



*Unrequited Scars*

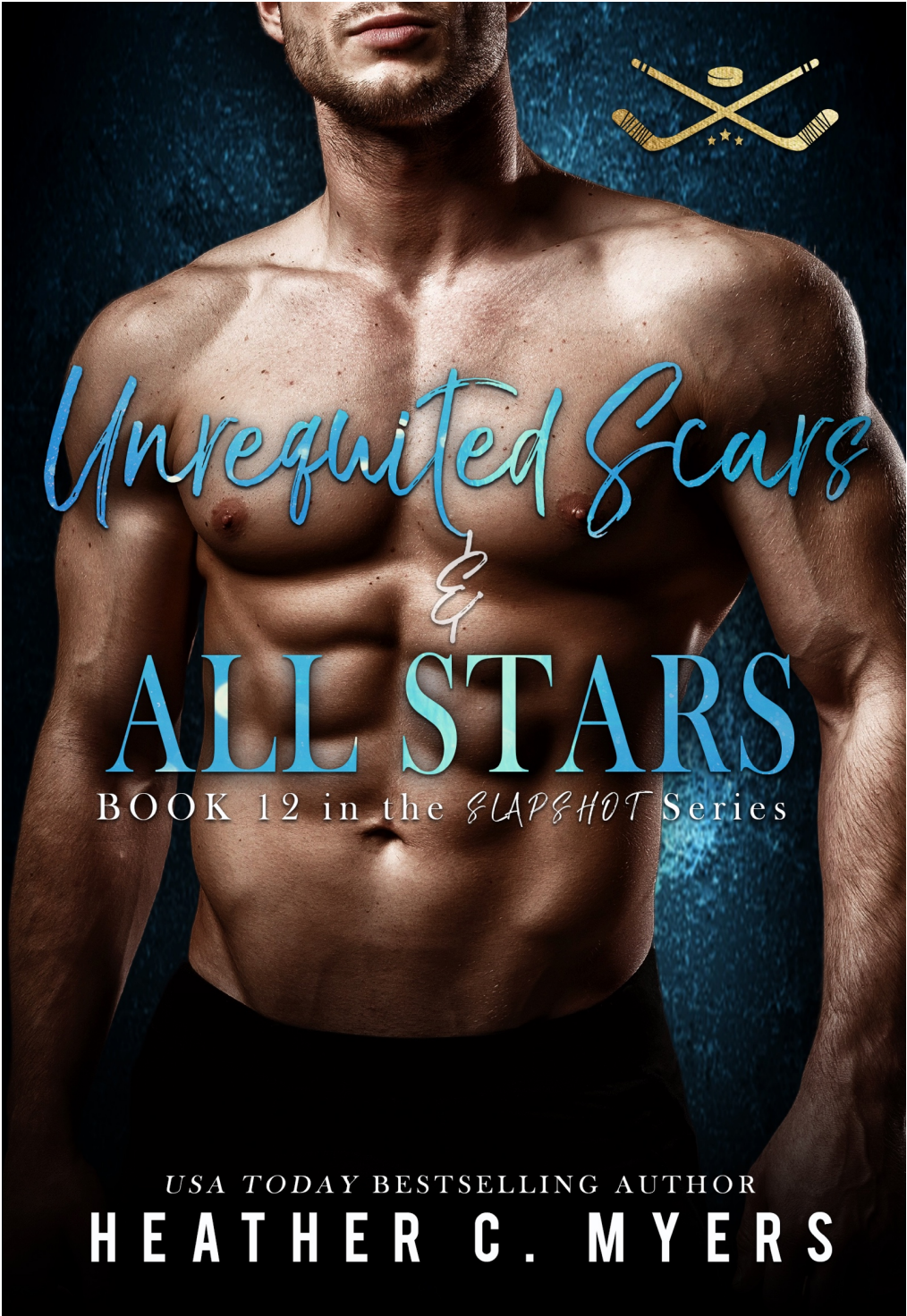
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**ALL STARS**

BOOK 12 in the *SLAPSHOT* Series

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**HEATHER C. MYERS**



Unrequited Scars

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UNREQUITED SCARS & ALL  
STARS

Book 12 in The Slapshot Series

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HEATHER C. MYERS

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Damon

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WHEN THE NEWS BROKE, it rained all day.

It was fitting, really. The grey skies were nearly black, and the rain pounded on the roof of the NHL superstar's apartment. It wasn't a penthouse, not really, but considering it belonged to one and one man alone, it tended to feel as big as one.

Damon Smith glanced around his apartment, trying to feel something. Most of the time, he enjoyed the numbness that came so naturally to him. It was easier to block out, easier to pretend he was incapable of feeling at all, especially when feelings he might have had otherwise tended to be distracting, and worse, make him weak. When he thought about now, though, he wasn't sure he could muster up the appropriate amount of effort to feel anything at all. Even now, with the news official, he wasn't sure where he stood. Would he miss this place, his home for the last seven years? Seattle had always been good to him. When they selected him during their premier season from the Newport Beach Seagulls, he truly believed it was a blessing. Sure, a part of him was pissed at the Gulls for choosing not to protect him when they could have, when Damon had played for them since they drafted him at eighteen. But it also meant he could clear his head. It meant

getting away from his former best friend and getting away from *her*.

He hadn't thought about her since the day he told her goodbye.

*Lie.*

Well, technically, he hadn't said it. He just left, and that was it. She knew, of course, what had happened. Being born into a hockey family, especially to someone like Richard Sanders's family, she would know what happened.

That didn't make it any easier. And God, the last thing he wanted was any kind of expectation. Not from *her*. He already dealt with it constantly; the last person he wanted to put that pressure on him was her.

Yet, even with the newly acquired distance, even with the space to clear his head, it wasn't enough.

It would never be enough.

*You think about her every goddamn day and every goddamn night.*

Now, though, he was going back there. Back to the past he wanted nothing to do with. The friendship he threw away because his damn heart –

No. It wasn't his heart. It could never be his heart. And yet, he didn't think he could find a more accurate solution. She was...

*Stop thinking about her.*

*Stop...anticipating her.*

Sanders was still on the team, and some part of him was excited at the prospect of seeing his old mentor again. Even if

he hated Damon, which Damon knew he did. But Sanders taught him everything he knew. Sanders took him in, and Damon betrayed his trust. And while Damon didn't regret it for one second, he still couldn't help but miss the camaraderie he had with Sanders. It wasn't as though he had that with anyone else.

Hell, he didn't have it with Sanders.

Not anymore.

Not after what Damon had done.

“Fuck.”

He clenched his teeth and stood up, running his fingers through his chopped blond locks. What the fuck was the matter with him? It had been seven years. *Seven years*. Why couldn't he shake her? Why couldn't he get her out of his fucking head? He had no business *feeling* this way. He had no business feeling at all about anyone, but especially about her. He was Damon “Bone Breaker” Smith, for crissake! He slept around, never settled, and went hard for his team every night. He didn't think about love that slipped through his fingers, that he walked away from, that he managed to resist.

Fuck, no!

More than that, she had been so damn young. She was probably married now.

Damon grunted at the thought of Lyra being married. It seemed impossible. Not when she was supposed to belong to him and only him.

Maybe a serious boyfriend.

He growled — growled — at the thought. Like some kind of fucking animal.



As though he had any right to believe he still possessed her, after all this time. After the way he left her behind without even turning back, without even considering the possibility that she might have wanted to come with him on this new adventure....

A gentle knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. He tilted his head in the direction of it but couldn't bother to look up, to fix it with his attention, as much as he appreciated the distraction. He didn't want to see anyone, didn't want to deal with it, even though this was a moment meant to be celebrated.

At least, it should be.

Quite frankly, part of him was surprised anyone would want to see him at all.

It wasn't that he didn't get along with his team.

He did.

He was part of it. He felt like he earned his place there too, and while the others might not like him terribly as a person, they needed him as a teammate.

But Damon was also keen enough to know that they wouldn't miss his presence any time soon, especially when this business was so cutthroat. He had no idea who the fuck would be replacing him, and honestly, it didn't matter. He was just another cog in the machine. He was someone who didn't make a difference, like a fucking pathetic plastic bag floating in the wind.

Jesus, his thoughts were turning morose.

He needed a drink.

More knocking.

Damon grunted. He wasn't sure if he could be heard on the other side of the door. Then again, maybe whoever it was would take the hint and fuck off.

When management arranged the meeting to let him know that they wanted to trade him back to his former team, Damon wasn't sure what to make of it. His initial reaction was resistance and anger. One team had already let him get plucked away, and this new one, the one that had kept him around for seven years, suddenly decided he wasn't good enough? He had had one of his best seasons so far. What more did they fucking want from him?

It wasn't just because he was back on the trading block, it was because it would mean going back to *her*. Knowing that she was somewhere close, she was somewhere he could run into. *Would* run into her. Because with her family, and Sanders still on the team, he knew he would. And he wasn't sure what to make of that. He wasn't sure how to prepare for it. He wasn't sure of anything, and he fucking hated it because he felt like a little bitch.

There was a reason he left, after all. Granted, he didn't have a choice thanks to the way new teams were formed in the NHL. But he would've tried to come up with something if it had been possible. He needed to get away from her. He didn't trust himself with her. And he refused to be her ruin even though he desperately wanted nothing more than to corrupt her with himself.

The knocking persisted.

"For fuck's sake," he muttered before all but stomping over to the door and throwing it open.

Maela.

Hmm.

He wasn't surprised in the slightest, and yet, he couldn't help but feel a prickle of annoyance at seeing her standing there with that knowing glint in her eyes, like she had some kind of psychic ability that told her this was what would happen at this moment, and she wanted to witness it herself simply to say she told him so.

He looked her up and down. Slinky gold dress, twenties style black bob, dark makeup despite being early afternoon. It was fucking raining outside and her legs were fully exposed.

Fucking sexy, that much was sure. There was a reason he kept her around, went back to her, even though it wasn't in his disposition to fuck the same woman twice.

Too many complications.

Not that Damon cared either way. Her legs were one part of her body he liked, especially when they were wrapped around his hips.

He just wasn't in the mood for her or that look on her face.

"I heard," she announced, inviting herself in by sliding through the door. She moved her hips back and forth like she was on a run away, but he didn't notice. Not this time. Instead, he closed the door and crossed the room to the couch. "I would say congratulations are in order, but you look particularly miserable. Isn't this a good thing? You're a California boy, aren't you?"

He plopped down and rolled his eyes. There was nothing boyish about him, except maybe his face despite pushing forty. And yet, he couldn't bring himself to say anything witty about him being a man or one of his usual quips.

"Well?" she pushed, arching a brow.

He hated that brow. “Well, what?”

She rolled her eyes and brushed past him. “I don’t understand why you’re being so difficult.” She found the small dining table with a blue vase filled with yellow daisies. He hadn’t even realized it had been placed there. Had Maela been decorating his apartment without him realizing? “I’m trying to have a conversation about something that should be meaningful to you, and you’re giving me snappish answers. Have I done something to upset you?”

“You know, my mood isn’t always tied into you and what you do or don’t do,” he muttered.

She shot him a face that included a lifted brow and pursed lips, another way for her to challenge him.

He was so sick of being challenged.

“It’s the truth,” he said, standing up. “You seem to think you have some kind of hold over me, but the truth is much less complicated than you’re making it out to be.”

She dropped the stems of the flowers and turned, eyes narrowed. This was the viper, the beast hiding under the surface of her smooth, tan skin. This was who got on his nerves and heated up his bedroom. At least he had a reaction out of her. He could work with this.

“Oh?” she asked, arching a brow. “And what is this truth you speak of, Damon?”

“This” he gestured between the two of them “isn’t as serious as you like to make it out to be.”

She paused. “And what’s that supposed to mean?” she demanded to know, leaning back against the table to size up his hulking frame.

“Exactly what I say it means,” he said. “What we have is reserved for late nights and boredom. We fuck. That’s it. Decorating my apartment without asking and attempting to have deep and meaningful conversations isn’t going to change that. So, why waste your time?”

Another moment passed between them. He hated the silence.

“Is this your way of pushing me away?” she asked.

“*What?*”

“Your excuse for not asking me to come with you —“

“Come? With me?” he demanded to know. He sauntered to the fridge, knowing it was too early to drink and not giving a flying fuck. He never should have let her in the house, never should have entertained her. “Why would you think you would come with me?”

*Where was that fucking sangria...*

“Who’s Lyra?”

He froze. Somehow, her name on Marla’s tongue made him shudder the way a banshee might.

“Am I talking to a ghost?” she asked, folding her arms over her chest. “Or can you not speak because you see ghosts that claw at you, even in the throes of passion?”

Daemyn closed the fridge door slowly. He wanted to think of something witty, but his mind was blank. Not because he was wracked with panic but because he didn’t think anyone deserved an explanation for him — especially not her. Especially not about *her*.

“Do I surprise you?” she asked, pushing off the edge of the table. “I know her name, Damon. I know she means something

to you. It's not just that you've whispered her name when you're coming, but I hear you whimper it in your sleep. Who is she?"

"Not your business," he snarled. He didn't remember calling out her name while fucking, and he definitely didn't remember dreaming about her —

No.

That was a lie.

Of *course* he dreamed about her. Hell, every time he closed his eyes, she was there — all wavy blonde hair and grass-green eyes and freckles — thirty-two on the left cheek, thirty-three on the right.

He had her fucking *memorized*.

"Who is she?" Maela asked again, suddenly appearing in front of him.

Was he so distracted by Lyra's face, he didn't even notice Maela approach?

Fuck, he was in a state of ruin. How the fuck had she done this to him?

"She's some grand illusion created by you and your jealousy," he spat. She was too close to him and those eyes saw too much. It was one thing if he was on his game, but he wasn't. He was tormented, ever since the news broke. And now, she would use this against him. "I don't know who or what you're talking about?"

"Lie to yourself all you want, Damon," Maela said. Her voice was smooth, unperturbed by his attempt at hiding from her. "But do yourself a favor and don't try to lie to me. It won't work and, quite frankly, you're not very good at it."

Damon grunted. He wanted this conversation to be over so he could pour himself a generous glass of sangria and not have to listen to nonsense anymore. So he could drown out the face of the only person who ever had the audacity to haunt him like this.

“I’ve heard her name coming directly from you,” she continued. “Clearly, she’s something to you. Something you’re scared of.”

His nostrils flared. Teeth gnarled together, latching onto the ends so he had some semblance of control.

“And clearly you’re trying to make yourself feel better about the fact that I’m not taking you with me to California,” he said. If he had any more control, he would have smoothed out his voice into nonchalance. As it was, this was the best he could do with what he was given. “Whatever will help you sleep at night.”

“Oh, I have no problem sleeping,” she murmured, her lips curving up into a small smirk. “I don’t speak names when I’m dead to the word. I don’t have ghosts clawing at my back, trying to obtain some kind of closure.” She took another step back. “Now that I think about it, perhaps this is for the best. You leaving. Me staying. I wouldn’t want to come between you and your destiny.”

“Destiny?” he said with a sneer.

“Laugh all you want, Damon Smith,” she said, “but I’ve never seen you run before. And the last seven years, that was exactly what you were doing. I didn’t realize it then, but I do now. Whoever she is has you spooked.”

He shook his head. He couldn’t believe he had put up with this for so long. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,”

he said. “You’re just a bitter hag upset she wasn’t upgraded to more than just a quick fuck.”

Her eyes flashed, but the second he noticed it, it had disappeared. She had always been good at controlling her emotions, and even as he hurled insults the way soldiers hurled grenades, she still managed to remain relatively impassive. He wasn’t sure if he wanted her like this or if he wanted a reaction from her. At least with the reaction, he would have an excuse to fight.

“Not only spooked,” she continued, “but she’s wormed her way into your black heart, hasn’t she? You’ve always been quick-witted, but never cruel. Not unless something bothers you, something you refuse to do anything about.” She tapped her chin. “I thought you were a man. But you aren’t. You’re a boy, hiding under his mother’s skirts, waiting for the Big Bad Wolf to pass you by. What you don’t realize, what you don’t learn until you get your head out of your ass, is that you will not shake it until you confront it. But...in order to do that, you have to admit you have a heart in the first place. And I’m not sure you can do that. Your pride won’t let you.”

Damon took the glass he was going to fill up with his sangria and threw it against the wall. She flinched, but again, managed to control herself enough to look relatively calm.

“You’re out of control,” she said, more of an edge to her voice. “Maybe the California sunshine will do you good. Or maybe you just need a quick fuck to forget about her.”

Before he could tell her that he had been trying to do that for the last seven years, she was gone. She didn’t even bother to slam the door behind her, probably didn’t even think he was worth it.

Not that he could blame her.



He dragged himself to his bedroom, ignoring the way his phone blew up with texts and calls. Plopping on the bed, he heaved a sigh, clenching his teeth together, before throwing himself down on the bed and staring up at his ceiling. He blinked once, twice.

He didn't want to go back.

He wanted to remain as far away from Lyra as he could.

And yet, even he couldn't deny the way his heart clenched at the prospect of hope. At seeing her again. At being near her. He hated himself even more for it because Lyra was his ruin. It didn't matter how far away he ran, he would never be able to run from her.

Lyra

---

LYRA STARED at the blank computer screen, her brow furrowed so low, she could make out the dusty blonde of her eyebrows.

“Fuck,” she muttered under her breath, crossing her arms over her chest.

This was a typical morning for her. She couldn't find the words. She knew the story she wanted to tell, and yet, the words themselves remained like jigsaw pieces she couldn't stick together. Nothing fit. Everything came out wrong. Nothing flowed the way it was supposed to. For some reason, she couldn't get what was inside her mind out onto the computer. It wasn't that she was bad at crafting stories, it was putting them all together.

“And I'm supposed to be a writer,” she muttered.

She stood up, bringing her hair over her shoulder and lacing the strands together in a makeshift braid. It had been like this for the last seven years. The words were stuck, unsung melodies she couldn't bring to life. She couldn't make sing.

Strange, since as an old eighteen year old, she couldn't *stop* writing.

But then...

She clenched her teeth together, all but stomping into her kitchen and looking for a bowl. She refused to think of him, refused to put him in the context of muse or anything else as cheesy and ridiculous as that. Because that would be absurd. If she wanted to be a professional writer, she couldn't wait for inspiration to strike. She had to build a habit of creativity. When she sat at her computer, the words should just be able to come. That was it.

Because Damon *wasn't* her muse.

He wasn't.

There was nothing inspiring about him. Besides his looks, obviously.

She knew he looked practically the same since she last saw him all those years ago. Same blond hair. Same icy blue eyes. Same lithe body packed with muscle compounded by a lean frame that reeked of speed and arrogance. There was a reason he was such a damn good hockey player...and he knew it too.

See?

Too arrogant to be a muse, even if he was striking. Even if he was her first. Even if he made her feel...so many things she had never felt before.

But she refused to think about that.

And anyway, she didn't need Damon as her muse. She already had one.

Cole was.

Perfect Cole. Her boyfriend Cole. He was cute and her father respected him. Even liked him, which was hard because Richard Sanders didn't really like anyone except his family

and his fans. Cole had a college degree and wasn't some rich bad boy who squandered all of his opportunities as a means to prove just how tortured he was because he could never escape his reputation that his own behavior justified. He was a talented hockey player, an eligible bachelor, and a kind person. He wasn't jaded or sarcastic, and he rarely partied. He was *good*.

Lyra clenched her teeth just thinking about that stupid sob story she couldn't believe she fell for when she and Damon first started to get to know one another. In fact, she couldn't believe she had —

She stomped over to the pantry, hoping to find a box of cereal. At least that would prevent her from pulling her hair out.

But even now, even as her cheeks pinched with shame, the shame didn't stem from sex with Damon. It stemmed from the fact that she didn't regret it.

Not once.

Not even a little bit.

But she wasn't thinking about that, about those heated moments together. In fact, she focused on Cole, on what it was like being with Cole. Sweet. Perfect. Romantic.

She couldn't find the cereal.

Where the hell was her *Crispix*?

She ran her fingers through her hair, trying to get it out of her head. Trying to get *him* out of her head. Again. She didn't know how this happened, how it always happened. She would be thinking about something completely innocent, and then, without any sort of warning, Damon would pop up. Like her

mind wanted to relate everything back to him, seven years later.

Especially when she was trying to write and the words never came to her. Somehow, the thought of him managed to get her a few hundred words, which wasn't much but it was better than nothing.

Of course, she didn't want Damon to be responsible for her writing success. But when she attempted the same thing with Cole, she couldn't do it. The words wouldn't come.

Jeez, she was pathetic.

This couldn't be normal.

She was pining over an ex.

An ex of *seven* years.

What the hell?

She glared at the back of the pantry, and only then did she find her Crispix, hiding in the back. She snatched it from the shelf before stomping to the fridge, ripping the door open, and grabbing the milk. She needed something in her stomach.

That was it.

She was hungry.

Once she fed herself, thoughts of Damon would vanish.

She slammed her milk carton on the sink so hard some of the milk spilled out. She ignored it and poured some of it into her cereal, only to realize she never poured the cereal into the bowl in the first place.

*Double fuckity-fuck-fuck!*

“Come *on*, Sanders,” she muttered to herself. “You cannot be this sad. You’re in your mid-twenties now. You should have

your shit together by this point.”

Except, clearly, she didn't. She couldn't even get words on her fucking computer. How was she supposed to be a successful, consistent indie author if she couldn't even get the words on the fucking page? It was no wonder she had to work part-time at a bookstore, amongst authors who could write. Because she certainly couldn't.

Shaking her head, she took a deep breath, trying to focus. She needed to calm down. How was it that Damon could rile her up this way, seven years later? She hadn't even seen him in years.

She grabbed her box of cereal and added it, but because she did things out of order, it didn't taste right. She nearly gagged on it, which never happened to her with this cereal. Ever. This had been her favorite cereal since high school and she ate it every day like it was the first time. It was something she could never get sick of.

She rolled her eyes. Of course.

Damon could ruin a bowl of her favorite cereal and he wasn't even here.

Her cell shrilled in the silence, cutting off her concentration and causing her to spill even more cereal.

“Fuck,” she said through clenched teeth, trying to mind the mess.

She dropped the bowl into the sink, deciding she needed a clean break from attempting to salvage this. She'd get herself a new one soon. Instead, she rushed over to her coffee table. She grabbed her phone, only to see **Dad** flash across the screen. She frowned, trying to remember if they were supposed to meet for breakfast and she just forgot, but she didn't think so.

He tended to call her a few times a week, just to check on her, and that only increased during the season because she was expected to attend some of the events the Gulls put on.

Besides the upcoming All-Star weekend, which would take place in Newport, there was nothing she could think of that needed to be discussed. They had talked about the weekend so many times now, she was certain he had exhausted himself of what he wanted to tell her...but maybe not. Her father wasn't the type to call just to chat. He was a traditional tough guy, which was probably why he was still a popular hockey player, even though he was in his sunset season with the Newport Gulls.

"Hello?" she asked, beating the voicemail by less than a second. She mentally applauded herself for this small victory, unlike the embarrassing cereal situation.

"Lyra?" he asked instead of his usual, cringe-inducing, *Yello?*

"Yeah...?" Why did he sound so...concerned? Had something happened? Something...bad?

"Have you heard the latest news?" he asked, right to the point. Suddenly, she was glad he was direct. She was glad he sucked at small talk. If something had happened, she wanted him to get to it without grunting and umming.

Lyra dropped to the couch with a sigh and kicked her feet up on the coffee table. Her socks weren't matched, and she wondered how much longer she could get away with that, if part of growing into a responsible adult meant wearing socks that actually matched.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "Did you finally decide to retire? Like, officially? I know you were

going to make an announcement at the All-Star game, but that isn't for another week."

"No. It's not that." A beat. "It's about Damon. Damon Smith."

Like she might have forgotten who that was.

If only her father knew.

Lyra sucked in a breath. Damon? What about Damon? Had he gotten someone pregnant? Was he getting married? Was he —

Lyra buried her nails into the soft cushion of her couch. The last thing she needed was to let her mind run rampant right now, especially since her father wasn't the type to drag things out.

"N-no." She winced when she heard the quiver in her voice.

"Hmm." A beat. "It seems Seraphina Hanson acquired him in exchange for one of our prospects and a couple of draft picks."

A loud buzzing sound started filtering in and out of Lyra's ears. The words were within her vocabulary, and yet, she couldn't seem to make sense of them.

"I'm sorry," she said, smiling so wide, her cheeks pinched. "I think I misheard you. I thought you just said that Seraphina Hanson picked up Damon before the trade deadline."

"Lyra..." He let his voice trail off, but Lyra knew what that meant. She wouldn't be getting another answer out of him.

Not that she needed one.



That tone meant he wasn't going to indulge her venting because he already understood how frustrated she must feel. She knew he was probably feeling *something* too. Her father never approved of the relationship between her and Damon, and she understood. Besides the fact that he was sixteen years her senior, he also looked at Damon as a younger brother. Damon was a veteran, not even twenty, when he came to stay with their family, making Lyra all of three.

It wasn't as though Damon had any hand in raising her *at all*. She knew that, and it was something her mother continued to point out to her father whenever they got into an argument about Damon, which was a lot.

Well, a lot before Damon was picked up by Seattle.

Her mother wasn't exactly a fan of his reputation, but she knew he genuinely cared for Lyra. He spoiled her with treats and always made sure to give her attention, even when she was being ridiculous and childish and embarrassing.

"I just wanted to make you aware of the situation so you knew what was happening," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle.

"Oh." She cleared her throat. "Well, thanks." She sucked in a breath as a question she had no intention of asking danced on the top of her tongue. "Have you talked to him?"

Fuck.

She didn't want to ask him that. Might as well tell her dad she still had it bad for Damon even after all of these years, even though she definitely did not.

He sighed, and as crazy as it was, it sounded just like the tone he used from before: a warning, a trail off.

“Why would I talk to him?” he finally asked. “After everything that happened?”

Lyra rubbed her lips together. She glanced over at the fridge, wondering if the fluttering in her stomach was nerves or hunger. If she ate, she’d distract herself momentarily, which was a good thing, especially after hearing this.

“Yeah,” she said, breathing out. “No, I know.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. She shouldn’t have asked that. Stupid of the words to come out of her mouth, lazy of her to not even bother to try and stop herself.

Because she cared.

Because she *still* cared.

“I just...” She had no idea why she continued on with whatever she was saying. At this point, even she didn’t know what was going to come out of her mouth, and part of her was curious.

“He hasn’t changed, Lyra,” her father said. “You know that. If you need proof of that, go look him up and see what kind of debauchery he gets into off the ice. You aren’t special.”

Lyra clenched her teeth together and forced herself to stand up. She went to the kitchen but couldn’t bring herself to grab anything to eat. Even though she knew her father was right, even though she knew she couldn’t risk her heart to someone like Damon, there was a small twisted part of her that couldn’t help it. That wanted to believe she was special to him because when they were together, that was how he made her feel.

Or maybe her traitorous heart wanted to believe that.

She kept talking herself into things before talking herself out. She shouldn’t care. That was what she kept trying to tell

herself. It shouldn't matter.

But it did.

"I'm not...I'm not trying to be...mean," he said, his voice strained. Every word out of his mouth was like pulling a tooth, like it was difficult for him to be soft and empathetic and nice. "I just...I don't want to see you hurt."

"I know," she said. It took everything in her to keep her voice from wavering. "I'm not – I get it. It doesn't matter. I just –"

"There's a meet and greet tomorrow night," he said, changing the subject without any hint of transition. Lyra bit her tongue, letting him. She didn't want to continue this conversation anyway, didn't even know why she decided to prolong it. "You going to be there?"

