

THE STORM

Cleo White

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CHAPTER ONE

Cassian

“I don’t think we’re going to have a busy day and this storm is looking like it’s going to be intense. Should we send everyone home?”

I turn, staring out at the snow coming down on the street outside the shop, forcing away even our most intrepid clients. I don’t blame them. Behind me, my business partner Jace rattles around in his desk which is crammed next to mine in the tiny back office, oblivious to my preoccupation.

We should send everyone home. It’s the responsible thing to do, let everyone get home before the roads get too bad and a weather warning goes into effect, save ourselves the overhead of half a dozen bored tattoo artists with access to unlimited ink and needles. Pretty soon, somebody is going to suggest tattooing somebody else, someone will break out a bottle of whisky, and the day will go downhill from there. No, we’re better off cutting our losses and closing up for the day. But that would mean I won’t get to see *her*.

It’s a fucked-up obsession, even I know that. I’ve been in Luna’s life, well, always. Jace was my best friend growing up, I was around for all the shit he got into, including getting his high school girlfriend pregnant. I was there when Luna was born, when she went to kindergarten, when she graduated High School. I was the one who convinced Jace to let her take a year off to go traveling before starting college.

She went everywhere, sending me pictures of the incredible places she found and all the amazing people she met from every corner of the world. One year turned to two, then three. She worked along the way, taking a few months off at a time to wait tables in Amsterdam or clean hotel rooms in Paris. A romantic, bohemian existence, and no less than I would expect of my free-spirited pseudo-niece. I was fucking proud of her.

Then, about six months ago, she called Jace to tell him she'd decided it was time to come home, start college and get back to the "real world". *Finally*. Overjoyed, he'd booked her a plane ticket and not even two days later, I was standing with Jace, his wife Natalie, and their youngest daughter Sunny at luggage claim at JFK, waiting for Luna to arrive.

I wasn't paying a lot of attention to what was going on around me, too distracted by who was coming down the escalators ahead of us. I was never the type to chase younger women. At nearly thirty-seven, I valued experience and confidence in my sexual partners and appreciated that most women my own age didn't ask for more than I had to give.

This woman though. God damn. She couldn't have been older than her early twenties but one look at her made me want to throw out every single rule I had. My cock had become uncomfortably hard in my jeans, pressing viciously against my fly as my eyes roamed hungrily over golden tan legs in cutoff shorts and a tiny waist, begging for me put my hands on it.

It wasn't until Sunny squealed and ran forward that I realized, a moment too late, the stunning creature on the escalators was Luna.

I barely recognized her. Three years abroad had effectively shed her of the last traces of childhood. Her face had slimmed, her belly had flattened, she'd changed her hair and pierced her nose. Suddenly, I was struggling to breathe, trying frantically to get myself under control as Luna greeted her family.

Then she'd turned her gaze to me, smiled, and the whole world shifted beneath my feet.

Call it love at second-first sight, obsession or what-the-fuck-ever, I'd walked into that airport a free man and walked out owned completely by a woman I'd never have.

It's enough to fuck up anyone's head and make them do irrational things. Like keep their entire staff at work in a snowstorm just so they won't have to spend the next two days without their drug of choice.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, feeling a headache coming on as Jace continues to rattle around behind me, looking for God knows what.

“Hey guys.” My eyes snap open as my head turns automatically toward the door of the office, so quickly I twinge a muscle in my neck. Cursing, I rub it, gazing blearily at the angel leaning against the doorframe in black leggings and a plain t-shirt.

Luna’s eyes widen in alarm. “Are you alright, Cass?”

I wave her off, backing away to the farthest point in the office from the door and sinking own on the radiator. “Just strained a muscle. I’m fine.”

“I could rub it if you-“

“Nope.” I drop my hand from my neck, even though it’s still throbbing. “Already fine.”

“What’s up, Luna-Tuna?” Asks Jace, smiling obligingly at his daughter. She’d been looking for a job when our receptionist decided to follow her boyfriend to Nevada and Jace was thrilled to give her the job. He hadn’t even told me, assuming I wouldn’t care, so I’d just walked in one day and there she was.

Now my torment isn’t reserved for family dinners and the occasional party. No, now I burn every fucking day.

Luna tilts her toward the side of the shop where the artists have their own rooms. “I thought you’d like to know that Nancy is currently placing a stencil of a pizza slice on Tommy’s ass. In case you want to get out in front of that.”

Jace chuckles, shaking his head. “Christ. Yes. Tell them to go home. Call up whoever is left on the schedule for today and bump them, would you Luna?” She nods, giving me one last look before vanishing as Jace picks up his phone, speaking to me over his shoulder as his thumbs fly over the screen. “I’ve got to get Sunny from school, I don’t want her walking in this. Do you mind giving Luna a ride back to her place?”

It’s a perfectly reasonable request. Luna’s apartment is only a few blocks away from mine, and I go right by it. Still,

the thought of five minutes alone in the car with her is enough to make me screw up my face and wince.

“Um.” Jace and I both look around to see that Luna’s returned, her lips are pulled into a pained smile and my heart sinks, realizing she saw my dismay at being asked to give her a ride. Shit. “I forgot to ask if you wanted me to post anything to the shop’s social media pages about the closure.”

“Sure.” Jace tells her, oblivious to the underlying tension in the room. “Cass is going to give you a ride home since he’s heading that way anyway. I don’t want Sunny out in this.”

“That’s okay.” Luna says a little too quickly, looking anywhere but at me. “I’ll get a rideshare, seriously don’t worry about it.” And she’s gone again, leaving Jace and I in stilted silence.

“What was that about?” My best friend asks, turning to me with a frown.

“No idea.” I heave myself off the radiator, heading over to my own desk chair where I can pretend to look busy.

Jace isn’t put off though. “You guys have been cold as fuck for months now. She used to be your little bud, what the hell happened? Did you have a fight?”

My “little bud” grew up into the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen and the only way I can resist bending her over the nearest flat surface and fucking her senseless is by keeping as much distance as possible between us. The Atlantic Ocean would be ideal but being an asshole will have to do.

“We didn’t fight, Jace.” I sigh, fighting to keep my expression impassive. Hiding something like this from the person who knows you best in this world is a fucking uphill battle. “She’s an adult now. She doesn’t idolize me anymore. I don’t know what to tell you.”

Thankfully, Jace seems to accept this and turns back to his computer. “Just take her home, alright?” He insists over his shoulder. “I don’t want her getting in the back of a rideshare in a snowstorm.”

How the hell am I supposed to argue with that?

I linger in the back office, making up shit to do, while the shop empties, everyone talking happily about their snow day plans. I can hear Luna's voice speaking indistinctly from her desk in the lobby in a sweet, apologetic tone, presumably calling all the clients who had appointments for later today. We're booked out for months, but thankfully this was a light day so the closure won't mean too many late nights and weekends playing catch up.

When the shop is finally silent and the sound of Luna gathering her things can be heard, I finally venture out, bracing myself.

She glances at me out the corner of her eye while pulling on a pair of fluffy black snow boots. "You didn't have to stay."

"I told Jace I'd give you a ride."

Her lips press together in a flat line as she bends down to push her sneakers under the desk. "I already called a car."

Christ, her ass looks incredible in those leggings. I have to bite the inside of my cheek hard enough to draw blood just to stop my cock from hardening. "Cancel it."

Luna heaves a sigh and straightens up, crossing her arms tightly over her chest. "Look, Cass, I don't know what I did to you exactly, but I know you don't want to drive me home any more than I want to be driven home by someone who so clearly hates to be in my company now. So why don't we just tell Dad you drove me and save both of us the misery."

My gut twists. She always did know how to make me feel like shit. "Luna--"

She shakes her head, honey brown curls bobbing beneath her knitted hat. "Just don't, okay? Don't insult us both by denying it." She snatches her purse off the reception desk and pulls it over her shoulder before marching to the door. As she pulls it open, a gust of icy air blows into the shop, snowflakes coating the non-slip mat in the few seconds it takes her to get outside and slam the door behind her.

I stand there, feeling like the biggest asshole on the planet as Luna's bright pink jacket vanishes from sight outside the shop windows. I can't let her go out in this though. It's my fault I feel the way I do for her, she shouldn't be getting a ride from a stranger in a snowstorm just because I can't keep ahold of myself.

No fucking way.

I'm out the door before I even have a chance to zip up my coat, fully prepared to chase down an Uber. It's freezing outside, the snow coming down so hard I have to squint in either direction, almost sagging in relief as I see Luna's coat a little way up the street, huddled in the doorway of a closed dry cleaner, poking at her phone screen.

"Luna!" I yell over the howling wind, jogging up to her while the cold burns at my exposed face and hands. At the end of our little one-way side street, I see a snowplow drive by, adding to the bank of snow which is cutting us off from getting out of here without damn-near getting hypothermia. Shit.

"My car was canceled!" Luna tells me as I approach, her teeth already chattering. "I'm trying to get another one. Don't worry--"

But I nudge her shoulder, pointing to the other end of the street which is also clearly unpassable. "Come inside the shop." I take her arm, tugging her back the way we'd come. "We're snowed in."

CHAPTER TWO

Luna

There's nothing quite so humiliating as an unrequited crush.

I know he doesn't want me, I know he doesn't even like me, but still my stupid, masochistic heart flutters when Cassian Rowe so much as blinks in my direction.

It's nothing new. I've always been desperate to be the center of Cass's world. As a child I'd pouted and sulked when he went out to the bar with friends instead of coming to dinner at my parent's house. They used to joke that I was his "little bud" which was cute until I got to be about sixteen and had my first orgasm to thoughts of him.

After that, being called the "little bud" of a man you're madly infatuated with is just mortifying.

By the time my eighteenth birthday was approaching, I had this whole fantasy worked up in my head, where I would become an adult, Cass would see me and *just know* I was the only woman for him.

It didn't happen.

Obviously.

At my eighteenth birthday dinner, Cass gave me a gift card to my favorite bookstore and left early to meet his date.

So, I did what every broken-hearted heroine who's gripped with a serious case of unrequited love does in every romance book I've ever read.

I left.

It hurt for a while, being away from everyone and everything I ever knew, but slowly I found happiness out in the world. I grew confident and strong, blossoming before my own eyes into the kind of person I always wanted to be.

I was *so sure* I was over my silly adolescent crush.

My first ever kiss was with a semi-famous actor in Luxembourg and after that had a brief relationship with an Australian surfer who looked like his abs had been chiseled out of marble. Surely Cassian wouldn't impress me anymore now that I'd been with men like that.

My heart was safe. I could go home.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

I'd only had to step off the plane and see his face for all those feelings to come rushing back twice as powerful as before. This wasn't puppy love anymore, it was something deeper, more powerful.

