



# Reputation

MASON FAMILY SERIES

*USA Today* Bestselling Author

**ADRIANA LOCKE**

# REPUTATION

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ADRIANA LOCKE

Reputation

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*This book is dedicated to everyone that's been touched by  
cancer. You are not alone.*

*In memory of my mother. I miss you.*

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# SYNOPSIS

## **Reputation**

### **Mason Family Series #2**

Coy Mason is a jerk.

If there is one truth that Bellamy Davenport knows, it's that. Well, that and the fact she didn't mean to hurt him. Physically. Coy can't be hurt emotionally because he doesn't have a heart.

Coy is not just the small-town, literal boy next door. He's a heartbreaking, womanizing, mischief-making (and delicious) man and was all of those things well before he became a hot-shot country music sensation.

He's a dream standing in her doorway with no shirt, messy hair, and a "Do you wanna?" grin. But he's also a nightmare for her heart, and she knows it.

Their enemies-to-lovers relationship always ends the same way—heavy on the enemies, light on the lovers.

So why is she still standing there?



ONE

## COY

“You’re not doing anything stupid, are you?”

“Not yet,” I say, slurping the milk off my spoon. “But I just got here. Give me time.”

My eldest brother, Holt, half-laughs, half-groans through the phone.

The groan is there because he knows me enough to be afraid I’m serious. The laugh is there because, as much as he hates it, he’s entertained by my antics.

Somewhat, anyway.

I scoop up another spoonful of fruity cereal and shove it into my mouth. Ice-cold milk dribbles down my chin, and I swipe it away with the back of my hand.

“At least you decided to stay with Mom and Dad,” Holt says. “Maybe that’ll keep you out of trouble.”

“Yeah, because that’s worked out so well in the past.”

“Good point.”

I lean against the counter. The edge of the marble is cold and bites into my hip. I wish for a split second that I had bothered to put a shirt on when I woke up twenty minutes ago.

“I almost rented a house on Tybee Island,” I say, “but I figured I might as well save the cash. Besides, Mom cleans my room and makes food just how I like it. I can’t go wrong here.”

“You realize you’re in your mid-twenties now and have money of your own, right?”

“Your point, old man?”

Holt chuckles. “I’m simply pointing out that you’re capable of procuring food and housing on your own.”

“I procured them on my own.” I scrape the little flakes of cereal off the side of the bowl. “I called Mom myself . . . which was an easy choice when I got hit with how much it was going to cost on Tybee. Do you know what places are going for down there? Hell, Holt. I might quit performing and buy rental homes.”

“Great idea. I’m sure Wade would help you.”

“Very funny,” I say, making a face.

Out of all my brothers, Wade is the last one I want to deal with. About anything. Not that any of them are particularly a barrel of fun—except my youngest brother, Boone—but Holt and our other brother, Oliver, and I get along just fine. Wade and I, though? We rarely see eye to eye on anything. If I’m music and mayhem, he’s silence and spreadsheets. I’m not even sure how we have the same genetics.

“Be nice, Coy,” Holt says.

“What? Do you think that Wade and I could do anything together? He has a resting dick face and a repulsion for strip clubs. Yeah. I think not.”

Holt struggles to hide his laughter. He succeeds. *Barely*.

“I’m just happy to hear you’re managing your money well,” Holt says. “Even if you can’t manage your women.”

“Hey now,” I say, dunking the spoon into the bowl again with a little more force than necessary. “Keep your jealousy in check. I can’t help it that I’m a rock star and make women lose their damn minds.”

“Rock star?” Holt’s laughter fills the line with no attempt at restraint. “That’s a stretch.”

I smile. “Okay. You’re right. I believe the last headline I saw called me a *country music sensation*. If it makes you feel better to call me that, I’m good with it.”

“Well, the last headline *I* saw said something about you fleeing Los Angeles with your tail between your legs.”

*Fucker.*

I fill my mouth with cereal before a bunch of verbal diarrhea comes spewing out.

*My tail between my legs.*

What-the fuck-ever.

My stomach churns the children’s cereal as Willa Welch and a particular day last week comes to mind.

The pretty blond actress is better at her job than anyone understands. Hell, I’m not even sure what’s real and what’s not when it comes to her.

The only thing I am sure of is, somehow, I was automatically the bad guy in the press.

Again.

I swallow hard before taking another bite.

My brain replays the incident. The way the boutique door sounded when it closed behind us. The sun’s bright rays as we strolled down the street. The way she pivoted out of nowhere and looked like she was going to cry.

My confusion. The bag—the one holding the overpriced shirt with the semi-witty saying on it that I’d just bought Willa as a token of good faith—coming straight for my head. My shock. The shrill of her voice followed by the swarm of paparazzi who ate the dramatics up like starving hyenas.

I’ve only been caught off guard a few times in my life, but this was one of them. My first thought was that our shared agent, Meadow, had concocted this fight for Willa and me just like she created our fake relationship. It seemed crazy but so did the original premise.

*“You need to clean up this bad-boy image you have, Coy. Willa needs to dirty hers up some to get the roles she wants. It’s perfection,”* my agent said.

I was quite satisfied with my reputation but whatever. I just wanted the cash, and if being a nice guy would get me more opportunities, I was in. Besides, all I had to do was pretend with Willa.

All of it was bullshit.

One of us forgot that.

That one of us wasn’t me.

It all came to a screeching halt—along with a dozen cars—on Sunset Boulevard. I can’t remember what I said, but I was silenced by Willa throwing her coffee in my face as the grand finale. Thankfully, it was iced.

“Are you listening to me?” Holt asks.

“I did get the hell out of LA,” I say, annoyed. “But the only thing between my legs was my giant—”

“Okay, okay.” Holt’s sigh is tinged with amusement. “When are you planning on going back?”

“Not sure. I swore a blood oath to Meadow that I’d stay under the radar until she works her PR magic. I’m supposed to relax and write music—two of the three things I do best.”

My brother snorts. “I don’t even want to know the third thing.”

“Your call, but I could probably give you a few pointers.”

Holt seamlessly changes the subject to some business deal he’s working on, but I find it hard to follow along. My attention span is already short, thanks to the reminder of Willa.

The back of my neck tenses as I work through the asinine events leading up to me being in Savannah.

My jaw pulses as I try to calm down. It’s a load of crap that Meadow sent me to Georgia while Willa is allowed to stay in the comfort of her home and routine. She’s not missing

work. She's not putting a pause on her to-do list. And, even worse, she's allowed to cry to the press. About me. Over a fake relationship.

*None of that was real.*

"You can go with us if you want," Holt says.

"Where?"

"You weren't listening, were you?"

"Kind of," I admit. "Not really."

He goes on again, repeating the offer to go with him ... somewhere. But my attention is diverted.

The sound of footsteps rings through the kitchen. My mother breezes through the doorway in what looks like a lazy stroll, but it's not. I can see the wheels turning in her head as she glances my way and floats me an easy smile.

My mother makes *everything* look easy. She never used a cleaning service or bought dinner out very often for our family of seven. She managed the house, her five sons, a husband with a penchant for gin martinis and poker, and was still on the board of directors for various Savannah programs. Everyone thinks my brothers got their drive from our father, but it was really from Mom. She's the queen around here.

She points at the phone with a perfectly painted red fingernail. "Is that important?" she whispers.

"Nah. It's just Holt," I say around a mouthful of cereal.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," she admonishes before letting my error go. "I have an appointment in twenty minutes and will be home around six. Your father should be home slightly before me."

"Got it."

"Can you take the trash out for me, please?" she asks as casually as if she's asking me what I want for dinner—a question she did not ask.

My spoon pauses midway to my mouth. Milk drips off the sides and hits the counter.

“Did you just ask me to take out the trash?” I ask.

“Yes, Coy, I did.” She slides a water bottle into her oversized black leather bag. “Is that a problem?”

She glances at me over her shoulder with *that look* in her eye. It’s a quiet challenge, a silent invitation to press the issue.

“Mom,” I say, not really wanting to press the issue but unable to help myself. “Really?”

She stops at the door leading to the garage. “Really what?”

“I had the number-one song on the radio for eight weeks two months ago, and ...”

She opens the garage door as she simultaneously pins me to my seat with a firm gaze. After a long, awkward few seconds, her face breaks out into a victorious smile.

“Do it before I get home, please. Love you, Coy. Tell Holt I love him too.”

The door snaps closed behind her.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I mutter.

“Better get that trash taken out,” Holt says with a laugh. “I’ll let ya go. I have a meeting with Oliver in a few anyway.”

“Tell my favorite brother I said hi.”

“I’ll remember that the next time you call me needing a favor.”

“Well, you could be my favorite if you come over here and take out the trash for me,” I joke.

“Hard no. I pay someone to take mine out. Besides,” Holt says with what I’m sure is a shit-eating grin, “it might do you some good to remember where you came from.”

I look around the kitchen. The counters are a white granite and set off a dark-colored Viking range. Sub-Zero freezer drawers and a blast chiller are hidden in the cabinets. A crystal chandelier hangs arrogantly overhead.

“Yeah,” I say, my voice full of sarcasm. “Better remember my roots.”

“That’s not what I mean, asshole.”

I feign shock. “Asshole? That’s it. I’m going to have to bump another brother over you on the favorites list.”

“So what you’re saying is that Oliver and Boone are ahead of me, and Wade is last?”

“Well, yeah, basically.”

Holt laughs. “I gotta go. Call me later.”

“Bye.”

“See ya.”

I end the call and slide my phone across the counter. It narrowly misses the splashes of milk dotting the surface around my cereal bowl.

A loud, unnecessary growl rumbles through the air as I stretch my arms overhead. The clock says it’s late in the afternoon, but my brain lobbies to go back to bed. I try to bargain with myself that I got into town late and didn’t get to bed until well into the early morning hours. But truth be told, I wouldn’t have been to bed before three in the morning anyway.

Marching to the cabinet where I think the trash bags are, I open it and look around. I see a broom and a mop and a basket full of batteries. It raises a lot of questions that I force out of my mind.

I’m about to give up anyway when a slight rasp on the door leading to the side yard distracts me.

“Who is that?” I mumble as the faint knocking sounds again.

My family would use the garage door. If any salespeople manage to get by the neighborhood’s gated entry, they’d knock on the front door. The only people who would use the side door would be my dad if he’s coming in from grilling out—so twice a year at best, and this isn’t one of those two occasions.



I run my hands down my jeans—the same ones I slept in last night—and head to the door. There’s an outline of someone shorter than me by a good bit through the thin cream-colored curtain.

“Hang on,” I say, fiddling with the lock.

It takes a few seconds to figure out the fancy new combination lock that wasn’t here the last time I visited. Lucky for me, my parents’ choice of numbers was predictable.

I open the door.

“Hello—fuck!” I shout as something slams into the side of my face.

*Hard.*

It feels like I was smashed by a large and angry man or attacked by a swarm of bees. My eyes go blurry from the pain radiating through the side of my face.

“Oh, *crap*,” a familiar voice groans in front of me.

“Did I kill him?” another voice shrieks from farther away.

“No. Just ... sit down, Bree. Please. Right over there. Sit down and be still.”

I struggle through the wetness building in my eyes to see. I work my jaw back and forth to try to loosen the stiffness already settling in my face.

Finally, I get my bearings and open my eyes.

Through the blurry haze, I think I see heaven. And a little piece of hell.

TWO

# BELLAMY

*You've got to be kidding me.*

Despite the chaos swirling around me, everything slows down. *Way down.* It comes to a screeching halt on my neighbor's doorstep as I stand with an empty Tupperware container in my hand.

*Why didn't I just text his mother first to see if she was home? Better yet, why did I think making no-bake cookies with Bree was a good idea in the first place?*

*This is why I don't do domesticity.*

I know not to look up at him. I know better.

Yet I do because I must hate myself more than I hate him.

My gaze locks with the golden-eyed, shirtless asshole in front of me, and I try to steady myself with a deep breath.

“Did I break his face?” Bree shouts from behind me, panic tinging her sweet little voice. “Why didn't you catch the ball, Bellamy? You could've caught it!”

I should console her. My job is to give her my full, undivided attention. I should tell her that I got distracted by the sense something was amiss and turned at the exact wrong moment—the moment her throw whizzed right by me ... and right into Coy's face.

Hopefully, the nanny gods will understand my current predicament and give me a pass because my attention is most certainly divided.

I stand eye to eye with Coy Mason, the man I would give up my entire shoe collection to avoid—the man I would forgo Cheez-Its for the rest of eternity for as long as I didn't have to reencounter him. The man with a face I want to sit on and pummel at the same freaking time.

The man who's the bane of my existence.

My heart struggles to find an even rhythm as I let myself look at him for the first time in person for over a year. He's still irritatingly gorgeous with high cheekbones and full, pouty lips. But his skin is sun-kissed thanks to the California sun, and the little lines around his eyes somehow make him even more attractive.

Even though his face is swelling, and his jaw is tinted the color of watered-down grape juice, the bastard dares to smirk. Even though my disdain for this man is a ten-for-ten, my stomach flip flops. It didn't get the memo.

“Did I break him?” Bree shouts again.

“What do you say, *Bells?*” he asks cheekily. “Did she break me?”

His voice, warm and with arrogance-straddling confidence, shakes me out of the shock of seeing him. Reality blasts back in one swift, somewhat awkward moment.

“He was broken way before you hit him with the ball,” I tell Bree over my shoulder. “He's going to be fine.”

Coy chuckles as he leans against the doorframe. His hair is a wild disaster of a mess. There's more than a hint of stubble dotting his stupid jawline. His shoulders are strong and thick, reminiscent of his high school sports days, and for the briefest moment, I wonder if his neck still pops when he rolls his head around his shoulders.

But then I catch myself.

*What the hell do I care?*

He grins. “Did you come over here just to see me?”

“Hardly. I came for some sugar.”

As soon as I say it, I know it was a mistake. A mischievous shadow sneaks across Coy's face.

"I can *totally* help you there," he says, lowering his voice. "But preferably not in front of the kid."

*Bastard.*

My stomach releases a kaleidoscope of butterflies, and I feel unable to stay strong and unaffected by him. Luckily, the rest of me manages to recall survival instincts.

I narrow my eyes. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I can think of worse ways to spend the afternoon."

My bottom lip tugs between my teeth. Logic cuts through the flurry of Coy-induced hormones, hitting my blood like a shot of heroin, and I recalibrate.

"You know what? Me too," I say. "I can think of worse ways to spend the afternoon."

I fire a grin his way. It's a purposeful attempt to lure him in and play on his ego.

Not surprisingly, it works.

"Really?" he asks.

"No." I pivot toward Bree. "Tell your mom I was here, please."

"What? Where are you going?" Amusement plays in his tone. "Are you just going to leave now?"

I march down the walkway and toward the fence that separates my house from Coy's parents' house. Bree stands up from her perch on a planter as I approach. I ignore the commotion rioting inside me and reach for Bree's hand.

"Bells," Coy calls after me.

"Let's go," I tell Bree, grabbing her little palm.

"But the man is talking to you." She stumbles alongside me. "Shouldn't we say goodbye?"

"We don't talk to strangers. Remember?" I say.

“But ...” She looks over her shoulder as I nearly drag her toward the gate. “I’m sorry, Mister!”

My brain screams at me to get back on my side of the fence. *And to forget Coy’s ripped jeans and washboard abs.*

My body pleads for me to just hear him out. *And to forget the things he can do if given time, a tie, and a bottle of honey.*

My heart, however, wants me to find a way to erase this entire morning. *And to lock the gate when I get to the other side.*

“That’s a good arm you have there,” Coy says, cutting through the racket in my head. He’s much closer than I anticipate, and I wonder if it would look ridiculous if I picked Bree up and ran.

I don’t get to find out because Bree stops dead in her tracks. I nearly yank her arm out of the socket.

“*Bree,*” I insist, my words nearly a plea. “Let’s go, kiddo.”

“Thanks,” she tells Coy, ignoring me. She takes her ball from him. “I’m trying to decide whether to go into the major leagues or be a pianist. It’s a tough choice.”

I close my eyes and tilt my face to the sky. “I’ll help you decide your nine-year-old life’s choices at my house. *Now let’s go.*”

My teeth grit together. It’s as if I clench hard enough, it’ll keep Coy from coming closer.

*It doesn’t.*

I sense his proximity well before I see him. His cologne—a scent that reminds me of both cedar and pineapple—invades the air. The cells in my body lean toward him in the same ridiculous way they always do when he’s around.

“Did you know that I play the piano?” Coy asks from just behind me. “And I hold the record at St. James High School for the most strikeouts in a season?”

“What are you doing? Trying to charm children now?” I ask without looking at him.

“Why not? It’s more of a challenge than charming you.”

I flip my eyes open and turn around. Coy’s gaze snatches mine up before I even face him all the way.

It’s a tactic of his that I’m well acquainted with. He knows his strengths, and he plays them well.

His eyes fix on me. It’s a heady feeling whether you like him or not. Coy doesn’t just see you. *He sees you.* He makes you feel like the only person in the entire universe ... when he wants to. Apparently, he wants to now.

His gaze issues a challenge—for what, I don’t know.

All I do know is that I’m not getting drawn into whatever it is.

“Oh, *please*,” I say, ignoring the way his abs flex in the sunlight. “There’s not one thing about you that I find charming.”

He rolls his tongue around his mouth, letting his lips smack together at the end. “I think you lie, Miss Davenport.”

Bree moves at my side, slapping my thigh with her softball mitt. The sound *pops* through the air and breaks the tension between us.

“Can you teach me to throw a curveball?” she asks Coy. “I’ve been watching videos on YouTube, but I can’t figure it out. And since the last one I tried ended up hitting you in the face, I think it’s safe to say I can’t do it.” She looks at me disapprovingly. “But I do think it was catchable, Bellamy.”

Coy lets his gaze linger on me for a long, irritating second before looking down at Bree. He crouches down to her level.

I blow out a quiet breath and consider that mini-interaction a victory.

“I’m not sure the best way to throw a softball,” he tells Bree.

“That’s fine. I don’t want to throw a softball. I want to throw *a baseball*,” Bree says with her hand on her hip. “My cousin, Michael, plays baseball, and I want to do that too. He

says girls can't do the same things as boys, and I think that's a bunch of junk."

Coy laughs. "Well, I think that's a bunch of junk too. Let me see your ball again."

*Stop being nice to her.*

"Bree," I say, trying to figure a way out of this. "We really should talk to your mom before you play with boys. You know she's not sold on you playing baseball."

Bree looks up at me, her eyes twinkling with excitement. "True. But he's not a boy. He's a man. I think Mom would be okay with it."

Coy looks up at me with a twinkle in his eyes too. "Yeah, Bells. *I'm a man.*"

"Maybe anatomically," I say, hoping that the only thing he sees in my eyes is a lack of entertainment with this whole thing. "Bree, since we don't have any sugar, and it's clear we aren't going to get any, what if we go home and get out the glitter?"

She gasps. "I thought glitter was evil?"

Coy stands, his grin getting wider.

"Well, it's the lesser of the two evils today. Lucky you," I tell Bree, my eyes still fixed on Coy. "Why don't you run back to my house and get it out, and I'll be right there?"

"Yay!" Bree squeals as she runs through the open gate toward my house.

"Keep it on the table," I shout after her, already regretting the idea.

But as my attention lands back on Coy, I realize I didn't have a choice.

Seeing him on television and in magazines at the grocery store is one thing because I can turn the channel or look away. I scroll by online articles about him like it's my damn job, and every time he's on the radio, I change the station.



But in person, it's different. And it's definitely not that easy.

If I hate one thing in this world besides Coy, it's feeling vulnerable. Standing in front of him makes my carefully constructed shields develop cracks the size of the Marianas trench.

"Glitter?" Coy laughs, either oblivious to my inner turmoil or unconcerned. "I've had a lot of bad things said about me, but never that I was worse than glitter."

"That's not the worst thing I've said about you."

With a harsh, matter-of-fact tone, my words are short and chopped and to the point. I'm not entertained.

It's also clear that he is.

He runs a hand through his bedhead and graces me with a simple grin that makes people feel as if they're getting a side of him no one else gets. It's a damn good thing I know that's a lie.

"How ya been, Bells? It's been a long time."

"By design."

He juts out his bottom lip. "That makes me sad."

"Coy, shut up."

He laughs as his hair flops to his forehead again. "I'm glad you still have your moxie. I was afraid you'd actually become the basic bitch you pretend to be."

The laughter stops, but his smile stays put.

I don't even know why I'm surprised at this point, but I am. Maybe I hoped if we ever did encounter each other again, it would be more civil. Friendly. Less ... *us*. Perhaps I hoped that I'd see Coy and feel more compelled to forgive him. Move on. Be less ... *hurt*.

Clearly, that's not the case, so there's no point in pretending to be nice.

"I hate you, Coy Mason."

His grin grows wider. “Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart.”

*I’m done.*

My blood pounds through my vessels as I turn toward the gate. I contemplate whether to take the high road or just stoop into the gutter *like him*.

I could share a lot of truths with that asshole if I wanted to.

Beginning with how my basic bitch switch gets flipped when he’s around as a form of self-defense. I could jump right in with how we’re only friends when it’s convenient for him.

Or I could go really low.

I could tell him that he *did* become everything I feared. That the boy who went to war with my dad when we were younger over the Winter Wonderland dance—getting himself grounded and unable to attend himself—had turned into a selfish, egotistical human being that doesn’t resemble the boy I used to know.

And love.

“Hey, Bells,” he calls after me.

I keep walking.

“Your ass looks great in those shorts.”

My first instinct is to tug them down. My second instinct is to flip him off.

I don’t do either and keep walking because if anything irritates Coy, it’s ignoring him.

He might be gorgeous. He may be so talented that every song he records hits the number-one spot. He may be the sweetest to his mother and a benefactor for all kinds of charities in greater Savannah—but he’s still the biggest jerk on the face of the planet.

He’s still the man who breaks promises, forgetting them in an instant. *Forgetting me in an instant.*

And I'm going to remember that this time.  
Even if it kills me.

THREE

## COY

“Missed you too, Bellamy.”

I touch my cheek, fighting a grin, as I take the steps two at a time toward my childhood bedroom. My skin is swollen and warm to the touch, but thankfully, the pain has settled down. That’s probably because I’m too distracted to focus on it much.

My lips twist in amusement as I replay my interaction with Bellamy Raquel Davenport.

*“That wasn’t the worst thing I ever said about you.”*

That’s the one thing that sticks out about our conversation. It’s more prominent than Bells’s shock at seeing me, the way she tried to hide a smile, and the way her voice slides over me like a well-worn hoodie.

I check out my cheek in the mirror over my dresser and replay that line in my head.

It’s a typical Bellamy thing to say to me, and one that’s probably true to some degree. Our friendship has always been one based on snark, walking a fine line between bickering and teasing. We’re two alpha personalities—oil and water in many ways. But, at the same time, we’ve always been drawn to each other. We’ve had a connection that’s hard to put my finger on since we were kids.

Bellamy has always been headstrong. Hell, the girl was suspended in seventh grade for refusing to wear a skirt while the boys got to wear pants. Her act of defiance resulted in a month-long grounding from her father ... and a change in St.

James's dress code. She cut her hair when she was fifteen because her dad forbade her to do it, and Bellamy tried to join the football team because someone assumed she'd be a cheerleader. She's a powerhouse in her own right.

And I fucking love it.

Still, her ferocity toward me seems to have leveled-up. Something about it doesn't quite sit right with me.