"I'll have to talk to Cole about it," she said. "I'm sure it won't be a problem –"

"Why would it be a problem?" he asked, almost defensive. "He may be the All-Star, but your dad is also on the team and I'm inviting you."

She laughed, despite herself, even as tears filled her eyes. She didn't know why she was laughing or why she was on the verge of crying.

"I'll be there, Dad," she said. "I promise. I, uh...I have to go...shower. I need to finish up this chapter."

"Lyra." Another tone, this one firm and no-nonsense.

Lyra held her breath. Would he be able to tell that she was upset? That she was about to cry? Would he ask her about it?

"I'll see you then," he finally said.

A tear rolled down her cheek, which she quickly wiped away. “Yeah,” she said. “Definitely. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Lyra hung up as quickly as she possibly could and put her phone on the sink. She opened her pantry and stared at the variety of snacks and lite meals but didn't really see them. They were blurred boxes, colorful with cute, loopy fonts fighting for her attention.

Instead, she sighed dramatically and headed back over to her computer. Taking a seat, she tried to find the words, tried to find something that would get Damon out of her head. She wasn't this pathetic. She couldn't be. This wasn't high school and what she felt for him wasn't a crush.

*You aren't special.*

Lyra flinched, remembering how insistent her father was.

She hadn't been lying when she said she understood what he was doing. She knew, deep down, he was trying to protect her. But that didn't make it hurt any less.

More than that, she didn't understand why her father was supportive of her relationship with Cole and not Damon. They were both players on the team. Just because Cole didn't live with them for the duration of his rookie season didn't mean that Damon was anything less than what Cole was. Unless there was something that happened she didn't know about. Maybe she could reach out to her mother and figure it out.

Lyra stared at the blank screen, wishing it had the answers. Instead, it remained completely untouched like pure white snow, waiting for her to figure out how to start her story.

Damon

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THIS WAS SHIT.

Damon had only been in Newport for a few hours, and already Seraphina Hanson expected him to attend some stupid meet and greet with the team. Not that he had a problem meeting and greeting the fans. If anything, that was one of his favorite parts of the job. He just...wanted to get settled and prepare for other things.

He stared at his new boss from across her desk, hands resting casually on the arms of the chair. Part of him was curious if Sanders was the same man when he expected his only daughter to attend every damned event the Gulls put on, volunteering her time when she might have wanted to be anywhere else. It was one thing for him to have such expectations when she was younger, but now that she was an adult, would she still want to be there?

And, if she did, and she was there, what then?

Could he even prepare for something like that?

“...sure a lot of people will be eager to see you again,” Hanson continued as she handed him his contract by sliding it across the smooth surface of her desk. She reached into a Christmas mug – bright red with white snowflakes – and

handed him a pen. “When my grandfather drafted you, he knew you’d be able to do great things.” She paused, tilting her head to the side while maintaining firm eye contact. “I just, I wanted to apologize for not protecting you. With Seattle.”

Damon glanced up, surprised by the admission. Typically, general managers and owners rarely apologized for business decisions, claiming the choice was a business decision. Then again, Seraphina Hanson had always done things differently, based on the news pieces he had heard about. He didn’t have much interaction with her; it must have been her second or third year when Seattle was granted the go-ahead to create the next NHL team, and she was still shaky at best stepping into the role her grandfather expected her to take. He couldn’t exactly blame her for what happened to him. He hadn’t wanted to, even before now.

“There were only so many options,” he said. He dropped the pen once he finished signing. “No bad blood. I’m looking forward to coming back.”

He wasn’t sure if that was entirely true. It would all depend on *her*. Even seeing Sanders again wasn’t enough to make or break this. He couldn’t find it in himself to care one way or the other. It was about Lyra, about what would happen between them – if anything.

“You know,” she said, leaning forward slightly, a sparkle in her forest green eyes. “I could pull a few strings and get you your old locker back if you want. The one by Sanders. I remember my grandfather always talking about how close the two of you were. It was more than just mentor and mentee. It was family. Would that make your transition here easier?”

Damon’s lips twitched but he couldn’t bring himself to smile. It was a thoughtful gesture, but clearly she didn’t know

their history, and he wasn't about to say anything. "That's all right," he said, standing up. "I'd like to start over as new, if you don't mind. As if I had never been here at all."



OF COURSE, there was only so much that Damon could pretend about, especially at this meet and greet he definitely didn't want to be part of.

The air was cool, and he could smell salt in the sky, thanks to the Ice Palace being so close to the Pacific Ocean. He loved being next to the ocean. It represented freedom to him, like he could just pack a bag and jump on a boat and go somewhere if he needed to. There was something about it that smelled like home, eased the tension in his muscles. He might not want to be here, but he was and it meant more than he was willing to admit.

There was nothing he missed back in Seattle. Not Maela. Not his home. Maybe a handful of teammates. The fans that had embraced him despite the reputation people painted on him. But nothing else.

Was that wrong? Did that make him an asshole? Probably. But he couldn't bring himself to care.

The Newport Beach Gulls fans were filled with nostalgia tonight, judging by the way they continued to engage him in conversations about his time as a rookie. It was easy to forget life off the ice as he signed memorabilia and photos of himself — photos he didn't even recognize, photos he didn't even look at. He appreciated the distraction, needed it before his thoughts returned somewhere he didn't want them to go. Everyone was surprisingly friendly, excited to see him, a compliment as they

handed him something to sign. Damon didn't want to admit it, but he could get used to this.

The meet and greet was held outside in the parking lot of the Ice Palace. It was large enough where players were paired up together at tables in a variety of different places across the lot and fans could choose who they wanted to meet for a few minutes before getting in a different line and meeting more players. Damon was sure he'd have a few people at the most, but his line was surprisingly large, filled with a bunch of different people, from kids who loved watching him fight, older fans who remembered when he scored that overtime that took the Gulls to the first round of the playoffs, to women who made no hint of wanting to be the first to take him to bed now that he was back.

It was enough of a distraction that he forgot all about Lyra. He forgot that she was most likely there with her father, probably taking pictures for him and the fans lined up to see him, maybe making small talk with people still waiting in line. She was probably wearing one of her father's old jerseys, probably a throwback to the Gulls' inaugural season, her wavy hair straightened and pulled into a high ponytail he loved wrapping around his fist —

“Cole,” Damon's signing partner said next to him, “where is that fucker anyway? It's not like him to be late.”

Damon shrugged. Who the fuck was Cole? And, more importantly, why the fuck should he care or know the whereabouts of where he was? Damon got here hours ago. Hell, he didn't even know the guy next to him, couldn't even remember his name and didn't care enough to ask even though this would be his teammate.

Yup, he was definitely an asshole.



“I swear,” the guy continued, like Damon gave any kind of shit about what he was bitching about. Damon *thought* his name was Tom or something similar. Big, bigger than Damon with muscle, but Damon still towered over him anyway. And Damon was probably much faster. “Ever since he got with Sanders, he’s been fucking whipped. It’s pathetic.”

Damon froze. The second he said Lyra’s last name was enough for everything else – the whistles, the low murmurs from the phones, some announcement on the speakers set up around the parking lot – none of that mattered. Not when Lyra could be involved.

Maybe he meant that this Cole asshole got with Sanders the player to do something.

*Don’t kid yourself. No one used whipped in that context.*

Fuck.

Damon didn’t want to think about Lyra with Cole, with whoever the fuck Cole was. Clearly, he was on the team. Clearly, he was someone significant.

Jesus fucking Christ, could things have been worse?

“Oh, weren’t you around with Sanders?” Tom asked, glancing over at him and arching a curious brow. “I mean, you were the rookie who lived with him for a year, right? The two of you were close. You knew the family, didn’t you? You knew Lyra.”

Damon snarled. He couldn’t control himself. Hearing her name coming out of some peon’s mouth didn’t inspire him to want to control himself. And, quite frankly, he didn’t want to fucking talk about Lyra with anyone, much less some asshole he didn’t give a shit about.

“You okay? You coming down with something? I’m not looking to get sick, man. Just recovered from the flu. Had to sit out the last couple of games. I guess it’s going around.”

Tom also seemed to be an idiot.

Damon grabbed the table with his hands, knuckles already white because of how tight his grip on the plastic edges was. He wanted to ask more questions but he didn’t want to engage this neanderthal in conversation. He shouldn’t care. He *shouldn’t*. But he fucking did, and he knew it.

“Are you saying,” Damon said slowly, each word choked as he forced it out of his mouth, “this Cole person and Lyra Sanders are –”

“Sorry we’re late.” Before Damon could even finish his sentence, someone dropped on the other seat next to Tom, some hulking hockey player with slicked back brown hair that curled at the end and a long, prominent nose. He leaned forward and flashed Damon a smile. “Smith, right? I’ve heard a lot about you, man. Welcome to the team.” He reached across Tom and offered Damon his hand.

Damon stared at it for a long moment but didn’t bother to reach for it. It was a dick thing for him to do, especially since this was supposed to his teammate, his family, but he couldn’t be bothered to give two shits.

Cole dropped his hand, pulling it back in his lap.

“Where’s Lyra?” Tom asked as a fan dropped something in front of Damon.

Damon barely saw it. He had a sharpie in his hand and was already scrawling his name, trying to listen in on the conversation without making it obvious he was listening to the conversation.

“Helping her dad,” Cole said. “You know Sanders runs a tight ship and likes to keep things the way they’ve always been. We’re supposed to meet up after though. Hey — are you and Aurora free after this? We were thinking of heading to Fire & Ice.”

“I’ll see,” he said. “She’s not really into the club scene —“

Damon broke the sharpie.

This asshole was taking Lyra to a club? She wasn’t into that sort of shit either. Damon himself had taken her to a few, but she wasn’t into it. And he could care less. If Lyra didn’t like it, he didn’t —

“Mr. Smith?”

A boy’s cracked voice caught his attention. Damon forced himself to look up.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You got ink all over my jersey.”

Damon glanced down and saw that yes, he had done that.

Fuck.

“Sorry,” he said, standing up, looking down at his hands. They were covered in ink and he hadn’t even noticed. “I’m going to...clean up.” He didn’t even bother to stay to see how security would handle it.

He didn’t care.

He knew he needed to stay away from Lyra. He knew that. But one glance wouldn’t hurt. And she wouldn’t know.

He made his way through the weaving lines, unsure where one finished and the other began. He ignored the way a couple

of teammates nodded to him, recognizing him from his time here or with the Sea Demons, he didn't know.

He just had to —

And there she was. The breath left him instantly, and he stopped walking completely so he could fully look at her.

She looked exactly the same, but also different. It was hard for him to explain. She was still that innocent girl he knew from long ago, but she had filled out the way a woman did. Curvy hips, just the right amount of breasts that filled out her body. Blonde hair pulled into a high ponytail — but no bangs. Not anymore. Light makeup. A kind smile as she chatted with the fans. Tight jeans that revealed a juicy ass that looked even better than he remembered. Old Chucks she still had since middle school.

His chest ached, right in the place his heart was supposed to be.

Fuck.

He thought for sure he had gotten over this. He thought he remembered her in a way most people remembered their first time — with some romanticism, some nostalgia, but after encountering them again, they lost a bit of shine as reality settled in.

But no.

She was magnificent.

At that moment, she threw her head back and laughed, her small nose wrinkled, mouth wide. She had one of the most obnoxious laughs he had ever heard, but it was contagious. Even now, despite his best efforts, he couldn't help himself as he started to smile, as he felt himself get pulled into her again.

*Fuck.*

This was bad.

He needed to stay away.

Why had he agreed to come back? Maybe he should have brought Maela with him. Maybe he should have just fucking quit so he wouldn't have to be exposed to the likes of *her*.

Lyra glanced up at that moment, and somehow, she knew. She knew he was there, and she caught his eye. It wasn't supposed to happen. He could see that. But now that they saw each other, now that they acknowledged each other, he couldn't just look away. And she seemed unable to do so too.

Good.

Some demented part of him wanted to know how she had fared since their separation. Did she miss him as much as he missed her even if he didn't deserve it?

But he couldn't read those eyes. Grey, like the clouds during a storm. Not heavy and dark, but light. Unexpected. Too much time had passed.

He hated the realization, hated there was a chance someone else knew her better than he did. He didn't want to think about it, and yet, he was forced to acknowledge it.

Someone came up to him, a couple of high school kids, asking for autographs. He barely heard them. When they handed him something, he instinctively glanced down to look at it. By the time he signed some stupid picture of him, she was back to helping her father.

Whatever moment might have transpired between them had passed.

Which was fine with him.

He didn't want to be around her anyway, didn't want to be around this place with this breeze that smelled like home, didn't want to be reminded that life had moved on since he left. Which was stupid, because of course it had.

Said breeze tickled the back of his neck and he glanced up, into the dark sky. Strange. Even though he had been away for seven years, he didn't remember the cold. Was Southern California even allowed to be cold?

Maybe he had been away too long.

Maybe he had remembered things wrong.

Damon shook his head. He wasn't in the mood for this shit. He'd play the game, serve out his contract, and then...

He didn't know.

But he couldn't do this with her again. There was too much between them, too much history, too much to ignore. He thought he could come back without consequence.

Fucking stupid.

He was fucking stupid.

The obligation to return to his seat wasn't as heavy as he thought it might be. Instead, he headed towards the back, where his rental was parked. He wanted to go home. He wanted to...

He snarled. If he was truly being honest with himself, Damon wanted nothing more than to stalk back over to Lyra, swoop her up in his arms, and take her back to his car. He would then proceed to fuck her in the back of his car as quickly as he could just to feel himself inside of her, just to get a taste of what it might feel like, before driving back to the home the team rented for him and then making love to her

over and over again. By the time he was finished, he wanted her nails to have left scars down his back from how hard she scratched at him and the walls to echo with his name coming from her lips.

He was hard just thinking about it.

But he knew that wasn't something he could possess. Not yet, maybe not ever. He had had his chance with her, and instead of taking it, instead of making her his, he ran away. Like a fucking coward.

“Damon?”

His head snapped up at his name on her lips.

Had he imagined it, or...

But no.

There was Lyra, standing in front of him, head cocked to the side, looking more beautiful than he had ever seen.

For once in his life, Damon was at a loss for words. He had no idea what to say. He just knew he couldn't let her slip through his fingers.

Not again.

Not this time.

Lyra

---

THE SECOND LYRA SAW DAMON, all signs of vital life froze inside of her. She was a marble statue, a human tossed into the freezing ocean, an icicle about to fall from the roof and possibly impale some poor person at the wrong place at the wrong time. Or maybe the impaled person was her. Maybe Damon's presence pierced her heart to the point where life drained from her body, and she wasn't even aware of it.

No.

She couldn't be that dramatic.

Not about her ex.

Regardless, the world faded away to flurries and specks of snow, and all that mattered was the two of them.

*Stop being so dramatic. It's been seven years. Seven. Haven't you done this already by now?*

Except, how could she help it? Now that he was here, face to face, now that she was seeing him in real time after all this time, how could she help being anything but dramatic?

Her eyes quickly scanned his features, wanting to memorize him, to compare him to what she had known him to be all while trying to make it seem like he definitely didn't



matter to her. She couldn't have him knowing she still cared for him in any way. He still had that savage beauty she had always been drawn to, the kind that promised a hint of danger to an otherwise lust-filled attraction. That didn't even take into account their whole relationship was entirely forbidden because of who he was — who he had been — to her father. She used to call him uncle until she called him by his first name, and he always brought her gifts and treats he picked out especially for her because he knew her so well.. Why he fell for her, why he wanted her, she didn't know, not even now. He had seen her at her worst — buck teeth and acne, braces and tangled hair, *puberty*. She didn't understand. She didn't think she ever would. And maybe that was okay. Maybe that wasn't something she should understand. Maybe her thoughts were piling on top of each other and his eyes were still that sky blue she always lost herself in and her heart ached because there was *so much* still left unsaid between them —

And then, he turned.

He didn't even come up to her. In fact, he was moving in the opposite direction. He was...he was *leaving*.

She blinked in surprise. She wasn't sure what to expect, exactly, but to be ignored in this way wasn't it.

*Wait. Maybe this is a good thing. Maybe this is supposed to happen. You already have Cole. You're already happy. You don't need —*

Lyra ignored the desperate voice running through her head. Her brow hung low over her brow, and she clenched her teeth together. She wasn't sure if she was angry or offended. Not that she had any right to be. She was with Cole. She loved Cole. The voice didn't have to remind her of that. At least, she

thought she did. And she was over him. She was. She really was...

So, why were her feet moving in his direction?

Why had she told her father she was going to take a quick break without even thinking about it?

Why didn't she go to Cole, who she knew was waiting for her, and, instead, followed Damon further into the empty lot specifically reserved for the players?

What the hell was she doing?

Why was she *following* him?

“Damon?”

Why did she call his name? Why did she draw attention to herself?

*Because I want him to acknowledge me.*

*Because I want to see if he still feels something for me.*

*Because I want to know if he still remembers me.*

It shouldn't matter. Logically, she knew that. But she didn't care. She had to know. Because even though she had fun with Cole, even though she was still furious with Damon for leaving her without any sort of word, she needed to know these things – and so much more.

When he stilled, Lyra cocked her head to the side, sucking in a breath. She rubbed her lips together, holding in the air, waiting.

Waiting for what, she didn't know, other than she wanted some kind of reaction.

That acknowledgment.

*Something.*

He could keep ignoring her.

There was that possibility, one she was willing to risk. Because if he ignored her, then she could take that as a sign to move on, a sign that she was free to...well, she hadn't actually considered what that meant, so she chose not to dwell.

It wouldn't give her what she hadn't realized she wanted. She wanted that closure. She wanted to know why he just left without a word. She wanted to understand everything that had gone through her head so maybe she could make sense of it and finally move on. But she wouldn't get that if he ignored her, so she hoped...

She hoped he didn't.

She hoped he would do *something*.

But she was almost afraid to narrow in on what she wanted.

Finally, he turned. She let out a breath she didn't even realize she had been holding inside.

Good.

This was a good first step.

The silence lingered. His eyes narrowed, and she could detect the obvious suspicion on his face, though there was a lightness to the gaze, something that hinted at his curiosity just the same. Another breath of relief swept through her. He wasn't completely shutting her out. He wasn't completely shutting her down. This was a good sign. It had to be. She opened her mouth, wanting to say something, anything, that might fill the space between them. She just didn't know what she could say that might do that.

Which was weird.

She used to know him like the back of her hand. She spent every second of every day with him. And yet, standing in front of him now, she had no idea what to say to guarantee a response. It was like looking at a stranger she used to know.

“Uh, how...how are you?” she finally asked, darling to take one step towards him. She didn’t want to spook him, didn’t want to cause him to run off like a squirrel on the side of the road, debating whether to cross or not. She didn’t want to be the reason he rushed into traffic, potentially risking his life.

Then again, they were far away enough to hear nobody noticed them, shrouded within the shadows and emptiness of the backlot. The players were everywhere else, lined primarily in the main and east lots, which meant there shouldn’t be much, if any, foot traffic here. Lyra made sure to keep her voice down as well, not wanting to draw any further attention to them, didn’t want anyone to interrupt this moment between them. She didn’t know why, but there was a poignancy, something heavy between them that needed to get undone in order for them to move forward. If that was even possible, considering their history.

He sneered. “Is that what you want to know?” he asked in that caustic voice she absolutely hated.

*After all this time* was silent but she still heard it as if he spoke it aloud.

Some things never changed. She wasn’t sure whether she appreciated this familiarity or loathed it.

Lyra paused. She wasn’t sure where this anger came from. If anything, *she* should be the angry one. She had been left

without a word, not him. Why should he have the right to sneer at her, to be sarcastic with her? That might work on others, but it wouldn't work on her. And if he had known anything about her then, he would know that about her now.

Or maybe he did and he just didn't care.

"I'm trying to be polite," she said. She was proud of the way her voice remained steady, how she kept any frustration she had out of her tone. She didn't want to give him another excuse to be angry with her when she hadn't done anything wrong.

"You? Polite? When did I ever want you to be polite?" he asked. Now he was the one walking towards her, stalking her like a predator. Where she thought she had the power, he took it from her without so much as a blink of his eye.

He always had that sort of power over her, even now.

How was this possible?

Lyra should run, she realized. This whole thing was a mistake, one she should have seen coming. As much as she wanted that closure, she didn't think it was worth this risk, at remembering what Damon was truly capable of, at remembering how easily she fell into the palms of his hands. Damon was volatile. He was unhinged. Why would she think he wouldn't react in that way to her? Why would she think he'd have a rational response, a level head? Was she just in denial?

"I..." She didn't know what to say. The truth of the matter was, she didn't know what she was doing or why or any of it. She just wanted to see him, to have his eyes on her one more time. To remember their past. To regret walking away from what they had once had together.

“I want you to be honest,” he continued, taking another step in her direction. “I want you to be exactly who you are, who I’ve always known you to be.”

She frowned as his words sunk in. “How could you possibly know who I am?” she asked. She tried to control the tone of her voice, tried to ensure there wasn’t a tone he could decipher and interpret as aggressive, because there was no reason to fight. “It’s been seven years since you left me. People change in that time.”

Lyra pressed her lips together. That was much more than she wanted to confess. She jerked back, eyes wide, hoping the shadows masked the surprise she knew was still on her face. She couldn’t give him an advantage over her, couldn’t allow him to have any sort of power over her. Not anymore than she already inadvertently allowed.

Any *more* power.

“Left you?” he asked. “What else was I supposed to do? Take you with me to Seattle?”

She flinched at his caustic words, at the derivative tone he used, like she was some kind of child who didn’t understand how the real world worked. It didn’t surprise her that the very notion of taking her with him was simply unacceptable to him. She knew he wasn’t the sort to make that kind of commitment, especially a young hockey player who had the world at his feet, who was going somewhere new. But still. He didn’t have to make it so terribly obvious either.

“You were a child,” he said.

Lyra blinked. Was that why...?

“Yeah.” She scoffed. “You think that protected me? I still...”

But no. She wouldn't tell him how he left her broken, how she stayed up in the middle of the night in his t-shirt, listening to sad songs and crying. She wouldn't tell him how the rain reminded her of their first time together, how she could still hear the distinct pattern of it hitting the roof even now. He didn't deserve to know that, didn't deserve to know the pain she still suffered because of him.

“Oh, and you think my life was better?” He took another step towards her until there was only a bit of space between them, until there was a sliver of air, if that. “You think leaving you did wonders for me?”

Lyra opened her mouth. She wanted to know — she wanted to know so badly what his life was like after he left. But she refused to ask him. Because asking him meant she cared, and caring was impossible with Damon. It was a weakness, something she refused to lose herself in again.

“You walked away,” she finally said.

“I didn't have a choice,” he bit back. “The organization left me on the chopping block, and I was picked. The end, done deal.”

“And you couldn't even say goodbye?” she asked, her voice cracking on the last word.

Goddammit, she hadn't wanted to do that. She had wanted to be stronger, *older* even. But she still felt small when she was around him, a helpless being who couldn't figure out what to do to earn his respect, to earn a place by his side as his equal.

“What would that have done?” he asked. “At least this way...”

She wrinkled her nose. “What?”

“If you hated me, maybe it would have been easier for you —“

“Oh, bullshit, Damon,” she snarled. She raised her hand and poked him in the shoulder. Not that he budged. His shoulder was too broad, and she hadn’t packed enough punch in it the way she wanted to. “Don’t turn this around on me. Don’t pretend you were doing this out of some twisted favor for me. You broke my heart —“

“Did you think it was easy?” he demanded to know. “To leave? After the conversation your father had with me —“

“My father?!”

“—and knowing you had the fucking world at your feet, did you really think I wanted to be the guy to bring you down to my level?” he asked. “You think the last seven years have been easy for me? Just because I’m the one who left doesn’t mean I can just shut off...” He looked like he was going to say more but thought better of it. “It wasn’t, okay?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry *for you*,” she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I heard you have someone new anyway,” he said. This time, when he took a step towards her, there was little space between them, and yet somehow, they weren’t touching.

“That is none of your business,” she said through clenched teeth.

How dare he bring up Cole?

“That’s a fucking lie and you and I both know it,” he snapped. His eyes dropped to her lips and she knew with every fiber of her being that there was a good chance he was going to kiss her. And yet, knowing this, she couldn’t bring herself to



move, couldn't bring it in her to avoid the inevitable. "You will always be my business —"

"And what about you?" she demanded to know. "Don't tell me you were completely celibate, pining away for a memory. We both know that isn't true."

"No," he said. "It would seem the two of us have a lot more in common than we thought."

Lyra's chest clenched painfully, like someone struck through her heart until it bled all over the floor. She should have expected that answer. She knew that. And yet, it still felt like a surprise, like a betrayal. As much as she wanted to keep her face neutral, she couldn't. Pain must have flashed across her face because he seemed confused and then he pursed his lips.

"Tell me, Lyra," he purred. She hated when he spoke to her like that because of the effect it had on her body, because she knew he was going to say something particularly vicious to her in the most seductive way. "Did you think of me when you were with him? When he was touching you, did you imagine my hands caressing your skin, my mouth on your body, making you twitch and keen the only way I know how?"

Lyra clenched her teeth together. She would not let him get the best of her — not now, not ever. If he was going to be here for a while, she needed to get used to the way he pushed her buttons because he would make sure he took advantage of her every time.

"Did you imagine my cock inside of you, stretching you, molding you to me like your cunt was made for me and *only* me?" His voice was nothing more than a silky whisper, his lips so close to the shell of her ear, she could swear she felt his hot breath on her skin.

She took shallow breaths to fill her with *something*. She needed oxygen and this was the only way she could get it.

Before she could respond, a familiar whistle pierced the night.

*Cole.*

Lyra blinked, shook her head. “I have to go,” she says stupidly, taking a step back and then another. “I have to...” She didn’t owe him an explanation, and yet, she was fumbling around like she could find one somewhere.

Instead of finishing her sentence, she forced herself to completely turn away. It was easier to move, to breathe, now that she wasn’t looking at him. And her feet took her safely away from the beast and closer and closer to safety.

Lyra didn’t think she was out of the woods when it came to Damon. She knew she had a long way to go before she would ever be truly free.

Damon

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DAMON SNARLED AGAIN the second her back was turned. He was turning into some kind of overindulgent animal who couldn't seem to control himself. Then again, it wasn't like he could help it. Who the fuck dared to treat her like a goddamn puppy dog, whistling at her, beckoning her? It certainly wasn't Sanders. There was no way he'd do that to his daughter, especially not at a public event. As much as he and Damon had issues with each other, he knew enough about Sanders to know that he would never treat her that way.

And what pissed him off even more was the fact that she actually obeyed the damn command. Why the fuck had she responded to it? Was she this docile and he just hadn't realized it? Had she been good at hiding her true self from him?

No. There was no way. He made mistakes about a lot of things, but this wasn't one of them. It couldn't be. Where was the spitfire he knew from before? Where was the passion that burned inside of her, where she felt compelled to snap at him if he even dared to use the wrong tone with him? The burning intensity he knew was reflected in himself? They were the same, they always had been. And yet, everything seemed to have changed about her.

Sure, she looked the same. And when they argued, she certainly argued the same. He could still press the same buttons and get a reaction out of her, so that was something.

But *this*?

This was a goddamn joke.

A pathetic joke.

And the worst part was, she didn't even look like she realized how fucking pathetic she looked.