Only this time it was so much worse because I wasn't just Cass's *little bud* anymore, I was nothing to him at all. He'd taken one look at that shiny, new person I'd become for all of two seconds and decided "*nope, not for me*". He didn't hug me in the airport, just patted my shoulder and rode home in the back seat with me and Sunny, leaning over against the window, his shoulders hunched so his arm didn't brush against mine.

It's been months, and I foolishly keep expecting the ice to thaw, that one day he'll ruffle my hair or give me that crooked grin which was once reserved just for me.

Nope. The man I've loved all my life barely looks at me anymore. He's cold and distant and disinterested in anything I say. Today, I'd doubled back to talk to Dad and the sight of Cass's grimace at being asked to spend *less than five minutes* alone with me was as brutal as being dunked in a barrel of ice water.

It *hurt*.

It hurt so much that I snapped at him, unable to stop myself from betraying just a tiny bit of the pain I've felt from his indifference, something I've been resolutely trying not to do for months.

Now I'm trapped in the shop with him as the largest snowstorm New York has seen in a decade blankets the city

outside, effectively eliminating any chance I have of getting home and curling up in my bed to cry my eyes out in peace.

“I think we have a space heater in the back.” Mumbles Cass, who’s been busying himself locking up the shop, texting my parents and watering the plant in the corner to avoid looking at me.

I pull my knees up to my chest on one of the waiting room’s couches and stare blankly out the window at the storm, hoping and praying that a snowplow will drive by and save me from having to spend one more minute here.

Objectively, Blink & Ink is as good a place as any to wait it out. We have plenty of snacks, water, blankets, and an endless supply of weird, black and white Russian movies from Sasha’s station. It’s the closest place to a real home that I have.

I still can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be less right now though.

I’m dimly aware of Cass reentering the room and plugging in the space heater over by my desk. It’s not really necessary, considering the heat hasn’t dropped in here at all, but I’m not going to argue with him. In fact, I’m not going to speak to him at all unless the damn roof caves in and I need to find out where we keep the shovels.

“Luna?” I blink, looking over at the tattooed, bear of a man standing in the corner. He nods toward the back of the shop. “Do you want to eat? I was going to make some instant noodles or something.”

I shake my head mutely and go back to staring out the window, my heart aching in my chest. I expect to hear Cass lumbering off but to my surprise there’s movement in the corner of my vision and I turn to see him sitting down on the old, cracked leather sofa across from me.

I hate that my heart *still* squeezes at the sight of him, but I can’t help it.

He’s beautiful.

I’m sure there aren’t a lot of people who would characterize Cass as that, but he is. His hands are lined with

fading tattoos that disappear under the wrists of his black shirt and reappear on his neck, finally vanishing for good at the line of his thick beard. *All of him* is thick and big and muscled, but his tattoos are legendary for their delicate lines. He's a walking, talking contradiction, and I can't remember a time when I wasn't fascinated by him.

Even when I've wished I wasn't.

Hell, *especially* when I wished I wasn't.

Unable to just sit there in tense silence for even one more minute I get up and pace to the window, tugging my coat closer around me. I don't know if I've ever felt so lonely in my life, even when I first left to go travel. Maybe I should quit Blink & Ink. The money is good, the hours are flexible and Dad would be bummed, but the tradeoff of not having to have my heart stepped on daily by Cassian Rowe is sounding pretty appealing right about now.

"Luna." Cass says my name, his voice gentler than I've heard it in ages. "Come sit down."

I ignore him and speak tonelessly to the cold window. "I think the storm is supposed to last until Tuesday, but I bet it will slow down enough them to get ahead of the plowing tomorrow--"

"*Luna.*" He says again, his voice is rough and exhausted sounding, more vulnerable than I've ever heard it.

Reluctantly, I turn.

Cass is leaning forward on the couch, his forearms braced on his knees and his brow furrowed. He looks... Not like the cold, remote man I've come to know for the last several months. "I'm sorry."

I blink, surprised despite myself, and immediately begin mentally running down the list of Cass's offenses to decide which is the most likely for him to be apologizing for. I decide it's the look he had on his face when Dad asked him to give him a ride. He probably just doesn't want to sit here with me being pissed at him for god-knows how long.

“It’s whatever.” I wince. “I get it. Shitty weather. I wouldn’t want to go out of my way to drive someone either.” *It wasn’t out of the way at all*, but maybe if I let him off the hook for this one, I’ll be able to get through this nightmare with some shred of dignity intact.

As if either of us could forget the little speech I gave before my ill-fated attempt to leave.

Cass doesn’t look relieved though, instead he drops his head, like he can’t bear to look at me. Whatever. Maybe his conscience has finally caught up with him and he feels somewhat guilty for treating me like shit for months, or maybe he just doesn’t want to be stuck here with me.

Either way, I’ll do both of us a favor and get out of his face.

“I’m going to go sleep on Dad’s table.” I announce, plucking one of the blankets Cass collected off my desk and march back down the hallway to the tattoo rooms without a backward glance.

It’s noon, there’s no way I’ll actually be able to sleep, but I’d rather pretend than be subjected to Cass’s halfhearted attempts to fill in the giant fucking crater where our relationship once stood. Dad’s room is right at the back of the studio, with nearly two decades worth of polaroids on the walls, each displaying one of the tattoos he did. There’s a big leather chair that folds down into a flat table in the center of the room and I go about reconfiguring it in silence.

I used to love coming here when I was a kid. My Dad and Cass apprenticed here when I was only a toddler, and the old owner, James, was good about letting me hang out and color in the back office when my mom was at work. I still remember sitting on the floor with my markers, adding color to the black snake tattooed on Cass’s leg while the rhythmic buzz of the tattoo machine echoed in my ears.

I still love the noise, it’s soothing, though I don’t have any tattoos of my own. Dad offered when I first got back from abroad, but I’ve been putting it off.

I want tattoos. Of course I do, considering what I do for work and where I grew up, but whenever I imagined the first person putting ink to my skin, it was always Cass.

Maybe that's what I need to do to move on. Have sex, get a tattoo, try to get to know men who might *actually like me*.

Shaking myself from my self-pitying spiral, I lay the blanket out on the table and crawl on, wrapping myself up like a burrito. I feel numb and tired and cold.

I want to go home.

No, I want to get on the next plane and never come back, because running away again is suddenly looking like the only way to not feel like this anymore. It worked before, it could work again.

Maybe it's cliché of me, but I want what my parents have. They had me when they were so young, not even seventeen, and both their families were furious. Still, they stuck together through the hard stuff and came out the other side as the happiest couple I know. Dad still brings Mom flowers after work every single Friday, they have date nights and I've found cheesy little letters they wrote each other around their apartment.

It's why I haven't had sex yet, even though I'm probably the oldest virgin on the planet at twenty-one, because some romantic little part of me wants my *first* to be my *only*.

My eyes burn as a set of heavy footsteps come down the hall, pausing outside the door to my Dad's room. He can't see my face from this angle, and I work to keep my breathing even and steady, like I really am sleeping.

After what feels like forever, Cass moves on, and down the hall I hear the door to the office open and close quietly.

A little sob escapes my lips and I press my face against the blankets, trembling, just as I hear the unmistakable thud of a fist being driven through sheetrock.

CHAPTER THREE

Cassian

It will never cease to amaze me how I can be so fucking sure I'm doing the right thing, then life throws it all back in my face like *'think again asshole'*.

I'd known Luna was hurt by my cold behavior, of course I did, but to be confronted with the actual, real-life evidence of it and see the pain in her eyes from my actions is borderline unbearable. I'm hurting her, I've *been* hurting her, all in the name of keeping myself under control.

What is wrong with me that I can't just keep going like things always were, and hope that this burning attraction passes?

A part of me knows that it's because *it isn't going to pass*, and the pain in my fist from hitting the wall is like a constant, throbbing reminder of the power Luna has over me.

I have to do something though, because as sure as I am that I can never do anything about my feelings for her, I'm equally sure I can *never* see that look on Luna's face again. I'd rather go lay down in the snow and stay there.

After lingering in the back office for hours, trying in vain to formulate a game plan, I finally venture out late in the afternoon. The snow outside would probably reach my knees now and with the wind blowing up against the front of the building, I almost can't see outside to the darkening street. Luna still hasn't made an appearance but when she does, I can have warm food ready.

The break room is well provisioned and it's easy enough to throw a few cans of soup in bowls and put them in the microwave, all while keeping my eye trained on the long hallway beyond, looking for signs of life from Jace's tattoo room.

If she isn't coming out, then I'm going in.

Luckily, I'm just pouring the soup into two large mugs when a slight shadow slips from the room, her back to me, and pads softly down toward the lobby. I almost sag in relief and follow, heart hammering against my rib cage.

I'm terrified that when I look in her eyes, the vulnerability I saw in them earlier will have hardened to ice over the last few hours. I'd deserve it, it would probably make keeping my distance from her a whole lot easier, but it might break me too.

Fuck, I'm a selfish piece of work.

"Hey, I made us something to eat." Luna is facing the window when I enter the lobby, lingering awkwardly in the doorway of my own shop while she watches the snow.

When she turns, my heart sinks. She looks exhausted.

In silence, we sit down on opposite couches, and I push the mug of soup and half a package of crackers toward her. She looks so beautiful silhouetted by the falling snow and darkening sky. Have I ever looked at a woman before and just felt awe? I don't think so.

"Listen, Luna." I clear my throat. "I know I've been an ass, I just want to make it clear that it's about me. Not you. I've been going through some shit and-" It sounds like a lame ass excuse, even to my own ears, but I plow on anyway, "I haven't handled it well. That's all. I'm sorry."

Luna stirs her soup for a moment, her expression unreadable. When she finally looks up, there's resentful defiance burning behind those beautiful eyes. "It sure feels like it's *about me*, Cass. You're the same person to everyone else, nice to everyone else, I'm the only one you avoid and snap at." She shakes her head in disgust and drops her spoon to the table, leaning back on the sofa and drawing her knees up to her chest.

"We used to text every day. You'd make jokes with me, send me funny articles, pictures of the tattoos you did. I took one step off that plane and it was like you saw how much I've

changed and..." Whatever she believes that I think about her is lost as her words trail away miserably.

God. I fucking ache to step right over this table, pull her into my arms and never let go. That's my whole world sitting over there.

My whole world thinks that I hate the incredible person she's become.

"Luna." My voice breaks and I clear my throat, scrambling desperately for some reasonable explanation for my behavior other than the truth. She's so damn smart, sees so much, calls me out on all my bullshit. How the hell am I supposed to lie to her face and make her believe it?

