

A black and white close-up photograph of a man's face, focusing on his eyes, nose, and beard. He has a thoughtful expression, with his hand resting near his chin. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his skin and the intensity of his gaze.

TEACH
me

L. L. ASH

FROM THE BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF HIM.

Teach Me



Sophisticated Seduction Series

By L. L. Ash

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ISBN: 9798371828033

Image by Tverdokhlib

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Chapter 1



-Mia-

Writing was my life.

And I'm not joking about that. If I couldn't write, I would be absolutely useless to society. Some people take antidepressants, or do yoga or hike, or eat really good chocolate ice cream. For me, I write. It's my therapy, if you will.

So, to say that my creative writing class was my favorite my first year of college was a bit of an understatement. I mean, I'd taken it every year since I started college. When I became knowledgeable enough to become the class's TA, oh my God, it was like a dream come true.

Sure, being a teaching assistant was mostly just correcting tests, reading papers and doing the grunt work that my professor didn't have time to do, but I didn't care. I was going to be learning from some of the best, and my writing was going to benefit. Hell, maybe I'd even try to publish!

Now, the big obstacle ahead of me was *getting* the job.

I stood outside my professor's office door, waiting for time to tick by because I was ten minutes early.

"Goddamnit!" I heard from behind the office door and my eyes widened.

Professor Harlo was new, replacing my recently retired professor. A spike of worry shot through me, wondering if the man had a temper.

The door swung open and there Professor Harlo was, over six feet tall, in slacks and a white shirt, deft fingers

ripping off his tie.

“Oh, shit,” he whispered, jumping a little when he saw me there outside his door. “You here for the TA job?”

I nodded dumbly, my head bobbing up and down while he dabbed at his shirt. The big brown coffee stain on the front of his shirt finally grabbed my attention.

“Are you ok?” I finally bumbled, grabbing the tissue out of his hand so I could vigorously rub at the stain. “Did it burn you?”

Professor Harlo raised an eyebrow at me and watched me make a bloody fool of myself while I *cleaned off* my professor.

Oh God...

I finally blinked, realizing what I was doing, and shoved the napkin back at him.

“Sorry, I don’t know what I was...”

“Know how to get this out?” he asked, pointing to the spot and interrupting my apology.

I nodded.

“Good,” he said, waving me into his office as he wandered back in himself.

Those fingers, long and dexterous, started unbuttoning his shirt, starting from the neck down. I watched slack-jawed while he didn’t even bother glancing at me.

“Consider this a trial run,” he said finally, sliding his shirt off his arms before he bunched it against his bare chest.

Uh, yes, *bare chest*. And what a chest it was! His skin was pale, but there were muscles there that many academic men never bothered to develop. A dusting of freckles sprinkled across his pecs, and a dusting of dark hair trailed down into the band of his slacks.

“Hey,” he called, making the ‘I’m watching you’ motion with his fingers and eyes. “Get this all cleaned up and you’ve got the job.”

I blinked, clearing my mind as he shoved the shirt at me and pulled on an old man cardigan that fit him so well. The horn rimmed glasses on his face accentuating his dark, carmel colored eyes.

“What’s your name, by the way?” he asked once he was dressed again.

I drew my eyes away from the little triangle of chest and neck I was staring at and looked him in the face.

“Mia,” I stammered. “Mia Miller.”

“That’s fun enunciation,” he said with a grunt. “Ok, Miss Mia Miller. I want that back by tomorrow. Can you handle it?”

I lifted my eyebrows and nodded.

“Good,” was all he said before grabbing his leather briefcase bag and moving past me through the door, locking it on the way out. “By lunch tomorrow!”

I watched him saunter off after locking his office door behind us, and felt like my entire world had just imploded in that tiny room.

Once he was gone though, it was easier to breathe, and when I got some oxygen into my brain, I was able to finally convince myself of how idiotic my little instant crush was. Not only was my professor likely ‘over the hill’ and in his forties, but he was going to be my *boss*. Because yeah, I was getting the darn job, and no amount of coffee stained shirts were going to get in my way.

Shutting off the blood flow to my little love button, I stuffed the shirt into my backpack and hurried to my next class. Math. Yuck.



“Mom,” I cried into the phone, “how do I get coffee out of a white shirt?”

“Slow down,” she said with a chuckle. “What happened?”

“There’s coffee on this white shirt and I’ve been scrubbing it for an hour but it’s not coming all the way out!”

“Well, sweetie, you can try using dish soap and vinegar. That works for a lot of stains.”

I panicked as I looked around, hoping I had those two ingredients around. Seeing as I was in a dorm room and I didn’t make more than ramen or mac and cheese in my room, I didn’t have vinegar.

“Darn it!” I called again, which made Mom laugh.

“Bring it to the dry cleaners,” she finally said.

The thought sparked as inspirationally brilliant in my ears, and I was out the door before even saying thank you to my mother.

“You’re a genius!” I told her, already out of breath from going down my two flights of stairs.

There was a dry cleaner just down the street, and they were going to save the day.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” she asked me, listening to me panting into the phone.

“Yeah, it’s just kind of an emergency. I need this shirt perfect by tomorrow afternoon.”

Something in my stomach refused to admit that this was my ticket to the TA position. I wanted to earn it, but this wasn’t exactly how I’d planned on wowing Professor Harlo

Mom and Dad were crossing their fingers for me to get the position because they knew how much it meant to me, but this felt a little too much like luck, and that curdled my guts a little.

“Ok sweetie. Let me know if you need anything else. Are you still planning on coming for the weekend?”

“Of course,” I blurted. “I gotta go, Mom! See you Saturday!”

I clicked off the phone as she said goodbye and stumbled into the drycleaners.

“I need this stain out,” I gasped out, shoving the shirt at the attendant behind the counter.

They looked at me like I was crazy, but simply shrugged.

“We can have it ready by Saturday morning,” they said, blinking at me.

I just blinked back.

“I need it by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sorry, we’re too busy. We’re backed up for a few days. Until Saturday, exactly.”

“Dang it,” I grumbled, snatching the shirt back from them.

What was I going to do?

“You know they sell white button ups like that across the street at Walmart?”

A new shirt? Was I really stuck trying to pass off a new shirt as ‘cleaned’?

“Or you can wait until Saturday.”

“Thanks!” I called, already heading out the door.

Walmart was a bit of a walk, and it happened to be over ninety degrees in our Mississippi humidity, so I was sweating my rear off before I stepped through the air conditioned sliding doors. If I was smart, I would’ve taken my car, but frantic insanity had me running on foot while I talked to Mom.

Taking a few steps in, I had to pause and orient myself, because let’s be honest, I had no idea where the men’s section was. I mean, I’d gotten my fair share of clothes there, not too proud to sport Walmart brand while I was trying to save for tuition, but I’d never had a real boyfriend and I didn’t have a brother, sooo...

Right, the men’s section.

I went to the women's section first, positive that the men's clothes couldn't be too far.

And I was right. In the process of giving myself a pat on the back, I strolled through each section, looking for button up shirts. There was a tiny area, only maybe three feet wide, that was full of shirts. In that section, was a singular white button up in several sizes.

Oh shit! What size was he?

I frantically opened the stained shirt, finding only a 'Proper Cloth' tag on the neck. Further down, I saw another tag on the seam down the side and saw an odd set of numbers there. Holding it out, I assessed it against what my dad's shirts looked like, and it seemed darn close. Large? Ok, I could manage that. Crossing fingers that I was right

The shirts in front of me were also singularly marked small through XXXL. I grabbed the one marked L and hightailed it toward the register. Then I remembered that I needed some more bread, so I turned myself right back around and got the groceries I needed since I was at Walmart, anyway and I didn't want to come back anytime soon.

By the time I got home, I gave myself a little bit of breathing room, happy that I'd gotten the chore done. My roommate Clea was there, going through a thick textbook when I walked into our apartment.

"Girl, I was wondering when you'd get back. It's your night to cook," she said without looking up.

I grinned.

"Don't worry, I got this. I stopped by the grocery store and picked everything up."

"What're you making me?" she asked, finally tapping her highlighter against the page as she looked up at me.

"Your chef de cuisine shall make you a well loved special," I told her, enlisting my horrifyingly bad French accent. "Fromage on top of perfectly toothsome noo-dawls."

Clea giggled at me, then sighed.

“Mac and cheese again?”

“Sounds better when you say it with an accent,” I tried.

Yeah, I was bored of the same old stuff as she was, but it didn't matter. Neither of us had the money for good food, nor did we have the kitchen to cook anything worthwhile.

“Extra milky?” she asked.

My roommate liked her mac with extra milk until it was practically mac and cheese soup.

To each their own, but...yuck.

“I'll milk your bowl, but I'm not ruining the whole pan of it!” I told her, like I always did.

She just waved her hand in dismissal before going back to her homework.

Shoot, I needed to work on my homework, too. Right after I took a shower to get rid of all that sweat.

I pulled the white shirt out of the bag and removed all the little pins and tissue, then I laid it over a chair to try and get out the little fold lines all over the thing. Hopefully he wouldn't notice. And even if he did, he got a freaking brand new shirt out of it.

“Do I want to know?” Clea asked while I ran my fingers over the rough cotton.

“Nope,” was all I answered with, and it was good enough for her.

I'd have to play it off a little bit, but I was going to make the most amazing TA, and Professor Harlo was going to love me.

Refusing to think of that stupidly sexy body, I shoved him out of my mind for a little while and got writing to my latest paper from my English class.

Chapter 2



-Mia-

I waited outside Professor Harlo's office after my ten o'clock class let out. He wasn't around when I arrived at eleven, so I sat there for over an hour waiting for him to return from his own class. Then noon passed, and no Professor Harlo. He'd told me noon on the dot, and there I was, ten minutes past and he wasn't there.

Another almost half hour dragged by and I started tapping my foot. People were staring at me like I was a psycho for standing there so long, and my feet were aching something fierce. Genius I was for wearing thin, foam flip-flops.

Finally, approaching twelve-forty, Professor Harlo came meandering to his office, nose in a book and briefcase tucked under his arm while he dug through his pocket. He retrieved keys and finally lifted his face out of the pages long enough to look at his door, and consequently, *me*.

"Oh, good. You're here," he said, all chill and nonchalant, meanwhile, I was fuming.

"You told me to meet you at noon," I practically growled, my legs achy and stiff from standing at his door for so long.

He lifted a brow before closing his book with a perfect little 'thwack'.

"I told you to be here at lunch time, not noon. This is my lunch time."

I took a deep breath and tried to banish the sudden thought of beating him across the head with that book he'd been reading.

“I’ve been waiting here since eleven,” I informed him.

“Well, why would you do that?” he asked dismissively, going into his office and leaving the door open.

“Because you said lunch time and I have no freaking idea when a professor’s lunch time is. So I came between classes. My next one starts in twenty, actually. So I guess it’s a good thing you decided to have lunch. *Eventually.*”

He sat behind his desk and leaned back, and that was when I finally got a good view of him in his perfectly pressed white shirt beneath another one of those old man sweaters. It even had the little patches of leather on the elbows.

With a sigh, Professor Harlo took off his glasses and rubbed at his forehead and eyes.

“Well, it’s a shame you waited so long. That wasn’t my intention. I suppose I should have been more specific with a time period for you to come.

That was almost an apology, and I’d take it. Hell, I’d cling to it, because I really, *really* wanted that job.

Suddenly, I tossed the shirt I’d been holding at him and he caught it, without his glasses on and all.

“What’s this?” he asked, then reached up for his spectacles and put them on. “Oh, right. You got the stain out?”

I nodded, hoping he didn’t read the lie written all over my face.

He didn’t look too hard at it before he shoved it over to the side of his desk.

“Very good! ”

“So the job is mine?” I asked, needing to hear the words.

“Yep. You’ll start today.”

I stuttered, staring into his caramel eyes through those stupid sexy glasses.

“We’re actually having a test tomorrow, and I want you to take roll, time, and gather the tests at the end of class. You need to watch for cell phones and cheating.”

I nodded, dropping my backpack to pull out my notebook.

I wouldn’t need the notes, but I wanted to have them, just in case.

“Wh-what class?”

He blinked.

“You don’t even know what classes you’re TA-ing for?” He lifted a disbelieving eyebrow at me.

“It’s more a matter of *who* I’m TA-ing for, not what class.”

“So you specifically wanted to work for me?” He sounded even more skeptical then.

“Not you specifically... I mean, I’ve been aiming for this job since sophomore year. Professor Kingsley just never hired me...”

“So I’m the...rebound?”

The man certainly had a way about twisting my words.

“No,” I said finally, folding my arms over my chest, tucking my notebook close. “You’re certainly an accomplished professor and I’m excited to learn from you. I have faith that you’ll be a great replacement for Professor Kingsley. Plus, a TA job will look amazing on my resumé.”

His face relaxed at that.

“That’s the most honest thing you’ve said to me yet,” he said finally, shoulders slumping as if he was finally letting down his guard. “Let’s get this straight. You’re the only student I considered for this job, because Professor Kinglsey had nothing but good things to say about you, and I’ve been impressed with your writing so far, or, at least what Dora showed me. I think that the students in my class could

definitely use some of your creative skills, and maybe you'll pick up a thing or two in the process."

Professor Harlo leaned forward in his chair, clasping his hands as he looked up at me with a stern face.

"I don't like polite bullshit, and I expect you to be early to every class. Not on time, but early by at least a few minutes so you have time to settle in before my students arrive. I also expect you to spend office hours here, in my office, between your classes where you'll grade papers and help prepare tests. I'll send you an email with a complete list of my expectations."

Well, this Professor Harlo was a total asshat, and I... liked that. I could appreciate the no-nonsense atmosphere. At least I'd have a compiled list of what he wanted me to do, so I wasn't left guessing like I'd been with the whole coffee shirt debacle.

"Wait," I paused him, putting my hand up. "If you only considered me for the position, why did you have me clean your shirt?"

He grinned.

"Why?" he asked with the slightest tinge of a British accent. "Because I'd spilled coffee on my shirt. Why else?"

"With all due respect," I told him, frowning. "You're an asshole."

He laughed.

"Good. There's that straightforward attitude I was missing," he said, seeming pleased. "Now, you've got a class to get to, and I've got a lunch to scarf down before my next class. If you don't mind, close the door on your way out."

Just like that, he dismissed me.

"What class, Professor Harlo?" I asked, needing to know what classroom he expected me to be at.

"Creative writing, of course," he said as if I was an idiot. "It's the evening class, so you shouldn't have an issue attending, correct?"

“Correct,” I agreed.

“I’ll send the room number and class details in the email I referred to earlier. Now, toodahoo.”

The man was probably, at least a little bit, insane.

And oddly enough, I liked it.

Without another word, I left his office and made my way toward my next class, sore feet and all.

Well, even if I didn’t learn anything, I was at least in for one heck of a semester with Professor Harlo.



“What do you mean you’re not cooking dinner tonight?” Clea asked with a frown while I shoved some lunch meat and crackers into my mouth while I finished my homework for the evening.

It was already half after six and I was skirting with being on time instead of early if I didn’t get a move on.

“I already told you,” I muttered, watching cracker dust fly out of my mouth while I tried to chew and talk at the same time. “My new job.”

“What kind of TA job makes you work nights?” she demanded, frowning.

Ok, it was more like pouting.

The girl really hated cooking.

“Sorry. I’m not sure how often I’ll be out in the evening. When I know my schedule better I’ll let you know and we’ll adjust the cooking calendar, ok?” I promised, digging for some mint gum in my desk drawer before packing my bag.

What did a woman need to take to TA a class? I had no freaking clue.

The school was deserted by the time I went through the main entrance; the halls had never seemed so big. The few

individuals that lingered were the night school crowd, an elusive group I'd never mixed with before.

Professor Harlo wasn't in the classroom when I arrived, so I found a little chair sitting in the corner of the room and situated it beside the desk before I sat to wait.

And wait.

And wait.

The class filled up over the next twenty minutes, and all the while, I wondered where the heck the professor was who'd insinuated that 'on time' was late?

Well, he strolled in after everyone had been seated, plopped his briefcase on the desk and proceeded to lean his rear against the front edge before sticking his hands in his pockets and looking around.

"You know," he started, jumping right in. "It's been said, 'Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.' Have any of you ever heard some variation of this quote before?"

Silence.

"We're not sure who said it first, some say it was Picasso, or the Dahli Lama, the list goes on, but I have always found it important and concise, no matter who said it first. Why is it important and concise, you ask? That is simple. Writing is art. You've all taken the prerequisite English 101. You've begun to learn the rules of writing. Now, in this class, you'll begin to learn how to break them."

He got up and went to his briefcase where he pulled out a stack of papers. For the first time since stepping into the room, his eyes alighted on mine and my chest tightened for some inexplicable reason.

"Pass these out to the class, please," he said, handing me the papers.

I did as he said, trying to understand why I was having what felt like a freaking heart attack just by meeting his eyes.

I took little stacks and passed them out to the first person in each row, who sent it back from there.

Professor Harlo went on for a while, discussing the merits of creativity versus rules, and when to use both. I soaked it all up, breathing in the richness of his experience like a whore snorting a line of cocaine. It was beautiful, the way he talked, in an odd sort of way. Nobody should sound like they're reciting poetry while listing the ideology of breaking rules in art.

When class ended, I jumped, startled as the chairs all scraped back in unison.

"Next week, I want every one of those papers turned in with your three page short story," he called out while everyone filed out. And tomorrow we'll have a short pop quiz."

I watched, still sitting on my butt.

"Well, that was a successful class if I do say so myself," Professor Harlo said as he went back to his briefcase.

I wasn't sure if he was expecting an answer, but he didn't really leave me time in which to decide if he was.

"Come along. There are papers to scratch at and tests to grade," he said to me, waving me after him.

I followed like a puppy dog.

"So, Miss Miller," he started as we made our way back to his office. "What brings you to the English department? Why not math or some other drudgery-filled subject?"

"Well, not math because I hate it with a burning passion," I informed him, out of breath from power walking and embarrassed by the fact. "I love writing and everything it brings to the world."

"And? What's your favorite work?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow at me as we arrived at his door after our hurried pace.

“You’re going to laugh,” I admitted. “But I’m in love with Madeleine L’Engle’s Austin Family series, particularly ‘A Ring of Endless Light’.”

He paused, his eyes resting on me and for the first time, he seemed genuinely curious about what I had to say.

“L’Engle, huh?” he asked finally, jerking the door open before heading inside. “What an honest answer.”

I had a moment of panic, wondering if it was the *wrong* answer.

“It’s actually what inspired me to write,” I admitted.

“So you write more than papers?” Professor Harlo sat in his chair with an audible sigh. “Here, take the other side of the desk. That chair should be comfortable enough for the next hour or two.”

I nodded and sat, waiting for him to tell me what to do.

He didn’t, though. Professor Harlo paused with his arms folded over his soft leather briefcase and looked at me again. “What about that book or series inspired you?”

“Well, it’s about a girl who was my age when I read it for the first time, which is what got me hooked, and the series had a little romance in it. What stuck with me though, was the philosophical arguments and conversations that happened in such a human and understandable way. It wasn’t just a girl who had a crush and a boy broke her heart. She dealt with real life things. Life and death, sometimes, and it’s a story that breaks your heart, then stitches it back together again. I want to write stories like that.”

“That’s a noble goal,” he admitted, his caramel eyes locked onto mine.

God, his face was beautiful.

“What do you hope to get out of this arrangement? Is this just a job? Or are you looking for guidance as you sort out your book?”

“My book is more than half done,” I told him, blushing at the idea of showing him. “But no, it’s not just a job to me. I look forward to soaking in anything you have to say, and I hope, maybe, it’ll have an impact on my book and make it, maybe, better.”

“What is this book about?”

“It’s uh...it’s a fiction,” I tried.

He wasn’t biting.

“So, a novel. What genre, Miss Miller.”

“It’s a romance,” I blurted. “And please, just Mia is fine. Miss Miller makes it sound like I’m from the Victorian Era.”

His lips turned a little and he smirked at me.

“Fine, Mia then. And I’m fine with just plain Owen. No need to be so formal when it’s just the two of us. So many extra syllables ruin efficiency.”

I nodded.

“Ok, Owen.”

He nodded, then his smirk turned to a grin.

“Romance, is it?”

“I know it doesn’t have the best reputation or anything, but...”

I was ready to go to bat for the genre, but he just shook his head, making me pause in my words.

“It’s brilliant, actually. Romance is the biggest genre in literature at the moment. It’s not the easiest thing to write romance well, and to create a character based story where they are both flawed but yet relatable is a feat of its own. I’d like to take a look at it, when you’re ready for some eyes. You’re halfway through the manuscript, yes?”

“Right,” I agreed, my heart pumping like crazy at the idea of a pro looking at my book to critique it.

“It’s good to get critiques early on. I’ve done some beta reading for some friends of mine over the years, but I’ll admit, romance is a new area for me, so I don’t know how much help I’ll be.”

“Just having your opinion on if it’s crap or not will make a huge difference,” I told him.

“Good, then send me the manuscript when you have time. Meanwhile, we’ve got several papers to get through, and I gave my English 101 class a test today. It’s only two weeks in, but I’m curious if they’ve absorbed anything yet.”

I chuckled.

“Do you want me to work on tests or papers?”

He lifted an eyebrow and shoved a decent sized stack of papers at me.

“Either-or? Darling, you get to do them all.”

I sighed as he laughed.

Evidently the asshole tendencies weren’t a one-time deal.

“Sure,” I agreed, taking the papers. “It’s my job after all, right?”

“Precisely,” he agreed. “Now, here’s the answer key to the test. I’ll be right here if you need me. But don’t need me. Got it?”

I blinked at him, but chose not to answer because he had already moved on and was face-first into his computer screen.

I took the first paper off the desk and sighed.

Professor Harlo, or, Owen, I supposed, plopped a red felt tipped marker in front of me, eyes not moving from the screen.

It made me wonder just how much of his attention was actually on the computer, and how much he was watching me grade from the side of his eye.

With my first red mark scratched on the page, his shoulders seemed to drop a little in relief.

“Neither of these classes need the papers back for a couple days,” he told me, leaning back into his chair, though his face was still on his laptop. “No need to get it all done tonight.”

My tired eyes were already crossing, so I counted my lucky stars that he didn’t want it all done in one sitting.

“I’ll do as much as I can tonight, then come finish tomorrow,” I told him.

He nodded.

“Fine by me,” he said, then silence descended, nothing but taps on his keyboard and the familiar scratch of the pen on paper was between us until close to ten at night.

“Go home,” he eventually said, “The rest will wait ‘til tomorrow.”

I nodded, rubbing my tired eyes.

“Goodnight Profess—Owen.”

“Goodnight, Mia,” he said, voice low and gravelly from disuse.

The dang sound of it slammed straight through my body, and suddenly, I wasn’t so tired anymore.

I let myself out and breathed the cold, fresh air in the hallway. The place was really deserted by that point, all the classes for the evening over with.

So, spooked by the stillness of the place, I hurried and headed home, walking in the dark to my dorm.

I got back fine, no incidents keeping me.

“How was it?” Clea asked from her bed, her phone in her hands as she watched her nightly, brainless reality TV.

“I...I don’t know,” I admitted. “But, Clea, I think I’m in love.”

She laughed.

“I’ve heard he’s really cute,” she told me. “Is he?”

“Stupid sexy,” I admitted. “And listening to his class today... He’s different from any of the teachers I’ve ever had.”

“That a good thing?”

“For my book, yes. For my va-jay-jay, no.”

Clea laughed harder, swatting her leg in mirth.

“Girl, you can’t fall in love with your teachers. They can’t have relationships with students, even *if* they felt the same way about you. Don’t set yourself up for disappointment.”

I knew that. God, I knew that, but it didn’t stop my heart from pounding and my core from throbbing when he entered a room.

“Think of him like your dad. Like, your work dad, or maybe a dad-type mentor.”

Right. Mentor.

I’d need to try to see him that way, because having to catch my freaking breath every time I saw him was going to get old, quick.

“Right,” I said out loud, then dropped my bag to the floor by my bed. “I’m pooped. I’m passing out.”

“Ok. But don’t forget, you’re cooking tomorrow since I had to fend for myself today.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Sure, Clea,” I agreed, wondering if I was even going to be in our dorm for dinner. Not if my professor/boss had anything to say about it.

She went back to her show, and I spent the rest of the night trying *not* to think of my stupidly fit, and yet entirely sexy boss.

If only he wasn’t so well read, or well spoken, or... well, *everything*.

Ugh.

Chapter 3



-Mia-

“Can I get your thoughts on this one?” I asked Owen as I sat across from him in his office.

It had become our normal thing, three nights a week in the evening during his night classes, and two afternoons after my last classes were done for the day. Five days a week I’d spend working on grading papers, writing tests and test keys that I’d have to grade with later.

“What’re you working on?” he asked, tearing his eyes away from the file in his hand.

“This student,” I told him, holding out the three-paged paper. “This looks like plagiarism to me.”

He lifted a brow and grabbed the paper. I indicated where, then he turned to his computer to type in the paragraph in question.

“I thought so,” he mumbled. “It’s from Steven King’s novel ‘The Mist’.”

How a student managed to plagiarize from a horror novel onto their freaking English paper and have it make *sense* was...kind of impressive.

Owen, however, wasn’t amused.

“Plagiarism is grounds for an automatic fail,” he said, making a note of the student. “I’ll need to meet with them. It’s a female student, so I would like you to join me in the room. For legal purposes.”

“Sure,” I agreed instantly.

I knew things were pretty iffy when it came to people in power positions interviewing or having private talks with

their employees or, in this case, a student. He needed the reassurance that another person was there as witness, just in case.

“I’ll talk to her after class on Tuesday, and I’ll let you know the time we decide on.”

I nodded, then moved on, leaving the other paper with him.

The man went through it with a fine toothed comb, marking a few other spots on the paper before he set it aside and went back to his file.

“You never sent me that manuscript of your book,” he said after another minute of silence.

It’d been a week and a half, and I’d almost hoped he’d forgotten about it.

Almost.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, finally feeling comfortable enough with him to say the words. “There’s uh...steamy bits in it, and that feels really awkward to hand to my professor.”

“I’m not your professor,” he said simply, leaning back in his chair. “I’m your boss.”

“Even better,” I deadpanned.

He lifted a brow at me like I was being ridiculous.

“Do you really think a forty-two year old man can’t handle a little sex in a book?”

My heart skipped a beat.

Forty-two?

Holy crap! I was losing my brain over a man twice my age!

“You don’t look like you’re in your forties,” I told him, and that made him grin.

“Well thank you, I take that for a compliment, whether you meant it that way or not.”

“Ok, I’ll send it to you,” I finally agreed. “Just, maybe...skip over the hot scenes.”

His lips twisted in that sassy grin.

“Are you kidding? The fucking is the best part.”

My mouth went dry at the way he’d said that word.

Fucking, with a little bit of a British twist that lightened the ck sound.

I was pretty sure that wasn’t ‘professional’ so to speak, but God, I loved the sound of his cursing. It was jarring and sexy at the same time.

I bloomed red with embarrassment immediately, and Owen seemed to enjoy the fact that he could get me riled up with nothing but a few words.

“Right,” I croaked, making my cheeks blush a deeper crimson until my whole face felt like it was on fire.

“You ok there?” he asked, the accent tinging his words coming out stronger as he teased me. “You look a mite bit flustered.”

“Oh, shut it,” I mumbled, which made the man laugh.

“Don’t be embarrassed, darling. Everyone fucks in this world. It’s only human.”

I grumped.

Everyone might, except *me*. Damn my geeky, introverted self.

He watched my face bloom hotter and his smirk moved into a grin.

Thank God though, he didn’t go on.

“It looks like the test scores for the morning English Literature class aren’t doing so good,” I told him after another few minutes.

“I’ve noticed,” Owen said, leaning back in his chair.

“Why, uh, do you think they’re struggling?” I asked him, trying real hard not to offend him or imply that it was his

teaching that was failing.

“Oh, it’s probably not much more than the fact that it’s a seven in the morning class. It’s pretty typical. The papers that come out of the class are fine, but tests...they seem to struggle.”

“Really?” I lifted an eyebrow in question.

Was it really so simple as an early morning class?

He nodded.

“I’ve found that to be the case for a while now, even at the school I came from,” he told me.

His phone buzzed and he stopped what he was doing and immediately reached for it, opening it and reading what was there on the screen. A text, most likely.

“Oh shit, is it really seven thirty already?” he asked after a moment.

My stomach took that moment of silence to start gurgling in protest of being empty.

His eyes flicked up from his phone and he smiled a little.

“Looks like I’ve kept you from dinner,” Owen said, scooping up his papers in one swipe. “Let’s go get some food.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but a hunger hiccup came out instead.

Yes, some people hungry-burp, I hungry-hiccup.

That curve of Owen’s lips turned from an amused curl to a full out smile that brought out a dimple in his chin that I didn’t even know was there.

It was...*wow*. His smile was like spring morning after a long, cold winter.

“Like, together?” I stammered.

“If you have a problem with sharing a meal with your boss, then you can do what you like. But if you want to come, it’s my treat.”

The poor college student inside of me clapped and squealed at the idea of a free meal, while the vag in me started panting over a dinner date with Professor Sexy Pants.

I swatted that va-jay-jay down and tried to smile, though it was probably more of a wince.

“Hey, I don’t turn down free food.”

“Well, you’ve worked hard, and I don’t want you saying I’m working you on an empty stomach.”

“Sure, but it’s my job,” I protested.

“Yeah, but I don’t have to be an asshole boss *all* the time, now do I?”

I gave a little laugh, entranced by that dang dimple.

“Fine, I’ll let you buy me dinner,” I gave in, grinning back at him.

Owen shoved his papers back into his briefcase and stood.

“C’mon then, before you starve to death,” he joked.

I stood as well, stacking my papers up on the edge of his desk to work on later.

We filed out of his office and paused only long enough for Owen to lock the door, then headed down the hall until we made it to the main hallway that led through the building.

Once we stepped out into the deep humidity outside, I listened to Owen curse at the ‘chewable air’ as he hurried to the only car left on the street next to the English building.

“Where to, Professor?” I asked him.

He side eyed me while unlocking the car.

“Depends. How old are you, Mia?”

“Twenty-three,” I admitted, blushing even though I didn’t know *why* I was turning red.

He reached across the soft top of his Porsche convertible and wiggled his fingers.

“Give me your ID.”

I lifted an eyebrow, but went along, digging my wallet out of my backpack to hand him my drivers license.

“Hm, good,” was all he said after a glance, flicking the card back over the car toward me. “In that case, we’re going to Muddy Waters.”

I’d heard of the place, but hadn’t gone, despite the fact that it was the best sports bar in the area and I’d been going to college in Columbus for going on four years. Clea had gone several times with boys on dates there, and she loved the place, so I was excited to finally go, especially since I wasn’t paying.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Owen said once we were both inside the car.

I was busy trying not to touch anything and just admiring the perfectly bright white interior to match the color of the paint.

“I’ve been keeping you quite a lot. Are you doing ok with your own classes?”

I glanced over to him, clasping my hands between my thighs to keep my fingers to myself.

“I’m fine, Professor Harlo,” I told him with a little smile. “Besides. You’re not my guidance counselor. I’m a big girl and I can handle my own business.”

He passed a side glance at me again, this time while he drove, pulling out into the street.

“I’m very aware,” he murmured, so quiet I barely heard him.

There was a pregnant pause, then he went on as if the comment had never happened.

“You’re a grown up, but I’m faculty at the school, Mia. Last thing I want is for you to work so hard as my TA that your grades drop.”

“I’ve got enough time for homework, if that’s what you’re worried about. My roommate on the other hand, is tired of me skipping out on my night of making dinner though, so there’s that. Can you help a girl out with that?”

He barked out a laugh.

“What the hell do you think I’m doing right now?” he asked, lifting an eyebrow in amusement.

“Trying to win my favor,” I told him. “I’ve got a feeling you’re buttering me up for something. Maybe putting together a midterm. You buttering me up, Professor Harlo?”

“Owen, for God’s sake,” he groaned. “You keep calling me professor and I’m going to start feeling like a pervert for taking out a student.”

My body jolted up in the seat. He made it sound like a date...but... No, it wasn’t a date. Just a dinner of appreciation.

“Here we go,” he murmured as we pulled into the parking lot of an already hopping bar.

I opened my door at the same time he opened his, then glanced back over the expensive-looking interior of the car.

“Didn’t know professors made enough to have cars this nice,” I told him before shutting the door.

Too bad. I should’ve shut my mouth instead.

He chuckled.

“It’s not the teaching that affords me things like this,” he told me, beeping the thing locked before motioning to the swinging doors of the bar.

“You have a side gig, then?” I asked as a joke. “Maybe do a little prostituting on the side?”

“To the chagrin of my ex-wife, no prostituting.”

The ex information was ripe and ready for the picking, but I clung to the other part instead.

“Why would that make her chagrined? You’d think a woman would appreciate a husband’s fidelity.”

“You,” he said with raised eyebrows that left no room to question, “don’t know my ex.”

I wondered what the heck kind of female could leave a man like Owen. He was beautiful, strikingly intelligent, and his mouth was sharp, but in a really incredible kind of way.

Was their issue in marriage a sex issue? Marriages ended for things like that all the time. Maybe the man was A-sexual.

Damn, what a waste.

“Well,” I tried as we sat at a table in the back, “not everyone finds pleasure that way. I mean, a mind can be attractive and fulfilling just as much as...other stuff.”

He blinked at me.

“Are you suggesting that I don’t like sex?” he asked, leaning forward as if he was incredibly invested in hearing my answer.

“Well, I mean, from what you said about your wife, I just assumed... Darn, I shouldn’t have assumed anything. I’m sorry about that.”

The man sat back slowly and tapped his glasses back up his nose before shoving his hand into his hair, eyes roving down me again.

“You’re a frustrating creature sometimes Mia Miller,” he told me, his attention finally coming back up to meet my eyes. “This is an incredibly inappropriate conversation to have with a student, but fuck it.”

He leaned forward again, one lock of his dark curls dropping onto his forehead all tasseled and gorgeous.

“I’m not A-sexual, but I am a sapiophile. My *ex*-wife was bitter about it because she lacked a few screws up top and it became more difficult to excuse the older we got. So yes, she would have taken a prostitute husband over a man who finds intelligence as the most attractive trait in a partner.”

My cheeks were blooming hot and red, and I must have looked pretty darn close to a tomato by that point.

“Most, but not only?” was the only thing that popped out of my mouth.

“I’m a sapiophile, not blind, Miss Miller,” he ground out before turning away and lifting the menu to dismiss the conversation. “Order whatever you’d like. It’s my treat.”

I lifted my own menu, blindly roving it while I absorbed the information he’d given me.

Usually, you don’t want to think of your teachers in a sexual sort of way, but it was hard when they were attractive, and God, my body reacted to him. My thighs were tingling and rubbing together under the table and I had to take a moment to breathe so some of that blood could rush back to my damn brain.

“What can I get ya,” our waiter asked, looking bored about life while he glanced between the two of us.

“Whatever you have on tap,” Owen told the guy. “Something dark and caramelly.”

The guy nodded, then turned at me.

“Same,” I agreed.

Our waiter looked me over, but didn’t say anything even though his raised eyebrow told me he wasn’t sure about my choice.

“Gotta see IDs” he said, putting out his hand and wiggling his fingers.

I dug through my backpack again, feeling an odd *deja vu*.

“You, too,” he said to Owen, who looked put out.

“At what point do I get old enough that I’m very obviously *not* under twenty-one?” he joked, leaning to one side to retrieve his wallet and identification from his back pocket.

“Hey, for all I know you’re some kind of Benjamin Button, and I ain’t losing my job over not checkin’.”

“For the love of God, do I look old enough to be a fucking young Benjamin Button? He looked ancient in his teens.”

The waiter laughed, and I smiled while Owen rolled his eyes in amusement while our waiter checked our cards.

“Cool. Want an app?”

“Mozzarella sticks,” I blurted out, staring right at the app page of the menu, needing to do something that wasn’t a bloody replica of the man across from me.

“Motz sticks,” our waiter mumbled as he walked away.

“Tell me about your novel,” Owen said, sitting back in his seat.

I was just grateful to get off the subject of his ex-wife.

“Oh, it’s a regency novel,” I gushed. “Set in the Georgian Regency Era, it’s like...Jane Austin if she had multiple boyfriends.”

His eyebrow raised.

“Multiple boyfriends? Your heroine sounds like a busy woman.”

Why did I bring that up? Oh God...

“Uh, well, I mean, the men are all prim and proper, usually, and she’s...”

“Usually?” Owen looked far too amused.

“Like I said, skip over the steamy bits,”

Owen’s lips turned up at the corners and that dangerous smirk settled back in place as he leaned forward again.

“And like I said,” he basically whispered, “the fucking is the best part.”

There I went, glowing red like a freaking stop light.

Why?

Why couldn't we seem to get off the sex topic? I wasn't a sex obsessed woman, and neither was my professor, even by his own admission just moments ago. So what the heck?

"So your heroine has multiple partners, but what's the story about? What's the intrigue?"

Our waiter came back just in time to hear Owen's comment. His brows perked up, but he didn't say anything as he dropped the beer down on the table.

"Your appetizer will be out soon," was all he stated before wandering away.

The crowd in the place was getting denser, but I didn't care. My focus was entirely on the man across from me. Successful, confident, and incredibly attractive, how could I *not* stare?

"Oh, well, she's not a girl from a wealthy home, but not poor either. Her father tries to marry her off to a viscount, but he's old enough to be her dad."

"And what's wrong with that?" he asked, that cheeky smile back on his lips.

"Nothing, except that the man is fat, humorless, and crippled with gout."

"Sounds like a strenuous start to a relationship."

"Well, she doesn't get that far. Even though the marriage would ensure her financially, she doesn't want to trade her happiness for it. So, she runs away."

"Sounds reasonable," he smirked.

I manage a smile at that, but take a big gulp of my beer to bolster myself.

"She managed to find a job at an inn on the edge of town, and that's when she meets the first of the brothers."

"The men are all brothers?"

I nodded.

“Yep. He sees her get fired for dropping a dish of stew, and catches her outside the inn, offering her a job. He takes her home to his manor, since he is the duke.”

“She marries up. Good for her.”

“She doesn’t just marry up. She finds things in each of them that she loves. Their personalities, their sense of humor, and of course their looks.”

“Of course,” he obliges. “So why not just pick one?”

“Why would you if you didn’t have to?”

“Touché.”

“Anyway, I haven’t gotten much further than that. I’m still working on the antagonist. They’re currently far too comfortable and happy. That’ll never do.”

Owen chuckled, sipping at his own dark brew.

I took another mouthful too, tasting the full, grainy and caramel flavor burst over my tongue. It was a little much compared to the lite, cheap stuff I was used to, but what I was aiming for was a buzz, and it would get me there.

“Angst and interest are always welcome in that genre, or so I imagine.”

“Oh it is.” I grinned.

“Hm, I guess I’ll need to brush up on my erotic romance. I’ve dabbled before, a long time ago, but I always found the stories lacking in character and intrigue.”

“What kind of books do you read?” I asked him, finding myself intensely curious on what a man like him would spend his time reading.

He sighed and sat back in his chair again.

“Oh, I dabble in it all. Though, I do enjoy science fiction and fantasy. Sometimes people’s minds are just... fantastic.”

“You write, don’t you?”

He nodded.

“Like I said, I dabble in it all.”

My eyebrows lifted.

“Do you write fiction? I know you wrote a book on creative writing that went on to the New York Times Bestseller list.”

He gave a wistful smile.

“I don’t tell many people, but yes, I write some fiction, too. As Lloyd Alexander said, *‘Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It’s a way of understanding it.’* I find that I agree with him on that. Being an artist is its own special kind of hell, but the highs can be...monumental.”

“What do you write, Professor Harlo?”

“Owen,” he reminded me again, “and like I said, I write many things. I’m currently working on a space opera style sci-fi.”

My jaw dropped.

“What? That’s amazing! Do you write under another name? I haven’t found another book other than the one I saw under your name.”

“Of course I write under a pseudonym. I’ve got a reputation to uphold as a teacher and instructor,” he said as if it were obvious. “Who wants to hear some small-time fiction author telling you what to do?”

“Oh, Owen, I have to know! What’s the name?”

For the first time in probably ever, his smile wasn’t a smirk or amused. No, it was full and brilliant and pure, sexy delight.

“And what will you give me if I tell you?” he asked, sipping his beer.

It came away, leaving a streak of foam on his lip.

I grinned, then bit my own bottom lip as I wiped the foam away.

His smile melted as he sat there, stock still until he was cleaned up.

“There,” I said, sounding way breathier than I meant to. “Now your reputation is saved because I saved you from a beer mustache. You’re welcome.”

Oh God, my hands were shaking so bad I had to hide them beneath the table.

“Well, I should be ever grateful to you, I suppose,” he countered, his head tilting a little to the side as he seemed to assess me all over again. “Willie P. Ness.”

I jarred for a moment, then realized that was it. His writer’s name.

“Are you kidding me?” I finally squealed, hiding the flush bursting over my cheeks.

Chapter 4



-Owen-

I threw my head back and laughed.

God it felt good to laugh again.

Watching Mia's cheeks turn cherry red had become a new pastime for me. It was so satisfying, but I just couldn't decide *why* I loved it so much.

She hid her embarrassed face behind her glass, slurping some more beer like her life depended on it. In reality, she probably just needed some liquid courage because she'd put me on some kind of stupid pedestal and I made her fucking nervous all the time.

"That's the kind of reaction I'd hoped for when I settled on the name," I admitted to her, which made her choke on the drink.

"You *want* people to think...*that* when they see your name?"

I was going to hell for sure, but I couldn't stop bringing up sex with the girl. Watching her bloom beet red was just too delicious.

"Hey, you're not the only one who likes to write about fucking."

I listened to her mutter 'oh God' under her breath as she guzzled more of her drink.

"Besides, most people don't get it. Only those of us with minds perpetually in the gutter can put together the meaning."

“I don’t understand you,” she said finally, dropping the beer glass to the table with a clink before she retrieved her cell phone from her pocket. “Alright. Let’s look up this Willie P. Ness character, shall we?”

Why did hearing her say the word willie spark me like a fucking twelve year old boy?

I had been totally honest when I’d admitted that I was a sapiophile. A woman walking around half naked on the beach? Barely a twitch in the trousers. A woman giving a presentation on the plausible and incomprehensible depths in reality of quantum physics? I’m hard as a fucking rock. Reaching under the table, I had to adjust my cock to sit a little more comfortably, trying decently hard to make it settle down a little, but every time Mia opened her mouth about writing and started blushing like a virgin, it stiffened up again. It felt a little like a losing battle that I was more than happy to surrender.

Shit, *no!*

She was a *student*.

I wiggled a little and threw my arm over the back of the booth behind me to look a little more casual as I man-spread to give the boys some room to breathe.

My eyes zeroed in on her teeth pulling at her plump bottom lip.

Dammit!

She wasn’t even that pretty, to be honest. My ex had been a volleyball player, long and leggy and blonde, a near ten if ever there was one. Mia was a little bit mousy in a girlish sort of way, looking younger than her twenty-three years. She wasn’t particularly tall, either, standing in at maybe just over five feet against my six foot, two inches. Her hands were delicate though, always going in gently before she committed to grabbing a paper or lifting her water bottle for a drink. It was like she questioned every single move she made, and that drove me fucking crazy. She was incredible and impressive in the best sort of ways, and all the papers I’d read from her were

informed but artistic. They drew you in and it was easy to forget that you were reading a ten page non-fiction opinion piece about the benefits and drawbacks of semi-colons.

“What? You’ve got eighteen books here! And two thousand reviews? Small town author my ass!”

She threw her hand over her mouth at that, blushing again.

Hell, maybe she never *stopped* blushing.

“It is small time when you compare it to the greats out there like Tolkien, Hemingway, Twain, Austen. They’ll live forever through their books. These are just an income and an outlet.”

She shook her head, letting her hand drop.

“Why are you so dang hard on yourself? This is incredible! I can’t believe you think this is nothing. I’d give my left boob for this kind of success.”

There she went, lighting up again.

“Don’t,” I blurted. “They’re too perfect to chop off.”

We both froze.

What the fuck was that?

While I mentally pummeled myself, my inner professor started in on damage control.

“I mean, you’ll get your own success, I’m sure,” I rambled, hoping she’d let the comment go.

I might not have liked the fact that I was stuck in some no-name, small-town college in Mississippi compared to working at UCLA, UC Berkeley and Yale. Didn’t matter.

“Can I ask you something,” she interrupted my yammering about the old ‘if you work hard, you can achieve anything’ routine.

“Uh, yeah. Sure,” I agreed, practically sinking with relief at changing the subject.

She didn't seem disturbed by my reference to her stupid, perky tits, so thank fuck for that.

"Why are you here?" she rushed. "I mean, you used to teach at such prestigious colleges, then you're...here. We're just a little college in the middle of Mississippi."

Those rounded, white teeth were chewing on her bottom lip again and I wanted to reach out and free it, but I kept my appendages all tucked away tightly so I didn't do anything stupid. Well, all but one. Luckily my pants were keeping that one relatively contained beneath the table.

"The truth?" I blew out a breath, wondering if I shouldn't tell her all of it.

She was a student, yes, but she was something of a co-worker, too, which made me see her as more than that. Maybe it was the purity in her eyes, or the fact that I knew she wouldn't judge me harshly because she was just too damn nice to, but I did. I told her everything.

"When the divorce finalized, my ex-wife decided that she wanted to go home and live a 'simpler' life with our kids. So the choice presented itself. Stay in California and live with only periodic visits over holidays with my kids and maybe a couple weeks during the summer, or move too, and be able to at least be part of my kids' lives."

She pressed a hand to her heart and sighed.

"Wow, that's so awesome of you. I bet your kids love you."

I grunted, not sure if I could agree with the sentiment.

Things got weird with everyone when Paula kicked me out. Problem was, she tried to kick me out of their lives, too. My kids loved me. I knew they did. And I prayed to God they knew I loved them too. It had been the hardest decision I ever made, but I chose them. Things were still rough, but they were getting...better.

"They're good kids," was all I could get out.

My phone dinged again and I checked it.

My eldest, Charlie, had been texting me, begging to keep his mom from making him get braces.

“How old are they?” she asked, excitement in her eyes at the intimate topic.

“Eight and six,” I said, unable to keep the smile off my face. “Lunatic assholes, the both of them. But good kids.”

She chuckled at that.

“They sound great.”

Her eyes roved my face for a minute, a question in her eyes.

I knew that question. I knew it, but I wasn't going to answer it. She wanted to know why I was forty-two with barely a six and eight year old. But I'd shared too much already and I was feeling my skin squirm because of it.

“I suppose the humidity isn't so bad in California, huh?” she asked with a smile, moving on without my having to lead us away.

That was another thing I liked about her. She read people like they came with pamphlets.

“No,” I said with a laugh. “I've never felt anything like this before.”

She laughed, too.

“Is that why you were complaining about chewing your air?”

“Tell me you don't feel tempted to chew this fucking humidity!” I countered, which made her laugh harder.

Those damn cheese sticks showed up at the table just then, and the smell made my stomach start to really cramp with hunger.

I hadn't remembered lunch, so after my morning scrambled eggs and smoothie, I was a starving mess.

“You were planning on sharing, right?” I asked while snatching a golden, oozing bite.

“I suppose since you’re paying, you can have one or two.” She smirked at me, nibbling on one herself.

Dammit, Harlo. Don’t stare at her lips!

I purposely put my eyes down, staring at the plate and the marinara sauce instead of at my dinner companion.

Ok, maybe when I’d said she wasn’t physically attractive, I was lying a little. Her features weren’t typical California girl sexy, but she had this easy going, girl next door kind of thing, and it made me feel like I was fucking twenty again. I had to keep stopping myself, sending a none so gentle reminder that I was literally twice her age. Old enough to be her dad, even.

“I need another,” I told our waiter, the boy looking at Mia with puppy dog eyes like he was bloody in love with her already.

She sent him a friendly smile, then went after another mozzarella stick.

“Yeah, sure,” he agreed.

I stared down at my beer, realizing that I had to cool it on the drinks. One more beer and I had to cut myself off. I still needed to drive the girl home, for hell’s sake.

Mia asked for another beer, downing the last of her first like the true college student she was.

We put in our entrée order, both of us having chosen the house fried chicken, collards and cornbread. Mia picked it first, and I just said ‘same’, which our waiter hardly noticed since he couldn’t take his fucking eyes off my dinner companion.

Conversation just...flowed. Mia blushed and her eyes sparkled, bright and eager as each topic blossomed then changed to the next exciting thing. Meanwhile, she sat there and bought at least three of my books that I noticed while she scanned through Amazon.

“This was a great idea,” Mia said while pushing away her mostly empty plate.

I was impressed she'd managed to almost finish the whole damn thing. I was bloated off the portion I had, and I was twice her fucking size.

"Let's do it again," she added, winking at me, those beers making her saucy.

"Mia, darling, I think you're sloshed."

"Am not," she protested, waving her hand around as she slid out of her chair, wobbly on her legs. "Geez, feet, way to make me look bad!"

I barked a laugh, which made her beam and grin back at me.

"Good thing you're driving, huh?"

"Right. I'll get you home safe and sound. Just don't tell your girlfriends who you were getting drunk with."

"Oh, Clea would love it," she said, rolling her eyes. "And that's exactly why I'm not going to tell her."

I didn't touch that one. Instead, I put my arm around her shoulder, wondering how the hell she's so tipsy after two measly beers while I led her from the bar.

"I'm sorry, Owen," Mia said, blushing again. "I don't drink very often."

"I can tell," I murmured, amused as hell by the girl on my arm.

She was quiet as I opened the passenger door and held her hand while she dropped down into the seat with a plop.

When her hand left mine so I could close the door, it kind of felt like ripping off a Bandaid. Damn near hurt as she turned those bloody hazel eyes on me and followed it up with a thankful smile.

I shut the door in her face, breaking away for a second before I went around to my own seat, taking several deep breaths to shake off whatever weird fog was settling in around me to even look at the girl the way I was. Maybe it was the booze.

The hard-on I'd had in my office earlier shouted out the falsity of that, but I didn't want to listen, so I believed whatever bullshit I wanted to.

"You know..." Mia started saying, pressing her hand against my shoulder until the car slammed on its breaks ahead of me, forcing me to do the same.

The girl's body, still wobbly with beer jerked forward, her hand bounced off my shoulder, slid down my chest and...

"Oh my God!" Mia shrieked, her fucking hand cupping my semi.

Legit cupping.

Balls and all.

She jerked her hand away like she'd been bit, and that semi I'd managed to beat down was back to full attention.

"I'm so sorry," she cried again, covering her face with her hands like she could disappear into the seat.

"It was an accident," I practically growled.

I wasn't mad. Not at all. I was fucking turned on and there wasn't a wet pussy anywhere in my near future to ease it with.

The car went totally silent for the last couple minutes until we made it to campus.

"Which building?" I asked her, hoping to just forget about the little feel up and move back into familiar ground.

"Hasting's-Simmon's," was her response, eyes closed, probably still trying to disappear.

I pulled up, and Mia opened the car door, letting herself out.

"You ok getting back up?" I asked, watching her fumble a little with her backpack.

"Oh, I'm fine," she promised. "Don't worry."

"Text me when you get up, ok?" I asked, knowing that I couldn't bring her up myself.

Imagine what people would think of a professor taking his drunk student back to her dorm.

She nodded in agreement, then paused.

“Thanks for tonight. It was nice getting to know you, Owen. And I’m sorry again about...that.”

Dammit, that sounded a whole hell of a lot like a post-date line.

“See you in class, Miss Miller,” I said, lifting my fingers from the steering wheel to give her a sort of wave.

She jerked a nod at me, then closed the door and made her way inside the dorm building.

I sighed, feeling like an asshole, but I had to do it. I had to put some sort of space back between us because it seemed like we’d demolished the professional line that had to exist between student and teacher.

Mia turned at the lobby door and looked back at me, but she didn’t wave, and neither did I before she finally went inside and disappeared from view.

I revved my car and drove the few minutes back to my house, a beautiful Antebellum style home, built in the 1850’s. Driving up the half circle driveway, I parked my car right in front of the door, like I always did. Not like I ever had visitors that would care to use the driveway.

As I made my way to the front door, I listened to the crunch of my feet on the pebble gravel drive and wondered how many carriages had followed my path. The short flagstone walkway that led to the door was an equal wonder. It was the big reason why I’d bought the house after moving to Mississippi. The history in these parts was deep and dirty and rich. The house itself felt like a slice of the past, and living in it was a little like living in a dream.

My phone beeped in my pocket, and my damn hand reached for it immediately.

Mia Miller: *See? Made it to my room in one piece. Made it into my jammies, too!*

I smiled. Drunk or not, the girl was charming beyond reason.

Me: *Good. You'll need your sleep. We've got a big test to plan for midterms.*

Mia Miller: *I knew it! Already planning for midterms, huh? I'm just getting settled into my classes. Don't talk about such cursed things, Professor.*

Me: *It's my job. Yours too. Besides, I'm a sadist.*

Mia Miller: *Sepiosexual and a sadist? You're getting more and more interesting with every hour.*

I bit back a groan. Mia with her inhibitions gone was something to behold. Between her sweet personality, that amazing brain of hers, and the junk grab from earlier, I was still throbbing and in need of something to ease it.

Me: *I thought we were done with the sex talk, Mia Miller.*

Mia Miller: *Who said anything about sex? I'm just taking notes of your tendencies and preferences. That's kind of my job. right?*

Me: *Right.*

Shit, I needed a fuck.

Passing my incredible library on the way up the stairs, I headed straight to my bedroom, and consequently, to the attached bathroom.

I shed every last bit of my clothes, letting them sit on the floor while I hurried around the massive, regal tub in the middle of the large room and into the shower tucked into the corner.

The thing was from probably the 70's when the house was last updated, a calamity of brown and orange tile with brass fixtures. Not that I cared, I just needed hot water and some soap to get the job done.

My eyes closed the moment my fist wrapped around my cock, a moan trying to escape my pursed lips. Damn, those

delicate hands, and those plump lips. God, I wanted to bite them myself.

It didn't take long, much to my shame, before I was exploding all over the ugly tiles with a pained snarl.

When the orgasm eased up, my back pressed against the tile and I closed my eyes, hating myself just a little more for fucking my fist to some twenty-something girl who happened to be a student of mine.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

Another ping echoed through the room and my heart gave a stupid, idiotic leap, hoping it was Mia again. The girl was probably passed out drunk in her dorm, where she belonged.

I slapped the tile, growling in frustration before I shut off the water and stepped out. Just to torture myself a little more, I took my time drying off and getting dressed in some fresh boxer briefs before digging my phone out of my pants pocket from the floor.

The ping had been Mia, but not a text. It was a Google invitation to a document.

Her manuscript.

I hadn't been lying when I'd told her I'd beta read plenty of novels before. Several of my friends had written one or two of their own books, but they tended toward historical biographies and self-help style literature. Nothing like the harem style romance I'd just been given.

Throwing away any idea of doing more work tonight, I collapsed into my extravagant and period perfect 1800's four poster bed to dig in.



Three.

I got three hours of sleep.

I'd been soaking up the romance Mia had sent me, and I couldn't put the damn thing down. Was it because I had some

sort of fascination with the woman who wrote it? Maybe. But the book itself was good, too. As good as a sex-heavy erotic novel can be, anyway.

There was even a little moment of triple penetration that was unrealistic, if not hot as hell. Ok, it was both.

My class was starting soon, though, and I had to get my ass there. The last three chapters would have to wait.

The first class of the day was pretty dead, as was usual. Kids showed up for the numbers, but most of their brains hadn't turned on yet, and a couple were sleeping in the back. Early morning classes were among my least favorite.

What I *did* look forward to though, was a few days with my boys. Paula was going out of town for...who the fuck knew what, and the boys were staying with me while she was gone. I usually only saw them on the weekend, but having them around breathed a little bit of life into me, and I treasured every moment with them.