Damon shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out his keys. He didn't want to be here, didn't want anything to do with this fucking place and these fucking people and —

The second he got in the car, he started the engine and peeled out, his tires squealing like he was in some kind of car movie. He was sure he'd have to think of an explanation, and unfortunately, jet lag wasn't going to work. Seattle was on the West Coast as well, which meant they were in the same time zone. It wouldn't apply. After he made a right and found himself on the nearly empty Pacific Coast Highway, he slammed his palms on the wheel of the car, muttering to himself. If he were back in Seattle, he'd call up Maela, he'd demand she get to his place so he could fuck her over and over, until he forgot the dewy skin of Lyra, forgot the dimples framing her bottom lip, or the flyaway hair that framed her face. He wanted to forget all of her, every last part of her, because *fuck*, she looked more perfect than he remembered, and he didn't know how to handle that.

Fuck, he hated Lyra.

He needed to free himself of her. His sanity demanded it of him. If he was going to stay in Newport, if he had any hope of building a potential career similar to what he had before he left

or even to what he had in Seattle, he couldn't sit around, indulging in fantasies about the past, about what might have happened if things had been different.

He couldn't pine away for her like some high school pussy who lost the first great love of his life.

Fuck that.

Damon hated that he wanted nothing more than to kiss her in that moment, to wrap his fingers around her throat and claim her. Just talking about his cock buried in her cunt, stretching her out, made him harden. He didn't even give a shit if she noticed it or not. He couldn't help himself, couldn't be bothered to care. If he could indulge his debauched fantasies, he would have taken her somewhere secluded but close. If things were arranged like they had been when he was still on the team, he'd take her to the player entrance of the arena, in the supply closet next to the Gull locker room. He'd put his hand over her mouth, muffling her cries as he thrust into her, fucking her against the wall until he couldn't take it any more and spilled himself into her tight, wet cunt. His head would fall on her shoulder and she would card her long fingers through his hair, and he would feel safe. Cared for. He wouldn't pull out right away and she wouldn't move. They would simply hold each other, enjoying each other's presence, while they caught their breath and the tingles of their pleasure began to dim.

Fuck, he missed her.

He missed that.

He missed all of it.

Seven years couldn't erase that, no matter how much he tried.

He slowed at a red light, leaning his head back against the leather chair. He took a breath, then another.

Would her cunt still fit him the way it had when he first claimed her innocence so many years ago?

Would it feel the same, welcoming, warm, *tight*? Like it was made for his cock.

*Because it was. Her cunt was made for his cock, and that was all there was to it.*

God, he wasn't even sure he wanted to think about it.

He forced himself to focus on the drive home, even as his cock got harder at the thought of her cunt, dripping with her own juices of desire for him. How his spend would trickle down her fleshy thigh, marking her as his. How she would wipe it up with her fingers before sticking it in her mouth –

Fuck, he shouldn't have lingered. He shouldn't have indulged her the way he had.

Maybe he was the goddamn puppy. He certainly stopped when she said his name.

*God, it felt so damn good to hear his name on her lips once again.*

What was she doing, anyway, calling him like that? Why did she want him to stop leaving? He thought he was doing her a favor. He thought by leaving, he was protecting her.

Had he made the wrong decision?

Had he been protecting her? Or was he really a coward?

When he got to his place — a townhouse two blocks from the beach — he pulled into the tiny garage and cut the engine. For a minute, he did nothing but sit there.

Was he this much of a pussy that seeing Lyra again — looking so damn beautiful it physically hurt him to look at her — rendered him into a pitiful shell of the person he thought he was? Had he idealized her as a whole, the way she touched him, the way he fit inside of her? Had he thought sex with her was untouchable because of their separation? Put it on some kind of pedestal that no one else could match up? Was all of this in his head?

God, he hoped so.

Damon forced himself to get out of the car and slammed it shut. He made his way out of the garage and down the narrow hallway until he spilled into the living room. Tiny beach houses were overrated as far as he was concerned. Fucking expensive for seven hundred square feet. What a joke. Not that Seattle was different, but still.

Maybe when he finally figured out where he wanted to settle down, he might think about investing in some land, claiming some space. He could imagine a ranch house with kids running around —

Jesus Christ, kids?

Damon stepped into the kitchen, needing something to eat, to fill his belly so his head wasn't filled with Lyra.

The thing was, Damon had never been averse to kids. He wasn't going to have them with just anyone though, but he wanted a big family. Coming from being an only child in a family too busy for him, he wanted noise and laughter and connection. There was something appealing at the thought of passing his legacy down to children, of continuing his family line, something that heightened the mood when he coupled with...

There was only one person he considered such things with, and he hated both himself and her for the moment of weakness. And yet, even now, even imagining her stomach growing ripe with *his* child, *his* seed, was enough for his cock to twitch with want, to seek out the warm, slick womb so he could deposit himself deep inside of her.

Food was momentarily forgotten. He needed release. All the tension that accumulated tonight needed to come out, to get out of his system. She might not be here. She might not be the one touching him, stroking him, looking up at him with those goddamn eyes and those rose petal lips in that perfect pout, a sight he couldn't erase from his mind because she had used some sort of bewitching enchantment to stain it to him for the rest of his life.

He moved to his couch and undid his pants, pulling them down so his cock could spring free. Without wasting any time, he took himself in his hand. He wished he had lotion nearby, anything that might smooth himself out as he clutched at himself. He couldn't replicate her soft touch, her dainty fingers. And no one else could live up to the way she molded to him like he was nothing more than clay.

But this was all he had, and he would have to make do.

He leaned back, trying to get comfortable.

Fuck, he felt like a goddamn teenager. When was the last time he made himself come? It had to be middle school – maybe high school, but at that time, he knew his way around a woman's body. His first lover, an older woman, made sure to teach him everything she knew.

Part of him wished he knew someone he could call, someone he could trust that would come over and he could fuck her just to get this feeling out of his system.



*It won't go away. She won't go away.*

Damon growled, gripping himself rougher than he intended to. He began to move up and down his length, closing his eyes, pretending it wasn't his callused hands on his cock, but hers. It was difficult to pretend because no one felt like she did, no one could replace *anything* she did, not even himself.

He remembered the first time she touched him, all wide eyes and flushed cheeks. Her mouth dropped into that soft 'o' that made it all the more difficult to refrain from shoving his cock past her lips until it hit the back of her throat. He wanted to see tears in her eyes, wanted to feel her gag on him as he fucked her mouth.

He groaned, because he had. Many times, he had. And her mouth, the way her cheeks sucked in, the way her eyelashes fluttered as tears rolled down her cheeks so prettily for him...

And then, she got used to him and he grabbed her hand and taught her to move it up and down his shaft as she sucked, spreading her saliva like a sheath all over him. With her other, he brought it to his balls, to caress, to touch, to inflict just the right amount of pleasure until it hurt and enhanced the pleasure she was already giving him.

"Fuck," he gasped out, though whether that was himself or the memory, he couldn't be sure because it didn't matter.

None of it mattered except the moment, except the feel, the thought that this could almost be real...

And then, she looked up at him with those wide, innocent eyes, and how they glistened with tears, and how she looked like she still trusted him completely, how she was willing to endure anything he gave to her, even the pain, because she

loved him. Fuck, she loved him and she belonged to him and she was so perfect...

A little moan crossed her lips, like somehow she derived pleasure from his own.

“You like this, don’t you?” The words ripped from his mouth like he was speaking them directly to her, like she was still here, even now. Even after all this time. “You like to take my fat cock in your pretty perfect mouth, don’t you?”

He could hear her mew in response, even now, even when it was just him and her ghost. And the sound electrified his body in a way no one else could reproduce.

“That’s it,” he said. “You’re such a good girl, so sweet, so *good*. You like sucking my cock, don’t you? You like to take it in your mouth. It makes you wet, doesn’t it? Tell me. *Tell me.*”

Except she couldn’t. She wasn’t here.

But those sighs, the keening in desperation. He remembered when she would rub her soaking mound on his leg like a dog humping her master. He could still feel her, still feel the dampness on his Champion sweatpants afterwards. He didn’t wash them for days, just so he could smell her when she wasn’t around...

“There you go,” he said. “Oh, Lyra. There you go. *Lyra*. Good girl, that’s — I’m going to —“

And she kept her mouth on him, those lips puckered sealed so tightly, as he spilled his seed inside of her mouth, and she kept moving her head, his good girl, until he couldn’t give her another drop. And then, she did the most peculiar thing — she swallowed every last bit of him.

He couldn’t keep his eyes off of her.

She was the most beautiful thing in the world.

But she wasn't here.

It was just her ghost.

Instead, he spilled into his hand, and while it helped him with his release, it was hollow, like cracking open an Easter egg, only to find there was nothing inside.

"Fuck," he said, angrier than before. Tension was still swarming his body like a hive of bees protecting their Queen.

He reached for a tissue from the stand next to the couch, careful not to spill out anymore.

He should have been satisfied, but he wasn't.

Because he didn't have her.

Not really.

He cleaned himself and got to his feet. He threw away the tissues and fixed his pants before deciding he needed a shower and maybe a drink.

If he could choose to do anything, it would be to forget her. To forget her smile, the way her eyes would crinkle at the corner, the obnoxious laugh that somehow made him laugh even when he was in a particularly foul mood. He wanted to forget the wrinkle in her nose and the freckles on her face and the way her fingertips felt on his face, touching him like he should be worshiped, like he was a thing of beauty and wonder.

No one looked at him that way before.

He doubted anyone else would.

But he would never forget. He could drink as much as he wanted to, fuck as much as he wanted to, but there was no way

he could forget a thing about Lyra Sanders.

She was his punishment for all the bad things he had done, and he knew he would be in torment for the rest of his life because there was no way he could deserve her. And there was no way she could want him after everything he had done to her. He was cursed to a life of ghosts and there was nothing he could do to escape it.

Lyra

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"WHERE DID YOU GET OFF TO?"

Cole's familiar voice broke through Lyra's traitorous train of thoughts. She still wasn't sure if she was grateful for the interruption with Damon, or if she was furious. Even now, she could feel the faint flush on her cheeks at Cole's whistle disappearing, though the fact that he had used it on her, in front of Damon, was more embarrassing than she would have cared to admit. Of course, Cole didn't know she was with Damon, and that was probably a good thing, but still.

She had seen Damon's eyes just before she turned and walked away. The judgment. The fury. Not at her, but at her being called for like she was little more than a dog.

And maybe the truth was, he had a right to think those things of her.

Cole reached for Lyra's arm the second he got close enough to her in order to do so. She barely noticed him waiting at the edge, just far away enough from the tables that no one would hear what he might say to her. She wanted to look behind her, to see if Damon was still there, but she managed to refrain. She highly doubted he was there anyway,

and even if he was, she didn't want to draw Cole's attention to him.

Because then Cole would know she had been talking to Damon, and she didn't want that. Not until she could sort out her own thoughts about it.

The second Cole placed his hand on her, she flinched unexpectedly, as though it was the thing that propelled her to break free from enchantment Damon had her under.

Concern pooled in his dark eyes and he cocked his head to the side. He wasn't offended in the slightest by her reaction, and guilt pooled into her stomach like a snake, slithering around and searching for its prey. "You okay?" he asked, thumb gently caressing her. "Your dad said you disappeared for a moment and when you didn't come back, he got concerned."

Lyra furrowed her brows, annoyance flaring in her chest, which seemed to completely contradict her guilt. "Why would he say that?" she asked, glancing to her left, as though she'd be able to find her father from where she was.. The crowds and lines were still persistent even though they were two hours into the event, but she couldn't make out her father from her current position.

But Lyra knew why her father would make a comment like that since he was the one who told her about Damon returning in the first place. He would know that Damon was here as well, and he would make assumptions...assumption that might have been correct, sure, but assumptions nonetheless. She just needed to know if he mentioned, or even hinted, anything to Cole about where Lyra had been. He wouldn't...would he?

Lyra chewed her bottom lip. He might have, if he thought it was protecting her in some way. And it was clear he still

didn't like Damon, regardless of the seven year break. She wrinkled her nose. How was it justification of questionable actions or statements came so easily if it was for her own benefit? Who got to say what was good for her, especially since she was an adult at this point in her life? Wasn't she allowed to make her own choices, or was that right revoked because Damon was back?

Either way, this was bullshit.

"He's probably just worried," Cole said, making excuses for her father yet again. His sharp eyes took in the look on her face but he wisely made no comment on it. "You're his only child and I'm sure the fact that you're his little girl just adds to everything. The fans can get rowdy, especially if they've been drinking. He probably just wants to check on you. I'm sure I'd do the same thing to my daughter too."

Guilt gnawed at her stomach even more than it already was. That wasn't what she wanted to hear. She wanted an excuse to be mad at everyone. Couldn't he give her that. Was that just so hard to ask for?

More than that, it reminded her of her parents' journey to even be able to have her in the first place. She shook off her mother's infertility issues as much as she could. It wasn't her fault she was an only child. However, she could understand why her father might be overbearing since she was somehow the only baby that survived. But why Cole had to bring that up and use it against her as a way to guilt her into understanding this was below the belt.

"Yeah," she agreed, the tension fading from her body. "I should probably get back —"

"I told him I'd find you and let him know," Cole said, throwing her a smile despite blatantly interrupting her. "Let

me just do that and maybe we can go out —“

“Actually,” she said, holding up a hand. “Cole, I know you wanted to go to that thing at that club, but would you mind terribly if maybe we just stayed home tonight? Or, I mean, you could go, but I just don’t think I’m in the right frame of mind to people right now.” She forced what she hoped was the least suspicious smile she could muster and considered batting her eyelashes to add to it.

Probably going overboard and making her more suspicious than she needed to be.

He cupped her shoulders with his palms, giving them a gentle squeeze as he leaned close to her so her forehead brushed his. “Yeah, of course,” he said. “I have no problem staying with you —“

She shook her head. “Honestly, I know you’ve been looking forward to it,” she said. “The season’s at the midway point. Everyone’s been working hard. You deserve to have some fun with your team. I’m probably just going to take a bath and fall asleep. You should go.”

“I don’t...I mean, I wouldn’t feel right, just leaving you at home,” he said tentatively. It was like she was a bomb that he was carefully trying to diffuse, like this was one big test he wasn’t sure he was handling the right way. She would have laughed if she wasn’t still reeling from her encounter with Damon.

“I’m a big girl,” she pointed out, leaning forward. For some reason, she stopped herself from touching him in return. She didn’t know why, but she didn’t feel like there was a point to indulge. Plus, she didn’t want him to think she was belittling him in any way. “I’m pretty sure I can be left to my own devices. It’s really not a big deal. And you deserve this.



Cole, you made the All-Stars. That's huge, especially since they were fan voted this year."

"I think they're like that every year," he said.

Lyra smiled. "Even so," she said. "You deserve to have some fun just like I deserve to have some rest. Come on." She tilted her head to the side. "Please? For me?"

Maybe she was laying it on a little thick, but she needed him to agree to this. She needed him to give her this space or...Well, she'd be distracted and she didn't want to have to keep making excuses for herself as to why she was distracted. Even she knew she was a terrible liar, and Cole knew that as well. She couldn't risk it.

Cole gave her a long look, trying to read her face. If it were Daemyn, he would take one look at her and know exactly what she was thinking.

If it were Daemyn, he would never go to the party without her. Instead, he'd follow her home and they would fuck and make love and everything in between for the rest of the night and long into the morning.

"If you're sure," he finally said.

Lyra's heart panged, though she couldn't say whether it was with relief or disappointment. She knew she wanted to be alone, but she also knew if Cole was someone else, if Cole was Damon, he wouldn't let her and she would have felt... special in that respect as well.

Fuck, she was a hot mess.

"I am," she assured him. She leaned forward and placed a kiss on his lips, offering him more reassurance.

Or maybe she was offering it to herself.

She didn't know, and that was what scared her.

Before Cole could deepen the kiss or even wrap his arms around her to pull her into a hug, she jerked back. She couldn't be touched right now. She didn't want to be. After waving one last time, she turned and headed in Damon's direction. She knew he was already long gone — he was notorious for running from things that meant something — but her car was back there and it meant she didn't have to weave through fans and staff in order to get there.

Her fingers shook as she pulled out her keys, dropping them to the street.

“Come on,” she whispered.

“Hey.”

Lyra jumped, only to find Cole looking at her with a cocked head.

“What are you —“

“I was going to walk you to the car,” he explained. “But you took off so fast I couldn't offer.” He frowned. “You sure you're okay?”

Lyra let out a breath of relief. “Yeah,” she said, shaking her head. She wasn't sure who she expected that to be, who she *wanted* it to be, but, for some reason, Cole wasn't that person. And yet, seeing him was a consolation to whom it might be.

*But it couldn't be Damon. Damon is gone. And that's a good thing.*

“Thank you,” she forced herself to say, catching eyes with him. “For that.”

“Of course.” He opened the driver's door for her and waited for her to slide inside. “You know, if you change your

mind about tonight –”

“I really think I’m going to stay in,” she said as she strapped her seatbelt across her chest.

“I mean, if you want me to come to your place and hang out,” he said. “I don’t mind. I love hanging out with you, and we already get a less than ideal amount of time together.”

“Well, you are in the middle of your season,” she pointed out. “And even with the All-Star break, it’s not really a break for you, is it? Mr. All-Star?”

He rolled his eyes and captured her lips with his. The kiss was...fine. It was a good kiss, one she liked. Appreciated. It was warm and safe and she knew exactly what to expect from it. There were no surprises.

He pulled away and kissed her cheek. “Call me if you change your mind,” he whispered before closing the door firmly.

Lyra started the car and pulled out slowly. Her fingers shook as she gripped the steering wheel, trying to keep her driving and breathing steady. The last thing she wanted was to freak out Cole even more than she already had. God, what was wrong with her? Why was she spazzing out over him touching her, walking her to her car? He was the perfect boyfriend. And judging a kiss she had fallen in love with –

Well, she wouldn’t go that far.

She liked Cole. A lot.

But love?

“Stop it.” She shook her head, wiggling her torso, like she wanted to get a spider off her body.

The second she got home, she pulled into her garage, got out of the car, and made a beeline for her bathtub. She needed to wash away everything Damon had said to her, everything he brought up that she thought had been dead and gone.

*“Tell me, Lyra. Did you think of me when you were with him? When he was touching you, did you imagine my hands caressing your skin, my mouth on your body, making you twitch and keen, the way only I know how? Did you imagine my cock inside you, stretching you, molding you to me, like your cunt was made for me and only me?”*

She shuddered as his silky low voice caressed her naked skin. She sank further into the bath, but there was an ache between her thighs, an ache nothing could fulfill. Tears pricked her eyes. What the fuck was wrong with her? She should hate him. She shouldn't want anything to do with him, especially considering she was with somebody else, somebody who deserved her.

Why was she pining for Damon?

Why did she spread her legs, even in the tub, trying to soothe the pulsating that began to turn into a throb. She locked her ankles around the side of her bathtub, arching her back up so she could tilt herself out of the water. She didn't want anything inhibiting the feeling she got when she brushed her fingers over her swollen clit.

Fuck, how could Damon make herself lose herself so completely after one conversation?

Why did she need to relieve herself of this pressure that built up inside of her? It felt like it had been building he left and she hadn't even known it. But now that he was back, she needed to have this, she needed to remind herself what it was like to be his, and she hated herself for it.

Even so, that didn't stop herself from touching her nub. Instead of her fingers, though, it was his tongue. The way he would look over her mound to ensure she had her eyes on him as he devoured her whole. It was such a strange situation initially. She had always heard guys didn't like this sort of thing, but Damon couldn't get enough of it.

"Look at me when you come," he murmured against her lips, the vibration only enhancing the sensation he gave her.

He feasted on her like a starving man lapping at the sweet nectar that came from her cunt.

"Sweet girl," he would say. "I love the taste of you. I hope I die with the taste of you on my tongue."

He was always so dramatic, but she ate it up the same way he ate her up.

Her fingers would twist in the sheets, sinking in the bed, as her legs twitched even more apart, trying to give him the best access to her juices. They dribbled down, leaving a wet spot on her bed she might have otherwise been embarrassed about if this was anyone other than Damon.

"Are you going to be a good girl for me, my sweet girl?" he asked. "Are you going to come all over my face? Jesus, just thinking about it gets my cock so hard..."

He would stroke himself as he continued to maneuver her into what he needed her to do. She couldn't keep her eyes off of him, though she wasn't sure where to look. She loved watching the wretched pleasure that filtered across his face as he pleased her, but she also loved the hypnotic movement of his hand moving up and down his shaft. To know she caused such a reaction – *her*.

It boggled her mind.

Power surged across her body. No longer was she shrouded by doubt or embarrassment. Damon seemed to coax this natural burning sensation from an ember into a torrent of flames. It consumed her as he continued to whisper violent, vicious things that should have had her rushing from him, but instead, had her spreading her legs even more like a wanton, reaching for him with one hand so she could grab his shoulder and hold him in place.

Her breathing turned shallow, and Damon knew it too.

“There you go,” he said, almost like he was soothing an inconsolable child rather than her. “Come for me, won’t you? I want your juices dripping down my face. I want your scent to be on my skin long after we’re done.”

His words were like some magic incantation because she broke for him. She reached her peak, touched the highest star, and now, there was nowhere for her to go but down, down, down...

Damon never stopped. He kept his pace consistent, gripping her hips even harder to keep her spasming pelvis in place. Even when she finished, he continued to lap at her until he was satisfied he had every last drop – or she pushed him away due to how sensitive she had become.

Lyra opened her eyes, releasing a breath. Lukewarm water splashed over the side of the tub, and she suddenly remembered where she was, that she was alone. Damon wasn’t here.

But his ghost, it would seem, lingered, and she wasn’t sure she was ready to get rid of him the way she thought she had been.

Damon

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THE NEXT WEEK was a good distraction from Lyra. Damon threw himself into practice, choosing to focus on getting as good as he could possibly be all while purposefully avoiding anything that had to do with Fuckface. Others called him Cole, and that was fine with Damon, but Fuckface would always be Fuckface, and there was nothing anyone could say that would change that. The guy seemed nice enough, which, to Damon, just made him even more of a pussy than he already was, and Damon didn't want to hang out with pussies who knew what Lyra looked like naked. In fact, the code Damon had built up for himself insisted that Cole's face got broken in, simply for that offense, but he knew he couldn't indulge himself without some kind of repercussion and he didn't want to be more of a problem than the team considered him to be.

Sanders refused to acknowledge him completely. This surprised Damon, but truth be told, it could have been much worse for him so he didn't let himself get too ruffled by the isolation. As long as he kept his distance from Lyra, he didn't think he would be too much of a problem to anyone. And, even if he wasn't quite ready to throw in the towel when it came to her, he did want to focus on settling in with the team as best as he could. There were a couple of away games he

attended with the team, and while he was placed on both the second and third lines, he seemed to have the most chemistry with the third line center...if only he could remember his name.

As hard as he worked avoiding Lyra, the task itself was impossible. Lyra was always present, always there. He didn't actively seek her out, but he was so attuned to her, he knew when she was around. More than that, he knew she must have been in the same boat as he was because she never looked at him. Even when he was directly in front of her, even if he was the cause of commotion on the ice, she never gave him the attention he found himself craving from her.

He wasn't sure if such a thing was reassuring or not. He liked knowing she watched him, even if she didn't want to. He liked that he knew where she was too, that she was forced to acknowledge his presence in the same way he was forced to acknowledge hers.

But he didn't like the way she magnetized his attention. He didn't like the buzzing sensation he felt whenever she was around, like his body kept tabs on her even as his mind did everything it could to ignore her. He couldn't even see fit to find another woman and fuck her to at least get some sort of release. Certainly, he looked, and there were plenty of puck bunnies that threw themselves at the team in order to get some special attention. But Damon barely even acknowledged them. Because no one was Lyra. No one could replace her. And if he tried to, he'd get more frustrated. He'd lose his temper. He wouldn't climax, and he'd be more tense than when he started.

*What the fuck was wrong with him? Beautiful women were throwing themselves at his feet and he didn't even care?*

*Fucking pussy.*



*He was whipped and he wasn't even fucking Lyra. This was bullshit.*

After a particularly grueling practice, he contemplated calling Maela for the six hundredth time. At least he was familiar enough with her to know her, and she had been with him when he was too in his head, when he dreamed about Lyra and couldn't get away from her, couldn't relax enough to fully climax. She would understand. He could come with her. He could find some kind of satisfaction, even if it wasn't the satisfaction he craved. Even if it wasn't Lyra directly.

But no.

He refused to bend the knee to her, refused to admit that she might have been right about certain things he didn't want to acknowledge.. She already spat her words at him like venom, and the last thing he wanted was to admit that she was right in any capacity, to have to endure that glittery look in her eye when he admitted such a thing.

Absolutely fucking not.

The only solace he would find was with his own hand, and for now, that would have to do. In fact, it was much more satisfying than he originally anticipated, especially with the fantasies his mind would conjure.

“Hey Smith.”

Damon cocked his head to the side and locked eyes with Dean Morgan, one of the veteran defenseman who would most likely retire after this year. Damon only knew him because they were on the same line together and Damon respected how the older man played. The guy was brutal, vicious, and didn't let any type of opponent scare him. He never backed off from

a fight and he always played hard, despite the havoc it might cause on his body.

Damon began to tug off his jersey, though he had cocked his head in Morgan's direction to at least let the man know he acknowledged him in some capacity.

"You need to get laid," he said as he pulled off his sweaty jersey. Players were still trickling in after the arduous practice, their heavy footsteps echoing off the glistening oak walls. "I swear, I could shove my stick up your ass and sharpen it to a point."

"Is this you offering?" Damon asked, lips curved into a sardonic grin even though there was no mirth in his words. In fact, they came out tight, just like everything else about him was, apparently. The fact that some asshole like Morgan noticed this was enough to make Damon question how subtle he was being. Then again, it could have been a lucky guess, something all the guys said to one another when their focus was clearly on something else. "No offense, Morgan. You aren't really my type."

"Hey, fuck off, I'm everybody's type," Dean said with a grin. "Anyway, I'm serious. You have so much tension. I mean, shouldn't you just slide in here easily? You've been here before, right? I heard you housed with Sanders when you were a rookie so coming back here should be a no-brainer, right?"

Damon's eyes flared up at Morgan, lips pressed together in a tight line. The locker room was silent. It would seem everyone knew what had happened between Damon and Sanders, between Damon and Lyra, and yet, no one was willing to explain to those that hadn't been around during that time. Damon wasn't sure if this was a blessing; he just knew

he didn't like to hear inept idiots talk about shit they didn't know. And even though Dean was twice the size of Damon, Damon had no problem shutting the vet up if he had to in whatever way he had to.

“What?” Morgan asked, throwing his arms out as he began to unravel his tape from the blade of the stick. “Shouldn't you have chemistry with some of these fuckers? Maybe they're more your type, eh?”

“Oh, he certainly has chemistry with someone –”

Fucking James Negan. Why wasn't Damon surprised that it was this asshole who couldn't keep himself from running his mouth.

Damon knew Negan liked to get under the skin of people. It was why he was so damn good at getting penalties on opponents, because he had a natural talent for it. But it was the exact wrong thing to say at the wrong time. This week had coiled into Damon, like he was a jack-in-the-box, and Negan just happened to be the one to pull the lever.

Damon couldn't stop himself if he tried. He lunged for James Negan and swung a fist so it connected to his nose. Bastard had broken it four times in his career, and Damon was willing to be the fifth just to ensure he would think before opening his mouth and talking about Lyra, about his previous relationship with Lyra..

“What the actual fuck, asshole?” Negan held his nose with his hands, glaring at Damon. Another player who was twice Damon's size in girth, but Damon wasn't about to back down, especially when it came to discussing his past. Discussing *her*.

“How about you shut the fuck up?” he asked.

“How about you tell me what the fuck that was about?” Morgan countered, brokering no room for argument.

