanted to have this chat at a much calmer pace, controlled by me. But it's too late for that now. He knows.

I shouldn't smile, but I honestly can't stop my lips from curling upwards. "It's exactly what you think it is. I just found out earlier today. I didn't know it was coming but..."

“You’re pregnant?” Delight floods his expression. I didn’t know how he would take this, but I’m over the moon to know he’s happy about this. “Oh my God, Mallory, this is incredible news. Absolutely amazing. Are we *really* going to have a baby?”

I nod and he rapidly crosses the room to grab me. He lifts me up high and spins me around before lowering me down to kiss him. This could have been terrible news, especially if we were still in that weird secretive place. But everything is out in the open now, and we can celebrate this. We’re going to have a baby!

“Oh my God, Mallory, this is the best news ever. I can’t get over this.”

“Same,” I giggle happily as I finally land on the floor, just to kiss him once more. “We’re going to be a family. I’m so ecstatic about it.”

“Me too.” He holds me close, silently promising me that he isn’t going to let me go, that he’s always going to be there. I can feel it. “Oh I’m overwhelmed.”

I had hoped he would take it this way, but there were no guarantees. A small part of me wasn’t sure if he would freak out because everything has been such a whirlwind and we’ve only just gotten our feet on steady ground. I didn’t know if Wyatt would be prepared for another upheaval, even when it was a blessing.

But he’s surprised me again and in the best way possible. The next time we start kissing I just know we aren’t going to stop. Because there is no reason to stop this time, there isn’t anything sta

I shake his dinner jacket off first. Much as I love seeing this tattooed hunk making a real effort in his finest clothing, all I really want to do is get my hands all over his body. I gasp with pleasure, flames flickering all over my skin, because his abs are taut underneath my touch.

I can't believe it. All of it. I can't believe that me and mom are free, that me and Liss are talking again, and that I'm about to have a baby with this gorgeous man. The man of my dreams, who I have *always* had a crush on.

And now he's mine. All mine. I will never get tired of knowing that.

I lean back against the fridge, needing something to not only cool me down, but also to keep me standing upright. As my dress slides down my body, so do his kisses. His lips spark a flicker of desire all the way through my body, so intense I have to squeeze my thighs together in an attempt to keep control of myself.

But I don't get to keep my legs together for long. Wyatt grabs my left leg and throws it over his shoulder flicking my panties off as he does. I didn't even realize he'd slipped them down until they vanish.

Damn, this man is good.

I gasp, my whole body pulsing with need as he brings his lips up to my thigh, but not quite connecting with where I absolutely need him. I try and beg him to give me everything I'm craving, but honestly he's stolen the air out of my lungs.

Fuck. I toss my head back with pleasure, actually hitting it against the metal of the fridge, but that only adds to the dizziness which this man has curling my toes. His fingers lightly brush through my wispy pubic hair as hot streams of air blast along my soaking wet core. I'm trembling with desire so violently I could tumble to the ground, but he has a firm hold of me. My leg over Wyatt's shoulder means I'm not going anywhere.

"Sh... shit, Wyatt..." I stammer. "Oh my God, I need you, I want you..."

Finally, just as I'm on the edge of losing my shit, his rough hot tongue grazes over my clit, I don't even recognize the sounds flying out of my mouth and vibrating violently in my chest, but Wyatt has become a mad man on a mission. He's out

of control, running his tongue all over me, plunging it deep inside of me, coaxing intense pleasure from me.

Fucking hell, how does Wyatt just know my body so well? How is he able to taste me in this way? My whole body bucks and writhes, I'm stiffened and shuddering, unable to catch my thoughts for even a second. I'm a slave to the burning heat searing through my veins. I know I don't stand a chance of feeling every split second of this, because he's dizzying me, pushing me, shoving me with that gorgeous tongue of his until I simply can't take it any longer. I'm burning in the fire, my flesh is searing, and I love it.