Meanwhile, I had to make it through the day until I could pick them up from school and have some family time.

Chapter 5



-Owen-

“Sorry I’m late,” Mia murmured as she stumbled into my office, red faced and huffing like she’d just run across campus.

Hell, maybe she had.

“It’s fine, I’m just going through the papers that were your responsibility,” I said, lifting my eyes to meet hers as she sat in her seat across from me at the desk.

She blanched, but when she saw the quirk of my lips, she blew out a relieved breath and smiled.

“My last class went over and then I had to talk to my professor afterwards and...ugh. Nevermind. I’m here. Put me to work.”

I nodded, pushing another paper toward her.

“Get to it,” I said, half joking and half not.

My brain was still rattled after our dinner together, but I honestly wondered how much she actually remembered of the night. Not much, I hoped.

“I woke up with such a hangover,” Mia admitted while she scanned through the paper. “How did you drink two giant beers and not even get a buzz?”

“I’m twice your size, for starters.” I chuckled. “I’ll remember what a lightweight you are next time I ply you with alcohol.”

She finally met my eyes and gave me one of those breathtaking smiles.

“Do you plan on plying me with alcohol anytime soon, Owen?”

“No,” I said, lying through my teeth.

Her shoulders slumped a little, like she was disappointed with my answer.

“Anyway, I can’t recall anything from my history class this morning. I blame you.”

“Fine, I’ll take the blame,” I agreed. “Just drink a ton of water and sleep well tonight and you’ll feel better.”

She nodded.

“I sent you my manuscript yesterday. Did you get it?”

I nodded.

“Yeah, I’ll get to it this week.”

I wasn’t sure why I was lying to her. Maybe because I didn’t want her to know how eager I was to read the damn thing, or that I’d gotten shit sleep because I couldn’t put it down. I needed to try and keep that wall of professionalism up, no matter the cost. Even if it made me a fucking liar.

“I’ll be heading out early today,” I said, blessedly changing subjects. “I’ve got my boys this week, so I’ll leave at two forty-five to get them until Friday. You’ll have that time off, too.”

“Will we get behind?” she asked, all worried.

“No. Besides, we’ll meet Saturday and Sunday to make up for it. You don’t mind giving up your precious weekend to work, do you?”

She smiled.

“No. Not with this job. Although, my roommate hates you since I’m never home to cook her dinner anymore.”

I barked a laugh.

“She can come and lay into me for it. If she dares.”

“She’s more likely to flirt with you than berate you.”

That had my eyebrows rising.

“She’s got a thing for older guys,” she admitted, face blushing all pretty and pink.

“Does she? I’m sure she’s the only one who shares the opinion.”

Mia looked anywhere but at me as she murmured, “I don’t know. They’re not so bad.”

The words punched me right in the chest, and I struggled to catch my breath again.

“So, uh, you’ll talk to the plagiarizer tomorrow?” she blurted.

“Uh, yep, right,” I agreed, bumbling like an idiot.

Her naivety was cute on her. It wasn’t cute on a man of my age.

We didn’t say anything else for the hour and a half she had before her next class. I just watched her nibble on a sandwich while we silently worked, trying not to stare at her lips like a creeper.

It was actually a relief when she left, waving at me and wishing me a good time with my boys. I wouldn’t see her again until Tuesday, which was probably a good thing. My obsession with my little TA was a problem that needed to be fixed. Maybe it was all the time we spent together in an inclosed space that did it. The distance would do us good, and I could move on in the meantime.

Time went so fucking slowly after she left, and the hours of one to three took so long. I couldn’t write or plan my next lesson, and I was practically crawling out of my skin by the time it came to leave.

I hurried to my car, a more reasonable sedan instead of my sexy Porsche Boxster coupe. The sedan was my family car, and the Boxter was my mid-life crisis. Paula hadn’t understood it, but I wanted something physical to show for all the fucking work I’d put into my success. Was it too much to enjoy some of that success?

The pickup line at the boys' school was always a headache. It took no less than half an hour of sitting there before they hopped into the car, which sucked. But the moment I saw their happy faces, I grinned, too.

"Hey guys!" I called, waving them into the back seat.

Luckily Caden was finally old enough to buckle himself, which meant they were ready within a minute and we were heading out, bypassing the rest of the parents still hugging the curb.

"How was school?" I asked, watching their faces as best I could in the rearview mirror while they answered.

"Great!" Caden answered. "I'm in first grade, Dad!"

"I know, buddy," I told him with a laugh. "I'm glad you had a good day. What about you, Charlie?"

"It was fine," my eight year old answered with a blank face.

"Do anything fun? Make any friends?"

He just shrugged, silent.

"I did!" Caden said. "I have a girlfriend!"

"Like, a friend that's a girl, or a girlfriend?"

"She's a girl." Caden nodded seriously.

"She'll give you cooties," Charlie told his little brother, shoving at his shoulder.

"Nuh uh! She's nice! And she said she brushes her teeth every day so she doesn't have cooties!"

Wait, what the hell did brushing teeth have to do with cooties?

"Be nice, Charlie," I warned, which just made him frown and turn his face toward the window as the thick, southern trees zoomed past our car.

"Can we have pizza tonight, Dad?" Caden asked.

"I was going to make us some of my famous tacos!"

“Your tacos aren’t famous,” Charlie grouched.

“In our family it is,” I countered.

“Mom’s boyfriend makes tacos, too,” Caden dropped *that* bomb.

“Mom’s boyfriend?” I demanded. “What boyfriend?”

The ink on our divorce papers was barely fucking dry, and she already had a boyfriend?

“Mom says that it’s ok since you’ve been divorced for a whole year.”

A year? Had it really been that long?

“Well, what’s this boyfriend of hers like? Is he nice to you?”

Caden nodded, which I only barely caught in the mirror. “He’s nice. He plays basketball with us at our house. He calls Mom a cougar sometimes though, and I don’t know what that means. Cougars aren’t nice, but Mom is.”

Oh shit...how was I going to explain that one?

“Uh, yeah, I don’t know, bud,” I said, chickening the hell out on that one. “Is he much younger than your mom?”

Both the boys stared at me.

“He plays basketball in his college!” he said instead, all excited again about basketball. “He said he’s going to the NBA this year!”

College? What the fucking shit! What was Paula doing with a... Images of Mia flashed across my brain and I shut my mental mouth. But, at least I wasn’t *dating* the girl. I might have jerked off to her a couple of times in the last twenty-four hours, but...

“Ok, pizza it is,” I finally agreed, not having the mental capacity to deal with all the shit in my head, plus try to manage some kind of homemade dinner.

Not that the kids were used to any kind of homemaking. Paula wasn’t a *warm baked cookies* kind of

woman.

“Then maybe we can have a movie night?” I offered.

Caden hooted in excitement, but Charlie had nothing to offer me.

When we got back to the house, Caden went to the fridge for a snack, but Charlie headed for the stairs immediately.

“Don’t be long, we’ll have dinner soon. I was hoping we could play a game before the movie.”

“I don’t want to play a stupid game,” he said, not even looking at me while he continued up the stairs.

“What’s going on, Charlie?” I called, but he just ignored me before heading up and, eventually slamming his door so hard I heard the thump of it from the foyer.

When did my little boy turn into a fucking teenager? What would he be like when he *actually* turned into a teen?

“Charlie’s been mean,” Caden said when I joined him in the kitchen.

He was snacking on some grapes he’d found in the fridge, his little legs swinging from the edge of the chair.

“What do you mean? Mean how?”

“He yells a lot, and Mom slapped his mouth. Oh! He got in a fight at school and punched a kid!”

Caden made a double one-two punch while fisting those grapes while my fucking head exploded.

“What do you mean he got in a fight? Your mom would’ve told me.”

“Ohhh...” he moaned, drawing out the word. “Sorry, I wasn’t s’posed to tell you. Mom said it was our little secret. Please don’t tell Mom I told you!”

I sighed, dragging my hand down my face.

“Bud, I’ve got to talk to your mom about it. She needs to know it’s not ok to keep things like this a secret from me.”

Caden's face fell as he grabbed another handful of grapes, then dropped off the chair and followed his big brother's footsteps up the stairs and to his room with a slam of the door.

Awesome.

Fucking awesome.

My pocket vibrated, but I took a minute of self pity before pulling it out to check what it was.

Mia Miller: *Am I supposed to wait with you after class tomorrow while you make an appointment with the plagiarizing student? PS Hope your week with your boys is awesome.*

I sighed, wishing my day had been better so far.

Me: *You don't have a class after the 2 o'clock creative writing, right? If that's the case, then yes. Stay.*

Me: *And thanks, but that's looking unlikely. Evidently little kids can act like teenagers. Who knew?*

I grouched at myself for sending that last message. She wished me a good week, she didn't ask for every Goddamn struggle I'm having with the kids.

Mia Miller: *Yikes. Yeah, I think the tween stage starts earlier than is rumored. My little brother turned into a monster when he became nine. My most sincere condolences.*

I laughed, feeling some of the tension that'd taken over my body start to dissipate. How did just seeing words she wrote do that to me?

Me: *Thanks. I appreciate condolences. I also expect you to say something nice at my funeral, if that comes sooner than anticipated.*

There was a minute of those little dots dancing at the bottom of my screen before she sent a laughing emoji face.

Mia Miller: *Is giving a eulogy part of the job description? I suppose I better get on that. We'll have to hang*

out more though, if you want anything other than 'he was an asshole boss'. That and 'he knows how to hold his beer'.

Me: Damn, I suppose maybe I'd prefer at least an added 'he was a decent fellow', so I'd better figure out a way to prove it, aye?

Mia Miller: LOL! Aye? I'd swear, sometimes you're British.

Realizing this small exchange was turning into a full-blown conversation, I made my way to the library where I'd settled my home office and sat my ass in my comfortable swivel chair. Meanwhile, I heard Caden thump back down the stairs and turn on the TV in the living room.

Me: Apologies, sometimes my graduate school in London comes back to haunt me.

Mia Miller: Right, I think I read something about that on your Wikipedia.

I barked out a laugh at that. She'd looked me up?

Mia Miller: I didn't mean it like that. I'm not a creeper or anything...

Mia Miller: Oh God...

Me: I forgive you. Besides, I'm an interesting and impressive character. It's only natural for you to want to learn about your boss. Do me a favor though, if you want to know something, ask me. Wikipedia doesn't have the whole story on anything.

There was a minute of silence from my phone, so I took that time to pour a rather tall glass of some sweet cognac. It burned in the best way on the way down, leaving a sweet, floral blossom of flavor in my mouth. The floral note reminded me of the salivatingly delicious lavender and vanilla scent that followed Mia around. Aaaaand I was hard again.

Cursing myself and trying to think of something other than my sexy little TA, my phone buzzed again on the glossy wooden top of my desk.

Mia Miller: *I've got so many questions about you, Owen. That's a dangerous thing to offer.*

I didn't think before writing,

Me: *Ask away.*

There was a long pause that sent my heart all pitter patter in anticipation of what she'd say next. I'd put the offer out there, but would she take it?

Dragging another slow sip of the cognac into my mouth, I felt my phone buzz again, but just gripped it in my hand.

Something in me didn't want to look at the text so I could just enjoy the rare sort of anticipation that was flowing through me, but the other part, *the stronger part*, needed to know what she'd said.

Mia Miller: *I keep asking myself, why me? Not only have you picked me for a TA, but I keep thinking that, maybe, you picked me for a friend.*

Mia Miller: *If I'm wrong, stop me now before I say something else stupid...sorry.*

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. She wasn't wrong. Our chats, and the dinner we had the night before... It felt like friendship to me, too. Friendship with a girl half my age who was still learning about herself and making her way through life. I was a pervert, yes, but when we were together, age melted away. It was just us and words and the sparkle in her eyes.

Mia Miller: *Oh God! If I'm wrong, stop me now before I say something else stupid...PLEASE!*

I chuckled.

Me: *It's your brain. You've got that kind of old soul, but at the same time life is still so fresh for you, it's exhilarating. I enjoy our conversations.*

Those dots blinked at the bottom of the screen for far longer than the word that popped up required.

Mia Miller: *Oh.*

That was it. Those two letters.

I gave it a long minute before putting my phone down.

Shit, I'd scared her away. So much for that wall I'd been trying to build. It was more like a queue line, begging her to follow the velvet ropes that led toward me.

What the fuck was wrong with m—

My phone buzzed and I dove for it like a fucking Olympic swimmer.

Mia Miller: *How does a sapiophile find a date at a bar if they're only attracted to intelligence?*

Relief rushed through me, and I smiled.

Me: *Fake it 'til you make it, and ask about history and literature. People sort themselves out pretty quickly with subjects like that.*

Mia Miller: *What advice would you give to me? I mean, if I ever met a sapiophile and wanted to impress him.*

Again with my impulsive behavior, I wrote and sent the text before I could second guess myself, then slapped my forehead in frustration. Professors don't say that kind of shit to their TAs!

Me: *Don't change a fucking thing.*

Chapter 6



-Mia-

Professor Harlo: *Don't change a fucking thing.*

I couldn't breathe.

The last couple days had been a series of innuendos and what felt like whispered hints that he wanted me. Of course, I realized that it was probably just projecting, because that man made me forget my brain and made me feel like the smartest woman in the world all at the same time.

Not only did Professor Owen Harlo have an amazing career as a teacher, and as a writer, but he had the body of a supermodel. Combine that with his asshole-ish tendencies, and the tender moments of care he's shown over the last few weeks, I was falling head over heels for him.

The biggest problem was, infatuation evidently made me brave, evidently.

When he told me to ask away, my heart practically stopped when he gave me his description of my character. He thought I was naïve, yes, but in a lot of ways I agreed with him. I *was* still young, and I looked forward to making messes and screwing things up in order to learn and get wise. I also loved that not once in the reasons he liked me was my looks. I knew I wasn't the prettiest girl. I wasn't a cheerleader type. In fact, I got *bullied* by the cheer squad and their followers throughout high school. Even still, I wasn't ugly, either, and I knew that, too. I did my best with staying fresh, wearing the perfume I got from the Bath and Body Works website, and applying mascara just to keep me from looking washed out. Owen was probably used to so much better than that. No wonder he didn't want me.

But...did he?

Those moments in conversation ended real quick, so it was hard to catch them sometimes. It was like he realized what he was doing and just...cut it off.

“Good morning,” I said, walking into Professor Harlo’s office, not bothering to knock since I knew he was inside already.

A loud thump sounded from my left, so my head whipped around just to see Owen holding his forearm like he’d banged it.

“Fuck me,” he ground out, leaning over the appendage in pain while he sucked in a couple breaths.

“Are you ok?” I gasped, hurrying over to help him.

I reached for his arm just as his other hand outstretched to stop my approach.

“Nope, I’m good, I’m good,” he said, sounding a little bit frantic. “Time got away from me, is all. You startled me.”

My eyes fell to his lap where he cradled his arm and I saw the button and zipper splayed open, a hint of blue underwear peeking past his black slacks.

Oh *GOD!*

Had he been...?

“Sit,” Owen growled, pointing to my chair, which left his lap nicely covered up by the desk.

“I, uh, can give you a few minutes,” I choked out, but Owen threw me a dark look.

“I had my fucking six year old in my bed all night. Give a single dad a break, huh?”

That bold, sexually hungry monster inside me started inventing images of me crawling under the desk to finish off the job, but I clamped those thoughts down and shoved them away because...I wasn’t that kind of girl.

Nope.

No, sir.

I ducked my head and went right to the papers while Owen zipped up as inconspicuously as he could.

Neither of us spoke, just sat in the thick and awkward silence until it was time for his last class of the day to start.

Owen didn't even say anything, just packed up his suitcase and headed for the door.

I stacked my own papers, though I wasn't allowed to bring them home like Owen did, then stood to leave. He was holding the door open, not looking at me, but still thinking of me like he always proved he did with little gestures like that. Or, heck, maybe he was just holding the door open so he could lock it when I was out?

"I should apologize," he started as I went past him into the hallway.

"No. I should have knocked. I'm sorry about that."

He blew out a long breath and slowly closed the door, locking it once it clicked shut.

"I honestly lost track of time. It won't happen again."

I finally raised my eyes to his just to find him already looking at me. There was spitfire in his eyes, burning those caramel irises right up.

My mouth opened to say something, to acknowledge the look on his face telling me he wanted something I couldn't give him, but he started ahead of me and started walking away, cutting off the moment before I could even say anything.

So, I didn't. I said nothing and followed him to the next class where I swooned for a full hour over the brilliance that came out of his mouth to the students that looked half bored and half lost to their own thoughts.

When class let out, Owen called out, "Ms. Grey, I'd like to speak with you for a moment."

I saw a girl's head pop up and look toward Owen.

"I've got a class to go to," she said weakly.

“That’s fine. It won’t take long.”

The girl brushed some of her blonde hair out of her face as she slowly made her way down to speak to Owen. If I had any question as to whether she was guilty, that doubt was gone after watching her for less than a minute.

“I’d like to set up a meeting where we can discuss your last paper,” Owen said, down to business immediately. “It must be this week.”

She stuttered, her face bursting into a blush.

“Oh, yeah, um... My last class on Friday is two o’clock.”

“Good. I’ll see you right here at five minutes past two.”

“Uh, ok,” she agreed quickly.

“Good. We’ll discuss your paper on Friday,” Owen said, turning away from her to dismiss the girl who looked freaking mortified.

She ran back up the aisle and out the door like her rear was on fire.

The room was silent after that, just the soft thud of the door as it closed behind the girl. One question took over my mind, though. Bolstered by Owen’s response to ‘ask away’, I did just that and hoped he’d answer.

“Owen,” I said softly, his name soft and intimate on my tongue somehow, which gave me shivers when I uttered it.

“Yes, Mia?” he asked, glancing up at me, for a moment between stacking and sorting papers.

He didn’t seem affected, so it must have just been me who had chills running down their spine.

“I’ve been wondering, and I wanted to ask you, but don’t answer if you don’t want to... I mean, if it’s...”

Finally, he looked up at me and met my eyes.

“Spit it out, Miss Miller,” he said with a quirk of his lips, giving away that he was amused.

I gave a relieved smile back and blurted my question out.

“Why meet with Ms. Grey? You have plenty of proof to give to the Dean and get her expelled, or at the very least, fail her in the class. I don’t mean to question your method, I just...I guess I just want to know *why*.”

He nodded, then tilted his head toward the door. “Walk with me.”

I followed him toward the parking lot, the time inching just past four in the afternoon, long after when he’d said he was supposed to pick up his kids.

“I could fail her,” he agreed as we made our way toward the front door of the building. “Maybe even expel her if the Dean sees fit. But I want to hear her out and give her a chance before it goes on her record. I’d like to hear the reasoning behind the plagiarized lines. If I see fit, I’ll let her re-write the paper and we’ll forget the whole thing. If not, then I will fail her and maybe we’ll see her next semester.”

“And what would convince you to give her a second chance?”

He shrugged.

“I’ll just know,” was his answer.

I smiled.

“You’re a conundrum, Professor Harlo,” I told him, following him to his car.

I didn’t add the last part, which made me blush. *A conundrum that I’d very much like to unwrap.*

“Stop fucking calling me Professor,” he said with half a groan and half a laugh.

I laughed back at him, pausing at the curb.

“Need a ride back to your building?” he asked, checking his watch.

“No. You go get your pre-pre teens.”

“No fucking kidding. Pre-pre is right. Eight years old. Ugh...”

I laughed again as he sank into the driver seat of an innocuous silver sedan.

He paused before closing the door and looked up at me, as if waiting for something.

“Have a good day, Owen,” I told him, lifting a hand.

He finally closed the door, then lifted a hand in a wave. The car engine turned over, and his window sank down.

“Remember,” he said, a knowing smirk tilting his lips. “Keep Saturday open. You’re all mine.”

I grinned back at him, nodded, then waved again as he left.

“OMG! Who’s that?” came that voice I knew so well.

I jumped, turning to my best friend on campus, Clea.

“Girl! You scared me,” I scolded, planting my hand on my chest before watching to see if I could still glance the back of Owen’s car. I couldn’t. He was already gone.

“You are grinning like a girl in love,” she said with a sigh.

I groaned.

“I don’t know, Clea. I don’t think...”

“Mia. You’re my best friend, but honest to God, you need to lose that V-card and get a boyfriend who’s going to blow your mind!”

“Have *you* ever had a boyfriend who blew your mind?” I demanded, and she gave me a look of guilt.

“Well, no, but I’m still on the search. I go on dates all the time to find the right guy. You know that.”

“Well, yeah, but you also have a lot of really terrible experiences, too. Do you remember that guy sophomore year who literally followed you around for weeks?”

She scoffed and turned on her heel, heading toward our dorm.

I followed.

“You gotta take risks if you’re going to find the man of your dreams.”

“I’m not looking for the ‘man of my dreams’,” I told her, trying to rein in her wild imagination. “I’m looking for a good man with a good career, and a good sense of humor.”

“You know what I heard?” She interrupted my rant. “I heard ‘good’ and there’s no part of you that deserves *good*. You deserve great!”

I laughed.

“Clea, I’m a small town girl, lucky to be in college. I’ll probably never even leave Mississippi, and that’s ok.”

“It’s *not!* You need to explore, see the world, date guys and...and...fuck them!”

My eyes widened at the curse.

“You want me to do what now?” I demanded.

“See? You can’t even say it! You can’t say fuck!”

I looked around, sure that we’d get in trouble somehow, even though there was nobody in college to punish us for cursing. I could swear though, my gran would probably be able to hear me all the way down in Louisville.

“C’mon Mia, say it!” Clea insisted, grabbing my shoulder and shaking me a little. “You’re a grown woman, experiencing the world, and you’re acting like your Methodist mama is going to come on up here and slap your face! You are a strong, independent woman, and you can say whatever you want, and who’s going to stop you?”

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe I know all those things, and yes, I’m strong and independent, but that doesn’t mean I want to curse. It’s a sign of intelligence to not *have* to curse to be understood.”

“Said who?” she snorted.

“My gran,” I admitted, grinning at my friend.

Clea rolled her eyes at me.

“Say it, Mia.”

Groaning, I bumped her shoulder, feigning staggering from weariness.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Say it!”

“Why do I have to—”

“Say it, Mia!”

Growling, I stop and turn to my friend.

“Fine! Ugh, you’re so annoying Clea!”

She stopped and folded her arms across her ample chest.

“I still don’t hear y—”

“F-fuck!” I yelled.

Mortified at how loudly I’d yelled the word.

Clea clapped her hands and shouted an echo, making the people nearest us turn judgemental eyes our way.

“Isn’t it freeing?” she said dreamily. “Nothing can hold you back, Mia.”

While I agreed that nothing could hold me back, there was something that still felt foreign and wrong about saying obscenities for others to hear. It was one thing to give characters voices in my books, but for *me* to say it? It felt so alien.

“Now that we got that out of the way, you need to go on a date. What about a double with me and Howard?”

“You’re seeing Howard again?” I asked.

When Clea had gotten home from her first date with the man, she hadn’t seemed too enthusiastic about him. I was surprised she was giving him a second try.

“Well, he’s not terrible to look at and he’s going to be a dentist, so I figured I’ve got to give him a chance to prove himself.”

“Clea, my friend, that’s got to be one of the saddest things you’ve ever said. You can’t date someone because they’ll make a good living!”

“Oh, well excuse me missus ‘good career’ on the husband to-do list!”

“Wanting my husband to have a good job is *not* the same as dating a man because he’ll make a lot of money. His personality must come first. Similarities in morals and beliefs are the number one thing you should be looking for. Not money.”

“Pish. I want a man with money so he can shower me with diamonds and fancy cars, like that little Porsche your professor has. Mmm! That thing is sexy!”

She wasn’t wrong.

“I’m sure Owen has worked hard for the things he has. Besides, he’s a lot older than us and has had time to save and manage a fancy car like that.”

“Owen, huh? You two on a first name basis now?”

“Well, yes. He said Professor Harlo took too long to say, so we’re down to short, sweet, and to the point. He’s nothing if not efficient.”

And sexy, and brilliant, and hot as all Hades.

“Do I smell a romance happening here?” she asked, poking me in the ribs now that we’d started heading back to our dorm again.

“What? No!” I adamantly denied.

There was no romance. Heated looks and innuendos? Yes. But nothing physical or romantic had ever passed between us. Well, besides my hand accidentally plunging into his lap in his car... Dear Lord, I thought I’d die of embarrassment when that happened. But what was inside his trousers? That was nothing to laugh at. The man was hung like

a horse, and if the girth of his half-erect state told me anything, it was that Professor Harlo was packing, big time.

I was just grateful I'd been half drunk that night, otherwise I might have bloody died from embarrassment.

“Well, good. He's way too old for you. Leave the older men for me! You need someone young, hot, and rich.”

“No. I need someone intelligent, supportive, and kind.”

“One day I'll get you to see the light,” Clea said just as we finally made it to our building.

“Doubt it,” I countered, smiling at my friend.

She just turned to me and winked.

Chapter 7



-Mia-

My novel...ugh! I could swear up and down that my characters were trying to thwart an ending somehow. Well, not just the ending, but the part that comes after the middle, and the rest that follows that part, too. Basically the last half of my book.

It also didn't help that I still hadn't heard back from Owen about the fourteen chapters I'd sent him. I wasn't sure if he just hadn't read it yet, or if he *had* read it and was trying to save my feelings by not telling me how much it sucked.

Did I really want to hear his opinion if it wasn't positive?

I'd been thinking about that since Sunday when we'd gone to dinner. I'd been thinking about Owen a lot in general since our dinner. Our almost constant texting didn't help matters, either. I didn't want to discuss the fact that I was usually the instigator for those digital conversations. But he wrote back every single time. When things started seeming like they were heating up, he'd come up with some excuse and he'd have to go, ending the conversation, but there was always a next one.

Me: *Can I get your advice?*

It wasn't more than two minutes later that he wrote me back.

Professor Harlo: *I'll do my best. What's up?*

I smiled down at the words and smiled.

Damn it all, I really was falling for him. I was even getting silly and giddy just seeing his texts.

Me: *I'm struggling to write. Writer's block.*

Professor Harlo: *Ah. In that case, good fucking luck.*

I laughed.

Me: *You're so helpful.*

Professor Harlo: *I aim to please.*

Professor Harlo: *Seriously though, what kind of scene are you stuck on?*

I blushed. Somehow my brain hadn't anticipated that question.

Me: *It's a...steamy scene. Or at least, that's where it's heading. I just feel like my creative juices are all dried out.*

I read back the sentence and realized that the text sounded a whole heck of a lot like one big innuendo.

Professor Harlo: *Happens to the best of us. Have you tried acting out the things you're trying to write? Maybe if you're trying to write a scene like that, get yourself a steamy kiss.*

I didn't know why those words had me tingling all over, but I was on veritable fire when I was done reading it. My breathing picked up and I was panting and throbbing, hands shaking as I tried to write back.

Me: *Unlike you, I don't have a fanbase of beaus eager to kiss me.*

Professor Harlo: *No, instead you have horny teenage boys and girls filling the halls around you. A girl as pretty as you shouldn't have a problem getting a kiss from just about anyone.*

Instead of focusing on...all the things he just said, I zeroed in on one detail.

Me: *boy or GIRL?*

Professor Harlo: *I didn't want to make any assumptions.*

Me: *I'm a simple woman.*

Professor Harlo: *In the best way.*

How was it possible to be so freaking turned on, but also melt from the adorable compliment. I couldn't help but wish I could get that kiss from *him*.

Professor Harlo: *Anyway, hope that helps. Sometimes the Muses abandon us and it's a shitshow.*

Me: *Who or what is your muse, Owen?*

Professor Harlo: *Same as all artists, I imagine. Love, heartache, loneliness, pain and sex. The fundamental five.*

Me: *That's straight from your book. But, I suppose you're right.*

Professor Harlo: *I'm a pro, darling. I'm always right.*

I laughed at his attempt to lighten up the conversation, but I was too keyed up to let it drop.

Me: *What do you do when you need inspiration?*

I asked while shutting my computer down and looking around the empty dorm room. We had our own bathroom and a small kitchenette area with a counter and room for a hot plate and toaster. Clea was gone, so I was alone.

So conveniently alone.

Dropping onto my bed, I gripped my dingy phone with a mix of shame and excitement as I slid my hands over the center seam of my shorts.

Oh God...that felt good...

Professor Harlo: *Depends on what kind of inspiration I need. If I could use a story idea, I turn on the news or go people-watching. When I need help with a scene, I try to reenact it however I can, putting myself in the MC's shoes.*

It didn't matter that he was talking technical jargon. His words spiked my pleasure every time I reread them.

Me: *And what would you do if you needed help with a scene like I'm working on?*

It was a daring question, and I started panting, eyes rolling in the back of my head as my fingers dripped beneath the band of my shorts into my soaked folds.

Professor Harlo: *This feels like a trick question.*

Me: *I just want to know what you would do.*

Professor Harlo: *The truth?*

Me: *Yes!*

“Yes!” I yelped, feeling the word right down to my bones as my fingers sank into my slit, the heel of my palm still working my clit.

Professor Harlo: *The truth... I'd go bar hopping like I used to as a college student, then get bored and go home to find some kind of porn to replicate on the page. People and women don't interest me like they used to.*

Me: *No boy OR girl situation for you?*

Professor Harlo: *I've tried it. Not for me. I prefer to be the only one penetrating in the relationship.*

My lips opened in a gasp, so close to that elusive peak with those words. I could almost pretend that my fingers were his, and he was with me, on top of me, whispering in my ear ‘come, Mia. Come for me.’

Me: *I'll keep that in mind.*

Whimpers escaped me as I got so close, but was unable to fall over the edge of an orgasm.

Heck, I should have probably just gotten a vibrator like Clea kept telling me to.

Professor Harlo: *Fuck you, Mia.*

Professor Harlo: *Now I'm... uncomfortably tight in the pants in front of my fucking kids. Thanks for that.*

I laughed, but paused in returning his text. How did I answer that without telling him I was currently trying to

masturbate to his words?

So, I didn't.

I gave my fingers a couple more minutes, but quickly gave up with a growl of frustration and went to the shower instead to hopefully slough off the arousal that was still simmering my blood.

When I got out fifteen minutes later, I found another message on my phone.

Professor Harlo: *I apologize. That was too much information. Forget I said anything.*

No! He mistook my silence for being uncomfortable with his admission. I couldn't let him think that. Was I willing to tell him the truth to make him feel better? Oh God...

Me: *No, it wasn't that. I was...busy.*

Heck, that didn't make sense without context.

Me: *I mean, my hands were busy.*

There was a long few minutes of radio silence before my phone finally dinged. I hoped he understood without me having to say the freaking words.

Professor Harlo: *Glad to know I wasn't the only one.*

My mouth dropped open, eyes sliding shut to picture it in my brain. Owen, laid back and stretched out against his pillows, naked... OhmyGod! Eyes closed in pleasure, perfect white teeth crushing his lip between them while his hand wrapped around his—

I dashed toward my laptop and flipped it open.

Hello Muses. Thanks for the inspiration.



He told me not to come in on Wednesday or Thursday. No word from him except the simple text to tell me that he could take care of the few papers he had and that I should take the time to work on my own homework, and that he'd see me on Friday.

I felt like I'd done something wrong. Surely I had. What possessed me to tell my boss that I was freaking masturbating to his admission? If my mother knew, she'd string me up by my big toes!

It was the longest two days I'd ever endured.

When Friday finally arrived and the meeting with the resident plagiarist arrived, I stepped into the classroom ten minutes before two in the afternoon so I'd be there before Ms. Grey. Also, it felt really weird to call a girl younger than me by any title besides her first name, but Owen insisted on it. To keep things professional, he'd said. Which made no sense why we called each other by our first names...unless...

"Good afternoon, Miss Miller," Owen said as he arrived at the classroom just at two.

Five minutes for Ms. Grey to show up.

"Good afternoon, Professor Harlo," I countered, which made him narrow his eyes on me.

"What did I say about—"

He stopped mid-sentence when the door opened again, showing the woman of the hour, who was literally shaking in her boots.

"Ah, Ms. Grey. Please, join us up front here," he called to her, switching immediately to 'professor mode' while he took his seat at the desk.

I took my seat just to the side of his desk and opened the notebook in my hand. My purpose was strictly for witnessing the event, so I wasn't sure what to do with my hands. I'd decided that I would look busy instead of looking like I was eavesdropping.

Owen pulled her paper from his briefcase, marked up to hell with the illegal quotes and plagiarism cut from 'The Mist'.

"I assume that you know why you're here, Ms. Grey," Owen said, looking her right in the eyes.

She was shaking even harder now, clasping her fingers in her lap so hard they were starting to turn white.

“I-I’m so sorry,” she started out, admitting her mistake. “I was so busy with math homework and biology, and I’m taking food science too which has so much work! ‘The Mist’ is my favorite Steven King book, and I loved that part... I don’t know what I was thinking! It just seemed to fit, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to say it better than the man himself so I...”

Ms. Grey was crying, fat teardrops falling down her pretty face.

I looked at Owen, wondering if he was taken in by the girl and her theatrics. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but it wasn’t the hard, cold look he currently had plastered to his face.

“I want you to think, for just a moment,” he said simply, snapping the words out, “that you worked so hard on a paper, and your fellow classmate stole your work, then turned it in as theirs. How would that make you feel?”

She legitimately sobbed.

“I’d feel cheated,” she cried.

“That’s how I feel, Ms. Grey. I feel cheated.”

Owen sighed and looked over the paper again.

“I’ve read this over several times, and I think you had some decent work here, but then you took...four paragraphs from a man who worked his ass off to succeed. Do you want to succeed, Ms. Grey?”

She nodded vigorously.

Owen tapped his fingers on the desk, watching the girl fall apart in front of him.

“If you want to succeed, you must work, and work hard; not just in school, but in life. I could take this to the Dean and you would fail. Are you ready to fail this class?”

“No, please no! I’ll...I’ll rewrite it! I’ll write five papers!”

He tapped his fingers again.

“Five is unnecessary. But I do want two.”

Her eyes turned up to Owen with hope.

“I want to see a whole new paper. None of this here. You need to remake it from scratch, understood?”

She nodded again, her brain practically rattling in the process.

“I also want you to write me a five page report on ‘The Mist’ and why you like it. What are the important points, and what makes it a masterpiece. Understood?”

“Yes! Yes, Professor Harlo,” she begged.

“Good. I expect them on my desk at the beginning of class on Friday.”

“B-but you gave us two weeks to—”

“Yes, I did. And now I’m giving you an additional six days and...twenty three hours to get it done and have it on my desk.”

She nodded again, tears running down her face again.

“Good, now, if I were you, I’d get on it,” Owen told her, dismissing her with a simple sentence.

“Thank you Professor Harlo,” she said, panic written in her eyes as she stood and hurried back out the door.

After the soft thump of it closing, I turned to Owen and watched him as he stared down at the paper.

“Her tears were sincere,” he said out of nowhere, finally setting the paper down. “She looked legitimately mortified to have been caught.”

“So you’ll forgive her?” I asked him, leaning back in my chair.

“Not necessarily. I’ve given her a very difficult task, and she’ll decide her own fate. If she puts any kind of effort

into the two new papers, then I know she's serious."

"So you're not going to tell the Dean?"

"Oh, I've already informed him. He just agreed with me that I could handle it, and if Ms. Grey makes no attempt to correct her actions, then our lovely Dean will take over and she will fail out of my class and will face academic discipline."

"Oh, I didn't know you already talked to the Dean. I'm surprised he's letting you handle it. I know this school takes pride in performance and honesty."

"They do, but you'd be surprised by the strings a seasoned professor like myself can pull. While the school takes pride in honesty, they also want their students to succeed."

I smiled.

"You talk like you're seventy years old."

He grunted, finally looking at me.

"I feel like it sometimes. Besides, what's the difference to someone your age?"

I felt those words as a personal insult.

Owen stood and smashed the papers back into his bag before hurrying back out of the room.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Miss Miller," he said, putting up a hand in a half-assed wave over his shoulder as he headed toward the door.

"Don't you dare walk away from me!" I heard myself shout at him.

Owen paused and looked over his shoulder in surprise.

"Excuse me?" he asked, eyebrows up to his hairline.

I stood and stomped toward him.

"I get that you might feel that way," I told him, getting closer until we were practically toe to toe, a foot of height difference between us so I had to look straight up at him like a

child. “But you don’t get to project that onto me. I don’t care what age a person is. What matters is what’s in their heart; what’s in *here*.”

I stabbed my finger at his chest, stubbing the dang thing against his hard muscle.

“Maybe you should start thinking that way too, *Professor*.”

I stormed away from him and left the room first, leaving the man in shock behind me.

Chapter 8



-Mia-

Professor Harlo: *How do you feel about coming and doing the work in my home office? There's a lot more space to spread out. If not, we'll meet at the school.*

Those were the first words he said to me after I flipped my lid at him following our meeting with Ms. Grey on Friday. It was Saturday morning, half an hour before I was supposed to meet him at his office.

Me: *Do you have a more comfortable chair? 'Cause the one in your office wasn't meant for more than a ten minute chat.*

Professor Harlo: *Yes. And I'll tell you what, you can even have my personal chair. It's ergonomic.*

Me: *I'm sold. Where?*

He gave me his address, and that's when I realized that I'd have to leave immediately if I was going to take the bus.

I could've taken my car, but I tried not to because parking was more than difficult most of the time, and the bus was easier than finding a parking space, especially on the weekend.

"Where are you going so early?" Clea asked, watching me throw my backpack together with my laptop and papers, just in case I could get some writing in on the way there and back.

"Professor Harlo gave me most of the week off, so we're making up for it by doing it all this weekend. Yesterday

was another paper day for the creative writing classes.”

“Ugh, you’ve gotten so boring since you started working for him. You can’t ever hang out anymore.”

“Well, I have a job, Clea. I need the money, you know that.”

She moaned in protest.

“Yeah... I guess we should at least be grateful you found a job you love. Like, who better to nerd out about books with than the school’s English professor?”

I laughed.

“You’re not wrong.”

“Ok, but if you get back too late, you’ll probably miss me. I’m going out with Howard today and I might not be home tonight.”

I lifted my eyebrows.

“Are you really going to go that far with a guy you’re just feeling ‘eh’ for?”

“I don’t know. We’ve been texting. Well, sexting...”

“Clea, you dirty dog!” I called, as I headed for the door. “Tell me if you’re staying out. Otherwise I’ll be checking in and ruining the moment.”

“Fine. Enjoy Professor Sexy Pants.”

I choked, wondering for just a moment if she’d read my texts or something.

“What?” I blurted.

“Oh, don’t even give me that. Everyone knows he’s freaking sexy. Don’t pretend you can’t see it.”

I blew out a relieved breath.

“Right. He’s just my professor,” I fibbed while opening the door, hurrying out of there.

“Liar!” she yelled while I shut the door, cutting off the word that sliced a little too deep and close to home.

She was right. Owen was so much more than just my professor. Fortunately, she didn't know the half of it.

I went down to the bus stop and waited for the next bus that went North on 10th, then dropped me off a few minutes later near Main street. It was up to me to make it the rest of the way on foot.

When I walked up to the house, according to Google Maps, I paused to admire the beauty of the place. It wasn't really a house. It was a huge, old Antebellum manor, tall, white, and filled to the brim with history. My heart started beating fast before I even found the way to the front door.

Owen was waiting by the long drive that would have led to the stable house back in those days when the house would've functioned as a plantation home. He sat on the edge of a low brick wall that housed beautiful leafy trees that towered above him in the yard.

"Did you walk here?" he asked me, looking over my shoulder for a car.

"Sure," I agreed, shrugging.

I didn't see the big deal.

"Damn it, Mia, I would've come and picked you up if you'd have told me you didn't have a way to get here."

"I took the bus to Main Street. It wasn't a problem. Promise."

Owen sighed and shoved his fingers through his hair, which made me realize that he wasn't in a suit or button up shirt for the first time since I'd met him. The soft old t-shirt and dark jeans he wore with deep brown leather loafers made him look a decade younger. The only thing left to reference his age was the worried crinkle between his brows.

"Ok, well, I'll drive you home. I'd feel like shit making you come out here just for my comfort."

I laughed, trying to relax myself after every muscle tightened with seeing him so casually dressed.

Owen crossed his arms over his chest, which made the shirt pull against the muscle there. He wasn't what one would consider broad or built, but he was lean in a good way, with enough muscles that a girl felt safe with him.

"It was literally less than a mile. Don't daddy me, Professor."

"God damn it, Mia," he groaned, then turned and led me down the brick laid walk toward the front door.

"I can't believe you live here," I gushed, my eyes flying everywhere so I didn't miss a thing. "How old is this place?"

"Built in 1858," he said, opening the door to the grand entrance.

It was incredible, despite it being mostly empty. The stairs were beautiful, made of a honey colored wood and spiraling up and over a doorway that led to another room. On one side were built-in cabinets, and across from me was a huge doorway that opened to another room, which was all windows that showed nothing but greenery in the backyard. Huge velvet curtains framed the windows ahead, and a massive carpet was laid over the pristine wood floors.

"Oh wow, Owen," I breathed, my chest tight and constricted from the majesty of the place.

"Want a quick tour?" he asked, his face lighting up.

I nodded, not even needing to squawk a word out for him to begin.

"The dining room," he said, pointing through a door frame to a room with a giant round table inside.

The furniture wasn't necessarily to date with the house, but I wasn't an expert on such things, anyway.

"The place has been updated in all the ways that matter," Owen said as we wandered through the sun room in the back that had all the windows, which opened to the magnificent backyard. "There's modern plumbing, including showers and toilets, and the kitchen has been ninety percent

updated with modern appliances and finishes like granite counters and a steel sink.”

The kitchen was next, down a hallway to the left.

“Oh wow,” I murmured again, trying to take it all in. “This place is incredible!”

“I have to say, this is probably one of my favorite things about being out here. One of the only good things, really. The history here is rich, if not quite grim. But I found this house for sale when we moved here and I just had to have it. There’s nothing like it on the West Coast.”

“If I had the kind of money to buy it, I would have, too,” I admitted.

Not that I’d likely have the money to buy anything like it in my lifetime.

“There’s A/C and regular duct heating, which is amazing, but it costs a fucking arm and a leg to cool a place this big down.”

“I can imagine,” I agreed with a laugh.

He smiled, that chin dimple teasing me.

“I’m glad you like it, Mia. This place is my pride and joy, right behind the kids... And my books... And my job teaching...”

He rubbed the side of his head in frustration from the words exiting his mouth, but then shrugged it off like it didn’t matter.

“I’m still in the process of filling it up. I’m doing my best to get furniture and things as close to accurate as I can, even if they’re reproduction pieces.”

“Can we work from here every day?” I asked him, which got him laughing.

“I haven’t even shown you the best part,” he said, like he had a secret he was waiting to reveal.

Following right behind him, we headed to a room with what looked like green velvet curtains. When I stepped foot

inside, my jaw dropped and I spun around, feeling like I just stepped on-set for a modern day retelling of ‘Beauty and the Beast.’

The library was stunning. Every wall of the room was filled floor to ceiling with bookshelves, with one window in the middle, which let in a ton of natural light. My brain went on overdrive and I imagined some Victorian man or lady sitting behind the massive mahogany desk and working on the accounting books for the household.

“Owen,” I practically whined.

“I know,” was his answer.

The man stepped further into the room while I stayed rooted to my spot in the doorway.

“See? My seat. Ergonomic, like I promised,” he told me, pulling out the large wingback on wheels that was waiting near the Empire style desk.

“You’re such a liar,” I told him, finally moving my feet.

I went to him and sat down, then I moaned at the soft, but firm conformity of the chair to my body.

“Mhmm,” he said, a smirk of ‘I told you so’ on his face. “It’s a modern reproduction, made with all the good stuff. I’m too old, and I spend too much time on my ass in that seat to have a real antique.”

“Oh yeah,” I groaned again, stretching and leaning back in the chair.

“That’s right, make yourself comfortable,” he said sarcastically, though his lips were grinning.

“Will do, thanks!” I called out, then noticed the stacks of fresh papers for us to go through.

“So, shall we?” I asked him, motioning to the pile.

Owen’s smile sank away a little, but he nodded in agreement.

“Right. That’s why we’re here.”

“Where are you going to sit?”

He shrugged.

“Probably that chaise over there. I’ll take half and you take the other.”

I agreed and got right to it, taking a red marker from the cup of pens on his desk before I dug in and got to work.



“This is stupid, Owen,” I told him as we wandered outside to the beautiful garden in his backyard.

He had to have half an acre, paved in walking paths with a giant water fountain in the center of it.

“Everytime I see a new part of your house, I’m continually blown away. Can I live here too? Like, do you rent to students?”

He laughed at me, then pointed to a little spot that was tucked away near the big brick fence. Vines covered a little hideaway that was built just as a shaded area to sit. Cute little iron chairs sat there with a table in the middle facing the garden.

“No. This place isn’t student approved housing, unfortunately.”

“Dang,” I mumbled, which made Owen’s dimple pop out again on his chin.

I loved that stinking thing.

“I never got to ask you, how did your week with your boys go? Any improvement with the pre-pre teenage behavior?”

He shook his head.

“I guess it’s natural, considering we only divorced a year ago. I know I didn’t handle it well when my parents broke up. There was a lot of struggle when it came to where I belonged for many years after that.”

“Oh, man. That sounds like a difficult thing for a kid to go through,” I told him, feeling a little ache in my heart for the child Owen used to be.

He just shrugged though.

“Kids go through it all the time. We’ve done our best to try and ease them through the separation, and I feel like we’ve succeeded for the most part. We are still civil to each other for the boys.”

I was reaching a point in the subject where I had to decide to either let it drop, or start asking questions.

“Don’t answer if you don’t want to,” I told him, sitting in one of the iron chairs, “but do you hate her? I mean, you must have loved her at one point, right?”

He nodded.

“We met in college, actually. She’d been there on a Volleyball scholarship, working on a degree in childhood education. Of course, I was working toward my doctorates in English language and literature, with a minor in creative writing. She stayed with me all the way to England and back, and even put off having kids until we were finally back home and settled, and I was teaching in LA. But when we got back and life settled down...things began to change.”

Owen sat down, checked his app where we’d ordered lunch to be delivered, then looked up at the green web of vines above our heads.

“At some point, she decided she wanted more. I’m not sure what triggered it, but we...grew apart in England. She didn’t physically want me anymore, and I honestly didn’t really want her, either.”

He ran his hand through his hair, sighing.

“I honestly don’t blame her for falling out of love. We weren’t the same people who’d met in college. My degree and job teaching became more important to me than watching volleyball games on the couch with her in the evening. I think she’d released me from those duties while I was in school, but once I was done, I think she expected me to turn all my

attention to her, rather than to just be the partner I had always been, if that makes any sense. After we had our boys, it just kept getting worse because time was even more scarce for me. That's why she...found someone else."

"That sounds like a tough place to be in, for both of you," I murmured, hoping he'd go on.

Owen looked at me and smiled.

"Well, what's done is done. No point in dwelling in the past."

"Yeah, but things like that leave scars."

He shrugged, but didn't say anything more.

I reached for something to fill the silence between us.

Anything.

"What about you, Mia? You'll graduate with your Master's soon. I'm sure you've got plenty of heartbreaking stories of love to share by your age."

I shrugged.

"Not particularly. I grew up in a regular old household. My parents and my gran are Methodist, and they have a particular way of looking at life. I'm just in the place now where I'm trying things out and I'm deciding if their way is my way, or if maybe now is the time where we part paths a little."

"Talk about a difficult place to be," he said, watching my face.

I shrugged.

"Life's an adventure, right?"

"Right," he agreed with a snort. "So that's what we're calling it now?"

I grinned back at him, then looked around the garden again.

"Ah, there's lunch," Owen said, getting up from his chair with a grunt.

The sound made me smile. It almost sounded like the noise my dad made when I was a kid when Mom asked him to do something after he'd just settled into his favorite recliner.

Owen came back with a paper bag dangling from his fingers.

“Lunch is served!” he chirped, putting the bag between us before he dug for his sandwich and sat down to eat.

Sharing lunch with him had become almost habitual. We'd spent more afternoons together than apart lately, so breaking bread with him felt normal. Natural.

“Thanks for lunch,” I told him, grabbing my own Subway sandwich before taking a big bite.

“It's the least I can do,” he told me. “But hopefully you notice the stark absence of alcohol, you lightweight.”

I burst out laughing while Owen grinned over at me with his lips closed, mid-chew.

“You suck,” I told him.

He shrugged and took another massive bite.

Holy cow! How was he halfway done already?

I hurried with my own sandwich, not sure if we were going to work any more before I left.

“Did you manage to read my book?” I asked him between bites. “I'm dying to hear your feedback.”

He hummed, mouth full again so he didn't answer.

“But if you hated it, then don't tell me.”

Owen laughed at me.

“It was good,” he said, then paused while he took his last bite. “But I did have some criticisms to bring up, if you want to hear them.”

“So you liked it?” I begged, abandoning the last half of my sandwich since my stomach started flipping and turning nervous somersaults in my belly.

“It was good,” he agreed, crinkling up his sandwich paper before tossing it back into the bag it came in. “But I have a gripe with the sex scenes.”

My cheeks bloomed pink.

“I told you to skip those parts,” I squeaked.

He turned to me and gave me a deadpan expression that basically told me I was stupid to believe he actually would have skipped them.

“I told you the fucking is the best part. Besides, there can be great artistry in intimate scenes like that.”

“But not mine?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t say they were lacking artistry. And, I mean, there’s four men and one woman, so sure, there will be some suspension of disbelief while reading. That’s fine. My biggest gripe is the realism of the sex itself. It lacked description and color. Also, a man doesn’t experience orgasms the same as a woman. Nipple pinching doesn’t do a whole lot for most guys, and there’s no throbbing happening in a man’s cock until he’s ejaculating. More like a tightening and pulse than anything. Like when you can feel your blood pumping hard through your arm after it fell asleep? Something more similar to that.”

My mouth went dry as he spoke, the dirty words from my books clinging to his lips, but they were *good* there. They weren’t dirty at all when he spoke them.

“I assume you’ve never been with four men at once. I mean, most women haven’t, but have you at least tried some of the things you’ve written about?”

“Uh…” I mumbled, not wanting to sound like a know-nothing, which I really was when it came to sex.

“Did you ever get that kiss like I told you to?” he asked hopefully.

I shook my head.

Owen frowned and tapped his finger against his lips in thought.

“Do you know what Thoreau said?”

I shook my head again.

“He said, ‘How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live’.”

Turning my eyes over to him, I found him leaning toward me, his elbows on his knees.

“Can you imagine what he meant by those words?”

“I guess he meant, don’t write about things you know nothing about.”

Owen tapped the tip of his nose.

“To be fair, we artists take license to maneuver around reality a little, which is one of those things that makes books so brilliant and enthralling. You don’t have to fuck four men at the same time to know how to write it, but damn, it’d help if you fucked one in all the same ways she does in the book. How colorful would the scenes be then?”

I swallowed hard, unable to take my eyes off of him.

Owen tucked his lips between his teeth and shut his eyes, as if trying to rid himself of whatever images were cycling through his imagination.

“Live, then make up the difference with some creative writing,” he said eventually, though the smile he gave me was strained.

He wouldn’t look at me now, and I didn’t miss the way he folded his arms over his lap.

“Owen?” I whispered.

The faint sound made his eyes open and zero in on me.

“Will you help me out?”

He lifted his eyebrows and asked, “I will if I can. What do you need?”

“I...I need you to kiss me.”

His head quirked, ear turning toward me a little as if he hadn't heard me correctly.

“What?” he finally asked.

I was one second away from losing my courage, so I stood. He followed.

“You told me to get a hot kiss. So, kiss me.”

“Mia, I didn't mean—”

“Owen, *kiss me.*” I demanded, and I watched his determination snap half a second before his lips slammed down on mine.

Chapter 9



-Mia-

I'd asked for a kiss, but what he gave me was...it was like breathing for the first time.

His lips were firm against mine, solid and demanding, but gentle. After a moment, his tongue flicked out and touched my lips, like he was begging entrance. So, I gave it to him.

My jaw flexed as our mouths opened, tongues tentatively greeting each other for the first time. Owen's hand slid into my hair and he tilted my head back until the soft greeting turned into a battle between our tongues.

I was panting, breathing ragged and hard while my chest caught fire with excruciating heat. His kiss was lighting me up everywhere, from my toes to my nose, then seemed to focus right on the tight, sensitive buds of my nipples and the hot wetness of my throbbing core.

I felt like cheering and sobbing at the same time, my emotions were on such a high, then he tore away from me, putting a few feet of distance between us. He looked shell shocked.

"I'm so sorry," he said, touching his lips like he couldn't believe he'd actually kissed me.

I took three steps toward him until we were close again, everything in my body screaming to feel him again, and not just his lips this time.

"Look at me, Owen. Really see me," I breathed, touching his rough cheek. "I want you, too."

He swallowed hard, fighting a raging battle in his mind, but that same determination snapped again and he was

on me, this time, his hands were, too.

His hot palms smoothed over my waist, pulling me toward him as we shared another life-altering kiss.

“I can’t do this,” he breathed, his mouth leaving mine to trail scorching kisses down my jaw and neck. “*We* can’t do this, Mia...”

“I want you,” I panted into his ear, feeling the ridged length of him against my hip as he pressed us closer together. “The only thing left to ask is, do you want me, too?”

The way he attacked my mouth again and his hands sank, grabbing my rear in two firm handfuls gave me the answer I needed.

It all seemed so surreal, so impossible. What would a brilliant man like him want with a twenty-three year old English major? It didn’t make sense, and yet, there we were, practically tearing each other’s clothes off on the back lawn.

“If we go inside, I won’t be able to stop,” he said, grinding his teeth so hard, I watched the muscles in his jaw jerk and move.

Feeling a burst of bravery, I found his hand on my waist and cupped it in mine before moving it up and pressing it against my breast.

“Fucking hell,” he growled, fingers gripping me almost painfully as he dipped down to kiss me, then grab my rear enough to hoist me up.

I gasped against his lips and folded my arms around his neck until I was in his arms and we were heading to the house.

Was that what women meant when they said they wanted to climb a man like a tree?

My legs wrapped around his hips, trying to help support some of my weight as we went up the stairs slowly, one careful step at a time.

“This is a fucking *bad* idea,” he murmured against my skin, nipping my collar bone as I hugged him closer to me.

“I don’t think so,” I countered, brushing my lips across his stubbly cheek. The sensation was new and beautiful.

I’d kissed boys before. Two to be exact, but they’d been just that. Boys. Owen was a man, and not only did his mind confirm that, so did his body.

When we reached the top of the stairs, he went down a hallway, then through a door that he kicked closed behind him. I was working blind for the most part, my attention focused on the man holding me and my eyes facing where we’d just come from rather than where we were going. We must have reached his bed because he lowered me, setting me onto something soft, our bodies staying connected as he hovered over me, kissing my lips again while his fingers drifted over my breast again.

“Help me,” I murmured against his lips before unwrapping my arms and legs from around him to pull up my t-shirt.

His hands followed mine, gliding up my skin as they caught my shirt and pushed it up. Our lips separated just long enough to get the thing over my head, then we were on each other again.

I felt like I was starving and thirsty and dying, and his lips were a feast. It felt so damn right that every nerve in my body began to tingle as his fingers slid over my skin.

The man slipped a hand behind my back and had my bra unclasped in moments. His deft fingers gripped the cups of my bra and he tore it off, exposing my breasts. I was gasping again as he dipped his head, mouth covering a nipple before he dragged his tongue over the bud.

A cry left my lips as he lavished my breasts with attention. My fingers begged for something to grip as the feeling of him on my body sank in. It was foreign, but it felt like something I’d been missing for so long. Something I never knew I needed.

“You’re incredible,” he breathed against the valley between my breasts, his scruff scraping in the most erotic way

I could imagine.

“I-I need more,” I admitted to him.