Damon was close to looking over at Sanders, to see if he could read the veteran player’s face and see what he would prefer Damon say. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t give a shit. He’d run his mouth the way he always did, and if that didn’t work, he’d throw a fist or two.

But this was different.

Part of him wanted to make a place here. He wasn’t sure if home was the right word, but he wanted to settle. It had nothing to do with Lyra, either. He had always loved the smell of salt, the sea breeze, the California beaches provided. He loved the year round weather, simple and predictable. He loved the beautiful women — one in particular —

“You’re going to stick around, aren’t you?” Morgan continued. He threw his tape in the trash, already wrapping his blade with a new set. “Be on this team? You definitely won’t make any fucking friends here if you’re such a dick — and I would know, because I am a dick.”

“If you don’t say something, I will,” Negan growled, narrowing his eyes. “A lot of us already know. Some don’t.”

“Yeah, well, quite frankly, it’s no one’s business,” Damon muttered. “And it doesn’t matter anyway. You think I should get laid? Fine. I’ll go and get laid.”

Morgan snorted, leaning his stick on his shoulder and grinning like a fool. “Oh yeah?” he asked. “And how the fuck am I supposed to believe you’re word? I don’t think so, princess.”

“Name the time and place, hell, I’ll even let you pick the girl,” Damon said, shoving his shoulder pads in his bag. He

was already over the conversation, and yet, he couldn't stop himself from running his mouth. Part of him reveled in this. He needed to take his ire out on someone and since Lyra wasn't here, his team would have to do.

Still.

He didn't want to be a dick all the fucking time. Dare he say it was exhausting? And he was only alienating himself at this point. Was that what he wanted?

*What the fuck has gotten into you? When did you start caring about shit like this?*

"You think you're so fucking cocky," Negan said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Well, if you had my cock, you would be too," Damon retorted, shrugging on a shirt.

"Shut up."

The words were soft but firm and came from the right corner of the room.

Sanders.

"The last thing I want to know about is you and your dick," he said. "Jesus Christ, Smith. You'd think that after how many years, you'd have grown up. But you're the same asshole kid, trying to get into my daughter's pants, aren't you?"

From Damon's peripheral, Fuckface stiffened. So far, the younger player had been relatively silent, minding his own business. In fact, Damon barely even noticed him. But now that Sanders himself brought up Lyra, it would appear he was much more involved.

Which was perfectly fine with Damon.

If Sanders wanted to be an ass, he'd be perfectly happy to play.

“Who said anything about try?” he asked.

Sanders slowly stood up. Despite the fury that crossed his rugged features, it was like the guy had all the time in the world. He cracked his knuckles, like that was supposed to intimidate Damon.

Damon practically bounced on the balls of his feet. He was ready to fight. He was ready to take out Sanders. He'd been waiting for so long, and now, he finally had his chance.

Without warning, Damon's head jarred to the left. Pain exploded from his jaw. He grunted, staggering to the side a few times. He managed to keep himself upright, though.

“Don't talk about Lyra that way,” Fuckface growled, dropping his hands to his sides.

A strong metallic taste burst across his mouth and Damon's lips curved up. Blood. He reached up and dabbed at the corner of his mouth, as if to double check, to see for himself that it was there and it wasn't his imagination.

When the bright red contrasted greatly with the pale skin of his fingers, he grinned even deeper.

Perfect.

This was just what he needed.

Without warning, Damon turned to face Fuckface and unleashed himself on him. One punch, then two. Fuckface, unfortunately, knew how to punch back. Damon's face took some damage, but Fuckface's did too.

“What's...your...problem?” Fuckface asked through a grunt as he tried to connect his fist to Damon's face again.

But Damon was adept at reading people quickly. He was able to dodge the blows and landed a couple here and there. Even though his knuckles screamed in pain whenever he connected it to Fuckface's face, satisfaction bloomed within Damon. He would bask in the pain. He would do whatever he needed to in order to send a message to the little asshole.

*And what message is that?*

"All right, all right!" Zachary Ryan, the captain of the team now that Brandon Thorpe finally retired, called. He grabbed Damon from behind and heaved him off of Fuckface.

Damon struggled, but the second he took sight of Fuckface's face, his lips split into another grin. His left eye was already swelling shut and there were trickles of blood running down his chin. The guy looked pathetic.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Zach asked, trying to get between the two now that he had managed to pull them apart. "We're supposed to be a fucking team and were beating the shit out of each other, and I want to know why."

"Tell them," Negan said, his dark eyes narrowed.

"Oh, I have no problem explaining," Damon said. It was only then that he realized it hurt when he spoke. "Sanders, on the other hand, might not like it. And this cock sucker" he jutted his chin at Fuckface "certainly won't."

"Go on," Sanders said, a dare in his tone. A threat, too. Like Damon was going to back down from a threat, especially from Sanders. "Tell them how you took advantage of my underage daughter and then left when you got bored."

"I didn't touch her," Damon said, sticking up a finger to emphasize his point, "when she was underage. And I can

promise you that if anyone took advantage of anyone, she took advantage of me.”

Sanders growled, stepping forward. “Take that back, you son of a bitch.”

Damon was already furious, but his lips twitched with amusement. The truth of the matter was, he had never grown tired of Lyra. He left her because he left California, and that was it. If Newport had protected him, if he wasn’t forced to make another team...

“No.”

Damon blinked, as if he was just remembering Fuckface was here in the first place.

“She would have told me.”

Damon threw his head back and started to laugh. He couldn’t help it. Lyra kept him from Fuckface? He wasn’t sure what to expect, but that definitely wasn’t it.

Which meant...she might still care about Damon.

His foolish, traitorous heart skipped a beat at the thought. And he hated himself even more for it.

But there it was, that fickle feeling of hope.

Hope that maybe...maybe she might...

“Cool the fuck down, both of you,” Ryan said, glancing between Damon and Fuckface. “And if you guys can’t get your heads out of your asses, something drastic is going to have to happen.”

Damien knew he should care, but he didn’t. Not when there was a chance that Lyra could still care about him. Could still love him. And it was hope, and hope was just as fickle as



any man, but it was Damon's, and Damon wasn't going to leave it around where anyone could get it and ruin it for him.

He would win her back, he decided.

No matter what the cost.

Lyra

---

EVEN THOUGH LYRA considered herself a writer, she still needed a part-time job to help pay her bills. Her father tried to pay for everything, and while Lyra had accepted her rent and a couple of other payments, she did want to start pulling away from that and start doing things on her own, hence, her job at the bookstore. While it was still a retail job, she enjoyed being surrounded by a variety of different books, and every time she walked by the Young Adult section, she envisioned her own book there.

Eventually.

Once she could find out what to write, of course.

The morning was quiet. The store had been open for an hour, and so far, Lyra had only helped one customer. Slow days like this were peaceful, and it gave Lyra time to go through her planned book, to try and find some spark that would drive her to write more.

That was what she focused on as she replaced books on shelves. At least, she tried to focus on that, considering Damon's damn near perfect face kept popping up at the worst times. She didn't want to think about him. In truth, she had been doing enough of that at the worst times. Like when she

was alone. When she explored her body. Even when Cole came over and kissed her, and she knew he wanted to go further along, but she couldn't bring herself to let him because she wasn't in the right frame of mind to give herself to him.

Not when her mind was picturing someone else.

Fuck. She needed to figure this out because it wasn't fair to Cole.

She was lost in the stacks of books when a chime indicated a new customer. She left her stack of books where they were in order to make her way back to the counter, in case the customer needed to ask her a question.

The last thing Lyra expected at her job was Cole showing up with a swollen eye and a bloodied lip. What surprised her even more was that he was angry.

With her, apparently, judging by the glare he pinned her to her spot with.

"We need to talk," he stated the second he stepped towards the register.

Lyra glanced to her left and right. The bookstore was relatively quiet. Considering the store just opened and it was a Tuesday morning, this was the norm. It also meant she had some time to spare before college kids, writers, and moms with toddlers who needed to get out of the house started to come in.

More than that, she wanted to make sure that her other co-worker was nowhere in sight. Cole always had a happy-go-lucky attitude and treated her like a princess. Everyone told her as much, and it made this whole mess with Damon even more aggravating because she knew everyone was right, that Cole was the better match, even though no one else realized

there was anyone else. Right now, Cole wasn't living up to that pristine reputation, and Lyra wasn't sure what caused such a shift in his demeanor.

"Sure," she said, trying to keep her voice down. "I think we have that book in the Literature section. I can show you the way, if you'd just follow me, *sir*."

Lyra hoped he took the hint. They were at a place of business, *her* place of business. How would he like it if she confronted him at the ice rink where there were much more people and fans? He needed to simmer down, especially when she had no idea why he was so angry.

Cole didn't smile. Instead, he waited for her to step around the desk, nearly bumping into the new children's book stand right next to the corner. It had been there for the last week and still, she couldn't seem to get used to it. He followed her silently past the stack of bookshelves until they reached the section she had just been, before she heard him come in. She led him down *L-M* and, once they reached the middle of the aisle, turned around and shrugged.

"Everything okay?" she asked, perking her brow and forcing her smile. It was a stupid question because she already knew the answer: no, he wasn't okay. She just didn't know why and what his anger had to do with her, and, quite frankly, she was a little pissed he was simply reacting instead of waiting to give her a chance to potentially explain herself. Even though she had no clue what she would have to explain in the first place.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked in a low voice.

Lyra furrowed her brow, trying to figure out what he was talking about. Was there a secret she kept from him? Something she didn't want him to find out? There was no way

he could possibly know she had thought of Damon when she touched herself that one time in the tub...

And yet, his tone implied that she knew.

“You and Damon,” he said through gritted teeth, like the fact that he had to group them together was painful. “Something happened between you and Damon.” A beat. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Lyra froze. Every synapse in her body started firing up some kind of defense, but she still wasn’t sure where he was coming from. Did he mean their conversation in the parking lot or did he mean their history? Because she could excuse the conversation easily, but the other part, the deeper connection between her and Damon... She wasn’t sure how to even put that into words, let alone offer up some kind of explanation for it.

“What do you mean?” she asked instead, because that felt like the safest question.

Cole ran his fingers down his face in frustration like he was trying to hold onto whatever patience he still had. “Don’t,” he said, his tone a warning if she had ever heard one. She just hadn’t expected that sound to come out of his mouth.

She flinched out how sharply he bit out the word and he glanced around, as if remembering where they were.

“Don’t treat me like I’m an idiot, Lyra,” he said, shaking his head. He reached up to touch his bottom lip before scowling and dropping his arms back to his side. “I don’t like being made a fool of, especially by someone I’m supposed to trust.”

“Is that where you got the marks on your face?” she asked. She reached out to touch one, to comfort him in some way, but

before she could make contact, he jerked away from her like he believed her touch would inflict more pain on him than whatever happened to his face already.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, his voice dangerously low, contrasting with the way he had previously been speaking to her. “Not until you tell me what’s going on with you and him. Not until you tell me why you didn’t tell me about the two of you in the first place.” He raised his brows. “Well? What’s going on with you two?”

“As in, presently?” Lyra asked. “Nothing.”

She wasn’t trying to be a smartass. She was trying to buy time and figure out the best way to respond without riling him up. She never thought he’d be one of those guys that were easily ruffled, but apparently, she was wrong.

“You know what I mean,” he growled. It was a tone she had never heard from him before. She arched her brow, daring him to continue to use that on her, especially when he had no grounds for attacking her like this at her work place, where anyone could overhear.

“Actually, I don’t,” she insisted yet again, crossing her arms over her chest. “You come without even letting me know that you would be here, at my place of work, and start attacking me with questions that are so vague, I can’t figure out what you’re trying to say. You look like hell and I still have no idea what happened to you but apparently, these random but very accusing questions are way more important than your injured face. I’m not a mind reader. Just tell me what’s going on so I can tell you the truth. I don’t have time for games and I’m sure you don’t want to play any either.”

“You and Damon,” he repeated like I was a two-year-old. “What happened between the two of you?”

Lyra looked away. How did he even know about her and Damon? Had Damon actually said something to him about it?

He would, just to stir up shit. Just to make her life a living hell.

Fuck Damon.

“Why is that any of your business?” she asked instead.

His brows shot up like fireworks. She was surprised he didn’t flinch in pain because of the injuries on his face. “So,” he said slowly. “Something did happen between the two of you.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t remember asking you for a detailed account of your romantic history,” she said, grabbing a book from the shelf and practically ripping it from its position. Someone put it in the wrong place.

“*Romantic?*” Cole asked in disbelief, running his fingers through his hair. “I’ve known that guy for less than a week and even I know there’s no romantic bone in Damon Smith’s body.”

Lyra bit back a reply. She was on the verge of reminding him that the Damon she had known wasn’t the same Damon the public knew. Hell, even his teammates only saw a certain side of him.

But the Damon she knew, the one she had given her heart to...

That was hers. She hadn’t told anyone about her time with him because she didn’t want to. She wanted to keep it forever without having to explain anything to anyone.

Even Cole.

Instead, she lifted her brows, waiting for more. Another question, another insult. If anything, at least she didn't have to worry about hiding this from him any longer. She didn't have to worry about him walking in on a conversation she might have had with Damon – not that she intended to speak to Damon again. But still.

“You have nothing to say?” he pushed.

“You're at my place of business –”

“You work at a bookstore,” he said flatly, “as a part-time clerk.”

Lyra raised a brow. “And?” she asked. “So, what you're saying is, if I wanted to accuse you about a girl from your past, I could go to you in the middle of your game or practice and start asking you questions, right? That would be acceptable.”

“It's different.” He looked away, locking his jaw.

“How?” she demanded. The fact that her voice hadn't lifted or wavered was nothing short of a miracle.

“It's...it's just different,” he said. “You can't expect me to stop in the middle of a game –”

“Isn't that what you're doing here?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You're changing the subject,” he said. “Avoiding it. Why don't you want me to know about him? Are you ashamed?”

“*Ashamed?*” Her tone was filled with disbelief. “Why would I be ashamed of Damon Smith?”

“Because he fucks anything with tits,” Cole said. “Because it would mean you're a notch on his bed.”



“That’s you making an assumption,” she said, placing her hands on her hips and digging her fingers into her sides. “And even if that was the case, why are you so worried about it? Why does that anger you so much?”

He grunted. “You think I want to make assumptions? It’s not like you told me anything?” he asked.

“Or you could trust me,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest and giving her hips a reprieve from her clutching. “It shouldn’t matter what my history is. What matters is I’m here with you now.”

Cold sighed, glancing away. Some of the anger drained from his face but didn’t quite leave him altogether. “You aren’t wrong,” he admitted, his voice returning to a low tenor so no one would be able to overhear our conversation. “Under normal circumstances, I would even agree with that. But the difference is, Damon isn’t just in your past anymore. He’s in your present.”

“Not in the role of boyfriend,” she pointed out.

“So, he was a boyfriend?” Cole asked. Before she could remind him that it still wasn’t any of his business, even now that he had managed to calm down a bit, he continued quickly: “I don’t understand why you don’t want to talk about this. I get that it’s not my business. I’m not...I don’t want you to think you owe me an explanation for something that happened before me. I just want to know so I understand.”

“But even I don’t understand why you feel this need to understand it,” Lyra said. She tried to keep her voice controlled as she ran her fingers along the spines of the new books, refraining from giving into her instincts and burying her nose in the new book smell. “I was young. We were

together. He left. That's it. That's this great love story you're trying to paint."

"It's just..." He desperately turned from me, picking up a book before setting it back down. "I just...I want to know what you felt for him and why it ended so I can try and keep it from happening to us."

"And you think you're doing a good job of it so far?" she replied doubtfully.

"You keep avoiding an answer." It wasn't a question, not anymore. But there was something else in his voice, something like dejection. "If it doesn't matter anymore, if you're happy with me, I don't understand why you just wouldn't tell me, especially now that he's here." He clenched his jaw, not to intimidate Lyra. Judging from the way his eyes scanned her face, she could tell he wanted to make sure the words he spoke next were clear so she couldn't misinterpret them. At least he had gained some of his sensibilities. "I have to play with a guy. And it's really hard for me to trust someone like that in general, but knowing he had you in ways...I don't want to think about, it bothers me. And I'm looking to you to help reassure me that there's nothing there between the two of you anymore, regardless of what he says."

Lyra opened her mouth, ready to tell him there was nothing for him to worry about, that she was with him for a reason, and just because she had feelings for Damon at one point didn't mean she still had them now.

Until her brain caught up with him.

Until she realized what he actually said.

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, regardless of what Damon says?" she asked. At this point, any resolve to not

demand answers from him had gone out the window. She had been patient enough, but to find out Damon was feeding this frenzy was not something she wanted to hear.

“He just...you know he can be crude —“

“I know he says a lot of things to get a rise out of people,” she shot back. “And you’re an easy target, no offense.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, scowling. This time, his face did flinch, and she wondered if he could suddenly feel things move intensely now that his anger had simmered slightly.

“I said no offense,” she reminded him, lifting a finger. “Look. You see how Damon is. He tries to be a pest. That’s how he plays hockey. That’s how he is in real life. You just have to ignore him. You can’t let him get to you because that’s when he wins.”

“You sound like you’re speaking from personal experience,” he said.

Lyra glanced at him, frowning.

He threw his hands up like he was surrendering. “I’m not trying to be a dick,” he said. “And this time, I’m not actually fishing for information. I’m just telling you my unbiased, outside observation.”

She rolled her eyes. “He likes to get a reaction from people around him,” she admitted, “especially those he’s closest to.”

“Like Sanders,” Cole said quietly. “I heard about him living with you guys when he was a rookie. I didn’t think — it doesn’t matter.”

“So,” she said, dropping her gaze to the floor. She decided to avoid the unasked question about Damon, instead focusing

on a piece of trash that looked like one of the pastry bags from the in-store cafe. She bent down and picked it up. “Is that what happened to your face? Is that courtesy of Damon?”

“Something like that,” Cole said. He looked down at his knuckles. “I started it. Shouldn’t have, but...” He shook his head. “I just didn’t like what he said about you.”

Lyra ignored the way her stomach clenched. Again, she wanted to ask what was said, but she didn’t want him to think she cared.

“Don’t feel the need to defend me,” she told him. “I don’t care what Damon says or thinks about me. That part of my life is over. I’m with you now.”

The words were more difficult to get out than she anticipated. Why was it hard telling him this truth?

It was true, wasn’t it? That part of her life was over. She didn’t care about Damon anymore. Then why did her heart squish itself as small as it could get simply because she spoke the words out loud, to Cole? Why was everything in her body insisting it wasn’t the truth at all?

Damon

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SERAPHINA HANSON'S sigh reverberated throughout the office, the flickering of paperwork the only other noise in the room. Despite always appearing put together, Damon could see the slight bags under her eyes, like she hadn't slept well in the past two days. Whether that exhaustion was work-related or Brandon Thorpe related was anyone's guess, but he liked to think she played as hard as she dedicated to the team.

Regardless of her exhaustion, she still managed to find the time to call in Damon himself. A trip to her office reminded him of the multiple trips he had to take to the principal's office, though this time, he wasn't intimidated nor was he scared. Whatever was going to happen would happen, and quite frankly, there wasn't anything Damon could do about it, so why stress out?

Damon knew exactly why he was here. After he left the locker room, he had an hour to do whatever he wanted before Seraphina herself called him, requesting his presence at eleven that day. He wanted to tell her to fuck off, but considering this was her team and she was the one signing the paychecks, he knew he couldn't bite the hand that fed him, especially since it wasn't her fault this had happened in the first place.

He just didn't want to discuss feelings or fighting or Lyra. Especially not with someone who didn't know shit. He didn't owe anyone any explanation, and he wasn't about to start now, even if this was his boss.

"I had a feeling something like this was going to happen the second I decided to bring you back," she murmured more to herself than to him. Her hand cradled her chin, long, elegant fingers curving around her cheek. There was a small glint to her eye, one that wasn't amused by his antics nor surprised by them. In fact, the more he studied her, the more he realized she wasn't as easy to read as he initially thought.

"Then why bring me back in the first place?" he asked, sliding his legs from under the chair, stretching them out in front of him casually. His elbows rested on the arms of the chair, hands creating over his taut stomach. If he wanted to appear more professional, he would have sat up straight and rolled his shoulders back, but he didn't give a shit about how he looked right now. Judging by the way his face pinched with every moment, he knew he wasn't at his prettiest. In fact, there was a good chance he looked more pathetic than anything else. Then again, Cole was worse off. That alone was enough for Damon to smirk slightly. That alone made this entire ordeal worth it.

"Because we need your type of player," she said. She wasn't defensive or even annoyed with his snippy attitude. In fact, she had much more patience for him than he expected. "It's been a year since we brought the Cup back, and with Thorpe retired, we need to break our new goalie in more. He's a kid, really, and doesn't have that experience that helped us go all the way in the first place. You do. You're also an asshole, and I've conducted a study that basically implies the

more assholes on the team, the greater the chance we get the Cup.”

“Really?” Damon asked. “How do you figure?”

“Because assholes are more stubborn than anything else,” she said. “Too stubborn to lose. And judging by the look on your face, I’d say you were one of the bigger ones.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean that as a compliment,” she pointed out, leaning forward. But there was a playfulness in her eyes that implied there was more to it than just that. “When we played against you guys, while you were with Seattle, I hated you. You stayed in that crease, you kept poking and prodding the puck until the whistle was blown, you got under the skin of even our most skilled players, kind of like Kyle Underwood does for us. But now, I get to cheer for you because you’re on my team.” She smirked. “And while Kyle does exactly what I need him to do, I need more Kyles. I need more of you. I think you’ll be an integral part of bringing the Cup home again simply because you’re an asshole who knows what he wants and who’s willing to go after it, no matter what might be required of him.”

Damon narrowed his eyes slightly. Certainly, they were still speaking of the Cup, weren’t they?

Judging by the small smirk on Serapohina’s face, he couldn’t be sure.

It was strange, hearing someone speak about how thoroughly and faithfully she believed in him. Hell, she didn’t even know him. Not in the way her grandfather had. And yet, she still thought he could help this team get another Cup.

This had to be some kind of joke. People didn’t believe in him. He had a reputation. People believed *that*. And yet,

looking at Seraphina now, why would she lie? She had every reason to kick him off the team, and she was basically telling him that she needed him. He didn't understand. Was this some kind of a mind game she was playing him with?

He couldn't help but blatantly stare at her, scan her face for any hint of lying. People didn't believe in him. It just wasn't done. Even his teammates, whether he was a rookie on the Gulls, or a veteran with Seattle, people regarded him as some party boy who fucked anything that moved. Who went on rampant alcohol binges. Who partied late until the early mornings and was still drunk when morning practice came around – though he did make it a point to show up no matter how hungover he was. Everyone thought he was lazy, everyone thought he wouldn't amount to anything, even on a national hockey team.

And he was used to that treatment. He preferred it because it meant he didn't have to be dependable. He didn't have to be disciplined. There were no expectations except for the simple role he was hired to play – be an asshole, but don't be significant. It should have been easy.

It didn't matter that none of it made sense. He couldn't be a successful NHL player and be drunk at practice. The coaches in the management wouldn't hear of it. On top of that, he had no intention of fucking anything that moved. He had some standards, especially since trust was not an easy thing for him to experience. Fucking, though, didn't require trust, at least not the way he fucked, so he didn't particularly care one way or the other about any of that. He knew who he was, who he could be, if given the chance, but he also had no chip on his shoulder that implied he needed to prove himself either. If people were unwilling to give him a chance, that was on them. No one seemed to care about logic when it came to Damon.



They had their opinions, and that was that. They wouldn't even give him a chance to contradict those opinions.

But Seraphina Hanson spoke like he actually meant something to the team, like he was selected based on the merit of his success and not any preconceived notions of who he was. The only person who had treated him that way before had been...*her*.

But he refused to think about Lyra right now.

"However," she continued, leaning back in her chair, arching a brow in his direction as if to say there was more to this conversation than how great he was. Which, to be fair, he should have expected as well. "That isn't going to happen if you can't get along with your teammates. Want to enlighten me about what happened in the locker room this morning?" Her gaze dropped to his lips, and he knew it wasn't because she was tempted to kiss them.

Damon scowled, ignoring the way the pain flared up in his face. "I'm sure you already got the story," he said. "You don't need me to waste your time by repeating it."

"I want to hear it from you," she replied. "And I'd like to think I have a good grasp of my time to know what would waste it and what wouldn't."

Another flash of surprise. He didn't want to give her too much credit, not when he barely knew her. It was her grandfather who didn't protect him, not her, and after hearing what happened to the old man, even Damon couldn't hold onto that particular resentment. Seraphina Hanson was an unknown, an enigma. In another life, he might have flirted with her, might have attempted to fuck her, but there was something he respected about her, some line about her that even he couldn't cross.

“Look, Damon,” she continued, lacing her fingers together and leaning forward. “I know what they say about you. When I called Pete to acquire your contract, he had some things he wanted me to understand before he would even consider my offer. My own guys here had some things to say. I’m going to be frank with you: I don’t give a shit about what’s being said. I care about what I see from you and what I hear from you. And while I did see Cole’s face and I am well-aware you beat the shit out of him, I’m also aware bears don’t attack unless provoked.” She sat back in her chair. “So...I just wanted to give you the opportunity to tell me, from your perspective, what happened because I’m willing to hear it with an open mind.”

Damon’s lips curved down. This felt like a trap. People rarely gave him the benefit of the doubt. Why would they start now? Why would *she* start now when she didn’t even know him?

“What did Cole say?” he asked instead, brushing his hair back from his face.

“Apparently, he said you said some pretty disparaging things about his girlfriend, who just happens to be Sanders’s daughter,” Seraphina stated, eyes narrowed, probably trying to gauge his reaction.

“Would they be disparaging if they were true?” he asked sardonically.

Seraphina was silent for a moment. “I suppose that depends,” she finally said. She chewed her bottom lip, moving back and forth in her chair without actually spinning around in it. “You know, I spoke to the team before bringing you here. Most didn’t have a problem with it, you being here. Sanders, however, told me about your history.”

Damon scoffed, glancing out the window, shoulders still slumped. Why wasn't he surprised? Anything to prevent him from coming back, Sanders would have jumped on. And to think, Damon had been secretly looking forward to seeing him. "Really?" he asked. "And what did Sanders say, exactly?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw Seraphina purse her lips. She would tell him it didn't matter what Sanders said, she would say she wanted to hear Damon's side. He wanted to laugh. The whole thing was a joke. This team was a joke. His life was a joke.

How the hell had it come to this?

What was he doing with his life? What did he *want* to do?

"He told me the history between you and Lyra," she said finally. "That the two of you had a passionate...affair and it ended just as abruptly. She was heartbroken. You had moved onto someone else —"

Damon grinded his teeth together.

Seraphina stopped herself from continuing, tilting her head to the side. "You disagree," she said.

"It doesn't matter," he said tightly.

"Cut the shit, Smith," she snapped, any hint of teasing gone. Now she was all business and it was clear she wasn't going to tolerate him being an asshole. "I wouldn't ask if it didn't matter. You wanted to know what Sanders said. I'm repeating it. That doesn't mean I agree with him, and judging from your reaction, you don't either."

"People are going to believe what they want to believe," he said slowly, tilting his body in the opposite direction.

“I didn’t think you were the type of person who cared one way or the other about what people thought of you,” she said.

“I don’t.” His eyes snaked away again. “You don’t understand.”

“Sure, I do,” she said. “You don’t care what they think about *you*, but Lyra is a different story.”

Another tick of his jaw.

Was he really this damn easy to read, or did Hanson just have some kind of talent for it?

