

K E L S E Y
K I N G S L E Y

the hero
in her
story

The Hero

in Her

Story

a novel by

Kelsey Kingsley

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To Kelly—

You keep asking when I'm going to dedicate a book to you.

Here you go.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Writing a book is a funny thing.

It begins as this tiny nugget of an idea. Most times, those nuggets fizzle out and disintegrate before they can become anything substantial. But every now and then, that tiny, little, miniscule nugget grows. It rolls around for a while—sometimes days, weeks, even years—collecting other nuggets along the way that fit just right. It manifests, and it festers, until it's too big to fit into the brain holding it. It has to go somewhere, so into a Word document it goes.

I know. It kinda blows my mind too.

But what always strikes me as a funnier, more mind-blowing thing is the side characters within that initial book. Because that initial nugget began with its own set of people. People the author already knew were going to be a “thing.” They're developed; they've already become real within that author's mind. But those side characters, man ...

You never really know which ones are gonna bite and hold on for dear sweet life, creating their own nuggets and rolling around, until you finally let them tell their story.

When I wrote *The Girl in the Front Row*, I didn't think Connor and Tarryn would get a story. I didn't think they'd need it, to be honest. But then, the more I wrote *that* story, the more theirs built in my head, and that little nugget wouldn't stop growing, until I knew they weren't going to stop their bickering and bantering until I gave Tarryn the hero she deserved.

So, this is their story, and I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Kelsey

Listen to the Spotify playlist while you read:
<http://bit.ly/3YsDHV0>

PROLOGUE

Stacey shifted on my lap, grinding her ass against my dick in a way that said she wanted something from me. She didn't care that Matt was sitting next to us on the porch, blowing his cigarette smoke through the corner of his mouth, like that alone would keep the shit from lingering in the air and staining Mom's couch cushions with the stench. And Stacey definitely didn't care that my little sister was standing over there, leaning against a post and applying another coat of lip gloss.

No, Stacey's attention span started at my dick and ended at sex, and that was cool with me 'cause, at eighteen, the feeling was undoubtedly mutual.

But I gotta admit, she was making it hard—pun definitely intended—to concentrate on the conversation.

“Yeah, fuck college, man,” Matt muttered, slipping the cigarette between his lips and sucking at its end like his life depended on it. “What the hell would I even do there anyway?”

Dude had started smoking when he was fourteen to impress some high school chick, and he was never able to kick the habit.

Idiot.

“Yeah, my parents don't wanna pay a ton of money for me to party,” I replied, shrugging, while Stacey disguised a wiggle of her ass with a cough.

“Hey,” she said, glancing over her shoulder. “I thought you weren't going to college to stay with me.”

“It's one reason, sure,” I told her, but—and this was probably a dickish thing to say—she had made that assumption without any help from me.

Even at eighteen, I knew there was nothing permanent about my relationship with Stacey. I had fun with her, and we were having a lot of it, but I didn't love her, and she sure as hell didn't love me.

You didn't cheat on a guy three times if you were in love with him. Just saying.

Looking back, maybe I shouldn't have forgiven her so easily. But like I'd said, I didn't love her, and we were having fun.

Plus, the summer was coming to an end. She was starting school at Suffolk Community College, and I was heading up to Connecticut to help a couple of buddies move into their new apartment. We both knew there weren't many pages left in the story of Connor and Stacey, so if she wanted to believe I wasn't seeking further education for her benefit, then that was cool.

Especially when she had an ass like that.

I was about to ask if she wanted to get the hell off my parents' porch and into my truck for a quickie when a pair of headlights turned into the driveway. The little blue Volkswagen Beetle I knew well parked behind my pickup, blocking my escape, and just as the lights clicked off, the passenger door opened.

"Oh yeah," Matt mumbled salaciously from beside me, pulling the cigarette from his lips to let the tendrils of smoke leave with his remark.

"Shut up," I grumbled as I watched Tarryn King waltz up the driveway in her high-heeled sandals and *so tiny that they should be illegal* shorts.

"Lennon," I called, alerting my sister to her friend's arrival, in case she hadn't noticed.

Lennon didn't notice much. One of the perks and downsides of being legally blind, I guessed.

"I know," she answered, looking over her shoulder and shooting me a glossy smile.

I was really gonna miss her once I headed up to Connecticut. She was one of my favorite things about New York—always had been. But, man, I needed a change of scenery, even for just a little while.

“Hey, girlie-girl,” Tarryn exclaimed with arms outstretched as she jogged up the walkway to the porch steps in her bikini top.

The tiny leopard-print scrap of fabric left next to nothing to the imagination, and I didn’t like the show she was putting on for my sex-starved buddy over there with every heavy bounce of her boobs.

Reaching around Stacey and her wiggling ass, I grabbed the sweatshirt I’d brought outside with me, just in case the warm weather took a turn, and threw it in Tarryn’s direction.

“What the hell, Connor?!” she shrieked when the thick garment hit her in the face and dropped to her feet.

“Maybe you should get dressed before you leave the house,” I fired back, lifting the corner of my mouth in a smile I hoped she’d see was meant to be good-natured.

She didn’t.

Come to think of it, she never did.

“Screw you too.”

“Hey, she could show up naked for all I care,” Matt said a little louder than before, and I jabbed him between the ribs with my elbow. “That fuckin’ hurt, shithead!”

“She’s sixteen, asshole.”

He snickered, and I wished I’d broken his rib instead of just bruised it. “She don’t look sixteen.”

Stacey groaned—at the conversation or my wilting dick, I wasn’t sure at the time—and stood up, grabbing her purse in the process.

“Connor, are we leaving or not?” she asked, rolling her eyes down to meet mine.

Earlier in the day, I had told her I’d take her to the movies. But that was before Matt got wind that I was home and stopped by. Before Lennon told me she and Tarryn were heading to the mall with Tarryn’s cousin. Before I knew Tarryn was going, dressed like *that*.

“You don’t wanna hang out here for a while longer?” I asked, knowing the answer would be no.

“With who? Your little sister and her friends? No, thanks.”

“Hey, I’m here too,” Matt interjected, never mind the fact that he had to get to his job at McDonald’s in fifteen minutes.

“Whatever,” Stacey muttered, pulling her purse high onto her shoulder. “I’ll call you later, Connor.”

“Later.”

She left the porch without so much as a kiss on my cheek, but my glaring eyes weren’t on her or her gorgeous ass.

They were on Tarryn and her bejeweled belly button. Her boobs that were too developed to belong to someone as young as her. Her full hips and the frayed hem of her shorts, barely concealing an ass she had no business showing off.

It shouldn’t have, but it pissed me off. And what *it* was exactly, I wasn’t sure.

The fact that I had known her since I was six?

That she had, at some point I wasn’t aware of, hit puberty and left the house one day, looking like a supermodel?

Or was it simply that I’d had the goddamn nerve to notice?

Hell, maybe it was all of it.

But at the moment, it was her refusal to put my sweatshirt on before grabbing my sister’s hand and dragging her down the walkway to her cousin’s car.

“Hey!” I stood, hurrying from the porch and grabbing the black zip-up from the ground.

Tarryn and Lennon both turned to look at me, equal parts startled and unamused.

I thrust the damn thing at Tarryn. “I said to put it on.”

“Who are you, my dad?” she asked with a pink-lipped smirk.

It was a trick question, and I wasn't gonna honor it with an answer. I knew as well as anybody else in my family that Tarryn's dad hadn't been in the picture since she was still in the womb.

"There are perverts at the mall," I told her, unrelenting in my insistence for her to put the sweatshirt on.

"Oh no! Not perverts!" she gasped dramatically, clapping her hands to her cheeks. Then, dropping them back to her sides just as fast, she smiled in a condescending way and said, "You don't have to worry about me, but thanks. You're sweet."

"When you're taking my sister with you, yeah, I do," I pressed, shoving the sweatshirt against her chest and shielding her cleavage from Matt's hungry eyes. "Wear it."

"Come on, Connor," Lennon groaned from beside her best friend, her cheeks pink with embarrassment, as if I cared.

She could be embarrassed—that was fine. I wasn't backing down until Tarryn put it on. I didn't want the eyes of every sicko in Islip looking at them.

I didn't want them looking at *her*.

"It's too hot to wear a sweatshirt," Tarryn finally said. The first reasonable argument, given the late August heatwave we were in the middle of and soul-sucking humidity.

"Fine." I dropped the sweatshirt to my feet and pulled my T-shirt off.

Lennon huffed with annoyance and humiliation while Tarryn stared. Taken aback, baffled, and ... something else. What was it? I wasn't sure. But whatever *it* was, it made her swallow hard as her eyes softened and blinked in rapid succession before they hardened again and glared into mine. I shoved the T-shirt at her with a silent command, and this time, she accepted.

"Happy?" she spat at me before pulling it over her head.

It swallowed her whole. Her hips, her belly button ring, her boobs, and her ass—all of it was claimed by my fucking T-shirt with the Saint Savage logo emblazoned across the chest.

“Yes,” I replied, flashing her an obnoxious, triumphant grin.

“Great.”

She turned and stomped her way back to her cousin’s blue Beetle while Lennon sneered at me in a perfected little-sister style before following her friend to the car.

They climbed in and left without so much as a glance in my direction. But before they disappeared from my view, I watched their mouths flap animatedly, and I made the safe assumption that they were collectively bitching about Lennon’s protective, ridiculous, stupid big brother.

Thank God he’s leaving soon, I imagined them saying, and, yeah, the thought stung a little, but at least she was covered up.

Meanwhile, I stood there, shirtless, in a toxic cloud of Matt’s cigarette smoke. Wondering what new kind of low I had stooped to, to be jealous of a fucking T-shirt.

CHAPTER ONE

Tarryn

“Tarryn, can you bring your leg up just a *little* higher?”

Jackson’s sweaty brow hit my shoulder as we sighed in unison at Lori’s fourteenth interruption since we had begun shooting for the day. He stepped away, buck naked, save for the pouch concealing *the goods*, and I dropped said leg from Jackson’s thigh to turn and stare our director down with an exhausted glare.

“Lori, any higher, and I could make a career as a contortionist,” I replied dryly.

Lori’s forehead crumpled with a hefty dose of displeasure and sass. “You’ve had your leg wrapped around his ass before,” she argued.

“Yeah, when we’ve been lying down,” I pointed out, throwing back as much sass as she was giving. “You’re asking me to have one leg on the ground and another wrapped around his ass when he’s six foot five and I’m a whole freakin’ foot shorter than that. It’s not happening. Sorry.”

Lori pinched her lips like the truth had left a sour taste in her mouth. She hated being told she was wrong, absolutely despised it, and I knew I’d be on her shit list for the day.

Whatever.

She’d had it coming. We’d been filming the one sex scene since seven o’clock in the morning, and we were tired of all the action without any of the benefits.

Jackson wiped the back of his arm along his brow as he asked, “What if I lift her up and pin her against the wall?”

“Oh yeah. Lots of leg around the ass then,” I corroborated, nodding and hoping she’d just go for it.

Or better yet, tell us to get in bed and take a load off for a while.

But Lori shook her head. “No. You know what? Let me just rework the scene. It’s fine. Everybody, go home.”

Jackson’s jaw dropped, looking as appalled as I felt. “Are you serious?”

“Yep.”

His blue eyes met mine, his expression saying, *Can you believe this nutbag?*

I silently responded by rolling my eyes skyward and shrugging. *Yes*, my expression said. *Yes, I can believe it.*

We’d been working with the woman for two years, so I knew what to expect from her by this point. She was an artist with a vision, and if that vision wasn’t met, she couldn’t rest until it was. And if it couldn’t be, then she would just reimagine the whole damn thing altogether.

So, cold and naked, Jackson and I hurried together to a couple of waiting crew members, took our coats from their hands, and quickly put them on. Another man wearing a *Breckenridge* sweatshirt and baseball cap ran toward us, wielding two cups of steaming hot tea, and we accepted gratefully.

“I’d be happier if it was something stronger,” Jackson said, quirking his lips into a half-smile. “But this’ll do, thanks.”

“Thank you,” I said, raising the cup with gratitude before taking a sip and warming my goose-pimpled flesh.

October in Scotland wasn’t my favorite. The weather exhibited more mood swings than I did the week before my period. One second, it was freezing with a layer of crystal frost coating the rolling hills. Then, the next, the sun was out to coax the world into a false sense of comfort before the clouds parted for a thunderstorm.

Not that it was much better at home in New York. Mother Nature was just as much of a moody bitch there as it was here. But it was *home*, and two years spent in Scotland wasn’t enough time to replace it in my heart.

“So, now that half the day has been opened up, what are you doing?” Jackson asked, wandering with me toward our trailers, standing just outside the barn where we were supposed to be making hot, passionate love but had apparently failed.

“I dunno,” I answered with a shrug as I brought the cup of tea to my lips. I took a sip and released a satisfactory sigh. “Honestly, I think I just wanna get into my jammies and binge some Netflix.”

The ground was wet beneath our feet from that morning’s rain shower, our toes frozen from the frost. But two years of starring in *Breckenridge* had left us almost immune to such conditions, and while we felt the chill and the wet, they didn’t faze us as much as they had on that very first day of filming over two years ago.

“Is it a solo binge-fest, or would it be okay if I invited myself along?” Jackson asked as our path forked and he headed in the direction of his trailer and I, mine.

“Oh, I think I could find a little space for you,” I said, shooting a smile his way.

My six-foot-five co-star grinned with appreciation as he threw open the trailer door. “A little space is all I ever ask for.”

In a T-shirt and a pair of flannel pants I probably should’ve thrown out ten years ago, I shuffled through my apartment with a bottle of wine and two stemless glasses. Jackson had called just a little while ago, saying he was on his way over, and considering his place was only down the street from mine, it shouldn’t take him long to get here.

And judging by the knock on my door as I placed the wine and glasses on the coffee table, I was right.

“Hello, good sir,” I said, throwing the door open for my closest friend in Scotland.

Well ... my only real friend, if I was being totally honest.

“Good evening, m’lady,” he said, greeting with a grand bow.

As I curtsied in reply, I noticed the bag hanging from one of his hands. “You come bearing gifts?”

He stood to his full height and raised his arm, dangling the bag in front of my eyes. “I stopped at that little French bakery you like,” he said, wagging his brows, and I promptly snagged the bag from his hand.

“First of all, it’s a *patisserie*,” I corrected while leading the way to the living room. “And second of all, thank you. I needed this like you can’t even believe.”

I had met Jackson Stark nearly three years ago, shortly after we were both cast as the main characters in *Breckenridge*—the award-winning television series based off the B. Davis novels. Our chemistry on-screen was praised by critics, and we were dubbed two of the best actors of the twenty-first century. But there was nothing fictional about our connection. Most of the time, it hardly felt like we were acting at all.

Jackson had truly become one of my best friends.

Which was awesome because he always picked up the best pastries.

After plopping on the couch and placing the bag on the coffee table, I pulled out the box and flipped the top to reveal an assortment that was going to keep my ass on the elliptical for an extra hour every day for the next week.

Worth it.

Jackson pulled off his peacoat and draped it over the back of the couch. As I plucked an éclair from the box, I glanced at him and laughed at his ensemble.

“You’re meeting the dress code very well,” I said, approving of his fleece Batman onesie.

He chuckled—the sound equivalent to a warm cup of hot chocolate on a freezing day—and pulled the hood onto his head, revealing bat ears and a mask.

“I thought it might come in handy if I had to run from our millions of groupies,” he explained, hardly able to conceal his grin.

Jackson and I weren't recognized much in the real world. Dressed in sportswear or sweatpants, messy buns and sunglasses, we didn't resemble our characters, Breckenridge and Rebecca, all that much.

It was one of the perks of acting in a medieval fantasy.

I bit into the éclair and groaned in conjunction with the explosion of chocolate and custard.

"God, it has been way too long since I ate sugar," I mumbled, mouth full. Crumbs of pastry flew from my mouth and onto my pants and coffee table as I spoke, and Jackson snorted as he reached for a kiwi tart.

"Such a lady," he jabbed, shooting a playful sideways glance in my direction.

"That prim-and-proper crap stays on set, and you know it," I said as I wiped my chocolaty fingers on the hem of my shirt and grabbed the remote. "Okay, so what are we watching?"

"This is your party, babe; you decide. I'm just along for the ride," he replied, kicking his Nikes off and reaching for the bottle of white.

He filled the two glasses and passed one to my eager fingers while I browsed Netflix for something worth watching. The menu was full of shitty horror movies, the kind you spent more time laughing at than hiding under the covers, and my heart ached for Lennon, my best friend at home.

Had it already been four months since I'd last seen her? It seemed impossible for such a long amount of time to have passed, but it must've when I wasn't noticing. I was busy, I was working, I was building a career I used to believe lived only in dreams and fantasies ...

But I was also missing out on so much, and for that reason, it was hard not to hate my life sometimes regardless of how much I loved it.

"Hey, earth to Tarryn."

I slid my gaze from the screen to find the soft powder-blue eyes of the sweetest man I'd ever known. He smiled when

he knew he had my attention, bringing the dimples in his stubbled cheeks to life.

“Where’d you go?” he asked.

“New York,” I replied with a forlorn sigh.

His smile wilted as he nodded with understanding. “Oh man, I know. It’s been a long time. I was just thinking today about my grams and how it’s already been four friggin’ months since I’ve seen her. I’m not sure I’ve ever been away from her for that long.”

“Yeah, I was just thinking the same about Lennon,” I replied, hugging the glass within my palms, but not bringing it to my mouth. “Did I tell you she’s getting married?”

Jackson sipped his wine, then licked his lips before asking, “She’s with the rock star, right?”

I nodded as an image of my ebony-haired bestie and her tall, tattooed fiancé clouded my view of the TV. “Yeah, Dylan Pierce.”

He shook his head with disbelief, starstruck despite being touched by the hand of fame himself. “So cool,” he muttered, bringing the glass back to his lips and taking a long gulp.

“They got engaged a couple of months ago, and I wasn’t even there,” I complained, not intending to sound like such a whiny brat, but what could I do? “I’m the reason they’re even together in the first place. And now, in a couple of weeks, they’re having an engagement party, and I can’t be there for them.”

Jackson’s brow crumpled with confusion. “Why not?”

I glared at him, incredulous. “Uh, we’re still filming.”

“So? Tell Lori you need a couple of days. Fly in for the party and come back. It’s not like we haven’t done anything like that before, and neither one of us makes a habit of skipping work on the regular.”

He had a point. Years ago, before the hype had begun, I wouldn’t have thought twice about asking for a couple of days off here and there. I had shown up for Lennon’s thirtieth birthday, and I had flown in for the concert that sealed the deal

between her and her famous then boyfriend/now fiancé. Of course, that had been then, before times changed and priorities shifted, but attending her engagement party seemed reasonable enough.

“Yeah,” I said, thinking aloud and nodding. “I think I’m gonna do that.”

“Good,” he said, reaching out to pat my thigh.

His eyes then lingered on my shirt for a few seconds longer than usual, and I laughed uneasily, unsure if he was checking me out or judging my choice in loungewear.

“What?” I asked, still laughing.

“That shirt has seen better days, huh?” His gaze met mine, revealing laughter and mirth.

I glanced down at the dark gray T-shirt, thin with age and mottled with faded stains. It really did look like crap, but it was the most comfortable thing I owned. The most precious thing.

“Shut up,” I said, clasping the threadbare cloth in my clenched fist. “I love this stupid shirt.”

“Whatever you say,” he teased. “Also, I never would’ve pegged you for a Saint Savage fan. Are they even still around?”

“Fine,” he said, dropping the sweatshirt to the asphalt and reaching for the collar of his T-shirt. He pulled it off, revealing to my teenage eyes a chest too defined to belong to a boy of just eighteen.

And just like that, the annoying boy I’d known for most of my life became a boy I wanted to want me as much as he wanted the girl he’d had on his lap.

But he wasn’t a boy anymore; he was a man. And he would always see me as a stupid, annoying little girl.

I snatched the shirt from his persistent hand and pulled it over my head, still warm from his skin and smelling of sweat and something I’d never noticed until then—him.

“Happy?”

The memory faded like the band logo across my chest, and I made a conscious effort to force thoughts of Connor away, like I always did.

“I don’t even know who they are ... or were,” I finally answered while lifting the wine to my lips. “Someone gave it to me a while ago.”

Jackson snickered and reached for a napoleon. “Well, I suggest you give it back. Or burn it.”

I sniffed a little laugh as I took a few sips too many, too fast and said, “Yeah ... maybe I should.”

CHAPTER TWO

Tarryn

“Oh, she’s going to be so excited to see you,” Lennon’s mom, Kathy, said over the phone. “But, you know, I was thinking ...”

A heavy gust of freezing wind sliced through the layers of silk and tulle and nipped at my cheeks until they stung.

What a lovely contrast to the otherwise sunny day.

Shielding my eyes with a hand, I squinted toward the open field of heather, watching as Jackson rode his horse, Majesty, through a tense combat scene like a seasoned professional.

“What’s up?” I asked Kathy.

Jackson swung his broadsword and dropped it unceremoniously onto the grass. The two men on horseback broke out in a chorus of laughter, collapsing against manes and shielding their mouths with gloved hands, and I giggled along with them.

This was take thirty.

“I’m gonna get it eventually,” Jackson called out to whoever was listening. “You just watch. This time, I’m gonna fuckin’ *nail* it.”

“Sure you are, Jack,” Landon, our costar and one of Breckenridge’s many enemies, replied through a hearty chuckle. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“Well, I was thinking, what if you surprised her?” Kathy asked, reminding me I was still on the phone. “Have you said anything to her yet?”

I licked my chapped lips absentmindedly and then chastised myself for messing up my lipstick. Makeup would have to do a touch-up ... again.

“No, not yet,” I replied, watching as the sword was handed back to Jackson by a crew member.

“Oh my God, then you should definitely surprise her! She’d be so happy, Tarryn. You have no idea. She misses you like crazy.”

It didn’t take long for my throat to swell with burning emotion.

“Yeah, I miss her too,” I replied, dropping my gaze from the two men readying themselves for battle once again. “Maybe I should tell her I definitely can’t make it. That way, she really won’t expect me to be there.”

“Yes! She would love that.”

I could see it now—my best friend since preschool having no idea I was even in New York and seeing me waltz through the door at her engagement party. Her infectious smile, her shining eyes. Hell, maybe she’d even cry—I knew I would. It really would make an already-special day a little more memorable, and I nodded to myself, deciding then and there to do just that.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m gonna do,” I confirmed out loud to Kathy. “I’ll text her right after I hang up with you, tell her I can’t come and that I’m so sorry, and then, in two weeks ... happy engagement!”

“I could ask Connor—”

“Oh,” I cut her off, not even knowing where she was going with this. “No, Connor’s probably—”

“No, no, honey, listen. Why don’t you have Connor pick you up from the airport? You could even fly into Connecticut the day of, if it makes it easier.”

Having Connor Jacobs pick me up from the airport was a horrible idea, never mind forcing him into taking a three-hour road trip with me to Long Island. The guy held no love for me in any part of his body, apart from the acknowledgment that his little sister and I adored each other. Putting him out like that would only sour the day for both of us.

“Or, you know, I could just ... get a car ...”

“Don’t be silly, Tarryn,” Kathy replied, using the mom voice my own mother had seldom given me. “Hold onto your money. Connor will do what I tell him.”

From the moment I had been born, my family had been broken. My parents never married and broke up while my mother was still pregnant with me. My dad moved up to Boston before I was born, where he decided at some point to not involve himself, so as not to step on Mom’s toes, while she, single and career-oriented, handed me off to day cares and babysitters.

I never bothered to resent either of my parents for their choices in life. I always had pretty clothes and enough toys to keep me occupied, and all things considered, I was happy.

But it wasn’t until I met Lennon Jacobs in preschool that I ever knew the love of a real family. One that was whole and not fractured, like mine.

Her parents always treated me like a second daughter, her aunts and uncles took me in as an adopted niece, and I adored her grandparents as if they were biologically my own.

But her brother hated me.

Two years our senior, with a habit of getting into trouble, he’d pester us until Kathy sent him to his room or demanded he leave the house altogether.

I’d always accepted his feelings toward me for what they were. There would never be a sibling-like attachment between us, unlike the ironclad bond I shared with his sister, and that was fine. I had resigned myself from a young age to keep my interactions with Connor to a necessary minimum.

And now, the excitement I had just felt in surprising my best friend was erased by the dread—and unwanted butterflies—I only felt in her brother’s presence.

“Yeah, okay,” I conceded after too many moments of silence as Jackson finally succeeded in swinging the sword and striking Landon with enviable skill, knocking him off his valiant steed. “But, um, could you maybe give him the *happy* news?”

Kathy laughed knowingly. “Oh, sure. Let me be the bad guy.”

“Better you than me,” I muttered, and the crowd of crew members broke out in applause as Lori shouted, “And that’s a wrap!”

Two weeks, twenty hours, and one connecting flight later, I arrived on American soil.

The deep breath I pulled into my lungs the moment we landed was nothing short of sweet.

“Ah, yes. The lovely smell of smog and pollution, mmm ...”

I opened my eyes to glare at Jackson and the teasing grin on his stupid face. “Leave me alone,” I whined, shoving against his arm. “I’m just glad to be back.”

“Oh, trust me, babe,” he said, standing from his seat and stretching his arms overhead. “I’m thrilled to be here. I mean, not gonna lie, I’ll probably cry when I see Grams.”

“I *know* I’m gonna cry when I see Lennon,” I replied, already wishing I could fast-forward a few hours to the moment when I walked through the door of the hall her parents had rented for the party.

Jackson offered a hand and helped me stand from the seat I had called home for enough hours to stiffen my joints. I groaned, twisting my back and stretching my arms out, just as he had, working out the kinks that had made themselves at home in my thirty-three-year-old muscles. Then, I grabbed my Hermès purse, Tom Ford sunglasses, and Louis Vuitton carry-on to follow him from the plane.

We were in the States for only two days, and although I knew how quickly the short visit would pass, making me sad, the upside was not having any luggage to wait for. The walk through the airport terminal was brisk as we rushed away from bustling crowds that might’ve recognized our faces. Jackson

pushed the door open to a cacophony of beeping horns and rumbling engines, and there, at the curb, was my ride.

“This is me over here,” Jackson said, pointing toward a black car not far from Connor’s dirty, old pickup. “Did you get a car? You want me to wait with you?”

My gaze was on Connor, sitting inside the cab of his truck. He was checking his wrist for the time and shaking his head, impatient and already pissed off. He turned to say something to the young girl in the seat beside him when his blue eyes met mine. He scowled, shifting his stony glare from me to Jackson, then opened the driver’s door.

Here we go.

Looking up to Jackson, I went to reply, “Actually, I—”

“Twelve thirty, huh?”

I pulled in a deep, cleansing breath and turned to face my best friend’s older brother and the scowl plastered on his face. “Hi, Connor,” I replied, tugging my purse further onto my shoulder.

“Mom said twelve thirty. Do you know what time it is now?”

I cleared my throat, glancing from the tall, bearded ogre to my well-groomed friend—the contrast between the two was almost startling. “Uh, I—”

“It’s *two*.”

“Sorry,” I grumbled and crossed my arms. “The layover in Paris was a little—”

“And what, you just forgot to mention it?”

“Actually, I did message you,” I answered over the honking horns, glancing at Jackson with an apology I wasn’t sure was even necessary.

Connor dug his phone out of the pocket of his jeans. “No, you—oh.” His lips pressed together in a firm, thin line as the phone was once again stuffed back in its place. “Whatever. Let’s go. We’re already gonna be late.”

He turned and marched back to his truck, and I wondered why he'd even bothered to get out in the first place, other than to embarrass me and piss off the people parked behind him at the terminal curb.

"You have a brother?" Jackson asked, his eyes on Connor's broad back.

I couldn't help but laugh with a bitter taste singeing my tongue. "No. He's Lennon's older brother."

"Oh, well, he doesn't seem to like you very much," he replied with a laugh, only to glance at me with a heavy dash of sympathy. "You wanna ditch him and carpool with me?"

The offer was tempting, and I momentarily considered accepting. But Connor had already driven an hour out of his way, only to sit for almost two hours, waiting for my plane to land. If I ditched him now, he was likely to poison my drink at the party and call it an accident.

So, I shook my head and said, "Nah. I can handle him. But thanks though."

Jackson looked doubtful. "You sure?"

"Trust me, I've been putting up with him since I was four. He doesn't scare me," I said, flashing my friend a confident grin that didn't quite touch the fluttering butterflies in my stomach.

"So, who's the guy?" Connor asked after five uncomfortable minutes of silence.

I was seated behind his thirteen-year-old daughter, Sammy. She had offered to let me sit up front, but her dad quickly squashed the suggestion with a shake of his head. He insisted I wasn't above sitting in the backseat, as if I disagreed, and to prove a point, I'd kept my mouth shut and climbed in with a smile plastered on my face.

Now, the girl in front of me turned to her father with a gasp, her jaw agape. "Dad, you're kidding, right?"

Connor turned to his daughter, brow furrowed. “Am I supposed to know who he is?”

“He’s my friend,” I chimed in quietly, readjusting my long legs for the third time.

I wasn’t going to complain, but, jeez, it would’ve been nice to have a little more leg room. There wasn’t much back there, and I was quickly beginning to reconsider not fighting for my right to sit up front.

“Uh, he’s also Jackson Stark,” Sammy said, glancing over her shoulder and gawking at me, as if this were news to me.

I sniffed a gentle laugh at her bewildered expression. “This is true. He is in fact Jackson Stark.”

“Still don’t know him,” Connor grumbled, keeping his stony glare on the road ahead.

“Dad, stop it. Yes, you do,” Sammy replied, rolling her eyes back to her father. “He plays Breckenridge, and he’s *so* freakin’ hot.”

“Oh! Stupid me!” He smacked a hand against his forehead. “How did I forget the hot guy?!”

Sammy released a low, impatient groan, and I stifled a giggle as she said, “You know who Breckenridge is, Dad. Don’t be dumb.”

“I don’t know Breckenridge.”

“Yes, you do,” she fired back, then looked over her shoulder again. “He does. We watch every—”

“So, what, are you dating him or something?” Connor interrupted, speaking over his daughter and glancing into the rearview mirror.

I snorted at the mere thought of dating Jackson. There was no point in denying the man was attractive. It didn’t feel like long ago when I had been talking to Lennon about my gorgeous new costar, and I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t imagined what a night in his bed might be like.

But that had been then.

We worked together now, and he was my friend—a good one. If we dated and things went well, that'd be amazing, but what if they didn't? We were already contracted for five seasons with the possibility of more. Dealing with a breakup while having to still work together, especially intimately, would be a stupid move ... and considering Jackson had never once made an implication to move things in our friendship forward told me he agreed.

Still, that didn't mean I wouldn't be open to things going in that direction—even as just friends, if you catch my drift.

“Is that a yes?” Connor asked, glancing through the seats to meet my eye for a split second.

“Uh, no,” I corrected, batting my lashes. “We work together, and he's my friend.”

I waited for a reaction from the front seat, but got none. Connor kept his eyes ahead, gripping the wheel with both hands and driving toward Long Island with his brows set low. Sammy reached out for the radio and jabbed her fingers at the buttons until she found something she wanted to hear and turned the volume up, putting an end to any conversation we might have had.

And that was just fine by me.

Conversation with Connor never led anywhere good, and we were better off not saying anything at all.

CHAPTER THREE

Connor

“Aunt Lemon!” Sammy cheered, rushing through the door of the VFW hall.

Dylan was a first-class guy with more cash to blow than anybody I’d ever known. He had offered to spring for something fancier. But my folks insisted this place could be fancied up just as well as anywhere else. And while I wasn’t so sure about that—the guy had paid for his two-million-dollar house in cash without batting an eye, for fuck’s sake—they had certainly dressed the place up enough to be worthy of my sister.

Dressed in black with matching Doc Martens, the happy couple stood in the center of the room, surrounded by guests. Lennon turned toward my daughter’s excited voice and stretched her arms out for a hug while I hung back near the doorway and waited for Tarryn to finish changing in the restroom.

The woman drove me batshit crazy, but I wasn’t going to leave her alone in there. Especially when she was naked and defenseless in a restroom lacking a functioning lock.

“Where’s your dad?” I heard my sister ask, and I prayed Sammy would keep her mouth shut long enough for Lennon to be surprised by Tarryn’s unexpected presence.

Mom quietly snuck out of the room and saw me waiting beside the restroom door.

“Hey,” she whispered, sliding her arms around my neck for a hug. “Where’s Tarryn?”

“Taking her dear sweet time in the bathroom,” I grumbled, jabbing a thumb over my shoulder.

Mom stood back to eye me with suspicion. “And you’re just standing here?”

I sighed and offered a begrudging nod. “Yep.”

“But *why*?” Mom narrowed her eyes and wrinkled her nose, and I could only imagine what messed up shit was going through her head.

“The door doesn’t lock,” I explained in a grumble.

She sighed with what was probably relief and patted a hand against my bearded cheek. “You’re a pain in my ass, but you’re a good man.”

“Thanks, Mom. I can always count on you to—”

Just then, the restroom door opened, and out stepped Tarryn. “Okay, I’m all—oh, hey!” Her arms were extended in a second as she hurried to hug my mother.

Mom squeezed her with an affection I came close to envying. She wouldn’t call Tarryn a pain in her ass. She wouldn’t assume Tarryn had nothing but salacious things on her mind. Oh, but she used to, back in the day when Tarryn had been a wild child and given my parents reason to worry about Lennon’s innocence while in her presence. But both Mom and Dad had accepted that kids grew up and eventually became adults.

They had yet to believe that I, at thirty-five, did anything but remain a perpetual child. Never once remembering that I was doing my part to raise a teenager while holding down a full-time job and maintaining my own place up in Connecticut.

“Oh, honey. You look incredible,” Mom said, stepping away from Tarryn’s embrace and holding her at arm’s length to assess her dress.

It was then that I took the opportunity to really look at Tarryn and what she’d chosen to wear. Earlier, when I’d picked her up from the airport, she’d been wearing a pair of skintight leggings and a baggy sweatshirt.

But now?

The long-sleeved red dress was smooth and lacking in any embellishment, but, man, it didn’t need it. The thing hit mid-thigh and exposed the smooth expanse of her toned back, just above the swell of her ass. From the front, it did nothing to conceal the infuriating fact that her tits were perfect with a clear view of her delicate collarbone and deep cleavage.

On her feet, she wore a pair of stilettos to match.

“Fuck-me shoes,” my buddy Matt would call them, and as much as I hated to admit it, he’d be right.

Those shoes screamed sex and everything else Mom would hate to know I thought about at any given time.

She’d smack me if she knew what I was thinking at that very moment.

“You look like you need to eat a sandwich,” I jabbed, eyeing the definition of her spine.

“Connor, be nice,” Mom scolded.

Tarryn laid both hands over her flat stomach and said, “Oh my God, for real though. I haven’t eaten since the plane.”

“What?!” Mom exclaimed, her mouth falling open as she looked from Tarryn to me. “You didn’t feed her?”

What was she, a cocker spaniel?

“I wasn’t aware it was my job to make sure she ate,” I muttered, now glaring at Tarryn for even mentioning the last time she had been given nourishment.

If she was so damn hungry, why hadn’t she said something?

“Oh, it’s fine,” Tarryn said, dismissing both of our commentary with a wave of her hands. “I figured there would be tons of food here, and I plan to completely break my diet tonight.”

Mom didn’t waste a second. She wrapped an arm around Tarryn’s shoulders and led her to the door, excited to finally make Lennon aware of her presence. Leaving me behind to roll my eyes and hope she didn’t need a ride back to the airport.

But I watched every step she took as she walked through the door and quietly edged her way through the crowd. Lennon didn’t see her at first, but when she did ...

“Oh my God!”

Everybody within a fifty-mile radius was then aware of my sister’s reunion with her best friend, and I couldn’t fight

the reluctant curl of my lips. Lennon wrapped her arms around Tarryn, the two of them squeezing each other until I was sure one or both would pass out. Dylan stood by, grinning with an affection I loved him for.

The dude was hopelessly devoted to my sister, and anything that made her happy was good enough for him. It was the way it should always be, and I was glad my sister had found herself a man I didn't feel the need to dig a ditch for.

But now, Lennon was dragging Tarryn to a table, while Dylan hung back and chatting with a couple of his musician buddies. Mom and Dad found themselves at a table with Sammy, chatting about who the fuck knew what. Food was going to be served at any minute—a buffet of shit my parents, Dylan's parents, and whoever else had slaved over—and I knew there was only one thing left for me to do.

Thank God for open bars.

“This DJ sucks,” I mumbled to the bartender.

“Not one of the better ones I've heard—that's for damn sure,” he agreed, shooting the DJ a killer stink eye.

“This guy I know, Matt ... he got married a while back, and he had one awesome fuckin' DJ,” I said, staring into my glass of Jack like it was going to tell my fortune. “I mean ... he's divorced now, but, you know ...”

I sipped at the drink, glancing toward my sister, her fiancé, and all their rock-star pals. It was a new life for her, one I wasn't sure I was even privy to, and whose fault was that anyway? Not Lennon's, and it certainly wasn't Dylan's either.

No, it was my fault. I was the one who'd left. I was the one who'd decided to take a chance up in Connecticut. I was the one who had driven the wedge between my family and myself, and why was it bothering me so goddamn much now?

“Hey, what do you have on tap?”

I turned at the sound of Tarryn's voice and watched as the dude behind the bar stared directly at her tits.

"Hey." I snapped my fingers repeatedly in front of his face until he acknowledged me. "She asked you a fuckin' question."

"O-oh, right," the guy stammered, stunned and stupefied.

He acted like he'd never seen a nice rack before in all his forty, maybe fifty, years on this planet, and it was pissing me off.

It was really too bad too.

Who the hell was I supposed to talk to now?

Tarryn awkwardly repeated her question, and the dude listed off the few beers he had on tap. She decided on Coors Light, although she said she preferred Miller, and I stared into my nearly empty glass, wondering how I was going to get a refill with this guy now on my shit list.

"Thanks," Tarryn said as the bartender handed her a tall glass.

"You're that actress, right?" he asked, suddenly finding his tongue and the ability to speak.

Tarryn smiled in a way that looked painful. "Yeah ... that's me," she replied.

"I love your show."

"Thank you so much!" she exclaimed, sounding too phony to be genuine.

All he could manage was a smile, lowering his gaze back to her cleavage momentarily before pretending to work at lining up some glasses behind the bar. I had an idea of what he had been thinking while staring at her chest. Imagining them like he'd seen on his TV screen. Picturing himself with her instead of that dude I had seen at the airport. It was hard not to when it was right there for all to see on TV and several streaming services.

But that didn't mean I liked this dude staring at her like that.

Tarryn didn't walk away though. She lingered beside me, holding her glass and slowly sipping at the beer's foamy head. I wondered if I should be the one to walk away first, if I should go and sit with my parents and daughter until cake was served.

But before I could make a decision, she spoke. "This is weird, isn't it?"

I glanced over my shoulder at the room, alive with guests dancing and chattering away about God knew what. I didn't know what the hell she might've been referring to, so I shrugged.

"What do you mean?"

"You know ..."

I didn't, but I also didn't need to say as much for her to clarify.

"Lennon getting married."

"It's not that weird," I disagreed as the bartender took my glass and gave me a refill without me even asking.

I guessed I could forgive his douchebaggery, but just this once.

"It's weird that ..."

Her words faded to nothing, and I glanced at her to find her eyes searching the contents of her glass, just like I had earlier.

And now, I was thinking something might actually be wrong.

Sighing and feeling the moral obligation to ask, I said, "What?"

"Nothing. You don't want to hear it."

"No, come on," I replied, accepting the full glass from the dick bartender and turning to stand parallel to her.

She lifted her crystalline eyes to mine and rolled them away just as quickly. "I'm just missing so much," she said, her voice cracking at the tail end of her confession.

"Well, of course you are, Tarryn. You live ten thousand miles away. You're gonna miss some shit. It's just how it is."

Was it the most sensitive thing I could've said? No. But I never said I was a touchy-feely kind of guy, and I'd rather speak the truth than dance around it.

Still, I could tell my words stung as she swallowed a heavy gulp of beer and blinked back a fresh wash of tears. "No, I-I know that. But ... I miss being here. I miss my best friend. I miss going to the beach and all the shitty fast-food places I don't have overseas, and ..." She wilted with a sigh, shriveling within that killer red dress and pressing her bare back against the bar. "I'm just homesick, I guess."

Thinking back on my earlier thoughts, I spared a moment to believe that, hey, maybe this girl—this *woman*—and I weren't so different after all. Because that was exactly what I was—homesick. I hated that there were things I was missing out on, the things that were moving on without me. That there was an entire world that existed without me in it. It ached and sucked the energy right out of me, and as unbelievable as it was, Tarryn seemed to get it.

But then she said, "And between you and me, I'm a little jealous."

"*Jealous?*" I didn't bother to bite back my snort. "Jesus Christ, Tarryn. What the hell could you, of *all* people, possibly be jealous of?"

She stared at me, eyes hard and features unmoving. The shitty DJ thumped the rhythm of my heart as I stared right back, almost as if daring her to justify that statement.

She was jealous? The woman had more money than she knew what to do with. She owned a condo in New York and an apartment in Scotland. She had a killer career that was going to carry her through the rest of her life if she played her cards right.

Jealous ... I scoffed, unable to believe she'd be jealous of my sister or anybody in that room.

"You know what? If you don't already get it, you're not going to," she said, her tone as cold as the ice cubes in my glass.

"How about you—"

I couldn't get my words out quick enough before she walked away, marching with purpose toward the door and pushing it open to enter the VFW lobby. From where I stood, I watched my mother turn from the exit to stare at me, her head shaking.

Guess I fucked up again.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tarryn

“This place is definitely haunted,” I said, meandering down the upstairs hallway in Lennon’s house on the lake in Brightwaters. Looking over my shoulder, I grinned and added, “It’s freakin’ amazing.”

Her smile was prideful and delirious, almost like she couldn’t quite believe this was all real yet.

I knew that feeling.

“I know, right?” She ran her hand along the wainscoting. “Dylan woke up in the middle of the night and thought he heard the floor creaking. Wouldn’t it be crazy if we actually had ghosts?”

“My apartment *definitely* has ghosts,” I told her, as though I hadn’t already told her a hundred times. “I hear them in the hallway, and sometimes, I swear I put something somewhere, and it turns up somewhere else.”

Growing up on horror movies, both of us had forever dreamed of living in haunted places. Not so much by malevolent spirits, but friendly ghosts who had been left behind—or maybe they just simply didn’t want to leave.

Lennon squealed now at the evidence of our dreams coming to fruition. “Oh man,” she said, clapping her hands together. “I have to get to Scotland and see where you live.”

“Yeah, you really do,” I replied while those words—*where you live*—circled my brain until I felt dizzy.

The implication that I no longer lived here, that New York wasn’t my home, hurt more than it should’ve. And I guessed it was the lingering thoughts from the night before, at the party where I’d foolishly confessed to Connor that I was homesick and jealous of my best friend. It wasn’t the first time I had envied her. I had grown up wishing I’d been born into her family instead of mine. One selfish, shameful moment, I’d

even been jealous of her for having access to front row tickets at a concert, simply for being visually impaired. It was the wrong thing to envy. The thought never should've crossed my mind, and I scolded myself immediately. But at the time, it'd felt unfair to know that I had to pay an exorbitant amount of money for front row tickets while she simply had to be born a certain way.

God, it felt awful just to think it now.

But even that, even those horrible thoughts of envy over an unfortunate diagnosis, it couldn't compare to how jealous I was that she had found love. And not just satisfactory companionship, where the conversation was decent and the sex was okay enough and it was all better than being alone. No. Lennon had found the obsessive type of love. The *can't stop thinking about each other, nobody else compares, write an album's worth of songs, can't keep your hands to yourself* kind of love that belonged nowhere in real life and only in romance novels. Dylan was and forever would be tethered to her soul like a goddamn leech on a fresh, wet limb, and I loved it for her but hated it for myself.

Because why not me too?

That was what I had tried to tell Connor last night, but fuck him. The guy would forever be the man who looked out for me when it suited him, but never actually gave a shit about my feelings, and you know what? That was fine. I didn't need him to be anything at all but an annoying man-child who had once given me the shirt off his back.

I just wished I could stop thinking about him.

"So, hey," Lennon said, now leading the way back to the staircase meant for movies about demonic possession and black-and-white films, "I wanted to ask you ... what happened last night?"

"Nothing," I replied stupidly. Obviously, it hadn't been nothing. I had walked out of her engagement party and spent fifteen minutes crying in a restroom that didn't lock. Her friend Cassie walked in just as I was dabbing the streaks of mascara off my cheeks, and I was sure she had gone back to Lennon to tell on me.

Thanks a lot, Cass.

“You can tell me if Connor pissed you off,” she said. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“He’s not that bad,” I found myself saying, feeling the need to defend him for no other reason than I thought he was gorgeous in a manly, primitive, rugged sort of way.

“Whatever you say,” she said with an incredulous scoff.

We headed down the winding staircase and into the foyer. Turning a corner, we were back in the living room with the large fireplace and built-in bookshelves. Dylan sat on the velvet sectional, wearing a pair of sweatpants with one leg looking more deflated than the other. Beside him, propped against the couch, was the prosthetic leg he wore most times I saw him.

“Sorry,” he muttered when he noticed my gaze on the mechanical limb. “It was annoying the hell out of me.”

I waved a hand, brushing his unneeded apology away. “It’s your house, dude. Take off whatever limbs you want; I don’t care,” I said on my way to the bookshelves.

He snorted at the comment. “I’m envisioning myself as a motherfucking Potato Head right now. Thanks for that.”

I laughed as I plucked a book from a shelf, remembering a time when Dylan couldn’t stand me and I hadn’t cared much for him either. Back when he was jaded and traumatized from an accident that had cost him a leg and almost his life.

Back before he fell in love with Lennon.

“Isn’t it gorgeous?” Lennon asked, hurrying to take the book from my hands. “It’s my favorite cover. I’m using a different artist now, and even though my others are cool and all, this one is just ... wow.”

The level of awe in her voice was endearing as she stared at her seventh self-published book. She had put so much work into building her career as an indie horror-romance author over the past few years, and I couldn’t have been prouder of her for all she’d accomplished in such a short time.

“It looks really freakin’ good,” I agreed. “I actually just finished it before I flew over here. It’s probably my favorite one so far.”

Lennon laughed, rolling her eyes. “You sound like that guy over there,” she said, glaring at Dylan. “Every single one is his new favorite.”

“Because every single one gets better and better,” he pointed out with the raise of a brow. “You’re perfecting your skills as a writer, so naturally, every book has the potential to be better than the last.”

I jabbed a thumb in his direction. “What he said.”

Lennon considered the idea with a slight cock of her head as she stared at the book in her hands. I knew it had been a struggle for her to climb out of the endless monotony of her life and make something of herself once and for all. And when it had finally happened, it had been so sudden, so fast, and I could imagine how difficult it was to accept that she was, in more ways than one, living her personal fairy tale.

I told her as much shortly after, when we decided to leave Dylan to call for pizza and take a walk around the lake just outside her front door. It was a gorgeous evening, the kind you wished would last an eternity, and I stared out over the still surface of the water and pulled in a deep breath.

“You’re literally living a dream.”

“Yeah, okay,” she replied sardonically, pulling the sleeves of her sweatshirt over her hands.

“No, really,” I pressed. “You’re living here. Your fiancé is your favorite rock star and biggest celebrity crush. You’re making a nice living, doing the only thing you’ve ever wanted to do. Like”—I rolled my eyes toward her, standing just a few inches below me—”do you honestly know how slim the chances are of *one* of those things happening to someone, let alone *all* of them?”

Lennon stared out toward the lake through her dark sunglasses. Her lips twitched with the beginning of a wistful smile, and then she turned to look at me. “Well, if I’m living a fairy tale, so are you.”

I wouldn't lie and say she was entirely wrong. Most actresses never saw the degree of success I'd had in a relatively short time frame. And who knew? Maybe that had nothing to do with my ability to act. Maybe it all came down to being a pretty blonde with perky tits, a bubble butt, and a willingness to sleep around. But whatever it was, it had gotten me where I wanted to go.

But I was alone.

I was living in a strange country, which had only recently started to feel familiar despite my living there for years. I could count on one hand the amount of genuine friends I had in my corner. My mom had loved me as best as she knew how while she was alive, but she'd died a couple of years ago while my father was MIA somewhere up in Boston—last I'd heard anyway.

If Lennon was living the fairy tale, then what I had was a deal with the Devil—a perfect career in exchange for my desperate, lonely heart.

That was what I had tried to tell Connor. But fuck him and his inability to see me for anything but his sister's annoying friend.

I didn't bother replying to my best friend because what would be the point? I loved Lennon like a sister, but she couldn't understand this side of fame. The harrowing despair of wanting someone to love the person and not the character. The pain of needing someone to want me for something other than my body and the thrill of saying they'd slept with that actress or that cheerleader or that girl with the big tits.

So, I forced a grin and pointed my face to the sky.

“God, it's such a beautiful night,” I said, and that was true.

Because while October in New York was about as moody as October in Scotland, it was New York.

And it was home.

That night flew by too quickly, and soon, I was in the backseat of a four-door Mercedes, heading for JFK Airport. My flight back to Edinburgh was scheduled to board in just two hours, and the sheer thought of spending another nineteen-plus hours traveling from one country to another so soon was enough to make a gal break down and eat a Big Mac.

My elliptical was going to get a lot of use once I got back to Scotland.

Lennon had cried a thousand tears that morning, and so did I. I wanted more time. I wanted to take more naps, eat more food, see more people.

So, I'd settled on an IHOP breakfast with my bestie and her fiancé before climbing into my ride, where I cried some more.

Leaving would never get easier—I knew that. But the only other option was to never come back at all, and I would rather lose my job than ever make that choice.

And at least there was Jackson, waiting there just inside the terminal, insistent on never letting me fly alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Connor

The truck alerted nearby motorists and pedestrians with a loud *BEEP, BEEP, BEEP* as I pulled it up to the curb. Ben jumped off the back, grabbed the dirty black can, and flipped it, dumping the crap inside into the hopper.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long" blasted from the speakers of the radio. Great tune. A classic. And normally, I would smack my hand against the wheel to the beat, but today, I was too trapped in my damn head to sing along or find the rhythm.

Come to think of it, I hadn't been in the mood for much since Saturday night.

At the end of the street, the last on our route, Ben climbed in through the passenger door and buckled up, already nodding his head to the music.

"Wanna grab breakfast?" he asked as I turned the truck onto River Canyon's only main drag.

"Yeah, sure."

"I could really go for a fried egg sandwich. How about you?"

"Sounds good."

"Cool. Let's do it."

Ben was a good guy. We'd been working together for about five years or so, and I liked him enough. But he was a chatty motherfucker, completely incapable of reading the room, and didn't know when to stuff a sock in it.

"Man," he grumbled, proving my point as he pulled his phone out of his shirt pocket, "Gabby is really getting on my last nerve today."

Funny. He was about to get on mine, no matter how much I liked the guy.

“Oh, yeah?” I asked out of obligation as I headed for the transfer station in Pawcatuck to dump the trash.

“Hold on a second.”

With his teeth digging into his bottom lip, Ben’s thumbs tapped the screen furiously as he typed. As AC/DC faded into Bon Jovi’s “Wanted Dead or Alive,” I poked my tongue along my inner cheek, thinking I should tell him I didn’t care enough to hold on at all. That I’d had a shitty weekend and I just wanted to live in my own head for a while. But my mouth stayed shut, and ten whole seconds later, he tossed his phone into his lap and smacked the back of his head against the headrest.

“Let me tell you something about this woman, man,” he began, and I knew I was in for it.

Thank Christ the dump was only fifteen minutes away.

“She wakes me up this morning with a laundry list of shit to do before I head to work, right? I know she has a lot of stuff going on today with the kids—doctor’s appointment, dance, soccer, whatever—so I do everything she has written down ‘cause I’m a good guy like that.”

“Uh-huh,” I grunt to add something to the conversation, nodding.

“Then, I leave while she’s in the shower because I have a freakin’ job to do. And what does she do?” He snatched his phone from his lap and thrust it in the air. “She texts me with a goddamn essay about everything I did wrong. And then, when I don’t answer right away—‘cause, uh, hello, I’m fuckin’ *working*—she sends me a million other messages. Calling me a loser, asking why I’m ignoring her, what I’m doing ... like, give me a fucking break!”

Ben had already been married when I met him, and I couldn’t say I’d ever met his wife, Gabrielle. But I could honestly say she’d have a coronary if she knew I was aware of every aspect of their relationship—the good *and* the bad. The sweet and the sour. Every downright dirty detail. And, look, I

didn't mind being a sounding board for the guy—like I'd said, he was good people, and I liked him enough. But, shit, if I were his wife, I'd be pissed if I knew my man was airing out every load of dirty laundry to the dude he collected trash with.

“Consider yourself lucky, man. That's all I'm saying,” Ben muttered, peeling the baseball cap from off his head. “You don't have to deal with this shit.”

“Oh, no,” I replied sarcastically, “I don't have any shit to deal with.”

“You don't have *this* type of shit,” he countered, lifting his phone again before unceremoniously dropping it back into his lap. “You're not tied down to a woman who turns into a nutcase anytime she has shit to do.”

“Uh ...” I raised a brow and glanced at him across the cab. “You do know I have a thirteen-year-old daughter, right?”

Ben rolled his eyes toward the window. “That doesn't count, man. She's not even with you half the time.”

Now, that was the crap that pissed me off. Bullshit comments about my life reminded me of my mother. Downplaying my role as a father just because I shared my parental duties with Sammy's mother, not giving me credit for the shit I did on a regular basis ...

That close-minded shit wormed deep under my skin, and I didn't appreciate it.

“I'm still her dad,” I replied. “And that always fuckin' counts.”

“Hey, Mal,” I greeted the redheaded bartender as I walked through the heavy oak door and into my town's dimly lit watering hole.

“How are ya, Connor?” he asked in his thick Irish brogue.

I pulled my baseball cap off and dropped it onto the glossy, buffed surface of the bar before raking a hand through

my sweat-matted hair.

“You know, I’ve been better,” I admitted in a tone full of exhaustion.

“Anythin’ ya wanna talk about?”

The Ole Tavern was a nice place—not the seedy type of dive bars I had been drawn to in my younger years, where I didn’t care what they were serving as long as they didn’t care if the IDs were fake. Nah, this place was clean and classy. The kind of bar you wouldn’t mind taking a date to and grabbing some dinner to accompany your cocktails.

Malachy Shevlin, the regular bartender, fit the vibe nicely with his neatly pressed button-down and vest. Yet he never stuck his nose up at the scrubs like me who wandered in right off the job. He poured our drinks and made us comfortable enough to share our lives with him, and in exchange, we tipped him well.

If I was being real here, my relationship with Mal was one of the best I’d developed in this town in the years I’d lived here. And what that said about me, you could decide for yourself.

“My sister’s engagement party was on Saturday,” I began with a preparatory sigh.

“Ya don’t sound very happy about that,” he assessed accurately, and I snorted in reply before saying, “Man, I was so happy; I downed my weight in Jack and spent the night on my parents’ couch.”

Kev, a guy I knew from the bar and around town, snorted from his stool. “Sounds like my type of party,” he commented while lifting his pint glass of beer to his lips.

Mal lowered his brows and guessed, “Ya don’t care for her fiancé? I thought ya liked him ... what was his name?”

“Dylan,” I offered, then shook my head. “Nah, it’s not that; he’s a good guy. But I went ahead and got into it with Lennon’s best friend. Shit got kinda messy. I felt like a dick ... so I drank myself into a coma.”

It was the abridged version. Tarryn had spent a solid half hour in the restroom that didn't lock, and while I figured she was upset, it wasn't until afterward that my sister interrogated me about why the hell I'd made the woman cry. As if I'd had anything to do with it.

But it wasn't until Sunday night—after I nursed my hangover, snuck in a couple of therapeutic cigarettes, and dropped Sammy off with her mom—that I'd started wondering if I had in fact had something to do with it. Like, what if I had conducted myself better, if I had said the right things and asked the right questions? Would Tarryn have still been so upset?

I didn't like being the reason behind anyone's tears, and being the cause of hers was chewing away at my mind and heart in a way I wasn't willing to admit.

“Sounds like ya owe an apology to someone,” Mal suggested while sliding over my usual glass of Sam Adams.

A mumbled sound of discontent pushed through my lips as I shook my head. “Nah, it'll blow over,” I said, assuring myself as much as him. “She's already back home now anyway, and I don't have her number, so ...”

They were bullshit excuses. Tarryn being back in Scotland didn't prevent me from shooting her a message over Facebook or asking Lennon for her number. But to do so would be to admit I knew why she'd been crying after I already lied and said I had no clue. Those were confessions I wasn't sure I wanted to air ... nor was I sure Tarryn wanted me to let any of her cats out of the bag either.

“Might make ya feel better to just say somethin' though,” Mal offered with a hopeful half-smile.

Kev snorted from over the lip of his glass. “Mal, you're a sweetheart, you know that?”

As he busied himself wiping down the bar, Mal chuckled. “I just know a thing or two about leavin' shite unsaid. Better to let it out than keep it in, I say.”

Malachy Shevlin was a good guy, one I liked a lot, but that crap burrowed deep into my brain and left me

uncomfortable in my own skin long after I left the bar and headed back home to my apartment.

I kicked the door shut behind me and dropped my keys into the tray Sammy had insisted I keep to stay organized. Then, I wandered into the quiet, small living room that all at once felt too dark and lonely to be comfortable, and I plopped onto the secondhand couch to stare at the blank screen of the TV.

My hazy reflection stared back, illuminated only by the nightlight Sammy had asked me for to light her way from her bedroom to the bathroom late at night.

“Fuck, *should* I apologize?” I asked that guy in the TV.

He shrugged.

The bastard was as clueless as I was.

I had never made a secret of my feelings toward Tarryn. The woman had rubbed me the wrong way since I had been a kid with the way she waltzed into my parents’ house that first time like she owned the damn place. And just like that, she stole their hearts and took away my sister’s need for me, and, man, as a kid, I hated her for it. Absolutely despised the shit out of her and everything she brought to our family. Was it irrational? Sure, I could see that now, but at the time, my entire world and sense of purpose had felt demolished, stolen away by a four-year-old thief in pink sparkles and pigtails.

And, well, old habits die hard, I guessed. She was still a stuck-up brat, flaunting around her expensive shit and letting my sister down with every broken promise to visit and not showing up.

But none of that changed the fact that she had tried to confide in me. She was looking for a shoulder to lean on, an ear to listen, and I’d squashed any chance of that with a few obnoxious lines and a thirty-year-old grudge.

I shouldn’t have done that, especially when it maybe would’ve been nice to have someone to confide in myself.

“Fuckin’ hell,” I muttered as I pulled out my phone and opened Facebook. Because I was a stubborn bastard and there was no way I was going to ask my sister for Tarryn’s number.

But I could still send her a message.

CHAPTER SIX

Tarryn

It was three a.m. on a cold, rainy Tuesday morning in Fort Crow, Scotland. All I wanted was to be deep in a restful sleep and wrapped in my cozy, warm blanket. But what I got instead was a dreary, wet cave in the middle of the woods, a dirty and torn dress, and mud streaked across my face and through my hair.

“Tarryn, I’m gonna need you to hunker down lower,” Lori called from the dripping mouth of the cave.

“Lor, any lower, and I’ll have my face in this puddle.”

“Oh.” Her face brightened in the glow of the set lights. “Can you do that?”

Jackson snorted from beside me, kneeling like the lucky ass he was, as I begrudgingly pulled in a deep breath and bit back every curse word I’d ever learned. Moving from my crouched position, I lay flat, dipped my chin into the freezing water, and felt the bodice of my dress grow heavy and cold.

“Jackson, move forward a little. Yes, just ... no, a little more. We don’t want to *see* Rebecca. We just want—okay, stop right there. Perfect. Absolutely ... perfect. Okay. Whenever you guys are ready.”

My favorite thing about working with Jackson was his ability to reach perfection with a simple shift in mindset and a slow exhale. His persona moved effortlessly from a thirty-something-year-old actor in the twenty-first century to that of a weathered warrior, alive during a time of dragons and knights. For me though, it was a process; I needed a moment of quiet, a second to remember where I was and who I was supposed to be. But for Jackson? He just needed to blink, and he was Breckenridge.

I listened for his released breath, and then he said in the gruff, surly tone he only used when in character, “Ready

whenever you are, Rebecca.”

Filling my lungs, I closed my eyes to the cold against my chest and the water surrounding my frigid fingers.

I'm not Tarryn King. I'm Rebecca Godfrey, daughter of Samwise and Isabella, lover of Breckenridge.

I'm not in Coille Feannag, forest in Fort Crow, only miles from my apartment. I'm in Dunshire, hiding from Vareth Waywoorm, malevolent wizard of Hillspire Ruin.

Then, with an exhale, I opened my eyes to no longer see the cameras and lights, but Vareth himself, cloaked in darkness and accentuated in moonlight.

“Ready,” I said before sinking lower, as if I could melt and become one with the water.

“Action!” Lori called from somewhere in the distance, beyond Breckenridge and Vareth and the silver glow of the moon.

Breckenridge spread the fingers of his wounded right hand, signaling me to freeze, to not move a muscle or blink or even breathe, as he pointed the dagger steadily toward the man in velvet, decorated with fine, gold thread.

Unafraid of paltry weaponry, Vareth stepped toward my hero like he was strolling through a quaint village.

“I must say, I do find you to be quite entertaining,” he mused in a carefree tone that made my blood boil in the frigid water. “Truthfully, if I had the time or patience, I would happily chase you around the world three times over, all for the thrill of making you believe you might have a chance of survival. But alas, our king has orders.”

“*Your* king,” Breckenridge corrected, refusing to rise to shield my presence from Vareth’s stare, barren of morality and soul.

The cruel wizard’s burst of chilly laughter echoed off the dank cave walls. “Oh, will you stop with your pitiful defiance? Honestly, Breckenridge, this refusal is starting to make me yawn.”

“And *your* refusal to accept my mutiny is why your blood will drip from the tip of my dagger by the time this conversation is over.”

Vareth flipped a dismissive hand in a blur of flowing embroidered velvet. “Nothing but a pin prick before I remove your blasted head from your shoulders with the slightest flick of my wrist.”

It was a pissing contest, a show of who had the bigger cock, and one I’d listened to during every encounter I witnessed. But Vareth was too fast to kill while Breckenridge was too stubborn to die.

But it wasn’t Breckenridge he wanted.

It never had been.

“Why are you on your knees, Breckenridge, hmm?” the wizard asked, taking another step toward the shadowy hollow, where I hid. “Why won’t you stand and offer me a proper duel, I wonder?”

The wet seeping through my corset was no longer the cause for my goose-pimpled flesh; it was the leather shoes now easing their way toward my hiding place. Breckenridge flinched, shifting his weight from his foot to his knee as he leaned farther to conceal my form. It was honorable—his desperation to keep me hidden—but his love for me left him a fool.

Maybe I’d be better off dead.

“Ah, there you are, my beloved,” Vareth purred, crouching to the edge of the shallow lake. His gangly, thin fingers reached out to brush a lock of sodden hair from my forehead while I foolishly remained in the water despite being discovered. “What has become of you? Are my affections truly so horrible that you’d prefer living such a life with this wreckage of a man?”

As he stared into my eyes, his guard was down, and Breckenridge grasped the opportunity to aim the dagger’s blade at the wizard’s throat.

“Touch her again, and I will end your life right here, in this dark, cold, bloody hole in the world.”

Vareth shifted his gaze to look unamused at the man I loved. “Will you ever learn your threats are nothing but empty promises?” Then, with the tiniest, quickest twitch of his finger, the dagger and the man holding it were thrust back against the dampened stone wall. “Now, stay over there.”

With a frightful scream, I sprang from the water to my feet as Breckenridge’s head struck a jutting fragment of rock. His eyes rolled before closing, and his body landed, lifeless against the cave floor.

“No!”

“Yes, yes, I know. It’s horrible,” Vareth droned sardonically. “Now, come, my love. We have months of lost time to make up for.”

In a weak, stupid attempt to get away from Vareth and whatever wicked plans he had for me, I ran from the freezing water in a dress too sodden to allow a quick escape. A bony, chilly hand reached out, tied itself in the tangles of my hair, and pulled me back and to my knees.

He leaned down, pressing his thin reptilian lips to my ear, and hissed, “Careful, angel, or I won’t be as kind to your pretty body as I intend to be.”

Pain seared through my scalp only momentarily before he released me from his merciless grasp. But my freedom was brief, and with more strength than I thought possible, Vareth hauled my body over his shoulder and carried me from the cave, leaving the broken, lifeless body of my love, my Breckenridge, behind.

“And cut!” Lori called out, the abrupt crack of her voice ricocheting through the cave. “You okay, Jackson?”

The switch had been flipped at her call to stop, and Jackson was already in a seated position by the time Jason put me back on my feet. I looked to find my costar rubbing a spot at his temple, where his head had hit the rock, and my brow lowered with concern.

It hadn’t occurred to me that the hit might not have been intentional.

“Yeah,” he answered, chuckling as he shook his head, beside himself. “Stupid me forgot that, duh, rocks are hard.”

“Let’s get a medic over here to check you out,” she instructed, waving for one of the crew to come over.

Removing myself from the role was as much of a process as getting into it, and I gave my head a little jostling shake as I walked over to where Jackson was crouched. The concern for my fictional lover felt too strong to be anything but friendly, and when I knelt beside him, my hand curled behind his neck, like I wanted to kiss him.

Well, Rebecca did.

Tarryn ... not so much.

Not in that moment anyway.

“You’re actually hurt?” I asked, brushing my thumb against his thick hairline before reality took hold and my hand dropped to his shoulder.

Jackson lifted his gaze, as if to try and see the wound at the side of his head, and winced. “Gotta be honest; it hurts like a fuckin’ bitch.”

“Can I see?”

He turned his head to show off the shallow, bloody gash from where his head had made contact with the jagged stone. I reached out and grimaced, only allowing my fingers to hover over the wound.

“You don’t feel light-headed or anything, do you?” I asked as the medic came to join us.

“I don’t think so?” Jackson replied, but he didn’t sound sure.

“Let’s take a look at ye,” the medic said in his soft Scottish accent, and as his gentle hands maneuvered Jackson into the light, I gave my friend a reassuring pat on the shoulder before standing to stretch my legs and take a much-needed break from this damn cave.