I didn't know what was happening within my own body, but I knew I needed him. All of him.

My core clenched on nothing, feeling so wildly empty in a way I'd never experienced.

Finally, for the first time since entering his room, Owen looked into my eyes. Fire and lust reflected back at me, but I could tell he was restraining himself, and I wanted it *all*.

He kept my eyes with his as those strong fingers brushed down to my waist where my shorts were. Smart fingers had the button open with little effort and the jeans slid down my hips so slowly.

Torturously.

“Owen,” I cried, feeling like I just might burst if he didn't put *something* of his inside me.

I grabbed his cheeks and kissed him, sloppy and needy, but he gave the same back to me as his fingers hooked my panties next and dragged them down.

I kicked them off as best I could until I was completely naked underneath him.

Damn it, I needed to see him, too!

Fumbling with his shirt, I hauled it up like he had with mine, but with much less finesse.

I felt him grin against my lips as I yanked, then saw that smile on his face as he broke the kiss to help me get the shirt over his head. The thing finally lifted and left the expanse of his chest open to me. Those freckles I'd seen the first day were still there. The dusting of dark hairs down the center of his chest caught my eye again. I'd get to see where that happy trail led beneath his trousers, and that had my heart pounding all over again. Wait, when did he take off his glasses? God, he's gorgeous!

When I started reaching and pulling at the button of his jeans, he smirked, but shook his head as he sank lower, kissing my stomach, then my hips.

That man's face was real close to my mound, and he wouldn't let up eye contact as I got onto my elbows to watch what he was doing.

I wrote romance. I *knew* what he was doing. What I didn't know was what it was going to feel like.

"Oh God!" I cried, eyes flying shut as my head dropped back.

Owen's tongue felt just as good on my clit as it did inside my mouth. No, it was even *better*.

Fingers brushed at my lower lips, wetting themselves with my juices before he slowly slid them inside me.

It was so tight. Tight enough to hurt, really. Then he went completely still.

I caught my breath enough to open my eyes and look down at him again, mouth right there at my entrance. But his face was all screwed up like something scared him.

"Mia," he croaked, twisting his fingers inside me. "Have you had sex before?"

Could he really feel that stupid hymen?

"Uh, well..."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he barked, yanking his hand out of me.

"What?" I barked right back at him.

"Why didn't you tell me you were a fucking *virgin*?" he demanded, looking legitimately angry.

"Oh, pardon me for not bringing it up during lunch," I snapped, the empty feeling of my channel gnawing at me and making me real damn cranky.

"You should've said something," he started, but I cut him off.

“Why should I, though? What difference does it make to you if it’s my first time or not?”

“Mia, the first time is really fucking important! I’m not... We shouldn’t. Not with me.”

I sat up just enough to slap the man across his cheek, which jerked him out of his brilliant, but currently idiotic mindset.

“I get to decide who I have sex with for the first time. Not you. Besides, first time, second time, hundredth time, doesn’t matter. One little piece of my biology doesn’t make decisions for me. I am not whittled down to the one little moment when a cock enters my vagina.”

He licked his lips, watching my eyes as I laid into him.

“I don’t like it,” he stated, but he seemed to be breaking down.

“I don’t care,” I simply told him. “You either want me or you don’t. Do you want me, Owen?”

His jaw tightened again as he growled, “yes.”

I leaned in, only inches from his face as I bit back, “then fuck me.”

I needed to remember to thank Clea for making me say the word out loud. It made it all that much easier to say the one thing that made Owen’s control break.

He sprang up from the floor, smashing his mouth against mine before wiggling a little, then climbing onto the bed, his knee between my thighs.

I rode him, trying to get what friction I could as his fingers pinched the heck out of my nipples.

A yelp burst from my throat as the pain turned to pleasure, the tingles shooting straight toward my clit.

“I’ll do my best not to hurt you,” he murmured against my neck before he left a firm, gentle bite there that had me gasping again.

I didn't realize he was naked until he eased between my thighs and my legs wrapped around his bare hips. My eyes sank and I got to see my first real penis since I was five and my neighbor friend who did playdates with me every week took his pants off to show me what he was packing, all proud of his inch long pecker.

This wasn't an inch. No, this was barely-fit-in-my-hand big. How was that going to get inside me? My hole was barely big enough for a tampon, let alone that beast!

Before I could revolt against the goliath-sized monster, I felt the velvet skin of his cock smooth over my clit, which sent fireworks all across my eyes. Next, a finger entered me, then two. He scissored them, stretching me while hitting all the good spots while I lifted my hips and ground against him, trying to find some purchase.

"You ready?" he finally asked, seemingly satisfied that he'd prepared me enough.

I nodded, my heels digging into his rear to beg him to enter me.

"Oh, fuck! Condom," he cried, the head of him right there, tacoed between my swollen lips.

"Birth control, virgin," I barked, humping the head of his cock in the most pathetic and desperate act of my life so far.

"Fuck," he breathed again, then pushed into me.

My back arched, fingers gripping his forearm until my nails sank in. A gusty burst of pleasure slammed through me and moaned out of my mouth as I stretched around him. It was so tight, I felt like he just might tear right through me, but I needed more. I needed him to move.

Owen growled, his whole body shaking with the effort to stay still as my body became accustomed to his girth.

"More," I cried. "Like a man, Owen!"

I heard him bark out a laugh just as he retreated, then thrust even harder until he was down to the hilt, our hips

pressed together.

I breathed through the pain until the pleasure of it engulfed me.

He didn't stay still this time though. No, he started to move, slow, long, stinging drags in and out at first until I got so wet that he was slipping and sliding around enough to pick up that pace. His hands curled around my hips and he used me as an anchor to pump. I curled my legs tighter around him, spreading my thighs further for his easy access. It allowed him to go deeper, to hit that beautiful and elusive g-spot I could never quite reach with my own fingers.

"Fuck," I breathed the curse.

My brain was cloudy and blurry with lust and pleasure, eyes hooded, lips permanently parted and chanting his name through my gasps. Owen lifted a hand from my hips to brush across my lips, dragging his thumb over them before his hand disappeared again.

Suddenly, he reared up to his knees, then I could feel pressure, and after that a circling over my clit as he still pumped in and out of me. And that was all she wrote.

I threw myself to the side, my hair flying around as I bore down around him and freaking screamed. Legitimately screamed as my orgasm washed over me in an overwhelming burst, then sank into hot wave after wave like lying on warm sand with the ocean licking at my toes.

"Oh, *fuck!*" Owen yelled, dropping his head and curling over me like he was in pain as my channel clamped around him over and over again.

Could a cock get strangled by an extra tight pussy?

He gasped, panted, then shoved into me a couple more times, less rhythmically, then I could literally feel him swell inside me and the pulse and shot of him coming.

There were a breathless few moments as I tried to commit the feeling to memory. It was enough to make my core pulse again, which pulled another strangled moan from Owen.

“Are you ok?” I finally asked when he took a gulping breath, his member still inside me.

He looked at me like I was crazy.

“Do I fucking look ok?” he demanded breathlessly. “Your pussy just tried to make me a eunuch!”

I laughed, which made him grin, too.

There was a collective breath of relief, then he settled his head down on my chest as he recovered.

“I should be the one asking you if *you’re* ok,” he commented, eventually lifting his head again to look into my eyes for an answer to his non-question.

“I’m fine,” I told him. “Better than fine.”

“Good,” he said, looking amused.

It was that moment that he chose to pull out of me, and the slick slide of him leaving my body was hollow and agonizing. I wished he could just live there, like that, taking residence inside my vagina for the foreseeable future.

Owen did put his arm around me though, hugging me and spooning my naked body to his as our breathing evened out and my eyelids drooped with a sudden post-coital fatigue.

“Bath?” he asked me, brushing hair away from my face.

“That sounds really nice,” I admitted.

“Come,” he said, but I shook my head.

“Carry me.”

He grinned down at me, but did as I asked, hauling me up bridal style toward his bathroom.

I was set gently to my feet beside the bathtub, which was more like a freaking pool in the center of the giant bathroom. On one side was the toilet room, then a big shower was tucked away on the other wall, but the bathtub was framed with marble and four massive pillars covered in painted ivy, welcoming you to a very Roman-ish style bathhouse.

Reaching over, Owen started the water, stopped the drain, and dropped in a handful of what looked like epsom salts that were stored in a jar beside the tub, then he took my hand as I stepped into the thing.

I let out a long, low moan as the hot water hit my cold toes.

“No more of that, you need time to recoup,” Owen said, rebuking me like I was a naughty child.

“Who said I need recovery time?” I demanded.

He turned to me, his face more serious.

“Your bleeding pussy, that’s who,” he said in a low voice.

Oh...I hadn’t even noticed blood.

Owen stood and moved around to the fireplace on the nearest wall. He dipped and put together some sticks and wood shavings from beside it to start a small fire.

I watched his strong back for a second as the impossibility of us flitted over my mind again.

Impossible, but we’d done it, anyway.

With a grin, I closed my eyes and sank into the bath water.

Chapter 10



-Owen-

What the ever-living fuck did I just do?

I needed a minute to think, so I dipped down and started an unnecessary fire to warm the bathroom while Mia sank into the bath.

That was...probably the best sex I'd ever had in my life.

Not joking, not exaggerating.

The way Mia moved, and the sounds she made had me fighting against an orgasm practically from the moment we started, but the fucking strangle of her cunt on my cock was what really did me in.

A virgin.

I couldn't fucking believe I'd just deflowered a virgin. My inner wishes-he-was-a-Victorian-gentleman was on a bender, throwing horrible names around for my having taken the innocence of a young woman I had no intention of marrying. The LA modern man in me was high-fiving himself, and my inner professor was smacking me on the back of the head for sleeping with a student.

All three of them were right, in a way. There was one long list of reasons why this was a really *really* bad idea. Two of the biggest ones were named Caden and Charlie.

Shoving the palm of one hand into my eye as the fire started rolling, I threw a glance over my shoulder and my breath smashed out of my chest again.

Mia was sitting up in the tub with steamy water barely up to her navel. Her fingers were in her hair, dragging it back

from her face as it stuck to her neck. The ends were wet and clung to her succulent skin. Fuck, she was incredible.

The woman looked like a Grecian goddess, scooping water with her hands to dribble over her chest. I watched the droplets slip over her curves, glittering in the firelight and the fading sun outside.

Mia turned to me, a smile gracing her face as she found me watching her like a creeper.

“You joining me?”

I chewed on my bottom lip, wondering how the everloving hell I had this beautiful woman naked in my tub.

Standing, I took slow steps toward her as her lips opened, her breath speeding up while her hazel and green eyes dipped down to my cock, the fucking thing already trying valiantly to get back up.

“You’re beautiful, do you know that?” I asked her, finally getting to the tub where I leaned over her, the ledge hiding my half mast status.

That’s a lie. It was full on tapping-the-bellybutton status.

That’s also a lie. Who the fuck is long enough to reach their bellybutton? Where did that phrase even come from?

Mia’s smile widened.

“I do, now,” she said, her voice soft, but so fucking sexy and throaty.

“Do you know how long I’ve wanted to say that to you?” I asked next, bending far enough over her, I could tease a kiss against her lips, brushing but not quite connecting.

A mewl escaped her lips as they opened for me, those pretty eyes closing as she anticipated a kiss that didn’t come.

“Maybe...since I walked in on you jacking into your hand under your desk?” she asked, that sassy mouth slipping into a smirk as her eyes opened again.

I couldn't help it. I pressed a firm kiss against those brutal but sweet lips.

"Join me," she whispered, flicking her tongue out against my mouth, no longer asking, but telling.

When I stood to my full height again, Mia scooted forward in the water that was now licking at her nipples.

No more words. I just climbed into the bath behind her and pulled her against me, holding her.

Mia's eyes closed as she leaned back against my chest, relaxing fully into me. I rested my arm against the edge of the tub, lifting the other to fuss with her hair, drawing my finger over her creamy shoulder.

"I like what you do with your hands," she murmured, tilting her head back to peek at me.

I chuffed, then lifted my toes to push the faucet handle to the off position. Steam rose around us, the scent of my stress relieving bath salts permeating the air. It was lavender heavy, which may have been the reason I chose it, now that I considered it. It smelled like *her*.

Unable to help myself, my fingers dropped from her shoulder and dipped beneath the water, following the line down the side of her breast and waist until they brushed against her mound again. Her back arched, a soft moan whimpering from her lips as I splayed her lips and drew my fingers across her swollen clit.

"See what I mean?" she managed, breathless and panting. "Nice hands."

Hiding my smile in the crook of her shoulder, I nibbled on the sensitive skin there while rubbing circles over her tender bud, holding her tighter as she began to squirm.

"Owen," she gasped as her body jolted, thighs squeezing my hand as she came in my arms.

I slipped a finger into her slit, giving her something to contract against so she didn't have to experience the empty gnawing of coming with nothing inside her. I was gentle

though, careful not to stimulate that area too much since she was probably sore from me impaling her earlier.

“Wow,” Mia gasped out as she came down, her lungs deflating as she finally relaxed again and took a real breath.

“You respond to my touch like a dream,” I whispered into her neck, which made her giggle.

“Your beard is rough,” she told me, squirming away.

I smiled, gave her a good rub with my cheek which made her squeal, then lifted my head so she could lean against me again.

“Thank you,” she said softly, shifting so her cheek was against my chest, her eyes closed.

It wasn't more than three seconds before she made a sleepy little snoring sound that had me grinning like an idiot. Everything about her was cute or adorable, or sexy as hell.

The thought sparked a landslide of guilt, burning through me with a new sort of shame I'd never felt before. How could I do that to her? Mia looked up to me, entrusting her education, along with begging advice from me. I was someone she considered a mentor. And there I was, sitting in my bathtub, naked as the day I was born after giving her not one, but two orgasms in the last hour.

I dragged my hand through my hair, hating myself a little for what I'd done, but I also knew that there was no scenario that I would've said no to her. I never could. She was adamant about what she thought she wanted, and what she had decided on was...*me*.

She knew my age, she knew about my kids, my divorce, and all the dirty, nasty shit that came with that, and she wanted me anyway. Wanted *this*, at least. I wasn't sure if the thing between us was a one and done, or if she wanted something else, or if she'd even fucking *thought* about the consequences.

Well, maybe she didn't even *know* the consequences. But I fucking did. I was flirting with a quick sack if the Dean found out. Sleeping with a student wasn't just looked down

upon, it was grounds for an immediate dismissal at this school. I'd be a laughing stock in the academic world, and my chances of getting a job back at UCLA or Yale afterwards were dramatically diminished. I would have to look at the school bylaws to see what, or even if there would be disciplinary actions against the student in such a situation, but the thought of destroying her chance at finishing her degree made my chest tighten with new shame.

That was assuming she wanted a relationship, though. Maybe she just needed a really good fuck to get the next scene for her book finished. Maybe this time, I was her muse.

I had a lot of questions, but I knew none of them would be answered today.

No, I was going to give Mia the night to enjoy the post orgasmic glow of her first fuck and we'd have to leave the messy stuff for morning.

Oh shit, was she going to stay the night? I wanted her to, but she had a roommate and someone who would miss her if she didn't go home. The sun sinking behind the trees told me it was getting to be dinner time, so I had to wake her.

"Mia," I murmured, pressing kisses up and down her throat until she smiled and stretched languidly in my arms.

As her movement shifted the water, I realized how cool it'd gotten as I sat there immersed in my own brain.

"Hi," she said finally, her eyes blinking sleepily open at me.

She looked so fucking happy to see me, it made my heart squeeze a little bit. I couldn't remember the last time someone was that happy to look at my face.

"It's getting late," I told her, lowering my voice so it didn't jar her. "Will your roommate be missing you?"

She hummed, then jerked upright.

"Oh, crap," she groaned, standing up immediately, water jumping and sloughing off her skin in a glistening sheet.

It left me eye-to-ass with her, and I nodded, appreciating the firm curve of each cheek for a long moment. I didn't have long to admire, however. Mia stepped out of the tub, looking around for a towel as she dripped all over my tile floors.

"The cabinet, over there," I told her, pointing.

She smiled gratefully at me, then hurried over to get one. She didn't just get one though, she got two and handed me the second as I stepped out of the tub.

"Thanks," I said, freshly amazed at the way she was able to think outside of herself.

She wrapped the towel around her body, tucking in a tale of it between her breasts as she quickly headed toward my bedroom again.

"I left all my stuff in the garden," she said over her shoulder while she nimbly plucked up all her clothes and started pulling them on.

I did the same, but chucked the old stuff into my hamper before grabbing a new pair of underwear and some gray sweats with CAMBRIDGE down the sides. I'd had them since my years in England, and they showed their wear, but I couldn't get myself to part with them.

"Clea said she's probably staying with her boyfriend tonight," Mia mumbled as she reached around, trying to hook her bra back on.

I stepped up behind her and took the ends from her, which surprised her. She froze as I met the ends and hooked it, then pressed a kiss on the back of her neck.

Mia turned around, in her jeans and bra, and I watched her eyes drag back over me. It was kind of fun to feel like a hunk of meat again. Women still looked at me like that occasionally, but usually for different reasons, with money being at the top of the list.

This girl? She just liked what she saw, and it didn't go deeper than that. I hadn't felt like that since...college.

“You’re so hot,” she blurted, dragging her eyes up to mine. “It’s not fair.”

I chuckled at her, then lifted my hand to brush a hair off her cheek. God, I just couldn’t stop touching her.

“Not as hot as you,” I countered, which made her blush all over again. “How are you feeling? Do you hurt?”

She shook her head, the sharp, wet ends of her hair flailing about with the movement. “I feel amazing. You’re really, kind of disturbingly good at giving a girl orgasms.”

No, I wasn’t, but I wasn’t about to disagree. I wasn’t any better than any other guy, her body just bloomed for me, and it made my touch seem magical, but it was just our chemistry that made each touch zing.

“Crap,” she mumbled again, turning away from me to grab her shirt. “Stop it, Owen.”

“I’m not doing anything,” I called to her as she left the room, tossing back a wicked grin as she went.

I followed her, scooping up my t-shirt as I went, but I stayed a few steps behind her.

Mia hurried back out to the garden and grabbed her phone from the little vine covered patio tucked in the corner of the yard. I watched from the doorway, my shirt still tucked in my fist as she checked her phone, shielding the screen from the evening sunset as she tried to see it. She typed on it, like she was texting, then she eventually turned to me and smiled before making her way back.

“Everything ok?” I asked as she approached.

“Yeah, I just needed to respond to Clea. She texted me two hours ago.”

The blush on her cheek was fucking adorable. It was those moments that reminded me just how young she was.

“I was a little distracted,” she added, as if I couldn’t read between the lines that we were fucking when that text came in.

I raised an eyebrow and nodded, sliding over to the side so she could pass back into the sun room that led into the main part of the house.

Demands that we sit and talk about what happened stayed at the tip of my tongue as Mia headed back into the house, but I bit it all back down. I could live with uncertainty for one day. Instead, I needed to live in the moment and just... *live.*

“Hungry?” I asked, closing the door and snapping the lock closed before I passed her, making my way to the kitchen.

“Actually, I am,” she agreed.

We’d had a late lunch, not that Mia actually ate much of it. I figured she would be hungry after our...vigorous activities.

“Good. Come sit at the bar and I’ll cook for you,” I told her, pointing my finger at the bar stools.

She obeyed, but it was odd seeing someone sitting there that was over four feet tall. Usually the boys had breakfast there on the weekends.

“Do you want help?” she asked, leaning on her elbow. “I’m not completely helpless in the kitchen.”

“You can,” I offered. “Or you can sit your ass down and let me pamper you.”

Mia laughed, then leaned back in the stool to watch.

“You really know how to cook?” she asked, her hands framing her cheeks while she leaned forward in anticipation.

“How do you think a single man manages to survive?” I countered.

“Takeout?” She quirked a brow at me.

“Ew, nobody can live off takeout and fast food and stay healthy.”

Mia giggled at that, then proceeded to watch my every move while I assembled simple fried rice with a plethora of veggies. She was quiet while I worked, methodically chopping

scallions, carrots, kale and zucchini. When the veg hit the hot pan, Mia jumped at the sound, but settled back in, head leaning against her arm again as her eyes drooped with exhaustion.

“You’re quiet,” I told her while sliding the plate in front of her.

She smiled up at me.

“Sorry, I guess I’m just pooped.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I told her.

“I will probably need to go home after dinner. I can’t keep my freaking eyes open.”

I mulled over what I’d say next, not sure if I wanted to offer what I was fucking *dying* to offer. Didn’t have to really think about it, though. The words came spewing out of my mouth, anyway.

“Stay. You don’t have to leave.”

Her eyes got so big at the prospect, shock staring back at me in her eyes.

“You want me to stay?” she whispered.

Shit...I promised myself I wasn’t going to do it, but we had to talk about it just a little.

“I...I don’t know what we’re doing,” I admitted, taking the spot next to her at the bar. “And we don’t have to even really think about it tonight, but I can tell you I love being with you, and if you want to, I’d love having you here with me tonight. If you don’t want to, I’ll bring you home as soon as we’re done eating.”

Mia’s eyes glistened, then a beautiful smile burst onto her lips. She didn’t answer one way or the other, choosing instead to dive forward and kiss the ever living hell out of my mouth.

Her tongue swept immediately in my mouth and I sucked on it, which made her squeal and giggle.

“Really?” was her final answer.

I nodded, unable to help the grin on my own face.

She pressed a kiss onto my lips again, then dove into her dinner.

Once the plan was set for the evening, it was like a fog of uncertainty was lifted off us, and it was easier to enjoy our time together. Mia ate quickly, moaning over every savory bite, then I took her hand and led her back to bed.

“Here,” I said, tossing her a shirt and some sweats from my dresser. “So you don’t have to sleep in that.”

“You want to *dress* me before getting in your bed?” she asked, her cheeks flushing, though her mouth loved to give me those dirty, juicy nuggets just to tease the fuck out of me.

“You hop in there naked and you won’t hear one complaint out of me,” I told her, whipping off my own shirt and sweats so I could crawl under the sheets in my black boxer briefs.

I stretched out under the Egyptian cotton and watched with satisfaction as Mia undressed, stripping slowly as if to give me a show.

Eventually, she’d taken off everything but her panties, those high, tight breasts were proudly on display as she joined me in the bed.

“Do you really intend to tease me with your bare tits all night?” I groaned, my mouth already watering to suck her tight nipples.

“I thought you weren’t going to complain,” she said with a giggle.

I gave another groan, then pulled her to me, spooning her. My hand might’ve slid up to cup one of her breasts, but she didn’t complain. Instead, she sighed and wiggled her ass into my crotch like a fucking deviant, then sighed long and deep before closing her eyes. She still smelled of lavender, and her hair was something like a cloud of vanilla or marshmallow. Something like that. Didn’t matter, really. I just dug my nose into her thick, light brown hair and drifted off.

Chapter 11



-Mia-

When I woke up from the best freaking wet dream of my life, I jarred a little at the unfamiliar surroundings. The big four poster bed was like something out of a fantasy, and the sun peeking in from the huge window to my right was only dampened a little by the velvet curtains tied back on the wall. Once all of that settled in, I turned and saw the almost angelic face of Owen Harlo, sleeping with his nose buried in my hair and his hand still loosely gripping one of my boobs like it was a lifeline.

I grinned, thinking back to what had happened the day before. Every memory was erotic and sweet and beautiful. I never wanted to forget a single thing about it. It'd been pure perfection.

There was only one thing that could make it more perfect, and that was what I intended on doing before my bed partner woke up.

Easing out of Owen's hands, I froze as he turned onto his back, throwing his arm over his eyes with a sleepy sigh.

I couldn't have planned it any better myself. I pulled the blanket down a little, exposing his chest, stomach and hips, and stopped to admire the satisfying bulge waiting for me.

Nope, couldn't have planned it better if I tried.

Slowly and carefully, I crawled over him and straddled his legs before scooping my fingers into the band of his underwear and pulled it down until his erection popped straight up, aiming at my face.

I grinned, then took a deep breath and took him in as far as I could and sucked.

It didn't take long before his whole body flexed and his hand came down on my head, fisting in my hair as he groaned.

"Fuck me," he mumbled, still half asleep, but knowing some kind of shenanigans was going on.

I laughed in my throat, his cock still deep in my mouth as he pressed my head down, making me take him in further.

"Mia, what the fuck," he finally growled, awake enough to finally register what was happening.

"I needed to know what you tasted like," I told him, after letting him pull out of my mouth with a satisfying pop.

"Is your curiosity satisfied?" he asked, brushing his hand down my mouth, which I opened for his fingers.

He cursed again, hooked his fingers in my mouth like I was a fish, and dragged me up his body. I fumbled, licking his fingers while crawling up his body... kind of like a tree.

Huh.

When I was close enough, he pulled me by the back of the neck until our lips were pressed together, battling it out inside my mouth, then his. It didn't take long for him to dig his fingers into my panties and pull. I could feel the bite of them on my thighs, so I wiggled until they were dangling off one ankle, and I was straddling him, grinding against his pelvis with needy hunger.

"Get on me, darling," he said, his voice carrying the bite of British accent that I loved picking out when he spoke sometimes. "Get on me and ride."

I obeyed. Like, immediately.

I was still a little sore from our first deep dive into my pussy from the day before, but I didn't really care, to be honest. I needed him inside me more than just about anything, so I grabbed his shaft, angled it as best I could, then impaled myself on him.

Matching his-and-her groans filled the room on impact, I ground down into him while he flexed up, and I

could feel him so deep, it ricocheted through to my belly button. God, it felt so good.

“How the fuck is it possible to be so Goddamn *tight*?” he grunted, hands gripping my hips so hard I was sure I’d have polkadot bruises left there from his fingertips.

The idea of that was thrilling.

He guided my hips, speeding me up when I slowed to languidly enjoy the sensation of him sliding within me. It was a feeling unlike anything else. Now I knew what all the fuss was about, and I could definitely say that I was going to be rewriting some of my sex scenes, for sure.

“We were supposed to take a break so you can heal,” Owen growled, reaching up to pinch the heck out of a nipple, which made me yelp.

The zing of it traveled down my nerves, convalescing down in my clit, which was dragging against his pelvis like my own personal rabbit toy.

“I’ll be fine,” I told him with a grin. “Though, maybe you want to kiss my booboo?”

Owen paused, his eyes shooting up to meet mine.

“Mia Miller,” he said breathlessly. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

Before I could even process those words, he threw me off him so my back bounced on the bed. He crawled over me and kissed a line down my chest and belly, pausing to dip his tongue into my belly button, which made me squeal in delight.

With a grin on his own face, Owen sank further down, then met my eyes before his mouth found my center, licking a long line up my slit, then a tiny kiss to my lips. *Those* lips.

“Better?” he asked, voice low and wicked.

“Better,” I agreed just as he dove back in, shoving his tongue up my channel before taking my clit between his teeth and nipping.

I thrashed around like a woman possessed, my brain freaking exploding by the pleasure a mouth on my privates could bring.

God, I was so close. With just two orgasms behind me, I could already feel my next coming on, my brain trying to function enough to figure out how I'd lived twenty-three years without one.

"Come for me," he growled, slipping two fingers inside me and curling them up against my—

"Oh, God," I whimpered, grinding against his hand and mouth as his lips circled my clit and sucked.

A long, low groan echoed up his throat, reverberating through my clit which felt so fucki—

"Ahh!" I shrieked, my orgasm smashing through me like a sledgehammer.

A strong hand stroked up my belly, pressing down gently so my movements weren't as wild, but he kept sucking in little pulses that prolonged my pleasure to a point of almost pain, it was so excruciatingly good.

When the hot waves dwindled, Owen lifted his head and I saw the fire of lust burning in his eyes. Lord, he was incredible.

The stalemate of staring at each other's faces lasted a good ten seconds before it was *his* turn to climb *me*, and when he did, his mouth crashed to mine.

His lips were wet, faintly tasting of...well, *me* I supposed; salty, sweet, and faintly floral. I never knew it could be such a turn on to taste myself on the lips of a man.

"Are you still sore?" he grunted out just as I noticed my freaking hips were bouncing against him, begging for some fulfillment.

"Get inside me," I whispered.

"I'm clean, too," he promised. "I haven't been with anyone since—"

I pressed my palm to his mouth and shook my head. There was no part of me that needed to know when the last time was that he slept with someone else. Besides, it was too late, anyway.

He just nodded, then shook every single freaking thought out of my head as he pushed inside me with one firm thrust.

The man rode me, and without the sting of virginity, I felt nothing but a little bruised, and a lotta pleasure with each slick motion of his hips.

“I want to ride you again,” I told him, trying to put together a cohesive sentence.

He didn’t say anything, yay or nay. Owen simply tucked my knees into the crook of my arms, gripped my thighs, then threw himself over so we spun, me on top and him still inside me.

“That was amazing,” I said, using my knees on the mattress to grind down on him.

He chuckled, then lifted a hand to palm my breast and massage it, rolling my nipple between his fingers.

“Your wish is my command,” he told me, cheesy as all heck, but I absolutely loved it.

“Then I wish...” I murmured, looking into his eyes again, “to be here, like this, forever.”

An odd expression crossed his face, and I wondered for a moment if I’d screwed it up, but then he sat up and grabbed the back of my neck, kissing me again. It wasn’t like our other kisses, though. This kiss was filled to the brim with soul and some kind of desperation that was either acceptance or...goodbye.

I gave everything back to him, praying to God that it wasn’t goodbye, but then I thought better of praying since I was literally in the middle of effing my professor.

My hips continued to roll, his chest pressed against my b-cup boobs as our sweat-slicked bodies molded into one.

When he came, I watched a lot closer. The way his eyes squinted and brows furrowed, and the groan he gave me was entrancing. I wanted to see it over and over again, staring at his face forever.

As he came down from his orgasm, he held me tightly to him, bear hugging my chest to his which stopped my hips from moving. We sat there still, with his softening erection still inside me as we panted into each other's necks.

"This isn't fair," he whispered, then loosened his arms and let me go.

Pain was written across his face, and I needed to know *why*.

"What's the matter?" I breathed, but he gently pushed me to the side and got out of bed, heading for his bathroom.

"Owen?" I called, not sure if I should follow him.

He shook his head, then disappeared around the door frame just for the sound of a shower to filter into the bedroom.

What had happened?

I got up and followed only to find him leaning against the open shower door while the water heated up.

"Owen, what's wrong?" I asked him.

He glanced over his shoulder at me, arm braced on the tiles as if he was struggling to hold himself up.

"We can't do this," was his answer, then he turned and stepped under the water.

It was then that I realized I had two options. One option was, put my clothes on, go home, and give up my job as a TA because it would be unbearably uncomfortable to work for him after what we'd done. Or option two, which was simply, fight for him and try to make it work.

Could we make it work? Were there guidelines in his job description that prohibited him from sleeping with a student? Could he lose his job just for being with me?

Panic set in with that thought. As much as I wanted him, I couldn't let him get fired just because I couldn't keep my freaking hands to myself. But on the flip side, I couldn't imagine *not* having him in my life. It seemed a cold and dismal existence without his smile, his dimple, and that incredible intelligence behind a sharp, but kind intellect.

Needing answers, I followed him to the shower and let myself in. He didn't seem surprised.

"We can't do this, Mia," was the first thing he said.

"We already did," I said, as if to remind him that we hadn't had sex once, but twice in a twenty-four hour period.

"But we shouldn't have," he countered.

"Why not?" I barked back.

"I could lose my fucking job and reputation, for one," he bit back. "Besides the glaring fact that you're still a fucking kid and I'm old enough to be your fucking *dad!*"

"Really? After all this, you're having insecurities about your age?" I raised my eyebrow at him.

He didn't look amused.

"So, we'll keep it quiet. It doesn't have to affect your job," I promised. "Nobody needs to know."

"Sure, for a week or a month, or however long it takes for you to get your kicks then move on to someone your own age?"

I was affronted at the accusation.

"What does that mean?" I demanded.

"It means that this isn't real," he breathed, sighing all of the fight out of him.

"It's real for me," I volleyed back. "This is all real for me."

"Damn it, Mia," he said, turning away from me to grab the bar soap.

I watched him suds up, then caught it as he shoved the slippery thing into my hands to do the same.

I didn't do anything but stand there, waiting for some semblance of sense to finally blurt out of his mouth, but it seemed anger had built up instead, and when he turned back to me, his hair plastered to his forehead and water glimmering on his chest he was scowling.

“What? I was literally inside you five minutes ago, but you can't share a bar of soap?”

Tossing the bar, I realized that there was no amount of sense that was going to make a comment like that worth the wait.

“Mia!” he called, but I was already out of the shower and scrubbing down with yesterday's towel.

The water shut off, but by the time he was stumbling out of the shower, I was heading to the bedroom for my clothes.

My panties were across the room, so I dipped to grab those since I'd disposed of them earlier, then I found my bra, shirt, and pants on top of his dresser on the far wall.

I was all dressed when he joined me, digging through his dresser for a pair of sweats that he struggled to get on over his damp, naked body.

“What the fuck, Mia!” he called, storming after me while I hurried to the front door.

The man caught up to me, slipping on his glasses just as I got the door open, but he pulled me back in and slammed the door closed before pressing me into it, caging me in his arms as his fiery amber eyes met mine.

“You don't get to insult me then expect me to listen when you call my name,” I spit, shoving against his shoulders.

“I don't know what I'm fucking doing,” he growled back at me, his hair still wet and dripping over his face and shoulders. “I don't fucking know, ok?”

“It’s ok to fumble a little to figure out what you’re doing, but it’s not ok to hurt me and to shove me against a door, looking like you want to eat me alive.”

“But I *do* want to eat you,” he bit out. “I want to *devour* you. I want fucking everything with you, Mia, and that scares the absolute fuck out of me!”

It hit me then. He wasn’t angry, and he wasn’t dismissing me. He was trying to protect himself.

He’s scared.

“Owen,” I whispered, pressing my palms to his cheeks before placing a soft kiss against his lips. “I’m scared, too.”

He swallowed hard, eyes closed like he couldn’t handle whatever turmoil was going on in his brain.

“I’m scared, but I’m willing to chance it,” I told him. “I’m willing to take a chance on you. On *us*.”

He bit his bottom lip, then opened his eyes to look at me. He looked tortured.

“You’re so young, Mia...”

“We don’t have to promise anything,” I hurried, watching him pulling away in real time. “We can just...*be*. Just for now.”

“I’m your professor. Hell, I’m your *boss*...”

“I don’t care,” I told him, meeting his gaze with what I hoped he saw as strength and resolution. “I know you won’t treat me differently just because we’re sleeping together.”

He sighed again, shaking his head.

“No, I wouldn’t,” he agreed.

“And nobody has to know. This is between you and me. Man and woman. Nothing else.”

“Man and woman that’s half man’s age,” he countered.

“Woman and man who woman doesn’t care what age man is,” I tried.

He gave a gentle laugh and shook his head.

“That didn’t make any sense,” he admitted.

“Sorry, I’m still a little dick brained right now,” I told him, which made him laugh again.

“I’m too old for no strings, Mia. Where is this going? Am I just your cock of choice while you finish your degree, then you’ll move on to greener pastures?”

I shook my head.

“I don’t know what’ll happen in a year,” I told him, dipping my face in front of his, so he was forced to look at me. “But what I do know is that you drive me crazy, and you’re so smart and cool, and you’re the sexiest guy I know. None of that involves your age. My heart wants you, Professor Harlo. The question is if you’ll accept it.”

He shook his head again.

“Fine,” I said with a shaky voice. “Consider this my resignation.”

“Mia,” he said, trying to grab my arm, but I resisted. “At least let me drive you home. Fuck!”

The idea of walking the mile back to the dorm sucked, but so did sitting in his quiet car for several minutes.

Owen didn’t wait for a response. He grabbed a teddy-lined corduroy jacket off the rack by the door and slipped it on over his bare chest, then picked up his keys from the sideboard.

“I need my bag,” I whispered painfully.

He silently nodded, so I took the moment to gather my thoughts, and my possessions.

I didn’t know what any of it meant, him wanting to drive me home, or him saying he was scared, but obviously not willing to take a chance on what we could be.

I hurried back to the front door. Owen was still there, but he looked angry, just not at me. His movements were jerky

and his mouth was set in a deep frown, but his eyes were filled with sadness when ours met. It broke my heart.

We went to his coupe in silence, but he went to my side and opened my door, ever the gentleman. Funny how I couldn't unsee in my brain how *ungentlemanly* he was in bed.

When we pulled up in front of my dorm building, Owen let out a sigh, then finally spoke.

“Take the day. I'll see you on Monday at one.”

I wanted to scream and use my new f-word on him, but I chose to stay silent and not promise anything as I got out. He didn't pull away though. When I got to the main door, I turned on the small stoop and saw him still there, watching me with a look of wretched frustration on his face. It hit me just how hard it was on him just to tell me ‘no’.

Still though, just because it was difficult, did that mean I could forgive him?

I didn't know.

Turning my back to him, I went inside and shut the door. Running up the stairs, I hoped Clea wasn't home yet. She would definitely be able to sense the sex on me, plus she'd recognize that I was in day old clothes. Thank God she wasn't back yet. Being the masochist I was, I went to the window which looked over the street and front yard, I saw Owen's car still there, his face in his hand as he sat there, unmoving.

I must have watched him for a good five minutes before he finally sucked in a big breath and sat up, then put his car in drive and zoomed off.

My heart crumbled all over again. First things first though, I needed to shower and change before Clea could sniff out the sex on me. Dang it...I was going to have to lie to her, because if she found out I lost my V-card, she'd want to know who I'd lost it *to* and would hound me until I broke and told her.

Anxiety speared through my chest, but I just breathed through it and stepped under the water, flashing back to Owens shower while I washed all remnants of the man off me.

A tear slid down my face and got lost in the water.

How could no promises hurt so bad? He never told me he'd be my boyfriend. In fact, he'd said several times that it was a bad idea before he'd broken my hymen. Evidently even professors weren't immune to making stupid decisions with their dicks.

Chapter 12



-Owen-

What the hell was I doing?

The words that flew out of my mouth were... “What the fuck?”

When I got home, I looked in the mirror by the front door and saw the glow on my skin mixed with the deep frown that had set in ever since Mia left my car.

I’d sat there, outside her dorm hating myself so violently. I wanted to run in after her and throw myself at her feet, begging her to have me, but I couldn’t. I fucking *couldn’t*!

My phone rang in the midst of my self-hatred, so I yanked it out of my pocket.

Paula.

There was a chance that it was one of the boys, so I shoved all the pain and anger down long enough to answer and find out.

“Hey,” came Paula’s voice.

I sighed.

“Now is not a good time,” I told her.

“Yeah, well it’s my *only* time, so I’ll make it brief. I want to take the boys on a trip next weekend.”

“What the fuck? No. You got them this weekend. Besides, they seem to need a little space from your new boy toy.”

“Oh, don’t even. Boy toy?” she laughed off my anger. “He’s a full grown man with a career. You don’t look good

dressed in envy, Owen.”

“I’m not envious,” I spit. “I’m against some asshole kid around my children, calling their mother a cougar.”

“Dammit, Caden!” she called, but I barked to get her attention back.

“Don’t you get mad at him. I need to know what’s going on in their lives and in their homes. Thanks for telling me you’re dating some kid still in *college*.”

Half the anger in my voice was directed at myself, because, hadn’t I just done the same thing?

“No, you don’t get to know everything that goes on in my life. If he were a bad example for the boys, he wouldn’t be here. Besides, you’ll get to the point of dating someone eventually.”

“But a college kid? Really? After Charlie gets into a fight at school, you’re calling him a *good* example?”

I half wanted to laugh, half cry and beg her to tell me it was ok to date so young.

“Don’t you try and pin that on him. He’s almost graduated, twenty-two,” she said. “Besides, age is just a number, Owen. This is one of the reasons we divorced. You’re so strict and on the dot that it makes you rigid and immovable. You can’t have a relationship like that. No woman could or would tolerate that.”

Shit, how many times had I heard that?

“Now, if you’re done barking about my boyfriend and humping my leg, I’d like to talk about the weekend with the boys.”

“Paula...”

“Hear me out. I got tickets to a basketball game in Memphis and Charlie actually looked excited about it. I can’t get that kid to smile about anything anymore. I’ll let you have them for all of fall break until Thanksgiving.”

It almost sounded like we were trading around inanimate objects, and I hated that. But Charlie smiling?

“Shit...fine. If it'll make him happy, then go.”

“Good. We're staying there for two nights. Game is Saturday night. We'll be home maybe at noon on Sunday, but that's not a lot of time before bedtime.”

“Will your child boyfriend be going?”

She laughed.

“He's not a child, but yes. He's coming. He's the one who got the tickets to see the Grizzlies.”

I rubbed the heel of my hand into my eye socket and sighed wearily.

“Fine. If that's what the boys want, then they can go.”

“Good,” she said, then went silent on the line for a minute. “Owen, are you ok?”

“I'm fine,” I growled.

“Well, you don't sound ok. You know you can still talk to me, right? I mean, we're divorced and everything, but if you need someone to—”

“Thanks, but I think that ship sailed along with our marriage, when you fucked somebody else,” I bit out.

“Ok,” she clipped. “They'll be back at your house next Saturday. You can even pick them up Friday night if you want.”

“Fine,” I agreed, then we hung up.

I hated bringing that up, but I had for *some* reason. She blamed me for the reasons she cheated, but I couldn't ever get over the betrayal. I mean, yeah, I was busy with my job and my writing, but I never would have hurt her like that.

Shit...

Images of Mia in my shower and her shell shocked reaction before she ran off blew through my brain, which made me wince.

Evidently I was damn good at hurting people, too.

I shucked my jacket, then made my way to my computer to emotion dump all over the keyboard.

While I word-vomited into the pages, I couldn't stop thinking about whether she'd show up to my office on Monday or not. I spent way too much time thinking about it, to be honest, so what little I managed to write was probably total shit.

Shutting off my computer, I went to the living area instead and turned on the TV, needing something to distract my mind. I had more than a full day to wait to find out if she'd given up on me or not. Not that there was an 'us' to give up on. But fuck, it sure felt like there was, and that we'd just suffered our first argument and first breakup all at once.

My skin itched to go to her, but I forced myself to be still.

I couldn't have her.

Could I?

Chapter 13



-Mia-

I spent hours and hours agonizing over the question of whether I was done working with Owen or not. While I was struggling to forgive his assholery, I couldn't imagine a day without him. Sunday was excruciating enough, and that wasn't just because of the radio silence between us, or the fact that I'd had to lie to Clea about everything.

What I eventually came to decide was, I needed to see him, to see if maybe he'd figured out his brain enough to realize he'd made a massive mistake.

Well, that wasn't the *only* reason. Part of my brain, the realistic and logical side, still knew that my TA job would help prepare me for my hopeful writing career. Asshole or not, he was a professional and I still had so much that I could learn from him. If we could keep it in our pants, anyway.

At five after one, I knocked on his door a moment before entering.

Surprise registered over his face, then it leveled out.

"You're late," he said, that twinkle back in his eyes when he teased me. "You know how I feel about being late."

"When you're on time for class for once, you can berate me," I countered, then sat on my chair across from him.

It was silent for a long moment, until he said, "I'm glad you came back, Mia."

I nodded, but didn't look up. Instead, I grabbed the top of the small stack we had left from Saturday when we'd... gotten distracted.

Owen pinched the bridge of his nose, a frustrated action. He didn't say anything else, though it was obvious he wanted to by the way he kept opening his mouth, then shutting it with a quiet snap.

Well, evidently there was a plan C, which was *'pretend nothing ever happened and get really freaking awkward'*.

Awesome.

We went on for two hours that way before Owen sat back and grabbed his hair, letting out a frustrated growl.

"What is it now?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"Isn't it enough to sit in this awkward as heck silence, you have to add your own frustrations to it for me to endure?"

He chuckled, though there was no humor in it.

"Fuck awkward. This is torturous," he finally admitted.

"Do I need to resign?" I asked in a quiet voice.

I didn't want to, but I was starting to wonder if I even had a choice at this point.

"No, we can be grown ups about this," he said, shaking his head while he fussed with some papers on his desk for no reason.

"There's been no point in this where we've acted grown up since the moment you pulled out of me Sunday morning," I told him.

His head shot up and he met my eyes, that familiar hunger dangling before me, so close, but so inaccessible.

"I'm trying to do the right thing, Mia," he growled. "I'm doing the hard part for both of us."

"No, you're making it hard when it doesn't have to be." I shrugged, but that seemed to infuriate him.

“Do you know how fucking difficult this is?” he demanded, “How much I want to throw you over this desk and fuck you ‘til you’re breathless?”

“So do it,” I challenged.

“And what? Just wait for someone to come in and find us with our pants around our ankles? Wait for the Dean of this fucking school to realize that I fucked one of my students and throw my out on my ass? Wait for you to graduate and go off to see the world after I’ve already invested myself in you?”

“Why do you keep assuming that after I graduate, I’ll leave you?” I asked him.

“Because it’s inevitable.” He scoffed. “I’m not an idiot. I’m a fling and I know that. The older man, an authority figure, the successful writer... I’m fucking irresistible to you, but it won’t always be that way.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

His eyes crinkled in irritation as he watched me.

“For being *so* freaking old, you certainly don’t get it, do you?” I asked.

He bristled at the old comment, but he’s the one who wanted to keep focusing on age.

“Enlighten me,” he ground out through his teeth.

I stood and leaned over his desk.

“Your age, your success, none of that has to do with why I like you. I never took you for a man with poor self-esteem.”

His jaw fish-flopped open and closed again.

“I like you *despite* your age. I like you because of the care and pride you take in your students and their education. I like you because your mind is incredible. You call yourself a sapiophile, but it seems that your eyes are the only things that control you. I fell in love with your mind, and I thought you had liked me for mine, too. I was obviously very wrong.”

His teeth were grinding, making an audible sound as his molars mashed together.

He didn't seem to have anything left to say, so I scooped up my bag, needing some space.

Funny how I needed to be with him almost as much as I needed to be away from him. It was tearing me apart from the inside out.

“We still have work to do,” he bit out.

“So, fire me,” I threw back and shut the door in his face.

Irresistible, huh? The nerve of that man! After what we'd shared, he was going to—

The door flew open and a big hand grabbed my wrist, pulling me back into Owen's office.

“You can leave when I'm done with you,” he growled, heat and anger coloring his voice.

“If I want to leave, I can do whatever the h—”

I didn't get to finish that statement. Instead, hard lips smashed into my mouth and I stumbled backwards, just to be caught by the cage of his arms pulling me closer to him.

“I thought you wanted...to end...this,” I stuttered against his lips, my arms slipping around his neck as he pulled me further into his office, my rear bumping against the edge of the desk.

“It is. It's ended,” he told me before tonguing my tonsils.

“I should tell you ‘no’,” I panted, breathing the words out between huffs and kisses. “Like you've done to me the last three days.”

“Tell me ‘no’ and I'll force you to reconsider with my lips on your pussy,” he said, whispering into my ear as his fingers slid up my thighs.

I was ever grateful to be wearing a skirt instead of my regular yoga pants or leggings. I hadn't been necessarily

hoping to entice him, but just in case I did...

“Maybe I should follow through with my threats,” I said, holding back a cry of need as his fingers found my panties and ran up the line of my slit. “—and get you back on your knees where you should be. So you can see who is in charge here.”

Owen grinned and puffed a laugh before backing up a step and slowly, torturously lowering himself to his knees.

“Sit down,” he whispered, motioning to the chair I normally sat in.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do,” I informed him, but sat anyway, but not before dipping to take off my panties, which I threw into his chair across the desk.

Once I was in the boxy chair, he came to me on hands and knees, though his eyes held no humility or submission, just simple lust and desire, instead.

I dragged up my skirt as he finally sat on his heels before me, probably uncomfortable as heck as his hands lifted my legs and hung them on the arms of the chair, opening me to him.

“You think you’re directing this,” he said, sounding amused as heck. “You’ll soon find out that you don’t run anything, except away from me.”

“I’m not running from you,” I promised, but he didn’t seem convinced before his head dipped and he sucked a labia lip into his mouth and sucked hard.

Instantly turned on, my legs widened and he edged me relentlessly, making me so close to orgasming before he brought it back down again. It should be the UN’s newest form of freaking torture if it wasn’t already. Being that close and unable to finish felt like the end of the world, like everything would cease to exist until I came.

“This is a new low, Owen,” I told him, wiggling and grinding on his face in hopes to change his mind about letting me come.

“Are you sufficiently tamed, Miss Miller?” was his response.

I just laughed, hugged his head with my thighs and said, “Fuck you, Harlo. Make me come or I’ll leave and find someone who will.”

He gave the slightest moan against my clit and my whole body heated up.

I was so close...*so close*...

The man gave some quick flicks with his tongue, then sucked my clit into his mouth, which set off the avalanche.

Knowing I needed to silence myself, I stuffed my sleeve into my mouth and between my teeth and screamed into it.

He licked and sucked me through the pulsing, stroking my outer lips with his tongue until my back finally eased and I sank back into the chair.

Owen didn’t say anything as he stood and dipped, wrapping his arms around my waist. I let him move me, doing whatever the heck he wanted because my body was a limp mass of bones.

“I’m going to fuck you now, darling,” he whispered in my ear, setting me on the edge of his desk. “I’ve been daydreaming about bending you over my desk for so long now, I can’t remember a time when I didn’t think about it.”

My heels tucked around his hips and he quickly unbuckled his pants. While he worried about that, I let my fingers drift over his chest, taking in the coarse weave of his grandpa cardigan with leather elbow patches. I took each thick button and slowly undid them while he sank between my legs and finally, between my thighs.

I let out a long, low groan at the feeling of him inside me again. It felt incredible and full and euphoric as he gave me a couple long, slow pulls in and out before slamming back in and speeding up.

As we moved, I finished the last button of his cardigan, then worked on the little buttons of his dress shirt. When there was a decent swath of skin open, I pressed my mouth to his chest and licked a long line up, leaving long, lingering kisses to his collar bones, his neck, that strong jaw. His stubble made my lips tingle and the sensation made me smile.

With each preceding kiss, he pulled me tighter until we were so close, I could feel each shudder that ran through his body with every thrust.

“We shouldn’t—”

“If you tell me we shouldn’t be doing this one more time while you’re balls deep inside me, I’m biting off your dick.”

He choked out a laugh, said dick jumping in excitement before he gave me a particularly hard thrust.

“Might very well be the best way to die,” he murmured, “With your lips around me and my cock down your throat.”

I gasped when he legitimately hit my cervix, feeling like I was freaking swallowing him while he did.

The man moaned, obviously feeling how freaking amazing that spot felt, so he kept it up. Not even thirty seconds later, I was clamping my jaw down trying not to shriek so the other professors in their nearby offices couldn’t hear us.

As my orgasm washed over me, he kissed me, swallowing down my screams with open, messy kisses. He came then, pumping into me just as the peak of my ecstasy eased up.

We stayed there just like that, panting and gasping as he softened inside me.

“I don’t know how to give you up,” he said finally, his fingers digging into my hair while he pressed his forehead to mine.

I stared at his face, his eyes closed and brow furrowed.

“Don’t,” I breathed, shutting my eyes too, taking it all in.

His fingers squeezed, clutching my hair a little in his desperate attempt to hold on to this moment.

“You caught my attention from day one,” he whispered.

The words surprised me, but I didn’t move and I didn’t speak, hoping that he’d go on.

“Then you chewed me out and called me an asshole, and I was fucking hooked.”

I grinned, feeling moisture gather in my eyes as his hand gripped even tighter in my hair.

“Then you opened your Goddamn mouth and we talked about everything books and writing and...then you came to my house and that look in your eyes when you saw all that history... I’ve never... I’ve never met anyone who I harmonized with like this. Someone who challenges me and who will listen with a critical but supportive ear.”

I looked at him, but his expression read pain and frustration.

“Owen...” his name slipped from between my lips and his eyes finally opened, connecting to mine.

His hand dropped from my hair and moved to my cheek.

“This happened too fast, Mia. A few weeks isn’t worth risking an entire career for.”

All the air in my lungs whooshed out as agony raced through me.

“But this,” he added, sparking a flame of hope. “This feeling in my chest is worth it. It’s worth...*everything*.”

I smashed my mouth to his, my chest feeling so full it could burst.

“I don’t care how fast it was,” I told him. “I don’t care about anything else. I care about this. About you and me. You

make my heart swell and my breath stutter. You're all the things I never knew I wanted, and everything that I knew I needed. I'm not here to take what you give me. I'm here to give you everything I am, in hopes that you'll do the same back."

His jaw clenched again, eyebrows scowling for a moment.

"It's not just me," he said finally. "I come with two boys and a shitton of drama in the form of an ex-wife."

I wanted to yell from the rooftop that I didn't care. I would take him in any way he'd give himself to me.

"Give me time." He sighed. "I have shit to sort out in my life here. That'll give us more time to get to know each other and let this all settle in."

"And school?" I asked.

"Nothing needs to change. You're my TA still, and I need your help. Midterms are coming up and we're going to make the tests for the classes together."

I nodded.

"But I want you in my home. In my bed," he said, his voice growing thicker.

"I'll need to tell my roommate something."

"Tell her the truth. You're dating someone."

I grinned at the idea of the two of us dating.

"You don't know Clea. The moment she finds out I'm going on dates at all, she's going to demand to know who the guy is."

"She can mind her own fucking business," he said gruffly, tilting my head back up toward him.

I soaked in his kisses, drinking down every noise he made as he stiffened against my thigh all over again.

"You make me feel like I'm twenty-five again," he said with a chuckle, nudging his erection against the apex of

my thighs.

“I want you inside of me,” I moaned against his lips.

I didn't need to say anything else. He hooked my knees with his arms and entered me immediately.

It was different this time though. There wasn't a frantic energy about our lovemaking, but a soft, slow intention instead, that made me want to cry.

We both came again, clinging to each other with my rear sticking to the top of his desk.

“I'm going to be honest,” I told him after my breathing had somewhat normalized. “I may or may not leave a butt print on your desk.”

Owen grinned.

“Worse things have happened,” he said before helping me down.

The squeak of my damp skin sliding over the highly polished surface of the wood made us both laugh. But when I looked back, I saw the two perfect round shapes of my rear on the desk, along with a wet, peachy streak where my va-jay-jay was hanging out.

“I'm never washing it again,” he said, pressing a kiss to my lips with a grin turning his mouth up at the corners.

“That's disgusting,” I countered, but took in his kisses like a starving woman, even though he'd given me so many already.

“As much as I want to do this forever, you've got a class starting soon.”

I turned my eyes up to the clock and yelped.

“Oh my God, I'm going to Ethics smelling like sex,” I groaned.

“If anyone bothers to care, then fuck 'em.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't help the grin on my face.

How my life had changed in just a matter of a few days.

“Will you come home with me?” he asked me, buckling up his pants before fixing his shirt and cardigan.

“Do you want me to?” I asked, feeling insecurity grip me, even though I hated that it did.

He cornered me against his desk again, even though I was finally straightened out again, sans panties.

“I want your legs wrapped around me every second of every fucking day. So yes, I want you to come home with me tonight.”

I grinned and kissed him again.

“Now, get your ass to your class, then meet me back here and I’ll bring you home, feed you and fuck you until you can’t keep your eyes open any longer.”

My heart fluttered in my chest with excitement at the prospect.

“Ok,” I agreed. “But I need my panties.”

He gave me a devilish grin.

“Those are mine. You get to go to class and feel my cum leak out of you, wetting your thighs and dribbling down your leg until you finally come back to me.”

My core throbbed at the thought.

I didn’t bother bridging my bag, opting simply to grab my notebook, a pen, and textbook instead, leaving the rest with a brooding Owen.

I needed to be all there for my class, but I stopped caring about it as my thighs slicked against each other with every step, his cum freely dripping down my legs because of my skirt-and-no-panties situation. All through class I felt it, shifting in my seat and hoping nobody noticed the growing wet stain on the back of my skirt. Thank God for black denim.