“That’s it, isn’t it?” she asked. There wasn’t exactly a push in her voice, but it was clear she wanted an answer from him and she wasn’t going to stop until she got one. “You care. Everyone thinks you don’t, but you do.”

“Well, if you know, you don’t need me to clarify for you,” he said snidely, though why he was giving her attitude when she did nothing didn’t make sense.

The corner of her lips flickered up and she rested her hands across her stomach. “You loved her,” she said. There was no inflection, no question in her tone. “Maybe you still do. And when you hear that people dismiss your feelings as predatory or sexual or both instead of validating the fact that they’re genuine, it pisses you off because it takes away from what you had with her.”

“I don’t need their fucking validation,” he snapped, straightening in his seat. “I don’t give a shit. I just —“

He cut himself off. Digging his fingers into the armrests, he forced himself to shift. He didn’t like that gaze on him. It was too much, too *knowing*. He’d rather deal with assholes like Sanders and Cole who thought they knew but didn’t actually know shit. Hanson, on the other hand...she *knew*. And

he didn't know if that was because she was a woman and had a sense about these things or what, but it unnerved him more than he was willing to admit.

When the silence continued to hang between them, Seraphina picked up her pen and began to click it. "Look," she said softly. "At the end of the day, the only thing I care about is whether or not you can mesh well with the team. I can't have guys in here with bruised faces and cut lips unless they got into a fight with the *opposing* team the night before. If you can't trust each other, that's a huge problem. I don't give a shit about how you feel off the ice, but on the ice, you're family, whether you like it or not, which means you need to set your differences aside and get the job done on the ice."

Damon closed his eyes and then opened them, rolling his shoulders back so he was fully erect. "I can get the job done, regardless of how people view me," he said. "I've been doing it my entire career, and I don't plan to change anything now. My only caveat is..." He let his voice trail off, but something hung between them. And he knew she understood without him having to vocalize it.

"This thing with Lyra." Hanson clicked her pen three times in a row. "Is it going to be a problem?"

Damon opened his mouth, ready to give another smartass reply. But then, he held back. Really considered the question.

"I don't know," he admitted after another moment passed.

"I know she's with Cole, technically," Hanson said, click-click-clicking her pen. "But I'm also aware things change, and history...History isn't always buried in the past."

Damon narrowed his eyes. What the hell was she playing at? Was she...was she teasing him?

“Keep it off the ice,” she said, standing up, “and we’re not going to have a problem.”

“I can do that on my end,” he said, following suit. He hadn’t realized just how much taller he was compared to her. He reveled in the fact that she had to crane her neck in order to make eye contact with him. “But I can’t promise anything about that bitch, Cole. Mark my words – he’s going to be a problem.”

Lyra

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AFTER GETTING the story out of Cole in regards to exactly what happened, Lyra realized she couldn't keep avoiding Damon. Part of this was her responsibility to resolve, and she would. For the good of the team. And because she didn't want there to be any issues between her and Cole. She didn't think she had done anything wrong by keeping Damon from him, but she was also aware he had every right to feel hurt by being blindsided by her past and she wanted to find a way to make it up to him.

Not that she would tell Cole what she was up to. She doubted he would want her coming here, like she was fighting his battles for him. It wasn't like that, but Lyra wasn't sure what else she could do. Truth be told, she couldn't believe she was here, standing outside Damon's new home, waiting for him. Waiting to talk. To confront their past and ask him to let it go. To move on.

This was dangerous.

Just being here, alone, was dangerous.

She knew that, and yet, she remained where she was, hoping her good intentions would save her from whatever was going to happen.

She definitely didn't trust him. That was for sure. But the problem was, she didn't even trust herself. In fact, she wasn't even sure being here in the first place was a good idea. The entire drive over here, she kept going back and forth about what was best, but she wasn't sure who that applied to. And every time she was on the verge of talking herself out of it, a picture of Cole would flash across her mind – bloody and bruised and surprisingly angry – and she knew she had to be here, had to talk to Damon, to make him see that this couldn't keep happening, and while she trusted Cole could maintain his temper, she didn't trust Damon to keep control over his.

Not one bit.

He had a knack for getting under the skin – she would know. He did it to her constantly, even when he wasn't around. Even when he hadn't seen her in years.

She wasn't sure how long she had been there, in the quiet neighborhood. At first, she sat in her car, trying to scroll through social media and watch ridiculous videos to distract herself. And that worked, for a bit. But then the videos blurred, and the more she watched, the more she realized they weren't that funny. On top of that, she couldn't ignore the way her heart kept pounding, the way her phone kept slipping out of her clammy hands. If anything, it just reminded her where she was and who she was waiting for. It reminded her that she hadn't seen Damon in years besides those brief moments at the meet and greet –

*“Tell me, Lyra. Did you think of me when you were with him? When he was touching you, did you imagine my hands caressing your skin, my mouth on your body, making you twitch and keen, the way only I know how? Did you imagine*



*my cock inside you, stretching you, molding you to me, like your cunt was made for me and only me?"*

Jesus Christ, she couldn't keep lingering on those words, on the way it set her entire body on fire.

After another minute, she decided to get out of her car and lean against it, hoping she didn't look too conspicuous. Hoping the change of scenery would get him out of her head. She wouldn't be surprised if she came across as a woman scorned, ready to give Damon a piece of her mind.

But she didn't care.

If anything, she wanted that, wanted an excuse to be mad, a place to direct her anger.

Whatever people assumed about her presence didn't matter as long as she could get through to him, as long as she could make him understand.

She shook her head.

Would he understand, or was this a colossal waste of time?

Did it even matter at this point?

She wasn't sure. She was here and she would stay here. At the very least, she had to try.

More time passed. She began to chew on her bottom lip, furrowing her brow. Every few seconds, she'd pull out her phone and check the time. It felt like ten minutes passed when, really, it was more like a minute at best. She grunted after the fourth time, pushing from the car so she could pace. At least some of her energy came out in some way. It gave her something to do.

"Well," a voice drawled from behind her. "I should say I'm surprised to see you here, but I'm not."

Lyra whirled around, nearly losing her balance. She expected to see a fancy car roll up to the garage she assumed was his, but maybe she got confused. Because Damon had walked up behind her, no car in sight. In fact, the only thing that he seemed to have on him was a set of keys in his pocket.

Or maybe he was just happy to see her.

No.

She wouldn't think about that.

But fuck, how could she not, when, even in a Gulls Classic t-shirt and sweatpants, he was so fucking beautiful. His blond hair was slicked back, and while the bruises on his face were fading, it did nothing to take away from his obvious beauty.

It didn't matter if she managed to find a way to hate him, there was no way she could not be attracted to him.

*Fuck.*

"I take it you've seen Cole?" he asked, staring down at her with an unreadable grey storm in his eyes.

Because, of course, he would understand why she was here in the first place. He wouldn't even give her the chance to confront him.

Lyra didn't respond for a moment. Cole's face was bad, but it was clear Damon didn't completely escape unscathed. He had a bruise under his right eye and a cut on his chin. Not as bad, but still. In fact, she was surprised Cole managed to get a couple of shots on him. Whatever had been said to Damon during the skirmish must have distracted him because Damon rarely allowed himself to get hit. His pride wouldn't let him.

When his words finally settled in, she scowled and looked down at the sidewalk. "Want to tell me what that was about?"

she demanded, hoping he couldn't hear her erratic heartbeat. She shoved her hands in her hoodie pockets so he wouldn't notice them shaking either. "What could he have possibly done to warrant *that*?"

"Want to tell me what you're doing here?" he countered. It was only then did the storm abate in his eyes. Back was the teasing glint she knew so well, the one that forced her to stare much longer than was necessary. The one he seemed to only use when it had been just the two of them and he knew her well enough to know what to say to get her to smile.

Damn him.

Why couldn't he just treat her like a stranger, the way they were meant to be to each other right now? It would make things so much easier than watching him look at her like that.

Lyra ripped her eyes away from him. Maybe she needed clarity, a way to gain some space from him. She glanced around the neighborhood, taking it in. She knew a lot of rookies and newcomers were housed here within the community because it was relatively close to the rink and it was easy to bond with others in similar situations. It was only then that she realized anyone could see her here. Anyone could recognize her. And then what if they told Cole? What if they told her father? She wasn't sure she wanted that. It wouldn't matter that she was trying to help. Cole wouldn't take it that way. Her father probably wouldn't even believe her.

What the fuck was she doing here?

"Oh, right, this isn't the place for you, is it?" Damon asked, his tone taking on more of a bite which maybe she deserved. "If you want to talk, you better do it now. You can either come into my place or you might as well leave."

“Damon —“

“I’m not playing games, Lyra,” he said, and she was surprised by the seriousness of his tone. “Come in or don’t. The choice is yours. But you’re no victim here.”

Before she could respond, he sauntered over to his front door and proceeded to unlock it. Lyra chewed her lip even harder. Should she go after him? Should she talk to him somewhere...safer? The thing was, she wasn’t sure she trusted him alone in his home.

Hell, she wasn’t sure she trusted herself. Alone. With him. In his house. Where no one else was there, supervising them. Supervising her. Because they’d be alone.

*Yes, I think we’ve established we’d be alone here.*

Lyra blinked just as the door to his home closed. She reached for him, suddenly worried that she had lost her chance to —

What?

To tell him off about what happened with him and Cole?

Or was there something else?

She kicked the toe of her foot, hitting the pavement, grunting as she did so. She wasn’t in the mood for games, either, and yet, she was cautious about how to proceed. She didn’t know why, but something felt heavy, as though this interaction was different. As though this one had weighted consequences.

Or maybe she was just thinking too much about it.

*Just say what you came here to say. You are in control of your actions, no one else. You aren’t a victim! Don’t act like one.*

Lyra released a breath. Without thinking about it, she marched to the front door and pulled it open. She wasn't surprised in the least that it was still unlocked. She refused to think about the fact that he knew her well enough to know she'd come to him. Didn't want to think about what that meant.

*Not that it means anything!*

She stepped into the home, closing the door shut behind her.

"Took you long enough, princess," he said, smiling sardonically at her from his position on the couch. His legs were spread, one arm resting on the head of the couch, like he was some kind of king and this was his throne. The way his eyes prowled up and down her body caused goose bumps to crawl up her arms like spiders.

Damn him.

Damn that look.

She recognized it all too well, and no matter how angry she was, no matter what mood she was in, it caused her to melt.

Just because years had passed didn't mean that had changed, unfortunately for her, and she wouldn't be surprised if he knew it too.

"And here I thought you were afraid someone would spot you outside *my* house and ruin your pristine reputation," he continued.

"Didn't you hear?" she asked sarcastically. "That went out the window the second everyone found out about the two of us." She moved to the other side of the couch, careful to leave a good amount of space between them as she took her seat.

She stretched her legs out in front of her, hands on her thighs, shoulders hunched forward.

“Why are you here?” he asked, turning his head so he could look at her fully.

“I...” She began to tug her bottom lip between her teeth when Damon’s fingers brushed against her face. If it had been anyone else, she would have flinched. But she knew Damon so well, could recognize his touch after years of absence from it, that she did nothing except freeze under it.

Waiting.

Waiting to see what he would do.

“Why do you constantly bite your bottom lip?” he asked in a low murmur, in a voice that wasn’t supposed to belong to him because it caused her heart to quicken and her pelvis to pulse and all of the desire she thought she managed to successfully keep at bay to flood her body and overwhelm her senses. “I thought you would have gotten over this by now. It’s such a bad habit.” His fingers moved underneath her chin and gently turned her towards him. With his other hand, he placed his thumb on her bottom lip, slowly peeling out of the grasp of her teeth. “What did I always tell you about doing that?”

Lyra tried to breathe, tried to get functioning brain cells back in her body, but couldn’t seem to successfully do so. “You said that was your job,” she said. She hoped it would have come out stronger, with more of an attitude. But all she managed was a whisper, one that accompanied a shudder down her spine as his other hand cupped the side of her throat in his usual gently possessive grip.

“You remember,” he stated, inching her head closer to his mouth.

Part of her wanted to respond, but another part of her didn't, because that would mean his thumb would fall from her mouth, and she didn't want that.

"Tell me," he said finally, the fingers at her throat brushing her skin in a way they shouldn't. It was too intimate. It was *too much*. "Why are you here?"

Her eyes snapped open to lock with his. She hadn't even realized they had closed.

What was happening to her?

*It's him. It's always been him.*

She swallowed, sitting up straight, forcing herself to disentangle from his touch even though it felt like she was removing one of her own limbs.

"I'm here to tell you..." Her mouth went dry. She cleared her throat. This shouldn't be difficult. *This was the same person who left you, who refused to say goodbye, who broke your heart and didn't look back. You shouldn't care about him. You should be able to tell him the truth without succumbing to him like...like this.* "You need to...I can't have you..."

Damon's lips curved up. "Surely you can speak," he said with faint amusement in his tone. "You've never held yourself back before now."

"You and Cole," she forced herself to say. "You have to stop."

Damon's jaw ticked at the mention of Cole, and he sat back, pulling away from her. His gaze flickered directly in front of him, to the blank television set. Lyra wished she could have swallowed up what she said so he never heard it, so his face was still soft as he looked at her.

“I can control myself, regardless of what other people think,” he said, his tone strained. “That *boy*, on the other hand...”

“Come on, Damon,” she said, leaping up from the couch like she had been sitting on fire. “You’re telling me to believe you didn’t provoke him. Not even a tiny bit?” She whirled around to face him, needing to read him, to see if the truth was easily discerned on him.

“I told him the truth,” he said cryptically.

She wanted to smack him.

Throttle him.

Shake some kind of sense in him..

He was being difficult on purpose, to get a reaction out of her. And the worst part of it all was that it *was working*.

Lyra prided herself on putting the past behind her, on moving on, on specifically not caring. But with Damon, she was reduced to being the same middle school girl who forgot all of that just because the cute boy smiled at her. She didn’t want to be that girl. And she didn’t want him to think she was that girl.

“Damon,” she said, her voice coming out in a warning. “Please. I’m not saying...Cole didn’t know about us before...”

“I gathered as much,” he snipped.

“Yes, well, I didn’t see the need to tell him,” she retorted, pulling her hair over her shoulder. “But I did after he showed up at my job with his face looking the way it did. I’m asking you to move on, to leave whatever we had, behind. I’m...I’ve moved on.”



Damon scoffed, interrupting her. “Keep telling yourself that, princess,” he said. “I’m sure it makes you feel better, but we both know the truth.”

“And what’s that?” she asked, placing her hands on her hips.

“You’re like me,” he said, taking a step closer to her. She should move back, she should escape from that penetrating gaze, but she was rooted to the spot. “No matter who you’re with or who you fuck, no matter how many times you try to remove me from your system, it’s futile. You’re stuck with me for the rest of your life. You might as well get used to it. Lord knows I’ve been trying to.”

Lyra’s breathing hitched. There was so much she wanted to say, and yet, nothing came out. Instead, she turned and left Damon behind, hoping what he said wasn’t true...and knowing, deep down, it was.

Damon

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DAMON WATCHED HER GO. He had to clench his teeth together to keep himself from calling her back to him. He wouldn't look like such a bitch, refused to. If she wanted to leave, fine, let her leave. He wasn't going to stop her. But there was a conflicting storm brewing in his chest. Part of him knew she would leave, wanted her to just go and be done with it so he could finally relieve himself of her. It was the only thing that made sense. But there was another more pressing part of him, that wanted her to just admit that what he said was true. That neither of them had to pretend any longer.

He clenched his teeth even harder, glaring at the door, willing her to come back. Willing her to be the one to come to him again.

But she didn't.

Of course, she didn't. She had always been stubborn, as had he. It was one of the things between them that had kept their relationship so fiery and unpredictable. He growled, running his fingers through his hair in frustration.

“For once, could you not be so fucking stubborn,” he said to no one in particular.

He wasn't sure how much time passed. All he knew was that he continued to stare at the door and nothing changed. She wasn't coming back, and yet, he couldn't seem to pull his eyes away, too afraid he might miss her. Which was stupid because that wasn't possible if she was coming through his door. But, at the end of the day, he didn't think it mattered. Instead, he grabbed his phone and unlocked it before pulling up a familiar number. Because he was done. He was over this. And something had to fucking change.

He shouldn't call her.

Maela would love nothing more than to make fun of him, than to tell him that she told him so. No doubt she would hold it against him for the rest of his life, how he should have brought her with him, how she would never have let him get so close to going under for Lyra again if only he had listened to her in the first place.

Like that would ever happen. Damon was already doomed when it came to Lyra, and nothing was going to change that. Not even another body on his end, a boyfriend Lyra might think she cared for, nothing like that. Those were mere obstacles, something easily overcome with time.

He was fucking pathetic. A pussy. A bitch. Any word that made him appear weak. That was what he was when it came to Lyra, and something had to be done. At the very least, he had to try and do something.

He needed to remove Lyra from his system like the cancer she was. Before she caused any more damage to his system than she already had.

At this point, he didn't have a choice. He refused to continue to pine for someone who wanted nothing to do with him, who refused to acknowledge her wants and desires, who

thought some man-boy would satisfy her more than Damon ever did. He might be willing to overlook her being with someone else, and, as long as he didn't have to think about it, he didn't particularly care about her sharing things with a body. He didn't care about any of that. At the end of the day, he wanted her. He wanted her in every way he could possibly attain her. He wanted to be her last.

But if that wasn't good enough, if she wanted Cole...

Fuck, it was hard to even acknowledge. But he had to. He couldn't keep pretending at this point.

If she wanted that, if this was her choice, he couldn't force her to do anything. He wouldn't. His pride wouldn't let him beg if she didn't want him. So, he clicked the green button and pressed the phone to his ear. He might have to grovel, but if it meant getting Lyra out of his system, he would do what was necessary.



"YOU OWE ME AN EXPLANATION." The second Maela stepped into Damon's car, she didn't hold back, and he hadn't expected her to.

John Wayne Airport wasn't terribly busy. It was a Thursday, and picking up Maela after she agreed to come out was easy enough. He was grateful she didn't ask questions during the phone call, but he knew Maela well enough to know that that wouldn't last.

And clearly, it hadn't.

He heaved a silent sigh, glancing out the driver's side window, buying time to come up with a plausible explanation

that wouldn't require him to admit anything just yet. The truth was, he was tired. Tired of pushing these feelings away. Tired of ignoring them. Tired of denying them. Maela might not be happy with what he had to say, but he would tell her the truth. She was the only person he thought he could tell.

So, he did.

He sucked in a dramatic breath and told her of his time at the Gulls when he was a rookie, how he had to live with a vet, who happened to be Sanders. How he met Lyra and knew she was young, didn't even look at her until he bumped into her going out to her eighteenth birthday party. How he realized she was much better looking than he thought. How she became forbidden fruit, which made her all the more compelling, alluring, tempting.

"You're depraved," Maela said, arms crossed over her chest as they were about to pull into his driveway.

Damon lifted a shoulder. That wasn't the first time he was called this, and he knew it wouldn't be the last.

Once the car was tucked in the garage, he killed the engine and rubbed his face with his palms.

Maela was silent for a long moment. Her dark, knowing eyes were in front of her, mouth pursed but not tightly. It was difficult to read her, it always had been, but now, it bothered him more than he realized. He wasn't prone to vulnerability, and he felt as though he had just stepped out of a Catholic confessional. Now, he waited to be judged. Waited for... absolution. Maela would make it better, wouldn't she?

"But it was more than just that, wasn't it?" she asked, arching a brow.

"What do you mean?"

“You can hide behind depravity day and night, Damon,” Maela said, “but after listening to your tale, it’s clear you respected her father. She might have been, what did you call it? Tempting, but you wouldn’t have done anything about it unless you felt something more for her than mere lust.”

Damon blinked, surprised Maela would even believe he was capable of such a thing. In truth, he wasn’t sure. He kept going over it in his head, again and again. Would he have made the same choices knowing what he knew now?

And when it came to Lyra, it was always yes. There was no other answer it could be.

“Maybe you first took notice of her when she was legal,” Maela continued, “but you were curious about who she was after that. You couldn’t help yourself.”

Damon didn’t respond even though he didn’t think she expected him to. He didn’t know what to say to that. Admitting it would mean his feelings ran deep, and while he knew that, he wasn’t sure he wanted Maela to know the extent of those feelings just yet.

“And now that you’re back, you find you’re still drawn to her?” she asked, keeping her eyes ahead of her. There was nothing in her tone that would indicate attitude or criticism, and Damon wasn’t sure if that was better or worse. Part of him wanted someone to yell at him for his foolishness, for his weakness, and Maela knew how to hit him where it hurt. At the same time, the fact that he had unburdened himself was enough to cause his shoulders to droop forward and a huge sigh to pass his lips once more.

Now he finally understood the relief of removing a burden, especially one that was more mental than it was physical. And

even if Maela made him pay for it, even if she ridiculed him, it felt good not to have to worry about it any longer.

“Let’s talk about this in the living room,” he muttered, getting out of the car before she could respond. Moving caused his mind to think instead of dwell, and since he had already spoken of Lyra at length, he would have preferred to talk about anything else.

The problem, of course, was he doubted Maela would be as open to a change in subject.

Damon went to the trunk to grab her small suitcase and brought it into the living room. He didn’t bother to wait to see if she was following him or not. Part of him didn’t care. He just needed some time to digest her question, not because he didn’t know the answer, but because he didn’t know what to do about it.

*Isn’t that why Maela’s here? To help you rid yourself of Lyra?*

If only it were that simple. Unfortunately, Damon didn’t think it was.

At first, he thought a distraction was exactly what he needed. He could pretend it was possible not to feel anything for Lyra anymore.

But now, now that he said what he needed to say, now that he had heard Maela’s own observations...he didn’t think it was that simple.

By the time he dropped to the couch, Maela had followed him inside, taking her time and sauntering around like she owned the place. Instead of sitting next to him, she remained standing, arms crossed over her chest, eyebrow arched.

“You don’t have to answer my question,” she said. “I can already tell, the way you move like molasses and so easily give into your self-pity. You *pine* for her, Damon. And it’s pathetic.”

These were all things he already knew.

Damon’s lips flickered. “Jealous?”

“I thought I was, but now, I know I’m not,” she said. “You think I want a man who’s depressed because of something I might have said or done?” She scoffed, shaking her head. Her heels began to clack on the hardwood floor as she paced the length of the room. “What’s gotten into you to render you so goddamn useless? Do you really and truly believe this girl wants you for the heaping pile of sadness you’ve turned into?”

“She’s already with someone,” Damon said, melting into the couch. “Someone good and honorable. Someone I could never be.”

“Would you *want* to be him?” Maela asked, her lips twisting into a frown as she stopped pacing and placed her hands on her hips. “You’re Damon Smith, and you want to be good and honorable?”

“I want her to want me!” he exclaimed roughly, throwing his arms out wide. His eyes widened at the admission; he hadn’t said that out loud, and especially not to anyone else before.

Maela rolled her eyes, unperturbed.

“I want her to admit that she still does.” He sat up and pushed off the couch, arms flinging up and down as he all but stomped around the coffee table so he could get closer to Maela. He wasn’t sure if he was trying to force her to see his point or to get her to believe him. He didn’t realize it until that



moment that he needed her to believe him. “I want her to admit that I was the best she ever had, that she still wants me, that what we had wasn’t –”

“Nothing?” Maela asked softly, arching a slow brow. She stared at him for a long moment that Damon couldn’t help but take a step back. “I see you, Damon. No one else does, but I do. You don’t care what anyone else thinks. It’s why your face looks like a rotten banana. You only care about her and what she thinks. And you need her to validate your feelings for her.”

“What?” His head jerked back like she had just slapped him. “I don’t –”

“You do,” she said, her voice steady. “Think about it. You need her to tell you that what happened between the two of you wasn’t in your head. You need her to affirm that what you felt was real when, in reality, you have the power to do it yourself.”

Damon clenched his teeth together. He didn’t want to sit here and listen to woo-woo shit. He wanted Lyra writhing underneath him, he wanted to hear her scream his name and only his name and promise that she’d never leave him even if he deserved it. Even if he had done something to her to warrant leaving.

“Feeling it, allowing yourself to admit that it was real, is enough, Damon,” Maela said, her voice almost a whisper. “You don’t need her to do that for you.”

“And if she doesn’t feel the same?” he demanded roughly, even though he didn’t want to know the answer.

“That, I can’t say for certain,” Maela said before pursing her lips and glancing at the wall to her left. “I’m not here to reassure you, Damon. You have a mother to do that. You need

to start admitting to yourself what happened between the two of you, and what you want now. And, possibly, if you see a future between the two of you.”

“She’s with –”

“It’s not about *her*, don’t you understand that?” Maela asked, a growl to her voice. She was clearly exasperated with his ineptitude to read between the lines of what she was trying to explain to him, and maybe she was right to feel that way. It wasn’t as though he was going out of his way to try and understand things. He just wanted the answers. He wanted to be told what to do and that he would get what he wanted. Was that so difficult? “It’s about you. You need to accept your feelings for her, even if she’s with someone else. You need to let yourself want her without strings and without guilt.” She cocked her head to the side. “Why won’t you let yourself love her the way I know you want? Do you not think you’re worthy of it?”

Damon clenched his teeth, snorting. “Worthy? What kind of stupid question is that?”

“It’s not stupid,” she said. “You think the person she’s with is better than you. You won’t even consider the possibility that she’d leave him for you because, as you’ve said, he’s honorable and you’re depraved. But that doesn’t make you a bad person, Damon. You know this, don’t you?”

“All I wanted was to get you out here, to fuck you, and forget,” he said. “I was willing to take the blows, the way you would lord this over my head. I don’t want a lecture. I don’t want you to try and fix me –”

“You think fucking me will make you forget her?” Maela asked in disbelief. “You’ve been doing that for the last seven years and clearly it hasn’t worked.”

Damon flared his nostrils. He wanted to argue, wanted to tell Maela to fuck off, that she was wrong, that he could forget Lyra, but the truth was, that was a lie. All of it was a lie. Because Maela was right. She was fucking right and he fucking hated that he even had to admit it.

“But...” She let her voice trail off, brows knitting together slightly.

“But?” he dared ask, and then hated himself for his weakness.

His desperation.

“There is a way you can figure out how she feels about you.” Her lips slithered into a smile. “Once you figure out your own shit first, of course.”

Lyra

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LYRA HEAVED another sigh and frowned as she considered whether leaning against the wall would wrinkle her dress, and if she cared enough to allow it to deter her. The All-Star weekend had just picked up, and she was required to show up at a fancy charity ball Friday night to kick the evening off. Because Newport was hosting this year, there were a variety of players from teams across the NHL, some she had never met before, some even she was starstruck at when she first saw them – Ryan Hart was one.

The last few days had gone by in a blur. She should have put more effort into caring about them, but she couldn't. Her job was slow, which made her think, and, instead of thinking about what she was going to wear tonight, her thoughts always went back to Damon.

*“You’re like me,” he said, taking a step closer to her. She should move back, she should escape from that penetrating gaze, but she was rooted to the spot. “No matter who you’re with or who you fuck, no matter how many times you try to remove me from your system, it’s futile. You’re stuck with me for the rest of your life. You might as well get used to it. Lord knows I’ve been trying to.”*

She couldn't forget these words, even though she wanted to. Even though she tried.

It wasn't just because they were true. It was more than that. It was the fact that he admitted he was going through the same thing, that he had been doing what he could in order to forget her. And that wasn't something she expected him to admit at all. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she believed he wouldn't have admitted anything if he could have helped it.

But she was wrong.

And that was the thing, wasn't it?

She had been wrong about so many things when it came to Damon, and now, she had to figure out what to do about it.