*Knock! Knock!*

The sound catches me off guard. I turn to see Boone, the youngest of us five Mason boys, standing in the doorway.

Boone scratches the top of his head and watches me with a quirked brow.

There's a curious glimmer in his eyes—eyes the exact color as mine. People thought we were twins growing up. Being eighteen months apart will do that to you. It didn't help, either, that we were always together. It was me, Boone, our cousin Larissa, and her best friend ... Bellamy.

Until it wasn't.

“Did you just get up?” he asks.

“Nah, I've been up a while. Holt's dumb ass woke me up about an hour ago.”

“Been up long enough to find trouble then, huh?” He grins as he walks inside my room, grabs my desk chair, and spins it around. He settles in like we're about to have a casual conversation. “Anything interesting happen today?”

He knows Bellamy was here. I can see it in his eyes.

“Nope,” I say, fighting a grin of my own. “Just had some cereal and then contemplated the conundrums of life.”

He snorts. “Thinking about Bellamy, I see.”

“Is it that obvious?”

He laughs. “Well, the purple welt on your face would give you away if I didn't already know. Bells texted me and

threatened to break my legs because I didn't warn her you were home."

"You didn't know."

"Tell her that."

"Ha. She'd probably break mine if I walk over there to tell her." I glance out the window toward the Davenport's house. "Why does that sound kind of hot?"

"Because you're all sorts of fucked up."

"Probably true." I shrug and pull my gaze back to my brother. "So, what are you doing today?"

"Oh, just avoiding Holt like my life depends on it." Boone shakes his head. "He wants to send me to Portland for some meeting this weekend, and I don't want to go. It has nothing to do with me."

"But you work for him, right?"

Boone looks disgusted. "Why do you have to put it like that?"

I laugh as I sit on the edge of the bed. "Hell, I love Portland. I'd go with you if I didn't have to keep my head down."

"How long do you have to lie low?"

"Until Meadow tells me I can come up for air." Frustration sweeps over me. "It's a bunch of bullshit. Why do I have to hide like I did something wrong when Willa broke our contract? She fucked this up, not me. Yet I'm being punished for it."

Stress pulls across the back of my neck, and I grab it with my hand.

*How did this go so wrong?*

I was supposed to be in Nashville this weekend. Larissa's boyfriend, Hollis, was coming up, and we were going to work on some new music for my new album. It was going to be his first time in a studio, and he was pumped. *I* was pumped. The creativity was flowing.

Now it's not. Because apparently continuing with your life—including being at home and writing new material—means I'm a soul-sucking ex-boyfriend from hell, and the tabloids are just waiting to expound upon that.

I sigh.

“Well, it *is* bullshit when you put it like that,” Boone admits. “You know that you're the one everyone is going to blame for Willa's breakdown. But, dude, why the hell did she have to meltdown on Sunset Boulevard? She could've chosen a more private spot.”

“Yeah, you think?”

It's the same question I've asked myself a hundred times.

A part of me feels like this thing with Willa is a setup—that this month's public demonstration of our “relationship” was in Los Angeles so Willa could make a show of having her so-called heart broken. Why else did she realize her feelings weren't reciprocated on one of the most visible spots in all of California—feelings that I'm pretty freaking sure don't exist in the first place?

I don't want to believe that. But I kind of do. It makes a whole lot of sense.

“That's the price you pay for fame, right?” Boone shrugs.

“I guess. I just don't need this bullshit right now. Meadow just worked out my contract with the label for my next two albums, and I need to be collaborating. *Creating*. I need to be in the damn zone, Boone. Not in my parents' house.”

He senses my foul mood and changes the subject.

“What are you going to do while you're waiting to get back to your life?” Boone asks. “Just hang out with Mom and Dad?”

“I don't know. Write music, if I can.” I stretch my arms overhead and yawn. “I need to see if Hollis is coming down here this weekend now that the Nashville trip is canceled.”

Boone nods. “Larissa is head over fucking heels for him.”



“She could’ve done worse.”

“That’s for damn sure. Division One football player who treats her like gold—”

“And who can write lyrics like people write grocery lists.” I shake my head. “Never thought I’d like one of Riss’s boyfriends but here we are.”

Boone’s phone chirps, and he pulls it out of his pocket. He laughs as his fingers fly across the screen.

“Speaking of the devil,” he says. “It’s Larissa. I don’t think Bellamy threatened to break her legs over you being home, but threats *were* made.”

I grin. “You can’t call Bellamy uncommitted.”

Boone laughs again, sliding his phone back in his pocket. “Bellamy is the most uncommitted woman I’ve ever met.”

My ears perk up.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Bellamy has commitment phobia. I told her that I was buying her a cat for her birthday so she can get started on her old cat lady routine because that girl’s going to be alone for the rest of her life—by choice.”

I try not to look interested because I’m not. Not for any reason other than I’m nosy.

Sure, I get tidbits of Bellamy’s life from Boone and Larissa here and there, but it’s nothing I poke around about much. I’m too busy for that shit. And the last text I got from her told me in no uncertain terms to mind my own business. But being home—and seeing her—makes me curious about what’s been going on with her. I want to catch up. And I *definitely* want to see her smile, even if it’s while she’s telling me to fuck off.

*Besides, what else do I have to do?*

“What does she do these days, anyway?” I ask as casually as I can.

“She’s a nanny, which I find hysterical because I don’t think she really even likes kids. She dates a lot, if you can call

it that. Hangs out with Riss. She quit her job and moved to her dad's guest house once he got sick. She doesn't want to get too far from him."

On reflex, my attention skips to the building behind the Davenport's home next door.

Mom told me that Joseph Davenport had colon cancer. I called Bells about it when I found out, but she didn't answer. I shot her a text instead, and she told me she was fine ... and that her new boyfriend didn't appreciate me texting her.

Which was a load of bullshit.

But I acquiesced because I didn't want to cause her more problems. I just checked in with Mom about him from time to time and snuck over to see him when I was home a couple of times. *What else could I do?*

"How's he doing?" I ask.

Boone shrugs. "It just got upgraded ... downgraded? I don't know the right term for something like this. Anyway, it's now a stage four-something. It's not good. But Bellamy manages it pretty well. You know her ..."

*You'd never know if she was handling it well or not. That's not how Bellamy works.*

"Well, if you're good, then I think I'm going to head to Gramps's and watch some golf," Boone says. "I know Holt won't look for me there."

"You're hiding out from our brother at our grandpa's? This is where you are in life?"

"Absolutely." He gets up and heads for the door. "Wanna come?"

I chuckle. "Nah. I'm gonna sit here and try to be productive." *Or go back to bed.*

Boone pauses at the door and tries to hide a smile. "Holt said to tell you not to forget to take the trash out."

"Tell him to fuck off."

He laughs. “I’m not telling him shit. I’m avoiding him, remember?”

“I might go by his office today and just bother him. Keep him from getting anything done.”

“If you get bored later, I’ll be home around five or so. I can help you write music.” He pats an uneven beat on his leg just to mess with me. “Did you get a rental car?”

I nod.

“Good.” He heads out the door. “I’ll catch ya around.”

“See ya, Boone.”

He waves over his shoulder before disappearing down the hallway.

I blow out a long, heavy breath as the silence of the house descends around me. It makes *not* being at home in Nashville all the more noticeable.

Without a doubt, I know that I’m going to go stir-crazy if I don’t find something to do.

*That or I’ll become so irritated by the fact that I’m in lockdown that I’ll go crazy.*

I tug my suitcase on the bed and open it with a flourish. My things were stuffed inside after a hasty pack-and-go last night. Grabbing a wrinkled T-shirt, I slip it on over my head.

My mind skips over the past few minutes—Willa, Meadow, Bellamy, her father.

*Why can’t anything ever just be okay?*

I touch my cheek again. It stings a little but doesn’t ache like I thought it would. But the momentary pause to see how I feel makes my skin all over seem too tight. My muscles are too rigid. My energy level too high.

Something has to give.

I put on some socks and sneakers before plopping an Illinois Legends hat on backward. Then I head down the stairs and out the front door.

The Savannah breeze is fresh and cool. I probably could've used a hoodie, but I don't have the gumption to go back inside and get one. Instead, I walk across the lawn and try to let the trees and their swaying mosses work their magic at calming me down. It was my secret weapon growing up. I even wrote my first song with that rhythm in mind. But today?

Today, it's futile.

My attention keeps dragging through the foliage to Bellamy's house.

*"But Bellamy manages it pretty well. You know her ..."*

The truth is that I don't know her. Not anymore. And as much as it bothers me that her father is sick and she may or may not be taking it well, it drives me nuts that I *don't know her*.

At one point in my life, she was one of my best friends. There were no secrets between Boone, Larissa, Bells, and me. And now, I don't know what she needs, only that it's probably nothing from me. It's easier to live with that when you live in another state and are so busy that you can't see straight. But seeing her in person? It hits different.

It makes a lot of things hit differently.

The roar of an engine distracts me, and I look at the street. A car rolls up the Davenport's driveway. I mosey my way over to the edge of the block wall—to the spot where rose bushes only separate our yards.

The car stops at the main garage. I try to look interested in the foliage in front of me and not like a creeper.

A woman gets out of her car. A few seconds later, the little girl—Bree—who was with Bellamy earlier runs around the corner.

Bree talks animatedly with her little hands flying through the air. She nearly bounces up and down. I catch a smile flickering against my lips as my gaze is yanked to the side.

Bellamy walks around the corner of the house with her arms wrapped across her middle.

My instincts light up as I take in her every move—the easy smile on her face, the softness of her shoulders. The way she ruffles the little girl’s hair as she talks to the woman. She seems to be happy and relaxed unlike earlier.

Before I can process that, the little girl whips around and *points at me*.

“There he is!” she shouts, her voice weaving amongst the tree branches.

I tuck my chin and start to turn back toward the house, but I’m not fast enough.

“Hey! Mister! How do you feel?” she shouts.

I can’t avoid the question because it’s obvious I heard her. People a block over probably heard her too.

I hold up a hand. “I’m good. Thanks. Have a good day.”

The little girl is having no part of that. She races across the driveway and crosses the Davenport’s lawn. The woman follows as quickly as she can in heels. Bellamy trails them with a look of fire in her eyes.

I head back to the roses and await the ambush.

“Did my daughter hit you today?” the woman asks. She stops in front of me with Bree at her side. “Yikes. She did, didn’t she?”

“It’s okay. Honestly.” I avoid Bellamy’s glare. “It’s not a big deal at all.”

“Mom, he’s fine,” Bree says. “I already apologized, and we’re friends now. Right?”

“Yup. We’re friends now.”

Bree looks up at her mom. “Did you know he played baseball *and* piano? He’s my hero.”

The woman narrows her eyes as she studies me. “You’re Coy Mason, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m Lauren Stahl. It’s nice to meet you.”

Bellamy pins me in place with a look that could kill. I'm sure it's a warning, but all it does is turn me on.

My initial hesitation about this impromptu meet-and-greet is replaced with satisfaction. I don't love that Bellamy is telling me to eat-shit-and-die, but it'll give me material for later.

"Lauren, Coy is fine," Bellamy says. "See? Bree was just overly concerned."

"I think it's sweet of Bree," I say back. "Considerate kids are a hallmark of good parenting."

"Like you know anything about parenting," Bellamy huffs.

"I know Bree is a sweet girl," I lobby back, just to see what she'll say.

Bellamy's not entertained. "Bree *is* a sweet girl. Thank you for noticing."

I grin. "I notice *everything*, Bells."

Her hands go to her hips as if she needs to display her disapproval physically.

"Mom, he was going to teach me to throw a curveball today, but Bellamy said we should ask you," Bree says, tugging on her mom's hand. "Could he teach me? Would you mind?"

"Oh, honey," Lauren says, her eyes glued to me with that hazy look that women get sometimes. "Coy doesn't have time to play with you."

"He's really busy," Bellamy adds from behind them. "We probably shouldn't even be talking to him right now."

I read the warning she's flashing me this time loud and clear. Unfortunately for her, there's no fun in that.

"You know," I say, twisting my lips. "I'm *not* busy. I have a little time on my hands these days."

"See? I told you!" Bree says, jumping up and down.

Bellamy shakes her head, and steam practically comes from her ears. It's adorable.

"Are you sure?" Lauren asks, obviously loving the idea of her child being tutored by me.

"Oh, yeah," I say, grinning at Bells. "If Bellamy wants to bring her over, I'd be happy to teach her how to throw a ball. Or to play the piano. You said you liked that, too, right, Bree?"

"Yes!" Bree squeals. "Mom, please. Please say he can help me. No offense, but you and Bellamy don't know anything about this kind of stuff, and I need a mentor."

*Well played, kid.*

"Everyone good has a mentor," Bree continues. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

I fold my arms across my chest and level my gaze at Bellamy.

I don't know why I'm doing this. The last thing I need in my life is to have a little kid running around and asking me a million questions. But having Bells come around while I'm in town? Worse things could happen.

*For me, anyway.*

Irritating her is fun. It's our natural balance. It's what we do.

We bicker and get under each other's skin ... and then a handful of times, we got under each other. And then we go on about our lives.

She presses her full lips together, and it triggers a ripple of goose bumps down my skin.

*Damn.*

"Coy, I'd pay you," Lauren says. "As you can see, my daughter is very driven and mature for her age. She would eat up this opportunity, and your generosity floors me."

*Me, too.*

“I couldn’t accept payment,” I say, my face burning from the force of Bellamy’s stare. “But I’d be more than happy to help. Maybe Bellamy could bring her by tomorrow morning. Around eleven?”

We all turn to look at Bellamy. Exasperation is etched all over her pretty face.

“This is not a good idea, Lauren,” she insists.

“And why not?” Lauren asks her. “He’s a musical genius. And I vaguely remember him in all the papers in high school.” She looks at me again. “I just aged myself, didn’t I?”

*This isn’t about you, Lauren.*

“You don’t look a day older than me,” I tell her, turning up the charm.

She smiles widely.

*Her husband better thank me tonight.*

“Can we talk about this in private?” Bellamy asks her. “I have reservations about this that I think are warranted.”

Lauren looks from Bellamy to me and then back at Bellamy again. “Well, sure, I suppose. But I don’t see the problem.”

*Me either.*

“And I know my husband is going to be ... *astounded* by Coy’s offer,” Lauren says. “I mean, he’s *Kelvin McCoy*. I just think this is an excellent opportunity, Bellamy.”

“It sounds like you guys need to work out the details,” I say, grinning. “But tomorrow at eleven works for me. Can’t wait to see you, Bree.”

“I can’t wait to see you, Coy.” Bree squeals. “I’ll bring my mitt. Oh, *and* my piano workbook. Just in case we have time for both.”

*Oh, joy.*

“That sounds great,” I say, hoping that it came out sounding better than it did in my head.



“It was nice to meet you, Coy. And in lieu of Bellamy telling me you sacrifice goats or something, Bree will see you tomorrow. Sound good?” Lauren asks.

“Sounds super.”

“Great. We’ll talk soon,” Lauren says as she heads back to her car with Bree at her side.

Bellamy waits a moment and lets them get some distance away before leaning toward me. “Can’t you take a hint?”

I grin. “Yup.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“Because you like it, and you know it.”

She narrows her eyes. “I want you to know that I hate you.”

I lean forward too. “I can tell.”

“Ugh,” she says and marches off.

“Hey, Bells!” I call out.

She looks over her shoulder.

“Wear shorts,” I tell her.

She hides her hand behind her back and flips me off. Then, for my benefit, I’m sure, she shakes her ass with more force than necessary as she strides across the yard.

Even though there is a parade of beautiful women in my life, being around Bells moves something different inside me. It must just be the familiarity, I guess. But still, it’s always there when we’re together.

And it’s something I can’t shake.

FOUR

## BELLAMY

“Lauren, wait up,” I say as I approach her car.

She makes sure Bree is buckled in the back seat and then closes the door. Her face is riddled with suspicion as she turns around and faces me.

“I’m sorry for all that,” I tell her.

“I’m not. Coy is wonderful.”

I bite back a snort and try to cover my frustration with a smile.

This is typical behavior. Women go crazy for Coy and lose their heads. I’ve seen it a thousand times over the years.

“Look,” I tell her as gently as I can. “I’ve known Coy my whole life. We were best friends growing up, so I know what I’m talking about.”

Lauren flashes me what I call her Parent Smile. I don’t get it often, but I know I need to back off when I do. It’s the I’m-the-parent-not-you-so-please-kindly-remember-that sort of thing.

And she’s right. She is Bree’s parent, and she ultimately knows what’s best for her child. I’m not saying I disagree with that. I couldn’t parent a porcupine. But this thing with Coy? I am an expert on it, and it’s my duty, my obligation, to press the issue.

“Bellamy, I adore you. You know that,” she says, placating me. “But I don’t understand. Why isn’t this the best opportunity for my child?”

I stumble for words.

All of the reasons I loathe Coy Mason form too long of a list to explain to Lauren in the five minutes she's going to give me to explain. Maybe less. They are also inherently personal. And while Lauren has breached the employer-employee line with me many times—specifically the time she told me she got a butt plug stuck, which I didn't know was possible—I'm not ready to hang my dirty laundry out for her to see.

Even if it is cleaner than her sheets.

Besides, I see the look in her eye. She's downright charmed by Coy. Anything I say will come across as bitter or childish, and it's neither of those things.

Well, it's not childish. Yet it very well might be bitter.

"He's just arrogant. And his reputation is horrendous," I say, mentally patting myself on the back for going the high route. "Exposing your sweet Bree to that kind of behavior is not a good idea. Heck, Lauren, he answered the door today shirtless."

Her eyelashes flutter.

I roll my eyes and then mentally kick myself for it.

"I understand your position. I do. I've read the magazines," Lauren says, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "But my husband has the same kind of reputation in certain circles, and Bree lives with the man."

*Oh, that helps.*

Lauren opens the driver's side door. "I'll talk to Sean about this when I get home, but I think this is a dream come true. You know Bree has her piano recital coming up. Can you imagine what this would do for her confidence? And the fact that he's home while she's on this break from school? This could be ..." She looks at the sky and smiles like God himself beamed a present in her lap. "An answer to my prayers."

It takes everything I have not to laugh.

*Coy? An answer to prayers? More like a curse of a Category 5 hurricane that leaves devastation in his wake.*

She starts to climb inside the car.

“Lauren,” I say, my voice almost pleading. “I wish you’d hear what I’m saying.”

“Haven’t I?” She rests a hand over her steering wheel. The giant diamond she got as an anniversary gift last month glistens in the sunlight. “I’ve heard what you said, and I simply do not agree.”

My heart skips a beat as I realize that as soon as she gets in her car, this conversation will be over. I’m going to be face-to-face with Coy Mason every day if she has her way. And Coy will go along with it until he skips town and goes back to his highfalutin life with his fancy actress girlfriends, where he’s once again too busy to remember the people back home.

But the truth is that Coy won’t be home long—just long enough to get under my skin if I let him. If we’re around each other, he’ll tease me, torture me, and make me remember how he isn’t a dick *all the time*. That part of him exists. He’s well-loved around here for a reason.

If I have to see him, I’ll be forced to witness non-asshole Coy, too. I’ll watch him dote on his mother, laugh with his brothers, and I’ll be reminded of all the good times we shared. When we were the best of friends. When we shared secrets. When I looked at him and always believed I’d have him in my corner.

That was before I knew how the world worked. That was before I knew how the world would change him.

“I’ll tell you what. I’m going to go in late to work tomorrow,” Lauren says. “I won’t drop Bree off until around nine. Why don’t you think about it and get back to me? If this is something that you truly don’t think you can handle, or don’t want to handle, then I’ll see if I can find someone else to watch her while Coy is home and willing to help her.”

My mouth drops open. “You’d do that? You’d fire me?”

“It’s not firing you. It’s working around your life choices.” She slides into the driver’s seat. “I would bring Bree back once you’re ready to take back over.”

“I’m ready to take over or keep my job now.”

She smiles. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow at nine, and you can take Bree to your neighbor’s house. Unless Sean objects, of course, but I don’t see that happening.”

I take a step away from her car. Lauren closes the door, starts the engine, and backs away with a little wave.

Irritation surpasses the shock coursing through me, and I fire a glare at the Mason house. I pivot on my heel and march toward my house.

“What the heck do I do now?” I groan.

The hardwood creaks as I step inside and close the door behind me. It was a laundry room and a little kennel area where I used to keep my Pekinese dogs when I was a little girl sitting on my right. On the left is a storage closet and a room where we just shove stuff.

I pass through the oversized kitchen filled with my mom’s rooster collection—one of the many things my dad refused to change after Mom passed when I was ten—and into the living room.

A game show blares on the television as my dad naps in his brown leather recliner. I grab the remote and turn it off. He opens his eyes and looks at me, a smile spreading across his face as his eyes adjust to the light.

Seeing him like this makes me physically ill.

“There she is,” he says sleepily. “How are you, baby girl? I haven’t seen you today.”

“Hey, Daddy.” I pat him on the top of his hand before sitting on the loveseat next to his chair. “How are you feeling?”

His eyes flutter closed as he struggles to stay awake.

My question was rhetorical.

His skin has a yellow tint that the doctors tell me isn’t good but is expected. I’m supposed to keep an eye on it and not let it get too yellow without calling the doctor’s office, but

I don't even know what that means. I rely on the nurses who come every morning and some evenings to try to help me gauge it.

Dark brown spots dot the skin on his hands, and the veins look like they're sitting barely beneath the surface. His lips are thin and discolored, and when he smiles, it's like he can't quite find the energy to spread it across his cheeks.

My heart splits in half every single day because it never gets easier. I brace for the way my breath stills in my chest and for the pain that actually feels like my insides are being ripped in two.

It comes swiftly, almost buckling me with its intensity even though I experience the sensation every single day.

I absorb it, but then I press on because that's what I have to do.

"Did you eat today?" I ask as I slip off my shoes and tuck my feet underneath me.

He nods and licks his lips. "I had some tomato soup. The nurse made me some. She said we're about out of crackers, so can you get some more, please?"

"Absolutely," I say as happily as I can. "What else sounds good? What about some pears? We haven't had any fresh pears in a long time."

He opens his eyes again and peeks out at me. A ghost of a smile plays on his lips.

"Pears?" he asks.

"What? It's better than lemons."

He tries to laugh, but the movement makes him cough instead.

I grab a throw pillow next to me and pull it against my stomach. I hold my breath and refuse to blink, so I don't cry.

"What's the matter with you?" he asks once he gets himself under control.

"What do you mean? There's nothing wrong with me."

“Don’t lie to me, Bellamy. I might be old and sick, but I’m not blind. Yet.”

I narrow my gaze. It makes Dad smile, which makes me smile.

I consider lying to him anyway, even though he knows he’s right. He doesn’t need my bullshit non-problems when he’s lying there trying to fight cancer. On the other hand, he can read me like a book. If I don’t tell him what’s wrong—or give him some semblance of an answer that he’ll believe enough to let it go—he’ll sit here and fret. And that won’t do either of us any good.

“Coy is home.” I say it as though it’s not something wrong with me but more like it’s a fact. Like the sun is shining or soft-baked chocolate chip cookies are superior to any other cookie in the world.

Dad’s body shakes as he chuckles.

“What are you laughing about?” I ask.

“How’s that boy doing?”

“Oh, he’s as frustrating as ever.”

Dad grins. “I suspect that he’ll always be frustrating. That little shit has caused me more gray hairs than anyone but you.”