After class, I practically flew back to Owen’s office. He was waiting for me, his and my bag dangling from his

fingers as he leaned against his closed door.

“Good. My car, now.”

I followed behind him, trying not to look like the love-crazed idiot I felt like. We still had to pretend nothing was happening while at school. So, I followed one step behind, then got into his passenger side with my thighs still wet.

“I hope nobody could see the wet mark you left,” I told him once the doors were closed and he started the engine.

He grinned.

“Part of me wishes the whole world would know,” he said, then shook his head.

“But they can’t,” I added.

“Right,” he agreed.

We pulled away from the curb and drove up to his home. The place was as beautiful as ever, but I had a hard time focusing on it when his fingers danced gently against the skin of my thighs as we parked.

“I take it we’re not working?” I asked breathlessly.

He smirked at me, the slightest British accent touching his voice as he said, “it’s safe to assume you won’t be doing anything anytime soon unless it’s on your back or your knees.”

A tremor shot down my spine as my girly parts began to sing with arousal.

“As long as I get a bath afterwards.”

“I’ll bathe you myself,” he assured me, then opened his door.

Chapter 14



-Mia-

I was waddling.

Officially waddling.

When I showed up back at my dorm room after an incredible night and morning with Owen, Clea zeroed in on my bow-legged walk.

“What?” she screeched, throwing her hands in the air.

A bright red flush heated my cheeks as I tried to ignore her, not wanting to talk sex with my best friend, despite how many times she’d talked about it with me.

Sadness panged my heart as the fact settled in that I *couldn't* talk about it with her.

“No, you’re not getting away that quick,” she said, pulling on my arm until I was sitting on the edge of my bed, her plopping right beside me.

“You’re doing ‘the walk’ and you just spent the night out of the dorm. You’re doing it. You’re having sex with someone!”

“Yeah,” I blurted, not sure where I was planning on going with that tidbit.

“I knew it! Who? Who got your bones rattling?”

Her eyes were wide and almost crazy as she waited for an answer.

“It’s someone in my class.” I winced, hating lying to her. “He’s just someone in my class.”

It was technically true. Owen was in my class. He was *teaching* said class, but that’s semantics.

“Picture?” she asked frantically.

I shook my head.

“I don’t have a picture of him.”

“Girl, I need a picture! What’s he like? Is he a good kisser? Good in bed?”

I choked on a laugh.

“Those are awfully personal questions,” I told her. “I kind of want to keep this close to my chest for now.”

A naughty grin spread over her lips.

“So he can suck on your boobs?”

I rolled my eyes and stood, then made my way to the bathroom to clean up.

Owen and I had done it against the table by the front door on the way out of the house that morning, so I knew I smelled of sex.

“I need more, Mia!” Clea shouted at me while I closed the door.

I enjoyed a hot, steamy shower and gently cleaned the soreness between my legs. The ache reminded me of every thrust and pummel he’d given me, and that led to all the moments where our mouths battled each other, tongue and lips and moans. I remembered his hands gripping my hair and stroking the insides of my thighs as he devoured my womanhood whole.

If I’d thought he was Adonis in bed before, once he’d let himself have me, he was Eros incarnate the moment he loosened his grip around his propriety. The man was wild and intense, and all male in a way I’d never envisioned myself with. It was...incredible.

I found my fingers lazily stroking my beat up clit, thinking about the man, but a sharp knock on the door woke me from my day dream and hurried me out.

I had classes to get to, but I really just needed a couple hours of sleep.

“Girl, you’re going to be late!” Clea called through the door.

When I got out, Clea was already pulling on a sweater and gathering her backpack.

“You better hurry and get dressed or we’ll be late,” she told me.

I shook my head.

“I’m not going to History of Economics today. I need a nap, and my next class isn’t for another couple hours.”

Her lips turned into another naughty grin.

“Sure. I’ll bring you notes.” She flicked her hair around as she hurried out the door.

The room was especially quiet when she left. It felt a little eerie.

Knowing I needed some sleep, I dragged on some shorts and a tank top, then crawled into bed with a long sigh of relief. Eyes closed, I drifted into sleep almost immediately, only to be awoken by my phone.

I groaned, letting out a faux sob of frustration as I grabbed my phone, still charging on my side table, and pressed the green answer button, followed by the speaker button.

“Hey honey,” Mom called happily through the phone.

I bit back another cry and tried to sound happy to hear from her.

“Hey Mom, what’s up?”

“I’m calling between your classes, right? I struggle to keep up with your free time every semester.”

I glanced at the clock, and sure enough I had already slept like the dead for a full hour. My phone read three unread texts, and I clicked on that shiz before I even answered my mother.

“Honey, are you there?”

“Yeah, sorry, I dozed off. Yes, I’m between classes right now. You picked a good time.”

Two of the texts were from Owen, and I saved those to savor them in a moment, choosing to see Clea’s first. It was just a series of eggplants, peaches, and water droplets.

“Oh good, I was just talking to your father, and—”

The other texts opened next, and I grinned down at the simple words.

Professor Harlo: *Not going to class, huh? I happened to stroll by your economics class between lessons and they were missing one sexy little English major.*

Professor Harlo: *You doing ok?*

“Mia? Are you there? Can you hear me?”

“Oh! Yeah, I’m here Mom. Sorry, what did you say?”

“Oh, I was just saying that your father and I were thinking that it’s been too long since you’ve been home. We miss you, hun.”

I frowned.

“I miss you too, Mom. It’s just been busy around here. You know I got that job as a TA. I spend a lot of weekends working now.”

And with my professor’s cock nine inches deep.

Guilt swam through my chest as she sighed.

“Yes, I know. I’m just missing my little girl. You know your brother’s going to be off to college next year. What will we do with all our babies gone and out of the house? We’ll be...*empty nesters.*”

She said the words with such disdain, it made me laugh a little.

“There’s nothing wrong with being an empty nester, Mom. In fact, I think you’ll enjoy it. Imagine all the activities you can help put together at church, and how many fundraisers and dinners you could put on for the community!”

She made a soft sound, like maybe she was considering it.

“Yes, well, I’ll have to talk to Pastor Abraham about all that. There is already quite the flock of hens that do all the party planning. I’d like to do more service. Actually, I heard that the shelter needs more volunteers...”

I grinned. My mother was a genuinely good person, and I was grateful for her.

“Well there you go. There’s a fantastic way for you to be doing the Lord’s work.”

Mom seemed relieved after that, and turned the conversation onto me.

“Now, how about you? You know your gran is still askin’ if you’re dating yet.”

“Well, actually,” I choked out, “there is one guy. We’ve had dinner a few times. He’s in all my writing classes.”

Mom practically lost a gasket.

“Is my baby girl datin’ and didn’t even bother to tell her mama about it yet?”

I grinned, feeling butterflies flying around my stomach just at mentioning Owen to my mom.

“Ok, so tell me about him. Obviously he’s a student there. Are you both doing a creative writing major? I’m not sure there are a lot of job opportunities for a degree in writing.”

“No, he likes teaching,” I stumbled. “But he has a passion for writing like I do. He’s brilliant, Mom. Our conversations are so cool and enlightening. I’ve learned so much from him. It’s been amazing talking to someone who loves literature and writing like I do.”

Mom was silent for a moment, then sighed.

“It sounds to me like you’re serious about this boy.”

I cringed at hearing Owen being referred to as a boy, but I couldn’t correct her.

“I care about him a lot,” I admitted. “Maybe more than I should at this point, but...”

“I just want you to remember, my beautiful girl, the promises you made to our Lord about your chastity.”

“Oh, Mom...” I moaned. “That was when I was a kid, back in Sunday school...”

“Doesn’t mean the promise ain’t worth nothin’ anymore,” she countered. “I know we’ve talked about what we needed to, and that this is between you and the Lord. I just wanted to remind you.”

Oh God, she was going to freak out if she found out some of the things we’d done...

“Anywho, if things get serious with this boy, I want to meet him. Actually, strike that. I’d like to meet him soon. Maybe over fall break?”

I choked.

“Uh, I’m sure he’ll be with his family, Mom.”

“That boy will make time to meet his future in-laws if he’s serious about you, I promise you that.”

“We’re not getting married! Goodness, we’ve just been on a few dates.”

And had a few sleepovers. And fucked like bunnies for hours and hours at a time.

I cleared my throat, trying to do the same to my brain as Mom went on.

“Your father and I just want to see you home soon. That new boss of yours has to let you come home sometime. Besides, where have you been doing your laundry?”

She had a point. I’d been using the laundromat since I started working on the weekends.

Maybe Owen would let me use his, during one of our ‘sleepovers’.

“Anyway, we’ll see you soon, hun.”

“Ok Mom. I’ll try and make it back soon. Promise.”

“Mhm. Love ya! Take care.”

I repeated the sentiment, then plopped my head back down on my pillow as she hung up and my phone canceled the call with a soft beep.

It felt so good to tell people about Owen, but I worried that I was only digging my own grave. It was simply a matter of time until the eagerness to meet him turned to demands, and I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. Owen had to be my secret until...

Until when? Would he ever stop being my secret?

Refusing to acknowledge my own fear and anxieties, I turned my eyes back to my phone and reread the texts.

Me: I’m sore but good. Needed to catch up on my sleep a little. Some meanie kept me up all night.

He answered right away.

Professor Harlo: Oh dear. The orgasms must have been terrible.

Me: Not terrible necessarily, but incessant. Over and over and over...

Professor Harlo: You’d better stop or I’m going to get a hard-on right before class starts.

Me: That sounds like a personal problem to me.

Professor Harlo: On the contrary, It’s most definitely your problem. Someone’s going to have to kiss it better.

I grinned, staring at the screen.

Me: Is that a promise?

Professor Harlo: Fucking hell, woman.

I laughed, then threw myself back on the bed, eyes closed in bliss.

I couldn’t remember the last time I was so happy. It wasn’t just the sex, though that was real good too. No, it was *him*. Owen was an incredible person.

My smile slowly melted away as that proverbial cloud nine disintegrated beneath me and I fell right back down to reality. My conversations with Mom and Clea sank back in and helplessness took over.

I heard my phone ding twice more, but I didn't touch it again. Instead, I felt my heart race as I began to think, *when does this end?*

Suddenly, it's like my brain finally decided to understand the fact that I was dating a man twice my age. A man with two children. A man who was a professor while I was his student. Would I ever be more than just a secret to him?

Just days ago, I was ready to take things a day at a time, heck, an hour at a time. Now...now I needed more.

Oh God... How could I manage a life without him? Since the moment I walked in that office door and looked into his eyes, I started falling in love.

I was officially in deep, deep trouble.

Chapter 15



-Owen-

Something was going on.

One second we're flirting and the next she stopped answering my texts.

I felt like a Goddamn fifteen year old boy whose self-esteem was tied to whether or not the pretty cheerleader texted him back.

Standing in front of my class, I found myself without the problem of a hard-on like I'd threatened her earlier. No, my own uneasiness put a real quick end to that. I found my voice empty, the words repeated from the papers I'd drawn up days ago. Since when did I lose the joy of teaching?

No, the joy wasn't gone. My brain was just focused on other things. Rather, *one* other thing.

When class got out, I paused to look at my phone while the last of my students filed out. Still nothing.

"Professor Harlo," came a soft feminine voice behind me.

I turned, seeing Darla Grey standing before me with a thin stack of papers in her hand.

"You have your makeup work?" I asked her, wondering where the hell she'd come from.

This wasn't her class, so she'd sought me out just to hand it in.

"You had four more days," I told her, still not taking the papers from her.

"I know. I finished them early."

“That’s wonderful. I’m looking forward to reading them on Friday.”

She blinked up at me, not lowering the papers. We just stood there in silence until Miss Grey’s cheeks turned pink and she finally took the papers back and pressed them to her chest.

“I suggest you take the next few days to go over your work. Your scholarship here relies on it.”

Her mouth popped open in surprise.

Yes, I knew about her scholarship. It was the main reason I gave her the second chance I did. If she failed my class, she would likely lose it, and that would probably be the end of her college career.

“Right, ok, I will,” she said, hightailing it right out of the classroom.

Snatching up my briefcase, I made my way back to my office, feeling anxiety building in my chest with each minute that Mia didn’t answer me back.

Funny, as a parent, I was used to imagining the worst that can happen in any situation. When one of my boys would jump mid-swing, I’d have a tiny, stuttering heart attack at all the images of the hundred ways they can die or fall on their face in the wood chips.

Maybe it was fatherhood, or maybe it was just the fact that I *knew* I was dating someone out of my league in many ways, and that scared the ever living hell out of me. All it would take was a single day when a lightbulb moment sparked and she ask herself what the fuck she’s doing with an old bastard like me. And that quick, she’d be gone.

Shit...I wasn’t going to get any work done when I was a mess like this.

My phone started ringing and I fumbled it out of my pocket, whispering an incoherent prayer that it was Mia.

Speaking of fatherhood.

“Yeah, Paula?” I asked, dropping my ass into my seat behind my desk.

“Hey Owen. I know it’s last minute, but a friend of mine just informed me that she’s getting married *next week*. It’s total insanity! Anyway, It’s a destination wedding in Vegas and I can’t take the boys. Will you watch them for a Thursday and Friday next weekend, then your regular Saturday and Sunday?”

Four days with my kids? Uh, yes please.

“Of course. Next Thursday? Not this Thursday?”

“Right. Although it seems kind of dumb to go through all this effort to go to a wedding that’ll probably end in less than a year.”

“At least you get a vacation,” I put in, though I didn’t really care one way or the other.

“Yeah, and Jamie is excited about it. We just have to make sure we’re home in time for his next game.”

“You’re going to Vegas with your boy toy?” I asked her, lifting a brow in disbelief.

Then again, who the hell was I to talk? My girlfriend was just as fucking young as her boyfriend was.

“Oh, not this again,” she said.

I could practically feel her rolling her eyes through the phone.

“I don’t care,” I said finally, knowing I had no space anywhere to judge her.

“Good. Now, I’ll drop the boys off first thing Thursday morning before I head to the airport. You can get them to school?”

“Mhmm,” I hummed, my attention elsewhere.

“Good,” she said again. “Thanks, Owen.”

“Yep. Have fun,” I grunt out, then hung up and checked to see if I had any missed text messages.

Surprisingly, I did.

Mia Miller: *Sorry, I'm not feeling well. I'm not going to be able to come to work today.*

My eyebrows drew together again at the words on my screen.

Nothing about the several other texts I'd sent. No, just some vague 'not feeling well.'

She was pulling away.

Drawing my fingers over my contacts, I came to her name and pressed on it until the phone was ringing.

It went on for at least five rings, and I started thinking she wasn't going to answer until her voice filtered over the line in a hesitant, "Hello?"

"What the fuck is going on?" I demanded, immediately regretting my tone.

She sniffled like she'd been crying.

"Sorry, but I'm not feeling good," she said, her voice cracking with the word 'good'.

"What happened, Mia? We were talking and then all of a sudden you're radio silent. Did I say something that offended you or hurt your feelings?" I asked her, forcing my voice to lower and soften.

She let out a whine.

"I'm not ready to talk about it," she said.

And damn it, I had to respect that.

I let out a long sigh and rubbed at my temple.

"You know you can talk to me about anything?" I reminded her, but she just sniffled at me. "Mia?"

"Mhmm?" she hummed shakily.

"You know I want you, right? This whole thing is kind of fucked up, but it doesn't change the facts. Whatever your brain is trying to convince you of, just remember that. I want you, and I'll wait forever until you're ready to talk."

She started to full-on sob over the line, and my fingers got twitchy, wishing I could hold her. They remained frustratingly empty, though.

“When you’re ready to talk,” I told her, “Come to my place. I want to just hold you.”

She let out a sobbing ‘ok’, then said goodbye and hung up on me.

Sitting there in my office at the school, I stared at my phone like *it* was the one who had offended me.

I spent maybe an hour trying to put together the midterm for my creative writing classes before I gave up and headed home. I needed a stiff drink and a purge session on my laptop.

Once at my incredible home, I took in a long breath and absorbed the smell of old wood and history bleeding off the old walls. If only walls could talk, they would have so many incredible stories of love and tragedy that had happened over the last hundred and fifty years.

Going to my study, I grabbed a tumbler and poured a spot of absinth into it to rinse. I stood there a moment, swirling the noxious green alcohol for a moment, then stared at the tablespoon of liquid pooled at the bottom.

Eh.

Shooting the potent spirit down, I choke a bit, because holy shit!

At least it would help me on my quest to get drunk faster.

Next, I added a sugar cube and a couple splashes of bitters before crushing it with the back of a spoon while the absinth burned the everliving fuck out of my mouth. My old go-to sazerac was almost as easy as it was delicious. Sour and sharp and herby, oh my.

I dropped a little more than the prescribed ounce and a half into my glass, then stirred with my trusty old spoon.

After taking a sip to get the taste of the absinth out of my mouth, I frowned at the amber liquid. It needed some ice.

I made my way down the hallway back to the kitchen and collected a couple ice cubes from the modern refrigerator and headed back to my office. I let out a long groan as I sat in my fancy ass chair, ready to purge all my emotions into my keyboard.

For three hours, I sat there. I dumped it all onto the digital pages and felt desolate. Empty.

Damn, creating something can take everything out of you. I felt tired both mentally and physically as I leaned back into my chair and took a big breath, blowing it out slowly.

My back needed a break, and I'd been eyeing my empty tumbler for over half an hour. Time for a refill.

I headed to the sink to rinse out my glass and put new ice cubes in it, and after the soft 'tink' 'tink' of the ice going in, I heard a soft knock on the door.

It was fucking nine-thirty at night. Who could it be?

A pang of hope shot through my chest when I hoped that it was Mia, but I tried to tamp that down because she would have called first. Right?

Ice still clinking in my glass, I opened the door to Mia, who looked chilled in her shorts and a chunky knit sweater that in no way would have blocked out the rapidly cooling weather.

"Fuck, you're lips are blue," I said to her, pulling her right in.

Her teeth were chattering and her body shivered while I pulled her into my arms, trying to warm her. Shit, she was a popsicle.

I knew what she needed; a stiff drink and a long bath.

Going back to my study, I set down my glass and grabbed a new one before pouring in some of my cognac. It was strong, but she'd be able to handle it. Hopefully.

“Come,” I told her, taking her icicle hand and dragging her along into my bedroom and to the majestic bath.

“Sorry, I j-just walked here because the b-bus wasn’t running f-for a-another hour.”

I paused and turned.

“You walked all the way here?” I demanded in a harsh whisper.

“I-it’s not that f-far.”

I scoffed, but continued to pull her along until we were in my bathroom.

“Undress,” I told her. “We’ll talk when you’re warm.”

She nodded and dragged up the sweater, dumping it on the ground pretty quick before she removed her tight biker shorts and tennis shoes.

Trying not to get distracted with her incredible, tanned skin, I shoved the bath handle to hot and let it fill a little before switching it to warm.

Mia slipped her feet, flinching at the heat at first, then she started lowering herself in.

“Here,” I handed her the glass, eyes glancing over her breasts and plump thighs as she sat there.

How was a guy *not* supposed to look when tits are presented?

“This’ll warm you from the inside,” I said, putting the tumbler into her hand.

She lifted it to her lips and made a face, but continued to drink.

I waited.

And waited.

Eventually, the water was shut off, and we stared at each other while tension thickened the air.

“So,” I finally drawled now that she had stopped shaking and shivering. “It seems like you had a hard day

today?”

Her eyes immediately filled with tears as she snorted a laugh through them and nodded.

“I’m sorry. I knew it wasn’t fair to freeze you out while I’m in my own head. That’s why I came.”

Not wanting to distract her with a chastisement that she should’ve called instead of walking, I shut up and let her speak.

“I’ve just been doing...a lot of thinking.”

I lifted an eyebrow and waited a little longer.

“I think we need to break up,” she barely whispered, squeezing her eyes shut like she was in pain just saying the words.

Shit, not this again.

I leaned back, wishing I had a matching tumbler filled with alcohol.

I could fucking use it.

“What’s got you going back on this?” I asked her, feeling all my hopes for the future start to crumble around me.

She was already giving up on me.

“I just...I finally realized that this isn’t going to work.”

Well, if that wasn’t the same shit I’d spewed just days ago...

“Why?”

She shook her head, as if not wanting to answer. But no, she’d opened Pandora’s box. We were going to finish this shit even if it killed us.

“I...”

She paused, and didn’t continue.

“Let’s start,” I said softly, “with what happened while we were talking. We were texting and all of a sudden, you

stopped. What happened right then?”

She bit her lip, staring into the crystal of the tumbler in her hand.

“Owen...I’m not sure I’m ready to talk about it,” she murmured.

I sighed, raking my fingers through my hair as I closed my eyes in frustration.

“Mia, if you can’t talk about it, how are we going to work through—”

“I love you,” she blurted.

My eyes popped open in shock and met hers immediately.

She looked just as surprised as I did, her mouth dropped open like she couldn’t believe she’d actually said it.

Hell, I couldn’t either.

We just stayed still, staring at each other after the admission.

“I’m sorry,” she started to say, but I just shook my head.

“No, don’t apologize.”

She shook her head, tears blurring in her eyes as she looked away, staring off to the other side of the bathroom.

I just didn’t know what the fuck to say to that.

“Well,” she said eventually, still not looking at me. “I realized that with feeling this...*way*...I’m dooming myself, I think.”

“Dooming yourself, how?” I finally asked.

She mulled over my question for a minute, turning the glass slowly as light reflected off it.

“I really don’t want to be one of those girls, Owen, but...” she said eventually, her voice empty and face blank. “I really was ok just staying free and off the cuff with things.”

I wasn't sure where the fuck she was going with that.

"But then things changed?"

She bit her lip again, and my eyes couldn't help but drop to her mouth. She was literally crying in front of my and I couldn't fucking stop my cock from draining my brain of all my logic.

Goddamnit...

"Nothing really changed," she whispered. "I just finally realized what I'd already been feeling."

Mia rubbed her sternum, then seemed to shake out of her fog and looked around.

"I'd like to have the rest of this conversation dressed," she said in a quiet voice, gripping the sides of the tub as she stood.

I gathered a towel for her, but didn't do what I normally would have. I didn't wrap her in it, then fold my arms around her. She always giggled when I did that. Today, it didn't seem like the right thing to do though, all things considered.

Mia wrapped tightly in the towel, but looked down at her shorts and sweater with a frown.

"Here," I told her, taking her hand, finally touching her as I dragged her out of the bathroom and toward my dresser where I got out my favorite Cambridge sweats and an oversized t-shirt.

She accepted them wordlessly and pulled the shirt on first, then the pants, which sat a little snug against her full hips.

Mia moved toward the bed and sat on the edge, fingers squeezing around the edge of the mattress.

"What can I do?" I asked her, brushing back a few strands of hair from her cheek.

She shook her head.

“I think I just need time to think. Maybe I’m just being ridiculous and hormonal or something. Nothing feels as bad after sleeping on it.”

“That’s true,” I agreed.

I wasn’t sure what to do though. Paula would agree that I didn’t know a single thing to do with an emotional, irrational woman.

“Do you want me to drive you home, or...”

I didn’t want to assume she wanted to stay with me.

She considered it.

“Can I stay here tonight? The thought of going home with Clea there ready to ask questions and...I want you to hold me.”

Shit...

I didn’t think, I just grabbed her and pulled her into my arms where she started crying again. I couldn’t remove the rending of her heart, but I could do this. I could hold her and carry her if she was too weak to stand on her own.

My chest bloomed with heat and sadness and my heart pumped hard. I laid with her, both of us above the covers as a stiff, cool breeze flooded in from the window.

“I’m sorry, Mia,” I whispered into her hair. “I want to take the uncertainty away from you. It shouldn’t hurt to love.”

She cried harder and I shut my eyes, squeezing them closed as I tried to think of what else I could say. There was only one thing I could say back to take the pain away from her, but I couldn’t.

Fuck...could I?

Didn’t matter that I already knew I loved the girl. I’d known for a while. It just didn’t make any difference to how things would play out between us.

Mia had the world at her fingertips, ready to really dive in for the first time, and I was a single dad who’d already

fucked up one relationship, and was terrified of fucking up another.

Then again, my hesitancy to say the ‘L’ word had nothing to do with her. Not really. It had everything to do with me. Me and fear and that low self-esteem she’d accused me of before. Funny, I’d never known I had bad self-esteem. But everything was magnified with Mia, so in a strange sort of way, it made sense that she’d see it.

When it really came down to it, I was fucking scared. But was my fear really going to keep me from uttering the words she needed to hear? Words she’d admitted to me even though they probably gutted her to release them?

“I don’t know if it means anything,” I finally said, my voice shaking. “Or if you even care...but Mia Miller, I love you, too.”

She gasped and whipped around in my arms, staring up into my face.

“I can’t make you promises,” I blurted next. “I know you can’t either. Hell, I don’t want you to. I want you to stay free as a bird. But if you can have the courage to say it, so can I. I’ve never met anyone like you before, and you plucked up my heart before I even knew what was happening.”

“You’re not just saying it?” she questioned, desperate hope in her glassy eyes.

I shook my head.

“When was the last time I said something just to speak?”

She sobbed again, digging her face into my sweater-swathed chest for a while until she eventually lay still.

We didn’t say anything else that night. No, we just laid there and I thought through every single variation that I could of how this thing between us would end. The sad part was, ninety percent of the options concluded with bloody heartbreak and never seeing each other again.

Even still, these moments made it worth it. Even if I was nothing afterwards but a husk of a man who was simply a writer and a father, it would have been worth it to bask in her glow for just a little while.

Worth it just to feel *love*.



I woke to movement beside me. The sun was just barely peeking through my curtains as my eyes cracked open. Mia was up, dressed, and she was scritch-scratching on a piece of paper on the nightstand for a moment before she turned back to me and frowned, not noticing that I was awake. Then, she turned and left.

The soft sounds of her footsteps echoed down the stairs, then I heard the front door close behind her.

That quick she was gone, and I was fucking alone.

I dove for that paper, crumpling it in my desperation to snatch it up.

Owen,

I'm sorry I bugged you last night. I need some time.

I'm going home for a couple days over fall break and I'll be home in time to help put together the midterms.

So sorry again. I hope you'll forgive me.

With love,

Mia

I gripped the paper so hard it wrinkled, but then I let go, terrified I'd break it.

In my hand was, what I knew to be possibly the last thing she'd ever write to me. There was a nagging realization that with Mia going home...she might never come back.

For the first time in a very, very long time, I closed my eyes and prayed to a god I hoped was listening.

Please...let her come back. I don't know if I can live without her.

Chapter 16



-Mia-

Clea was at class before I got back to the dorm. I left her a note just like I had for Owen before packing a quick bag and loading up my dirty laundry for an excuse to go home. Then, I started the hour long trip back to Louisville where a hug from Mom waited for me.

Dad was at work when I drove up to the house. Mom's car was in the driveway, so I knew she'd be home, or at least close, maybe at a neighbor's house.

I sat there, idling in my car on the curb outside my childhood home and let more tears slip out of my eyes. I needed to talk to Mom. I needed her advice so badly, but I couldn't tell her...could I? I couldn't break their heart like that.

Then again, If I wanted things to last with Owen, I *had* to tell them at some point, no matter how much it hurt them.

My chest felt bruised, like it'd been shredded open and glued back together. I hated that my happiness would hurt them.

Then again, was it worth saying anything at all? Chances are things wouldn't work out, and we would all end up hurting.

Indecision kept me still in the car for more than an hour before Mom spotted me through the living room window and started waving frantically through the open curtains. She disappeared, then came rushing out the door, her arms outstretched like she was just waiting for that hug I was craving.

I got out of the car, trying to suck all my emotions back in, but they all came blubbering out of me the moment Mom's matronly arms wrapped around me, holding me so tightly.

"Oh, honey, what is it?" she cooed, smoothing my hair while I sobbed. "Tell me what's the matter, baby girl."

I just shook my head and sucked snot back up my nose before it dripped.

I was a real mess.

Mom led me into the house and sat me at the kitchen table, then went about preparing some honey and lemon tea. She'd always done that when I was upset about something, and the familiar motions made my heart hurt more.

I couldn't tell them. I couldn't break Mom's heart.

Right?

She set the tea before me, along with a box of Oreos because she knew they were my favorite cookies, right behind her homemade ones.

"Now," she said, stroking my hair back from my face, just like Owen had done last night... "What's got my baby girl all torn up?"

I wiped at my eyes, my nose, then looked into her familiar blue eyes.

"It's about the guy I've been dating," I told her, squeaking out the words. "Owen."

"That's his name, is it?" she asked, nodding her head. "Tell me what's the matter, dear. He didn't hurt you, did he?"

A flash of fierce protectiveness flickered across her expression, but she toned it down and waited for me to speak.

I needed her advice. I needed it like I needed to breathe. I had to think of something, because I was freaking desperate.

"Well," I blew out in a shaky voice. "He's... There's a really big thing between us. A big difference..."

How could I word it so it would make sense?

“You mean religion?” she asked, lifting her eyebrows.

I clung to it.

“Something like that,” I started, but she just nodded along, already on to the next part of our conversation.

“He’s not a Methodist, then?” she confirmed.

“No,” I said honestly. “He’s not Methodist.”

Mom frowned.

“Ok. Well, there are worse things,” she said, but frowned again. “Is he Christian?”

I shook my head, realizing that I’d never even asked him.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I don’t know if he believes in religion at all.”

“Oh dear,” she said, biting at her lip just like I do when I’m nervous or thinking hard about something. “I suppose that does present a problem, doesn’t it?”

I wiped at my eyes and Mom’s frown softened, her brows drawing together in sympathy.

“Do you love this boy?” she asked me, meeting my eyes.

I nodded, biting down on my tongue so I couldn’t shout my admission to the world.

“Oh dear,” she murmured again, taking my hands across the table.

We sat in silence for a while, before Mom finally started talking.

“You know,” she said eventually. “In the bible it talks about the first great commandment.”

I nodded.

“To love God,” I told her.

“Yes,” she agreed. “And the second?”

“Like unto it, love your neighbor,” I answered on instinct.

Mom just sat there nodding.

“Now, I have so many ideas of the man that I imagined you would marry one day. Of course I hoped that maybe he’d be a good Christian boy. That’s every mother’s dream, you know.”

Well, not *every* mother but...

“But you know what means more to me than that?” she asked me.

“What?” I whispered, unsure what she would possibly say.

I always knew the kind of man my mother wanted for me. I’d looked for that kind of man myself, but the right one had never appeared. Then Owen fell into my lap and...he changed everything. All the things that I thought had mattered didn’t even blip on my radar anymore. The things I didn’t used to think mattered became the most important things.

“What means more to me than all that is whether he’s a good man or not. Does he have a good moral code, and does he stick to it, live his life by it? Is he good to other people? Is he Christlike in his actions and dealings with others? Will he be a good husband and father? Is he selfless and caring and sympathetic? Is he giving and kind? Those are the things I want for you, honey. Now, can you tell me, is he a man like that? Is he all of those things?”

The way Owen had given his student a second chance whispered across my mind. The way he cared for his students was next. The kindness and empathy he’d shown me when he’d accepted my virginity echoed through me until I was nodding.

“We haven’t known each other that long,” I admitted. “But from what I’ve seen, he’s a good man. A *great* man. I think he and Dad would get along.”

Not to mention they were about the same age.

Mom's smile blossomed.

"Then there you go, honey. What more can a woman ask for than that? Yes, I'd prefer if he was devoted to God, but if he's living the same values as we'd expect, then does it matter all that much? Besides, I know you never really liked going to church all that much, anyway."

She did have a point.

"But...what if the difference is just...too big?" I asked her. "Would you and Dad accept him?"

Mom smiled.

"If he's as good a man as you say he is, then your father will accept him. I'll make him."

I choked out a laugh.

I needed to tell her the truth. I needed to—

"Mia-May, is that you?" our neighbor Beatrice called in from the back window.

Mom turned to her friend and scolded her right there.

"Beatrice, don't you be a peeping Tom! Come inside or go on home!"

Beatrice let herself in through the door in the kitchen, joining us at the table.

"Well, it's been a long time since I've spotted your pretty face, Mia," she said, squeezing my cheek.

Mom rolled her eyes at our elderly neighbor, but smiled despite herself. My mother couldn't be angry at a mouse stealing her pie, let alone our lonely old neighbor.

"It's been a month, maybe?" I said, smiling at her.

"So," she started, leaning in. "Any boys to bring home to meet your ma yet? We've been waiting for a wedding, and you ain't gettin' any younger!"

"Beatrice Farmer, don't you rush her," Mom scolded, then turned wide, shining eyes on me. "Although, I have been craving a grandbaby something fierce."

I rolled my eyes at the two women, but smiled anyway and listened to the old hens go on about the happenings at church and the neighborhood.

We had lunch together, and my heart was lightened. Being home was a breath of fresh air. And then Patrick came home.

“What’s for dinner?” he called through the house the moment the front door opened.

Beatrice took the moment to sneak out, pressing a kiss to Mom’s cheek in thanks for her hospitality.

“We’re having whatever you’re cooking!” I yelled back.

There was a thump of a bag hitting the floor, then hurried footsteps into the kitchen. The swinging door was thrown open, and my handsome brother appeared, a grin on his face.

“Well, if it ain’t the old maid!” he teased, hurrying over to scoop me up.

I laughed, shoving at his shoulders as he lifted me in the air, just to show off how big and strong he’d gotten over the last couple years.

“Didn’t Mom ever tell you not to manhandle women?” I asked with a giggle.

He snorted.

“Sure she did. But you’re not a woman. You’re my sister!”

Barking out a laugh, I smacked him again, which got him laughing. He eventually let me down and raided the fridge.

“Isn’t it the middle of the semester for you?” he asked, looking for a snack.

“Yes, but I decided to take a couple days. I needed to come home for a few days.”

Patrick emerged, a worried scowl on his brows. He kissed Mom on top of the head, who was sitting there and watching her kids interact with a grin spread over her face.

“I’ve got homework, but after dinner, you and I need to talk,” he said, pointing at me around the Coke in his hand.

“Dinner’s in an hour,” she told him as he headed back out of the kitchen with a handful of cheese sticks and his drink.

“He’s become quite the whirlwind,” Mom muttered, a smile of love on her face for her only son and youngest child.

I grunted an agreement, then asked how I could help with dinner.



We went on a walk, Patrick and I. Dad and Mom were finishing up their scripture study for the evening, so we’d decided to steal away so they could have some alone time.

“Alright,” he said, towering above me almost as tall as Owen. “The folks are out of earshot. What’s going on?”

“Why do you think there’s something going—”

The expression on his face stopped me. The flat look he gave me told me that he knew something was bothering me, and he wasn’t going to give up until I told him.

“Out with it, sis.”

I blew out a long breath and looked into the sky, only able to see a smattering of stars.

“I’m in love,” I admitted, feeling a weight lift off my chest with the words.

“Aw, shit. Love? Really?” he asked.

I giggled, still not used to hearing my brother curse.

He was so careful around Mom and Dad, but we’d always let our hair down around each other. There were no secrets between us. At least...until lately.

“Ok, so, either you did the deed and you feel *real* guilty, or you’re feeling guilty over the guy himself. ’Cause I’ll tell you, sis, there’s guilt written all over that face of yours.”

“I don’t feel *guilty*, specifically,” I countered, though he was right. I did feel guilt about lying through omission to Mom and Dad.

“Out with it,” he said again as he hopped the waist-high fence into the middle school’s playground across the street from our house.

He helped me over it, then we continued to walk toward the swingsets.

“He’s amazing,” I admitted. “There’s just one big problem.”

“And what’s that?”

“He’s older.”

Patrick’s expression pinched as he glanced at me through the dimly lit night.

“*How* much older?” he asked slowly.

I bit my lips so hard I could taste blood before blurting out, “Forty-two.”

He let out a low whistle.

“That’s only a few years younger than Dad. You know that, right?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I know. That’s why I can’t tell them. You can’t tell them either, Pat. Promise me.”

We held out our pinkies and promised, curling them together then we kissed our fists and spit.

“Cross my heart,” he said, then plopped into a swing. “How did you meet someone so ancient, anyway?”

A tear streamed down my cheek as it all just came barreling out of me.

“He’s the professor over the English department,” I admitted. “I’m his TA.”

“Mia,” Patrick scolded. “Your professor?”

I blushed down to my toes.

“I’m going to ask, even though I don’t really want to know the answer, but did you guys uh...do stuff?”

I couldn’t look at him as I nodded.

He sighed again.

“I know I’m not a genius or whatever,” he said eventually. “But even I know banging your professor is a bad idea, Mia.”

“It’s not like that,” I told him. “It doesn’t have anything to do with his age or the fact that he’s my professor. In fact, it would all be so much easier if he wasn’t. We just... we spent time together. I got to know him on a human level and he’s amazing, Pat. He’s so amazing, and I kind of wonder what he’s doing with me sometimes because, how lucky could I be that he’d pick *me*?”

He barked out a laugh.

“You’re kidding me, right?” he asked. “He’s the one dating someone half his age, and with a beauty like you on top of it. Of course he’s down with it.”

Patrick’s face dulled, and his lips turned into a frown.

“He’s not...married—”

“No!” I yelped, putting up my hands to stop him right there. “No, he’s been divorced for a year.”

Patrick blew out a long breath of relief.

“He does have two kids, though,” I told him. “Eight and six.”

He lifted a brow again.

“You’ve dug yourself a hole, sis,” he said finally. “You know Mom and Dad will freak.”

I nodded.

“But you love him,” he murmured. “You positive about that?”

I nodded again.

“I told him that last night,” I admitted. “He said he loved me back, but that he’s scared to love someone like me. And I get it. Lord, I get it. There’s so many things that stand between us telling us that we can’t be together, but yet, every time I’m not with him, my heart beats, but it’s empty. My chest hurts without him. I mean, I could go on. If things didn’t work out, I would be able to live, but would I *want* to? I’ll never find a man more perfect for me than him. He’s a writer, you know? He and I share so many passions—”

“Ugh, Mia, I don’t want to know about you sharing passions,” he groaned.

I whacked him on the shoulder, swaying in my swing.

“Not everything is about sex, Pat,” I told him.

He just grinned at me.

“So? He worth disjointing your family over?”

I shrugged.

“That depends. Am I just a fling for him, or are we for real? I’m not telling anyone anything about him until I have an answer to that.”

“But you said that he said he loves you too, right? You really think some forty-something is going to say the ‘L’ word just to get in your pants when you’ve already let him in your pants?”

“Dang it, Pat. Do you have to be so crude?”

He sent me a long look.

“Says the girl banging her professor.”

He had a point. I was a girl living in a glass house and throwing rocks.

“He’s more than just a professor,” I said. “Besides, I’m in my last semester. Three months and I’m done with

college. After that, what else is there besides age? And I don't think age is a big deal, anyway."

"Uh, how about the fact that he has two kids? That's kind of a big deal."

"Well, not necessarily."

"And the ex."

"It would depend on the kids and everything."

"Well, it sounds to me like you need to get to know the guy and his life better before you make any kind of decision."

I nodded, but I couldn't help the frown making my lips droop at the corners.

"Now what?" he asked with a sigh.

I just shrugged.

"I don't know. I just...I can't imagine life without him. But at the same time, if I stay, how much worse is it going to be when we decide things aren't going to work out? By that point, I'll be invested, you know?"

"Sounds to me like you're already invested, sis."

I sighed, dropping my head into my hand.

"So, what would you suggest I do?"

He chewed on his cheek for a minute, then turned toward me again, his expression decisive and more grown up than I was comfortable with. When did my baby brother get to be all grown up?

"Well, what I'd do is simply get to know them all. The next couple months will tell you everything you need to know about the guy. If he's as amazing as you said, then maybe he's the one, who knows? And if he's not, well, then it's going to hurt like hell whether you break up now or later. I don't see it getting much worse."

I shrugged.

“I talked to Mom about him just a little. She knows his name, anyway. She thinks he’s a student at school, not the teacher. That, and now she thinks he’s some kind of atheist or something. She kind of jumped to conclusions and I didn’t correct her.”

“Stop doing that, Mia. Now *that’s* going to hurt her even more if you’re lying to her. She’s probably already planning the wedding and imagining this twenty-something kid. You very well might give her a heart attack when they find out how old he is.”

“*If*. If they find out how old he is.”

He snorted.

“Yeah, I guess.”

We sat in silence for a little longer until I finally poked him in the shoulder and demanded, “So? Any girls for you?”

His face bloomed into a big ol’ grin.

“There’s one girl,” he said, tilting his head back to look at the sky. “She’s a senior, too. And sis, she’s freaking *hot*.”

I laughed.

“Is that her finest quality?”

“Hm, not even close,” he murmured, shaking his head. “She’s super freaking smart, like, mathlete smart, and she’s one of the kindest girls I know.”

“She a keeper?” I asked him.

He shrugged.

“I dunno. We’re not to the whole love stage. We’ve been going out for like five weeks or so, and I’m really attracted to her, and pretty infatuated, but I don’t know when it turns from infatuation to love, ya know? We’re trying to take it slow.”

“How slow?” I asked, knowing he made the same chastity promise that I had when I was in high school.

He gave me a wan smile.

“We haven’t done the dirty, if that’s what you’re asking. But, I mean, does a blowie count as ‘the dirty?’”

I cackled at him and his use of the word ‘blowie’.

“Shut up,” he said with a laugh, shoving my shoulder so I swayed sideways on the swing.

“Do you think you will?” I finally asked once I could get my breath back.

He shrugged.

“I’m not worried about it either way. I mean, It’s not that I’m like, leader of the chastity club or anything, but I want it to mean something, you know? Maybe that sounds stupid, but...”

“That’s not stupid. I mean, if that’s stupid, then I’m stupid.”

He grinned at me, shrugging.

“Well, you’re definitely not stupid,” he countered, and we dissolved into silence after that.

I couldn’t tell how long we sat there, silent in the darkness with only the moon to light the night. There was the slow, rhythmic squeak of the swing chains and the buzz and chirp of cicadas.

Eventually, Patrick stood from the swing and stretched, his back cracking in three places.

I laughed at him.

“I tell ya, football is no joke,” he said with humor lacing his words.

“How is that going?” I asked him. “Mom told me that you’re hoping to get into college on a scholarship. You think that’s going to happen?”

He shrugged.

“I sure as hell hope so. Otherwise, I don’t think I’m going to college.”

“Really?”

He shook his head while I stood.

God, I’m getting old. My back was aching like crazy.

The two of us started walking home again.

“Yeah. I dunno what I’d go to school for anyway. I’ll probably just become an apprentice at Dad’s work. It’s a good, honest living.”

“Sure, but is it really what you want to do?”

He shrugged again.

“In the long run, if I’m making a good enough income, does it matter if it’s something I love? I mean, very few people get to make a living doing what they love, and the rest of us? We work so that we can do what we love. I’m not afraid of hard work, and the world will always need electricians, right?”

I supposed he was correct about that.

“I just want you to be happy,” I told him, grabbing his hand and squeezing.

“Ditto, sis,” he said, giving me one of his beaming smiles. “But you don’t need to worry about me. If I were you, I’d be worrying more about how the hell you’re going to get Mom and Dad on board with your forty-two year old boyfriend.”

I laughed, smacking him on the arm.

He cackled at me, then opened the gate to our back yard and let us in through the kitchen door.

Mom and Dad were both asleep in front of the TV, and I smiled lovingly at them. The love they had was all I’d ever wanted for myself. A partner, and someone to lean on to support me, who I could support, too. Someone who cared, and was tender with me.

Owen was all of those things.

Patrick said goodnight to me and headed up to his bedroom, so I followed, ending up in my room which was right beside his. Everything was still bright pink and purple, but the bookshelf stacked with YA books and teen dramas was still by the door.

I picked one out at random and brought it to bed with me, then I pulled out my phone.

I didn't have to look very far into the book to find the perfect sentiment.

Me: *The Wonderful World Of Oz. Pg 15 lines 22-23*

Leaning back in bed, I waited and hoped for a response, but I would've understood if he needed some time away from me, too.

Eventually, my eyes closed and I let out a deep breath.

Then my phone gave a familiar ping and it was *him*.

Chapter 17



-Owen-

The text came in, breaking up the silence in my office while I was banging my head against a wall.

Writer's block was no joke.

I glanced at the little rectangle on my desk and frowned. Immediately my mind went to the percentage of possibility that it could be Mia, but most likely it was Paula or maybe even Charlie.

Knowing it could be my son, I blew out a long breath and flipped my phone to look at it.

Mia Miller's name stood out against the black screen and my heart started beating an intense tattoo against my ribs.

I couldn't get the message open fast enough.

Mia Miller: *The Wonderful World Of Oz. Pg 15 lines 22-23*

I frowned at the words, until I realized she was giving me lines of a book.

What the actual fuck?

I stood, then browsed over to the bookshelves with my very, very old classics on it. Hopefully the lines were the same, because all I had was the original Wizard of Oz.

Opening it up, I flipped through the pages until I reached fifteen, then tried to count down the lines, but my blurry eyes prevented that.

With a sigh of frustration, I brought the book to my desk and flicked on the lamp. It illuminated the page enough

so I could use my capped pen to count. Fuck it all, why do old eyes struggle with stupid, everyday shit? I hated getting old.

‘Hour after hour passed away, and slowly Dorothy got over her fright; but she felt quite lonely—’

Those fucking words shouldn’t have been so sweet.

But they were.

She missed me. Maybe almost as much as I’d missed her.

Me: *I miss you too.*

Mia Miller: *I’m sorry if I’m bugging you.*

Me: *You could never bug me.*

Well, maybe that wasn’t entirely true, but she’d have to work damn hard at it to succeed in irritating me.

Mia Miller: *I almost take that as a challenge.*

I laughed, gripping my phone so tight it legit made a squeaking sound in my palm.

Calm down, Tarzan. No need to get worked up over talking to a girl.

I rolled my eyes at myself as my phone vibrated again.

Mia Miller: *I can’t stop thinking about you. Is that weird? I was supposed to come out here to get space but... I don’t want space.*

Me: *Then come home to me.*

I wanted to snatch those words right back up, but I couldn’t. The text was sent.

Mia Miller: *Do you have any siblings?*

I raised my eyebrows, confused at the change of subject, but I went with it. Mia was scared and flinchy. If she needed to know my story to feel better about us, then so be it.

Me: *Two. My older sister has already passed away and my brother lives in New York.*

Mia Miller: *I’m so sorry. That’s far too young.*

Me: *Freak accident when she was a teen. It was a tragedy and honestly, none of us really got over it.*

Mia Miller: *I have a brother. He's just finishing his last year of high school. I couldn't imagine losing him.*

Me: *I think it's one of the reasons my brother stays in New York with our mother. He's the baby and he sort of took on the roll of being her shoulder to lean on.*

Mia Miller: *Are you close with your brother?*

Me: *We were when we were kids. But not in a long time.*

She got me thinking, maybe it was time to call my brother up and see how he was doing. My mother, too.

Mia Miller: *How did I not know this about you?*

Me: *We're either talking school or books, or we're naked in bed. Not much time to talk about those things.*

Dammit, again with sticking my foot in my metaphorical mouth.

Mia Miller: *I like talking to you.*

Me: *Me too. What's your brother like?*

There was a pause as those dots on my phone danced, letting me know she was typing.

Mia Miller: *He's a handful, but he's one of my best friends. We tell each other everything (yes, including you) and I'm a little weirded out by how grown up he's gotten this year. He actually gave me good advice. Can you believe it? From an eighteen year old boy!*

Me: *As long as the advice wasn't to leave me on my ancient ass, then that's great.*

Mia sent me a laughing face, then another.

Mia Miller: *Actually, I think he likes you. I gave you a glowing review.*

Me: *How kind of you. Hopefully you didn't say anything I'll struggle to live up to.*

Mia Miller: *His biggest worry is your kids.*

Wow, drop the bomb right away.

Me: *Just that I have them or something else?*

Mia Miller: *That I'm twenty-three and not ready to be a mom.*

I blew out a long breath.

Mia was getting way fucking ahead of herself, and the idea that she was already thinking about not only 'us' staying together for the long term, but her integrating into my life was... I was freaking out a little. My heart was hammering in anticipation of all the things I wanted to do with her, and adding the kids to that... Holy hell, the idea lit in my brain like a tire fire, and I couldn't let it go. But it scared the ever living shit out of me, too.

Me: *Does that mean you want to keep me? Those are heavy thoughts when we've only been together for a matter of a week.*

Mia Miller: *I know that. I know it and yet it doesn't change anything. It's why I'm scared.*

Me: *You don't need to be scared.*

Mia Miller: *I'm scared because I see this going somewhere, and my heart is latching onto you for dear life, but my brain is yelling at me to slow the heck down because it's too much, too soon. I understand that. But again, it doesn't change the way I feel.*

Me: *You mean how you love me? And how I love you?*

Writing those words was like ripping a sliver out of my literal heart. It hurt like hell, but it was relieving to get it out there.

Mia Miller: *Yes.*

Me: *And so, what? It's all or nothing?*

Mia Miller: *That's how it feels in my chest. I want to give you everything that I am, but I'm terrified that you don't want it.*

Did I want it? Did I want what she was offering?

She was right, it felt like way too much, way too soon. People didn't make decisions of permanency after only one week. But at the same time, did the timing really matter if I was already sure that I loved her?

My idiot heart pitter pattered over that.

Love.

I'd been positive that I would never experience the heady feeling in my life. Even with Paula, it had been fun, exciting, and we'd been a good pair, but love had nothing to do with it. Not really. Sure, I'd thought it was love at first when we got married, but I soon realized that infatuation was a whole different beast than the 'L' word.

The feeling made me breathless, *reckless*.

Me: *Do you want to meet them?*

I must have been going fucking insane.

It was a good four minutes before she answered. I knew that because I'd stared at my phone screen and watched each minute tick by until she wrote back.

Mia Miller: *Yes, but not yet. I need to get to know you more, first.*

Me: *Tell me when.*

There was another pause in which I threw in the towel for the night and gave up on writing, heading to my bedroom, instead.

Mia Miller: *Do you believe in God?*

Me: *That's a tricky question.*

Mia Miller: *Not really. You do or you don't.*

Shit, I felt like it was a trick question.

Me: *I'm not sure. My parents weren't really religious, so I don't have much experience with it. Do you?*

Mia Miller: *I do.*

Mia Miller: *Maybe not in the same way my parent's do, but I believe.*

Me: *Is that a deal breaker for you, if I decide that I don't?*

Mia Miller: *No. My faith is my own. You sharing it would be wonderful, but I don't need you to believe what I believe to have that piece of myself.*

Me: *What do you plan on doing after you graduate?*

I figured if we're getting the big stuff out of the way, it was time to ask the things I needed to know for my own comfort.

Mia Miller: *I haven't decided yet. The only thing I know for sure is I want to finish my book and maybe publish it, if I can figure that out.*

Me: *Is that your life ambition?*

Mia Miller: *One of them. I want to be a mom and have a family eventually. I want all the things my mom has. Families bring love.*

My fucking hands tingled in anticipation. She wanted a family. Kids. She wanted all the things I did.

Me: *How many kids?*

Mia Miller: *At least three or four. As many as God will give me.*

I typed, then paused, then typed again.

I had to know.

Me: *Will your parents hate me for us fucking before marriage?*

There was a long pause, and it made me literally sweat as I waited.

Mia Miller: *They'll be disappointed, but they wouldn't hate you, I don't think. Dad would maybe punch you though. But only once.*

I blew out a sharp breath and chuckled. Only once, huh?

Mia Miller: *I'm just kidding. Mostly.*

Me: *So relieving. Mostly.*

She sent me more laughy faces.

Mia Miller: *What do you want to do with the rest of your life? What do you see in your future?*

Shit, that was a good question that I didn't have an answer to.

Me: *I don't know, to be honest. I'm mostly living day to day as Dad, writer, and teacher. Those are a lot of hats to wear.*

Mia Miller: *Do you want to keep it that way? Is a girl like me too complicated?*

Me: *Complicated, yes. A problem? No.*

Mia Miller: *Not to mention your ex-wife would hate me. That would make things between you even more uncomfortable.*

I had to let out a laugh at that one.

Me: *In that case, you're wrong. My ex-wife is currently dating a twenty-two year old almost graduated athlete. Younger than you.*

Mia Miller: *What the heck? Really?*

Me: *She traded her geek ex for a jock. I suppose she's as happy as she's going to get.*

Mia Miller: *Are you saying, you really think we could do this, if everything works out?*

Me: *I'm saying, I've never met something in my life that I fought for that I didn't get.*

Mia Miller: *Will you fight for me, Owen?*

Shit, the words hit me square in the chest, and the answer came immediately.

Me: *Every single time, I will fight for you.*

She didn't write back after that. I didn't either. Hell, I wouldn't have even known what to say after a confession like that.



Her next text came in first thing in the morning.

Mia Miller: *'The Secret Garden' page 48 line 10-13*

I grinned at the ridiculous code.

Me: *Where the fuck are you getting these things?*

My ass was out of bed immediately, creaking joints and all, and I was stumbling out of bed and down the stairs to my library office to look for the book.

I looked, and looked, and looked.

I didn't have 'The Secret Garden', evidently, which really pissed me off. Why didn't I? It was a fucking classic!

I worried for a moment that I'd have to tell her to just give me the quote, but I hurried over to the school and the library that it contained, and got real fucking lucky that they had an old version of the book.

Flipping through the pages, I found the forty-eighth and squinted, scrolling down to line ten.

'Where has tha' been tha' cheeky little beggar?' he said. 'I've not seen thee before today. Has tha' begun tha' courtin' this early in th' season? Tha'rt too forrad.'

Me: *Is that what we're doing? Are we courting, Mia Miller?*

There was a long, pregnant pause as I stood there, the old book in hand as I waited for her answer.

Mia Miller: *Does that put you off?*

She asked eventually.

The same feelings from the night before barreled into me. They said all the same things, like, 'it's too soon' and 'I

would do anything for her.’ Contradicting thoughts made me question my sanity for a moment, but if my ripe age had taught me anything, it was that life’s too short to beat around the bush and wait to take the things you want. I’d been honest with myself about her from the beginning, and I was pretty sure she had been, too. I’d always hated the phrase ‘old soul’. It seemed trite compared to the people we always used the line on, but there was no better way to describe the young woman who’d captured every fucking part of me.

Me: *Should it?*

Mia Miller: *Probably.*

Me: *I was never one to follow rules.*

Mia Miller: *You’re giving me non-answers.*

Me: *Did I ever tell you I was on the debate club in high school? They taught me some great skills.*

Mia Miller: *Owen Harlo...you’re killing me here.*

I let out a bark of a laugh, then curled my lips in because I was in a damn library.

Me: *If I start courting you for real, We’d need to meet the families.*

Mia Miller: *Maybe the courting thing can wait a little while.*

Me: *You scared to introduce me to your dad?*

Mia Miller: *Maybe a little.*

Me: *Me too.*

Mia Miller: *How about we give it to the end of the semester? If we still feel the same, then you’ll meet my parents and brother and grandma.*

Me: *That sounds fair.*

I didn’t add that I was absolutely sure I’d be feeling the same then as I did now. The only thing that could change would be her feelings toward me, and I was trying to prepare myself for that possibility.

Mia Miller: *Ok. Until then, we explore this.*

Me: *Good. When do you get home so I can explore you a little more?*

I smiled down at my phone for a moment, then made my way out of the library and toward my office in the English building.

My day went on as it usually did. Classes, homework, sitting at my desk and tangibly missing the girl who'd buried herself in my heart weeks ago. Nights had been lonely, and not just because she'd been missing from my bed. My desk felt empty without her taking up too much room on the other side, and my office at school and at home had felt barren without her.

By dinnertime, when she usually spent evenings marking papers in my office, I started to feel the loss of her too sharply, so I started packing up so I could at least feel lonely in the comfort of my home.

A soft knock came from the door and I lifted my eyes to the sky, praying briefly that it wasn't a co-worker trying to invite me out to 'the bar' again.