She stares at me expectantly and my mind is completely blank. I don't know what to say, what to do, how to do right by her. Apparently sitting there staring at her with a bewildered look on my face isn't enough because eventually Luna scoffs, shaking her head and uncurls herself to go back to her soup.

My hands follow suit numbly, and for a long time there's no sound apart from the wind howling outside and our spoons clinking against the mugs. When my phone buzzes on the wood table between us we both look over and see Jace's name on the screen.

Feeling sick, I hit accept and put it on speaker.

"Hey man. You're on speakerphone."

Jace laughs. "How are you guys doing? Staying warm?"

My cock twitches in my pants as my mind immediately jumps to all the ways I could keep Luna warm that have nothing to do with the space heater running in the corner.

Luna smiles bravely, as though her father can see her. "Sure are. Cass made some soup. Are you and Mom and Sunny alright?"

Jace sighs. "Yeah, we're fine. My car is completely buried in snow from the plow, or I would come get you guys."

"We miss you Luna and Cass!" Sunny's voice calls from the background and Jace laughs again. I can imagine them all

bundled up in Jace and Natalie's apartment, likely watching the Princess Bride and drinking hot chocolate. My own parents are assholes, I've got no siblings, no wife, no kids. Jace's family is as good as my own, which makes my feelings for Luna all the more messed up.

"Miss you guys too." Says Luna, her voice too upbeat and high to be genuine. How does nobody hear it but me?

"Just wanted to check in. See if we needed to send in a rescue chopper." I can hear the sound of clattering in the background, like he's cooking.

Almost the moment the words leave his mouth, the humming of the space heater and electronics die away. The overhead lights flicker off and suddenly the shop is deathly, eerily silent. Outside, the streetlights flicker off and we're plunged into near complete darkness.

Through the gloom, my eyes meet Luna's, and a moment of silent understanding passes between us. If Jace knew the power was out, he would be hiking out here through the storm to meet us. We'll be fine, and even if we're not, the phone still works.

"You guys there?" My oldest friend asks, and I clear my throat.

"Yup. Still here I'm going to hop off though, I need to go find my phone charger."

"Alright, you two. Have fun. Get some of that bookkeeping done while you're stuck there!"

I hang up and stare mutely at Luna. I can barely see her, but I can still tell she looks exhausted.

"It'll be okay." I assure her. "The city prioritizes maintaining power on residential streets in storms like this, but we hopefully won't be down for more than a few hours."

Luna nods, standing and crossing to her desk. A moment later there's a flicker of light and she returns with a scented candle which casts a faint glow over the waiting room where we're sitting. "My phone is dead." She reports grimly and I pick up my own, wincing when I see the battery at only 10%.

“It’ll be fine.” I assure her again, trying to ignore my own prickling of disquiet. “The shop is well insulated. The heat should hold for a while.”

By the time two hours have passed, I’m proven wrong.

The icy wind battering the shop has found its way through the walls and despite both of us being wrapped in our coats and every blanket in the shop, Luna’s teeth are chattering.

I’m faring better, considering I’m about twice her size, and practically sweating from the dread and anticipation which has been welling inside me since I saw that first little shiver from Luna.

I can’t get the power back on or walk home with her in sub-zero temperatures during a snowstorm, but there is one sure fire way I can keep her warm.

“Come here.” Luna looks up sharply as my words break the hours long silence.

She frowns at me, even as she gives a particularly violent shiver and she can barely reply her teeth are chattering so hard. “W- w- why?”

“So you don’t get hypothermia, Luna.” She stands reluctantly and squeaks when I shove the blankets off her shoulders. Her puffy coat won’t do any good if she’s not warm underneath, so I unzip that too, until she’s standing in just a thin white t-shirt and leggings. I unzip my own coat and gather her in my lap, pulling the blankets over us both and leaning back against the arm of the couch, our legs tangled together.

Luna’s skin is ice cold, but she sighs with relief when my arms surround her and nestles closer, her head tucked just under my chin. Through our clothes I can feel every one of her curves pressed against me and I have to grit my teeth against a groan when one of her arms winds around my torso, pulling us more securely together.

Jesus Christ.

“Thank you, Cass.” She murmurs and reflexively, I press a kiss to her hair. This might be the only chance I have to hold her in my arms, and it be the right thing for both of us. I’m sure as fuck going to enjoy it.

“Better?” I ask, greedily breathing in her the sweet, floral scent of her hair.

Luna nods against me, and I can feel she’s already getting warmer. Her shivering has stopped, and her skin is absorbing the heat from mine. “Feels good.” She mumbles.

It does feel good. Dangerously good. I don’t remember the last time I held someone like this or had someone else’s arms around me for comfort rather than sex.

It’s easy to pretend, just for a second, that everything is different. That Luna is here because she wants to be, that this will happen again, that in the morning I’ll wake with her hot mouth around my- *shit*.

The briefest thought of Luna’s lips around my cock is enough to send blood rushing to it. I freeze, heart hammering as I try to think of the most unarousing, unappealing things I can.

It’s too late though, and I’m surrounded by Luna’s scent, her beautiful body is in my arms, wrapped around me like a lover.

My cock hardens beneath the thigh she has slung over my lap, impossible to miss. I expect her to roll off me, to gasp, *something*, but Luna doesn’t move a muscle.

With a jolt, I realize why. Her breathing is deep and even, her muscles are relaxed, and even the hand clutching my side has softened.

Luna is asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

Luna

Someone is holding me. Normally I'd be more concerned by this, considering I've never woken up next to someone, especially a very large, male feeling someone with thick arms and a beard brushing against my neck, but I have more pressing worries at the moment.

Like the long, thick bulge pressed against my ass and the big hand that's slipped beneath my shirt and is teasing my nipple with callused fingers.

My eyes pop open.

I'm staring out at the lobby of Blink & Ink, curled on my side on the leather couch with early morning sunlight filtering in through the front window. It's still snowing but the power came back on sometime in the night and the shop is warm.

Cass is behind me. I vaguely remember him pulling me into his arms late last night and feeling immediate relief and comfort from his big, warm body against mine. I'd been next to him then, but we must have shifted in the night, my father's best friend winding himself around my back. Touching me.

I have to bite my lip to stop myself from whimpering out loud as Cass's thumb lazily swipes over my nipple, sending another wave of hot arousal straight to my core.

It's just a physical reaction. Morning wood is a real thing from what I've heard, and of course Cass would subconsciously gravitate toward a woman's body that happened to be in his arms when he was worked up like this.

It doesn't mean anything.

I should get up and save both of us the embarrassment which would come from him waking up like this. That's definitely the best thing to do. But as Cass rolls his hips

against me, groaning softly right in my ear, I'm powerless to do anything other than fight back a moan of own.

I feel so good in his arms. On the few other occasions I messed around with guys, I always felt tense and awkward. I was overly aware of the sounds I was making, *are they too loud or too soft? Do I sound like a porn star? Was that a sound out in the hall, is his roommate coming back?* I didn't feel like I could combust on the spot or die if he didn't touch me more.

It wasn't like this.

Holy shit.

Cass starts to thrust against me a little harder, his hand gripping my breast harder to keep me in place. It's wrong, he's sleeping, he doesn't know this is me. I have to bite my lip harder to stop myself from making a noise or grinding back against him, no matter how desperate I am for friction against my soaking wet center.

Then a gravelly voice sounds in my ear, mumbling a single word over and over again. "*Luna.*"

I could weep with frustration, but I don't want to move and for this to be over. He's dreaming about *me*. He might be asleep, but his subconscious at least wants the woman in his arms to be *me*.

It shouldn't mean anything, I shouldn't let this give me hope, but I can't help it. I've been in love with this man my entire life and this is the first time he's shown any sign at all that it might not be entirely unreciprocated.

Cass groans in my ear and his thrusts stutter. I can feel the length of his cock through my leggings and his jeans, twitching while he presses it tightly against me. Hips grinding just a little more like he's trying to milk every last bit of pleasure from his orgasm.

Holy crap.

My mind is still reeling, trying to wrap itself around what just happened when I feel the change in Cass. His whole body goes tense and his breathing changes from deep and even to a

panicked hiss. The hand holding my breast is ripped back and Cass practically throws himself over the back of the couch. Rolling over, I can see him staring down at me in horror.

Ouch.

I sit up, pushing my hair out of my face, trying not to look too distraught by his reaction and careful not to say a word. That's just what I need, for him to think that I've gotten overly attached just from him dry humping my ass and feeling me up while he slept. I might be inexperienced, but I'm not *that* inexperienced.

Cass rubs both hands over his face. "Shit. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." And without so much as another glance at me, he turns on his heel and vanished down the hall toward the tattoo rooms.

Just what every girl wants to hear when she wakes up with her long-time crush for the first time "*Shit. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*"

Despite Cass's reaction though, I feel a whole lot better today than I did yesterday. Even if it's still snowing fiercely outside, and the powdery white drift nearly covers the window.

He said my name.

Over and over again.

On the front desk, the phone rings sharply and I jump, stepping over discarded blankets to reach it.

"Blink and Ink, this is Luna, how may I help you?"

"Hey kiddo!" Dad's voice comes from the phone, sounding cheery. "How's life in the shop? I tried to call earlier but it wouldn't go through."

I lean my hip against the desk and peek around the corner to see if Cass is around, but he must be hiding out in the bathroom or back office. "We lost power for a little while, but it's all good now. What does the news say about the storm?"

Dad sighs distractedly. "It's a doozy. Probably looking at another day of this before it slows down enough for the roads

to be cleared. The governor declared a state of emergency, nobody's supposed to be out except first responders."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Listen. Since you're there, do you mind getting ahead on all the rebooking? I'll pay you overtime. Just tell Cass."

Privately, I think the likelihood of Cass staying in the same room as me long enough for me to form a complete sentence is looking pretty low, but I'm not about to tell Dad that. Or that it's because his oldest friend dry humped me on his favorite leather couch.

"Sure." I agree, clicking on the computer and wincing at the number of appointments we have booked over the next few days. It's going to take forever to get through these and bicker with the artists about when they're willing to work late.

"Thanks, Luna-Tuna. Mom says hi. Love you."

"I say hi back. Love you too."

I hang up with a sigh and make the trek back to the women's bathroom where we thankfully keep a little self-care basket for our clients. My hair is a rat's nest but I'm able to work my fingers through it and brush my teeth before opening the door, almost knocking right into Cass who is coming out of the men's.

My stomach flips when I see he's changed his pants.

"Hey." I attempt a smile that he doesn't return. "Um. Dad said that you guys would pay me overtime to get all the scheduling cleared up from the storm closure."

He nods curtly, looking at the wall over my left shoulder, his jaw locked and tense. "That's fine."