“First of all,” I say, smacking him lightly on the arm, “I haven’t caused you that much worry in your life, and you know it.”

He sighs as dramatically as he can manage. “You worry me every morning when I hear your little feet hit the floor. You’ve caused me more worry than ten daughters ever could’ve.”

I gasp. “I think you’re being a little dramatic, Daddy.”

“Oh, I think not.” He closes his eyes and rests for a moment. “Did you tell Coy to come see me?”

I bite back my natural reaction and remind myself that Dad doesn’t know. He thinks my snarkiness when it comes to Coy is just me being me. He doesn’t realize I mean it this time.



“Nope,” I say as casually as I can manage.

“I wish you would’ve.”

“And I wish you would’ve been on my side in my war with the neighbor.” I grin as I shift my weight on the loveseat. “I know you like Coy, but I’m your daughter. Like me more,” I tease.

He rolls his head to the side and looks at me. “Clearly, I’m on your side if there are sides.”

“Not if you’re considering fraternizing with the enemy.”

He laughs. It’s warm and not quite full but full enough to ease a bit of the pain in my heart.

I know he loves Coy in his sweet but misguided way. Coy hung around like a little puppy after Mom died. He bothered my dad so incessantly that his father, Rodney, came over to ask Dad if he should make twelve-year-old Coy stay home.

They created some weird bond that year—some strange connection I never really understood. Dad has always had a soft spot for the boy next door.

But he wouldn’t. Not if he knew that I broke down the night we found out that Dad had cancer and that I was so distraught, so hopeless, that I texted Coy.

I’ve re-read that text so many times that I have it memorized.

*Dad has cancer. It’s bad. Really bad. And I don’t think I’m going to make it, Coy. I’m terrified. You told me on the Fourth of July that you would always be here for me. I need you. Please call me.*

Unfortunately for me, there was no return text or call to commit to memory. Coy responded a couple of weeks later like he forgot to answer and felt bad about it.

*No, thank you.*

“I hope I’m around when the two of you stop this bickering nonsense,” Dad says. “I can’t imagine the laughs the two of you will have together instead of at each other.”

I get to my feet. His words send a chill down my spine that I have a hard time shaking off.

“Will you tell him to come by and see your old man when you see him next?” he asks.

“I don’t plan on seeing him again. But if I run into him somewhere, I’ll be sure to ...” I look at him. “Nope. Not gonna lie to you. I won’t be asking him to come here. I don’t want him to poison our auras.”

Dad snorts. “Give that boy a break.”

“I will do no such thing. And you can forget the pears now,” I say, winking at him as I slip on my shoes and then head for the door.

His laughter follows me through the kitchen and down the hallway. I slide out the side door.

The Mason house, my favorite place in all of Savannah, towers over me from the other side of the fence. I study it as I walk down the sidewalk and toward the back of the property.

It’s unique for such a large house. Instead of feeling stately or putting off an untouchable vibe, it feels like home. It’s warm and welcoming. It’s been my respite, my safe place away from the storm of my life, more times than I can count.

When I couldn’t stand my house after Mom died, I went to the Mason’s. When I needed advice as a teenager, I went to Siggy. Even now, when I need anything, I go there, and Siggy is more than wonderful to me. She makes me feel at home.

But when Coy is home, I’m reminded that I don’t really belong there. They’re not my family.

I enter the guesthouse that I moved into a few years ago after Dad’s diagnosis. I loved my little apartment downtown with a terrific view of my favorite shopping district. I left a job in a dentist’s office that wasn’t going anywhere long term, but I did love it. It was the perfect job for me to find my footing in life. But this is where I was needed, so this is where I am.

The John Deere green tile that Larissa and I hung last summer in the kitchen makes me smile. A couple of them are

barely hanging on. One is cracked. Overall, it wasn't too bad of a job for two novices who had a little too much wine and a lot too much self-confidence.

I make a quick cup of tea and then sit at the table. It's banged up and cracked and has definitely seen better days. But that's also why I love it. It's imperfectly perfect, and a total swap meet steal. I often wish it could tell stories of the meals that have taken place on it. God knows I tell it mine.

I drag my finger along an extended cut down the center of the table, spotting a few missed flecks of glitter from this afternoon, and think about the stories it would tell about me.

There would be tales of dancing, recounts of sexual encounters, and lots of spilled wine with Larissa. Conversations about children's book characters and pianos with Bree. Tons of nachos. Nights of whiskey and stupid comedy movies with Boone.

And there would be quiet tears when I missed my mother, wishing more than anything that I'd had her for longer than ten years. And more recently, louder sobs as I fear losing my father.

Of being totally alone.

Of being twenty-four years old and knowing that I have my whole life ahead of me without either of them.

Of having no one in the entire world that will be there for me unequivocally.

Those moments are the worst. The coldest. *When I feel so exposed.*

The table could recant the depths of my fears—fears I hide from everyone. It knows how scared I am of being alone, how I loathe feeling so ill-equipped to deal with my life. And how I hate being exposed to anything that might cause me more problems. Or pain.

One thing is also true: your life can't be destroyed if you don't allow people access.

Having my heart broken by Coy Mason made me realize that I went against my better judgment and asked him for help. He didn't deny me. He didn't even bother to respond when it mattered.

I will never allow someone that access to me again.

I shiver.

"That's enough feelings for one day," I say, standing. I find my phone next to the toaster.

ME: Hey, Riss. Wanna get dinner and, by dinner, I mean wine?

LARISSA: Meet you at Paddy's in an hour?

I GLANCE at the Mason's house through my kitchen window.

ME: Perfect. See you there.

FIVE

## COY

I sling the trash into the container and slam the lid shut.

My thumb swipes over my phone screen as I read the latest headlines.

*Heartbroken Willa Welch Gets Tea in Hollywood*

*Willa and Coy—The Real Truth He Doesn't Want You to Know*

*Insider Claims Willa Welch 'Didn't See BreakUp Coming'*

The more I read, the more I want to scream. It's all a bunch of horseshit. How anyone believes this crap is beyond me. But people do, and here I sit, unable to defend myself.

I'm about to click on a sports update to try to save my sanity when my text alert pings.

Meadow: Contract update. Call me when you can.

I groan into the early evening air. My irritation level is so high that I consider not calling her. But I know my curiosity about the contract will keep me up all night, so I break down and find her name.

"That was fast," she says after the first ring.

"You said to call when I can. It's not like I have a lot going on these days."

"Touché. How are things in Georgia?"

I glance at the trash can. “They’re great. What’s up?”

“We ran into a bit of a snag today with the contract negotiations with your label.”

*What?*

“Define *snag*, Meadow,” I say. “We’ve gone over this, and you know the main thing I won’t budge on is to have more leeway to create the kind of music I want and not just their definition of country.”

Frustrated, I rattle off a few more things we agreed to—like two more albums for a two-year term, their *option* to renew—but the longer I regurgitate what Meadow already knows, the angrier I get.

*Why isn’t this moving forward?*

Meadow sighs. “We agreed to all of that—in theory. Nothing was ever signed. We were supposed to do that next week, as you know, but—”

“Meadow, what the hell is going on?”

I switch the phone between my hands.

“The label wants assurances that you’ll be less of a liability and more cooperative going forward,” she says in her matter-of-fact tone.

I blink twice. “What the fuck? I have been *cooperative*. Less of a liability? What the—”

“It’s mostly a public relations issue, Coy. They want you to be the face of their new music division. The handsome boy from Georgia who delivers a punch of soul and sweetness.”

“And I have.” I blow out a hurried breath. “Half of my two albums for them include songs I don’t even like. Songs that aren’t me. Songs that they chose to make them fucking money.”

“It made you money, too.”

I close my eyes and try to stay composed. “I told you and them when we signed that I didn’t want to be straight country. But here we are. I’m total country. I’m cooperating. I’m toeing

the line, Meadow. And then you come at me with this? The woman who—let’s talk about this for a second,” I say, seeing red, “is letting Willa paint me as an asshole in the press while I sit here and stay quiet? Please, tell me you see the hypocrisy in this.”

My whole body shakes with suppressed anger. My mind races with a million different options.

I didn’t break the fucking *arrangement* with Willa. Yet now my contract is being affected. This is totally wrong.

“This is a fluid situation and business,” she says. “You know this. While I concur that Willa is getting a little out of hand—”

“A little? Really?”

She sighs. “I have a call with her tomorrow. Okay? And I do appreciate your willingness to do what I ask. But the label is seeing this right now as a nightmare for them. Your reputation isn’t great. How do they pit you as the guy who every girl wants to date when you’re out breaking hearts in the middle of the street?”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. That shit with Willa—you fabricated that. I didn’t break her heart.”

“But that’s what they see.”

“Because you made that happen. Not me.” I tug at my hair as I try to be professional. “Look, I just want to go back to my life, okay? I want this nightmare to be over—the one *you* got me in. So, get me out. Just ... please, fix it.”

Her no-nonsense attitude barrels through the line. “I’m working on it. While we’re on here, they’re not interested in the staff writing deal for Hollis Hudson. I pressed it, but they flat-out denied him.”

“Of course, they did.”

“Coy ...” Her cool demeanor cracks as she fights to stay collected with me. “I know you’re frustrated. I am too. I’ll talk to Willa again tomorrow and get her to get on board.”



“If she doesn’t, I’m speaking out. I’m not letting her just use me as some token in her bid to ... do whatever she’s trying to do. I’m going to stand up for myself if no one else will.”

“I’ll talk to her,” she reiterates to appease me. “I’m talking to the label again tomorrow as well, and I’d like to be able to tell them that you’re on board with their vision. That you understand the acceptance and delivery term and that you understand that they have no obligation to release music that deviates from your contract.”

I don’t answer her.

We both know I have to agree to this. I don’t have a choice if I want to sign with the label again. And I do. It gives me access to bigger shows, bigger venues, more publicity. They know I know that, so they have the reins.

But I have the reins with Meadow, and I’m starting to wonder if she’s the best person to negotiate on my behalf. She’s the first agent I ever had—and the best by all accounts—but this incident is making me wonder if that’s true.

Meadow changes tactics.

“Have you been writing?” she asks. “Feeling inspired?”

“Wrote a song tonight about taking out the trash.”

“I hope you’re being facetious.”

I roll my eyes even though she can’t see me.

“You have star power, Coy. You have the talent and energy this label wants. They’re willing to make a big investment in you. We just have to sell you.”

“If that doesn’t make you feel like a prostitute, nothing will.”

She groans. “You’re impossible.”

I pace a little circle next to the trash can and contemplate my choices. I really don’t have any. I have to get on board with whatever the label wants and solidify my place in the music world, or I balk at their demands and potentially find myself bagging groceries next week.

It's happened to many people before me—people far more talented.

“I have my team working on firing back on your behalf,” she says. “I’m not hanging you out to dry even though it might seem like it.”

“It does.”

“I know it can look that way, but it’s not true. We’ll have a statement out tomorrow, and we’ll try to set the record straight. In the meantime, please don’t add any fuel to the fire. No pictures of you skinny-dipping in hotels or leaving a bar with each arm around a different girl. Or my personal favorite—no using shoe polish on drive-through windows, okay?”

I grin. “I’m not apologizing for the skinny-dipping. And the girls at the bar were just friends.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But that restaurant deserved it. Not selling tacos to a ... maybe slightly inebriated patron after midnight. They were very clearly animals.”

“And all of that is not a look that’s becoming of a country music star. Thank you for making my point for me.”

I hate when she does that.

A part of me wonders if our dynamic would be different had I not signed with her when I was so young and stupid. What does a twenty-year-old know about doing business? Not much. I didn’t know much about shit back then. But I’m wiser now and not the fresh-faced, naïve kid who hired her years ago ... and I wonder now, too, if I’m not just an easy paycheck.

“You behave, and I’ll work my magic. Okay?” she asks.

“It’s about time you did something,” I half-joke.

“You’re hilarious. Now relax and write some music. Use this frustration to pen some lyrics.”

“Sure. Call me tomorrow after you talk to the label,” I tell her. “I want to know what they say.”

“Will do. Good night, Coy.”

“Night, Meadow.”

I end the call and then put my phone back in my pocket.

A breeze rattles the leaves on the tree in front of me. The sound reminds me of being a little boy. Boone, Larissa, Bellamy, and I would come out here and play tag or hide-and-seek until it got too dark to see. As teenagers, we would make a fire in the pit in the back and sit around drinking beer we would convince—*blackmail*—Oliver to buy for us. We always knew something about our second-oldest brother to hold over his head. He’d cooperate as long as we gave him our car keys and promised not to leave.

Life was good back then. Easy. Uncomplicated.

Maybe it’s that way for everyone. Life’s complications might just come with getting older and successful.

“Or, maybe not,” I say out loud.

I wonder what my life would be like here as an adult. *Would it still be as fun as I remember? Would it feel as simple as it did back then?*

I look at the Davenport house. The light in Bellamy’s old bedroom is off.

*Would we still be friends? Could I trust her?*

I can’t imagine Bellamy pulling a stunt like Willa. There’s no way I can see her making me wonder about her loyalty like I do with Meadow.

Granted, I’m not exactly friends with Willa and Meadow, but I’m not sure I’m really friends with Bells anymore either.

And that realization stings.

*“I want you to know that I hate you.”*

I glance at the gate that separates our side yard from theirs. I’m tempted to walk over to it.

“Do you hate me, Bells? Or are you just fucking with me like you usually do?” I ask quietly.

She has to be messing with me. There's no reason for her to loathe me.

If there's one thing I've never done in my historic career of messing things up, it's wronging Bellamy. I'd never do it. I'd never hurt her.

Not even when I break a guy's nose for fucking around on her because she "won't put out."

Bellamy still thinks that was some screwed-up form of jealousy. She'll never learn from me that I broke the guy's nose for hurting her and that I didn't tell her what he said to save her from hearing what he said.

He was twenty. Bellamy was seventeen.

He's lucky my friends pulled me off him before I swung a second time.

A light switches on in her dad's bedroom, and my stomach drops.

I hate that Joe is sick. He was always so full of life and a little piss and vinegar—just like his daughter. We always had some weird connection, especially when it came to Bellamy. He'd tell me to keep my eye on her, and I always did. I probably would have anyway, but it felt different knowing that her dad counted on me. It made me feel ... trusted. And I always appreciated that.

I went to see him the last time I was home, but he wasn't there. The woman who opened the door said he was undergoing a hospital procedure and would be gone for a few days. When I saw Bellamy the next day, she shot me a dirty look. She then refused to answer the doorbell that afternoon.

So I stayed away. I had other shit to worry about anyway.

*But maybe that was a mistake too.*

With a final glance at the gate, I tear myself away and go back inside. I'm just starting to replay my conversation with Meadow when my dad walks into the kitchen.

He's a big man—bigger than any of us boys. He's like my eldest brother, Holt, with his sandy-colored hair and way of

staying composed no matter what. No matter what we did growing up, Dad didn't lose his cool. Not even when Boone lit a kid's hair on fire at school his junior year.

Mom? Panic. Dad? Cool as a cucumber.

"Were you taking out the trash?" he asks with a laugh.

"Yeah, well, laugh away, but I'm not about to piss Mom off."

"Excellent plan," he says as he passes me. "Want to play poker with me tonight? We were supposed to play Tuesday, but one of the guys is getting audited."

I make a face. "None of that sounds fun."

"You're welcome to join us."

"Thanks. I think I'm gonna hang out at Boone's."

He nods. "I'll send your mother a text so she doesn't hurry home to an empty house. I bet she forgot my poker night got moved."

I sit at the table and watch him rummage through the pantry for a snack.

"What does Mom do while you play poker?" I ask.

"I don't know. She works or sometimes has dinner with her friends."

"Oh."

I pick up a piece of paper on the table and fold it in half. And then in half again.

"Why?" Dad asks, looking at me over her shoulder. "Do you think she just sits here alone? Because I can assure you that she doesn't. She has a life outside of me."

I believe that. She always told us that you were responsible for your happiness, so I imagine that Mom does ensure her life is full independently of my father.

Something about that makes me smile.

"Pick a woman like your mother, Coy Boy," Dad says. "If you ever pick one."

“Eh, I don’t think I’ll be settling down soon.” I look up to see my dad smiling. “Or ever.”

He laughs. “I always thought that too. But there will come a day when you just know. And then it’s over.”

I hum. And then it’s over. Well, shit. *That doesn’t sound like much fun at all.*

“You’ll see,” he says, patting me on the shoulder. “I’ll be back late. If you and Boone want to come play a few hands, we’ll be at Roger Petticoat’s.”

“Cool.”

“All right. See ya,” Dad says and walks out of the kitchen.

I look at the space my father just occupied and think about what he said.

*“Pick a woman like your mother, Coy Boy.”*

I fiddle with the folded-up paper.

If I ever would pick a woman to settle down with, I would prefer someone like my mom. Someone feisty and determined. Someone sweet and kind. A woman who doesn’t need you at their beck and call all the time. One you don’t have to make too many compromises in your life to make them happy. A woman who was all of those things and would have your back no matter what.

I blow out a heavy breath.

I’ve only ever met one woman who comes anything close to all of those things.

And she says she hates me.

I grin.

“I guess I’ll just be alone forever,” I say and get up from the table. “That doesn’t sound like a bad plan at all.”



# BELLAMY

Me: I can't sleep.

I stare at my phone to see if Larissa will answer. After ten minutes, I call it quits. But because I'm not a total quitter, I change recipients. And tactics.

The only light in my bedroom is the glow from my phone. I scroll through my Favorites List until I find Boone's name.

Me: Are you up?

It doesn't take long for him to text me back.

Boone: You better be dying or in another state of emergency to text me this early.

Me: That's mean.

Boone: So is waking me up at six in the morning for nothing.

Me: You don't know that it's for nothing.



Boone: So, are you having a real emergency and just not one of your famous existential crises?

Me: I wanted to wish you good morning. <happy face>

Boone: My point remains.

Me: Don't you have a job that you have to go to anyway? I'm probably doing you a favor by waking you up before your alarm. I mean, who wouldn't want me to wake them up instead of a buzzing sound.

Boone: Me.

Me: You don't mean that. This is the sleep talking.

Boone: I mean that. I really do. See? Now you've already projected your meanness on me. Good work. <eye roll emoji>

With a laugh, I sit up in bed. I get situated against the headboard as my fingers fly across the phone again.

Me: I went to bed hateful. It has a long-lasting effect.

Boone: Noted. Can I go back to sleep now that you've cast your lousy juju on me?

Me: You could. Or you could come over for breakfast. Or an even better idea—I'll meet you at Judy's for apple fritters.

Boone: I'm going back to bed. Find someone else to entertain you.

Me: Come on, Boonie.

Boone: Ask Riss.

I stick my bottom lip out.

Me: Riss won't answer.

Boone: I'm not going to again because I'm turning my phone off. Good luck with your breakfast situation.

Me: Don't! Don't leave me.

But he does. My last message shows delivered but not read.

“Ugh,” I say, dropping my phone on the blankets.

I waited until six in the morning to text my friends. I wanted to message them at three but held off out of respect for their normal-people sleeping habits.

I haven't slept well in years. For some reason, my brain just decides to turn on as soon as the sun goes down, and I replay everything I've ever said, everything I didn't say, and every missed opportunity and humiliating event.

Strangely, a large percentage of those things all involve Coy.

My shoulders sag against my pillows.

He's the singular thing in my life that I can't rectify. He just hangs out in my head like a perpetual mental hangnail—festering and unresolved.

“But there's nothing to resolve,” I admit, my voice piercing the darkness. “It is what it is.”

It's a natural progression of our friendship if I really think about it. And I've really thought about it.

Our connection was always different than mine and Boone's. Boone and I are like brother and sister. Never once have I wanted to kiss him or gotten jealous when he dated another girl. Heck, I've set him up on dates lots of times.

My first regular kiss was with Coy when I was twelve. It was behind his dad's shed after a game of flashlight tag. My first real kiss—tongue and all—was also with Coy when I was thirteen. We were on Tybee Island, and it was the first time I realized that I liked what he looked like with no shirt.

As we got older, things remained the same—just more.

Boone and I went to the movies. Coy and I would wind up at the creek behind our properties in the middle of the night to

talk. I'd divide my homework up with Boone and spend the time I saved trying to see if Coy was around.

I liked Boone, but I loved Coy. Always.

It hurts when I let myself realize that. It's uncomfortable and embarrassing because I let myself believe that Coy looked at me differently. I trusted him when he said there was something between us. I gave him my virginity in a tent in his backyard when I was seventeen and my heart on my sleeve on my twenty-first birthday three years ago.

I got nothing back either time but heartache. Watching a phone screen for a comforting text when you need it the most was more painful than I thought possible.

*I need to accept the situation for what it is. The blame going forward lies on me.*

I know that you can't believe everything you see in the tabloids, but sadly, there have been too many Coy photos with too many women not to see a distinct pattern. He's carefree, careless, and reckless—not someone I should ever pin any hopes on.

*Nor should anyone else.*

My conversation with Lauren is on my mind as I yank the blankets off my body. The air is cold, prickling at my skin, so I slip on a robe before heading to the kitchen.

“What am I going to do?” I ask the empty room.

I find a coffee pod and plop it in the Keurig. The delicious aroma of caffeine fills the air.

“Why do I let him have this kind of power over me?” I pour creamer into my cup. “Why do I let him bother me so much?”

I sip my drink as I sit at the table. The stillness of the kitchen helps to center me despite my lack of sleep.

My gaze scoots across the kitchen. It slips over the refrigerator filled with images of my friends and me. It skips the sink and the dishes that still need to be done from two days ago and over the countertop riddled with mail. It doesn't stop

until it lands on the built-in desk at the end and the calendar hanging on the wall behind it.

A circle encompasses the last day of the month. A more optimistic version of me drew a smiley face inside it—the day I was supposed to have completed my introduction to manifestation.

“That must’ve been a vodka version of me,” I say before sipping the coffee again.

Late one night a few months ago, Larissa and I watched a video on YouTube about manifesting happiness. You’re supposed to be able to bring good things into your life through attraction and positive thinking. There were steps to take and a prettily colored journal you could order from an Etsy shop—which I did, complete with the cute little stickers—to help you manifest the life you always wanted.

I don’t know if Larissa went all-in and ate the high vibrational foods and spent time in nature or what, but she manifested herself Hollis Hudson. All I can say is that my junk food diet and time spent with a pre-teen and Netflix did not give me a Division One tight end.

“Maybe I was onto something,” I say before finishing my coffee. “Maybe I need to clear my head and start fresh.”

The more I think about it, the more I like it. The more it makes sense.

It worked for Larissa. She’s in bed with the man of her dreams right now. The only thing in my bed is a remote control with dead batteries.

Standing, I take my cup to the sink. The bills and envelopes scattered on my counter only reinforce my newfound hope for the future. Sure, things are a mess right now. My life is definitely on hold because of Dad. But maybe I need to open my chakras and invite positive energy in. Perhaps that will bring clarity and direction.

And dick, but that’s a close third on the priority list.

I head toward my bedroom and change clothes in a hurry. I try to remember the things the guru told us to do. The only one

that seems doable at this hour is to reconnect with nature.

I toss my hair into a misshapen bun, and I ignore the stain on my sweatshirt as I head out the door.

My breath billows in front of me. I shiver against the chill in the air. *This temperature might freeze my chakras before I open them.*

Not knowing what to do and feeling very out of my element, I sort of amble around the yard. I remember someone saying to touch the ground with your bare feet, but it's too damn cold for that. Instead, I find a chaise by the pool and sit.