On a normal day, the morning would have allowed my alarm to go off at nine, after at least six or seven hours of relatively decent sleep. But on this particularly crappy

morning, Lori had been very insistent she wanted the authenticity of the forest and cave at an early hour.

“Lights and computers can only manufacture so much,” she had said, and while she wasn’t entirely wrong, the weight of my exhaustion was beginning to pull me down harder than this soaked dress.

Proving her ability to mind-read, Morgan, our costume designer, hurried over with an identical dress, albeit dry and much more welcoming. I thanked her as we ducked behind the cover of a nearby tent to hurriedly change. I was grateful for this dress, an embellished shift that didn’t require the layers of undergarments to form a shape other than my own. Before long, I was dry and considerably warmer in contrast to the chilly morning, and I thanked Morgan profusely for saving me yet again from a bout of frostbite.

“You got it,” she said, turning away to bring the wet, tattered dress back. Then, she stopped with an abrupt, “Oh!” and dug her hand into her coat pocket. “You left this when you were getting dressed.” She pulled out my phone and handed it over as she added, “I think you got a couple of messages or something.”

“Thank you,” I replied, grateful for having something to do while we waited to start filming again.

She offered a smile and a nod before turning to leave me to my solitude, and I opened my phone to find I did in fact have messages waiting for me.

My stomach knotted at the sight of his name, no different from the way it did at the sight of his face.

Connor Jacobs:

Hey, so I was kind of a dick at the party. My bad.

Connor Jacobs:

Shit. I don’t even know what time it is over there. Hope I didn’t wake you up.

The connection between my eyes and brain struggled as I stared at his words, continually reading them until they stuck.

Connor had messaged me. Not once, but twice. Which only meant he had thought of me at some point during his night. And now, I was no longer a thirty-three-year-old woman on the set of an award-winning show she starred in, but the sixteen-year-old girl I once had been. Standing on a walkway in her bikini top and shorts, staring at her best friend's hot older brother as he demanded she wear his T-shirt *right now*, the stubble dusting his jawline and the definition in his chest giving away the man beneath the boyish sheen of sweat.

My defiant urge to despise him forever told me to ghost him, to ignore his message and forget he'd spared a moment to think about me. But the crush I held tighter than a child held a teddy bear told my fingers to not text, but call, to wake him up and hear his voice.

"Earth to Tarryn."

Clearing my throat like I'd been caught doing something I shouldn't have done, I turned to find Jackson standing beside me.

"Oh, hey, what's up?" I rushed to reply before noticing the bandage at his temple. Narrowing my eyes at the faint bloodstain seeping through the gauze, I added, "You okay?"

He groaned and shifted his gaze toward the bustling crew. "Well, apart from the mild concussion, I'm just dandy."

I gasped, immediately pocketing the phone without giving Connor's messages another thought.

They could wait ... for now.

"Seriously? Shouldn't you go to the hospital?"

He shrugged. "The medic said to take it easy for a couple of days and, if anything gets worse, to go to the hospital."

My eyes narrowed with skepticism and worry. "But you feel okay?"

"I have a little headache," he said with a heavy sigh, as if the admission was a sign of weakness. Then, with a frustrated

groan, he sat slowly on a cooler full of water bottles. “And okay, maybe a little dizzy, but otherwise, I’m good.”

“For now,” I added, crossing my arms over my chest.

“For now,” he agreed with a nod, resting his forehead in his open palm.

The network had provided a team of skilled medical personnel to always be on standby during filming for times just like this. They had come in handy—for everything from Jackson’s broken rib during a battle scene gone haywire to my sprained ankle from an erotic moment in a dark stairway. I trusted their expertise, and if they weren’t concerned by a bump on the head and a mild concussion, I had to believe they were right. It didn’t stop my mind from worrying though, and I eyed my friend through narrowed, concerned eyes as he closed his eyelids and held his aching, bleeding head.

“So, you’re out for the rest of the day?”

Jackson replied with a nod before saying, “Yeah, Lori’s benched me until I get a clean bill of health.”

“What are you going to do until then?”

He lifted his head and dropped his hand to let it hang between his spread knees. “I guess I’ll go home and go back to bed.”

“You shouldn’t be alone though,” I insisted, recalling all the medical shows I’d binged in the past and remembering the worry directed at a concussion of any degree. “Aren’t you supposed to stay awake?”

He didn’t seem perturbed though and answered with a half-hearted lift of his shoulders, “It’s not my first concussion, T, and it probably won’t be the last. I’ll be fine. Just gotta take it easy.”

“Well,” I said with a dose of finality, “I’m telling Lori I’m done for the day, and I’m going home with you.”

He eyed me through thick black lashes any woman would envy and screwed his face into an expression of amused incredulity. “Why?”

I was already walking toward Lori, leaving Jackson behind, as I replied, “Because you might not be worried, but I am.”

Then, he chuckled quietly, and I barely heard him mutter, “Yes, ma’am.”

It wasn’t how I would’ve preferred to spend my Tuesday.

My blanket was still in my apartment, in a bed I missed and longed for, and sleep was becoming a distant memory. Still, I couldn’t complain when I was showered and in a T-shirt and sweatpants a few sizes too big but comfortable enough. After his head had met the side of that stupid cave, Jackson and I had spent the morning watching crappy TV on his couch and laughing at rich people’s choices in interior design.

“You know, we could be on here,” he pointed out before stretching his mouth in a yawn that consumed his entire body.

“Speak for yourself, Stark,” I muttered with a small shake of my head. “*I* have taste. These people should’ve hired a designer.”

“Maybe they did,” he offered as he grabbed a throw pillow and hugged it to his chest. “God knows they have the dough.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I muttered, tucking my feet under my bottom and laying my head on the couch’s cushioned back.

“They probably paid some up-and-coming decorator to tell them that peacock-feathered couch would look badass in their parlor, and they believed them because they had coughed up a hundred grand to have someone tell them what to do.”

I snorted, knowing he was more than likely right. “Well, it doesn’t *look* badass,” I said.

“Oh, I agree. It looks like fucking shit. I’m just saying, rich people like anything if it costs them a buttload of money even if it looks like dog crap,” he replied, gesturing toward the hot-pink peacock-feathered sofa on the screen. “And I’m also

saying, that could be us one day, with more money than we know what to do with.”

“And *I’m* saying, speak for yourself,” I countered with a smirk, repeating what I’d said earlier.

Jackson chuckled, his sleepy smile showcasing the deep dimples in his cheeks. “Oh, get the hell out of here. Like you haven’t done stupid shit in the name of fame.” Then, he shot me a side-eye with a cheeky grin before adding, “And don’t even try to deny it. Don’t forget that I know all about the skeletons hidden in your closet.”

My lips curled into a challenging half-smile to hopefully conceal the panicked gallop of my heart. “Oh, are we having a pissing contest now? Because you know I’ll win.”

With a good-natured laugh, he tossed the pillow in my direction. “I wouldn’t even think of it,” he said. “Besides, I can count the notches in my belt on one hand, and you’re, what? In the triple digits?”

If the comment had left the lips of any other man, I would’ve slapped him for shaming my sexuality and the choices I’d made in my life before and after my path to stardom—not to mention, the choices I hadn’t made at all. But Jackson’s path hadn’t been much different, and our tally of secrets were equal to each other’s. We joked about them easily even if the discomfort they brought chilled our beds at night.

I threw the pillow back.

“Oh, please.” I snickered with an eye roll. “Your train left the single-digit station before you entered your first drama class.”

He released a wistful, forced sigh at that and turned his gaze to the ceiling. “It’s so sad but true.”

The room fell silent, save for the eccentric millionaires and their peacock-feathered sofa, allowing our heavy thoughts to do the talking. Knowing neither of us was proud of the things we’d done while also acknowledging we’d known no other way to be who we were and to get to where we wanted to go.

Nobody had taught us otherwise ... or was it that we'd never thought to learn?

"God, I am so fucking tired," Jackson finally groaned, adding a pathetic whimper as he flopped against the arm of the plush gray couch.

I forced away the images of experiences I seldom thought about as bleary eyes glanced at my watch. "It's been about six hours since you hit your head," I announced. "I think we're safe to sleep."

"Oh, thank Christ," he grumbled as he yanked a blanket from the back of the couch to lay it over his long, lean body.

I laughed, reaching over to help cover his legs and feet. "You want me to hang out for a while before I head home?"

"Babe, I don't care what you do as long as you let me sleep," he muttered, already on the way into a deep slumber.

"Yes, sir," I replied quietly, grabbing another blanket and laying my head down on the opposite side of the sectional that was big enough for two.

We fell asleep together and woke up the same to the moon rising through the floor-length windows. After stretching his arms overhead and realizing his head didn't feel terrible, Jackson asked in a groggy, sleep-rasped tone if I wanted dinner, and realizing my stomach was gurgling with the reminder I hadn't eaten since this morning, I said yes. Chinese was ordered, and we ate on the couch where we had spent most of our day, sitting closer and closer and laughing until the lines between friendship and more felt blurred to me and maybe him too.

With empty cartons on the coffee table, I noticed his leg pressed parallel to mine, still wearing his sweatpants. I noticed the length of his neck, exposed in a rare moment with his long, dark hair pulled back in a messy knot. I noticed the accentuated bow of his upper lip and the fullness of its lower counterpart as he rubbed a crooked finger against his thickly stubbled chin. Then, with a glance toward the clock, I finally noticed that I hadn't spent this many hours with a man without finding him between my legs, not since I had been a child.

And just like that, that was exactly where I wanted him—with the assumption he wanted the same thing.

“So, hey,” I said, sliding my hand from my lap to his thigh. He dropped his finger from his chin to focus his attention on the hand lingering there on his leg. “If you want, I could stay the night. You know, if you don’t want to be alone.”

“Tarryn,” Jackson replied quietly, voice strained.

My fingers traveled the length of his thigh in a touch that hardly felt like touching at all, featherlight and barely there, yet I watched as goose bumps broke out along his arms.

“I could sleep on the couch,” I suggested, watching as my fingertips moved back up, up, up and around, now edging near his inner thigh. Near the outline of something I had felt before countless times, but never seen. Never known quite like this, never quite this close. “But I’d probably rather be in your bed, if I’m being honest.”

My gaze lifted to watch as his eyes closed and his forehead creased with ... something. Something closer to pain than pleasure, and before I could graze my fingers over the place I currently craved the most, I snatched my hand away.

“What’s—”

“Tarryn,” he interjected, using my name again but harder this time—sterner and more pressing. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, okay? I appreciate you and our friendship—”

“Friends can have fun,” I pointed out. “And if you’re worried about feelings getting in the way, don’t. I am perfectly capable of separating—”

“But that’s the thing,” he said, interrupting again but gentler this time. “The next person I’m with, I don’t want them to be just another tally mark. I’ve had enough meaningless sex in my lifetime, and I dunno about you, but I’m sick of it. And with you—”

My eyes pinched shut as I tried to keep up with what he was saying. “Wait. Are you telling me you have feelings for me?”

“No! God, no,” he said, and I opened my eyes again to stare at him as he chuckled and pulled me against his muscular, hard-earned body. “Don’t take that the wrong way either. You’re gorgeous and sweet and one of the greatest friends I’ve ever had in my entire life, but I’m not into you in any other way than that.”

For twenty years now, I had known the pleasure I could get from the opposite sex. Making out had become my favorite pastime at the ripe age of thirteen—until I’d fully understood what sex was only three years later. With more notches in my proverbial bedpost than even I’d care to admit, I thought I could tell when a man was interested in me, especially considering I had yet to be wrong. There was a first time for everything, I guessed, but being rejected by my best guy friend felt more bruising to my ego than if he were a random guy in a bar.

I flattened my hands on his chest, gently pushing from his tight embrace. “Okay,” I said, nodding and forcing a smile.

His brows pinched with guilt. “Hey, it’s nothing personal. I just—”

“No,” I said, shaking my head and standing from the couch. “You don’t have to explain yourself. It’s fine, really. It’s just that nobody has ever turned me down before, and honestly, I’m not entirely sure what to do with that, so ...”

Jackson laughed at that, an incredulous spark glinting off the icy-blue lake of his irises. “A man has never said no to you? *Ever?*”

Shaking my head and pinching my lips, I said, “Nope,” making sure to pop the *P*.

“Well then, I’ll consider myself honored to be the first,” he said, standing and pulling me in for another hug. This one I reciprocated. “Because I don’t need that shit to love you.”

“Yeah, whatever you say,” I said, squeezing his waist before letting go.

I went in search of my sneakers and purse, all the while feeling his watchful eyes on me. He said nothing though as I stuffed my feet into the black Converse or as I hoisted my bag

over a shoulder. I told him I'd check on him in the morning and blew him a half-hearted kiss, already dreading another lonely night with my computer and trusty vibrator, before heading for the door.

That was when he said, "I mean it, you know."

"What?" I turned to look at him, standing with his hands stuffed into his pants pockets.

"I do love you," he said, his voice sure and his eyes sincere.

I could count on one hand the number of people who'd ever uttered those words to my face. Sure, there were the countless fans online or in the crowds outside hotels and award shows, flinging them around like they meant something. I guessed, in a way, they did, and who was I to decide what capacity someone could or could not love me in?

But the thing was, not a single man had ever said it to my face who wasn't related to me in some way. And to hear it now did something to me, uttered from the lips of an honest man, who seemingly didn't have any interest in sleeping with me. A sticky lump clotted in my throat and nearly choked me as tears bit angrily at my eyes.

"I love you too," I croaked, immediately embarrassed by my emotions.

"Thanks for staying with me today," he said, lifting a hand to touch the gauze on his head.

I waved the comment away, like it was no big deal to sacrifice an entire day of downtime. "You would've done it for me," I replied as my hand reached for the door.

Jackson's lips curled into a smile, bringing to life the dimples in his cheeks. "You know it."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tarryn

The soft patter of snow against the windowpane filled the otherwise quiet apartment as I crossed the living room to toss another log or two into the fireplace. The spit and crackle of the flickering flames reached for my frozen fingers. If I hadn't known their intent was to melt the skin from my bones, I might've thrust my hand into their embrace, if only to warm up quicker.

The woman who owned the apartment building had warned me of this years ago when I found the place. "The old girl doesnae heat up the way the newer buildings do, y'see," she'd said on a cold day in December, not unlike this one. "Ye'll be makin' use of the fireplace for certain."

She hadn't been kidding.

Without the fireplace, I would've died of hypothermia years ago. And if not death, I definitely would've at least sacrificed a toe or two to frostbite.

My teeth chattered as I rubbed my hands vigorously just outside the flames. In seconds, a comforting warmth seeped once again into my bones, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, my phone rang.

I reached for it, nestled in my sweater pocket, and answered the moment I saw the picture of my best friend light up the screen.

"Hey!" I said, excited to hear her voice.

We texted every day, but it had been too long since the last time we'd actually spoken, thanks to things like work, wedding planning, and differing time zones.

"Finally!" Lennon exclaimed. "Did you get my call earlier?"

“What?” I narrowed my eyes at the rising flames, trying to remember if my phone had rung at all. I came up empty. “When did you call?”

“I tried to FaceTime you a few hours ago!”

A few hours ago, I’d been on set with my phone set to Do Not Disturb. I must have missed the notification that she had called, and with a groan, I told her so.

She groaned back. “I found my dress. I wanted you to be there in some form, so I had Cassie try and FaceTime you from my mom’s phone.”

It was silly to feel jealous, and it was even sillier to feel angry, but in an instant, I was both.

Why was Cassie shopping for wedding dresses with you? I wanted to ask but stopped myself before the words could form.

Cassie had never been much of a friend to Lennon in school, but in recent years, she’d become one. A good one in fact, and it broke my heart that she had, in some ways, taken my place since I’d moved to Scotland. That was where the jealousy came in.

And the anger?

I should’ve been there too.

But I hadn’t been.

I wasn’t there for a lot of things.

“Oh,” I replied, sounding breathless and quiet, as I sat on the couch. “I’m sorry. I wish I had known you were going. I could’ve—”

“No, no, no! Don’t apologize,” Lennon hurried to say, cutting me off. I could hear her smile in her tone, and I tried to smile with her. “You were busy; I get it.”

“But I could’ve scheduled the time off,” I countered, as if anything could be done about it now. The dress had already been found and bought. It was over. But that didn’t stop the disappointment and hurt from consuming my heart with an ache I felt deep in my bones.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine. But I didn’t push it further. Because what was the point?

“Anyway,” she said with excitement, “you want to see it?!”

“I mean, obviously,” I replied, forcing a playful tone while the rest of me wanted to cry.

I hated how much it hurt to miss her.

“Okay, hold on. I’m going to put you on speaker while I send the pictures.”

In that moment, my ear was flooded with a chorus of voices and clinking utensils. I glanced at the clock on the mantel to find it was eleven at night. That would make it six o’clock in New York—dinnertime. I listened as someone asked if they needed more time with the menus, and I realized Lennon was probably ending the day out at a restaurant with whoever had gone dress shopping with her.

Another experience, another celebration, another moment I was missing out on.

“Okay, I’m sending them over,” she said against the background of chatter and clatter.

“Oh, is that Tarryn?” It was Lennon’s mom, Kathy, and I stretched my lips into the first genuine smile I’d had since I’d answered the phone.

“Hey!” I exclaimed, reaching for a blanket to settle into.

“Hi, hon! Everyone, say hi to Tarryn.”

A smattering of greetings blasted my eardrum, and I laughed while trying to discern one voice from another.

“Hey,” I replied. “Who’s over there with you guys?”

“Cassie, Sammy—”

“Hi!” Sammy interjected with more enthusiasm than I could hope to muster.

“My dad and my stupid, mopey brother,” Lennon concluded before saying, “By the way, you should have the pictures.”

I did. I'd felt the phone vibrate between my palm and ear, indicating their arrival, but the mention of her stupid, mopey brother had had me immediately thinking about things outside of wedding dresses and restaurant dates. But I couldn't mention it. Lennon was suspicious enough over my occasional interest in Connor, and I didn't want to bring more attention to a silly crush that was only ever one soul mate away from being extinct.

So, I put her on speakerphone and opened the text from her.

Then, I promptly teared up and squealed, "Oh my God! Girl!"

"Don't you love it?!" Lennon's voice was tight with her excitement and joy, and who could blame her?

The dress was an angelic dream from the front with its sweetheart neckline, long lace sleeves, and flowing skirt. But in the back played a seductive contrast, dipping low to just above the small of her back, where it corseted over her butt.

And the best part?

It wasn't white, but instead a deep blood red.

"I really, really do," I said, loving how the color played against her long black hair. "Dylan's gonna love it."

"That's the idea," she replied in a singsong tone. "I checked out the bridesmaid dresses too. I haven't totally decided yet, but you guys are definitely gonna wear black."

I grinned. "I wouldn't have expected anything less."

Lennon's mom scoffed. "I tried to talk her into something more normal, but she won't listen to me."

"Leave her alone," I heard Connor mutter, and there went my heart again. Telling my stomach it would be a good time to somersault and unsettle my dinner from just a few hours ago.

"Thank you. Glad I have someone on my side," Lennon said to him. "Cassie doesn't like it either," she said, now speaking to me. "She thinks it's too dark."

"I didn't say I don't like it," Cassie defended herself. "I said, it's not my taste."

“Which is basically saying you don’t like it,” Sammy muttered. “*I love it.*”

They bickered, bouncing defenses off one another and forgetting I was there on the line. The fireplace crackled against the logs, illuminating my living room in quiet, flickering ambience, and it was beautiful and cozy, but I didn’t want to be here.

I wanted to be home.

The chatter was muffled then, and Lennon said, “Anyway, I’ll let you get to bed, okay? I just needed you to see the dress.”

“I wish I could’ve helped you pick it out,” I admitted, allowing my feelings to show just a little.

“I know,” she replied quietly, rueful. “I wish you had been there too. Honestly, I wanted to wait until next week, but you’ll only be here for a few days, and I didn’t know how to fit it in with Christmas and—”

“No, no, it’s fine,” I said hurriedly, not wanting her to feel guilty for doing what she had to do. “It’s perfect, and you’re beautiful, and that’s all that matters.”

“I can’t wait to see you.”

“I can’t wait to see you too,” I replied, laying my head back against the arm of the couch.

My eyelids grew heavy with every second that passed in the fire’s lullaby, and I said good night, not allowing for another moment of sadness or jealousy to cloud my mind.

Instead, I fell asleep in anticipation of spending a Christmas with the people I loved most.

The car pulled up to Lennon’s house on the lake in Brightwaters.

She had insisted Dylan or either of her parents could pick me up, but I couldn’t, with a clear conscience, force anybody

to wake up at six in the morning to play chauffeur.

Lennon's lack of argument had told me she agreed.

Now, I tiptoed up the porch steps to search for the key she'd left for me under the planter, only to find there were six planters, all identical to each other.

"Which one of you has my key?" I whispered to the potted rhododendrons before tipping one in hopes of winning the lottery on my first attempt, only to find nothing underneath. "Dammit."

The floorboards creaked beneath my boots as I tiptoed to the next planter while wishing I could remember if Lennon had mentioned if it was hidden to the left or right of the massive wooden door. With a sigh, I grabbed the next one and tipped it over to peer underneath, only for my fingers to slip on the smooth, slick ceramic. It toppled over, and the sound of tiny multicolored bulbs smashing against the floorboards accompanied the thunk of the pot landing on its side.

"Fuck," I hissed with a grimace, then attempted to brush the spilled soil back around the sad little tree.

"I wonder how long you're gonna fuck those plants up before you realize the door is unlocked."

In my crouched position, I whipped my head around fast enough to lose my balance and landed on my ass in a pile of dirt. My cheeks heated with cruel embarrassment as Connor slowly climbed the porch steps, a cigarette between two fingers.

When the hell did he start smoking?

For a second, I thought he might offer a hand, but that would assume Connor Jacobs possessed a polite bone in his body ... and of course, he didn't. Instead, he leaned his back against a dark wooden post, the way he used to at his parents' house back in the day, while I got back on my feet with no help from him.

"I didn't know you were out here," I said, stating the obvious. "Actually, I didn't know you were here at all."

“Yeah, well ...” He lifted the cigarette to his mouth, but before it could slip between his lips, he said, “I actually wasn’t supposed to be in New York, but ...”

“Where were you supposed to be?” I asked, brushing my ass off while my eyes remained transfixed on that cigarette, tucked between his softly puckered lips.

Conflicting emotions rose to pinch at my reddening cheeks.

I hated that he was smoking, hated that it reminded me of certain things—certain *people*.

And I hated that I found it so damn attractive on him.

He didn’t watch me as he inhaled but instead kept his hooded eyes on the lake, barely touched by the sun’s early light. Even in the cold, he wore his shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, showing off the blanket of tattoos covering his toned forearms, unburdened by goose bumps. As if he were simply too cool to be cold and his glorious body knew it.

“With my kid,” he replied, harsh and condescending, as if I were stupid to even ask.

“Sammy’s not here?”

“Nope.”

“I take it, she’s with her mom then.”

His eyes flitted toward me then, the corner of his mouth barely twitching upward. “You’re quick to catch on, huh?”

My body quaked with secondhand shivers as I watched as the shirt stretched and relaxed over his chest with every inhale and exhale. How he wasn’t cold, I couldn’t understand, but I was grateful for the eyeful of his broad, toned chest.

“Monica took her to Florida to have Christmas in Disney World with her family,” he explained.

“Ah,” I replied, nodding with a touch of sympathy.

“Yeah.”

“So ...” I swallowed, gesturing toward the front door, apparently unlocked and ready for me to make my escape. “You’re staying here then?”

“Yeah,” he replied, hardening his glare with lowered brows and a tight jaw. “Why? Do you have a problem with that?”

Shaking my head profusely, I replied, “No. I was just wondering.”

He grunted an incoherent sound, but didn’t make an effort to change the expression on his face. It was clear he was angry, but why it seemed that anger was aimed toward me now, I had no idea. Whatever the reason, I didn’t bother to find out as I quietly slipped into the house without another word. Leaving him there on the porch to stew in whatever had him in another shitty mood. I tiptoed upstairs to one of the guest rooms. Wondering how I was going to survive three days in Connor’s company and if his room was at all close to mine.

Throughout my childhood, Christmas had been my favorite holiday.

I guessed that was typical for any kid, enthralled with Santa and the promise of magic and gifts. But for me, it wasn’t so much about the gifts, and I couldn’t recall a time when I’d actually believed that a fat, oversize man was the one dropping them off under the tree.

For me, it was all about the time I got to spend with my mom. It was the one day out of the entire year she never focused on work, on herself, on whatever it was she saw as more important than her daughter. And, yes, there were lavish gifts—always. Not a moment went by in my life where I didn’t have the best and latest electronics, clothes, and accessories. But those weren’t the things I was starved for.

What I’d wanted—no, *needed*—was love, affection, and the coveted feeling of being important, and Christmas was it for me. Not even my own birthday held a candle to December 25.

I found it funny now, how the one day Mom had devoted to me was the only day I seemed to even think of her

nowadays.

And that was exactly what I was doing Christmas Eve, the first holiday spent at Lennon's home. Sitting on the porch with my arms wrapped around my knees, looking out toward the lake and at a few ducks who hadn't known to fly South. The white kind, bought as ducklings for kids on Easter, only to be kicked outside when the parents realized they'd actually have to care for them once they were no longer cute and fluffy.

Animals shouldn't be bought as gifts for children.

And sometimes, I wondered if my mom should've had me.

The front door opened behind me, and I couldn't be bothered to turn around and see who'd come out to join me in the quiet of the lake, separated from the holiday hoopla inside. It was painful to see everyone, to listen to the excitement over the wedding and the house and how great everything was for them. I was happy for Lennon and her fiancé. I knew it didn't seem like it, but truly, I was—how could I not be? But pain and hurt were selfish emotions, and that was exactly what I was.

Pained, horribly hurt, and so, so fucking lonely.

"There's no fucking air in there." It was Connor again, his heavy boots hitting the porch, coming closer and closer until he dropped to sit beside me on the step. "I swear to Christ, if I have to hear one more thing about this wedding ..."

Despite my selfish pain, hurt, and loneliness, I turned to him with a sour expression and said, "Your little sister is getting married. Would it kill you to pretend to be happy for her?"

He scowled, his brows dropping even lower, if it were possible. "You know, that's actually hilarious, coming from you, considering you're out here and not in there, jumping for joy like everyone else."

"I'm out here, thinking about my mom," I countered, using the *dead parent* card to avoid talking about my own stupid, selfish feelings.

Connor's Adam's apple bobbed with a hard swallow as his brow loosened. He looked away and uttered a quiet, "Oh."

He folded his arms over his knees and stared at the ducks, moving from the lake to a bush. They hunkered under its barren branches, nestling together to find warmth and sleep, while he propped his chin on his forearm. He reminded me then of the boy he used to be. The one who was always being scolded, the one who could never do anything right.

I tried to imagine what this wedding might be like for him. I mean, I knew what it was like for me, as the best friend pushed unwittingly to the back burner, but he was the older brother. The one who was supposed to do these things first, the one who was supposed to set an example. But here he was, sitting outside of his little sister's gigantic, renovated Victorian when he was still living in the same shoebox-sized apartment he'd been in for over a decade because he couldn't afford anything better.

It had to suck. In fact, I knew it did by the way he sighed and dug into his pocket to retrieve the lighter and cigarettes I'd seen him with that morning.

"So, when did you start smoking?" I asked him, if for no other reason than to make conversation about something other than flowers and seating arrangements.

"Funny thing actually," he said, plucking one from the pack and putting it between his lips. "My buddy Matt—you remember him?"

I swallowed and barely nodded as I said, "Hard to forget."

"Yeah, well, he dared me to try it right before I left for Connecticut. I always thought it was fuckin' nasty—still do, honestly. But I tried it that one time, and ... I dunno. There was something nice and relaxing about it, and ever since, when I'm stressed or upset about something ..." He cupped a palm around the lighter and sparked the flame. The end of the cigarette glowed orange, and he immediately inhaled, pulling in the nicotine and smoke before saying with a held breath, "I gotta light up."

A short huff of a laugh left my nose. His old buddy Matt wasn't someone you'd want to pick up habits from, and the thought of Connor being influenced by him to do anything made my skin crawl with the feeling of a thousand drunk spiders.

But there was something about the way he closed his eyes and held his breath before releasing a slow, long tendril of smoke through pursed lips that made the act look more meditative and sexy than disgusting and sleazy. The way he pinched the smooth white cylinder between two fingers and sucked painstakingly slow at the end. The way he exhaled like a sigh, dropping his shoulders and his chin. The way his lips quirked into the smallest, nearly sated smile and how he opened his eyes and looked at the cigarette in his hand with more appreciation than I'd been shown outside of an award ceremony or bedroom.

I had never wanted to be an inanimate object before in my life, but my God. If Vareth were to show up right now, I would demand he work his magic and put me in this man's mouth.

As a cigarette or otherwise.

"God, is it really that great?" I asked with a laugh, and he looked to me with an amused side-eye, looking happier than I'd seen him in years.

"Here. You tell me."

He held out his hand and offered the half-smoked cigarette, and without thinking, I took it between my thumb and forefinger. I brought it to my mouth, only momentarily acknowledging that this thing had just been in *his* mouth and so I was inadvertently kissing Connor Jacobs—*oh my God*—and slipped it between my lips.

"Take it easy. Don't inhale too much, or you're gonna choke."

My lips stretched into a playfully coy smile as I said through clenched teeth, "Maybe I like being choked."

Connor rolled his eyes, unamused, and replied, "Seriously. I'm trying to help you out here."

“Oh, thank you,” I said before taking a small, tentative puff and blowing the smoke from my lips like a seasoned veteran. “Whatever would I do without you?”

He narrowed his eyes as he accepted the cigarette back between his fingers. “You’ve smoked before?”

“Once in high school. But it was weed, not cigarettes, and I didn’t enjoy it as much as I enjoyed that,” I said, nudging my chin toward the smoke, once again between his lips.

“See?” He inhaled exactly the way he’d told me not to and said, “Poison shouldn’t be so fuckin’ good.”

“Or maybe that’s *why* it’s so good,” I considered, casting my gaze back to the snuggling, sleeping ducks. “Forbidden fruit and whatever.”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding slowly. “Maybe.”

The thick, rustic scent of herbs and menthol hung heavily in the air. I knew it was popular opinion to hate it, and maybe I should’ve, but I didn’t.

What I did hate was the memory that scent had attached itself to.

“You really shouldn’t smoke though,” I said after a few moments of silence, a contradiction to what I’d said and done just a minute ago. “It’ll kill you.”

Connor stopped mid-drag to peer at me through the corner of his eye. “We’re all gonna die of something,” he reasoned with a shrug, lungs taut and full of smoke. And yet, even as he said it, he dropped the half-smoked cigarette to the bricks at our feet and crushed it under the heel of his boot.

“Should probably get back in there before they start wondering what we’re doing out here,” he said with a smack of his hands against his thighs, then rose to his feet to pick up the cigarette butt and stuff it into his pocket. “Gotta hide the evidence,” he explained before heading back up the steps.

“I mean, at least they’d have something else to talk about,” I offered, looking over my shoulder to find him watching me from the top of the stairs.

One side of his mouth lifted in a half-smile, genuine and not at all forced. “Tempting.”

I followed him to the door, where his hand gripped the handle, ready to push it open.

But before he let us back in, he turned and said, “Hey, I was wondering ...”

Now, I didn’t know what I was thinking he’d say. In the real world, I knew it would be damn near impossible for Connor Jacobs to ask me out or even imply any intentions to one day do so. But somewhere in the most foolish parts of my heart, I believed that was what was about to happen, and my heart skipped a few beats as I answered, “Yeah?”

“Why didn’t you message me back?”

I stood there, guilty and dumbfounded, as the memory of his Facebook messages rushed in, as if I’d received them yesterday. But it hadn’t been yesterday; they had been sent months ago. How had I forgotten to reply? How had it completely slipped my mind?

“I just got busy,” I replied quietly against the hushed excitement from behind the door, feeling instantly horrible and stupid.

Connor’s eyes narrowed with a skepticism that made my clothes feel too tight and my skin itch with discomfort. He didn’t believe me—that was made evident by the doubt in his glare. All I wanted was to insist it was the truth, to go blue in the face, explaining exactly how busy I was on a daily basis. But it would only further showcase how guilty I felt for letting my job hold more importance than anything or anyone else.

“I’m sorry.” It felt necessary to add an apology, even as he shrugged.

“Whatever. It’s fine. I was just wondering.”

Then, without another word, he opened the door and hurried away toward the kitchen. Leaving me to wonder how fine it really was.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Connor

My favorite thing about Christmas had always been Sammy.

Sammy's face in the morning after finding out Santa had come.

Sammy's excitement as she opened her gifts.

Sammy's gratitude for the things I had bought and couldn't really afford.

I mean, before having her, I couldn't remember a time since early childhood that I'd even given a fuck about Christmas. But once she'd entered my life, that had all changed. Hell, a lot of things had. But now, I was angry. Sitting in a chair in my sister's living room, wondering what my daughter was doing on her first Christmas without me.

I'd tried not to care after Monica called me up to ask if it was okay to take her to Florida. That was the cool thing about Sammy's mom—she never did anything without running it by me first. That was the type of co-parenting relationship we had, and I was proud of it. And I had been proud then, too, as I told her it was fine. That the time away from Connecticut would be good, that the time with her grandparents would be nice, especially spent in The Most Magical Place on Earth.

But I hadn't realized how shitty my time without her would be.

Sammy had called, of course. First thing in the morning, she wished me a merry Christmas and told me all about the presents she'd received from Nana and Pop-Pop. Then, she called again sometime in the afternoon to ask how my time at Aunt Lemon's house was going. I told her it was fine, that I was having a good day with my family. What I hadn't said was how much I missed her, how much I hated having her across the damn country, and how bored I was in between her phone calls.

It wouldn't have been so bad if there were something to talk about other than Lennon's new house or Lennon's wedding or when Lennon and Dylan were going to give my parents another grandchild.

"It's about time one of these kids got married," Aunt Maureen chided after a little too much eggnog. "Connor sure as hell isn't tying the knot anytime soon."

I kept telling myself I was too old for sibling rivalry, too mature for jealousy, but you know what? Fuck that. Because while Lennon wasn't the one to rub it in, everybody else was, and why the hell was I supposed to just stand there, laugh, and take it like they weren't inadvertently saying, *Oh, look at Connor, the poor fuck. What a waste of air.*

"You look like you need this."

I lifted my gaze from my wringing hands to see my future brother-in-law, holding out a bottle of beer.

"You know, for a guy who doesn't drink, you sure keep a lot of booze around," I commented, gratefully accepting the frosty bottle and bringing it to my lips to take a pull.

Dylan shrugged and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Just because I don't doesn't mean nobody else can."

I raised the bottle to him and swallowed. "Good man."

Dylan shifted his weight from one leg to the other and leaned against the wall. The guy looked exhausted, and whether it was from entertaining for two days straight or simply living life with a prosthetic leg, I couldn't know for sure. Whatever the reason, I asked if he wanted to take my seat and relax for a second, but he declined with a shake of his head.

"I'm good," he insisted. "But you can bet your ass I'm looking forward to getting these people out of my house."

I snorted, turning to cast my gaze across the living room and through to the kitchen. Between his family and mine, the place was crowded and full of talk and laughter. Normally, I would've been right there with them, mingling and having a good time. But, man, jealousy is a bitter pill, and I was getting

tired of swallowing it over and over again anytime I took a chance at conversation.

“I think I would’ve been good just doing Christmas Eve,” Dylan went on, almost as if speaking to himself.

“I honestly can’t believe you agreed to both days,” I admitted. “My parents would’ve loved to host Christmas Day.”

I looked back to watch him sigh. “Yeah, I know. But the idea of doing it was nice, and in theory, I thought it would be kinda fun. But now ...”

As his words faded into the crowd, I knocked the bottle back and watched as my little sister entered the room. She turned her head this way and that, obviously looking for someone. I lowered the bottle to call her name, and she turned in the direction of my voice.

“Over by the bookshelves.” I guided her, and then she was hurrying toward us through the crowded room.

When her crappy vision finally brought her husband-to-be into view, she huffed with agitation. “There you are,” she said, grabbing his hand. “Mom wants pictures.”

“Uh, didn’t we do that already?”

Lennon rolled her eyes skyward. “That was yesterday. She wants more from today.” Then, she knocked her foot against my ankle and said, “You too. Get up.”

I stood with a groan. “You’re bossy when you host, you know that?”

“You would be, too, if you spent all night cooking for forty people,” she countered as she led the way toward the foyer.

“Uh, are you forgetting I was here last night?”

Dylan narrowed his eyes at his fiancée. “I was gonna say, Connor helped all night.”

With a flutter of her hand, she brushed our commentary away. “Whatever,” she said with an exasperated huff. “I’m stressed, okay? Leave me alone.”

We crossed the threshold from the living room into the foyer, where my parents were waiting with Aunt Maureen. The brunette woman held a phone at the ready, waiting to snap some pictures.

“It’s too bad Sammy isn’t here,” she mentioned as my family and I clumped together in front of the door, surrounded by evergreen garland.

“Yeah, I know,” I replied out of obligation.

“Just feels like something is missing from the shot.”

“Yeah.”

“Dylan, you know people. Can you find someone to superimpose her into the picture?”

Dylan glanced over my sister’s head to shoot me a confused look. “Uh ...” He turned his eyes to Aunt Maureen. “Graphic designers are kinda out of my wheelhouse.”

“But, hey, if you need a song written, he’s your guy,” Dad chimed in, clapping a hand against Dylan’s shoulder.

“But what are we going to do without Sammy in the picture?” the woman practically whined, and I bit my tongue hard enough to taste blood.

Mom interrupted and ordered her to take the damn picture. I was grateful. It was hard enough to be without my kid on Christmas, but to have every member of my family remind me of what I was missing only made it harder. The picture was snapped, Mom got her phone from my aunt, and everybody scattered to schmooze and eat and whatever the fuck else.

Me? I turned to look out the stained-glass window in the front door, and there, on the porch, I saw Tarryn, attempting to smoke a cigarette inconspicuously.

My brow furrowed immediately while my heart set off at a gallop toward panic. I patted my jeans and shirt, looking for the pack of Marlboros and lighter I always kept on me in hopes that Mom wouldn’t discover my nasty little habit, only to come up empty.

“Fuckin’ thief,” I muttered, glaring out at Tarryn and the plume of silvery smoke she sent into the air.

I pulled the door open and closed it just as quickly, so as not to allow the scent of cigarette smoke to pass into the house. Startled, Tarryn threw a wide-eyed stare over her shoulder, afraid she’d been caught, until she saw it was me. Then, she relaxed with a sigh and turned away.

“Oh, thank Christ it’s you,” she said as I headed toward the bench she sat on.

“You know”—I sat beside her and snatched the cigarette from her pinched fingers—”stealing isn’t nice.”

Her mouth fell open in a shocked *O* as I brought the smoke to my lips and inhaled deeply. Exhaling into the night, I looked up to the clear, starlit sky and wondered what Sammy was doing. If she was thinking about me. If she was having such a good time with Mickey Mouse that she didn’t think of me at all.

The kid had turned me into a sap—I knew it—but she was the exception.

“They fell out of your pocket before,” Tarryn said, thrusting a clenched fist toward me. I opened my hand, and she dropped the cigarettes and lighter into my palm. “So, really, I was doing you a favor.”

“Or you could’ve just given them back,” I suggested with a casual shrug.

“Well, maybe I wanted to smoke.”

“And you could’ve just asked,” I countered before taking another pull from the half-smoked cigarette. Then, I passed it back. She offered a tight, almost-grateful smile before slipping it between her lips.

I couldn’t say I was particularly proud that I’d allowed her in on my little habit. I wasn’t proud that I occasionally smoked at all. It wasn’t something I found to be an appealing characteristic in other people, and when others caught me lighting up and sneered with disgust, I couldn’t blame them in the slightest.

Yet something about the way Tarryn's lips touched the place mine had just been sent an electric current down my spine. And the way she tipped her head back, closed her eyes, and slowly blew a curling, tentacled cloud into the air? Man, I wasn't ashamed to admit it was one of the hottest things I'd ever seen.

But would I say it out loud?

Hell. No.

Tarryn pulled the cigarette from her lips and eyed it through hooded lids as she said, "This might be the worst Christmas I've ever had."

"Oh, cool. That makes two of us."

"It's funny. I was so excited to be here and get the hell out of Scotland for a few days and actually see people." She turned to look at me with her pretty, sparkling blue eyes, and behind all that makeup, for the first time ever, I noticed how fucking sad they were. "Did you know I don't really have any friends over there?"

My brow crumpled as I shook my head. "How do you spend years somewhere and not make friends?"

She shrugged half-heartedly. "I'm not good at meeting people, I guess."

"But what about that guy you act with?"

"Jackson?"

I nodded.

She pulled in a deep breath and rolled her eyes toward the porch ceiling. "We're friends, yeah, but only because we're forced to work together. If I had never met him through the show, he probably would have been someone I slept with once and never saw again"—she brought the cigarette to her lips again—"if I'm being really honest."

A hot, boiling rage licked at my blood until it bubbled and blistered against my skin. She had said she wasn't into him. She had said they were only friends. So, what was this shit about her hooking up with him?

“I thought you didn’t like him like that,” I mentioned, hoping I didn’t sound as jealous as I felt.

She snorted and pulled the cigarette out with her exhale. “I don’t. Well, not really. And he made it *very* clear he doesn’t like me like that either.”

“So, you *haven’t* hooked up with him,” I guessed warily.

Tarryn shook her head. “No. I tried ... well, sort of. A few weeks ago, I was sad and lonely, and I had spent all day taking care of him after he got himself a concussion. And we were just sitting there, like, having this moment—or so I thought. But he rejected me, so”—she shrugged—“I guess not.”

Before I could question what she meant by any of that, she burst out with an abrupt laugh, throwing her head back and clapping a hand over her eyes. “Oh my *God*,” she uttered breathlessly. “I don’t even know why I’m saying all of this to you right now. You don’t freakin’ care. You don’t need to hear about my stupid crap. I’m sorry. I’ll shut up now.”

A flashback to Lennon’s engagement party came rushing in. How Tarryn had tried to confide in me. How I’d been an asshole and brushed her off with some snide remarks that were—let’s be real—completely uncalled for. She had run off to cry in the restroom while I drank myself into oblivion at the bar, only to feel the guilt days later. And now, she was opening up to me again, desperate for the same connection I hadn’t noticed then at the party, and I made up my mind to not be a dick.

Or at least I could try anyway.

“You don’t have to shut up,” I said.

Tarryn glanced at me for a moment, her sad blue eyes full of skepticism before rolling away. “You’re just saying that. You don’t give a shit about me, Connor. I know that, you know that, so just—”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I interrupted, now flabbergasted and edging toward anger. “Who said I don’t care about you?”

“Uh”—her eyes rolled their way back over to my gaze—“*you* did.”

“And when the fuck was that? ‘Cause I sure as hell don’t remember.”

“I was fifteen. My cousin dropped me off at your house. You and that asshole Matt were sitting on the porch, and you said something about some girl’s boobs or ass or whatever the fuck. Matt told you I could hear what you were saying, and you said—and I quote—‘I don’t give a fuck about her.’”

She spoke so quickly, so heatedly, and somewhere in those sad eyes, I saw a residual hurt that I’d never been aware of before.

How could she remember something so clearly from nearly twenty years ago?

Or better yet, *why*?

Maybe the same reason you remember a lot of shit too.

“Tarryn,” I said, lowering my voice to nearly a whisper, “I was a stupid seventeen-year-old kid. What—”

She gave her head a gentle shake and threw the cigarette butt to the stones beneath our feet. “Whatever,” she muttered, stomping it out with the toe of her stiletto. “You haven’t exactly done anything since then to prove otherwise, so ...”

She stood abruptly and hurried up the steps to the door, leaving more questions and tension hanging in the frigid December air.

What the hell is going on?

“Tarryn, wait a second,” I said, standing just as quickly.

She stood frozen at the door, but didn’t turn around.

I lifted my arms in a shrug. “The fuck just happened?”

Her shoulders, usually held high, sagged with a heavy sadness I was suddenly so curious about. It felt unacceptable to me that she could be so pained and keep it so concealed. Did Lennon know? Did anybody?

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not a big deal.”

“Yeah, but I’m sorta getting the impression that it is.”

She shook her head, pulled in a deep breath, and rolled her shoulders back up. Like she was resigning herself to play

just another part. Then, she turned, her hands folded neatly over her flat stomach, wearing a fake, plastered-on smile.

“You already apologized, right? So, don’t worry about it. It’s no big deal. I’m just ...” She sniffed a forced laugh I wouldn’t buy even if you paid me. “I’m having a bad night. I miss my mom, I miss ... I don’t know ... a lot of stuff, I guess, and I’m taking it out on you. So, I’m sorry, okay? Thanks for the cigarette.”

After her speech, she turned again and entered the house before I could reply, leaving me to stand there on my sister’s porch with a half-empty pack of cigarettes in my hand and a lighter growing warm against my sweaty palm.

“Can’t thank me for something you stole,” I muttered before plonking my ass down on the bench we’d just left and lighting up.

CHAPTER NINE

Tarryn

“You know, when you said you wanted to hang out, I was thinking something like a movie or maybe dinner. Not ... this.”

I stared up at the glowing neon sign—Trinity Studio—above the black wooden door. I had known Jackson was looking for a little fun, but nothing about this situation felt like a good idea.

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled his sunglasses off. “What, you’re scared of a little ink?”

“No,” I slowly drawled. “I’m scared of ink that doesn’t come off with a little soap and water.”

“Oh, it’s gonna be fine.”

“No, it’s gonna be permanent.”

He flashed me a blinding grin. “Not everything permanent is a bad thing,” he said before pushing the door open.

But he was wrong about that.

Permanent meant commitment, and nothing that required commitment came without pain.

I didn’t like pain.

And I had a sneaking suspicion I didn’t like tattoos.

You like them on some people.

Shaking the thought away, I headed inside the Edinburgh tattoo shop. Jackson was already chatting with a black-haired girl at the counter. With her snow-white skin and her eyes rimmed heavily in black, she reminded me instantly of Lennon, and the torturous longing swept over me like a tidal wave.

“This must be yer friend,” the girl said, smiling at the sight of me.

“Yep,” Jackson replied, reaching out to sling his arm across my shoulders. “This is Tarryn. We’re both tattoo virgins, but we’re hoping you can change that.”

The black-haired girl grinned, and the little silver gem beside her left eye glinted in the light. “I think we can help ye both out. What do ye have in mind?”

Jackson wasted no time in pulling a folded-up piece of paper from his pocket and presented it to her. “I’d really like to do this, if it’s possible.”

My curiosity was piqued as she unfolded the paper, but when I saw the Breckenridge coat of arms printed on the other side, I couldn’t contain my smile.

“Aye,” she said, nodding her approval. “We’ll see which of the lads wants to do it, but it shouldn’t be a problem at all.”

Then, she turned to me, that little gem twinkling all the while, and asked, “And what about you, lassie? What did ye have in mind?”

Jackson glanced at me with a smile that was almost apologetic and said, “If you really don’t want to do this, it’s okay. Don’t feel pressured.”

And the thing was, for as long as I could remember, tattoos terrified me. The thought of permanently imprinting something on my body was more of a commitment than I thought I could ever handle—not unlike how I viewed everything else. What if I later decided I hated the tattoo or husband or breast implants? Sure, I could reverse all those things, in one way or another, but the scars would always remain. The memories. The pain. And was any of it worth it?

Well, I couldn’t answer that question myself, but my mother would always tell me it wasn’t—none of it.

How she had truly expected me to take that, I wouldn’t ever know. But what I assumed was this: she regretted my father, me, and everything else that tied her down.

And that was why she'd spent the rest of her remaining days in Florida, on the coast in Miami and far away from everything permanent in her life.

You couldn't experience that type of abandonment and not be affected by it. And how it'd forced its influence on me was by killing every desire I'd ever had to affix anything permanent into my life, apart from Lennon. Nothing else was worth my time, and nothing else was worth the effort.

So, I was surprised to find myself smiling at the black-haired girl with the gem at the corner of her eye. "Hold on," I said as I pulled out my phone and opened Google.

Then, after I found what I was looking for, I turned the screen toward her, and she nodded.

"Not a problem at all," she said as she walked toward a black velvet curtain. "Both of you can just follow me back here, and we'll get started."

"What I was most surprised by was how much it didn't hurt."

Jackson reached across the table for the basket of fries—excuse me, *chips*—and pulled it toward him.

"Oh, it hurt me," I said with an incredulous laugh. "But I didn't hate it."

"Honestly, I already want another," he replied, plucking out a chip and popping it into his mouth. "But Lori's already gonna kill us as it is."

"Why?" I took a bite of my sandwich and continued to speak with my mouth full. "Jason has a shitload of tattoos. Makeup covers them. No big deal."

"Yeah, but ours are fresh. They can't cover ours until they're healed."

"Shit."

Why hadn't either of us thought of that before deciding to embark on a tattoo adventure in Edinburgh?

Jackson shrugged. “It’s fine though. Mine will be covered by my shirt, and yours is on your ankle, so all your dresses will keep it hidden for a while.”

I scoffed. “Yeah ... until Lori wants us naked.” Then, I winked as I reached for a chip from the basket.

He snorted as he chewed. “Guess our hot lovemaking is gonna be put on hold for a while.”

He was kidding, obviously, and I knew I should’ve laughed with him. But the mention heated my face with a furious blush as I remembered that time in his apartment. We hadn’t spoken about it since then. It had been brushed under the rug, like it hadn’t happened at all, but I remembered—hell, how could *he* forget?

The drifting of his laughter and the wilting of his smile told me he hadn’t.

“Hey,” he said in a gruff, hushed tone. “I know what you’re thinking, and it’s not a big deal, okay?”

I sniffed an awkward, clipped laugh. “Then, you’d be the first friend to not be weirded out by me coming on to them.”

“T, you’re not the first girl friend I’ve had come on to me.”

My eyes met his with incredulity. “But the first you’ve rejected,” I guessed, keeping my lips in a flat line.

To my surprise, he shook his head. “Definitely not the first.”

There was something he wasn’t telling me. Something hiding beneath the surface of his sincere expression and rugged exterior. The man was gorgeous—one of the hottest I’d ever seen—and I knew he used his looks and body more than his heart, just like me. But something in his expression told me there was more to it than that, and I cocked my head, meeting his eyes with skepticism and curiosity.

“What are you not telling me?” I asked point-blank.

Jackson pushed the basket of chips away to fold his hands against the table. Then, he hung his head and parted his lips with a heavy, weighted sigh. His demeanor made me nervous,

and I watched while a knot tightened somewhere in my gut, squeezing around the chips and beer we'd just had.

"I wanna tell you something," he nearly whispered. "But you have to promise not to tell anyone."

"Sure," I replied as my head jittered with a nod.

His soft eyes met mine with a stern warning. "I'm serious, Tarryn. You can't tell a fucking soul, okay? Not even Lennon."

My forehead crumpled with concern. There wasn't anything I hadn't told Lennon, and she told me everything. How serious could this really be if I couldn't even tell her?

"Okay," I assured him. "I won't say anything to anyone."

The air left his lungs like he'd been holding it too long. Then, he nodded and cleared his throat. "Okay. Um ..." His eyes volleyed around the pub, as if to make sure nobody else was listening. Then, he looked back to me and said in a low, hushed tone, "I'm, uh ... I'm actually not into women at all."

Every tightly wound secret, every clue I'd seen but thought nothing of over the years, unraveled with the confession. Everything made immediate sense, and I couldn't help clapping a hand against my forehead.

"You're gay," I stated in a volume to match his.

Jackson nodded, unable to meet my gaze. "Yes."

"Why didn't you say something sooner?"

Groaning, he let his shoulders sag as he wiped a hand over his mouth and chin. "It's, uh, it's kinda complicated," he replied.

"So, explain it."

With another huffed sigh, he pushed from the table and leaned back in his chair. "My agent—you know, Scarlet—advised me to keep my sexuality hush-hush before auditioning for this role. She didn't think I'd have a chance in hell of landing it if they knew which way I swung, so"—he lifted a hand and let it drop to his lap—"I stuffed myself back into the closet, so to speak."

"But you were, at one point, out?"

He raised one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “Never publicly and never as an actor, but in my very personal life, yes.”

His admission crushed me in a way that made my back hunch with the weight of my secondhand heartbreak. I stared at him, my lips parted and heart aching, as I shook my head.

“Jackson ... that’s fucking awful.”

To my horror, he simply shrugged, like it wasn’t a big deal.

“It is what it is,” he replied with the tiniest hint of defeat. “Scarlet said it breaks the illusion of an overly masculine, heterosexual character, knowing that the actor playing him is into guys. And I mean, I get it, you know? I could see what she was getting at. So”—he offered a weak, lopsided smile—“I went along with it.”

“Yeah, but at what cost?” I asked, hardly able to believe this could happen in the modern world, where *acceptance* was a household word.

Jackson blew out another heavy breath. “It’s not like I’ve met anyone worth risking my job,” he reasoned. “I guess I’ll cross that bridge if I ever get there, but for now ... it is what it is.”

His secret was heavier than I’d expected, and I sat there in a crowded Scottish pub, feeling sad and horrible. The afternoon had taken a turn toward heavy, and I wished I’d had Connor’s pack of cigarettes with me to ease the tension in my bones. But I was grateful Jackson felt he could trust me. That meant something—maybe more than anything had ever meant before.

“Hey,” I said, breaking our silence.

He looked up from his empty beer glass. “Yeah?”

I offered a small smile. “Thanks for telling me.”

The smile was returned tenfold. “Thanks for not hating me.”

I rolled my eyes and scoffed. “Are you kidding me? It has been my literal dream to have a gay best friend.”

Jackson laughed at that, easing the tension and lightening the mood. “Well, I’m more than happy to accept the honor.”

What a weird day, I thought, plucking a chip from the basket and popping it into my mouth.

Between the tattoos and now Jackson’s seemingly sudden confession, I felt I had too much to wrap my head around, too much to adjust to. I wondered if he had planned it this way. If he’d asked me out and brought me to Edinburgh ultimately to spill the truth—and why?

Maybe he was just tired of carrying his secrets alone.

The thought lingered for a moment as I thought of my own secret. The one I’d never spoken aloud to anyone, not even myself. Would it help to put it out there? Would it make me feel at all better?

“Hey, so what’s with the crow anyway?” Jackson asked.

I smiled, unaware that he was apparently a mind reader, and accepted this as my opening and a sign to finally spill my guts.

“You know that old Saint Savage T-shirt you saw me in?”

He nodded, intrigued.

“Well, it’s from that.”

Amusement glinted in his eyes. “I seriously had no idea you were such a huge fan.”

I shook my head. “I told you I’m not. But ...” My lips spread into a smile while my heart ached fiercely. “This guy gave me that shirt when I was younger, and um ... honestly, the crush I have on him has probably been the most consistent thing in my life—apart from my friendship with Lennon, I mean.”

Jackson sat up straighter in his chair, face aglow with his intrigue. “Wait. You actually *like* someone?”

I rolled my eyes as a smile overtook my face. “Oh my God, seriously, I am capable of wanting someone for more than just sex, okay?”

“Hey, I didn’t say that,” he replied. “I just assumed you weren’t a long-term type of gal.”

“I’m not,” I insisted while shifting uncomfortably in my chair. “But Connor ...” I sighed at the sound of his name passing through my lips. “He’s the exception.”

“Oh, so it’s Connor, huh? And how do you know him?”

And that was how I finally spilled the truth about my feelings for Connor Jacobs after maintaining a painful silence for nearly twenty years.

No, maybe it had been longer. Maybe I had always liked him, even as a little girl, but was never aware of what my feelings meant until I was old enough to understand. I couldn’t know for sure, not when I had known the Jacobses for longer than my memory would allow. But what I did know was that my feelings for that man had stretched for decades, and no matter how cruel he sometimes was, my heart never came close to liking another because it was too stuck on him.

God, Tarryn, you’re pathetic.

That was what I expected Jackson to say by the time I was finished and the pub was starting to empty. But he only smiled—this cheesy, lovey-dovey grin that made me want to smack him—and clapped his hand over his heart.

“And he has no clue?”

I shrugged. “I honestly don’t know if he knows or not, but there’s no way I’m asking to find out, so ...”

“Uh, why not?”

I hardened my glare. “Because nothing is going to happen between us—that’s why.”

I mean, of all the stupid questions.

Jackson groaned and flattened his hands on the table. “Okay, listen to me—are you listening?”

“Yes,” I grumbled.

“So, I completely understand why you’d be apprehensive. There’s a lot on the line there—I get it. But, sweetheart, you have an opportunity here to have something potentially really,

really good and special. I mean, God, I would kill for that,” he said, and that ... that was what did it.

That was why, when I left the pub and climbed into the car with Jackson, I pulled out my phone and messaged Connor.

Because it didn't feel right anymore to resist what could be something great when one of my best friends wasn't even allowed the chance.

Me: Hey, so I got my first (and probably only) tattoo.

Connor: Hey. Congratulations on popping your cherry.

Connor: What did you get?

Me: A crow on my ankle.

Connor: Sweet. You got pics?

Me: I'll take one later.

Connor: Send it my way when you do.

Me: I will. :)

CHAPTER TEN

Connor

“Dude, your phone’s ringing,” Ben said, passing it across the truck on our way back from the transfer center.

I glanced at the screen and scowled. “It’s my sister.”

Lennon never called during work hours. She knew better, unless it was an emergency, so bearing that in mind, I answered right away.

“Hey, sup?” I asked, putting her on speaker.

“Connor, what are you doing right now?”

“Uh, dropping the trash and truck off. Why?”

Lennon sighed. “Okay. Um ... we’ll figure something out. It’s fine.”

I narrowed my eyes out the window at the cars whizzing by. “What’s fine? What’s going on?”

“Well, you know how my shower is tomorrow?”

“Yeah ...”

I was more than aware. Once I got back to my pickup, I was heading over to Monica’s place to grab Sammy, and first thing in the morning, we were heading down to Long Island for my sister’s bridal shower.

“Well, Tarryn’s flight is, like, two hours away from landing, but they had to reroute. The weather is crazy here right now, so she’s flying into Rhode Island instead. We obviously can’t pick her up, so, um ...”

I loved my sister more than I loved most people, and she knew damn well there was no way I’d be able to say no to her—no matter how much I really didn’t want to travel up to Providence with my shitty, sometimes-unreliable truck to grab her friend from the airport.

But, man, it annoyed the hell out of me to try and shoehorn something into my already-tight schedule.

“Fine,” I grumbled, pulling my cap off to rake my fingers through my matted hair.

“Have I told you lately that you’re the best?”

“Probably, but go ahead and tell me again.”

She laughed into the phone. “You’re the best brother in the entire world, and I love your face.”

“Yeah, yeah ...”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said. “Oh! And, by the way, there’s no way you’ll be able to drive down here tonight, so can Tarryn stay at your place?”

My eyes widened, and my throat tightened at the thought of Tarryn King staying in my apartment. Where I was also staying. Where there was too much seclusion and too many beds and surfaces. Sure, Sammy would also be there, and she would be a deterrent, but what about when she went to sleep?

Oh, this isn’t a bad idea at all.

“Lenny, um ...”

“If she can’t, if you don’t have the space or whatever, it’s fine. I can text her and tell her to get a hotel or something. I just figured it would be easier since you guys were heading down here tomorrow anyway.”

There was no fucking way I could get out of this. Not with a good conscience, not without my mom ripping me a new one tomorrow for allowing Tarryn to spend a few pennies of her millions on a hotel room when she could’ve spent the night in my tiny apartment with the mouse traps in every corner.

But, fuck, this was *such* a bad idea.

“No, um ...” I coughed, as if I could actually dislodge the fear from my throat. “It’s cool. She can take my room. I’ll, um, sleep on the couch or something.”

Good idea, asshole. Put Tarryn in your bed, where you’ve jerked off to the thought of her a hundred fuckin’ times. Smart.

My eyes met Ben's across the console. His features were scrunched with curiosity, probably at the sudden terror and trepidation marring my face, and I dreaded having to explain what that was about once I hung up the phone.

"Oh my God, I love you. Okay. I'll let her know."

"I'm sure she'll be thrilled," I muttered.

Tarryn made no secret of how she felt toward me. The occasional Facebook message didn't wipe away the years of our mutual distaste for each other.

Or the fact that I want her worse than I've wanted anything.

Lennon laughed. "Yeah, I know. But it's only one night."

One night is all it takes.

"Try not to kill each other, okay?"

"I'll do my best," I grumbled as I thought, *Killing her is the least of my worries.*

"What the hell do you think is taking her so long?" I grumbled, readjusting my legs and slumping further into my chair.

Sammy looked up from her phone long enough to glance at me. "I dunno," she said with a nonchalant shrug. "Maybe she's looking for her suitcase or something."

I released a long-winded sigh and raised my eyes to the ceiling of Providence Airport. "Yeah, maybe," I mumbled, wishing I were at home and eating dinner instead of sitting in this fucking airport.

As a distraction, I glanced at Sammy's phone to find a group of young girls around her age doing a choreographed dance in someone's kitchen. They were all wearing belly-baring shirts and shorts smaller than some underwear I'd seen.

My eyes narrowed, and my blood boiled as I asked, "What the hell are you watching over there?"

Sammy was unfazed. “Some girls from my school.”

I sat up straighter in my chair as the girls eyed the camera seductively, licking their lips and shaking their asses. Watching them, I felt like a creepy old man, and I shook my head with disgust.

“You actually know these girls?”

“Yeah.”

She scrolled to another video of a litter of puppies crawling all over some guy.

“Why the hell are they posting videos like that? Their parents are okay with that shit?”

“I dunno, Dad.”

Another video. This one of a pretty lady doing her makeup.

“Well, you’d better not be doing that crap,” I muttered, looking away from the phone to study the tattoos on the backs of my hands and fingers.

“Yeah, right,” Sammy mumbled. “I don’t have a nice enough body to do that stuff.”

Looking abruptly from my hands to my daughter, I scowled. “What are you talking about?”

She shrugged like she hadn’t said anything worth commenting on before saying, “Nothing. Just ... those girls are pretty, and I’m not.”

The words left her mouth like it was the most obvious thing in the world while my brows lowered, and an unknown surge of protective anger left me bristled and ready to fight someone.

“Who told you that?”

Sammy didn’t respond, and I nudged her arm with my elbow.

“Hey,” I said, raising my voice. “Who told you that you weren’t pretty?”

She answered with a jab of her elbow against mine. “Nobody, Dad. I just know—”

“Hey, guys.” Tarryn interrupted the disconcerting exchange with my daughter, and I looked up to see her looking ragged, exhausted, but undeniably gorgeous in a sweatshirt and matching pants. “Sorry. I had to—”

“Will you tell her she’s pretty?” I jabbed a thumb at Sammy, who was now complaining about what an annoying pain in the butt I was.

Tarryn furrowed her brow. “What?”

“Apparently, she doesn’t think she’s pretty,” I replied, still wondering where the hell she had gotten that bullshit from.

Tarryn’s full, glossy lips dropped open in an expression of shock as she gawked at my daughter. The reaction was exactly what I’d hoped for, and Sammy shied away from her surprise with a deep blush as she hid her face with her phone.

“Sammy!” Tarryn exclaimed without a care of who might be looking or listening. “Baby, you know you’re gorgeous, so knock that off right now.”

“No, I’m not,” Sammy insisted.

“And why the hell do you think that?” Tarryn asked.

“I’ve been trying to get that answer out of her, but she won’t tell me shit,” I said, shooting my daughter a side-eyed glare.

It was reasonable to think a thirteen-year-old girl would be reluctant to tell her dad the stuff going on in her head. Just as I hadn’t been insulted when I learned she’d gotten her period by finding a tampon wrapper in the garbage can and not directly from her. It was just the way things were, and I accepted them without an ache in my heart. But the idea that this gorgeous, tall, blonde young lady could think for a second that she wasn’t beautiful rattled me more than when I’d learned she had a crush on a boy in her class. It wasn’t supposed to be that way. She wasn’t supposed to grow up too fast, and she wasn’t supposed to dislike her appearance when there wasn’t a single reason for it.

Still, I figured Tarryn might have more luck getting answers from her, and my assumption was proven true when Sammy groaned and threw her phone into her backpack.

“Mom doesn’t let me wear makeup,” she grumbled. “And my clothes are stupid.”

I shook my head with immediate disapproval. “Uh, if you think for a second you’re dressing like one of those girls in that video—”

“Okay, listen,” Tarryn interjected, eyeing me with a stern warning to shut the hell up. “I can’t argue with either of your parents on what you can and cannot wear in public. And besides, none of it’s all it’s cracked up to be.”

Sammy dragged a scornful glare over Tarryn’s body before muttering, “At least you get to do whatever you want.”

“Baby, nothing I do is because I want to do it. All of this stuff?” She gestured over her body and face. “It’s either because someone gave it to me and asked me to put it on or they told me it’s what looked good. Nothing I do is really, truly for myself,” Tarryn replied a little too ruefully for my liking. “Well, almost nothing anyway.”

Sammy lowered her gaze and mumbled, “That’s kinda sad.”

“Yeah, it kinda is,” Tarryn agreed with a half-hearted smile. “So, maybe we could both use some fun, huh? I brought a ton of makeup in my bag, so, if you want, we can play with it tonight. If it’s okay with your dad.”

Tarryn’s eyes met mine as her lips curled into a hopeful, albeit apologetic, smile. With all that she had said and with all she kept locked inside those sad eyes, how the hell did she expect me to say no?

So, a few hours later, that was how I found myself sitting on the couch in my shitty little apartment with my chin in the hand of the woman I couldn’t get out of my head.

“Keep your eyes closed,” she ordered, holding the thin, bristly brush just centimeters from my face.

“What the hell are you going to do with that thing?”

Looking up from her spot on the other side of the couch, Sammy laughed and said, “It’s mascara, Dad,” before returning to her toenail painting.

“Why do I need that shit?”

Tarryn’s exhausted glare met mine. “Because you have lashes any woman would kill for and I want to see what they’d look like with a little mascara.”

“But you already put that other shit on my face,” I argued, thrusting my hand toward the compact of eyeshadow and whatever the hell else I’d let them slap on my eyelids.

“Just let me put a little of this on, and we’ll call it done,” Tarryn bargained.

“Actually, I think he could use a little lip gloss,” Sammy suggested.

“Okay,” Tarryn replied, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “A little mascara and a *tiny* bit of gloss, and we’ll be done, I swear.”

And, fucking hell, I let her do it. I let her stick that poky little brush on my eyes and wiggle it back and forth, and then I let her slap some goopy shit on my mouth. All because it made my daughter laugh and smile—and it made Tarryn smile too.