The big difference between LA and the south? At least in LA people didn't like each other and it was evident in their dealings. In the south, people were unbearably polite and friendly, and it made me feel like a total asshole if I didn't return the sentiment.

As I stood to open the door to whatever intruder stood there on the other side, it actually opened. A pretty face popped through the crack with long, dark hair and a twinkling smile.

"Sorry I'm late, boss," Mia said, letting herself in.

I plopped back into my seat in shock, but was out of it quick as a flash to engulf her in my arms.

"I fucking missed you," I breathed, squeezing her maybe a little too tightly.

She giggled, hugging me back with all her strength. It was endearingly soft.

“I was only gone a day,” she whispered into my gray sweater.

“It felt like eternity.”

“Yeah it did...”

We stood there like crazy people for a good ten minutes, just embracing. I took in the smell of her shampoo, floral and sweet and delicious.

“Will you come home with me tonight?” I asked her, murmuring into her hair.

She sighed contentedly, but shook her head.

“I need to head to my dorm. All I left was a vague note for Clea that I’m going home for a couple days. She’s probably worried about me.”

“Yeah, sure, I get it,” I said, letting her go.

She gave me a small, fragile smile as she backed away, clasping her hands in front of her like she didn’t know what to do with herself.

“Well,” I offered, pointing toward the desk. “We’ve got a backup of tests and that pesky midterm is still waiting to be finished up.”

She flashed me a bright smile before heading to the desk and flopping down into her seat.

Fuck, it was nice to see her where she was meant to be. The whole physical relationship between us had changed things in our working relationship, but I’d realized that I had to keep a cap on my passions while we were working to keep things just-so at school. At home, we could do whatever we wanted. Here? We needed to keep it professional, for both our sakes.

“I got those papers from Ms. Grey,” I told Mia, patting my leather briefcase.

“Have you read them yet?”

I shook my head.

“No, I only received them earlier today. Once I take a look at them, I’d like you to read over them as well.”

“Sure,” she agreed.

We melted into quiet with only the sound of a scritch-scratching marker on paper. The sound made me grin and melt for her.

When the clock read seven-thirty, I finally stood and stretched. I didn’t want to go home, but my brain was ready to shut off for the evening.

Mia and I packed up, stacking papers that we’d blown through like a well oiled machine.

“Let me walk you out,” I told her. “I can drive you back if you want.”

“Oh, I’m ok walking. My dorm is the opposite way as home is for you.”

I gave her a deadpan look.

“Yeah, don’t want to take me a whole ten yards out of my way.”

She gave me a naughty grin.

“Right! Besides, walking is good for the soul.”

I agreed, albeit hesitantly.

She was perfectly capable of walking, but it didn’t stop me from wanting to take her to her door and watch her go in.

With my bag in hand, I reached for the door handle, but was stopped with the flat of Mia’s palm pressing against the thick wood.

“Not even a kiss?” she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

I lifted one side of my mouth in a smirk.

“I didn’t want to assume anything. I know you’re trying to work through things, and I didn’t want to push anything onto you until you’re ready.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I don’t understand you,” she said, lifting her hand to brush her thumb across my stubbly cheek. “Half the time you’re a gentleman with a stick up his bum, and the other times you’re a freaking animal.”

I barked a laugh, giving her a taste of the latter.

She eyed me, saying ‘I told you so’ with her expression alone.

Without another word, I cupped the side of her face in my hand, lifted her chin, and dipped down to gently press my lips to hers.

“I love you,” I murmured against her mouth, stealing one more brush of her lips before I backed away.

She let out a soft whine.

“I need more,” she practically begged.

I gritted my teeth and frowned.

“If I give you any more, I’ll be bending you over my desk and fucking the breath out of both of us.”

Her eyes flashed in excitement, but she simply gave me one of her signature devilish grins.

“Shame we don’t have the time,” she said, leading out the door with a flourish.

When she was feeling frisky, she had a wicked streak that could get me hard in about three seconds flat. So, of course, I had to rearrange myself before walking out the door to follow my little vixen into the damp night outside.

Chapter 18



-Mia-

I walked side by side with Owen out to his car, because I had a question that I needed to discuss with him before I could go home to my dorm.

“Change your mind?” he asked as he got to the door of his Porsche.

“No, I’m just trying to gather the guts to ask you something,” I said, hoping he’d dig the words out of me so I didn’t have to get the bravery myself.

His brows drew together as he leaned against his car.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Well, I wanted to ask you how you felt about me telling my friend about us. My dorm mate.”

He pulled his cheek between his teeth and nibbled as he stared at me, thinking.

“You’re a grown up, Mia. You don’t need my permission to do anything.”

I met his eyes and said firmly, “I know that. But a relationship isn’t just two grown ups doing their thing. It’s two grown ups taking each other into account and doing what’s best for the collective. I want to tell her. I want to be able to talk about everything with her, even if she’s a bit sex crazy. But if you don’t think it’s a good idea, or if you’re not comfortable with it, then I won’t. I’ll wait until after the semester.”

He spent another moment chewing on his cheek before shoving his hand through his hair.

“Far be it for me to keep girlfriends from gossiping. My only question is, do you think she’ll be discreet? That’s my biggest concern.”

I considered that, and honestly, even with how excited she would be, I believed she would be able to keep her mouth shut.

“I think so,” I told him.

He lifted a brow.

“Think so or know so?” he asked.

I grinned, because he couldn’t turn off the dad part of him.

“I can’t be one hundred percent sure of anything when it comes to other people and the decisions they make. You know that.”

He grunted, but nodded.

“Ok. I trust you, Mia. I don’t necessarily trust your friend, but I trust you.”

I lifted my hand to touch his face again, but yanked it back when I remembered that we were outside.

“Get in the car,” he growled, like he was ready to devour me.

Even though it was a tease, I gripped his hand just for a moment to squeeze it, then shook my head and backed up a few steps.

His growl got deeper and more gravelly, but he let me go even though his eyes were burning embers.

I knew that if I got in that car with him, I wouldn’t be going to my dorm. I’d end up sprawled naked in his bed and taking his delicious cock all night.

And I couldn’t have that.

Sighing and wishing I could crawl into his car after all, I made my way back to my dorm and let myself in.

And of all the rotten luck, Clea wasn’t even there.

I frowned and dropped into my bed, instantly regretting not going home with Owen.

I sent him a text to tell him so.

Me: *Aaand she's not even here.*

Professor Harlo: *I'm turning around.*

Ugh, I wanted that so bad.

Me: *Don't. I really need to talk to her.*

Professor Harlo: *It can wait until tomorrow.*

Me: *Stop being so tempting.*

Professor Harlo: *I'm here.*

I groaned out loud to the empty room, wanting both things so badly. But Clea wasn't here, so maybe I should just go with him?

I grabbed a shrug and slipped it on before sliding my feet into some slippers, then I pounded down the stairs with a compromise in mind.

He was idling in front of my building, music blaring through his window as he stared across the street at the house that was obviously in the midst of an epic party.

I knocked on the window and he jumped, then cranked down the music to a soft purr in the background.

"I'll make you a deal," I said as he lowered the window. "Twenty minutes. In the car, over in that parking lot over there. Then you bring me home, or I'm walking."

He frowned, grumbling to himself about stubborn women, but leaned over and popped the passenger door.

I looked around, making sure nobody was watching before I went around the car and climbed in.

As soon as I was in and buckled, he zoomed off, making me shriek as I got sucked back into the seat.

"I agree with one of your terms," he said, driving like a madman through the light traffic on the road. "I'll bring you home when we're done."

“Owen Harlo,” I barked out, pressing my hands against the dash as the loss of control sent me spiraling.

He gave me a vicious grin that was so unlike him, but it made my heart pound, and not in a bad way.

We sped out of town like the devil was chasing us and didn't slow down until we passed the border into Alabama. We took a random dirt road that wrapped around some trees that led to a power transformer and tower hiding in the brush.

He slammed the car into park in the middle of the dirt road and reached down, sliding back his seat as far as it would go.

“Get in my lap,” he growled.

I licked my lips and wiggled down my leggings until I was in nothing but my t-shirt, shrug and panties and climbing into his lap like a good girl.

He gripped my thighs, settling me over him with my knees jammed into the center console and the door panel on either side of him. The moment his fingers brushed against my panty-clad center, I forgot all the discomfort and moaned for more. I dropped my face to his and took his mouth in a burning kiss.

He stroked me like that, sinking his tongue into my mouth as heat flared all over my skin, licking up my chest and cheeks until I felt too hot.

I panted like a dog as his fingers slipped past the burier of my panties and slicked through my folds, sparking each of the nerve endings in my clit.

“Don't stop,” I breathed, the pleasure almost painfully delicious.

As his fingers sank into me, I grunted with the feeling as he moaned, scissoring and curling them inside.

“Do you want the gentleman,” he asked, panting, “or the animal?”

I barked a laugh, then met his hooded eyes.

“I want a gentleman in public, and an animal between my thighs.”

The growl he gave was deep and animalistic as he shoved me over the console. I shrieked, but the shock didn't last long as his hands scraped my panties down harshly and his mouth descended.

He sucked me in, biting to the point of pain, and each nibble had my hips lifting to his mouth, my hands digging into his hair and fisting.

I cried out as his tongue entered me, thrusting into me like a savage while his lips laved sloppy kisses over me.

“Oh-Owen,” I breathed, unable to entirely fill my lungs. “I need you inside me. Right now.”

He didn't need more instruction than that. My lover, or boyfriend, or whatever we were, grabbed my hands and pulled me up until I was sprawled over his legs again and sinking onto his glorious length.

I let out a low groan as he stretched me, throwing myself back into the steering wheel.

We both jumped when the darn car burst with a honk, then we melted into giggles until the feeling of him moving in and out of me dissolved our mirth altogether.

I hugged his head to my breasts, his teeth glancing over my skin in little love bites as I fought to breathe. God, it was like I couldn't get air into my lungs, all the while I was panting like a wild beast in heat.

My hips ground down on him, smashing my clit into his pelvis with a wet slick until shudders were wracking my body and shivering up my spine as fire burned through me. I gasped through the first waves of my orgasm, each inhale stuttered as Owen's mouth moved up, lips blazing up my neck until he was growling out his own release into the curve of my shoulder.

With lips parted, I drew in harsh breaths and closed my eyes as the hot waves of my orgasm blew threw me, but I felt him, too, pulsing heat into me as his hands gripped my

hips so hard I was sure he'd leave little polka dots when we were done.

When the raw need drained out of us, I finally realized how insane all of it was. We'd driven almost twenty minutes out of town just to have sex in his car because we couldn't keep our hands off each other.

And I kind of loved that.

"Ok, you need to bring me home now," I told him, flopping back into my seat, still out of breath.

He sat there in his seat, pants still flared and his softening manhood exposed as his fingers dug into his hair and stayed there.

"You know, Mia," Owen said after a minute of silence while I kept searching for my panties that were nowhere to be seen. "I don't know how, but you make all of this feel new again."

"Is that an offhanded compliment?" I asked him with a grin, pulling on my tights without my underwear because evidently a Yeti stole it while we were too busy to notice.

He glanced over and smiled at me, his face relaxed and content.

With my lips still stretched in a stupid grin, I leaned over his lap and took him into my mouth, tasting the flavor of the two of us mixed together.

"Oh *fuck!*" he barked, throwing his head back into the seat behind him as I teased for just a moment.

He didn't get completely soft, and I admired that he was trying to get up for round two.

I helped put him back into his underwear, then I zipped his slacks up. As I sat up, his head lulled toward me with a silly grin covering his lips.

"Time to take me home," I whispered.

He let his head fall back again for a moment, then his fingers reached down to finish buttoning his pants. After that,

he moved his seat forward, then started off west, back home to Columbus.

We'd barely been gone an hour when he pulled back up to my dorm building, but he looked totally different. His face was flushed, and his hair was a mighty mess from my fingers.

"Get some good rest," he told me, reaching over to press one more kiss back onto my lips before moving away again.

"I will. You too," I told him while I climbed out.

That was our goodbye. I paused only for a moment to wave goodbye to him, and he just lifted his hand toward me, then took off like a shot down the road again.

It wouldn't have surprised me if he went on another drive, just to get the steam out of his blood.

Luckily for me though, Clea was home when I stepped in the door.

She looked at me and her eyebrows shot up as her jaw dropped.

"You said you were in Louisville!"

I grinned, trying to brush down my wild hair.

"I was. I got back this afternoon."

"And immediately got down and dirty with your new beau?" she demanded.

I laughed.

"No, I went to work first, then got down and dirty with my beau."

Clea clapped her hands and squealed, and my heart beat with excitement to tell her all about Owen.

"Girl, I'm dying over here! You gotta tell me who this mystery man is!"

I sat down, not caring that I looked like I'd just been sexed or that I was missing my panties.

“Do you remember what I told you about him?” I asked her, plopping down on my bed away from her.

She was practically panting with excitement.

“You said he was in your class, but you’ve been real hush-hush about him. Not even a name!”

I bit my lip, then put out my pinky.

“I need you to pinky swear that you won’t tell anyone what I’m about to tell you.”

Her face became serious.

“Pinky swear?” she asked.

I nodded, wiggling my pinky again.

Clea put out her pinky and curled hers around mine, but put in the caveat, “I’ll keep my mouth closed, unless something happens to you, or I’m scared for you. In that case I reserve the right to tell the police about said guy.”

I laughed, but agreed.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me. He’s not dangerous,” I told her with a laugh.

The apprehension drained from her eyes and she went back to bouncing on her bed in excitement.

“I wasn’t lying when I told you he’s *in* my class,” I explained slowly.

She watched, unblinking.

“But he’s not a student here. He’s one of my professors.”

The look of shock on her face was priceless.

“*WHAT?!*”

I laughed as she lost her freaking mind.

“Professor Hottie Pants?” she demanded of me.

I nodded.

“Oh my God! Mia! That’s insanity! How did you do it?”

I shrugged.

“Honestly, we’re just really similar souls. We like the same things and are passionate about writing and literature. He’s so wise and brilliant, and I couldn’t help but fall for him when we worked together so much, you know?”

She was just shaking her head, trying to take it all in.

“So, you’re banging admin?” she finally asked, disbelief ripe on her face.

“It’s more than that. I love him,” I admitted, just like I had to Patrick before that.

“Oh, Mia, don’t get too close to him,” she told me, her face going serious again.

“We love each other—”

“Don’t get me wrong, it feels good at first” she said, interrupting, “but older guys like that are only in it for the sex. You know that, right? I mean, it’s probably *great* sex, but that’s all it is for them.”

“That’s not how it is with us,” I tried to explain, but she shook her head.

“When the semester is over and you go home, what? Do you think he’ll go with you?” she countered.

“We’re taking it one step at a time—”

“Exactly. That’s what they all say, girl. You can’t trust them. You need to know that.”

“How would you know?” I bit back, but she just frowned.

“I was you once,” she admitted. “I fell in love with this older guy. He had his own business, a car, a future. Turns out he had a family, too.”

“Owen doesn’t—”

“It doesn’t matter, Mia. They draw you in with pretty lies and promises, then they get what they want out of you and spit you back out. Professor or not, he’s no different.”

“He is different,” I barked, feeling really freaking upset that she would say such terrible things about Owen when she didn’t even know him.

“I’m just saying, have fun, then break it off before you get too involved. If he doesn’t leave you alone, then go to the faculty.”

“He could lose his job!” I shouted, officially ticked off.

“So? He’s the one doing a girl half his age.”

My lips sealed shut and I itched to grab for my phone. After the unexpected turn of things, the last thing I wanted to do was sleep five feet away from Clea in awkward silence.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you mad,” she offered.

“Yeah, I know you mean well.” My voice was tight, but she was my friend.

We could work it out.

“So, how are things with Howard?”

She grinned.

“So good,” she gushed. “We’ve been talking about what he’s going to do once he opens his practice, and I honestly think he’s going to ask me to marry him after the semester is through. He wants to move to Birmingham or Memphis, just somewhere to get out of this hole of Nothingness, Mississippi.”

“Wow, then you’re getting everything you want,” I tried. “He’s your dream guy, huh?”

She shrugged.

“Well, I mean, no, but he’s checking off the list, right? Isn’t that what you said? Good job, confident, supportive, smart.”

Somehow I couldn't imagine her with someone like that. Clea needed a man who drove her crazy just as much as he drove her mad with passion.

But, instead of telling her that, I was going to support her unlike how she did to me.

"I'm happy that you're happy," I finally said. "I'd like to meet him sometime."

She hummed, then her smile dimmed.

"I suppose since you're dating a professor, the whole idea of a double date isn't going to work, huh?"

I shook my head.

"Not right now."

"Right," she murmured, dropping her eyes to her phone.

We gave up our conversation so I laid down in my bed and checked to see if I had any messages.

There weren't any, and I kind of hated that Owen was giving me the space I asked for. I wanted him to invade and steal me away. Was reading my mind a little too much for a girl to ask?

I grinned to myself, thinking of that hour in his car and the hot minutes when I was squished in his lap. There were even bruises forming on my knees, and I relished every second of it.

Not feeling the least bit tired, I sat up again and grabbed my laptop and got to work, spilling all my thoughts and emotions onto the pages of my very first book. The first of many, I hoped.

Chapter 19



-Mia-

“I swear, one of these days I’m getting you a new chair for your office,” I said to Owen, rubbing my back as we stepped in the door of his incredible home.

We’d just spent three hours finally finishing up the midterm test in his office so we could distribute it between his classes before Thanksgiving break. Well, that and going over Ms. Grey’s papers. They were really good, so it looked like she was getting a second chance.

Owen stretched after slipping off his old man cardigan, and I smiled. He perpetuated this style of being an old man at school, as if it made him appear more literary and wise. But I always thought it was funny because in jeans and a t-shirt was when he really bloomed as an artist.

I went to him just as his back cracked in three places, making him moan in pleasure.

With a chuckle, I brushed my hand across his chest, still covered in a powder blue dress shirt.

“I’m oddly glad that Ms. Grey gets to stay in your class. We’ll just have to keep our eyes out for repeat offenses.”

He murmured an ‘mhm’ as his hand slid up my back, pulling me toward him.

“Can I tell you a secret?” I asked, completely changing topics before lifting to my toes so I could press a kiss to his perfect lips.

“Hm?” he hummed again in answer, his hand cupping my jaw as he lavished a few more feathery kisses across my lips.

“When we first met, in your office, when you took your shirt off right in front of me... Also, what kind of professor takes his shirt off in front of his student?”

He barked a laugh.

“I was running late for a class and I wasn’t thinking straight. Plus, I’d just burned the shit out of myself to boot.”

“Hm, well don’t do that. It was way too sexy for a student to handle.”

He grinned down at me, ready to delve into more kisses, but I stopped him.

“Wait, I was trying to say,” I interrupted. “Is that I never actually got your shirt clean. I bought a new one.”

His smile grew impossibly bigger.

“I know,” was all he bothered saying.

“You *knew*?” I yelped, playfully slapping at his shoulder.

His arms slipped around my waist as I fought to get away in my outrage.

“You missed a pin,” he whispered into my ear, then nibbled on my lobe before I could get away.

I threw myself against the wall by the stairs while pointing an accusing finger at him.

“You let me think all this time that I’d pulled the wool over your eyes!”

“Did you honestly think that I’d mistake a ten dollar Walmart special shirt for the two hundred dollar costume wool dress shirt I’d given you?”

My jaw dropped.

“It was not,” I cried.

I’d just thrown the other shirt away without a second thought.

Two hundred dollars?

“What could you ever do to make it up to me?” he asked, prowling toward me.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I demanded.

His smile melted into one of adoration.

“Because I didn’t see the point. Besides, in the beginning I was just trying to get you to not hate me. After that, I kind of forgot.”

I rolled my eyes at him, but let him approach this time. His arms slid around my waist again and eased up the back of my tank top.

Not to be left behind, my fingers deftly started working the buttons of his soft shirt. I got halfway down when a knock at the door made us both jump.

“Probably a package,” he said, pulling away to get the door.

I whined as he went.

“You have the only package I want,” I tried, but he just laughed at me.

“That was terrible,” he said, then opened the door.

The way his whole body stiffened had the friskiness draining out of me and apprehension taking its place.

“I’m sorry,” came a female voice. “They called me in for an emergency shift, and if I say no they’ll give me another strike...I can’t lose this jo—”

I peeked my head around the door and the beautiful woman on the other side stopped mid-sentence. Two little boys stood beside her, both with backpacks in their hands. One wore a smile, the other a frown.

“Uh, who is *this*?” the woman asked, giving up on her explanation evidently, to demand one from Owen.

Owen’s mouth opened, but he choked on his words, nothing but gibberish bubbling out.

The woman’s frown burst into a grin.

“You hypocritical bastard,” she shot at Owen, though she didn’t seem mad. “Really? After the shit you gave me over Jamie?”

A blush broke over Owen’s cheeks as the woman leaned forward, hand out to shake.

“I’m Paula, the ex,” she told me, still looking like she’d won something. “Good friggin’ luck with this one.”

Her hand waved toward Owen, as if I would need luck with the man of my dreams.

“Now, I’ll be able to get them from school tomorrow. You just need to get them there. Ok?”

She was already moving on, pushing the boys in the door.

“Paula, I’m...”

I gripped his forearm and looked the woman Paula in the eyes.

“It’s fine, I can head home.”

She shrugged as if she didn’t care one way or the other.

“Well, I suppose that depends entirely on whether you plan on sticking around long term or not,” she said flippantly, then started down the stairs.

That quick, Owen and I were standing across from his two children who were looking at me like I was an alien.

“Who are you?” the younger boy asked, stepping closer until we were basically a hair’s breadth apart.

His bright blue eyes stared up at me with innocent wonder, and I couldn’t help but love him instantly.

“I’m Mia,” I told him.

He grinned at me, then put his arms around my waist and put his little face right into my crotch as he hugged me tight.

Owen watched, then gave me an apologetic smile.

“You’re the new girlfriend?” the older boy asked, Charlie, I thought his name was.

“Do you have your piano lessons tonight?” Owen asked, completely bypassing Charlie’s question.

“Mom already moved it to Thursday,” he said, shifting around us to head to the kitchen.

The youngest boy...*Lord, what was his name?* He gave me one last squeeze then ran after his brother.

“I’m sorry...” Owen started, but I shook my head.

“No, no Owen. You’re a professor and a writer, but you’re also a father.”

“Right, but we’d planned on waiting until later to—”

“Since when do things go according to plan?” I asked with a laugh.

He lifted an eyebrow and nodded.

“Yeah, but if it’s too much, I can take you home and...”

He drew his fingers through his hair and glanced down at his watch.

“*Or...* in two hours the kids will be in bed and we’ll have the rest of the evening to ourselves.”

I bit my lips, recalling the sensation of his fingers trailing up my shirt and his hard body pressing into mine.

“Two hours is easy,” I said with a grin, then leaned in a bit closer. “You can’t leave me to go to bed alone with a lady boner, now, can you?”

His mouth curved into a smirk.

“No, we can’t have that,” he said before leaning down and pressing a gentle kiss to my lips.

I grinned back at him then took three steps back and turned to join the boys in the kitchen.

They were already digging through the fridge for something to eat.

“So,” I drawled, making my way to the fridge, “Do you boys like spaghetti and meatballs?”

I happened to know that there was the fixin’s for exactly that in there because I’d brought them over only the day before because I’d wanted to make Owen something instead of him always cooking for me.

The youngest...Caden— *That was his name, Caden!* His eyes went all wide with excitement before he burst up in a jump and started dancing around.

“You cook?” Charlie asked, sounding skeptical.

“I do,” I agreed. “But spaghetti happens to be my specialty.”

He lifted his eyebrows and looked just like a miniature of his father right then.

The boys sat at the bar, and Owen leaned beside them while I bustled about to make dinner for the whole lot of them.

As I stirred up the meatballs with eggs, seasoning, and breadcrumbs, Owen had the boys get out their homework and the three of them worked on it together. Charlie was working on multiplication and Caden was practicing his phonics and spelling. Watching Owen sound out the more complicated words with Caden melted my freaking heart. He was so patient and proactive, encouraging him when he got something right or gently correcting when he wasn’t. Oh how my heart melted watching them.

When the meatballs were browned then braised in my homemade marinara sauce, I got the noodles strained until they were a jiggly mass of wiggles.

“Why do I have to do math?” Charlie whined, slapping his hand over his homework in frustration.

“Because math is the base of science,” Owen told him, messing his hair. “And science pays the bills. English majors are just wasting a degree.”

He looked up at me with a grin and a wink, but I scoffed at him.

Taking a noodle between my fingers, I lifted it, then tossed it toward him. It landed with an audible splat onto Owen's forehead, then dropped down to the page he'd been looking at.

All conversation stilled and my eyes grew wide. My aim had been better than I'd meant for it to be. Caden started to giggle, his hand covering his mouth.

"Did you just—" Owen murmured, picking up the noodle slowly, staring at it.

Fast as The-freaking-Flash, Owen was around the island and digging his shoulder into my belly, hefting me up.

Both boys were laughing now.

"Give us a minute," he said to his children. "Mia has to go to time out."

I laughed, slapping Owen's back as he made his way out of the room and to his office where he shut and locked the door, striding toward his desk. I'd barely caught my breath from laughing when he dropped me to the top of his desk, slipped between my knees and dropped his head to kiss me hard and fast.

"You're incorrigible," he murmured against my lips before slipping his tongue into my mouth.

I moaned, taking everything he'd give me.

"Better incorrigible than boring," I whispered back, and that made him grin against my lips.

"I wish we had time for a real time out," he complained, shoving his hands into my hair and fisting it before he let me go completely.

"You'll just have to spank me before I go to bed," I told him.

His eyes sparked and spit fire as he held himself back.

"Don't tempt me," he rumbled, took another vicious kiss from my lips, then strode from the room.

I spent another minute there to catch my breath and let the flush ease from my cheeks as the cool air in the room helped soothe the fire burning through my veins.

When I felt sufficiently calm, I strode from the room and saw Owen beside the stove mixing together the al dente noodles into my sauce and meatballs.

“Not a spaghetti stacker?” I asked, watching him stir it together.

He shrugged.

“Not really. If you mix it all together it assures you don’t have leftover sauce or noodles. You get the perfect noodle coverage every time.”

He put his fingers to his mouth and kissed them like a good Italian, then grabbed a few plates.

“Ok boys, put away the books for now. Let’s eat!” Owen said.

Both boys stacked up their books on the counter and slid off their seats to grab a plate.

For the first time since being with Owen, we took our plates, and I followed the boys as they automatically went toward the dining room table. The dining room was gorgeous with its big round table and dark green wallpaper, transporting me back in time immediately.

Caden snuck a noodle into his mouth as we sat, sliding it off the edge of the plate with his lips.

I grinned at him, then sat across from Owen as the boys took the seats beside him. Once he was seated, he looked up and saw me, then messed Caden’s hair saying, “Hey, why don’t you trade so I can sit next to Mia?”

Caden frowned.

“But *I* want to sit next to Mia!”

Owen lifted a brow.

“You *will* be sitting next to her, silly. Now, scoot your boot.”

“Oh yeah!” Caden shouted, then scooted his plate along the edge of the table while I got up to sit beside my... boyfriend?

It felt so strange calling him that.

Once I was in my seat, Owen reached down, took the leg of my chair and scooted me closer before folding his arms over his chest.

The boys followed suit and I was shocked as they all bowed their heads to say grace.

Owen said the simple and sweet words, then after a collective ‘amen’ he rubbed his hands together in anticipation of our meal.

I took my shock and stowed it away as they all dug in. The room immediately filled with moans of pleasure as they ate, slurping noodles and stuffing meatballs in their mouths. Owen looked over at me and gave me an expression like ‘*come on*’ as he rolled his eyes into the back of his head in bliss.

“Holy shit,” he eventually said when he swallowed. “You hiding some Italian genes in there and forgot to tell me?”

I laughed, squeezing his bicep in my hand. His grin eased to a smile.

“It’s incredible. Remind me to let you cook more.”

“Let me, huh?” I asked.

Caden saved his father from having to answer with a loud exclamation of, “Oh my GOSH *this is amazing!*”

I grinned at the boy.

Owen laughed and agreed, then looked toward Charlie.

“What do you think, bud?”

“It’s good,” he agreed, but was too busy eating to say more.

I took it as the simple compliment it was.

“Well, now I know spaghetti and meatballs are a hit. I’ll have to make it again if—”

Heck, I didn’t know if there was going to be a ‘next time’. At least, anytime soon.

“Maybe we should make it a Sunday tradition, before the boys go back home every weekend.”

My throat swelled with emotion at the thought.

The question in his eyes prompted me to say, “I’d love that.”

He let out a breath like he’d been holding it, then gave me the brightest smile.

“So,” he said after another bite. “Tell me about things.”

That was all he had to say before Caden went on a binge of telling him every single little thing he had done in the last few days since he’d seen his dad. Charlie was quiet, but I caught his eyes on me a few times, a question there that looked just like his father’s.

I wish I knew how to answer him. How to set him at ease, but he obviously had been hurt by the divorce and trusting new people in his parent’s lives wasn’t going to come easy. It was a good thing I was up for the challenge.

Chapter 20



-Owen-

I couldn't remember the last time I had an evening so good.

After dinner, Mia whipped together some cookies while we finished with homework, and the boys plowed some down before heading off to get ready for bed.

I followed them upstairs and was surprised when Mia followed.

"Is this ok?" she asked me, as if I was going to tell her to back off or something.

Seeing her interact with my kids in such a natural way was...it was fucking beautiful. I mean, I loved her before, but watching her with them was just incredible. I wanted to bend her over the closest surface and fuck the hell out of her, but I did the grown up thing and kept it in my pants so I could say goodnight to my boys, and *then* drag her off to my bedroom to defile every part of her body.

Caden came out of his room with his jammies on, his shirt on backwards which happened more often than not, to be honest.

"Oh no!" Mia said, pointing to Caden's chest. "You've got a dinosaur chasing you!"

Caden turned around, looking over his shoulder with an amused expression of shock.

Mia approached and pointed to his back where the print of his t-shirt showed a dino that said 'it's party time'.

"It's backwards!" Caden cried, pulling his arms through his sleeves so he could turn it around.

Once he was all fixed up, Mia gave an exaggerated sigh of relief.

“Whew, no more dinosaurs following you around,” she told him.

Caden just laughed and threw his arms around her neck, smacking a kiss to her cheek.

“Night-night, Mia,” he said before turning to give me a similar hug.

I pressed a kiss to the top of his blonde head and waved him off to bed.

“Don’t forget to say your night-night prayers.”

Charlie sighed, his toothbrush sticking out of his mouth.

“I don’t wanna pray anymore,” he said. “Mom just makes me.”

I chewed on my cheek for a moment, trying to figure out how to approach the subject.

When Charlie had spit out, I waved my son over as Caden closed his door to go to sleep.

“What do you mean you don’t want to pray?” I asked, sinking down to the floor to chat with him.

Charlie frowned and plopped down beside me, sighing like he was put out by having this conversation.

“I just don’t want to,” he said.

“But why don’t you want to? What changed?”

He seemed to think for a minute, but finally answered, “I don’t know if I believe in God.”

I nodded.

This was definitely not a conversation I was ready to have with him, but sometimes things came up and they needed to be dealt with. Kids needed to know you were there when *they* needed you, not when it was convenient for you.

“That’s fair,” I agreed. “Have you talked to your mom about it?”

He shrugged.

“I don’t want to hurt her feelings.”

I gave him a gentle smile and stroked the hair out of his eyes.

“Well, whether you pray or not is between you and God. I’m not going to force you, and neither is your mom. You know how much that stuff means to her, so you should maybe have a talk with her about how you feel. She’ll be understanding, and you won’t hurt her feelings, bud.”

Charlie looked at me with gratitude in his boyish eyes.

“But,” I put up a finger as a caveat. “As you’re exploring what you believe and what you don’t believe, give the God thing just as much of a chance as you give everything else. Deal?”

He nodded and put his arms around me.

God, he didn’t hug me much anymore, and I cherished every moment of this closeness with him.

“Thanks Dad,” he said, then stood and glanced Mia’s way.

Unexpectedly, he put his arms around her waist and hugged her quickly, then hurried to bed.

Standing up, I rubbed at my aching temples before turning to Mia.

“I hate having conversations like that without their mom. The whole dual but separate parenting thing sucks.”

I took her hand in mine and led the way across the long hallway to my bedroom.

“I thought you handled it like a champ,” she said, squeezing my hand in hers. “You’re a really amazing dad, Owen.”

I scoffed.

“Nah, I was a shit dad for many years. It’s only recently, after the divorce when I started to have them by myself, that I realized just what a shit dad I really was. It’s been better since, but Charlie remembers me never being there. He remembers my long hours and my face shoved into a screen at the times when I rarely *was* home.”

“Sure, but you’re a busy man—”

I shook my head to stop her right there.

“That’s no excuse,” I told her. “I had work, yes, but I should’ve put the other bullshit aside and been a father, been a husband. My ex did everything on her own. I don’t blame her for dumping my absent ass. Hell, I don’t really blame her for cheating, either. We’d gone from lovers to partners, then partners to acquaintances.”

She pulled my hand and stopped me, making me turn to look at her. The love in her eyes was bright and watery as she stared back.

“Be that as it may, you’re here *now*. You’re here and your boys love you. You’re a good father, and a good role model. Give yourself some credit.”

I just shrugged, not ready to take any kind of credit because I didn’t feel like I deserved it.

In my own room, I immediately shucked off my shoes and drew off my belt.

Mia dug through her little overnight bag that she’d just started storing here and got out some satiny pajamas.

“I didn’t know you were religious,” she finally said after undressing and dressing again in pajamas.

I’d watched her from the side of my eye like a perv, but turned to her to answer.

“I’m not particularly religious,” I admitted. “I was never the go to church type, or the praying type. But I know how much it means to Paula, so I do what I can to keep on the routine that she sets for them. Kids need consistency.”

“Ah, I see,” she murmured.

I paused in my undressing and stood there across from her in my dark blue boxer briefs.

“Why do you ask?”

She shrugged, pushing up the silky strap of her pajamas.

“Oh, well, I’m religious,” she said. “I wondered how that would work, you know, long term.”

I bypassed the pajamas and slipped into bed with her just in my underwear. There was less than a one percent chance that she’d get to go to sleep before I fucked her brains out anyway, so it was saving a step, really.

“Is that a problem for you, that I’m not necessarily devout?” I asked her. “It’s not that I don’t believe in God per se, but it’s always been a sort of abstract thing for me.”

“I mean, when we look at a future together, I think about going to Easter and Christmas, and the thought of going alone makes me...sad,” she admitted, tears wetting her eyes.

“You wouldn’t have to go alone,” I promised. “Even if it’s not for me, I’ll support you. That’s kind of how this whole relationship thing works. If God and religion is a passion for you, then I’ll find a way to help you explore it.”

Mia gave me the most grateful grin, tears dripping down her cheeks.

“You’re amazing,” she murmured before gripping my cheeks and lowering my face to hers.

“Amazing enough to earn a blowjob?” I countered.

Mia giggled and crawled over me before kissing down my chest.

All thoughts of God and religion flew out of my brain as my girlfriend yanked down my underwear just to sink her whole mouth down around me.

I let out a strangled moan, giving it all to her before I eventually flipped her over to return the favor.



Caden jumped into the bed between us at six in the morning.

I jerked awake, but Mia screamed when my six year old's cold hands found her bare belly. Now, luckily she'd been smart enough to dress after I'd made her come three times, but sleeping had made her shirt and shorts ride up, and Caden didn't give a single shit how cold he was when he started nestling in with us.

"It's just Caden," I told Mia who was sitting stock upright, trying to figure out what the fuck was going on. "He's an early riser and he likes to cuddle in the morning," I told her.

She blinked away the fogginess of sleep and finally registered the child in our bed.

With a smile that was far too gracious for the situation, she put her arm around him and tucked him in before closing her eyes again, cuddling the shit out of my kid like it was the most normal thing in the world.

I heard a shuffle by the door and saw Charlie there, waiting for an invitation.

Without a word, I waved him over and he crawled in, too. And then there were four in our king size bed. It suddenly felt a little too small, but way too big because I couldn't touch her with the two kids between us.

Mia's eyes opened a little as she smiled at me, and all I could do was smile back before everyone went still for a grand total of two minutes. After that, Caden started wriggling around uncontrollably, so I kicked him out. Charlie followed suit and ran after his brother. I could hear them playing down the hallway, leaving all the lights on in their wake.

"Aw, shit," I mumbled, finally able to drag Mia's body into mine.

She hummed, tired but still in a decent mood, all things considered.

"Guess I'm up," I said.

Now, I couldn't help it that my hand slid down her side and hip, resting perfectly over one round, firm ass cheek.

Mia giggled at me with her eyes closed, wriggling as my hands got a little too handsy with my kids just a few doors down.

"Down boy," she murmured, giving me a winning grin.

I pressed a kiss to her pillowy, pink lips, then another, and another. Next thing I knew we were full on making out right there with the door open. We jerked away from each other when we heard shuffled footsteps back toward the bedroom, and I sat up, as if that was somehow less conspicuous. The blanket was still covering my lap though, hiding my fat boner.

"Dad, do you think we can make pancakes for breakfast?" Caden asked.

"Sure dude, blueberry or chocolate chip?" I asked him, my voice squeaking with the awkwardness of the situation.

Mia was still shifting underneath the sheets trying to arrange her clothes again because I might've pulled her boobs out to suck on them a little.

But *just* a little.

"Ooo! Chocolate chip," he said in some kind of deep, Schwarzenegger growl.

My kid was a weirdo.

"Ok. Just give me a few to shower and get dressed. I'll meet you down in the kitchen. You shower and get changed, too."

Caden skipped away shouting at Charlie about the chocolate chips, so I took the opportunity and closed my bedroom door.

"Shower?" I asked Mia, leaning against it.

The woman looked like she was ready to devour me whole.

“Think we have time for a quickie?” she countered.

“There’s always time for a quickie,” I said, sounding offended that she’d even questioned it.

With a devilish grin, she flew out of bed and sprinted to the bathroom, stripping her clothes all the way.

I paused for half a second and looked up, doing the unexpected and sent a little prayer up there if there was a God listening. *Thanks. Thanks for this amazing woman.*

Chapter 21



-Owen-

“No, you don’t get to just walk away from me,” Paula said with a laugh after dropping the kids off on Saturday morning.

I had them for the whole weekend, so Mia said she would give me the day with just them, then come over on Sunday to make spaghetti for us all again.

“There’s nothing to say,” I tried, but she let herself into my house and marched right into my office.

I followed.

“No way. I need it all. Especially after the runaround you gave me with Jamie!”

“Paula, I’m your ex-husband, not your bestie,” I tried to remind her, but she was having none of it.

“She looks young,” she said, completely ignoring me. “How old is she?”

Half of me wished to just deny her everything and refuse to answer, but another part of me was itching to tell someone. I’d kept it mum for so long, and I had none of my old buddies to shoot the shit with anymore, so it looked like my ex was going to be my sounding board for my new girlfriend.

Awesome.

“Twenty-three,” I admitted.

Paula whistled.

“Though, I’m not surprised.” She snorted out a laugh. “Age never really meant much to you anyway. Remember

when I thought that you were cheating on me with your teacher in England?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Ugh. Professor Burton,” I drawled out. “She was like, eight hundred years old! I don’t know how you could have thought that.”

“She was seventy-five,” Paula said defensively. “And you talked about that woman non-stop! You stayed after classes and met with her so often. How could I *not* think something was going on? Plus, that was when you stopped wanting to sleep with me every three seconds.”

I let out a long breath, plopping into my chaise because I realized it was going to be a long morning until she was satisfied.

“Unfortunate timing,” was all I added.

She huffed.

We’d been through the whole thing over and over again. And as painful as it was, she knew why we’d broken up and divorced. Hell, they had been very loud, devastating conversations, but we’d managed relative peace between us since, for the sake of the kids. Well, besides when she decided to get all up in my business, like today.

“Mhmm,” she hummed, but waved her hand around to excuse the turn our conversation had taken. “So, tell me about her.”

“Do you realize how weird that is to ask?” I questioned, eyeing my cognac just a few feet away on the little bar cart.

But damn it, I had kids to take care of and the amount of alcohol I needed to get through our conversation would leave me unfit. Better to just not start.

“Jamie doesn’t know what a cassette is,” she said, blinking rapidly like she couldn’t comprehend the words spewing from her mouth. “And he thinks VHS’s are some sort of virtual reality.”

I barked out a laugh, fondly recalling my childhood of movies and music from film instead of hard disks.

Paula turned and eyed the bar cart too, but didn't refrain. She went over to it and poured a shot of cognac for each of us in the tumblers there.

I took it gratefully when she offered it.

"And I got a Cabbage Patch doll for Caden on his birthday, and Jamie looked at it like he'd never seen anything like it! Can you believe it? My dad got into a fistfight trying to get me one when I was a kid, and now kids don't even know what they are!"

I grinned.

"One time, I made bananas foster and went to get us a couple spoons to eat it," I told her between slow sips. "I did the whole Tick thing and held it up, shouting 'SPOON!' She had no fucking clue. I felt like a massive idiot."

Paula cackled.

"We had it good," she said with a sigh. "But I tell you, sometimes the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. I can hardly keep up with Jamie in bed. Whew!"

I crinkled my nose.

"Not the kind of conversation I want to have about your new boy toy," I told her.

She flashed a wicked smile.

"Boy toy, huh? Is that all your girl is? A toy?"

Bristling, I threw back the last drops that were in my cup and got up to make another.

Shit, I knew it would be hard to stop once I got started. Paula had a tendency to drive me to drink.

"No," was my firm answer.

"Do you have feelings for her then?" she asked. "I mean, as nice as the vigor of youth is, I know what a

bibliophile you are, and that...what did you call it? Zombiphelia? Liking brains or something?"

I rolled my eyes at her. "Sapiosexual, Paula."

"Yeah, right, that. Kind of hard to believe a twenty-something has more brains than your forty year old wife. Should I be insulted?"

"It's not just about intelligence," I murmured. "It's about how a person thinks, more than anything. You're smart. You have a degree and a successful career, but our conversations were never stimulating in the way that I needed them to be. It was a me thing, not a you thing."

"Still sounds like I'm the idiot here," she said with a tired sigh. "Anyway, I'd like to meet her. Maybe we can get my parents to babysit for a night and we can double?"

"A double date with my ex-wife?" I deadpanned.

She shrugged.

"Well, yeah. I mean, if she's sticking around, then it's only right that I get to know the girl who will be spending so much time with my kids."

"So now it's about the kids?" I raised an eyebrow at her. "I thought this was about your fucked up curiosity."

"Fucked up or not, indulge me," she drawled.

"I'll ask Mia," was all I offered to that.

Hopefully she'd say a resounding 'no' so I didn't have to be the bad guy this time.

"You know, when the kids got home from school on Monday, they couldn't stop talking about her. 'She's so pretty' this, 'she's such a good cook' that." Paula waved her hands around as she spoke animatedly. I just watched the odd jealousy with amusement. "Even Charlie likes her, and he doesn't like *anything* anymore."

"Mia's pretty easy to fall in love with," I admitted.

Paula just pouted about that.

“Well, as much as I hate to admit it, you look happy, Owen. Happier than I ever made you.”

“You know this is not about—”

“I know, I know. It’s not about me.” She waved off my comment. “I’m just saying, I’m glad you’re happy. You know, we were married for fifteen years, and all I ever wanted was to see you happy. And to be happy myself.”

“And are you?” I asked.

She nodded.

“As weird as it is to have a relationship with someone so much younger, I am. Jamie fits my soul, you know? After experiencing this, I just think maybe we got caught up on the little things, like looks and sex, and we didn’t really stop to think about what kind of partners we’d be for each other.”

I nodded.

“Mia is a writer, too. She understands my need to sit down and purge. Hell, most of the time she gets out her laptop and we share the desk, doing it together in silence.”

Paula nodded.

“Right, and Jamie understands my need to go and do things, to move and experience new things. He’s perfect for me in that way.”

“But what are the drawbacks?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“There are little moments,” she admitted. “Like, sometimes if a girl is showing off her boobs or butt in something tight or revealing, his eyes will wander. He always snaps out of it pretty quick, but I see it. I don’t think he’d ever cheat, but sometimes I wonder if he’ll get tired of the saggy mom tits and the crows feet.”

I frowned.

“First of all, I know you don’t have saggy mom tits because I paid for you to have a lift.”

She barked out a laugh.

“You enjoyed them once they were done. Don’t lie.”

I lifted another eyebrow, pleading the fifth.

“Second of all,” I said, bypassing her comment, “you still look like you’re thirty. Any young asshole that can’t see the worth in an older woman is just that, an asshole.”

“I know,” she agreed.

There was a long silence before Paula went to refill her glass, too.

“So, where did you meet her?” she asked eventually.

I blinked, trying to figure out what to say without fully lying, and without telling the entire truth, either.

“At the college,” I drew out.

Her eyebrows bunched in confusion, then they skyrocketed up in shock.

“You dirty fuck!” she yelped. “She’s your student, isn’t she?”

Aw, shit.

“See, I told you you’re not dumb,” was all I added.

Paula cackled away, throwing herself back onto the chaise beside me like she couldn’t even sit up with how much she was laughing.

“It’s not that funny,” I told her with a frown. “Besides, she’s not my student, necessarily. She’s my TA.”

“Oh God, like that’s any better,” she gasped out breathlessly. “And she’s an English major, isn’t she, if she’s your TA? That makes her under your department and your student, whether you teach her class or not. You’re who she’ll turn in her thesis to.”

She had a point, and I didn’t like it.

“Shut up,” I said finally, completely over the whole conversation. “School is over in a couple months, and all that goes away.”

“And you think she’ll stick around after the semester ends?” she asked, her turn to lift a brow this time.

“I think that we’re taking it one step at a time. But we...” Shit, why was it so hard to admit that I loved her? “We uh, we love each other, so I think it’ll last.”

Paula whistled. “Oh boy. Love, huh? I didn’t even know you felt such an emotion.”

I tossed her a scowl.

“And what is it you think I feel for my boys? Fondness?”

“That’s different.”

“No, it’s not,” I countered. “Love is when you are willing to sacrifice for someone. When you’ll put that person’s needs in front of your own. Someone who you’ll give everything to.”

Her face softened at that.

“You’re right,” she admitted. “You feel so strongly about her?”

I nodded.

“The sex is great, sure, but if someone chopped off my dick tomorrow, she’d still be the girl I’d want to spend the rest of my life with.”

Tears welled up in her eyes as she stared at me.

“Well damn,” she mumbled, wiping at her face. “Color me jealous.”

“And I hope,” I added, looking into her watery eyes, “that you’ll find someone who you can say the same about one of these days. If it’s not Jamie, then someone else.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Now that she was all teary and crying, Paula stood and brushed invisible lint off her pants.

“Well,” she managed while wiping up her face, her makeup smearing a little. “I should probably get home.”

Jamie's waiting for me. We're supposed to go on a date this afternoon."

"Have fun," I said, lifting a hand to wipe up the smeared mascara under one eye.

She gave me a grateful smile before turning and leaving.

My heart hurt for her. One couldn't spend a fifteen year marriage with someone and be able to cut them fully out of their heart within a year. Marriage or no, I cared for her. She'd been my best friend and my partner for so long, and I hated to see her crying. She'd hurt me, yes, but I knew that I'd hurt her, too. Neither of us were perfect, but I knew that despite her choices sometimes, Paula was a good woman, and I hoped she could find the love that I had.

My phone rang, interrupting my thoughts.

I pulled it out of my pocket, expecting to find Mia's newly applied picture on it, but saw the three little letters that I dreaded more than most.

MOM.

With a groan of frustration, I headed back toward my bar cart and poured a third shot because I was going to need it if I was going to survive a conversation with my mother.

"Hello Mom," I said stiffly as the crystal of the decanter tapped the rim of my glass.

Shit, why were my hands shaking?

"Hello Owen," Mom said in her typically aristocratic voice.

If she had been born in the late seventeenth century, she'd have been one of those nasty old women who got girls burned for witchcraft.

"It's a delight to hear from you," I said, gagging out the words.

She huffed.

“Yes, well, I’ve decided that I’m coming to see you. That woman can’t keep my grandchildren away from me permanently.”

“Mother, Paula isn’t trying to keep them away from you. She wanted to live by her family, who happen to live across the fucking country.”

“Owen, manners,” my mother hissed.

Well damn, I’d forgotten for a moment there what a prude my mother could be.

“Apologies,” was all I offered.

She huffed again.

“Like I said, I’m coming to visit. I expect you have room in your home for your dear mother?”

Aw, fuck my life.

“Of course I do,” I agreed. “How long will you stay?”

“I shouldn’t be longer than a month.”

I choked, hoping and praying to God that it wouldn’t actually be longer than a week. Maybe the humidity would get to her and she’d be too afraid it would rehydrate her raisin face.

I would almost feel bad for the harsh thoughts, but years of smoking, drinking, and scowling had done that to her. Why deny the truth?

“A month? I’m very busy, mother...”

“Too busy for the woman who bore you and raised you?”

Ugh. That old argument.

“No, of course not.” I said eventually.

“Good. Now, I’ll be arriving for Thanksgiving. We’ll spend the holiday together. And maybe Christmas, if you can stand me that long.”

Fuck me...

“Of course, Mother. I’ll prepare a room that will be comfortable for you.”

“Very good. I’ll send you the itinerary.”

Just like that, she hung up and I stood there gripping my phone so hard I thought it might snap.

I kind of envied my father in a way. even though they’d divorced when I was a kid, he could never be rid of her. Paula had always said that he’d died just to get away from the woman, and I honestly agreed with her.

Chapter 22



-Mia-

Things between Clea and I didn't get better.

For the next couple of weeks, we hardly talked, giving little strained smiles to each other because we had nothing to say. In a way, it broke my heart. We'd been friends for several years, meeting in my Junior year and her Freshman year. We would graduate the same year, but me with a Masters and her with a Bachelor's degree.

The space between us made me lean more on Owen. We still had our evenings where we worked together, sitting across from one another at his desk at the school or in his home, then we'd put the books away and we'd go from professor and TA, to man and woman.

And meeting the boys had been...just wow. I couldn't necessarily see myself as a mother, but I'd instantly fallen in love with them, and it reminded me in a small way of my brother growing up. Being five years younger, I remembered most of his babyhood and toddlerhood. Caden reminded me of him the most, wild and loud and excited about everything. Charlie was quieter. A thinker. I could relate to that. I often found myself tucked into a corner with him going over a book or sneaking treats while Owen wasn't looking. He liked me because of that. Of course, I'd told Owen we were sneaking candies, and he didn't care. His only response had been *'if you can get him to talk, give the boy fucking sugar cubes if that's what it takes.'* I'd simply laughed, but kept on with what I'd been doing.

We'd just finished our third weekend with the boys, and it was a Monday night, just the two of us.

“So,” Owen said while he flicked through Netflix, trying to find something to watch while we lounged in his plush living room. “I’ve got to ask you something I need you to say no to.”

I lifted an eyebrow at him, which made him groan.

“Seriously. Say no.”

“Ask me, and I’ll decide if I say no.”

He blew out a breath, then blurted, “Ever since Paula found out about you, she’s been hounding me to go on a double date with her and her boy toy. I need you to say no so I can tell her no, then she’ll leave me alone.”

My other brow rose to meet the first in surprise. It was probably the last thing I’d expected him to say.

“A double date with your ex-wife?” I clarified.

He moaned in pain.

“Yes. Now say no so I can tell her n—”

“Ok!”

He slowly turned to me and my exclamation, horror written across his face.

“What?” I defended my answer. “It sounds interesting. Besides, wouldn’t I need to have some sort of understanding with her if I’m going to stick around?”

“Mia, you don’t need to do this. If you’re just trying to appease her, then...”

“I’m not. I honestly think it’d be interesting. I’m sure she has all the tea about you. Plus, she’s the boys’ mom.”

“Fuck my life,” he murmured, tossing the remote onto the ottoman.

With a quick movement, he threw me over his shoulder then started up the stairs toward his bedroom.

I laughed and slapped his back, just for him to lay one big palm over my rear with a gentle smack.

“This is your fault,” he said while pushing open his bedroom door with a foot. “You know you can’t say things like ‘sticking around’ or ‘the boys’ and expect me not to fuck the shit out of you.”

I laughed as he threw me down on the bed, my back bouncing on the mattress with the motion. He crawled over me and pressed a hand against my cheek.

“I love you. You better know that.”

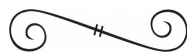
I grinned up at him, threading my fingers through his hair before I laid a gentle kiss over his mouth.

“I love you more,” I whispered.

He grinned wickedly.

“Prove it.”

So I did.



As it turned out, it didn’t take Paula long to plan an outing the moment Owen had told her yes. I found myself sitting across from the woman with her young boyfriend just two days later, and it was so awkward I wanted to crawl out of my skin.

Owen was sitting beside me at the nice restaurant with his face planted in his hand, which told me he wasn’t happy to be there.

Jamie just looked around with wide eyes like he wasn’t sure what was even happening, or what he should do.

So, knowing the boys would be useless, I looked at the woman who used to be married to the man I was in love with, and smiled.

“I’m glad you suggested this little get together,” I told her.

Her eyes sparked with curiosity.

“I have to say, I’ve been quite curious about you. As you know, Owen isn’t the most...welcoming man.”

“He doesn’t need to be welcoming,” I put in. “He’s intelligent and autonomous. He doesn’t need others to be fulfilled.”

Owen snorted a laugh and turned his eyes to me, them sparkling with amusement.

Paula laughed from her belly, nodding in agreement.

“That he is,” she agreed. “But it seems you broke through the surface, anyway. And his TA to boot?”

I shrugged.

“I’m not embarrassed about the way we came to know each other. In fact, I’m grateful, because I was able to get to know the man behind the teacher’s mask.”

“Hmm,” Paula hummed, her eyes glancing from me to Owen and back again.

“How did you and Jamie meet?” I asked, trying to get some of the attention off us.

“Oh, well,” Paula blushed, but Jamie grinned.

“My baby brother goes to school with Charlie,” he said with a smirk. “My mom had an appointment to go to, so I went and got him. We met in the pick up line. She bumped into the back of my car and the rest is history.”

Owen blinked.

“At Charlie’s school?” he asked. “You hit a kid’s car in front of our child’s school and...what? Got his number?”

Paula’s blush got pinker.

“She felt bad for rear ending me,” Jamie said. “It was just a little cosmetic scratch, so I told her she could make it up to me by going out with me and buying me dinner.”

“A twenty year old asking out a woman twice his age?” Owen asked Jamie.

Jamie’s grin turned wicked.

“You ever heard of the phrase MILF?”

I snorted into my hands while Owen blinked.

“First of all, that’s not a phrase, it’s an acronym, secondly—”

“What the letters stand for is a phrase,” Jamie butted in.

“We don’t need to talk about this,” Paula tried, but the boys were already aiming for the jugular.

“I can only imagine how that date started...and ended,” Owen threw out, tapping his finger to his temple. “Not sure there’s much in there besides sex and basketball.”

“What else is there?” Jamie countered with a smirk.

Owen barked out a laugh of disbelief.

“Really?” he directed at Paula.

“Please,” Paula said, putting out both hands in hopes to quell the conversation.

I pressed my hand to Owen’s bicep and squeezed.

He turned to me, face slack in utter shock.

“Please,” I added to Paula’s pleas.

“I need a drink,” Owen said, standing abruptly.

I pressed my palms to the table and stood.

“Excuse me,” I said before following him toward the bar.

Owen was in the middle of ordering a sazerac when I approached him.

“This isn’t a measuring contest,” I whispered, moving right beside him so my breasts bumped his arm. “Stop making this about him. This is about me and Paula.”

He frowned but turned toward me.

“This isn’t a dick measuring contest,” he agreed. “We all know who’d win. No, this is about Paula dating an A-class moron because he challenges her in bed.”

I scoffed.

“Even if that’s the truth, which you’d know it isn’t if you bothered listening to anything either of them has said tonight, what business is it of yours to judge them? What did we start out as?”