The tsunami of bliss hits me hard. It really does knock me off my feet. Wyatt has to grip me tighter as I fall hard and fast in to the intense orgasm that consumes me whole. I swirl through the pleasure, I collapse in to heaven, I lose myself in the sort of lovely feelings no one else except Wyatt is able to make me feel.

At the tip of his tongue is where I want to be always.

Never let me go, I want to scream at the top of my lungs.

Stay with me, always.

It seems like Wyatt understands my silent plea as he rises rapidly to his feet and claims my mouth with his once more. I can taste myself, intimate parts of myself I wouldn't normally taste, on his mouth and that is fucking electrifying.

I need more, so much more.

"Oh, Wyatt," I breathe out. "I can't even tell you how you make me feel."

"I know," he murmurs in between kisses. "Because I feel the same way. But I don't need you to tell me, I just need you to show me. I can feel it, and I hope you can too."

I can show him. I can show him how much he means to me with my actions. I freaking love that, because honestly I don't think the words will come.

I wrap myself tightly around Wyatt, kissing him harder as he takes me in to the bedroom. I have to admit, I love it when we make it to his bed. There's something more intimate and exciting about it, it makes me feel like he really wants me forever.

Especially as he continues to kiss me like I'm the most precious person on the planet as we fall on to the bed together. I don't let go of him, I don't remove my limbs from wrapping around him, because I want to feel all of him. I need to have every part of him in my arms and pressed up against me. There's not one bit of him that I don't want to feel.

Eagerly, he thrusts inside of me, making me scream once more. I'm drowning in the heavenly post orgasmic bliss as Wyatt determinedly sends my head spinning all over again. He flips my body over, and takes me from behind. We flip again and I sit astride him and rock back and forth. We seem to hit all the positions, each of them thrilling me in new ways. It doesn't matter how he takes me, or which one of us is in control, it feels just as phenomenal, just as exciting, just as explosive.

It proves to me that even after everything we've been through together, there is still more for us to learn about one another. We still have tons of adventures to go on, lots of exploration to do. Wyatt makes my body feel things I honestly didn't know I could.

He brings out a hunger inside of me, a need for more. It doesn't matter how much he sates me; I want more from him. I want everything...

If this is the way it's going to be now, then the fight will have all been worth it. I don't regret a single thing I've been through because they've all brought me to now, to this moment. That makes me happier than anything else could. Just knowing I found my place, and it's right here, where I will never be alone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

WYATT

“What is this?” Liss’s eyes light up as she runs her gaze over the hopefully life changing file I have just handed her. “Is this... about him?”

I nod slowly. The stack of paperwork that my private investigator had given me the day before, had made Mallory really happy, so I was pretty sure Liss was going to feel the same.

“I can’t believe you did this for us, Wyatt. I’m in shock. All this time, even with everything happening between me and you... you were still seeking him out?”

I smile lovingly at Liss. “It doesn’t matter what happens between us, does it? You’re always going to be my friend. Of course I would do this for you.”

Liss swallows hard. “So, Derek... he’s really gone? Out of the state?”

“Yep, gone. Back to live with some family member of his. A cousin or something. I don’t think it matters who, he doesn’t have the means to return. He’s absolutely flat broke. I guess his intentions were to go somewhere else and sort himself out a little, he must have realized he had gone too far with the last attack, but I don’t know if that man is capable of bettering himself. He’s drinking a lot, so who knows....”

As Liss runs her eyes through the photos, I smile to myself, grateful I can give her this peace. I don’t tell her other things that I have done, such as reporting Derek to the local authorities with the hope that maybe they’ll take any future

complaints against him more seriously. I've also sorted out the landlord of their old home, so her mother won't have to worry about rent or finances. It's done, it's over.

I'm so grateful for this family.

Well, my family now, right? Since I'm having a baby with Mallory. One day I hope to marry her as well. Me and Liss are always going to be in one another's lives, as the siblings we always felt like we were, and now she really was like a sibling. It's wild, I can't believe everything has happened like this.

"Wow, so it's over." Liss looks like a weight has been lifted off her shoulders. "I am shocked. Happy, but stunned. I'm glad to know we never have to worry about him again."