We stand there for a minute, locked in the most loaded silence I've ever experienced in my life. Part of me wants to throw my arms around his neck and kiss him senseless, another wants to hit him for being such an asshole. Mostly though, *I just want to talk*. "Listen, Cass--"

But he shakes his head, cutting me off before I can even attempt it. “We’re not discussing this, Luna. It was a mistake, I was dreaming about an ex, it won’t happen again. Let’s just be adults about this, call it extenuating circumstances and let it go.”

He is the most aggravating man alive, and I know what he’s doing by pretending he was dreaming about an ex, and suggesting I was just a convenient, warm body to rub against. He’s trying to hurt me, and it confirms there’s a lot more going on here than meets the eye.

The strange mystery of Cass’s behavior over the last month is starting to make a little more sense when I look at it in the right context.

That maybe, just maybe, he wants me too.

I plant my hands on my hips, frowning up at him. “You’re lying.”

His eyes snap down to mine, widening slightly. “What the fuck does that mean, Luna?”

“It means you’re lying! You were saying my name, Cass. You weren’t dreaming about an *ex*.” I spit the word, my stomach souring just at the thought of Cass with someone else.

His nostrils flair. “I was *dreaming*, Luna. I didn’t have control over any of it. Even if it *was* you, I swear to God, you’re the last person in the world I would want to fuck.”

Oh.

I take an unsteady step back. If I’d thought Cass’s cold disinterest hurt before, it’s nothing compared to the cruelty of his words now. He might not know I feel the way I do, maybe he does, but either way his words have found their mark.

“Luna-“ The cold, callous expression on Cass’s face has vanished, and suddenly he looks just as wrecked as I feel.

I don’t want to hear it. I won’t stand there and nod politely, pretending my heart wasn’t just shattered to pieces in my chest while he apologizes to make himself feel better.

Fuck. That.

I turn on my heel, heading back to the lobby, tears blurring my vision.

Stupid. I'm so stupid. Even the faintest hint that maybe he wants me just a little bit, and I lunge for it like a dog for a bone.

Cass is right. He can't control his dreams. He's literally trapped in a *not-nearly-big-enough* shop with me right now. I was sleeping in his arms. It's no wonder he dreamed about me.

"Luna!" He calls after me just as I reach the lobby but I ignore him, sitting down my desk and carefully turning my head toward the computer so he can't see me cry. I click the first appointment I see and pick up the phone to start dialing.

A big, tattooed hand plucks it out of my grasp though, and shoves it back down on the receiver. "Luna." Cass says again, and I've never heard him sound so desperate.

Maybe he's afraid I'll tell my dad.

"It's fine, Cass." I try to keep my voice steady, still keeping my face turned away from him as big fat tears run down over my face. God, this is humiliating. "Really. Like you said, let's forget it."

"Luna." His warm hand comes up to cup my face and I realize he's kneeling on the floor behind me, making us nearly the same height. "Look at me, baby girl."

Gently, he pulls me around to look at him directly. We're only a foot apart now, and Cass's face crumples when he sees that I'm crying. Bringing up his other hand he smooths the tears away, even as they fall faster and harder. A sob bubbles in my throat. Why is he doing this? Why is he making me face him?

"Please." I whisper, my bottom lip trembling. I don't even know what I'm begging for, mercy maybe, for him to leave me alone and let me grieve in peace.

Cass runs his thumb over my lip, his dark eyes searching my face. "I didn't mean what I said back there, Luna. I didn't mean it at all."

I shake my head, resisting the urge to press my hands over my ears like a child. I don't want to hear this. I don't want to hear the stupid, consolation speech. If he tells me how beautiful I am and how happy I'm going to make some lucky man someday, I am going to throw up all over his shirt.

Taking a deep, gasping breath Cass leans forward, pressing his forehead to mine. "Oh, baby girl, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Fuck, please believe me. I never meant for any of this to happen. I never meant for you to get hurt."

I try to pull away, but he holds me steady, the pair of us entwined between the chair and the floor, locked together in our misery and guilt.

"Please let me go." I whimper but Cass shakes his head against me.

"I've tried, Luna. I've fucking tried."

And he moves forward, closing the distance between us, and claims my lips with his.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cassian

There have only been a few moments in my life that I'm sure I'll remember until the day I die.

Meeting Jace.

The first time I put needle to skin.

When Luna stepped off that airplane.

Right now.

If I thought she owned me before, it's nothing, *nothing* compared to what happens to me when my lips meet hers. Like something inside me slots into place, opening and destroying me all at once. Whatever it is, it's fucking permanent. I can feel her burning through my veins, changing me from the inside out.

Luna's frozen against me, her hands hovering over my chest like she's afraid to touch me, her breath trembling as I kiss her. My own hands grip her waist, dragging her body flush against mine, intoxicated by the taste and feeling of her.

Nothing has ever felt this good.

I can feel the exact instant she comes back to life, and the magnitude of this moment sinks into her bones. She doesn't wrap her arms around me or kiss me back though, instead her small hands plant right against the center of my chest and *push*.

Already thrown off balance by the kiss, I topple backward, sprawling on the floor, completely bewildered. What the hell just happened?

Luna is standing now, gazing down at me in undisguised fury. "What the hell is *wrong with you*, Cassian Rowe? You treat me like absolute *shit* for months and you think I'm going to just kiss you like that?"

Her cheeks are burning and the tears which were streaking down her face only a minute ago are gone, replaced by an undeniable righteous indignation.

I stumble to my feet, still trying to wrap my mind around what just happened. “You want me.” I say dumbly, echoing the realization which had washed over me in the seconds after I’d spit those hateful words at her to cover my own shame. I’m sure of it. She does want me.

Luna scoffs. “It doesn’t matter that I want you! I have enough self-respect to not let go of all the crap you’ve put me through just because you kiss me.”

God, she’s beautiful when she’s pissed off. “Luna-“

“No way. Are you kidding me?” She shakes her head, scowling fiercely. “I don’t want to hear it!”

I stand there bewildered, staring at her while she turns and sits back down at the computer, yanking her headphones out of the drawer and shoving them over her head.

“Luna.” I growl, stepping forward to pull her headphones back down around her neck. The look she gives me is both terrifying and sexy as fuck. Christ, I need to go to therapy.

“*What do you want?*” She snaps, turning in her chair to face me. “What part of that wasn’t clear to you, Cassian?”

“All of it!” She looks at me like I’m being purposely ignorant. “Seriously, Luna. Spell this out for me.”

Luna’s lips curl into a frown. “You’ve been cold and awful to me for *months*, Cass. Months. It hurt. I’ve had a thing for you for...” She trails off, shaking her head and a tiny crack of despair manages to find its way through her wall of anger. My heart wrenches as I see this whole situation with new eyes.

She wants me. She’s wanted me for ages. And the last few months I’ve been nothing but dismissive and cruel in my efforts to stay the hell away from her.

What would I have done that day in the airport if I’d known she felt the same way? Would it have changed anything?

Yes. I answer my own question with a rush of awful certainty. If I'd known Luna felt the way for me that I do for her, my willpower would have snapped months ago.

"I'm sorry." The words are woefully insufficient. "I didn't know. I never imagined--"

My words trail away as Luna's lips pull down unhappily. "I get it. Really. But it doesn't change anything, not really."

My whole-body aches to hold her again but I stay back, hovering there like a useless sack of shit while my girl hurts *because of me*. "Tell me what to do."

A bit of Luna's fire comes back at this. Leaning back in her chair she crosses her legs and gazes up at me from beneath her lashes. "If you want me..." Her eyes flick up and down my body appraisingly and my cock twitches, already supplying my imagination with all sorts of filthy things I could do to make Luna forgive me. "You'd better make me *forget* you're an *absolute asshole*."

In my defense, most of my experience in relationships has been in trying to figure out how to make them *end*.

I love Jace, but I always kind of pitied him for tying himself down so young. I don't claim to be the best-looking guy out there, but women seem to enjoy my particular brand of bulky, tattooed, and cranky. I've never had an issue attracting casual *arrangements*, and thankfully the ones who thought they could turn me into husband material seemed to evaporate around the time I turned thirty.

Since then, it's been a blissfully unattached string of divorcees and single moms who just want to use me like I use them. I never wanted more, never found someone who made me want to try to be that guy.

Until Luna.

For Luna, I would shovel a path to city hall, bang down the door and make her my wife before the end of the day. The problem isn't my commitment, it's her. Or rather, her knowing I'm committed.

I only have myself to blame.

I'd had so much shame for my newfound feelings for her that I haven't stopped to think this through. I'd *assumed* she didn't feel the same way, I'd *assumed* I was a damn creep, and look where it's landed me.

Trapped in the shop during the snowstorm of the century with the woman I love who is *working*.

"Hi, Jules? This is Luna calling from Blink and Ink, calling about your appointment with Jace tomorrow?"

I watch silently from the sofa while Luna works her way through the dozens of appointments we had scheduled for the next few days, rescheduling everyone, and apologizing for the inconvenience as if she can help the fact that the whole city is closed down. I half listen, waiting for one person to give her a hard time so I have an excuse to take out my frustration and ban the fucker from my shop for life.

When it becomes clear she isn't going to acknowledge me at all, I wander back to my tattoo room and return with a drawing pad and pencil. It's been a while since I sketched for the sake of it. Creating your client's vision all day long tends to make any artist a little burned out by the time they're off duty and I'm no exception.

Drawing helps me think though, and right now I need all the help I can get. Nothing is resolved, the situation is the same as it's always been, but everything has changed. Jace will be furious, I'm likely facing a fist to the nose when he finds out, but I can't bring myself to walk it back now.

Luna is mine, and once I get *us* squared away, I'll worry about Jace.

Time slips away, my attention glued to page in front of me and Luna's sweet voice in place of the heavy metal I usually play when I'm drawing. The room is warm and the snow has been blown so high against the building it creates a wall of bluish light where the window should be.

I don't even realize her voice has stopped until it comes from right behind me.

“That’s beautiful, Cass.” I look up in surprise to see Luna staring over my shoulder at the sketch I’ve been working on.

It’s an old gothic window that might have been plucked from the ruins of a forgotten castle, grown over with delicately curling vines and flowers. I pass the pad up to her and watch as she runs her fingers over the ink, eyes moving over it slowly, taking in all the little details I’d hidden.

“I’ll tattoo it on you, if you want.”

I’m not really expecting her to accept. Luna’s skin is a blank canvas, completely untouched despite the fact she works in a tattoo shop and is several years past the legal age. I’ve never spoken to her about it, but I always assumed in a family with more ink than exposed skin, *not* being tattooed was her own little rebellion.

To my surprise though, Luna bites her lips and nods hesitantly. “Okay.”