I shiver again.

My hands slip between my knees as I try to keep them from shaking. I move in the seat in an attempt to stay warm.

Immediately, I regret this decision.

I stand, ready to abort my mission, when I look toward the gate and see Coy. He's leaned against the post in gray sweatpants and a black hooded sweatshirt looking downright edible.

"Morning," he says.

"Yes, it is."

He grins. "Why are you up so early?"

"Why are you standing there like a creep?"

He rolls his eyes as he walks toward me.

My body stops shaking, and I don't shiver anymore. Instead, a warmth fills me that heats more the closer Coy gets.

"I was standing there because I heard a noise from over here," he says. "I was making sure no one was breaking in."

"We have cameras."

"Good for you." His grin gets wider. "Why are you up?"

"I already told you."

He comes to a stop only a few feet in front of me. "No, you didn't. You called me a creep."

*Oh.*

I lift my chin and try to resist the pull of his body. “I was getting in touch with nature.”

“On a plastic chair next to a swimming pool?” He laughs. “This is not nature, Bells.”

“What do you want me to do? Go on a hike at dawn and get eaten by a bear?”

“Maybe.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Which is it? Hiking or getting eaten?”

“I don’t know.” His grin turns into a deep, unsettling smirk. “Do you like getting eaten?”

My entire body clenches at the way the words fall off his kissable lips. His eyes hold mine, and I can’t pull them away even when I try.

*Damn him.*

“You don’t have to answer that,” he says. “I already know.”

His arrogance is just the break I need to gather myself again. I ignore the fact that he’s right—he does know. *And he knows so, so well.*

He looks at me with amusement laced with desire. It’s like he knows he has my brain turned to mush.

But that’s not true. *And two can play this game.*

Especially if one of us—that one being me—remembers to keep her *chakras* closed.

I face him and fire a dirty little grin right back his way.

“Oh, I know you know,” I tell him. “I remember that night on the boat very, very well.”

His eyes betray him. A glimmer of excitement shines through.

“Do you now?” he asks with his typical cocky sway to his voice.

“Uh-huh. How could I forget?”

Even though I’m bringing all of this up in some twisted power play, it just might backfire. Because while my brain remembers, so does my body. *Acutely well*. Normally, I replay this in the privacy of my bed. Alone. Not in front of Coy when he’s wearing male lingerie and a smirk.

He takes a step toward me, encouraged by my cooperation in whatever little game he’s playing.

“What was your favorite part?” he asks, his voice husky.

“There were two.”

He raises a brow in a silent prod for me to elaborate.

I try to hide my grin as I whip together a response.

“Well, first,” I say, licking my lips and watching his eyes shoot to my tongue, “I loved seeing your head between my legs.”

I can’t believe these words are coming out of my mouth. I don’t think he can either. His pupils go wide as his eyes darken.

My insides squirm as he takes me in—both of us brought back to the night on the boat.

I should stop there. I don’t, though, because I’m a glutton for punishment. I’m also determined not to let Coy walk away from this, thinking he has a hold on me.

I bite my lip and then let it pop free. Coy’s Adam’s apple bobs in his throat as our breaths cause a frenzy of fog around us.

“I’ve never gotten off so hard in a man’s mouth,” I tell him, my voice just above a whisper. “And to watch your eyes while you spread me apart with your fingers and licked my body ...” I let him see me shiver.

“Damn, Bells,” he growls.

“But that was only one of my favorite things.”

The lines of his face seem deeper, sexier in the early morning light. His jaw appears more angled, his neck thicker. My fingers want to dig into his back while my fingernails claw their way down his skin, leaving marks for him to remember me by.

It takes everything in my power to restrain myself.

“What’s the other?” he asks, clearly fighting the same internal battle as me.

I take a deep breath of the cold air and will it to extinguish the flame burning in my core. I face Coy head-on and let him watch as logic overpowers my lust.

I smile. “It was when I woke up, and you were gone.”

All the oxygen in his lungs evacuates in one rushed, strangled breath.

“Have a good day, Coy,” I say, turning toward the house.

“What the fuck was that?”

“What was what?” I ask, still walking away.

“Bellamy, dammit. Stop it.”

I do. I pause next to the sidewalk that leads to my house and look at him. “What do you want?”

He runs a hand down his face. “That’s a loaded question right now after that little speech you just pulled off.”

I snort. “Oh, please. It was a loaded question for you to ask me to start with.”

“Maybe.”

“Come on, Coy.” I narrow my eyes, relieved at the frustration coursing through me. It’s a feeling I know what to do with. It feels safe. “You’re just pissed you didn’t get the rise out of me that you wanted.”

“I was just fucking around with you.”

I look him right in the eye. “Me too. It doesn’t hit the same when you’re the one getting walked away from, does it?”

“Bellamy ...”



“Don’t *Bellamy* me. It’s fine for you to mess with me and then scamper away like it’s some sick joke. I figure it’s fine for me to do the same thing.” I flash him a disingenuous smile. “Have a good day.”

“Will you stop it?”

My answer is the sound of my door closing behind me.

SEVEN

## COY

Pressing the piano keys, I send a somber array of sounds fluttering through the air. Something about it catches my ear, and I turn toward the instrument.

I play it again, this time quickening the tempo and changing the chords every couple of beats. It's brighter. Snappier. Catchy. I tap it out again. It feels good.

*"Hum, hum, hum ... I didn't believe when you whispered my name ..."*

My fingers stop. I reconsider and start again.

*"Hum, hum, hum ... Lipstick stains on my T-shirt, a fear in my heart that this can't work ... Ooh, yeah, things aren't the same ..."*

I drop my hands to my side.

"Where the hell did that come from?" I ask an empty room.

I pivot on the bench and rest my elbows on my knees.

A myriad of feelings has battled inside me all morning. Not only do I have a weird energy and a surge in creativity but I also have an annoying prickle in the back of my mind.

I know why. It's not lost on me.

*"It doesn't hit the same when you're the one getting walked away from, does it?"*

I know the night she's talking about. The night on the boat. The Fourth of July three years ago just before I hit it big in

music. My parents throw a massive party every year on their houseboat, and, naturally, Bells was there. We drank a lot and flirted even more. As the night wore on, we danced on the deck before finding ourselves in a bedroom.

That night creeps up on me often.

The sweetness of her body against my tongue. The heaviness of her hands against my skin.

The warmth of her smile, the heat of her tongue—the searing pain in my chest as I held her against me as the sun started to rise over the horizon.

I never thought I'd have Bellamy. Not again. We might've fumbled around when we were teenagers, but this was different. This was fucking *real*. This was touching and kissing and looking at each other while our bodies moved together—not just an awkward exchange of bodily fluids.

This was the moment that the two of us hooked up as adults. It wasn't just two horny kids looking for quick relief from a burst of lust. It was the culmination of something that I'd always wondered about the possibility of happening.

That night on the boat, I lost track of myself for a moment. I blame it on the alcohol. I held her face in my hands and told her that I would be there for her if she ever needed me. That all she had to do was call. I hoped she'd read into things and give me some sort of indication that she did need me—daily.

Instead, Bellamy made it clear that I was a peripheral part of her life in her subtle way. She cracked jokes and talked about me like a guy she barely knew. She put a bit of distance between our naked bodies and fell asleep shortly after that.

So I stayed there. *Emotionally. Physically. In every way.* Right where she wanted me.

Just like I do now.

Her indifference to me—that night specifically—shook my confidence a little. I'd never attempted to connect with someone like that. To be shot down? Ouch. But, more than that, it diminished that sliver of possibility about the future. It

freed me in a way that I didn't want once I had it but took advantage of anyway.

I slept with women. I acknowledged that they would never want the real me because if the one person who knew me better than anyone didn't, who would?

I watched Bellamy as I texted Meadow back a few hours later. The thought of leaving Bellamy softened my excitement of dashing to New York City to open for a headliner in Times Square. But I knew what I had to do—both for her and for me.

I left before she woke up and hoped it made things easier for her.

*But did it?*

The doorbell rings before I can think about it too in depth. I glance at my watch as I make my way down the hallway and descend the stairs.

*Did she change her mind and decide to bring Bree over?*

I tug open the door without looking through the peephole.

Standing on the other side is a smiling Bree and a scowling Bellamy.

My cheeks split into a grin. "Well, I didn't expect to see you two today."

"Mom said I could come," Bree says, holding up a mitt and a workbook. "I'm ready to get busy."

"That's great," I say, looking at Bellamy over Bree's head. "What do you want to do first?"

"Baseball. But Mom said it has to be piano because I have a recital coming up," Bree says with a sigh.

Bellamy crosses her arms over her chest. "Hi."

"Hi," I say, motioning for Bree to come inside.

I step out of the way as they both walk by me, then shut the door behind them.

“Can I use the bathroom before we get started?” Bree asks. “I gotta pee *bad*.”

I laugh, pulling my eyes from Bellamy’s. “Sure. Go into the kitchen. There’s a door on the left with a calendar hanging on it. That’s a bathroom.”

“Thanks!” Bree sets her stuff on the floor and takes off toward the kitchen.

Once her footsteps fade away, Bellamy sighs.

“About earlier ...” She bites her bottom lip.

I reach forward and spring it free. She gasps at the contact. I could, too, by the heat that fires through my veins, but I contain my surprise better than her.

“What did you mean earlier?” I ask her.

“What do you mean?”

I roll my eyes. “You know what you said. You insinuated that I walk away from you, I assume, like it’s a joke.”

Her cheeks flush as she looks toward the kitchen. “Look, I shouldn’t have said that. It doesn’t matter. I—”

“The hell it doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t, Coy. I’m only here because Lauren couldn’t get anyone else for Bree, and Bree was so excited. So, I’m a sucker, all right? But I’m here for her, not to hash out things that don’t matter between us.”

I furrow my brows and try to work out what she’s saying and what she’s not saying. I feel like both are equally important.

“Bells, if something is bothering you, I wanna talk about it.”

She shoots me a dirty look. “Please don’t placate me.”

“I’m not.”

She covers her face with her hands and holds them there.

“What are you doing?” I ask, trying not to laugh.

“I’m manifesting.”

“What are you manifesting?”

“Peace, love, and goodwill to men.”

I snort. “So, you’re trying to manifest yourself into a Hallmark card?”

She drops her hands and fights a smile.

I want to reach out and touch the side of her face. My fingers burn to run through her hair, and it’s almost impossible not to reach out and pull her to me.

She’s too beautiful, too sexy—too real and raw with her makeup-free face and the cellulite that I know dimples her ass. What you see with Bellamy Davenport is what you get, and there’s something remarkably, insanely attractive about that.

“If you get sick of doing this, just give me the heads-up, and I’ll get Bree out of here,” she tells me. “I know this is going to get old really fast.”

I shrug. “Maybe not.”

She quirks a brow like she doesn’t believe me. “I can handle Bree, but you’ll have to tell Lauren. She’s all about this.”

“I think Lauren was all about *me*.”

She scoffs. “I bet you do.”

“What? Are you saying she wasn’t?”

“I’m saying that you think every woman is about you.”

I can’t help myself. I take a step closer and grin. “What about you? Are you about me?”

She doesn’t move. Doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t bat an eyelash. “No.”

For a split second, my confidence is dinged. *Maybe she’s not*. But then I see it—the chink in her armor. The acknowledgment of the energy between us. The way her eyes light up as she’s undoubtedly thinking about that night on the boat again too.

Because I for damn sure am.

“Why do you pretend you aren’t attracted to me?” I ask her.

“Why do you pretend I am?”

I take another step toward her. “Why do you pretend you don’t like me?”

“Because I don’t,” she says with a slight wobble to her tone.

I stop just in front of her.

She looks up at me, refusing to bend to my will, and grins. I lick my lips as I tell myself not to kiss her.

“You’re right, Coy. I need to stop lying to both of us.”

I nod, closing the slightest gap between us. Our bodies nearly touch and would if our breathing wasn’t so shallow.

My cock goes hard; my blood turns red hot as I watch desire pool in her eyes.

I straddle her feet with mine and peer down at her.

“Part of my manifestation journey is being clear about what I want,” she almost purrs. “I used to think that if I just told myself that I didn’t want certain things, *or people*, that the desire would go away. But that’s not how it works.”

“Nope.”

She smiles mischievously. Her lips part, forming a soft *o* before she breathes in a hasty breath that I think is just to rile me up.

It works.

“Bells ...” I say, unable to see straight. I want her so bad I can taste her.

I tell myself that it’s because it’s been a while since I had sex. I wasn’t fucking Willa and had to play that part publicly. That dashes your availability.

*But I’m available now ...*



“Here’s the thing, though,” she says. “Just saying you don’t want something doesn’t mean you don’t. What you have to do is clarify what it is you want.”

“Your point?”

“I can’t just *say* I don’t want you,” she says, laying a fingertip on my sternum and ignoring my request to expedite the process. “The desire is still there.”

“Bellamy,” I growl.

I’m trying to have patience and let her finish, but I don’t give a shit how she got here. I just want her to admit she wants me, and then I want to figure out how to get rid of this kid.

She sighs. “But when I’m clear about what I want ...” Her lips twist into an amused grin. “It diminishes the desire. It’s freedom.”

I pull away from her to get a better view. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Her eyes fill with fire again. “You might be right when you point out that I’m attracted to you. But when I’m clear about the kind of guy I want to give my time to—it isn’t you.”

She starts to walk away, but I swing her back to face me.

“What just happened here?” I ask her.

“I don’t know. I gave you the truth, and you didn’t like it.”

I eye her curiously. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“What are you talking about?”

The more I think about it, the more I know it’s true.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” I ask her.

“I have a couple of them.”

I glare at her. She shrugs.

“Something has changed with you, and I wanna know what it is.”

“Why? You haven’t cared before.”

I make a face. “What’s that supposed to mean? I always fucking care.”

It’s Bellamy who closes the distance between us this time. It’s Bellamy who pins me with her gaze this round.

“We can get along for the sake of Bree, but don’t lie to me, Coy. Cut the shit. I don’t need you to care. I don’t need you to tell me the things I want to hear so I can survive, okay? Maybe that’s how other women work but not me. I’m going to be just fine without it.”

I hold my hands up. None of this makes sense.

“Right now, I have a little girl who wants to learn how to play the piano,” she says. “You volunteered to help her. So let’s be amicable for that and stop pretending we have unfinished business. Let’s get this over with as quickly as possible.”

“You know what I think will help?”

“What’s that?”

“We need to fight or fuck. Get it out of our system,” I say over Bellamy’s protest.

When I look toward the kitchen, there’s still no sign of Bree. So I lean forward and place my lips near Bellamy’s ear. I’m surprised she doesn’t pull back.

My heart pounds in my chest as I breathe in the scent of her perfume.

“Do you need to be licked, Miss Davenport?” I whisper.

“I got *licked* last night, Mr. Mason. But thank you for the offer.”

A bolt of jealousy sweeps through me, and I clench my hands at my sides. “Then I guess we fight.”

“What—”

I pick her up and toss her over my shoulder. She squeals as I lock an arm over the back of her thighs to hold her in place.

“Put me down, Coy!”

“What are you doing?” Bree says as she runs toward us.

“Now. I mean it,” Bellamy shrieks.

“We’re going to go upstairs and play the piano,” I tell her, ignoring Bellamy’s demands. “Is there anything you’d like to learn?”

Bree picks up her mitt and workbook. “Something new. My teacher has me learning old stuff but said we could pick something different for the recital. Do you know anything new?”

“Coy Mason, so help me, God ...” Bellamy warns.

I tighten my grip on her. “Settle down up there, will ya?” I wink at Bree. “Yes. I know lots of things. Let’s head up to the piano, and we’ll pick something.”

Bree bounces up and down before racing to the stairs. She makes it to the top well before I do.

“Go down the hall and through the door on your right,” I tell her. “I’ll be right there. Get settled at the piano and get your book out,” I say, in hopes that it keeps her busy for a moment.

As I reach the top of the stairs, Bree disappears into the library.

“Coy ...” Bellamy groans. “Let me down.”

I stop at the landing and do as instructed, letting her body slink its way down the front of mine. Her eyes are wild as my gaze scoops them up and holds them in place.

She starts to speak, but I place a finger on her lips to quiet her.

“Now, I’m done fucking around with you,” I tell her. “You wanna fuck? Tell me when. You wanna fight? Please. Let’s. Tell me why you’re pissed. But I won’t do this guessing game with you anymore. Got it?”

“Who made you—”

I drop my lips to hers and capture her words with my mouth. She hesitates, sucking in a quick breath before her lips

match the intensity of mine. Her hands wrap around my neck and drape over my shoulders. She leans into the kiss that neither of us was expecting.

Music begins to play from the library, so I know Bree is occupied.

I palm the back of her head with my hand and work my mouth against hers. I part her lips slowly, deliciously, with my tongue and kiss her for all it's worth.

Fire pushes through my veins as my entire body reacts to the proximity of her.

Her lips are soft, her mouth as sweet as I can remember. Her perfume fills my senses. Her body sags against mine, her breasts pushing against the walls of my chest.

*Holy fuck.*

It's too much. It's overwhelming.

I grip her face with my hands. She moans a little against my tongue as I savor the moment—taking my time as quickly as I can. It's a rush, a push and pull, a hurry but go slow because this might never happen again.

Kissing her is a scratch to an itch that's been plaguing me. That fucks me up. It feels better to kiss her, to hold her in my arms, than it does to screw someone else.

I don't know what that means, but I know it has to end.

Finally, as the notes to "Mary Had a Little Lamb" finish, so do I. I pull back and look into a wide set of gorgeous blue eyes.

I grin. "I made me king, if that's what you were going to ask."

She stands in front of me and struggles to catch her breath. Her cheeks are pink. Her lips are swollen. And I commit that image to memory.

Then with a casual wink tossed her way, I leave her standing on the top of the stairs.

*Let her think about that.*

EIGHT

## BELLAMY

Music floats through the house, sneaking up behind me and escorting me down the stairs. My brain is frazzled, my heart threatening to pound out of my chest as I hurry into the kitchen and lock myself in the powder room.

I look into the gold-framed mirror hanging over the sink. My cheeks are flushed, my eyes wide open as though I've ingested too much caffeine.

"Shit. *Shit, shit, shit,*" I whisper to my reflection.

Rummaging around beneath the sink, I find a hand towel. I wet the corner with cold water and dab it around my face.

This was not how this morning was supposed to go.

*"We need to fight or fuck. Get it out of our system."*

I lay the towel on the edge of the sink and hang my head.

*I can't do this with him. I can't get pulled back into his orbit.*

My mind scans our history and begins popping up uncomfortable memories to help my heart—and body—understand the danger of our predicament.

It's a total Coy move. He sucks you in and disarms you. It's such a fun way to fall to impending doom. He kisses you, smothering you with attention, and tells you everything you want to hear. But when the time comes to act on any of it, he bails.

I know this.

That's why I don't want this.

*But dammit. That kiss was amazing.*

"Why does he do this?" I groan, closing the toilet lid and sitting on top of it. "And why do I do this too?"

It's as much my fault as it is his. I know that. I came over here and went toe-to-toe with him, and if I'm honest, I wanted him to kiss me. I needed his touch. As angry as I get with Coy and as much as I tell myself I hate him, being with him is like a balm smoothed over a wound.

A wound that he helped to cause. That's the kicker.

I race through my options because seeing him again now is a guarantee. At a minimum, I have to snatch Bree up and get her back to my house without making myself look crazy.

*Crazier than I looked when he threw me over his shoulder.*

I grin. I don't want to, but I do.

He can be so good when he wants to be. Coy can be silly and playful. He can be kind like he is right now, sitting with a little girl he doesn't even know and teaching her a skill. He can distract me and make me feel safe.

He can be everything I'd ever manifest for myself.

And he can be the opposite.

He can be the one who turns away, ready to leave, and never looks back. The one who seems to have no clue how he hurts my feelings. How he hurts ... me.

*I have to remember that.*

I blow out a breath and flush the toilet. Then I wash my hands because no one wants to get caught coming out of a bathroom without the water running. Just before I grab the door handle, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Suit: Drinks tonight? Tomorrow?

I twist my lips.

Suit is a man I met the night Larissa met Hollis a few weeks ago. We meet up for quickies here and there—but that’s all he’s suitable for. He’s not my type. Besides that, he wears suits, and I find that ridiculously hot.

*But not hotter than the man upstairs.*

I wince.

Me: Busy right now. Text you later.

Suit: Sure. Let me know.

WHY DO I compare the *untouchable hot*, though, when I can have *nicely convenient* at a text’s notice?

*You need to get your head examined, Bellamy. And stay away from Coy’s lips.*

I shove my phone in my pocket and exit the room.

Siggy comes around the corner. She jumps when she sees me.

“Bellamy,” she says, clutching her chest. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Oh, sorry. I, um, just—”

“Sweetheart, you don’t need an excuse to be here. I love having you here. I just know Coy ...” She makes a face. “You know what I mean. You usually avoid us altogether when he’s home.”

“Yeah.” I walk around the table. “Coy is helping Bree, the little girl I babysit. Hear that?”

We pause as someone, obviously Coy, plays Matchbox Twenty’s “She’s So Mean” on the piano. It doesn’t take long before his voice barrels through the house as he sings the lyrics. It’s perfectly in tune and thick and warm.

The bastard.

Siggy tries to withhold a chuckle.



I can't. I laugh. "It's fine. We both know Coy is talking about me."

"I didn't want to suggest such a thing, but ... I think you're right." She laughs freely. "He loves getting under your skin."

*I love when he gets under it too.*

*No. No, no, no.*

"Can I get you a drink?" Siggy asks as she opens the fridge. "I'm about to go to the office. My first shipment of the special edition pieces of my new collection comes in today."

"Larissa was telling me about the new line. She said it's your best yet."

Siggy beams. "Well, that's nice of her to say. I'm in love with it. Rodney says it'll never sell because I love it so much. The last time I was this obsessed with a collection, I couldn't give it away."

"I'm sure that's not true."

She smiles. "Do you want a drink?"

Coy's voice peters off, and the music stops playing.

I look at Siggy. "I think I better go get Bree. She'll take up Coy's whole day if we let her."

"It's not like Coy has much else to do."

I shrug because I don't know. I don't know what he has going on or what he has to do.

She must read my reaction because she closes the refrigerator softly.

"Did the two of you make up?" she asks. "I mean, I know it's none of my business, but I hate seeing the two of you so estranged."

I grip the back of a kitchen chair. "We aren't estranged. Just ... on different paths, I guess."

Walking over to the table, she pulls out a chair and sits.

"I make it a habit not to get involved in my children's personal lives. It's not my place," she says carefully. "But you

and Coy—and Boone, for that matter—have been the best of friends throughout your entire lives.”

I nod.

“Sweetheart, those are the friends you want to keep close,” she says softly. “I know Coy is hard to love sometimes.”

“Coy shits clovers.” Boone storms in and barely misses a swat from his mother. “What? It’s true.”

“What does that terrible analogy even mean?” Siggy asks him. “And what are you doing here in the middle of the day?”

I laugh as I watch their interaction. It’s so foreign to me, and if I didn’t adore them both so much, I’d be jealous.

“It means that everything works out for Coy, and he doesn’t even have to try.” He points at me as if my presence personifies it for him. “Coy shits clovers. Get it?”

“Not really,” Siggy says, her face screwed up. “I’d rather not hear that again.”

“Yeah. Same,” I say.