"You can take this to your mom if you want." I nod towards the door, knowing that Liss is going to want to leave right away. "I figure it will be better coming from you."

"But you are the one who found all of this..."

"Not for glory, Liss." I laugh. "I did it for you guys."

Impulsively she throws her arms around me and hugs me tight. Me and Liss don't usually hug like this, so I take it as a sign that she really has forgiven me. Fully at last. I'm sure seeing how happy me and Mallory make one another also helps. Plus the fact that we really are about to become a family.

It all adds up.

Once Liss is gone and it's time to lock up the shop, another smile spreads across my face, because I have an awesome plan for the night. I'm not known for spending a lot of money or being overly flashy. To me money has never equated to happiness. But Mallory is carrying my baby, and she deserves the world. She might not need it, but I want to give it to her. I want to give her a night she will never forget, so she knows how I feel about her.

Once the shop is closed, I run up the stairs two at a time, eager to see my beautiful girlfriend. I find her curled up on the couch in the middle of a video call with her mom. As she tosses her head back and laughs I admire the radiance flowing out of her.

I indicate for her to keep talking as I sneak off into our bedroom to gather everything I need for the date of my life. I even arranged for a beautiful red Dior gown to be delivered earlier in the day so Mallory has something lovely to wear. I hope she likes it.

I shower and dress quickly, transforming from the oily guy who works with motorcycles to the gentleman who will show his girlfriend the best night ever. Mallory is surprised when she ends the call and comes to find me. She wraps her arms around me from behind.

“Oh wow. You look amazing.” Mallory says hungrily running her eyes all over me.

“Thank you very much.” I pull back to look at Mallory. “We’re going out tonight, so I thought I would give us something fancy to wear. What do you think?”

I hand her the dress which makes her flush with delight. “Oh my God, is this for me? This is really lovely. Maybe too nice for me to wear though...”

“Absolutely not, put it on. I want to see it on you.”

She beams from ear to ear and snatches the dress from my hands. I continue smoothing down my tie and straightening my collar until she reappears, moments later, looking like an absolute goddess. My heart begins to pound in my mouth with excitement.

“Oh wow, Mallory... I’m speechless. You look wonderful.”

“I have to admit I kinda like it myself.” She gives me a twirl. “I don’t think I’ve ever worn anything so nice in my life. This is going to be a wonderful night, isn’t it?”

She's giggling and sweet which makes my chest warm up with happiness. I can't wait for this night to begin. A fancy dinner, dancing, walking in the moonlight... we're going to do it all.

But my favorite part of the night is going to be right at the end. That's going to be the best surprise of it all. I can hardly contain myself because I'm sure Mallory will be overwhelmed. But in the best way possible. Ooh, tonight will be amazing...

"No way!"

Just as I thought, Mallory is delighted with my first surprise. "I thought you were going to call us a cab home, not a horse-drawn carriage!"

I toss my head back and chuckle, pleased with myself, I wanted this to feel a bit like a movie for Mallory, because she's been through so much horror. I hope I've achieved it. To be fair, this horse-drawn carriage is even nicer than I thought it would be.

"Well, you haven't seen the town properly until you've seen it like this," I insist as I pretend to tip my hat. "Here, let me help you climb in."

There's a fizzle of joy as Mallory grips my hand. I hope this electrifying feeling will never subside, because my God is it intoxicating. It's so much healthier and makes me so much happier to have Mallory as my new addiction. I adore her.

"Wow, this is cozy," she declares as I sidle into the seat beside her. "I like this. You might want to be careful though, because I might want to travel this way forever."

She rests her head on my shoulder and finally the carriage starts to pull us around the town. Anticipation floods through my veins as I wonder what will happen when Mallory picks up on the direction we're traveling, because we're not going to the restaurant... instead we're going to the next surprise.

A house. A house I hope she's going to adore.

I have loved living above the shop, and I have to admit the lack of commute is amazing. But it can't stay that way forever now. Not with a child on the way. We need more space and more freedom. I need to separate work and home, so I can have balance in my life.