“Don’t you compare what they have to what we are,” he hissed under his breath. “We were friends before we fell into bed together. There was incredible forethought that happened before—”

“Before I asked you to kiss me in your garden?” I interrupted him. “Before we went from forbidden teacher and student or boss and employee, to bunny rabbits because we couldn’t get enough of each other? I can tell you that there was zero forethought on my end, only aching desire and longing that I knew would never come to fruition, but I wanted it more than anything, anyway.”

Of all the reactions he could have given, he smirked.

“Are you telling me you hadn’t thought about kissing me before that day in the garden? Not once?”

A blush spread over my cheeks, and he leaned down to speak into my ear. Goosebumps spread over my body as his low timbre stroked over me like soft velvet.

“That,” he rumbled, “is my point. You and I had intense attraction from the beginning, but we did nothing about it until we learned our souls were a match, too.”

He had a point.

His fingers pressed into the small of my back and a soft gasp escaped my lips. He chuckled, then moved closer until his lips were brushing my ear.

“Your nipples are almost as hard as I am,” he grumbled with humor lacing his words.

I blinked, trying to shove down my intense need to climb the man like a tree and beg him to take me.

“Now, Get your ass back to that table and get to know my ex-wife. As soon as you’re satisfied, I’m taking you home and—”

“Two Coors Lite!” a voice shouted above us as a body bumped against ours.

My eyes lifted to see Jamie there, waving his hand around like a crazy person, trying to get the attention of the bartender while his chest knocked against Owen’s shoulder.

Annoyance slashed across Owen’s face, but he simply stood and put out his palm so the guy stopped bumping him.

“I’ll get the beers,” he said in a weirdly, almost friendly tone that didn’t match the look in his eyes. “Not sure you could afford them, anyway.”

I sighed, rolling my eyes.

“You don’t know shit about me,” Jamie scowled at him. “Don’t go presuming to understand anything about Paula and I.”

“It’s Paula and me, not Paula and I,” Owen corrected, but just those simple words had flames erupting in Jamie’s eyes.

His fist snapped out so fast, I almost missed it. Owen didn’t, though. He saw it just soon enough to start to push me out of the way as Jamie’s fist met his face.

The people around us cried out and surged away as Owen pushed back, shoving Jamie away before wiping the blood from his nose.

“She’s not your wife anymore, asshole,” Jamie shouted as security started making their way through the crush of people toward the bar.

“I know, I’m the one who filed for divorce,” Owen spat. “Even still, she deserves better than a runt like you.”

Jamie howled and went after Owen with both fists flying, and to my surprise, Owen lifted his own and snapped his closed fist toward Jamie’s face.

I yelped, backing away as Paula approached.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said, sending a disgusted glare toward the guys.

Feeling a bit of the same disgust mixed with an arousal I wouldn't ever admit to, I followed her out, leaving the men to be separated and kicked out of the restaurant.

Paula slipped her arm through mine and we went back to our table.

"They can use a time out," she said finally when we were sitting down again.

We watched Owen and Jamie being led out of the building by security and I let out a huff of disbelief. Never in my life would I have imagined a man like Owen would be escorted out of a restaurant after participating in a fight! It was concerning and oddly...*exciting*.

"I'm sorry," Paula said eventually. "Jamie can be a hothead sometimes, and Owen is...he's a papa bear and doesn't know when to turn it off, even if it's inappropriate."

"I can't believe they got in a fight," the words rushed out. "I mean, he's forty!"

Paula laughed.

"Honey, they don't ever lose that masculine stupidity. Even when they're one hundred years old."

"Who do you think would've won?" I blurted, immediately regretting it.

What kind of question was that?

Paula grinned.

"Oh, as much as I hate to admit it, Owen would've won. He spends too much time exercising to get his blood flowing, and he's too intelligent and thinks his hits through instead of rashly just swinging like Jamie would."

An odd question formed in my brain, and I had to know the answer. And Paula was the only one who could give me the answer.

"Has he done this before?" I demanded.

"Well..." she drawled, looking away so I couldn't see the lie on her face.

“Oh my God, he has?” I cried. “Owen gets into fights?”

She waved her hands around.

“No, no, not normally,” she corrected. “He’s a brain-first-brawn-last kind of guy, but once in a while he found himself in a situation when someone else pulled fists first and he defended himself, like he did tonight.”

“Uh, he didn’t just defend himself. He punched Jamie right in the face!”

Paula laughed again, but there was a wistful smile on her face like she enjoyed it.

“Prepare yourself,” was all she added. “When he gets his hackles up...he needs an outlet and writing doesn’t tend to be enough.”

“Point taken,” I told her, though I wasn’t sure how it made me feel that she biblically knew my man in every way that I did, except she’s known him for far longer than I have.

There was a long silence between us as the restaurant settled down and things returned to normal.

“I’m sorry,” Paula eventually said. “I guess I didn’t realize how awkward it would be to meet like this. I thought that, I don’t know, maybe we could be friends.”

I nodded.

“It’s just weird to know that we uh...we’ve both seen him like...you know...”

“We’ve both had sex with the same man?” she asked, lifting a brow.

I just nodded, a blush creeping up my cheeks.

“Oh, honey, we’re ancient history,” she said. “Besides, we hadn’t been physical in the last couple years of our marriage. I just wasn’t someone who could get him excited, and I had to learn to be ok with that.”

That was horrible!

“We’d tried,” she said, looking off at nothing as she thought back to those days. “He wasn’t into me, and things just got...weird, because I was always mad at him, that he didn’t desire me like I wanted him to. So when he tried to force himself to want me, I would send him away. I still remember the sound of his sigh of relief when I would feign a headache. But every couple months, he’d come to me and offer, even though I knew he didn’t want me. For more than a year that went on.”

“That sounds like a nightmare,” I whispered.

She nodded.

“It was. I’m sure he told you the catalyst of why we divorced was because of my affair, but our relationship had been falling apart long before that. I needed things that he couldn’t realistically give me. Maybe I’m needy, but I don’t really think so. He just needs a woman willing to be hands off when he’s on one of his writing benders. All other things cease to exist when he’s face first in one of his books.”

She paused and lifted a finger.

“To be fair, he’s gotten better since the divorce. He’s been a good father to the boys, and that’s all I can really ask for. He’s there for them so much more now than he used to be because he doesn’t have someone else to dump the child rearing onto anymore.”

Paula chuckled and stroked the rim of her water glass.

“I’m not sure how serious you two are, but knowing Owen, he’s all gaga about you. If you choose to stick it out with him, just...don’t let him do that. Don’t let him retreat when he has to deal with things he doesn’t want to. Don’t let him warp your relationship from a partnership to a convenience for himself.”

I bit the inside of my lips, grateful for her candor.

“Do you think that he’ll change?” I asked. “I mean, you know him far better than I do.”

She thought about that for a moment, but we were interrupted by the waiter coming out to ask what we wanted.

“How about we make them sweat it out through an appetizer, then we’ll go find them?” Paula asked.

I agreed.

She ordered a plate of assorted apps, then two glasses of white wine before the waiter left and we were alone again.

I wondered briefly if she was going to answer my question, but before I had to think too much, she shook her head at me.

“Do I think he’ll change? Yes. He’s already changed a lot, honestly. I think his problem was me, not marriage. I’m not trying to dissuade you. I just don’t want you to make the same mistakes I did. You’re young, you should make all your own mistakes.”

I huffed a laugh, my lips turning up.

“Besides, all the things I hated, it sounds like you enjoy.”

I felt my cheeks warm at the thought.

“Yeah, well, I guess I understand that part of him.”

“Well, at least someone does.” She laughed.

Our drinks and apps arrived just then, and Paula legitimately clapped with excitement.

I smiled at her, wondering about the contradiction that she was. Childish, but also full of experience. I could see what Owen had liked about her, but also why things hadn’t worked out.

We enjoyed our food, but it only made me hungrier.

“Ok, let’s get the boys. If they haven’t killed each other yet, that is,” Paula said before draining the rest of her wine.

I did the same, emptying my glass as she asked for the bill.

I started to pull out my wallet from my purse, but Paula waved me away.

“Honey, I remember what it’s like being a broke college student. It’s not a problem.”

Even though I was grateful, I was also embarrassed that I probably couldn’t have afforded our drinks and the appetizer, either. Every penny went toward living expenses, so I didn’t have to take a loan out just to survive.

“Thank you,” was all I managed while she handed the waiter her credit card.

Within a couple minutes, we were walking out the front door of the restaurant arm in arm again.

“So, should we make bets on what condition we find them in?” she asked while we looked around the parking lot.

I just laughed, and shook my head.

“I honestly don’t think I even want to know,” I admitted, just at the same time we heard masculine laughs coming from the side of the parking lot.

We raised a brow at each other, then headed toward the voices.

There they were, both men sitting on the curb together with beers in their hands and a few on the walk beside them.

“What the hell is this?” Paula asked with a bark of a laugh, and that’s when the guys looked up, holding out their beers with welcoming cheers.

“Ay! There they are!” Owen called.

The man was sloshed.

Jamie giggled and leaned into Owen, whispering something in his ear that made my boyfriend howl in laughter.

The best part was, both men looked like they’d been through a meat grinder, blood on their faces and bruises that were swelling and coloring. They’d obviously finished their fight, and had moved on to getting drunk and becoming buddies.

“You two are absolutely ridiculous,” Paula added, stealing Jamie’s beer to take a sip.

He pulled her into his lap where she collapsed into him, then they both started giggling.

“Really?” I asked Owen, who just grinned up at me. “I take it you’ve gotten over your differences?”

His face turned serious as he nodded, then he burst into a wide smile again.

“We had a good talk,” he added, not sounding as drunk as he obviously was with the giggles and the bromance going on.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

The sound of a loud fart tore through the air, and all three of them started laughing as Paula pushed away from Jamie while shouting ‘ew!’

Owen shoved Jamie’s arm, but the jostling caused a burp to escape him. His eyes went wide as the others erupted into laughter all over again. The love of my life groaned and chuckled as he dropped to his back right there on the sidewalk and folded his arms over his face.

“Fuck me,” he groaned.

I smiled and moved to sit beside him.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you drunk,” I told him.

He grunted.

“Better sooner than later, I guess,” he offered.

“Now, the big question is,” I murmured, leaning on my elbow to get closer to him so only he could hear. “How do you perform with whiskey dick?”

His lips split into a wicked smirk.

“Do you want to find out?” Owen asked, moving his arms off his face.

His breath stank of beer, but I accepted his kiss anyway when he pulled me toward him.

“Get a room!” Jamie called, but Owen just lifted a hand to shoo him away.

“Let’s get something to eat,” Paula said, stumbling and trying to stand even though she and her four inch heels were tangled up in her boyfriend’s legs.

I grinned and accepted a few more soft kisses before pulling away, eliciting a forlorn moan from Owen’s lips.

“C’mon,” I told him in a quiet voice while Paula was still trying to untangle herself from her boyfriend. “I’m starving.”

That was all Owen needed to hear to get to his feet and take my hand. He glanced over at the mess that was his ex and her plus one. Rolling his eyes, he held out a hand to Paula, who gripped it so Owen could yank her up to her feet.

“Thanks,” she said, wiping her hands on her thighs while Jamie scrambled to his feet.

We headed toward the Porsche while the others followed behind toward their own car.

“Oh Lord, that Goddamn car,” Paula called as Owen unlocked the doors.

He went toward the side door to open it for me, but I shook my head and held out my keys.

He lifted a brow. “Do you know how to drive stick?”

I frowned.

“No, but—”

“Ride with us!” Paula called. “This way!”

I took Owen’s hand and didn’t ask permission, simply dragged him along. He let out a tortured groan but followed easily enough.

“I can drive, Paula,” I offered, knowing that on top of her two glasses of wine, she’d also had one of Jamie’s beers.

She handed over the keys and I climbed into the driver seat of her Jeep. Paula and Jamie went into the back and Owen slipped into the front seat as I turned the key in the ignition.

“Where to?” I called.

“McDonalds!” Paula and Jamie called drunkenly.

I turned to Owen, and he just shrugged.

“Sometimes you gotta just say yes and go with the flow,” was all he answered.

With that, I backed the car out, grateful I’d only had one glass of wine in the restaurant, and we made our way to the fast food place. In the drive through, we ordered enough food for ten people, then stopped by the liquor store at Paula’s behest.

Several bottles of wine and some whiskey later, she led me to a little spot near Columbus lake that she called ‘Makeout Point.’

“I used to come out here as a teen during high school,” Paula admitted, which made Jamie growl and pretend to bite her neck.

“You were a wild little thing, weren’t you?” he demanded, which made Paula squeal.

“We shoulda gotten another bottle of whiskey,” Owen murmured, sounding strung out already.

I laughed at him as I parked, then moved out of my seat to explore the area.

It was beautiful, green and dense and cool since the sun had gone down.

“Jamie, help me get the shit out of the back seat!” Paula called as she stumbled out of the back once Owen had gotten out of his seat and popped it forward.

“What shit?” Owen called while Paula dug through the back.

She handed several blankets to Jamie, stacking them in his arms before she grabbed a padded bag and a couple pillows.

Owen barked out a laugh. “You keep that in your *car*?”

She laughed at that.

“I happen to enjoy picnic dates, so yes, I keep them in my car sometimes.”

He shook his head, watching with amusement as Jamie spread out blankets in one big mat in the middle of the small clearing ahead of us.

“Can you handle the drinks?” she asked Owen, who took up the bags of food and alcohol from her.

Paula nodded at him, then made her way to the blankets, settling down to open the bag, which produced two wine glasses and a cork screw.

“Prepared,” I murmured to Owen, who agreed, though he didn’t seem impressed.

“It’s like watching her in college all over again,” he whispered. “Drinking, flirting—”

“You’re doing the same things,” I teased.

“I don’t keep a wine emergency kit in my car,” he growled.

I laughed, but moved to go sit down, settling near Paula.

Owen settled beside me, nestling all the bottles down beside his ex. All except for the whiskey bottle, which he cracked open and guzzled from the bottle.

“Slow down, lover boy,” Paula told him. “You can’t take as much as you used to.”

“How would you know?” he countered. “I haven’t gotten drunk in front of you in...shit, probably ten years.”

She honked out a laugh.

“Bullshit! We got drunk on my sister’s wedding weekend two years ago. It took you three drinks. *Three!*”

He moaned.

“They put *way* too much booze in my sazeracs! Everyone knows it’s two ounces. Two! They half filled the fucking glasses with cognac and expected me to stay sober?”

They put too much money into the open bar and not enough into a capable bartender. *That* was the problem!”

She laughed her rear off and waved him off like it was all an excuse.

Owen rolled his eyes, but took another swallow before handing it off to Jamie, who did the same.

Paula was working on uncorking the wine, popping it with a loud thwunk, then pouring the two wine glasses, one for her, and one for me.

I sipped, watching the others with amusement. I’d never seen this side of Owen, and the others were a riot to be around.

“So,” Jamie said after a few drinks, obviously drunk by that point. “No offense or anything, but is it just me, or is the whole idea of doing this ex’s date thing really weird?”

Owen huffed a laugh.

“Thank you,” he agreed, waving at the man. “That’s what I said. Mia insisted we accept the invitation.”

“You just better not tell your mother that you’re on a date with your ex,” Paula said, bouncing her eyebrows. “Pretty sure she’d disown you, considering how happy she was once we’d finally divorced.”

My boyfriend groaned and covered his face, lying back onto the blankets.

“I’d never hear the end of it,” he agreed. “Just don’t mention it to her while she’s here, ok?”

“Your mother is coming?” Paula cried, crossing herself with her index finger like she was warding away a devil. “Oh God, please tell me I don’t have to see that woman!”

“She wants to see the kids. Not you,” Owen admitted.

Paula guzzled her wine and pointed at me with a shaking finger.

“Good luck to you, dealing with that she-beast. It was the one thing that made me want to leave that man long before we got divorced.”

“She’s not *that* bad,” he sighed.

“Uh, do you not remember when she called me a cow while I was *nine months* pregnant with Charlie? Seriously! She told me to stop eating sugar and bread so I could ‘lose some weight’!”

“She can be overbearing—”

“Overbearing is what we call a puppy eager to see his person. Your mother is straight up vindictive and hateful.”

He didn’t disagree.

“I feel bad for you, Mia. God be with you. Hopefully she’ll hate you a little less than she always hated me.”

I swallowed a large gulp of my wine and stared at her with wide eyes.

Would I have to deal with Owen’s mother? The idea of that had my heart pumping furiously with nerves.

“Will you...tell your mother about us?” I asked, turning to Owen with a million questions in my eyes.

He looked up at me from his spot, his hand gently stroking my thigh over the denim of my jeans.

“I would love for you to meet her, but I also understand if you’re not ready for that step yet.”

Well shoot, I didn’t know if I was ready for it or not.

“When will she come?” I asked before downing the rest of my cup of wine and lying out next to him.

“She said Thanksgiving, so we have a few weeks.”

Leaning on my elbow beside him, I ran my eyes over his face, relaxed in the moonlight. He was so beautiful like that. Untethered and a little bit wild with zero restraints.

“Maybe we can talk about it when you’re more sober,” I told him.

His eyes popped open and he eyed me with a frown, until we heard a shriek, some giggles, then a moan and a hush.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Owen hissed, leaning up to see where the noise had come from, but shaking his head instead as he obviously decided against it.

“Let’s move,” he said. “I’m not interested in hearing my ex squeal like a pig.”

I snorted a laugh, but agreed quickly as another soft moan came from the mound of blankets just a few feet away.

The two of us grabbed three of the bigger blankets and dragged them off to the other side of the jeep where we had some more privacy.

The moans quieted to just about nothing as Owen produced the half full bottle of whiskey.

“Now, what were you saying earlier about whiskey dick?”

I laughed at him, watching him take another long draw from the bottle before settling it down into the grass.

“I was asking how well you can perform with a high blood alcohol level.”

He grinned down at me.

“Why take my word for it? How about I show you?”

“Mmm, I could always use more fodder for my book.”

That grin got impossibly bigger as he crawled over me, hovering above my face with a wicked promise in his eyes.

I lifted my hand and touched his cheek, then slid my fingers into his hair.

“You know I love it when you talk literature to me,” he murmured, his lips so close to mine I could feel his breath brush across my mouth.

“Jane Austen,” I gasped out, aching for his lips to touch mine. “Was nothing but a 1800’s smut writer and I love

it.”

“Mmm,” he moaned against my lips, pressing a lingering kiss to them.

“Moby Dick wasn’t about revenge. It was about the flaws of blindly following a corrupt leader.”

He growled and settled a firmer kiss to my lips.

“Fuck, you are incredible.”

“Should I go on?” I murmured.

He deftly shook his head.

“Not unless you want pre-ejac all over your belly.”

The crude words made me snort with laughter, but he simply smiled then brushed his lips over mine more firmly as his palm slid up the hem of my dress, his fingers whispering across my skin.

“We can’t do this with them so close,” I breathed, hating the words coming out of my mouth.

“Why not? They’re fucking just over there. They won’t notice us while they’re busy.”

“But she’s your ex,” I exclaimed quietly.

“Exactly, so I don’t give a single shit what she or her little boyfriend thinks.” He paused, his fingers barely stroking the seam between my legs. “It only matters to me what you think.”

Swallowing hard, I had to decide for myself what *I* wanted. And Lord, did I want him.

Gliding my fingers through the slightly overgrown hair on the back of his head. I fisted it and lowered his head until he was kissing me with urgency as if the moment between us might slip away.

“I need you,” I whispered, pulling him closer to kiss the shell of his ear, “...inside me.”

His lips smiled against mine.

“Do you think you can stay quiet?” he murmured, his hand finally slipping over my mound, palming it.

“Yes,” I breathed.

He chuckled.

“*Liar.*”

And then he kissed me.

I moaned into his mouth as his fingers left me, then moved to pinch my nipple through my cotton dress.

“Quiet, or I’ll have to stop,” he told me, then flipped me to my belly, my hips now in his hands.

I gripped the blankets beneath us and smothered a gasp as he shoved up the skirt of my dress and pulled on the band of my underwear until the cool air of the night hit my bare skin.

“Spread your knees,” he told me, then smacked my rear, eliciting a yelp from me.

A loud moan filtered through the night as Owen’s hands tightened on my hips, gripping so tight I would likely have bruises the next day.

My yelp melted away as his fingers traced down to my slit, rubbing them through my slick heat there before entering me.

I whimpered. It’d been too long since I’d had him this way, and even his fingers had me panting and squirming beneath him. Between school, work, and him spending the weekends with his boys, we hardly got time to do this, it seemed. Not often enough for my taste, anyway.

Biting down on my lip, I tried not to make any more noise. I wasn’t about to test him to find out if he truly would stop.

“Fuck, you’re wet,” he ground out, curling his fingers just right until I was writhing.

“Stop torturing me,” I mumbled, my words smothered by my face smashed into the blanket underneath us.

He seemed to have heard me though, and he slipped his hand away, leaving me feeling so empty.

Just then, he turned me again until I oomphed onto my back. He moved forward and with a single thrust, was balls deep.

I let out another gasp, trying to suffocate it by pressing my face to his shoulder. He let me until the sound retreated, then leaned into me until my lips were on his neck and his were on mine. And we moved together. My hips swayed and legs squeezed his ribcage until it was probably hard for him to take a breath. Not that he complained. He just panted and rammed in, tweaking my g-spot and my clit all at once.

For a long time, I'd used to imagine the sex that went on in my favorite romance books was fake. Nobody could actually orgasm like that, right? God, I'd been so wrong. The heat flaring through my lower belly told me as much.

My lungs started heaving, and he must have recognized the beginnings of my pleasure, because he pressed his lips to mine and took my scream as it tore through me. Slowly, and with measured thrusts, he helped me through it, then let me collapse to the blankets when my energy was gone.

"Good girl," he said, then sped up again.

With my hands covering my face and my mouth, I felt him swell, then spill inside me.

"How's that for whiskey dick?" he questioned, a knowing grin curving his lips.

"You'll do," was all I managed to pant out while I recovered.

He chuckled, then laid down beside me and pulled me so close. With my head to his chest, I could hear his heartbeat as everything else besides the cicadas became silent.

"I love you," I whispered to him.

He ran his hand through my ratted hair.

"Love you," he murmured back, pulling one of the blankets over top of us.

Contentment wasn't really a word I'd understood before him. But in moments like that, I'd realized that I'd found it. True contentment.

Chapter 23



-Owen-

Where the fuck did I put my glasses?

Last thing I remembered I was balls deep in Mia, then I was waking up in the butcrack of nowhere with my glasses missing, a severe case of raunchy cottonmouth, and the sun glaring through the canopy of trees above us.

Mia wiggled a little in my arms as my eyes threatened to burn out of their sockets.

I'd drunk too much.

My young girlfriend blinked her eyes open and made a face filled with pain.

"Ugh, this is why I don't drink," she whispered, fingers pressing her temples.

I couldn't help the chortle that escaped me.

The copious amounts of alcohol I'd consumed roiled in my belly, and I craved something greasy and crispy, like bacon and yolky eggs.

"Breakfast?" I asked her, running my fingers through the hair at her scalp.

"Mmm, yes please," she agreed, sitting up.

The blanket fell off her and the disheveled state of her made me grin. I loved rumpling her up. It brought out that caveman part of me that said yes, this is my woman.

A whole different sort of moan echoed from where Paula and Jamie were, at the other side of the clearing. These ones weren't filled with pleasure, but rather pain.

"I need grease," came Paula's unmistakable voice.

God, it grated on me. For the most part, we tolerated each other fine, but once in a while my knee jerk response came back and I cringed just at the sound of her voice.

“Let’s go home,” I told Mia, sitting up so I could figure out where my glasses had gone.

“Here,” she said, holding them out to me. “They must’ve fallen off while we were sleeping. I found them by my head.”

I took them with a kiss of thanks, then slipped them over my eyes.

I wasn’t completely blind without them, but nearsightedness was no joke. I’d like to see a predator coming at me in the woods before they got like, six feet away from me, ya know?

The world opened up to me once my typical horn-rimmed glasses were on my nose, everything coming into crystal clear focus, including my ex-wife and her...fucking butt-ass naked boyfriend.

“Really?” I complained from around the jeep.

“I gotta piss!” Jamie called back.

He must have figured I was aiming my comment at him, because Paula was dressed, albeit rustled to hell with a couple crispy leaves matted into her blonde curls.

The guy stumbled over toward the thicker woods to relieve himself.

“How long does your mom have the kids?” I asked Paula while moving around the jeep.

Mia followed, a mess of blankets in her arms.

“She said she’d take them until tomorrow,” she told me. “But it’s your weekend, so you can pick them up today if you want.”

I sighed and shoved my hand through my hair.

“She can keep ‘em,” I said eventually. “I know she doesn’t get as much time with them as she’d like. Besides,

when my mother comes, she'll want to see the boys more than just on the weekend.”

“Thanksgiving was supposed to be mine this year,” she said. “And Christmas was yours since I had it last year.”

“Yeah. We can trade if you want.”

“Oooooor...” Pauls said with a wicked grin, “Why don't you come to Thanksgiving? We'll make it a big family affair.”

I eyed her like she was fucking crazy. Which she was.

“I'm not going to your family's house for Thanksgiving like we were still married, Paula. I indulge your insanity most of the time, but I refuse to endure another holiday with your parents. Besides, I'm sure Mia is spending the holiday with her family.”

Paula turned to her as if a simple ok from Mia would put me back in line. In reality, there wasn't a single fucking thing that would make me force our parents together again when we were divor—

“I was actually hoping, maybe, to spend the holiday together,” Mia said, turning her eyes to me.

I blinked.

“Really?” I asked.

Surely her family expected her to go home for the holiday, but she wanted to be with me, instead?

A blush pinkened her cheeks as she gave a tiny nod, smiling.

“Oh my God, you two are too freaking cute,” Paula said, wrinkling her nose and grinning at us, as if she was simultaneously charmed and disgusted by the display.

“Get your boy toy, and let's go,” I told Paula, dismissing her.

“You know, I don't call Mia your toy,” she told me, her grin turning to a frown. “I thought by this point you'd realize he wasn't so bad.”

Speaking of the devil, he wandered up in just a pair of jeans, buckling the button.

Now, I didn't get intimidated by other men often, but staring at the dude's eight pack had me rubbing my barely-there bumps that were slowly fading to the background with my age. The muscles that had naturally appeared in my youth were melting away in front of my eyes. Maybe I needed to learn to enjoy hitting the gym. I had a young girlfriend to impress, and a dad bod wasn't going to do the trick, and neither were home exercises, evidently.

Before I could demand the guy put on a shirt, He pulled one out from the back pocket of his shorts, and I kind of hated him for using the same moves I used to when I was his age. And just like then, Paula couldn't tear her eyes away from the guy's chest until it was covered. That's when she shook herself to break the spell, then produced her car keys.

"Ok, everyone inside!" she called, moving around to the front seat.

I gathered the few bottles still on the ground and shoved them into the back with the blankets for her to deal with later, then climbed into the back seat. Mia stumbled a little trying to get in around the seat, so I held out a hand, which she gave me a heart melting smile for in thanks.

"We have a whole day by ourselves," I whispered into her ear while the others were talking in the front seats. "Whatever will we do?"

Mia blushed again, and I loved the flush over her cheeks.

Last night had not been enough for me. I'd given her an orgasm, quick and dirty, because we had company not twenty yards away. I wanted to fuck her every which way, and taste her honey on my lips. I wanted to shove my cock down her throat as tears streamed down her face, then kiss them away as I brought her to orgasm over and over and over.

We'd been good, not fucking in my office like little bunny rabbits because we knew with how loud she was, there

was a good chance we'd be found out. And with our late nights and her trying to spend time in her dorm as well as my place, plus homework and the boys' presence during the weekend... Needless to say, there wasn't nearly enough fucking happening, and I could feel my craving for her deep in my gut like an abyss that was never satisfied.

"I need a shower, or a bath," she said, her fingers pressing against my thigh. "Other than that...I'm all yours."

That hand slipped to the inside of my thigh and I had to take in a deep breath so I didn't get a full on woodie in the car.

"We need to talk about the whole Thanksgiving thing, though," she added, her face fading to be decidedly less frisky than just a moment ago.

"Sure. Soon as we get you that bath," I agreed.



"So, about Thanksgiving," Mia said as we sat at the kitchen bar and ate some takeout because I couldn't be bothered to cook after the exhausting, fuck-filled afternoon we'd had.

"You tell me what you want to do, and we'll make it happen," I told her between bites. "But no matter what I do, my mother is coming along, unfortunately."

She frowned.

"Is she really that bad?"

That was a really tough question.

"Define bad." I tried. "Is she difficult? Yes. Is she set in her ways and struggles to get along with people? Yes. Is she a good woman? Also yes. She was tough, but fair growing up, and she's who I got my love of literature from."

"Really? I can't see a woman like that being a lover of fiction."

I grinned because I couldn't see her loving fiction, either.

“No, she read biographies and the like. She’d do one hell of a good job on Jeopardy, let me tell you.”

Mia giggled and pressed her hand on top of mine.

“So basically, your Mom’s going to hate me, a frivolous smut writer. Besides the fact that I’m so much younger.”

He shook his head.

“I doubt the age gap will throw her. But the romance...ehhhh...”

I put up my hand and weighed it side to side.

In reality, Mom would have a hell of a time with the idea of someone making and selling what she would consider rubbish. She didn’t have the appreciation that I did for creating something from nothing and becoming successful with it.

“Maybe I just won’t say anything,” she murmured, her fingers brushing softly over my knuckles. “Or maybe...I just shouldn’t have Thanksgiving—”

I flipped my hand in hers and squeezed until she stopped talking.

“Let me tell you this one thing,” I whispered.

She listened carefully, her eyes meeting mine.

“I don’t fucking care what my mother thinks. I’m not out to impress her, and if she disrespects you, I’ll kick *her* out of the room, not you. I’m incredibly proud of you, at such a young age, putting this book together. I know better than most how soul wrenching it is to put yourself on the pages, and how terrifying it is to give it to the public who can act like piranhas sometimes.”

I paused and gave her hand one more squeeze.

“But, they can also be a little like a family, too.”

“I don’t want to cause waves between you two...”

“You will,” I admitted. “When I dated Paula, then married her, it caused a shit ton of waves. I dealt with it then,

and I'll deal with it again. My mother thinks no woman is good enough for her child. That's on her, not you. You can't let her intimidate you."

"Sure, but maybe we can wait."

"Do you want to wait?" I asked. "We've jumped into this disaster headfirst, and it's been a juggling act, but it's gone well. The kids love you, Paula fucking loves you, for what that's worth. And I love you. I know we were going to take everything slow but...I don't want to. I don't want to suffer the holidays coming up without you. I know it's selfish but—"

"It's not selfish," she said, stopping the words flooding out of my mouth.

I wasn't usually so wordy. At least, out loud I wasn't.

"I want that, too. I know we can't at school, but otherwise, I mean, why not now?"

She held my hand tighter and I reciprocated.

"I want to tell my family about you. I hate lying almost as much as I hate hiding you. You're not something that should be hidden."

A burst of excited relief smashed through my chest. I hadn't realized how much I'd been wanting to hear those words until she'd gifted them to me.

"Maybe...we could spend Thanksgiving with my family, and Christmas with yours?"

"I *am* supposed to have the boys for Christmas this year, so that will work. Other than my mother, of course."

"She can come. If there's anyone who can win her over, my mama can."

My other hand lifted and I touched her cheek so gently, swiping my thumb over the curve of it.

"Ok. I'm just worried that my cantankerous mother might ruin my first impression."

She chuckled.

“How could they not like you?”

I lifted a brow, but didn't argue. Instead, I leaned forward and pressed my lips softly to hers.

“I love you. With that, we can get through anything. Even a couple holidays with our families.”

She nodded, staring up at me with such blatant love and trust, it almost scared me. I knew at some point I would disappoint her. That was just the curse of humanity. I just hoped that I would be able to make it up to her, and she would be able to forgive my imperfections.

We dissolved into silence as we finished up our dinner, then we moved over to the living room where we tried to find a show to watch.

“I actually have some school to do,” Mia said after a while. “Homework.”

I nudged her shoulder.

“That's fine. Do you have it with you?”

She shook her head.

“No, it's at the dorm. I dropped my backpack off after classes let out, before getting ready for our double date yesterday.”

I frowned.

“Well shit, ok. I'll drive you back.”

She gripped my arm as I tried to get up.

“Give me a few more minutes to cuddle,” she whispered.

I set the remote down, abandoning the idea of relaxing in front of the boob tube with her.

“I've been meaning to ask you about school. How are things doing?”

She gave me a wan smile.

“Are you asking as my boyfriend, or my professor?”

I wrinkled my nose, then admitted, “Both.”

She chuckled and leaned further in, getting comfy.

“I’m alright. There just don’t seem to be enough hours in the day. I’ve been putting off my own writing in favor of work and homework.”

“You haven’t been working on your book?”

She shook her head.

“No, I’m still just on page eighty-nine. With as much inspiration as you’ve given me, It’s been hard to find the time to actually sit down and write.”

I understood that. With how much time I’d spent with Mia lately, I hadn’t had much time to write, either. I only utilized the evenings she was at her dorm to get the words down.

“How can I help you?” I asked her. “What do you need?”

Mia gave a wan smile.

“I need at least thirty hours every day. Can you give me that?”

I snorted.

“If I was a magic genie, then sure. Your wish is my command.”

“Fiiiiine. What’re you working on, then?”

“A sci-fi harem novel,” I admitted, totally serious.

Her eyes widened, then she burst into laughter.

“Are you kidding me?” she barked out. “A harem?”

“Why not?” I countered. “You gave me inspiration to do it. You and your four book boyfriends.”

Her eyebrows raised.

“Are you saying there’s...*sex* in your book?”

The grin I gave her couldn’t have been more salacious if I tried.

“Like I said. Inspiration.”

“Oh God. I need it. I want the manuscript right now.”

Throwing my head back, I laughed at her.

“Are they aliens?” she asked, wiggling out from underneath me to crawl into my lap. “Oh! Please tell me he has more than one cock!”

Fuck it, I loved when she talked dirty. Getting her to curse outside the throws of sex was pretty much impossible. Who knew all I had to do was talk about sex in a book to get her to say things like cock?

“Is that a fantasy of yours?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow. “Dual penetration?”

She blushed so hard I thought her head might explode.

“Fucking hell. Really?” I asked. “Do I need to be worried about you going out and getting a second boyfriend to fulfill all your dreams, Mia Millers?”

“No!” she yelped. “One man is enough for me, thank you very much.”

I let out a sigh of relief for her benefit, then narrowed my eyes on her to show I was thinking.

“There are other ways to give you DP without another boyfriend,” I said slowly.

Her cheeks got impossibly redder as she wriggled again, grinding herself down on my lap so I knew despite her act of innocence, she wanted it.

My only problem was that I knew nothing about ass play. Well, not really. I’d played around with some women before I’d met Paula in college, but it was usually just a finger in the bum and that was it. Paula had wanted nothing to do with it, and that was fine by me. Now I kind of regretted my ignorance.

Well, no better time than now to try something new.

A whimper left her lips and I grinned, knowing she had to be sore from my vigorous affections earlier, but youth

makes people do crazy things, like want to fuck even if it'll be the death of them. That's a lie. That kind of insanity wasn't just saved for the youth. I was just as nuts for her.

"Strip," I told her, pushing her off my lap.

She licked her lips but did what I said. I sat back and watched my very own strip show as she slowly pushed down her shorts, then slid up the tank top she had on. She wasn't wearing a bra, but her panties were still blocking me from the goods.

"That too," I said, nodding toward her crotch.

"What about you?" she demanded, fingering the edge of her panties.

I couldn't help but draw my eyes down her perfect frame. Full breasts, thick thighs, and birthing hips I wanted to dig my fingers into. That's not to mention her sexy bubble butt that could make a sane man go feral. I also kind of loved the fact that she didn't 'scape' anything. My girl was *au natural* and didn't spend time trimming her bush because she was too busy sculpting her mind. It was something I'd told Paula that I didn't care about, but she'd insisted on a full Brazilian at least once a month. The physical meant more to her than I could ever understand. What man wanted a woman who was bare down there like a little girl, anyway? Pervs, that's who.

"Because this isn't about me," was all I told her, nodding back toward her pelvis.

Those panties hit the ground at the same time my fingers finally reached down and opened my trousers. That tongue ran over her lips again like she was fiercely hungry as she watched me unbuckle and unzip. The moment my cock sprang free from my lowered pants, she bit one spectacular lip.

"Come sit on my lap," I told her.

Mia grinned and giggled at the terrible line, but I just winked at her and welcomed her into my arms.

Her bare breasts pressed against my shirt as chilly fingers slid up my belly and pulled my shirt along with it.

Then she adjusted her hips and sank down hands free. My eyes rolled into the back of my head with the feeling.

“Fucking hell, you’re—”

“I know,” she interrupted, lifting then sinking back down.

I bit back another curse and closed my eyes as the overwhelming sensation of pleasure hammered through my chest and up my spine with her movements.

Wait! This wasn’t about me, just like I’d told her.

My eyes opened again and I kissed her, tasting the lust on her lips as she rode me like a fucking cowgirl. I grabbed her ass, squeezing the cheeks in my palms. She hummed and moaned against my lips as she gyrated in my lap. Her pussy was already fluttering around my dick, which meant I needed to get things going immediately if we were going to try the butt stuff that got her all hot and heavy.

Moving my hand over her ass cheek again, I slid my fingers gently over the slit and followed it down, which made her jump and gasp in surprise.

“What are you doing?” she breathed, lungs panting and heaving for air.

“Didn’t you want to try some DP?”

Her eyes widened with shock.

“Really?” She gasped.

“If you want to try it...”

Those surprised eyes widened somehow even more, then she finally blinked and began to slowly nod.

“That scares me,” she whispered. “But if I ever trusted anyone to do...*that*...it would be you.”

Lifting a brow, I sent her a silent question. She just nodded again.

So, I moved my fingers back along the line between her cheeks and she closed her eyes, lips parting with a sharp

inhale.

My finger found the puckered little spot they were aiming for and she gasped again, jerking at the odd sensation.

“If you want me to stop...” I started, but she shook her head.

“No, keep going,” she begged.

I bypassed that little bud and scooped some of her arousal that was coating the both of us, even though she wasn't really riding anymore so much as spasming around me. Taking her honey on my fingertips, I dragged back up toward that puckered hole and rimmed it in her arousal for a long moment. Mia's lips quivered and she took in a shaky breath.

“That feels...” she began, but then I slowly inserted my middle finger to the first knuckle, and she cried out, arching her back as her muscles tensed.

“Breathe,” I reminded her, dragging a kiss across her panting mouth, breathing in her air as she obeyed.

Knowing she was all but boneless with pleasure, I gripped her hip and thrust up into her as she whimpered, all the while twisting my finger around inside her as I went.

Several thrusts later, she seemed to gain her rhythm again and started to move on top of me, gripping my head to her chest as she rode me. I took advantage and pressed open mouth kisses across her flesh, dragging my tongue over those pert, dark nipples. Fuck, she was glorious.

It didn't take long before she was fisting my hair and crying out again, coming all over my cock. I could feel the pulses of her orgasm over my cock, but that puckered asshole of hers squeezed against my finger, trying to milk me for all I was worth.

She could handle another cock there, I was sure of it. And judging by the way she screamed, she would want to try this again. Soon.

The squeezing and pulsing around my dick had me careening into the abyss after her. When we could finally

breathe normally again, I popped my finger back out and she hiccupped a gasp again before dropping boneless against my chest.

“Wow,” she moaned eventually, her fingers dipping beneath the collar of my t-shirt.

“So?” I chuckled. “How did you like it?”

She drew back enough to give me the best fucking you’re-an-idiot I’d even seen.

I just laughed and placed a kiss on her frowning lips.

“Maybe next time we should get a dildo and see how you like that.”

“How would you do that?” she questioned, looking really fucking curious to hear my answer.

“You’re just going to have to wait and find out,” I whispered.

Chapter 24



-Mia-

I was so freaking nervous. Finals were over and Thanksgiving was only a few days away. I'd been putting off telling my parents about Owen, but now was the time. And I had to tell them before the holiday, because springing him on them wouldn't have been fair to anyone.

Owen had the boys for the weekend, so I decided to spend that time before the holiday at home, telling my parents that I was dating a man the same age as they were.

Oh God...

I was doing the whole sitting in front of their house thing again when Mom saw me. Again. She waved me in through the front window and I slapped my forehead, then dragged in my overnight backpack.

"Honey, why are you sitting there in the car?" Mom asked once I stepped in the door.

Patrick was in the living room watching something on TV and Dad was reading his newspaper on his favorite chair.

How was I going to do this?

"Hey kiddo," Dad said when he saw me. "Your Mom's been telling me about some boy named Owen from school."

Oh God!

"Mhmm," I squeaked.

"So? Tell me about this boy."

I bit my lip, then stiffened my back and tightened my fists. I was going to do it.

“Dad, can I talk to you and Mom in the kitchen?”

That grabbed Patrick’s attention immediately. He turned to look at me with wide eyes and high eyebrows.

“You doing it?” he mouthed at me.

I nodded.

“Well dang, I gotta go,” Patrick said abruptly, standing and fleeing out the front door.

Mom appeared at the kitchen door and Dad looked up at me, folding his paper into his lap.

They both stared at me, waiting.

So, I opened my mouth and let it all out.

“Owen isn’t just a boy at school,” I admitted. “He’s one of the teachers there.”

Mom’s mouth opened in horror, but I trudged on.

“He’s the most incredible man I’ve ever met, and he’s successful, mature, strong, brilliant, handsome—”

“A professor?” Dad barked. “He’s one of your teachers?”

I shook my head.

“No. I mean, he’s head of the English department. He’s who I TA for, but none of that is affected by our relationship.”

Mom blinked rapidly, trying to process the words coming out of my mouth.

“I know it’s not conventional, but he’s a good man. And...I love him.”

Dad made a click with his mouth and looked down at the paper again without comment.

“Are you saying that you’ve been dating a...how old is he if he’s a professor.”

I gulped.

“He’s forty-two,” I admitted.

Mom collapsed into the couch and started waving a hand at her face.

“Forty-two?” Dad finally burst out. “He’s old enough to be your father!”

I cringed, hating when Dad yelled. I understood it though, which was why I trudged on.

“I know,” I agreed. “But it doesn’t matter, Dad. It doesn’t matter to me. I love him.”

“Is he coercing you?” was Mom’s addition.

My eyebrows drew together in confusion.

“Coercion?” I almost laughed. “Did you not hear what I just said? I love him, Mom.”

She wiped up a tear before it could fall, then met eyes with Dad.

“I don’t get it,” he said finally, shrugging. “I can’t tell you how damn wrong it feels. All of it. He’s a grown man, lived a lot of life, and he has a position of power over you as the English department guy and as your boss. This shouldn’t be happening, Mia. You know that. That’s why you’ve hid it for so long.”

I sucked on my cheek, not sure what to say because he was sort of right.

“Yes and no,” I answered. “I don’t believe it’s wrong. What we have is unique and beautiful. But I knew you would struggle to understand, and I know why. If it was a friend of mine, I’m sure I would feel the same way...but it’s not like that. We fought our attraction to each other for months. He didn’t want to date me because he felt wrong dating someone so much younger, but age doesn’t matter between us.”

“I need to know,” Mom said after a while. “Is this just...a passing fancy? You say you love him, but love comes and goes. And I know at your age, sometimes it’s hard to tell lust from love.”

“It’s not lust, Mom...”

“So what, you going to marry the guy?” Dad asked, raising an eyebrow. “At past forty, you think he’s having kids? He’ll be a senior citizen by the time your kids move out of the house!”

“No, he has two boys already, and they’re amazing—”

“He has children?” Mom gasped.

“Yes, from his previous marriage...”

“Lord, so this man is twice your age, divorced, with two kids of his own. And he’s dating his student and what... are you having sex? No man at his age is going to stick around if you aren’t.”

I gaped at Dad’s harsh words.

“Well? Are you? Did that promise you made to God mean nothin’ to you?”

Tears heated my eyes and stung my cheeks as they fell.

“Dad,” I said finally, “I made a promise that I wouldn’t take the gift of intimacy God gave me for granted. I promised that I would save that experience to share with the man that I love. I don’t think it’s a sin to love, even if our situation is a little out of the ordinary.”

“No,” Dad agreed. “It’s not a sin to love. The problem is this. Is it really love? Love is pure, unadulterated. Giving, selfless, freeing. Love is something you work for, not just something that happens.”

“I know that,” I agreed, but he stopped me with a lifted hand.

“No, Mia, you don’t. You’re still a child in all the ways that matter. You haven’t experienced the real world. You’ve been going to that college, which has been wonderful for you, but it’s isolated there and just an extension of high school. You might as well still be seventeen years old.”

Anger flooded me, but I did everything I could to tamp it down. They were hurt, and they were confused. It wasn’t about me so much as it was about their fear.

I took a deep breath and shook my head.

“I understand that you’re upset,” I said slowly. “This is a big shock, and I didn’t prepare you for it. I’m going to ask you to do two things, and that’s it.”

“And what’s that?” Dad asked, lifting a weary eyebrow.

“I want you two to pray about him and me. I want you to ask God with a sincere heart, because I have, and I know he’s the man for me. I can’t imagine that you would get a different answer than me.”

“And what is the other thing?”

“I want you to meet him. Once you get to know him, I know your worries will evaporate.”

Dad looked over at Mom for a minute and they had a silent conversation.

“Is that acceptable, honey?” he asked finally.

Mom was crying silently, but she just nodded. “I need to meet the man.”

“I was hoping he could come for Thanksgiving. His mother will be in town as well, and we can all get together and...”

“His mother?” Dad interrupted.

I nodded.

“Owen said she’s a little difficult sometimes, but she’ll be here soon and she just kind of comes as part of the package until she goes back to New York.”

“Gran will be there,” Mom said quietly. “She’s not going to understand this, honey.”

“Gran will have to understand. What you have to say about him means a lot to me, but even your disapproval won’t stop me from seeing him.”

Dad just gave a curt nod and opened his paper back up.

I was kind of surprised.

“That’s it?” I asked him.

He didn’t even look at me when he said, “Does it matter? You’ve informed us that our opinions don’t matter on the subject, so I don’t see the point in continuing to talk about it.”

I took in a sharp breath, processing the sharp sting his words left. It would have been better if he’d yelled, cried out, or even cursed. The callous, flippant words tore right through me in a way none of the others could have.

Mom didn’t say anything either. She just silently wiped tears from her cheeks as we three sat in silence again.

Taking that as my cue, I hurried back toward the door to leave.

Nobody stopped me.

I got back into my car and drove home, back to the dorm which was empty more often than not lately. Clea was with her boyfriend Howard a lot lately, which gave me way too much time to think. But, instead of thinking this time, I flipped open my laptop and opened my manuscript and poured everything I had left onto the pages.

Line after line appeared under my fingers. Every moment my heroine felt the strain of judgment for her choices and many boyfriends, I felt it personally to my bones. I didn’t have many boyfriends, but I did have one that the most important people to me scoffed over. Listening to Mom cry about something that made me so happy was...

Before I knew it, tears were dropping down my cheeks and wetting my hands over the keyboard. I stopped writing for a minute, then went back and read what I wrote, which made the tears come harder.

Ugh, I needed a break.

Pulling out my phone, I sent a text to Owen just to update him.

Me: *So, I told them. We'll be going to my parent's house on Thursday for Thanksgiving.*

It didn't take long for him to write back. When his name popped up I smiled. I needed to change his contact name.

Professor Harlo: *How did it go?*

Me: *It could have been better. It was about how I expected, to be honest.*

After sending the text, I went in and changed his name.

Owen: *Do you want to come over? We can talk about it.*

Looking around my dorm and, seeing the empty space, I let a smile bleed over my face as I answered.

Me: *I need to see you. But do you want to come here? My roomie is gone, and we've never christened my bed.*

There was a long pause before my phone rang.

"Are you sure?" was the first thing he said after I answered.

"It doesn't have to be here," I told him, hearing the question in his voice. "I can go to you—"

"No, I...I'm heading out the door," he answered, letting out a heavy sigh.

"Seriously, if you don't want to come, then don't."

"It's not that I don't want to," he admitted. "It's in the dorms and there's the chance someone could see us. See *me*, really."

That hit me the wrong way. After what I'd just been through with my parents to tell them about him... It felt like I was trying to take a chance for us, but he wasn't willing to do it, too.

"It's fine," I said finally. "Don't. I should go to bed soon, anyway."

“Mia—”

“No. You’ll have the kids tomorrow anyway, so you should get some sleep, too.”

“It’s fucking seven in the evening. Neither of us are going to sleep anytime soon. That’s not what this is about.”

I bit my lip in frustration but said simply, “I’ve got to go.”

“Don’t—”

For the first time in my life, I hung up the phone while someone was on the other line.

My stomach swirled with instant regret, but pride demanded I didn’t call him back to apologize or make excuses.

He wasn’t coming, and I refused to go to him, so... It was probably better I worked through my stuff on my own anyway, to figure out why his words had hurt so much so we could have a real conversation about it.

I’d barely gotten my things together to have a quick shower before crawling in bed with a sappy romance when a knock sounded on the door.

Did Clea forget her keys?

I shoved my stuff into the bathroom before opening the door. I wasn’t prepared for what awaited me.

“Here you go,” Marsha, one of the other upperclassmen said, giving me a little finger wave before leaving Owen there at my doorstep.

What the hell?

Owen pressed his hand against the door to make enough space to slip into my dorm room.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed, shutting the door behind me.

“There’s a lock at the fucking front door. I had to come up with some excuse to see you here,” he bit back. “I

just told her I needed to talk to you before we handed out tests tomorrow.”

“People are going to talk.”

“I know. That’s why I don’t *come here*.”

Suddenly, I felt like a moron for being so angry with him. Of course he was right. Coming here meant exposing what we had to people who could hurt us. Or really hurt *him*.

“I’m sorry. I’ve just had the worst day, and I wanted to see you but...I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

He paced the room for a moment, glancing around before he shoved his hand through his hair and plopped down onto the edge of my bed.

“I do,” he blew out. “You wanted your boyfriend to be there for you no matter where you were. I get it. And I want to give that to you...I just...”

“You can’t,” I whispered.

Anger flashed across his face as he sliced his fingers through his hair again, mussing it all up until it stood on end in the front.

“I hate this,” I breathed. “I hate that everything is trying to tear us apart.”

He finally looked up at me with frustration pinching his brows.

“We agreed on this, knowing all the shit it would bring,” he reminded me.

As if I needed the reminder.

Tears welled in my eyes and I tried to dash them away before he saw, but he did.

He stood immediately and pulled me into his arms, and the moment his arms circled me, the tears increased and I sobbed into his shoulder.

“Fuck,” he breathed, holding me tighter as I cried.

I had no idea how long it took for the tears to subside. All I knew was that he held me the entire time, whispering sweet words into my ear that he loved me, and that everything would be ok. I knew it would be, but it didn't make it any easier while we were in the midst of the struggle.

“What can I do?” he said eventually when I'd stopped crying. “What do you need me to do? I don't like seeing you cry. It rips my fucking heart out, Mia.”

I shook my head.

“Nothing. Neither of us can really do anything right now. We just need to get through the holidays, then finish out the year. After that...”

“What *does* happen after that?” he asked me, his fingers brushing over my salt-streaked cheeks before he brushed back my hair. “After the end of the school year, what do we do then? We don't have to hide anything from anyone. My boys know about you, your parents know about me. There's nothing else between us besides these next couple of months. Six weeks. What do we do in six weeks, Mia?”

I hadn't thought about that too much. I hadn't *let* myself think about it.

“What do you want?” I asked him.

“I...want to know what you want, first.”

Not knowing what to say, I just blurted, “you.”

He pressed a kiss to my forehead and held me a moment longer before whispering, “Move in. After the semester is over. I don't want you going home to Louisville. I want you here, with me.”

More tears slid down my face, but they were happy tears this time.

“Ok,” I breathed.

He kissed my forehead again, then leaned back and gave me a smile.

“Really?”

I nodded, pulling his head down so I could kiss him.

We shared a lingering moment just like that, but then he broke away and moved toward the door.

“I need to go, before people start talking.”

I agreed.

He opened the door and stepped out before saying loudly, “Glad we got that worked out. I’ll see you in my office on Monday. Three sharp. Oh, and I’ll need you to help pass out the midterms in the eleven o’clock class.”

He winked at me, though his voice was impersonal.

“Right,” I said, trying not to smirk. “Sorry you had to come all the way here, Professor Harlo.”

“Not a problem Miss Miller. See you on Monday.”

My phone started ringing inside the dorm, so Owen waved and hurried back down the hallway. The girls coming in and out of their dorms looked at him oddly, but dismissed him as he hurried out.

“Was that Professor Sexy Pants?” came a voice right beside me.

I jumped, pressing my hand to my chest as my head whipped around. Clea stood there with wide eyes and her keys in her hands.

“Where did you come from?” I rushed out.

She just blinked at me, then at where Owen had disappeared.

“What was he doing here?” she demanded in a harsh whisper.

“We just had to go over a couple things,” I blurted.

Clea grabbed my arm and dragged me into the room, shoving the door closed behind us.

“Seriously, what are you doing, Mia? I thought you were going to hump and dump him!”

The phrase was jarring coming out of her mouth.

“Excuse me?” I demanded. “I never said any such thing.”

“Mia, this has to end. You know that. You can’t keep up with this guy. He’s like, forty years older than you. You gotta end this before you get too involved.”

“Yeah, well it’s too late for that,” I bit out. “We’re moving in together after the end of the semester. So, in January we’ll be a real couple.”

“So what, he came here so you guys could bang while I was gone? What would you have done if I came back sooner?”

“No! We didn’t do anything like that—”

“Oh right. Like I haven’t seen you waddling in the door more times than I can count.”

“That has nothing to do with this.”

Clea stomped over to her desk and grabbed her purse, then stopped in the bathroom to get her toothbrush.

“I’m staying at Howard’s place tonight. Don’t do anything on my bed.”

With that, she stormed out of the door and left me in silence.

My phone rang again and I turned, looking at the device that had my brother’s picture on the screen.

I ran my hands over my eyes, trying to sort out the hurricane of emotions running through me before talking to Patrick. Who was I kidding though? It was going to take a lot more than five minutes to sort myself out.

Grabbing at the phone, I got it just before it stopped ringing.

“Hey Patrick,” I sighed into the phone.

“So, Mom and Dad seem upset,” was his greeting.

“Yeah.”

“You also left instead of staying the weekend, so I assume it didn’t go so well.”

“You would assume correctly. They weren’t happy at all.”

“You didn’t expect it to go any differently though,” he reminded. “You knew they were going to be pissed.”

“Doesn’t mean it still doesn’t hurt.”

He hummed sadly. “I’m sorry, sis. If it means anything, I’m with ya.”

I moaned and threw myself into my bed.

“Did they say anything to you?”

“No way. They’ve been freaking silent all night. I don’t think I’ve seen them like this since I got caught making out with that girl on the youth trip two years ago.”

We laughed over that, but the humor drained quickly as I considered my parents.

“He asked me to move in with him,” I said, wanting to hear his thoughts. “Like, after the semester is over.”

He blew out a long breath.

“Wow. That’s a big step. Mom and Dad are going to struggle with you moving in with a guy when you’re not even engaged.”

“I know. But I also know that I can’t make every decision based on what they want or what they believe.”

“Funny you say that. If I’d have asked you three months ago, you would have said you’d never move in with a guy before you married him.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“So? What changed?”

I shrugged even though he couldn’t see it.

“Everything,” I admitted. “I’ve done so many things with him I never imagined I would. It’s scary, but it makes me feel so...*alive*.”

“I know the feeling,” he said. “Same. But just because you want something, can you really make yourself believe that all that other stuff you’ve always believed just...doesn’t apply anymore just because you don’t want it to?”