I put ink to skin every single day, all day. It’s been my job since I was eighteen years old and I’m pretty damn proud of co-owning one of the best shops in the city. My own books have been closed for years, and I work exclusively on the client base I cultivated over the beginning of my career. Nobody off the street could end up on my table, not that they don’t try.

I don’t get nervous. Haven’t felt so much as a tremble in my hands before a tattoo in over a decade.

This is different though. This is Luna. Luna’s *first* tattoo, and it has to be perfect.

I spend over an hour setting up and finishing my sketch, something that would normally take me only a few minutes. Luna *knows* too, damn it. I watch her smirk as I bumble around my tattoo room, spilling ink and dropping three needles on the ground in a row.

Cursing, I finally turn to her, forcing my face to remain impassive. Professional. “What were you thinking for placement?”

Luna bites her lip and blood surges to my cock. “The front of my thigh. Is that okay?”

Jesus Christ.

“Of course.” I clear my throat. “Um. I need to measure the area.”

I snap off my gloves as she steps into the room, stopping right in front of me while I pull the little cloth measuring table from off my station. She’s wearing leggings, thin enough I can feel the heat of her skin through them, and I think again about how good it felt to fall asleep with her soft, warm body curled against mine.

“Okay.” I jot down the measurements and look up to find her staring down at me, cheeks pink and pupils blown wide.

At least I’m not the only one suffering through this.

I have no damn idea how I’m going to convince this woman that I’m not an “*absolute asshole*” but hopefully the sexual frustration on both ends will push this along.

“Okay.” Luna echoes finally, blinking like she’s just realized we’ve been inches apart, staring at each other.

“I’m going to go wash my hands and print the stencil, then we’ll get started.”

CHAPTER SIX

Luna

This might have been an error in judgement.

I was so determined to make Cass work to make things right between us, but it's only been a few hours and I'm about to be laying on his tattoo table with no pants on. Wearing the same panties that have been pretty much continually wet since I woke up in his arms this morning.

It doesn't help that he's *hot* like this. Cass in tattoo mode, all confident and self-assured, is better than any buff romance book cover model or shirtless actor. He's going to be *touching me*. Okay, through gloves and while holding a needle to my skin, but still.

I'm doomed. The feminism leaves my body every time he so much as looks at me.

I slide onto the table, my heart fluttering in my chest as the sounds of him moving around the back of the shop echo through the wall.

He wants me. It's a heady, overwhelming feeling after being so convinced he doesn't for so long.

Cass's boots thud down the hall and I peek over my shoulder as he comes in, frowning at the stencil in his hands. I don't think he was expecting me to already be on the table because he stops short at the sight of me, eyes flashing to my bare legs, widening slightly.

I clear my throat and his head snaps up, blinking like he's forgotten what we're doing here. I raise my eyebrows expectantly and a dark look crosses his face. Stepping forward so he's looming above me, Cass reaches out to touch the skin he'll soon be marking forever.

"I won't pretend that I'm not attracted to you anymore, baby girl. If you want to make me pay for that shit I pulled, that's fine, I deserve it, but we're not going to go backwards."

His hand slides up to grip the very top of my inner thigh, not even an inch away from my absolutely soaked panties.

I squirm, spreading my thighs unconsciously and watch as a satisfied smile curls his lips. Cass brushes his thumb over the sensitive skin, barely a ghost of a touch and I gasp, more wetness spreading over my already damp panties.

“You’re so beautiful, Luna. Do you know how often I’ve jerked my cock to thoughts of you spread out for me just like this?” Can you have an orgasm just from someone touching your inner thigh? I whimper, my back arching off the table as Cass’s thumb continues to make leisurely strokes over my overheated skin. “Do you want me to touch you baby girl?”

Oh god. I do. I really, really do.

Tension is coiling low in my belly and he’s leaning over me. I can smell him and see the long, thick bulge of his cock in his pants which betrays just how much he wants to touch me too. It would be so easy to say yes and give myself to him completely. I’d let him take my virginity right here on this table, and we could walk out of this shop at the end of the storm *together*.

It’s only the dull ache in my heart holding me back. Subconsciously I know I don’t trust this, *us*, that I’m still angry with him. Saying yes would mean starting out on less than equal footing. I want him to touch me, I want him inside me, but I want *him* more.

So, even though it kills me to do it, I shake my head.

Cass’s thumb stops moving and the tendon in his neck strains with the effort of holding himself back. “Baby girl-“

“I want you.” I confess softly up at him, my heart raw like it knows I’m about to lay it out here on the table. “But I want more than sex.”

Cass looks wrecked. Collapsing back into his rolling chair he runs a hand through his hair, gazing at me. “You don’t have to worry about that Luna. I know I’ve got some work to do, but I’m willing to do it. I want to. This is a hell of a lot

more than just sex, and I won't sure as hell won't fuck you until you're sure of that too."

A tear tracks down the side of my face and Cass is on his feet again, leaning over me to wipe it away with more tenderness than I've ever seen him show. He holds my face in his big, tattooed hand like I'm the most precious thing in the world to him and my poor heart feels like it might burst.

Slowly, giving me plenty of time to turn away, Cass leans forward and kisses me. I quiver, reaching up to touch his chest, and not a single part of me wants to push him away this time. We kiss slowly, gently, but with an undercurrent of desperation, like we're both trying to show the other just how much this means to us.

It's what our first kiss should have been.

As I weave my hands through his thick hair, Cass shudders against me and breaks our kiss to press his forehead against mine. "I won't ever give you a reason to doubt me again, baby girl."

Growing up in a tattoo shop, I was quick to learn that everyone handles pain differently, and everyone has a different tolerance for it. I've seen grown men, bikers in their leathers, whine and cry when my father or Cass started their tattoo. Then there are tiny little blonde girls getting an infinity symbol on the top of their foot who sit there texting, not wincing once.

I didn't really know what to expect or where I would fall on the spectrum, but Cass's gloved hand gives my leg a reassuring little squeeze when all the prep is done and I'm finally laying back, ready for him to begin. "Relax." He orders gruffly, and even though my eyes are squeezed shut, I can hear a smile in his face. "You're not breathing."

I giggle reluctantly and take a long steadying breath. "I'm nervous."

"You're going to do great. I've got you, baby girl." And the familiar buzz of the tattoo machine turns on, making my

heartbeat skyrocket in the seconds before the needle first touches my skin.

It hurts, of course it does, but it's not even close to unbearable. I relax onto the table, forcing myself to breathe evenly as I feel the needle moving in long, even strokes over my skin. After a few minutes, the vibration seems to match my heartbeat and there's something oddly soothing about it.

"See?" Cass teases and I peek over to see his smile.

"Yeah, yeah. You're an expert." His eyes don't move from his work for a second but I wish he would look up and meet my gaze. "What made you want to do this? I've heard Dad's story, but I don't think I've heard yours."

Cass reaches up to adjust the light, a ghost of a smile beneath his beard. "I didn't have a great home life, growing up. Drunk, asshole parents, you know the drill. I met your Dad the first day of Middle School in art class. We had a lot of the same shit to contend with and art became a kind of therapy for both of us. When I was probably fourteen I saw something online about stick poke tattoos and Jace and I spent the whole summer fucking around with it." He adjusts his grip on my leg and pauses for just a second, lost in memory.

"Your mom got pregnant around that time. We had an art teacher who didn't think we were complete wastes of space. He hooked us up with James who gave us jobs doing design work. Then we became apprentices, and you know the rest."

"Do you still talk to James?" I ask curiously, I haven't heard his name much since Dad and Cass bought out the shop over ten years ago, but I still remember the older man with tattoos covering his scalp sneaking me candy when my parents weren't looking.

Cass chuckles. "He's in Florida. Living the life. I went down to see him last year. He's all set up, has a boat and everything."

"Damn. Good for James." I smile, lifting my head to put my head on it so I can see him better. "Is that what you want? Or do you want to die right here at your station?"

“Nah.” Cass grins. “I’ll pass this place on to the next generation of delinquents. It’s the right thing to do. I’d like to travel, see a little more of the world.”

I hum. “I love traveling.”

His hand pauses and he lifts his gaze to meet mine, something burning behind his eyes. “I know you do, baby girl.”

I doze through the rest of the tattoo, worn out from the stress of the past day. According to the weather forecast, the snow will be stopping sometime tonight which means my time with Cass in this relationship pressure cooker will be over. What will happen when we aren’t trapped in the shop together?

I want to believe that he’s serious about me, but months of ice-cold rejection and years of unrequited feelings have made me reluctant to hand over my heart so easily.

The truth is I’m not angry with him, not really. I understand why he handled it like he did, I’m just a big fat chicken, scared out of my wits that he’ll shatter my battered heart to pieces, and I’ll never recover.

“You’re done, baby girl.” Cass’s voice rouses me from my nap on the table and I blink, disoriented by the sudden silence of the room after hours of the tattoo machine running.

I sit up slowly, gazing down at the large black tattoo suddenly taking up a good portion of my thigh. My heart wrenches. “It’s perfect, Cass.”

He’s stretching at my side, a self-satisfied smile on his face from my praise. “Damn straight it is. Some of my best work.”

“Are you going to put it in your portfolio?” All the artists have their own pages on the Blink & Ink website showcasing their work.

Cass scoffs, holding out a hand to help me stand. “Nobody sees those thighs but me, Luna.” I lean against the table as he cleans and wraps my brand-new tattoo while

talking me through the aftercare instructions I've heard and given countless times before.

"I know all this." I remind him, laughing when he scowls but doesn't argue the point, too busy with throwing out the used supplies. "I'm good, Cass. Really." My heart flutters. "Do you only take tips in cash?"

I'm flirting with him, and he knows it. Abandoning his efforts to clean up his station, Cass snaps off his gloves and kicks his rolling chair over to me. "Usually." He muses, going along with my little game. "For my favorite client, I might be open to alternatives. What did you have in mind?"

I reach out to trace my hands over his broad chest, intoxicated by the way it shudders beneath my touch. I'm still not used to touching him whenever I want and seeing him just as affected by my touch as I am by his sends makes my core flood with warmth. Neither of us speak as I lean forward to kiss him softly.

Cass groans against my lips, his hands coming out to grip my waist as he stands, sealing us together. *We just* agreed no sex, but it wouldn't hurt to touch right? Just a little?

My hand sneaks down between us, palming Cass's erection through his jeans and he hisses at the contact, thrusting into my palm. Wow. I'd known he was big, but actually feeling him in my hand sends a shiver of anticipation and fear down my spine.

What would it feel like to take all that inside me?"

Cass's hands tighten on me, like he's trying to hold himself back from touching me without my permission. I love that. "Let me touch you, baby girl. Just a little. Let me make you feel good."