I'm excited for this new chapter in our lives and I can't wait to see how Mallory feels too. I pull her closer to me, trying to cling to her so I don't accidentally spill any secrets I don't want her to know yet.

Any minute now, I remind myself as I keep biting down on my bottom lip to force myself into silence. This is way harder than I thought it would be, I'm bursting with the news. I've never like this about anything. It's actually kinda funny. *We aren't far.*

Mallory must really believe we are taking the scenic route because she doesn't question the drive at all. I think she must be enjoying this as much as I am.

"This is a nice area," she murmurs quietly. "I don't think I've ever been to this part before."

"Well, you are going to be here a lot more often." The carriage comes to a halt. "Because that house there... you see the one I mean?" She nods. "That's ours."

Mallory furrows her eyebrows in shock as her cheeks burn with anticipation. "What are you talking about? We live above the shop."

"Yes, for now, but since we're about to start our family I thought it might be a good time for a change." I nod over in the direction of the house. "So, what do you think about it?"

"Wyatt, it's a mansion!" she gushes. "How much room do you think our baby needs?"

I laugh. "Well, we might not have just one baby, right? Plus I have a massive family and your family will want to

come and visit as well. I thought it might be a good idea to get a house with lots of rooms, you know?”

I don't think Mallory has grasped how big this is for us. I don't think she's anywhere near processing it yet. But this house will give us a secure life, all our family members too. There will always be somewhere for them to stay. I'm definitely thinking of Mallory's family with this, because we will always want her mother to be safe from now on.

“I can't believe you did this, Wyatt. You are wild.” She leans across and kisses me lightly on the cheek. “You have no idea how much I love you...”

Whoa. Even though we've both felt it for a while, and we've done what we can to show one another how we feel, we haven't actually expressed yet. I don't know why, it seems silly now that we haven't just said it aloud, but that's how we've been.

Now though, I can't wait to say it back.

“I love you too, Mallory. So much.”

She leans in and kisses me some more, the love flowing between us as we connect. I don't know if Mallory knows quite how much she's done for me. She's opened up my heart and shown me love in ways I didn't think possible. I will never find a happiness like this again, which is why I know I will do whatever I can to make Mallory happy.

“Are we allowed to go inside?” Mallory giggles happily. “I want to see this dream house in all its glory. The perfect end to a perfect date.”

I shoot her a wink as I lead her out the carriage. “Of course we can. Like I said, this is ours, this is your home. This is where our happy ever after happens...”

EPILOGUE MALLORY

Six months later...

I *know* Liss is dating someone. I can see it in her eyes every time her cell phone pings with a new message. She grins uncontrollably and blushes in ways I have never seen her do before. I really want her to tell me all about whoever she's dating, but she's keeping her lips tightly shut and every time I protest she reminds me that once upon a time I was pretty secretive myself... as if I wasn't doing that for her good!

But I can't argue with Liss because I did keep Wyatt a secret until I was ready to talk about him. So I have to give her the same space and hope she'll come to me when she's ready. No amount of me pouting will change things.

I even tried pulling the 'I'm pregnant' card, but apparently I can only do that so many times, so... I will just have to wait and try to be patient. Not that I feel patient.

"Mom is doing really well at her new job, you know," Liss suddenly blurts out, probably to change the subject so I don't ask her anything else. "I think she's really happy now, which is great. Although I definitely don't think she's going to be dating again any time soon."

I sigh happily. It's been awesome to see her slowly coming out of her shell and becoming herself once more. It's been a slow process, and I'm sure she still has a long way to go, but the horrible dark cloud that Derek had hanging over her life is gone, thank God.

Who knows what he's doing these days. I don't know or care, as long as he isn't anywhere near my family. I rub my swollen belly, grateful my child is about to be born into a loving family where everything is calm and happy.

"I'm so glad she's doing good. There was a long period of time when I didn't think we would ever get here. I didn't think Mom would ever get away from him."

"Same," Liss sighs. "But thankfully it's something we'll never have to worry about again."