She really did have one killer smile.

“Voilà!” Tarryn exclaimed, thrusting her hands toward my face. “What do you think, Sammy? Is he not the most beautiful man you’ve ever seen?”

My daughter hobbled over with cotton balls stuffed between her toes to inspect my made-up face, then nodded with approval. “Absolutely gorgeous. Excellent job.”

“Great,” I grouched. “Now, can I wash this shit off my face?”

Tarryn pursed her lips with consideration, then shook her head. “I think we should all get dressed up really fancy for dinner.”

“I’m making pasta,” I replied, hardening my glare. “There’s nothing fancy about pasta.”

But Tarryn shook her head and grabbed her phone from the coffee table. “No pasta tonight. I’m ordering us all dinner from the nicest place in town.” She jabbed a pointed finger in

my direction. “And don’t think about talking me out of it. It’s the least I can do after you picked me up and let me stay here.”

“And let you put all this crap on my face,” I muttered, already trying to wipe the gloss off with my sweatshirt sleeve.

“For what it’s worth, you do look very pretty,” she said with a reluctant grin.

“I feel like a fucking idiot.”

All she could do was laugh as she looked back to her phone. And I didn’t talk her out of ordering us dinner. Not just because I didn’t particularly care to eat a simple dinner of boiled noodles and canned sauce, but also because I thought it made her happy. I thought being with us and having a good time made her happier than maybe she’d been in a while.

And you know what? As much as I didn’t like to show it, it made me happy too.

So, after she ordered filet mignon dinners to be delivered from the nicest steak house in the area, we all got dressed in our finest attire. I put on a suit I hadn’t worn in years while Tarryn and Sammy raided the four huge and completely unnecessary suitcases Tarryn had brought with her.

I made sure not to look in the mirror, not wanting to see my face with all that crap on it, but I sure as hell made it a point to look at Tarryn when I left my bedroom.

“And this kid doesn’t think she’s gorgeous.” Tarryn scoffed, gesturing toward my daughter.

But I wasn’t looking at Sammy or the dress she’d borrowed from our famous guest.

No, I was looking at the skintight, strapless number Tarryn had vacuum-sealed herself into. The one that hit mid-thigh and accentuated her hips and tits to look like something Jessica Rabbit would’ve paid to have.

And this is why she shouldn’t be here, my dick said while my brain begged him to shut the hell up.

“Connor?”

I swallowed and refocused my sights on something that wasn’t Tarryn’s thin, slender neck or the way her collarbone

dipped into cleavage that should warrant prison time.

“Yeah,” I said brusquely, clearing my throat. My eyes shifted toward my daughter, and, holy hell, I wasn’t too ashamed to admit a bout of emotion rushed in swift and hard at the sight of her. “Wow.”

Sammy laughed awkwardly, looking down at the knee-length floral dress. “It kinda fits okay, right? I mean, even though I don’t really have ...” Her hands fluttered in front of her chest as her cheeks reddened beneath the makeup Tarryn had put on her earlier.

“No, you look beautiful,” I told her. “You always do, you always are, but ...” I smiled and cleared my throat of all that unexpected emotion brought on by this silly game. “You look beautiful.”

Dinner arrived at the apartment, and the girls laughed from the living room as I answered the door in my Sunday best and face full of makeup.

The delivery guy made it a point to give me a thumbs-up and an encouraging, “Good for you, man,” before retreating down the hall.

We ate around my little dining table that I likely wouldn’t have owned if it wasn’t for Sammy, and we made small talk about the food and the ride to Long Island the next day. I couldn’t say I was looking forward to it, nor was I looking forward to helping clean up after the party the way I’d promised. But it was just another thing to do for the apparent wedding of the century, and Tarryn treated it the same.

Sammy excused herself from the table to take some selfies, wash her face, and get ready for bed, leaving Tarryn and me alone.

She glanced at me and offered a shy smile. “You’re actually a really good dad.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes toward Sammy’s bedroom door. “You say that like you’re surprised.”

“I am a little bit.”

“Gee, thanks.”

My jaw shifted from side to side as I considered the idea that she had ... what, assumed I was a terrible father? A shitty, deadbeat dad? Honestly, I didn't know what she'd thought or what would've given her that impression. It wasn't as if she hadn't seen me with Sammy over the past thirteen years ... unless she'd always assumed that was all for show.

But whatever it was, it irked me and made me wonder, *What other bullshit has she assumed about me?*

"I never met my dad."

I turned from Sammy's door to stare at Tarryn. "Never?"

She shook her head, keeping her gaze on the table. "Nope. Anytime I mentioned him, Mom would just brush it off and say something like, 'We're better off without him.' And maybe she was right—I don't know—but with her gone, sometimes, it feels like I'm an orphan ... even though I think he might still be out there somewhere. And that's a weird feeling, you know? Being an orphan, parentless ..."

I didn't know. Both of my parents were alive and well. Not only that, but I had also grown up with both of them, and despite how much I drove them crazy at times, they never kept their love for me a secret.

I couldn't say the same for Tarryn, and, fuck, that really was sad.

Feeling bold and desperately wanting a change of subject, I asked, "So, what's really your issue with this wedding?"

Startled by the question, she hesitated with parted lips and wringing hands before she said, "I think, honestly, I just want what she has."

My features softened with a different kind of sympathy—maybe even empathy too. "Dylan? Or—"

"No," she replied with a fluttery laugh, shaking her head. "I mean, don't get me wrong; the guy is hot. But, no. I'm just ... I don't know ... really, really tired of being alone."

Nodding slowly, I let myself admit, "Yeah. Me too."

"Really?"

“Yeah,” I said, planting my elbows against the table. “But it’s not just that. I’m ... I’m kinda known as a fuckup, you know? I always have been despite everything I’ve done for myself here, and it is what it is. But, as shitty as it sounds, I never thought much about it because Lennon wasn’t much better. She was unemployed, living at home, not doing a whole lot with her life ...” I laughed despite myself. “God, I can’t believe I’m saying this shit. It’s awful. I just ... I dunno ...”

“You’re jealous,” Tarryn accurately assessed.

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

She smiled with an understanding I hadn’t been aware she could feel. “Well, at least we can be jealous together.”

I chuckled and nodded while wondering what other common ground we might find if we only tried.

“Anyway”—she stood, still in that killer dress, and grabbed a couple of dirty dishes from the table—“I’ll help you clean this stuff up. It’s getting late.”

I held up a hand to stop her and shook my head. “Leave it. I’ll clean up.”

“You sure?” she asked, looking startled. “Because I don’t mind if you—”

“Nah, you can go to bed. It’s fine.”

Tarryn swallowed before placing the plates on the table once more. “Okay,” she replied. “Thank you, Connor.”

Then, she smiled before taking a couple of steps backward, watching me with every move. I waited for her to disappear into my bedroom, where she’d put her bags earlier, and then I set to cleaning up. All to prolong my eventual sleep on the couch.

All to keep my mind off the sad, gorgeous woman in my bed.

But you know what?

I could not keep my mind off the sad, gorgeous woman in my bed.

No matter how much I scrubbed the kitchen, watched TV, or tossed and turned on the couch's lumpy surface, I could not get the thought that Tarryn—hot and, as far as I knew, very available—was mere feet away in my bedroom. Irrational, insane thoughts filled my head—*what is she wearing, is she naked, what is she doing, is she touching herself*—and how the hell was I supposed to sleep like that?

This was a horrible idea.

I had known it too. I had fucking known it, but I had said yes anyway. And why? To be a good brother? To be a decent guy? Because let me tell you, I didn't feel like either when all I could think about was barging through that door and seeing if she was in fact naked and touching herself.

"I need to fucking sleep," I muttered into the dark living room, as if the command alone could force my stupid brain to shut the hell up.

My bedroom door creaked open then, and from my place on the couch, I held my breath as the patter of footsteps crossed the floor.

Did she hear me out here, talking to myself?

The bathroom door closed quietly, and I could breathe again. Then, I waited for a whole two minutes—I kept track, thanks to the clock on the cable box—for the door to open once again. I lay there, listening for the sound of Tarryn's footsteps, but they didn't come. She was waiting. Standing there, in the bathroom doorway. Was she watching me? Was she looking to see if I was awake?

"Connor?"

Fucking. Hell.

"Yeah?"

There came the footsteps, coming closer and closer until Tarryn stood at the end of the couch. Wearing a baggy T-shirt and sweatpants.

A thousand reasons for this exchange filled my head, a thousand scenarios swam through my tired, perverted mind. I imagined her crawling over me, laying her lips against mine, pulling off her shirt and those sweatpants and ...

“Um ... you’re out of toilet paper ... just so you know.”

“Oh.” *Idiot.* “Okay. Thanks.”

She nodded and lifted her hand in a wave. Then, she turned to walk away, back to my room, but the glow cast from the night-light hit on something. The image on her shirt. And I sat up abruptly, trying to catch a glimpse once again, but her arms were folded tightly over her chest, blocking my view, and then her back was to me, about to disappear into the dark bedroom.

“Hey.”

Tarryn glanced over her shoulder. “Yeah?”

“What shirt are you wearing?”

Every now and then, there were moments in your life when you just knew one of the pieces of life’s proverbial puzzle had slipped into place. A sort of knowing overcame you, a divine knowledge, and somehow, in some way, shit just started to make sense.

This was one of those.

Tarryn hesitated in the doorway, her back to me. Then, clearing her throat, she turned. “Um ... it’s just this, uh ...” Her arms dropped to her sides as she stepped toward the couch, then gestured to the T-shirt I hadn’t seen in almost twenty years.

“That’s mine.”

It wasn’t a question or an accusation. Just a simple statement, spoken in a flat tone, and there wasn’t anything else for her to do but nod.

“Yeah, um ...”

“You kept my shirt.”

I had thrust it at her all those years ago. Demanded that she put it on if she wanted to go out with my sister. I hardly

thought about it after the fact, but every now and then, I'd wonder, *Whatever happened to my Saint Savage shirt?* The thing was an ancient relic, proof that Sebastian Moore had played with another band outside of Devin O'Leary & the Blue Existence. I missed it sometimes, the way you randomly missed the lunchbox you'd had in kindergarten, and it would piss me off, not knowing what had really happened to it.

Now, I knew.

Tarryn had kept it all these years.

But why?

She just stood there, speechless, like she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't have done. I guessed she wouldn't be wrong. I'd never told her she could keep it; it was a loan. She'd stolen it from me, that little fucking thief.

"Why did you keep my shirt?" I finally asked, unable to take my eyes off it. Unable to remember that I was a thirty-five-year-old man and she was a thirty-three-year-old woman. We weren't kids, not anymore. But right then, I was. I was an eighteen-year-old, pissed that my favorite shirt had been taken when it was only meant to be borrowed.

"I don't know," she replied. "I just forgot to give it back, I guess."

"That's a long time to forget."

"Um ... do you want me to take it off?"

Yes. Take it off right here and show me what I've seen a thousand times on TV.

"No, it's fine."

"You sure? Because—"

"Nah," I said, lying back down. "I'm going to sleep."

I was so full of shit.

"Okay. I'll, um ... I'll see you in the morning."

"Yep."

"Good night," she whispered, tiptoeing back to the room.

Wearing my shirt.

Why the hell does she have my shirt?

“Night.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tarryn

Me: There's a ridiculously hot guy in the next room, and for the first time in my entire life, I don't know WTF to do about it.

Jackson: You're asking me for guy help now. This is a whole new level of our friendship, and I am here for it.

Me: Didn't I say I always wanted a gay best friend?

Jackson: You did, and didn't I say I was honored to accept the position?

Me: You did. Now, WTF DO I DO?

Jackson: Well, what would you normally do?

Me: I'd throw myself at him and hope he took the bait.

Jackson: Well, there you go then.

Me: But I can't do that with Connor. Connor is different.

Jackson: Why is he different? He's a man, isn't he?

Me: Yes, but he's different in that he's not just another man to me. He's CONNOR. It's bad enough I just made an absolute ass of myself. He knows I kept his stupid shirt, and now, he probably thinks I'm a weirdo. Or a thief. Whatever.

Jackson: Holy shit. You're actually really into him.

Me: Oh, now, you get it.

Jackson: Okay. So, my advice? Don't do anything.

Me: Oh, I'm sorry. I think you forgot you're talking to ME, the woman who doesn't know how NOT to do anything.

Jackson: No, hear me out. You stay where you are. Don't make a move. But don't make it a secret that you like him either—flirt with him, but don't seem desperate because you're not. See if he takes THAT bait.

Jackson: I mean, if you don't want to just fuck him and call it a day.

Me: I mean, I do want to fuck him ...

Jackson: But do you want it to actually mean something?

Me: For the first time in my life, yes. I really do.

Jackson: Then, trust me on this. Wait. It'll be worth it.

Affection had been a foreign word to me when I was growing up.

The first genuine hug I could remember receiving was from Kathy, and it had nearly moved my little kid heart to tears.

And it wasn't that I truly believed my mother was heartless, nor did I feel she didn't love me. She had grown up in a loveless household herself as a child, and so she had become an adult, unaware of how to effectively love a child of her own.

Maybe I made too many excuses for her—I didn't know.

Or maybe I just didn't think I could do much better if I were in her situation.

The fact was, I had been starved for human affection from an early age, and the moment I learned exactly what boys and girls could do together, I could distinctly feel that gaping chasm in my life start to fill.

Physical touch. Human contact. Feeling good.

The boys I made out with in middle school gave me that. And at sixteen, I lost my virginity, and while that experience wasn't a positive one, I had learned that those make-out sessions had the potential to be so much better.

I didn't have relationships. And maybe it was simply that I didn't know how to be in one. But I did know how to have sex, and I was good at it. It was how I showed men I cared; it was how I held control. It was how I showed my appreciation

and gratitude, and it was how I'd snagged some of the most important roles in my life—not including *Breckenridge*.

And now, I lay in bed, trying not to sneak out of this room and show Connor Jacobs just how much I liked him with my hands, body, and mouth. Because Jackson was right—what better way to really show Connor how different he was than by treating him differently?

Especially when he treats you differently, I thought as my hand flattened over the T-shirt. *Don't you owe it to him to return the favor?*

But, God, that didn't mean I wanted to. And that didn't mean it was going to be easy.

I couldn't tell you when I'd finally fallen asleep, but I woke up to a knock at the door.

“Huh ... wha ...”

I rolled over in the strange, albeit comfortable, bed to grab my phone from the nightstand. It was ten a.m. When was the last time I'd slept that late? And had I really slept through my alarm?

“Um, Tarryn?” It was Sammy. “Are you up?”

I cleared my throat and ground my fists against my eyes, trying desperately to wake up. “Mmm ... yeah, I'm up,” I called to her.

“Okay, um ... Dad was just saying—”

“You can come in,” I said, saving her from shouting through the door.

She came in then, already dressed in her knee-length dark purple dress, flannel shirt, and Doc Martens. Like a little punk right out of the '90s, and I loved it.

“Hey,” she said, smiling when she saw me sitting. “Dad wants to leave soon.”

“Yeah, of course. Um ... is there coffee?”

Sammy nodded and hurried from the room, like I'd inadvertently given her an order. I climbed out of bed and went to my bags to begin getting ready when I heard Connor from somewhere in the apartment.

“Seriously? Fuckin’ princess can’t get her own damn coffee?”

“She didn’t ask me to get it, Dad. I’m just—”

“Yeah, well, she’s not helpless. She can get her own—”

With clothes bundled in my arms, I left the room and leveled him with a hard glare. He swallowed with the realization that I'd heard, and—dare I say it—his eyes softened with the slightest hint of an apology.

“Morning,” he greeted gruffly.

“Good morning,” I replied, maintaining a hard, flat monotone. Then, addressing his daughter with the coffee cup and pot in her hands, I said, “Thank you, Sammy, but I can order myself something from that coffee shop in town.”

I hurried into the bathroom and shut the door loudly behind me. Connor and I were no strangers to petty banter and jabs that teetered on the edge of cruel and too far. But he'd never brought his daughter into it, as far as I was aware, and to hear her be on the receiving end of one of those jabs had hurt in a way that maybe it shouldn't have.

“I should’ve just fucked him,” I grumbled beneath my breath while pulling the shirt over my head and throwing it onto the floor. “He’s different, my ass.”

Knock, knock, knock.

“What now?” I muttered, grabbing my dress and holding it over my boobs before throwing the door open to find Connor standing on the other side, a cup of coffee in hand.

His eyes immediately dropped to the flimsy dress held firmly to my chest as his cheeks flushed pink. “Um ...” He thrust the mug at me. “Here.”

“Oh, am I allowed? I didn’t get it myself ... or do you want money for it?”

His eyes rolled from my boobs toward the ceiling. “Tarryn, just take it.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to feel like I’m taking advantage of you.” Okay, maybe I was laying the sass on a little too thick. “If you’ll just let me get dressed, I’ll grab my purse and—”

He stepped into the bathroom, placing the mug on the sink vanity before closing the door behind him.

I blinked up at him. “Well, if this is how you want to receive payment, I guess that’s fine too. Wouldn’t be my first —”

“Will you shut your mouth for two seconds?”

My lips clamped shut while the bathroom was sucked of every last shred of oxygen. It was a small room, only really big enough for one, and having him in there with me was too much.

Without being naked and partaking in certain physical activities anyway.

“Thank you,” he practically growled.

“You’re welcome.”

He closed his eyes and pulled in a deep breath. Like dealing with me was driving him to an early grave. Then, he opened his eyes and said, “Sammy is a really good kid.”

“I know that.”

“She also worships the fuck out of you,” he explained. “And I don’t like her treating you differently than she would anyone else.”

The snark I’d been holding on to dissipated quickly as my gaze fell to the scuffed toes of his boots. “Oh ...”

“You might be a celebrity everywhere else, but to me, you’re just Tarryn. You’re not a guest; you’re not anybody deserving of special treatment. You’re *family*. And I don’t want Sammy to treat you any differently than that. You get what I’m saying?”

Was it eloquent? Was it gentle? No, and no. But if ever there was a moment to make me want to drop that dress and throw myself at him, this was it. Because Connor saw me as more than his sister's annoying friend. He saw me as family. And that one little word had stolen the air and attitude right out of me.

"Yeah," I replied, nodding, "I do."

"Cool." He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder toward the door. "So, anyway, I'll—"

"You still brought me coffee though," I said, allowing my lips to stretch into a smile.

Connor's eyes volleyed from the mug on the vanity, then back to me, and he shrugged. "Well, yeah."

"Why? I mean, If I'm not a guest and I can just get it myself—"

"That's for Sammy," he cut me off, keeping his voice low. "I don't want *her* treating you any differently."

"But not you?"

I held his gaze, searching for the answers I desperately wanted to find. But he didn't give me the privilege. He turned too quickly, diverting from my gaze and reaching for the door.

Then, with his hand gripping the doorknob, he muttered, "Hurry up. We gotta get going, or we're gonna be late."

He left the room, leaving me to smile to myself as I drank my coffee and got dressed. Because whether Connor wanted to say it aloud or not, he knew that, in one way or another, I was different—and so was he.

The ride to New York wasn't nearly as torturous as I'd initially expected it to be.

In fact, we kind of had fun.

We played Twenty Questions until it got old, and then Sammy asked me about the show. If I could give away any spoilers, what Jackson was really like, if we were ever going to date. I laughed at that, knowing what I knew while knowing I would never spill his secrets.

But Sammy was insistent about how good of a couple we'd make.

"Everybody ships you," she said.

"Yeah, I've seen what people say online," I replied, smiling at her innocent fangirling while reaching over to scan the radio stations. "But, really, we're just friends."

"Why though?"

Connor glared into the rearview mirror. "Sammy."

"What?" she fired back at him. "I'm just asking."

"But it's none of your business," he retorted, quickly glancing in my direction.

I answered with a reassuring smile. She was a kid—one I happened to like. I could handle her interrogation far better than any paparazzi.

"We're happy with our friendship," I explained. "No reason to let a relationship get in the way."

With a quick glance behind me, I saw Sammy contemplating my answer with a furrowed brow and pursed lips.

Then, she said, "A few girls at school said you'd make a really hot couple. I kinda agree, but ... I dunno. I always kinda thought you'd be better with Vareth. Like, can you imagine? That would be a crazy plot twist."

I laughed, remembering a scene we'd recently shot in which Rebecca did actually get with Vareth—for survival and not romance, of course. The public wouldn't see that until the next season aired, and for a moment, I wondered if I should give the kid an exclusive spoiler. But I thought better of it. It would ruin the shock, and where was the fun in that?

So, Sammy plugged her earbuds in and shut the world out for the remainder of the ride to Long Island, leaving Connor

and me to fend for ourselves in the way of conversation and entertainment. I mindlessly pressed the radio buttons until Connor reached over and pushed my hand away, then jabbed his rough, thick finger at a button. Van Halen's "Why Can't This Be Love?" filled the truck's cab as I glared at him through narrowed eyes.

"Keep it on," he demanded.

"What if I don't like this song?"

He snorted. "You think I care?"

"Well, you should."

"Why?"

"Because that's what a good host does."

Connor leveled me with an unamused glare, then replied, "I told you already. You are not a guest; you're family. And I don't let any member of my family mindlessly smash the buttons of my radio. Pick a fucking station and stick with it."

"Oh, but if I were a guest, that'd be okay?" I challenged with a puff of my chest.

"No."

I snickered and shook my head, looking through the windshield as we passed New York City.

"You know, this is probably why you're still single," I casually mentioned, knowing damn well I was pushing buttons better left untouched. "It's impossible for you to just relax."

"Oh, I'm perfectly capable of relaxing," he quickly snapped. "Just respect my shit, and I'll relax just fine."

I laughed incredulously. "How was I not respecting your shit?"

He mockingly jabbed at his radio buttons, then shot me a wicked glare. "That is not respecting my shit. I have an old truck with an old radio—"

"Well, obviously. Cars made in this century at least have a CD player."

"It can't take that kind of abuse," he concluded, raising his voice over mine. "Now, listen to some classic rock and

keep your fuckin' hands to yourself.”

Crossing my arms and turning to look out the window at the Manhattan skyline, I couldn't help but smirk. I would be a liar if I said I didn't love this—the rapid-fire of our banter, the way it made my heart beat fast and my lungs pump with fiery breath. It was fun, and whether Connor felt it or not, it was also hot. It turned me on. And although I wouldn't say it to Sammy, that was a big reason why Jackson—if he were straight—and I never would've worked out, past hooking up. I needed snappy wit and heated exchange.

I needed *him*—Connor—or, at the very least, someone like him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Connor

Mom threw the door open like I'd rolled up to the house with royalty in tow. She always did when Sammy came to visit, but when you added Tarryn on top of it?

Forget it.

The woman was ready to bring out the good china.

"My girls!" she exclaimed, standing on the porch in a fluttery-looking dress with her arms opened wide.

"Hey, Mom. Nice to see you too," I muttered, brushing past her to step inside and greet my father.

Dad was sitting on the couch, watching a football game and wearing his decent pants and a freshly pressed tucked-in button-down. They were the clothes he reserved only for funerals and dress-casual occasions.

Was I supposed to dress up for something?

"Uh ..." I stood beside the couch, eyes narrowed and hands tucked into my jeans pockets. "Why are you wearing your funeral clothes?"

Maybe one of his buddies kicked the bucket or something.

Dad slowly raked his eyes over my worn jeans and Pearl Jam T-shirt before meeting my gaze with trepidation. "Your mother is going to kill you if you show up to your sister's shower, wearing that. You realize this, right?"

I snorted and rolled my eyes toward the open front door, where I watched Mom group-hug her granddaughter and the woman she'd give anything to call a daughter.

"Good thing I'm not going to my sister's shower."

"Oh, but you are."

"Oh, but I'm definitely not."

"You said you would," he hissed.

“I said I’d be there to help clean up afterward. I’m not *attending*. Nobody gives a shit what I’m wearing.”

If I wasn’t mistaken, bridal showers were an outdated tradition in which women got the usually unwanted opportunity to gush unnecessarily over the bride-to-be and shower her with the things she needed to begin her life with her groom. Nobody enjoyed themselves, nobody wanted to be there, but they did it because ... societal rules or some bullshit like that.

Personally, I couldn’t understand why Lennon was even having one. She already lived with Dylan. The guy was loaded—not to mention, she wasn’t doing bad for herself either—and they had everything they needed. Their honeymoon was already paid for—because, like I’d said, the guy was loaded—and they weren’t asking for charitable contributions to whatever organization of their choice. So, what the point was exactly, I had no fucking clue.

Lennon had said it had something to do with giving Mom and Dylan’s mother what they wanted, but that just begged the question of, did it even matter what Lennon or Dylan wanted?

And anyway, why the fuck would *I* need to go to a party with a bunch of ladies and their unnecessary traditions?

“That’s all Mom said we need to be there for. To help clean up. So, why do I need to be dressed up for that?”

Dad sighed and lifted his hands in a shrug. “Hell if I know. I tried throwing on a T-shirt and jeans, and your mother had some words to say about that.”

“Well, nobody told me anything, so—”

Mom hurried inside with Tarryn and Sammy trailing close behind. She was yammering on about the caterers and when Lennon would arrive and the beautiful job the other bridesmaids had done with decorating when she stopped abruptly to look at me while Tarryn and Sammy continued toward the kitchen.

“Connor,” she said in a flat if-voices-could-kill monotone.

“Mom,” I mocked.

“What are you wearing?”

I glanced down at my ensemble. “Looks like a T-shirt and jeans to me.”

“I see that, but why are you wearing it?”

“Because it’s Sunday, and Pearl Jam kicks ass?”

She blew out an agitated breath and opened her mouth, like she was about to say something, but then she pinched her lips shut and shook her head before saying, “You know what? I don’t care; do whatever you want.”

I shot a triumphant glance toward Dad, who was now gawking at my mother as she hurried away to find Tarryn and my daughter.

“So, I can change?” Dad called after Mom.

“If you don’t want to see tomorrow,” she called back.

“Son of a bitch,” he grumbled, rolling his eyes back to mine.

“Sorry, man.”

He lifted his shoulders in a surrendering shrug and returned his attention to the game. I was about to join him when Tarryn came hurrying out of the kitchen with her arms loaded with a big basket of crap.

“Hey, you need help?” I asked, noting the way her arms shook and her back bent from the basket’s weight.

“Um, actually ...” She hesitated, like she didn’t want to admit she wasn’t strong enough to carry whatever the hell was in that thing. But then she nodded and passed it into my ready arms.

“Where’s it going?”

“The back of your mom’s car.”

“You wanna get the door?” I asked, nudging my head in its direction.

Tarryn hurried ahead, letting me outside, and then joined me on the porch to run down the walkway and open the trunk on Mom’s little Toyota.

I nearly dropped the basket inside beside a bundle of lace and flowers. “Jesus Christ,” I said, shaking my arms out. “What the fuck is in there?”

“The shower favors,” Tarryn explained, rolling her eyes toward mine. “Your mom thought paperweights would be super useful, but apparently, she didn’t realize how heavy they’d be.”

“Paperweights?” My arms felt like they’d just carried a baby elephant. “How many are there? Two hundred?”

Tarryn bit back her laughter. “Um ... eighty, I think. Maybe ninety.”

“Well, they’re heavy as fuck.”

She snorted. “No kidding.”

I rubbed a hand along one of my biceps. “And it’s been a few days since I got to the gym, so ...”

“Oh, right,” Tarryn said, crossing her arms and continuing to nod with exaggerated understanding. “I get it. You’re out of practice.”

“Just not used to it.”

“Sure. You want me to call my chiropractor?”

Huffing with a sigh, I brushed past her to head back toward the porch. “You could’ve just said thanks, you know.”

“Do you want me to run down to the drugstore and grab some Aspercreme?”

“You’re welcome, Tarryn. Happy to help.”

I climbed the porch steps to the sound of her giggles, and, dammit, she made it hard for me to fight my smile.

“Wait, wait, wait. One more.”

Sighing, I turned on my heel and crossed my arms. “Fine,” I grunted, looking down as she stood on the walkway in her flowy, ankle-length pink dress.

Her long blonde hair, framing her face in illustrious waves.

Her blue eyes, highlighted with the softest touch of makeup.

Her lips, accentuated with a rosy color, reminiscent of kissing and making out and sex.

Fuck. The last time I'd stood here on this walkway with her, she'd been sixteen and foolish, wearing her little shorts and littler bikini top. I'd thrust my sweatshirt at her, unable to stomach the thought of other guys looking at my sister with her—looking at her—only for her to refuse. She'd accepted my shirt though—the shirt she still possessed—and I could still see the way it had draped over her frame then. The way it had concealed her body, protected her—the way I could and would if she'd just let me ...

I blinked rapidly, pushing away the image of sixteen-year-old Tarryn and eighteen-year-old me until all I wanted was a stiff drink and a cigarette.

“Are you okay?”

I pressed my eyes shut and swallowed before shaking my head. “Uh ... I dunno ... y-yeah, I think so.”

Tarryn came up the steps, her high heels clicking against the wooden boards, and gripped my arm with a caring touch.

Don't focus on that hand. Pretend she's not there. Pretend it's not her.

But, fuck, why are her fingers so soft?

“You sure? You got really freakin' pale all of a sudden.” That same hand released my arm and pressed to my forehead. “You're not warm, but—”

“Stop.” I brushed her away with a lighthearted chuckle to keep her from worrying. “I'm fine. Seriously.”

She didn't look convinced. “Okay ...”

Glancing over my shoulder into the house, I watched Sammy help my mom and dad with something in the kitchen. Then, I looked back to Tarryn and said, “Hey, will you tell them I'll meet you guys at the hall later? I'm gonna see if Matt wants to grab a drink while I'm in the area.”

As fast as my demeanor had changed before, Tarryn wilted in front of my eyes. Her gaze dropped to my chest, and her hands gripped her elbows as she bobbed her head in a hardly noticeable nod.

“Yeah,” she said in a voice barely audible over the sound of a passing car. “Sure. I’ll let them know.”

“Thanks,” I replied, curious and uncertain. “You good?”

In the blink of an eye, Tarryn snapped out of whatever funk she’d gotten into. She released her arms and waved a dismissive hand while nodding assuredly and smiling with those beautiful, bright white teeth of hers. She insisted she was fine, that she’d just been thinking about the stupid shower she didn’t care to go to, and I chuckled with a touch of sympathy. I told her I’d see her later and ran back down the steps to head for my truck, just to get away from her and the feelings I didn’t want to feel.

All while wondering what secrets she kept and why she wouldn’t set them free.

“Dude!” Matt stood from his barstool to clap his palm against mine. “What’s happenin’, man?”

I pulled him in for a one-armed hug and smacked my hand against his back. “Not a whole lot,” I replied, stepping back and wiping my palm, covered in the condensation from his beer bottle, on my jeans. “Just glad we could hang before I have to get over to my sister’s friggin’ shower.”

“Hell yeah!” He re-situated on his stool and patted the seat beside his. “Take a seat, man. Let’s get you a beer.”

He raised his hand, grabbing the bartender’s attention, while I slid onto the stool and lifted my eyes to the TV screen hanging at the other end of the bar. The game Dad had been watching was on, and I pretended to have an interest in it while Matt took the liberty of ordering me a drink.

This was what I needed. Time away from any talk of weddings and showers. Time away from women I shouldn't want. Just an old-fashioned drink with an old buddy. It would do me some good—I knew it—and when the bartender slid the beer into my palm, I brought it immediately to my lips and took a healthy pull. To allow the suds to assure me that this, right here, was exactly what I needed.

And for a while, it was. Matt brought me up-to-date on everything he'd been up to over the past year or so since we'd last hung out. The couple of chicks he was seeing off and on, whenever the mood struck. The new trailer park he had moved into a few months back. The restaurant job he'd gotten fired from, but managed to weasel his way back into.

The guy wasn't your definition of an upstanding citizen—far from it. But I always thought he meant well. He couldn't help that he had grown up without a mom or that his dad and brothers never gave a shit to do right by him or steer him in a better direction—it wasn't like they'd done any better for themselves. At least Matt had kept himself out of prison. It was more than I could say for his old man or younger brother.

“What about you?” he asked after catching me up on the shit show that was his life. “What have you been up to?”

“Ah, you know”—I shrugged and held my empty bottle up, silently telling the bartender I needed another—“same shit, different day.”

“You get back with that baby mama?”

I snorted at the mention of Monica, Sammy's mom. Every time I got together with Matt, this was where it went, and I couldn't say I liked it.

“Nah, man. That was a one-and-done thing—you know that.”

“Yeah, but come on. You don't think she'd be open to giving you another chance?”

“Dude.” I nodded my thanks to the bartender as he slid another bottle in my direction and took the empty away. “It was only gonna be a one-time thing. Neither one of us expected shit to go the way it did.”

“Sure she didn’t,” he muttered with a snicker, shaking his head.

This was where shit with Matt always went south. He couldn’t accept that, sometimes, shit really did happen. Sometimes, no matter how safe you tried to be, a condom slipped away, and the chick you had only planned on having a one-night stand with got pregnant. Sometimes, fate really did have other plans, and it wasn’t anybody else’s fault, and nobody was out to tie some dude down and collect child support for the next eighteen years.

Not that he could say the same.

But nobody had told him to assume that the chicks he was banging were on the pill. That was entirely on him, and that was exactly how he’d ended up with two kids from two different women.

I never liked to call the guy an idiot, but—well, let’s be honest—the guy was kind of an idiot.

It was better to put a cork in the conversation before he went on his woman-hating tirade. I liked the guy enough. I mean, obviously—I wouldn’t have seen him otherwise. We went back a long time, and he reminded me of my glory days, when we had still been in school. But it didn’t take much for us to butt heads, and I wasn’t in the mood.

So, I knocked my beer back and diverted my eyes to the TV to see that the game had ended to go into a celebrity gossip show, and there she was, larger than life.

Tarryn, on the arm of her long-haired costar Jackson.

“Are there sparks flying between *Breckenridge* sweethearts, Tarryn King and Jackson Stark?”

The beer sloshed and soured in the pit of my gut at the sight of her beside him. Not because they didn’t fit together. No, it was the exact opposite. God knew Tarryn was beyond gorgeous, and that Jackson guy? I mean, I didn’t swing in that direction, but, fuck, even I could admit the guy was hot as hell with his chiseled Disney hero jaw and muscles-on-muscles body.

How the hell am I supposed to compete with that?

The thought was swift to hit, and, man, did it pack a punch. Because who said I needed to compete with him? Who said I even wanted to?

But, okay, let's pretend I did, just for shits and giggles.

I was a good-looking guy. I was arrogant enough to admit it. Solidly above average, I'd say. Six-two, decent body, nice blue eyes—or so I'd been told.

But red-carpet material? Eh ... maybe not so much.

I was a tad rough around the edges. The beard could use a little trimming, my jawline wasn't sharp enough to slice through butter, and I'd rather die than spend my entire life at the gym—a few times a week was good enough for me, thanks. Never mind the annoying facts—that I drove a fifteen-year-old pickup, lived in a shitty apartment, and had no idea how I was going to scrounge up the cash to fill up the tank and get back home.

You can't compete with that guy, man. You just need to convince her to get her head out of her ass and date him. Hell, run away and marry the dude, have a thousand kids, live happily ever after ...

Matt snickered from beside me, drawing my attention away from the TV screen to find him lifting his bottle of beer and aiming the neck at Tarryn's face.

“Now, that's some crazy shit right there,” he said, curling one side of his mouth into an amused smile.

“What is?”

“Tarryn fuckin' King.” He shook his head and brought the bottle back to the bar. “Man, can you believe she's this fuckin' Hollywood hotshot now? Living in England—”

“Scotland.”

“Wherever!” He laughed boisterously and bumped his arm against mine. “It's just fuckin' nuts, man. Who the hell knew that slutty little girl would grow up to be this fuckin' millionaire actress? I mean, still a whore, I'm sure, but ...”

A flash of red blinded my vision as my brain kept that word on a loop—*whore, whore, whore, whore, whore*.

I was no stranger to Tarryn's habit for promiscuity in her younger years, and Lennon had told me enough of the tales of her sexual escapades in adulthood. I couldn't say I cared for it much, but, hey, her body, her choice, right? She could do whatever the hell she wanted with it as far as I was concerned ... no matter how much I'd shamefully wished she'd chosen to do those things with me.

But who the fuck was this asshole to throw around insults like that?

"Watch your fuckin' mouth," I muttered through gritted teeth, glaring at him through the corner of my eye and clenching my fist around my empty beer bottle.

Matt let his head hang as his whole body shook with an obnoxious belly laugh. "Oh man ..."

"The hell are you laughing at?"

I mean, seriously. The nerve of this fucking guy. And to think, I'd actually wanted to waste my afternoon with him.

"Nothin'," he said, shaking his head and wiping a tear away from his eye. "I just can't believe you still have it so bad for her. Honestly, it's sad. It really is."

My jaw clenched, and my chest puffed with the need to defend myself and her, but ... no. What did it matter? It wouldn't help anything. I just needed to get to the shower and forget this moment had even happened. It meant nothing, it *was* nothing, it—

"God, I can't even imagine what it did to you to know that *I* was the one who popped her cherry."

The fuck did he just say?

My mouth was dry, and my tongue glued itself to the backs of my teeth as I slowly turned to face him with the rage of a thousand warriors rampaging through my blood and guts and bones. There was no way I'd heard him correctly. There was no way he was telling the truth. Matt was a liar, a complete piece of shit, and there was no fucking way in hell he had done what I thought he had said he did. No fucking way.

“What was that?” I said in a voice so calm that it scared me.

He was laughing again, and with his scraggly beard and shaggy, mousy hair, he looked like a rat. One that reeked of booze and cigarettes and twenty years of friendship that I now realized never should’ve happened at all.

“Oh God, I thought you knew,” he said, continuing to laugh. “She tells your little sister everything, I ... oh man, this is too funny. Okay, so you know how you got out of town and moved to Connecticut?”

“Yeah ...” It hurt to keep the anger from bubbling up into my tone.

“Well”—he blew out a breath and calmed his hyena laughter—“one of the kids we went to school with—Troy or whatever—threw this crazy fuckin’ party at his parents’ place a couple of weeks after you left. There were a ton of us there, man. Me, Ricky—remember Ricky? Still crazy he fuckin’ died —”

“Yeah, it is. What happened with Tarryn?” I swallowed, urging him along with a motion of my hand.

“Okay, okay. So”—he shifted on his stool and leaned in close, like he was about to spill the juiciest gossip—“I saw her there, right, and, I mean, we all had it bad for her. No point in denying that. The girl’s been hot as fuck since she got herself a pair of tits and learned how to show ‘em off. Anyway, she was drinking a little—she wasn’t *drunk* or passed out or some shit, so don’t go thinkin’ that—and we got to making out. I asked if she wanted to head up to Troy’s room—shit, was that his name? I can’t remember ...”

“It doesn’t fucking matter what his name was,” I said before grinding my teeth so hard that I thought they’d shatter.

“Yeah, okay. Uh, so anyway”—he shrugged—“she said yes, we went up, and next thing I knew ...” He used his arms and hips to make a thrusting motion, and I fought the urge to gag.

Someone had kicked up the heat in the bar. My skin prickled with a sheen of sweat, and I was dangerously close to

throwing up. Saliva flooded my mouth at the thought of Matt—the sleaziest asshole I knew—going at it with Tarryn. I knew the rumors about him. I'd heard secondhand stories of the things he'd done to women with little proof to back it up. His alleged lack of respect. His supposed inability to listen to the word *no*.

I need to get the fuck out of here and away from him before I murder him.

I was two seconds away from doing just that. I was ready to get off the barstool and storm out the door. But then I thought about Tarryn's body language at the mention of his name, and I couldn't leave without asking.

Goddammit, I just had to ask.

“Did you”—*fuck, I can't believe I have to ask this*—“hurt her?”

Matt snorted as he brought the mouth of his bottle to his lips. “Connor, man, are you asking if I fuckin' *raped* her?”

I thought my glare did all the talking.

He sniffed a humorless laugh into his beer as he drank. Then, he said, “No, I didn't fucking *rape* her, you asshole. Now, did she *enjoy* it?” He sucked his teeth and shrugged one shoulder. “I'd love to say she did, but ... no, she definitely didn't enjoy it. Probably regrets it too. But ...” He sighed and raised his eyes to the ceiling. “At least I get to say I fucked Tarryn King. Even if she did cry and never saw me again ... at least I get to say it happened.”

I didn't kill Matt.

The touch of pride in his voice when he'd said she had cried forced me to grab him by the collar of his shirt and throw him off his fucking barstool with the threat to break his neck if he so much as spoke her name or used my number again.

But I didn't kill him.

The security guard was too quick to grab my arm and pull me out of the bar. I still wouldn't have killed him—he wasn't

worth the life sentence—but I would've happily beaten his weaselly face with the butt of my beer bottle. The apologetic look on the security guard's face told me he wouldn't have blamed me. But the guy had a job to do, and I respected that.

Plus, I had a bridal shower to get to, and I spent the short drive to the party hall in a seething rage. Thinking about his callous hands on her body. His poisonous dick inside her. The tears he had made her cry—and why? *Why* had she cried? Had she been hurt?

Fuck!

It made me so furiously angry, so sick with the regret of not being there, of not stopping it from happening all those damn years ago. And I didn't know how I could do anything about it *now*, many years after the fact, but maybe if she knew, maybe if she was aware of how I felt, it might make up for my absence. Even just a little. A little was better than nothing at all, right?

So, when I got to the party venue, I threw the door open and stormed inside with every intention of grabbing that woman and holding her to me with the promise of never allowing another piece of shit to make her cry again. I hurried down the hall, following the signs to the shower, and I knew I was going to kiss her. This was it. The moment I would make Tarryn King mine, the moment I would show her just how much I wanted her, and I was ready. I had never been more ready for a goddamn thing in my life.

Until I burst through the door with powerful determination, like I was the freakin' Kool-Aid Man, only to have every pair of eyes pinned right on me. Lennon was still opening her mountain of gifts—*what the fuck did they even buy her?!*—and she was glaring at me with a look that would've burned me alive if she'd had the power.

Cassie, one of Lennon's friends and bridesmaids, forced a lighthearted laugh. "Look, everybody! Connor is here!"

"Uh, hey," I muttered sheepishly, lifting my hand in a limp wave as my eyes found Tarryn's.

She looked as startled as everyone else. But there was something else there. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on, but, man, I was itching to find out.

Sammy—bless her fucking heart—hurried from her spot beside her aunt and grabbed my hand. “You can sit over here,” she whispered, dragging me to an empty chair between Dad and Dylan at the back of the room.

I sat down as Dylan leaned toward me and said, “Nice entrance, man. Very subtle.”

“I didn't think they'd still be doing this,” I explained stupidly.

“They've been doing this”—Dad gestured toward the spectacle at the head of the room—“for the past hour or so, we were told. We got here twenty minutes ago, just like Mom had told us, but ...”

“People bought a lot of shit,” Dylan concluded, probably wondering what the hell they were going to do with all of it.

“What the hell do you guys even need?” I finally asked, glancing at my soon-to-be brother-in-law. “You already have everything.”

He rolled his eyes and shrugged. “I thought so, too, but both our moms apparently disagreed and convinced Lennon to register at a ton of—”

“Can the peanut gallery please keep it down?” Mom called from beside Lennon's chair, and we collectively zipped our lips.

“Connor, take these outside, will you?” Mom gestured toward a pile of gifts.

It would be my fourth run to the parking lot, carrying presents to be dropped off at my sister's house. My parents' cars were both fully packed, and Dylan's was almost there with just a little space left in his backseat. A couple of the bridesmaids had offered their cars for the leftover food, but

they'd already left with my sister to unlock her front door. I stared at the vacuum, set of wicker laundry baskets, air fryer, and custom-made guitar-shaped planter with confusion crumpling my brow.

“Where do you expect it to fit?”

“Don't you have room in your truck?”

I pulled in a breath and held it in my lungs for a moment before replying, “I have Tarryn's bags in my truck. I might be able to find a little bit of space, but Sammy's gotta fit and—”

“Well, be creative. I'm sure you can find a little room between Dylan's car and yours.”

Forget creative. I needed to learn how to perform miracles in order to make all of this shit fit. Not to mention, the leftover centerpieces, favors, and cake.

“Come on,” Tarryn said, heading for the stack of gifts and grabbing the baskets. “We've both played enough Tetris to make this happen.”

I held back a chuckle, knowing damn well Tarryn hadn't played Tetris a day in her life. Instead, she and Lennon had watched me play, egging me on until I lost my concentration and screwing up any of my attempts at beating my dad's high score. But I didn't say anything as I hoisted the vacuum and air fryer into my arms and followed Tarryn outside to Dylan's BMW.

That dress did wonders for her ass. Not that she needed the help, but ... damn.

It didn't hurt that she carried herself with such poise and grandeur. I had thought to myself a number of times, while sitting against the back wall and watching the tail end of the party, that she outshone every other girl in the place. She truly was the star. And, no, I didn't mean in the way that she was a celebrity, but her confidence and charisma were set so apart from that of my sister and the other ladies that Tarryn might as well have been on another planet. One that I badly wanted an invitation to.

It struck me as weird though that she hadn't gone back to Lennon's house with my daughter and the other bridesmaids.

She stayed back with the rest of us plebeians, cleaning up and loading the remaining cars, and I wondered why.

“So, hey,” I said as she opened the BMW’s trunk and stuffed the baskets inside, “why are you still here and not with the other girls?”

Tarryn crossed her arms, rubbing her biceps like she was freezing, then shrugged as she said, “I figured you guys could use the extra set of hands.”

That was a load of horse shit. “Between my parents, Dylan, and me, we had this covered.”

She knew it too. She had hardly lifted a finger since we’d started cleaning up—
and

not out of laziness. There just wasn’t anything for her to do.

Unless it was about spending time with someone—or avoiding someone else.

“Yeah, but—”

“Come on.” I shoved the air fryer beside the baskets. “You love being honest, so go for it.”

Her chest lifted and dropped with her deep breath while her eyes rolled toward a bright clear sky. “They don’t need me over there.”

My eyes narrowed as I closed the trunk. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know exactly what I mean.”

“I don’t, but okay.”

With the vacuum in hand, I turned from Dylan’s car and headed toward my truck. Tarryn huffed with an agitated sigh and followed close behind.

“I’m the maid of honor,” she stated, as if I didn’t know that already.

“Right ...”

“But do you think I had anything to do with any of this? I didn’t decorate, I didn’t plan anything, I wasn’t even included

in picking out our dresses—which, by the way, are fucking horrific, but what else should I have expected when Cassie is the one who—”

“You don’t like Cassie?” I lifted the vacuum and laid the box into the truck bed. “Since when?”

Tarryn dropped her arms to her sides and groaned toward the clouds. “I *do* like Cassie,” she insisted. “I just don’t like that she ... that she’s taking my place.”

We were back to this again. Her incessant fear of missing out. The feelings of inadequacy. I shouldn’t have been surprised that those feelings hadn’t gone away since the engagement party, but she hadn’t really mentioned them since. Maybe she didn’t feel like she could after I’d been such a dick and she spent the night crying in the bathroom.

“She’s not taking your place,” I assured her, resting my back against the tailgate. “But ... she is *here*.”

“I know.” She mimicked my stance, standing close beside me and crossing her arms tightly against her chest. “I just can’t help how much I hate it. Not ... Cassie, but ... just how much I’m missing out on and the fact that there are other people to step in.”

I hung my head and nodded toward the asphalt. “I get that. Living in Connecticut kinda blows, in that nobody here thinks of me anymore. They have to, like, force themselves to remember me, even for obvious shit, like holidays and whatever.”

Tarryn was silent for a moment, giving the floor to the passing cars. I glanced at her, wondering if I’d divulged too much, only to find a small, empathetic smile tugging at her lips.

“Exactly,” she said quietly.

And this could be *the* moment.

She was standing so close; her arm was a feather’s touch against mine. The scent of her expensive perfume drifted through the breeze and wrapped around me, and I could so easily lean down to capture more of it from her hair and neck.

I could hold her and kiss her and ensure that, for at least a moment, there was no such thing as being alone.

But it didn't happen.

Instead, I nudged my chin in the direction of the hall and said, "I gotta get back in there."

"Yeah ..."

"But, hey"—I thrust a thumb over my shoulder toward the truck's cab—"my pack of smokes is in the center console if you want one."

Her eyes studied my face with curiosity and skepticism, like she couldn't quite figure me out. And, you know, that would make two of us because right now? I had no idea who I was anymore or what I felt or what the fuck was happening. But she seemed to have an epiphany, and she smiled with the softest nod.

"Thanks," she whispered, and I lifted my hand to lay it against her shoulder as I replied, "Yeah. Anytime."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tarryn

Breckenridge stars Tarryn King and Jackson Stark were spotted this weekend, enjoying a coffee date at an Edinburgh café. Just a few weeks ago, the pair had been seen entering a tattoo parlor and left in good spirits. Could this be the start of a brand-new relationship for two of our favorite on-screen lovers?

The article had been sent to me by my agent, Lucy, and as I sat, having my makeup done, I stared through narrowed eyes at the picture of Jackson and me, all cozied up over a cup of coffee. It had been taken just two days ago.

I remembered the occasion well. We had been looking for something to do on a rainy Saturday and didn't want to spend the day holed away in our respective apartments. So, Jackson asked if I'd like to run out for a cup of coffee, and I agreed. We had joked around, as we always did, and had a good time catching up on the personal happenings in our lives. But what I didn't remember was looking quite like that—leaning into each other, staring into each other's eyes.

Looking like we were in love.

It was almost convincing, even to me, and I could see where an onlooker might think we were together. But we weren't. Yet that was what the world was beginning to think, and I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

“Did you see this?” I asked Jackson the moment I saw him walk by in his suit of armor.

He peered at my phone and let his eyes scan the screen before shrugging. “It's just bullshit gossip.”

My eyes rolled to his before my makeup artist instructed me to keep them closed while she dusted powder over my

face.

“Well, maybe we should ... you know ... do something to make them think we’re not together,” I suggested dryly as the powder brush swept across my forehead and down the length of my nose.

“What does it matter?”

“Seriously?”

“Okay,” the artist said, “you can open your eyes now.”

I did just that and turned my glare immediately to Jackson, who was now standing beside me with an infuriating amount of nonchalance blanketing his face.

“We’re not together,” I stated, like he needed the reminder.

“Yeah”—he crossed his arms and nodded—“and we know that. What does it matter what the rest of the world thinks?”

You know what? I’d normally agree. It didn’t matter what the world thought. They could all collectively believe I was sleeping with every man under the sun before going home to share my bed with Jackson Stark, and I’d never bat an eye at it. What people, those I didn’t know or care about, thought of me had never bothered me, not once, and I wasn’t about to start now.

I mean, if that were the case, I was in the wrong profession.

But I did care what one person thought. And even though we weren’t together—who knew if we ever would be?—the last thing I wanted was for him to believe I was attached to the very man I’d sworn was only my friend.

“The *world* doesn’t matter,” I said to him as I stood from my seat. “But ...”

Jackson’s eyes swept the general area. I took note of his silence as he waited for the makeup artist to walk away and leave us in peace. Then, he brought his attentive gaze back to mine.

“I get that you don’t want T-shirt Guy thinking we’re an item,” he said, his voice low and close to a whisper. “So, tell him that.”

“I actually already have. But what is he supposed to think if he sees this picture? And what if there’s more?”

“Oh, there’ll be more,” Jackson grumbled, shaking his head. “Once the media gets a taste of something, they’re hooked until the next juicy piece of gossip comes along.”

My stomach hurt with the relentless pangs of nerves and stress. It had been a hot minute since I’d been the source of the paparazzi’s frenzy, and even then, there hadn’t been much at stake. Now though? Any prospect of anything with Connor could potentially be on the line.

“Exactly,” I muttered.

“But there will always be other juicy gossip,” Jackson assured me. “And when it eventually happens, nobody’s gonna care about this. So, just let it die a natural death. And in the meantime, just tell whoever asks that it’s just the media doing what the media does. No big deal.”

I knew he was right. It was par for the course in this industry, and really, I was shocked it hadn’t happened sooner. Jackson and I had been buddy-buddy for years now, and we were no strangers to hanging out together in public. It had been bound to happen at some point, and if I was being honest, I was surprised it had taken this long for the gossip rags to start biting.

But even bearing all of that in mind, I still couldn’t get the unsettled feeling in my gut to go away, and it showed in my work that day. It was hard to push myself into character; it was nearly impossible to focus.

All I could think was, *Has Connor seen this? What does he think? Is he upset? Is he hurt? Does he even fucking care?*

Knowing him, he probably didn’t. It probably didn’t faze him in the slightest. He probably didn’t care at all ... but *I* cared. And that was his fault.

He had been so unusually nice the weekend of Lennon’s shower. We had talked, we had connected, and a part of me

had started to wonder if this could be an actual possibility. A real relationship. A genuine commitment. I hadn't known when or if it would ever happen in the first place, but a flicker of hope was better than none at all.

That flicker had started to burn out the moment I saw that damn article. It felt like ten steps backward when Connor and I had only just started taking a few cautious steps forward.

Or maybe it's all just in your fucking head.

“Okay. Tarryn?”

Lori's voice pulled me from the dark space in my head, and I looked up to see her hardened gaze aimed right at me.

“Yeah?”

She shook her head and blew out a huff of hot, agitated air. “Wherever you are right now, I need you to leave and come back to us, okay? We only have a couple of hours of daylight left, and I would really like to get this scene shot before we have to quit for the day. Do you think you can do that?”

I forced an apologetic smile. “Sorry. I'm good.”

“You're sure?” She looked skeptical.

“Yes,” I replied, growing more annoyed by the second. “I'm sure.”

“Good. Now, everybody in position, and ... action!”

“So, will I see you tomorrow?” Jackson asked as he walked me to my car.

Like I had a choice in whether or not I came to work. Like he believed I'd really skip town or something, for the sake of running away from whatever mental turmoil I was experiencing.

“Yes, you'll see me tomorrow,” I grumbled, opening the back door and tossing my giant Gucci tote bag inside.

“You sure? Because you’re not acting like you want to see me.”

He was right; I *was* acting that way. It was no fault of his, and I even felt a little guilty for treating him with such disdain. But I couldn’t help that I was trapped within this mental prison of uncertainty and helplessness, and I couldn’t help that I was taking it out on him and the rest of the crew with snippy retorts and killer eye rolls.

“I’m sorry,” I said, meaning it. I shut the car door and turned to face him and the concerned look in his eyes. “It’s just ... that fucking article ...”

He nodded. “Yeah, I figured.”

“It makes me feel like such an amateur for letting it get to me so much, but ... I can’t help it.” I saw the picture in my mind—how close we were, the mutual affection reflected in our eyes—and hated that I hadn’t realized we looked that way at the time. “I don’t even know why I care so much.”

“You’re worried about what T-shirt Guy will think. I understand that.”

My head ached from the stress of it all, and I squeezed my eyes shut while lifting a hand to press my fingers to my temple and rub in a circular motion. “Yes, but we’re not *together*. He has never even implied that he *likes* me. The guy *tolerates* me at best, so why the hell do I feel so sick over the thought that he might suspect I’m hooking up with my hot costar?”

Jackson’s cheeks reddened beneath the light of a Scottish moon as he chuckled. “You’re cute, you know that?”

“Great. That’s exactly what I was going for in my moment of crisis. *Cute*.”

“Look, if it’s getting to you this much, why don’t you just send him a message, explaining what’s going on?”

“Oh, ‘cause that’s not weird at all. I hardly talk to the guy, but, yeah, let me just randomly shoot a text his way to let him know that the piece of BS gossip—which he probably hasn’t even seen—was in fact BS, and, by the way, I’m still single and ready to mingle, if he’s interested.”

Jackson snorted and wrapped a comforting arm around my shoulders. “Okay, okay. Don’t message him then. Just go home, take a long and hot bath, maybe drink a couple of glasses of wine, and go to sleep. You’ll feel better tomorrow.”

I leaned my head against his chest and pouted. “And what if I don’t?”

“Then, you and I are gonna go out and get completely blasted at that pub down the street from your place. Okay?”

Nodding, I sighed and said, “Okay.”

“Good. Now, give me a hug, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He kissed my cheek as we hugged, and then he opened my car door for me to get in. We waved our good-byes, and I drove out of the lot, but not before I noticed the group of paparazzi, holding their phones and cameras.

My stomach churned at the sight of them, but I told myself it didn’t matter. They—the paparazzi and their bullshit pictures—didn’t matter. And I drove home to do exactly what Jackson had suggested.

With a glass of wine at the ready, I stepped into the tub and submerged my body in the bubbly, hot water.

Then, I grabbed my phone and called Lennon.

“Hey, girlie-girl,” I said the moment I knew she’d answered.

“Hey! What’s up?”

“Just having a bath and thought I’d say hi.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I did want to say hi, but we had other matters to discuss.

Like her bachelorette party.

I might’ve been absent for much of the planning, but I was still the maid of honor. And I was going to throw my best friend the best damn bachelorette party she could ever imagine.

“Ooh, a bath, huh? Is Jackson there?”

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling of my bathroom. “No, Jackson isn’t here.”

“Well, I just figured he might want to join you ...”

I should've known she'd tease me about this latest bit of gossip, and normally, I would tease right back. But I wasn't in the mood.

While lifting the full glass of wine to my lips, I grumbled, “Good thing I don't care what he wants,” knowing damn well *I* wasn't what Jackson wanted.

I wasn't even of the right sex.

Lennon sighed with the realization I wasn't playing along. “Okay, I'll stop. I'm sorry.”

After taking two big gulps of red wine, I lowered the glass back to the table beside the tub, then sighed. “It's okay. I've just had a ridiculously long day, and I'm ready to turn my brain off.”

“You all right?”

No, I wasn't. But I also wasn't prepared to have the *I've been into your big brother for years* talk, so I sighed and forced a smile I hoped she'd hear.

“Yeah, I'm good. Especially because I've been thinking about a certain bride-to-be's bachelorette party ...”

Lennon groaned in the way I'd expected her to, and I laughed. She was never one to drink, party, or get in trouble—that was my job. I had also taken into account that her fiancé, Mr. Dylan “Straight-Edge” Pierce, wouldn't be down for a wild time during his own last hurrah as a single guy. I wanted to throw her a party that was a reflection of her and her personal tastes while still giving her a good and memorable time.

But before I could say that, she was already turning me down.

“I don't need a bachelorette party,” she insisted. “Dylan isn't having a bachelor—”

“The hell I'm not,” I heard him say in the background.

I snorted as I took another sip of wine.

“I thought you didn't want one,” Lennon replied.

“Uh, I told you I wasn’t drinking or hitting up the strip clubs. I didn’t say we weren’t having a party. Simon has already been—”

“Connor didn’t say anything about a bachelor party.”

The mention of Connor nearly made me choke on my merlot, and I coughed, wondering when my friend was going to return to our conversation.

“Because it’s not a big deal. We’re just gonna fly to Texas —”

“You’re going to Texas?”

There was my cue.

I cleared my throat loudly. “Actually, Lennon ...”

“What?” she asked, coming back to me.

“I was thinking, if you wanted a sort of destination bachelorette party, I could definitely handle that.”

She seemed to consider it for a moment, given her silence. “Yeah, but ... where would we even go?”

I laughed and brushed my hand over a mound of bubbles as I replied, “Anywhere you want! Just name the place, and we’ll go.”

“I don’t know ...”

Lennon always hesitated when it came to traveling and allowing others to treat her to something nice. The travel made her nervous, mostly due to her lack of reliable vision, and I understood it. But this was something I wanted to do for her, and I wasn’t going to let up until I convinced her.

Plus, having a weekend away from my own life would be an added bonus.

“Come on, baby. Please? I’ll pay for everything; you don’t have to worry about it. I swear, we’ll have fun. Nothing crazy.”

“Well ... I mean ... if it’s not too much trouble for you and work ...”

“Oh my God,” I exclaimed with a laugh. “No, definitely not. Honestly, I need the freakin’ vacation even if it’s just for a

couple of days. So, what do you say? You down?"

"Okay." Lennon instantly sounded happier and brighter.
"Yeah, I'm down."

"Yes!" I cheered, splashing my hand in the bath water.
"Oh my God, we're gonna have so much fun."

"We have to make sure it's okay with the other girls though. And we have to find out if Connor is okay with letting Sammy go."

That name again ...

"Of course, of course. But where would we go? We can go anywhere in the world. Paris, London ... ooh, what about Seattle? You've always loved the idea of Seattle. Or—oh! What about Salem? You've been dying to go to Salem forever."

"Actually ..."

"Yeah?"

She hesitated. "Never mind. You wouldn't want to."

I furrowed my brow. "No, no, no. Come on. This isn't about me. Where do you wanna go?"

Lennon laughed nervously before saying, "I actually really want to go to Scotland."

I had to bite my tongue to stifle my groan.

There had been a time in my life when Scotland was a dream destination. I had wanted to see the rolling hills of the Highlands forever. I had craved the cobblestone history and bagpipe soundtrack for years. But now that I lived in Scotland and saw it nearly every damn day of my life, the dream had begun to lose its luster, no matter how much I still appreciated her beauty and historic charm.

Still, this was Lennon's party. And if what she wanted was a weekend getaway to Scotland, then that was what she was going to have.

And I was going to make sure we did it in a way that it felt like a getaway for me too.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Connor

“So, then my wife says to me, ‘Asshole, if you wanna sleep in this bed tonight, you’ll go out right now and get me mint chocolate chip ice cream.’ And, man, the craziest shit is, I fuckin’ *went!*” Ben dropped his water bottle back into the cup holder and propped his foot up on the dash. “The shit we do for sex, man, I tell ya.”

“Yeah, well ...” *Am I really about to divulge anything about my sex life to this dude right now?* “I wish I could say I can relate, but ...” *Okay, apparently, I am.*

Slowly, Ben turned his head to me, brows lifted with intrigue. “Are you saying you’re not getting any?”

I scratched the back of my neck and kept my eyes on the road. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“Not from *anywhere?*”

My gaze shifted toward him momentarily. “Isn’t that what I said?”

“Well, I mean ...” He seemed uncomfortable and in disbelief. Like it was impossible for me to not be getting laid. “I dunno, man. I thought maybe ... maybe you were still hooking up with the baby mama.”

“What?” I snorted with a burst of incredulous laughter. “Dude, that ship sailed a long time—no, I take that back. That ship didn’t even leave the fuckin’ dock.”

“Hey, I didn’t know, man. You’re a closed fuckin’ book most of the time, you know?”

Was that true? Was I really shut off and guarded? I mean, I guessed when I thought about it, I was. I didn’t talk to Ben; I let him talk to me. So, why would I expect him to know anything about me?

Did I want him to know at all?

I considered the question for a moment, leaving the conversation hanging in the air. I didn't have a lot of friends in Connecticut despite having lived here for nearly twenty years. When I'd first made the move, I had a couple buddies from high school in the area, but after college, they had moved back home while I remained. Partially due to my stubborn inability to admit I needed to move back in with my parents, partially because I liked it here, and later ... it was all about Sammy.

Now, she seemed to be all my life was about, and everything else had stopped at high school graduation.

I decided then that it wouldn't kill me to talk to Ben. He was good people, I liked him, and, hell, maybe he could even be a friend—a real one.

“I met Sammy's mom at a Starbucks almost fourteen years ago. She made my coffee, I asked her out, and we hooked up before she went home. We had absolutely nothing in common, and we both knew we'd never go out again, so we thought, *Why not?*”

Ben sniffed a sympathetic laugh. “And the rest is history.”

“Pretty much,” I said with a chuckle. “Two months later, she told me she wanted to see me again. So, I went back to that Starbucks. She told me she had been made manager, and, ‘Oh, by the way, you're gonna be a dad.’”

I laughed at the memory now while remembering a time when I hadn't laughed at all. It felt like yesterday when I'd stared at Monica over the bar in her Starbucks, unable to blink or speak for a solid two minutes before, finally, I bolted out of the place to puke on the side of the building.

Not one of my finest moments, but the woman had caught me off guard, to say the least.

“Man ...” Ben puffed out his cheeks with his heavy breath. “But, hey, you stuck around. Some guys, they wouldn't have.”

I nodded. “I know it. But anyway, we never got together or anything after that. We just continued more like acquaintances than anything, just ... two separate people raising the same kid. She's got an awesome job, a house. She

makes a killing”—I gestured at myself, decked out in my sanitation uniform—”and here I am.”

“Connor, man ... if it’s that you think you’re not good enough for her—”

“What?” I snorted and shook my head. “No way. I’m just saying, she’s done great for herself. Me, not so much. But that’s life, you know? Anyway”—I turned the truck toward the drop-off location—”all of that to say, I’m not hooking up with anyone but myself these days.”

“Jesus. I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“You gotta get out there, man. Get online and meet someone.”

I brushed the idea away with the wave of my hand. “I don’t need to meet anyone. ‘Cause I, uh ...” *Holy shit, you’re just spilling it all today, huh?* “I kinda have a, uh ... a thing ... for someone.”

His grin was big and shit-eating. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed, wondering if I’d ever admitted this shit aloud before, and why was this about to be the first time? I guessed maybe I just needed someone to tell. “You don’t know her. She’s ... she’s my sister’s best friend.”

And that was the moment I learned Ben was a big fuckin’ sap.

“Bro, that is the most adorable thing I’ve ever heard in my entire life.”

My brows pinched together. “It’s really not, but okay.”

“No, for real. Is this one of those *you’ve known her your whole life* kinda things?”

“Pretty much, but—”

“Is that why you haven’t made your move?”

“N—” I closed my mouth to stop myself before I could lie. “It’s not just that. She’s, uh ... kinda unavailable. And a little out of my league.”

Make that *a lot* out of my league.

“Ah, so she already has a man.”

My hands clenched tighter around the wheel as I thought about the pictures of Tarryn and that guy—Jackson. There was too much photographic evidence of their relationship now for her to deny her involvement with him. And it angered me more than it should’ve.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Or at least, I think so.”

Ben slapped a hand against his knee. “Okay, so you know what you have to do, right?”

“What?” I asked cautiously, unsure that I actually wanted his dating advice.

“You gotta ask her, point-blank. Be like, *Hey, are you really seeing this dude?* And if she says yes, then, obviously, you gotta respect that. But if she says no”—he clapped his hands—“you make your fuckin’ move, man. Because you *are* a catch, and any lady would be lucky as hell to call you her man.”

Fucking Ben’s a liar, I thought as I threw the apartment door open and tossed my keys onto the console table.

I wasn’t a catch.