Boone shrugs. “And for the second part of your question, I’m here to eat and to avoid the office.”

“What’s happening at the office?” Siggy asks.

“Oh, nothing except I just convinced Holt not to send me to Portland, and now he and Oliver are at each other’s throats over something else, and I’m being called to side with one of them. That always ends well—with all sarcasm intended.”

“Whose side are you on?” I ask.

Boone looks at me over the door and makes a face before going back to his hunt for food. “Neither of them. Holt will make my life hell professionally, and Oliver will harass me mercilessly in person. I can’t win, so I won’t play.”

“But who is right?” Siggy asks. “If you had to pick a side?”

Boone grabs a slice of pizza from the refrigerator and closes the door. “Oliver. But if you tell Holt that, I will put you

in a nursing home when you get old.”

Siggy laughs.

“So on to other more important and interesting topics—what are the two of you doing here?” He grins at me before taking a bite of pizza.

“Well, I live here,” Siggy says. “And Bellamy brought her little babysitting charge over to get lessons from Coy.”

She turns in her seat and smiles at me like we have some big secret.

Boone nods appreciatively. “Well, they *can* be in the same house without it burning down. Good to know, good to know.”

“You stop that,” Siggy tells him. “Don’t make this awkward.”

I snort. “I kind of think we’re already there. And on that note, I think I’m going to go grab Bree and make a run for the hills.”

“It was great seeing you, Bellamy. Come by any time,” Siggy says.

“Thanks, Siggy. It was nice seeing you too.” I walk to the doorway. “Call me later, Boone.”

He nods with a mouthful of pizza.

I shake my head and make my way back through the house. Baby pictures of the Mason boys hang on the walls of the hallway leading to the stairs. They’re all adorable with chubby cheeks and the same white-blond hair. It’s hard to tell one from the other.

Coy and Bree are walking down the staircase as I approach.

“Bellamy, *he is awesome*,” Bree tells me. “He knows cool music and not just nursery rhymes.”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard,” I say, raising my brows at him. “Was that Matchbox Twenty I heard?”

He laughs.

The sound sweeps over my ears and quickens the beat of my heart.

I take the workbook and baseball mitt from Bree and join the two of them as they walk to the front door. Coy accompanies us to the porch.

“What did you learn today, Bree?” I ask, trying to fill the silence with some mundane conversation to keep me from blurting something out about the kiss.

“You have to arch your fingers like this.” She holds her hands in front of her like claws. “It keeps them from cramping, and it lets you move them easier. Right, Coy?”

She looks up at him and beams. He grins back down at her.

“That’s right,” he tells her. “Gotta keep good hand posture.”

“Can we play baseball now?” she asks, looking at him like he hung the moon. “I want to work on my curveball.”

“We need to get home,” I tell her, cutting in. “I have to meet the nurse for my daddy. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” She frowns. “Can we come back tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow is Saturday, so you’ll be home with your parents,” I point out. “But we’ll get with Coy and see what his schedule looks like for next week. Okay?”

She flashes him a big, toothy smile. “Okay.”

“You did good today,” he tells her. “You’re a natural.”

She shakes with happiness. “Thank you!”

“Sure thing,” he says.

“Can I go back to your house and get a snack cake and turn on the television?” she asks. “Just for one show. One. I won’t ask again today. I promise.”

“Just one,” I tell her. I don’t even get the words out before she’s running across the lawn toward my house.

I watch her go, mostly so I don't have to look at Coy. I can feel him staring at the side of my face, probably wearing his ridiculous smirk, and I don't know what to say to him about what went down at the top of the stairs.

"You're a natural too," he tells me.

"Oh, really?"

"Yup. You lie with the best of them. Hell, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you hated me."

I roll my eyes as my cheeks get warm again. "Just because *you* kissed *me* doesn't mean I don't hate you."

The air between us shifts. Before I know it, I'm facing Coy.

The intensity in his gaze is something I can't squirm my way out of. He's so focused, so superficially sincere, that it takes my breath away.

"Why do you say that?" he asks. "Why do you say you hate me?"

*Because it's easier than the truth.*

I force a swallow and try to determine how to answer him.

"Hate is a strong word, Bells," he says.

"You're right. I probably don't hate you. I reserve that for the guy who created plastic Easter grass."

He bursts out laughing. "What?"

"Oh, come on. Have you not ever had to clean that up? It lasts forever and is only second on my list of dreadful things behind glitter."

"Wow. That's serious."

I half-smile and wish that it was enough to distract him from his question. But it's not.

I sigh. "I have to get going ..."

"Answer me, Bellamy."

“My dad’s therapy nurse will be at the house in a few minutes. I have to be there for a variety of things, none of which are interesting to you.” I turn and walk down the stairs. “Thank you for helping Bree today.”

My steps pick up pace as I cross the lawn.

“This isn’t over, Bellamy,” he calls after me.

*It needs to be.*

My brain and body are at war, both wanting what’s best for me. I know logically that I need to distance myself from Coy. But the illogical side of me—the side that irrationally holds out hope that the spark between us could sustain a lifelong fire—wants to live in this moment. It wants to grip the shred of everything being okay, if only for a second.

It’s confusing, and I don’t know which way to turn. So, I tuck my head and ignore the tingle on my lips and make a beeline for the other side of the gate.

NINE

## COY

“Boil it down for me, Meadow,” I say.

She’s danced around whatever she’s trying to say for ten minutes now. She started with niceties that I know she didn’t mean and then went all-in with telling me that she strong-armed Willa into nixing her smear campaign against me.

But that’s not why she called. She’s just warming me up.

Meadow takes a long, deep breath that stirs a sense of dread inside me.

“Coy, the label wants to modify your contract,” she says.

“What? What does that mean?”

I shoot to my feet and clamp a hand over the back of my neck.

The setting sun casts shadows throughout my bedroom. It feels like a projection of my emotions because whatever Meadow is hem-hawing around about isn’t good. For me, anyway.

“Your label, Heater Records, is merging with Arturo Records at the end of next month. I was just informed this morning,” she says. “They also told me that they want you to deliver an entire album by June.”

“That’s impossible.”

“They also want to pull all funding for videos—”

“What? Why?” I ask before she can finish.



She sighs. “Videos are not profitable. They haven’t been for a long time, but they used them as a marketing tool regardless. Bob is stepping down from Heater after the merger, and there will be a lot of changes, I do believe. He was your biggest champion.”

I pace the room and try to convince myself this will be okay.

“I can get over the video stuff, but I can’t deliver by June, Meadow. You know that.”

“There are other things, Coy.”

“Like what?”

“Well, Arturo Records has a lot of the old-school artists in your genre. They’re trying to shift their schedules around to accommodate both company’s contracts. That could bump yours to a second-tier priority because they’re less willing to go all-in on your brand now. Their options just widened.”

I stop pacing. “They realize what my two albums have accomplished, right?”

“Yes. But Arturo may not be as committed to putting a lot of energy behind you like Heater.”

“This is a bunch of horseshit.”

She smacks her lips together. “It’s how the business works. I’ve seen this before, and I’m doing all I can. I’ve sent a copy of their suggestions to your attorney. I’ve forwarded it to your email as well. We’re going to need to be flexible and keep our eyes on the overall prize.”

“That’s good to hear since you’re making a cut from this.”

“I know you’re upset. Please just stay calm and trust the process. I’m doing everything I can do to fight for you.”

*Trust the process, my ass.*

“I’ll get back with you in a few days,” she says. “As soon as I hear anything, you’ll be my first call.”

“Thanks, Meadow.”

“Talk soon.”

“Goodbye,” I say before ending the call. I toss my phone onto my bed.

My stomach twists as I try to come to terms with what Meadow said.

I hate this. I hate this so fucking much.

*Why can't I just make music and make people happy? Why does it have to be so damn complicated?*

My guitar sits in the corner of my room, and I pick it up. It instantly brings a smile to my face.

I strum the chords and remember when music was my lifeline. It was the one thing I was good at because *I was good at it*. It wasn't like baseball—something I'm also good at, but my talents can be attributed to the thousands of dollars my parents spent sending me to camps since I was a kid. I wasn't a bad wrestler, either, but I spent a week every summer at a camp in Ohio to sharpen my skills. My parents' connections and money helped me get a step ahead in nearly every arena ... except music.

Music was fun. There was no pressure to compete or follow a protocol or do it the right way. I just picked up the guitar or sat down at the piano and did whatever I felt.

It was my true love.

But now? It's tarnished. Creative control has been compromised to get the music made. My style has been sacrificed, the joy of it tinged with the smell of dirty money.

But what can I do? Nothing.

I set the guitar down and almost grab my phone but think better of it. Instead, I head downstairs and into the kitchen.

My mom looks up from the stove. Her face breaks into a wide smile.

“I will never get sick of seeing your face around here.” She motions for me to kiss her cheek, so I do. “Hungry?”

“Yeah. Smells good. What are you making?”

“Garlic butter chicken with egg noodles.”

“Sounds good,” I say, sitting at the table.

I take a deep breath and try to keep my spirits high for my mom’s sake. But, being the mother she is, she side-eyes me from across the room.

“What?” I ask her.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just got off the phone with Meadow. My contract is held up.”

She keeps stirring as she watches me. “Everything okay?”

I shrug. “Guess we’ll find out.”

She turns back to the stove.

“I mean, it’ll be fine,” I tell her. “We’re talking about an insane amount of money and crazy opportunities either way you cut it. But I hate dealing with the business side of this shit. I don’t know how Holt and Oliver do this all day.”

“And Boone.”

I laugh. “Mom, Boone doesn’t do shit.”

“Boone plays a role in things that you all don’t necessarily see.” She taps the spatula on the side of the pan. It makes a ringing sound. “This family has a lot going on at all times. You have Holt and Oliver running a multi-million-dollar company. Wade runs his architecture firm. You have a music career. Boone’s niche in this family is providing support.”

“He’s like the support puppy. Makes sense.”

She gives me a dirty look. “You know what I mean, Coy.”

I think about what she says. I don’t really see it.

“Boone does work,” she says. “He has the biggest contract in the company’s history.”

“Do you know why?”

“I know what your brothers say,” she says, silencing me. “I’m not getting into all of that. I’m only saying he does work.”

But he also provides an element of fun to all of your lives. He's the one every one of you call when you've had a bad day. Don't even lie to me."

This *is* true. We do call Boone if we need to laugh or forget our problems.

Or need someone to go on a trip with you.

And if you want a weekend in Vegas, Boone is *definitely* your guy.

"Life can't be all work," Mom says. "And you can't have everyone in your life about business, either. It's good to have someone around you in your inner circle that doesn't prioritize the business you're in." She flips off the stove. "When I come home from the office, your dad doesn't care about my shop. Sure, he wants it to succeed, and he cares that it does, but if I would choose to close and never reopen, he would support that. He doesn't love me because of it."

I get what she's saying, and it makes sense. Still, I can't help but rib her a little.

"Well, Boone *does* love us because of our businesses. They pay his bills."

She laughs as she takes the plates out of the cabinet. "I want you to know that I appreciate your perspective on your contract. People get tied up in the details and forget what a blessing things like that are to begin with."

"I mean, I want what's fair."

"Absolutely."

"But things could be worse, you know?"

Placing some noodles and chicken on a plate, she carries it across the kitchen and slides it across the table to me.

"You could be battling what Bellamy has going on," she says before turning around and heading back to the stove.

"How is she? Really?"

"Don't you know? You were with her today."

She's not asking a question. She's digging. She's trying to see what happened between Bells and me today, and I don't know how to answer that.

Mostly because nothing did happen. Sadly.

"We were just talking about Bree," I say. "We didn't talk about her dad or anything."

Mom brings two glasses of wine to the table and sits down across from me.

I take one of the drinks and gulp half of it down. She raises a brow but doesn't comment. Thankfully.

"Joseph is very sick, Coy. He has stage four colon cancer." Her voice is somber. "Bellamy spends a large part of her life with her father, making sure he's taken his medicines, running him to doctor's visits, just ... spending all the time she can get with him before he's gone."

I'm not sure if it's the wine or her words that send a shiver up my spine, but something does.

*Before he's gone.*

I can't imagine how Bellamy would be if she loses her dad. Or when, rather. *What will happen to her? Will she lose the light in her eyes? Will she be scared?*

*Fuck, yes, she'll be scared.*

*Then what?*

I look up at my mom, and she's nodding as if she can read my mind.

I think about my mom and dad and all of my brothers. Hell, even Larissa and her parents. My family is big and loud and annoying, but at least I have them.

Bellamy has no one.

I gulp.

"I guess I didn't realize it was that bad," I say. "People always come back and get better. I guess I thought maybe that would happen."

Mom frowns. “He’s not going to get better, Coy. He probably doesn’t have much time left. If you want to see him for any reason, you should probably do that while you’re home.”

I drink the rest of the wine in one swallow. The alcohol burns my throat and settles heavily in my stomach.

“Do you see Bells a lot?” I ask her.

She nods. “She comes over once a week or so. I bake them banana bread or an extra meatloaf a couple of times a week, too. But you know how Bellamy is. She doesn’t want to be doted on or made to feel like she can’t handle it.”

*But she can’t.*

“I wish I would’ve known all of this before now,” I say. “I mean, you told me, but I didn’t realize it. I guess I didn’t want to realize it. It was easier not to know.”

“While Bellamy doesn’t have that luxury.”

“Yeah.” I lean back in my seat. “I got ahold of her a couple of weeks after my Country Music Honors performance—the night you told me, actually. And she texted me back and said that she had a boyfriend and didn’t think I should message her anymore.”

Mom recoils. “Bellamy having a boyfriend? If that was true, I didn’t know it. And it didn’t last long.”

“Why do you say that?”

She grins. “Because she’s clearly smitten with you.”

So many things lump together in my brain and demand attention. Meadow, the contract, getting back to Nashville. Bellamy, her father, and why she’s acting so hot and cold with me.

Since I can’t do anything about the first set of problems right now, I should focus on the second.

“I think I might head over and see Joseph. You think that’s okay?” I ask my mom. “Should I call first or something?”

Her grin splits her cheeks, and she gets to her feet. “I think you should go on over. And take this with you.” She heads to the counter and picks up a bakery box. “I got these at Hillary’s House today. Blueberry muffins. Joseph loves them. Bellamy too.”

I take the box from her. “You’re the best. Do you know that?”

“That’s what they say.” She winks. “Now, get over there before it gets dark.”

I laugh as I head for the side door. “Yes, Mommy.”

“Good boy. I’ll save your plate for later.”

I chuckle all the way to the gate.

TEN



# COY

*Knock! Knock!*

I pass the box of muffins from one hand to the other. I shiver against the chill in the air as I stand on the Davenport's porch.

A light turns on in the living room, and I hear the squeak of the recliner. I wonder if it still sits beside the bookcase in the living room with the dark brown coffee table beside it.

"Who is it?" Joseph's voice is weak and distant.

"Hey, Joseph. It's Coy Mason. I was just coming by to say hello."

"Come on in."

I open the door and step inside. The foyer is precisely as I remember it. The walls are a light grayish-blue, and pictures of a baby Bellamy decorate every available surface.

Through the arched doorway to my left, I spot Joseph sitting in his recliner. It sits beside the bookcase and next to the dark brown coffee table.

I smile.

"Well, there you are," Joseph says, setting a newspaper on the table. His voice is gruffer than I remember. It reminds me of a smoker's voice with its raspiness, and I've never known Joseph to smoke a day in my life.

As I step inside the fully lit living room, my stomach sinks to the hardwood floor.

Joseph's face is gaunt. His cheeks are sunken in like a mummy on the Discovery Channel. His eyes almost look too big for his face, and his lips are thin and dark.

It's like a knife hitting me in the gut, twisting and turning to maximize the pain. My brain immediately goes to Bellamy, and I wonder where she is and how she feels.

And how she deals with this every day.

"Hey, Joseph," I say, trying to sound as natural as possible. He motions for me to sit on the loveseat next to him, so I do. "How are you, buddy?"

Immediately, I regret the question. He's obviously shitty. But what else do you say to break the ice to someone in his case? I don't fucking know.

Joseph gives me what I would bet is his best smile. "I'm not dead yet."

I start to laugh, but I catch myself. *Do you laugh at things like this?* Again, I don't know.

Joseph observes me before chuckling to himself. "Oh, come on now," he says. "That was funny."

"Yeah, well ... not really," I say, wincing at the uncertainty in my voice.

He fiddles with a butterscotch candy wrapper until he gets it open. He pops the disc into his mouth and then tosses the wrapper into a trash can tucked between him and the table.

"I'm not too bad," he says. "Been better, been worse, believe it or not." He rests his head back against the chair and looks at me. "How about you? How have you been doing?"

I set the box of muffins down beside me. "I'm okay. Thought I would come by and see you while I'm in town."

"I'm glad you did."

I fold my hands on my knees and look around the room. "Do you need anything? Can I get you anything?"

"Nah. I'm pretty good. Bellamy takes pretty good care of her old dad."

He watches to see how I react to the mention of his daughter. It puts me on the spot a little bit but not enough to make it weird.

“I never really imagined Bellamy having the disposition to be a good nurse,” I half-joke. “She gets tired, and ...” I make a face.

Joseph chuckles. “Well, if we’re being honest, I didn’t either.”

We laugh together easily. It helps to settle my nerves.

He grabs the remote and turns down the game show he was watching.

“You home for long?” he asks. “I haven’t seen ya around in a long time.”

“I’m not sure. Just kind of taking some downtime while some things get worked out on the business end. You know how it goes.”

He nods. “I’m sure your parents enjoy having you home. They haven’t seen much of you lately either, huh?”

“No. I’ve been pretty busy. Things really took off after the Honors show a couple of years ago.”

“You took Entertainer of the Year, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

His face brightens as he smiles at me. “That’s great, Coy. I’m proud of you, son.”

“Thanks. That means a lot to me.”

“You’ve always been like a kid to me. Always around, asking questions and stealing cookies.”

“The cookie thing was Boone.”

Joseph chuckles.

I watch him take a tissue and dab the corners of his mouth where the candy has pooled. The vision of him like this is staggering. I remember a robust man who split firewood in the summers so they could have a fireplace going in the winter

because Bellamy liked it. Joseph was the kind of man who worked on his cars before taking them to the mechanic's shop.

He fascinated me.

Now it fascinates me to see him like this.

A pang of guilt washes over me. The amount of time that had to have transpired from the Joseph I remember to the Joseph sitting in front of me is embarrassing.

And I missed the transformation. I missed a lot.

“That show changed your life, didn't it?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I admit. “It changed it overnight. My phone rang solidly for weeks after that. My schedule has had something on it almost every day. I mean, it's a good problem to have. It's just hard to get away for long.”

He rocks back and forth in his recliner and watches me thoughtfully. He licks his lips as if they're dry while the candy rattles around against his teeth.

My heart pulls in my chest. I wish what I said wasn't true. I wish there were more time to be spent at home—more holidays at Mom's. More visits to Joseph and the poker guys with Dad. More Vegas trips with Boone and ski trips with Oliver.

More being here with Bells as she deals with all of this.

*But I can't be in two places at once. That's something I'm just going to have to live with.*

*Isn't it?*

“Can I give you some advice?” Joseph asks, luring me out of my daze.

“Sure.”

He takes a long minute before he begins to speak.

“You know that I did pretty well in my life, right? I was president of the bank for twenty years—up until I got sick. And, before that, I had various roles that had me out of the house more hours than I was in it.”

“I remember.”

He continues to rock in the chair. “When Shelley and I got married, I worked so much because that’s what I thought men do. That’s what my father always did. He worked sunup until sundown to provide for his family, so I did the same.”

He smiles faintly, staring off into space.

I wonder what he’s feeling and how hard his life must have quietly been for him. He lost Shelley so young and then raised Bellamy on his own.

*How did this never occur to me before?*

*Because you were young and self-centered.*

Slowly, he pulls his gaze back to me.

“After Shelley died, I suppose I buried myself in my work to avoid feeling the loss,” he tells me. “That wasn’t fair to Bellamy or me—or my wife’s memory. We all deserved to grieve the life she led.”

“She was so much fun. The best chocolate chip cookie maker ever.”

He grins, appreciative of me sharing that thought with him.

“But even after she died,” he continues, “I kept working those long hours and extended weeks. I was covering my emotions, staying busy so I didn’t have to face a lonely house. But I was also probably trying to compensate in some weird, wrong way. As if ...” He sighs. “As if being able to fill Bellamy’s life with things would somehow fill in the hole Shelley left behind. I know that sounds ridiculous.”

He waits for me to respond, but I don’t know what to say. Finally, I just hold my hands out in front of me and shrug.

“I’m not going to sit here and judge you,” I tell him. “I can’t imagine how hard that was, and I’m positive I would’ve done a shittier job. I mean, look at Bells.” I grin as I think of her. “You raised one hell of a woman, Joe. I think that speaks volumes for how well you did handle things, whether you realize it or not.”

He smiles at me. “She’s pretty great, isn’t she?”

I return his smile.

The chair sways back and forth again as he gazes off into the distance. “You know my only regret?”

“No.”

“I regret not experiencing everything that I ran away from. Even the hard stuff—especially the hard stuff. I regret not sitting on the floor with Bellamy and crying for days. I regret being in my office when she was a teenager and quite the little pistol and not being at the dining room table while we discussed whatever trouble she’d gotten herself into.”

I laugh. “I think you did that a time or twelve.”

He chuckles too. “I did for sure.”

We watch each other. We’re sitting just a few feet away, and it feels both like millions of miles and only a few inches.

“I have a lot of time on my hands these days,” he admits. “It’s an interesting position to be in. I have all of this dead time with nothing to do but sit and think about the moment in which I have more time. It’s quite a predicament.”

“I’ve never thought of it like that.”

“I hadn’t either.” He picks up another piece of candy and holds it in his palm. “I’ve thought about every piece of my life, replayed every day.”

“I do that every night,” I say in an ill attempt at a joke.

Joseph lets it go without acknowledging it. I get the feeling he’s not gotten to the point he’s trying to make, so I sit back and let him talk.

“Life is made up of a web of experiences and emotions. They are the only two things we have in life no matter who you are, where you live, or what you do. You’re going to experience things, and you’re going to feel things.”

I mull that over. It seems true. I’ve never thought of life like that, but I’m not sitting around pondering life’s greatest mysteries either.

Joseph shifts in his chair, wincing as he moves to face me. He looks me in the eyes.

“The key to life—the key to everything—is who you choose to build your web around,” he says, his voice eerily calm. “I built so much of mine around my job. I have so many experiences and emotions from my days at the bank. Some were good. Some were bad. Some were amazing moments in life that I’m better for having. But Coy ...” He sets the candy down on the table. “I’d give anything to trade some of those things for more memories with Bellamy.”

The sincerity in his tone strangles me.

I press my lips together and look at the floor, the weight of his words settling on my heart.

The reality that he’s painting for me is not hard to imagine. Although I’ve never thought of it exactly as he’s describing it, I’ve experienced it. I’ve danced around the concept while in a random hotel in an equally random city while Holt FaceTimes me from the golf course with Gramps or Larissa texts me while at dinner with Boone and Bells.

The difference is that Joseph might have been building his web, so to speak, because he was running away from his life. I’m trying to run toward mine. Surely, that’s different.

“I sit here some days,” he says quietly, “and wonder what my legacy will be like when I’m gone.”

My eyes snap to his. “You’re not gone yet, Joe.”