"Another champagne, miss?" a waiter asked, offering her his tray of champagne flutes. The light gold liquid bubbled enticingly.

Lyra glanced at the offered drinks, pondering for a moment. She certainly wanted another one. The bubbles in her head might make her feel light and fluffy, like everything would be okay in the world and it wouldn't be heavy and angsty and confusing. But she didn't think it was a good idea. She was here representing the Gulls, after all, and her father. And Cole. And she didn't want to make a spectacle of herself right now, when she knew she was in a vulnerable position.

"No, thanks." She forced a smile as the waiter walked away.

Lyra sighed and glanced around, hoping for the familiar sight of Cole. At least, that was what she kept telling herself, who she kept telling herself she was looking for. He asked her to attend with him, and she said yes without even thinking

about it. For one, she didn't like these fancy getups, and for another, she didn't want to deal with people asking her the same questions over and over about her father she had heard for the last twenty years of her life. And now that Damon was here, she didn't want to get any questions about Damon either.

Luckily, no one really knew about her relationship with Damon. Unless someone within the organization had leaked it, which also wouldn't surprise her in the slightest.

Fuck. Maybe she should have grabbed that champagne.

When the same server passed by, she plucked a flute of champagne, bringing it to her lips immediately. She murmured a quick thanks, hoping he didn't think she was too weird because she had changed her mind so quickly. She wasn't a big drinker, especially when it came to things that had bubbles, but she needed something to settle her nerves, and the list of positive affirmations she had been reciting all day had fallen flat.

The bubbles hit her almost immediately. She glanced down at the champagne, slightly surprised that it was good. She had never been a fan of carbonation – the few times she drank soda, it always made her gassy – but this made her feel warm and light, just like she assumed earlier.

She took another sip and looked around.

For Cole, she reminded herself. *Cole*.

Every time her eyes moved around the half-filled room, however, she looked for a blond head of hair and sparkling blue eyes. And she hated herself for it. Had she no shame? Was she this pathetic?

*Yes, yes she was.*

Even when she told herself who she wanted to see, her eyes wanted someone else. She wanted to see someone else.

But that was stupid.

Damon had never cared about events like this. He only showed up because of the fans and because it was his job. If he didn't have to, he wouldn't. And after what happened between him and Cole, she wouldn't be surprised if Damon was specifically asked not to come.

She took another gulp of the liquid, nearly downing it. Had she really drank that much, or were these flutes super skinny that it wasn't that much at all? Her inexperience with alcohol, specifically champagne, was starting to reveal itself, and she needed to fix that, and quickly.

“Easy there, tiger.” Without warning, Cole appeared in front of her like he was some kind of magician, throwing her a charming smile. The bruises on his face were practically faded to the point where one could easily mistake them as a consequence of a recent game. They did nothing to detract from his appearance; in fact, they added to his persona. He wasn't known for being a tough guy but clearly he could handle himself. On top of that, his figure looked especially cut in the suit he wore. His dark curls were slicked from his face and teased the back of his neck, and he smelled like something clean and fresh. “I think we actually have to socialize tonight and as much as I want to see your reaction to champagne on an empty stomach, I highly doubt you'd forgive me in the morning if I let you indulge *too* much.”

“*You* have to socialize,” she pointed out, taking back the flute. “*I* am merely the window dressing. I can do what I want.”

Cole leaned forward, his lips curving up into this cross between a smirk and a smile. “You are much more than window dressing,” he said in a deep, low murmur.

Lyra brought the glass to her lips and finished the champagne before turning to dump off the empty flute on another server’s tray. Her head tickled with bubbles and a warmth spread across her chest. She needed to ignore Cole’s voice. The effect it had on her body could only be described as dangerous, which wasn’t exactly a good thing, considering she still hadn’t sorted her life the way she wanted.

Cole leaned in close, so close Lyra nearly jerked back automatically. “Did I tell you yet how absolutely ravishing you look?” he asked, his lips close to her ear.

“About forty times already,” she replied, but she couldn’t help but smile.

“Oh, good. Just as long as you know.” He stood back and offered her his arm. “Should we make the rounds?”

“As if I have a choice,” she muttered. Her eyes widened. Had she said that out loud? Because she definitely hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

The ballroom at the South Coast Plaza Hilton was decorated spectacularly. There were chandeliers hanging down from various points on the high ceiling, with a black and white theme. It reminded her of her senior winter formal, a snow ball, with glittering, pure white tablecloths and black white napkins that were placed in some kind of folded origami shape on each setting. Everyone was dressed in black and white, and everyone looked so put together, that Lyra couldn’t help but fiddle with the skirt of her dress. It was one of the few long dresses with a slit on both sides of her legs and a flash of white on top, outlining the sleeveless sweetheart cut of her dress.



She could have worn white gloves but she hated the feeling of them, so she opted not to.

Her eyes skimmed the crowd. It was still about halfway full, which only added to the elite status of who was invited and who wasn't. Journalists would be allowed to enter once everyone had finished dinner, and that was when Lyra intended to leave.

*He's not here.*

Lyra clenched her teeth together. She hadn't even realized she was looking —

No.

She wasn't.

She wasn't looking for Damon. And even if she was, which she wasn't, she already knew he wouldn't attend this kind of thing. He wasn't into it. She had to keep reminding herself of that, because, apparently, she was having trouble remembering even the most basic of things.

“Jesus Christ.” Cole stopped abruptly, forcing Lyra to bump into his back. Luckily, she wasn't holding a flute of champagne or else she'd spill it everywhere. “I can't believe it.”

“What are you talking about?” Lyra asked, standing on her toes in order to see over Cole's broad shoulder.

“I just wasn't expecting...him to come.”

Lyra's heart thudded against her chest before she even saw him.

But she knew.

Lyra stepped around Cole, trying not to make it obvious that she had to see him for herself. Had to see Damon. She hadn't had any contact with him since she had been at his place earlier in the week, refusing to go to any of the practices the coach scheduled despite the fact that they technically had the week off because of the All-Star festivities. Part of her was grateful for the space. She never knew what to expect with Damon. Worse, she didn't trust herself around him.

Maybe being in public, being with Cole, would keep her in check.

She pointedly ignored the laughter ringing through her head.

Damon looked absolutely stunning. She hated that she stared, hated that she couldn't help herself. Sweeping over the sharp angles of his cheekbones to the cut of his form-fitting, all-black suit, he looked everything like the bad boy he was purported to be. His hair was slicked back and she had to shove her hands behind her to keep her from reaching over and running her fingers through his hair. She would *not* be a spectacle.

Not here.

Not for Damon.

Almost as though he knew she was staring, Damon glanced up from the person he was speaking with and locked eyes with her.

It was only then that Lyra was struck with the realization that Damon wasn't alone.

Apparently, he had a date.

And she was absolutely spectacular. Beautiful. Graceful. Everything that Lyra wasn't. She tried to push the jealousy

away, tried to quell the instinct to put herself down, but it was difficult. Especially now that she noticed Damon had a hand on the small of the woman's back and his body was angled in her direction, like he was paying attention to only her.

The skin on her own back tingled, like she was the one he was touching. The way he used to. When they were together.

God, Lyra could remember that giving her his full attention was so damn easy for him – at least, that was how he made it seem.

How could she have forgotten?

How could she have taken that for granted?

And now, some woman was here with Damon, reaping the benefits.

More than that, Lyra knew Damon well enough to know that his date must be more than just someone he fucked around with. He wouldn't have brought her otherwise.

Because he didn't come to these events normally.

Her heart seized at the thought. Did that mean she was serious? Did that mean he was falling for her? But what about the looks he gave Lyra? What about punching Cole in the face?

*Come on. It's been seven years. Do you really think he's been holding onto some summer fling from years ago? Do you?*

It was stupid, she could admit.

But even so, she couldn't use that logic to explain to her heart why the hell it hurt so damn much seeing him now. She should be happy for him. That was the right thing to do. She should want him to move on because that meant she was able

to move on. There was nothing holding her back from Cole. But she found she wasn't able to do anything except stare.

And her heart?

It pounded against her chest like it had stakes coming out of every crevice rather than being a solid thing keeping her alive.

She didn't want to be here anymore.

She didn't want to see this.

“Lyra.”

Lyra blinked and turned to look at Cole. His eyebrows were scrunched and his lips were tugged into a frown. “Did you hear me?”

“What?” she asked, tilting her head in his direction.

She didn't even think Damon noticed her – and why would he, when he had *her* on his arm?

Fuck, she was too young to be this bitter.

“I've been asking you if you want to grab something to eat, but I can see you're distracted.” Cole glanced over at Damon and then back at her.

Without warning, he took her wrist in his hand and gently tugged her out of the ballroom and onto the balcony. The night air was chilly, and her bare skin pimpled. She turned to look at him, opening her mouth to ask what they were doing out here, when Cole kissed her abruptly.

Lyra froze.

She was so taken aback, she couldn't move. His tongue pushed into her mouth, big hands cupping her cheeks, pressing his body against hers —

Wrong.

This was wrong.

Lyra pulled away, frowning her brows. “What are you doing?” she asked, glancing around and hoping no one else saw that display.

“I’m trying to get your attention since you seem distracted by something else,” Cole said with a growl to his voice. She locked eyes with him, tilting her head to the side. She couldn’t remember when he spoke to her in such a way. “Or should I say, *someone*.”

“And what does that mean?” she asked, but she already knew.

She made it obvious, and now, she was paying for it. Because Cole saw it too. How was she supposed to explain? Could she? Did she even want to?

“You know exactly what it means.” He pressed his lips together, like he wanted to refrain from saying something he might later regret. “Lyra, I can’t do this. I’m at the All-Star charity gala. I’m an All-Star. I’m supposed to be enjoying myself. But all I can see is you staring at Damon with this look —“

“What look?”

“A look I’ve never seen before,” he said. “A look you’ve never had for me.”

“Oh, come on, Cole,” Lyra said. She might have stamped her foot if it wouldn’t make her look juvenile. Instead, she sighed, being overly dramatic about her reaction, knowing she was lying to him and to herself, but not caring. Because it was easier to gaslight him than it was to admit that maybe...maybe

he was right about this. “That isn’t fair. You’re making a lot of assumptions. There’s no reason to be jealous –”

“I’m not.” Cole lifted a shoulder, running his fingers through his hair and mussing it up. “Honestly, I’m not. I thought I was, but...” He let his voice trail off. “I’m not going to play this game, Lyra. If you still have feelings for Damon, figure it out. Because I’m not going to wait around for you to decide you’d rather be with me. I know what type of man I am. I know what I can offer you. And if *you* can’t figure that out, that’s on you, not me.” He placed both of his hands on her shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. “I’m really glad you came here with me. And I’m falling in love with you as we speak.” He gave her a grin. “But I also know my worth. And if you’re not falling for me, I think I’d rather know now. I think I deserve that much.”

Lyra’s heart crumbled to flecks of stone too heavy to blow away in the gentle breeze. She was glad they were alone because her eyes teared up and she didn’t think she’d be able to blink away her tears.

Before she could respond, he leaned forward and gave her a lingering kiss on the cheek. “I hope it works out for you,” he murmured. “I do. Because you deserve that much. But I wouldn’t hold my breath. Not with someone like Damon.”

And with that, he walked away, leaving her alone to stew in her thoughts and realize her heart was breaking, but not because of losing Cole.

It broke because everything he said was right.

Damon

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THE FACT of the matter was, the second Damon stepped into the hotel ballroom, he knew exactly where Lyra was at all times. He refused to make it obvious; in fact, he tried to keep himself from catching her attention only because he wanted time to observe her and who she was with, but he watched her reject champagne before taking the champagne, and then, practically downing the champagne.

It was clear she wasn't acting like her usual self, only because Damon knew she had never been the type to drink, especially things with carbonation. She would always wrinkle her nose and purse her lips whenever she tried, and he would always laugh because that face was just too funny.

"That's her, then?" Maela asked, coming to stand next to him, holding her own flute of champagne. She tilted her head to the side so it rested on Damon's shoulder. Under normal circumstances, Damon would have moved; he wasn't all that fond of physical affection. However, he also knew he had a role to play, and as such, he remained firmly where he was. "Hmm."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Damon all but growled. He wasn't particularly sure why he was suddenly defensive of

Lyra, but he was. He wouldn't even entertain Maela making any criticisms against her.

"You don't deserve her," Maela said glancing up at him. She moved her head slightly, but kept her body close to him. "She's too beautiful for the likes of you. That's all I was saying."

Damon scowled, rolling his eyes, but he didn't deny it. The truth was, she was too good for him in every way, not just with her looks. He couldn't argue with that.

"She's young," Maela continued. "Carefree. Naive, almost." Her eyes cut back to his. "No wonder you're so drawn to her. She's nothing I'd imagined you'd be attracted to, and yet, now that I see it for myself, it makes sense."

"Look," he said, making sure to keep his voice down. He didn't want to deal with anyone overhearing his conversation with Maela about Lyra. They would think he was pathetic, and he already knew he was. This whole plan of Maela's reeked of high school drama and desperation, but apparently, he was willing to go through it for Lyra, to see where she stood, to get her to act. "I didn't bring you here to offer your opinion."

"No," she said, reaching up to fiddle with his tie. "You brought me here to make her jealous, to see if there's a chance she might actually have feelings for you. And I think there's a possibility this could all work out in your favor."

Damon's eyes snapped in her direction. Suddenly, he wasn't as keen on grabbing a glass of champagne all while avoiding having to talk to anyone he might have played with or against. Instead, he watched her fingers as they adjusted the article of clothing before smoothing down the wrinkles and dropping her arms to her sides.



“What are you talking about?” he asked. He didn’t want to ask because it would reveal just how badly he wanted her to be right. But he trusted Maela already – this was her plan, after all – and whether that was a smart decision or not, he didn’t care. He just wanted Lyra, he wanted a sign, he wanted...

He wanted everything about her.

Maela nodded her chin at a glass door that seemed to lead out onto a balcony. Though it was difficult to make out the distorted bodies through the glass, he could easily decipher the golden hair Lyra possessed through the glass, indicating she had stepped out for a bit. That was something he would always know, like the back of his hand. Like the count of her freckles on her cheeks. He knew the color of her hair, the way it easily wrapped around his fist when he held her down in the throes of passion.

But he couldn’t distract himself by thinking about that now. Not when he was so close to getting what he wanted.

At that moment, he saw another figure, his back to Damon and Maela, cross over to her. Damon’s lips curled into a sneer. He knew that asshole. Didn’t have to see his beaten up face either to confirm it. Fucking Cole. Why wasn’t he surprised? Of course, Cole would ask Lyra to come. And why the fuck wasn’t Sanders pissed that his daughter was dating someone on the team? Was he fine with this because Lyra was older? Or did Sanders just have an issue with Damon himself?

Fuck.

He shouldn’t care, but he did, and it wasn’t fucking fair. None of this was fair.

Damon tried to look elsewhere, tried to find something else to distract himself with, but he couldn’t take his eyes off

of Lyra, of Cole touching Lyra. The fucker put his hands on Lyra's shoulders, kissed her cheek. Didn't Cole know that Lyra still belonged to him? Was that concept truly difficult to grasp?

“Why the fuck are you showing me this?” Damon growled, pulling his eyes away from the spectacle so he could look at Maela.

A couple of players from Vegas glanced over at Damon, probably because Damon had spoken louder than he intended to, and Damon clenched his teeth to keep himself from saying anything else people might overhear. He didn't want to draw any attention to himself or it would defeat the purpose of why he was here in the first place, and that point was to see if Lyra still wanted him, if she would get jealous. But the truth was, Damon wasn't even sure she noticed him in the first place. In fact, right now, she seemed completely distracted by Cole.

“You trying to prove a fucking point?” Damon continued when he was certain they were alone, even in a crowded hotel ballroom, even with servers carrying around fancy finger food and expensive liquor. He took a step closer to Maela just so he wasn't tempted to raise his voice in any way. “What, that she doesn't return my feelings? Are you amused? You got to come all the way out here because I called you – I never should have fucking called you. That was a fucking mistake. Congratu-fucking-lations, Maela. You were right. I –”

“Will you shut up for one second and look at what's actually going on?” she asked, and though the words were sharp, her tone was calm. Like she was placating a child. Her eyes burned, but she wasn't offended; she was exasperated with him.

He didn't care. He wrinkled his nose. “Why would I want to see –”

Maela placed her hand on his cheek and forced him to look back at the balcony. Damon wanted to resist, but he also saw a couple nearby looking over at them. Whether they recognized him or not wasn't an issue, but he needed to make sure he looked like someone who was content lest people start talking about what his problem was. He didn't want to give Seraphina Hanson another reason to sit him down like a schoolboy and lecture him.

He fixed his eyes on what Maela was trying to show him, despite not wanting to see it at all. Instead of the lover's embrace he expected to see, Cole was gone and Lyra...Lyra was alone.

Damon frowned. Had he left to grab her another drink? Maybe he needed to use the restroom or do something else? And yet, there was something inside Damon that seemed to say this wasn't the case. That he had left on purpose. That he probably wasn't coming back.

"Besides the fact that she kept glaring daggers at me," Maela said, "it doesn't appear as though things worked out between her and Cole. Perhaps you should see what happened."

Damon was ready to argue. But how could he deny what he saw? Lyra was outside and alone. Probably cold, knowing her penchant for getting cold all the damn time, even in the summer. He straightened and messed with his tie, just to give his fingers something to do, even if Maela just fixed it.

And what else had Maela said? Lyra had glared daggers at her? But why...?

Unless Lyra had noticed him, and Damon didn't realize it, which was definitely a possibility.

“Well?” she asked. “Have I rendered the great Damon Smith speechless?”

Damon would have given her an annoyed glare, but he couldn't take his eyes off Lyra. She was alone. And he...he wanted to go to her.

But...why? Where did Cole go?

*Fuck, you really are pathetic. Can you get your head out of your ass? Who cares what happened? Just because something maybe happened, it doesn't mean she's going to jump into your arms or into your bed. Stop pining and do something about it before somebody else does.*

Damon shook his head, trying to snap him out of his stupidity. He grabbed a flute of champagne from a server passing by and, in one motion, downed it without a thought. Maela said nothing. Instead, she arched a brow, hand on her jutted hip, as though she was asking him what he was going to do about it.

A challenge.

A challenge he was burning to accept.

He glanced around the room. It wasn't long before his eyes settled on Seraphina Hanson, decorated in a sparkling ivory gown. She looked like a bride if the dress wasn't as tight or low cut. Currently, she was talking to a group of men in suits. If he *were* to speak to Lyra in public, at least he knew where she was.

But what about Sanders?

“What are you waiting for?” Maela asked, a touch of impatience in her tone.

“I can’t just rush in,” he snapped, tightening his grip on the empty flute.

“Why not? This is *you* we’re talking about. What’s stopped you from doing exactly what you want, including rushing in?” Maela’s lips curved down, arms crossing over her chest. “The Damon Smith I knew wasn’t a coward. Even if he felt things he couldn’t explain, he certainly wouldn’t run away from an opportunity to get exactly what he wanted. The whole point of tonight was to see how she felt about you, and now that we can, now that we’re at the point to do that, you’re looking for an excuse not to.” A beat. “What happened to you?”

Damon wasn’t sure whether to be extremely pissed at all those insults dressed in pretty words or extremely motivated to march over to where Lyra was on that balcony — still alone — and do exactly what Maela suggested.

“We succeeded,” she said. “We made her jealous to the point where even that man she was with noticed. And now he’s gone. They probably broke up and you’re here, scared.”

“I’m not fucking scared,” Damon said with a sneer.

“Oh?” She raised her brow to challenge him. “Then do something about it.” She tilted her head towards the balcony but didn’t take her eyes off Damon.

“What would you have me do?” he asked.

“Whatever you want,” she returned quickly.

That was the problem. Damon didn’t know what he wanted.

Actually, that wasn’t *quite* true.

He wanted Lyra. He just didn’t know the right way to get her. Did he give her space? Or did he swoop in? And if he

swooped in, was he taking advantage of her in a vulnerable position — but that was only assuming she and the fucker Cold *had* broken up, and it wasn't like Cole was making an announcement about his relationship status to the world as of yet.

“I'm going to get myself something stronger to drink,” Maela said, her voice practically a purr. “I have no intention of seeing you again unless this has completely failed and you need to release some kind of tension. Then again, I hope to be doing that with someone else who isn't you.” Her lips curved into a small smile. “No offense, of course.”

He rolled his eyes but didn't comment. He was too focused on Lyra.

“Hopefully, tonight, you'll finally shout out the right name this time, hmm?” She patted him on the shoulder condescendingly before stepping back and giving him one last look. “Good luck, Damon.” She flipped her dark hair over her shoulder and sidestepped around him, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

The first thing he should have done was head straight for Lyra, to figure out what had happened between her and Cole, to figure out where they stood. Instead, he remained rooted in place, eyes taking her in, watching. There was something powerful in watching someone who had no clue they were being watched, and he couldn't stop staring, even if he wanted to. He still didn't know what to do. The last thing he wanted was to be vulnerable, but Maela was also right. He needed to do something if he was going to figure out what the fuck was going on. He finally accepted that he wanted her — not just for a night, and not the way they had been. He wanted more.

He just couldn't define what more meant.

“Fucking pussy, fucking do something. You’d never act this fucking scared on the fucking ice.” He forced himself to set the champagne flute on a buffet table and made his way swiftly onto the balcony before he could talk himself out of it.

Lyra didn’t even look up when he opened the glass doors, didn’t even acknowledge him when he clicked them closed. Part of him wanted a reaction, some kind of acknowledgment. His chest tightened at the fact that she might be ignoring him. There was only so much he could take from her. He got dressed up in this stupid suit to attend a stupid gala he didn’t actually care about in order to see her.

He had to see her.

When Maela planted the idea of making Lyra jealous, he jumped at the chance. He was petty and he didn’t care. He wanted her to hurt. He wanted her anger and frustration, her fire within her so he could give it back to her just as good as she gave it to him. He wanted passion and shouting and insults. He wanted a fight.

And she...

She couldn’t even be bothered to look at him.

Suddenly, all of his own adrenaline fled his body, and he found himself moving to the edge of the balcony to stand next to her in silence. His shoulders brushed hers, but she didn’t pull away. And he couldn’t either.

For a moment, they said nothing. They stood there together, barely touching, simply enjoying the night. It was obvious she was cold but too stubborn to say anything about it. He slipped out of his jacket and hesitated for only a moment before placing it on her shoulders.

She whipped her head in Damon's direction, locking eyes with him. She didn't pull away and neither did he. He wasn't sure if this was a good thing, if this was something that might spark some kind of hope in his chest.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice low, almost unrecognizable, even to himself.

"I..." She brushed hair from her face, looking away. Though her makeup was relatively light, he couldn't tell if she was blushing or if it was just the shadows casting odd angles on her face. "I didn't expect you to do that."

"I'm not some kind of monster, Lyra," he said, and his chest contorted into a tight knot at the thought that she might think he was. Not that he needed her to think that way. He cleared his throat, hoping to remove some of the tension. "At least not when it comes to you."

Lyra swallowed, reaching up to brush hair away from her face, hair that wasn't there at all. It was strange watching her move with such doubt; the girl he knew was full of confidence. Annoyingly, she thought she could do anything, and usually did. But now? He wasn't sure what to expect. Rarely did he treat any conquest with kid gloves, but this was Lyra and she wasn't just a conquest.

This could be the start of something significant, and he needed to act accordingly — if he cared.

And clearly, he had shown that he had.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She looked at him again. Her eyes were wide, scanning his face like she was searching for an answer to a question he couldn't fathom. Whatever she wanted, he would give to her. Didn't she know that? Didn't she realize?



“Can you take me home?” she asked in a surprisingly meek voice.

Damon blinked. That...was unexpected.

“Of course,” he forced himself to say.

And before he knew it, the two slipped out of the gala unnoticed except by a pair of heavily mascaraed brown eyes.

Lyra

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SHE COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. Had she really told him –?

Had he really agreed...just like that?

There wasn't any arguing, no smartass comments. He just...agreed. And that was that. And now, they stepped into the night, towards the valet, towards his car, towards... freedom.

The second the two got into the car, Damon opened the door for Lyra and eased her inside before heading around to the driver's seat. She buckled her seatbelt, ignoring the way her fingers shook as she clicked it in.

What was she doing?

Was this even smart?

Was this –

She was doing what she wanted.

Lyra's heart raced and she wished her hands didn't sweat when she got nervous. She kept trying to wipe them on the skirt of her dress, hoping Damon wouldn't notice from the driver's seat. Hoping he couldn't see just how nervous she truly was. She didn't know why she cared, but she did. Maybe

she didn't want him to question why she was doing this, or doubt her intentions, or question her at all.

Or maybe this was the first time she finally let herself have what she actually wanted.

The drive was surprisingly silent. She glanced out the window, holding her breath. The closer she got to her home, the more fidgety she seemed to get. She rolled her shoulders back, trying to seat herself the way she imagined Damon's date — whoever she was — probably sat. She lifted her chin and folded her hands in her lap, trying to appear prim and proper, but it felt like she was faking it all.

She released a breath, looking out through the window again. What was she doing? Was she seriously having Damon take her home? Why? What was she trying to prove?

And why did she keep trying to emulate a woman she didn't know about, shouldn't care about, and refused to compare herself to, even though she had so many questions. Part of her preened at the fact that Damon chose to leave that date behind in favor of taking her home, but Lyra didn't like that part of herself and immediately pushed it away. She didn't want to be that girl. It wasn't like his date knew about Lyra or asked to be ditched. In fact, the fact that Damon had done such a thing was rude and selfish and —

“Why are you squirming over there?” Damon's voice cut through the silence, and her thoughts, like a knife and Lyra clenched at her thighs. She didn't even care that her nails dug into her flesh because at least it gave her something to focus on.

“What are you talking about?” she asked. She had hoped to sound nonchalant, but the truth was, her voice came out as

jittery as her movements seemed to be. Apparently, she couldn't hide her nervousness the way she had hoped to.

Damon's lips flickered up but he kept his eyes in front of him. "You can't sit still," he said. "Reminds me of our first date when we went to Disneyland. You were so nervous that day."

Lyra stilled for a moment, her eyes widening slightly. She tilted her head to the side, to take in his profile even in the shadows. "You remember that?" she asked, not bothering to hide her disbelief.

He snorted. "How could I not?" he asked. "You've been obsessed with that place since you were a kid, and every time you and that friend of yours...what was her name? Olivia? Something? When you guys would talk about ideal first dates, you always said Disneyland. I knew if I wanted to impress you, I'd have to take you there, even though I could give a shit about Disneyland."

Lyra ignored his issues with the amusement park. She still couldn't wrap her head around the part where he actually knew that still, even after the time passed between them. Even after their history together.

She shook her head, her grip on her legs loosening. "How do you remember that?" she asked in a whisper. She wasn't sure she even wanted to know. Because once she did, she worried that feelings she might have boxed up inside of her might suddenly spring open, like Pandora opening her box and releasing chaos into the world.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye before looking ahead of him again. "I remember everything."

He said it like it was obvious. Like this was just something he did. Something Damon Smith would say.

But it wasn't. They both knew it wasn't.

Lyra stared at him for too long. She knew it too, but she couldn't pull away from him, even if she wanted to. Why would he say something like that? So uncharacteristic. Something there was no way he could say to her and have it make sense.

*Because he means it.*

The thought came hard and fast in her mind like a shooting star.

Damon never said things he didn't mean. She knew that like she knew Disneyland. Like she knew the proposal scene from *Pride & Prejudice*. Like she knew the Newport Beach pier. Which meant...

“Who is she?”