Liss crosses the living room to sit beside me on the couch so she can rub my belly and coo over the life growing inside of me. She's just as excited as me and Wyatt are about our baby. I just know she will be the best aunt ever.

"Not long now," I remind her, and myself. "A couple more months."

"I know, and I just can't wait." Her eyes are actually brimming with tears. Happy ones. "My little sister is going to be a mom. You're going to be so amazing at it, since I'm pretty sure being a mom is just loads of crisis management. You've become an expert at that, haven't you? And not just with Mom, but with Wyatt and all the court cases as well. You've helped him with all of that, which was hard even if it did turn out well in the end. All those guys are locked up now. SK won't be out for years..."

I nod, feeling so grateful that's also firmly behind us. "I know, it's really great..."

A sound from the other side of the house grabs both of our attention. I didn't know that Wyatt was going to be home this early. I go to stand up so I can greet him, but Liss insists otherwise. "No, you stay here. Get your rest. I'll go and see what that was."

Before I can tell her not to be so ridiculous, Liss has bolted from the room. That was strange, wasn't it? I can't quite wrap my head around why Liss is suddenly acting so weird. But she did make a good point about me needing some rest. Pregnancy is so *tiring*.

I lean back on the couch and grab the remote to flick through the channels. It's only when I start to get fed up with being alone that I give up and rise to my feet. Slowly I move through the house, growing increasingly confused. The hum of conversation coming from the kitchen doesn't sound like Liss and Wyatt chatting or whatever. Something else is happening.

Why the secrecy? Why the weird behavior? Urgh, I don't know if I like this, I have a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach that I might not like what I find.

"Oh my God, Mallory, you're here!"

Yep, I was right. I don't like this one bit.

Why the hell are both mine and Wyatt's family all congregating in the kitchen looking like they're sharing a secret so big it could rock my world? I rub my belly for comfort and try to take a step back before I stumble across something as awful as a surprise party...

One with *everyone*. Not just Wyatt's brothers, but their wives as well. Lexi, looking like a freaking goddess as always, even with a newborn in her arms who I've heard isn't the best sleeper. Belinda with her swollen belly, barely containing the twins in there – *twins*, crazy, but she looks utterly radiant. Lillian offers me a sweet smile, before the kids playing behind her capture her attention and she's drawn away once more.

Thank goodness we have so much space here. There is no way we would all have fit in the apartment over the shop. That doesn't even bear thinking about...

I still love that apartment though. I know we don't live there anymore, so we don't have a reason to be there, but visiting is always fun. There are so many memories in that place. Without that apartment, I wouldn't be where I am today...

Although right now, I don't know where I am right now.

There's a weird silence in the air which makes me increasingly uncomfortable. I dart my eyes around, looking at everyone in turn until I finally meet Wyatt's eyes. He snaps into action the moment he senses how awkward I feel.

“Okay, guys I need some space.”

“You’re going to do this now?” Liss exclaims. “But...”

He holds up his hand to silence her. My heart begins to thunder anxiously against my ribcage because I *really* don’t know where this is going, and it all feels very weird. By this time everyone has backed away, so my eyes focus on Wyatt. I realize the nerves have gotten so bad I’m actually trembling like crazy.

“Don’t worry,” Wyatt whispers. “Sorry, I just realized this might be a bit overwhelming. I wasn’t thinking about that when I planned this.”

“This?” I whisper back. “What is this?”

He doesn’t answer with words. Instead, to my surprise, he digs something out of his pocket before falling to one knee in front of me. Even if this is a gesture I recognize, my brain isn’t ready for this, I can’t quite process it yet. I did gasp as I clapped my hands to my mouth though, so I guess a part of me put it together.

“Mallory, I really did have a whole elaborate plan, which I might have been able to complete if Liss hadn’t been so nosy...”

“I just wanted to help out,” she insists, making everyone laugh. Even I just about manage to chuckle lightly, although the sound comes out a little strangled because I’m still drowning in confusion.