I was a garbageman, paying child support, seriously considering shaking out the couch for loose change to buy some food, and wondering when the hell I was going to get down to the Laundromat to wash the only four pairs of jeans I owned. What the fuck did a guy like me have to offer an actress who was worth millions? Especially one who could land any dude she pointed her manicured finger at.

Nothing—that was what.

And yet, somehow, I had found myself in a group message with a few rock stars—the guys in Dylan’s band, also worth millions—to discuss Dylan’s bachelor party. Somehow, it had been decided we were going to Texas because my sister’s groom was apparently a huge fan of this particular

barbeque restaurant there. My phone had been blowing up with texts my entire drive home, and now, finally able to open the messages, I dropped onto the couch to read the long string of conversation, started by Simon, Dylan's keyboard player and best man.

Simon: All right, gentlemen. Are we all still good for Texas next weekend? I need a definitive head count. Booking the flight now.

Greyson: Zach isn't thrilled about it, but, yeah, I'm good.

Simon: Tell him to clean the sand out of his vagina. It's only a couple of days. He'll live.

Greyson: Yeah, definitely not gonna tell him that. And a couple of days alone with two little kids is kinda nightmarish, by the way, and this IS kinda last minute, so I don't blame him for being a little peeved.

Simon: Okay, so Greyson's out—got it. What about you guys? Dave? Connor?

Greyson: WTF, man? I didn't say I'm out. I just said I get why he's annoyed.

Simon: Yo, nobody's making you go! LOL.

Greyson: Uh, I'm not fucking missing out on some good food, so, yeah, I'm kinda forced to go.

Simon: Dude, your boy toy is the best freakin' chef I know, and your dad's ribs are better than any other ribs I've ever eaten in my life. Don't act like you don't get good food all the damn time.

Simon: Where the hell are Dave and Connor? Guys?

Greyson: Yeah, but Texas barbeque is shit I don't get all the time. And it's fuckin' GOOD. You ever have barbeque in Texas? I mean, holy shit ...

Simon: We've eaten at this restaurant TOGETHER, you idiot. So, yes. Yes, I've had barbeque in Texas. Jesus, Grey.

Simon: DAVE?! CONNOR?!

Dave: Hey, sorry. I was in the shower. I'm not reading all this shit. What's up?

Simon: FINALLY. Okay. Are you good for TX next weekend?

Dave: Does a bear shit in the woods?

Simon: Great. That's a yes. Connor?

I pressed my fist to my forehead as I stared at the last text, asking if I was down for a trip to Texas. I wanted to go—that was the truth. I liked Dylan a lot, I was happy he was going to be my brother-in-law, and I didn't want to miss out on his bachelor party or good food.

But how was I going to afford any of this shit when I didn't even have the money to fill my truck or wash my damn clothes?

And how could I say that to a bunch of rock stars who wouldn't bat an eye at a few thousand bucks?

Me: Hey, guys. It sounds like a great time and everything, but I dunno if I can make it. I have my kid that weekend.

Simon: What? I thought she was going with the girls to Scotland. Right?

Greyson: Yeah, I'm pretty sure Dylan said Tarryn was planning the Scotland trip for the same weekend.

My brow furrowed with an angry burst of protective rage. My daughter was going to *Scotland*? When the hell was anybody going to tell me about that?

Me: Oh yeah, that's right.

Simon: So, you good?

Me: Yeah, I dunno. Let me check my schedule.

Dave: Come on, dude. We want you there.

Greyson: Yeah, if I'm not getting out of this shit, you can't either.

Simon: Grey.

Simon: NOBODY. IS. MAKING. YOU. GO.

Greyson: Jesus, Si. Fucking relax.

Me: LOL. I'll think about it, okay?

"Think about a fucking way to get out of this shit," I mumbled, tossing my phone to the seat beside me.

And why the hell didn't anybody tell me about this trip to Scotland? Who the hell decided that and thought they didn't need to ask Sammy's father if she could go?

"I have to call Monica."

I snatched my phone up as quickly as I'd dropped it and was about to dial Sammy's mom's number when it began to ring. Simon's name came up, and I cursed into the empty apartment.

"What the fuck does he want?" I grumbled before answering. "Hello?"

"Okay, what's really the problem here, man?"

Not *hi*, not *hello*. Straight to the fucking point, and I wasn't sure whether to appreciate it or hang up—or both.

"You really wanna know?" I asked, standing to head toward the fridge for a beer.

"Would I be calling if I didn't?"

I laughed. "I mean, you could've just sent a text ..."

"Nah, if I'd texted you, it would've been easier for you to find another bullshit reason. So, be real with me. What's up?"

This was Dylan's best man, and he needed an answer. I was a pretty decent liar. I could continue to BS him, give him some other half-assed excuse, but honesty was more likely to get me the results I needed.

"Okay." I pulled the fridge door open and grabbed a beer. "So, when I say I'm about to shake out my couch cushions for

quarters so I can do my laundry tomorrow, I'm not joking."

Simon was quiet for a moment, and I was already wishing I had just made something up. Of course he'd forgotten Lennon came from a middle-class family and her brother was a broke idiot, living in suburban squalor.

"Yeah, I was kinda wondering if money was a problem," he said, proving me wrong.

Opening a kitchen drawer and pulling out a bottle opener, I said, "I mean, between you and me, I don't even know what the hell I'm gonna do about this tux rental."

Although I knew, once I told Lennon about my predicament, she'd come to my rescue, as she usually did these days. She'd said it was always to thank me for giving her the push she had needed to finally publish, but I knew it was because she felt sorry for me.

But anyway, that wasn't the point I was trying to make here.

"We've all been there, man."

I tried not to snicker at his attempt to bring himself down to my level, but let's be real here. The guy wasn't hurting for cash. From what I knew about him, he lived in a cushy condo in New York City that had cost him a few million a while back—chump change, I was sure—and he owned a couple of properties out on Long Island that he'd generously given to his family. Nice guy. Respectable.

But on the level of the workingman?

Not even a little.

"Yeah, no offense, but I don't think—"

"I grew up in a family who needed food stamps," he said, cutting me off with kindness and assurance. "My brother and I wore our cousins' hand-me-downs, and my parents never drove a new car until I bought them one. So, has it been a while since I struggled? Yeah, it has. But when I say we've all been there, I really mean it."

"Well, now, I feel like a dick," I muttered sheepishly, cracking the beer open and lifting it to my lips to take a few

gulps.

“Don’t sweat it. It’s easy to make assumptions.”

“Doesn’t make it right.”

Simon didn’t agree or disagree. Instead, he said, “Anyway, don’t worry about the money, man. It’s on me.”

The offer soured the beer in my mouth. I shook my head as I swallowed, then said, “Uh, thanks, but no, thanks. I appreciate the gesture, but I don’t need your—”

“It’s not charity, dude. Tarryn and I talked about it, and we both agreed that, as the best man and maid of honor, we’d cover the cost of the bachelor and bachelorette parties.”

I leaned against the refrigerator door, holding the neck of the bottle in hand. “Oh ...”

“Yeah, it was Tarryn’s idea actually. She wasn’t gonna make your sister’s friends pay a crazy amount of money they didn’t have for a trip to Scotland, and she thought it’d be nice if I did the same.”

This was an interesting development. Why Simon was telling me, I wasn’t sure. But I found it both endearing and surprising. Not that Tarryn wouldn’t have the heart to pay for my sister and her friends and niece—she had always been generous in that way. But that she had gone out of her way to call this guy and talk him into mirroring the gesture. None of these other guys were hurting for money. They’d happily cough up the dough to fly first class and stay at a five-star hotel in Texas. Whatever it was would be a drop in the bucket for them.

Which only meant that her insistence that he pay was for one reason—and that was me.

“Well, thanks a lot for that, man,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“Yeah, no problem. So, can I assume you’re down?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding, “I’m down.”

Monica answered the phone after the first ring. “Hey,” she said in a hurry. “Everything okay?”

“I guess that depends on your definition of okay,” I replied as the microwave announced that my dinner was ready. “When the hell were you going to tell me Sammy was going to Scotland?”

I loved Monica. Not in a romantic sort of way—not by a long shot. But she was a great mom, an admirable woman, and I was grateful for that. I mean, if I had to have a baby mama, I was glad she happened to be mine.

We had always been open and honest with each other about everything regarding our daughter. It was our one big agreement. When it came to our personal lives, we had no reason to inform each other of anything, but when it concerned Sammy? The lines of communication were wide open. Which didn’t explain why this had been kept so hush-hush.

Monica sighed into the phone. “Honestly? I kind of assumed someone had already mentioned it to you.”

“Yeah, well, nobody did, and I had to find out in a group chat with the other groomsmen.”

The groan she let out was full of regret. “I’m sorry, Connor. I should’ve said something. I really thought your mom or Lennon or Tarryn had said something to you.”

I shouldn’t be mad at her. I wasn’t even sure if I should be mad at anyone at all. But, dammit, I was. I was fucking furious. Once again, my position as Sammy’s father had been undermined, and this time, it was by nearly every woman in my life. Not one of them had considered I’d need to know my daughter would be traveling thousands of miles away to a strange country. Not one of them had even asked if I would be okay with it before the decision was even made.

For the record, I wasn’t.

“Well, I’m not cool with this,” I stated point-blank.

“The flight has already been booked—”

“I don’t give a shit. I should’ve been asked. This should’ve been a *discussion*.”

“I understand that, and I agree, but—”

“Who the hell thought this would be a good idea anyway?” I demanded to know, becoming angrier with every passing moment as I stormed through the apartment toward my bedroom.

“Um, I think it was Lennon who decided she wanted to go to Scotland,” Monica replied. “But it was Tarryn who suggested they go on a trip.”

Fucking Tarryn. Of course it had been her idea—her *fault*.

I yanked a dresser drawer open and grabbed a clean pair of boxer briefs. “Give me her number.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, I’m serious,” I said on my way to the bathroom for a shower.

“Connor, you’re acting crazy right now.”

“The hell I am. I wanna know why she thought it was a good idea for my thirteen-year-old daughter to travel to a strange fucking country without running it by me first.”

Monica pulled in a deep breath and sighed, knowing there was no getting through to me. “Fine. I’ll let this be between you and your family. Like I said, I’m sorry. I should’ve talked to you first, but I just figured—”

“Just give me her damn number, Monica. Please.”

She did, and I hung up, fully prepared to argue with Tarryn for the millionth time in my life.

But this time, I had a legitimate reason.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tarryn

“Your phone’s ringing,” Jackson announced, walking out of my kitchen with said phone in hand.

I pulled my body into a seated position on the couch and reached out my hand. “Who is it?”

“It’s just a number. Probably spam.”

It was an unlisted number, and while that didn’t mean I didn’t get spam calls, they rarely occurred. When I saw that it was a Long Island area code, I answered in case it might be someone I knew, ready to hang up in the event it wasn’t.

But I was right.

“Hello?”

“Tarryn?”

I’d know that voice anywhere. Deep. Gravelly. Angry. But no amount of anger could keep it from commanding my body like the flip of a switch, and I closed my eyes to ward off the rise of hormones.

“Hi, Connor,” I answered, laying my hand against my forehead and blocking my view of Jackson’s teasing gaze. “I wasn’t aware you had my number.”

“Yeah, well, next time you decide to fly *my* kid overseas, you might wanna share it with me, so I don’t have to get the news from someone else.”

Oh, he’s really mad.

And I instantly felt terrible.

“You didn’t know?” I asked sheepishly.

Of course he hadn’t known. Would he be calling me, all upset and pissed off, if he had?

“No, I didn’t fucking know.”

My stomach knotted with the guilt of having not even thought about it. “I just figured ...”

“Yeah, everybody just *figured*.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, dropping my hand to find Jackson’s furrowed brow and concerned eyes aimed at me.

What’s going on? he mouthed.

I’ll tell you later, I mouthed back.

“You’re sorry,” he mocked. “Everybody’s always fucking sorry, but nobody ever thinks beforehand.”

In the background, I heard a shower being turned on.

Wait ... is he naked at this very moment?

Stop it. Stop it right now. He’s mad. It’s not the time to think about his body or what I’d like to do with it.

“Connor, I—”

“And you know what gets to me the most?”

The edge in his tone disappeared, revealing something closer to hurt, and I swallowed.

“What?”

“I expect this shit from everybody else. Mom, Lennon ... I’m invisible to them. I know I’m an afterthought. And Monica? Of course she assumed they’d said something because they’re my family—why *wouldn’t* they say something, other than the fact that they didn’t? But *you* ...”

My heart skipped a beat at the evident pain and hesitation in his voice as my eyes drifted toward the movie on my TV screen, still paused from when Jackson had gotten up to grab something to drink. We had thought a chick flick and wine was in order after a week of grueling work in another freezing cave. But now, all I could focus on was the frantic beat of my heart and the trepidation of not knowing what Connor was about to say to me.

Jackson thrust my wineglass under my nose, and I smiled gratefully as I took it in hand.

I was going to need it.

“What?” I asked Connor weakly, too impatient to wait.

“You don’t *ever* forget about me,” he said, a statement aimed straight for my soul, “but this time, you did. And that ... that’s fucked up, Tarryn, and I don’t appreciate it. And I don’t give a shit if you think I’m overreacting. Sammy is my—”

I hastily swallowed a gulp of wine before saying, “I don’t think you’re overreacting at all! Connor, I told you, you’re a good dad. You *should* be worried about your kid flying overseas. I totally get that. And you’re right.” I took another sip, this one to steady the tremor in my voice. “I don’t forget about you—ever. And why I didn’t think to say something ... I don’t know. But there’s no excuse for it, and I am truly, truly sorry.”

My gaze shifted from the TV to Jackson to find him sitting at the edge of his seat, watching me with wide eyes, his hands clenched between his spread knees. This was a moment—I could sense it—and apparently, so could he. What it meant, I didn’t know, but it felt like something was happening. Something big, maybe even monumental, and I knew I had to tread lightly for it to not blow up in my face.

“Okay.” Connor sighed, loud and heavy, and the sound of the shower faded. “Sorry. I’m just ... I’m fuckin’ *sick* of being undermined.”

I heard the flick of a lighter, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Are you smoking?”

“Fuck yes, I am. My kid is going to a strange country, and I’m not gonna be there.”

“But *I’ll* be there,” I said, as if it meant anything. I hoped it did.

“Yeah ... I know.”

I hurried to add, “Lennon will be, too, and Cassie and ... shit, why can’t I ever remember that other girl’s name?”

He chuckled. I reveled in knowing I’d lightened the mood and made him laugh. He had a great laugh. Always had.

“I don’t fucking know who she is either,” he admitted, voice tight with his held inhale. “Megan? Or Maggie?”

“Yeah.” I sighed, immediately melancholy with longing. I wished I weren’t here. I wished I were sitting in his apartment with him, smoking and laughing and talking and doing whatever else could happen. “Something like that.”

He blew out a long, smooth breath. “You gotta promise me something, Tarryn.”

“Anything.”

I sipped at my wine and turned away from Jackson’s watchful gaze. This moment ... this felt too private for his eyes now. I wanted him to get the hint and leave, and as if he could read my mind, he did.

“Promise me you’ll take good care of her.”

My eyes narrowed at the absurdity of his request. “Of course.”

“I’m serious. No crazy shit. I don’t wanna hear she got drunk and got a lap dance from some Scottish stripper.”

I guffawed at even the thought of it. “Oh my God, are you kidding? Do you really think that’s what we’re gonna do?”

“Well, I don’t fuckin’ know!” He released a chuckle, the sound taut and strained. “I don’t know what stupid shit you get up to now.”

“I can assure you, none of it will involve getting Sammy drunk,” I grumbled, rolling my eyes toward the ceiling. “In fact, I promised your sister there won’t be any drinking while Sammy is around, and there won’t be any strippers at all. So, you can rest your pretty little head, knowing everything will be very wholesome.”

“Uh, no offense, but you and wholesome don’t exactly go hand in hand.”

I snickered and brought the glass back to my lips. “I make exceptions where your daughter is concerned.”

“Appreciated.” He sniffed a soft chuckle. “And I’m sure your boyfriend appreciates it too.”

Uh ... what now?

“Boyfriend?”

“Don’t think I don’t see those pictures.”

My glass was empty, and Jackson had taken the bottle of wine into the kitchen.

Fucking hell.

“I wasn’t aware you were looking,” I said, only half-lying. I had hoped he wasn’t. I had hoped he wouldn’t question the truth in my insistence that Jackson and I were just friends. But here we were.

“Oh, I’m always looking.”

My cheeks flushed. That feeling of this being a moment ... it was only building higher and higher until I thought I’d drown in the implications and suggestions.

“They’re just rumors, Connor. I told you, he and I are friends, and I meant that.”

“Yeah, you guys look real chummy. I look like that with *all* my friends. Like we’re about to tear each other’s clothes off and suck face at any second.” Then, he snorted at his own jab at me. “Ugh, God, I can’t even joke around about that. Nasty.”

I laughed with him, relieved that he was in fact joking. But whether he believed the rumors or not was left to be seen. I hated that he’d entertained them for even a second, but could I really blame him when it was my word against dozens of incriminating pictures?

My word should be more important than anything.

“I’m going to Texas next weekend,” he said then, making conversation.

“Yeah, Lennon told me.”

“I’m gonna chill with some rock stars and eat barbeque and ... I don’t even know. What the fuck do rock stars do at a bachelor party?”

I giggled. I actually giggled, like we were teenagers talking late into the night and flirting. “Well, normally, I’d say

sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but when you're straight-edge rock stars with strict instructions to avoid the strip clubs ...” I pulled my knees to my chest and shrugged. “Maybe you're gonna hit up the spa?”

“Jesus Christ,” he grumbled through clenched teeth, and I could just picture him with the cigarette pinned between his lips. “Can you picture me at a spa? Covered in mud and getting my fuckin’ nails done?”

My giggles were out of control now as I imagined him wrapped in seaweed and getting rubbed down by a hot man named Sven. “No, I really can’t.”

“I hope these guys are ready to be humiliated,” he said, laughing. “There ain’t no diamond in this rough—you know what I’m saying? This is gonna be like ... like the Clampetts rolling into Beverly Hills.”

Our conjoined laughter faded gently into my forlorn sigh as my chin touched my knees. Before I knew what my mouth was doing, before I could stop it from happening, I said, “God, I miss you.”

Then, I stopped breathing.

I wasn’t supposed to miss Connor. I wasn’t supposed to long for him or our time together. I wasn’t supposed to do anything that might imply I pined for him at all. But I had said it. I had thrown it out there, and now, there was no taking it back.

Another flick of the lighter.

“You miss me, huh?” he asked through gritted teeth.

Another cigarette.

He’s stressed. He had just started to relax, and you had to open your goddamn mouth.

Tarryn ... you’re a fucking idiot, you know that?

“I mean ...” I cleared my throat, wishing I knew how to erase the last minute of my life from existence. “Yeah. A little bit, I guess.”

“Well”—he released a breath, and I could see those tendrils of smoke lingering in the air—“I guess I miss you too.”

A little bit.”

Where the fuck is that wine, Jackson?

“Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

My heartbeat could be heard from a thousand miles away. My legs ached to jump up and down on the couch cushions. My lungs forgot that my body needed air to survive. All while my brain tried to understand what was happening, if it was happening at all, and where the hell I was supposed to go from here.

“I actually miss you a lot,” he added, his tone gruff and quiet.

“So”—I swallowed and willed my lungs to exhale—“that must mean you think about me.”

Sending a stream of breath against the phone, he replied, “I do actually. More than I should probably.”

“Well ... I think about you too,” I said, suddenly unsure of what I was doing.

How the hell did his anger turn into this?!

“Hmm.”

Hmm?! What the hell does that mean?

My experience with men had never gone into this territory. Talking about missing people and thinking about them. I had sex, I had one-night stands, and I was good at it. I didn’t do relationships or feelings because they were complicated and my life didn’t allow for it. I needed Connor to take the wheel and guide me through the unknown, and I gritted my chattering teeth, hoping he would to ease my jittering nerves.

But he didn’t. Of course not.

Why would I expect anything more from him?

“Well”—he cleared his throat—“I’m gonna jump in the shower. And I will see you in a month.”

The rehearsal dinner. The wedding.

“Yes,” I replied, “you will.”

“Take care of Sammy next weekend. You have my number now if you need me.”

I always need you.

“Okay.”

I always have.

And I wish I knew how to say it.

“Have a good night, Tarryn.”

“Yeah,” I whispered, hugging my knees tighter. “You too, Connor.”

Jackson approached slowly from the kitchen, wielding the bottle of wine. He eyed me with optimistic intrigue, his brows raised and fingers crossed. He uncorked the bottle and began to fill my glass.

“So, that was T-shirt Guy,” he guessed correctly. “And am I right in guessing he said he misses you?”

“He did,” I whispered while slipping my thumbnail between my teeth. “And he thinks about me too, apparently.”

“More than I should probably.”

Jackson sat down as I brought the glass to my lips and took three hearty gulps. He laughed and ordered me to slow down.

“You wanna settle your nerves, not get wasted.”

I downed the rest of my glass.

Jackson winced. “Or maybe you *do* want to get wasted.”

I placed the glass down with a loud, hollow clink and jumped from the couch to pace the living room. “I feel too old to be this clueless,” I complained, thrusting a hand into my hair. “He thinks about me. Should I assume that means in a positive way?”

“I would assume so, yes,” Jackson replied, smiling as though he’d never seen someone so adorable—or stupid.

“Oh my God.” I held my hands over my tumbling belly. “I need a cigarette.”

He twisted his face into a look of question and disgust. “Since when do you smoke?”

“Since Christmas.”

He lifted the open mouth of the wine bottle to his lips, eyes wide with disbelief. “Ooo-kay ...”

With my hands in my hair, I walked to the fireplace and back again, over and over, while trying to make sense of what had just transpired.

Connor had been mad, so he had gotten my number and called.

Connor had yelled at me, and I had apologized.

Connor had softened, we had talked, and ...

“God, do you think he actually *likes* me?” I asked myself and Jackson and whatever divine entity would listen.

Jackson was the only one to answer. “It kinda looks that way. But it’s probably not safe to assume. Talk to him again. Feel it out.”

With my hands over my stomach, I nodded. “Yeah. That’s a good idea.”

Jackson smiled with an abundance of affection. “You really don’t know what you’re doing, huh?”

“No idea.”

“Well”—he stood from the couch and handed the bottle to me—“let’s hope you figure it out before you see him again.”

God, I fucking hope so.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tarryn

The paparazzi had become ruthless in the weeks since the rumors had begun. Every chance they got, they attempted to snap pictures of me—with or without Jackson—and it was beginning to put a damper on my independence.

I started using a driver, provided by the network while I was in Scotland. It had always been an option, but I had always enjoyed driving myself to and from location. I enjoyed the scenery; I enjoyed my alone time in the car.

But the vultures had taken that away from me.

“Miss King, I’ve just received word that your friends have left the plane. Their bags are bein’ collected, and they should be out here shortly,” Ferguson, my driver and most recent companion, said from the front seat of the van.

His usual ride was a sleek black Mercedes. But for Lennon’s bachelorette party, he had swapped it out for a BMW with a privacy partition, separating him from the group of us. Normally, I enjoyed our conversations. He was a friendly, interesting man. But this weekend, I was looking forward to some time with Lennon, Sammy, and the other girls.

“Great,” I said with a smile. “Thank you so much, Ferguson.”

In another life, not long ago, I would’ve gotten them myself. I would’ve stood there with a little handmade sign, waiting for them to emerge while jumping up and down like a madwoman to get their attention. Those days were gone—for now at least. Now, I’d had to hire one of the crew members to wait for them with that sign. He wouldn’t jump up and down; he wouldn’t even be excited. But I was sure he’d be polite and discreet, and that was what mattered the most.

Discretion. Privacy. Respect.

I snorted at the thought. Never in my life had this many people respected me. Never had I expected it.

I glanced out the tinted window and damn near jumped out of my seat. There they were. Lennon and her long black hair, held together in a tight braid cascading over one shoulder. Beside her, holding her hand tightly, was Sammy, and behind them was Cassie and—

God, why can't I remember that girl's damn name?

“That’s them,” I said needlessly, unable to hold back my squeal.

Ferguson pressed a button to slide the door open. The man I’d hired to escort the ladies hurried them into the van, and the moment Lennon laid her sunglasses-covered eyes on me, her face lit up like a damn Christmas tree.

“This is the most celebrity thing you’ve ever done, and I’m living for it,” she said before leaning over in her seat to throw her arms around me. “Oh my God, I cannot believe we’re here!”

“I know!” I squealed again, beyond thrilled to be reunited with my friend. Even if that meant entertaining these other ladies too. “And believe me, I would’ve preferred to get you myself, but ...”

Sammy sat in the row ahead of us, beside the girl I couldn’t remember the name of, while Cassie squeezed into the back with me and Lennon. A handful of onlookers had started crowding the van, wondering who might be inside, and the door was closed quickly while the crew member sat up front with Ferguson.

“Ladies, if ye need anythin’, just press the intercom button,” Ferguson said.

“Thank you, Fergie,” I replied with a smile.

“Anytime, Miss King.”

The partition was raised, and Sammy turned in her seat.

“Were those people paparazzi?” she asked, her eyes wide and excited.

“Maybe,” I said with a shrug. “Sometimes, it’s hard to tell.”

“That would be so friggin’ cool if my picture ended up online,” she said, turning to Lennon. “I mean, you guys have your pictures all over the place all the time, but not me. The girls at school would be so jealous.”

Her level of innocence made me sad. There was nothing cool about how I had to live my life nowadays, and while I didn’t want to be a killjoy before their trip began, she also needed to understand how disturbing it could be.

“Sammy, this is the first time I’ve done anything but go to work in weeks. I used to be able to have fun, go out to dinner, do whatever ... but now? I can’t even pick up my friends from the airport without having to worry who’s going to be taking pictures and how they’re going to misconstrue them to fit their narrative.” God, it sounded dramatic, but it was the truth. “I mean, hopefully, one day soon, they won’t care as much. But right now, they’re freakin’ desperate for anything they can get on me. It’s insanity, and ... I mean, if I’m being really honest, I hate it.”

That other girl turned in her seat to smile cautiously at me. “But I mean, that’s the trade-off, right? You’re rich and famous. So, if that means you can’t really have much of a private life, I think it’s kinda worth it ... right?”

I didn’t smile back. I didn’t even reply.

I just bit my tongue and wished I could’ve had my best friend here to myself. Alone. Without these other girls or the public getting in the way.

Apart from the initial tension in the car, the party started smoothly. We picked up coffee from a quaint café in Edinburgh, drove around and took in the more touristy sights, and then headed to the hotel I had booked for the weekend. A few bodyguards had been hired to escort us inside and to our room, and while it felt excessive, I was grateful to have them

watching guard as we walked through the lobby and toward the spa entrance.

“Oh my God, I cannot wait to get rubbed down,” Cassie groaned like a cat in heat. She rolled her eyes toward the back of her head. “It’s been forever since anyone’s touched my body. I’m ready.”

I laughed. “Girl, I don’t think they like it when you attack the masseur.”

“You’re married,” Lennon reminded her friend, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Tell your husband to touch you.”

“Oh, Lenny,” Cassie sighed, “just you wait until you have a baby. Nobody gets touched. Ever.”

“Hey!”

The abrupt sound of Jackson’s voice startled me from another moment of jealousy, thinking about babies and husbands and touching, and I turned to watch him approach our group with his arms outstretched. He had known we’d be here this weekend, but I’d apparently been unaware of his plans.

He planted his hands against my shoulders and kissed my cheek while my comrades stared in starstruck awe.

“What ... what are you doing here?” I practically hissed, painfully aware of the stragglers who had entered the hotel lobby in his wake. Their phones were out; they were already taking pictures.

Did he plan this?

God, I hated thinking that. But ... I couldn’t help it.

“I brought my grandma here for the week,” he explained while dropping one arm to his side while the other slinked around my shoulders. “She’s upstairs, getting settled. I came down to check on our luggage when I saw you ladies come in.”

“Your ... grandma ...” I stammered stupidly, suddenly recalling him saying something along those lines.

Why couldn’t I have picked a different hotel? Why didn’t he?

“Yeah,” he said with a nod. “She just got her passport, so I figured I’d take her around. Anyway, are you gonna introduce me to your friends, or are you just gonna make them stare?”

I did introduce them. Maybe not with the gusto he would’ve appreciated, but I was having a difficult time finding the enthusiasm when, off in the distance, a handful of cell phones were aimed directly at us. Snapping away the pictures of my friends and me with Jackson’s arm around my shoulders. More fuel for the flames.

I had tried so hard to avoid it. But he’d given it to them anyway.

It’s like he wants it ...

Jackson graciously agreed to autographs and selfies, accepting their fangirling with a grin. I appreciated how good-natured he was and looked on with an affectionate smile that I was sure would make it to the headlines by morning.

“Okay, ladies,” he said when all the signatures were signed. “I’m gonna leave you to your party and get back to Grams. Have a great time, and, Tarryn, I want you nice and relaxed on Monday, you got it?”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “I’m always relaxed.”

“Yeah, sure,” he teased, leaning in to kiss my cheek again. “After a few glasses of wine, maybe.”

The flash from someone’s phone went off, and that was when Jackson was seemingly made aware of the pictures being taken. He backed away and shot me a hurried smile before heading for the desk to check on the luggage. He seemed startled, like he hadn’t expected it, but I watched him for a moment through skeptical eyes. Wondering how I could be on such high alert, but he didn’t seem to be at all.

“You ready?” Lennon asked, pulling me from my own head.

I looked at her, so grateful she was here with me that I could cry.

“Yeah, girlie-girl,” I said. “Let’s go.”

The spa experience led to a trip to my favorite restaurant in Edinburgh, and then, with my bodyguards not far, we took a walk through the streets. Enjoying the city, taking in the sights and sounds of Scotland's nightlife. Sammy was over the moon, skipping ahead over cobblestone roads, and I took out my phone to snap a couple of pictures to send to her dad.

Connor: Wow.

Connor: She looks so freakin' happy.

Me: She's having a really good time.

Connor: Great. Now, every time she sees me, it'll be, "This is great, Dad. But you know what was better? That time Tarryn brought me to Scotland." Thanks for that.

Me: LOL, sorry.

Connor: Nah, I'M sorry for jumping down your throat. She's having a good time, and I appreciate it.

"Who are you texting?" Lennon wrapped her arm around mine and glanced at my phone screen.

I had never been so shamefully grateful for her crappy vision in my life.

"Nobody," I lied, quickly tucking my phone away while wishing I'd had just another second to ask him how his trip was going.

"Oh, that's not your nobody face. That's your *I want this man's dick* face."

Lennon might have had a couple of drams of whisky during dinner.

"I know I said I wouldn't drink, but I only have my bachelorette party once," she'd said, and I'd sworn I wouldn't

tell her brother she was drinking while his daughter was in our care.

Me, on the other hand? I had kept my promise to Connor and hadn't consumed a single drop of alcohol. Even though I really could've used it.

Or a cigarette.

I forced a laugh and rolled my eyes away from Lennon's scrutiny. Because I *did* want that man's dick. She just didn't need to know that man was also her brother.

"How's Dylan doing in Texas?" Cassie asked, performing a balancing act along the curb.

"Good, I think," Lennon replied. "We agreed to not interrupt each other unless it was something important."

Whatever Her Name Is eyed us all with a mischievous grin. "I wonder how Connor is doing."

"Oh God, will you stop?" Lennon groaned. She slid her irritated gaze over to me and said, "Mel has a thing for Connor, and it's so weird."

Mel! Her name is Mel!

I pulled my phone out to quickly text Connor.

Me: MEL! It's Mel!

Connor: Holy fuck. Thanks for saving me from an awkward fucking situation.

Me: She likes you, by the way.

Connor: Awkward situation once again reinstated.

Me: LOL.

Connor: Sucks to be her.

Me: Oh, come on. This might be your last chance at happiness.

Connor: You think so? Hmm ... that's too bad.

“Why is it weird?” Mel asked. “He’s single, I’m single ...”

Sammy skipped back over to us and slung an arm around Lennon’s shoulders. “Who’s single?”

“Your father,” Lennon grumbled.

Sammy narrowed her eyes. “Yeah, and?”

“*And ...*” Cassie poked Mel in the ribs. “Mel over here has a little crush on him.”

“Oh.” Sammy’s nose wrinkled. “That’s gross.”

“Tell me about it,” Lennon grouched, throwing her head back dramatically.

“I can’t help that he has that, like ... hot, grumpy thing about him, you know?”

Ugh, I know exactly what you’re talking about.

“And he has a great sense of humor.”

The best.

“And an amazing body.”

No shit.

I held in my sigh of longing as Lennon and Sammy simultaneously pretended to gag. That made me laugh while I wondered what the hell they’d say if they knew I agreed.

“Not to burst your bubble, but Connor doesn’t crush on anyone,” Lennon said, pointing a finger at Mel. “He has a black heart and doesn’t believe in settling down.”

And that was when Sammy rolled her eyes toward a dark, star-speckled sky. “Oh, he definitely has a crush,” she muttered. “He doesn’t think anybody notices, but *I* do.”

Lennon gawked at her niece. “Wait. He actually likes someone?”

I snorted. “God, you all sound like you’re, like, thirteen.” I met Sammy’s unamused gaze and added, “No offense, Sam.”

“None taken,” she replied good-naturedly. “And anyway, yes, he likes someone, and he makes it so obvious. It’s annoying.”

“Who?!” Lennon and Mel both exclaimed, and Sammy’s lips stretched into a big, wide, shit-eating grin as she turned and pointed a finger ... directly ... at ...

Me?!

“*You,*” she teased.

My lips fell open, about to protest, but no sound was made. Lennon stared, doing the same guppy impression I was, while Mel pouted.

“Well, I guess I can’t even blame him if that’s true,” she muttered. “I mean, you’re gorgeous, tall, blonde—of course, you have to be to do what you do, but still.”

Lennon stopped abruptly, holding her hands up to halt the rest of us. “Wait. I need to process this.” She turned to Sammy and asked, “Are you sure?”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure,” she replied, really laying the teenage attitude on thick.

“Jesus ...” Lennon shook her head. “Dylan had mentioned he suspected something, but ... I didn’t think it was true ...”

I didn’t know why I was so desperate to know what she was thinking. I didn’t know why that, with every hammering beat of my heart, I prayed she’d look at me and tell me it was about damn time and encourage me to call him right then and there and demand I ask him to marry me.

But after a few minutes, she rolled her eyes to the sky and laughed. “Oh my God, this is crazy. And kinda sad. I mean, if anybody would break his heart, it’s you, T.”

I knew she didn’t mean for it to sound as hurtful as it did. She was making a playful jab. Maybe it was even meant to be a compliment—a comparison between her beastly brother and me, a princess playing a role on TV. But that statement alone splintered the patchwork surface of my heart the moment it was out there.

I would rather die than break that man’s heart. And I wished I could’ve found it in me to say it then and there, but instead, I could only laugh along with them.

Because I might have been a princess. But I was also a coward, looking for a hero to help me be brave.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tarryn

April brought with it more rain, an escalation of rumors, and the end of filming. The second season of *Breckenridge* was in the bag, and with it came a sigh of relief I hadn't known I'd been holding.

It meant spending just a little less time with Jackson.

I loved him. I really, truly did. But the talk of our so-called romance had moved into our fans. There was a small group that had always shipped us, as Sammy had said, but now, it was all over social media and the fan-made blogs. My patience for it was wearing thinner than a piece of tissue paper in the rain.

Jackson, on the other hand, seemed to love it.

Well, maybe *love* wasn't the word. But he certainly wasn't doing anything to discourage it. And that was starting to wear on me nearly as much as the constant tweets directed at me, asking whether or not we were getting engaged.

Lucy, my agent, had told me to ignore it all, just as Jackson continuously said. But how long was a lion meant to be poked before it finally attacked, claws out and teeth bared?

I tried to stay calm though, finding distractions everywhere I could, and with Lennon's wedding coming up, I had something to look forward to.

But Jackson's surprise visit to my apartment wasn't doing much to help my plan of staying stress-free and distracted.

"Hey," I said after letting him in.

I knew I could've turned him away, but he was still my friend, and I didn't want him thinking I regretted knowing him altogether.

"Hey, you." He gave me a hug and stepped inside.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, good sir?” I asked, closing the door and following him to the living room, where he was already eyeing my bridesmaid dress.

Long black silk with a draping neckline and deep red Swarovski-encrusted straps. It was stunning, not the type of dress to make the bride look better, but to complement her and her deep red dress.

Thank God Lennon decided against the nasty chiffon ensemble Cassie had originally helped pick out.

“Damn,” Jackson drawled, lightly pinching the fabric between his fingers. “You are gonna look amazing in this.”

“Oh, I do,” I replied, not too above self-flattery.

He laughed. “So modest.”

Standing beside him with my arms crossed, I stared at the formfitting dress. “Seriously though, it is a great dress. I might actually wear it to the Emmys.”

“You should. Who makes it?”

I shrugged. “Who knows? I’ll find out though. Get them a shitload of business once we step out onto the red carpet.”

“That’s a good idea.”

It was then, in the way he said it, that I realized he wasn’t his usual happy self. He was upset. Bothered.

Eyeing him suspiciously, I asked, “Everything okay?”

He looked away from my dress, hanging from the curtain rod in my living room, to head for the couch. “Not really.”

“What’s wrong?”

Dropping onto the couch and pulling a throw pillow into his lap, he said, “It’s been, like, three weeks since we hung out. Did you know that?”

I let my gaze fall to the floor. “I knew it had been a while, but ...”

“You’re avoiding me.”

I guess there’s no point in dancing around the truth.

“Can you blame me? Every time I spend time with you, our pictures start circulating. And you might not care—I mean, clearly, you don’t—but I *do*.”

He threw his head back against the couch and blew out an impatient sigh. “Tarryn, you act like this isn’t par for the course.”

“But it never was before!” God, why was I suddenly yelling? “We had been on this show for two fucking years before anybody even gave a shit. Jesus, Jackson, six months ago, we could go out to lunch, and nobody even looked at us.”

He brought his eyes back to me, looking helpless and broken. It hadn’t been my intention to hurt him. It hadn’t even been my intention to push him away. I just wanted the pictures and rumors to stop—especially when I had so much more than this on the line. Or I thought so at least.

“Is it really so bad, being my fake girlfriend?” It was an attempt at a joke, shown in the gentle tug at the corner of his mouth, but neither of us laughed.

“Jackson, a fake girlfriend at least gets the benefits of pretending to be in a relationship. These are just stories, pieced together by some inconspicuous pictures.”

“I know.” He hung his head.

Sighing, I trudged over the rug to drop beside him on the couch. “And for the record, it wasn’t that I was purposely avoiding you,” I explained. “It just sorta happened.”

“I get it. And I also get why. I just miss you.” His eyes met mine. “I miss my friend.”

“I miss you too.”

And so, because we missed each other and were apparently in desperate need of some companionship, we ordered dinner and watched a movie. We chatted about the things going on in our respective lives—or lack of—and drank a couple of glasses of wine.

It was a lovely night and reminded me of a time when I hadn’t cared about pictures and what the media thought. I missed that, I missed this, and I truly missed him.

“So, the wedding’s coming up, huh?” he asked before polishing off his third glass of wine.

“Yep.” I popped the *P* and brought my glass to my lips for a nerve-relaxing sip.

“You have a date? Maybe a certain groomsman ...”

He glanced at me with a wink, and I rolled my eyes.

“Oh, stop. I don’t even know what’s happening with that.”

“Well, this is your first time seeing him since, you know, he found out you missed him and you found out he missed you, right?”

“Yes,” I drawled, thinking about that night from weeks ago, “but we’ve hardly spoken since then.”

I said it like it was at all possible for my feelings to change in just a short period of time when I’d been infatuated with the man for nearly twenty years.

But who knew? Maybe it was possible for Connor to change his feelings that quickly ... if there were any feelings there at all.

“So, are you going solo then?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I didn’t want to go alone. There wasn’t much on this planet sadder than going to a wedding alone. But I didn’t see any other options, so ...

“Well”—he shrugged nonchalantly—“want me to go with you?”

Oh God.

“Jackson ... I don’t know ...”

I could think of two big—*very* big—reasons why that was an absolutely horrible idea. One being the media-feeding frenzy. The other being the man I so desperately wanted.

Jackson being my plus-one did not bode well for either of those issues.

But, in the event that Connor really didn’t want me and I spent the entire wedding alone, having Jackson there might actually be a good thing. Better than good even.

It might be really nice.

I eyed him suspiciously. “If Connor shows any interest ...”

“I will back the fuck away so fast that you’ll think I was the wind.”

“So, remember when I told you I wasn’t bringing a date?” I asked, flopping onto my bed with my phone in hand.

“Yeah ...” Lennon sounded dubious.

“Well, I changed my mind.”

She sighed into the phone. “Don’t tell me you’re bringing Jackson.”

“I’m bringing Jackson.”

“Tarryn ... I thought all this shit about you guys being together was bothering you. And you think this is a good idea?”

I stuffed my feet under the cover of my comforter and pulled it up to my chin. “No, I don’t particularly think it’s a good idea, but I won’t be alone, so ...”

“Oh my God, seriously?” She scoffed. “You wouldn’t be *alone*. You’ll have all of us.”

“Oh, right. Because it would be so much fun to hang out with my best friend’s soon-to-be husband’s rock-star buddies—who are all practically strangers to me, by the way. Oh, or maybe I can hang out with your parents. Yeah, dancing with your dad all night sounds like—”

“Okay, you can stop.” She was completely unamused. Annoyed even. “I get it. I don’t even blame you for bringing Jackson. But I’m just saying, with everything going on ...”

“I know. But it’s one night—”

“Two, if you count the rehearsal dinner.”

“Okay, two. Two nights. It’ll be fine. We’ll have a good time—dancing, drinking, whatever—and then I’ll go back to living under my rock.”

Lennon laughed. It wasn’t a happy sound. It was sad—maybe even sympathetic—and I didn’t like that. It was like she felt sorry for me, like she pitied my life, and that was the last thing I wanted. Not that I didn’t appreciate her care or worry. But nobody had ever felt sorry for me a day in my life—not that I was aware of anyway. I had a life others envied. I had a life they coveted. Nobody was *supposed* to feel bad for me.

Especially not over the media thinking I had a hot, famous boyfriend.

“Well, then, I guess we’ll see you guys soon,” she said, forcing a happy tone.

“I can’t wait.” I grinned at the dark ceiling. “I cannot believe you’re getting married.”

“I can’t either,” she said, giggling—happily now. “I mean, we’ve been living together all this time, but ... I dunno. Being legally bound to someone is on a whole different level.”

“It is. You’re contractually required to stay together. That’s serious shit.”

Lennon sighed, happy and content. “Yeah, it is.”

It was all she had ever wanted for her life. To be married, to have a house, to be happy and in love with a man who deserved her as much as she deserved him. It was a bonus that the man happened to be her favorite rock star ever. Some people got lucky like that, and Lennon truly deserved to be one of them.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” I laughed, hunkering into my mountain of pillows.

“You ever want to settle down?”

“Oh God, I don’t know ...” I groaned, rolling over to face the wall. “I’ve never really thought about it.”

That was a load of bullshit if I'd ever heard one. Yes, it was true that I'd never been the girl fantasizing about her wedding day. I didn't have a dream dress or theme in mind. But despite my fear of commitment, the thought of having that constant kind of companionship. Someone to always count on. Someone to come home to. That, I did want. I craved it in the worst way all the time and especially during moments just like this. I wanted a body instead of these pillows. I wanted arms instead of this blanket. But I didn't want it from just anybody, and that was precisely why I wouldn't talk about it now.

"You know what I think?"

"What?" I replied quietly, wondering if Connor wanted those things, too, and if he could ever truly want them with me.

"I think the right guy is going to come along eventually and sweep you right off your feet," she predicted. "And I can't freakin' wait for it to happen because I need you to double date with. Cassie and Steven are okay and all, but you're way more fun."

I laughed. Cassie had always struck me as that vanilla type of girl. Comfortable but ... well, a little boring.

"We'll see," I said before saying good night and hoping I'd dream of that man. The one who would sweep me off my feet and rescue me from a life of loneliness. The hero who deserved me as much as I deserved him.

The driver picked Jackson and me up from the MacArthur Airport and dropped us and all our luggage off at my condo down by the water in Bay Shore. The place felt more like an Airbnb at this point and less like my house—the first I'd bought on my own with the help of the money my mother had left me.

But it made me happier than the apartment I had in Fort Crow.

There was something so serene about stepping out of the car and hearing the bay sloshing against the shoreline.

There was something so comforting about knowing my best friend and her family were minutes away.

Jackson let loose a long whistle as he stepped through the door and into the open living room. It led right into the enormous kitchen with an island bigger than my closet in Scotland.

“Nice place,” he complimented, looking out the big sliding doors at the back of the kitchen. “Right on the water, huh?”

“Yep,” I said, locking the front door and setting the alarm.

“What is that? The bay?”

“The Great South Bay, yeah.”

“Very nice.”

It was small talk, but I could live with that. It was better than reliving the mob scene at the Edinburgh Airport or the media fiasco at MacArthur.

God, there had been so many flashing cameras. So many fans. So many *people*. They pelted us with questions and accusations. They made their demands and assumptions, and by the time we got onto the plane and in the car, I couldn't even think to talk to my companion. All I'd wanted was to shut down and retreat inwardly until all there was left was the reminder of my heartbeat. I was a person underneath these expensive clothes. I had a life and a right to privacy, and I was so, *so* sick of being treated as though I didn't.

“We should get ready,” I said to Jackson, finding the garment bag holding my rehearsal dinner dress. “The car will be back in a couple of hours to take us to the wedding venue.”

He turned from the sliding doors to nod. “Gotcha. Okay. Uh, where should I—”

“Up the stairs and to the right. There's a guest room with its own en suite. You can shower and get dressed in there.”

“Cool.” He smiled, revealing the friend I knew within the man the media believed was mine.

I missed that friend.

I was missing way too much these days.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Connor

It hadn't been too long ago when my sister was a scrub, just like me. Living at home and collecting money from the government when she wasn't able to work due to her disability. To her, it didn't seem like she had too many prospects for a future, but then Dylan Pierce stumbled into her world and rescued her from a mundane life she had never been meant to live in the first place.

Lennon had been born remarkable, and it was about damn time she realized it.

But the hotel they were having the wedding at was too extravagant for my taste—and my sister's too. Huge. Flashy. Crystal chandeliers in every room and shiny marble floors everywhere you looked. I wanted to pull Lennon aside to ask if she truly liked this place or if she was just appeasing what our mother wanted for her—or was it Dylan's mom? But I didn't say a damn thing as I walked through to the garden, where the ceremony would be taking place, with Sammy by my side.

A field of organized chaos surrounded us on all sides as we walked down the stone path toward the group standing near the altar. Everybody was there—my sister, Dylan, our parents, Simon and the guys, and the other bridesmaids.

Well, everybody, but the maid of honor.

“Hey, guys. Did you see Tarryn?” Lennon asked, her brows pinched with worry.

“Not when we came in,” I said. “Did you try calling her?”

“I did, but the service sucks here. It just keeps going to voice mail.”

I pulled out my phone, ready to dial her number, just to see if I had more bars, when the hurried clacking of heels came rushing toward us.

“Oh my God, I am so freakin' sorry.”

Someone could've done me the solid of warning me that my heart was going to stop right then and there in that garden. They could've told me that I would cease to exist, that I would drop dead with no chance of resurrection, and I still wouldn't have been prepared for the sight of Tarryn King rushing toward me in a dress made for royalty.

"God, I miss you."

"I miss you too."

"Hey," I said a little more breathlessly than I would've liked as I tucked my phone back in my pocket, suddenly oblivious to the other people around me.

Her blue eyes met mine, sparkling beneath an orange sunset sky. "Hi."

Why the fuck is my mouth so dry? "I was just about to call you."

"We hit traffic," she explained in a hurry, talking with her hands, the way she did when she was nervous and frazzled. "And then we had to find someone to tell us where to go. It's been an ordeal. Anyway, we're here, so ..."

We?

As if on cue, I looked up to watch Jackson fucking Stark saunter down the laid stones. He wore a suit worth more than every one of my material possessions combined, and his long hair was pulled back into some half-updo that would've looked stupid as hell on anybody else, but not on him—of course not.

He extended a hand toward me, grinning from ear to ear, and I wasn't sure I could possibly despise another human being more than I did right then and there.

"Hey, I think we've met," he said casually. "At the airport in Connecticut, right?"

"Right." I cautiously slid my hand into his and shook. "Connor."

"Jackson."

That grin remained on his face, and he seemed to be genuinely happy to officially make my acquaintance. But I

couldn't say the feeling was mutual.

I hoped I got that message across in the warning I held in my stern glare and the squeeze in my hand.

But if he got the message, he didn't let it show as he moved on to meet the rest of the wedding party—all of whom were outwardly honored to meet the dude they'd only known from their TV screens. Then, he took a seat with Cassie's husband to wait as we quickly ran through the wedding rehearsal with Lennon and Dylan's wedding planner—*I can't believe my sister has a fucking wedding planner*—guiding us every step of the way.

Sammy and I waited our turn as Simon and Tarryn walked down the aisle as best man and maid of honor.

"Dad," Sammy hissed, tugging on my arm and pulling me away from the sight of Tarryn's ass in that tight lavender dress.

I lowered my ear to her and whispered, "Yeah?"

"How badly do you wanna punch Jackson right now?"

Furrowing my brow, I shot my daughter a side-eyed glare. "What? Why would I—"

"I'm not an idiot, Dad. I *know*."

The wedding planner clapped her hands and hurried toward us. "Okay, Sammy and Connor. Now, you go."

And we went, walking together toward Dylan, Simon, and Tarryn, all while I wondered what exactly my daughter knew and how many others did too.

Dinner was at a nearby Italian restaurant, and I was grateful it was more low-key than I'd expected.

No need to wonder which fork was appropriate to stab myself with.

Tarryn sat across from me, sandwiched between Jackson and Simon. It was just as well—I'd rather be able to watch Jackson than wonder where he was putting his hands. But I couldn't talk to Tarryn from here. Not in the way I'd grown

accustomed to over the past couple of months. I couldn't raise suspicion with talk of missing her or feelings, so instead, I said nothing at all and kept my eyes on my chicken Parm and Jackson's wandering fingers.

Sometime between dinner and a third round of drinks, Simon made a speech about Dylan and his brush with death. The accident that had stolen his leg and nearly taken his will to live as well. He talked about the after-party, where he'd met my sister, the way she'd rocked his world and awoken his soul, and as he spoke, I realized how fucking badly I needed that for myself.

I needed to be shaken.

I needed to be woken up and kicked out of this shitty, mundane bed of a life I'd made for myself.

And I needed a cigarette.

"Hey, I'll be right back," I whispered to Sammy, who was sitting beside me.

"Okay," she replied with a nod.

At some point, not long before I left the table, Tarryn had excused herself to use the restroom. I half-expected to bump into her on my way out the door, and I hoped I would. I planned to invite her outside, ask if she'd like to share a cigarette with me, assuming she needed one too. Hell, maybe I'd even tell her how I felt, if she cared to hear. I decided it was a good idea with a nod and a pat of my hand over the pack of cigarettes in my pocket, and I hoped it all went according to plan.

Bumping into Matt was never a part of that plan.

"What the fuck?" I blurted at the sight of him, cornering Tarryn beside the women's room door.

She cowered beneath his stare, diverting her eyes. Breathing heavily and silently pleading for someone, anyone—*me*—to save her from that fucking creep.

I pushed past a waiter carrying a tray of drinks, only grunting a half-hearted apology as I hurried toward them.

“Come on,” I heard Matt say as I approached. “Just one drink. Let’s make up for lost time, catch up, you know—*oof!*”

His back hit the opposite wall as his hands flew to my forearm, pressed against his throat, pinning him beside a painting of a happy, fat man eating a plate of spaghetti.

“C-Connor,” he croaked, clawing at my arm and trying to pull me away. His eyes watered, and his lungs gasped. “Jesus, man. I can’t ... fuck, I can’t ... I can’t breathe.”

Good. He can die next to this fucking guy and his meatballs.

“What the fuck did I tell you?” I asked through my clenched jaw.

“Connor.” It was Tarryn, standing beside me and edging toward panic. “He ... he can’t breathe.”

I ignored her and held tighter. Pressed harder.

Matt wheezed. “Sh-shit, man.”

“I told you to stay the *fuck* away from her. Didn’t I say that?”

His face was red as his head jittered with a broken nod. “Y-yeah, you ... did.”

“Didn’t I say I’d fucking kill you if you didn’t listen?”

“F-fuck, man ... I-I can’t—”

“Didn’t I say that?” I pressed harder, and Matt began to cry, alerting nearby diners of the psycho who was about to murder the pervert next to a shitty drawing of a fat man and his pasta.

“*Connor.*” Tarryn grabbed my arm and pulled harder than I’d expected. The girl was strong.

I loosened my grip, and I turned to set my angry eyes on her, only to find the appreciation and worry in her gaze.

“Let him go, okay? He got the message.”

“I *said* I’d kill him,” I told her, meaning every word.

She nodded, her gratitude expressed in her gaze. “I believe you. But he’s not worth the jail time.” Her sparkling

blue eyes pleaded with me. “Don’t make me miss you that much, okay?”

And just like that, with my eyes on hers, I let him go.

Matt wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his shitty button-down. “You-you’re a fucking psychopath,” he said, coughing and sniffing. “You might think I’m trash, Connor, but you know what? I’d rather be trash than a fucking homicidal nutcase.” Then, he scurried away and brushed past a waiter heading in our direction.

“Is everything okay over here?” he asked, brow pinched with concern and his eyes full of caution.

Tarryn held tight to my arm as she stepped forward and said, “That guy was attempting to assault me when this man stepped in and stopped him from going any further.”

The waiter’s gaze hardened as he glanced over his shoulder. “And we only *just* gave that guy his job back a couple of months ago. I’ll have to let my manager know.” Then, he turned to me and clapped a hand against my shoulder. “Good job, man.”

He left us alone, standing in a dimly lit hallway off the main dining room. The adrenaline was pumping through my veins, thick and heavy with an urgency for release. We were tucked away and hidden from most of the restaurant, and if I wanted to, I could easily shove her against the wall, right next to that shitty painting, and kiss her. I could do everything I’d always dreamed of doing, holding my mouth against hers to keep her moans from alerting everybody else of our presence.

But I didn’t.

I backed away to press my spine against the wall, exactly where Matt had pinned her, and blew out a breath.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Tarryn finally said, her voice quiet and timid. “I can handle myself, you know. I—”

“Tarryn, please shut up.”

“Excuse me?”

My eyes opened to look down at her. “He told me what happened.”

She shrank before me as she backed away two steps, unable to figure out what to do with her hands. They flew to her hair, her face, her neck before settling against her stomach.

“I-I don’t—”

“I don’t know everything,” I assured her, “and you don’t have to tell me. But he told me enough that I swore to God, if he ever said your name or called my number again, I’d fuckin’ kill him.”

Her eyes blinked rapidly. “I ... I don’t even know what to say right now. H-he had no right to say anything. That ... that was personal, and—”

“Stop, okay?” I pushed away from the wall and dug my hand into my pocket. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. You owe *me* nothing. Whatever went down between you two ... I’m sorry. Okay? That’s all I’m gonna say. I’m sorry it happened. I’m sorry it was *him*. And I’m sorry it wasn’t—” *Fuck*. I was talking too much. I was saying more than needed to be said right now, and I clamped my lips shut before I could let any more spill out.

Tarryn swallowed. “What?”

I closed my eyes. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No. Tell me. You’re sorry it wasn’t *what*?”

I cleared my throat and shook my head. “It’s nothing.”

She opened her mouth to speak. She knew it wasn’t nothing. She knew it was so much more than that. But before she could say anything else, I pulled my pack of smokes and lighter from my pocket, took her hand in mine, and placed those two items into her palm.

“They’re gonna suspect something if we’re both gone for too long, so here, take these. Go smoke if you need one. Otherwise, I’ll see you across the table.”

I forced myself to walk away, hoping my face wasn’t reflecting the anger I still felt, as I listened to Tarryn head in the opposite direction toward the door.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tarryn

The silver smoke faded against a canopy of twinkle lights as I slipped the cigarette between my lips again.

It was a nasty habit and one I wasn't thrilled I enjoyed thoroughly. But it certainly had a way of chipping away at my pent-up nerves and anxiety, and I guessed there was something positive to be said for that.

I clung tightly to Connor's lighter, standing with my back pressed to the stucco siding, hiding from the world on the restaurant's back patio. They had a strict No Smoking policy within the vicinity of the restaurant ... but fuck it.

There wasn't anybody around, the cigarette was nearly finished, and I was sure some exceptions could be made.

God ...

I'd never thought I'd ever see that fucking guy again. Not after that night so many years ago. Matt and I never ran in the same social circles in school or otherwise. He had somehow graduated and was no longer in school, and just one short year later, I went away to college. Life had been a whirlwind after that, and I seldom gave that night much thought—whether out of self-preservation or simply never finding a reason to, I couldn't say.

Every now and then, his name would come up—usually in conversation with Connor—but those little blips in time were easily brushed away.

How the fuck could I have ever expected to run into him outside of the ladies' room at an Italian restaurant on Long Island's North Shore?

At least my hands aren't shaking anymore. That's good.

I was on my way to the restroom, hurrying along so as not to alert anybody to my presence, when he left the men's room. He looked vaguely familiar despite the thinning hair and scraggly beard, and I made the mistake of doing a double take just as he did one himself.

"Well, ho-ly shit," he said, curling his lips in a devious grin. "Look what the cat dragged in."

Funny he should say that about me when he looked like a fucking rat.

"Hey, Matt," I replied, forcing a kind smile. "Nice to see you. I'm just ... heading back to my table."

He knew it was bullshit and wasted no time in pursuing me, using his slender arms to cage me in against the wall. God, how easily he had gained the upper hand. I could've taken him—there was no doubt about that—but ... I had let him. He had intimidated me, made me smaller, weaker, and I couldn't find it in me to fight. So, he had backed me against that fucking wall.

"So stupid," I grumbled into the night, shaking my head and blowing out another puff of smoke.

I could smell his breath—laced with booze and cigarettes, no different than it'd been that night—as he leaned into me.

"Hey, so I hear you've come a long way since ... you know ..." He rolled his eyes, making light of a moment far more traumatic for me than it'd ever be for him. *"So, if you want a do-over, I'd be down."*

"No," I replied, shaking my head and hating how much the rest of my body shook with it. "I just want to get back to my table."

"Okay. A drink then."

"No."

"Come on." He laughed a little. Laughing at me. "Just one drink. Let's make up for lost time, catch up, you know—oof!"

I gasped when Connor had shown up out of nowhere to shove Matt against the opposite wall beside a hideous drawing of a fat man and a plate of spaghetti. His arm was firm and solid, pinned against Matt's neck. Forcing the air from the weaselly man's lungs and crushing his throat. I could only stare as I watched Matt's eyes tear up and fill with fear.

Connor is going to kill him. He is actually going to fucking kill him ... and he is going to do it for me.

I hadn't let him, of course. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if Connor had been thrown into prison simply for defending my honor. But he had done just that—defended my honor, like a real-life hero.

He had been hot before. But now?

Well, I wasn't sure what he was, but I wanted it. I had never wanted something so much before in my life, but I couldn't just ... *take* it. Not then, standing in that hallway after Matt slithered away like the fucking snake he was. Not when Connor had admitted he knew what had happened between Matt and me.

My eyes filled with a fresh batch of tears at the thought, and, fucking hell, immediately after crushing the cigarette under the toe of my shoe, I pulled out another because fuck the rehearsal dinner.

Lennon would understand if she knew.

Well, maybe not the cigarettes. She'd never understand the cigarettes.

I laughed at that thought despite the rush of memory clouding my view of the smoke reaching up toward a starless sky.

What the fuck had he told Connor? Had he told him that he'd found me at that party, tipsy and desperate? Or that I'd made the first stupid, childish, foolish move? I hated to think that Connor knew any of that, but what I hated more was if he knew that Matt had taken me up to a bedroom. That we'd continued making out until I begged him to take my virginity

—God, I'd been so fucking desperate to lose it that it didn't matter who took it.

But ...

What if he knew that it had hurt more than I'd anticipated, that Matt had been too rough toward my body and too unforgiving toward my uncertainty? What if he knew that, while I hadn't said it, I'd wished Matt would stop long enough to notice my discomfort? Or that I'd cried afterward, only for Matt to chuckle at my tears and tell me I'd be fine? What would Connor think then?

Did he already know?

I don't know how the fuck to feel.

On one hand, I hated that he knew anything at all. That time in my life was private; it was *mine*. It was a pivotal part of who I was, shaping me into the woman I was today. I'd sat in that room for a long time afterward, crying and berating myself for not putting a stop to it before it happened. I cried and cried until finally making the decision to never allow another man to have the upper hand. From that point on, sex would be on my terms. I'd have it only when I wanted it, it would feel the way I wanted it to feel, it would always be my call, my fucking decision—all of it. And I'd kept that promise to myself all these years—until Matt had spotted me outside that bathroom.

But, on the other hand, Connor was the only other person I could imagine myself confessing the secrets of that night to. If he had asked, I would've told him—maybe with a few glasses of wine under my belt, but still.

And then I would've told him I wished he'd been there instead of Matt.

I had always wished it were him.

But Connor had been there outside of that restroom. And he had saved me, just as I'd wished he'd been there to save me decades ago. He had swept me off my feet and blown me away, the way I always imagined he would, ever since that time he'd thrust his T-shirt at me and demanded I put it on.

And now, I was smoking his cigarettes, wishing he were out here on this patio with me. But he was too good to invade my space, uninvited.

He was always too good.

Too good for me.

Maybe all I was meant to have was a fake gay boyfriend, given to me by a media mob, while I wore the old T-shirt of a man I never should've wanted in the first place.

“Maybe that should be good enough,” I muttered to the twinkle lights as I pulled out one last cigarette.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Connor

I slept in the lap of luxury for the first time in my life. And after sleeping on that glorious pillow-top, memory foam king-size bed, I should have felt like a million bucks when I woke up—but I didn't.

Instead, I greeted the day, feeling about as worried and sick to my stomach as I had going to bed. All because Tarryn hadn't looked at me once she returned to the table at dinner. And not only that, but she didn't speak another word to me, even as she slipped the pack of cigarettes and lighter back into my hand after we all left the restaurant. She had just hurried back to her car with Jackson following sheepishly behind her.

He didn't know the things I knew. And maybe that was what bothered her so damn much—that I actually *knew* what had happened. I guessed I could understand why that'd get under her skin and make her feel self-conscious. But I wasn't judging or blaming her, and I found that I desperately wanted her to know that. I was angry for her, and the secondhand hurt I felt was so powerful that I could thrust my fist through a goddamn tree, just to pretend it was Matt's stupid, weaselly face.

But there was no point in texting her now. It was Lennon's wedding day, and all the bridesmaids were in my sister's suite, getting dolled up for the big event.

And I was stuck here, in my bedroom, alone. Putting on a tux that made me look a shitload better than I actually felt.

I didn't know what the bridesmaid dresses looked like—Sammy wouldn't let me see—but I wondered as I slipped the silk red bow tie around my neck.

What's Tarryn wearing? Is she gonna tear the breath straight from my lungs, or am I gonna just drop dead, right there on the aisle?

Then, as I slipped on the vest and jacket, I wondered what she'd think of me. If it was at all possible for her to look at me just one second longer than Jackson. If she might find it in her to let her eyes linger on me when she was supposed to be paying attention to him instead.

The thought puffed me up with just the right amount of confidence to leave my room and enter the suite's living room, just as my father was leaving his room in a nearly identical suit. His bow tie, however, was deep black in color. He looked over from his door with a grin and approached, hand extended.

"You look good, son," he said, pulling me in for a hug.

"You're lookin' pretty snazzy there yourself, old man."

He smoothed his hands over his chest and nodded. "It really is a nice suit," he said, glancing down. "Too bad it's a rental, huh?"

I laughed. "Yeah, well, I dunno about you, but there's no way in hell I could afford an eight-thousand-dollar suit, so I'm fuckin' glad it's a rental."

Dad chuckled before a touch of sadness could sneak its way into the otherwise happy sound. I frowned and asked what was wrong, and he shook his head while forcing his grin to broaden.

"My baby's getting married today," he said simply, like that should explain it all. "You'll understand one day."

"Yeah ..." I scoffed and rolled my eyes. "Maybe in fifty years."

He chuckled again, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Whether it's five years or fifteen, it'll all feel the same in the end. Goes by in the blink of an eye."

I didn't say anything more after that as we headed to the elevator to meet up with the other guys downstairs. Because I knew from my own experience that he was right, and there was so much about it that I hated. Mostly that there was nothing I could do to slow the speed of time and that, whether I liked it or not, my baby girl was becoming a woman faster than I wanted her to.

That fact was made painfully evident to me when I finally saw her, standing in the hall outside the ceremonial garden. With her blonde hair pulled back into a curly bun and her face all done up in way too much makeup, I had to do a double take to realize she was my daughter at all.

“Holy shit, why do you look thirty?” I asked, taking in the sight of her sleek black dress with its sparkly red straps.

Christ, when did her body start to look like that? And is she wearing high heels?

Jesus Christ, that's it. She's going to be the death of me.

Sammy ignored my disapproving glare as she pinched the lapels of my jacket in her hands. “Oh my God, Dad. You look great.” Then, she reached up to my hair and smoothed the sides down with her hands. “You could've done something with your hair though.”

“What the hell was I supposed to do with it?”

“Oh, I don't know. Running a brush through it would've been nice.”

“It looks *fine*,” I insisted, pushing her hands away while looking around for anybody else in the wedding party. “Where is everybody?”

“Dylan and the other guys are around somewhere. But Aunt Lemon, Tarryn, Cassie, and Mel were still getting ready, so I came down here with Grandma,” Sammy explained while continuing to fuss with my hair. “Seriously, Aunt Lemon's going to be so annoyed when she sees your hair.”

“She's lucky I even got dressed.”

“We're *all* lucky you got dressed,” a voice said from behind me, and I took that moment to brace myself before glancing over my shoulder.

The sun, the moon, and every one of their star companions couldn't compete with Tarryn's smile, accentuated

by a red lipstick to match the crystals adorning the spaghetti-thin straps lying against her slender shoulders.

“Hello, Connor,” she whispered as I turned from my daughter to face the enigma standing before me in a dress that had clearly been made to stop my heart dead in its tracks.

It was almost the same as Sammy’s, but the straps were thinner. It hit Tarryn’s curves differently—and thank God for that. I shook my head at its long, sleek silhouette and the neckline that draped too low to conceal any of her cleavage.