She clenched her teeth. That was the last question she wanted to ask, partly because she knew she shouldn't care but partly because he would know she did. And yet, that was what came out of her mouth. Because if it didn't, then she would think about what he said, and she thought about what she said, more of those feelings would slip out, and she didn't want that because that would be dangerous.

If anything, she wanted a heated discussion with him, something that actually made sense. Because none of this was making sense to her.

Lyra tilted her head away from Damon, closer to the window, and began to pick at the car seat. She sunk deeper into the warmth of the jacket he gave her, trying not to let

herself get overwhelmed by his intoxicating scent, and failing to do so.

Maybe it didn't matter if he knew about those feelings, if she let them go. Maybe he should know. Maybe pretending was more exhausting than she realized. And maybe she wasn't as slick as she thought.

"Jealous, princess?" Damon asked, but his heart wasn't in it. There was something hollow about the tone, almost like he was tired too. Like he wanted this stupid game between them to be done with for good.

She didn't respond. Instead, she sighed, folding her hands back into her lap. Fiddling with the button on the sleeve of her jacket, she rested her head back and closed her eyes, counting her breaths. She wished it would rain, wished the sky would swallow her up so she didn't have to figure out what to do.

"I knew her when I was in Seattle," he said after another moment. Lyra opened an eye, looked back at him. She wasn't surprised to find him looking straight ahead, like talking to the windshield was easier than talking to her. "She's...a friend."

The word gutted her more than she expected it too and she blew out a breath.

A friend?

Damon didn't have friends. Especially not friends who were also women. Damon only cared about one thing when it came to women, and it wasn't being friends.

*That's not fair. He didn't treat you that way.*

If the voice in her head was trying to make her feel better, it went about it in the worst way. So, now this date, this friend of Damon's, was on equal footing as Lyra was?

Her heart beat painfully, and she tried not to focus too much on the pain. She appreciated the honesty from Damon, she did, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt. And she hated that it hurt because she didn't think it was fair that she hurt and he...

Well, she wasn't sure what he felt.

And she was tired of making assumptions, one way or the other.

"Don't lie to me," she said, hoping he would understand she was being serious. "Just be honest."

"I am." There was an insistence to his voice but it wasn't pushy. He knew it was true, and he wanted her to understand it was true, but he wasn't going to force her if she chose not to believe him. "It didn't start out that way, but that's...that's what we are now."

Even he sounded surprised by this.

"Explain." She knew she had no right to ask this of him. It wasn't her business. That was what kept rolling over in her mind, like a chant, a prayer, something she begged the Universe to help her with because she desperately didn't want to care, but she also couldn't help it. Because this information was crucial to her, though she couldn't explain why.

Did she have a chance?

Did she even want to have a chance?

Without warning, Damon turned down the street. This wasn't the right way to her home, but it didn't matter. Lyra trusted him. And maybe...maybe they needed to hash this out. Get it in the open so they were on the same page. Figure it out so they could move on.

*Don't kid yourself. There's no way you're moving on and you know it.*

Lyra released another breath, this one fogging up the window. She pressed her finger against it, trying to draw... something. It was hard to express herself when she had no idea what she was feeling.

Damon pulled into a small parking lot and killed the engine. Lyra blinked. She knew exactly where they were. This was Seraphina Hanson's neighborhood, a large residential area dubbed Westcliffe, for the houses on the cliffs, or Dover Shores, which were closer to the private beach that was just on the edge of the neighborhood. There was a small park without a playground, one specifically for dog walking, that overlooked the small channel that led into the Back Bay. Because it was dark, it was hard to make out the grass and the slope of the hill that led towards the Dover Shore area, but Lyra was glad for the shadows, glad to have somewhere to hide. It gave her a place to think.

This was *their* spot. A safe place they could get away from everyone else. How had she not realized they were nearby?

"Tell me why," he said. Though his voice wasn't even that loud, it seemed to fill up the silence between them to the point where even Lyra straightened. There was always something commanding about his voice; it made her want to obey, even when she was in a rebellious mood.

"Why, what?" she asked, looking straight ahead at the black water. It was hard to differentiate it from the area surrounding it, but it gave her something to focus on rather than Damon's penetrating stare.

"Why do you want me to explain who she is to me?" he asked.



Lyra closed her eyes, trying to come up with a decent explanation, something that wouldn't have her looking like some kind of fool in front of him. But she was left blank. The words wouldn't come. She had nothing to say. She tilted her head down and began to pick at the chair between her thighs, her hair falling in her face and offering her some kind of curtain of safety. Hopefully, it would block him from reading the emotions on her face.

"Damon," she murmured so softly, she almost didn't think she had said the word at all.

"Tell me," he insisted, and the compulsion in her to obey gripped her like a wrestler.

She snapped her gaze up, her eyes narrowed, as anger coursed through her system. "What do you want me to say?" she demanded to know. "What? Do you want me to tell you that I'm jealous? That I automatically hate her even though she might be a very nice lady because she was there with you? Do you want me to tell you I haven't stopped thinking about you, about us, in the last seven years? And even when I'm with Cole, I wish it was –" She cut herself off then, slapping a hand over her mouth.

It was too much.

This was all too much.

She had said more than she intended, and now, she couldn't take it back.

*Didn't you want it to be out in the open?* a voice taunted her.

Lyra bit her bottom lip. She didn't know. Part of her had, but she was vulnerable now. Which meant he could use her words like weapons against her. He could hurt her – or worse.

He could make her fall in love with him all over again and then run away, just like he always did. And the worst part of it all was, she had never fallen out of love with him in the first place. It would be so easy for her to let go, to give into these feelings...

“And you think *my* life was any easier?” he demanded, his voice little more than a harsh whisper, like a brittle breeze on a cold taste.

“You left me, remember?” she pushed, wrinkling her nose in frustration. “You didn’t even say goodbye. You didn’t even offer to take me with you.”

“You were a child,” he replied.

“Eighteen,” she said. “I was eighteen. Not a child. I could have –”

“What? Left your family for me? The family you loved and cherished?” He wrinkled his brow, shaking his head. “You really think I would make you do something like that?”

“You could have at least invited me!” she pointed out.

“And put you in an impossible situation?” he countered, his eyes clashing with hers. “I would never do that to you. I would never make you feel that way, ever.”

“So, what, you just leave? You don’t even say goodbye?” she asked. Her seat belt tightened against her as she moved, twisting her torso in his direction, trying to gesture with her hands to emphasize her point. The fact that he would use her age as a reason to leave infuriated her. He couldn’t treat her like an adult in certain respects and treat her like a child in other ways. He couldn’t have it both ways.

“You think it would be easy for me to say goodbye?” he asked. He unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned forward. For a

long moment, Lyra was sure he was going to kiss her. She held her breath, waiting, because that was exactly what she wanted. She wanted his anger, his passion, everything he was willing to give her. “You think I even could? Call me a coward, call me a pussy, whatever. It’s the truth.”

“You think I don’t hear about the kind of reputation you have?” she all but growled. “You say goodbye to women all the time, before and after me.”

“And you think you’re just like them?” he asked with a sneer. “You’re not that stupid, Lyra. Stop pretending.”

“Pretending? You think I’m pretending?”

“That’s all you’ve been doing, ever since I got here. You pretend you don’t want me. You pretend you’re in love with Cole. But we know the truth. *I* know the truth. I can read you like a play on the ice. The others can’t. Hell, I don’t even think your father can, but I know you, Lyra. And maybe seven years have passed, but I know you. You haven’t changed. Not really. People pretend they change, but they don’t. I’m certainly the same dick I’ve always been, and you...you’re the same girl I fell in love with when I knew I shouldn’t have. When I did everything I could to avoid it. And I know you still want me the way I’ve been wanting you since the second I left that night.”

And, without warning, he grabbed her face roughly in his hands and crashed his lips onto hers.

Damon

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DAMON KNEW he should pull back. He was doing too much too fast, and he didn't want to scare her away.

But fuck, he had been waiting to kiss her forever, and he couldn't stop himself now, even if he wanted to.

She tasted like fucking heaven. Like bliss. Like what an orgasm might taste like if one could define it that way.

He couldn't pull away from her even if he tried. But there was no way he was king to try? Why should he? This was what he wanted. He hadn't known what he wanted when he got here thanks to a trade, but now, he knew.

It was Lyra. It had always been Lyra. And to deny it any longer was stupid. He always knew too, but it was like he wanted to pretend that he was incapable of caring for her even now, after all this time. After all of it. And maybe if it was anyone else, it might have been. But this was Lyra and she was different, and he knew that, he fucking knew that, but he was also a fucking idiot. And stubborn. And prideful.

Why Lyra put up with him in the first place, why she bothered to put up with him now, she had no clue.

Lyra didn't pull away from him the way he expected her to. If she wanted to fuck with him, this would have been the

perfect moment — pull away, slap his face, reject him the way he rejected her so long ago.

But she didn't.

Instead, she met his kiss with her own hunger, allowing him to claim her mouth the way he used to when they were together, when he was allowed to claim her in every way he wanted. His tongue pressed against her bottom lip, demanding entrance. He wouldn't wait for her to offer herself to him, even though that had been one of his fantasies.

No.

He needed to taste her, to see if she was still the same, and that meant taking what he knew was his. He wouldn't ask. He wouldn't do anything that might be misconstrued as soft or romantic. This wasn't the place for that, though he would put it on his list of things for him to do.

But not now.

Not when he needed her and not when she was giving herself to him so willingly.

Lyra always had a sweetness about her, something he couldn't quite put into words, and he needed to know she still did, even after all this time. It was what enticed her to him in the first place. She was so damn beautiful, so damn innocent, and she saw past the bullshit people used to stigmatize him, and so who he really was...like a fucking enchantress.

Lyra opened for him without struggling. The fact that she obeyed his silent commands, that she melted into him, was enough to cause his cock to twitch. To stir even more than it already had. Already, fantasies played out in his mind like a movie of everything he wanted, everything he believed was his.

God, he missed her.

God, he wanted her the way he used to have her.

Jesus, she would be the death of him, and it was only a kiss.

Had he really turned into some pile of bones who would bend to her will simply because she allowed him to kiss her like she belonged to him?

Yes, yes he would.

And honestly, the second he knew that, the second he was able to wrap his head around that, the easier it was for him to let go, to give in, to truly accept what he felt for her.

And he was okay with it. He wasn't ashamed or afraid or any of that bullshit.

Maela had been right, and the fact that he could acknowledge that without any sort of snideness was a big deal. Because this was Maela and he fucking didn't want her to be right about anything.

But this?

The whole set up that led to this, that led to Damon kissing Lyra, was because of Maela.

Fuck. Maybe he owed her more than he realized.

But he didn't want to think about that right now. He wanted to think about her, Lyra, and all the wicked things he wanted to do with her. And he hoped to start it right now.

The second Damon was able to, his tongue was in her mouth, dancing with her own. She wasn't fighting him, but meeting him, welcoming him, tasting him the same way he tasted her. Exploring him, remembering him and the way they

used to be together. One hand dropped her cheek so he could snake his fingers in the back of her hair and tighten his grip on the roots, tilting her back so he could deepen the kiss even further and giving her just enough pain for her to remember that she belonged to him and he was the one in charge. He was the one calling the shots.

At least, for tonight.

She whimpered, and the sound made his cock harden even more than it already was.

Fuck.

Had she always had this power over him.

*Yes. Yes, she did.*

Why was he still surprised?

She made him feel like a fucking virgin, like he needed her to lead him to some promised land only she could take him to.

He pulled away, only slightly. His eyes were at halfmast, and he made no effort to open them further. He wanted to see her, to see the desire flicker in her green eyes, casting them the same color as Christmas trees. He wanted to take in her bruised lips, knowing he was the one who assaulted her so, who made her body ripple with desires. And the breathlessness that escaped from her was the same sound as angels singing some kind of heavenly chorus.

*Fucking bitch.*

He didn't give a shit. Not when it was Lyra.

“You're my good girl,” he whispered, tracing the curve of her lips with his finger. “You open up so easily for me, even now, don't you?”

She looked up at him with those wide eyes, and despite her age, there was still innocence brimming inside of her, innocence he wanted to claim as his own and corrupt. An innocence he knew, and yet still felt like it was the first time he saw it. There was an animal inside of him, rushing to the surface, wanting to take her in the worst, depraved way —

And he would.

He knew he would.

But not right now.

Right now, he would focus on her, on taking her back, on making her remember, on ensuring she never went anywhere else again.

He leaned forward, kissing one cheek, then the other, then her mouth. However, instead of it being as passionate as it was before, this one was slow and sensual. Long and alluring, like they had all the time in the world, and he wanted to take advantage of it. Because there was no need to rush.

Not now that they finally had each other.

He leaned forward even further – God, he needed her in his arms, he needed to feel her warmth against his body – trying to be even closer to her than he already was.

“Tell me you want me,” he breathed against her before kissing her cheek then her throat. He began to suck on her skin until a bruise started to form. So fucking juvenile, but he didn’t give a shit. “Tell me you’re still mine.”

She was silent for the longest time. It could have been a breath or two but they felt like ungodly hours, stretching long into a humid summer’s day with no water in sight.



“I’ve always been yours, Damon,” she finally whispered, looking up at him so she could catch his eyes with her own. “That hasn’t changed. I don’t think it ever will.”

“No,” he agreed. “It won’t. You’re mine, Lyra. You’re mine. And you’ll always be mine, no matter what.”

She nodded, sighing as she did so.

“So,” she said before biting her bottom lip. Damon reached down and pressed her bottom lip with his thumb, causing her to release her hold on it. “She means nothing to you?”

He searched her eyes. “Who?”

“The...the woman you were with,” she said. “In the black dress.”

Damon softened slightly, but his lips curved up again in understanding. “I never thought you’d be the jealous type,” he murmured, kissing the lobe of her ear.

She shuddered. “Neither did I,” she admitted, “but then I saw her with you, and I...” She shook her head. “I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to see it.”

“She means nothing to me,” he told her sincerely. “She is my friend though. She helped me set this entire thing up.”

Lyra sat back, pulling from him. A brow arched as she looked at him. “Set what up?” she asked suspiciously.

“She wanted to see if you would get jealous,” he explained.

“Wait...you told her about me?” she asked.

Damon opened his mouth to refute her, to brush it off, but what could he say? It would be a lie. And he didn’t want to lie to Lyra any longer. He didn’t want to lie to himself.

“I called her out here because I wanted to forget about you,” he said. “And she was someone I knew I could be with and wouldn’t expect anything from me. I can’t give her what I want to give to you. I can’t give that to anyone. And I’ve tried.” Well, maybe not as hard as he could have, but the intention was there. And she didn’t need to know that. “But it doesn’t matter.”

Lyra sighed, looking back at her lap. “When you left, I thought...everyone said...” She shook her head. “I hated that everyone thought they were right about you. And that I was the example they gave in order to prove their point. Why... why not just say goodbye? I needed that closure, Damon. You don’t understand what it was like without you.”

“I have some kind of idea,” he said, cupping her cheek once more. He had to touch her. He always had to touch her. Now that he could, now that he was allowed. There was still a small part of him that worried this might be some kind of dream, and the last thing he wanted was to find himself waking up in cold, dreary Seattle alone on his bed, arms empty. Not when he finally had her again. “I couldn’t give you closure because saying goodbye was final. There’s no coming back from that, and I...I couldn’t even imagine what saying goodbye would mean if I said it to you.”

Lyra looked like she didn’t believe him. And why would she? Despite ripping away layer upon layer of who he portrayed himself to be in public, even she fell into the trap of believing his reputation instead of simply believing him. He shouldn’t be surprised, but he also couldn’t help the bitterness that tightened his chest. He wanted her to be different, wanted her to see him differently.

“Damon...”

“Don’t patronize me, Lyra,” he said roughly. “I’m allowed to feel things too.”

Lyra nodded once. She didn’t argue with him, didn’t point out all the occasions when it seemed like he hadn’t...

And then, she kissed him long and slow. Damon wasn’t usually used to letting someone dominate the kiss, but this was Lyra and he needed this, needed to feel her want and desire for him. Needed to know that this wasn’t just something he felt, but was reciprocated.

“I missed you so much,” she whispered against his lips. “I don’t think you realize –”

“I do,” he told her, hoping she could hear it in his voice. “I do. Lyra...whatever you heard about me...it is true. But they were never you. I tried... Fuck, I tried so hard to get you out of my system, but...I couldn’t. I can’t. I don’t think I ever will.”

Lyra whimpered and kissed him again, this time with more passion. Her hands were on his face, her body turned at an awkward angle. His hands reached for her, flattening against her ribcage he could feel, even through the thin material of her dress.

“Let me take you home, Lyra,” he whispered.

Lyra pulled back, eyes wide. He instantly saw her fear, the vulnerability, swimming in her irises, and he knew why.

“Not your place,” he said. “Back home with me. Where you belong.”

Lyra softened, biting her bottom lip shyly. Damon pressed his thumb against it again. When he was sure she wouldn’t take her lip between her teeth, he turned the car back on and took off.



ONCE HE REACHED HIS PLACE, Damon pulled his car into the garage and turned off the engine. Lyra was stiff beside him, glancing around, as though she hadn't been here earlier in the week, lecturing him about what happened between him and Cole.

“Are you nervous?” he asked, amused at the prospect.

“I'm not quite sure what to expect,” she admitted. “I know why I'm here. I know what I want, Damon. But...but what does this mean?”

He looked at her like he couldn't believe she hadn't figured it out yet. “Everything,” he said, as though it was obvious.

Lyra looked like she was going to bite her lip before she stopped. She opened her mouth, but then closed it. She kept fiddling with her fucking fingers because she was nervous, and he couldn't help himself as he reached out and clasped her hands with one of his own.

“Nothing has changed,” he told her firmly. “Nothing. I need you to know that.”

“Damon, it's been seven years,” she said, but he wouldn't even let her finish the sentence.

“I don't give a shit,” he said. “I don't give a shit about the women I fucked between you and now. I don't give a shit of what people think of me or the reputation I've built for myself. All that matters is you, what *you* think of me.”

“I was with Cole,” she said. “My father hates you.”

“And that’s reason enough to give this up?” he demanded in a rough voice, gesturing between the two of them. “The last few weeks have been fucking agony because I wasn’t sure where things stood between us, but now, I know. I fucking know. And I know you want me. I know you still care about me. I know it. And I don’t need you to tell me or show me. I thought I did, but the truth is, I want you. I want this. And I know you want it too.”

He stopped himself. He said too much, and he knew it, but he didn’t give a shit. He wanted her to know. Now, she could make an informed decision. Now, the ball was in her court.

And he hated this lack of control, but he had to trust her if they were going to be together. And this...this was a way to show he trusted her.

“So, what happens if you’re traded again?” she demanded to know. “What then? Do you just run off without saying goodbye? Do you leave and never even try to make contact with me again? Do you really think I’m capable of letting myself love you, Damon, knowing that when things get real, when things don’t go your way and you’re not sure what to do about it, you run?”

“You come with me,” he said. “Where I go, you go. That’s it. That’s the deal.” A beat. “I’m not concerned about where we’ll end up. I want to end up with you. You have to figure out if you want the same thing.”

“I thought you just insisted I did,” she remarked flatly, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You want me,” he said, “but that’s different. What you need to figure out is whether you want to give up everything to be with me. Think about it, Lyra. What’ll your dad say when he finds out? I can’t hide away with you anymore. I can’t

pretend you're just another fuck because you aren't. If we're going to do this, we're going to do this, and that's it. You have to figure out if I'm worth giving up your reputation for."

There it was.

His biggest fear.

That she would realize he was unworthy.

And right now, he had exposed himself to her. Now, all that was left was for her to respond...if she responded at all.

Lyra

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LYRA'S BREATH vanished in her throat. Even if she wanted to, even if she tried, she couldn't breathe. This was everything she wanted to hear, and yet, she couldn't help but hesitate.

No. Hesitate wasn't the right word. She wasn't hesitating. It was something else. Something...serious. She would have said it was doing the adult thing. Following her heart, running away with someone she thought was the love of her life was what made up fairytales and children's stories. It lived in the heart of romance novels and successful k-dramas. It wasn't real life.

At least, it wasn't supposed to be. Her father liked to remind her of that as many chances as he got.

And yet, she still refused to say no just because she was an adult. She refused to give up what she wanted now that she had him, now that she knew herself well enough to know she wanted him.

It was just...she wanted to be sure.

Not because she didn't think Damon was worthy, but because she owed it to him to truly consider his offer. She wasn't going to treat this like some grand adventure because it wasn't. It was her life and his, and she cared about him much

more than she ever thought she could, which meant he deserved to be taken seriously. Everything he said deserved that consideration. He shouldn't be brushed off simply because of his reputation, which might not have been fairly assigned in the first place.

If she had been eighteen, she wouldn't have cared. She would have jumped at the chance to go anywhere with Damon, no matter the risk, no matter the cost. She wouldn't have considered how it might have hurt her family or how it would reflect on her father specifically. In fact, she wouldn't have even thought about how it might have painted Damon himself.

But now, it was different.

It had to be. And while she thought her feelings for Damon were the same, she realized they weren't. Like her, they had grown. And now that she had perspective, she understood why he had to do what he had to do. He was still a coward, he still handled everything the wrong way, but she understood why he couldn't take her with him...as much as it pained and frustrated her to admit in the first place.

Lyra took a breath. She was in her mid-twenties, figuring out what she truly wanted from her life. And she knew she wanted some kind of stability, a home, a man she could see her future with. She wanted to be able to write the words on the page without being stuck and she wanted to thrive in the indie publishing world while continuing to do lots of charity work with her dad and the Gulls. And she wanted, more than ever, someone to support her endeavors, and she wanted to do the same in return for him as well. She wanted a true partnership with someone.



If she was being honest, she wanted a true partnership with Damon.

“Why don’t we finish the conversation inside?” he suggested tentatively. It was a strange tone to hear from him since he normally spoke with such confidence, with such arrogance.

Lyra looked at him for a long moment. She didn’t move just yet. It wasn’t as though she didn’t trust him or assume he was trying to get her upstairs for any reason in particular, but she didn’t want to lose the conversation, not when they were finally making progress. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she realized that this would be their first real conversation about something serious in a long time. Not because they never spoke about serious things back when they were together, but seven years changed a person, made them rethink and shift their priorities. This conversation wasn’t going to be like any conversation before because this one was going to discuss the future and what they wanted from that future.

Lyra held her breath. Part of her was scared. Even though she knew she had changed, she wasn’t sure if Damon had. And if he hadn’t, there was no point in having this conversation at all, only because he wasn’t thinking about the future, just the moment. Just right now. And part of her didn’t want to be confronted with the fact that they might be in two different places because...

Because that would mean she would have to let him go. And that wasn’t something she wanted to do.

But...she would. She would if she had to, and this time, it would stick. This time, she would truly move on.

She finally nodded once, deciding whatever else she had to say could be said on a couch rather than a garage, and she grabbed her purse and her phone – which died some time on the way here – before stepping out of the car.

It was crazy to think she had been at the Hilton less than an hour before, as Cole's date, preparing for the All-Star weekend. And now, she was here, in Damon's home, not to tell him off about Cole, but to talk about...everything.

Her heart skipped a beat at the thought. She didn't want to get too hopeful, but she also didn't want to think the worst. She wanted to shoot her shot, to get all of her cards on the table, to know she had done everything she could. And if it still didn't work, then fine. She had tried. Unlike the last time where she didn't even get that opportunity, she would demand it this time. Hopefully, the pieces would fall into place, but if they didn't...

They didn't.

And maybe that was enough to start writing again.

Maybe that was enough to inspire herself rather than wait for someone to do it for her.

The two made their way into the townhouse, Damon shutting it securely behind them. Part of Lyra wished he would push her against the wall, tear her purse from her hands and drop it carelessly on the floor, before smothering her mouth with his own, kissing her until she was breathless, damn the serious conversation to hell. Another part of her wanted to finish the conversation, to say everything she needed to say and to hear everything he wanted to tell her so there was no misinterpreting either one of them, and they could both figure out the next right thing for both of them.

Maybe there was a way to do both.

Maybe she was wistfully thinking.

As it was, they spilled into the living room. Damon reached for her. Instead of ripping away her purse, he tugged it off of her shoulder before dropping it on the carpet, every movement careful not to overstep, not to rattle her. He treated her like she was a rabbit, ready to bolt at any moment. Like she was fragile.

“Don’t.” The word came out of her mouth before she could stop it.

He froze. He hadn’t touched her, not yet, but he probably thought she was rejecting him.

Lyra forced herself to clear her throat, to tell him what she meant. “You’re treating me differently,” she pointed out.

“I’m being careful,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s not you. Don’t. Don’t treat me like I’m glass when you, more than anybody know I’m not.”

Damon swallowed. She watched as his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. There was no way he could be nervous, could he? He had done this before, certainly, with so many women before and after her. He was an NHL player, for goodness’ sake.

Lyra took a step towards him and then another. When she reached him, she stood on her toes.

“Lyra,” he whispered. She couldn’t tell if it was a warning to stay away, or something else entirely. But it almost felt as though he was giving her one last chance to back away, to leave, before...

But she didn’t want to leave.

Not now. Not ever.

“I know what I want, Damon,” she said in a low voice, leaning slightly towards him. “It’s like you said. And you know what I want too.”

He opened his mouth just as she touched her lips to his throat. The conversation could come later – and it would. She promised herself that much.

But she also wanted him, and she wasn’t going to deny herself any longer.

He released a breath and his hands planted firmly on her waist, pulling her even closer to him. She could feel his hardness against her, how much he wanted her, and she sighed, because it was both new and familiar and she didn’t want to take that for granted.

She wouldn’t.

Not anymore.

Damon pulled away slightly, but only so he could grab the side of her neck with his large palm, caressing her jaw with his thumb. He looked so deeply into her eyes, she worried he might fall into them, and while the thought of this closeness was an intimacy she didn’t realize she craved, she knew she wanted more and would do whatever she could to attain it.

She tilted her head up and kissed him again, the same way she kissed him in the car. It was more than just staking her claim on him; she wanted him to know that he was her choice, had always been her choice, and there was nothing that would change that.

His mouth opened for her on instinct, his grip on her throat tightening possessively, but not harshly enough where she worried he might hurt her.

Damon might say the wrong things and make the wrong choices, but she knew, without a doubt, that he would never hurt her.

His tongue plunged into her mouth, and even though she had initiated the kiss, it was long before he took control. His other hand wrapped around her waist, pressing her close, hand against the small of her back. She was trapped against him, and she didn't care. This was exactly where she wanted to be.

The second they had to break for air, Damon's lips dropped to Lyra's exposed throat, and he took full advantage of the angle of her head. Lips trailed down until they found her bare collarbone, thanks to the cut of her dress. Teeth emerged, biting her just enough to put pressure on her, and she gasped – not because of any pain but because of how good it felt.

“Damon,” she whispered, hands going to his forearms, nails sinking into his skin. “*Please.*”

“Tell me what you want,” he said in a raspy voice, lips vibrating against her flesh.

“You already know,” she replied.

He shook his head, his hands tracing her curves, thumbs flicking underneath her breasts before trails down the length of her torso. “You need to say it,” he said. “It's been years. You could have changed –”

“You know what I want, Damon,” she insisted as his lips found that sensitive area between her neck and her shoulder. He sucked just hard enough to leave a small mark on her skin, and he pulled back with a smug, satisfied smirk. “Nothing's changed.”

“Everything's changed,” he all but growled, reaching behind her to fiddle with the thin straps of her gown. “You

know this. This isn't us being young and stupid. This...this is more."