“I know that. But I’m going to be. I tried being positive by pretending this was all going to work out. There comes a time, though, when you just have to admit the truth to yourself. It’s freeing after that. After about a week, you can move on and try to control the things you can.”

I don’t know why he’s telling me all of this. Perhaps it’s because he can’t talk to Bellamy this truthfully. Maybe his friends have stopped coming by. And it might just be that I’m safe because he knows I’ll be leaving and taking his secrets with me.

Whatever the case, it’s still hard to listen to.

“We’re very different,” he tells me. “But we’re a lot the same, too. You work hard. You worry about your legacy.”

*Do I?*

He smiles. “If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be on the television and radio all the time.”

*Fair enough.*

“Promise me something, Coy.”

“Okay.”

“Do you remember the promise you made to me right after Shelley died?”

I nod. “I promised you that I’d make sure Bellamy was okay.”

He grins, relief filtering across his tired face. “That’s right. I remember you being all serious and standing next to my desk in the den. You said, ‘Mr. Davenport, Bells will be all right. I’ll make sure of it. I’ll keep my eye on her.’” He chuckles. “You were such a little man.”

I grin, my face heating at the memory.

“I hope you’ll honor that when I’m gone,” he says, his voice cracking on the last syllable.

He blinks rapidly as he obviously struggles with a burst of emotion.

My chest swells, making it hard to breathe as I watch him try to regain his composure. I wish there was something to say, something to do, to make this go away for him. No one should have to sit day after day and mentally torture themselves like this.

*Fuck.*

Finally, after a minute or two, Joseph steadies himself and looks at me. His eyes fill with a seriousness that erases anything in my mind other than this moment.

“When I’m gone,” he says, starting again, “Bellamy will have no one. There will be no one to celebrate her birthdays.”



His voice breaks once again. This time, it doesn't find its rhythm. "There will be no one to make sure she makes it home after she stays out too long with Larissa. Nobody will make sure she goes to the doctor when she gets bronchitis in the fall or makes her chicken noodle soup without carrots. And that ..." Tears stream down his cheeks in a quiet river. "That's what keeps me up at night."

He reaches for the tissue box and swipes a few pieces from the container.

I fight back a surge of emotion as I watch him struggle with his burden. It's not something I ever imagined. I suppose it's a privilege to be born into a large family. I never have to wonder if someone will remember my birthday. I only have to wonder if they'll wake me up before I'm ready that morning. And even though I knew Bellamy would be alone, I'd never thought about it *like this*.

I try to picture her sitting in this house by herself on Christmas morning. It shreds my heart to think about her being scared on Halloween like she is every year when she watches too many horror movies. I try to picture her with good news to share or being angry or sad and having no one to call.

Just like she is now.

*Coy, you are a motherfucking idiot.*

"I know you have a life to live," Joseph says, sniffing. "And I'm not trying to impose on that. I know she has Larissa and your brother, and I'm thankful for that. I know she's a smart, strong girl, too, but ... she's my baby." His face twists into a ball of unshed emotion. "And I need to trust someone to watch over her. To be her friend in a way that only you have ever been. Larissa can help her with some things, and Boone ..." He grins. "Well, you know Boone."

I don't trust my voice to speak. I just sit quietly and try not to let my emotions play out on my face. I don't want to make this harder for him.

Joe sighs. "You're different than the others, Coy. You've always been special to Bellamy. And I know this is a lot to ask

of you—”

“It’s not,” I say, my voice rough and raw. “You have my word.”

“Thank you.”

Relief settles across his features as he dabs his eyes with that tissue. He lets out a breath and then drops the tissue unceremoniously into a wastepaper basket by the chair. A smile is thrown my way, and then he picks up his remote and turns the TV back up.

I get to my feet, a little unsteadier than I was when I came in, and walk over to his chair. It hits me that this might be the last time I ever see Joseph Davenport. A part of me doesn’t want to leave as if that will somehow delay the inevitable.

I extend my hand toward the man who taught me how to split firewood one summer when I was determined to build muscle for wrestling. He looks up at me and puts his fragile palm in mine.

“I trust that you will remember this conversation,” he says. “And take care of my girl.”

“I will.”

He lets go of my hand. “I’m going back to my show now. Thank you for coming by. It was good to see you, Coy.”

“It was good to see you, Joe. Let me know if you need anything. Please.”

I take a final look at him before I turn around. I head for the front door and step onto the porch as quickly as I can.

The air is cool and nips at my skin as I start back across the lawn. Just before I hit the driveway, a sound from the back of the house snags my attention.

I walk along the driveway, creeping so I’m not seen. I peer around the corner and see Bellamy standing next to the pool with tears streaming down her face.

*Take care of my girl.*

Fuck.

ELEVEN

# BELLAMY

I wipe my face with the back of my hand. Mascara stains my skin with streaks of black.

The longer I cry, the more irritated I get at myself. It won't solve anything. It's not going to cure my dad or bring my mom back or help me sort out the rest of my life.

Sometimes it hits me out of nowhere. Fear just sneaks up on me and wallops me from behind. It slithers its way into my brain, swamping me with an overwhelming loneliness that I can't cope with.

I'll be fine. I know that. I have Riss and Boone.

I'll find my footing—I'm not scared of that. I'm afraid of losing a connection with my past. I'm terrified of everyone getting busy and forgetting about me.

“Bells?”

I whirl around at the sound of his voice.

Coy is standing only a few away from me. His hair is messy, and his eyes full of an emotion I can't name.

He peers at me. “What's going on?”

I wipe at my eyes again and hope that my face isn't as smudged as my hand. “Nothing,” I say, sniffing. “What are you doing here?”

“I came by to see your dad.” He takes a step closer. “Talk to me, Bells. Why are you crying?”

“I’m not,” I say automatically, even though it’s evident that I am.

He gives me a stern look.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “Just go home, please.”

There’s a war brewing in his beautiful eyes. It’s a battle I can’t watch. I don’t know what it means, and I don’t have the energy to figure it out.

I turn away.

“Dammit, Bellamy,” he says, the edges of his words rough. “I’m sick of this.”

“It’s a good thing you can just walk away then.”

He grabs my elbow and spins me to face him. When our eyes meet, his narrow. I narrow mine right back.

My heart is tender from our kiss earlier, and it’s broken from trying to read my dad’s doctor’s reports that I have to send to his insurance company. It’s all too much for one day.

“Why are you doing this?” he asks.

“What am I doing, Coy?”

“Shutting me out.”

I want to ask him why it matters.

*What good would it possibly do to bring him into the trenches of my life? So he can pretend he cares? So he can feel like he did something before he leaves again?*

Nah, I’m good.

“Shutting you out would infer that you were ever inside,” I say, turning away from him again.

“Really?”

His tone—accusatory and sarcastic—is precisely what I don’t need right now.

“Yes, *really*,” I say, giving him a dirty look. “Thank you for coming by to see Dad. I’m sure it means a lot to him. I—”

“Stop it, Bellamy.”

“Stop what?” I whip around to face him. “Why don’t *you* stop it, Coy?”

His eyes grow wide. “I’m just asking you what’s wrong. What the fuck?”

“No, what you’re doing is waltzing in my life like it’s your stomping ground,” I tell him, my finger wagging in the air between us. “You just come in with some kind of bravado like I should be grateful you’re here. *I’m not*. Okay? I’m fine.”

He has the audacity to look bewildered. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

A light flips on in the back of my house. It’s Dad’s bathroom.

I drag my attention back to Coy. “I’m not doing this with you.”

“Yes, you fucking are.”

“No, I’m not.”

I march toward my house. It takes everything I have to snuffle back another round of tears as my emotions well up inside me.

*Why does this have to be more challenging? Why did he have to show up here and spark all of these feelings that I had successfully put to bed?*

*Why did I have to go over there? Why did he have to kiss me?*

*Why does he keep pushing and probing like this matters to him beyond tonight?*

He needs to go back to Nashville and back to his life with people who are as superficial as him.

*And stay away from my dad.*

I know that’s not fair because Dad probably loved seeing him. A small part of me loved seeing Coy walk over to the house tonight too. But I’d love it a lot more if I thought he’d remember a week from now.

I blink rapidly as I shove my door open. I swing it shut behind me, but it stops ... on Coy's hand.

"Please just go," I tell him as I square my shoulders with his. "I don't have it in me to fight with you tonight."

"I don't wanna fight with you."

"Well, I wanna fight with you. I just can't manage it right now."

My bottom lip quivers.

The truth is, I don't want to fight with him either. I'd give anything if I could fall into his arms and pour my heart out in a way I can't do with anyone.

But I can't do that with him either. Because if I do, it'll be that much more bullshit to deal with later. And my limit on bullshit to deal with has been exceeded.

Coy's features soften. He looks as vulnerable as I feel, and that makes me want to cry.

And that pisses me off.

"Why didn't you tell me that Joe was this sick?" he asks.

My grin is angry. "Look, Coy, I'm not going to beg you to care."

"What's that supposed to mean? That you're not going to beg me to care? You didn't give me a chance to care."

"Yes, I did, and you blew me off—"

"What?"

His feigned innocence infuriates me.

"Yeah. Please excuse me for not wanting to talk about this because you feel compelled to express your emotions. I have to live with them every day."

"How was I supposed to know he was *this sick*? Why didn't someone tell me? Does Boone know?"

I roll my eyes. "Of course, Boone knows. I see him every day. And I don't know why your mom or Boone didn't

describe the depths of my daddy's sickness so you could gauge whether it was worth your time or not."

Coy's jaw sets, and his demeanor cools. "That's not fair."

"You're damn right it's not."

We glare at each other.

"I'm not around every day, so I'm blackballed? Is that what this is?" he asks.

My laughter is abrupt and loud and causes him to flinch.

"You are *so precious*," I say, releasing years of frustration. "I try to tell you what's going on, and you blow me off—"

He balks like he has no idea what I'm talking about. "What?"

"And then you decide you're the victim?" I laugh angrily again. "That's not how this works."

I leave him standing in the living room and walk to the kitchen. I need fresh air. Space. Room to calm myself down.

My emotions were so high before this—before he caught me crying. God knows that I'd never let him see me cry on purpose.

I'm not alone for long. Coy enters the kitchen with a flurry.

I close my eyes. "I *really* don't want to do this," I tell him, exhaustion sinking deep into my bones. "Please, go."

When he doesn't respond for a full minute, I lift my chin and look at him.

He's standing in the doorway with a sober look on his face. There's no ego, no cockiness—none of the self-importance I expect to see.

Instead, there stands a man who wormed his way into my heart so many years ago. I can't shake it or deny it, even if I want to.

My shoulders slump as my will to argue melts away. I cried myself tired.



“What did you mean that you tried to tell me what was happening, and I blew you off?” he asks softly. “And don’t get snarky or start yelling. Talk to me, Bells.”

I exhale long and loud. “I texted you. You ignored me. Well, until you called me like two weeks later.”

He furrows a brow. “Bellamy, that’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

He holds a hand out toward me like he can ward off an eruption of anger. Lucky for him, I’m too defeated right now to get angry again.

“I found out from my mom that your dad was sick,” he says. “I never got a text from you.”

I shrug.

“I swear to you, Bells. I didn’t know until Mom told me.” He takes a cautious step forward. “Did you really reach out to me?”

“Yes. The night I found out.” My lip trembles again as I think back on that fateful day. “I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to tell Riss or Boone yet. I didn’t want them coming over here and babying me. I just wanted to talk ...”

I walk backward until the back of my knees hit a chair. My weight drops to the seat, and I sink into the wood.

Coy doesn’t move. He doesn’t even blink. He just watches me sit in front of him like a caged animal.

“I know it doesn’t matter right now,” he says. “Not to you. And I get that. But do you know what day you found out? What day you texted me? Because I swear to you, Bellamy, that I didn’t get it.” He lowers his head. “I would’ve responded. I swear it.”

“It’s okay that you didn’t. I’m fine. I’ll be fine. I—”

“Dammit, Bellamy. Listen to me.” He steps toward me again. “I would’ve responded.”

*But you didn’t.*

“You don’t owe me anything,” I tell him. “We were friends a long time ago. That’s it. You have no responsibility to me.”

He shakes his head. “I’ve always had a responsibility to you. Don’t be dense.”

My eyes nearly fall out of my head.

“Remember Bodhi? That fuckhead you dated when you were seventeen? I didn’t just crack him because I was jealous—although I probably was. I busted him in the face because I caught him out with another girl, and he had the nerve to say some unflattering bullshit about you.”

I stand. “Why are you telling me this now?”

“So you realize that you meant something to me *even then*,” he says, his eyes growing wide as if he’s as surprised to hear the words as I am. “So you understand that I would never, *would never, Bellamy*, not be there for you.”

My jaw hits the floor as I try to absorb this information. I don’t give a crap about Bodhi now. I didn’t even really care about him then. ‘*So you realize that you meant something to me even then*’—that’s a lot to digest.

I can’t process all of this right now. Not when my brain was already mush when this whole thing started tonight. The only thing I can pick out—the only thing that I know for sure—is that Coy has had many opportunities to stick around, and he never has.

Our relationship could be enemies-to-lovers, but it’s always heavy on the enemies and light on the lovers.

“I texted you the night you won the Honors award,” I tell him, my voice staying nice and even. “It was a couple of hours before the show went on air. I just got home, and I got Dad settled inside, and I came out here and had a breakdown.”

He bites his lip.

“And that was it. You walked off the boat on the Fourth before that without saying goodbye, and then you blew off my text. I decided that night I would never give you that kind of access to me again.”

The truth hangs in the air. The tension is thick. We stare at each other like two adversaries pulled together with strings.

I wish I could run into his arms and nestle my face against his chest.

But I can't.

And I don't.

Coy forces a swallow. "The day of the Honors awards, I didn't have my phone all day. And when I got it back that night, it was so blown up that I didn't even try to go through it. Everyone that ever had my number sent me texts, calls, direct messages. It was insane." He grips the back of a chair. "I got a sponsorship the next day from a different service provider anyway, so I just used the new number. I never sorted through that barrage of messages."

I consider this. It might be true. It could be true. I remember Boone telling me about a new number shortly after that, but I didn't save it. I was too hurt. And when Coy called me a couple of weeks later, it was from an unusual number.

But still ...

His gaze pins me in place. "And for the record, I walked off that Fourth of July because you wanted me to."

"What?"

"I tried to tell you I wanted ..." He closes his eyes. "I held you that night and told you that I'd always be there. I told you to tell me if you needed me, and you rolled over and went to sleep."

"Because I knew you would leave anyway."

"You didn't give me a chance."

"Why would I, Coy? I'd given you everything I had to give, and it wasn't enough to keep your interest."

He shoves off the chair, sending it rattling against the table. He looks at me with fire in his eyes. "What's that mean?"

My cheeks heat with a mixture of embarrassment and fury. I don't want to do this, but I might as well get it over with.

*What else do I have to lose?*

“That means I gave you everything,” I say slowly. “My first kiss. My virginity,” I say, ignoring the shock on Coy's face. “My heart on that boat and my vulnerability when I needed someone and dared to ask for help.”

He pulls his hands over his face.

Emboldened by my declaration and freed from the weight of the truth, my entire being feels lighter. I keep going because I'm too tired to care. I continue because it'll be one war that I can end tonight and then move on from.

I suck in a breath as his eyes find mine again.

“I used to name all of my boy dolls after you,” I tell him. “I had a journal when I was eight, and I would practice writing Bellamy Mason in it every day, over and over.”

I close my eyes and let my anxiety settle.

“The older we got, the more I realized that you and I would never be a thing. That giving you my virginity wasn't enough to keep your eyes on me. That I was just another girl—maybe less.”

“Bellamy, that's not true. I had no idea ...”

“Then you weren't paying attention.” I shrug. “And, yes, on the boat that Fourth of July, I did pull away because I saw the writing on the wall. Your phone was going off the entire night, and I knew I couldn't compete with whatever Nashville had to offer you. So, I took what I could and knew that would be the end of it. And that's okay. I made that choice.”

*And I think I've hated you for that choice ever since. Because it really wasn't a choice. It was a necessity.*

He forces a swallow. “I can't say I would've stayed if that's what you would've wanted. Actually, I know I would've gone anyway. But things could've been different.”

I shake my head. “No. They are the way they are because that’s how it’s meant to be. I’m just a silly girl who’s always been in ...”

I catch myself a moment too late.

Words topple out of my mouth—a nonsensical string of phrases that only exist to deflect from the singular phrase I let slip far enough to out myself.

It’s one thing I should’ve kept tight to my chest.

Coy stalks around the table, his eyes dark and hooded. There’s a fire in them that I haven’t seen since the night on the boat when he took my hand and led me upstairs.

He knows where I was going with that, and my ramble afterward didn’t cover it.

I’m glued to the spot on the floor as he approaches me. My mouth goes dry.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

I try to come up with a deflection, a way to save myself from whatever is about to happen. But before my brain decides to work, Coy is standing in front of me.

“What were you going to say?” he asks.

“It was nothing.”

“Say it,” he demands.

“It was nothing.”

He lifts my chin with the tip of his finger. The contact sends chills up my spine.

His eyes drill into mine, holding them hostage as he searches them for an answer to an unasked question.

“I will pick you up and throw you over my shoulder again,” he says, the corner of his lip twitching. “And I will throw you into the pool.”

“Oh, that’s scary.”

He grins, trailing a finger down the side of my face. “Tell me what you were going to say,” he whispers.

I weigh my options. I could continue to argue with Coy, but the damage is done. I'll have to deal with the fallout anyway.

So, I suck in a deep, nervous breath and give him a version of what I was going to say.

"I'm just a silly girl who's always had a thing for the boy next door," I whisper back.

His grin falters before growing again. He cups both sides of my face with his palms.

I hold my breath, awaiting his reaction.

Coy knows that's not what I was going to say. I can see it in the twinkle in his eye. But he seems to take pity on me and lets it slide.

"You wanna know something?" he asks.

"Probably not."

He chuckles. "I'm just a crazy guy who's always had a thing for the hot, beautiful, and sexy girl next door."

"You have a neighbor like that?"

He tries not to laugh but fails miserably.

My cheeks heat as his words settle against my heart. I normally brush off sentiments like this from guys, figuring they're just a line to get me in bed.

Usually, they are.

But I've known Coy Mason long enough to be able to determine when he's full of shit. And when he's telling the truth.

*And this? This line that I never thought I'd hear come from his sweet, kissable lips?*

He's telling the truth.

Mountains of tension and stress float away. If it's just for right now, that's okay. It's a relief to have things feel like they're right where they should be.

I exhale, letting my body sag forward. Coy holds me steady.

“I’ve got you,” he says. “Okay? *I’ve got you.*”

There’s a gravity in his words, a double entendre that peppers my heart.

“No more bullshit,” he says earnestly. “No more assuming. No more miscommunication. Got it?”

I nod. “That works both ways. Because I told you about my dad. You just didn’t see it.”

“Of course. You’re right. That works both ways.” He takes a deep breath. “I know you have a lot going on, Bells. More than I realized, and that’s on me. But it’s on you that you didn’t tell me.”

“I can agree with that.”

He strokes my cheeks with his thumbs. “I want to be here for you. I want to be your friend. I want to ... be lots of things, okay? I don’t ... I don’t know ...”

I raise a finger to his lips and press it against them. “I don’t know either. And we’re probably not going to figure it out right now. I mean, I still kind of hate you.” I wink at him. “So let’s just ...”

“Start over?”

“Nah, not start over. Maybe we forgive and forget?” I bite my lip. “Well, maybe not forget everything. There are a few nights I’d like to remember.”

“You are the most confusing and infuriating girl I’ve ever met,” he says, narrowing his eyes playfully.

“Yeah, well, you’re the most frustrating and irritating man I know.”

He grins before leaning down until his mouth is a hairbreadth from mine, and his breath is hot against my lips.

I close my eyes and will his mouth to touch mine—if even for a moment.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he says, the words brushing against my skin. “If you want to object, now is the time. Otherwise, I’m taking it as consent, and I don’t think I’ll be able to stop.”

“Coy ...”

His thumbs dig into my cheeks. “Yeah?”

I open my eyes as my heart threatens to burst out of my ribs. “Kiss me.”

And he does.



TWELVE

# BELLAMY

He kisses me. *Barely*.

His lips brush against mine in the faintest, least satisfying way.

“What the hell was that?” I ask him, my eyes still closed.

“What do you mean?” He breathes the words against my mouth. “Did you want more?”

My body screams at him in a silent demand for attention.

I twist my body, moving it around in hopes that I can find some relief to the tension this asshole just created.

Coy leans back, his eyes twinkling. “Are you frustrated?”

“Yes. But it’ll help when I throw your ass out of here.”

He laughs. “You think you can do that?”

I give him a look that questions his sanity.

“We’re gonna get one thing straight before anything transpires here,” he says, running his hands down my neck, over my shoulders, and down my arms.

I shiver at the contact. “Huh?”

“You’re going to stop being so damn difficult.”

His hands drop away from my body, and finally, I can think again.

I take a step back. “Maybe I have demands,” I say, thinking on the fly. “Maybe I have something we need to get straight too.”

He grins. “Give it to me, sugar.”

*That’s what I want to do, asshole.*

As if he reads my mind, he bursts out laughing.

I roll my eyes. “You are so predictable.”

“Me? Am I predictable? I know exactly what you were thinking, and that defines predictability.”

He shrugs with a playful arrogance that only makes me want to one-up him. He’s not getting the power position. Not in my house.

I shrug back, mocking his gesture to me, and head to my bedroom. He follows. I don’t point out how predictable that is.

“You really didn’t get my text message that night?” I ask him, flipping on the bedroom light.

“Nope.”

He stands in the doorway and leans against the frame.

I face the full-length mirror so that he can see my face in the reflection. After holding his gaze for a moment too long—just enough time for him to be confident that my actions are, indeed, intentional—I lift the hem of my shirt and tug it over my head.

His pupils widen, but he doesn’t move.

“Oh,” I say as if I’m not disrobing mid conversation. “And you didn’t know I was a virgin?”

I hold his gaze again for a solid second before unfastening my bra.

“Nope,” he says with a pop on the p. His gaze settles on my beaded nipples in the reflection.

“That makes me feel less hateful toward you,” I say.

I unfasten the button on my jeans, yank the zipper down, and slide the denim down my legs. Coy’s eyes follow the movement as I kick them into a corner with my shirt and bra.

“That makes me feel a lot of ways toward you.” He widens his eyes for effect as he watches my fingers dip beneath the

waistband of my red lace panties. “May I ask what the fuck you’re doing?”

I drag my finger under the fabric before letting it snap back against my skin. The sound makes Coy flinch.

“What?” I ask, raising a brow as I watch him in the mirror. “Did you want more?”

He sighs, fighting a smile, as he realizes I’m giving his words back to him.

I pout as I lean forward, holding his gaze, and pull the lace down my legs as slowly as I can. Once they hit the floor, I stand back up and kick them away as well.

“Bellamy ...” He groans but doesn’t walk toward me.

“Are you frustrated, Coy?” I toss him a wink. “That’s what you asked me, isn’t it?”

“I’ll be less frustrated when I throw your ass—”

I squeal, interrupting his sentence, as he picks me up and throws me on the bed. Pillows bounce as I make contact with the blankets. My hands go to my breasts as they bounce too.

Coy stands at the edge of the bed and does quick work of ridding himself of his clothes.

My mouth waters as he bares his solid, muscled chest and his chiseled abdomen. The lines on his hips point to his thick, hard cock. A bead of precum glistens at the tip.