“Well, anyway,” Wyatt continues, his eyes firmly fixed on me the entire time. “I’m going to do it now, because the moment feels right. Also, I want to put you out of your misery.” He pops open a little box revealing a stunning diamond ring inside. That’s the moment the jigsaw pieces all slot in together at long last. “Mallory, I love you. I love everything about you. You’re the mother of my unborn child and the light of my life. I don’t ever want the sunshine to dim.” As his eyes well up with happy tears, I find myself doing the same. I’m hormonal and emotional as it is, so this is obviously going to make me spiral more. “I want you to be my

wife, Mallory, so we can continue on with our journey into life, hand in hand. Because there is no one that I want to do this with, other than you.”

He reaches out and rubs his hand over my belly. I love the way his eyes soften as he touches me, thinking about our child. I don’t know what our life will look like as we become parents, it’s not something either of us has been through before, but like him I wouldn’t want to do this with anyone else in the world.

“So, what do you say, Mallory?”

His eyes reach up to mine. “Will you marry me?”

Such a simple question, so perfectly worded, but the way those words make my heart explode is incredible. This is the last piece of us being together, isn’t it? And I’m so grateful that we can do it here, surrounded by all the people who love us more than anything in the world. This is the sort of surprise party I don’t mind.

“Of course I will,” I gush as I bring my lips down to kiss his. “I would love to be your wife.”

He slips the ring onto my finger before rising up to hug me close. I’m pretty sure everyone else is clapping and cheering excitedly for us, but I can hardly hear any of it. I’m consumed by the man who is now my fiancé, kissing me like there’s no tomorrow... even though we know there is going to be a tomorrow, and the day after that. We have all the days now, don’t we? Because we’ve just declared that we’re going to spend the rest of our days together.

Me and Wyatt.

Who would have ever thought this man would be my happy ever after? Certainly not me, but I’m not going to question it. I intend to enjoy it instead.

The End

Thank you, lovely for reading Mafia Enemy’s Baby.

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Never fake date a silver fox... especially when he's your boss.

**Take it from me, never bang your boss, don't agree to fake date him,
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My smoking hot boss is too high and mighty with a massive ego and an even bigger... wallet.

He refuses to notice my talent at work until he needs a favor.

Be his fake date for 2 weeks so he can prove a point to his family.

That's my chance to knock him down a couple of notches.

I was doing so well keeping my heart protected.

Until he unexpectedly swoops in as the hero I didn't know I needed.

Suddenly my hate turns to hunger.

Next thing I know, I'm waking up next to my frenemy with benefits after a hot mind-blowing night.

The rest should be history.

Except things have gotten a little complicated.

I now have to explain this growing baby bump to my co-workers.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

CHAPTER ONE – OWAIN

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Fuck this.

I do *not* have time for this.

What is this boring guy even *talking* about?

“...so, then we can use this pre-launch as a way to get some PR from the local papers...”

Even his voice is monotone.

I curl my hands into tight fists, my knuckles tense and white, what the hell *is* all of this?

“My marketing team is supposed to be *special*.”

Uh oh. Keeping my anger in check, clearly hasn't worked. It's shooting off my tongue, splaying accusatory bullets all around the room.

The worst thing is I can't stop now.

“This is the dullest presentation I have ever listened to in my life, and this is *my* business. *My* company, so I’m already excited about the products. But if you can’t get *me* all fired up, then how the hell are you supposed to get customers fired up?”

My father’s marketing team is something else. No wonder he’s so successful.

Fuck, I need that!

“Where is the creative thinking? Where is the excitement? What are you all *doing*?”

I scrape my chair back, the sound echoing through the now silent room. I shake my head as crushing disappointment sets in...

“Wait.”

Who is that?

Oh... her. The blonde with a big mouth. Always talking and never saying anything. I can't even remember why I hired her. Maybe because she's hot, but that shouldn't be my criteria.

“That's just one idea,” she insists. “One idea from Dan, who seems to be the only member of the team you respect. The only one you'll listen to anyways. What about the rest of us?”