Trembling with desperation, I nod.

Cass doesn't give me the chance to change my mind. In seconds he's on his knees, lifting me back onto the edge of the table with my legs spread open over his wide shoulders and buries his face against my damp panties. "God, you smell good." He kisses and nips at my swollen, sensitive flesh

through the cotton and it's all I can do to hold onto the table, my chest heaving as my core floods with another surge of warmth.

I've never been so turned on in my life. The sight of Cass on his knees for me, his tattooed hands holding my thighs open, even the feeling of his beard rubbing roughly against my skin is enough to make me melt.

An ex did go down on me once, probably in an effort to get me to have sex with him finally, but it was nothing like this. Cass releases my thighs, his hands coming up to hook under the waistband of my panties and I lift my hips, allowing him to slide them down so I'm sitting on his tattoo table in nothing but a t-shirt.

He doesn't waste time, diving into my pussy with his lips, tongue, teeth and even nose working me into a sobbing, trembling mess within seconds. Pulling back, Cass sucks my clit in between his lips, flicking it over and over again with his tongue as two fingers plunge inside me. Hard.

I squeak, instinctively trying to scoot back and Cass pulls back to stare up at me, my wetness shining on lips and in his beard, eyes wide with surprise. "Luna, are you-" his chest heaves and his eyes flick down to my center. Gently, he moves his fingers deeper inside me, testing. A twinge makes me gasp again and Cass rips his hand back, his expression horrified.

"It's nothing." My face burns and I try to pull my legs off Cass's shoulders so I'm not just sitting here with my legs wide open, but his hands come up to tighten on my thighs, stopping me.

He looks up at me finally. "It's not *nothing*, Luna. Fuck. I can't believe you've never-"

"What is that supposed to mean!"

Cass opens his mouth to respond but both of our heads turn automatically at another sound at the front of the shop. We're both frozen and my heart is pounding as a voice calls out through the silent rooms.

"Luna! Cass!"

My Dad.

Cass rips himself away from me so quickly you'd think I was on fire. Clattering backward he tosses my panties into my lap and strides out of the room without a second look.

My eyes burn as I pull on my panties and the leggings I'd left neatly folded on the chair in the corner. In the lobby, I can hear the deep voices of Dad and Cass speaking, but not what they're saying. I work my hands through my hair and brush away the tears which threaten to fall, desperately willing myself to look normal. I'm disoriented and confused, unsure of myself after the abrupt end to our messing around. *What was he going to say?*

"Hey Luna Tuna!" Dad grins at me when I emerge. He's dressed in about five layers of clothing and snow is sticking to his beard and eyebrows, but he looks delighted with himself.

"Dad." I croak, stepping forward to hug him and chancing a glance at Cass. He's staring at the floor, emotionless, and doesn't meet my eye. "What are you doing here?"

Dad beams, oblivious to the fact that my heart is breaking with every second Cass doesn't look at me. "I have a client who works for the NYPD. He owed me a favor. Didn't want to leave you guys in here another night, I keep hearing stories about power going out in this area." He nods toward the door. "Let's go. Our ride is waiting. You guys can crash with us until we can get you back to your apartments."

I nod wordlessly, walking over to get my purse, coat and boots from behind the desk. Cass however, doesn't move.

"You take Luna." He tells Dad. "I'm going to stay here."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cass

The snow stops just before dark on the second day of the storm, hours after Luna left with Jace.

I'm not snowed in anymore. I've seen the flashing lights of the plows shining through the window of the shop and a few voices out on the street. The city is still hibernating, so am I, but without Luna here, the shop has lost its comfort.

I'd seen her expression when I told Jace I wouldn't be leaving with them, saw all the rawness left from moments before crack open and bleed out onto her beautiful face.

All I do is hurt her. All I do is fuck this up. I've spent my whole goddamn adult life fucking around and now I have no idea what to do when it's actually show time. The main event. The big one. Luna is *it* for me, but I don't have the slightest idea how to do this right, how to avoid hurting her or her family or myself.

I don't want to lose Jace. He's my family, my business partner. I'm not sure I could stand walking into Blink & Ink every day and seeing hatred or even resentment in his eyes. This guy has done nothing but be there for me, and I repay him by falling in love with his too young, too good for me, daughter.

Sitting alone in the dark of the lobby though, I know I can't give her up. Even if it means torpedoing the other relationships in my life, even if it means burning it all down and starting over again, if I had Luna at my side, I would do it.

Which means I have to man the hell up. I won't sneak around or try to steal her away in the dead of night like a thief. No, if there's any chance at all of somehow getting Luna and keeping my relationship with Jace intact, I'm going to have to do this right.

I've never felt uncomfortable knocking on the door of Jace and his wife Natalie's apartment before. Actually, I don't normally knock at all, just walk right in and have a bowl of whatever Nat's making for dinner pushed into my hands.

It's still early, but after hours of tossing and turning on the couch, I couldn't stand to sit in the shop alone for one more minute. Not knowing that Luna was out there thinking the worst. I've done more than enough damage.

So here I am, dressed in the best spare clothes I could find in the office, hair brushed, beard trimmed and heart pounding in my chest as a set of footsteps echoes behind the door and it swings open to reveal the surprised but pleased face of my best friend.

"Cass!" He steps back to let me in. "What are you doing here this early?"

I clear my throat, glancing around automatically for a sign of Luna but she's probably still asleep in Sunny's room. Nat is standing at the stove though and she smiles wearily over her shoulder at me. "Morning, Cass. Coffee? I'm making eggs too if you'd like."

"No, thank you." The longer I sit here, the less likely it is that I'm going to do what I came here for. I need to do this. Now.

"I actually wanted a word with both of you."

Nat and Jace glance at each other but nod. Jace gestures to the little round table in the corner where we've eaten countless family dinners together, bumping elbows. "Everything alright?" Asks Jace, sitting down across from me and folding his arms over his chest. "What's this about?"

"It's about Luna."

Jace's eyebrows knit together, and his voice is instantly accusatory. "*What about Luna?*"

There's a zero percent chance I'm getting out of this without a punch to the face, but if that's what Jace has to do, I won't blame him. I exhale heavily and finally confess the

words that have been branded on my heart since that day in the airport nearly six months ago.

“I love her.” Silence, dead silence. Jace stares at me, and I can see the confusion in his face. He doesn’t get it, not yet. “I’m *in love* with her. I have been since she got back. I’ve fucking tried to pretend it wasn’t happening, to push her away, and it’s hurting both of us. I can’t do it anymore, Jace. I won’t.”

There’s a clatter to my left and I look around. The spatula in Natalie’s hand has clattered to the floor in her shock and silently, Jace gets up to retrieve it and turn off the burner. When he turns back to face me, his expression gives away nothing.

My gut twists. Fuck.

“You’re in love with Luna.” Jace runs a hand through his hair, glancing at Nat then back to me. “Christ, man. This is-“

“I know.” I shake my head. “It’s a lot. I fucking get it. I don’t expect you to give me your blessing or anything like that, but I’m trying to do this right. Trying not to sneak around or cheapen what we feel for each other.”

Jace’s eyes widen slightly in surprise. “Wait. You’ve *spoken to her* about this? Luna knows?”

I open my mouth to reply but beside him, his wife scoffs. “Do you think he’d be here putting his neck out for you to swing an ax into if he hadn’t?” Nat rolls her eyes. “Don’t act like this is a surprise, Jace. We knew.”

I almost choke on my tongue. Spluttering, I look between them in shock. “You *knew*?”

Jace’s eyes narrow. “*Knew* doesn’t mean *approve*, ass wipe. That’s my kid.”

“For God’s sake, Jace.” Nat sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Yes, Cass. We knew. Or guessed anyway. Luna... matured quite a bit over the last three years, and we both saw your face when you saw her that first day.”

I hadn't even realized anyone had seen me. I could only imagine what I'd looked like when I realized the incredibly sexy creature in baggage claim was Luna. How many times over the past six months have I slipped, just for a moment, and shown exactly how I felt about her?

Was I that damn obvious?

Could all this shit have been avoided if I'd just spoken to the people I love in the first place?

"I just want to make her happy." It's a pretty feeble plea, especially given the fact I've done almost nothing but make her miserable for months, but I ache for it.

Nat elbows Jace meaningfully and, as though he's reciting something his wife made him repeat in front of a mirror a few dozen times, he speaks flatly, glaring daggers at me. "I love Luna and I love you, you're both adults, it's not my business to interfere."

My throat tightens with affection for this man. My best friend, my brother in all but blood. "You won't regret it."

Jace's eyes narrow. "See that I don't."

I stand up, looking toward the apartment where I know the bedrooms are. "Is she still sleeping? Can I wait?"

"She went home this morning." Nat tells me and when I turn, I can see she's worried. "I'm not sure what happened between the two of you Cass but do what you can to fix it. Yeah?"

I nod, never meaning words more in my life when I swear to them. "I'll fix it."

The hardest job is still in front of me, but as I step out onto the snowy sidewalk outside Jace and Nat's apartment, it feels like a thousand pounds have been lifted off my shoulders. I've been carrying it around for months, the guilt and the shame, when I didn't have to. I hurt myself, hurt Luna and wasted precious time which could have been spent falling

deeper in love with her, getting to know her as an equal, a partner.

It ends today.

It's nearly three miles across the white topped city to reach Luna's apartment, but I walk anyway, savoring the clarity and relief of the cold air in my lungs.

I know where it is, and that she shares the place with three friends she met in her travels, but I've never actually been inside Luna's apartment. I'd made excuses not to, in the name of keeping my distance, and the regret for that sinks in the moment I catch the door for a neighbor leaving and slip inside the building only to realize I have no idea where I'm going.

Shit.

I pull out my phone and hit Luna's contact, but it goes straight to voicemail, and I growl, shoving it back in my pocket. Just when I'm about to suck it up and call Nat, praying she'll take pity on me, the door to the elevator slides open with a ding and two girls walk out. One of them casts me an appreciative look and smiles coyly.

"Ello, sir." She says in a thick French accent, pausing on her way out the building to talk to me. She's objectively beautiful, but I don't feel so much as a flicker of interest. "I don't believe we've met. Are you one of my neighbors?"

"I'm meeting someone." I reply shortly and her smile fades. "Do you know what apartment Luna Bradley lives in?"

The girl and her friend both look me up and down, instantly suspicious. "And who are you?" Asks the second, raising an eyebrow at me coolly.

"Cassian Rowe."

They glance at each other, before the French girl turns back to frown at me, crossing her arms. "Luna is my roommate. Tell me, Monsieur Rowe, have you come to break my friend's heart further?"