She sucked in a breath as he pulled the sleeves down her shoulders, gently exposing her body to him. She wore no bra with the dress because it had already been built into the material, so by the time he finished, she wore nothing but lacy black boy shorts. Her initial instinct was to cross her arms over her chest to cover herself up. When she got ready for the masquerade, she knew there was a chance Damon would see her in the dress. However, she hadn't expected him to see her out of it, and she wasn't sure how she felt about being this exposed to him.

"Don't," he snapped, the second he saw her arms twitch up. "Don't hide yourself from me. I've been waiting to see you again like this for years."

Lyra shifted her weight. His words caused power to surge up her spine, and at the same time, she felt exposed. Almost shy.

There was a hunger in Damon's eyes, one that feasted on Lyra with no shame. Her cheeks pinched, and she knew she was blushing but she couldn't bring herself to care. There was a side of Damon that was practically feral, that looked at her like a piece of meat and he was a starving man. Her own pelvis twitched in response because it promised pleasure only he could give her, pleasure she had missed these past seven years, pleasure she couldn't duplicate with anyone else, no matter how hard she tried.

"Mine." He moved his lips up, just below her ear as one hand grabbed the back of her head and tilted it roughly to the side to give him better access. "I don't care who came before

this moment, but from now on, you're mine. I won't share you with anyone else."

His other hand cupped her breast, giving it a territorial squeeze.

Lyra gasped, arching her body into him and tilted her head back, exposing herself even more to his insatiable appetite.

"You're perfect, my darling girl, so fucking perfect." He bowed his head, almost in reverence to her, before claiming a nipple between his lips.

She groaned and pushed even more against him, needing more from him. He always knew how to touch her, how to coax responses from her body in a way no one had before. Her hands immediately found his hair and she ran her fingers through them, tugging gently in the strands. When his teeth grazed her marbled nipple, she tugged at him.

"Damon," she managed to say, his name a desperate whisper in the otherwise silent room.

"I want you to tell me," he said, his tone lazy. She didn't have to look at him to know he was amused by her wanton display of desperation, of need, for him. She knew he was taking advantage of it.

But she didn't care.

Not if it brought her the pleasure she so desperately wanted from him.

His lips moved across her chest until he took her other peaked nipple in his mouth, tongue swirling against the bud like a snake charmer. She hissed, tightening her grip on his shoulder.

"Fuck me, Damon," she said. "Make me yours again."

“You want me to fuck you, little girl?” he asked, his voice raw and jagged. At least she wasn’t the only one swept up in the moment. “Take you up the stairs and fuck you —“

She interrupted him by shaking her head. “I can’t wait that long,” she said. “Fuck me here.”

He pulled away so he could look at her, eyes dark and stormy instead of bright blue. He was searching for permission, for access to her, and she nodded once, hoping he would understand that she had it from her.

Without warning, he placed his hands on her hips and spun her around so she was facing the arm of the couch. One hand pressed against the lower half of her back so she was forced to bend over. She whimpered as his grip on her hip tightened.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he muttered behind her.

He pressed his clothed length against her, just to let her know he was here, that he wanted her.

“I’ve seen you every fucking way, but it’s like I forget,” he said, speaking low and fast, like he was talking to himself. “Like it’s the first time every fucking time.”

His hands released her so his fingers could slide between the flimsy material of her panties, and he slid them down her long legs without waiting. She sucked in a breath, writhing in anticipation.

“You’re so gloriously wet,” he murmured before pressing his lips to the back of one thigh.

Goosebumps naturally erupted on her skin, and they didn’t go away, even as he lifted up her foot in order to step out of the panties altogether before doing the same thing to the next one. “Is that for me?”



Lyra wanted to strangle him. Why was he doing this to her? Why prolong this when it had been years and they both wanted it.

“Damon,” she said, more rough than she intended. “Please. I...”

“Yes?”

“I want you to fuck me,” she said. “I don’t think I can wait anymore. Please.”

“Oh, I love how pretty you sound when you beg me,” he murmured, his tone almost moaning.

Sensations fluttered in her pelvis at the sound and she closed her eyes, wishing on every star that he would give her what she wanted, that he wouldn’t drag this out. There was a time and place for that, and she didn’t think right now was the time or the place.

“Such a good girl for me, aren’t you?” A kiss to a cheek of her ass. “As much as I want to worship you, to take my time and draw out your pleasure, I find you too irresistible for such niceties. I can’t wait either, Lyra. Fuck, I can’t wait. You deserve more than this, but for now, it’s all I can give.”

And then, he slammed himself into her.

Damon

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DAMON WASN'T wrong about her being wet. More wet than he had ever remembered her being. That whole ridiculous saying about seeing stars and feeling it through his entire body was apparently real. Ridiculously romantic, but also true.

Because, fuck, this felt like coming home. This felt like nothing and everything he remembered, like familiar fruit and an exotic find. Like coming home and starting an adventure.

It didn't matter, at the end of the day. He wanted to chase this feeling until he captured it, until he could say with absolute certainty that it was his and he would always have it for as long as he wanted. Which would be forever.

Also romantic, but also true.

Fuck, she was turning him into a desperate bitch and he couldn't even bring himself to care.

Not when she felt like this.

This was the only place he wanted to be. He thought it would be the ice. After everything he had been through at home, the ice was his safe haven, a place he could go to let loose, to forget.

But Lyra?

She was also a place he could go to if he wanted to forget the rest of the world. If he wanted the safety and comfort and love he still wasn't sure he deserved.

But he could go to her and trust that she would be there for him. Hopefully as wet as she was now.

He closed his eyes, hands on her hips, feeling her, *remembering*. But how could he remember this? She had been the best he had ever had, even after they separated. Which amazed him, considering she had been a virgin when the two first got together. Then again, he was her teacher. He got to mold her into the delight he had craved, teach her things he liked and what he didn't. She was his and his alone, a blank canvas to do with whatever he wanted. No one would ever compare to her. How could they? It was like she had been sent to him by God Himself to make up for his miserable past.

But now, he realized, this moment surpassed even their history together. He couldn't remember a time he felt spectacularly sheathed in her warmth, stretching her cunt to fit him like a custom-made pair of skates after being boiled and molded to his feet. She was made for him perfectly, and he had forgotten.

How could he have forgotten *this*?

He let out a low moan as he pulled out of her slowly, torturing himself as much as he tortured her in the most blissful of ways.

Because he liked the pain, the slow burn of remembering exactly what she felt like. Except it was all new. How it could be both familiar and new at the same, Damon didn't know, but that was the only way he knew how to describe it.

“Jesus Christ, Lyra,” he muttered, though he wasn’t addressing her directly.

Not really.

The words seemed to fly past his lips before he could stop them and they only added to this moment. Now, nothing barred him from saying exactly how he felt, exactly what he wanted to her. He didn’t have to be careful about scaring her away; she was already his, and that was how she would belong for the rest of their lives. It was like everything he had stopped himself from saying since he left, maybe even before then, began to release like a clogged faucet suddenly spewing out water. He couldn’t control the words as they left his mouth, and he didn’t want to. He wanted her to know the truth, to know everything he had bottled up since last seeing her.

Because there was no way in hell he intended to let her go.

Not after tonight.

He didn’t care about her father or Maela being right. He didn’t care about Cole or the effect this would have on the team. And maybe he should. Maybe he shouldn’t be so damn selfish, but when it came to Lyra, he didn’t know how else to be. She was his, plain and simple, and there was nothing more to say.

The only person who could change his plan about Lyra was Lyra. If she didn’t want to be with him...

No.

He refused to think that way, especially not right now.

Lyra’s whimper pierced through his thoughts, and his cock twitched in response to the sound. He tightened his grip on her, knowing he would leave bruises on those deliciously pale hips of hers, but he didn’t care. He wanted to mark her up, to

leave yet another reminder on her body that she was his, that she was claimed so anyone who might look upon her hips – and God help any man who tried – would know she belonged to him and no one else. They also served as a reminder to him in the same way — she belonged to him and no one else.

“More,” she begged him, arching her back even deeper. She loved slightly, spreading her thighs to give him more access to her dripping cunt, and the best part was, this was all for him. No one would ever see her like this except him. “Please. I need...I want to feel you, Damon. Please.”

“Oh, you’re so sweet when you beg,” he returned, but he didn’t pick up the pace. He wanted to draw this out. He wanted to frustrate her, agitate her, torture her, in all the ways he could, drawing out her pleasure so when she did convulse and twitch and spasm around his cock, it would feel that much better and the rush would be that much stronger.

Instead, he thrust hard into her opening, and she let out a startled cry, one mixed with pain coated in pleasure.

Yes. *Yes*. That sound. All of them. He loved to hear her noises. He wanted more of those noises.

“You like that, don’t you?” he continued, the words continuing to spill from him unhinged and debased and completely like him. Luckily, he knew she reveled in his filth. She’d never admit it because she was *such* a good girl — *his* good girl — but she was just as repeated as he was, just as dirty, just as filthy, but she would never admit it. And that dirty little secret was enough to make him hard. She didn’t even have to do anything; all that was necessary was simply thinking about it, about her, and he was hard. “This is what you want?” He thrust in her again, deeper still, like his cock was trying to scrape against her womb and reach places even

she couldn't reach. He wanted to be the only person who touched her there, where not even she had done it before. His eyes rolled to the back of his head, thinking about such uncharted territory, only enhancing his sensations. "Fuck, you're so tight. You're mine. Your cunt is mine. It was never meant for anyone else. It's mine and mine alone."

He began to increase his pace as his words came out in grunts. He didn't even know what he was saying anymore. It didn't matter. All that mattered was this moment, that he was exactly where he belonged, inside of her, claiming her. There was no barrier protecting her from him, protecting him from her, which showed an unspoken level of trust between them.

Or maybe he was being foolish.

Maybe they should have discussed the right things before this, before fucking her without a condom. Was she on birth control?

It didn't matter.

He had no desire to be a father, but the idea of her stomach swelling with his kid, passing down a legacy onto something he created, caused his cock to stiffen even more than he thought was possible. He groaned, whether at the sight his mind conjured for him or at the sensation she provided him, or both, it didn't matter.

It didn't fucking matter.

Something about owning her, possessing her, in that way, was enough for him to lose his senses even more. If he thought simply being immersed in her warmth, that only enhanced it.

It was like he was in high school all over again. He was going to come and they barely just started. Under normal circumstances, he might have been embarrassed. But he didn't

care. Not when it came to Lyra. Because with Lyra, he knew, he could have her whenever he wanted, however he wanted. This was just the beginning. He intended to keep her in bed tonight and fuck her again and again. It wasn't as though they had anywhere to be the next day. Sure, the fucking All-Star skills competition was tomorrow, and as a player, he might have been expected to make an appearance, but besides that, he could lose himself in her again and again.

“Fuck,” he said through a grasp, and forced himself to increase his pace even more. “Lyra, you better fucking come now because I can't wait for you. I want to feel your juices all over my cock. Show me you're mine. Say my name.”

Lyra glanced over her shoulder to look at him. There was a sheen of sweat on her brow, tantalizing droplets rolling down her cheek.

Fuck, he wanted to lick them off of her face.

He wanted to lick her everywhere.

“Please, Damon, I...I...”

He could feel her. She was close.

“Fuck, yes, there it is, my precious girl,” he murmured. He didn't stop for even a second, not quite knowing how to. Not quite wanting to at all. “Give it to me. Let me feel it. Please, Lyra. I need it. I need to feel you.”

Her cunt clenched down on him hard just before she started to spasm against him.

Which was perfect timing because he began to twitch and shake as his own climax took hold of his body, gripped him the way he gripped Lyra's hips, and refused to let him go. He spilled his seed so deeply inside of her, he didn't think it would come out of her for a few days.

Which was good.

Slowly, so fucking slowly, his movements began to decrease but his grip never slackened. His own energy was depleted, and he needed respite or else he was going to collapse.

Odd, he had just felt like a teenager, and now, he felt like an old man. What was she doing to him?

He kissed her shoulder, then her spine, refusing to move, to let her get up, to remove himself from her, just yet. He closed his eyes, pressing the side of his face against her back. How she wasn't sweating, he had no idea. It didn't matter. She was warm and her breaths were shaky, and honestly, he could fall asleep in this awkward position and it would probably be the deepest sleep he had ever had.

He didn't care anymore. He just knew he would never let her go.

Not after today.

Not now that he had her back.

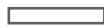
“Damon,” she whispered.

How he loved hearing his name fall from her lips.

“Hmm?” He didn't even think he was that conscious right now, didn't think his response was discernible. His breath had already slowed. He was on the precipice of sleep.

“Take me to bed,” she said. “I want to sleep now.”

And so, he did.





DAMON WOKE up three more times that night and fucked her every which way. After a few hours of deep sleep, he was ready for another round. Apparently, he was a teenager again, consuming her, being insatiable for her. He couldn't get enough, just like before.

And she opened for him every time. Even when she was deep in sleep, he would coax her out of it and she would welcome him, taking his cock, needing it, and making those fucking sounds that drove him wild with lust. She was just as wild for him as he was for her, which still baffled his mind but also reminded him just how lustful she was.

He must have had her in every way — him on top, her on top, from behind again, side by side, against the wall, even in the shower when it was morning and they both thought it was best if they washed the heady stench of sex off of them...even if Damon would have preferred to bask in her glorious scent all day.

When they finally emerged from the steamy shower, they dried off and he gave her some clothes she could wear for the time being. As much as he loved her in that dress — and especially nothing at all — he knew she preferred something loose and comfortable, especially on days she was being particularly lazy on.

“You work today?” he asked, watching as she scrambled eggs from behind the stove.

There was something frighteningly domestic about the sight of her, standing there in one of his shirts, hair still damp from the shower, cooking for him. His heart clenched, and he blinked in realization: he could get used to this.

Not only that, he wanted this. He wanted that domesticity he thought he'd rather run from. Commitment, children, a life

with someone he...loved.

He blinked, shocked by this revelation.

He loved her — in a possessive, obsessive, and altruistic way. He didn't understand how they didn't contradict each other, these feelings deep inside of him, but he loved her, and he wanted her, and he hoped, more than anything, she wanted the same thing.

She glanced over her shoulder, catching his eye. Her lips turned up, smiling shyly.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said nonchalantly. “Just...enjoying the view.”

She rolled her eyes as she dropped the eggs onto a plate. “I can't believe you're still saying that.”

“Only to you.”

This seemed to please her as a nice flush spread across her cheeks. She turned off the stove, just as the toaster popped. Grabbing the butter, she quickly spread it over the toast, dropping the food onto the plate. From there, she grabbed the salt and pepper, sprinkling it over the eggs before setting it down. Once she had a fork, she took the plate and set it between the two of them on the marble bar.

“If your tastes haven't changed, this is scrambled eggs and toast, just the way you like it,” she announced proudly. “One of the few meals I can make with the utmost confidence.”

Damon took his fork and stabbed at some of the eggs. Just before he could put the bite into his mouth, someone pounded on the front door. He furrowed his brow with suspicion. Who the fuck could that be? Only two people would come here, he

realized. Maela, if she needed to change her clothes or if she found somewhere else to be. If that was the case, her timing was shit, and while he thought Lyra would be understanding, he didn't want this to dampen the night they had together. The only other person who it could be was Cole, who had heard Lyra had gone home with Damon and he was here for round two of their confrontation from the locker room.

Damon stood up, chair scraping against his floor. He hoped it was Cole. God, he needed an excuse anyway.

Except, when he opened his front door, it wasn't either Maela or Cole.

It was Sanders, Lyra's father.

Damon's eyes narrowed and he refused to invite him in. Petty, certainly, but he didn't need the drama.

"Is my daughter here?" Sanders asked in an insistent voice. "I've been trying to reach her all day but she hasn't been answering her phone."

Damon considered telling Sanders to fuck off. A darkly selfish part of him wanted nothing to do with Sanders, wanted to keep Lyra for himself so no one could turn her against him. But he knew that was impossible. As much as Lyra loved Damon, he also knew she loved her father, and he would never put her in a position to choose. Partly because he wasn't sure who she'd choose, and partly because he didn't want her to have to endure that.

"She's inside," he said.

Sanders nodded once, twice, before rubbing his hand over his jaw and then punching Damon in the face.

Lyra

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THE RAIN STARTED SHORTLY after Damon went to check to see who was at the door. This particular weather wasn't terribly out of place on a late January morning, but Lyra always thought rain in Southern California was rare regardless of the season. Everyone treated it with surprise, even if it was accurately predicted on the news. Her lips curved up at the thought, bringing the frying pan to the sink and setting it carefully inside before turning on the faucet water. It was the perfect way to start this whole thing with Damon — again.

Fresh.

New.

A chance to start over. A chance to start for the first time.

It wouldn't be easy, but it would be worth it. That, she knew with every fiber of her being. And she was willing to put in the time and effort into this relationship with Damon, no matter what it cost her.

And then, she heard something. A scuffle at the front door. She froze, her hand midway in the bag of cheese, tilting her head to the side as if that would help her hear better.

*Pop.*

That was definitely a punch. She stopped dumping shredded cheddar over her scrambled eggs in order to see what was going on. There was no way it could be Cole. She and Cole settled their issues yesterday at the gala. He hadn't come here because he changed his mind...had he?

No.

No, she knew Cole, and she believed him when he told her that he wouldn't chase her. She let him go, and he had accepted it.

So, who could it be?

The second she saw Damon stagger back, holding his face, and her father, waving his hand like it was wet and he was trying to dry it, she immediately knew what happened and positioned herself in front of the two of them. She didn't stop herself from rolling her eyes either. Part of her wasn't surprised to see her father here, though she wished he was anywhere but here, ruining their morning and coming to conclusions she'd rather not have her father, of all people, come to.

Clearly, her father — her father — struck first, and as much as she knew Damon loved her, she could understand why he might be inclined to retaliate. A flash of Cole's face tickled the back of her mind, and she knew she needed to figure something out before things escalated. Even if her father deserved it, and she was pretty sure he did, she didn't want Damon getting into another fight. He had just gotten to this team a couple of weeks ago, and if he had any hope of staying, he needed to be careful, especially if someone like her father provoked him on purpose.

And honestly, at this point, Lyra wouldn't be surprised if her father did it to purposefully try to remove Damon from the

team. Lyra had no idea if Damon was under some kind of probation after his last fight, but she did know how much he loved hockey, how much he loved playing. If her father provoked him enough, Damon would have no problem, fighting back, even if that meant, he forfeited his position on the team. Lyra couldn't have that happen.

“What’s going on?” she demanded, turning the question to her father. She already had somewhat of an idea, but she wanted to hear it from him.

“I’ve been trying to reach you —“

“And that’s Damon’s fault?” she asked. There was an insistence in her voice, one she refused to back down from. Which was odd, because she never confronted her father. She usually just went with what he said because, usually, he was right. Whether she wanted to admit it or not wasn't the point. Her father was usually right about most things.

But that changed.

“Lyra, now is not the time —“

“No.” She took a step forward. Her father raised his brows at her, somewhat shocked, and then narrowed his eyes. Under normal circumstances, she would have withered under his gaze. She would have buckled. But she didn't. Not this time. Because this time, she knew her father was wrong, and she wasn't going to pretend otherwise. She was a grown adult, and she was more than capable of making her own decisions, including decisions about her love life. While she could respect that her father had an opinion, that didn't mean she agreed with it or would listen to it. It was her life, after all. “You owe us an explanation. You can't just show up at Damon's house and then punch him in the face. Who do you think you are?”

“I can when it comes to you,” her father insisted. “You have a toxic history —”

“Toxic?” Damon bit out.

Lyra shook her head before her father even finished his sentence and held up her hand in Damon’s direction. She could handle this. At the very least, he needed to let her try. “No,” she said. “You couldn’t do it then when I was eighteen, and you can’t do it now. I’m an adult, Dad. You have to stop this. If it was Cole, you wouldn’t have an issue.”

“But this isn’t Cole,” he said, shifting his weight. Every few seconds, he glanced over her shoulder to glare at Damon, like he wanted to keep his eye on Damon. “You know how he is, Lyra. Don’t let your feelings — what you think are feelings — cloud your judgment —“

“No,” she repeated, this time more firmly. “You don’t get to tell me what my feelings are. And you don’t get to pretend you know Damon because you don’t.”

“But I do know Damon —“ her father tried to insist but she wasn’t going to hear any of it.

“No,” Lyra said, shaking her head for what felt like the fiftieth time. She was surprised she hadn’t pulled any muscles in her neck. “You don’t. Dad, you think you do but you don’t. I’m not a little kid anymore. I haven’t been a little kid for a long time. And that’s not something I have to deal with, it’s something *you* have to deal with.”

“If anyone knows him, I know him,” her father stated. “I was there when he was a kid, when we went out to celebrate, when he flirted with other women and bought them drinks. I was there in the locker room when he discussed how he fucked them, how he pleased them, how he had no intention of calling

them back. I heard these things come out of his mouth, Lyra. I'm not lying about that."

Under normal circumstances, Lyra would have hated hearing about this. She didn't want to know about Damon's past. In fact, she wanted to pretend that he didn't have one, that the only person he had ever been involved with was her and that was the end of it. But in order to accept Damon, she knew she needed to accept this about him as well. And once she made the decision to do so, she realized it was much easier to let his past go than it would have been to fester in it, let it ruin her day. Because the truth was, she had a past too, and she was sure Damon had more of an issue with hers than she did with his...and that was saying something.

"I never did those things when I was with Lyra," Damon said from behind her. There was a bite to his tone, but it wasn't overly desperate. He spoke a fact, not an opinion he needed everyone to believe.

"Oh, please." Her father made a face. "Don't bullshit me. You've been at it consistently since --"

"Has he?"

Her father cut himself off due to the interruption to give his daughter a long look.

"Think about it, Dad," she said. "We got together two weeks after my birthday, which would have been after Christmas. Are you telling me that he talked about sex or flirted with girls then?"

He opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

"I know he didn't," Lyra continued. "Because on those nights when you went out to celebrate, he came home with me."



It was the only time we knew you wouldn't be there and we wanted to take advantage of that.”

Her father pinched his nose, looking away from her. “I didn't...I don't want to know that,” he said, shifting with obvious discomfort.

Lyra thought for sure Damon would make some sort of joke, some rude comment that would only cause her father to get more irate, but surprisingly enough, he was quiet.

Thank God he was quiet. She could only defend Damon for so long.

“And I didn't want to tell you that either,” she said. “But I'm sick and tired of everyone thinking they know who Damon really is. That guy you see at the club or with a woman or whatever? That's the mask. And the fact that no one seems to get that just tells me that no one knows him at all.”

“And you do?” my father demanded. “He left you.”

“Yes,” she said. “He did. He was going to be selected by Seattle. There was nothing he could do about that. If anyone understands that, I thought it would be you.” She took a step forward and placed a tentative hand on her father's shoulder, forcing him to look up at her. “Let me ask you something, Dad. Would you have rather he asked if I would go with him? Because he didn't. He purposefully chose not to so I wouldn't be in a position where I was forced to choose between him... and you.”

Her father looked over his daughter to Damon. Lyra wished she could turn so she could study the exchange between both men, but as it was, she kept her focus in front of her.

“You were heartbroken –”

“I was,” she said. “Dad, I loved Damon. I thought he was the love of my life. Of course, I was going to be heartbroken. It’s just part of life. That’s not Damon’s fault. It’s just the circumstances we were given.”

“No, Lyra...” Damon stood next to her, taking his hand and placing it on her stomach to gently push her back. It was almost as if he was shielding her from something, though what that was, she couldn’t say. His eyes found her father’s. “I could have handled it better, Sanders. And I know she was off-limits, even when she became legal.” Sanders growled slightly, as though this wasn’t exactly what he wanted to hear. Lyra bit her bottom lip to keep herself from laughing out loud. “She’s your daughter. What you need to know is that I love her. I’ve always loved her. There’s no question what I feel for her. And I understand, based on my behavior, on what I’ve said, why you would feel I don’t deserve her. But I just want you to know that I’d do anything for her.”

“You came to the gala last night with a woman and left with my daughter,” her father pointed out, his tone flat. “How do you want me to believe you’re anything more than a womanizing piece of shit?”

“Maela is my friend,” Damon said. “She’s here because –”

“Because he called her here,” Lyra said, “in order to help him with me.”

Her father jerked his head back, looking to Damon for confirmation.

Because, of course, her father couldn’t believe that of Damon. Because he only saw Damon for that flimsy reputation.

“I’m telling you,” he said again. “I love her.”

“You can’t possibly expect me to accept this,” he said, gesturing between Lyra and Damon.

“I know,” Lyra said before Damon could say anything. “I’m not asking you to do that either. I’m not asking you for anything. I’m *telling* you how it’s going to be, Dad. From one adult to another, I’m telling you that this is my choice. Damon is my choice. And if that’s something you can’t accept for whatever reason, then that’s on you, and anything we lose because of it is on you.”

Her father opened her mouth, ready to argue, but shut it. He shook his head, helpless to the situation he found himself in.

“I don’t trust him with you,” he finally said.

“Then trust me,” she pushed. “Trust me as an adult capable of making a decision on her own.” She paused a moment and took a step forward before reaching for his hand. “Dad, trust yourself, that you raised a daughter who is strong and capable. I have enough self-respect to know what I will and will not tolerate. I’m not a child anymore. I know what I want, and I want Damon.”

“You want Damon.” He nodded in Damon’s direction but he never looked at Damon. His attention was solely reserved for Lyra and Lyra alone. “You choose him.”

Lyra released her hold of her father, took a step back, and nodded once.

“Yes,” she said. “My choice is Damon and that’s not going to change.”

“And what if he breaks your heart?” Before she could answer, he held up a hand. “Just indulge me for a moment. We

all want the happy ending, but that's not always guaranteed either. What if, Lyra?"

"Then *I'll* kick his ass," she said. "You have to remember Damon didn't want to leave, he was forced to. And he didn't want to put me in a position where I had to choose between you and him. He handled it terribly, for sure, but his intentions weren't to hurt me."

"How can you know that?" he asked.

"How can you?" she shot back. "Everyone looks at Damon and immediately writes him off. No one takes him seriously, and part of that is on him, sure. But another part of it is on us. Is on you guys. You only see what you want to see when it comes to him. You don't see that he actually cares about you."

"Honey..."

"No, Dad." Her voice was resolute. "You don't get to tell me how I feel. And you don't get to choose who I'm with. Now, you've said your piece. But me and Damon are eating breakfast, and I'm sure you have press to do for the All-Star Game. I'll see you later."

With that, she closed the door. She didn't want to give him a chance to respond. She was already too wound up as it was and didn't need to cause a scene on the porch of Damon's house.

Damon pinched her side, drawing her attention.

"Did you really mean all those things you said?" he asked. Lyra couldn't remember his voice ever being that serious except on extremely rare occasions.

She locked eyes with him. "Every word."

He stepped forward and kissed her hungrily. He tilted her head back, tongue plundering her mouth, as though he wanted to devour her. And honestly, she wanted him to.

She couldn't say how long the kiss lasted or when it turned into another round of physical intimacy – this time on the kitchen counter. All she knew was that she loved Damon, and she could always make more breakfast.

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## Acknowledgments

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The Anaheim Ducks because they're my team no matter what  
- especially the team from 2011. My inaugural season. ;)

My family

My friends

Jammie for your AMAZING betas!

Susanna Lynn, for your beautiful cover. It's amazing and  
stunning and perfect!

Theresa Schultz, my amazing and hilarious editor.

Thank you to my readers who have fallen in love with this  
series, with hockey, and with the amazing players. I write for  
YOU!

Frank, Kylee & Madisyn, Josh & Jacob, for your continued  
love, support, and understanding