I narrow my eyes at her. “You trying to tell me you have something better?”

“I'm trying to tell you that we might all have better ideas, but you never bother to listen to us.” She narrows her eyes right back at me, refusing to back down. “But you just listen to Dan and that's the end of it. There's never any time for anyone else.”

She's getting right under my skin.

“Come on then, let's hear it. You say you have good ideas? Put your money where your mouth is.”

“I don't have a whole presentation like Dan, because when I have put stuff together in the past you didn't give it a chance.”

Ha! Backing down.

This feels like a victory, and I really need a God damn victory right now. I don't know who else I'm supposed to take my frustration out on.

“So, you *don't* have any ideas. Just as I thought.”

“You’re going to walk out on that remark?” Ooh, I guess not now. “The way you behave is totally sexist sometimes. This isn’t the way to run a company.”

Too much. Too far.

I won’t stand for that.

“Everyone else, get out of here. Back to your desks, and for the love of God, come back to me with some better ideas. I don’t want to deal with any more wasted time.”

I don’t take my eyes off of Raven as she flicks her ashy blonde hair over her shoulder defiantly. She knows she isn’t to go. Good, we’re gonna have this out *now* before she pulls any of that shit again.

Sexist, how dare she? I’m definitely not a sexist man. I’ll take good ideas off anyone.

Maybe she has tried to show me ideas in the past, but if they had failed to capture my attention, that was *her* fault not mine.

I don’t know why it seems to take an age to get everyone else out of here, I get the impression a couple of them are pointedly being slow in the hope that they can lap up some gossip. Not a chance. No way I’m going to give them anything to go on. Let them come up with their own bull shit. I have enough to worry about.

Raven remains completely unfazed as we wait forever. No nervousness, no fear. That’s what really gets to me. I keep expecting her strong stance to falter or her eyes to move off of mine, but she doesn’t flinch. Not even once.

Fine, she wants to challenge me? So be it. I can play that fucking game.

“Right.” I jut my chin out. “So, you want to explain what the hell that was all about?”

“Me calling you out?” She cocked a brow.

“If that’s what you want to call it, fine.”

“I think it’s time *someone* calls you out on the way you run things, because it’s crazy. You really do only listen to Dan’s ideas, and his are always the worst ones...”

“Well, at least we agree on something. His idea was shitty as fuck today. But *you* are the one who stood up and acted like you had a million ideas to throw at me. But you don’t.”

My one shoulder shrug should send her running, but it doesn’t. How embarrassing is this for her? Can’t she see she’s humiliating herself?

“No, of course I don’t. Because I have wasted more than enough time trying to get the attention of Mr. Baker.”

“You have it now.” I edge closer to her. “You have my eyes and ears on you. But it turns out you don’t have anything to say. Only accusations of sexism without anything to back it up.”

“Oh, I can back it up,” she snaps back. “But you’d probably fire me for it. Not all of us have rich fathers to hand us everything on a silver platter. Some of us actually need our jobs.”

My teeth grit together. This is the worst shit someone can throw at me. Assuming I only have the life I have because of my dad. I *know* he’s wealthy, I know I came from privilege, but this business hasn’t been born out of that.

I started it from nothing, I gave it my all, I brought it up to what it is today, and *still* feel like I have to prove myself every single God damn day.

I could really explode with this. Seriously, I could lose my mind. It takes every scrap of self-control I have not to make this any worse than it already is.

Although I don’t yell, I can’t stop myself from getting in her personal space. Big mistake.

Her citrusy scent floods my nostrils which sparkles weird zinging electricity in the air.

I won’t react though, I refuse to.

“Look, I think this company is at the stage now where we need to start taking risks with the marketing,” Raven continues, slightly diffusing the tension. “It’s time to get the press to come to us, rather than reaching out to them all the time. It’s time to go viral.”

I scoff. “So, you want to do a stupid online thing?”

“We *are* a tech company, aren’t we?” She smirks. “I know you don’t use social media much, but I really think you should. It’s the fastest way of getting all eyes on you. For free. And if you do it right, you’ll end up with tons more business in an instant.”