“You ...” I dragged my teeth over my bottom lip. “You ... look fuckin’ beautiful.”

Her cheeks deepened in color as her gaze dropped to the flowers in her grasp. Then, she giggled and laid a hand against her forehead. “God, it’s so weird when you compliment me. I don’t even know what to do with myself.”

“Would it be better if I said that if this wasn’t my sister’s wedding and we weren’t all expected to wear this shit, I’d be tearing off my jacket and demanding you put it on?”

Tarryn erupted in a laugh that made her glow brighter than anything I’d ever seen before.

Fuck ... she really was so fuckin’ beautiful.

“That would be much more appropriate, coming from you, yes.”

Because she doesn’t expect anything more.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets and tipped my chin to my chest, wishing things were different. Wishing *we* were different so that Tarryn would believe me when I said she looked beautiful while also wondering if it was too late to change her mind and our future ... even if it was too late to change the past.

But before I could ask, before I could say anything else, the others showed up, and the wedding planner rushed us into position outside the garden. I stared at the bundle of curls at the back of Tarryn’s head, thinking of everything I wished I could say and not knowing how the fuck to say any of it, while

we waited for Dylan to walk down the aisle with his parents on either side of him.

Then came the barrage of bittersweet moments. One right after another.

The realization that, not that many years ago, Dylan hadn't been sure he'd even live, let alone be able to walk.

The minutes it took for Sammy and me to walk down the aisle together. I knew that, one day, she and I would be taking this same walk again. Only then, I'd be giving her away, not taking her back home with me, where she belonged, and that ... well, that was when I started to choke up.

And then I stared at Tarryn.

I stared at her as Greyson came down the aisle with Cassie, and I continued to stare at her when Dave walked down with Mel. And I knew that, if she glanced over at me, she would think I was just looking across the aisle at Sammy. But all I could see—all I *wanted* to see—was *her*.

Until the time came for my sister to take her final walk as Lennon Jacobs, before she became Lennon Pierce. She held tight to our father's arm, never faltering in keeping her gaze toward the end of the aisle. I knew she couldn't see us well yet, not from where she stood, but she knew where she was going and who was waiting for her when she got there. That was all she had ever done—dream and imagine and pray that she'd one day get to where she was headed—and when she did get there and Dad passed her off to Dylan's waiting hand, I had to fight back a wave of emotion. One of pride and admiration, one that had no room for jealousy and envy.

And then I looked across the aisle to Tarryn. Only to find her looking right back at me.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that I despised parties.

Dance music was the devil, buffets were always better than a five-course meal of foods most people didn't want to

eat, even with the risk of salmonella, and there was nothing fun about wearing a suit for that many hours.

But I trudged my way through with a smile on my face most of the time, simply for the sake of my sister and her wedding pictures. I figured it was the least I could do. But any chance I got, I was sitting at the table—usually by myself—with a cold drink in my hand and poking at whatever crap was on my plate.

Until Sammy came over and sat beside me to put her head on my shoulder and yawn.

“The night is young, spawn,” I said, pushing over a glass of water. “Drink up and get back out there. You have to do enough dancing for the two of us.”

“You go dance. I’m tired,” she complained, already closing her eyes.

“You and I both know that’s not happening.”

“I don’t like the slow dances. Grandpa steps on my feet.”

“You gotta take one for the team, kid.”

She groaned, reaching for the water glass and taking a sip as the DJ switched gears and started to play a slow number. Sammy slapped her hand against the table and said, “I’m sitting this one out. There it is, I’ve declared it.”

“Suit yourself. But be aware that someone’s gonna come over here and wanna know why we’re not out there.”

“Whatever.”

I shrugged, pinching a sprig of something green and giving it a sniff. Then, I licked it, realized it was mint, and tossed it back on the plate. Sammy laughed and rolled her eyes, grumbling something about not being able to take me anywhere.

“You know what you should do?” she asked.

“Hmm?” I nibbled on something resembling a dried-up leaf.

“You should ask Tarryn to dance.”

I dropped the leaf to the table and turned in my chair to stare at my sneak of a daughter. “Oh? And why the hell should I do that?”

“Because you like her,” she stated too matter-of-factly for my taste.

“Okay, I need to know who told you that.”

“Oh my God, nobody, Dad.” She rolled her eyes. She was getting really good at that. “You’re not exactly the king of being subtle.”

Not seeing any point in arguing with my overly observant daughter, I turned back to my plate of something posing as salad and muttered, “She probably wouldn’t want to dance with me anyway.”

“Oh my God,” Sammy groaned, dropping her elbows to the table and holding her head in her hands. “The two of you drive me crazy.” Then, her hands landed on the table as she turned to stare at me, completely unamused and apparently sick of my shit. “Trust me. She *wants* to dance with you.”

“But what about Jackson?”

I lifted my gaze to find Tarryn with her hands on Jackson’s shoulders and his arms around her waist. They looked good together, dancing beneath a veil of multicolored lights, and who the hell was I to get in the middle of that?

“You’re killing me.” Sammy stood from the table and grabbed my hand with hers, pulling me from my chair.

“Sammy,” I hissed while allowing her to take the lead as she brought me onto the dance floor, where she tapped Tarryn on the shoulder.

Tarryn stopped dancing and turned, startled to see us both standing there.

Sammy jabbed her finger over her shoulder toward me and said, “Will you dance with my dad?”

This right here was an all-time low, and I laid a hand over my eyes, unable to fight my humiliated chuckle or heated cheeks.

Tarryn didn't bother fighting hers either. "Sure, I'd be happy to dance with him."

"Great," Sammy said, then turned to face me. "Good news. She wants to dance with you. Happy?"

My eyes met Tarryn's over Sammy's head as I replied, "Ecstatic. Now, get the hell out of here."

Tarryn's laughing eyes never left mine as I moved in for the kill, wrapping one arm around her waist and taking her hand in mine. She gasped at the same time my heart skipped a beat, the moment her body pressed to mine, and I wondered if she felt the same thing I did. That this ... her hand in mine and our bodies moving in time ... felt as right as the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon and the unveiling of the stars in the sky. Because it was, and now, there was nobody that could convince me otherwise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tarryn

It was everything I loved a wedding to be. Fun, just over the top enough to be extravagant, and so breathtakingly gorgeous with just the right amount of personal touch to be distinctive to that particular couple.

I mean, I would hope so.

With as much as it cost, it'd better be all of that ... and then some.

Of all the weddings I'd attended with the Jacobs family, I had known better than to expect Connor to leave his post at the table, so I freely danced the night away with Jackson. He surprised me by being an impeccable dancer—I mean, who knew he could move so well?! He even shocked the hell out of me and all the other guests by showing off his ability to swing dance like a pro.

“I had to take ballroom dancing lessons for a role in a movie,” he explained when I settled back into his arms after he swung me around like a rag doll.

In short, we were having fun. Much more than I'd anticipated. For the first time in weeks, I wasn't worried about who was watching or what assumptions were being made. I simply felt like Tarryn King, the version of myself I used to be, having a good time with her friend, surrounded by people she loved at her best friend's wedding.

It was a good night.

The DJ began to play an Ed Sheeran song—“One,” a personal favorite—and Jackson slipped his arms around my waist to pull me in for a slow dance.

I instinctively laid my hands against his shoulders and laughed. “What, you're not gonna wow me with the waltz?”

“Nah, I need to take a load off. Just a little side-to-side sway this time.”

“I’m good with that.”

And that was exactly what we did for the first thirty seconds of that amazing song—until Jackson raised a brow with the spread of his lips.

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. “What?”

“You’re not seeing what I’m seeing.”

“What are you—”

There came a tap on my shoulder, and I gave Jackson one last questioning glance before turning to find Sammy.

Right behind her stood Mr. Connor “I Hate Weddings” Jacobs.

Sammy looked entirely too exhausted and unamused as she asked, “Will you dance with my dad?”

My heart pattered an irregular beat as I looked over her head to meet Connor’s eye. “Sure. I’d be happy to dance with him.”

“Great.” She turned to face her father. “Good news. She wants to dance with you. Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” he grumbled, and I couldn’t help but laugh at his dry tone. “Now, get the hell out of here.”

He approached me then, stalking through those few steps like a lion stalked its prey. The other guests faded, the room around us disappeared into nothingness, and all that was left was Connor’s palm pressing against the small of my back, pulling me in close, and taking my hand in his. Heat traveled down my spine and into my belly as I became all too aware of his big, warm hand spreading out against my lower back. Touching me and luring me closer, pressing my body to his until there was nothing more than a whisper of air separating him from me. His fingers interlocked with mine as he pulled our conjoined hands to rest over his chest, and I gasped so loudly and stupidly. I knew I was blushing, but I couldn’t find it in me to care.

Because of all the times I’d danced with other men, of all the moments in which my body had been held close, not a single one had looked at me quite like Connor was looking at

me now. Like this fragment of time—me, him, on this dance floor at my best friend’s wedding—belonged to nobody but him and us. Like every moment we’d ever lived, every word of fiery banter, every cigarette, it had all brought us here to the very moment in which I knew and he knew that this was right in every possible meaning of the word.

“You were scared to dance with me?” I asked for the sake of saying something.

“No. I just didn’t think you’d want to.”

His eyes never left mine as we moved to the tune of that perfect, fitting song, and I laughed.

“Why wouldn’t I want to dance with you?”

“Well, not when you have Mr. Footloose over there, impressing everyone with his fancy moves.”

He sounded bitter, maybe even jealous, and that only made me laugh more.

“You don’t like Jackson very much, huh?”

His eyes flitted toward the table where Jackson was now sitting with Sammy. Chatting animatedly and making her laugh. He really was a good guy. One I treasured, one I hoped I knew forever.

But he couldn’t hold a candle to this man, squeezing my hand in his.

“I have no problem with Jackson. He’s good people. What I don’t like is what he is to you.”

“And what exactly do you think he is to me?”

Connor brought his gaze back to mine. There was no mistaking that possessive envy now, and it grabbed the breath right out of my lungs and held on tight.

“The guy the world thinks you belong to.”

I smirked. “Connor, if you think I’d ever belong to *anyone*, you don’t know me at all.”

He pressed his lips into a tight, thin line of contemplation before saying, “Maybe your body and mind wouldn’t belong

to someone, but your heart would. And the entire world thinks yours belongs to Jackson, and that's why I can't like him."

Oh God. If snarky Connor could make me swoon, then cryptic, romantic Connor was rendering my heart, mind, and soul completely useless to do anything other than fall at his feet.

"Are you saying it should belong to someone else then?" I asked with the confidence of an actress, simply playing the role of Female Love Interest, as my heart jumped straight into my throat with every intention of choking me to death.

Connor opened his mouth, then closed it again. His eyes dodged around us, and I was once again made aware that we weren't as alone as I'd been made to believe. We were surrounded by people—friends and family, people I knew, and people I didn't—all dancing and enjoying the party. I realized that whatever Connor wanted to say, he wasn't going to say it around them. Which only made me wonder if he would ever say it at all.

So, instead of speaking, I leaned forward and pressed my head to his sturdy, solid shoulder. I closed my eyes and imagined that it was us who had exchanged vows. This was our wedding, our celebration, and I smiled while holding on tight to his hand and wishing this song would never end and I'd never have to return to a world in which we weren't together.

But the song did end.

And he did let go of my hand.

"Thanks for dancing with me," he said as I reluctantly lifted my head from his shoulder. "Now, nobody can say I didn't dance at my sister's wedding."

"Glad I could rescue you from a lifetime of guilt and torment."

He smiled like he was holding something back, like it pained him to walk away and not say what needed to be said. Yet he did start to walk away in the direction of the table, but I couldn't let him leave. Not without asking the one question I'd had on my mind since last night.

“Connor.”

He turned with his hands stuffed into his pockets.
“Yeah?”

“What else were you going to say last night?”

He furrowed his brow like he couldn’t remember, and I sighed with exasperation.

“You had said you were sorry that it wasn’t ... something. What were you going to say?”

There, on the dance floor of my best friend’s wedding, Connor Jacobs parted his lips and took on the expression of a pained man as his gaze lifted to the ceiling and his Adam’s apple bobbed with a deep, hard swallow.

Then, he pulled in a heavy breath, and his chest lifted beneath that amazing black shirt, black vest, and deep red tie, and he stepped forward to stand close and bring his mouth down to my ear.

“What I wanted to say ...” He swallowed and took in another deep breath.

Is he smelling me?

“What I wanted to say was, I’m sorry that it wasn’t ... that it wasn’t me.”

My mouth fell softly open with a silent gasp as my fingertips fluttered to my chest, neck, and lips. It was the only reaction I could muster before he stepped away, moving backward for one, two feet, watching me with honest, somber eyes before turning and hurrying from the room with his hand pressed to his forehead.

And what else was I supposed to do?

I chased after him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Connor

What the fuck were you thinking?

I pushed through the French doors and out onto a terrace overlooking Long Island's rocky North Shore. The Sound swept over the sand in the distance, and if my mind wasn't in such a blinding panic, I might've taken more than a second to appreciate the view.

Tarryn had asked for the truth, but had she been prepared to hear it? I should've thought before I spoke. I shouldn't have let a nice moment—one stupid dance—render me so fucking idiotic that I couldn't even think straight before blurting out a bomb of a declaration. Now, it was out there. She knew I regretted not making a move before Matt did. She knew I wished I could've been the one to set the bar and show her how she should be treated before she had a chance to be insulted and hurt and violated by that piece of shit.

I dug into my pants pockets, remembering at once that my cigarettes were in my jacket pocket. The jacket I had left draped over the back of my chair.

"Fuck," I muttered through gritted teeth.

I couldn't go back in there. Not now, not after I had to go ahead and change every fucking thing with one stupid confession that never should've seen the light of day—*ever*.

My hands thrust into my mess of hair. "So fucking stu—"

"Looking for these?"

I closed my eyes at the sound of her voice, an added note to the soft melody of water meeting the shore.

I blew out a rueful sigh and shook my head. "Tarryn ..."

She moved her feet softly over the stone tiles to stand beside me and press the pack of cigarettes and lighter into my palm. "I figured you might need these."

“Well, thanks for apparently being able to read my mind.”

She sniffed a humorless laugh and crossed her arms over her chest, deepening cleavage that should be made illegal.

“Connor, you know ... you don’t get to drop a bomb like that and just ... walk away from me.”

I plucked a cigarette from the pack and slipped it between my lips.

“It’s ... it’s confusing and unfair, and ...”

I stuffed the pack into my pocket and cupped a hand around the cigarette hanging from my mouth, lighting it and taking a deep breath.

“I ... I don’t know what’s going on or-or what’s happening in your head ... God, I don’t know what’s happening in *mine* anymore, and—”

“Tarryn,” I said, pulling the cigarette from my lips and knowing at once what I needed to do. Right now. Right here. In this moment.

I turned to face her, cigarette pinched between two fingers, and she turned to mirror my stance.

“Wha—”

The tail end of her question faded to nothing as my mouth crashed down hard against hers, leaving her with nothing but a soft, pitiful whimper straining in her throat. Her arms unraveled and wrapped around my neck, hands cradling the back of my head and fingers threading through my rat’s nest of hair, as my arms found their way around her. Holding on, pressing her body to me with a powerful desperation I’d never known I was capable of feeling.

Then, she pulled back, taking my breath with her, and with her arms still wrapped around my neck and fingers still in my hair, she shook her head. “You kissed me,” she whispered, voice full of disbelief.

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her lips. “I did.”

She pressed her forehead to mine. “Why would you do that?”

“Why did you keep my shirt?”

She laughed despite the tears flooding her eyes, and, fuck, I hated that she wanted to cry.

“Because ...” She released a shuddering breath and sniffed back a torrent of emotion. “Because it felt like you.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Nobody had ever said shit like that to me before, and I couldn’t begin to wrap my head around what it meant or how it was supposed to make me feel, apart from this full, heavy, sobering sensation pressed against my chest, and all I could think to do was search her eyes with frantic need before kissing her again.

And I couldn’t fucking believe I was kissing her as her lips parted and my tongue swept inside her mouth. I couldn’t believe this was the little girl who had broken my Legos. The kid who had driven me and my friends insane with her incessant teasing and taunting. The teenager who had rendered me stupid and horny with tiny shorts and tinier bikinis. She had been nothing but a pain in my ass my entire life, a thorn in my side, an unrelenting gnat, annoying my every waking moment whenever she was around, but now ... with this kiss ... with every dance of our tongues and every escaped moan from my throat or hers ...

Somehow, she was nothing that she used to be and became everything else. Everything I had known I wanted, everything I never knew I needed, and I couldn’t get enough. I wanted this to last forever—her hands in my hair, my arms holding on to her with the strength of a million men, her tongue and my tongue sweeping and touching and exploring with a desperate passion I hadn’t even been aware could exist in anything but my dreams. I wanted it always. I wanted it more than I wanted that cigarette now burning down to my fingers.

But like everything else, it was always bound to end. And it did—a separation of our lips and mouths and tongues that hurt like she’d become a brand-new part of me that was tearing itself away just as quickly as it’d come. And she untethered her arms from my neck and smoothed her hands over her dress.

“I, um ... we ... we should get back inside,” she whispered breathlessly against the backdrop of waves.

“Yeah,” I said, dropping the unsmoked cigarette to the ground and stamping the embers with the toe of my shoe.

Then, without another word spoken or a breath of air shared between us, we headed back inside. I let her go in first, so as not to raise suspicion, and lingered outside the reception for a few minutes. Watching her walk back to the table with her head held high and confident, watching as she sat beside Jackson and jumped straight into conversation. Doing these things with such poise and grace, like our lives hadn't just been altered by one maybe foolish kiss on a terrace overlooking the Long Island Sound.

And then I remembered once again that she was an actress. Constantly playing a part in whatever life she was living at the time. And I wondered what was real, if she even knew anymore, and if I would ever be lucky enough to experience the real Tarryn King.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Tarryn

“So, you wanna tell me where you ran off to earlier?” Jackson asked, smirking coyly before taking a bite of cake.

With dramatic flair, I dropped my head into my hands and groaned. “He kissed me,” I muttered into my palms.

Jackson’s mouth stopped moving mid-chew. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

I whined dramatically, “Yes.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

My hands slapped against the table, and I slumped against the back of the chair. The party was still thriving. Those who hadn’t left were on the dance floor or eating cake, but every desire to enjoy myself had vanished with the memory of that kiss.

“It was perfect,” I admitted sorrowfully.

“Sounds like a serious problem.” He took another bite of cake. “God, this is fucking amazing.”

“You don’t get it. It was one of those *sweep you off your feet, make you see fireworks, rock your world* kind of kisses,” I said with a wistful sigh.

“Still failing to see the issue here.” He scraped the remnants of icing off his plate with the side of his fork before pointing at the untouched slice of cake in front of me. “You gonna eat that?”

I shoved the plate toward him.

“Bless you,” he said, digging in. “So, tell me what’s wrong.”

“The issue is, I’ve never been kissed like that before in my life. I’ve never been spoken to like that.” The air left my lungs as I looked toward the vaulted ceiling. “He told me he

wished *he* were the one to take my freakin' virginity, Jackson. Like, do you even know how long ago that was?"

"Before the beginning of time, I'm guessing."

I rolled my eyes. "You're not funny. My first time was shitty as hell. I hated that guy. He had made me cry, and all I could think about was how I wished I'd waited. I wished I'd saved it for someone who mattered—"

"You wished it were Connor," he guessed, and I nodded. "So, while he's been wishing it were him, you've been wishing for the same thing. I gotcha."

"And that was years ago."

He let his fork hover over his cake for a few moments as he nodded. "That's a long time for two people to want each other and not say anything."

"And now ... we both know ..."

"And he's your best friend's brother."

I groaned.

Then, he added with a wince, "And you're going back to Scotland in two days."

I squeezed my eyes shut and laid my palms over my face once again.

It was so cruel, so unfair, and my heart wept despite my willpower to keep my eyes from crying. I didn't know what the future had in the cards for Connor and me, if we were meant to last or simply have a night of hot passion after years of pent-up hormones and emotion. But the thought that we couldn't figure it out now, while I was in New York but surrounded by all these damn people, was so unbelievably frustrating, I couldn't stand it. Because what were we supposed to do? Connor was sharing a suite with his daughter and parents while I was sharing one with Jackson. There was no privacy to be found there, no way we could figure this out without having their watchful eyes on us.

I hate this.

Jackson eyed me with sympathy before laying his fork down with finality. "Well, I guess I should head to bed."

“What?” I asked as he stood up, leaving my piece of cake half-eaten. “You’re just gonna leave me?”

“No,” he said. “I am going to book myself my own room, and you are going to text that man and tell him to meet you at the suite.”

If anything could make me cry in that room full of people, it was this.

I clapped my hands over my heart. “Jackson ...”

“I don’t know realistically how long you’ll have. I mean, the guy has a kid. But hopefully, it’ll be enough time to ...” His hands fluttered as he searched for the words. “Do something.”

I laughed, knowing I was blushing at the idea of doing anything at all with Connor. “Thank you. Seriously. You’re a good friend.”

He leaned down, pressed a kiss to my cheek, and said, “I know. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He left the party, sneaking out the door before anyone could notice, and with shaking hands, I pulled my phone out of my clutch purse. Connor had never returned to the table after he kissed me. Instead, he had taken an extremely exhausted Sammy upstairs to the suite he was sharing with his family. I didn’t know if he had gone to bed, too, or if he was standing on his balcony, smoking that entire pack of cigarettes. But I wasn’t going to bed before I could find out.

Me: Hey, what are you doing?

Connor: Nothing at the moment. Torn between getting shit-faced or smoking every cigarette in my possession while trying to remember if I’ve ever had a kiss like that before in my life, knowing damn fucking well I never have. So, my brain is kinda screwed at the moment, and I’m not entirely sure what to do about it, to be honest. Especially when my kid is sleeping in the next room and my parents just walked in. They don’t even know I smoke, so I guess the only option is to get completely shit-faced, so ... to the bar I go!

I smiled at the wall of typed word vomit, unable to control the outburst of giggles that blended seamlessly with the thump of club music. I positioned my thumbs, ready to reply, when I was startled by the figure of a man overshadowing the phone in my hand.

“What are you doing over here by yourself?” Dylan asked, pulling out the chair across from mine.

I smiled, trying to hide my giddiness and hoping my best friend’s new husband couldn’t sense that I’d just made out with her brother. “Jackson went up to bed, so I’ve just been debating if I should, too, or if I should hang out for a little while.”

It was such a lie, and I hated myself for it. But I also wasn’t ready to let anyone else in on the truth.

“Where’s Connor?”

Or maybe he already knows.

“I don’t know. I think he, um ... took Sammy back to their suite or something.”

“Hmm.” Dylan nodded, lacing his fingers together on the table before glancing over his shoulder at the room. Then, he looked back at me, his eyes meeting mine. “Can I give you some unsolicited advice?”

Swallowing, I nodded. “Sure.”

“When you know you have something worth holding on to, don’t be an idiot and let it go. Okay? I know the instinct is to run or to hide shit, but ... it’s better to let whatever’s gonna happen ... happen instead of pushing it away and wishing you hadn’t been such a fuckin’ idiot. You get what I’m saying?”

I was all too aware of the year Dylan and Lennon had spent in a tug-of-war before they solidified their relationship. Both of them had been to blame for that, and even at the time, I had thought they were both foolish. Now, sitting at their wedding, I wondered what would have happened if it had all gone differently. What if neither of them had pushed or pulled

at all? What if they had simply let things go and moved on? Where would we all be today if none of that had happened?

There was no way Lennon would be smiling the way she is right now if she had let him go.

“I get what you’re saying.”

“Cool.”

Then, Dylan smiled at me and asked, “You ever gonna let Lennon know?”

I felt the color drain from my face as I swallowed and began to speak. “I, uh ... I’m—”

“Relax, Tarryn. I’m not gonna say anything to her. It’s your business and your call to make. You have my word on that. But I’m just saying, she already suspects something’s going on, and I think if something *is*, she’d prefer to hear it from you.”

I knew he was right. I knew that if she were to hear about some kind of love affair between her brother and me through the media, that would hurt her more than anything else. But for now, I didn’t know if there was even anything to tell or if the tale of Connor and Tarryn was meant to begin with a T-shirt and end with a passionate kiss by the water.

There was more to find out before I knew if there was a story to tell.

So, as Dylan walked away to find his new wife, I pulled out my phone and sent Connor a message.

Me: Do you want to get shit-faced with me?

Connor: Tarryn, there are about a thousand things I want to do with you, but believe it or not, getting shit-faced isn’t one of them.

Me: Well, do you want to come to my room and check some of those things off the list?

Connor: Give me your room number, and I’ll be there in five.

Connor wasn't at my room in five, nor was he there in ten.

I started to wonder if he had chickened out by the time he showed up—sixteen whole minutes after he told me he'd be there. But when the knock on the door came, I sprang from my bed quicker than I'd ever moved before in my life.

I threw the door open to find him there, wearing just his black button-down, black slacks, and shoes. “Hey, what took —”

Before the remainder of my question could leave my mouth, he had me against the wall just inside my room, lips on mine and hands clasped to either side of my face. My body responded instantly as my fingers reached for the soft cotton of his shirt, gripping on tight as his tongue explored the depths of my mouth.

He tasted like booze and cigarettes. So similar to Matt, so eerily reminiscent of that first time I'd been desperate to forget. Yet so, so different and so, so much better.

“Do you know how long I've wanted to kiss you?” he asked, stopping long enough to press his forehead to mine.

“No.” I ran my hands down the length of his torso, then back to his chest.

“That day, when I gave you my shirt,” he said, tracing my cheekbone with the pad of his thumb, “I wanted you then, and I've never stopped since.”

Laying my hands over his shoulders, I pressed my lips to his, responding to his confession with the very thing he'd waited all these years for, and I hoped to God it'd all been worth it.

I knew it was for me.

He groaned against my lips—a new, primal sound I'd never heard from him before—and I knew in an instant that I needed to hear it again and again and again. It fed the part of me that craved this type of attention—the touch, the feel, the sensation of being with a man—and as if by habit, my hands

moved from his shoulders to slide over his chest, stomach, and down to the waistband of his pants.

“Tarryn,” he muttered against my lips.

I took the usage of my name as encouragement as I acquainted my fingertips with the length of his erection, straining against his zipper and begging to be released. This was what his body wanted, what he was silently asking for, and my hand gripped tighter and rubbed harder, uniting myself with a part of Connor I’d only dreamed of.

What does he look like naked?

What does he taste like?

“Tarryn.”

I heard the edge in his tone now, and even if I hadn’t, I felt it as his hands left my face and held my wrist, pulling me away from his arousal.

My eyes flew open to look at him. The regret and sympathy in his gaze wounded me, and I pulled my hand from his grip.

“I thought this was what you wanted,” I said, my tone cold and harsh as I pushed past him and deeper into the suite. “I thought you wanted *me*.”

He groaned again, but this time, it was different. He wasn’t turned on; he was frustrated and ...

Sad?

“It is,” he insisted, soft with an edge. “I mean ...” He huffed with exasperation. “Obviously.”

“Then, what the hell is your problem?” I dropped down to sit on the couch, feeling too rejected to look at him as I pressed my elbows to my knees and stared at the floor.

He was cautious in his approach and sat beside me. “I don’t want you to do anything with me just because you think I want you to do it,” he said gently. “What I want is whatever *you* want.”

Oh, that Connor ...

He was the first to prove that some men could be interested without expecting me to flaunt my body. He was the first to show me that some men could be decent in their approach. And then, on that couch in my hotel suite, he was the first to make me see that what I wanted from sex was important too.

Yes, I had kept my promise to myself since Matt. I never partook in relations with men if I truly didn't want to. But their needs, their wants, their desires ... they came before mine. Because what I wanted from them was the assurance of their company. I wanted the praise, the momentary companionship, and the affection.

I wanted everything I was missing.

“So, what do you want to do?” Connor asked as the tears filled my eyes and threatened to spill over and ruin hours' worth of makeup. “Anything you wanna do, I am here for it. But I want it to be what you want.”

God, why is he so good? And why doesn't he ever realize that he is?

“Honestly?”

“Please.”

I laughed around a sob, and I wiped my eyes as I turned to his watchful gaze. “I really, really want to cuddle.”

“You want”—his lips curled into an adoring smile—”to cuddle?”

“So fucking badly that it's probably pathetic.” The tears wouldn't stop, no matter how ruthless I was in wiping them away. “And I want to kiss. I want to kiss you a lot, but mostly ... I want to cuddle.”

“I think we can manage that.”

Connor didn't waste a second in rising to his feet and extending a hand down to me. I let him pull me from the couch, I let his lips touch my forehead as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders, and I let him lead me toward my bedroom.

“So, what should we do now?” he asked, keeping his arm wrapped around my shoulders as he reached for the glass of champagne on the nightstand.

“Ask me something,” I said, tightening my arm around his middle and nuzzling my cheek against the rock-hard surface of his chest.

“Hmm.” He took a sip and swallowed. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Okay”—he downed the rest of the glass and placed it back on the nightstand—“has your heart ever been broken?”

My leg wrapped around his, holding tight, as my fingers danced over his stomach, still covered by his shirt.

I didn’t think I had ever lain in a bed with a man before where at least one of us wasn’t naked. But here we were, and it was the most intimate experience of my life.

“I dunno,” I said, speaking quietly while watching my hand move over his body. Unable to believe it was him lying here with me when, just last night, I hadn’t been sure he’d ever know how I felt at all.

His fingers traveled the length of my arm, then back up to my shoulder, and down again as he sniffed a melancholy laugh. “You don’t know? Seems like a pretty simple question to me.”

“Well, has yours?”

“Yes,” he responded so quickly, so easily that I rose onto my arm to look at the somber expression on his face.

“When?”

“Well”—he raised his hand to brush a strand of loose, curly hair behind my ear—“the first time was when you moved to Scotland. It pissed me off that I hadn’t told you how I felt, and when you moved away”—his eyes stared blankly across the room to the large screen TV on the wall—“I figured it was too late.”

Is it still too late? I couldn't find it in me to ask, so instead, I said, "There was another time?"

His eyes rose to mine, and then he nodded. "When I found out about Matt."

The pain and sincerity burning against the blue in his irises were too intense. It was too much, and I pulled away to sit up in bed, still wearing my dress.

"Sorry," Connor said, sitting up beside me and running a hand through his hair. "I know you don't want to talk about it, but you asked, so—"

"I had been so obsessed with the idea of losing my virginity," I confessed, pulling my knees to my chest and hugging my arms around them. "For a long time, it didn't feel like it mattered who took it as long as it was gone."

Connor nodded slowly. "Yeah," he drawled. "That was me with Stacey—remember her?"

I uttered a disgusted sound, and he turned with wide-eyed amusement.

"I hated that girl," I muttered.

"Apparently."

"Anyway," I went on, brushing away the thought of his old on-and-off high school girlfriend, "after that day you gave me your shirt, I ... oh God"—I groaned, covering my face with my hands—"I don't even know why I'm gonna say this, but"—I dropped my hands back to my knees—"I wanted it to be you so badly. I had this plan, like ... I don't know. I was gonna seduce you or something. It was so stupid, and I knew it probably wouldn't have worked—"

"You're right," Connor replied, his voice gentle but firm. "It never would've. Not then anyway."

"I know that. But in my sixteen-year-old mind, I was determined to make it happen because you ..." I swallowed and lifted my eyes to the ceiling fan. "You *cared* about me, and I liked that a lot. But then you left, and I was so ... I was so *mad* about it. Like, really spiteful, so I—"

Connor groaned and laid a hand over his eyes. “Please don’t tell me you slept with Matt to get back at me for going to Connecticut.”

“No,” I said, laughing morosely. “I wasn’t that crafty. But I did tell myself that I’d fuck the first guy to show any interest, and that guy happened to be a cold, heartless piece of shit.”

“I could’ve told you that,” Connor grumbled heatedly.

My mouth fell open with my shock. “Oh, so you *knew* he was an asshole?”

Connor lifted a flippant hand as his forehead crumpled with apology. “I knew he wasn’t a good guy,” he explained ruefully. “Like, I knew he slept around and liked to cheat. But I didn’t realize how bad he was until, a while back, I met up with a couple of other buddies who mentioned he’d been kicked out of his old apartment complex for, uh ... let’s say, pursuing a neighbor who didn’t have any interest in him. She kicked him in the nuts and complained about his constant need to hit on her, and the super kicked him out.”

I cringed, remembering his pursuit of me outside the restroom at the restaurant. It was hard to believe that’d just happened the night before. “Did she press charges?”

Connor shook his head. “There was nothing really incriminating about what he had done, supposedly. But his lease was up, and the super wouldn’t let him renew. Now, he’s living in some trailer park in Bay Shore.”

It was sickening to think men like him could exist in the world and get away with the things they did. What a flawed system we had, where a boy in love could be slapped with statutory rape charges at eighteen, simply because an angry father didn’t approve of him sleeping with his seventeen-year-old daughter. But a piece of bottom-dwelling scum like Matt could continue to do wrong and toe the line of the law and never face the consequences of his actions, just because he wasn’t wrong enough.

Men like him would eventually become someone else’s trauma.

“I should’ve just let you kill him,” I muttered.

“If I had, I wouldn’t have been here tonight.”

That brought a smile to my face. “That’s true.”

“And I would’ve spent the rest of my life wondering what it’d be like to kiss you, and that really would’ve sucked.”

“Yes,” I whispered, remembering that kiss on the terrace. “And I would’ve spent the rest of mine holding on to a T-shirt, wishing I’d just waited for you.”

Connor sniffed a laugh and lifted his lips into a melancholy smile. I knew now that he wished I had waited too. He wouldn’t say it—what would be the point now? There was no sense in beating a dead horse when there was no such thing as going back in time. But we both knew, and that was enough to build the foundation of what we could be now.

“Ask me something now,” he whispered, his voice weighed down by the magnitude of our discovered attraction, as he reached out to take my hand, watching as our fingers slid together and interlocked.

A giggle escaped my lips as I asked, “Why have you always been so mean to me?”

That made him laugh as he brought our conjoined hands to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “Let’s be real, okay? You were always a pain in the ass.”

I feigned a dramatic gasp. “I was not!”

“Yeah ... but you kinda were. You always broke my shit, you taunted the fuck out of me for no reason—”

“Oh, and you were such a saint.”

“Not a saint,” he corrected, raising a brow. “But I gave as good as I got. You had it coming, and then ... I dunno ... it just became our thing. It was kinda fun, and, um ...”

He hesitated, twisting his lips to the side and diverting his gaze.

I pinched my brows with curiosity and asked what he was going to say, and he shrugged.

“It, uh ... I guess it was easier than admitting I was into you.”

I nodded because I understood. Not just to guard my own feelings, but the hopes and dreams of others. I was too close to the family, too involved and attached. Hell, even now, I wondered what the fuck we were going to do about telling them—or if we ever would.

“Ask me something else,” he said, squeezing my hand.

My gaze fell to his mouth, and although it had only been an hour since he’d last kissed me, I missed it. It was honorable, his desire to wait for me to move at my own pace without what he wanted influencing my decisions, and it was the most gentlemanly gesture I could have asked for.

But that didn’t mean we couldn’t make out a little more because I very much wanted that.

“Will you kiss me again?” I asked, lying back against the pillows and luring him to me with a tug of his hand.

He lay beside me, resting his palm against my cheek, as he slowly closed the gap between his lips and mine. “Yes,” he whispered before pressing his mouth to mine.

We made out like teenagers, frantic and clumsy and passionate, in a tangled mess of limbs, hair, teeth, and tongues. I relished in the new way he said my name, muffled against my neck as he tasted my skin and smelled my hair. I groaned his name back, holding on to his hair and guiding his lips to the plunging neckline of my dress. His beard scraped my skin with every kiss and every bite, marking my body in redness I knew would make me smile and reminisce tomorrow, and then I frowned with a touch of sadness, knowing tomorrow would leave my arms once again lonely and empty.

“Connor,” I breathed, savoring his name on my tongue.

“Hmm?” He licked a path between my breasts, and I released a strangled groan.

“Will you take off my dress?”

He lifted his head, his eyes disbelieving. I bit my lip and nodded with a silent plea. Slowly, he sat back on his heels, allowing me to climb off the bed and present my back to his hungry gaze.

A warm, rough hand gripped my shoulder as another gripped the zipper pull in the center of my back.

I closed my eyes and shivered with insurmountable anticipation.

Millions of people had seen my body through a variety of screens. Dozens of men had touched me, and dozens had seen me naked in the flesh—but not one of them had been Connor Jacobs.

He slowly tugged at the zipper, and the room was silent, apart from the metallic hiss of it the dress coming undone.

“Jesus, fuck,” Connor muttered from behind me, and I bit my lip at the thought of what he must see.

The complete exposure of my back. The black silk thong separating two halves of my well-developed ass—thanks to hours of yoga and HIIT training.

I let the thin spaghetti straps fall from my shoulders, sliding over my arms until the dress was free to pool at my feet, leaving me entirely nude, save for the whisper of silk concealing the only part of my body never shown on television. Connor’s heated gaze followed me as I stepped from the black puddle at my feet to walk toward my open suitcase on the floor, where I bent over and pulled out that old, threadbare Saint Savage T-shirt.

“You are the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Connor choked out.

“Well”—I turned, holding the shirt to my chest as I walked back to him, still sitting on the bed in his shirt and slacks—“that makes us even then.”

His tongue wet his lips as an incredulous sound scraped along his throat. “We are nowhere near even, Tarryn. We’re not even in the same fuckin’ ballpark.”

“That’s because you’ve never seen what I see.”

I lifted my arms and made a show of sliding his old T-shirt on, only giving him a momentary glimpse of my breasts before the thin fabric engulfed me in its comfort.

Then, I crawled back into bed, and he lay beside me, wrapping both of his arms around my body and kissing my temple with a sigh.

Exhausted, I closed my eyes and asked, “Will you stay until I fall asleep?”

Connor swallowed as he nuzzled his cheek against the top of my head before whispering, “Yes.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Connor

Waking up with my arms wrapped around a hot woman was disorienting.

Realizing that woman was Tarryn was a total mindfuck.

The events of the night came rushing in like a tidal wave, sweeping me away with memories of the kisses we'd shared and the questions we'd asked before falling asleep with her in my damn T-shirt.

It had been the greatest night of my entire life.

But now, I panicked with her head on my chest and her hand tucked beneath my button-down to lie against my stomach.

What the hell time is it?

I lifted my head to search for a clock, grateful to find one on the nightstand beside my empty champagne glass. It was five a.m., and while I wasn't sure how long I'd been asleep, what I was sure of was that I needed to get the fuck out of that room and back to mine before anyone realized I was gone.

"Hey," I whispered, brushing my thumb over Tarryn's cheek in some kind of attempt to wake her up gently. "Tarryn, I have to—"

"Mmm," she mumbled, tightening her hold around my waist while curling her leg around mine.

For fuck's sake.

The woman slept like a fucking koala bear.

"Tarryn," I urged, raising my voice and attempting to unravel her arm from my waist.

She slowly lifted her head and peered up at me through bleary eyes. Even now, after sleeping for hours and having the imprint of my shirt button on her cheek, she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my damn life.

I am officially fucked.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I said, lifting the side of my mouth in a smile. “It’s five o’clock in the morning.”

Recollection was slow to settle in before smacking her all at once with the memories from the night. Her makeup-smudged eyes widened, and her lips dropped open as she uttered an, “Oh shit,” before jumping out of bed.

“You have to go,” she declared, scurrying to find my shoes.

“This is the most romantic moment of my life.”

She shoved my shoes into my lap. “Put these on and get the fuck out of here.”

I pressed a hand to my chest. “God ... I am just feeling ... *so* special right now.”

In the T-shirt I’d demanded she put on years ago and nothing else, she planted her hands on her hips and leveled me with an unamused glare. “Connor, I don’t know about you, but I’m not ready to explain all of”—she fluttered her hand rapidly between us—“*this* just yet when I’m still trying to process it myself. So—”

“Tarryn, I know,” I said softly, moving to the edge of the bed to put my shoes on. “I’m just teasing you.”

She blew out a breath and nodded as she crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m sorry. It’s just ... it’s—”

“A lot. I know.”

“Great. I’m glad we’re at least on the same page. That’s ...” She swallowed and moved her hands back to her hips. “That’s great.”

I stood up, grasped her shoulders in my hands, and leaned in to press a kiss to her forehead. Closing my eyes, I lingered there for a moment—just holding my lips to her skin—and took a deep breath. This was one of the most real, most terrifying endeavors of my life—being here with her, being honest and trusting—and it scared the ever-loving shit out of me to think that it might not last beyond that door. She could go back to Scotland; she could reemerge into her life of

extravagance and riches and realize that she had absolutely no space to fit a garbageman from Connecticut.

I wasn't sure my heart could handle that.

"Hey." She pulled back and lifted her hands to cradle my face in her palms. Her thumbs brushed against my beard as she smiled into my eyes. "I'll text you after I wake up later, okay?"

"Not if I text you first," I said with a wink.

She stood on her toes and kissed my mouth before shoving me away with the sass I'd always known to expect from her. "Now, get the hell out of here before anyone knows you were here."

With a swipe of the key card through the lock, the door opened with an obnoxious *clunk*, and I cursed under my breath as I crept into the suite's living room. It was dark inside, lit only by a small table lamp near the door, and I breathed out a sigh of relief as I closed the door behind me.

"Dodged that b—"

"Connor?" Mom entered the living room, holding a cup of coffee in both hands. "I thought you were in your room."

I blinked sheepishly at her, flapping my lips like a fucking goldfish while trying to come up with some feasible explanation as to where I'd been. It was too late to blame the wedding reception, and I wasn't drunk, so claiming I'd been at the bar all night was out of the question.

Dad came in behind her, looking as though he'd just showered. Why the hell were they even awake after partying all night? Since when could they survive on zero hours of sleep?

What the hell are they, vampires?

"Hey, bud. You just getting in?"

“Uh ... yeah.” I nodded, stuffing my hands into my pockets in search of my cigarettes and lighter. Making sure I hadn’t left them in Tarryn’s room.

I was gonna need them after I pulled some bullshit out of my ass.

“What’ve you been up to?”

Oh, you know, just making out with my little sister’s best friend. The usual.

“Went outside to get some air,” I said with a shrug, “and woke up on a bench a little while ago.”

“Oh my God, Connor!” Mom gasped, clapping a hand against her forehead. “You’re lucky nobody mugged you.”

“Yeah, seriously. ‘Cause you know those muggers, always hanging around expensive hotels with crazy-good security systems,” I grumbled sardonically.

“What if you had gotten *killed*?”

“Well, then I’d be dead, and I wouldn’t have to worry about it while you guys wondered what the fuck I was doing, sleeping outside.” I made a beeline toward my door. “Anyway, good night!”

I disappeared behind the door and blew out a heavy breath of relief.

“Still got it,” I muttered, thanking Christ I’d spent so much time lying through my teeth as a teenager.

Then, I peeled my clothes off and jumped into bed, naked, more than ready to pass out for a few more hours before we had to check out.

If only I had her back in my arms ...

“Tarryn!” Mom exclaimed happily, throwing the suite door open. “Where’s Jackson?”

I spun on my heel to watch Tarryn enter the room in a purple tracksuit, her blonde hair piled high on her head in a messy bird's nest of a bun. Sammy rushed in for a hug, and Tarryn laughed as she squeezed my daughter.

And the sight of them like that—hugging and smiling—warmed my heart with a reminder, saying, *Hey, she likes your kid.*

“Jackson’s getting his stuff together before we check out,” she explained, keeping her arm around Sammy’s shoulders.

“Oh, okay,” Mom said, still beaming with the joy of having Tarryn stop by, unannounced.

“Yeah, so anyway, I thought I’d pop in before I left to grab that lipstick you found, Connor.”

Her eyes met mine with a wide-eyed plea to get me alone, and I stood from the couch.

“Right, yeah, I have it in here,” I said, nudging my head toward the open door of my room.

“Great.”

She gave Sammy a big kiss on the temple before following me into the room. To get out of my family’s line of sight, I led Tarryn to my open suitcase on the bed, and my hands went to her hips, her arms flew around my neck, and she pulled me down for an urgent, frenzied kiss. Making out silently with whispered giggles and grins pressed to open lips.

“Hey, Connor?” Mom called from the living room, and I backed away from Tarryn quicker than if her body had suddenly burst into flames.

“Yeah, Mom?”

“Do you remember that yeast infection you had on your hands?”

Tarryn’s hand flew over her mouth to stifle a fit of giggles as I furrowed my brow and wished Mom knew the meaning of discretion.

“Yep,” I called through gritted teeth.

“Terry’s daughter is going through the same thing. God, I didn’t even know you could get a yeast infection on your hands before that happened to you.” She appeared in the doorway with her gaze aimed at the phone in her hands. “I want to tell her what you did to get rid of it.”

Raking a hand through my hair, I wished I’d possessed the power to disappear. Or make other people disappear. Whichever. “Yeast infection cream, Mom.”

“Like, the women’s kind?”

I shot her with two pointed fingers. “Yep. That’s the stuff.”

She wandered into the room, pecking away at her phone with one finger. “I think I still have pictures of it on here,” she went on, coming to stand beside Tarryn. “Let me show you.”

“Jesus Christ, Mom. Tarryn doesn’t wanna see that.”

Tarryn’s jaw dropped as she clapped her hands to her chest. “Uh, excuse me. Don’t just assume I don’t want to see pictures of your yeast infection, thank you very much.”

“You tell him, T,” Mom said, swiping through her photo album. “They’re here somewhere ...”

“You know what? Text them to me,” Tarryn said as she laid a hand on Mom’s shoulder. “Connor’s just finding my lipstick, and then I have to leave. Our car’s gonna be here at any minute.”

“Oh! Of course, hon,” Mom said, patting Tarryn on the back. “Connor, hurry up and find that lipstick. This girl’s gotta run.”

“Got it, Mom.”

She left the room then, wandering out while continuing to scroll through her pictures.

Tarryn lifted her amused eyes to mine. “A yeast infection on your hands, huh?”

“Okay, first of all, it was called tinea manuum, okay? And second of all, it was from the gym I used to go to,” I said defensively. “I don’t go there anymore, it cleared up, and that’s all I’m gonna say about it.”

Her lips twitched with her teasing grin. “I was just saying, it sounds awful.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And, I mean, especially since you had to go down the feminine care aisle all by yourself ...” She shook her head, barely holding back her laughter. “That must’ve been ... *awful* for you.”

I glowered down at her. “Don’t you have a car to catch?”

She sighed, shaking her head and chasing away her amusement. “Okay, okay, I’m done.”

Then, she stepped forward, back into my embrace, and whispered, “I came by because I wanted to ask if you’d want to stay at my condo tonight.”

A sleepover. With Tarryn. Alone.

I cleared my throat and pushed all thoughts of sex aside as I whispered back, “As much as I want to say yes, I can’t. I have to bring Sammy home.”

“She can stay at my place too.”

“Oh, yes. What a great idea. I can’t see any way whatsoever that wouldn’t blow up in our faces.”

Tarryn shrugged. “She had you dance with me. She knows how we feel.”

“Maybe how we feel,” I pointed out, “but not what we did.”

She sighed, pressing her hands to my chest. “I just ... I want to spend as much time as I possibly can with you before I have to leave. I have one day left at home, and if it’s not with you, it just feels like a day wasted, so ...”

“Jesus,” I groaned quietly. How was I supposed to say no to that? “Okay. I’ll drop Sammy at home with her mom, and ... I dunno ... I guess I’ll drive back to Long Island.”

It felt ridiculous. Completely and utterly absurd. Not to mention, I had no idea where the hell I was gonna find the gas money to fuel that many trips back and forth. But for some

insane reason, spending another night with her was worth racking up a little more credit card debt.

I am one hundred percent fucked.

“I could send a car to pick you up,” Tarryn said, now excited and holding my shirt in tightened fists. “That way, you won’t have to drive or spend money on gas.”

“Nah, it’s fine.”

“At least let me pay to fill up the tank.”

It was tempting, but still, I shook my head. “I don’t want you to do that.”

“Why not? You’re coming to see me. I know your ... situation isn’t great—”

“I don’t want a sugar mama,” I told her. “And I don’t need your charity.”

It wounded her pride; I knew it in the way she pinched her lips and loosened her grip on my shirt. But I wasn’t willing to sacrifice my own pride by accepting her money, not yet anyway, and I stood my ground.

“Fine,” she finally relented. “But I’m buying you dinner. I don’t care what you say.”

With a smile, I bent to brush a kiss against the corner of her mouth before whispering, “Well, I guess it’s a good thing I’ve never been one to turn down free food.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Tarryn

My stomach was twisted into a thousand knots as I watched Jackson carry his bags to the door. The car would be here at any minute to take him to his hotel, and I wasn't sure I had ever loved him more.

"You know, I would've really enjoyed staying here tonight," he said, forcing a rueful sigh. "We could've had some wine, watched some movies ..."

"Oh, you mean, everything we do literally all the time?"

He offered a smile as the black car pulled into the driveway. "You and I both know things are going to change now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well"—he opened the front door—"now that filming is done and you're trying to build a relationship with your dream man, I figured you'd be spending a lot more time at home than in Fort Crow."

His words left me taken aback as he kissed my cheek and told me he'd meet me at the airport the next day. The idea honestly hadn't crossed my mind even though filming had ended a week ago.

Why hadn't I come home sooner?

The house was quiet now that Jackson was gone, allowing for too much noise to cloud my brain.

What did it mean, I wondered as I walked through the kitchen and to the sliding doors, *that I hadn't hopped on a plane immediately after filming was done?* All I had thought about for months and months was how desperate I was to be here, and yet the opportunity to do so had slipped under my radar without even a notice.

I stepped outside onto the deck to look out toward the bay. The water was still beneath a midday sun, and the seagulls called overhead, providing a welcome distraction to the noise in my brain.

I hated being alone, yet I had clung to it longer than I needed to.

Maybe because I knew I'd be alone regardless of where I was.

It was a sad thought, but it was the truth, wasn't it? Lennon had been so busy with the wedding. She had her dream job, her new friends, her rock-star fiancé—well, husband now. And outside of my job and mundane life in Scotland, all I had was ... well, her.

The front door opened from across the house, and I didn't bother to turn around and see who it was. I already knew by the sound of his heavy footsteps walking through the house. Then, he came through the back door, invading my space with his presence as he gently wrapped his arms around my waist and buried his face against my neck.

And all I could think was, *I'm not alone anymore.*

Now, I have him.

The day was spent in my bed with the curtains drawn so no outside light could be let in and disturb the most perfect, delicious nap I had ever had in my life.

Not once did he let me go.

We woke up to discover that we had spent nearly three hours asleep in each other's arms, and it struck me how tired I must've been without even realizing—I had simply grown accustomed to being exhausted, to the point where it felt normal—and how simultaneously sad and amazing it was that it had taken Connor to make me notice.

Now, with me in his old T-shirt and him in a pair of gray sweatpants and nothing else, we sat at my kitchen island with

my array of takeout menus strewn over its surface.

Connor stared at them with an abundance of amusement in his eyes.

“That’s quite the collection you have there,” he commented.

“Thank you. It’s taken a lot of effort and time to come this far, but”—I spread my arms wide and gestured toward the menus from local Greek, Chinese, Italian, Indian, and American restaurants—”here I am.”

He reached out for one of the half-dozen Chinese menus. “So, is it that you don’t know how to cook or ... just don’t want to?”

“Um, honestly?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want the truth.”

I smiled, flipping through the stack of Italian menus. “It’s a combination of both.”

“So, you don’t know how to cook anything?”

“Well ...” I hesitated before laughing. “No, not really. But in my defense, it’s only ever been me, and I’ve always been so busy. I don’t have time to learn.”

“But you went away to college,” Connor said, laughing. “How did you get by without ever making yourself a pack of ramen?”

“Rich mom and a never-ending amount of money to order pizza,” I explained simply.

“Ah,” he replied, nodding. “That’ll do it.”

“Yeah, and growing up, the only home-cooked meals I ever really ate were at your house. Or, you know, on holidays. Everything else”—I lifted a handful of menus and let them fall like leaves from a tree—”ordered from a menu.”

Connor watched me for a few long beats of my heart before slapping his hand against the countertop. “Okay then,” he said, sliding off his stool to head into the living room.

“What?” I asked, spinning on my seat to watch him grab his hoodie from the couch and pull it on. “Where are you

going?”

He stuffed his feet into his sneakers as he replied, “Grocery store.”

Taken aback, I slowly climbed from the stool and asked, “Why?”

“Because I’m cooking you dinner and I highly doubt you have anything to make around here.”

He was right about that. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d even stepped foot in a grocery store, let alone bought anything.

“But I was supposed to buy dinner,” I protested weakly.

“Then, I guess you’d better come with me,” he said with a wink.

Grocery shopping had always been, I thought, one of the most mundane things you could do. It was a necessity for most, something you did to get through life, but it was no different to me than paying bills or doing laundry.

A necessary evil, if you will.

But Connor made grocery shopping feel more like an adventure than a chore. Between scooting through the aisles with the cart and insisting I stand on the back for the ride and juggling cans of peas when the employee stocking the shelves wasn’t looking, I spent more time laughing than I did wishing I weren’t there.

And I didn’t know why I never realized he could be this fun to be around. Hot to look at, yes, and a blast to banter with, obviously. But *fun*? Who knew?

I certainly hadn’t.

We went shopping for the makings of something he called Marry Me Chicken, and when he told me the name of the dish while heading down to the meat department, my eyes widened

with the silent question of, *Is this a marriage proposal already?*

Because yes. A thousand times yes.

“It’s called that because, supposedly, when someone makes this dish, the other person will immediately want to spend the rest of their life with that person and propose,” he explained, grabbing a pack of chicken.

“Well, has it worked?”

He shot me a narrow-eyed smirk and asked, “What do you think?”

I laughed. “Is that a testament to how good your cooking is? Should I be scared?”

We moved onto the produce section as he explained, “I’ve only ever made this for Sammy.”

“So, you don’t regularly bring ladies to your apartment to woo them with your chicken?” I was fishing, and I knew it. But I was curious. It was occurring to me more now than ever that I knew so little about Connor’s life. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know everything.

“There hasn’t been any wooing in a really long time, and I’ve never cooked for anyone else.”

“You don’t date?”

Connor loaded the cart with tomatoes and fresh basil. “Not really.”

“So ... when was the last time?”

He raised his eyes to mine, lifting a questioning brow. “When was the last time what? That I went on a date ... or got laid?”

An elderly couple nearby glanced over with a blend of adoration and curiosity reflected on their faces.

“Um”—I swallowed—“both.”

“Jesus, okay.” He pushed the cart to grab a bag of premade salad. “Last time I went on a date was about a year and a half ago. She was the mom of one of Sammy’s friends.”

“And what happened?” I asked as a blinding envy licked away at my veins, heating my blood and burning my skin.

You asked, Tarryn. He’s only answering.

Connor tossed the bag into the cart. “She didn’t think I was funny, and she didn’t like what I did for a living.”

The envy was instantly erased with a need to defend and protect. “What the hell? She actually said that?”

“Uh, no. It was more like, ‘You’re a nice enough guy, but I don’t want to teach my daughter that it’s okay to settle for a man who collects trash for a living.’” He puffed up his chest with a sigh, then shrugged.

The elderly couple grumbled as I shook my head with disgust.

“How did you know she didn’t find you funny?”

“She didn’t laugh when I told her I didn’t want my daughter to think it was okay to settle for a bitch.”

Amusement tugged at my lips as the elderly couple tittered with quiet laughter from nearby. “You actually said that?”

“Yep.”

“Good for you.”

“She didn’t think so, but ...” He shrugged and threw in a bottle of salad dressing.

“Okay, and the last time you got laid?”

He weaved between a display of packaged strawberries and a rack of croutons and said, “That same night.”

“You actually *had sex* with her?” I didn’t mean to say it so loudly, drawing the attention of not just the nosy, old couple, but a few others as well. I clapped a hand over my mouth and winced apologetically.

Connor’s eyes dodged around to the people standing within the displays of fruit and vegetables. “And now, they all think I cheated on you.”

“No, they don’t.”

“Yep. They’re all thinking, *God, what an idiot that asshole is to sleep with another woman when he already has perfection right in front of him.*”

“Oh, shut up,” I said, rolling my eyes and smacking his arm, all while fighting the desire to swoon into a puddle at his feet. “You’re avoiding the question.”

He steered the cart in the direction of the bakery. “Ah, right. The question you announced to all of these fine people.”

“Why did you sleep with her if she didn’t like you?”

“Oh, she liked me.” He snickered, browsing the loaves of freshly baked bread. “Just not enough to keep things going.”

“Was this before or after she told you she wouldn’t be with you?”

His eyes flitted to mine for all of two seconds before dropping again. “Before.”

“So, she ...”

“Screwed me and *then* insulted what I did for a living? That’s more or less the gist of it, yeah.”

He didn’t seem all that bothered by the confession as he continued to peruse the bread, occasionally picking one up and looking it over, only to put it back.

But it bothered me.

It made me sad.

Nobody deserved to feel like shit about what they did for a living. Were some occupations more glamorous than others? Of course. But did that give anyone the right to undermine what someone else did? And besides, what would life be without the guys doing the dirty work?

What would my life be without him?

I trailed a few steps behind, deep in thought, as he pushed the cart toward the register. My heart ached with feelings I didn’t yet know what to do with, watching his sweatshirt shift over the muscular expanse of his back with every step, when that elderly couple stopped me.

“Excuse me, dear,” the woman said, and Connor stopped at the sound of her voice.

I smiled at her old, weathered face. “Yes?”

God, I thought she might’ve recognized me and was looking for an autograph. I would give it to her, but selfishly, I wanted one day without being noticed. One quiet, relaxing day with this man who suddenly felt like mine.

“I’m sorry for eavesdropping, but Al and I have been so delighted to watch the two of you. You remind us of how we were, back before ... you know, we got old.”

I relaxed with a chuckle as I caught Connor’s softened gaze as he said, “So, you’re saying you hated each other for years—”

“Before we fell madly in love?” Al—an old guy in a Mets cap—wrapped his arm around her hunched shoulders. He grinned at his wife like there wasn’t anybody he’d rather look at for the rest of his days. “You’re damn right.”

“Oh, get out of here.” She shoved him away, wearing the expression of someone annoyed and irritated, but the glint in her eyes said otherwise.

“Anyway,” she went on, “all I wanted to say is, you’re adorable.”

“Thank you,” I replied with a grateful smile, enjoying a rare moment of being recognized for something other than who I played on television.

The woman reached out to tug on the sleeve of my sweatshirt. “You have a good one there,” she added, lowering her voice to a whisper. Her gaze drifted to Al, already wandering away to grope some tomatoes. “I would know.”

“Will you marry me?”

With his mouth full, Connor laughed. “That good, huh?”

“Oh my God.” I took another bite of the creamy chicken and closed my eyes with my groan. “It’s *that* good.”

“You know what? I can’t even take your opinion seriously. I could’ve made Hamburger Helper and still blown you away.”

“You’re probably right,” I admitted, reaching for my wineglass. “Your mom made Hamburger Helper a bunch of times, and I remember liking it a lot.”

He chuckled lightly before taking another bite. He ate slower than I did, savoring the meal and watching as I inhaled every scrap of food on my plate. I felt like I was starving, too deprived of a good home-cooked meal.

And I had meant what I’d said—it truly was good.

“Do you cook a lot?”

Connor nodded mid-sip and lowered his glass. “Every night pretty much. I don’t have the money to go out that often.”

“What else can you cook?”

“Let’s see ...” He leaned back in his chair and held the back of his neck with both hands. “Well, most nights, it’s cheap, simple shit. I’m broke as fuck, so I usually make pasta and a can of sauce or a box of mac and cheese with a can of peas—stuff like that. But when I have Sammy, I try to make the good stuff if I can. This chicken, meatloaf, lasagna ... um ...” He leaned back into the table and folded his arms against its surface. “You know, stuff like that. Nothing crazy, but ... it’s good.”

My smile began at my heart and stretched so wide that it ached. “I know I said it before, but ... you’re a really good dad.”

“Yeah, well ...” He dropped his gaze to the table. “I’m not good at much, but ... I try to do what I can where it matters.”

I nodded, unable to stop the thoughts of my mother from wedging into the peaceful happiness of the night. She had loved me in the only way she knew how—with gifts and

babysitters who would make sure I was cared for while she worked herself to the bone. She had tried, and I had loved her dearly for it, but sometimes, I wondered how different things would have been if she had been present. If she'd put her time with me above her desire to provide me with expensive, pretty things.

"You know, we kinda grew up together," Connor said, fidgeting with the base of his empty glass, "but I feel like ... I don't know a whole lot about your parents."

"That's because you probably don't," I said, laughing.

"So, tell me something about them. Like ..." He shrugged. "How did they meet?"

"At work," I said with a sigh. "And they were together for a couple of years, got pregnant by accident, and then ... that was basically it. They never got married, they didn't stay together ..."

"Yeah, I knew that, but ..." Connor held back whatever he wanted to say with endearing hesitation. He didn't want to hurt my feelings; he didn't want to make me sad. "Why wasn't your dad involved?"

"Mom didn't need him," I replied simply. "She didn't want to hold him back or force a family on him if he didn't want one. So, he told her to let him know if she needed anything, moved to Boston, had his own life, and Mom never asked him for help—she didn't need it. He didn't want to step on her toes or her regimented life, so he just hung back."

Connor's jaw was set firmly as he stared ahead at his empty plate. Then, he dragged a hand over his mouth before saying, "I can't imagine not fighting to be in your kid's life."

I pushed the last bits of tomato around my plate. "It was a mutual agreement. Mom wanted to keep me but didn't want to straddle him with the responsibility, so ..."

"I get that," he replied, his tone stony. "I get that they made some kind of agreement that she would be the parent and he would just ... be out there somewhere, sending a check every now and then or some shit. That was their business, and, hey, if they were cool with that, far be it from me to criticize."

I'm just saying, if that were me, I can't imagine just ... walking out of my kid's life and being cool with it. I would insist on being there."

This was not what I wanted to do tonight. This was not the plan.

I pulled my lips between my teeth and diverted my gaze, looking off toward a kitchen that had been seldom used. "You have no idea how you'd handle a situation like that—"

"Yes, Tarryn," he said firmly, "I do."

My gaze met his.

"Monica gave me the option to leave. She told me if I didn't want to have a kid, if it wasn't a part of my plan, whatever that meant, I could walk away with no hard feelings. But I couldn't do that. That's why I stayed in Connecticut. Not because I loved it there or because I had this great fucking job I loved. I stayed because I knew that the most important thing I'd ever do in my life was be that kid's dad."

He cleared his throat and abruptly stood up, taking our plates with him into the kitchen.

It had struck a nerve, talking like this. But Connor had brought the subject of my parents up. It wasn't like he hadn't known I had grown up without a father or that I'd been raised by babysitters and his parents while my mom worked and showered me with everything I never needed.

Not knowing what else to do or say, I stood up and walked from the table to stand by the kitchen while Connor washed the dishes.

"You can use the dishwasher, you know," I told him as he scrubbed vigorously.

"It's fine; I'm used to washing a couple of dishes."

"Okay, but ... it can wait until later, can't it?"

He smacked the faucet handle, turning the water off, and threw the sponge into the sink. Then, he turned to face me. "How does it not faze you?"

"What do you mean?"

“I mean”—he rounded the island to stand before me —”how can you talk about your dad like it doesn’t matter that this guy is out there somewhere and he has no idea who you are?”

I shook my head and shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe because ... it doesn’t matter. Not really anyway.”

“I think it does.”

The thing I wouldn’t say was, Connor was right. It *did* matter. It had always mattered, but what was I supposed to do? Time had moved on and carried my life further and further away from any hope of a relationship with my father. I hardly knew what the man even looked like—I hadn’t seen him outside of a couple of pictures—and whatever he knew of me, if anything, was likely grabbed from the TV or internet. It was sad, of course, but after so much time had passed, I couldn’t find a reality in which my father and I ever knew each other. It just seemed easier to leave it alone, let it be and move on.

So, I had.

But that bothered Connor. And whether that was because he couldn’t fathom a life without his daughter or one without me, I didn’t know.

Hell, maybe it was both.

But I saw the pain in his eyes. The sympathy. The passionate hurt. I stepped forward and pressed my hands to his chest, still covered by his sweatshirt, and looked up into his blue eyes.

“I love that you care,” I said, closing the gap between our bodies.

“It’s what I do,” he said, grasping my chin between his thumb and forefinger to tip my head up and back.

“For how long?”

He craned his neck, inching his lips down to mine, and whispered, “Always.”

He kissed me without the urgency we’d known the night before at the wedding. Instead, he took his time. Savoring, caressing, devouring. I whimpered with need, sliding my

hands down over his stomach and beneath the thick fabric of his sweatshirt and over hard-cut muscle.

“Take this off,” I said, my words muffled against his lips.

“Yes, ma’am.” He broke our kiss long enough to pull the hoodie off and toss it to the floor.

“God, you’re so hot,” I mumbled as the kiss resumed and my hands roamed the defined contours of his abs and chest.

“Now what?” he asked, voice low and sultry. “Tell me what you want.”

Jesus. Of all the men I’d been involved with, only a handful had seemed to care about my wants and desires. And not a single one had asked.

I was rendered shy and tongue-tied at the request for orders, pulling back from his mouth to bite my lip and stare at his tattooed chest.

Samantha Jean was written over his heart, accompanied by a lion wrapped around his cub. It was a perfect depiction of him. Powerful. Protective. Loyal.

I leaned in to kiss the ink, then said, “I want what you want.”

“No, no, no,” he said, inching me back until I bumped into the island countertop. “Tell me what to do. What do you want? What do you need?” His hands were on my waist; his mouth was on my neck. Kissing. Licking. Biting.

Fuck. “Um ...”

“Come on.” He planted a trail of soft, small kisses from my neck to just behind my ear. “Don’t hold back. Tell me, and you got it.”

I closed my eyes, conjured up the ability to speak candidly to a man without the expectation to return the favor, and said, “I want ... I want you to, um ... to lay me on this counter and ... use your mouth on me.”

I wasn’t good at talking dirty or speaking aloud the things I wanted, and that was obvious in my ridiculous stammer and the heat that rose to my cheeks. But it was the truth, and that had to count for something. It was what I wanted right now, in

this moment, more than anything. To feel his mouth between my legs. To orgasm with his name on my tongue and my taste on his. And if he felt that it was rushing things, then so be it, but he'd wanted my honesty, and I had given it to him.

He pulled back far enough to search my eyes with his. "Use my mouth? Where?"