My own heart aches at her words. “Please.” I’m begging two girls whose names I don’t even know, but I’m past giving a damn. I just want to see Luna. “Just tell me what apartment.”

The second girl elbows her friend. “Luna will be fine. Besides...” She looks me up and down and smirks. “He looks like he’s here to grovel.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Luna

I've never wanted to run away more than I do right now. I tried to come back home, tried to get over Cass, and ended up even more broken hearted than when I left three years ago.

Nope. Hard pass. I'm out.

How am I supposed to go back to Blink & Ink, sit there and answer phones while Cass's pretty, mature clients, *women who aren't the daughter of his oldest friend*, fawn all over him? All while remembering the look on his face when he realized exactly how young and immature I really am.

I was never ashamed of holding onto my virginity. I don't advertise it of course, nobody wants to be *that girl*, but foolishly I never imagined it would be that much of an issue.

Judging by how quickly Cass sent me home to my parents, it's a very big issue to him. Big enough that all those promises he made, *promises I stupidly believed*, were forgotten.

I'm going to call out sick for a few days, tell Dad I have the flu. With some luck, maybe the little bit of time will be enough to translate the hurt I'm feeling into a healthy dose of anger. Being pissed off would be so much better than *this*.

Josette and Kennedy just left, and my other roommate is at work, leaving me alone in our tiny apartment. I wasn't terribly close with any of them when we moved in together, but it's been nice having a close circle of girlfriends. I hadn't given them the full story when I got home this morning, but they'd heard enough to have a few choice names to call Cass.

I didn't argue with them. He deserves it.

A hard knocking on the door makes me groan. I swear, if it's my other roommate Emma's ex-boyfriend again, I'm going to slam the door in his face. I get up from the couch and trudge over to the door, pulling it open without bothering to check

through the peep hole who is standing on the other side. I'm almost hoping it really is Emma's ex so I can have someone to unleash my feelings on.

It isn't Emma's ex though. It's Cass.

We stare at each other for a long moment while my entire chest tightens. Is he here to make sure I don't tell Dad what happened between us? To try to have sex with me before ignoring me the next time we're in front of my family?

My bottom lip trembles and Cass's restraint seems to snap. Stepping forward he crowds me into the apartment, closing the door firmly behind him before his hands fly to my face. "I missed you." Are his first words to me and an incredulous little laugh bubbles in my throat.

"Stop."

Cass shakes his head, jaw clenched. "No. Never, Luna. Fucking never. I'm going to be the biggest pain in your ass until I finally figure out how to do this right."

"Do what right?" I bite back bitterly.

"You, baby girl. Us." He takes a deep breath, like he's trying to steady himself. "I went to see your parents."

I freeze. *That's* not what I was expecting. "Uh. About what?"

Cass's big chest shakes with his laugh. "I told them I was in love with you."

My heart stops. "*What?*" He steps forward and I'm completely frozen, unable to wrap my mind around the information he's firing at me.

He went to see my parents?

He told them he loves me?

"I'm not hiding from this anymore, Luna. I'm all in. I'm not going to lie, baby girl, I have no idea what I'm doing, but—" He's rambling, but I've never felt this way before, like my feelings for Cass are *right*. He went to my parents? Risked his oldest friendships out of respect for them and for me?

“Cass.” I cut him off, a laugh bubbling from my lips. My whole heart is so full, and I’m not afraid anymore. He’s in this every bit as much as I am. “You told my parents you’re in love with me?” He nods and I shake my head, smiling so big my cheeks hurt. “You didn’t want to tell *me* first?”

His whole face cracks and then he’s smiling too, and I’m filled with so much joy I might burst. Cass reaches out to close the distance between us, weaving into the hair at the back of my neck and I go willingly, pressing myself to him so we’re intertwined right in the middle of my shabby entryway.

“I’m in love with you, Luna.” His other hand grips my waist, pulling me more securely against him, my own arms wrapped around his neck. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am for how I handled this, baby girl. I’ve been such a damn idiot.”

I touch his face, marveling at him. He’s everything I’ve ever wanted, and he’s doing everything for us. What more could I ever ask for? “I love you too.” I confess quietly, feeling Cass’s chest expand at my words. “And I’m not angry anymore, Cass. I swear. I just... I want to be happy.”

“With me.” Cass clarifies, suddenly frowning and I laugh, nodding.

“Yes. With you.”

It’s all the confirmation he needs. Leaning forward, Cass closes those few inches left between us and kisses me fiercely. There’s no more fear or hesitation or anger, all that’s left is a burning, desperate *wanting*. I want him.

He must feel it, because as our kiss deepens, Cass leans forward and lifts me easily. I wind my legs around his waist, moaning when he turns, pressing my back against the nearest wall. I can feel him hardening right against my center, pressing insistently through his jeans as he rolls against me, hands coming around to grip my ass.

I pull away, panting. “Take me to bed. *Please*, Cass. I want you.”

His hands tighten but he doesn’t move, eyes searching my face. “You’re sure?”

I don't have to think about it. "Yes."

He releases me, letting me down so I can take his hand and lead the way.

My bedroom is tiny, tucked away in the furthest corner of the apartment and barely big enough for my full bed to fit, crammed between two walls. With the snow piled on the window sill, the room is dark and warm and cozy when Cass shuts the door behind us.

It feels like we're in a dream.

Our lips hover over one another's, not quite kissing, just breathing the same air and listening to the hushed rustle of clothing and breathing as our hands ghost over the other. Touching, feeling, wanting.

I've never felt this close to another person, and he's barely even touched me.

I break the spell, my fingers finding the buttons of his coat and undoing the one after another until I can slip the fabric from his shoulders. It hits the floor with a muffled thud and we both shudder when my hands skim over his chest.

It's Cass's turn now. His hands find the hem of my sweater and lift, throwing the garment to the floor to join his coat. His groan shatters the silence when he realizes I'm not feeling anything underneath.

His hands on my bare skin are the best feeling in the world, I have to remind myself to breathe when they find my breasts which feel heavy as heat floods my body.

His shirt follows, then my pants, then his, and finally we're naked together, standing beside my unmade bed in the dim light of my too-small bedroom. It's perfect though, like we're in our own little world.

I moan when my nipples skim the hair on his chest and the noise seems to trigger something in Cass. He leans forward to kiss me again, pulling my naked body against his. His cock is long and thick between us, the ruddy tip leaving a trail of wetness against my belly.

Cass walks us backward until the back of my knees hit the mattress and I break away from him, pulling myself into the middle of the bed while the man I love gazes down at me hungrily. I watch as his hand drifts to his cock, gripping it roughly and stroking up and down, up and down.

My thighs press together unconsciously, and Cass's throaty chuckle fills the bedroom. "Do you want this big cock inside you, baby girl? Do you want me to open up that virgin pussy?"

Another rush of wetness spreads onto my inner thighs at his words. A dark little part of me wants it to hurt a little, I want to feel him inside me, even after he's gone. I want to remember this with every single step I take.

I nod, almost panting when Cass releases his cock and kneels on the bed to push my knees apart.

Cool air makes my wet center feel more sensitive and I flush under Cass's gaze. Reaching forward, he dips two fingers between the lips of my pussy, drawing them through my wetness to press gently against my opening.

My arms give out and I fall flat on my back, squeezing my eyes shut instinctively. A sharp little slap against my pussy makes me squeak and jerk, eyes flying back open.

Cass growls. "Watch. I want you to watch me getting you ready for me."

Oh God.

I'm not an expert, obviously, but I definitely *feel* ready. Sloppy wet and literally aching to be filled. "I'm ready." I beg, reaching for him.

Cass's answering smirk is maddening and sexy at the same time. Fisting his cock, he brings it to my entrance and pushes his head against me.

I gasp, trying to wriggle away immediately at the instantly overwhelming, burning stretch. Cass draws back, replacing his cock with his fingers. "You're not ready." He growls. "You're half my size, baby girl, I don't want to hurt you. Be patient, let me make you cum."

Who am I to argue with that?

Cass pushes two fingers into me and I moan, spreading my legs instinctively wider to get them deeper. I lose myself in the sensations, every nerve in my body straining for more as my big, tattooed lover falls forward over me, sucking and biting angry kisses over my chest and neck.

“Come on, give it to me.” He grunts, curving his fingers inside me to hit a spot that makes my toes curl and a cry echo through the quiet room. I’m so close, teetering on the edge and when Cass lowers his head to suck my nipple roughly into his mouth, I fall over the edge.

I’m still cuming as Cass’s fingers pull away, replaced almost instantly by the head of his cock.

CHAPTER NINE

Cass

I can't wait another second.

Luna is still quivering beneath me, her sweet little pussy soaked from the orgasm I'd wrung from her, when I fit the head of my cock just inside her entrance. I press my lips to hers, kissing her deeply and, before her body has the chance to tense up, surge forward in one incredible thrust.

I swallow her cry of pain and surprise, biting back a groan of my own as her nails bite into my back. I've never been bare inside a woman before, and the thought of putting on a condom with Luna occurred to me for all of half a second before it was dismissed. I don't want anything between us.

She feels incredible. Hotter and tighter than I possibly could have imagined. I pull back to look between us at the place where we're connected, unable to stop myself from groaning at the sight of her little pussy stretched wide around my thickness.

"How does that feel, baby girl?" I pull back just a little, pulsing my hips to give her a taste of what's to come.

Luna's panicky, uneven breaths are calming now, and when I meet her eyes, I see they're wide with surprise. "I- I like it. Oh God, Cass-" She cries, clutching my shoulders and giving a little gasp when I begin to thrust a little more, the tip of my cock bumping the deepest part of her.

Fuck that's hot.

"That's right." I murmur as a fresh wave of wetness eases my way. "You do like that. I can feel it."

"Cass!" Luna gasps, her eyes going even wider when I angle my hips, the head of my cock bumping her g-spot. She feels so damn good, I'm too far gone for this to last long, but I'm determined to her feel her cum on my cock.

Suddenly inspired, I grip her waist and roll, tugging her with me so she ends up astride my cock. The bed is so tiny we're nearly at the wall and Luna's hand presses against it, her chest heaving as she gets used to feeling me this deep.

I reach up, cupping her tits in my hands. They're fucking edible, a perfect handful and topped with small, dusky nipples. I could spend all day just worshipping them.

Luna's hips give a tentative roll and she moans, gazing down at me in undisguised lust. Careful of her new tattoo, I run my hands up her thighs. "That's it. Ride me, baby girl. Don't be shy. Do what feels good."

It doesn't take her long to get the hang of it. After a few experimental rises and falls, she's taking me with ease, her hands pressed to my chest as she bounces up and down on my cock, moaning and whimpering.