“Are you saying I’m giving up on what I believe in for the pleasures of the flesh?” I scoffed.

“I don’t know. Are you?”

I frowned, considering his words.

“I guess the big question is, do you feel as connected to God as you did before you met him?”

“Well, I mean, sometimes I forget to pray at night, when I stay over at his house. But I’ve prayed a few times with his youngest son Caden and it’s just wonderful. We pray over meals with the kids, too.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Do you feel as connected as you used to?”

“I do,” I admitted. “In a different sort of way. I feel like *I’ve* changed in a lot of ways since we met. So much of me was naïve and young and foolish, to be honest. I never knew what love was, and I never knew that another person could mean so much to me. Maybe that sounds silly. Of course I hoped for love, but to wish for it and to have it are... I don’t know. I guess what I’m trying to say is that no, I don’t consider what I’m doing to be wrong because I intend to marry this man. What difference does it make if we move in together now or later? He’s my forever, Pat.”

“And you’re positive that you’re his? Have you ever stopped to think about what happens if...things don’t work out?”

Just hearing those words put together made my heart ache.

“I pray to God every day that it won’t happen, but in the case that it does, I guess I’ll have to move on. Somehow. Thing is, whether I choose to move in with him or not, a breakup would destroy me. And it has nothing to do with sex. It has everything to do with the man.”

“Alright, alright,” Patrick said with a chuckle. “Those are just the questions I have to ask myself with Maria. That’s her name, by the way, Maria.”

He let out a sigh of longing.

“I’ve been thinking about proposing. Is that weird? I know we’re just seniors, but I love her, and I have a plan for the future and everything. I’ve been looking into jobs lately.”

“You mean, proposing after you graduate?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Graduation is so many months away...”

“Don’t even think about it,” I scolded him immediately. “I don’t care if you go to college, but you need to get your diploma. Promise me, Pat. I don’t care if you wait until marriage, or if you get her pregnant, or anything. You have to finish your degree.”

“Lord, I’m not getting anyone pregnant, Mia!” he laughed.

“I’m just saying!”

“I know, I know. Ok, I’ll finish. Promise.”

“Good. It’s not just for you, you know. Imagine how her parents would feel if you guys didn’t finish high school and went to get married? Not a great way to start a marriage.”

He blew out a breath.

“Yeah I know. Sometimes it just feels like I’ll die, you know? I just love her so freaking much, I feel like I’ll explode.”

I chuckled.

“I know how that feels, Pat...”

“She’s just doesn’t believe in sex before marriage, and I don’t want to pressure her or anything. I mean, I admire her conviction of it, it just feels like I’m withering away.”

“Oh, Pat,” I moaned in sympathy.

“It’s just a few more months though, right?” He gave a miserable laugh.

“You’ve got to respect her, Pat. You’re doing a good job. Just be patient with both of you. Her feelings are valid, but so are yours. Believe me, I know what it’s like to want and not have. But you’ll regret it, and so will she, if you give in for the wrong reasons.”

“You’re such a freaking hypocrite,” Patrick said, though he sounded like he was laughing and not so serious.

“Not a hypocrite, just a different situation.”

He laughed again and acknowledged the difference, then ended on a sigh.

“Ok, well this conversation got away from me. I just wanted to check on you and see how you’re doing.”

“I’m ok, Pat. You don’t need to worry about me. Although, if you don’t mind, pray for all of us come Thanksgiving.”

“I’m excited to meet this guy, you know. I won’t hold back on my opinions.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. You’ve always told me your opinions on the boys I liked.”

He chuckled.

“I’m going to let you go, sis. I was supposed to catch a movie with Maria tonight. She’s waiting for me to pick her up.”

“Ok. Love you little brother. Have fun on your date. And keep it in your pants.”

He snorted, then hung up.

Smiling down at my phone, I took a few minutes to lay back in my bed and let the conversation settle, then I remembered that hot shower that I was supposed to be taking. I stood and hurried into the bathroom and turned the water on to hot and enjoyed that delicious, orgasmic shiver that

trembled down my spine. Everything would seem easier to digest after a shower. I was sure about that.

Chapter 25



-Owen-

“Mother,” I growled, pointing at the front door. “I understand that you don’t want to have Thanksgiving with strangers. I get that. But this is a big deal for me, so can you please just throw back your shoulders and take this with grace? You’re the one who decided to come out without asking me what my plans were. So, you have to just go along with things. Consider this a good chance to get to know the woman who I hope will become your new daughter-in-law.”

My mother said nothing to that, but it didn’t matter. My heart was pounding anyway, having said those fucking words out loud. Daughter-in-law. The thought had been rattling around in my head recently, I mean, the proof had been in my pocket for days, but I still couldn’t really comprehend them. I wanted Mia to be my mother’s new daughter-in-law.

Holy shit.

A knock at the door had me about jumping out of my skin. It was Mia. I knew it was, but I was so wrapped up into my own brain that it surprised me.

“Is that her?” Mom asked from her seat in my office, where we sat waiting for Mia to arrive.

I nodded, then moved to go answer the door.

Mia was there on the porch, looking incredible with a dark, floral tea dress and black tights, standing taller than usual in three inch pumps. She looked absolutely delicious.

“Is she here?” Mia whispered as a greeting, looking around me as if she’d see my mother hiding behind me like a troll.

I grinned and nodded. “She is. In my office.”

Mia blew out a heavy breath, then nodded, as if preparing herself to go to war.

I led her into my office and slid my fingers between hers, giving her hand a squeeze.

“Mother,” I said, though it was unnecessary because my mom was already staring at Mia with hawk eyes. “This is my girlfriend, Mia Miller.”

“You’re awfully young,” were her first words.

Mia gave a gracious smile.

“Yes, well, thanks,” she tried.

God, I could feel her hand sweating with nerves while it was curled around mine.

“You never mentioned that you were dating a child,” Mom said, sounding like the words were distasteful.

“I am not a child,” Mia bristled. “I’m twenty-three, and about to graduate with my master’s degree in English Literature.”

Mom scoffed with a roll of her eyes.

“Really, Owen?” she asked, dismissing Mia entirely.

“Do you remember that conversation we just had?” I said, sending a quick warning glare to my mother.

She waved her hand and stood, gathering her bag and made her way toward the door.

“It might be fun for now, dear, but you could do far better than a child.”

My mother breezed out the door, leaving me with apologies on the tip of my tongue.

“Well, I guess I can breathe easy now that I definitely know your mother doesn’t like me,” Mia said with a smile, but I could see tears brimming in her eyes.

“Shit... Mia,” I murmured, pulling her into my arms.

“It’s ok. I didn’t expect her to love me at first meeting. A girl can hope though, right?”

Cursing my mother in my head, I gently let go of Mia and led her to my modest sedan and found Mom waiting by the front passenger seat.

“You can sit in the back,” I said to her, knowing that she was just trying to make a power play.

When the kids were in the car, she would often sit in the back with them to discuss the ailments of the world while nobody sat in the front with me.

“Oh, no, of course not,” Mia protested. “Your mama should have the front seat. I don’t mind sitting in the back.”

Mother smirked and lifted her chin, unmoving from her spot beside the door.

“No, she’ll be just fine—”

“I’ll hear nothing of it.” Mia had made up her mind, and was already opening the back door to scramble into the back seat.

“Goddamn it,” I mumbled, hurrying to open her door.

Why did she have to be so fucking stubborn?

She’d already crawled into the seat and started buckling up, so I closed the door and moved to open my mother’s, which pissed me the hell off. I slammed the door, just to piss *her* off, then moved to the drivers side because I was in charge of chaffering us to Louisville, which felt like it was going to be a long fucking drive.



It was a blur, the walk up to Mia’s parent’s house. I barely registered the blue paneling and the quaint look of the place before we were just going right in without knocking.

There was a bustle of people inside, moving here and there, and it took a solid fifteen seconds of us standing there at the door before someone noticed our little group.

“Mia!” a teenage boy shouted, which got everyone’s attention.

Mia embraced the boy, calling him Patrick as she did.

“So? This is the guy?” he asked, looking up at me with expectant eyes.

Then those eyes got...bigger.

“Are you fuc...freaking kidding me?” he shrieked.

I almost wanted to back up as the kid stumbled toward me, acting like I was some kind of hero or something.

“You’re Willie P. N—”

I smacked my hand across the kid’s mouth so he didn’t finish that sentence.

Mia’s eyes shot open wide just as a young woman joined us, putting her arms around Patrick’s waist as she looked at us with legitimate sparkles in her eyes.

“Are you Maria?” Mia asked, completely bypassing Patrick’s almost announcement of my pen name in front of his family, and my mother.

An older woman came over while Mia and the other young woman did their introductions, and she’s the one who broke up the traffic jam at the front door.

“Now, y’all come in and get comfy,” she said, having the cutest little southern accent. It was so thick, I could hardly understand her. That’s how you know she’s a real southern grandma.

“Gran Gran,” Mia said to the woman. “This is Owen. Did Mom and Dad tell ya anything about him?”

Gran Gran looked up at me and frowned, but nodded.

“Sure did. And I have a mighty lot of questions to ask you, but today is about thanking our Lord for our many blessings, so we’ll put it off until another day, hm?”

Mia nodded and smiled, then hugged her again.

“Man, I’ve missed you.”

“Well, you certainly don’t come home near as much anymore. No time to see your Gran Gran.”

Well shit, that was probably my fault.

The older woman looked up at me again and scrunched her nose.

“So, I hear you’re going to be joining the family, hm?”

My lips opened, but nothing came out. Luckily, Mia came to the rescue.

“Now, Gran Gran, don’t say things like that,” she said, cheeks burning with a blush as she led her grandmother back toward the kitchen where a man and a woman stood, somewhere around my age, though, I seemed to have somehow managed my years better, or maybe it was the LA water, filled with Botox and liposuction.

“Mama, Daddy, this is Owen,” Mia said nervously.

As far as I knew, she hadn’t talked to them since her trip last weekend, which hadn’t gone so well.

Her dad stayed pretty quiet, but Mia’s Mom approached slowly, half eager and half terrified, if I was reading the expression on her face correctly.

“Polly,” I said, putting out my hand to shake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

My fucking heart was pounding out of my chest with nervous energy. I’d tried so hard to pretend that I was too old to get nervous to meet the parents, but nope, I was nervous as fuck. So nervous in fact, that the hand I extended to shake was trembling a little.

Mia’s Mom frowned at my hand, then swatted it away before she pulled me in for a hug.

“We’re huggers around here, Owen,” she said so sweetly, patting my back in the most motherly hug I’d ever received. And that counted all the three or four hugs I’d gotten from my own mother growing up.

We’d grown up in a decidedly *not* huggy family.

When the hug ended, I awkwardly pulled my arms back, then looked up at the man who was maybe five years my senior and had raised the girl I loved.

“Patrick,” I said, putting out my hand to him next.

Yes, Patrick Senior and Junior. It was all a complicated mess.

He hesitated, looking me over for a moment before folding his arms up against his chest, proving that while his wife might have accepted me, he certainly didn't.

I lowered my hand after feeling like an idiot, then was surprised when he took a step forward and engulfed me in a hug.

“Now,” he whispered between pounding my back a little too rough, “My wife insists that she prayed about this whole thing, so I'm trying to put my faith in her and in God that he knows somethin' I don't. But I'll tell ya right now, you better never hurt my little girl or I'll have to go shine up my twelve gauge and go a-huntin'.”

I snorted a laugh and tried to back away, but he held me fast.

“We heard the whole lot there about you two, and I ain't happy about some things, but I'm trying to respect Mia's wishes. Don't piss me off now, Owen. We might be huggers, but I'm also a daddy bear.”

The very vivid image of a none-too-gentle bear hug came to mind, and I figured he got his point across rather perfectly, if I was honest.

This time Mia's dad began to back up, but I held him in our long, awkward hug for a moment longer so I could respond.

“None of this worked out the way we'd hoped. But it doesn't change the fact that I love your daughter with my whole heart and soul. If I ever hurt her, I'll load the shells into that twelve gauge.”

Meeting his eyes, I saw a pleased smirk tilt his lips.

“Now I see it,” he said with a nod, then backed away.
“Welcome to our home. ”

I tilted my head in thanks.

“I appreciate your welcome, after everything. There was a hiccup in the plans though. Might I introduce my mother?”

Just like that, all eyes moved to Mother, who stood by the door with a stark look of distaste written across her face.

“How do you do,” she managed, though she held onto her hat with talon-like fingernails, unwilling to part with it.

I knew my mother. I’d grown up in the upper crust, or at least, what my mother had wished was the upper crust. We’d always been just on the outside looking in, and it had made her go mad with needing everything to be perfect and proper and just so. This cute little home, while darling and comfortable, would be like a hell hole to someone like her who has spent her entire existence trying to impress an invisible somebody.

“Well then, welcome,” Gran Gran said, snatching the hat out of my mother’s hand. “Why don’t you come on in and sit down and I’ll get you a nice warm drink. And don’t ya worry, I’ll spike it.”

Mother was finagled toward the old, floral couch and plopped down there before Gran Gran returned with what looked like a cider hot toddy. At least, I hoped there was some whiskey in it to loosen her up.

A hand slipped into mine, and I looked down to see Mia smile hopefully up at me.

Yes, I had hope, too. I let my mind wander to the future, and I started to plan out what kind of honeymoon we might take.

Patrick Jr., the teen, broke the moment as he shoved several books my way.

“I’m such a big fan,” he admitted, holding up a Sharpie. “Do you mind signing my books?”

I looked down to see several of my newer titles, all sexy and violent and filled to the brim with foul language. The fact that Mia's brother had read them all, and read them enough that he *recognized me*? Holy shit!

"Uh, sure," I said, trying to quickly scribble my fake name in the books.

I'd always thought my pen name was hilarious, and kind of a fuck-it-to-the-man kind of thing, but now I kind of felt ashamed, knowing Mia's conservative parents would associate that kind of childish humor to the man who wanted to marry their daughter.

"I'm happy to talk to you about all this," I told him, handing them all back. "But not tonight, ok? But thanks, for being an awesome fan."

Patrick grinned at me, then nodded.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I think you should be far more concerned that they know you took her virginity than writing some books they'll never read."

Oh God...

"Mia, honey, c'mon over here," Gran Gran said. "The football game is about to start, and we've got some things to chat about. You too, Maria!"

The ladies, minus my mother who was trying to ignore everyone around her, hustled into the kitchen while Patrick Sr. turned on their thirty-five inch TV and flicked the channel to the Thanksgiving day game. I knew there would be questions galore, but I was prepared for it. So, there I went, pretending to like football while being interrogated by my girlfriend's dad. Excellent.

Chapter 26



-Mia-

I was grateful that Owen's mom didn't join us in the kitchen.

Maria was giddy and excited to gossip, but Mom and Gran Gran only had ears for Owen. And they wanted to know *everything*.

They both grabbed my arms and sat me down at the dining room table before Mom plopped a bowl of sweet potatoes and a peeler in front of me. Gran Gran sat down with some bread dough that she immediately started to knead.

"He's handsome," Mom said, sliding the ingredients for some green bean casserole over to Maria before sitting down to grate some cheese for our mac and cheese.

"He is," I agreed, blushing. "But more than that, he's such a wonderful man."

"I'm sure your father will get all kinds of information from him. But I'm sure your Gran has questions for you. I know I do."

Gran looked at me over her reading glasses perched on the end of her nose.

"I hear you've entered a relationship with a much older man," she said with disapproval all over her wrinkled face.

Of all the questions she could have asked, this was the one I'd hoped she wouldn't.

"He's a writer," I blurted. "Very successful, too!"

"And he's your professor," Gran Gran added.

“Only for a few more weeks,” I countered. “After that I’ll graduate and he’ll continue teaching.”

“Now, how in the world did a man teaching a class form a relationship with a young thing like you?” she demanded.

“Well, I help TA his classes, so we spent a lot of time together while we graded papers and things.”

Gran Gran let out a, “Mhmm,” and moved her attention back to the bread as she started to sort out little dough balls for rolls.

“What does he write?” Mom asked, trying to help move the subject to something less sensitive.

“He writes fiction. Space and fantasy and other sorts of adventures,” I said. “I’ve read a couple of them and he’s so talented.”

“That’s great honey.” Mom smiled, though it was strained.

“And two children?” Gran Gran added, dragging us back to her disputes for my relationship.

I nodded, unashamed.

“There’s Caden and Charlie. They’re six and eight and the sweetest boys.”

“And you’re ready to be a mother?”

“Some mornings they climb into bed and it almost feels like they’re mine,” I admit, and then I choke on my joy the moment Gran’s eyes go wide and horrified.

“Have you been *sleeping* at the man’s house?” she growled in a shaky voice.

My mouth flopped open and closed, but nothing came out as she stood and stormed toward the living room.

I stumbled out of my chair, dropping the potato peeler as I shoved open the door just long enough to watch my sweet little Gran Gran slap the love of my life across his face.

Owen's look of shock would have been hilarious if my grandmother didn't look like she was going to chop off his baby maker.

"How dare you!" she snapped at him, pointing her finger in his face. "I'm willing to accept that my baby girl has fallen in love with a man twice her age, but how dare you force yourself on a young little thing who promised herself to God until she was married!"

"Gran!" I shrieked, grabbing her arm. "He didn't force anything! I'm a grown up, and I get to make decisions for myself."

She stood, looking up into my eyes with such disappointment, I'd never seen the likes from her before and it broke my freaking heart.

"Well, I'm shocked," she said, staring at me like she didn't know who I was anymore. "I never thought I could be so disappointed in you."

With that, Gran Gran shoved past me and went back into the kitchen.

Tears began to well into my eyes, but I saw Owen there in front of me, framing my cheeks with his big hands and asking if I was ok.

I nodded, then shook my head and gave a sobbing laugh.

"I'll be fine. It's fine," I said, "I'm fine."

"You're not fine," he whispered, dragging his thumb over a tear that dropped from my face.

The beautiful moment was shattered by Owen's mother cursing loudly and storming toward the kitchen.

"Oh shit," Owen murmured, then moved past me to follow his Mom who was already yelling at Gran in the kitchen.

"Mother," he hissed the moment he went through the door to the kitchen.

I followed, nervous that the two old women might actually hurt each other.

Owen had already shoved himself between the two women, who were hurling insults at each other, trying to lean around his big body to point angry fingers at each other.

“Who are you to shame a girl for sharing a physical relationship?” Owen’s Mom bit out, stabbing her index finger at my Gran. “You religious zealots! Are you going to hang the girl now? Burn her at the stake?”

“Mother!” Owen shouted at his own Mom. “You’re acting ridiculous!”

“That *woman* slapped you! My own child! Her offspring would be lucky to share a bed with an intelligent, successful man like you! I’m more convinced than ever that this girl is not right for you. You could do so much better than a country bumpkin girl and her redneck family!”

I didn’t think I’d ever seen Owen so angry before. He got in real close to his mother’s face, practically nose to nose before he seethed, “How fucking *dare* you? For a woman who finds her worth on how her high society frenemies sees her, you have a lot of nerve to judge people you know nothing about. You know nothing about Mia, our relationship, or me, really. If you can’t act like any sort of lady and curb your sharp tongue, then I’ll drive you back to Columbus and I’ll leave your ass there to rot while I come back here and give a million apologies to these good people who have graciously welcomed us into their homes, and who you’ve unforgivably insulted.”

Owen’s Mom just huffed, acting like his words were some kind of joke.

“Oh my!” My own mother sighed, waving at her face.

Likely, the blush on her cheeks was the bold display of profanity, but my eyes were captured on Owen and his proud defense of my family.

“I’d prefer to have a holiday alone than spend it with these peons.”

He snapped.

Owen grabbed his mother's arm and stormed out, dragging her behind him.

"Wretched, thankless boy," she growled at him as he continued to pull.

Just like that, the two of them were out the front door and we were left in silence.

"Well I'll be," Dad whistled, shaking his head. "I don't envy you a mother-in-law like that!"

Mom huffed behind me and Patrick barked out a laugh.

"Sucks to be you, sis!" he cackled.

"Pat!" Maria elbowed him in the ribs, and that made me smile.

He put his arms around her and squeezed her to him, pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

Their love was adorable and I pressed my hand to my chest, feeling it ache with happiness for them.

"Do you think he's coming back?" Dad asked, lifting his eyebrows in question.

"I sure hope not!" Gran Gran butted in.

"He'll be back," I assured Dad, then turned to my grandmother. "And dang it, Gran, why would you say something like that to him? What you said wasn't nice at all, and he did nothin' wrong!"

Gran looked at me like I'd lost my head.

"You think he did nothin' wrong? That boy defiled you! You made a promise of chastity to—"

"I made a promise," I agreed. "But Gran, whether I keep any promises or not is my business, not yours. Besides, I'm going to marry that man, so what difference does it make to you?"

"If Pastor Abraham heard you talking like this, he'd —"

“He’d what?” I challenged. “He’d chastise me, then he’d help me plan the wedding. You’ve done plenty of chastising. Is that all you plan on doing today?”

For the second time in one day, I saw my Gran Gran speechless.

“And after the awful time he’s had with his own mother, I had hoped that you could be more Christlike and love instead of judge.”

Two pristine tears dropped down her wrinkled cheeks and that broke my heart.

“Bless you, my baby girl,” Gran said after a moment.

She stepped closer to me and put her gnarled hands on my cheeks.

“You’re right, and I’m not acting very Christlike. I’m just worried about you, sweet pea. I know you’re growin’ up, but even grown ups make mistakes sometimes.”

My heart warmed and melted.

“I know. But you need to let me make them. Mistake or not, I want my Gran Gran by my side. In just a couple weeks, we’ll be moving in together. Once the semester is over, there’s no reason why we can’t make things permanent.”

“You want to make things permanent, you’ve got to marry the boy, Mia.”

“Damn right,” Dad added, pointing his finger at me. “That boy better put a ring on your finger, or I’ll—”

There was a knock on the door that had Dad stopping mid-sentence. Patrick went to open it, and there was a downtrodden Owen with shame written across his face.

“I’m so, so sorry for my mother—” he started, but Dad waved him off, still in his seat on the couch.

“Nonsense. This is the most exciting Thanksgiving we’ve had in a decade, since Pat here almost choked on a wishbone.”

We all laughed, except Owen who looked completely embarrassed.

“Actually,” Dad added. “We were just talking about you, and when you were going to put a ring on my baby girl’s finger.”

“Dad!” I yelled, and a blush erupted over Owen’s cheeks.

“What? I just want him to make an honest woman out of you. Besides, if he loves you as much as you say he does, then the thought has to have crossed his mind more than once.”

To derail the conversation, I blurted, “Owen, what did you do with your mother?”

His eyes finally met mine, and I saw amusement sparkle in them.

“I made good on my threat, but I sent her back to Columbus in a cab. She hates cabs.”

I laughed, and he smiled for the first time all day.

“Now, Partick, you’re right about one thing,” Owen said, moving his attention back to my father. “The thought has crossed my mind more than once.”

My heart immediately seized up, and I waited with bated breath for what he would say next.

“And?” Dad prompted when he took too long to go on.

“And, I have a lot of things to consider, including my two boys. I have to think of what’s best for them, but also Mia. Believe me, I know that I don’t deserve her. She’s sweeter and more intelligent, caring, sweet, and beautiful than I could have ever imagined. I hesitate because I feel like she can do way better than me.”

The words were brutally honest, and no matter how much I willed it, he wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Didn’t stop you from sleeping with her now, did it?”
Dad snorted.

At that, Patrick noped out of there, dragging Maria behind him. Gran on the other hand, plopped down into the seat beside Dad and crossed her arms, waiting for his answer.

“No,” Owen admitted, rubbing at the side of his head.

He’d recently gotten a haircut, telling me that his mother would wring him alive if he had the shaggy grown out look when she arrived.

“We’re only human. And I admit that I don’t hold the same religious beliefs when it comes to virginity and whatnot, but I treasure your daughter. I highly regard her values and her beliefs, and everything that has happened between us has been mutual. Honestly, I’m surprised that you’re more worried about her hymen than the fact that she’s with a man twice her age.”

Dad shrugged.

“What the hell does age matter? I’m more worried about you being divorced with two kids than being forty.”

Owen looked surprised.

“Mia has met my ex,” he said, glancing my way before going on. “We’ve managed to keep a cordial relationship, as odd as it might be. And we try to raise our boys with every bit of love that parents can give their kids, we just do it in two different homes.”

“And I love those boys,” I finally piped in.

Owen’s eyes lifted to mine and he smiled again, gratefully this time.

“They love you, too,” he murmured.

“Well, we need to meet these boys,” Mom said.

“Not until they’re engaged,” Dad said, stopping Mom’s romantic vision of grandbabies.

She pouted briefly, but then Owen moved around the couch and held out his hand to me.

“Take a walk with me?” he asked, a question in his eyes I didn’t quite know how to answer.

I nodded and he led me out of the house and away from everything that waited back home for us.

“Whew, sorry, I needed some air,” he said when we made it out of the yard.

I led him down toward the school’s swings without thinking, since that was always my escape spot. Only this time, it wasn’t with Patrick, I was with the love of my life.

“Pretty sure if I bring you back without a ring on your finger your dad’s going to kill me,” he said nonchalantly.

“My dad will get over it.”

There was another pause, and he let go of my hand to put his fists in his trouser pockets.

“We never talked about this before. It all feels wrong to have these conversations about marriage and rings and shit without having talked to you first.”

“What’s there to talk about?” I asked back.

“Are you even ready to get married?” he countered. “You’re fucking twenty-three.”

“And? How old were you when you and Paula got married?”

“Oh fuck, don’t use us as an example. We screwed all that stuff up.”

“Are you afraid marrying me is a mistake?”

The idea cut deep.

“No, no, of course not,” he rushed, stopping and grabbing my hand. “I’m not afraid you’re a mistake. I’m afraid that...”

He licked his lips and looked away. The sun was already setting and it left an orange cast over the world around us.

“What are you afraid of then?”

“I’m afraid of getting hurt again,” he whispered. “I mean, I’m twenty years older than you. If, say, we got married, do you want more kids? I’d be fucking sixty when they left the house, and you’d only be forty. And when you reach sixty, I’ll be eighty. That’s a huge fucking difference. It might not seem like it now, but by the time ten, twenty years pass...would you even still want me anymore?”

The raw pain seeping from him broke me in a way I never would have imagined.

“Yes,” I breathed, pressing my palms to his face to force him to see the truth in my face. “Yes, I will want you. I want you now, and in twenty years, and in fifty years, if you can hold it together ‘til ninety. I want you now and forever, and nothing as stupid as age will change that.”

He bit his lip for a moment, then moved his face out of my hands and toward mine where he stole a kiss so heartbreaking and beautiful, it took my breath away.

“Mia?” he breathed against my lips. “I want to marry you.”

Chapter 27



-Owen-

I wasn't sure what possessed me to bring along the ring, but it sat in my pocket, burning an excruciating hole while I wanted nothing more than to give it to her and beg her to be with me forever.

"I want to marry you too," she murmured with hopeful eyes. "I love you, Owen."

"We need time to settle in and for the boys to get to know you better, but I was really hoping that maybe..."

My hands trembled as I pulled the ring from my pocket and showed it to her.

She gasped. Like, a legitimate keeling over in surprise kind of gasp.

"What?" she choked, staring at the ring, then up at me, then back to the ring.

She froze there, and so did I, but I knew I had to fucking do something or we'd both die of oxygen deprivation as we held our breaths for what would come next.

"Let me rephrase this," I said, even my voice was trembling with fear and excitement. "I want to marry you, but will you? Will you marry me, Mia Miller? Not right now, but I love it, so I'm putting a fucking ring on it."

She laughed at me, and I didn't blame her a single bit, because that was fucking dumb. Didn't matter though. She just nodded and nodded, over and over until I put that motherfucking ring on her finger.

"When did you get a ring?" was the first thing out of her mouth.

“A yes would be nice,” I countered.

Her cheeks flushed a deeper red with a blush before she blurted.

“A million, trillion yeses. Now, when did you get a ring?”

I laughed, took another kiss from her lips, then admitted, “A couple weeks ago. I’d hoped to maybe ask your dad’s blessing while we were here.”

“Oh my God,” she breathed, then grabbed my head again and kissed the hell out of me.

“You’re for real, right?” she panted against my lips. “It’s not just because my dad threatened you, right?”

I chuckled.

“You’ve known me for coming on three months. Do you really think someone could make me do something I didn’t want to do?”

She laughed and shook her head.

“Honestly, I have a hard time believing you were a kid at one point, saying ‘Yes Mother’. But then I met your mother...”

“Fuck... Yeah, I’m sorry about her. I should have known better. She can be a total bitch when she wants to be.”

“I can understand Paula’s distaste for her ex-mother-in-law.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I chuckled sardonically.

She pressed another kiss to my lips, then grabbed my hand.

“Do you need more air, or are you ready to head back?”

“I’m fine. I just needed to ask you to marry me before I lost my Goddamn head and did it in front of your whole family.”

She laughed.

“They wouldn’t have minded, but they don’t know when to shut up, either.”

I grinned down at her and pressed my lips to her forehead.

“Between your Dad and your grandma. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have made it through without some kind of interruption, so this seemed like the better way to go about it.”

She nodded and hurried me back to her parent’s home.

“It’s also colder than I thought it would be,” she added. “I should have brought a coat with me.”

As we were walking, I grabbed her shoulders and shifted her in front of me until my arms were surrounding her, warming her.

She grinned back at me as we awkwardly meandered back to her home, her body wrapped up in me.

When we made it back to the door, I finally pulled my arms away, but she caught my hand just as she pushed the door open.

“So? What was that all about?” Dad asked as we walked in.

Mia grinned and held up her left hand with a sparkly diamond on the ring finger.

“Polly!” her dad called, then stood out of his chair for the first time since we arrived.

Mia’s mom came stumbling into the room with a spatula in her hand, eyes wide and worried.

“What is it, dear?” she asked, Gran peeking out the door, too.

“Come see your daughter’s hand,” Patrick Sr. drawled with a smirk, which had Polly flying toward her daughter.

“Really?” Polly cried, excitement written all over her face.

“Mhmm!” Mia agreed, her face glowing with elation.

“Oh, honey,” she gushed, pulling her daughter in for a crushing hug.

Gran Gran came out and wobbled to her granddaughter and put her arms around the girls, making it a threesome.

“Are you kidding me?” Patrick asked from the door, his young face drawn with exasperation.

Within the next ten seconds, the kid was dragging his girlfriend into the living room, then he dropped to one knee.

“You know I love you, Maria,” he said, his face almost as flushed and pink as hers. “Will you marry me, too? We talked about this so many times, but now—”

“Absolutely not!” Polly and Patrick Sr. shouted together, the attention decisively diverted from me Mia and I.

“When’s the wedding?” Gran Gran asked me, looking up with steely eyes.

“We’re going to take our time,” I told her without apology. “But I’m sure Mia will ensure you receive an invitation when the time comes.”

Gran Gran gave a little snort, then turned to her granddaughter and hugged her again.

“And look here. All that time getting a degree and you’ll just be a regular ol’ mama, anyway.”

“My degree was not a waste,” she said, chuckling at her grandmother. “But Motherhood is something I would cherish with my whole heart.”

Her eyes turned to me after saying that, and I squeezed her hand, maybe a little too hard, but damn those words meant so much to me. I couldn’t help but let my overactive imagination run away with me as I thought of Mia mothering my children, or, God help me, barefoot and pregnant with one of *our* children.

I’d brought up the whole age difference before because I was prepared for the complications that our relationship would bring. There was no disillusionment for me

that things would go perfectly or that we wouldn't run into problems. In fact, I knew better than most because I'd suffered through years of fucking things up with my previous wife, who was no less than a saint for a good portion of that time.

I was a new man. A *better* man, but I was still going to fuck up, and no matter how much I wished I could change things for her, I couldn't make up for the twenty years I'd lived on earth without her. I was prepared to start a family fresh over with her, anticipated it even, if that was what she wanted. But was she really ready for a husband like me?

Even still, with a ring on her finger, doubts plagued me. Would it ever leave me? Even when we were married, would I be able to trust that she really wanted to keep me?

Fuck, when did my self-esteem get so poor?

"What're you thinking about?" Mia asked, nudging my shoulder.

I shook away my thoughts and smiled, turning into her.

"Nothing. Just bullshit," I whispered into her ear. "Just thinking about...the future."

Her beaming smile was fucking *everything*. It warmed me from the inside out.

"So," Polly said after a few minutes. "If everyone's done with all this engagement stuff, then let's get that turkey dinner on the table."

Mia giggled, pressed a kiss to my lips, then hurried after her Mom, Patrick and his girlfriend, and Gran Gran, who took her time following.

After they left, Patrick Sr. and I were alone in the living room with the football game on the TV playing low in the background.

"You had a ring, huh?" he asked now that things had calmed down.

I scrubbed my hand over my cheek and nodded.

“I was planning on finding a moment over the holiday to discuss it with you. As it turns out, I shouldn’t have worried about waiting for your approval and should have proposed before coming out.”

He chuffed.

“Yeah, well, you’re making an honest woman out of her, and you’ve got a successful career, isn’t that right?”

I nodded.

“She’ll never want for anything,” I swore. “I will protect her and treasure her, heart, mind, and soul. As a father, I hope that brings you some peace of mind. I know it would comfort me.”

“It does,” he said, but lifted weary eyes to me. “But your presence in my daughter’s life makes me wonder about her future. Are you going to give us grandbabies?”

I chuffed right back at him.

“Actually, you’d get two automatically.”

“You know what I mean. No offense to you all, but I want a grandbaby my daughter carried.”

“That’s up to your daughter,” I said finally. “If that’s what she wants, then I’m with her, one hundred percent.”

“And why do you think that she’d want a man like you, anyway? I mean, if it were me, I wouldn’t give a young thing like her a second glance. Why did *you*?”

That was a difficult question.

I blew out a breath and shook my head.

“Honestly? I don’t know either.”

He gave me that look that said he thought I was full of shit.

Lifting a hand, I shook my head again and met his eyes.

“I get it. Believe me, I get it. I’ve never dated a woman that young except when I was that age myself. I

married my wife relatively young and we were together for close to fifteen years. The thing is, I'm not attracted to Mia's looks."

That bullshit alarm went off on his face again, so I hurried on.

"She's a beautiful girl, don't get me wrong. But her beauty doesn't mean that much to me. Ask my ex-wife. She's still a sex bomb."

"Then why did you get divorced if you're still attracted to her?" he asked, eyes narrowing on me.

"Because looks don't mean shit to me. It's about what's here, and here," I told him, pointing to my temple, then to my heart. "And where my ex lacked, Mia has an abundance. She's the most intelligent, kind, naïve, creative woman I've ever met. Those are the things that matter to me."

Patrick didn't seem offended by my profanity, which I appreciated, because I struggled to speak from my heart without adding the idiotic words. Maybe it was the New Yorker in me that did it. Or maybe it was my time spent in England.

Sinking to the couch across from the man, I waited for him to say something.

"So this is all because she worked for you," he mumbled.

I shrugged.

"I never would have been able to get to know her if it weren't for the time we spent talking in my office while we graded papers. And I tell you, I fought it, Patrick. I know how fucked up this is. God, I get it. If it were my daughter, I'd want to pull off the guy's dick and stuff it up his asshole."

I winced at the phrasing and hoped he wouldn't be offended by my words.

In juxtaposition, he smirked at me.

"Oh, I've thought about it a time or ten," he admitted.

There was a small silence before he went on.

“While I have thought about it, I also want my little girl to be happy. On top of that, I’ve been praying about it, and so has Polly. She feels good about everything, so I have to just take a step back, even though all I want to do is go get my shotgun and force you off my property.”

“I...” How could I possibly thank him for his attitude?
“Thank you for accepting me. *Us.*”

He snorted.

“Got nothing to do with you. Thank God.”

Nodding, I looked toward the ceiling and did just that.

“Now,” Patrick interrupted my thanks. “I’ve missed half of this game already, let’s finish it up. You watch any sports?”

I shook my head.

“Not really. I’ve always been a bookworm. Mind narrating for me?”

I knew enough about sports to get by, mostly because my ex and her family had been sports fanatics, but I knew that this was a moment where we could bond.

Patrick did just that, pointing at the TV and explaining everything as it happened, and I smiled. I hadn’t expected her family to be so welcoming. Guess miracles do still happen.

Chapter 28



-Mia-

“I can’t believe it!” Maria said, looking down at the ring on my finger.

Heck, I hadn’t had a chance to look much at the ring, either, so I stared down at it with her. The thing had a massive diamond embedded into a band with little green gems surrounding it, and scrollwork on the golden band.

It’s beautiful...

“This has got to be a full carat!” she practically screamed.

I grinned up at her.

“You’re one lucky girl,” she said, looking into my eyes.

“Do you have a ring?” I asked her, wondering if Patrick had given her one.

She gave an embarrassed smile.

“No. Pat was just being ridiculous,” Maria said, though she didn’t seem like she thought the idea had been bad.

“Just bad timing,” I tried.

She gave a tentative smile, but I saw the eagerness behind her eyes. She wanted it to be soon. And if anybody understood that, it was me!

“Actually, I’d like to talk to you about a few things, if you don’t mind. You know Pat better than pretty much anybody. Except maybe your parents, but I can’t really have this conversation with them...”

A slight blush stained her cheeks and I grinned.

“Sure. Let’s just help get a few things in the oven, then maybe we can take a walk.”

She agreed just in time for Mom to pull me over to the stove to sauté the onions, celery, and sausage for the stuffing.

“I’m so happy for you,” she told me in a soft voice, squeezing my unused hand. “I hadn’t expected him to propose like that today.”

I shrugged, but my smile beamed.

“Evidently he’d been carrying the ring around for a while, wanting to get Dad’s approval before asking.”

“That’s sweet,” she sighed. “Your dad always wanted a son-in-law that asked permission first.”

With a cackle, she nudged my arm with hers.

“We just hadn’t anticipated said man to be born in the same decade as us.”

I laughed.

“He was born in the eighties,” I told her with a grin.

“*Barely*,” she countered, then her smile softened.

“I am so happy for you though, honey. He seems interesting. Evidently Pat has read some of his books. Isn’t that something? Sometimes things just seem so overwhelming and big, and then God gives us moments where he reminds us that it’s a small world and he knows us.”

I nodded and agreed.

“I have to admit, I didn’t say so before, but I’m glad he’s not an atheist. Lord, I don’t know what I’d do with an atheist in this family!”

“He’s not an atheist, but he’s more...agnostic? He isn’t as religious as I am,” I admitted.

“Well, that’s difficult.” Her brows dipped and scrunched together in thought. “But you were right. He doesn’t have to be a religious man to be a good man. I have to take your word on the man himself. But I look forward to learning

more about him so I can be assured for myself of his character.”

“Me too,” I agreed. “We’ll be spending Christmas with his boys but...maybe you can come and stay for a night or two at his home after that? You can meet Caden and Charlie and get to know him better, without his mother around.”

Mom snorted.

“That woman. I do not envy you your new mother-in-law, honey. She’ll be a difficult one.”

“Oh, she had a lot to say about me. Owen has been on a hair trigger since she arrived. They don’t get along very well. His previous wife warned me about her when I met her.”

“You’ve talked with his ex?” Mom sounded surprised.

I nodded.

“We went on a double date with her and her boyfriend, actually.”

Mom shook her head.

“I tell you, you’ve always been a strong, independent, and peculiar-minded girl. To be honest, if this is the extent of the oddities, then I think I can handle that, especially because you’re making things right by getting married.”

“Shouldn’t’ve got into bed with the boy in the first place!” Gran Gran cut in, waving a spatula around with sweet potatoes mashed into it. “There’s an order to how things should be done. Unless you’re procreatin’, you shouldn’t be sharin’ a bed.”

I’d thought that way for so long, agreeing with the sentiment, but being with Owen...everything had changed.

It wasn’t that I didn’t still think that way, but my eyes had been opened to the fact that sex wasn’t just for procreating, it was one of the most beautiful ways of showing someone you love them. And maybe it was impulsive to give up my virginity without even vows of love exchanged, but it didn’t matter. I loved him. I knew that now. I’d loved the man practically from the moment I met him.

“I know, Gran,” I said, not bothering to explore those thoughts out loud.

“You know, and yet you did it anyway,” she said. “And I’m disappointed in you for it. Pastor Abraham will be too when you go in for your marriage interviews.”

Oh Lord, I’d completely forgotten about that! Would Owen go along with that, so we could get married in the church I grew up in?

“Well,” Mom went on, ignoring Gran Gran’s comments. “I suppose you can still always come to church with us on Sundays. An hour each way isn’t too long to hear the Lord’s words.”

“Owen said he’d attend church with me,” I told her. “He said he doesn’t want to keep me from doing the things that I love, and that he’d support me in it.”

“Good boy,” Mama said, nodding her head.

The attention was turned to Maria and Patrick’s botched proposal, and I was grateful for the reprieve. I got the pie crusts all put together and in the fridge to chill for a bit, then saw Mom and Gran Gran had the rest of things under control.

“Mind if we go sit in the back for a little bit?” I asked the women, saving Marie from Gran’s inquisition.

“Sure,” Mom agreed, probably feeling pity for the girl and her cherry red blushed cheeks. “We’ve got a few minutes while we wait for Pat to get back with those Cranberries. I still can’t believe we forgot the cranberries!”

I took Maria’s hand and dragged her outside, grabbing two coats off the back of the kitchen chairs on the way. It was in the low fifties, so there was too much chill *not* to put something on. Hence my shivering while Owen and I took our quick little walk earlier.

“There,” I said, closing the kitchen door behind us.

Maria followed me silently to the little firepit in the big backyard and sat beside me on the stone bench there.

“So?” I asked her. “What’s up? What did you want to talk about?”

She fussed with the pebbles on the ground at her feet with the tip of her sneaker but stayed quiet as she did.

“I—” She paused, cutting herself off. “Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t...”

“It’s ok,” I told her, putting my arm around her as if we were already sisters. “Pat talks to me about...just about everything.”

“Really?”

I nodded.

“Did he tell you about...about how we haven’t...”

She couldn’t even say the words.

“You mean how you aren’t having sex?” I asked her.

A big rush of air left her lungs and her shoulders slumped.

“What did he say about it?” she gushed. “Does he hate me?”

I chuckled and pushed the hair out of her face.

“No way! That boy loves you something fierce. He’d do anything for you.”

Those words alone seemed to release a weight from her shoulders.

“And Pat’s kind of on his own journey right now when it comes to the whole sex thing. He’s a red blooded seventeen year old, Maria. Of course he wants it. Like, a lot. But he respects you and your desires more than he wants it. He wants to respect your promises and respect God. Pat’s ok waiting. He said so himself.”

Tears watered her eyes and my heart went out to her.

“I want to, too,” she admitted. “Everytime we’re kissing and things just sort of...get out of control, and then I’m the one who says ‘no’ and I hate it! I want to be able to

show him how much I love him in actions as well as words... but I also know that I want to wait until we're married. It'll mean so much more."

Her expression seemed torn between the two sides of her desires.

"But what does it matter if we're the ones right for each other? I mean, if we're going to get married, does it matter if we just jump the date a *little* bit? Kind of like you did."

I shook my head.

"Maria, don't give in just because of the carnal aspect of it."

"But you did," she countered, but not in a vicious way.

The poor thing was shredded with her decision.

"Honestly," I put my arm around her. "I should have waited. Owen would have waited for me, I think, but I got too caught up in the carnality of it. I loved him and I wanted him to know how much. I don't regret it, necessarily, but it's caused me to do some soul searching and have a change of perspective."

"How so?"

"Well, I'd made the same promises you did. To be chaste and clean so I could wear white unstained on my wedding day. But to be honest, eventually I kind of...it didn't mean as much to me as I thought it did, I guess. Like, maybe I wasn't completely invested in the vow of chastity. I had been, for years, but after him, things changed for me. There was a lot of wondering if he would even want me more than just as a fling, and then love was involved, and honestly there was desperation there, too."

"Desperation?"

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Do you really think that a girl like me could catch the eyes of someone like him? I really, *really* wanted him, and I used the only powers I knew of. Seduction."

Her face pinkened even more. Was this what Owen saw when I talked of things? An innocent girl who didn't cuss and who blushed too much?

"You seduced him?"

I nodded.

"He tried so hard to say no. Eventually I appealed to his baser instincts, and his attraction to me gave in."

"Wow..." she breathed out.

"You shouldn't do that, Maria. Pat loves you, and he wants the things that you want. I mean, if you want to cross that line, then do it together, not out of desperation, but of love."

She nodded at me and gave a slight smile.

"Thanks Mia. Your words tonight mean a lot to me. You've given me a lot to think about."

I blew out a long breath, grateful to be done with the conversation.

"Good. It needs thinking over," I told her with a wink, then stood.

My butt was cold after sitting on the cement for so long, and I was eager to warm up.

"What are the odds, you think, that the pies are already rolled out and in the oven?" Maria asked as we went up the two steps to the back door.

I laughed.

"My mother has been passing the pie dough job to me for years," I told her while cracking the door to peek in.

"Ah!" Mom called over to us. "Just in time to put the pies together!"

I turned to Maria to give her an I-told-you-so look, and she giggled before following me in and taking up a pie crust.

"I'll help you this year. We'll be a team."

I smiled at the girl, and hoped that my brother really did marry her one day. She was a nice girl, and she seemed to have her head on straight. He could do a lot worse, and they would make an adorable couple.

“Alright,” I murmured, washing my hands at the sink. “Let’s get this done, sis.”



Dinner was great.

Dad laughed with Owen over stupid things like football and dad jokes, and it couldn’t have made me happier. He’d been nervous to meet my parents, even if he hadn’t expressed his worries. I could feel it from the moment I’d arrived earlier in the day. Since then, his shoulders relaxed and his smile eased. Behind those sexy glasses, his eyes were sparkling.

When we’d had our fill and stuffed ourselves full of dinner and dessert, we filtered back out to the living room. Pat sat in the chair to the side with Maria in his lap, Gran Gran sat in the other chair, and Mom and Dad had the main couch. There was one spot left beside them, and I paused to consider where I was going to sit.

“I hate to call it a night so early, but it’s a long drive home and I’ve got to pick up my boys first thing in the morning,” Owen said.

I turned to him with a frown.

“You’re leaving?” He nodded.

“Plus, I have to make sure my mother made it home and that I didn’t get lucky that the cab driver was a serial killer.”

I swatted his shoulder and he grinned down at me, then the smile softened.

“Have a good evening with your parents. I’ll come back to pick you up tomorrow if you’d like.”

I shook my head.

“No, it’s alright. I’ll take the bus home.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I’ll be by at noon sharp. Don’t you dare get your ass on a bus,” he said quietly, then whispered, “Or I’ll be forced to spank it.”

I choked on my spit, but I didn’t have time to respond because he pressed a quick kiss to my lips, then a lingering one on my forehead before moving to shake Dad’s hand.

“It’s been a pleasure meeting you all. I’m sorry again about my mother. I hope nobody took her words to heart. She’s a bitter old woman and has forgotten how to love, I think.”

“Don’t apologize to us,” Mom told him. “It’s you I worry about, having to go home to her.”

He crinkled his nose at that.

“Well, I suppose I survived adolescence with the woman. I’m sure I’ll be alright.”

Mom stood to hug him, then he shook my brother’s hand and waved at Marie, then he faced Gran Gran.

“I hope one day you’ll not hate me,” he told her. “As you saw today with my mother, I could really use someone like you.”

Gran cackled, then got up to hug him.

“I’ll forgive ya,” she told him, then moved her arm to...oh God!

Gran gripped the back of Owen’s neck as he hunched down to give her a hug, then gave him a rough pat-pat right on his crotch that made him grunt and twitch.

“Just keep it in your pants, huh?”

I couldn’t believe my eyes, and the rest of us stood gaping at her as Owen stood straight and backed up like Gran would attack him again.

“What?” the old woman called out to the group, flinging her hands around. “I’m allowed to protect my

granddaughter!”

“Mother!” Mom screeched, hopping to her feet again.

The room burst out into shocked laughs as Owen’s wide eyes turned to me.

“I’m gonna go now,” he said quickly, opening the door as he grabbed his cute old man jacket from the tree by the door.

He dropped his head to give me a better, longer kiss by the door since everyone else was still occupied.

“Love you,” he said with a smile, dusting kisses over one cheek.

“Love you,” I repeated as he stepped down and toward his car.

Why wasn’t I going with him?

“Wait,” I told him, holding out my hand. “I’ll get my jacket!”

“You stay here with them,” he argued. “Spend some time with your family. You don’t see them much since I came around.”

I hated that he was right. All I wanted to do was climb back into that car with him, stop somewhere on the side of the road and show him how much I loved him.

Then again, his mother was there at his house waiting for us.

Maybe my childhood home wasn’t so bad, after all.

I waved as he got into the car and drove off, leaving me alone with my family.

“Alright,” Dad said. “Who’s ready for some Charlie Brown Thanksgiving?”

It was a family tradition that we indulged in every year. I had the movie about memorized by now, but it made me grin to think of watching it again with my favorite people. If only Owen could have stayed to watch it with us...

The TV flicked over to the DVD that Patrick had plugged in, and the introduction music helped me relax.

One more holiday, then I'd be able to move in with the man of my dreams. Until then, I'd enjoy every moment.

Chapter 29



-Mia-

My phone rang in my pocket as I started putting away my clean laundry. It'd been sitting in my little basket since returning from my parent's house on Thanksgiving. My mother would have been horrified by the deep wrinkles in my t-shirts and shorts, but sometimes there's more important things to do than laundry. Like spending the last two days with my fiancé's children. *My soon-to-be children.*

Just thinking the words sparked excitement and nervous jitters across my body.

Another ring tore me out of my own thoughts, and I fumbled to answer before I missed it.

Nearly letting it go to voicemail, I managed to catch Owen's name before it did.

"Hey," I said breathlessly, oddly exhausted from the fight with my tight pocket.

"Hey," he said back with a chuckle. "I just dropped the boys with their mom, and I need to get out of the house before I strangle my mother. Want to go on a drive?"

Dropping the days old laundry to wrinkle further, I agreed.

"Yeah, I'm not doing anything important," I told him, giving a wan look toward the laundry, and my computer which had the first two paragraphs of what needed to be a fifty page dissertation.

"Good. Pack an overnight bag."

"There's school in the morning," I warned.

“I know. I teach a class at eight. We’ll be there in time.”

“Ok. I trust you.”

“Good. Be there in a few.”

With that we said goodbye and hung up, which only gave me minutes to put together a quick bag with some pajamas, toothbrush and paste, and an outfit for tomorrow.

I wished I knew what he was planning, staying somewhere overnight. His mother was difficult, but I’d stayed over on Friday night and it hadn’t been too difficult. Well, not any more difficult than normal with her disapproving glares and blatant words of scorn.

The only thing that I’d seen melt her heart had been Caden and Charlie, though they weren’t big fans of their grandmother, either. She was at least nice to them though, and asked about their lives and school. Maybe there was something in her that was salvageable.

After sticking mascara and another pair of panties in my bag, I hurried with my backpack full of school books and laptop, and a tote with everything else out the door and down the stairs.

Clea was due home from her holiday at home at any time, and I was excited to tell her about my engagement, but it would just have to wait.

Owen was there waiting for me in his sexy little coupe when I got there. Another car was there, and I saw Clea standing beside the old sedan with who I assumed was Howard. There was luggage scattered around their feet as they said goodbye to each other. He didn’t seem to notice me, but Clea did. Her eyes roved over me, then the car and the driver sitting behind the wheel. While I lifted my hand to wave, she snapped her face away from me and pretended like she didn’t know me.

It broke my freaking heart.

So much for best friends.

I sank into the seat beside Owen and he drove away immediately, his hand finding my knee.

“That was your friend, I take it?” he asked. “The one you told about us?”

I nodded.

“She’s not been my friend ever since,” I admitted. “She hardly talks to me anymore.”

He let out a soft curse and squeezed my knee, then the soft flesh of my thigh just an inch above that.

“I’m sorry, darling,” he murmured.

I shrugged, though it felt like a heartbreak all of its own to give up a friend I’d had for so long over something so silly.

There was silence in the car for a good few minutes until I finally broke it by asking, “Where are we going?”

He squeezed my leg again, then glanced at me.

“I got us a hotel for the night. The Hyett, if you know it,” he said to me. “That ok?”

Nervousness spiked through me for some reason. I’d slept with the man more times than I could count, and yet, staying at a hotel with him felt like a big step.

“Should I assume that you just didn’t want your mother to hear the headboard banging?” I tittered.

Owen laughed at my ridiculousness as we pulled into the hotel parking lot. It was big and looked modern and fancy. Well, fancy to a girl like me. A hotel was more like a Motel 6 in my brain. This was extravagant.

“I’m sorry,” he said, taking my hand after opening my door. “I wanted to spring for something better but...there’s not much option for lavish luxury in a town like Columbus.”

I shrugged.

“This is perfect, Owen,” I told him, scooping my arm around his waist as we walked through the front doors with

our bags in our hands, as well as a black, half round pillow I'd never seen before.

Owen took care of the reservation, having the number on his phone so the desk clerk could look it up then give the keys.

"C'mon," he told me, taking my bags for me as we went.

"I can carry my own bags," I told him with a laugh.

"Let me be a fucking gentleman," he teased, leaning down to kiss me.

I gave them up easily and accepted his kiss, until the elevator dinged, anyway. We found the room and he slid the key card into the slot, then opened the door.

The place was nice, clean, and had a taste of luxury about it, but it wasn't ostentatious.

"There we go," he said, plopping down our bags onto the couch before tossing the pillow onto the bed.

"What is this?" I asked, picking it up and seeing an odd hole on the rounded side.

"Well," he said, shoving his hand through his hair. "You remember when you said you wanted to try dual penetration?"

I nodded, a flush heating my cheeks.

"Well, I thought on it, and how I could give that to you. And this is what I came up with."

He turned and opened his bag, pulling out a couple of...oh wow. One of the dildos in his hands was dark purple, and the other was a fleshy color.

"Of course, if you changed your mind, I'll put this shit away and I'll fuck you proper on that bed for the rest of the night, but if you want to try it, then we're prepared."

"Show me how it works," I whispered, feeling my ears turn hot at the same time my clit throbbed and my channel clenched.

Did I want this?

Uh, yes. Yes I did. Not only for research purposes, but just for... I needed to know how it felt.

Owen slowly moved toward the pillow and righted it, flat side on the bed and rounded part up. He took the sleek purple dildo and shoved it in the hole until it was sticking practically straight up.

“Then what?” I gasped out, the sight so freaking erotic I was already panting.

He dropped the fleshy one to the bed and moved closer to me.

“Then...” His fingers dragging through *my* hair this time as he rumbled in my ear, “I bend you over this damn pillow, spear you on that little toy, then take your ass for myself. Slowly at first, and then...”

My lips parted, jaw dropping in lusty desire.

“Do you want that?” he asked me, meeting my eyes with his swirling caramel irises as his thumb drew over my bottom lip making me gasp.

“Yes,” I practically begged.

“Undress,” was his simple order.

I bit my lip and slowly shed my coat as he did the same.

I got distracted by each new sliver of skin I watched him uncover, very aware that it'd been close to two weeks since we'd had a moment to be with each other intimately like this. Even when I stayed on Friday, we'd kept our hands to ourselves and just cuddled in bed.

Owen was stripped first, and by that time, I was down to my skivvies. He grew impatient and gripped my hip, pulling me toward him so he could press a hard kiss to my lips as his hands slid into the lace of my panties, rounding over my rear before giving a hard squeeze.

I pressed my hands to his chest, then giggled when his glasses pressed into my cheeks as we kissed. He let me retreat a little, breaking the kiss, so I gently grabbed his glasses by the silver arms and drew them off his face, folding them before setting them on the side table.

“Can you still see me?” I teased him, nipping his bottom lip.

He growled at me, squeezing my rear in both hands now.