He wanted me to say it, but I couldn't. Not without blushing, stuttering, and hiding my face. So, I took his hand with trembling fingers and pulled it down to touch the apex of my thighs. His eyes widened at the contact—I could only imagine what he was thinking when all I could think was, *Oh my God, Connor Jacobs is shirtless in my kitchen with his hand between my legs*—and then he dragged his teeth over his bottom lip.

"Fuck," he groaned, touching me now of his own accord. Searching. Stroking. Teasing. "You're sure?"

I nodded, hardly able to breathe. "If I wasn't ... I wouldn't have said anything."

He pulled his hand away and kissed me with purpose. Delving into my mouth as his arms wrapped around my waist and lifted me with ease. I was put onto my pristine, nearly unused countertop, where Connor pulled away, but not before snagging my bottom lip between his teeth.

"Lie back," he ordered.

I did as I had been told. His eyes roamed the length of my body, now laid out on the countertop, and he stared hungrily, as if I were his last supper. Big, strong hands drifted from the sides of my breasts to the tops of my thighs, where his fingers curled under the waistband of my sweatpants and pulled down until they were off my legs and tossed to the floor.

Connor treated the spreading of my legs as a sacred act. Slowly pressing his hands to my inner thighs and pushing them apart like he was unwrapping the most special gift of his life.

Hell, I guessed maybe, right now, it was.

"Holy fuck," he choked out through a clenched jaw before softly caressing the delicate fabric of my underwear and

pulling them to the side.

Then, with the utmost attentive care, he leaned in and devoured me until the noises coming from my mouth no longer sounded human and the control I had over my body disappeared. He used his tongue and fingers in the ways I had always imagined he would, simultaneously delicate and commanding, until I tipped over a blinding edge. I moaned his name, tasting it for the first time in a brand-new way, and I knew in an instant I would forever crave its flavor.

Connor kissed my thighs and belly, moving his mouth from one breast to the other, before pressing his weight against my sated body and capturing my lips with his. We kissed lazily beneath the kitchen lights, as if we had all the time in the world to be there, just like this. Without responsibilities. Without work. Without a life that would undoubtedly carry on whether we went along or not.

But for now, in this moment, we had this, and I was dead set on making it last as long as I possibly could.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Connor

Tarryn: Hey, what are you doing?

Me: About to eat dinner with Sammy. What about you?

Tarryn: Well ... I just got naked, about to slip into a nice bubble bath, and thought maybe I could call you, but if you're busy ...

Me: Jesus Christ.

Tarryn: I'm sorry, but I'm not sure what Jesus has to do with us having hot phone sex.

Me: Well, I'm gonna need him to help me get rid of this boner right now, so ...

Tarryn: Text sex then?

Me: While having dinner with my daughter? I'd rather die, I think.

Tarryn: You're no fun.

Me: And you have seriously shitty timing.

Tarryn: Time zones suck.

Me: You living thousands of miles away sucks.

Tarryn: Do you have any other suggestions?

Me: Yeah. Come home. You're not filming right now. There's no reason for you to be over there when you could be here with me.

Tarryn: Home is still in New York, and you're in Connecticut.

Me: But we could figure that out. Weekends I don't have Sammy, I could come down to NY. Or during the week, you could come up to CT. I mean, we have options, but there aren't ANY options right now.

Tarryn: I know you're right.

Me: So, come home.

Me: Pretty please.

Tarryn: LOL. Are you begging me?

Me: If that's what it takes.

It had only been a month since Tarryn and I had exchanged confessions, one whole month since I'd kissed her and spent the night at her condo with nobody being any the wiser. She had gone home the next day—to freakin' *Scotland*—and we had spent the past month playing text tag, trying to figure out a phone schedule that would work for our conflicting time zones.

We weren't as successful as I'd hoped we'd be, and even after a month, I was starting to question how the hell we were supposed to make this work at all.

Especially when we were still trying to keep shit under wraps.

"*Dad,*" Sammy said, using her *I'm about to say something obnoxious* voice.

"Hmm," I answered, my eyes on my phone.

"What do you always tell me?"

"Stop leaving dirty dishes in your room?"

She sighed. "What else?"

I lifted my phone to text Tarryn. "Clean your own damn hair out of the drain after you shower?"

My daughter threw her head back and groaned. "No phones at the table, Dad."

With a sigh, I looked up from the screen. "You're right." I quickly finished what I had been typing and sent it before tossing the phone across the table and onto the couch. "Sorry."

Sammy chuckled softly as she shook her head. She took a big bite of the homemade pizza on her plate and asked, "Who

were you texting anyway?"

"Uh ..." I was also very insistent she never lie to me, but I was breaking a lot of my own rules these days. "Grandma."

"Oh." She nodded and took another bite. "What did she want?"

"She, uh ... wanted to tell me Aunt Lemon got her pictures back from the wedding," I replied, miraculously pulling the conversation I'd had with my mom earlier from my memory. "She wants us to come see them."

"Ooh!" Sammy sat up straighter in her seat. "We should visit this weekend!"

I lifted a slice from my plate and nodded. "Yeah, I was thinking we could head down tomorrow and invade them for a while."

"Maybe Aunt Lemon will let us stay at her house."

"I mean, I could ask"—I looked ruefully over her shoulder toward my phone, lying on the couch, and pouted—"but my phone is all the way over there."

"Guess you're gonna have to text her when you're not at the table." She looked over her slice of pizza with a smug little grin, and I responded by tossing a slice of pepperoni her way.

"So, how's Mom doing?" I asked, steering the subject away from phones and texts. Mostly to avoid the possibility of lying again.

But I also genuinely wanted to know.

Monica and I didn't talk much about our respective lives, apart from the one very important aspect we shared. It had been an unspoken but mutual decision to keep our personal lives separate unless it had anything to do with our daughter, and we'd existed very happily together so far. But that didn't mean I didn't care about what was going on in her life, and I knew she felt the same about me.

"She's good," Sammy said. "She's going to Boston this weekend with Bill."

I nodded at the mention of Monica's boyfriend. "So, shit's getting serious, huh?"

Sammy lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “I guess. I mean, they see each other almost every weekend, so ...”

I slowly nodded as my mind began to wander.

Monica had been seeing this guy, Bill, for a while now. They’d met online—Monica was too busy with her career to meet people in the real world—and they hit it off right away. It had only been a few months so far, but they seemed to be making things work with weekly dates and regular phone conversations—according to Sammy.

If they could do it, so can we, I thought with Tarryn on my mind.

Yeah, except there isn’t a whole fucking ocean separating Monica from Bill.

I had sworn to Tarryn I’d never pressure her about anything. I wasn’t going to be that guy, and I would wait for her to do things at her own pace. But it was hard not to be downright obnoxious and plead with her on a daily basis to come back to New York. At least while they weren’t filming.

Hell, even Jackson was spending more time in the States than she was.

“Hey, guys!” Lennon called from her porch.

Ever since my sister had gotten herself a killer house on the lake in Brightwaters, it seemed that was the preferred location for family get-togethers. I guessed my parents figured it was better than using their small, three-bedroom Cape.

Or maybe it was just that they were tired of doing all the cleaning and cooking.

“Ah, there’s my favorite pain in the ass,” I teased, reaching the top of the porch steps and pulling her in for a hug.

“My favorite asshole.” She squeezed me tight. “You smell, by the way.”

I sighed wistfully into her ear. “I love you too.”

She brushed me away to hug Sammy as I headed inside to greet my parents and brother-in-law, all sitting on the big leather sectional with Lennon’s one-eyed cat, Ernest, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else but here.

“I feel your pain, buddy,” I said to him, crouching down to scratch between his ears.

“What?” Mom asked, suddenly aware of my presence.

“Oh, nothing. Just saying hi to ol’ Ernie here.”

Ernest swatted at my hand, and I yanked it back quick enough to avoid his assault.

“The fuck?” I said, laughing.

“He’s pissed,” Dylan explained as Ernest, the one-eyed cat, hopped off the couch and scurried away.

“Why?”

“I guess Lennon didn’t tell you what she insisted on.”

“Uh ...” I looked over my shoulder as my sister walked in with my daughter. “I guess not.”

“Dad,” Sammy whined, “Aunt Lemon got a puppy. Why don’t I have a puppy?”

I stood slowly, eyes narrowed at my sister as I replied, “You can have a puppy when you buy me a house to put it in. Uh, Lennon, you didn’t tell me you got a puppy.”

My sister told me just about everything. I had the texts to prove it.

The last time she’d hidden anything from me, it was when she’d spent months hooking up with a rock star.

“Yeah, I guess you’re not the only one who keeps secrets around here,” my younger sister fired back, a smirk on her face.

Uh ... what?

I followed my sister as she wandered into the kitchen, where I found photographs laid out on her kitchen island like a Thanksgiving buffet. A few of Tarryn in her bridesmaid dress

caught my eye immediately. An image of my face between her legs came to mind as I stared warily at the scene in front of me before turning my attention to my sister. Trying hard as hell to not look guilty.

“Uh ... so, what’s going on?” I asked warily, knowing the reason we were here was to look at wedding photos. But that didn’t explain the suspicious attitude.

Mom came in behind me, laughing. “Oh, you didn’t show him?”

I shot a look over my shoulder at her. “Show me what?”

What in the actual fuck is happening right now?

Lennon let a sinister giggle slip past her lips as she rifled through the pictures from her wedding.

And all I could wonder was, *Did she have us followed? Did she hire a private investigator?*

“This.” A smirk spread across her lips as she passed one of the photographs to me. “Since when do you dance?”

The picture in my hands was of Tarryn and me, our bodies close and our fingers intertwined. My eyes were hooded, staring into hers, while hers were aimed directly into mine. And I wished I were exaggerating when I said my heart skipped a handful of beats at how good we looked together. How well we *fit*.

I forced a snicker and shook my head, handing the picture back to my sister, even as I longed to steal it and keep it for myself. “You can thank your niece for that.”

Lennon looked at Sammy, clapping her hand over her heart. “You actually got your grumpy, annoying dad to dance?”

Sammy stood beside me, and I couldn’t ignore the little knowing glance she gave me. “I mean, I had to drag him out there, but he did it.”

Lennon held the picture out to smile at it with adoration. “I’m going to treasure this moment forever.”

Yeah ... you and me both.

I hated to admit it, but it was a fucking cute puppy.

A corgi named Zebulon with stumpy little legs and a wiggly little butt.

Just one more thing for me to envy my sister for.

While everyone was distracted by the tiny furball running around the living room, I pulled out my phone and quickly typed out a text to Tarryn.

Me: What's your opinion on dogs?

Tarryn: LOL. Lennon told me you were over there with the new puppy.

Me: Did she tell you she also gave me a fucking heart attack?

Tarryn: She told me she showed you the picture of us and that you looked like a deer in headlights, LOL.

Me: Oh, so you've seen it. Cool.

Tarryn: I did.

Me: So, that means you have it on your phone?

Tarryn: Yes ...

Me: Send it to me.

“Connor!”

Abruptly, I looked up from my phone to see my mom and sister both staring at me with amused suspicion.

“God, what the hell are you doing on that phone?” Mom asked, quirking her lips into an incredulous smile. “We’ve been trying to get your attention for the last five minutes.”

Obviously an exaggeration, but okay.

“Sorry,” I said, stuffing the phone in my pocket. “Just talking to my buddy Ben.”

Lennon cocked her head curiously. “The guy you drive the truck with?”

“Yeah.”

“Since when is he your buddy?”

I shrugged. “We started hanging out a little bit. Nothing crazy, but ... you know, lunches and shit.”

Not a lie. I could live with that.

She nodded as the suspicion left her eyes. “Oh, that’s cool.”

“Speaking of your buddies,” Dad said, ruffling the scruff around Zebulon’s neck, “I saw Matt at the grocery store a couple of days ago.”

I had to remember none of them knew what had happened between us. As far as they knew, he and I were still pals without any reason to sever ties. Still, it was hard to fight back the urge to clench my fists and glower murderously at the mention of his name.

“Oh, yeah?”

Dad nodded as the lines on his face deepened with his scowl. “Yeah, it was weird. I saw him walk into the store, so I waved and said hi. He just took one look at me, turned around, and left.”

Good.

“Huh,” I grunted with a fake frown. “That’s weird.”

“Maybe he didn’t know it was you,” Mom suggested.

Dad shook his head, his face suggesting he was deep in thought. “No ... he definitely did. He took a long enough look at me to know who I was.”

Lennon uttered a sound of disgust as she got up to head back into the kitchen with her empty glass of iced tea. “You know what? You’re better off. That guy is a gross piece of crap. He always gave me the creeps.”

I smirked.

Couldn’t have said it better myself.

Tarryn: I can't sleep.

Me: Neither can I. I'm in one of Lennon's guest rooms, and I can hear her and Dylan doing it.

Tarryn: Doing it? What are you, twelve?

Me: What else should I say?

Me: Making love?

Me: Having intercourse?

Me: Fornicating?

Me: Mating?

Me: Please, stop me when I hit on something you prefer.

Tarryn: Have I ever told you how unbelievably obnoxious you are?

Me: About a million times over the past thirty years, but go ahead. Tell me again to make it a million and one.

Tarryn: Are they at least having a good time? I've been told Dylan is pretty fucking amazing.

Me: There is so much about that statement I don't even want to acknowledge ...

Me: Also, yes. They sound like they're having a grand ol' time in there. And, yes, I am feeling jealous and grossed out, all at the same time.

Me: Weird combo. I don't like it.

Tarryn: So, call me and tell me everything you'd do to me if I were there.

Me: If you were here, I wouldn't come near you with a ten-foot pole.

Tarryn: Ugh, I wish you had a ten-foot pole.

Me: You absolutely don't. I'd split you in half.

Tarryn: Maybe that's what I want.

Me: Somehow, I doubt that.

Tarryn: Maybe I want to be filled and stretched until I can't take it anymore as I scream your name.

Tarryn: It's been so long since I've been fucked. The last time was with some guy in a kilt I'd picked up at a pub by my apartment, and we fucked in an alley. Mostly, I just wanted to say that I'd had sex with a guy in a kilt, but he was also ridiculously hot. He pinned me to the brick wall and screwed me like his fucking life depended on it. I used to think about that night a lot when I got off with my arsenal of vibrators. But I can't remember the last time I thought about him.

Me: What do you think about now?

Tarryn: I think about you, burying your face between my legs and digging your tongue as deep into me as it will go. I think about everything I want to do to you the next time I see you. I think about the first time I'm going to ride you until you come.

Me: Three things.

Me: One, I hope to fucking God you talk like this the next time you're here. Two, I feel like a fucking idiot, typing this kinda shit out. I'd rather be saying it to your face while I fuck you so hard that you forget Kilt Guy ever fucking existed. And three, I can't fucking jerk off in my sister's house while she gets fucked in the next room.

Tarryn: You're no fun.

Me: And you're torturing me.

Tarryn: Can I ask you a question?

Me: Anything as long as it doesn't involve imagining you naked.

Tarryn: Do you ever think it's weird?

Me: What?

Tarryn: That we talk to each other like this now?

Me: Weird? No.

Me: About fucking time? Yes.

Tarryn: I wish you were here.

Me: And I wish you were here.

Tarryn: I think I'd actually be able to sleep.

Me: I know I would.

I put the phone down on the nightstand and wished I knew what to say to make her come back to New York. I could live with the distance between us then. I could even live with the secrecy, at least for a while, as we figured shit out.

But this? Not knowing when we would be able to see each other again—especially when there didn't seem to be a good reason for it?

I'll wait for her as long as I can. Fuck, I'll probably wait forever, I thought as I pulled out my dick to make an attempt at quietly jerking off. But I'm not sure it won't kill me in the process.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Tarryn

It was four months until the season premiere of *Breckenridge*.

Two months since Connor and I had come clean with each other.

In those weeks of phone conversations and texting, I had learned more about him than I'd ever known before.

I knew he genuinely enjoyed his job despite the stigma surrounding it.

I knew window-rattling thunderstorms were his favorite weather.

I knew he had watched *Breckenridge* from the beginning and that it had started as him simply wanting to support me but evolved into an appreciation of my genuine talent.

And I thought my favorite of all was, I knew he was proud of me. Really, truly, and genuinely proud of me for all that I'd accomplished in my life. I wasn't sure anybody had ever said that to me before—not since I had been a little girl—and now, hearing it from him, I couldn't not be with him.

This was real. I wanted to take a stab at commitment, and so I made the decision to go home.

I knew there would still be distance between us. We'd still be a few hours away from each other. But it was better—so, *so* much better—than living on separate continents. It had to be.

But I couldn't just tell him over the phone. I wanted it to be a surprise, especially after he'd spent two months nearly begging for me to come back.

So, without him or anybody else knowing, I packed the things I needed from my apartment in Scotland and sent them to my condo in New York. I realized, as I packed bags and boxes, that I was excited. I hadn't thought I would be when it had taken me so long to make the decision. But I was. I

couldn't wait to spend regular time with Lennon. I couldn't wait to meet her puppy. I could already taste Kathy's home-cooked meals, and I could already hear the bay, rippling just outside my back door.

But most of all, I couldn't wait to sneak up to Connecticut to be with Connor.

But before making my way back home, I flew to California for a promotional interview and photo shoot. I met Jackson there, excited to see him after he'd been spending so much time with his grandmother. Just outside the entertainment blog's headquarters, he pulled me in for an enormous hug that forced the breath from my lungs, and I squeezed him just as hard as he squeezed me.

"I fucking missed you," he said, kissing the top of my head before stepping back and grasping my shoulders. His adoring eyes swept over me as his grin broadened. "You look happy. Are you happy?"

He was the only one who knew I was moving back to New York for the foreseeable future.

I couldn't just keep that secret to myself without telling *someone*.

"I am," I replied honestly. "A little nervous, I guess. It feels like I'm really settling down with him or something."

"Babe, you're not moving in with him. You're just moving closer."

"That's more than I've done for anyone else before."

It sounded pathetic, and judging from Jackson's narrow-eyed skepticism, he agreed. But it was also true. Of course, I'd had plenty of fleeting boyfriends, and at some point, I stopped counting the one-and-done men I'd encountered over the years. Nothing ever entered serious territory though—I had made sure of it. I had never wanted it before, but with Connor, I found myself daydreaming too often of how things could be—and I liked it.

That scared me more than I was willing to admit.

“I think it’s going to be fine,” Jackson said, leading me through a huge glass door.

“You don’t know that.”

“Well, I know I’ve seen the way that man looks at you,” he countered quietly, leading me through a wide-open lobby toward a white streamlined desk. “He’s in this for the long haul. And if you make up your mind to go along for the ride, I think you’ll be surprised by how fine it really is.”

The sleek-haired woman at the counter looked up, startled by the cacophony of our footsteps against the marble floor and bouncing off the high vaulted ceiling. It was impossible to ignore our entourage now—with Jackson’s and my agents in tow along with several bodyguards. It was strange, and although it was slowly becoming my normal, I had to stop every now and then just to consider how surreal it all was.

“Ms. King and Mr. Stark,” she greeted us with a red-lipped smile. “If you’ll please follow me this way ...”

Connor: Fuck, I can’t wait to see you tonight.

Me: Me neither. :)

I hadn’t told Connor I was moving back, but he knew about the interview in the States, and he knew my plane from California was flying into Hartford around nine. He thought it was simply a visit, and my stomach flopped at the idea of surprising him with the truth.

“Whenever you’re ready, Ms. King,” Bonnie—the woman interviewing us for her entertainment blog—said, forcing a pleasant tone to hide her irritation.

I tucked my phone away and smiled apologetically. “So sorry.”

“Oh, it’s fine. If I had a hundred dollars for every time someone texted me at an unfortunate time, I’d be a very, very

rich woman.” Bonnie already was a very, very rich woman. Or at least, her company was. “Anyway, so I was about to say, there’ve been so many rumors of your relationship.” She crossed her legs and eyed Jackson and me with a painted-on fondness. “When do you think you’ll make it official?”

It was the very first time anybody had ever mentioned it to our faces, and I thought, *This is it!* My opportunity to finally stop this thing in its tracks. With determination, I opened my mouth, ready to strike, when Jackson spoke first.

“Honestly, I think we’re just really enjoying the mystery,” he said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “I wanna hold on to that a little longer.”

What the fuck?

My entire body went rigid beneath his blanketing embrace, and I shot him a quick, stony glare from the corner of my eye.

“What a tease!” Bonnie laughed, slapping her thighs and leaning forward. “You want us all at the edge of our seats, rooting for you guys, huh?”

Jackson chuckled. “Something like that.”

The interview carried on with questions about the show and was followed by an intimate photo shoot of Jackson and me, nearly naked on a velvet couch and wrapped in each other’s tight embrace.

I had been nude in Jackson’s presence before, and I’d thought nothing could be more uncomfortable than the very first time.

But I was wrong.

This took the cake.

It was physically painful to take on the role of Rebecca’s character, to stare into his eyes and force the look of love when he’d outwardly given that woman the impression that we were together. Dammit, he had known how much it irked me. It was torture to be held in his traitorous arms when he knew damn well that I was heading to Connecticut that night to be with the man I’d dreamed of for years.

“You’re mad,” Jackson accurately assessed as we left the building later that morning.

I held my bag tightly to my side as I hurried toward the car waiting to take me to the airport. “Oh, how observant of you.”

“What was I supposed to say, Tarryn?”

My feet stopped moving, and I turned abruptly to stare him down. “Uh, how about that we *aren’t* together?”

Our respective agents were already climbing into our separate cars while the bodyguards stood around, glaring at the paparazzi waiting in the distance.

Jackson shot a glance in the direction of a few phones, held high and flashing, and his hand reached out to touch my arm. “Can I ask you a question?”

“What?” I snapped.

“What’s really the harm in letting them believe it for a little while longer?”

Is he serious right now?

My mouth fell open with my shock. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. The sincerity in his eyes told me he was in fact very serious. “It’s great publicity for the show. It keeps the fans talking. They love us together, so what’s the big deal in letting them think we are?”

“Because we’re *not*,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

“They don’t know that.”

“But *we* do.”

“I know, but ...” The look on Jackson’s face was desperate and troubled, and I couldn’t believe he genuinely wanted this. Really, truly wanted to carry on with this facade.

“Jackson ...” I shook my head and pulled in a deep breath to calm my rising temper. “I’m trying to be in an actual relationship. How is he supposed to feel when he sees all of these fucking rumors about us?”

“What does it even matter when you don’t want anybody knowing you’re together?”

The question came as a slap to the face. “We’re ... we don’t want ...” I stammered before closing my eyes and shaking my head. “It’s none of your fucking business.”

He ran a hand through his hair and groaned out of frustration. “You’re right, and I’m sorry. I just don’t feel about the rumors the way you do. But it was wrong of me to act before consulting with you first—”

“You already knew I wouldn’t have been on board,” I hissed.

“I know, and I’m sorry I disregarded that. I swear, I won’t feed the wolves again.”

I searched his eyes in hopes of finding my friend somewhere within them, and when I did, I sighed and nodded. I didn’t have time for this; I had a plane to catch and a man to see. Jackson’s promise would have to be good enough for now, and I left him with a hug and a nasty feeling in my gut.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Connor

Why am I so fucking nervous?

I paced the floor, looked over my shoulder at the terminal exit, and paced again.

Where is she?

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I yanked it out so fast that it almost slipped from my hand.

Ben: Hey, man, just wondering if you'd be down to grab a drink with the wife and me.

I cursed under my breath at my friend and coworker for tricking me into believing Tarryn had texted me and shoved the phone back into my pocket.

She was ten minutes late.

Where the fuck is she?

I paced again, checked over my shoulder, and paced some more.

I couldn't understand why I was so nervous. It wasn't as though our feelings had been a secret or that we hadn't spent the past two months getting to know each other intimately via phone and text. But maybe that was exactly the problem.

Maybe I was scared she'd found she preferred *that* guy. The one who could think before he typed. The one who could be anything she envisioned him to be, like some romantic hero in a book who existed in nothing but her imagination. Of course, she knew I was really out there, and of course, she'd known me most of our lives. But this degree of knowing was new for both of us, and while I was certain of my feelings for her, what if she didn't feel the same?

I paced, looked over my shoulder, and kept on pacing.

Sooner or later, there'd be a groove from my feet etched into this floor.

Maybe I was also afraid we liked each other *too* much. Because no matter what, no matter what happened over the next couple of days, she would still have to leave. And then what? How long until I saw her again?

God, is this even fucking worth it?

Oh, shut the hell up. You know it is.

Pace, pace, pace, look over the—

And there she was, dragging her suitcase behind her, until our eyes met. The suitcase was dropped. Then, she was running, closing the gap between us quickly, and she jumped. Launching herself into my waiting arms, wrapping her arms around my neck, almost knocking us both over. I held her to me, breathing in the scent of her hair and perfume, while she clutched my back and shoulders in a grip so tight that I thought her fingers might snap.

“Oh my God, I missed you so much,” she muttered, her voice muffled against my shoulder.

That was when I realized she was crying.

I loosened my hold on her, letting her body slide against mine until her feet touched the floor. When she pulled back, keeping her arms around my neck, I saw the sadness and relief held heavily in her tearful eyes, and I cradled her face in my palms.

“Hey, don't cry,” I said gently, kissing her forehead, then her cheek, then her lips.

Her hands moved to my face and rested against my cheeks. “I thought I'd be okay,” she whispered between a barrage of kisses. “But then I saw you, and ... God, I just missed you.”

“I know.” I caught her tears with my thumbs, brushing them away. “I missed you too.”

She held my gaze as she pulled in a shaky sigh, then shot a smile straight through my heart. “Can we get out of here?”

I stood back and took her hand in mine, already leading her toward the door. Because if I only had a couple of days with this woman, I was going to make them count ... starting now.

“So, you work with this guy?”

In a pair of sunglasses, one of my ball caps, and a baggy sweatshirt, Tarryn slipped her arm through mine as we walked down River Canyon’s picturesque Main Street toward The Ole Tavern. She kept her head down, avoiding the gaze of anybody we passed, and for the first time in my life, I was truly made aware of the life she led.

I nodded by way of greeting toward Officer Kinney, River Canyon’s most popular cop, then replied, “I’ve worked with Ben for a while, but ... I dunno ... we’ve gotten a little closer recently.”

The truth of it was, I hadn’t been able to talk to anyone else about my thing with Tarryn, but I still wanted someone to tell. So, I’d been talking to Ben, and although he didn’t know the extent of everything or who she was, I found he was a pretty cool guy and a decent friend to have.

“I’ve never met his wife though, so this could be interesting,” I muttered as we reached the bar’s heavy wooden door.

“It’ll be fun,” Tarryn said, smiling up at me from beneath the bill of my baseball cap.

She had been open to meeting my friend and his wife, but she’d also been worried about being spotted in public. River Canyon was a small town, but its inhabitants didn’t live under a rock. They owned TVs and watched all the latest hit series. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility for someone to recognize her. I’d offered the hat and sweatshirt as a weak disguise, but so far, it had sufficed.

All I wanted was for her to relax and not have to worry about people posting pictures online—for once.

The bar embraced us with its low lighting, dark wooden atmosphere, and soft acoustic music playing through the speakers. My eyes scanned the room of mismatched tables and chairs until I spotted Ben, sitting beside a redheaded woman in a corner booth toward the back.

He waved a hand to grab my attention, and I waved back.

“This way,” I said to Tarryn, leading her in my friend’s direction.

“Hey, guys!” Ben stood to greet us and extended a hand toward me.

I accepted, and we shook. “Hey, man.”

Tarryn wrapped her arms tighter around mine and cleared her throat, and I smiled at her eagerness to be introduced.

“Oh, this is Tarryn, my, uh ...”

Shit. I felt like a bumbling fool, stumbling over not knowing what to call her. We’d never been clear about titles or our official relationship status, and with all the secrecy, it’d never occurred to me that she might actually be my girlfriend ... yet simply calling her a friend felt like a lie.

“Seriously?” Tarryn asked, laughing at my incapability to say the word.

Ben grinned, and his eyes crinkled with amusement. “Damn, dude. Already winning those brownie points, I see.”

“Let’s see if I can do better.” Tarryn offered her hand to Ben, and he took it graciously. “Hi, I’m Tarryn, Connor’s girlfriend. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Connor’s girlfriend.”

Tarryn ... my *girlfriend*.

My brain tripped over itself as this new part of my reality was officially declared and thrown out into the world like it didn’t defy everything I’d known thus far in life. And yet it settled in softly, resting against my bones and heart like a

warm blanket. I smiled at how nice it felt as I wondered how I'd lived so long without it.

"Ben," my friend introduced himself with a smile before sweeping his hand toward the beautiful redhead, still sitting in the booth. "This is my wife, Gabby." He glanced at me with a good-natured smile. "Don't feel bad, bro. I've had a lot of practice introducing her."

"Okay, okay," I replied, chuckling. "I'm an idiot. I get it."

We slid into the seat across from Ben and Gabby with Tarryn sitting closest to the wall. The dividers separating the booth from the others surrounding it were high, providing us some seclusion, and she blew out a breath as she pulled the ball cap off.

"God, it's too hot in here to wear this stuff," she said, fanning herself with the hat before pulling off the sweatshirt and glasses.

"So, Tarryn," Gabby said, making conversation as the woman beside me disrobed, "where are you—oh my God."

My eyes shifted from Tarryn to the wide-eyed woman across from her. The recognition written across her features was unmistakable, and I was already dreading what was going to happen next.

"What?" Ben asked, looking to his wife with suspicion. "What's wrong?"

"You ... oh my God." She cupped her hands around her gaping mouth. "You're Tarryn King. Ho-holy shit."

"What?" Ben repeated.

"Babe"—Gabby reached out for her husband's wrist without taking her eyes off Tarryn—"she's *Tarryn King*. From that show we watch—you know, *Breckenridge*?"

Ben's realization was slow to happen, but eventually he nodded as his mouth fell open. "Ohh ..." He looked toward Tarryn. "Shit. Wow."

My lips were pulled tight between my teeth as I watched Ben's wife with an uncertain level of caution. What was I supposed to do in this situation? Were we supposed to leave?

Thank them for the invitation, but insist we never see them again? I felt like an idiot for not saying something before. I felt like a bigger idiot for putting Tarryn in this position, and I didn't fucking know what to do, other than to wait for her cue, but none came.

She just smiled graciously and folded her arms on the table. "You got me," she replied, like this woman was telling her something as mundane as what she had eaten for lunch. "Can you guys do me a huge favor though?"

"O-oh, of course!" Gabby stammered, nodding eagerly.

Tarryn leaned into the table and whispered, "I'm gonna need you to keep all of this to yourselves, okay? I just want a night out without having to worry about it ending up online tomorrow morning—you know what I mean? And this thing with Connor ..." She gestured toward me and winced a little. "We're just feeling stuff out right now, so ... don't tell anyone, okay?"

Gabby's gaze softened with empathy as she laid her hands over her chest. "Oh my God, of course. I won't say anything." She nudged her elbow against Ben's ribs. "And this guy doesn't talk to anybody, I swear."

"Hey, I talk to people," Ben said.

Gabby scoffed. "Yeah? Who? Connor?"

"He's a person, isn't he?!"

My eyes met Ben's. Was I really this guy's only friend? He offered a shrug that was damn near apologetic, and it dawned on me that maybe the reason he chatted so much was because he truly had nobody else outside of his wife and kids. Maybe he'd had friends at one point, but they'd all ditched him for one reason or another—hell, maybe *he* had ditched *them*. But it was in that moment when I realized we weren't all that different.

He just had more to say.

"Hey, so, um, it's probably none of my business, but"—Gabby grimaced like she couldn't believe she was even asking—"I thought ... I thought you were dating Jackson Stark."

My eyes dropped to the table in time with the bristling of my anger. I was so fucking sick of hearing about that guy. I was so fucking sick of seeing his face. It pissed me off to no end that he was who came to mind when thinking about Tarryn—the woman who was with me, not him—and it pissed me off that there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

“Well, I'm not,” Tarryn replied, an edge in her tone I hadn't expected.

“Really?” Gabby sounded surprised. As if it made more sense for Tarryn to be with a famous actor instead of a broke garbageman. “I had read—”

“Don't believe everything you read, okay?” Tarryn replied, reaching under the table to lay her hand against my thigh. “People will make anything up for a good story.”

The awkward beginning to the night disappeared after we got some food and drinks. Malachy Shevlin served us, his eyes meeting mine with the raise of his brow at the sight of a pretty blonde beside me. The look told me he was impressed, that he was happy for me, and you know something ...

For the first time in a while, I was happy for me too.

But after a couple of drinks, it was time for Ben and Gabby to relieve their sitter and get back home to the kids. We said our good nights, Gabby ensured Tarryn profusely she'd keep her mouth shut, and we went our separate ways.

“I like them.”

Tarryn hunkered into her seat beside me in the truck, exhausted from her flight and the night out, as I drove the short distance to my apartment.

“Yeah, they're nice people.”

She covered her mouth as she yawned, then smiled with bleary eyes in my direction. “And I really like the little bromance you have going.”

“Bromance?” I scoffed, shaking my head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You and Ben are adorable. You’re his best friend.”

I rolled my eyes, turning the truck into the parking lot. “Yeah, okay ...”

“And he”—Tarryn knocked a finger into my side—is obviously yours. And I mean, considering who you hung out with before, I’d say it’s a definite improvement.”

The statement warranted a snicker despite it maybe being close to the truth. I wasn’t sure he was my best friend—that seemed a little extreme—but he was certainly one of my only friends, and that had to count for something. Even if I didn’t want to openly admit it.

The truck was parked, and we got out. I insisted on carrying Tarryn’s small suitcase and backpack while she handled her purse, and we walked the short distance to the door. Tarryn stood close by my side, her hands on my arm the whole time. There was an eagerness in the way she shifted from one foot to another, and as if I didn’t already know what was going to happen once we were in my apartment, I definitely knew then.

Are we really going to do this?

We had kissed before. We had made out, and I’d used my mouth in places I had only previously fantasized about. Yet, somehow, I was so much more nervous now than I’d been before. And maybe all our conversations throughout the months apart were to blame. Maybe expectations had been built too high. Maybe we’d been looking too forward to the next time we’d be alone that the real deal was destined to be a failure and a major disappointment.

But even despite those nerves warning me to take a step back and think for a second, I opened the door and led us down the hallway to my apartment.

As I flipped through my heavy key ring for the key to my apartment, my gaze met Tarryn’s. Her shoulder pressed beside my door. Her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. She stared at me now in a way I had never seen before. Hungry.

Desperate. I swallowed, returning my attention back to the keys.

“I don’t know why the hell I carry so many,” I said, choking on a chuckle. “Like, why do I still have the key to my parents’ place? Or a truck I got rid of ten years ago? Who the hell knows? Sammy tells me all the time I need—”

The endless stream of words was halted by her mouth, pressed against mine, in time with my back slamming against the wall behind me. Her hands gripped my shoulders in an urgent squeezing grasp as her tongue moved past my lips to reacquaint with mine after a two-month hiatus. It took a moment for my brain to catch up entirely with what was happening, but soon, I was kissing her back, forgetting about the keys and thrusting my hands into her wavy, long blonde hair. Months of teasing and promises, coming to fruition with a fervent kiss.

I pushed back, pressing her against my apartment door, and she lifted her leg, wrapping it around mine and luring my thigh between hers. She moaned at the contact and gyrated her hips, pressing harder against my leg as one lithe hand left my shoulder to slide over my torso to the hard, aching erection straining against the zipper of my jeans. She broke the kiss to smile against my lips, evidently pleased as her fingers stroked me through my jeans.

“Fuck,” I groaned against her open mouth. “Tarryn.”

“You’d better open this door,” Tarryn said against my lips, “or I’m getting on my knees in this hallway, and I’m not sure your neighbors will appreciate that.”

A strangled laugh rumbled in my chest as the tension and need to do something about it heightened.

“You obviously don’t know my neighbors. That guy”—I nudged my head toward the door down the hall—“sounds like he’s having an orgy every—”

“Connor”—Tarryn bit my lip as her grip tightened on the steel rod in my pants—“open the damn door.”

In a moment of crystal clarity, I looked into her eyes and saw not the woman I thoroughly enjoyed making out with, but

the six-year-old girl who'd asked me to marry her, to which I had promptly said no—because what eight-year-old boy wants to marry his sister's pain-in-the-ass best friend? The nine-year-old girl who had once walked in on me while I was taking a shower. The ten-year-old girl who had at one point buried her face into my shoulder while watching *The Shining* for the first time.

But now, at thirty-five, I looked into those eyes, suddenly unable to believe that it was her hand on my dick or my leg between her open thighs, and I knew with an infuriating dose of lucidity that crossing the threshold into my apartment would be more prolific than I'd thought.

There would be no going back from this. If we had sex, everything as we'd always known it would change.

I needed to make sure she knew that.

“Are you absolutely sure about this?”

Tarryn's laugh was light and incredulous. “I didn't think you'd be so nervous.” She sucked in a deep breath before appeasing me with a nod. “Yes, Connor. I'm sure I don't want to sleep in the hallway outside your apartment.”

Wiseass.

I rolled my eyes and pulled from her grasp to find that damn key once and for all. Her hands never left my body as I unlocked the door, always pressing against my back or gripping my arm, like she needed the contact to be sure of this—or herself maybe. And then, when the door swung open, she did the honors of pushing me inside and closing us in.

We hadn't walked two feet inside, and the lights weren't turned on before her hands were at my waist, working frantically to undo my fly.

And, look, I was no stranger to sexual urgency and the need to get shit going right then and there. I was all about a good old-fashioned carnal frenzy if the mood struck—who wasn't? But, man, this was Tarryn. I wasn't saying there wasn't room for fast and dirty, and I was sure it would happen eventually, but—call me a sap; I didn't care—I couldn't see being that way now. Not with her, not this time.

She dropped to her knees quicker than it took for me to blink, and her fingers were sliding with expert precision into my underwear.

“God, I can’t wait to have you in my—”

“You don’t have to do this,” I felt the stupid need to say.

In the dark room, lit only by a night-light, I saw her look up at me. I couldn’t quite make out her features, but I could guess she wasn’t happy.

“Are you *trying* to kill the mood?”

Yeah. Definitely not happy.

“No, I’m not trying to *kill the mood*,” I grumbled, taking her by the hands and helping her back to her feet. “But I told you, I don’t want to do anything you don’t *truly* want to do. And if you’re just acting on autopilot because you think this is what I want, I want you to stop, okay?”

Tarryn took a step back, allowing the glow from the little night-light to shine across my face. She studied me for a while before turning, holding my hand, and moving backward toward my room. Never breaking the hold her gaze had on me.

“Nobody has ever talked to me the way you do,” she admitted, stepping through the open door and toward my bed. “Nobody has ever cared so much about how I feel or what I want.”

Anger was quick to flare in my gut, licking away at my heart and lungs. “You’ve been with some really shitty guys.”

I saw her nod in the darkness. “Yes, I have.”

God ... the simple truth in her tone was simultaneously heartbreaking and maddening. Shame bit hard against my face, and I hated myself for wanting her at all in the ways so many men had wanted her before. Didn’t she deserve more than that?

She deserves more than me.

“How many?” I asked, not knowing why I even wanted to know.

Her laugh was deep and husky as she backed into the bed and climbed on, one leg after another. “A lot.”

“Hmm.”

Tarryn’s hands gripped the collar of my shirt and lured me to join her. “I don’t speak caveman. What are you thinking?”

I complied with her unspoken request and climbed onto the bed, wrapping my arms around her as we lay together. “I want you to promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

I brushed the stray hairs off her face and ran my thumbs across her cheekbones. “Whenever you think about us, you won’t lump me in with all of them.”

Tarryn was still, quietly studying me in the dark, and I was happy just to feel her hand press against my heart.

“You have *never* been one of them,” she finally replied.

It wasn’t a promise, and she kissed me before I could insist she say the words. But I didn’t need to hear it now when I felt the truth in the softness of her lips and the delicate movements of her tongue against mine. Somehow, I knew that she’d never kissed anyone like this, never taken her time, never savored the moment until it lingered so long that it became a part of our biological makeup.

After minutes of kissing and roaming hands, Tarryn released a noise that sounded like a cross between a gasp and a sob, and I pulled back to study her face as best I could in the dark.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, afraid she’d finally put a stop to whatever the hell this crazy thing was.

But Tarryn could only press her forehead to mine and whisper, “Nothing.”

The kiss was resumed with her face cradled between my palms and her hands tightly clenching my shirt. Then, in slow succession, her fingertips moved to the hem of my shirt, as mine did to hers. It was funny to me that, two months ago, I’d had my face between her legs without hesitation, but right now, as we dangled toward the truest moment of no return, our

want for each other and for everything to remain the same warred at the hemline of our shirts.

I made the first move. Sliding my hands beneath the fabric, letting my fingers glide over the smooth skin of her belly and the lace of her bra. The kiss was broken, and she finished what I had started, pulling the shirt off and throwing it to the floor.

“Your turn,” she said, stealing the reins and finding her courage once again as her hands tugged impatiently.

It was like being a teenager again, giggles concealed behind stupid grins and voices lowered to whispers in an attempt to keep adults from hearing what was going on just on the other side of the wall. As I pulled my shirt off and Tarryn’s lips were on mine and her hands worked at the button of my jeans, I imagined what it would’ve been like if this had all happened when we were teenagers. What my parents would’ve thought if they’d caught us. How Lennon would’ve felt. What lectures would we have gotten from everyone? Would they have been happy? Disappointed? It was easy to forget that we were adults now, secluded in my apartment—miles away from the people who would undoubtedly have opinions and judge us for what was about to happen—as she shimmied out of her sweatpants and I pulled off my jeans faster than what was probably necessary.

Tarryn did the honors of pulling my underwear off, and I swallowed hard as her fingers wrapped tightly around my dick.

“Wow,” she uttered against my mouth.

I laughed. “Thank you.”

“No.” She laughed with me. “I mean, yes, but this is ... it’s just crazy.”

“We can stop, you know.” I didn’t want to stop. “We can pretend none of this shit ever happened.”

Her fingers moved over me in a way that didn’t feel sexual. No, this was loving. Adoring.

“Connor, I have wanted you since I was sixteen,” she said with another laugh, a little more humorless this time. A little sadder. “There’s no going back from this. I wouldn’t want to.”

The softness in her voice, the desperation and need ... it was the perfect moment, the only moment really, so without another word spoken, I kissed her hard on the mouth and crowded the space between her open thighs. We were both naked now in the darkness, and I had an acute awareness that I'd already seen everything before. Everything she had, had already been showcased boldly on my TV screen. Nothing that could be seen was a mystery. But as she aligned my body with hers and I sank into her with ease, the sensation of touch and smell and taste ... those were all new, things television could never replicate, and I didn't need the light for any of that.

"Holy shit," I groaned, touching my forehead to hers and settling into the brand-new feeling of being inside her.

Tarryn. The girl who had broken my Game Boy. The teenager who had stolen my shirt.

The most infuriatingly beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

A shuddering sob passed her lips, and my eyes snapped open to study her face in the darkness.

"Are you okay?" I asked, now wondering if I was too heavy over her or if she just wanted to stop altogether.

But she just nodded. "Yeah," she whispered, pressing her hips against mine and encouraging movement. "This is good."

She was right; it *was* good.

No, scratch that. It was more than good.

It was fucking perfect.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Tarryn

I woke up the next day with a smile and a stupid thought in my head.

I've slept in Connor Jacobs's bed twice now.

The first time though, I had only dreamed of this moment—my head on his naked chest, listening to the rhythm of his heart, with his arm wrapped tightly around my shoulders and the awareness of knowing what it was like to have him inside me.

God, I'd been dreaming of this for so long.

I knew there was no way I was going back to sleep. I had no idea what time it was, but it had to be late. I was wide awake and wonderfully rested. But I kept my eyes closed because, in the event that I was in fact only dreaming, I wasn't ready for this to end.

Moments later, Connor shifted beneath me and cleared the sleep from his throat. His fingers began a soft, lazy circle around my shoulder, and my smile broadened as my arm wrapped tighter around his waist.

"What time is it?" he asked, his voice rough.

"I don't know," I replied. "I didn't want to get up to find out."

He chuckled, the sound gruff and heavy with slumber. "Maybe we shouldn't look," he suggested. "We'll just pretend that time has stopped, and we'll spend all day right here in ignorant bliss."

"Mmm," I hummed, pressing my lips to his chest. "And what would we do all day?"

The sound that rumbled from deep inside his body was caught somewhere between a growl and a laugh as he quickly rolled to cover my body with his, grasping my wrists in his

hands and raising them above my head. I snagged my bottom lip between my teeth as I looked into his hungry eyes and felt his erection press heavily between my legs.

“I’m sure we’d come up with something,” he said, lowering his lips to kiss my jaw, my neck, my collarbone.

“I don’t know,” I teased as my back arched and my thighs fell further apart. “I think we’d probably get bored and—”

I was interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone, playing some cheerful little song on his nightstand.

Connor groaned and reached out to grab the phone as I teased, “That’s a lovely ringtone you have there. What is that, the *Barney* theme song?”

“It’s *Peppa Pig*, thank you very much. Sammy thought it was funny,” he grumbled almost absentmindedly as his brow furrowed at the screen. “Shit. I gotta answer this.”

The concern in his tone was enough to darken the lighthearted mood in an instant, and I nodded as he left me and the bed.

But at least I had a great view of his broad, muscular back and fantastic ass.

“Hey,” he answered in a gentle voice, and I knew immediately he must be talking to Sammy. “Is everything okay? Aren’t you at school? Oh, are you sick? Oh ... okay, I gotcha. Um”—he glanced over his shoulder to shoot a wide-eyed grimace in my direction—“yeah, of course I can pick you up. No, don’t feel bad. It’s fine. Sammy, seriously, it’s okay. Don’t call Mom. I’ll be there in a little while. Just hang tight, okay? Okay. Bye.”

He dropped the phone onto his dresser and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. “Fuck,” he groaned before blowing out a deep breath and turning to face me.

“You have to go?” I asked stupidly.

Of course he had to go. I was right here; I’d heard the conversation.

Connor was already reaching for his jeans on the floor as he nodded. “Sammy has cramps, apparently,” he said, giving

his head a little disbelieving shake. “Still can’t believe she does that shit already, but here we are ...”

I sniffed a small laugh I didn’t quite feel as my gaze dropped from the smooth, hard lines of his body to stare at the red-and-black plaid comforter. It hit me like a five-ton sack of selfish bricks that he was, first and foremost, a father, and not even a surprise visit from me, his girlfriend, would stop him from dropping everything to be there for his little girl. I knew I should’ve adored him for it, and, okay, I did. But in that very moment, all I could think about were those months I’d spent wishing I were with him, and now that I finally was, he was being pulled away again.

“So, um,” Connor said, pulling a T-shirt over his head, “what do you think we should do? Are we ... you know, letting the cat out of the bag, or ...”

I was quick to drag my gaze away from the blanket and up to his eyes. “Uh ... I don’t know about you, but I’m not sure I’m ready for Sammy to know yet. Not that I don’t love her, and I know she suspects something already, but the second she finds out, it’ll only be a matter of time before—”

“Everybody else knows,” he finished before settling into a silence too long to be comfortable. Then, he exhaled, long and steady, and his eyes held the frustration he wouldn’t speak. But he nodded after a couple of moments and said, “Yeah, I’m not ready for Mom or Lennon to know either. But then what are we telling Sammy? She’s coming back here, so unless you wanna leave—”

“I don’t want to leave.” I was quick to cut him off. “Why don’t you just tell her my flight landed here and you picked me up?”

Connor stood at the foot of the bed as he dropped his gaze to the floor. He wiped a hand over his mouth and shook his head with an expression of uncertainty blanketing his features.

“If she finds out I’m lying ...” He planted both hands on his hips while continuing to shake his head. “I can’t lie to her when I give her so much shit about telling the truth.”

I crawled out from beneath the blanket, wearing nothing but my long, sex-disheveled hair framing my face. I came to the foot of the bed and stood on my knees, reaching out to slip my fingers through his belt loops and pull him toward me.

“But it’s not a lie.” I walked my fingers over his wrinkled shirt to wrap my arms around his neck. “You’re just leaving out the details.”

Connor huffed a sigh of resignation, coiling his arms around my naked back. The muscles in his jaw loosened as he nodded slowly. “That’s true,” he grumbled. “But then you’d better get dressed.” His fingers tugged at the blonde strands cascading over my shoulders. “And maybe you wanna brush your hair.”

I stuck my bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout. “What’s wrong with my hair? You don’t like it?”

“Oh, no,” he said, smirking, as he moved closer to meld his body against mine. “I’m a big fan of this hair,” he went on as he wrapped the length of it around his hand, causing my head to tip back. “It just looks like you spent all night having the best sex of your life.” He pressed his smiling lips to mine. “So, unless you want my kid asking what we’ve been up to ...”

Another kiss followed, and another, and another until my fingers buried into the length of his hair and we were grinning like stupid teenagers in between a countless amount of tiny kisses and the softest touches of tongues. And with every single one, I held on tighter to the hope of finding true happiness and the gut feeling that I could maybe actually have it with him.

Connor groaned through his frustration as he pulled away before the fire between us could grow any higher. “I have to go,” he stated with the tiniest hint of regret.

I smoothed my palms against his bearded cheeks, just for the sake of touching him a little longer. “Do you want me to come with you?”

He shook his head. “Nah. You stay here and relax. I won’t be long.”

Connor left with a gentle kiss to my forehead, and within moments, I was alone in an apartment smaller than any place I'd ever lived in. Yet it wasn't lost on me that, in the short amount of time I'd spent there, it felt more like home than any house I'd ever personally owned.

But just as I wasn't ready for anybody to know of our budding romance, I wasn't ready to delve into what that meant either.

So, instead of thinking, I took a shower and washed my body with Connor's soap, closing my eyes beneath the spray of water and inhaling the spicy warmth that always lingered on his skin. I raked my fingers through my hair in lieu of a brush and gathered the damp, wavy strands into a messy bun at the top of my head. Connor's old Saint Savage T-shirt and a pair of boxers completed the ensemble, and by the time I stepped out of the bathroom, I heard the front door being unlocked and opened.

Sammy walked in with an empathy-inducing expression of pain written on her face. Connor carried her backpack over his shoulder and told her to sit with the tense discomfort of a dad who had no idea what the hell he was doing with a teenage daughter on her period. Still, she didn't protest and crumpled unceremoniously into a chair at the small dining table and dropped her head onto her folded arms.

Connor spotted me and threw a horrified grimace in my direction before fleeing into the kitchen. "So, uh ... do you want water, or, um ..."

"Hey," I greeted gently with all the sympathy in the world—for both of them.

Sammy looked up from her arms, but couldn't be bothered with a smile. "Hi, Tarryn. Dad told me you were here."

"Well"—I threw out some enthusiastic jazz hands—"surprise!"

Sammy spread her lips into a weak smile before letting it droop immediately.

Poor kid. She looked truly miserable. But lucky for her, I was the queen of terrible cramps.

“So, what happened?” I asked, pulling out a chair beside her as Connor emerged from the kitchen, helplessly carrying a glass of water and her backpack.

Sammy whined and laid a hand over her face. “I felt fine this morning, so I went to school. But then I was sitting in math class, and my stomach started to hurt really bad. So, I went to the bathroom, and I thought I just had to ... you know.”

I nodded, urging her to go on as Connor slid the water in front of her and dropped the backpack on the floor.

“But then I ended up throwing up.” Sammy dropped her hand back to the table, revealing a wriggling lip and tear-filled eyes. Her freckled cheeks were splotched with embarrassment. “I went to the nurse, and she asked me some stuff. Then, I called Dad.”

“What did she ask you?” Connor asked, jumping immediately at the need to protect and defend.

Sammy shrugged. “You know ... like, how I was feeling, if I had my period ... stuff like that.”

He swallowed. “Oh.”

Then, he shuffled back toward the kitchen, leaving us alone.

I cleared my throat and reached out to lay my hand against her arm. “Is this your first time having cramps during your period?”

She nodded, barely bobbing her head. “Mom told me about them, but ...”

The poor girl was two seconds away from breaking down. She lifted her big eyes to mine, silently pleading with me to make it all better. And maybe it was silly of me to feel this way, maybe it was even pathetic, but I had never felt more needed than I did in that moment, and, dammit, I was going to do whatever the hell I could to turn her shitty day around.

“Okay, so this is what we’re gonna do.” I called for Connor to bring me paper and a pen, and when he brought them to me like a soldier following orders, I set to work. “I am going to write a list of stuff we need. Then, I’m sending your dad to the store while we order food and find something good to watch on TV.”

Sammy was already sitting up straighter, watching as I scribbled onto the pad of lined paper.

Heating pad, ibuprofen, lots of chocolate, ice cream, raspberry tea ...

I ripped the sheet off the pad and handed it to Connor’s waiting hand, then watched as his forehead crumpled with hesitation as he read.

He had looked like that before. Back when I asked him to drop Sammy off and drive back to New York just to spend a little more time with me. God, I had been so selfish then, and yet I’d thought the chance to sleep in his arms for the first time ever would be worth the time and gas he’d spend to get to me. But now, I looked at him gnawing on his lip and looking like he desperately needed a cigarette, and I started to wonder about the things he wasn’t saying.

“Hey, why don’t you go find something for us to watch?” I suggested to Sammy, and she happily trudged her way over to the couch and grabbed the remote while I casually walked into the kitchen.

“Connor.”

He followed after me, stuffing the list into his pocket. “What’s up?”

“Take my debit card.”

His eyes narrowed with prideful defense. “Why would I do that?”

“Because this was my idea and I don’t want you to spend your money.”

“I can support my own kid, Tarryn,” he fired back, keeping his voice low before dropping his eyes to the floor to make way for a flicker of uncertainty.

“Please.”

It was all I needed to say for him to take a deep breath and reluctantly nod with a refusal to look me in the eye. I hurried to where I had my purse by the front door, grabbed my wallet, and pulled out the card. Then, I stuffed it into his pocket, making sure to graze my fingers over his crotch before taking a step back.

He rolled his eyes and tried desperately to fight his smile. “This doesn’t make me your whore.”

I snorted loudly, then quickly clapped a hand over my mouth to hold in my laughter. He thanked me with a lingering kiss before I hurried him out the door, not wanting Sammy to wonder what we were doing alone for so long. But I knew, when I joined her on the couch, I was blushing and jittering with the birth of emotions so new to me that I didn’t know what to do with them. And I hoped, for both our sakes, she didn’t notice.

Sammy had apparently never seen any of the classic chick flicks, and while they weren’t my usual cup of tea, there was always something so comforting and cozy in watching Meg Ryan fall in love. So, we spent the day curled up on Connor’s couch, watching *You’ve Got Mail*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, and *When Harry Met Sally*. Before Meg could famously fake an orgasm, Sammy fell asleep with her body folded around the heating pad. Connor grasped the opportunity to wrap his arm around my shoulders, and I answered with an arm around his waist. We sat like that in silence for the duration of the movie, not wanting to speak and wake his daughter from her much-needed nap. But to cuddle with him was enough. To feel him there and to be in his apartment and not in my cold, lonely home in Scotland was absolutely, truly one hundred percent enough.

And I wondered about Jackson.

I didn’t know why. Maybe it was the movie we were watching about two friends in similar situations, or maybe it

was the realization that we weren't in similar situations at all —not anymore at least. Whatever it was, I thought of him and wondered if he'd ever find himself happy to just be sitting with a man, happy to not touch him in a sexual manner, happy to not feel like it was necessary.

I hoped he would. Someday.

Shortly before the movie was over and Meg and Billy Crystal were realizing just how much they were meant to be, Sammy began to stir, and Connor reluctantly pulled away at the same time I did, our eyes meeting with the same hint of regret, as if to ask, *How long can it go on like this?*

I didn't have an answer to that. My situation was already complicated, and this made it even more so, but that didn't stop me from imagining what it would be like to kiss him in a crowded room without giving a fuck who was watching.

"What did I miss?" Sammy asked, sitting up, only to lean over and lay her head on my shoulder.

"Meg and Billy lived happily ever after. The end," Connor said, standing to stretch his arms overhead. The motion pulled his sweatshirt up, revealing a little sliver of skin, just above his waistline, and I wondered if I could sneakily reach out and lick it.

"What do you gals feel like doing for dinner?" he asked, unaware of my desperation to feel his skin beneath my fingers. "Cause I'm kinda starving."

"Sammy picks," I said, gently nudging my elbow against her ribs.

The girl twisted her mouth to the side as she thought. She was feeling much better now than she had that morning, and I was glad, knowing I had helped significantly. It felt good to be useful in a way other than to entertain or satisfy, and when I really thought about it, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt that way at all.

"Can we get McDonald's?" she finally asked, a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

Connor shrugged. "I'm cool with that." Then, he glanced at me. "And what about you, princess? Does that fit into your

diet?”

It was a playful jab, one that made me remember a time when I'd protested against having a Big Mac for the sake of keeping my weight down for the job. But it wasn't the jab that made me internally swoon; it was the pet name. *Princess*. I knew he meant it as a joke, but, God, I hoped it stuck.

“I think I can manage this one time,” I said. “I mean, it'll be five extra hours on the elliptical, but it'll be worth it to make this girl happy.”

Sammy threw a smug grin in her dad's direction, but his eyes were on me. Studious and hooded, watching with a curious expression as his lips curled into a gentle half-smile.

“Cool,” he replied. “And this time, it's on me.”

One Big Mac and a large fry later, I was sufficiently stuffed and elated. It had been way too long since I'd indulged in some good old-fashioned fast food, and I wasn't too lost to Hollywood to admit I'd missed it.

During dinner, Connor had gotten a call from Sammy's mom, asking if it would be okay for Sammy to spend the night since she was just going to be back at his place the next day for the weekend. Connor had hesitated and looked guilty, allowing his eyes to fall on me for an apologetic split second, before telling Monica it was fine. And as much as I would've loved to have him all to myself for another night, I wouldn't have expected anything less.

Sammy did go to bed fairly early though, exhausted from her new adventure in womanhood, leaving us alone at the table.

Connor waited for her door to close before allowing his soft, hooded eyes to dwell on mine, his hands clasped beneath his chin. I asked what he was staring at, and he simply replied, “You.”

I laughed uneasily. “Not much to look at.”

“I disagree.”

The way he was staring at me, boring his gaze through my eyes and straight into my quivering, vulnerable soul, was too intense, and I had to force myself to look right back and not cower in dark solitude.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard a foreign voice whisper, *Men aren't supposed to look at me like this. Men aren't supposed to want me like this.*

It was a lot to take, almost too much, and I was grateful when he finally released a deep breath and looked away.

“Thanks for helping today,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “I probably would’ve been pretty lost if I had been on my own.” He let out a self-deprecating laugh as he gripped the back of his neck.

“But you still would’ve been there for her,” I pointed out. “And that’s still more than most dads would’ve done.”

He didn’t protest. He just nodded. “I do what I gotta do.”

“I’ve always admired you for that, you know,” I admitted. “Even when you got Monica pregnant and I was jealous as all hell ... I admired you for staying.”

He snorted and curled his lips in a teasing grin. “You were jealous?”

“Oh my God, yes,” I uttered with an exasperated sigh. “I was deep in a major crush when you went and impregnated some girl you had just hooked up with. Of course I was jealous. God, I cried for hours, listening to sappy love songs, after Lennon told me.”

Connor laughed so hard at that, and I would’ve punched him if I wasn’t laughing right along with him. God, that girl back then never would’ve imagined she’d one day find herself in a secret love affair with that same guy she spent hours crying over.

“I can’t believe you’re laughing at my pain,” I said, even as I continued to giggle myself.

“It’s just so funny to me that I seriously thought you fuckin’ hated me all these years while you were out there,

crying over me. That's ...” He blew out a breath, steadying his laughter and shaking his head. “That’s fuckin’ wild.”

“And I really only hated you because I thought you hated me,” I replied with a half-smile that suddenly felt melancholy and not at all amused.

He sighed and nodded. “Yeah ...”

Unsaid confessions hung heavily in the air between us. Regrets that neither of us could do anything about years later, moments of longing and jealousy and pain—what would be the point of admitting them all now?

Then, he groaned and raked his hands through his hair. “God, I wish you didn’t have to leave tomorrow. I’m sorry today ended up the way it did. I mean ... it is what it is, but, fuck, it’s not how I wanted shit to go before you had to go back overseas.”

“I’m not going back to Scotland,” I blurted out, seeing this was as good of a time as any to tell him.

Connor nearly jumped from his seat as he sat straighter and flattened his hands on the table. “What?”

I swallowed, quickly backpedaling—and why, I didn’t know. “I mean, I am eventually, but ... I figured maybe I could stay in New York for the next few months. At least until work picks up again and I’m needed more often—”

Connor was out of his chair and reaching out to grasp my face in his palms and bending to press a bruising kiss to my lips. Every word I meant to say died in a needy whimper as his fingertips pushed into my hair and his thumbs stroked my cheekbones and his tongue swept in gentle whispers against mine.

With my hands around his wrists, I stood and allowed him to lead the way into his small galley kitchen, where we would be concealed if Sammy were to wander from her room. He was quick to lift me up and onto the counter. His ironclad gaze never left mine, and I giggled quietly, like an infatuated teenager, as he pulled my shorts off and dropped them to the floor. Then, he moved between my open thighs, fitting our bodies together like two missing pieces from the same puzzle.

“So, since you’re going to be staying in the States,” Connor said as he unzipped his jeans and my hands found their way back into his hair, “does that mean I can see you whenever I want?”

My laugh was coupled with a gasp as he slid into me, smooth and gentle, hands curled behind my head and kisses pressed to my lips and cheeks and jaw.

Then, I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, and before our lips could meet once more, I whispered, “You’d better.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Connor

The next few weeks of my life were great. Hell, I'd even call them surreal.

Tarryn and I had fallen into an easy routine. Since I had to work, she spent most weekdays at my place in Connecticut. Having her there, waiting for me, when I got home was a comfort I hadn't realized I'd been missing. And every day, she'd wrinkle her nose, tell me I smelled, and send me into the shower.

Most days, she joined me.

Then, we'd hang out—watching TV, having sex, talking about everything and nothing, all at once—and when it was time to eat, I'd cook dinner with the food she bought for us. We ate, we laughed, we enjoyed each other's company like it was a part of our lives we'd needed desperately and never known until we had it. And then we'd go to bed, looking forward to the next day.

It was just Tarryn and me those days when she spent her time at my place. It was quiet and nice, a taste of the life we could have if we lived together full-time. But the weekends were a different story because that was when she spent the most time with Lennon, and that was when I had Sammy.

Thanks to the credit card Tarryn insisted I use for gas, we always drove down to Long Island under the guise of spending time with my family. But really—with no offense to my parents or sister—I went to see Tarryn. To tease her. To sneak small, inconspicuous kisses in Lennon's backyard or my parents' living room when nobody was watching. To poke at her with the nostalgia of disliking her and the promise of making up for it come Monday.

I hated to admit that it was fun. But I hated even more that I couldn't just pull her onto my lap or wrap my arms around her waist without giving a shit who was watching.

Like now, while I was sitting at the dining room table in Lennon's house, sandwiched between Tarryn and Sammy with my parents directly across the table. Waiting for Lennon and Dylan to finish cooking in the kitchen.

They had insisted on handling everything themselves while we sat and waited. But between you and me, I thought they were making out.

Which was exactly what I wanted to be doing right now as my gaze drifted discreetly toward the low neckline of Tarryn's shirt. She did this shit to torture me, knowing I couldn't do anything about it until we were alone. And God only knew when that was going to be.

"Connor."

Mom's voice startled me, and I jolted in my chair as my gaze darted from Tarryn's boobs toward my mother's eyes.

"Yeah, what ..." I cleared my throat and hoped my dick would take a chill pill. "What's up?"

Mom looked none the wiser as she lifted her glass of iced tea to her lips. Like I hadn't just been wishing I could pitch a tent in my sister's best friend's cleavage.

"I bumped into Terry Laughlin the other day. You know, my friend Terry? From work?"

I could barely remember her friend Terry, but I nodded anyway to avoid a long-winded explanation. "Yeah. What about her?"

Mom's lips quirked into a coy little smile I immediately wished would go away. "Well ..." She waggled her brows as she bumped her shoulder against Dad's, who continued a staring contest with the basket of rolls in the center of the table, like he was forever two seconds away from pouncing on them.

I knew the pain. I was dying to eat, and my sister was taking her dear sweet time in the kitchen. But we'd collectively promised to not start eating until she and Dylan were at the table, so we were also collectively forced to starve.

“Her daughter just moved back home, the one with the yeast infection on her hands—remember I mentioned that? And she’s looking to make some local friends,” Mom went on, widening her smile. “Maybe even a boyfriend.”

Panic wiped away any hunger pangs as my gaze left the rolls to bore into hers. “Don’t go setting me up with anyone,” I was quick to say, hardening my tone with a harsh warning.

Her smile was replaced with a disappointed frown. “Oh, come on. She’s a beautiful girl, and I really think you’d get along.”

“No. Absolutely not.” I shook my head adamantly and tried to keep my body from leaning protectively toward Tarryn.

“Why not?”

“Mom, I don’t even live here!” *And I’m not on the fuckin’ market.*

“Oh”—she tsked and waved her hand in my direction, brushing the protest away—“you don’t live that far away. You’re here almost every weekend now!”

Sammy looked up from whatever the hell was so important on her phone and glanced in my mother’s direction. “Dad doesn’t date,” she muttered in a flat tone that leaned toward defensive.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. “Glad someone has my back.” I tapped the phone with my finger. “Now, put this away. Dinner’s coming out soon.”

Ignoring the request, she returned her attention to the screen. “I’ll put it away when we eat.”

“Nah, put it away now. Join us in this riveting conversation.”

“I already did.”

I sighed, hoping she wouldn’t make me play the part of the no-nonsense dad. He came out when he had to, but, God, I didn’t enjoy it.

Still, she kept scrolling and tapping away like I was invisible.

“Sammy,” I groaned with another heavy sigh when I saw she wasn’t making any moves to put it away. “*Samantha*. Now. Or I’ll put it away for you.”

Sammy released an exasperated huff, coupled with a groan. “*Fine*,” she shouted, thrusting the phone into her sweatshirt pocket. “God, why are you so annoying?”

“Because I enjoy making your life miserable,” I muttered, glancing toward my parents to see the faintest hint of judgment in my mother’s eyes.

Maybe, one day, I’d do something and not see it there, but today was not that day.

Tarryn, who had remained silent throughout the dispute with my daughter, finally opened her mouth with a question too close to damning for my tastes. “So, um, what’s this woman like?” she asked with an air of innocence, lifting her glass to her glossy lips that I knew were soft as fuck and felt too good around my dick. “What’s her name?”