My fingers skim down my stomach and toward my clit.

“Don’t,” he warns.

I don’t listen. I do slow down, though, because I’m not exactly sure what to do about the intensity of Coy’s gaze.

“Dammit, Bells. I mean it. If you touch yourself, I’ll get dressed and leave.”

I think he means it. My fingers stop just above the pebble that aches for relief.

My thighs are sticky from the wetness. My body temperature soars. My heart beats between my legs. All of my

blood pools in my vagina, causing my clit to swell.

“I don’t have a condom with me,” he says through gritted teeth. “I kind of want you to have one laying around, and I kind of fucking don’t.”

“Why?” I grin. “Do you not like the idea of me fucking someone else in this bed?”

His chuckle is deep. Unamused. More of a warning than a gesture of entertainment.

Because I’m clearly a masochist, it turns me on.

But, because I’m also unwilling to piss him off enough to ruin this before it even gets started, I acquiesce.

“There are condoms on the bedside table,” I say, fluttering my eyelashes. “I just bought them. You’ll get to open the box.”

He’s unsure if I’m joking or not. But when he finds the box with intact cellophane, he grins triumphantly.

I don’t tell him that was in case Suit came over this weekend. It seems like the best choice at the moment.

He makes quick work out of sheathing himself. I do quick work out of scooting back on the bed.

My breaths are quick and shallow. I can’t stop smiling. Just as I think Coy’s about to climb onto the mattress, hover over me, and punish me for joking around with his cock, he doesn’t.

Instead, the cheeky bastard crawls across the bed and stops at my feet.

I hold out my hands to prompt an explanation.

“Do you know what I think?” he asks, placing his hands on the spots where my legs meet my torso.

“I’m hoping you’re just thinking about getting inside me.”

He grins.

His fingers press into my skin. His palms are heavy, and he shoves me toward the headboard as he stretches out on his stomach on the mattress.

“Coy, for heaven’s sake,” I say, threatening to touch myself again.

My wrist is snapped up by his large hand before I even get close.

“I remember someone telling me how they liked it when I spread them apart with my fingers ...”

He runs a finger up my slit before separating my folds. The air is cool against my heated flesh, and I wiggle to try to secure some kind of contact—any contact—before my head explodes.

The bastard positions himself, so there’s no way in the world I can even accidentally brush my bud against his fingers.

I moan, arching my back off the bed.

“I also remember someone saying,” he says, scooping his free hand under my ass and holding it in the air, “that they liked me to lick them.”

I gasp and look down to see his eyes sparkling with humor.

“What?” I ask, pointing toward my very ready and very open vagina. “What’s the hold-up?”

He smirks. “What do you want, Bellamy?”

“What do you mean, ‘*What do you want, Bellamy?*’?”

“What do you want me to do to you?” His eyes stay glued to mine as he blows a breath across my overstimulated sex. “What do you want me to do to this little pussy?”

I throw my head back to the bed and try not to scream.

The anticipation is killing me.

His touch is destroying my willpower.

His refusal to give me what we both want is driving me insane.

His hand cupping my ass moves so that his thumb presses against the rim.

I yelp, trying to squirm, but he somehow holds me still.

“If you don’t lick me,” I warn him, “I’m going to—*oh, my fuck!*”

I squeal as his tongue dips into my part and slides up to my clit. He flicks it with just enough force to cause my legs to fall to the sides.

He chuckles against me. Even that is foreplay at this point.

I reach for his head and lace my fingers in his hair.

“Do you like that?” he asks, his words whispers against my overstimulated body.

“Yes,” I moan as I lift my hips to his face.

“Are you going to be nice now?”

“Probably not—*fuck you,*” I yell as he sucks my clit into his mouth and holds it in place.

A blast of colors spills through my visions as he flicks the trapped clit with his tongue.

“Coy. *I can’t .... Yes. Mhm ...*”

I can’t focus on anything. It’s all too much.

His thumb is pressing harder against my ass. Two fingers are stroking deep inside my pussy with a rhythm that’s *almost* enough to put me over the edge. His tongue is twirling around my wetness, practically writing the damn alphabet as he works me closer and closer to the brink of an orgasm.

“Look at me,” he says before sucking on me again.

“*Ahh ...*” I open my eyes and look right into his. It’s a simple, unexpected act that delivers an angle I’m unprepared for. “*Oh, shit.*”

My hips flex, grinding on his face and fingers. He gives in—finally—and works his fingers against the anterior wall of my pussy.

He removes his hand from beneath me and palms one of my breasts. His fingers work my beaded nipple, pinching it until I yell out.

“Coy!”

My body shakes against his fingers, my juices flowing across his face. His eyes hood as he watches me come apart at the seams.

Every muscle in my body flexes. My legs shake. My eyes roll back in my head as he continues to lavish attention on every known erogenous zone on the human body.

Finally, after what feels like a hundred lifetimes, I collapse in a heap of sweaty, sticky, completely satisfied completion.

Coy crawls up the bed and lays by me with a smirk the size of Texas.

“You’re proud of yourself, aren’t you?” I ask him.

He nods and laughs as he wipes his face off with the edge of my comforter.

“Ew,” I say, smacking his bicep. “Don’t do that!”

“This is the least of your worries.” He drops the blanket. “That wet spot is as big as your smile right now.”

My cheeks flush as he dips his still-damp lips down to mine and kisses me sweetly.

“Now,” he says in a quick turn of events, “I’m not finished.”

I giggle as he hops off the bed and grabs my ankles. In one swift movement, I slide across the blankets to the edge.

He looks down at me. For the first time since this all started, I feel slightly self-conscious. My brain begins to sort out every scar, dimple, and roll on my body.

He notices.

“If you ever start to feel any certain way about yourself,” he says, “I want you to remember the look on my face right now.” He gives me a soft, simple grin. “Because this is the look of a man who can’t believe he gets to be inside you.”

I can’t stop the smile that splits my cheeks, nor can I halt the stupid pride that probably radiates to Mars.



“Well, it’s not like you’ve not been inside me before,” I joke. “I guess I’m pretty forgettable after all.”

He plants his hands on either side of me and peers into my eyes. “Try *unforgettable*.”

I think he’s going to kiss me again. Instead, he nips at my bottom lip with his teeth, causing me to yelp. Then he flips me on my stomach and yanks my knees up and my ass backward.

“This one is going to be quick because I’m a chump and have waited entirely too long for this.” He growls an extended, guttural response as he slides his cock in me.

I’m unprepared.

“Don’t be quick,” I beg, spreading my knees wider apart. “That feels *so good*.”

“I got you off first.”

He fills me up and holds the position, letting the tip of his cock press against the back wall of my vagina.

I rock my hips back. “I want to get off again.”

“You’re so demanding,” he says, sliding out and then quickly shoving himself back in.

“You’re so ... *delicious*,” I hiss as he begins to find a rhythm.

He chuckles. “That’s a nice change in attitude.”

“Just give me the dick and watch me be a doll.”

He snorts. “I want to make a joke, but ... *I ... can’t ... concentrate*.”

I arch my back and squeeze myself around him. The angle hits me perfectly, and I feel the familiar buildup coming quick and hard.

“It’s your lucky day,” I say, my voice shaking.

“I’d have to fucking agree.” His fingers bite into my hips. “I’m going to come, Bells.”

I squeeze him as hard as I can. The tightening of my muscles causes more friction against my G-spot, and I hit the

top of the climb and fall over the edge.

“Dammit,” I yell as my body turns to fire.

His growl comes low and hard as his tempo picks up pace.

I’ve never felt more desired in my entire life.

Before I know what’s happening, he’s laying me gently against the blankets and kissing the top of my head.

I open my eyes and look at him.

“How was that?” he asks cheekily.

I shrug. “Not bad.”

“Oh.” He pretends to consider this. “Memorable, though?”

“Definitely. You’re in my top three all day.”

He takes a pillow and hits me with it. I giggle as I take it away from him and hold it to my chest.

His smile lights up a spot in my heart that was dark before tonight. And even if he leaves—when he goes—at least I had this time with him. At least I know the truth.

And at least I know that I’ll have him in my life in some way. Maybe that’s better than none at all.

“Do you have plans tonight?” he asks. “No other men coming by?”

“Not tonight,” I tease.

He narrows his eyes. “Well, then, how about we get cleaned up, order some pizza, and then go for another round in a couple of hours?”

“It takes you a couple of hours to get ready again?”

“Hey, be nice. I’m getting old these days.”

I sit up and touch the side of his face. “If this is you being old, then I’ll put you in my top two.”

Jumping off the bed before he can grab me, I giggle all the way to the bathroom.

THIRTEEN

## COY

The bed shakes as Bellamy flops down beside me.

I groan. It's partially because she decided to put on a yellow satin nightgown after the last round and somewhat because getting off that many times has wholly depleted me.

She gets situated beside me and grins. "What's wrong?"

Her voice is cheery, her tone snarky, as she asks the question she already knows the answer to.

"Are you tired?" She draws a figure eight on my stomach. "Did I wear you out?"

I close my eyes and enjoy the ease that's enveloped us tonight.

We've never had this simplicity. I doubt it'll last long because it is us, after all. But for however long we can maintain this easy banter and playfulness, I'm all about it.

"You're top four," I joke.

She slaps my stomach. I laugh, bending forward to cover my skin from another whack that's probably coming.

I look over to see her making a face while she squirms away from me. I lunge toward her, wrapping my arm around her far side and dragging her into me.

Nestling her against my chest, I tuck her head beneath mine and exhale.

*God, if you could pause time right now, that would be great.*

We both face the window, our legs laced together, and our arms wrapped around one another's. Our breathing finds a rhythm as we lay in the quiet of Bellamy's bedroom.

"I'm going to have to do the walk of shame at some point," I tell her. "Think my mom will mind?"

She laughs. "You're too old to care what your mom thinks."

"Um, no. Never." I make a face even though she can't see it. "I always value my mom's opinion, thank you."

"Are you her favorite?"

"Me?" I snort. "That would be Oliver."

"I didn't think it was ever the second child?"

"It is in our family." I pull her tighter if at all possible. "He's probably the best looking out of us all."

"I beg to differ."

She can't see my grin, but it's there.

"Oliver is also probably the smartest out of us all. Well, I don't know. Wade's pretty damn smart. It might be a toss-up there. Oliver also has the best balance of personality. He's funny like Boone, can control a boardroom like Holt, can crunch numbers like Wade, and can talk his way out of about anything."

"Like you?"

"Like me."

She laughs. "I don't know if I agree with all of that, but I see your point."

"You have a thing for Oliver now?"

"Maybe."

I hold both of her hands with one of mine and tickle the crook of her hip with my free one. She shrieks, squirming in my arms and sashaying her ass into my cock.

"Be careful," I whisper in her ear as I stop tickling her. "I might get a fourth wind."

She gives her ass one final shake but relents.

We lay quietly. I wonder what Bellamy is thinking, but I don't dare ask. Her head is a scary place.

But, then again, so is her life.

Instinctively, I hug her tighter.

She smells like amber and feels like silk, and I'm not sure how I'm ever going to crawl out of his bed and be the person I was when I climbed in. This feeling is every love song I've ever sang, every emotion I've tried to elicit with a constructed lyric. It's calm in the midst of an unpredictable world. It's safe when nothing else feels solid. It's like the last piece of the puzzle that you find under the rug snapped into place, and the hours of searching for that one tiny piece finally pays off.

Now that I've experienced it, I'm not sure how I'll ever be with someone who doesn't evoke this kind of reaction.

But no one else ever has.

I'm not sure anyone else ever will.

I press a soft kiss to the top of Bellamy's head.

Her phone buzzes on the nightstand in front of her. I release my grip on her so she can reach it.

She looks at the screen and laughs. Her fingers fly over the keypad.

I'm curious, but I don't want to ask. It's not my business.

But I can't take it either.

"Is that Riss?" I prod.

"Nope."

"Boone?"

"Nuh-uh."

My lips twist in frustration as she looks at me over her shoulder. Her hair hits the middle of her back. I wind it around my fist and tug her head backward.

She grins. "What?"

“Who is it?” I ask, pretending to grumble.

“Suit.”

The words are crisp and cheery. This mischief in Bellamy’s eyes tells me that Suit and I aren’t going to be friends.

“Suit, huh?” I snatch the phone out of her hands.

She gasps and reaches for it. I roll over and look at the screen.

SUIT: You didn’t get back with me.

Me: Sorry. Got busy.

Suit: Want to meet up tonight?

Me: Sorry. Busy.

Suit: Tomorrow?

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?” I ask as she tries to climb over my side and grab the phone. “What kind of name is Suit, anyway?”

“It’s what I call him.”

I look at her in suppressed amusement. “Let me guess—he wears a suit.”

She nods, laughing.

“So, what am I saved under? Stud?”

“You are not saved under anything.”

“I’m not in here? At all?”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t save your number.”

I pout.

“I hate you, remember?”

I snort. “I think we’ve established that is untrue.”

“I don’t hate your cock.”

“Facts.”

My thumbs swipe across the keypad. Bells tries her best to see what I’m doing, but I block her with my shoulder.

“Coy ...”

“I’m adding my number.”

“That better be all you’re doing.”

I finish my little project and hand her phone back to her with a smug grin of satisfaction.

She scrolls through her address book and sees my number saved as Stud. She rolls her eyes.

“It fits,” I say, shrugging.

She opens her mouth to respond when her phone dings again. I bite my lip as she looks at the reply and brace myself for the punch that hits me in record time.

“Ouch!” I chuckle, rubbing my shoulder where she blasted me with her fist.

She looks at her screen and reads the text I sent from her phone to Suit out loud.

“I’m fucking someone else now. Don’t text me again. Coy!” She hits me again. “Why did you do that?”

*I don’t know.*

It was a huge overstep on my part, and I’m aware of that. But at the same time, it doesn’t feel wrong. Not even a little bit.

I reach for her slowly, carefully, and take her in my arms. And then I hold her against me again.

“You’re much more cooperative when you’re in my arms,” I tell her.

She hums with her cheek pressed against my arm.

“Was I out of line doing that?” I ask her.

“Probably.”



“Huh.”

She turns her head so she can see me. “Aren’t you going to apologize?”

“No. Why would I do that? I’m not sorry.”

She rolls her eyes and turns her head again. “Just because we had this night together doesn’t mean I’m never having sex with anyone ever again.”

Her body stills against mine as I let that simple sentence resonate in my brain.

She’s right, of course. She’ll end up in bed with another man, and it’ll probably be some asshole like Suit who doesn’t give a flying fuck about her.

That pisses me off.

I hold her tighter.

I try to construct a response that fits the situation but also isn’t a lie. But no matter how I phrase it, it fails.

“It’s okay,” she says quietly.

“What’s okay?”

“I know you have to leave.” She looks at me over her shoulder again. “That’s what you’re thinking about, aren’t you? That you have to leave, and you’re afraid I’ll be mad again.”

“Kind of.”

She smiles sadly. “I won’t be. Unlike before, I feel like we’ve laid everything on the table. And ...” She turns away and presses a soft kiss to my forearm. “I have a lot going on here to worry too much about it. You know?”

My heart breaks at the pain in her voice. You can hear the scab being ripped off her wound. Being together allowed her to escape it for the past few hours. But now that an end is in sight again, her reality festers again.

I have a reality too—one with multi-million-dollar contracts and agreements and tour dates and recording

schedules. Or at least, I will have all of that. All of those things aren't possible in Savannah.

We both know that.

I can sense her pulling away from me emotionally. I hate it, but I don't have an answer or a solution to offer her.

"You know what?" I ask.

"What?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. You have a lot on your plate, and so do I," I say, even though my shit feels a whole lot less important than hers. "You might wake up in the morning and decide you hate me again, too. Then none of this stuff will matter."

She nods. "Except that you've ruined my booty call with Suit. I'll have to find someone else to service me quickly."

Her words hit a spark deep inside me. I roll her over on her back.

Hovering over her, I stare into the blues of her eyes.

"If you ever need anything, you call me, and I'll either talk to you, come home, or fly you to me," I tell her. "You wanna fight, fuck, or flee your life for a while—I'm your man."

She grins. "You're in the top four of them, anyway."

A slow smile spreads across my cheeks. "You little shit."

She laughs. It's music to my ears.

I reach over to the nightstand again.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"I think you need to be reminded who your number one is." I grab a condom out of the box and flop back on the bed.

She rolls onto her side and watches me rip the wrapper.

"I thought you were exhausted. And old," Bellamy teases me.

"I am. Both."

"So, how are you going another round?"

I roll the condom over my cock yet again.

“Because you, beautiful girl, don’t realize how gorgeous you are and how impossible it is not to want to fuck you when you pretend I’m not the best.”

She grins. “Who said I’m pretending?”

I lean over and kiss her. She melts into me, just like I knew—and hoped—she would.

“You just did,” I whisper.

She bites her lip to hide a smile, but I still see it. I see so many things buried in her sky-blue orbs that I could get lost there for days.

I don’t know how to sort all of this out or what it means—if anything—for the two of us. I just know that right now, there is absolutely nowhere else I want to be.

Bellamy has always drawn me toward her. How did I walk away without looking back?

Or did I look back and not have my eyes open?

She positions herself over me. Her nightgown is gathered in one hand off to the side.

“What?” she asks.

I wish I could tell her how I feel. I wish I could promise her all of the things I want to promise her right now.

That I’ll always be there for her.

That she’ll never be alone.

That I’d kill someone if they hurt her and that I love her.

*And maybe I always have.*

A shiver runs down my spine.

*Take care of my little girl ...*

*I will look after her, Joe. I’m just not sure exactly how yet.*

But I don’t say those things because it’s not the right time. Honestly, it might never be.

“Nothing,” I say instead.

“Good. You talk too much.”

I laugh as she sinks herself onto me, and I lose myself to this beautiful woman yet again. And maybe in a way I can never take back.

FOURTEEN

# BELLAMY

The ice in my cup clinks together.

I stand beside Larissa, turning my head side to side as I try to see what she sees.

The hedges in front of us are overgrown, and the lawn needs reseeding. Patches of grass are missing, and the deep, dark soil is exposed.

Larissa moseys her way around the property. She has a notebook in her hand and a pencil in the other as she sketches ideas on how to transform and restore this once-magnificent property.

I follow my friend around like a puppy and drink my iced coffee. I have nothing to contribute to her vision, no creative ideas to plant a colorful row of flowers or a windbreak on the north—something she said to me when we got here that still doesn't make sense.

But I tag along and tell her she's a genius because that's what best friends do. That and it's better than sitting at home, wondering what Coy is doing like some lovestruck teenager.

I turn away from the row of bushes Larissa is inspecting—like I look at cake—and take in the back of the early 1900s home. It oozes charm with its tall windows and faded bricks. The inconsistent colors make it imperfectly perfect.

I sip my drink and imagine the house lit up for Christmas. I envision white lights glowing from inside and scents of roast beef warming the air. I'm certain music was played inside the

walls, and I hope against all hope that they had cats. It's definitely a house for kittens.

The French doors leading from the living room swing open, and a woman in a tailored pastel pink skirt suit steps outside. Connie, as she introduced herself when we arrived, ushers an older couple onto the patio.

Connie gives us a little wave before turning back to the prospective buyers of the home.

"Just imagine this backyard all neat and tidy. Maybe with a large swimming pool and a barbecue to the right." Connie sweeps her hands through the air like Vanna White. "It would be fabulous."

*No, it would not.*

The man and woman standing next to Connie seem to agree with me. And whether Connie knows it or not, she's not convincing them to take a chance on this beautiful place that's falling into disrepair.

I should stay quiet and let Connie handle her business. None of this is my concern. Luckily for me and sadly for Connie, keeping my mouth shut is not how I operate.

"Don't put a pool there," I say, walking toward the patio. "You'll have leaves in it all the time. Besides, imagine having kids out here. You'd never get any rest."

Connie narrows her eyes. *Be patient, Connie girl.*

I have no idea what I'm doing, but this house needs a family. And, dammit, I'm going to get her one.

I turn around and take in the vastness of the space in the backyard. Ideas of what I would do with this property spring to life. Even though I'll never have either one, I let myself play.

"I'd do a pool over there," I say, pointing to an area to the left. "Can you imagine the water reflecting inside on summer days? And you could do a fence around it—in glass. How fun would that be?"

Larissa side-eyes me from the rose bushes, and I give her a bright smile. I can only imagine what's going through her head right now, knowing I don't have the slightest clue about landscape or design or selling houses.

Yet none of that deters me. I'm on a mission.

"What else would you do?" the woman asks, stepping to my side. "What would you do over there?"

"My friend Larissa—that's her over there," I say, pointing at Riss, "she's a landscape designer. I would have her create a version of a flower garden with minimal upkeep. No one wants to be out here pulling weeds."

"Dear heavens, no, they do not."

"And over here," I say, sweeping my hands to the right in my own version of a Vanna White, "this is where I'd put the barbecue and a firepit."

The woman's eyes go wide as she turns to look at her husband. "You love to grill out, Herbie. That would be so nice to have right out the back door."

I smile. "It would be perfect. The sun is blocked by the trees on that side so you wouldn't have to melt out here in the summer."

"I love it." The woman sticks her perfectly manicured hand my way. "I'm Janet. It's nice to meet you."

"My name is Bellamy. It's nice to meet you too."

She smiles at me as though we're old friends. "I love your ideas. They really make this estate feel more like home."

"You know what I'd really love to do out here?" I ask.

"Tell me."

"I'd put in an enclosed porch," I tell her. "I'd extend it the length of the house and use lots of windows that I could open in the spring and fall and really enjoy the weather without the mosquitos."

Janet clutches the strand of pearls around her neck. "I'm loving this. We could put your books out here, Herbie. You



could write out here.”

“But you’d have to put in a fireplace. You’d have to,” I tell them.

Janet and Herbie exchange a look before she turns back to me.

“Do you work for the realty company, Bellamy?” she asks.

“No,” I say, trying not to laugh. “I’m just here with my friend. I totally just butted into your conversation. I probably shouldn’t have done that.”

“What? Oh, no. I’m so glad you did.” She spins around and takes in another full-circle view of the backyard. When she stops, she’s facing me. “Did you see the kitchen? What would you do in there?”

I think about the layout that I saw through the windows.

“I’d totally do a fancy range of some kind because it’s really the focal point of the space,” I tell her. “And I’d keep as much of the original woodwork as I could. It’s just so beautiful. You can’t get that quality anymore.”

*Who am I? What do I know about the quality of woodwork?*

I ignore myself and keep marching forward.

“If I could get recessed lighting, I would. And I’d love a big farmhouse sink,” I add. “They’re deep and would be handy when the grandkids come over.”

I don’t know where that came from or even if these people have grandkids. It just slipped out like the most natural thing in the world, so I roll with it.

“You know, we could use your mother’s antique range in there,” Janet tells Herbie. “It’s been in storage for so long, and it’s such a shame.”

Herbie looks over his shoulder toward the kitchen windows. “That would be a nice tribute.”

Janet and her husband pause, looking at each other. Connie starts to panic and jumps into the mix.

“I love these ideas, Bellamy,” she coos. “Do you have any for the upstairs?”

*I haven't seen the upstairs, so no.* But, instead of saying that, I play along for the house's sake.

“A house like this needs a feature wall—something moody and earthy as soon as you get to the top of the stairs,” I say, using a home makeover episode I saw once. “And lots of plants so the outside feels like it's inside.”

Janet nods. “I love that. I can see it. I can feel it.”