"I'm gonna cum-" She whimpers desperately and I'm right there with her. Gritting my teeth to stop myself, I press my hand between us, rubbing frantically over her clit. It works. Luna comes with a cry, her walls clenching around my cock, milking my cum out of me so hard I literally see stars.

"Good girl." I groan when we're both panting and Luna collapses on top of me, my softening cock still inside her. I wrap my arms around her, kissing the top of her head as our heartbeats slow.

"I love you." Luna whispers, trailing her fingers over my arm.

A more perfect fucking moment has never existed. I feel complete as I nudge my woman's chin up and kiss her, savoring the taste of her, the feeling of her skin on mine, the warmth of her pussy wrapped around my mostly soft cock. I want to remember every detail of this until the day I die and when they cut me open, find it engraved on my heart.

I walked into this room one man, and I'll be leaving another.

"I love you." It's a promise more permanent than any ink on my body. I should be terrified, claiming another person so

completely, but I'm not. Luna was meant to be mine and I was sure as hell meant to be hers.

"I have an idea." She says hesitantly, biting her lip. "It's kind of crazy."

I raise my eyebrows, intrigued. "I like crazy."

Luna giggles. "I'm aware. It's just... I want this to work. Like I *really, really* want this to work."

"It *will* work." I promise, unable and unwilling to consider any other possibility. I don't care what it takes.

"I know." She smooths my hair from my forehead, suddenly a little more solemn. "This place, Blink and Ink, the city, we both have a lot of history here. And all our people are here, we'll be under a magnifying glass every second of every day."

She has a point there. I don't particularly like the idea of trying to romance the hell out of Luna, develop a relationship, with Jace glaring at me over her shoulder. No matter how reluctantly accepting he was, it will still be tense. No way around it.

"So." Luna continues. "What if we just... left."

"Left?"

She grins, a little sheepishly. "To be honest, I'm not loving college. I'm not sure it's for me, if it is, it's definitely not studying marketing."

I'd guessed as much when Jace told me what she was going to be majoring in. "Take time off." I tell her immediately. "Figure it out. I don't really give a shit, I just want you to be happy."

Luna melts against me, kissing me gently. My cock, despite emptying a full load into her only minutes ago, is already twitching. When she pulls away, her eyes are bright. "Maybe you should take some time off too. A sabbatical. Tattoo artists do that right? Sometimes?"

"Sometimes." I confirm thoughtfully. I've never even considered taking time away, but now that I stop to think about

it, I am pretty damn burned out. I'm not feeling as excited and passionate about my job as I once did. I've saved a shit load of money, why shouldn't I spend some of it and take off for a while? I grin up at Luna. "You want to leave New York?"

"Is it *too* crazy?" She wonders aloud, smiling slyly. Her pussy tightens around my hardening cock and I chuckle, reaching down to spank her ass playfully.

"I think it's perfect." I can't wipe the fucking smile off my face.

For the first time in who knows how many years, I'm excited to be alive. My world was so damn small until this woman stepped off a plane and turned it upside down in the best ways possible.

Luna beams, and she's so fucking beautiful it makes my heart skip a beat. I have no idea how I've gotten this lucky but I'm sure as hell not going to question it. "Yeah?" She asks hopefully.

"Yeah." I confirm, chest filling with excitement for her, for our life together, for all of it. "Let's run away together, baby girl."

EPILOGUE

Luna

1 Year Later

I can officially confirm that Paris is way better when you have a super-hot boyfriend.

The last time I was here, I lived in an absolutely disgusting hostel with seven other people, and several rodents, in my room. I ate cheap pastries and worked double shifts at a hotel to save enough money to travel.

Now, I'm laying naked in bed of the absolutely gorgeous rental apartment Cass booked for us, trying to be completely still while the equally naked love of my life gazes at me over the edge of a well-worn sketchbook.

Cass is an artist, he always has been, but lately his desire to create has been nearly obsessive. He's always drawing, painting, sculpting, creating work that moves me to tears.

My naked, freshly fucked body is his favorite subject, and my heart is full from seeing him rediscover his passion, as well as finding my own. I started a travel blog a few months into our trip and it took off, now I'm getting sponsorships and even being offered paid freelance jobs.

We're happy. *Really* happy.

My heart flutters with nerves as my mind drifts, for about the dozenth time in the past ten minutes, to the news I have to share with him.

It's not that I think Cass will be angry or upset, *I know he won't*. I know him, and I know he wants this. The past year we've spent together has bonded us in ways I never could have imagined. We've both grown, both changed, and learned to lean on one another after being solo acts for so long.

We haven't gone home though. My parents and Sunny came out to visit us when we were in Tokyo a few months ago,

and we spent our first real time together since Cass and I left so unexpectedly.

Things aren't strained exactly, but they're weird. I remember my Dad's pointed stares in the other direction when Cass leaned in to kiss me or when I showed them around our apartment and he saw our complimentary colored toothbrushes in a jar on the bathroom sink. I'd been confused about why that bothered him at the time, but I get it now.

Sex is one thing, splitting toothbrushes from the same pack is another. An unmistakable sign of intimacy beyond the physical, a commitment.

I'm nervous to go home, to face the real world outside our happy little travel bubble. We won't be able to spend the day in bed having sex or pick up and go wherever we want. Cass will go back to tattooing full time and I'll be...

My hand itches to move to my stomach at the thought of exactly what I'll be.

It's not like we've been working super hard to prevent it. On the contrary, Cass has never been bothered about birth control in the slightest. If it were up to him we'd probably already have a baby by now, but I was the one who wanted to wait and give ourselves a chance to just be *us*.

He pulls out. Most of the time.

In my defense, Paris really is the most romantic city in the world, and my boyfriend is hot. Like... really hot. The evidence of how attracted to him I am is growing inside me.

Cass's brow furrows, his eyes on my breasts, and I can see his cock hardening against his stomach.

"Eyes up here, baby girl." Cass orders me, his eyes sparkling over the top of his pad. "I'm not a piece of meat."

I hum happily, my toes curling into the white bedding. "You're my piece of meat."

Cass chuckles and tosses his pad aside, coming to kneel beside me on the bed. "Fuck yes, I am." He pinches my nipple,

making me gasp and sending a fresh surge of wetness to my already dripping center.

My thighs part in wordless invitation and Cass pulls me over to him. We both watch as he draws the head of his cock through my wetness, brushing against my clit teasingly, before pushing into me in one long, harsh thrust.

I've fucked him every day, usually multiple times a day, for a full year and I'm still not used to the stretch of his length inside me. It hurts just a little every time, and I love it. I'm addicted to him, just like he is to me.

"Fuck." Cass grunts, his thrusts growing harder. "Did my dirty baby girl need my cock again?"

I'm instantly twice as wet. His dirty talk is the sexiest thing on the planet. "Yes. I need it." I whine, wrapping my arms around his neck and drawing him down to me for a deep, desperate kiss.

"God, baby girl. You make me so happy." He mumbles against my lips, hands tangling in my hair.

My breath catches. "I have something that will make you happier."

His thrusts falter and he gazes down at me, suddenly serious. Wordlessly I reach up and take one of his hands in mine, drawing it down between us to press against my still-flat belly. "You got me pregnant." I murmur, stroking his chest, his face, his hair.

Cass gazes down at me, so frozen for a moment I start to feel just the smallest bit nervous. He doesn't leave me hanging long though.

"You're *pregnant*?" His voice is rough and filled with awe. The hand I placed on my belly trembles.

My heart in my throat and my eyes burning, I nod. "I didn't plan to tell you like this." I tell him with a watery laugh, nodding to the place where we're still connected. Cass's cock twitches inside of me.

“I love you so much.” He chokes, leaning forward to press our foreheads together. “You’re right, though. I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy in my life.”

We hold each other for a long time, exchanging soft kisses and promises. When Cass’s hips start to move again, it takes my breath away.

“Marry me.”

I’m so caught up in the moment, for a second I thought I’ve misheard him. He says it again though, begs me as we make love slowly, lost in each other.

“Marry me, Luna.”

I look up at him, my body already starting to tense as he drives me nearer and nearer to my orgasm. I don’t have to ask if he’s sure or if he’s serious, just like I don’t have to think about my answer. I already know.

“Yes.”

Afterword

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cleo White

Cleo White is a 29 year old caffeine addict who lives with her family in Vermont. After accepting the unfortunate reality that she has the attention-span of a fruit fly and finishing a whole-ass novel was never going to happen, she found a love of writing short, spicy, insta-love stories that always have a happy ending. When she isn't writing, Cleo can be found avoiding social obligations, gardening and painting.

BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

[For Always](#)

Huck Foster is my boss, my best friend's father and twice my age.

There are a million reasons why us being together is a terrible idea, but it hasn't stopped me from wanting him for so much longer than I should.

Huck has only ever been kind and respectful towards me, he's never put a toe out of line, even though I feel his eyes on me when I'm not looking. I have no reason to believe anything is going to change. He sees me as a kid, as his daughter's best friend and his star employee, nothing more.

I want him. I want to please him and have him boss me around outside of work.

Fingers crossed this holiday season brings a change, because it turns out you can only pine after your best friend's father for so long before something's gotta give.

[End Game](#)

Noah isn't just my boss's obscenely hot brother, he's one of the most famous pro footballers in the country.

I've never been so attracted to anyone in my whole life. Too bad I asked him out the first time we met and he turned me down flat.

It's not like I can blame him, Noah's a living legend, while I'm just trying work in his brother's store and fix up my grandmother's abandoned cottage. I'm no-one, and he can't even walk down the street without getting asked for an autograph. Our lives are worlds apart.

So why can't I shake this feeling that he might just regret telling me no?

Into Alaska

I came to Alaska to escape my life.

Getting caught staring at the ass of my town's local gruff, tattooed, much-older mechanic Wyatt Dawson was not the plan.

I was dying in New York. Suffocating under the unbearable pressure of what it takes to be a Marks, buried alive in designer heels, a smile plastered on my face even when I felt like screaming.

Wyatt is a walking, talking reminder of everything my mother doesn't want for me, and a life I'm not sure I'll ever get to have. He deserves the truth of why I ran thousands of miles away from my family, but I can't bring myself to shatter the new happiness I find with him and in my new home.

Unfortunately for me, most secrets don't stay buried for long.

Mixed Up

I've had a crush on the ice-cold biology professor, Dr. Damon Faust, for years now. He's a grump, a bully, and definitely too old for me.

I'm doing everything I can do live my life differently than my family, so can't I stop myself from wanting him? Fate keeps pushing us together and even when he's indifferent or hurtful or just plain mean, I keep coming back for more.

I want him to see me, even if it's crazy.

Even if it's pathetic.

Even if it's a mistake I won't be able to walk away from with my heart unscathed.