Mom turned her steely eyes from me and looked at Tarryn with a softer gaze. “Oh, um ... Cheryl. I’ve only met her a couple of times, but from what I saw, she’s a sweetheart. She just got a teaching job at the preschool.”

“A preschool teacher, huh?” Tarryn didn’t even try to hide the amused lilt in her voice as she nodded and lowered the glass to the table. “That’s adorable. And appropriate, considering Connor’s maturity is the equivalent of a four-year-old.”

Now, normally, a job like that would’ve gotten me excited. I would’ve leveled her with a narrowed glare and a silent promise to repay her later, when we were away from prying eyes and speculation. But this jab wasn’t playful. It was laced in jealousy and fear, like she was worried I’d actually take my mom up on the offer to date her friend’s daughter.

So, with a little more confidence than I’d normally exhibit around my family, I slipped my hand over her thigh, dipping my fingers into the strategically placed tears in her jeans and gently digging my fingers against her soft, smooth skin.

“You know, you might be on to something there. And, hey,” I said, turning to face her as I felt her tension ease a little under my assuring touch, “maybe she can introduce you to some friends with, you know ... your level of sophistication.”

“Oh, yes.” Tarryn rolled her eyes and reached for her water glass. “Because you would know sophistication.”

“Well, I mean, I know *you* don’t have any, so ...”

“You know, someone needs to record you guys one day. Then, maybe you’ll hear how freakin’ ridiculous you two sound.”

I heard my sister’s voice, and I quickly dodged my eyes toward the door to see her entering the room, carrying a tray loaded with the steaks Dylan had just had out on the grill.

I removed my hand from Tarryn’s thigh quick enough to smack my fingers against the underside of the hard wooden table.

“All I’d hear is how freakin’ obnoxious your friend is,” I fired back, fighting back a wince to ward off the pain in my hand, and Tarryn snorted from beside me, jabbing her elbow into my ribs.

Dylan was next to enter with a bowl of baked potatoes and grilled corn on the cob, and Dad released a long, satisfied sigh before diving into the bowl of rolls.

“Or *maybe*,” Dylan chimed in, placing the bowl on the table, “you’d fall madly in love with the sound of her sweet, angelic voice.”

Sammy laughed quietly as my eyes met his. He winked, and I shook my head with a stern warning. Tarryn had told me he knew about our feelings, but now, I felt like the guy knew too much. With every passing week, I wondered how much longer he was willing to hold on to the secrets he had sworn to keep. I mean, trust and hidden truths could only stretch so far, and keeping a secret like that from his own freakin’ wife must’ve been killing him.

But ...

With a glance toward Lennon and her amused smirk, I wondered if maybe she already knew. Hell, what if they *all* knew? What if this entire farce was all for nothing? What if they were all, deep down, genuinely happy for us, and Tarryn and I looked like fools for keeping this thing a secret from the people who cared about us most?

For a split second, as I loaded my plate with steak and potatoes and resisted the urge to take Tarryn's plate to do the same for her, I wondered if I should just say it: *Tarryn and I have been dating and fucking for weeks. There. Now, let's drop the charade and eat.*

I imagined their happiness. Hell, maybe there'd be some tears of joy, a round of applause, a demand to know when the wedding was and if there'd be a brother or sister for Sammy sometime in the future. All that good, joyful shit you always saw in the movies after a dreaded admission.

But then I imagined the look of disappointment in my mother's eyes that never seemed to be too far off for me. The anger from Lennon, when she realized we'd been lying to her for ... well, who the fuck knew how long really? The feelings of betrayal from my daughter, who was still pissed about having to put her precious phone away. And with those images in mind, I wondered if they'd *ever* know and how my and Tarryn's relationship would suffer if they never did.

That Monday, she barely made it through the doorway of my apartment before she jumped on me, attacking my lips with hers and wrapping her long legs around my waist. A chuckle rumbled through my chest as I kicked the door shut and headed straight for the couch, never allowing the feverish kiss to end.

"God, I've missed you," she muttered into my mouth, raking her fingers through my hair, still damp from the shower.

"I *always* miss you," I replied as my hands dropped to her waistline, teasing my fingertips along the edge of her leggings.

"I was hoping you'd come by Saturday night."

She was already breathless, eagerly panting as I rolled the black cloth away from her waist and down her legs. She assisted by kicking off her little high-heeled boots. Then, the leggings were off, and I was discovering she hadn't worn underwear—always prepared. With a groan from somewhere deep and animalistic, I quickly weighed my options—go down on her or bury my dick inside her, smooth and quick. Separate parts of my body begged for access, but my dick won this round, and I hurried to relieve it from its restricting confines.

“You know I couldn't,” I replied, covering her body with mine and diving deep inside her with an instant shudder.

It was painful how good she felt.

It hurt how much she felt like home.

“You could've if you really wanted to,” she argued in a husky, coy tone, lifting her hips to meet mine. “You could've snuck out. You could've ... *fuck*. You could've told them you had to pick something up ... from the store ...”

Eyes closed, I found her neck with my lips and breathed in the scent of her expensive perfume—roses and lavender—before mapping the slender length of skin and bone with kisses, connecting the dots with my tongue.

“I'm not sixteen, Tarryn,” I muttered against her throat. “I'm not gonna just ... sneak out when my ... my daughter is sleeping in the ... next room ...”

“You fuck like you're sixteen,” she teased, and I couldn't tell if it was meant to be an insult or a compliment. “You know we would've been done in a few minutes. They ... God, Connor, harder. They never ... they never would've known anything was going on ... *harder*.”

Gritting my teeth, I did as she'd demanded and picked up the pace, thrusting deeper, harder—dare I say it, angrier—and she gasped, only to spread her lips in a wide, satisfied grin.

“Yes, just like that,” she hissed through a clenched jaw as I gathered both of her wrists in my hand and pinned them above her head.

My forehead pressed against her temple as I said into her ear, “I'm not going to be like that with you—not ever. I'm not

going to just fuck you and leave after I blow my load, like you're nothing to me. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't treat me like that either."

Her smile wilted as she turned to find my eyes with hers. "Wait ... are you actually annoyed with me?"

I groaned, realizing I was in no mood to do this right now, and I released her wrists and climbed off the couch, already pulling up my pants as she lay there, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened.

God, how quickly the moment could be killed with a seemingly innocent comment.

Honestly, it was amazing.

"I'm ..." I huffed an irritated breath and thrust my hands through the damp strands of my hair. "I'm tired, Tarryn. That's what I am. I'm tired of sneaking around. I'm tired of trying to juggle all of these fucking pieces of my life when, to *me*, there's no reason I can't have it all together."

She shook her head as she sat up to grab her leggings from the floor. "You know why we can't do that right now."

"No!" I shouted, not intending to shout at all. I wiped a hand over my face and sighed. "No," I repeated, softer this time. "I really, truly don't. I could get it in the beginning. I understood it then, but now? Tarryn, it's been *weeks*, and I don't get how you don't see how stupid this is."

"You *know* I'm not comfortable with coming out about this yet." Her brow was pinched, her lips were turned into a scowl, and her eyes blinked rapidly, warding off a bout of tears I hoped wouldn't fall.

"Yeah, I get that. But *why*? I get Lennon and my parents. I get they'll be annoyed. But you know what? We're *adults*. And I dunno about you, but I'm serious about this shit, okay? As long as you and I are happy and good with it, I don't give a fuck what Lennon and my parents think. And I *am* happy, Tarryn. I really am. Aren't you?"

I expected her to nod immediately. I expected her to insist profusely that *of course* she was—how could she not be? But all that she expressed was hesitation as she bit against her

bottom lip and kept her gaze diverted to some random spot on the carpet.

I shook my head and rolled my eyes away from her. “Cool. That’s great,” I muttered and began to wander toward the pack of Marlboros on the table.

I need a fucking cigarette.

“Connor ...”

I snatched the foil packet with the lighter and pulled out a smoke. “I really don’t wanna hear it, okay?”

She followed me as I headed for the window, ready to open it and light up.

“It’s not *just* about Lennon and your parents.”

“Oh, you don’t say,” I grumbled sardonically with the cigarette hanging from my lips as I unlocked the window and pushed it open.

With a flick of the lighter, the smoke was lit, and I took a deep pull, hoping it would calm my nerves before I couldn’t control them any longer. I didn’t want to fight with her, but, man, it was worth it to fight for this. And I would if I had to.

“My life is ...” She blew out a heavy breath and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “It’s really complicated, okay? Let’s just put it that way.”

I blew a tendril of smoke toward the open window. “It’s only as complicated as you make it.”

“It’s not that simple.”

I pointed the glowing end of the cigarette in her direction. “But it is.”

An annoyed expression overtook her face as she huffed and shook her head before snatching my cigarette from my pinched fingers. She slipped it between her lips, inhaling deeply before letting the smoke billow from her nostrils.

“You don’t get it, Connor,” she said, melancholy and choked. “You think it’s as simple as declaring, *Hey, I’m going to be romantically and publicly involved with this person*, and going on with your life like any other normal human being

would. But do you realize that the moment people even speculate we're together, you'd have paparazzi all over the fucking place? They'd follow you to work, to Sammy's mom's house, to Sammy's *school*. Your pictures would be everywhere. Your *daughter's* pictures would be everywhere. Do you really want that?"

I slowly shook my head in protest as my gut was suddenly misshapen and cramped with trepidation and worry. "You don't know that it would be like that. You're making that assumption, but—"

"Look at what they're doing to me and Jackson! And that's based entirely around a freakin' rumor!"

With a snort, I took the cigarette back and put it to my lips. "Fucking Jackson," I muttered before taking a pull.

"God, what the hell is your problem with him?"

I lowered it from my mouth and stared at the burning end. "You ever think he likes it?"

"What?"

My shoulders lifted and dropped in a nonchalant shrug. "'Cause, I mean ... I don't know. He doesn't really do anything to put a stop to those rumors. But then again"—I lifted my eyes to hers—"neither do you."

I wasn't proud of myself for insinuating that she might actually enjoy the very rumors she claimed to hate. I hated myself for even implying I'd believe she could be with me while simultaneously fucking some other guy. It was low and cruel, and at the sight of her instantaneous hurt and anger, I wished I could take it back. But it was already out there, and I was riding the anger-induced adrenaline too high and fast to backpedal.

"I can't ..." She shook her head and quickly swatted at a tear as it rolled down her cheek. "I can't believe you'd think ..."

"I *don't*," I insisted. "But *something* is going on here. And it's not just the fuckin' paparazzi or my sister or ... or Jackson. It's something else, and I want you to tell me what it is. So,

what, Tarryn? Are you ashamed of me or something? Is that it?”

“Ashamed of you? What ... why would I be ashamed of you?”

“Oh, I dunno. Maybe ‘cause I drive a fucking garbage truck, and you’re ... well, you’re ...”

The raging heat that had been biting at my cheeks with anger and insecurity dialed it back and scurried back to whatever dark corner it had come from. My shoulders sagged as I looked at her—the wispy blonde hairs breaking free from the long braid, cascading down one shoulder; the tears brimming in her crystal-blue eyes; her cheeks splotched with rubbed-away makeup and hurt and shame.

Fuck ... I didn’t want to fight *with* her; I wanted to fight for *us*. I didn’t want to be mad or ruin this time we had together with speculation and assumptions.

“I’m what?” she asked, looking less like a star and more like that sad, broken woman I had seen months ago at my sister’s engagement party. The one I had hurt. The one I had made cry in the restroom.

I sighed and stamped the cigarette in the ashtray on the windowsill. “You’re amazing, and you’re beautiful, and you’re perfect. That’s what you are,” I said, hoping she could hear the apology in my tone. But for good measure, I added, “And I’m sorry.”

She allowed my arms to wrap around her shoulders, and then, with a quivering sigh, her arms were around my waist. I pressed my lips to the top of her head and apologized again, insisting I hadn’t meant to make her upset.

“I just want to be with you.”

“You already have me,” she muttered against my chest.

“But I want every side of you, and I want it all the time. Not just behind closed doors.”

“I want that, too, and we *will* get there,” she promised, tightening her arms and nuzzling her cheek against my chest. “I just ... I have to figure things out, okay? But we will.”

I pressed another kiss to the crown of her head and nodded, offering a simple, “Okay.”

But it wasn't okay, and I knew it with every ache in my bones and knot in my stomach. Yet, even as I hurt, I was tumbling, spiraling, falling, and Tarryn would have to do more than offer empty promises for me to let her go after I'd already spent too much of my life wishing I'd just held on.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Tarryn

Connor was falling in love with me.

He hadn't said it, and maybe he never would as long as we were still living in this secrecy that even I could admit was growing old.

But whether he'd admit it or not, he was, without a doubt, falling in love with me. I could see it in the way he looked at me, like he'd gather every star in the sky and lay them at my feet if I asked. I could hear it in the way he spoke to me, whether we were in bed or bantering the way we always had or simply commenting on the rain against the bay. Every word was inflected with an affection that even the most skilled actor could never duplicate, and between every single one was a secret deeper and more meaningful than our relationship itself.

It should've made me happy. It should've been everything I'd ever hoped for or wanted because ... well, it used to be.

But I was a much, much different person than I had been when I was sixteen.

I'd grown up. I'd gotten hurt. I'd gotten a job—one beneath a blinding spotlight. I had changed in every way a person could change, and the more time we spent together, the more I started to wonder if it really was for the best ... or if I was simply setting him up for the worst broken heart of his life by dragging him under this cloak of uncertainty with me.

Because the truth was, while I knew he hated living in secrecy, I wasn't sure I ever wanted to be out of it.

We were happy now; we were *good*. But the second we allowed the outside elements to touch this wonderful thing we had, what would happen then? When the paparazzi knew his face and my best friend knew I was sleeping with her brother and his daughter couldn't go to school in peace, what then? How long would it take for him to realize he didn't want this

with me after all and would prefer to be alone—or worse, with someone else?

I had always thought he had the potential to be my personal happily ever after, but it wouldn't be the first time a supposed soul mate ended up being another blip in the road. It could happen to anyone.

Just look at my parents.

They had been great until I came along.

Just a blip in the road.

“You're quiet today,” Connor commented, massaging my foot with one hand while tracing the seam in my leggings along my thigh with the other.

I smiled and let my gaze meet his, hoping my thoughts would remain in my brain and not in my eyes. “Sorry. I'm just tired, I guess.”

It wasn't entirely a lie. I had stayed up late the night before, chatting with my agent, Lucy, about the upcoming interviews and photo shoots before calling Jackson and catching him up on the exciting ongoings of my life at home. The days spent with Lennon. The secret nights spent with her brother.

Just the other day, I'd hardly gotten any sleep at my condo before I woke up to head over to Lennon's, where I had helped her paint her office and had lunch before I jumped in the car and headed for Connor's place in Connecticut.

Sooner or later, Lennon was going to ask where I was spending all my time when I wasn't with her, and every day, I wondered if my and Connor's time was up.

Jackson had said it was all so exciting, living like this.

I'd told him it was torture.

But I knew damn well what would happen if we were out in the open. And I wasn't prepared for it—not at all. And judging from Jackson's tone, he wasn't looking forward to it either—whether for me or himself, I wasn't sure.

Connor's brow furrowed as he nodded and brushed a strand of hair off my forehead. “You wanna take a nap while I

make dinner?”

“No, it’s okay,” I said, reaching out to run my fingertip over the collar of his shirt. “I wanna help.”

“You just wanna watch me cook,” he countered with a smirk.

I laughed playfully and pushed all negativity out of my crowded brain as I pulled my feet from his lap to straddle his thighs with mine.

“I can’t help it if you look so damn sexy, doing it,” I said, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my forehead to his.

“I don’t think it has anything to do with how I look,” he countered, hugging me and stealing my breath away with an elated grin. “I think it’s just the thought of eating a home-cooked meal that gets you going.”

“You got me,” I muttered, easing my lips toward his. “So, tell me, what are you making tonight?”

He kissed me. “Beer-battered pork chops”—another gentle peck against my lips—”and baked Parmesan asparagus.” And another.

“Mmm, that sounds good.”

“And”—he tipped my head, exposing my neck, and pressed a kiss there—”if you’re a *really* good girl”—another kiss, this one behind my ear—”maybe I’ll bake brownies too.”

“Oh, baby, I love when you talk foodie to me,” I said, releasing a husky laugh as my hips began to move against his erection, rapidly swelling to meet the pool between my spread thighs.

“Oh yeah? Well, just wait until you hear what I’m making tomor—”

A phone rang from the coffee table, and I looked over my shoulder. “Is that yours or mine?”

He cleared his throat, shifting beneath me. “Has to be yours. Mine’s on silent, I think.”

He made an attempt at kissing my neck again, but I was already reaching for the ringing device.

“Leave it. If it’s important, they’ll leave a message.”

“If it’s important, it should be answered right away,” I countered, leveling him with a gentle glare and an apologetic smile, and he relented with a sigh and a nod.

It was Lucy, and for a second, I did consider ignoring the call. She was unlikely to call me with anything pressing and was usually just delivering the news that I had another appearance on the roster. But something in my gut told me to answer, so I did and reluctantly brought the phone to my ear as Connor continued a sensual assault on my neck with his lips.

“H-hey, Lucy,” I said, gripping the back of Connor’s neck with desperate fingers. “What’s up?”

She didn’t greet me with a hello or any other pleasantries before she asked hurriedly, “Did you get my texts?”

“No ...” I hadn’t heard my phone alert me of any incoming messages. Had my thoughts really been that loud?

“Well, prepare to be bombarded on social media. Because Jackson’s agent just tweeted that you guys are officially an item.”

A rush of panic surged through my veins as I forgot Connor was making me feel good, and I hurried away from his mouth and hands to climb off his lap. “What? Why the fuck would she do that?”

As I walked quickly to his bedroom, I heard Connor ask, “What’s wrong?”

“Well, I mean, is it true?” Lucy asked cautiously.

I wanted to close the door behind me to give myself a little privacy before breaking down over this unbelievable mess I was in, but Connor was already entering the room, arms crossed and brow furrowed.

“No!” I answered incredulously as I turned from his questioning glare. “God, if it were true, why the fuck wouldn’t I want to be public about it?!”

The irony in that statement wasn't lost on me. But Lucy was clueless as to what was going on in my personal life—hell, everyone was ... except Jackson and my best friend's husband.

“Okay. Well ...” She sounded skeptical, but who could blame her? I was as secretive with her as I was with everyone else. “I don't know. I thought it was a little weird, personally. That's why I texted you about it in the first place.”

“What exactly did she say?”

“I mean, I sent you the screenshots, but basically, she retweeted that interview you guys did last month with *The Hollywood Soapbox* and said, ‘Another great interview with my favorite couple in the world.’ Something like that. Then, she said you guys are so cute together and will make beautiful babies. Which, I mean, is kinda true. You'd have great-looking kids. His complexion and hair, your bone structure and eyes —”

I cut her off with a groan. “We're not *ever* having babies, Lucy.”

“No, I know. I'm just saying.”

Connor was standing behind me, looming over my shoulder with concern and a thousand unspoken questions. Talking about this in front of him wouldn't help our own situation. Jackson had already pissed him off, and now, knowing that his freakin' agent was stoking the flames, the rumors were only going to get worse. Which would only build the tension between Connor and me.

I needed to talk to Jackson. And I had to do it without Connor masquerading as my shadow.

“I gotta go,” I said to Lucy. “I have a call to make.”

“Yeah, I figured,” she replied with a sigh. “What a freakin' mess. Do you want me to reach out to Jackson's agent?”

“No. Let me talk to him first. Then, we'll decide where to go from there.”

With a gray cloud of anger and suspicion hanging over my head, I walked to Black & Brewed, River Canyon's coffee shop. I had thought a little fresh air might do me some good before having the conversation I was dreading, but so far, it wasn't working.

Connor hadn't been comfortable with me going out alone, afraid that I'd be spotted and harassed without any protection to speak of. He wanted to go with me, but I was honest and said I needed the space to think and handle a situation I wasn't ready to talk about. I was grateful when he nodded with understanding, but the worry was still there, darkening his blue eyes. So, I'd reminded him of my pepper spray and extensive training in self-defense, and with that, he'd reluctantly backed down but still insisted he'd be checking his phone regularly in case I needed him for anything.

Now, inside the café, smelling of bitter, rich coffee and sweet baked goods, I ordered a macchiato. Lucky for me, it was a quiet day in the middle of the week, and the shop was empty for the most part. But there was still the blonde woman working the counter and espresso machine, and there was always the chance of more customers trickling in. So, I found myself a table tucked in a dark corner and got comfortable in the cushioned chair before pulling out my phone and dialing Jackson's number.

It went to voice mail.

"Are you kidding me?" I whispered harshly to the failed call screen, staring at the phone like it was Jackson himself.

Worry and a variety of possibilities coalesced in my gut, making the macchiato on the table in front of me seem less and less appealing with every passing second.

He's avoiding me.

It was the first thought that crossed my panicked mind, and I couldn't think of a reason to believe otherwise. If I'd allowed logic to infiltrate, I would've maybe considered he could be sleeping or taking a shower or chatting on the phone

with his elderly grandmother. But reason wasn't a friend in times of blind worry, and right now, all I could do was call him again, clenching my fist with a prayer that he'd fucking answer.

He didn't.

"Come on, Jackson," I whispered with a trembling, anger-filled voice. "Answer your fucking phone."

I called one more time, silently swearing to myself that, if he didn't answer, I'd head back to Connor's place. I'd tell him what was going on, and, hell, if he wanted to handle Jackson himself this time, I wouldn't stop him.

And as if he could hear my silent threats to send my big, tattooed boyfriend after his ass, Jackson finally answered.

"Hey, Tarryn."

I hated the sound of his voice. Laced with knowing and inflected with apology. He spoke every syllable with trepidation and hesitation, and I could only sigh and lay my face into the palm of my hand.

"You need to fix this," I told him, not knowing what else to say.

"Tarryn ..."

"No. I don't want to hear your excuses right now or how you think we need to just ride it out until it dies." I swallowed, dropping my hand into my lap to stare at the macchiato, growing cold on the table. "This is my *life*, Jackson. Do you understand that? This isn't just about you or—"

"Scarlet thought it would make me look better," he hurried to interject. "She thought it would help my image, and I didn't think it would hurt to make the media and fans think what they wanted. I didn't expect her to come out and confirm anything though. I had nothing to do with that at all."

The information was too much to process all at once, and I closed my eyes to try and let it sink in. "Wait a minute. Was this whole thing *planned*? The rumors, the paparazzi ... did you *plan* this?"

He sighed into the phone. "I-I wouldn't say—"

“Tell me the fucking truth, Jackson. Did you know this was going to happen?”

“Yes,” he replied without a moment of hesitation.

The overpowering wave of nausea struck me with a swift and direct blow to my stomach. “Oh my God,” I uttered, standing abruptly and leaving my untouched coffee on the table as I barreled toward the door.

The need to scream at the man I’d thought was my friend nagged at my limp tongue, but I had the sense to not do it in a quiet café.

“You need to let me explain,” he was quick to say as I stepped outside and hurried down the picturesque Main Street toward Connor’s apartment complex.

“You’ve done enough explaining,” I said through clenched teeth.

“No, Tarryn, listen to me. I—”

“Shut the fuck up, Jackson.”

I quickly turned onto Connor’s street, finally out of earshot of the meandering locals, window-shopping and chatting on Main Street’s sidewalk. I was free to speak without hesitation, and I did so with passion, poking the air with a firm finger as I spoke and headed toward the apartment.

“I *trusted* you! And you know how hard it is for me to do that, but you took advantage of me. You fucking *used* me!”

“Tarryn, no. Please,” he begged, sounding broken and helpless and upset. “A seed was planted, yes, but I had no idea how much it would spiral out of control. And like I said, I had no clue Scarlet would make that tweet—”

“But you *wanted* to plant that seed,” I threw back at him. “You *wanted* this!”

“I wanted them to think we were together, yes,” he admitted softly. Weakly. “But ... but it was before Connor, and I swear to God, since then, I’ve tried—”

“Oh, bullshit!”

“They think what they want, and I have never said yes or no. I do what I feel I have to do to protect myself while still trying to protect you—”

“God, Jackson,” I said with a bitter, humorless laugh. “It is so fucking funny how you still want me to believe you give any semblance of a shit about me. Honestly, it’s hilarious. But more than anything, it’s pathetic, and I’m done with this conversation.”

“Jesus Christ, Tarryn, please listen to me. *Please.*” He was pleading, urgent and desperate, but it fell on the deaf ears of someone who’d had enough.

I hung up and pushed through the complex door and hurried down the hall to Connor’s apartment, ignoring my phone as it rang. It had to be Jackson. Or maybe it was Lucy. Hell, maybe it was even Lennon, calling to congratulate me or question where I was or ask why the fuck I’d spent the past however many months lying to her.

What the hell has happened to my life?

Why the fuck couldn’t I be one of those actresses whose personal lives fly quietly under the radar?

Because Jackson wouldn’t allow it.

He used you because that’s what men do to you, Tarryn. They use you until they’re finished, and then they run away.

They don’t stay. They don’t ever stay. They find a reason to leave, and that reason is always greater than anything you can give to them.

My face was sodden with free-flowing tears by the time I burst through Connor’s door. And I didn’t give a shit how I looked. I didn’t care that my mascara was running or that my nose was dripping with snot or that my foundation had been paved through with an endless stream of tears. The only thought I had in my head was to turn to the one man who had so far defied the laws my life had been abiding by since the day my father had left before I was born.

But Sammy was there. For a moment, I couldn’t remember why she would be there until I remembered it was Friday and she was sometimes at his place on Fridays. And

why the hell hadn't I thought of that before making the drive up here? Why did the days have such a stupid, infuriating habit of running together without anything differentiating one from another, making it too easy for me to forget?

If you were in Scotland, this wouldn't be a problem.

"Tarryn! What are you doing here?" Sammy exclaimed, jumping from the couch to greet me, seemingly oblivious to my abrupt entrance and the tears streaking my face.

Maybe my makeup withstood the downpour after all.

"Um ... I, um, I told your dad th-that I'd be stopping by after checking out some, uh ... some real estate ..." The bullshit tumbled in broken pieces from my lips as I quickly scanned the small apartment for Connor.

"Are you moving to Connecticut?!"

The anger was too wild in my jittering veins to have this conversation as I picked at my cuticles and barely nodded to her question before quickly shaking my head and sweeping my gaze across the apartment. "I-I-I don't ... I don't know. Um, where ... where's your—"

The bedroom door opened, and out he walked, wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and a T-shirt that left very little of his muscular frame to the imagination.

"Oh, great. It's you," he said begrudgingly at the sight of me, like he hadn't just made out with me an hour ago. "How's it goin'?"

I knew I'd insisted on keeping our romance a secret. I knew he was only playing along like the loyal saint he was. But right now, I wasn't in the headspace to keep up with the farce. Not when I'd just been betrayed by one of my only friends. Not when the foundation I'd set for myself was shaky and crumbling beneath my feet.

The tears were quick to start again, not caring that Sammy was standing right there, staring in silent bewilderment as I broke down.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Tarryn, hey," Connor was quick to say, hurrying to pull me into his arms, cupping the back of my

head and pressing my face to his chest. “What ... what’s going on?”

“I-it was him,” I sobbed against his shirt, gripping the fabric at his back in my clenched fists.

“Sammy,” Connor said above my head, “go get a glass of water, okay?”

She hurried past us and toward the kitchen as Connor led me to the couch and, with his arms still wrapped around me, sat us down. I curled up against his side, cowering beneath the cover of his touch. His gentle fingers stroked through my hair as the tears relentlessly poured, soaking through his shirt.

“Talk to me.” He spoke gently, soothingly. “What did he do?”

I groaned like a wounded animal, speaking only to the heart that lay beneath his muscle and skin and bones. “Jackson encouraged the whole f-fucking thing. The rumors. The paparazzi.”

“Wait.” His tone hardened, and his body tensed. “Jackson told the media you’re together?”

Sammy returned and placed a glass on the coffee table. “Here,” she whispered, and Connor thanked her just as quietly.

I lifted my head from his chest but kept my arms around him, as if I needed the strength of his body to convince mine to continue living, breathing, surviving. “He planted the seed,” I said, lifting my gaze to the ceiling, unable to look at Connor’s protective glare or Sammy’s confused curiosity. “And he did nothing to stop his agent from confirming that we’re a couple.”

“But you *aren’t*,” Sammy chimed in, unsure of her own words, even as she spoke them.

The rise and fall of Connor’s chest escalated in time with every furious breath. “And what the hell is he going to do about it?”

“Nothing, I guess,” I replied with a weak, helpless shrug. “I-I don’t know.”

“Bullshit.” Connor released me, grabbing his phone off the coffee table. “Give me his fuckin’ number. I’ll make him —”

“No.” I shook my head, hardly able to believe it myself, when I had been so ready to send Connor after Jackson not long ago. “You’re not doing anything.”

His brow furrowed with the uprising of his protective fury. “The hell I’m not! I’m not going to sit back while this asshole dictates your fucking life!”

“But it’s *my* life, Connor. I’ll make my own decisions and handle things my own way when it’s regarding my—”

“It’s my life too, Tarryn!” he shouted, cutting me off with a slice of pain and rage. “Don’t you *dare* act like this isn’t my life too.”

He bolted from the couch and began to pace the length of the living room as Sammy quietly took a seat beside me.

I could only imagine what was happening in that girl’s head.

A heavy silence fell over the apartment as the scent of pork chops and asparagus permeated the space between all the things we weren’t saying. I didn’t know what to say when I knew I should’ve had zero qualms about unleashing my protective boyfriend on the friend who apparently wasn’t a friend at all. I knew I should’ve had no issue with going public about our relationship and squashing the rumors that abounded.

Yet all I could think was, *Maybe I should hear Jackson out. I could be angry, I could be hurt, but maybe I should truly hear him out before sending my attack dog.*

Connor’s heart didn’t seem to agree with mine.

“You know, I could understand the crazies watching the show.” He paced as he spoke, arms folded over his chest. “I could understand them looking at the two of you and coming up with whatever fucking fantasies went through their convoluted minds. But for him to egg them on and encourage them when he knows ... God, he fucking *knows* about ... about ... *fuck!*”

It pierced my soul to watch him stammer around the only word he wouldn't say—*us*. All of this secrecy I'd hammered into his head—he couldn't say it, he couldn't confirm it, not out loud in the presence of someone else. As if Sammy wasn't connecting the dots herself at this very moment. As if she hadn't known all along.

Come on. The girl wasn't stupid.

After all, she was the one who had told him to dance with me.

He stopped pacing to stand in front of me across the coffee table, his hands on his hips and his face displaying the helplessness I felt.

“Tarryn,” he said eerily soft, a harsh contradiction to the fiery explosion that had just taken place, “this shit has to stop, okay? You know it, I know it ... and I'll bet anything that Jackson knows it too. Hell, I'll even give the guy the benefit of the doubt and say maybe he's let it go on so long that he doesn't know *how* to make it stop. But I'm going to promise you something, and I'm only going to say this once, okay?”

I barely nodded before he began to speak again.

“I'm letting it go for the weekend. That's two days. But if Monday comes around and nothing is done to make this shit right, then I'm handling it myself. Because I don't care what you say. This isn't only about your life anymore, Tarryn. And if you won't put *that* first, for whatever reason, then someone has to. And it might as well be me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Connor

“Dad, are you even listening to me?”

Fuck, I did it again.

I gave my head a little shake and turned from the window to look at my daughter, sitting across from me at the table.

“Sorry, kid,” I grumbled as I returned my attention to the club sandwich I’d barely touched since the waiter had brought it over. “My head’s kinda somewhere else.”

That was putting it lightly.

Weekends with Sammy had always been my time to unwind and have fun. I might not have a lot of money to spend, but we always found fun shit to do nonetheless. But ever since this thing with Tarryn had begun, my weekends with my daughter had turned into a difficult balancing act of secrets and fatherhood. In the weeks that had passed, I had somehow not once realized that my priorities had shifted when Sammy had always come first—*always*. And it shamed me even more now that I had sworn I’d keep my mind off Tarryn and the drama with her fucking costar for just one freakin’ day, and I was clearly failing miserably.

Sammy eyed me with concern and just the faintest hint of acknowledgment before asking, “Is Tarryn your girlfriend?”

I had just taken a bite of my sandwich when the question was thrown out into the world, and I held the wad of food in my mouth, staring ahead at my observant daughter and wondering how long she’d known before she witnessed the shit show on Friday night.

But I had told Tarryn once before that I wouldn’t lie to Sammy, and I wasn’t going to start now.

So, with my mouth full, I replied, “Yes.”

I really didn't know what I expected her reaction to be. Betrayal? Hurt? Shock or anger? I mean, I assumed there would be some negative emotion tossed my way, maybe a bit of the old silent treatment when she realized I'd kept it a secret for so long.

Sammy was after all my best friend, the best one of all, and we never kept anything from each other—within reason, of course.

So, when it was finally in the open, I mentally braced myself for the inevitable backlash.

I never expected her to cup her hands around her mouth, eyes squinting with happiness and filling with tears, as she erupted with a squeal that could've woken the dead over in the River Canyon Cemetery.

“Oh. My. God.”

She bounced in her seat, and I swept my gaze around the diner, hoping nobody was taking a gander in our direction.

“Nobody else knows,” I told her as a warning. “Well, except Jackson. And I think Tarryn said Dylan knew, too, but I don't know to what extent, and—”

“I *knew* something was going on,” she said, dropping her hands to the table. “I just knew it. I mean, I knew you liked each other, but I didn't know something was actually *happening*. You guys are so ...” She grinned toward the ceiling as she searched for the word she needed.

“Obvious?” I offered in a flat, unamused tone.

Sammy shook her head, looking back at me. “No, not even. You're just ... *cute*.”

I scowled. “Cute? I think that's the last word I would use to describe anything in my life.”

“What about me?”

I shook my head and teased, “Nah. You were cute when you were little, but this angsty teenage shit you have going on lately ...” I wrinkled my nose. “Nah. Nothing cute about that.”

“Ha-ha,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “So ... why won't you guys tell anyone?”

The diner continued to bustle around us, everybody minding their own business and carrying on with their lives. Acting as though I hadn't been holding the weight of the heaviest secret of my life, only to finally have it relieved, just a little, after handing it to my daughter. But now, she was asking the million-dollar question. If she had asked me a few months ago, right after Lennon's wedding, I would've easily had the answer.

But now, the only thing I could say was, "I don't even know anymore."

Monica lived in Mystic, not far from the Starbucks I'd met her at fourteen years ago. But back then, she had still been living with her parents, attending community college, and working as a part-time barista. Now, she had a house of her own and was working her way up through the tech company she'd been with since a year or so after Sammy was born.

Her success had been an impressive metamorphosis to witness, and even though I knew we were no longer even remotely on the same playing field, I was proud of her.

"Hey, guys," she said, opening the door for us.

Sammy muttered a quick hello before hurrying past her. Monica smiled at me and invited me in, as she always did every Sunday when I dropped our daughter off.

"You want anything to eat? Something to drink?"

I shook my head. "Nah, we just had dinner at the diner. But thanks though."

She smiled fondly, crossing her arms. "How are you, Connor?"

My relationship with Monica was about as routine as brushing my teeth. It was a necessity, not a bad one, but mundane all the same. At about this point in our interaction, we'd engage in small talk until Sammy was finished dropping her stuff off in her room and she'd come to say good night.

“Call me if you need anything,” I’d always say before offering Monica a cordial kiss on the cheek and a grip of her shoulder, and that’d be that.

Same shit, different weekend.

But this weekend, everything had changed, and I needed to talk to someone so painfully removed from the situation that she wouldn’t care one way or the other.

“Uh ... I don’t really know,” I admitted.

The shift in our usual exchange made her tip her head with curiosity. “What do you mean?”

“Do you have a minute?”

“Is this about Sammy?”

I shook my head reassuringly. “No, not at all about her. Unless you count the shit show she witnessed Friday night. Then, yeah, I guess it involves her, but it’s not ... *about* her.”

Monica nodded as confusion furrowed her brow. “Okay ...”

I took the liberty of taking a seat at her kitchen island, made from a slab of white granite larger than my bathroom. Monica asked again if I’d like a drink, and this time, I said sure.

“So, I’ve been seeing someone,” I admitted as she poured us each a small glass of wine.

Monica looked startled. “Really? I had no idea. Sammy hasn’t mentioned it.”

She slid the glass toward me, and I gratefully accepted.

“She didn’t know until recently.” I took a sip and let the blend of bitter and sweet drown my tongue before swallowing. “It’s, uh ... been kept kinda quiet, at this woman’s request, and I’ve been okay with that. But there’s been a rumor going around that she’s with this other guy, and I could deal with it at first, but now, it’s been escalating. And I’m not okay with this anymore, but she still insists on keeping us quiet instead of clearing the air.”

Monica shook her head. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Oh, I’m with you on that. It doesn’t. Doesn’t fuckin’ feel good either.”

Then, I looked into the burgundy surface of the wine, staring at my reflection. Disheveled hair, beard in need of trimming ... if I was honest, I knew I looked like a wreck, and I never cared much about that before, but I wondered if maybe I should.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Monica sipped at her glass, then nodded. “Of course.”

I lifted my eyes from the wine to her gaze. “Do you think I’m a, uh ... a desirable guy?”

She actually snorted. “Are you asking *me*? Or just ... in general?”

“I’m asking you, as a woman, if you think I’m a guy other women would find desirable.”

It was her turn to check her reflection, contorting her pretty features into an expression of deep thought as she stared into her wine. It couldn’t be a good thing, and I sighed, wondering if maybe I should shave or get a haircut or a new job or something.

Then, Monica spoke. “If you’re thinking this woman won’t allow herself to be publicly with you because of how you look or what you do for a living, then she isn’t worth the breath it would take to break up with her. Because you *are* desirable, Connor. You’re attractive, you work hard, and you’re an incredible father. That’s all that matters.”

I stared across the blinding white surface at her, unsure of how to accept the compliment now that I’d received it. She’d sounded so genuine, so I knew it wasn’t a lie, and it felt nice. It was amazing actually, and I smiled.

“Thanks, Monica.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m interested,” she pointed out, returning the smile.

“Didn’t say you were.”

“Because Bill and I are very happy.”

“I’m happy *for* you.”

She sighed and let the smile droop. “Do you love her?”

With a sigh, I reached around to grip the back of my neck. “Ah ... I don’t know ... I mean ...”

She sniffed a quiet laugh. “Say no more.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to.” Monica was smiling again. This time knowingly with a hint of affection.

A silence fell over us as we finished our wine and sat in contemplation. I couldn’t say what Monica was thinking about. Honestly, I couldn’t even begin to guess. But I thought about Tarryn.

I thought about her and our situation and whatever the hell might be going on with her until my mouth tasted sour and my stomach sloshed around the wine. And all I could do was sigh, clap my hands against my thighs with finality, and stand from the chair I’d sat in because what else was there?

“Thanks for the drink,” I said to Monica. “And for talking. I appreciate it.”

Monica nodded with a hint of regret. “Of course. Anytime.”

Sammy entered the kitchen to give me a hug and a promise to call me after school. “Text me when you get home,” she said, as she always did, and I promised I would because I always did.

Then, as I was heading out, Monica hurried after me.

“Hey,” she said, ushering me outside and closing the door behind us.

I eyed her curiously as we stood on her front stoop, truly alone for maybe the first time since our daughter had been born. This wasn’t the type of relationship we had. We didn’t rush after each other to take cover in such seclusion, and now, I didn’t know what to make of it.

“What’s up?”

She blew out a breath, like she'd been holding it for minutes. "I just have to say something."

"Okay ..." I stuffed my hands in my jeans pockets and waited.

She inhaled with preparation and lifted her eyes to the light hanging above. "Look ... I've known you for a long time, and I've never seen you act like this about a woman, so she must be something special."

The tension in my arms loosened as I nodded affirmatively. "She is."

Monica smiled with that same affection as before. But there was something else. Something like sympathy, and I didn't like that at all.

"I just ... I want you to be careful, okay?"

"Careful?" Now, I crossed my arms, guarding my heart. "Why do you think I need to be careful?"

"Because," she began with hesitation and an expression of regret, "when someone is happy, they usually have nothing to hide, right? Unless they're protecting something, whether it's themselves or the person they're with or ... someone else. And ..." She grimaced, expressing every ounce of her apology. "I won't pretend to know her or the situation because I don't. But I just have a bad feeling someone's going to get hurt, and I couldn't let you leave without saying something ... just in case that someone is you."

What she had said kept me up all night because what if she was right? What if I had spent twenty years pining over this woman, only for her to destroy me after months of calling her mine?

But could I ever really call her mine at all?

The foreboding and gut-wrenching questions kept me sleepless all night and quiet all day at work, even as Ben told me all about his weekend of bickering with his wife as we

dumped the cans into the truck and brought the trash back to the drop-off site.

We'd gotten so close over the past several months that he commented on my silence during lunch and asked if I was okay, and all I could say was, "Yeah, man. Just had a rough weekend."

I wanted to divulge. I wanted to talk, especially when Ben had, after all, seen Tarryn and me together. But she had left me so paranoid about the secrecy that I felt like I couldn't say anything more than that, so I didn't.

Then, after work, I climbed into my beat-up truck and turned it on, only for the radio to decide it was done working.

"Oh, come on. Don't fuckin' do this to me."

I groaned before hitting the dash with my fist, hoping that would be enough for the old girl to get the memo. But it wasn't. The radio was dead, and considering the truck was over fifteen years old, I wasn't sure why that surprised me, yet it did, and I laid a hand against my forehead, biting back my frustration.

I wasn't a crier—never had been. But, man, with everything going on, I wanted to cry then, and if I allowed myself a moment to muster the strength, I could probably squeeze out a tear or two.

Maybe I'd actually feel a little better.

It was a thought. I mean, some people cried for absolutely no reason, right? Some people found it cathartic and helpful to have a good cry, and there I was, with a handful of reasons to let my emotions go. So, I sat there, in an emptying parking lot, with my head pressed against the truck's worn leather seat, trying to force something that felt unnatural. And with every thought of Tarryn, secrecy, and the goddamn radio, I found myself coming closer and closer to welling up and spilling over.

But I never had the chance.

Instead, Sammy called.

I shook my head as the phone rang and cleared my throat, then answered the call as I steered the truck out of the parking lot.

“Hey,” I answered, my voice sounding choked to my ears. I cleared my throat again. “How was school?”

She was silent.

“Sammy? You there?” I asked, putting the call on speakerphone as I drove.

Then came the sound of her sniffing. “Daddy ...”

Now, there were few things on this planet that could send me immediately into fight-or-flight mode, and the sound of my daughter crying was at the top of the list.

At the first inclination of her tears, I wished it had been me crying instead of her, and I instantly clenched my hands around the wheel with rage. Ready to pummel whoever or whatever was making her upset.

“Hey, hey, hey, what’s wrong?”

“I-I-I ...” She was sobbing, stammering, and I had to swallow down the rise of fury to keep my voice calm.

“Talk to me, honey. What’s going on?”

“D-Daddy, I-I ... I think I m-messed up.”

God, there had been a time when I wished I’d be Daddy again. I had wanted to wipe Dad from her vocabulary to ensure that Daddy never went away, to keep her from reminding me that she was growing up and rushing faster and faster toward womanhood and further from being my little baby girl.

But right now, Daddy was killing me. It was a reminder of her pain, whatever was making her sad, and I hated it.

“What?” I asked, narrowing my glare on the road as I turned into my apartment’s parking lot. “What happened?”

“You ... you’re going to be so mad at me ...”

“No, I won’t, honey,” I promised while wondering what the hell she could’ve done to make her think I could be mad at her at all. “Just tell me what happened, and we’ll fix it.”

She sniffled loudly before her tears took over, as if the thought of telling me was too much for her to handle.

“Come on, Sammy. It’s okay.”

I turned the truck off and took her off speakerphone as she continued to cry, and I hurried into the building, unlocked my door, and found Tarryn there at my dining table, holding her phone.

It wasn’t that she was there that surprised me. I had given her a key weeks ago, and she had told me she’d be waiting for me when I was done with work.

No, what surprised me was the expression on her face as she stared at her phone screen. The seamless blend of horror, anger, and trepidation, like the world was crumbling around her and she didn’t know what the hell to do about it.

I knew that look and this phone call couldn’t be a coincidence, and as my gut continued its cartwheel marathon, I asked, “Sammy ... what did you do?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Tarryn

Actress Tarryn King Caught Cheating on Boyfriend and Costar, Jackson Stark

A video was posted this morning on the popular social media app TikTok, showcasing a plethora of still photographs and video clips of the Breckenridge star, engaged in a clearly romantic relationship with another man. An unnamed source has identified the man in the video as Connor Jacobs, a sanitation worker from River Canyon, Connecticut. How Ms. King met the man and how long their affair has been going on for are undetermined at this time.

Jackson Stark has yet to make a comment regarding the situation.

We will keep our readers updated as we gain new information.

“The video has over ten million views,” Lucy said, sounding a lot like how I felt. Like the world was crumbling and there was nothing either of us could do to catch the pieces and put them back together.

Connor had taken a seat across from me at the table, not bothering to shower, as he normally would. His hair was matted down from his cap. His uniform was filthy, and the longer he sat there, the stronger the stench of his workday became. But I couldn’t find it in me to laugh and demand he get his ass cleaned and in a fresh set of clothes. I couldn’t find it in me to care at all.

Not when the entire world now believed I was an adulterer.

Stupidly, a situation I'd gotten myself into in high school came to mind. I had made out with another boy who wasn't that month's boyfriend—*God, why couldn't I remember his name?*—on a dare. When Lennon got wind of what had happened, she was disgusted—and rightfully so. She told me then that we made our choices, and whether it'd been a dare or not, I'd made the choice to cheat. It'd irked me then, and it continued to irk me now. I had sworn I'd never do it again, and keeping myself away from romantic relationships altogether had certainly helped.

But it didn't matter.

Because here I was again, playing the part of the cheating villain.

"I don't know what to do," I said to myself, Lucy, and Connor as I laid a hand over my face.

"Well, obviously, you have to break things off with this guy," Lucy replied. "Who the hell is he anyway? Why don't I know of him?"

God, I'd kept things under such tight protection that not even my agent and friend knew of my relationship with Connor. Hell, she didn't even know who he was at all, and that alone made me want to break down in a mess of tears and apologies.

Yet I could only say, "Don't you worry about who he is."

"Uh ... okay," she muttered. "But a sanitation worker? Really, Tarryn? It couldn't have been ... oh, I don't know ... an equally desirable actor? Someone at least worthy of Jackson's competition?"

She didn't know what she was saying or who she was saying it about. But as I dropped my hand and stared across the table at that dirty, beautiful man, wearing a look of worry and concern, her commentary pissed me off so much that I wanted to scream.

"I need to go," I told her.

“Okay,” she replied with a sigh. “We’ll figure this out. I don’t know how, but ... we will.”

“Yep.”

I hung up and dropped the phone to the table. Connor had been talking to Sammy—*oh my God, Sammy*—when he entered the apartment, but now, he sat with his hands folded, watching my every move. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was mad at me, but he couldn’t be. Not about this ... right?

He closed his eyes and bowed his head as he clasped his hands tightly. “Tarryn ...”

Oh God. The sound of his voice. The tension in his frame. Everything told me he was angry. Pissed off. Upset.

And this was exactly why I hadn’t wanted anything to happen between us. Not ever. I never wanted to be on the receiving end of his anger, his irritation. I never wanted to give him a reason to dislike me, and everybody always, always had a reason to dislike me eventually. That was the last thing I’d wanted from him, and there it was, manifesting across from me, and all I could do was spring from my chair and hurry to his bedroom.

“Where are you going?” he called after me, and there were his footsteps, coming after me, until he stood in the doorway. “Tarryn, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“I’m leaving,” I said even though that should’ve been obvious as I pulled my designated drawer from the dresser and grabbed everything inside.

“What? Why?” Now, he sounded panicked. As if he hadn’t been two seconds away from exploding moments ago.

“Because I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but your daughter made a big fucking mess, Connor. And now, I have to clean it up.”

I hated the words that had come out of my mouth and the sound of my voice. I hated every cold and distant inflection in my tone. But I had to be cold. I had to be distant. I needed to hurt him and make him upset. Because I knew he wouldn’t let me go otherwise.

“Sammy was going to ... she didn’t ...” He groaned and laid his hands over his face, stopping the weak excuses from continuing to tumble from his mouth. Then, he dropped his arms to his sides and said, “She was going to delete the video, but it was too late.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the way the internet works, Connor. Once something’s out there, it’s fucking *out there*.”

I opened the bag I’d brought with me and stuffed everything inside, not caring if it was packed neatly or not.

“She thought she was helping us, Tarryn. She didn’t know what would happen,” he reasoned, coming to his daughter’s defense, and could I really blame him?

But could he really blame me either?

I dropped the shirt in my hands. I turned to him and stared with all the anger and disgust I could muster.

“And now, the whole freakin’ world thinks I’m cheating on my boyfriend.”

“But he’s not your fucking boyfriend, Tarryn. *I* am,” Connor said, his voice low and angry.

“But the world doesn’t know that!” I exclaimed.

“And whose fault is that?!”

God, the fire burning bright and angry in his eyes hurt in a way nothing had before. I had to look away, afraid I’d combust if I stared too long.

“That’s why I have to go,” I muttered, turning back to the bag and zipping it up tight. “I have to clean this mess up. I have to ... I don’t know ... talk to Jackson, and—”

“And *what*? You’re just gonna walk out on me?”

“I don’t know what you expect me to do, Connor. I have shit to do, and I have to go home—”

“Home?”

I turned to face the fire, only to find it’d been extinguished as quickly as it’d been lit.

“Yes. Home.”

“And where is that, Tarryn? Where the hell *is* your home?” He shrugged and crossed his arms tightly over his chest. “Cause I’ve been trying to figure that out for a while now. So, you know, if you have any insight, I’d like you to share it with me.”

“I have to go back to Scotland,” I replied, ignoring his questions. “I have to talk to Jackson.”

Without another word, I grabbed the bag and pushed past him through the door. He followed close behind, storming after me with a desperation I hadn’t been aware he was capable of.

“So, call him. You don’t have to fly thousands of miles away to talk to him. Call him and tell him to clean up the mess he made of all our lives. This isn’t on you, Tarryn—don’t you get that? This isn’t—”

His endless prattling was too much. I couldn’t listen to it anymore. I dropped the bag on the floor, turned to face him, and brought my palms up to stop another word from leaving his lips.

“Connor, stop! I have to leave, okay? I have to fucking go. I can’t stay here, and ... and ... and ...”

“And what about us, huh? What happens to us?”

I shrugged. “Well, you could come with me, I guess, or ___”

“You know I can’t do that,” he interrupted, exasperated. “I have a job. I have Sammy, and there’s no way in hell I’d leave her—you know that.”

“No,” I said, nodding gently. “Of course you wouldn’t. You’ve always been the good dad.”

His shoulders sagged as his face fell with an instant dose of recognition. “Holy shit,” he muttered, wiping a palm over his mouth. “I ... Jesus, I can’t believe I didn’t see it before.”

My heart was racing, galloping away in my ears. “What?”

“That’s what this is about.”

“What *what’s* about?” I demanded, unsure of why I suddenly felt this need to defend myself so ferociously.

He chuckled sadly, shaking his head as he turned from me and wandered toward the couch, scratching the back of his neck. “You know, I actually thought you were ashamed of admitting you were with me. I really thought that was why you didn’t want anybody knowing about us, but ... no.” He shook his head again as he turned to meet my gaze. “You didn’t want anybody knowing because that would make this real, and it’s a lot easier to be hurt when shit gets real, isn’t it?”

The statement brought tears to my eyes in an instant, and I blinked rapidly, warding them off with an urgency to keep them at bay.

“W-what?” I gasped for air, shaking my head. “No, that —”

“You are so fucking afraid of being abandoned that you actually thought you could trick yourself into thinking this wasn’t real. But it’s always been real, Tarryn—you do realize that, right? There was no hiding from this.”

The tears were falling now. A deluge of emotion I’d been storing away for a time just like this as images of every man who’d ever hurt me came to mind, all cascading like a row of multicolored dominoes, until they landed on the first man to ever hurt me. The only man I could never get the upper hand on.

I couldn’t stand there in that tiny apartment and take this. I couldn’t stomach looking at Connor when he held every bit of salvation I’d ever wanted. I bent over and grabbed the bag, hurling it over my shoulder as I snatched my phone from the table and got ready to call for a car to pick me up.

“Jesus Christ, Tarryn, don’t fucking do this,” Connor pleaded, reaching out to make an attempt at taking the phone from my hand, but I turned quickly and out of his reach. “Come on, please. We’ll deal with this, okay? We’ll figure this out.”

My hands shook as I dialed the number and pressed the phone to my ear.

“*Tarryn.*”

“Hi, yes, this is Tarryn King. Can I be picked up at ...” I gave the address on autopilot as Connor continued groveling behind me.

I noted that he never put his hands on me. Not once.

When I hung up, I turned around to find him still watching me, a look of frantic helplessness written plainly on his face.

“They’ll be here in about ten minutes.”

I wasn’t even sure why I’d said it.

Maybe I thought he could say something—anything—to keep me from leaving.

I didn’t think Connor had ever looked so sad. Not at any of his grandparents’ funerals. Not when the family dog had passed away over twenty years ago. Right now, he looked like he’d been informed of his life’s expiration date and he hadn’t been given enough time to prepare. It broke me more than I let on to know I’d put that look on his face.

A sound came from his chest that might’ve sounded like a chuckle had I not known better. “I feel bad for you, you know that?” he muttered in a quiet voice, nearly a whisper.

“You don’t need to feel bad for me,” I replied, sounding unmoved while my heart was bleeding.

“Oh, but I do,” he said, nodding.

“Well, I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Too late,” he spat at me, his voice cracking somewhere on that last syllable. “Because you’ve made an awesome life for yourself, playing a character who is constantly being saved by this fucking guy, but you would rather run away than let someone save *you*.”

I swallowed at the next wave of tears, not wanting to cry again. “That’s not—”

“When the hell does someone get to be the hero in *your* story? Huh?”

My hands held tight to the strap of the bag as I turned and opened the door. “I have to—”

“I could be that guy, Tarryn. I *want* to be that guy.” He followed me as I hurried down the hallway to the exterior door. “Please, let me be that guy, okay? I promise I won’t leave. I promise I’ll never hurt you. But you gotta promise you’ll stay. That’s it. *Please.*”

And who knew? Maybe if the car weren’t there yet, maybe if I had a few minutes to think, maybe I wouldn’t leave after all. But it was already pulling up to the curb, and my legs and lungs and racing heart were all begging me to get the hell out of there and far away from the sweet promises he was laying down that I’d been hoping for but couldn’t trust.

So, I turned to face him as the tires rolled over the asphalt and came to a halt, and I stood on my toes to press a kiss to his unmoving lips at the same time one single tear rolled down his cheek.

“You’ve always been a good guy, Connor,” I whispered as the driver got out of the car. “I wouldn’t have expected anything less.”

“And yet it’s not enough,” he whispered back as the door was opened for me.

I could only smile apologetically as I climbed in and offered a small wave before the door was closed.

And as I drove away, I did feel bad. Of course I did. But I had meant what I said—Connor was a good guy, a genuinely good guy—and someone like him didn’t belong anywhere near a toxic life like mine.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Connor

I watched with tears brimming in my eyes as the car drove away until I could no longer see the sunlight gleaming off the sleek black.

Then, I kicked a concrete planter, grateful I was still wearing my steel-toed boots, and cursed out of frustration, loud enough for a dog somewhere to start barking.

What the fuck had I been thinking, getting involved with her? I knew she didn't do relationships. I knew commitment wasn't her thing. Why the hell had I foolishly believed I'd be different? Simply because she'd known me since she had barely been out of diapers? Because I hadn't treated her like a piece of ass and nothing but?

"Fucking stupid," I muttered through gritted teeth, looking out toward the street, just in case she might've changed her mind and turned around.

But of course, she hadn't.

With a shake of my head, I turned around and headed back inside, ignoring the neighbors who had ventured out of their apartments to pay witness to the fight. Could I blame them though? Nothing ever happened in this town. They needed to get their rocks off somehow.

Just outside my door, I took a deep breath, as if to prepare myself to face the empty apartment alone. She was supposed to be in there. We were supposed to spend the next however many days together, as planned, before the shit hit the fan. The idea of reverting back to the bachelor way of living filled my bones with a lonely ache, but what the hell could I do about it? Nothing.

So, I went in, and I found it hurt just as much to see the place in this dimmer light, as I'd expected.

“Guess I’ll shower,” I muttered to no one, kicking the door shut behind me and shuffling toward the table, too weighted by my disappointment and heartache to lift my own damn feet.

I glanced at my phone and wasn’t surprised to find a dozen texts from Sammy, apologizing profusely for the video I’d yet to watch. There were also three missed calls from my mother and two from Lennon. I raked my hand through my hair and slammed my eyes shut at the thought of talking to either one of them now, knowing I’d have to face their wrath eventually. But, man, if I could’ve ceased to exist for a day, just to wrap my head around this shit and make peace with the choices I’d made, that would’ve been nice.

That wouldn’t happen though, and that was proven as the damn thing began to ring again with Lennon’s picture taking up the screen.

I loved my sister, but, fucking hell, I hated the thought of talking to her right now.

Still, because I was a glutton for punishment, I answered.

“All right,” I said, startled by the exhausted sound of my own voice, “lay it on me. But be gentle, okay? I don’t think I can handle—”

“What the *hell* were you thinking?” Lennon spat, about as angry as I had expected her to be.

“Trying to figure that out myself actually.”

“God! You ... oh my God, I can’t even, Connor. She’s practically your sister!”

I wrinkled my nose, heading to the bedroom to find my pack of smokes. “Uh, well, no. Not really.”

“You’ve known her since you were—”

“That doesn’t make her my freakin’ *sister*, Lennon. I mean, Jesus, come on.” I shook my head as I reached my nightstand and opened the drawer. There, inside, was the pack of Marlboros and my lighter.

I took one out and slid it between my lips, knowing every one of them would be smoked by the end of the night.

“So, how long?” my sister asked.

I sighed as I headed for the window. “How long what?”

“How long have you been sleeping with my best friend?”

“A few months, give or take,” I answered with a shrug before opening the window and flicking the lighter.

“What is that?” Lennon asked suspiciously.

“My lighter.”

“For what?”

“To smoke,” I replied, not giving a shit anymore about secrets or bad habits as I pulled in the smoke and blew it out toward the window.

“*What?*” My sister sounded even more disgusted with me than she had before. “Since when do you smoke?”

“Since I was dumb enough to start.”

Lennon uttered an appalled sound. “First Tarryn, and now ... God, I can’t even believe I’m having this conversation with you. I can’t ... it’s just so ... it’s so *weird*.”

“What? That I smoke?” I asked, holding the smoke in my lungs before letting it go.

“No! I mean ... yes, but ...” She groaned again. “And you fucking *lied* to me! That’s the worst part of it. You guys both lied to me. How the hell am I supposed to take that?”

“Any way you want to,” I offered with another shrug she couldn’t see. “You can be pissed, you can feel betrayed ... that’s fine. Fuck, I can’t even say I blame you.”

She hesitated. “Wait, what?”

With a sigh that left me ragged and tired, I put the half-smoked cigarette out in the ashtray and shook my head.

I felt like I could sleep for a week, and it wouldn’t be enough.

“I *wanted* to tell you about us. I’d wanted to come clean about all of this shit for a while. But ...” I bit the inside of my cheek, unsure if I should throw her friend under the bus like

this or not, then decided, *What the hell would it hurt at this point?* “Tarryn kept talking me out of it.”

“Oh ...” Lennon’s anger seemed to dwindle a bit with the word. “Um ... is she there now?”

My head hung to touch my chin to my chest. “No. She, uh ... she left.”

My sister sighed, releasing whatever was left of her rage toward me, then said, “Dylan apparently knew about you guys. He told me today, after I saw that video Sammy posted, and I wanted to kill him for not saying anything, but ... God, I feel terrible, saying this, but, Connor ... I wish you had said something to me before ... whatever happened.”

I rolled my eyes. “Lennon, I don’t need your freakin’ permission—”

“No, it’s not that. I just know how she is. And you know I love her to fucking death. But I realize her faults too.”

“So do I,” I said, narrowing my eyes with the urgent need to defend the woman who’d just walked out on me. “But I also know that not everything is what we think it is, Lennon. Take you guys, for example. Everybody down there seems to think I’m some man-child, managing to fumble his way through life, but you know what? You’re wrong. I have a kid. I have a job I actually fucking like, believe it or not. I’m a damn good cook, and—”

“Jesus, Connor, where the hell is this coming from?”

“I am just sick and tired of constantly having these assumptions made about me,” I argued, not sure why I even felt the need to argue at all. I guessed I just needed to take my frustrations out on someone, and Lennon seemed to be a willing participant. “And while we’re on the subject of shit I’m sick of, we—me *and* Tarryn—are both sick and tired of being fucking forgotten. Like, just because we don’t live there doesn’t mean we don’t want to be included in shit. And I mean, look at this shit! We were sneaking around behind everybody’s backs, and nobody even noticed!”

My chest heaved with misdirected anger, and Lennon was quiet, and I felt guilty for unloading on her. Yes, I was

annoyed with her. I didn't appreciate that she had called to rip me a new one instead of asking how I felt about having my name and face plastered all over every celebrity gossip rag known to man. But she wasn't who I was mad at, and I was sorry.

My eyes pinched shut as I gripped the growing strands of my hair. "Hey, I, uh ..."

She cut me off with a sigh, then replied, "Don't apologize to me. I didn't realize you felt like that. Hell, I didn't know Tarryn felt like that either ... did she actually tell you she feels left out?"

"Yeah," I muttered, nodding, remembering how this whole thing had ultimately gotten started.

All because I made her cry in a restroom.

"I had no idea. I'm ... I'm really sorry. I can't speak for anybody else, but I never meant to make you feel like you were *forgotten*. Or like ... I don't know, like you're an irresponsible asshole or something."

I snorted a quiet laugh. "It's fine. I am kind of an irresponsible asshole."

"But you're also not. You're a good guy. I've always thought so, and maybe I don't tell you enough."

The comment struck a nerve, one that ached and pinched and left me breathless, as I missed a woman who had hardly been mine in the first place. She thought I was a good guy, too, and while that had once been the reassurance I needed to make things happen with her, now ...

Well, now, I just felt like an idiot.

"So, um ... you guys actually talked a lot, huh?" Lennon asked.

I nodded slowly, staring blankly at the dingy carpet in my bedroom. "Yeah."

"I can't believe I never knew."

"Yeah, I dunno how it happened, but"—I swallowed, startled by a rush of emotion—"she kinda became my best friend. Or one of them anyway."

Lennon gasped, and at first, I thought it was at the ironic admission. That I had spent so much of my life detesting that woman, only for her to become my closest friend, the person I wasn't sure I could live without.

But then my little sister said in a hushed voice, "Oh my God. You fucking *love* her."

I scoffed at the accusation, annoyed that she was now the second person in a twenty-four-hour span to insinuate something so ridiculous. "Oh, get the hell out ..." I started to say, but then I thought about it.

I thought about the way it felt to talk to Tarryn. How, for the first time in my life, I knew I could be completely honest and not be afraid of ridicule.

I thought about the cigarettes we'd smoked together and how she was the only person on the planet who knew I smoked at all—well, up until a few minutes ago anyway.

I thought about our phone conversations. The exciting rush that had come over us to hide our relationship, the sex we'd had, the meals we'd shared, and how it pained me to think of experiencing any of those things with anyone else.

And then I said, "Shit ... I fucking love her," sheepish and incredulous and unable to understand how it had happened in the first place without me realizing.

Lennon let out a squeal that was way too excited for the situation she had only been, just five minutes ago, ready to kill me over. "Oh my God, this is, like, everything I could've dreamed of. You're going to marry Tarryn, and she's *really* going to be my sister!"

"Oh, no, I am *not* marrying Tarryn," I protested, wrapping an arm around my middle and shaking my head.

"Oh, yes, you are," she insisted.

"Lennon, she literally just got into a car to fly back to Scotland and never see me again." I scoffed and rolled my eyes. "It's over, okay? She doesn't want to be with me. She made that very obvious in the fact that she never wanted anyone to know about us, so ... it is what it is."

“No, no, no, no,” Lennon chanted with urgency, and I could just picture her, bouncing on the spot and waving her hand as she spoke. “Listen to me. She is *terrified* of commitment. She is the queen of one-night stands for a reason, and not because she’s afraid of being in a relationship, but because she’s terrified of being *left*. The way her dad left her.”

“I got it,” I muttered, leaving out the fact that I’d already pieced together the issues she had when it was too late. “But there’s nothing I can do to change any of that, so ...”

Then, Matt came to mind, the piece of shit who had taken her virginity and made her feel worthless, vengeful, and ashamed for it. I’d confronted him, and she had seen firsthand what I was willing to do to protect her.

I had made her feel safe, and then I had given her something from sex no other man had ever given her—*equality*.

So, who said I couldn’t also give her peace from another part of her past?

“Hey,” I said, now filled with a brand-new determination, “actually, uh ... you wanna do me a huge favor?”

“Sure. What’s up?” Lennon asked as I glanced at my rugged reflection in the mirror above my dresser.

“I need to borrow some money,” I replied, putting my pride aside willingly for maybe the first time in my life.

“Yeah, of course. How much do you need?”

“As much as it takes to make this shit right.”

I pushed off the windowpane and hurried for the bathroom to shower.

After all, grand gestures couldn’t be made while smelling like trash.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Tarryn

The world felt different somehow as I walked on unsteady, tired legs from the car to the entrance of the apartment building. The air I breathed no longer felt clean and sweet, but thick and bitter. The greenery I had once appreciated no longer looked serene, but foreign in a way that made me sick for a place that I wouldn't allow myself to call home.

I didn't want to be here. I had known it the moment the plane landed. But I hadn't given myself a choice. There was no way I'd run back to Connor's apartment to drop to my knees and beg him for forgiveness, especially when I didn't feel there was anything to forgive. So, off to Scotland I had gone.

"Miss, should I wait for ye?" Ferguson called after me as I reached the door, ready to pull it open.

I had run from the car so quickly that I'd neglected to give him any instruction on what to do next. So, I looked over my shoulder to meet the gaze of the man who'd pulled himself out of bed to pick me up from the airport, and I shook my head. "No, it's okay. I'll probably be a while."