I have to admit, it sounds a bit more exciting than Dan’s rubbish. I can’t let her know that though. The moment I back down, she wins.

“What sort of stunt? You need to give me more than that to go on.”

“I don’t know yet...” she admits. “The electric car in space, the energy drink’s new moon, the fast food restaurant logo you can see from space. That sort of thing.”

“I thought you said this would be free. It’s starting to sound pricier by the minute.”

“You get the right campaign; it will be worth it. Trust me.” She’s smug. I need to bring her down a peg or two.

“Fine,” I snap, shocking the pair of us. “Come to me Monday morning with a complete idea. If it’s a decent one, I’ll do it.”

“You’ll...” Raven steps away from me with wide, surprised eyes. “You’ll do it? Just like that?”

“I’ll do it,” I confirm. “I wouldn’t want any of my staff members feeling unheard, and I certainly wouldn’t want to be seen as *sexist*.” My God, she doesn’t even look embarrassed that she had said that. I won’t allow her to stick by that, I refuse. “So, if you have a full presentation of a decent idea by then, we can make it happen.”

I can almost feel the nervous excitement rolling off her in waves. She isn't going to back down, is she? I keep thinking she's going to back down. Raven is one fiery, determined woman. Well, fine, whatever. I didn't actually believe she would be able to pull anything half decent by Monday.

"Monday morning, first thing," she promises. "I'm going to blow you away. You'll never want to listen to Dan's crappy ideas again."

Raven doesn't take her eyes off me as she gathers up her things, almost as if she thinks I'll give her whiplash by quickly changing my mind.

I've said it, I'm nothing if not a man of my word.

"I guess I'll see you Monday then."

"You will, Boss." I think that's the first genuine smile I've ever seen her give me. "You are not going to regret this."

"I already might be," I mutter to myself as she slides out the room. As soon as Raven exits the room, the whole energy changes. The intense heat zaps away, leaving me a little lost. I'm sure I have lots of stuff to do before the end of the day, but truly I can't think of a single freaking one.

What the hell *was* that?

I shake my head, unable to stop myself from smiling just a little bit. I don't know what dangerous game Raven thinks she's playing, but she won't win. I never lose.

Hell, either way I win, right? Either I'm right and she doesn't know what she's talking about, or I get a decent PR campaign, which will be the first time in a while.

Ring, ring... Ring, ring...

I groan. Only one person would bother calling my personal cell phone in the middle of the work day because he has very little respect for the hours I need to work. I really can't be dealing with him, but I know from experience if I don't answer, he will only call over and over.

"Dad, hi."

“Owain, are you finished in the office yet? You need to come home for dinner.”

Home. My parent’s house hasn’t been ‘home’ to me for years. I moved out sixteen years ago, just after my twentieth birthday. But whatever, I guess we don’t need to argue semantics.

“I’m not done yet, but...”

“Well, come as soon as you can,” he interjects, blowing right over my answer. “Your mother has a wonderful meal organized. Tom and Katie are already here, and they have some great news, and they want us all together to hear it.”

Oh great. Tom and Katie, the golden couple. The golden girlfriend for the golden child. Of *course*, they have great news to share, and we all have to be there for it. Why? Because Tom is perfect. He always was, the good kid at school with the best grades, the one who never stayed out too late or went to parties, the guy destined for greatness.

Then, to add to it, he was the one who joined Dad’s company, in my mind that was taking the easy route, whereas I had dared to venture out on my own. That was going to be rammed down my throat tonight for sure.

“Fine, whatever,” I sigh. All the anger bubbling within me ebbing away and sliding into disappointment. “I’ll be there as soon as I can, okay? I just need to finish up here.”

I cut him off before he could respond with some sarcastic comment. If I’m going to face that tonight, there’s no point now.

“Fuck,” I hiss. “This is going to be a shit show.”

Going alone, I was sure to be faced with a ton of questions about my love life as well. Yay, I can’t wait...

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