“Cheeky girl,” he bit out with a smirk on his face, then he lifted me right off the ground and wrapped my legs around his hips, taking my mouth all over again.

I accepted his kiss, stroking my tongue over his as I did my best to take him into me in any way he'd let me.

Setting me down on the bed, he reached down and pulled my panties down my thighs, and I awkwardly tried to help until they were off and I was naked except for my lacy bra that left nothing to the imagination since you could see right through it.

He stretched me out onto my back and kissed down my neck to my breasts, lavishing one, then the other with gentle nips and brutal sucks that had my back arching, shoving them further into his mouth.

Just as I was starting to really enjoy myself, his fingers dug into my hip and he turned me over until I was rear up, and his palms slapped down on each rounded cheek with a sharp slap that went straight to my clit. I yelped and clenched at the feeling, then melted under him as his strong hands massaged for a moment, then lifted my hips until my pussy was presented to him.

“Fuck you're beautiful,” he said, drawing his hand over me with gentle fingers this time.

“I need you inside me,” I told him, panting with need.

I always gave up on foreplay before he did, brutalized with need to have him inside me. Maybe it was age, or maybe

I just hated the empty feeling without him to strangle with my orgasm, but I needed *something*.

He reached around, pinched my nipple, then ran his fingers over my mound as he tapped my entrance with his cock.

“You can beg prettier than that,” he told me, teasing me.

I growled, then shoved myself back into him. He entered me in one swift movement and it had us both growling at the invasion.

“Cheeky girl,” he murmured again, breathless this time.

He spanked me again, but pumped, dragging slowly which had sparks going off inside me. His fingers on my clit rubbed slow circles and hustled me closer to release, but then he was gone.

Owen’s head left me the same time his weight did, and I whined, turning to see what the hell could be more important than fucking me.

He dug through his bag and came back with a little tube of clear gel in his hand.

Lube.

“Climb on,” he told me, chucking his chin toward the pillow.

So, I did.

I took the black pillow in my hands, got on my hands and knees, then flung a leg over the thing. With a press of a button, the thing started buzzing. It was a little awkward trying to settle on top of the toy, but when I managed it, Oh God...it felt so good.

I rode it slowly, acquainting myself with the feeling as I pressed my palms to the wall in front of me to steady myself.

Owen hummed in appreciation beside me, watching with hooded lids, brutally biting his lip.

“Owen,” I called. “You better get over here, or I’ll play without you.”

He chuffed, but came behind me until his chest was plastered to my back.

“Are you ready for this, love?” he asked, his fingers gripping my hips as I ground down into the toy and the little rabbit knob on it that had a textured part to grind my clit on.

“Now, please,” I begged.

He backed away a little, but I felt his fingers run over my back, slinking down my spine until he was right there.

I swallowed hard, trying not to be squeamish with the fact that he was *there*. Everything about humanity told us that this was the dirtiest part of human anatomy, but I needed to let that go. If he wanted me there, then I wanted to let him try it, too.

“I need you to relax,” he rumbled. “Breathe. Don’t clench up or it could hurt.”

“Are you an expert all of a sudden?” I countered.

He chuckled.

“No. But I watched some porn how-to videos, so I feel like I got a handle on things.”

“You did what?” I choked out, but the words were cut off when his finger entered me, causing a spontaneous combustion in my clit.

I wailed with the orgasm, throwing my head back as I rode it out.

“Fuck,” he ground out, spearing my thigh with his eager cock as we rocked together until the waves calmed in my belly.

When I stopped rocking, he gently rode his finger in and out of me with the movements I made on the little pillow saddle.

It felt so strange, and the further his finger sank, the more tingles shot up my spine.

“Do you want more?” he asked, panting behind me.

His restraint probably took superhuman strength.

I nodded vigorously, so he squirted more lube, then I felt a second finger push in with the first.

It didn't feel like when he'd put his fingers in my pussy at all. The ring was tight, and there was little sensation inside of me there, but oh Lord, I could feel his finger through the thin walls, pushing against the dildo on every single stroke, and it felt like I was so full I could burst.

But I wanted more.

“More,” I demanded, upping my pace.

“You're insatiable,” he murmured into my ear, biting the lobe so hard it almost hurt.

But he finally gave me three fingers, and that full feeling increased the pleasure happening around that dildo.

Those fingers wiggled and stretched me, pushing in and out slowly as I begged for even more.

Eventually, his patience must have worn out, and he snapped open the lube cap again, then dribbled some directly between my cheeks. The cold stuff sucked all the air out of my lungs, but that was probably a good thing, because when he started to push into me, I needed the room just to fit him inside me.

I stilled on the pillow, bracing for the stinging, but delicious fullness until he finally stopped his insertion.

“I'm in,” he grunted, sounding so close to breaking. “You ok?”

Those big hands of his dragged over my belly and one sank to my clit while the other cupped a breast and kneaded it.

“If we don't move, I'm going to burst,” I panted at him, jerking a little as the buzz inside me seemed to get even stronger.

“Ok,” he agreed. “Move. Pretend that's some random dick underneath you, playing with your tits and sucking your

nipples.”

His fingers squeezed said nipple so hard I cried out as he pulled out, then shoved back in.

The movement had me lifting from the dildo, then back down, causing this rocking effect that meant I didn't have to do a whole lot to get the most incredible fullness as the cock inside me rubbed up against the dildo with nothing but two thin walls of flesh separating them.

“I need...I need...” I mumbled incoherently, the entirety of what was happening feeling like way too much as my brain tried to comprehend the sheer pleasure happening.

Another orgasm smashed into me, but it seemed everlasting, chased on and on with each stroke inside me.

Owen moved away behind me, though he didn't leave me. Then, with a loud pop, he stuck the last, fleshy dildo with a suction cup on the end onto the wooden headboard.

“Foursome,” he muttered, then took my head and encouraged me to take the thing down my throat.

I choked on it, which made him remove his hand from my hair, but I took the thing in, closing my eyes as every freaking hole was stuffed with cock.

Just the idea of that sent me spiraling again.

I didn't know how many times I came like that, choking on a dildo while impaling myself on one, too, all the while Owen was behind me, framing me with his hand planted on the wall next to mine while he rode me.

When he came, I could feel the warmth and throb of his orgasm inside me, butting up against the toy in my other channel.

He shuddered, groaning as his weight leaned on me just a little more.

“Whoah,” he breathed eventually, lungs heaving against my back.

Sparks were still ricocheting through me, but the worst of my orgasms were past, leaving a delicious soreness in every hole.

With a slippery pull, Owen was out of me, then helping me off the saddle where I just fell over onto my back with jelly limbs.

“Wow,” I hummed, unable to move with complete satisfaction.

“You ok?” he asked with a chuckle. “You look half dead, love.”

I chuckled too, turning my head to meet his eyes.

“That was amazing,” I told him. “Thank you.”

“Not sure who liked it more,” he admitted. “Never thought I’d be an ass man, but...”

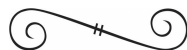
We both laughed at his double entendre, then he grabbed both dildos and the pillow, as well as the lube, and shoved them back into his bag.

“We mighta ruined their sham,” he said, plopping back onto the bed and cuddling me into his arms. “You juiced everywhere.”

“What a sentence...” I murmured, feeling my eyes closing without thought.

“I love that sentence,” he added, stuffing his face into the curve of my shoulder, breathing in my hair.

While he coughed on the dark strands, I let myself sink into contented sleep.



The loud shrill of Owen’s alarm pulled me out of my sleep. Everything was cotton and fog between my ears, and throbbing soreness between my legs.

“Ugh!” I groaned, flopping over in bed and pulling the blanket higher up my naked body.

Owen's arm moved from around me and I knew he was on his back, rubbing his eyes like he did most morning to try and wake up.

"How do you feel?" he asked me with his gravelly morning voice.

"Sore," I admitted.

"Now that you've experienced the aftermath, you think you want to do it again?"

I barked out a laugh, then cracked one eye open to look at him, sprawled on his back just like I'd imagined.

"Yes. Just not every day, or I'll develop a permanent limp."

Owen laughed heartily, then climbed out of bed.

"C'mon beautiful, let's get showered and off to school."

I complained, but followed him.

There was no funny business in the shower, just cleaning and basking in the hot water until we had approximately fifteen minutes to get to school, which was ten minutes away according to Owen's watch.

We carried our bags down the elevator, then returned the room key. After that, we were home free.

We climbed out of his car just as his phone rang.

"It's the Dean, I gotta take this," he said before waving goodbye as he put the phone to his ear.

Not three minutes later, my phone rang too, with an unknown number showing on my screen.

My gut reaction was to take the call, despite the likelihood that it was a sales call. Luckily, they'd already called roll, so I could slip out of class to take it.

"Hello?" I answered quietly in the hall.

"Ms. Miller, this is Angela from the Dean's office. He would like you to come meet with him at nine. Our records

show that you do not have a class at that time, correct?”

“Correct,” I agreed, though my stomach instantly roiled with nerves.

“Sure, I’ll go,” I agreed, my voice trembling. “C-can you tell me what it’s about?”

“Sorry,” she said with a chuckle, “I don’t know all the details, I just arrange his appointments.”

Her blasé attitude reassured me that it wasn’t what I dreaded it would be. But, then again, the Dean had called Owen on the way into school.

After hanging up, I snuck back into my class, but my knee was bouncing like crazy and I couldn’t pay attention to anything the professor was saying about economics.

My phone vibrated in my hand and I quickly looked at it.

Owen: *Did you get a call from the Dean’s office?*

Me: *Yes, a few minutes ago. They want to meet at nine.*

Owen: *Shit*

Owen: *Me, too.*

He didn’t text again, but it was plainly obvious what was happening.

Somebody turned us in.

Grabbing my bag, I hurried out of the classroom and went to Owen’s office to wait for him. He showed up five minutes before nine, done with his first class of the day.

“So, I guess we’re found out,” Owen said when he saw me.

He opened his office long enough to drop his briefcase inside and grab the sweater that was hanging over his chair.

It was one of the ones that had the cute little leather elbow patches.

“Shit!” I hissed under my breath, surprised at my own language. “What are we going to do?” I asked him.

“Ask for leniency,” he said before motioning me to go ahead of him down the hall.

We walked together towards the Dean’s office. “We’re an engaged couple, after all. Maybe that’ll mean something to them.”

“God, I hope so,” I breathed, feeling my nerves pinken my face in a perpetual blush.

At the office, we didn’t touch or even look at each other as we waited for the Dean. They made us wait almost twenty minutes before Angela the secretary told us to go back.

“It’ll be ok,” Owen whispered as we went.

The Dean, who I hadn’t personally met before, was sitting in his chair with steepled fingers, watching us as we came in. I took one chair, and Owen took the other, sitting back and looking relaxed as we waited for the Dean to speak.

“I’ve had troubling news reported to me this morning,” he said slowly, looking from me to Owen.

“What news is that?” Owen asked, lifting a brow like he wasn’t speaking to his superior.

“A concerned young woman came to me today just after I arrived and told me that her friend was dating her professor.”

Tears burned in my eyes, because I knew exactly who that ‘young woman’ was. Clea was a bitch!

“Ok,” Owen drawled.

“On top of that, I saw you two arrive together at school this morning. The evidence is pretty damning.”

“Sorry, but you pulled us in here because a jealous young woman told you I’m dating my student, and I picked my TA up for school on such a chilly day? I prefer not to let her walk to campus when it’s cold. She could get sick, then *I* would get sick.”

The ease in which he lied was kind of astounding. To be fair, not much of it was actually a lie so much as twisted truth.

“Are you denying any relationship with this young woman?” he asked Owen, looking directly into his eyes with that familiar look principals give to naughty students.

Actually, all of this felt a bit like being pulled into the principal’s office.

Owen didn’t even hesitate when he said, “No. I’m not denying anything. What I do know is that girl you’re referring to has been giving Mia a hard time, and has been making her life difficult. Also, a professor driving his TA to school shouldn’t be a red flag. That’s just ridiculous.”

The Dean’s head was spinning. I could tell by the accusation in his confused eyes.

“You’ve been dating a student then?” he demanded. “One of your own English majors, and your Teaching Assistant to boot! Have you no decency?”

Owen’s brow rose again.

“Decency?” he asked. “We’re both adults. We can date whoever we want. Besides, Mia isn’t my girlfriend. She’s my fiancée.”

Now the Dean’s head looked like it was going to pop.

“What?” he screeched.

I held my hand up.

“We just spent the holiday with my family,” I told him in a shaky voice that I tried so hard to keep steady. “He proposed to me there, with my family.”

I felt it necessary to add that my family had met him and approved. That it was serious.

The Dean finally turned to me.

“I can’t believe this! You know this is strictly against the code of conduct we expect our teachers to abide by,” he told Owen. “This is...I cannot abide this.”

Owen leaned on his thighs, looking the man in the eyes.

“Mia is almost done with her degree. She’ll do her dissertation and turn in the final paper, then it’ll no longer be a ‘school’ thing or your problem at all.”

“If I do not do something, next thing you know everybody’s going to—”

“Nobody knows,” Owen said, spreading his hands. “We’ve been very discreet. The only reason the girl knows is because Mia is her roommate and told her about it with the faith of a friend because she’d been bugging her to know who she’d been dating. Nobody found out, and nobody’s going to care as soon as she leaves. And we’ll be married before too long, so you don’t have to worry about me seducing another student, either.”

The Dean rubbed at his eyes.

“Still, something must be done.”

Owen shrugged.

“Let it pass for a couple more weeks.”

“I should fire you,” he said, looking right into my intended’s eyes.

Owen actually grinned.

“Sorry, but do you not remember how you begged me to take this job? I was all set up to start in Birmingham when you called me in here to bribe me with tenure and a department all to myself.”

“Yes, I remember, and replacing you would be a royal nightmare,” he admitted, then turned to me.

“No,” Owen told him. “You send her away and I’m going, too. Dating a student or not, colleges around here would love to have me.”

“Then what do you suggest?” he barked. “I can’t just turn a blind eye! We have a reputation to uphold, and how

could I ever really graduate a girl when her professor is as emotionally biased as you are?”

Owen bit his lips for a moment, then nodded.

“As much as I resent that you’re implying I can’t judge and grade her paper without bias, I will concede. You can’t possibly know me and that I would die before misgrading because I liked a student.”

“So?”

“So, how about this? Mia will do her paper and dissertation. I will give you a grade I suggest for the paper, and then you will go over it yourself, with your own unbiased appraisal.”

“But I’m not...”

“It’s just a paper,” he murmured. “I’m sure someone of your position could easily look over a simple paper.”

The Dean cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair, as if considering Owen’s proposal.

“With one amendment,” he said finally, steeping his fingers again.

“And what is that?” Owen asked.

“You continue to keep this...*thing* under wraps, and Mia will no longer TA for you. You’re on your own the rest of the semester. Since she doesn’t have any personal classes with you, this will limit your interactions here on campus.”

“Good,” he agreed. “Those sound like fair terms.”

“Is that suitable, Miss Miller?” he asked me.

I felt like a bystander in a rapidfire tennis match, my head bouncing from one person to the other as they spoke. To finally be spoken to was...jarring.

“Yes,” I agreed. “I accept.”

The Dean blew out a long breath.

“Good,” he said, then waved us off. “If you ever do this again, Owen, I will cut you off from this school that very

day.”

“Fine by me,” he agreed, then stood and held his hand out to me to help me do the same.

We hauled butt out of the office and back to Owen’s, where he plopped into his chair and covered his face with his hands.

“Holy fucking shit!” he finally exclaimed with a grin. “I can’t believe that worked!”

I finally let a bubbling laugh of relief leave my body.

“You were such a freaking *boss*,” I gushed.

Owen smiled at me before shoving out of his seat to slam a kiss on my lips.

“We’re going to be just fine,” he murmured against my mouth. “We’ll reach the end of this semester and his opinion won’t mean shit anymore, anyway. We made it far enough.”

I pressed my hand to his stubbly cheek.

“Thank you. I love you.”

He kissed my nose then returned the sentiment.

“Love you more,” he murmured, then pressed another kiss to my forehead.

Chapter 30



-Mia-

I wasn't prepared for this.

After knowing Clea had completely betrayed me, like, *viciously* betrayed me, Owen offered to let me move in sooner than later. I accepted immediately, knowing that I couldn't live in the same place with her if I had another option. Only problem I had left was that I had to get all my stuff out of the dorm and to my fiancé's home.

I had my car down in the parking lot, so I just had to pack my bags and put them in. If I had any luck left at all, she wouldn't be home and I'd be moved out before she even returned from class.

Well, Lady Luck evidently had given me all she would already today, because I ran directly into Clea who was sitting on her bed with red, swollen eyes and messy hair.

"Mia!" she called when I went into the room with a deep frown.

"I don't want to talk to you," I hissed, moving to my bed to get out the luggage I'd arrived to school with.

When she saw me get my bag, she yelped.

"What are you doing?" she cried out. "Why are you packing?"

I whirled on her, tears filling my own eyes.

"Because I can't share a dorm with you after what you did," I sobbed. "I told you about us because I loved you like a sister, Clea. You've betrayed me and everything we ever had!"

"I'm trying to protect you," she insisted. "A man like that isn't going to—"

I lifted my hand, practically slapping her face as I stuck my engagement ring at eye level.

“A man like my fiancé?” I demanded. “He’ll leave me, right? He just wants the sex? Then why did he meet my family last weekend and propose?”

Clea’s mouth dropped open as she took my hand between hers, examining the ring with shock written all over her face.

“I-I-I saw you two leaving yesterday and I...I was so scared,” she insisted as I snatched my hand away.

“No need to be scared on my account,” I snapped, grabbing all the laundry I’d left yesterday and stuffed it into the bag. “You don’t even have to think about me anymore.”

“No, No, Mia,” she pleaded, pawing at my shoulder. “I did it because we’re friends. *Best* friends!”

“Not anymore!” I barked at her, which had her retreating to her bed and sobbing again.

It didn’t take me long to pack my bags with the important stuff. Things like bedding and towels, I left there, figuring I could take care of it at the end of the semester. With all of my important things stacked in my duffels and suitcase, I started dragging them out the door.

Owen had offered to help me, but I’d insisted on doing it myself. Last thing we needed was to piss off the Dean and have him withdraw his fragile agreement with us.

As I lugged out the last beg, Clea followed me out the door and pleaded for me to stop and listen to her.

Outside in the parking lot, she hugged herself in some short shorts and a tank top with zero shoes as she cried, the cold air whipping her hair around and freezing her skin.

“Please, Mia,” she begged. “I thought I was helping. Really! I tried to warn you and I just...”

“You what?” I finally broke.

The pain I saw in her eyes was reflected in mine.

We'd been best friends for so long... I hadn't ever had a better friend than her. But when I'd started dating Owen, she just went nuts.

"I was jealous," she trilled in a too high voice. "At first I was jealous that you'd found someone like him...but then you kept seeing him. I got worried, Mia. I was jealous, but I was also scared that he was going to break your heart, or worse! I convinced myself I was being a good friend by telling the Dean. Owen would get fired and have to move, and you could take your life back. I didn't know you'd gotten engaged!"

"Of course you didn't! You haven't bothered to listen to me at all when it comes to Owen! You made assumptions and you almost destroyed his career!"

Her hand covered her mouth and more tears spilled down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. "I'm so sorry, Mia."

I got in the car, because I was two seconds away from melting down.

Owen was waiting for me when I pulled into his driveway for the first time with my car. It felt final in an odd sort of way. Like this was officially home to me now.

He hurried out of the house and opened my door, then saw the tears streaking my cheeks.

"Oh, darling," he murmured, reaching in to turn the key, unbuckle my seatbelt, then he pulled me out and into his arms.

"I'm ok," I breathed. "I was finally able to say all the things to her that I've wanted to."

He nodded and squeezed me.

"I have a surprise for you," he told me, turning my mind off the subject.

Looking up at him, I gave him a soft smile.

"What is it?"

Owen let me go so he could grab a couple of my bags, then he led me into the house.

“While you were gone, I got a few things moved around,” he said, dropping my bags by the front door before he opened his office door and waved me in.

There, right next to his big desk was a smaller one I hadn’t seen before. It was set up with a vase of flowers and Owen’s special orthopedic chair.

“Now you have your own space to write,” he told me.

“I love it,” I whispered, then smashed my face to his to kiss the thoughtful man.

He grinned down at me, then went to grab the luggage again and hauled them upstairs for me.

“What else have you done?” I asked as he led me up to his bedroom.

Immediately, I saw rose petals on the bed and a candle on the bedside table on the side I liked to use.

“Look around,” he said, dropping my bags beside the wardrobe and opening it.

Inside, it was more than half empty with hangers waiting for me to fill.

“Owen,” I breathed, tears threatening again.

Happy ones this time, though.

I swung around to him but he pointed toward the bathroom.

I went inside and saw that he’d emptied out several drawers on one side of the sink so I could put my beauty stuff inside, as well as one of the shelves in the shower for my shampoo and body wash.

“I want you to be comfortable here,” he murmured, wrapping his arms around me from behind. “Whatever you need, big or small, just tell me. I want to give you everything.”

Dropping my chin, I kissed his arms that were crisscrossing around my shoulders.

“You know I love it here,” I told him. “You don’t have to do anything extra for me.”

“Yes I do,” he chuckled into my ear and the pleasant rumble traveled down my spine with a shiver. “In so many ways, I’ve learned to live for you. You’re the first thing I think of in the morning and the last thing I think of when I go to bed, whether you’re with me or not.”

“You sure you’re not a romance writer?” I asked him with a laugh.

He grinned, then kissed me on the cheek before letting me go.

“Nope. That’s your job. It’s my job to be your muse.”

I lifted a brow at him, then glanced over at the roses all over the bed.

“Where is your mother?”

“She went to the park with Paula and the boys.”

Satisfied, I gave him a saucy smirk.

“Ok, muse. Inspire me.”

His grin turned devilish and he lifted his hand to drag his fingers into my hair, catching it almost roughly.

“What kind of inspiration does my woman require today?” he asked.

With all the emotion boiling inside me, I met his eyes and lifted my chin.

“I want it rough,” I stated. “Rough and hard and fierce.”

“Whatever my woman wants.” he murmured, then pressed a fiery kiss to my lips.

It was so contrary to how he was, my normally introverted, intelligent bookworm. As much as I was exploring my own sexuality, it almost felt like he was, too. I was

growing into this role of adulthood and finding myself as an individual, but also a partner. He seemed to be doing the same, exploring things about himself that he'd never known before, even in his forty years. It was one of those things that assured me that age didn't really matter. Once you reach adulthood, it was about experience, not years that gave a person maturity and individuality.

"Does this count as a consummation?" he asked, taking my face into the curve of his palm.

"More like a christening," I breathed into his lips.

He laughed between brutal kisses.

"In that case, let's see if I can figure out how to make you squirt."

I laughed at him, but the rumble fled quickly as his hand dropped to cup me between the legs.

"Ok," I hiccupped, overwhelmed with arousal.

"I am a man of experimentation and knowledge," he teased, gripping my neck as he drew his tongue up my jaw until he reached my ear, nibbling on the lobe.

"Guess that makes me your test subject?" I countered, panting already.

He hummed.

"Nah. That's too '*Bride of Frankenstein*'. I'd prefer a '*Tarzan*' style exploration."

God, could this man be any more perfect?

I giggled as he moved his thumb just enough to sink his teeth into me, leaving a gentle bite against my neck, making me shriek.

Owen laughed, then backed away enough to flick up his t-shirt and unbuckle his jeans, which fell to the ground without prompt.

"Me Tarzan," he said, pointing to his chest, then he pointed to mine, pressing right between my breasts. "You Jane."

I lifted my hand and took down my top bun.

“Next time we role play,” I told him, fingering open the buttons of my shirt. “We need costumes.”

He threw his head back in laughter, then his smile softened as he looked at me.

“I fucking love you.”

“I fucking love you back,” I agreed.

His fingers trailed over my lips and his soft smile turned to a smirk.

“I love it when you let filthy words stain your lips.” He bent to press a soft kiss to mine. “They taste delicious.”

Channeling my inner heroine, I shoved at his chest and smirked back at him, saying the words my book character would have said.

“Get your ass on the bed, then I want you to fuck me so hard with your big, hard cock until I scream.”

Owen laughed again, but did as I said, sliding his boxers down before he sat his bare rear on the bed.

He was already hard and ready for me, the long, lean, but strong form of his body so inviting I literally started to drool.

I shucked my top, my pants, then all my underwear before strolling as confidently as I could manage over to him.

“Pound my pussy so hard I can’t walk tomorrow,” I told him, copying a line from my book.

Funny how it didn’t sound so erotic in real life. More like...trying too hard.

Not that Owen minded. His pupils were blown and he was already lost to his lust. I could have sang the alphabet song and he would’ve found it sexy.

“Climb on,” he murmured, pressing languid kisses across my shoulders and collar bones.

I grinned and did as he said, giving up on the whole sexy heroine and just being myself, because myself was a pretty damn amazing thing to be these days.

Chapter 31



-Owen-

If I hadn't been in love with her before, I certainly would've fallen hard and fast now.

Watching her stand in front of her peers, giving a dissertation of the book that changed her life as a kid was like watching a rare flower bloom.

Over the last three weeks, I'd watched her stress and pull her hair out over this bloody paper. She'd worked so hard on it, blood sweat and tears, literally, when she'd bitten her nail so short with nerves she'd actually bled.

Now, it was like all those days of stress and anticipation were non-existent as she told her classmates, instructors, and the Dean about a simple child's book that changed her entire world.

"I think Ms. L'Engle said it better in her book than I ever could," Mia said, looking up from her paper.

She'd memorized this part because she thought it would have more impact if she looked people in the eyes when she said it.

"She said, '*Maybe you have to know the darkness before you can appreciate the light.*' And in a lot of ways, our youth is a vast nothingness that we're constantly filling in and lighting up with knowledge. But more than that, more than knowledge of physical things, our youth is filled with emotions and feelings that often feel too big for us. I suppose that's a sort of darkness, too, voids that we fill with the love that authors give us through the pages they've poured their hearts into."

God, I loved this woman!

When she put her papers down, finished with the dissertation, claps erupted from her peers, and I tossed a look toward the Dean, who looked begrudgingly satisfied.

I still couldn't believe I'd had the balls to talk to him the way I did. But when I realized that he wasn't going to take *my* job, but Mia's place in the school, some beast had burst out of me and given me the confidence to call the asshole's bluff.

Now, her paper was given, and there was no way she'd fail. My girl was going to graduate with flying colors.

Little did she know, I had a secret up my sleeve that was going to make her piss her sexy panties.

When we got home from our final day, Mia let out a screech of relief and exhilaration as we stepped through the door of our incredible home.

"That felt amazing!" she shouted to the cavernous entry.

"*You* were amazing," I told her, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

She beamed back at me, taking my face in her hands to smack a fat kiss to my cheek.

"I have a present for you," I murmured against her lips.

"Really?" she asked, still excited.

I laughed and nodded, then took her hand and led her to my office.

"So, I might have sent your manuscript to a friend of mine," I said, opening one of my desk drawers to pull out a thick manilla envelope.

"You did not!" she practically shrieked.

I laughed at her as I handed her the envelope.

"Yeah, so after I read the half of the manuscript you wrote, my guy called another guy that deals in the romance book space."

She stared up at me with big, eager eyes, but I just motioned to the envelope in her hand so she'd open it.

"Anyway, they liked it, even though it was a bit rough. He said to contact him when you have the full manuscript."

She pulled out the pages of her book printed and marked by the agent and looked up at me with confusion written in her eyes.

"It's not a full contract exactly, but he said he wants the book when you're done with it and he'll send it to his editors, then a small publisher said they'll take it on."

Mia gasped out loud, finally finding the contract at the back of the pages.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" she choked, looking at it, then at me.

I shook my head and pointed to the business card clipped to the contract.

"My agent wasn't kidding," I told her with raised eyebrows.

"I can't believe you did this!" she yelled, carefully putting the papers away before she threw herself into my arms.

"I didn't do anything," I told her, laughing. "Your book is good. It sold itself."

"You're incredible," she breathed, then kissed the hell out of me, which I happily accepted.

"I love you so much," she said, tears of happiness streaking down her face.

"What the hell is the racket!" Mother said loudly, making an appearance from her borrowed room upstairs.

I gave a tortured moan before hugging Mia tighter as I yelled over her shoulder.

"It's the sound of happiness and love, Mother. You'd want none of it."

“You’ve become a snarky boy,” she hissed, coming slowly down the stairs.

“We’ll talk about it more tonight,” I promised Mia in a whisper.

She nodded and backed away, wiping up her eyes.

“I still can’t believe you’d get married again,” Mother said, giving us a dismissive glance. “And to such a child.”

“We’ve talked about this,” I said sternly, putting my fucking foot down. “You may not insult my future wife in her own home.”

“You know your father would never approve,” she countered, as if I hadn’t said anything.

“How about I send you back to New York?” I asked, lifting a brow. “Since you’re so miserable here, I’m sure you’ll be happier at home for Christmas.”

“Nonsense. I’m not missing out on a holiday with my grandchildren. It’s about time I got to see them without their wild mother running around. At least this one has some grace to her.”

That was almost a fucking compliment.

I turned to Mia with a grin, but she was still frowning.

Leaning in, I whispered into her ear, “I think she’s starting to like you.”

Mia gave me a disbelieving look, then went into the kitchen, probably to grab some lunch.

“Want me to make something for you too?” she asked, looking at me with a weary smile.

I knew having my mother around so often was a huge cramp in what should have been a honeymoon phase, but she’d been a good sport since she’d moved in three weeks ago. Only one more week to go and Mother would be on her way home.

“Sure,” I agreed. “But let me help you.”

She bumped her hip against mine, then giggled.

“I still can’t believe you,” she said, grinning like crazy.

“Get used to it,” I told her. “I’m a crazy son of a bitch.”

Mia laughed at me, bumped her hip into mine again, then went to open the fridge.

“We should probably talk about our Christmas dinner menu,” she said eventually as we chopped some veggies for Philly cheesesteak sandwiches.

“How about that, Mother?” I called. “Do you still make your apple pie?”

“Of course,” she said. “They boys ask for it every year.”

“They’ll love it,” I agreed.

“Maybe you’d be willing to teach me how to make yours?” Mia asked hesitantly.

“Have you made pie before?” Mom asked, looking down her Goddamn nose at Mia.

“I do. I made all the pies for Thanksgiving.”

Mother hummed, but nodded.

“Fine. I’ll teach you if you can keep up. Owen deserves to have a woman who can actually cook.”

That was a harsh hit to Paula, but she was finally being nice to Mia for once, so I kept my mouth shut and my opinions to myself.

“I’d like that,” Mia tried to be nice, agreeing even though my mother tended to be a real bitch.

“Owen, dear,” Mother said, dismissing Mia. “I’m almost out of yarn. Will you take me to the craft store? I need to get those sweaters finished for the boys for Christmas.”

I grimaced while my back was turned to her, but agreed.

“Sure. after lunch,” I said, making a face at Mia which made her laugh.

“Good,” mother said, then held up her glass. “Now, can you get an old woman some sherry?”

I rolled my eyes but did as she asked while Mia took over finishing off the veggies.

One week.

One more fucking week.

Chapter 32



-Mia-

“Merry Christmas!” I called as Charlie and Caden came in the door.

They were decked out in a full down jacket, scarf and beanie, just like those poor boys in the movie ‘*A Christmas Story*’.

“It’s so cold here!” Charlie complained as he unwrapped himself and hung up his gear on the hat tree by the door.

I helped Caden do the same and hung everything up for him before I noticed that Paula was there at the door, looking around with smarmy eyes.

“Is she here?” she said in a loud, stage whisper.

“In the kitchen,” I agreed, motioning over my shoulder.

“Are those my boys?” Owen’s mother called, coming out of the kitchen with a tidy apron wrapped around her slim waist.

“Oh shit, not fast enough!” Paula said, trying to hustle out the door before she was reeled in.

“So nice of you to bring them to see their grandmother,” she snapped at Paula. “You might have divorced my son, but you don’t get to keep them permanently! How did you even get custody?”

Paula didn’t respond. She simply gave me a sympathetic look before saying goodbye to the boys, then closing the door behind her without even giving a moment’s attention to Owen’s Mom.

I didn't blame her one bit.

"Come on!" Owen called out to the boys as he pounded down the stairs.

He'd spent some time upstairs going over some of the book cover photos he'd been sent from his agent while he waited for the kids to arrive.

"You chose one?" I asked him as we stood side by side while the boys dove into the pile of presents under the tree.

Owen had gone over the top and bought a massive, real fur tree to put into the back corner of the entry.

"No. I want your opinion when we've got some time later. I have all next week to choose."

I turned my eyes up to him with a smile that he didn't even notice because he was too busy watching his boys with a grin on his face.

The man couldn't have ever known how much I loved him, or how much I appreciated that he included me in on things he didn't have to.

"Did you open my present to you?" I asked him, motioning to the little box that I'd put under the tree.

He shook his head then smiled.

"You shouldn't have gotten me anything," he said, but went to retrieve it eagerly, anyway.

I wrung my hands and waited anxiously.

He opened the hand-sized box, his brows meeting in confusion.

Tossing the lid to the chair beside him, he pulled out the little onesie inside.

He stared at it, then at me, then down to my stomach.

"Are you...?" he started, but I put my hands up to stop him.

“No!” I insisted, embarrassed for my idiotic gift. “I just...I wanted to tell you that I’m...I want to have a baby with you. Whenever you’re ready. Sooner rather than later.”

Relief blew through him, then he took another big breath.

“You just scared the fucking hell out of me!” he said, taking me into his arms. “Really? You want to have a baby with this old guy?”

I nodded, which made him wrinkle his nose at my lack of denying that he was old.

“I want to have your baby,” I whispered, pulling him into my arms while the boys hollered about one of their toys.

Owen had spoiled them, and I’d helped.

“I’ll stop taking my birth control,” I admitted. “If you say yes.”

“Of course I’m saying yes,” he agreed passionately. “Maybe we should try tonight. You never know when the lucky day will be.”

“That just means you need to marry me soon,” I told him, winking. “My dad will strangle you if I have a baby out of wedlock.”

He rolled his eyes with a grin.

“Oh, poor me. Marry the fucking girl of my dreams then stuff her so full of my spunk that she has my baby. I’m *so* unlucky.”

His sarcasm was appreciated, and I laughed at him.

“February is a good month,” he breathed, totally serious now.

“I like February. It’s the month of love. Valentine’s day and all.”

“You got it. A Valentine’s Day wedding,” he agreed, then kissed me hard.

“I’ll have to start making a guest list,” I chuckled.

“Do we *have* to invite my mother?” he whined.

I nodded, but kissed him again to lessen the blow.

“Dad! Catch!” Caden called just in time for Owen to get a Nerf dart right to the forehead.

“That’s amazing aim!” he called, then he kissed me one more time before going over to tackle his son, since he’d initiated war.

I laughed at them and watched the man roll around with his boys, who both had matching guns with a million darts.

“Those are going to be a pain to clean up,” Owen’s mom said, moving a little closer to watch all the boys playing.

“What’s a little mess compared to a child’s joy?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

She hummed in thought.

“You’ll be a good mom, hun,” she said quietly, still staring forward as if she hadn’t said anything at all.

I just smiled, taking the compliment right into my heart and burying it there to cherish.

“Thanks,” I whispered back.

“Hm?” she asked, continuing her denial of actually saying something nice.

I just let my smile widen as I watched the boys play.

Mom, Dad, and Patrick showed up in time for dinner, and while it was awkward, Owen helped the boys understand that Mom and Dad were my parents, and that they’d be their grandparents soon.

Mom corrected him and warned the boys with a grin on her face that the boys were already theirs. She punctuated that by handing them a gift each.

“They’re charming,” she told me after dinner while the men of the family treated us to some terribly sung Christmas songs.

“I love them,” I told her, laughing with tears in my eyes, my heart was so full. “All of them.”

Epilogue: 10 Years Later



-Mia-

My throat was sore and raw after screaming and cheering so much, but I couldn't help myself.

Caden was standing to my right with his little sisters Claire and Cassy nine and seven, respectively. He was yelling as loud as I was as his big brother walked down the stage to take his high school diploma from his school's principal.

I turned to Owen, who had tears in his eyes. He tried blinking them away, but that just sent them tumbling down his cheeks instead.

"Dammit," he mumbled, wiping at them while he smiled down at me.

I grinned, then kissed his cheek.

"Can you believe he's already graduating?" I asked with emotion staining my own voice.

"It feels like fucking yesterday you and I were just walking down the aisle ourselves," he said, thumbing the tears falling from my own eyes.

I stared up at the brilliant man, my husband.

We'd had our February wedding, then promptly found out we were pregnant with Clair just two weeks after that. Owen had been so excited! I'll never forget the look on his face. This look though, it was very similar, with the pride twisting his brows and the tears falling down his face.

Now at fifty, he was just as handsome as the day we met, though his hair was more silver than black now. It was the George Cloony kind of handsome, and I couldn't get enough of it.

After Charlie found his seat again. So did we. Owen leaned over to me and moved the hair away from my ear, then pressed a gentle kiss to it.

“So, first kid graduated, three more to go,” he murmured, the slightest flick of his tongue touching the shell of my ear made a sharp shiver run down my spine, depositing right between my legs.

“Seems like a cause for celebration,” I said, wiggling in my seat and clenching my thighs together.

Didn't matter that there were literally thousands of people around, including our children to my left. Nope. He could still get me going with nary a touch and a few words.

“I think we should break out the saddle,” he whispered right into my ear as others around us cheered the next kid accepting their diploma.

Oh God, I was panting like a hussy right in front of my kids.

“Every hole?” I squeaked.

He grinned and dropped his lips to my neck, switching between discrete kisses and laves of his tongue.

“Every fucking hole,” he growled, nipping my ear lobe.

My fists clenched into my skirt.

“Pat's coming over with Maria and the kids for dinner, plus Mom and Dad.”

“Screw them. I want to fuck my wife.”

I chuckled and turned to face him.

The little smile lines by his eyes made me grin as I poked his nose, making his glasses budge.

“When the kids are in bed and quiet for an hour, you can have your way with me. However you want,” I promised.

He whistled quietly and shook his head.

“Hm, that’s quite the promise to make. I read your last book. I know the kind of depraved shit that goes on in that head of yours.”

I grinned, thinking of my book, the eighth I’ve published since signing that contract with the publisher Owen had lined up for me years ago.

“Good. You are supposed to be my muse, aren’t you?” I asked.

He just grinned at me and didn’t answer as Cassie pulled my skirt, leaning in to ask how much longer the ceremony was going to be.

I laughed and told her, “It’s done when it’s done, honey.”

She rolled her eyes, then crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair in the tightly packed gymnasium.

“If there weren’t so many people around us right now...” Owen warned, mouth back at my ear. “I get so hard watching you mother our children. All four of them.”

I laughed and patted his thigh, the sexy moment passed now that I was back in mom mode.

“Keep it in your pants,” I told him with a grin. “But tonight, I expect you to unleash the beast.”

He sat back in his chair with a grin, relaxing with his arm thrown over the back of his chair.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he sassed, though I could see the bulge where his erection pressed against his pants.

I patted his thigh again, entertained that he had to figure out how to get rid of his little problem before one of the boys noticed and called him out on it.

Yep, they were finally old enough to know all about the sex stuff, and evidently the walls of the house were a little too thin.

I never knew how hard it was to have a silent orgasm until the kids asked why I was crying almost every night after

we'd gotten married.

Yeah, talk about embarrassing.

Owen's hand plopped onto my knee, teasing the edge of my skirt.

God, the man knew every one of my switches to get me going instantly. Just wrong time, wrong place.

"Tonight," I promised, pressing my hand on top of his to still it.

He whined, but finally sat up and pressed his elbows onto his thighs, hands gripped.

"It sucks being a grown up," he said, not for the first time.

I just agreed, then rested my head on his shoulder as we waited for the last kid to go across the stage, then we were free.

-Owen-



I slipped out of bed, leaving my sexy as hell wife naked and satisfied while I hurried to the big wingback chair on the other side of the room where we kept a notebook, pen, and lamp for those late night inspiration moments.

Hell, I still could hardly believe that she was mine. Even when she'd first said she loved me, then the proper southern wedding where I'd had to admit my carnal sin to Mia's parents' pastor. It had all been worth it, because Mia was worth it. She was worth fucking *evrything*.

Putting pen to paper, I outlined the plot that had invaded my dream and dumped it all there so I wouldn't forget come morning.

More than an hour later, I put the notebook down and looked over at my wife. So beautiful.

Two kids later and her figure, though filled out and softer now, was still banging hot. I was one lucky son of a bitch, and I couldn't imagine my life without her. She'd been an incredible mother, and an incredible partner. She understood me in a way that nobody else could, even when I'd told her I was done teaching and wanted to do writing full time.

It had been hard to give up teaching.

Between my increasingly demanding career with writing, plus the kids and Mia's own writing career, there just wasn't fucking time to do it all. So, not making the same mistake twice, I gave up teaching so that I could be there for my children and my wife. When Paula had found out, she'd given me a high-five.

Oddly enough, we were still on good terms with my ex-wife. Even after she got remarried to a man five years older than me. Yeah, things with the young buck didn't work out for

her long term. The kids liked him though, and I guess she did too, which was the only important thing, so I didn't really care one way or the other,

"You coming to bed?" Mia mumbled from the bed, peeking over the covers to see me sitting butt naked in the chair.

I grinned and got up, going to join her.

Her ass was going to hurt for a couple days, but holy shit she'd come so hard, more than once. I could still smell the sex lingering in the air more than three hours later.

"Just had to get a few things down," I whispered, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Go back to sleep."

I couldn't tell you how many times I'd seen her in the same seat in the middle of the night, though she only sat there dressed, the bare minimum being those sexy as fuck panties. I didn't mind the feeling of the velvet against my ass and balls. But that was also why she insisted on steam cleaning the thing at least once a week, though. Well, that and we liked to fuck in it, too.

Slipping down into the covers, I curled my arm around her and stuck the other beside hers under the pillow her head was resting on.

"I love you with all my heart," I told her, kissing her head again. "More every single day."

She hummed, half asleep and delirious.

I always knew I did a good job satisfying her when she was too tired to say she loved me back.

Snuggling my face into her hair, I breathed in the floral and vanilla sweet scent of my wife. Life couldn't have been any better, and I couldn't have been more happy than I was.

I looked forward to sharing every single step of the future with her, laughing and crying and letting go as our kids left the nest one by one.

Most of all, I looked so fucking forward to growing old with this woman. She kept me young, and I intended to keep her so happy she wouldn't even consider leaving me for some young Brad Pitt type. Though they'd probably be happy to take her away.

Nope, this one was all mine, and I had zero plans of ever letting her go.

End

Get the After The Happily
Ever After Bonus Chapter

[HERE](#)

Keep Reading for the first two chapters of BoyFrenemy, a taboo, step-brother, enemies to lovers romance.

BoyFrenemy



By L. L. Ash

- Preface -



Ivory

Three Years Ago

His hot breath on my cheek, sputtering from kiss-swollen lips just made me pant even harder.

“Fucking hell,” he gasped, hips battering into mine in the dark closet of my best friend’s basement.

Seven minutes in heaven had turned into something a little more than...uh...seven minutes.

We’d ignored every attempt to get us out and the subsequent catcalls that followed until we were just left alone to our erotic fairy-tale that wouldn’t last past midnight.

It had started as angry, frantic kisses, then light petting, then I was smothering my face in a puffy winter coat while he ate me out with that cocky smirk on his face. He knew damn well what he was doing, and I both loved and hated him for it.

Now I was naked from the waist down, with a high heel under my back and buried into my ribs. My head banged on the wall with every thrust and huff of effort grunting from his lips.

But I didn’t care.

I wanted him, and for the first time ever, he wanted me, too.

With a strangled little growl, he quietly finished inside the condom that he ‘so happened’ to have on him. Then again,

what eighteen year old boy didn't have a condom with them at all times?

In the quiet stillness of the dark closet, I tried catching my breath and digging the shoe out from underneath me while he pulled out and started buckling up his pants again.

"Thanks babe," he said, voice hoarse, but like silk to my ears.

I know what his orgasm voice sounds like now.

I grinned at the thought, then felt around for my panties, laying somewhere on the closet floor.

He stood and helped me up, then pressed a fierce kiss to my lips.

"What now?" I asked, elated that we were actually having contact instead of the regular cat and mouse game we'd played for years.

"Nothing."

Just like that, pantyless and baffled, I stood there while he slipped out of the closet and left me there.

Hunter Hayes had dipped in and shipped out, leaving me with dampness between my legs and a broken, bleeding heart.

Again.

- 1 -



Ivory

If I bit my lip any harder, I'd make a hole and would have a brand new place to put a lip ring. Not that I wanted one. They reminded me too much of *him*.

Instead of giving myself an inadvertent piercing, I started chewing on the inside of my cheek until I could taste the sweet and briny flavor of blood on my tongue.

"I can't wait until you come home, honey," Dad said to me over the phone. "I've been seeing someone. I really like her, and I want us to all have dinner together while you're home."

I grimaced at the idea of Dad dating.

Mom had divorced Dad more than five years ago. He'd just recently gotten back into the dating game when, all of a sudden, he was dating this mysterious woman who he fell instantly in love with.

Was it weird to remind my dad that he shouldn't fall in love with the first woman he dates? That seemed like the kind of advice that he should give to *me*.

Looking around my little shitty dorm room, I gave a wide grin to remind myself that, no matter who the woman was, I was an adult now, and I had my entire future ahead of me. I could endure some holiday dinners with any woman he chose, as long as she made Dad happy.

"I wouldn't want it any other way, Dad. Of course I want to meet her."

He sighed with relief.

“We planned it around the end of the semester. Her son will be there, too.

“That’s nice,” I said absently, not interested in this new woman or her son. Hopefully the guy wasn’t a complete asshole.

“Oh! Pen’s calling. I’ll let you know as soon as we’ve cemented our plans. Love you, hun!”

“Love you too, Dad,” I said, but he cut me off halfway through to switch to the new love of his life.

Blinking down at the phone, I frowned.

New love of his life.

All through high school, it’d just been Dad and I. Through boyfriends and breakups, proms and winter formals, Dad was right there as my right hand man while I managed to wade through it all. Now it was his turn, and I couldn’t help but feel a little...left out.

I wasn’t his number one girl anymore.

“Finally,” my roommate growled, staring at her Ipad. “Next time, take your phone calls outside.”

“This is my room, too,” I reminded her.

God, I really hoped I got a new roommate next year.

“The year’s almost over. Pretty sure you can deal with a couple calls until we don’t have to see each other again,” I told her, opening my American Economics textbook to go over today’s chapters.

I hated the course almost as much as I hated my roommate.

She just lifted her hand to me and stuck up her middle finger as she popped gum over her own thick textbook.

Yeah, the feeling was mutual.

Not feeling like doing homework at all, I shut the book a little too loudly, just to piss off my roomie, then slipped my flip flops on while texting Hillary to meet me at the beach.



“You’re going to have a *brother*?” Hillary asked while we sipped iced coffees on our favorite bench in Palisades Park.

It wasn’t as busy as Santa Monica Pier and it gave us the calming sound of the ocean without the bustle of tourists and beach bums.

“Is he hot?”

I shrugged.

“I don’t know. Never met the guy. He’s probably a total geek. Or worse, a beef head.”

“There are worse things than a beef head to look at across the Sunday dinner table for the rest of your life.” My friend laughed, as if the situation was so fucking funny.

She tossed her bleach blond hair and it shimmered with whites and golds in the mid-afternoon light. And for the millionth time, I felt a pang of envy.

Hillary was everything that I ever wanted to be. She was curvy, blond, big breasted, and she had a smile that could light up a room. Not to mention her personality was a bombshell in and of itself. My bestie was just easy to look at, and easy to love. We’d been friends since freshman year in high school, and started UCLA together last fall.

“Enough about my new ‘maybe’ in-law. How’s your roommate?”

Hillary gagged.

“I swear. I want to throttle the person who put me with someone other than you. I mean, we get along great! My roommate cooks freaking nasty shit in our room and the smell lingers *everywhere*. You know what it’s like going to a party smelling like garlic, anchovies, and perfume? Well, I do, now.”

I giggled.

“Oh, shut the hell up. All you have is some idiot who hates it when you talk. She doesn’t stain your clothes with permanent funk!”

“Next year,” I told her. “I know the person who helps sort rooms now, so I’ll try and pull a couple strings with her. She thinks my hair is awesome.”

Hillary pouted.

“Your hair is pretty awesome. I keep thinking I want to do something else with mine. You give me so much inspiration!”

I touched the magenta and cobalt stripes in my dark hair and smiled at her.

“Your hair is too perfect to mess it up with box dye. I’d kill you if you messed with that work of art.”

She just blushed like the awesome person she was and stuffed a clump of the shiny strands behind her ear.

“Any call from Jason?”

I shrugged.

“Nope. I think one date was enough for both of us. It was an epic disaster. You know that.”

“Well, yeah but he’s been so into you. Maybe it’s because finals are around the corner. I’m sure you’ll hear from him over summer break.”

“Maybe. What about your Greek cutie?”

Hillary’s blush got darker as she grinned.

“I talked to him yesterday after our dance class. He’s so freaking cute, Ivy! Like, the dark curls and his olive skin... God, I just want to lick him!”

“Oh my God!” I laughed, pressing my hand over my mouth when a nasty snort echoed out. “Lick? You want to lick the guy?”

“Hey, if you saw him, you would want to lick him, too,” she countered, that adorable pout back on her face.

“Whatever. I don’t like my guys delicious; I like them hot.”

“Oh, I know, Ivory. You like them like Hunter Hayes.”

She rolled her eyes while I shot her a glare.

“We do not mention the name of that asshole unless we’re in the process of cursing him.”

Another eye roll.

“Ooo! Speak of the devil! Is that him?” she sounded way too excited.

My head shot around and my eyes immediately found him.

Just up ahead, I could see him on the beach with his buddies, wearing nothing but board shorts that were riding low on narrow hips while they played around with their surfboards.

“Welp, I’m done here,” I told Hillary.

“He’s such a jerk,” she agreed, standing with me so we could throw out our empty cups. “Why don’t you just give him a piece of your mind and get it over with? This whole avoiding him on campus has gotten out of hand. The guy is freaking *everywhere*.”

“Cause he’s a total manwhore that really gets around,” I ground out between clenched teeth. “And no. I have no intention of ever talking to him again for the rest of my life. My time is too precious to waste it on him.”

Hillary sighed and just followed me back to our cars.

“I’ve gotta get back. Thanks for meeting me for a drink,” she said, looking at the time on her phone.

“Always. But I was the one to call you, remember?”

She shrugged.

“Same difference.”

I just let myself smile a little before hugging my bestie and soaking in her sunshine a bit before going back to my depressing dorm room.

“Remember,” Hillary sang as she sank into the driver’s seat of her pink Volkswagen Bug. “Hate makes you ugly and bitter!”

“So does Hayes!” I called back, and she laughed before shutting her door.

Yeah, just thinking about stupid Hunter Hayes made my blood boil, even two years after ‘The Big Mistake’. Twenty minutes in a dark closet with the asshole had turned me from a blossoming romantic to a bitter teen. One day, one mistake, was all it took for life to lose a little bit of its shine.

Shoving all thoughts of the jerk out of my head, I got back into my truck and started back to campus while Hillary went back to her job at Sephora.

Yeah, she was so cool that she got a job like *that*.

Slipping my sunglasses on, I wondered briefly if maybe I could get away with a moment of insanity of just driving over the dropoff and crashing into Hunter and his cronies. Not enough to really *hurt* anyone, but just to ruin their day like he’d ruined so many of mine.

No. I’d likely get a ticket at the least, or maybe jail time. That wouldn’t look good on my record while I was trying to get into psychology and family therapy. I’d just have to get over it and move the fuck on.

Forgiveness wasn’t for the other person, it was only ever for ourselves.

- 2 -



Ivory

Thirteen Years Ago

“Ivy?”

It was him. It was always him.

“What, Hunt?” I asked, frowning over my bologna sandwich.

“Wanna trade?” he asked.

He was holding out his deviled egg sandwich, which was my absolute favorite.

It was his favorite, too.

Mom didn’t really care what I ate for lunch, and rarely got around to making me anything. Dad had managed to throw a sandwich together for me with what we had left in the fridge and stuck it in my backpack with a bruised banana for my lunch.

“Yeah,” I told him, holding out the mangled Wonder bread and pink lunch meat.

I hated bologna, not that Mom cared. She bought it because it was cheap and easy. Hunter’s Mom actually cared about him, so he got what he liked every day for lunch, unlike me.

“Hand it over,” Hunter said, wiggling his fingers.

His hand was bigger than I remembered. He had just reached a growth spurt over the summer and Dad said he was going to be tall as a tree by the time we were grown up.

I gave it to him and he slapped the homemade bread with mayonnaise and eggs into my hands. It smelled like butt, but tasted awesome because his mom used Miracle Whip in it instead of just plain ol' mayo.

"Thanks," I told him.

He just smiled at me, then sat down next to me to open up the plastic baggie, taking a massive bite of the sandwich.

I was more careful with my sandwich, and I savored each bite of the stinky, delicious concoction.

"You see the new kid?" Hunter asked after a while, pointing to the new girl sitting by herself.

I nodded.

"They moved in next door to us. Mom says they're from Missouri."

"Where's that?" I asked, scrunching up my nose.

He shrugged.

"Dunno."

We ate the rest of our food in quiet companionship.

Yeah, Hunter and I had a lot in common.

He had a terrible dad, and I had a dud for a mom. We would hide at each other's places sometimes, when our parents would argue. Mom hated it, because she hated Hunter's mom so much, but I didn't really care. Mom would always shove it aside and drink, or go on a shopping spree until she felt better.

"You think we should say 'hi' to her?" I asked eventually, licking off any last remnants of sandwich filling from my fingers. "I was lonely when I moved in. I bet she's lonely, too."

Hunter frowned a little, but eventually he nodded and started getting up from the sticky cafeteria table.

Together we went to talk to the new girl, my hands a little greasy from my lunch, but it was a nice feeling to be full

of good food.

“Hi,” I said immediately when we made it to her table. “I’m Ivory Bell. Hunt calls me Ivy though, ‘cause he’s a dumb boy and he can’t say my name right.”

Hunter elbowed me in the side and I grunted, but grinned. He didn’t like being called a dumb boy, that’s why I did it.

“I’m your neighbor,” Hunter said. “And Ivy has cooties.”

The girl just stared at us like we were aliens coming down to take her away.

After a long bet of silence, I waved, then turned and went back to the table I usually shared with Hunter.

“I don’t think she likes us,” I told him.

“She just didn’t like you,” was his response.

I glared at him for a second, then we busted up laughing.

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here!*](#)

Author's Notes:

Hello my friends,

I just want to take a quick second to say thank you for reading this book! You could never know how much it means to me that you'd take time out of your day to read my drivel, and I think that's probably a sign of real friendship there.

This story was inspired by an author friend of mine, Pax Sinclair (callout to you, girl!) And I couldn't help myself but to create a story about authors who are on their own journeys. You know what they say, that every author puts pieces of themselves in their writing, and I find that totally true. Here is a little nugget of my journey, and I hope that you all love it as much as I do.

I thought I couldn't fall in love with a character as hard as I fell for Blake, but oh boy, Owen gives him some competition! What do you think? I'd love to hear your thoughts in your reviews. Speaking of reviews, please take a moment to do that! I read each and every one, *even the mean ones* and I love hearing what you have to say!

Don't hesitate to contact me on socials, because you're my favorite people, and I love it when we get to say hi!

All my love,

-Ash

About the Author

L.L. Ash is a Washington-born writer who has traveled and lived across the western coast of the US.

Ash has been writing fiction since she was a pre-teen, and while her writing has improved since then, her love for literature has not changed. Oftentimes you can find Ash reading an indie romance or enjoying a historical fiction. Dabbling in culinary arts and music, Ash has been an artist for decades but found her true love and passion in romances.

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