He hesitated before nodding. "Should I take yer things to yer flat then?"

"If you would, I'd really appreciate it," I said with a smile. "Then, please go home and get back to sleep. Thank you so much for coming out."

"Ah, it was my pleasure, miss," he said with a kind smile that read genuine, although I couldn't think of anything pleasurable in being woken up at four o'clock in the morning.

Which was exactly the vibe I was going for as I pushed through the doors to Jackson's apartment building, fully intending to beat down his door if I had to.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!

I hadn't called him before landing in Scotland. I hadn't even texted. He had tried calling me several times before giving up sometime around when I arrived at JFK Airport. And that was fine because no number of attempts to reach me would've made me answer. What I needed to say had to happen in person. I needed to see his face, read his expression. I couldn't trust him over the phone or through text. I needed the real deal, and if that meant camping outside his apartment until he opened the damn door, then so be it.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!

My knuckles stung from pounding so hard and loud, and I gritted my teeth with a silent prayer for Jackson to wake his ass up and answer the damn door.

A door across the hall opened, and an older man peered outside. I smiled apologetically in his direction, hoping he didn't recognize me, and all he did was scowl and slam the door shut.

"Dammit," I groaned, turning my attention back to Jackson's door.

I shouldn't have been surprised. It was early—or late, depending on how you looked at it, I guessed—and I knew he'd be deep in slumber, curled up tight and comfortable in his bed. But he had ignored my pleas to do something about this shit for too long, and I was done being brushed off.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!

The door flew open then to reveal Jackson, wearing nothing but his briefs and a hairdo better suited for the walking dead. A groggy look of sleep lingered on his face, even as his eyes widened at the sight of me, standing there in the same clothes I'd been wearing for over twenty-four hours.

"Tarryn."

"Surprise," I said in a tone flatter than the floor I stood on.

"I tried calling you."

"Oh, I must've missed it."

"I feel so—"

“Excuse me”—I crossed my arms over my chest—”but are you going to let me in? Because I highly doubt you want me to say what I’m going to say in your hallway—unless you don’t care if I wake up all of these fine people again.”

His eyes met mine for a split second and read the bitter anger I held deep in my aching heart. Then, he reluctantly nodded, stepping aside to grant me entry, and I walked inside, feeling immediately like a stranger in a home I’d been in hundreds of times.

As soon as the door was closed, I turned to face him, letting my arms drop to my sides. I stared at his helpless expression, the guilt in his eyes, and every bit of anger and hatred I’d held close during my grueling flight and numerous car rides reluctantly faded to reveal a gaping wound deeper than any other my heart had been dealt.

“I’m so sorry,” he said in a gentle, hesitant voice. “I didn’t think any of this would happen. I swear to God. You *have* to know I’d never intentionally hurt you.”

“I *asked* you, Jackson.” I rolled my eyes away toward the ceiling and exhaled until my chest ached. “I asked you time and time again to do something about it, and you *didn’t*. And *I’m* the one who suffers for it. *I’m* the bad guy while you ...” I shrugged, slapping my hands against my thighs. “You, what, get to be the poor, innocent victim in a relationship that never even fucking existed?”

“I know,” he whispered. “I know. And I called Scarlet the second I saw those articles and fired her. My gut feeling had always been that this was a bad, dirty idea, but I told you, I thought it was harmless.”

I snickered and diverted my gaze from his pitiful expression, unable to fathom how anybody could use someone else and think it was harmless in any way imaginable.

“I was only thinking of myself and my image, and ... I ...” Jackson swallowed and wiped a hand over his mouth. “I was a shitty fucking friend. I couldn’t look outside of my own desperation to protect myself and my own secrets, and I took advantage of you. I know sorry isn’t enough, but I am. I am so

truly, completely sorry, and I swear to God, I will do whatever it takes to clear your name.”

When it was obvious he was finished, I released the breath I'd been holding and nodded.

“Thank you,” I replied in a voice that felt unused.

What else could I say? What more could I possibly expect from him? As long as he did what he promised, then there was nothing else.

Jackson guffawed, stretching his lips in an incredulous smile. “Don't thank me! *I'm* the one who should be thanking *you* for not killing me the second I opened that door.”

I narrowed my glare. “Don't think I didn't consider it.”

“I wouldn't expect anything less.”

Then, with an exhale, he reluctantly stretched his arms out. “Are we still friends?”

“You know, we shouldn't be,” I said. “After what you did, I should be writing you off and refusing to look at you ever again outside of work. But ...” I sighed and stepped into his embrace, grateful he was still him and not the evil bastard I'd made him out to be in my mind. “Yeah. We're friends. But you'd better fix this shit, Jackson.”

His chin touched my head. “I will.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

I pressed my cheek to his chest and tightened my arms around his waist. The yawn that seemed to steal the breath right out of my lungs reminded me that I hadn't slept in way, *way* too long. My level of exhaustion had brought me to the point of being unable to stand steadily, and I leaned deeper into Jackson's embrace, remembering that, had everything not gone the way it had, I'd be in Connor's arms instead.

My throat tightened around the reminder as Jackson asked, “Tarryn, why are you here?”

My legs harnessed their strength and moved me out of his arms. “I had to yell at you in person,” I explained weakly,

brushing a few loose strands of hair out of my face, avoiding his questioning gaze.

“But a phone call would’ve sufficed.”

“Yeah, and have you ignore me? No, thanks,” I muttered, rolling my eyes toward the kitchen, searching for a distraction from the oncoming interrogation.

“I told you, I tried calling you.” His voice teetered toward suspicion now, and I headed for his refrigerator to avoid the wary look I knew was on his face.

“God, I need something to dri—”

“Tarryn ...”

Don’t say it. Don’t even mention his name.

“Did you break up with Connor?”

I closed my eyes and pulled in a deep, chest-aching breath, then opened the fridge and reached in for a bottle of water. I was going to ignore that question. I was going to pretend he’d never asked. Maybe if I just stood there, drinking, and then asked if I could crash in his guest room, he’d let it slide and forget to bring it up again after we woke up.

I exhaled and opened the bottle, bringing it to my lips.

“Oh my God,” Jackson uttered from behind me. “You broke up with him.”

He couldn’t have just dropped it. He’d had to go ahead and make accusations, and I wasn’t going to stand for that.

“No,” I corrected him, turning around on my heel and pointing a finger at his chest. “I didn’t *break up* with him. You can’t break up with someone you were never with in the first place.”

His head shook as disappointment blanketed his features. “You’re a freakin’ idiot, you know that?”

“Yeah, sure. I’m sleeping in your guest room tonight, okay?”

I brushed past him, hurrying in the direction of the hallway off his living room.

“You had something good, Tarryn,” he called after me, staying on my heels as I walked quickly to the door at the end of the hall. “You had the guy of your dreams, and he worshipped the ground you walked on, and you just ... threw it away, like it was nothing. Why the hell would you do that?”

“It wasn’t *nothing*,” I muttered through gritted teeth, finally reaching the door and pushing it open with too much gusto.

The solid wood slammed against the doorstop and bounced off, which would have hit Jackson in the face had it not been for his arm stopping it from breaking his nose.

“Then, I’m asking you again. Why are you *here*?”

I shook my head, barreling toward the bed, always made for an unexpected stay, just like this one. “I had to come home, and he wasn’t coming with me, so ... he stayed there, and I’m here, and that’s just the way it’s gonna be.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“Connecticut is his home, Jackson,” I explained angrily, turning down the comforter. “Scotland is mine. He made it very clear he’s never leaving, so—”

“You know what? I’m sorry, but I don’t think you even know where home is anymore.”

I turned to glare furiously into his unrelenting gaze. “Excuse me?”

He snickered and shook his head, never breaking our staring game. “You have spent every day since we moved here crying about how much you missed New York, about how homesick you were, and then the second shit got real over there, the second you actually had something to lose, now, *Scotland* is your home?”

My throat was dry despite the water I’d just swallowed. “I-I ... I ...”

“You know what I think? I think home is just the place you run away to when things get hard. You could’ve stayed. You could’ve worked through all of this shit with him, but no. You ran away so you wouldn’t have to deal with it. And the

thing that kills me—the thing that *really* makes me feel sorry for you—is, your problems aren't even with *him*. They're with *me*. And yet you're here and not there.”

His smirk wilted away to change into something sad, something heartbreaking, and I knew that, once he left this damn room, I'd cry myself to sleep.

“I'll let you sleep,” he said, finally relenting. “Can I just ask you one question?”

I nodded.

He shrugged one shoulder. “Why the hell are you so afraid of something you've wanted for so long?”

“Because love-induced happiness is an illusion, Jackson,” I said, wrapping my arms tightly around my middle. “No matter how long it lasts, no matter what you do to hold on to it, the bubble always bursts, and then it just hurts. Some people can get it back, but it'll inevitably go away again, and they'll spend their lives riding that freakin' roller coaster until it—life and love and everything—ends altogether. Maybe they're strong enough to do it, maybe they're made to handle it, but ... I don't think I am, and is that really so awful? Isn't it better I get out now, before we get too attached and the bubble bursts?”

Jackson sighed, deflated and depressed. “I guess,” he muttered. “But it's also just really, really fucking sad.”

“Yeah, well”—I turned back to the bed and cleared my throat of the tears threatening to pour at any moment—“life is sad. And some people are just meant to be alone. There's nothing wrong with that, and I wish people could just accept that.”

“Sure, Tarryn.”

Jackson began to shuffle toward the door, and I was ready to exhale, grateful to finally be left to sleep and recharge. But then he stopped and was still for a moment. My stomach turned with dread, as I knew he was about to drop some prolific bomb on me that would keep me awake even longer.

“But I think you have to accept it first, if you expect other people to as well.”

Why couldn't he just keep his mouth shut?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Connor

“So, while you were all falling for this”—Sammy’s face disappeared to allow for a montage of pictures of Tarryn and Jackson to flash across the screen—“I’ve been falling for *this*.” My daughter was replaced again by another slideshow to the tune of Ed Sheeran’s “One,” but these pictures and videos were of Tarryn and me. Pictures from Lennon’s wedding. Pictures from inside my apartment, ones I’d never known she had taken. Pictures of eye contact, cuddling, and kisses I’d never known she’d witnessed.

God, what else had she seen?

Who else had seen it?

Why did I even care anymore?

“It’s actually really nice,” Monica said quietly, offering a weak smile as she sat beside me.

It had been over a week since the video had been posted and deleted by my daughter—then posted again and again and again by several hundred other news sources—and I hadn’t found the strength to watch it until now, sitting in Monica’s kitchen.

“It is,” I muttered, nodding and tucking the phone back into my pocket.

I wasn’t mad at Sammy for posting it. She had meant well, her heart had been in the right place, but witnessing the catalyst to the end of my and Tarryn’s secret love affair was sickening. Especially knowing how many people had watched it before me.

Millions.

Millions of people knew my face. Millions of people knew now that I looked at her like I’d give her the world if I could afford it. Millions of people had seen the way I touched her, kissed her, held her.

Millions.

But I was over the shock of it now, and Tarryn was too. She had made that obvious by the chummy pictures she had posted of her and Jackson on her own social media platforms just a couple of days ago. I guessed she'd had reason to after Jackson made a video, apologizing for the bullshit he'd inadvertently allowed for the world to believe.

"I want you all to know that I am not and have never been in a romantic relationship with Tarryn King. She is a good woman, my best friend, and I know she would never in a thousand years cheat on a man she loves—and I hope, as her fans, you know it too," he had said with sincerity, and the only point in that speech I could focus on was the implication that Tarryn loved me.

She had never said as much—hell, I had never said it to her either—but had she told him? Did he know something I didn't?

I couldn't be sure—of course not—not without talking to her, but it was what I'd held on to as I hurried about my business that week. Getting things ready. Preparing for my trip and the reason I couldn't take Sammy for the entire weekend.

"So, what's your plan? I mean, apart from the haircut." Monica smiled kindly and gestured toward my head and face.

I ran my palm over the hair that had once brushed my shoulders, but now just barely hung into my eyes when a strand happened to fall out of place. The chuckle that rumbled through my throat was a little sheepish—embarrassed really. I had no idea if my *couldn't give a shit* appearance had had anything to do with why Tarryn left or not, but I wasn't going to leave anything up to chance. Not this time.

"Well ..." I inched forward, resting my forearms on the table, and cleared my throat before laying it all out for her.

After I'd gotten off the phone with Lennon and washed away what I could of the dirt and pain, I had sat down at the table and devised a plan, which began with swallowing my pride and accepting a loan from my sister and brother-in-law. They lent me more than I'd asked for, and Dylan insisted with

infuriating adamancy that I didn't need to worry about paying them back.

"You're family, and I always take care of my family, no questions asked," he had said after handing me a check with enough zeroes to make my hands shake and my forehead dot with sweat.

But I'd told him I wasn't a charity case, and every chance I got, even if it took me the rest of my damn life, I had all intentions of paying back every penny I spent—and I'd meant it.

The next step had been to take that check to the bank, and immediately after, I'd headed over to the dealership and gotten myself a new truck.

Well, new to me anyway.

"Sammy told me you got some new wheels," Monica said, gripping her coffee mug in both hands and bringing it to her lips. "Don't take this the wrong way, but ... it's about time."

I chuckled, beside myself. "Yeah, I kinda put it off for too long, but, you know ..."

She nodded, a tinge of guilt darkening her green eyes. I never complained about the child support I gave her every month, but I knew the truth of it. Monica made more than enough money to support the two of them and didn't need the checks I insisted on forking over. But it was my duty as a father to support my daughter, and I was glad to help in any way I could, whether it was truly needed or not.

"Anyway, then I got myself over to Harold's, grabbed some new clothes, got a haircut, took Sammy out to dinner, and here I am." I tapped my hands against the table, then shrugged like it was all nothing.

But Monica knew damn well it wasn't nothing, and so did I.

I just couldn't bring myself to act like it was anything more than that. My nerves couldn't handle it, and I needed to think clearly for the two-hour drive up to Boston. I needed clarity for the conversation I knew I had to have.

“Well”—Monica reached out across the table and laid her hand against my arm—”I hope you get her back, Connor. I really do.”

I nodded and laid my hand over hers, glad she was here. Glad I could call her my friend. “Thanks, Mon. So do I.”

The brick townhouse, trimmed with white, stood tall and proud on a quiet street in Arlington. I stared out the window of the new-to-me Silverado, gnawing at my bottom lip and debating for the last time whether this was the right call or not.

Lennon had given me his name—Louis King. And on my lunch break a couple of days ago, Ben and I had searched the internet for his—Tarryn’s father—whereabouts. I knew he lived near Boston, and I knew he’d be in his seventies—that was the extent of my knowledge. But after a bit of searching and narrowing down the results, we had found him—or at least, I was pretty sure we had.

Judging from the cars in the driveway, I was about to meet him.

“Well, Mr. King,” I muttered, narrowing my eyes at the wrought iron fence encircling the lawn, “I hope you have some insight on how to let her go ‘cause I can’t fuckin’ do it.”

Then, I got out of the cab.

I had chosen to wear the suit Sammy had insisted I buy. I hadn’t known why at the time I’d gotten dressed, but now, walking through the gate and up the clean brick path to the porch, I was glad I had. I felt confident. I felt like the type of guy who should be with the daughter this man had abandoned, and like an idiot, I caught myself hoping he thought so too.

I rang the doorbell, then adjusted the sides of my gray jacket, smoothing them out over the white shirt underneath. I ran my hands over my hair, making sure every strand was still in place, and shifted from one leg to another as I waited for the sound of footsteps from the other side of the door.

They didn't come.

"Come on, man," I muttered, peering through the stained-glass oval in the center of the white door.

Through the distorted glass, I saw a staircase and a hallway on the other side, showing no sign of life anywhere in the house despite the Audi and Lexus in the driveway.

I pressed the doorbell again, twice this time for good measure. The wind blew, carrying with it the American flag hanging from the porch, as I fiddled with the cuffs of my shirt and stared through that window. As if staring would encourage someone to answer the door.

But nobody did.

With a sigh, I turned, deflated and defeated, and headed back down the steps, wondering what the hell he was doing and why the hell he hadn't come.

"Maybe it's the suit," I grumbled, walking down the path.

He'd probably seen me on his friggin' security cameras and thought I was selling some shit he didn't want. But would he have answered the door if I'd been wearing my ratty jeans and band T-shirt? I couldn't begin to pretend like I knew the guy, but somehow, I doubted it.

I opened the gate, ready to head back to my truck, when I heard a door shut from somewhere behind me. I turned to look at the front door, but nobody was there.

"What the hell—"

"Hey! Sorry about the wait."

From the side of the townhouse, a younger man emerged through a fence, wringing his hands in a cloth of some kind. He eyed me curiously but kindly as he approached, and I saw the shirt he wore was splattered with multicolored paint.

"I was in my studio and saw you on the camera," he explained needlessly. "Anyway, can I help you with something?"

"Uh ..." I swallowed, moving my gaze from the speckles of color on his shirt to his blue eyes. I hadn't planned on this—talking to someone who clearly wasn't the man I was looking

for—and I hurried to string together a coherent thought. “Y-yeah, uh ... my name is Connor Jacobs, and I’m looking for Louis King. Does he, um ... does he live here?”

The man’s brows pinched as he nodded. “That would be me, yeah.”

Dammit.

I glanced toward the house and tucked my hands into my pockets as my mind ran through the names Ben and I had found. This was the only address for a Louis King in his seventies we’d found in the area. But maybe the website was outdated. Maybe he’d moved.

“Shit,” I muttered before turning back to the guy, who was still wearing that kind expression, like there was no way in hell this visit could be anything but friendly. “Sorry. Um, obviously, I have the wrong house. The man I’m looking for would be, uh ...” I chuckled and flipped a hand toward him. “Well, a lot older than you, so ... I’ll just get go—”

“Ah, wait.” Realization blanketed this Louis’s face as he slowly nodded. “You must be looking for my dad.”

Hope rolled over me as I asked, “Is he around?”

Louis shook his head regrettably. “No, uh ... he actually passed away a couple of years ago this September.”

The momentary hope left quicker than it had come as I closed my eyes and let my disappointment show in my sigh.

“Fuck,” I uttered, laying a hand against my forehead.

How the hell was I supposed to make any of this shit right? How was I supposed to make it better if I couldn’t talk to the very man Tarryn needed to make her peace with?

“I’m really sorry,” Louis said, not having a single clue who I was or why I was there.

Would he have been so sorry if he’d known I wanted to pummel his father for walking out on his ...

Wait a second.

My lids opened to take a better look at this younger man. His hair was darker, his nose was wider, and his lips were

thinner, but, man, his eyes ...

It was like looking into Tarryn's.

Which only meant they were the eyes of their father.

Maybe punching this guy would be enough.

A bitter, hushed laugh left my nose as I nodded to the ground and reminded myself that my beef wasn't with him.

The interaction was growing more awkward by the second, and after a minute, Louis cleared his throat with a short cough and said, "Um ... can I get you anything? Or, uh ..."

"Nah." I shook my head. "Thanks, but ... I'll just get going. Sorry for wasting your time."

Without another glance at the eyes he shared with his sister, I walked away from the younger Louis King and hurried for my truck. There was no point in staying. None of this should've happened in the first place. God, what the hell had I been thinking? And why the hell wasn't that site updated with the dude's death?

My hand was busy fishing out the keys from my pocket when Louis called, "Wait! Hold on. What did you say your name was?"

I turned to find him leaning his arms against the wrought iron fence.

"Uh, Connor Jacobs," I replied, eyeing him with curiosity.

He wagged a pointed finger at me as his mouth gaped open. "I know who you are. You ..." He shook his head as his lips spread slowly into a wide, bewildered grin. "You're the guy from the video."

"Oh, for crying out loud ..." I huffed a sigh and shook my head, turning back to the car.

Did he even know it was his sister in that video with me? Had his father ever had the decency to tell him of the daughter he'd left? The questions were quick to pile up, but I wasn't going to ask. What good would it do?

I returned my attention to the truck, and Louis stopped me yet again.

“No, no, no, man, wait.”

I looked up, more impatient this time.

Louis jabbed his thumb over his shoulder at the house. “Will you come inside with me? Please?”

“I don’t know ...” I eyed the tall townhouse, imagining this could’ve been where Tarryn grew up instead had the man cared to know her. “I really should—”

“I’d *really* like to show you something,” he interrupted, and my gaze returned to his to find him pleading with eyes that looked so much—*too* much—like his sister’s. “Please.”

I could separate him from the woman I loved. I mean, come on. I wasn’t a lunatic.

But I could never say no to those eyes.

I just hoped I didn’t regret it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Tarryn

Jackson sat beside me at the dining room table with two glasses of wine in hand. Across from us sat my agent, Lucy, and the woman he'd chosen to replace Scarlet, a little redheaded thing named Charlie.

In the middle of the table was my laptop, the screen open and directed at Jackson and me.

"You guys all set?" Lucy laughed, eyeing the full glasses of wine as Jackson passed one into my waiting hand.

I took a long sip, then nodded. "Yep. All set."

Lucy leaned toward Charlie and said, "Tarryn hates interviews."

"I do not hate interviews," I corrected. "I hate orchestrated interviews. I hate"—I pursed my lips and eyed the chandelier above the table—"reciting lines I've rehearsed a thousand times when I'm supposed to act genuine."

Jackson snorted into his glass. "You're in the wrong line of work, babe."

I cackled as my hand smacked his shoulder. "No, you know what I mean!"

The laughter left his eyes and was replaced with sincerity. "I do."

Playing a character was one thing, and I could be Rebecca forever and never grow tired of it. I loved being the vessel to tell her story through, and I loved working alongside Jackson, as Breckenridge saved her over and over again. But I hated playing myself in these interviews, where all I truly wanted was to be candid. To give an honest answer without checking my notes.

But it was part of the job, and I sucked it up as Lucy connected us via Skype to Rob, the man from *CelebWiz*, the

first celebrity gossip site to show any interest in us as a team since the rumors had been struck dead.

The number of media outlets that wanted to talk to me about Connor though?

That was an entirely different story.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Rob’s round face filled the screen with a beaming grin. “Thanks so much for sitting with me, guys.”

“Of course,” Jackson replied with a nod.

“We’re happy to,” I chimed in, moving closer to Jackson’s side to get better in the frame.

“If you don’t mind, we can get right down to business,” Rob said, lifting a sheet of paper into the camera’s view. “I know you’re both probably crazy busy with the premiere coming and all.”

“Yeah, just a little bit,” Jackson said with a chuckle.

Rob ran us through the usual rigmarole—what were we looking forward to in the next season, what were we excited for fans to see, was there anything we could tell him about upcoming seasons. Then, he asked if he could throw a couple of individual questions at us, to which we agreed, and he asked Jackson what his favorite part of playing Breckenridge was.

“The swords,” Jackson replied in jest, laughing heartily.

Rob grinned. “Yeah, I bet that’s a lot of fun.”

“It is.”

Then, my friend concerned me with a wilted smile and a far-off gaze. This wasn’t part of the script, and I narrowed my eyes at him, not wanting to alarm Rob or our agents, but I wondered what was going on in his head. I wanted to ask ... but I didn’t have to.

“But, you know,” Jackson continued, wringing his hands out on the table, “in all seriousness, I think ... I think my favorite thing about Breckenridge is how sure he is of *who* he is. And I think, when I’m on set and in his clothes and ... wielding his sword and saving his girl ... I can pretend I know what that’s like. To know exactly who you are and do exactly what you know is right.”

It was a cryptic message for anyone who didn't know who Jackson was, and that was exactly what broke my heart—nobody did. He had built an identity and barricaded his true self inside, and I wondered if—I *hoped*—he'd allow someone to hold the key one day. Someone other than me and the puppeteer holding his strings.

“Killer answer, man,” Rob said, nodding with approval.

Then, he addressed me behind his black-rimmed glasses. “Now, Tarryn, I was wondering if you could comment on the scandal that wasn't really a scandal.” He chuckled apologetically, as if to say he wasn't really the one asking, that he was only answering to a higher power, and I offered an assuring smile.

“It was just a bunch of silly confusion,” I replied, reciting what I'd been saying to a number of magazines and TV hosts over the past month. “People see what they want to see, and then words get twisted into something that was never really said ...” I lifted a flippant hand and shrugged. “It happens. But it's over now, and Jackson and I are still as good of friends as we've always been.”

Maybe even better.

“Now, what can you tell us about Connor Jacobs?”

My legs jittered beneath the table at the mention of his name, and it took everything I'd learned about acting to not let those nerves show in my eyes.

I shrugged and hoped my breathing could remain still and calm as I said, “There's really nothing to tell.”

“Are you still with him?”

“No,” I replied, offering a tight smile. “Mr. Jacobs and I are no longer seeing each other.”

“Oh, that's too bad. You both looked very happy in the—”

The cheery chime of my cell phone interrupted the interview.

“Crap,” I muttered through gritted teeth as I reached over and turned the ringer off. “I'm so sorry. I swore I turned that

off ... before ...” I glanced at the screen and saw Connor’s number.

Oh my God, why is he calling me?

Every reflex told me to answer. What if it was an emergency? What if it was something about Sammy? Or Lennon?

But what if he’s just calling to start shit?

“Sorry about that,” I said, sending the call to voice mail. “Anyway, I—”

The phone was vibrating against the table with another call from Connor, and Lucy was eyeing me with disbelief and aggravation from across the table as I stared at the screen while I struggled through an internal debate.

I knew a lot about Connor, and one thing I knew for sure was, he wouldn’t call twice if it wasn’t serious.

So, I apologized to Rob, Jackson, Lucy, and Charlie and stood from the table to hurry into my room with the phone. The door was shut quickly behind me as I tried desperately to prepare myself mentally and emotionally to hear his voice for the first time in weeks, knowing no amount of preparation would suffice.

Then, I answered.

“Connor.”

Jesus ... I had been the one to walk out. I had been the one to drive away and begin weeks’ worth of silence. And yet I said his name so breathlessly and desperately, like I’d been holding my lungs tight, just waiting to speak it again.

“Hi, Tarryn.”

This was a bad idea. I never should’ve answered. I never should’ve believed I could hear his voice and not feel the immediate urge to run back to him.

No, I told myself with a quick shake of my head. Find out what he wants and get back to work.

I cleared my throat of every panicked urge to beg for his forgiveness and said, “What can I do—”

“Don’t talk to me like that, Tarryn. Okay? Don’t do it.”

My eyes squinted toward the floor-length mirror beside the small stone fireplace in my bedroom. “Talk to you like what?”

“Like I’m someone you used to know.”

The snort that blasted through my nose was obnoxious and bitter. “Well, I mean, isn’t that exactly—”

“You’re always going to know me. As long as you’re close with my family, you’re going to know me. You don’t have to see me, you don’t even have to hear my voice—I’ll make sure of it, if that’s what you want. But you’re always going to know me as long as you know them, so—”

“I don’t *have* to know them. That’s my choice to make, and—”

“Fucking hell, Tarryn, come on. Don’t do this to Lennon,” he begged, lowering his voice. “I know you haven’t talked to her, and I get it’s awkward. But don’t do this to her. Don’t make me regret what happened between us. Okay? Please don’t do that.”

Ghosting Lennon hadn’t been my intention from the start. I had simply spent the days since I’d left New York conjuring the courage to hear her voice and whatever she had to say to me. But destroying my friendship with her was never part of the plan, so I dropped the attitude quickly and nodded to my reflection.

“No,” I replied in a hushed tone. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Call her.”

“I will,” I promised, nodding once more.

“Thank you.”

My lips quirked into a small smile at the sound of his gratitude, and it felt good to know that, at some point in my life, I had been worthy of someone as good as him.

“Is that, um ... is that why you called?” I asked, slowly sitting on the bed that never ceased to feel cold and lonely.

“Actually, it’s not.”

“Oh, so ... what’s up?”

“Okay.” He blew out a breath that flooded the speaker pressed to my ear. “So, for some reason, you have it in your head that you are alone in this world and that’s just how it’s going to be.”

The abrupt turn toward something far deeper and more serious jostled my heart. “Um, well, that’s because I am,” I argued, coming to my own defense. “And I know you’re going to say I have your family, and I know that should feel good enough, but sometimes, Connor, having your own people is the difference between feeling alone and ... not.”

“I’m going to resist saying what I want to say right now and instead tell you that I get it. And that’s why I found your father.”

My startled heart took off at a gallop as my mind warred between desperation and anger. “You did *what?*”

“I knew you never would, but I also knew you’d always wonder. So, I did it for you, and—”

“What the hell, Connor?!” I jumped from the bed and barreled toward the mirror, racing toward myself to stare into my furious, hopeful eyes before pacing back to the bed. “You had *no* fucking right. That was *none* of your business, and you never should’ve—”

“He’s dead, Tarryn. He died two years ago. I’m so sorry.”

His voice was full of so much regret, like he could hear the splintering of my fragile heart through the phone line. Like he knew how hopeful I’d felt beneath my angry words, only for every bit of that hope to be swept away with the pain of knowing I’d lost all chances to ever speak to my father.

“Oh,” I whispered, keeping my eyes on my cold, lonely bed. “Well, I mean ... whatever, right? It is what it—”

“Did you know he got married?”

The tears bit relentlessly at my eyes as I shook my head. “No, I didn’t.”

“Well, he did, and he lived in Arlington, Massachusetts, until he died. They had a nice life together. They were really

happy—”

“Great,” I interrupted, my throat clenched around three decades’ worth of pain. “So, you’re telling me that he moved on and never stopped to think about me once. That’s nice. Thank you, Connor. You’ve made me feel so much better. Now, I’m going to hang up, so—”

“Let me finish.”

“Why should I?”

“Because he thought about you all the time, Tarryn. He sent letters to you every week—”

“Bullshit. I never saw a fucking letter from him. And how do you—”

“Your mom sent them back along with the checks he’d sent with them. I don’t know why, and I’m not trying to vilify her by telling you this. I just ... I just think you deserve the truth, okay? And your dad ... he never stopped writing you letters. When you moved, he kept writing them. He kept every single one. He followed your career up until you got the role in the show. He lived to see the pilot episode, and he actually teared up. He loved you—”

“Stop,” I croaked, dropping my ass to the mattress and covering my face with my hand. “Stop. Please. I don’t know why you’re doing this or how you know, but—”

“He had a son,” Connor interjected gently, his voice like a warm embrace. “And he told me everything. He showed me the letters.”

My lungs clenched tightly as the tears froze from the shock of this revelation. “He had a son?”

“You have a brother,” he said, and I could hear every bit of his smile. “And he has a wife, and they have two kids, and ...”

“I have ... a brother,” I whispered, hardly able to wrap my head around this new truth.

“Yes.”

I guessed, thinking about it now, it felt silly that I hadn’t realized it was a possibility before, that he could’ve gotten

married and had a family. My father had been in his early forties when he moved to Boston and left my pregnant mother behind. But I'd just thought he didn't want that life. I had always thought he liked his freedom, that he had no intention of being saddled with a wife and kids.

I never would've thought it was my mother who hadn't wanted him.

"God, why would she do this to me?" I whispered to nobody in particular. Hell, maybe I was asking her. Maybe I hoped she'd swoop down from wherever she was and explain why she'd kept me from the man who had helped create me.

"There's no way of knowing why she made the decisions she did," Connor replied quietly. "But she was a good mom. She did the best she could, and she loved you. Remember that, okay? Remember Christmas."

A smile broke through the ache in my heart as I nodded. "Yeah ... you're right. I just ... I just don't get it."

"I know, and it sucks. But you're not supposed to get it. All you can do is learn to live with the cards you were dealt, Tarryn. There's no point in wishing you'd gotten different ones 'cause you didn't. This is your life, and I mean, it's not perfect—I get that—but all things considered, it's not so bad."

I closed my eyes to the tender warmth in his voice and imagined it was Christmas Eve and I was back on Lennon's porch, sitting beside her big brother, smoking his cigarettes and crushing on him harder than I had when we were teenagers. I wanted a do-over. I wanted to tell him then exactly how I had felt when I was sixteen and all those years since. I wanted to kiss him beneath the mistletoe, in front of his family, without a single care about who was watching or what they were thinking. I wanted him to know that nothing mattered more to me than making him mine and being his. Not my job. Not my reputation. Not the opinions of anybody else.

Him and me. That was all I wanted. Us. That was it.

"Connor, I—"

"Listen, there's someone here who really wants to finally talk to you, okay?"

“Wait, what?” I narrowed my eyes toward the mirror, afraid I’d never again get the chance to tell him what I was thinking or how I truly felt.

God, why haven’t I ever just told him how I feel?

“So, I’m gonna put him on. Be nice to him, okay? I know that’s hard for you to do sometimes, but he’s a cool guy. I like him. And you have the rest of your life to be his bitchy sister.”

Time stood still then as my brain fought between grand declarations of love and an unknown panic. The kind only brought on by knowing I was about to speak to my younger half-brother for the first time.

The brother I never would’ve known existed had Connor not found him.

I smiled through the tears that wouldn’t stop falling as the phone was passed to someone whose voice I didn’t recognize, and yet ... it was so familiar in the way your soul knew something that had always belonged to it.

“Hello?”

A jovial laugh burst through my lips, and I wiped the tears away with the palm of my hand as I said, “Y-yeah, oh my God, hi.”

“Hey, I, um ... I’m Louis. God”—he laughed—“this is wild.”

“Yeah, it is,” I agreed, pulling my knees to my chest and forgetting all about interviews and celebrity life and everything else outside of this room. “By the way, I’m Tarryn, and it’s really, really nice to meet you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Tarryn

“You’re *sure* you don’t want me coming?” Lennon asked over the phone. “You know, just to keep the rumors at bay?”

I laughed as Frederica, my makeup artist in the States, brushed another coat of mascara over my lashes—both real and false.

“I’m sure. It’s going to be fine. I’ll be at the premiere with Jason, and Jackson is going with some model, who’s trying to kick-start her career. We’re making sure everybody paying attention realizes we are not together in any capacity whatsoever.”

“Okay,” she grumbled. “But honestly, I don’t know why you didn’t just ask Connor.”

I sighed as Frederica spritzed my face with setting spray and gave me a thumbs-up. I thanked her profusely for working her magic once again as she grabbed her makeup kit and left the hotel suite.

I waited until I was alone to reply to my friend. “Oh, you’re singing a different tune today,” I said once the door clicked shut. “Wasn’t it just a week or two ago when you were telling me how gross it was that I had slept with your brother?”

“Yes, because it *is*. But ...” Lennon hesitated, and I could picture her rolling her eyes and shrugging. “I also kinda love the idea of you two being together. No, scratch that. I *do* love it. I want you to marry him and be my real sister and have his babies. So, make it happen, dammit.”

“Oh, yeah.” I snorted, shaking my head as I stood in my floor-length Versace gown and Jimmy Choos. “Because I’d really get married.”

“You’d marry the right guy, and you know it.”

“You’re assuming the right guy even exists,” I countered while knowing damn well he did.

And he was somewhere in Connecticut right now, probably making some amazing dinner for his kick-ass daughter—who had since apologized to me profusely, and I had just as profusely insisted I was never mad at her in the slightest. Her heart had been in the right place by posting that video. In fact, I loved it so much that I had it saved on my phone.

But I wouldn’t tell anyone else that.

“I’m going to pretend like I don’t already know you’re fantasizing about walking down an aisle toward my freakin’ brother and say, you had the right guy already. You just have to get him back.”

I smirked and rolled my eyes. “I have to go,” I said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay, girlie-girl?”

The very mention of tomorrow was enough to awaken my nerves.

After weeks of talking to Louis and getting to know him, we’d decided that, while I was in New York for the premiere, I would head up to Boston to meet him face-to-face. I was understandably terrified. Not because I thought I wouldn’t like him or even that he wouldn’t like me, but I’d never had a brother before, and I sure as hell had never met one who’d been unknowingly missing for the twenty-seven years since he’d been born. I needed some moral support, and so I had asked Lennon to hold my hand, and she, of course, was more than happy to oblige. Because even as our lives went in two separate directions and we couldn’t always put each other first, our friendship was stronger than distance, and our loyalty was more ironclad than time.

“Okay,” my best friend forever replied. “Have fun. Love you.”

“Love you too, girlie-girl.”

It was true.

I really did.

But I might love your brother more.

“Ms. King!”

“Tarryn! Over here!”

“Miss King, can I just ask one question?”

A strobe light of camera flashes lit our way down the red carpet toward the entrance to the theater the network had reserved for the *Breckenridge* season two premiere. Jason’s hand was pressed firmly to the small of my back as he guided me through a sea of journalists and paparazzi, stopping me every few feet for us to smile for a few dozen pictures before moving me along again.

On one hand, I was grateful he was there and that Jackson was behind me and not beside me, if for nothing else but to ensure the media never misconstrued our relationship again.

But on the other, I wished Jason’s hand weren’t so low on my back. I wished he wouldn’t stand so close. Yet no matter how many times I stepped away from him, he stepped right back. No matter how many times I moved from the heat of his palm, he’d put it right back where it had been. And I knew the smile on my face said one thing, but the furnace burning angrily beneath my skin said another.

“Tarryn! Who are you wearing tonight?”

I smiled, stopping for a young reporter with gorgeous turquoise hair. “Vers—”

“Me, obviously,” Jason butted in with a cheeky grin I immediately wanted to slap away.

Instead, I playfully rolled my eyes and laughed it off. “This is from Versace’s latest collection.”

“Well, it is gorgeous on you,” she gushed, beaming with excitement. “But you could make anything look good.”

I thanked her, smiled for more pictures, and moved along. With a glance over my shoulder, I watched Jackson stiffly

move along the carpet with his hand wrapped tightly around the hand of a pretty young blonde. They made a cute couple, but I knew the truth.

Charlie had set him up with someone for appearances. Another farce, but at least this one knew exactly what she was to him. There were no secrets between them, no rumors; it was all business. And in a way, I was happy it worked for him—at least for now.

But I missed him.

He never would've touched me like this.

“Jason,” I muttered through a clenched jaw when we reached the entrance of the theater.

“Yeah, babe?”

I closed my eyes and sighed, hoping I could keep my irritation under wraps. “Can you please move your hand?”

“Really? You want me to go there right now?” He winked as he began to inch his hand further downward. “Is this better?”

I took a step away from his wandering fingertips. “Don't you dare. You know exactly what I meant.”

This was not going the way I'd planned. I'd been so sure he knew what this night was. He'd needed a date, and so had I. We were helping each other out by attending the premiere together, but it was never meant to be a date, and he was never meant to misunderstand what I was to him.

Coworkers. Costars. Acquaintances.

God, I could barely call him a friend, considering the only time we'd spent together was on set—when we were Rebecca and Vareth—and at the occasional award show or premiere.

What a mistake this was.

“Oh, come on, Tarryn,” he said, hurrying after me as I walked through the theater door alone. “Don't be like that.”

I gawked at him in a room full of familiar and unfamiliar faces. “And how exactly am I being?”

“Like you don’t want me touching you when, come on.” His lips curled in a smile eerily similar to the one he’d give me on set, right before his character would violate mine. “We both know that’s exactly what’s gonna happen.”

Some people in this world seemed to be a magnet for luck. They were prone to win contests, lottery prizes, and school raffles. Me, on the other hand ...

I was a magnet for vile men.

Internally, I was shaking—afraid and angry and disgusted. But on the outside, my face remained a stone structure, as I refused to let him see how helpless I truly felt, surrounded by people who couldn’t be bothered to look in my direction.

“You will not be touching me tonight or ever,” I told him, keeping my voice low and hoping it sounded menacing to his devil ears.

“But isn’t that what you *do*? Or are *those* rumors bullshit too?” he asked, leveling me with a challenging glare. “Now, come on, baby.” He stepped toward me, never taking his eyes off mine. “Let’s give these people something to look—”

“One more word out of your mouth, and I swear, I will shove that ugly fucking tie down your throat.”

I turned abruptly with a gasp at the sound of Connor’s voice as a warm, familiar arm wrapped tightly—*protectively*—around my waist. He was there beside me, but he didn’t look quite like the Connor I had known only weeks ago. This Connor was dressed in a decadent three-piece suit, his hair was trimmed, and his beard was styled. As incredible as he looked like this, I couldn’t say I loved it as much as I had when he was scruffy, fresh from the shower, and in nothing but his sweatpants.

He pulled me against him and held me under the everlasting cover of his protection as he glared at Jason with murderous intent shadowing his blue eyes. A thousand questions, a million words, crowded my mind, every single one battling for center stage, as Jason awkwardly laughed away his lewd and unwanted advances.

“Hey, man, I was just playing around—Tarryn knows that. We’re friends. We’ve known each other for years.”

“You haven’t known her as long as I have, and friends don’t talk to friends like that. Especially when they’ve been told to stop,” Connor replied, his tone chilly with malice. “Now, get the fuck out of my face before I seriously choke you with that fucking tie.”

Jason narrowed his glare at Connor before turning his confused and rejected gaze on me. “Is he for real right now?”

“I’d say very,” I replied in something close to a whisper.

“And you’re just going to let him talk to me like that? Who the hell is he?”

I lifted my eyes to the dark, menacing look I’d seen time and time again and smiled.

“He’s my hero.”

Jason rolled his eyes and skulked away through the growing crowd in the lobby with his bruised ego and shady comments. Connor watched him leave and disappear in the sea of people, and then he finally looked at me.

“You’re never working with that guy again,” he muttered. “Or I really will have to kill him.”

“You’re not killing anyone,” I replied, smoothing a hand over the lapel of his dark gray jacket. “This is an amazing suit. Where did you get this?”

“After your buddy Jackson called and gave me the info about this little shindig, I raided my brother-in-law’s closet.” He ran his hands over the soft wool material, nodding his own approval. “And I will absolutely kill that guy if he so much as looks at you again.”

It was easy to ignore the chatter around us, or that the lobby had begun to empty as the crowd headed into the theater, or that a few members of the press had begun to take notice of the obviously romantic moment happening right before their eyes. Nearly everything else in the world seemed to dull while I looked up at him, still unable to believe he was here, not only coming to my rescue yet again, but also

wedging himself into my world of glitz and glamour and sweeping me off my feet while doing it.

How did I ever get so lucky?

“I’ll tell Lori what happened with him tonight and insist we recast or I won’t continue with the show,” I said quietly, not only to promise him, but myself too.

Connor was right. I didn’t deserve to be treated like that—I never had—and why I had ever put up with it, I didn’t know. But it was about time it stopped.

“She’d be an idiot not to listen.”

“I agree.”

Connor’s gaze was persistent as his hands captured mine. I was desperate for him to kiss me, and I hoped it would happen now—cameras and reporters be damned.

“Hey!” Jackson startled us from the moment as he clapped a hand against Connor’s shoulder. “Glad to see you two have gotten reacquainted, but we gotta get in there. They’re waiting for us.”

Connor smirked and said, “You guys are the stars of the show. They’re not gonna start without you.”

Jackson furrowed his brow. “I mean ... you’re not wrong ...”

“So, they can wait another minute while I kiss my girlfriend, right?”

My friend’s smile softened as he gave a small nod. “They’re all watching, guys,” he said to us. “Make it good. Give ‘em something to talk about.”

Jackson laid his hand against my shoulder, squeezed, and gave me a smile I felt directly in my heart. He was a good friend, one of the best, and despite everything we’d been through, I knew without a doubt that nothing had been done with ill intent.

And so did Connor.

“He’s a good guy,” he said, taking the initiative and laying a hand against my cheek, after Jackson left us to wait at

the theater door.

“Yeah, he is,” I agreed, cupping my hands around the back of his neck.

His thumb traced the outline of my cheekbone as he moved his body to stand flush against mine. “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him.”

“Why *are* you here?” I asked. “You could’ve just seen me tomorrow or—”

“You kept my shirt,” Connor interrupted. “You could’ve left it behind”—his lips edged closer; his nose grazed the length of mine—“but you took it.”

“Well”—I sifted my fingers through his hair—“I really do love that shirt.”

“No.” His lips brushed softly over mine, a barely there kiss, broken by his grin and a chuckle. “You love *me*,” he corrected, smug and conceited.

But he wasn’t wrong.

I pressed my lips against his, instantly breathless with the impact. “I do love you,” I mumbled as his hand left my cheek to hold on to the back of my neck.

He kissed me and kissed me, not caring about the cameras or the meandering costars, impatiently waiting for the show to begin. But it could wait for just a minute while I silently vowed with a kiss to allow this man to once and for all rescue me. To save me from a life of shitty sex with shitty men, from loneliness, from desperate longing. To solidify my place in a family I had already chosen as mine after he gave me the family I’d never known I had.

And none of that would have ever happened, had it not been for the shirt off his back.

Connor smiled against my lips, then laughed and said, “Tarryn, I gotta be honest.” He took a step back to look deeply into my eyes, staring as though he were searching for something or maybe even someone, then said, “I think I’ve always loved you.”

I laughed with him as I took his hand to lead him into the theater and ensure his place within my world as I whispered, “I freakin’ knew it. I always knew it.”

EPILOGUE

Connor

One Year Later

“Hey, Connor, you wanna send the mashed potatoes down this way?” Dad called from the other end of the table.

I pried my hand from Tarryn’s frayed-jeaned thigh to grab the bowl of potatoes Sammy had mashed earlier and passed it to Tarryn’s brother, Louis. It then went to his wife, Stephanie, then Monica, Bill, Dylan, Lennon, Sammy, one of Louis’s daughters, Mom, and finally, it reached its destination.

“Thanks, buddy,” Dad said, throwing a thumbs-up in my direction before dropping lumps of fluffy white potatoes onto his plate. “So, Monica, have you guys set a date yet?”

My eyes flitted quickly toward Tarryn’s, and she just as quickly shook her head before anyone else could notice. God, she had to know how hard it was to sit there on Christmas Day, surrounded by our friends and family, in a house we’d bought—well, okay, let’s be real here; *she* had bought it, but I had spent the past six months busting my ass, maintaining it—and not let them all know what we’d both been keeping from them for weeks. But she had said she didn’t want to overshadow Monica’s recent engagement to Bill, and I got it—I really did.

But, man ... it was *hard*.

“Oh, not yet,” Mon replied, an elated smile on her face as she reached for the biscuits Tarryn had fumbled through baking. “We want to enjoy being engaged for a while, you know?”

“Yeah, I wanna be able to call this beautiful woman my fiancée for a little while longer,” Bill chimed in before leaning in to kiss her temple.

Bill, as it turned out, was a real sap for romance.

Mom sighed wistfully. “That’s so nice.” Her smile hardened to give her the appearance of a creepy plastic clown

as she turned to me. “Isn’t that sweet, Connor?”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat and forced the corner of my mouth to lift. “So sweet, Mom.”

“What about you guys?” Dad asked, jabbing the tines of his fork in our direction.

Tarryn swallowed audibly from beside me. “What, um ... what do you mean?”

I rolled my eyes toward her, as if to say, *Princess, you know exactly what he means.*

Dad shrugged. “I mean, when are you getting hitched?”

Bingo.

“Oh, here we go,” I said with a snort, my glare dodging back to Tarryn’s to shoot her a wicked side-eye. “You sound like Mom.”

It felt like an eternity ago when my family had exploded in my face over my and Tarryn’s relationship. As we had predicted, Lennon had been more accepting of our feelings for each other than my parents—Mom in particular. She’d had the same worries we’d had in the beginning.

“What happens if it doesn’t work out?”

“How will the family’s relationship with Tarryn change?”

“Would Lennon and Tarryn feel obligated to end their lifelong friendship?”

But a year into our relationship and six months of Tarryn and me living together in a mansion on southern Connecticut’s coastline, my mother had taken to making it her life’s mission to ensure I made an honest woman out of Tarryn King.

Bill struggled to bite through his hockey puck of a biscuit as Dad shrugged and said, “Well, I mean, you guys are living together and don’t plan to break up, right? So, why not just get married?”

Every pair of expectant eyes turned to me, every face wearing the same expression of impatience. Like all of these people were daring me to drop down on one knee, right then and there, and demand this woman become my wife.

My lungs filled with air that suddenly felt stale and stifling as I shifted in my chair. My hand reached under the table for Tarryn's thigh, and the moment my fingers slipped inside the frayed fabric holes, I opened my mouth to say something.

But she beat me to it.

"Oh my *God*," she said on an exasperated breath of air as her hands flitted from the table to her hair. "Guys, we *can't* get married, okay? So, just—"

"You *can't*?" Lennon was shrill from down the table. "Is this because of Jackson? Because that guy—"

"It's not Jackson," Tarryn replied, frustrated. "It's because we—"

"Hey. What are you doing?" I asked through gritted teeth, turning my wide eyes on her, as my mother chimed in with, "*What?* What do you mean, you *can't*?"

Tarryn's eyes finally met mine, and I hoped to Christ my expression said, *Uh, excuse me, dear, but this isn't what we discussed not three hours ago before all these people showed up at our door.*

But it didn't, apparently, because her gaze flooded with apology as she said, "We can't get married because we already are."

A cocktail of relief and betrayal made me groan as I ran my hand over my beard and muttered, "You freakin' traitor," from behind my palm.

"Sorry," she whispered as my little sister exclaimed, "Uh ... *what?!*"

Once upon a time, I had told Lennon she should have the wedding she and her husband-to-be wanted without allowing the opinions of others to influence their decisions. And while I didn't think either of them regretted anything about the day they'd ended up having, I also didn't believe it'd necessarily been everything they had wanted either.

But then again, I guessed I couldn't pretend to know what they had truly wanted.

What I did know was, I loved Tarryn King. I had been in love with her since we had been teenagers, pretending to hate each other, caught in a narrative we'd set for ourselves when we were little kids. I hadn't stopped loving her when she was sleeping with countless men and I was raising my daughter with another strong woman, and I hadn't stopped when she relocated to another continent thousands of miles away.

And that was exactly what I'd told her a month ago on Thanksgiving night, after we spent the day at my sister's house, when we were relaxing in our living room, full of furniture we'd picked out together and a mantel she'd helped me install.

"Marry me," I had said, to which she replied, "Obviously," with every bit of attitude I'd grown to expect from her.

And that was when I found out something else—we didn't want a wedding.

We didn't want to be surrounded by faces—God, she was surrounded by them all the damn time as it was. We didn't want a public celebration when so much of our lives were already splashed across websites and grocery-store tabloids.

We wanted us. We wanted seclusion and secrecy.

And three weeks before Christmas, that was exactly what we did. A private ceremony in the Scottish Highlands, standing in the mouth of a cold, dripping cave. It was freezing, and it was dreary, and the words were spoken by a guy neither of us knew. But, man, I'd never been happier to be so far from everyone we knew, to embark on this next chapter of our lives the same way our relationship had begun—*alone*.

The first couple of weeks of wedded bliss had been just as wonderful as that first day, spent clearing out her apartment in Scotland to permanently move her home to Connecticut, where she belonged with me.

But now, the anger and hurt in the expressions of our friends and family made me feel guilty ... even if I still wouldn't change a freakin' thing.

We had done what was right for us, and I wasn't about to apologize for it.

“Did you just say you're *married*?” Lennon demanded to know, her voice a few decibels below a shriek as she sprang from her chair.

Tarryn pulled from my hand's grasp on her thigh to jump up and rush toward her best friend. “I'm so sorry, girlie-girl. We wanted to tell everyone, but ... God, Lenny, we just wanted it to be us, and ...”

Lennon raised her hand, and—holy shit—I thought she was going to slap Tarryn. I jumped to my feet to defend my wife—and, believe me, I wasn't afraid to get into a physical altercation with my sister. It'd been years since I'd pulled her hair and she'd nearly scratched my eyes out, but you could bet your ass I'd do it again in Tarryn's honor.

But before I could react, Lennon's arms were around Tarryn's neck, and they were hugging and crying like they hadn't just screamed at each other, surrounded by garland and twinkling lights.

Women are freakin' weird, man.

“You should've told me,” Lennon said, weeping against Tarryn's shoulder. “I would've let you get married without me. I just ... I wish I had known.”

“Oh, come on, baby,” Tarryn blubbered through a laugh. “You know as well as I do that you never would've let me run away with your brother to get married without packing your bags too.”

Lennon hesitated before giggling. “You're right. I wouldn't have. But ...” She bounced on her toes, tightening her grip on Tarryn. “Oh my God, you're my *sister*.”

“Like, for real. By *law*.” Tarryn bounced with her, and I raked a hand through my hair, sighing and dropping back into my chair to address the rest of the people at that table.

Dylan was his usual accepting self while Louis, his wife, and their kids all offered their congratulations. Monica and Bill were happy for us, and Sammy ... well, Sammy wasn't all

that surprised because she was the only other person who had known.

Come on. I couldn't get married without at least telling my daughter.

But then there were my parents. And the looks on their faces ...

Man ...

I had no idea how to read them as I tried to brace myself for whatever backlash I was about to receive.

"So, you've been ... *married* ... for ... *how long*?" Mom's voice was tight and quavering, like she was about to combust at any moment.

"Um ..." I cleared my throat and swallowed, wishing I hadn't quit smoking months ago. "Three weeks, give or take."

"Three ... weeks ..." She took a sip of wine, gulping it down quickly.

Dad's forehead crumpled as he folded his hands on the table. "You've been married for three weeks, and you didn't tell anybody?"

"Well ... I told Sammy," I offered weakly.

He nodded slowly as Mom rose from her chair. Her eyes flooded with tears, her gaze on me the whole time as she rounded the table. And I just knew, in the deepest, darkest pit of my gut that this was about to turn violent. The fight I'd thought I'd have with Lennon was about to happen between my mother and me right here in my dining room, and there was no way I'd lay a hand against her. She was going to kick my ass all the way from Connecticut to fucking Australia, and I was going to let her.

"Get over here right now, Connor," she commanded through gritted teeth, and once again, I rose from my chair, ready to face my mother's wrath for the millionth time in my life.

I had always been the disappointment. I had always been the biggest pain in her ass. So, why should the news of my marriage be any different?

“Mom”—I stared down into her eyes, drowning in tears —“I don’t know what you want me to—”

My words were stopped by the force of her hug as she threw her arms around my neck and thrust her body against mine. I inhaled deeply before resting my chin against her head, uncertain of what was happening while feeling nothing but adoration radiating from her embrace.

“All I wish,” she said, crying against my chest, “is that you’d said something sooner so that we could’ve congratulated you.”

“I’m sorry. We just didn’t want the pressure—”

“I’m not mad, and I understand. I just wish we had known—that’s all. But ...” She pulled in a deep breath, and I felt her smile. “God, honey, I know I don’t say it a lot ... I know I don’t say it *enough* ... but I’m so, *so* proud of you.”

If what the woman was trying to do was make me cry right along with her, she was making a really solid attempt.

“Uh ...” I cleared my throat again. “I can’t actually remember the last time you said it at all,” I admitted quietly as I caught Tarryn’s soft and loving gaze cast toward me from over Lennon’s head.

Mom pulled away from me far enough to look up into my eyes, piercing my heart with the sincerity pulsing from her soul. “Well, I am. I know I give you a hard time, and maybe it’s because that’s just how we are with each other—it’s how we’ve always been—but ...” She exhaled and smiled with all the reassurance I never knew I needed. “You are such a wonderful man, Connor. And I know you’ll be the absolute best husband because that’s all you know how to be—the best at whatever you do in your life.”

My chest felt full, dangerously close to exploding, as I nodded and glanced toward my father. “Well, I had a pretty good teacher.”

Tarryn released Lennon from her grasp to stand by my side, wrapping her arms around my waist as she said, “And believe me, I wouldn’t settle for any less than the best.”

Dad winked. “Smart girl.”

Two Years Later

Tarryn and I had decided we wouldn't intentionally try to have kids. We wouldn't follow her ovulation charts or the cycle of the moon or anything like that ... but we wouldn't avoid the possibility either.

So, a year and a half ago, after we'd decided to make this thing official for the long haul, we'd thrown away the birth control and left the potential for babies up to fate.

A year later, nothing had happened.

Tarryn would make jokes every month she got her period about her rotten uterus and broken reproductive system, but I knew, deep down, it bothered her. The jabs at her inability to become pregnant grew more bitter with every passing month, and by her twelfth menstrual cycle, she burst from the bathroom and announced that she was going to finally take a trip to her doctor and find out if something was actually wrong.

"You're clearly fertile," she'd said, obviously implying Sammy. "So, it's gotta be me."

She had said it as if she were damaged, and it bothered me, but I didn't tell her to stop hating on herself. I simply said that, to me, she was perfect regardless of what the doctor found—if she happened to find anything at all.

But as it turned out, there was something wrong, and as Tarryn had suspected, that something had nothing to do with me.

On New Year's Day, after our first Christmas as a married couple, in a house too big for just the two of us, Tarryn was diagnosed with fallopian tube agenesis, a rare condition in which a woman was born without one or both fallopian tubes—Tarryn had unfortunately been born without both.

“So, what does that mean?” I asked stupidly because what the hell did I know?

The doctor opened her mouth to speak, but Tarryn cut her off with a harsh, “It means I can’t get pregnant, Connor.”

Her doctor folded her hands and nodded solemnly. “Not naturally, no.” Tarryn’s bottom lip wriggled in reply. “I’m sorry. This isn’t something we see often, but it can happen ...”

“Obviously,” Tarryn snapped, so angry and hurt. As if it were the doctor’s fault she’d been born with such an anomaly.

I wrapped my arm around Tarryn’s shoulders and addressed the woman behind the desk with dumbfounded confusion. “But she gets a period every freakin’ month like clockwork, so why ...”

Tarryn struggled not to cry as her doctor explained that a woman would still menstruate normally with or without fallopian tubes. It was easy to go on with life, completely unaware that there was something wrong until a reason was presented to find out—trying and failing to get pregnant obviously being one of them. She then told us that there was still hope. That IVF could be an option, if we chose to pursue it, and that was the moment we decided that we did in fact want babies, if we were meant to have them.

Then, seven months later, after a series of treatments and more patience than I had known I possessed, we got the positive pregnancy test we were looking for. We were elated, about to embark on an adventure we’d been praying for harder than we’d prayed for each other. We had dreams and hopes, but because nothing could come easily, all of those dreams and hopes came crashing down around us when, six months after our two pink lines, Tarryn was diagnosed with severe preeclampsia and was rushed into an emergency C-section to deliver our son three months before his due date.

I’d never been more terrified in my life as I was while my wife fought for our baby’s life harder than she fought for her own.

I'd never felt more helpless, knowing there wasn't a fucking thing I could do to save either one of them.

I'd never cried in front of my daughter before in the nearly seventeen years she'd been alive, but I did then, after Monica had dropped her off in the labor and delivery waiting room. Sammy was the parent in that moment as she got to her knees and wrapped her arms around my shaking, crumpled body.

"They'll be okay, Daddy," she whispered, stroking her fingers through my hair. "They're going to be okay."

She couldn't have known that was true. There was no way she could've known, especially when, at the time, Tarryn was still recovering from the C-section and our one-pound baby, Louis, was in the neonatal intensive care unit and none of the doctors and nurses could give me any answers. But that was what Sammy had said, so sure of herself, and I believed her because I had nothing else.

An hour later, we were able to see Tarryn.

She was still out of it from the anesthesia, and as she held Sammy's hand and looked into my eyes, all she could talk about was her job—the movie deals she was in the process of finalizing and the last season of *Breckenridge*—and how none of those wonderful, exciting things would be able to happen now for the foreseeable future. Not when she had something so much more important and precious to devote her time to—her life ... and our son's.

"It's fine, baby," I told her, brushing the hair from her face as she cried. "You don't need to worry about that right now."

"No," she said, rolling her head against the pillow. "But I *do*. You ... you have to call Lucy. Tell her I'm done. I quit."

I wiped the tears from her cheeks. "You don't mean that. We'll talk about it later, okay? Just get some rest."

"Is Lenny coming? Does she know what happened?"

I swallowed as I remembered the difficult and surreal conversation I'd just had with my parents and sister. "*Tarryn*

and the baby almost didn't make it. They're stable right now, but I don't know what's gonna happen."

"Yeah, they're coming, baby. They know. Just close your eyes and rest, okay?"

"Have you ..." She took a deep breath as her eyes fell with the weight of her fear. "Have you seen him? Is he ... is he ..."

She wouldn't ask if he was alive, but I was glad to tell her that he was.

"He's with the nurses and doctors in the NICU, and they say he'll be fine," I told her, hoping I wouldn't one day have to break that promise.

"Good," she whispered as she sighed and closed her eyes. "That's good."

Tarryn had called Lucy herself days later when she was still in the hospital, trying to get her blood pressure regulated. She told her she needed to go on maternity leave ahead of schedule, and Lucy was more than willing to oblige in getting her affairs settled for the time being. She was insistent on Tarryn taking as much time as she and the baby needed to get healthy and that they would reassess her career when she was in a better place to do so.

And so we began our journey as NICU parents.

Outwardly, Tarryn handled the situation worse than I did—understandably. She was driving herself crazy, trying to produce enough milk to feed our baby while recovering from surgery and coping with the trauma of seeing him hooked up to a ventilator and countless wires. I didn't want to add to her stress, so I became a stone structure, running on autopilot. Driving back and forth to the hospital, helping my wife heal at home, taking care of the house, and going back to work when my paternity leave ran out.

I said nothing when she yelled and screamed at me for the sake of yelling and screaming at someone. I held her when she cried. I did everything she needed me to do without a single complaint or criticism, and when she was finally asleep after hours of pumping breastmilk and sitting at our son's bedside, I finally let go and cried in the shower.

It was the only time I allowed myself to break, and I never allowed Tarryn to see it happen.

She needed a hero, someone to lean on, and that was my job.

There was nothing else for me to do.

That was, until our son, Louis Samuel Jacobs, was finally released from the hospital after one hundred twenty days in the NICU and two separate surgeries. He was on oxygen and had a few more scars than what he had been born with, but he was otherwise healthy and more perfect than I could've hoped for.

Then, I took the vacation and sick time I'd accumulated at work and stayed home to take care of him with the help of my sister and parents, who had come to stay with us for a week after his discharge.

I let Tarryn sleep at night as I walked him back and forth, rocking him until he stopped crying. I fed him bottles, changed diapers, and washed hundreds of spit cloths and onesies—everything I'd hardly gotten to do when Sammy was a baby, everything I wished I'd been able to do.

And at some point, after months of keeping their communication to texts only, Tarryn called Lucy and told her she'd finish the final season of her multi-award-winning show, but then, she was going to take a little time away from life as a celebrity to enjoy life as a wife and mother.

Because as it turned out, after years of running and uncertainty, she had finally found a place to call home with me and the life we'd built for ourselves, and she wasn't looking to leave anytime soon.

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Can I just say how much I don't like writing these things? The fear of forgetting someone important is too real, and if I had my way, I'd just leave this whole segment out of the book. But the guilt is also real, so ... here we go.

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About the Author

Kelsey Kingsley is a legally blind gal, living in New York with her husband, her son, and a black-and-white cat named Ethel. She really loves doughnuts, tea, and Edgar Allan Poe.

She believes there is a song for every situation.

She has a potty mouth and doesn't eat cheese.

Books by Kelsey Kingsley

[Holly Freakin' Hughes](#)

A friends-to-lovers, small-town romance.

A woman, down on her luck, runs into an attractive stranger in a bookstore, and it changes her life forever.

[Daisies & Devin](#)

A best-friends-to-lovers, small-town, rock star romance.

Devin O'Leary has dreamed of being a rock star his entire life—until he meets Kylie James.

Now, his only dream is to make her his.

[The Life We Wanted](#)

A single-dad, small-town, enemies-to-lovers, rock star romance.

When Tabitha Clarke's sister passes away, she gains custody of her nephew. Desperate for help, she contacts the boy's father, only to find he's a famous drummer—and everything she never knew she wanted.

[Tell Me Goodnight](#)

A single-dad, second-chance, friends-to-lovers, rock star romance.

After the unexpected death of his wife, pianist Jon O'Dell struggles to make ends meet while taking care of his daughters. Desperate, he hires Tess to babysit, but could she also be what he needs to mend his broken heart?

[Forget the Stars](#)

A friends-to-lovers, second-chance, rock star romance.

Chad and Molly were best friends in childhood, but life tore them apart. Now, as adults, they come together again on tour and soon find that they could be more than just friends.

Warrior Blue

An enemies-to-lovers, tattoo artist, grumpy/sunshine romance.

After a tragic accident leaves his twin brother permanently disabled, Blake doesn't believe he deserves love. But Audrey is determined to prove him wrong.

The Life We Have

An age gap, friends-to-lovers, rock star, MM romance.

Drummer Greyson has been living a lie—until he meets Zach. Now, the secrets he's been keeping are begging to be told.

Where We Went Wrong

An enemies-to-lovers, dark romance.

She's everything he knows he shouldn't want. He's bad, he's broken, and she's perfect. Innocent, even. But Vinnie Marino is desperate to be better, and Andy might be exactly what he needs. If he can just keep the demons from the past at bay ...

Scars & Silver Linings

A friends-to-lovers, pregnancy, military romance.

Life has dealt Kenny a bad hand when she loses her boyfriend and has her baby prematurely. But with the help of a very friendly and attentive bartender, can things ever get better again?

A Circle of Crows

A strangers-to-lovers, Scottish romantic suspense.

Rosie Allan goes to Scotland to help solve the murder of her sister, not to warm the heart of a lonely, grumpy Scotsman...

Hoping for Hemingway

An age gap, mildly forbidden, friends-to-lovers romance.

At forty-two, Clara isn't sure she'll ever meet a man who fits her standards. That is, until she meets August Gordon, an attractive author. The only problem is, he's much younger. Can she get over being the older woman?

32 Rowan Blvd

A single parent, friends-to-lovers, delivery guy, small town romance.

Christy was abandoned by her boyfriend after finding herself unexpectedly pregnant. Now, while she's living the single-mom life, her love life is feeling a little stagnant. Until she meets Kev, her usual delivery guy—the same man who delivered her pregnancy test two years ago.

The Girl in the Front Row

A rock star, small town romance.

Lennon Jacobs was born with a rare eye condition that has left her feeling less than worthy. But can her favorite rock star convince her that she's more than worthy of his affection—and everything else she wants in life?

The Hero in Her Story

A sister's best friend, enemies to lovers, secret relationship romance.

Tarryn King has always been a thorn in Connor Jacobs' side, ever since she became best friends with his disabled little sister. But after he gives her the T-shirt off his back, he realizes that it's possible to be jealous of an inanimate object ... and that he wants his sister's best friend more than he hates her.

The Kinney Brothers Series

A contemporary romance series about Irish-American brothers and the women each one falls in love with.

One Night to Fall (Kinney Brothers #1)

To Fall for Winter (Kinney Brothers #2)

Last Chance to Fall (Kinney Brothers #3)

Hope to Fall (Kinney Brothers #4)