Herbie crosses his arms over his chest. “Want to make an offer, Janet?”

“Could we?”

Connie springs to life. “I'm so, so glad you agree with me that this place is the perfect retirement home. Let's head to that kitchen and get the offer going.”

Herbie wraps an arm around his wife, and they disappear inside the back door. Connie waits until they're out of earshot before she leans toward me.

“You are good,” she says, nodding appreciatively. “Are you a realtor?”

“Me?” I laugh. “No. I literally know nothing about any of this. I just watch *House Hunters*.”

She laughs too. “I think you've missed your calling then. If you ever want to go into this business, you call me. Girl, you're gold.”

I nod like I hear that sort of thing all the time. She flashes me a megawatt smile worth seven-percent commission before heading inside to finish wooing her clients.

“Did she just say you're gold?” Larissa walks up to me and tries not to laugh. “I've officially heard it all.”

“I knew I liked Connie from the moment we met her.” I make a face. “But I do wonder about her realty skills. How

hard would it be to sell a house like this? You'd think you'd have a line of buyers begging for it."

Larissa shoves her notepad and pencil into her crossbody bag. Then she sighs. As she looks up, she says, "This place is really something, isn't it?"

"I think I fell in love with it today."

"I get it. It's the kind of house I dream about. I don't think Hollis is this type of house guy, though."

I arch a brow. "Are we thinking about a future with him? Because, if you are, I'm totally okay with that. I would wrap that boy up and put a bow on him if I were you and not me and I was into hot football player kind of guys."

She bumps me with her shoulder. "We're still so new, so I don't know. We have to finish our senior years of college, and there are a lot of things to figure out. But ..." She looks at me with stars in her eyes. "I can't imagine my life without him."

"Awwww."

"Stop that," she says, swatting at my shoulder.

"What? I think it's sweet."

She snorts. "Bellamy Davenport, you never think anything is sweet."

I follow her lead. We walk around the side of the house and toward the driveway.

"So, friend," she says as we approach her car. "I've given you all day to bring up your night last night, and you haven't. Now I have to prod."

"But do you? Do you have to?"

She nods. "Tell me. What's going on?"

"Who even told you? I didn't tell a soul. And I can't imagine that Coy went home and called Boone right away." I think about it. "Boys don't gossip like that, do they?"

She laughs. "I think they totally do gossip like that, but I really had no idea that anything happened for sure. You were

just in a great mood today, so I hedged my bets.”

“You tricked me!” I gasp. “You little devil.”

“I did trick you,” she says, still laughing. “But I like it. I like this version of you.”

*Yeah, well, me too.*

I’ve enjoyed having a reason to smile today. It has felt good to have a layer to my life that was fun and exciting. Getting little texts from Coy throughout the day has been a sweet distraction from everything else going on in my life.

*And the sex? Fucking phenomenal.*

I’ve had a lot of sex with a lot of men, and I can admit that every element of last night was beyond what I—of all people—thought was possible.

I wasn’t sure if that was because it was Coy, and there’s so much history between us. I thought maybe that added an unexpected element that somehow leveled it up. Sent my orgasms flying. Sent *me* flying in some blissed-out state of happiness. Rejuvenated something deep inside me with every touch.

*I felt loved.*

But it wasn’t that. It wasn’t love. It was convenience or passion or a response to a situation with someone you know intimately.

It was that for him.

And I’m okay with that.

*I think.*

We make it to the front of her car and stop. We don’t open the doors or get in—just stand there looking at each other.

“We secured a peace treaty,” I tell her.

“Did you say a penis treaty?”

My jaw drops in faux surprise. “What has gotten into you?”

“Hollis’s penis, actually.”

“You’re such a child,” I tell her, laughing.

She sighs. “So what happened? What brought on the white flag?”

“He came over to see my dad. And I kind of was mid-meltdown, anyway ...”

She furrows her brows. “You had a meltdown because he came to see your dad?”

“No. I think ... I think it was more of a confluence of events that really brought it on,” I say, impressed with myself for knowing the word *confluence*. “I was still mulling over seeing Coy at all.” *And dealing with our kiss*. “Seeing him being nice always affects me because I forget so often that it’s possible.”

“He’s not a bad guy, Bells.”

*I know.*

“I guess I was already overwhelmed by everything that’s going on ...”

My voice trails off as I think of reading the letter from Dad’s doctor a few minutes before seeing Coy walk into Dad’s house. The date for his PET scan is in a couple of days and getting the pre-approval paperwork from his insurance company was enough to throw me completely off-balance.

But I don’t tell that to Riss. I don’t tell her much about my dad at all.

Cancer is a millstone on everyone and not just the patient. It has a way of trickling its venom to anyone that hears about it. The last thing I want to do is to spread the burden to my friends.

Besides, if Riss and Boone know just how bad it gets, it would put a shadow on every interaction we have. It would be impossible to grab a drink or go get a pizza or paint our nails and watch trash television without them worrying if my phone is going to ring or if I’m going to cry or if it’s appropriate to make a joke.

It's hard to explain to people that life has to keep going on. You don't have cancer pop up in your life, and all of a sudden, everything stops so that you can deal with it. Days go by, jobs have to be performed, dinner has to be made—things continue to go, and it's nice to be able to have one space that you can escape to and have everything feel normal for an evening or a weekend.

And that's Boone and Larissa for me. And it's imperative that I don't dirty that up.

“Anyway,” I say, getting back to the conversation, “I think I was just already emotional and in my feels. It's fine. We're fine.”

I can't say that without smiling, even though it doesn't actually mean anything. *We're fine* implies there is a *we*. Even though that's not true, it feels good to say.

He might have texted Suit back to fuck off. He might have promised me to always be there for me. And I believe that he meant both things. *I know that he did*. But it doesn't change the circumstances of our lives, and I really don't know how we could work around that.

That is, *if* he wanted to get around it in that kind of way.

I close my eyes and feel that breeze in my hair and the sun on my face. The birds chirp in the trees overhead. If I listen closely enough, I can imagine the sound of little kids laughing and, if I pay close enough attention, I can smell dinner cooking from the house in front of us.

It's an odd sensation.

When I open my eyes, Larissa is watching me with a curious look.

“You know,” I say, opening the passenger's side door. “If I ever did get crazy and decide to have a real relationship and get married and a family and all of that someday—I think I'd like to do all of that in a place like this.”

I look at Larissa over the roof of the car. Shock paints her features. I get it. I've never said anything like that before.

“I’m full of surprises today,” I mutter, climbing in the car and closing the door.

I’m also full of a wistfulness that makes me uncomfortable.

*If only my life would stop throwing me losses, maybe that wistfulness could become hope.*

I sigh.

*If only ...*

FIFTEEN



## COY

“It’s no wonder you go to Mom and Dad’s house to eat,” I say, looking at the contents of Boone’s refrigerator.

A jar of pickles, a block of cream cheese that looks suspicious, a half of a Snickers bar, and a jug of lemonade that I would bet the farm that he’s drunk straight from the container.

“I just want to point out that I’m not the one living there,” he says from his perch on the counter.

“I’m not living there either, asshole.”

Boone’s legs swing back and forth like a little kid.

“Wanna go to Vegas next weekend?” He grins. “Might be fun. Would get a suite and—”

I hold out my hand to stop him. “We’re not going to Vegas. I have enough fucking problems.”

“Coy—Vegas solves problems, brother. It doesn’t create them.”

I raise a brow. “Do you not remember what happened the last time we were in Vegas?”

“Hey, now. That wasn’t my fault. She came up to me and grabbed my hand and led me to the elevator. How was I supposed to know that she was married and pissed off at her husband?”

“I don’t know,” I say, sarcasm thick in my tone. “Maybe engage her in conversation. Or notice she was wearing a

wedding ring.”

He runs a hand through the air. “Too much work. The burden of ethical actions in that situation falls on her. Not me.”

I hop on the countertop next to the sink. The granite is cold and hard.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell him. “You lived *and* got to keep all of your teeth.”

“Barely.”

We laugh.

Sunshine pours in the kitchen window. I angle my face to the light and enjoy the warmth from the sun.

I felt lighter when I woke up this morning in Bellamy’s bed. My dad’s jokes were funnier while we played nine holes of golf before breakfast. Wade’s texts about a new tax law that apparently affects me weren’t even as annoying as usual.

I forgot how it felt to live in Savannah. *Is it this way all the time or just because I’m visiting? Or is it that, for once, I’m here for more than a day?*

My brothers do golf a lot. They take turns with Gramps on Wednesday nights, sitting with him and playing chess or shelling beans in the summer. Mom makes lots of family dinners, and they’ve all been known to fly to Aspen to go skiing at a moment’s notice.

Life in Nashville is fun, too. Just ... different.

And there’s no Bellamy there.

*Have I ever thought of that before now? Have I ever compared the company I keep with Bells?*

That would be a hard no.

Although ... no one has ever captivated me or made me think about things extending past a night or a weekend.

Only Bells.

I pick at my cuticles as I wonder what she's doing. We've texted on and off today. Soon, that will be all I get of her when I return home. I considered for half of a second that she might go with me, but I can't even ask her that. Not with Joe so sick.

I sigh.

"I really thought that you being a hot-shot country music star was really going to make my life better," Boone says, pulling my attention back to him. "But it hasn't, and honestly, I'm a little disappointed."

I burst out laughing. "I'm sorry my life hasn't been convenient enough for ya, Boone."

"Me fucking too." He winks at me. "So, what's happening on the music front these days?"

I look at my brother like the buzzkill that he is. "Do we have to talk about that?"

He shrugs. "Nope. Of course not. Let's talk about Bells instead."

I roll my head on my shoulders and look at the ceiling.

There's no use in talking about *the music front*, as he called it. There's nothing I can do about it anyway.

Meadow is in control. It's all in her hands. I've always settled into that idea and appreciated that I didn't have to worry about shit.

In a strange twist of events, now her being in control *is* the reason I'm worried.

*Fucking hell.*

"I heard through the grapevine—the one named Larissa—that you and our other mutual friend, Bellamy, had a little playdate last night. Now, I don't want the details of that because Bells is like my sister and not some fuck-a-friend like she is to you. I would appreciate a generalization of how the evening played out so that I know whether to duck when I see her again. I have to look out for myself here."

He smiles cheekily.

“That’s what we all expect out of you, Boone,” I say with a sigh.

“At least I’m consistent. Now you, on the other hand ...”

I ignore his little jab and pick up a bottle of dish soap instead. I twirl it around in my hands as I ponder my response to his inquiry.

There are a couple of things that I’ve been able to discern from this whole getting-on-the-same-page-with-Bellamy thing. One is that I cannot stop thinking about her. It’s a crazy, nearly obsessive thing, and everything that I do or say or think brings me back to her in some way.

Case in point: Mom asked me if I wanted blueberry muffins today. I immediately wondered if Bellamy found the ones that I left on the loveseat last night. Then I caught a whiff of a woman’s cologne at the gas station while on my way to the golf course. It made me think of her, too, and the scent she wears lately.

This is going to be a problem if I don’t figure out how to fix it.

“So, are you going to answer me or what?” Boone asks.

“Why couldn’t I have been really good at something in Savannah?” I ask him instead. “Like, why couldn’t I have been a good fisherman? Or a teacher? Or just a bum like you?”

He looks wounded. “You don’t hate yourself enough to be a teacher. And not just everyone can pull off a bum like me, okay? Check yourself.”

I chuckle. “That’s too bad because it would’ve been a hell of a lot easier than this.”

“What’s happening? Want to talk it out?”

I give him an odd look. “What is wrong with you?”

“I’m trying to be a good brother.”

“Well ... don’t. It’s weird.”

He shrugs.

I set the soap bottle down and sigh. “Meadow is going to call me this week and, hopefully, she’ll have a contract ready to go. I’m assuming that I’ll just have a few days to make a decision. She said the new label wants a super quick turnaround too, so I’m going to have to just jump in and get to work, and I’ve been struggling creatively. I can’t be creative and pen happy shit when I want to scream.”

Boone’s legs stop swinging.

“I didn’t realize how fucked up my life was until I came back this time,” I admit.

It’s strange hearing those words topple from my lips. I never would’ve thought that I would be in this position if you’d have asked me three months ago.

But now I know it, and I’m having a hard time forgetting it.

I blow out a long, noisy breath.

“I’ve tried to place the blame on everyone else,” I say. “Meadow is at fault for the whole Willa debacle. Meadow is at the helm of my contract negotiations, and they seem to want something, or someone, maybe, other than what I’m all about. Whoever *they* are now. And then I come back here and this shit with Bellamy ...” I look at my brother. “It’s all my fault, Boone. Every last bit of it.”

He considers this. “I doubt it’s all your fault.”

“No, it is. It’s my fault because I let it all happen. I looked away and let Meadow run wild with my career, and I accepted Bellamy pushing me away because, for all intents and purposes, I was a dick.”

“You are a dick. Always, more or less. But, playing Devil’s Advocate here, Meadow works for you. And Bellamy could’ve ... not Bellamy’d this.”

I grin. “I appreciate your support, but I dropped the ball. All of them.”

Boone picks up on that and runs with it.

He stands straight and looks me in the eye. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“I know exactly why I drop all the balls in my life. I can tell you why I neglected something, failed something, ignored something else—it doesn’t matter. Doesn’t mean there’s a good reason, either, just that there is one.” He pauses. “Why are you dropping your balls?”

I make a face and shake my head. “What on Earth are you talking about?”

“Your balls dropping.” He snickers. “No, seriously. I want to know why.”

“I don’t fucking know. Shit happens. Isn’t that good enough?”

“Yeah. Good enough if you’re willing to take a bullshit answer.”

We have a showdown, each of us unwilling to look away first. Finally, he gives up and sighs.

“Fine,” he says. “I’ll tell you why you drop them.”

“Oh, please. Tell me,” I say sarcastically. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“Me either.”

I flinch. “You mean you don’t already know?”

He shakes his head. “No. I just open my mouth, and the truth comes out. It’s my party trick.”

I laugh and head to the breakfast table. I sit. He watches me from the sink.

“Shoot,” I say.

“I think that you let your balls fall with Meadow because you didn’t want to have to think about your career. You could just party it up and have fun, and it didn’t feel like something permanent to you.”

*Not bad.*

“You always say you’ll be home to visit, and we both know that’s not true. But it sounds good, and I think you tell yourself that so you don’t have to acknowledge your life isn’t here anymore.” He narrows his eyes. “That or you don’t have to think about this being your life, your actual adult career. If it’s not and you fail—who gives a fuck? You had a good ride. You’ll just go on about your life in whatever job you were supposed to have all along.”

My blood runs cold.

I’ve never admitted any of that aloud to a single soul on the face of the planet. *But have I thought about those things?* Only a million times while lying in a bathtub in a random hotel.

Boone is emboldened by the success he thinks or knows he just scored.

“You also dropped your balls with Bellamy—not last night but the proverbial ones,” he says, grinning, “because you think you would lose her anyway. She’s always fought you and pushed you away. You figure that it doesn’t matter if you actually stayed in her life or not because it wouldn’t have worked out regardless. It was just so much easier to make the decision and help the inevitable along.”

*Holy. Shit.*

“Damn, I’m good,” he says, impressed with himself.

I’m impressed with him too. But I’m not about to tell him that.

My finger runs along my bottom lip.

I look at Boone like I just met him for the first time. This Boone has never been around. I didn’t know he existed. Hell, I didn’t think he knew the alphabet for sure, let alone be able to conjure up philosophical arguments from someone else’s point of view.

*We definitely don’t give him enough credit in this family.*

“Am I right?” he asks as he opens the fridge. He takes out the lemonade, opens the lid, and drinks it straight from the

container.

I'm less disturbed about his drinking habits than I am bothered by his theories.

I do all the things he said. Down deep, I'm afraid of failure.

Having a bad reputation and flying by the seat of my pants has always been easier than not being good enough.

Am I good enough to succeed in music? I hope.

Am I good enough for Bellamy? Not even a chance.

But keeping them apart from each other—not incorporating Bellamy somehow in my life—is the reason I'm unsatisfied. I know that now.

My web of experiences and emotions aren't filled with the right things. Or the right people.

Damn.

I run a hand down my face. I have no idea what this means or what to do about it.

I don't know if there's anything I can do about it.

Boone looks at his phone and motions for me that he'll be a second. He takes the call, saying, "Hey, baby," as he turns the corner and disappears out of earshot.

I sit at the table and think about my life.

I tried to fill the hole created by impersonal relationships by shoving it with razzle-dazzle. Filled stadiums, screaming fans, plaques on the wall—I hoped that someday all of that would make me feel complete. That the wonderfulness of the accomplishments would, at some point in the future, make up for all I sacrificed to get here.

But as I think about Bellamy smiling against my skin, the precious moments spent with Joe, my mom's garlic butter chicken, and Boone's weird epiphanies, I realize that this life—the one with my family and friends—could be pretty fucking spectacular right now.



That's a big problem.

Because my life isn't here.

It's in Nashville and being negotiated as we speak by a woman who I hope and pray has my best interests at heart. Although, I'm starting to realize that perhaps she doesn't really give a fuck about *my* best interests, but those that continue to provide her a decent income.

*Perhaps I don't even know what my best interests are.*

I suck in a breath.

*"You don't have to think about this being your life, your actual adult career. If it's not and you fail—who gives a fuck? You had a good ride."*

Is that all there is? All Meadow believes I'm capable of?

*You had a good ride.*

Fucking hell.

SIXTEEN

## BELLAMY

“Thanks for taking me with you today,” I tell Larissa as I climb out of her car.

“Thanks for going with me. Hollis worries to death when I go to those things by myself. He’s afraid some creep will be there waiting on me, and I’ll end up being murdered.”

“What is it with us and murder theories?” I ask, laughing. “You used to be afraid that I was going to get murdered with men swinging by for quick sex, and now how Hollis is afraid that you’re going to get whacked going on landscape ... consultations or whatever you call it.”

Larissa shrugs. “If you need anything, call me. I’ll be around if you get bored later.”

I don’t have to tell her that I won’t be bored later if I have my way. She already knows. I can tell by the little grin spreading across her cheeks

“Goodbye, Riss,” I say, shutting the door.

She waves as I head up the driveway and back to my house.

The nurse’s car from the afternoon shift is still in the driveway. They sit with Dad on most days. I didn’t want them to, but he insisted. He said that it would make him sicker and more frustrated to know that I was spending every minute of my life sitting there waiting on him to die.

My stomach roils as I remember those words coming from his lips.

I unlock my door and walk inside. I shut the door behind me. My bag slips off my shoulder and onto the table under the mirror as I head to the kitchen.

I don't even get to the refrigerator when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and smile.

Coy: Are you home yet?

Me: Just got here. Are you done golfing yet?

Coy: Just got back. Can I come over?

Me: You mean you're not on the way yet?

I wait for his reply. Before a text could even be typed out, a knock sounds against my door.

A bubble of excitement bubbles inside me as I make my way back through the house. I open the door without checking to see who it is.

There he stands.

Coy Mason has never looked hotter.

He has on a pair of jeans with holes that look like they were created by wearing them. A black hoodie with a Braxton College logo emblazoned on the front is stretched over his chest. His hair is crazy, probably from being on the golf course, and his lips appear to be slightly swollen.

But the thing I really like about Coy standing on my doorstep is that he's on my doorstep at all. The fact that he's smiling and I'm smiling, and he reaches for me like it's the most natural thing in the world—that's what I love most of all.

I take his hand and yank him inside. He kicks the door closed behind him.

He wastes no time in cupping my face in his hands and covering my mouth with his own. His breath is hot, his hands are cold, and together they have a dizzying effect on me.

“Well, that’s a great way to say hello,” I joke, pulling back so I can fiddle with his hair.

He gives me a shy smile. “I’ve waited all day to do that.”

“Have you? Because I’ve waited all day for you to do that.”

We roll with the easiness between us, but I can see in his eyes that he has the same reservations as me.

Today is Sunday. It’s usually my favorite day of the week. It’s lazy and slower, and people are generally more grateful and kinder on this particular day.

But today being Sunday gives me a lot of trepidation because tomorrow will be the first day of the week. It will pop the little bubble that we’ve somehow created. Lives will go back to normal, business will occur, and having Coy mostly to myself will end.

“Do you want a drink?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I thought about you today.”

I wrap my arms around his waist like I’ve done it a thousand times. “What did you think about?”

“Just about how much fucking time we’ve wasted fighting each other and pretending this didn’t exist between us.”

My stomach squeezes into a tight knot at his words.

I had similar thoughts throughout the day.

I thought about him when I got up and made myself breakfast. *What would it be like to expect him to come back after golf?* When I stripped my bed after our night together, I thought about how I’d only spent one night with him in my home in my life. How many nights could we have spent if we’d gotten along? I thought about him at the house with

Larissa. *What would it feel like to see his children with baseball mitts and guitars running around the yard while they wait on dinner?*

It's a wonderful vision of a future that I would manifest for myself if I could.

But I can't.

Even wishing for something that feels like inviting heartbreak into my life. It's too good. Too perfect. And if I know anything about life, it's that nothing good and perfect exists.

I lace my fingers with his.

He brings our interlocked hands to his mouth and presses a kiss to our joined knuckles. "I'm not going to lie to you," he says, working his fingers back and forth against mine. "I'm nervous about this."

My heartbeat picks up as I wonder if he's already second-guessing whatever this is between us.

I can't blame him if he is. I'm scared too. There's so much that can go wrong here, so much that's untested, unproven. We're taking our history and relationship that's worked one way and trying to flip it on its head.

But instead of just a friendship on the line, it'll be my heart now. And I don't know if I'm fully prepared to sacrifice that.

"Stop it," he says, pulling me into his chest. He presses a kiss to the top of my head. "You're overthinking everything on a level that only you can achieve."

"It's what I do best."

He smiles against my hair. "Being with you is the easiest thing that I've ever done. It's crazy, Bells. *Wild.*"

"I know." I wrap my arms around his waist and tuck my cheek against his chest. "I woke up this morning and couldn't believe this was real. It feels impossible. But then I sort of took stock of myself and how I felt, and I realized it's the most natural progression in the world."

He nods. “I don’t know how this is going to work. Do you?”

I shake my head slowly. “I don’t know, Coy. Can it work?”

“It has to.”

“In what capacity?” I pull away far enough so I can look into his eyes. “I mean, what does this look like for us? Is there an us?”

He looks into the deepest part of my eyes and smirks. “You better fucking believe there’s an us.”

His confidence, something that’s drove me nuts for years, feels different. Instead of being irritating, it makes me feel safe in the strangest way.

“I would never ask you to leave Savannah,” he tells me. “Not with your father being so sick and your friends here. Your life is here. But ...” He gulps. “I can’t just walk away from my life in Nashville either. You know?”

His forehead mars as I absorb his statement.

The words rattle around in my chest. I already knew this was true, and this conversation was coming, but to hear the uncertainty about what comes next causes a smidgen of panic to spread through me.

“I know you can’t leave your career,” I tell him softly. “I wouldn’t want you to do that. It would be stupid. But I can’t leave my dad either. I won’t.”

He bites his lip, nodding. “We’ll figure it out.”

I want to figure it out. I want to figure it out as much as I want my next breath. But there are a lot of things that I fear we’re ignoring.

“Is this realistic?” I ask him. “I mean, I’ll be here. You’ll be there. Is it worth it to try to make it work?”

“Do you think we have a choice?”

I snuggle against his chest, his words providing a comfort that I didn’t know I needed. His sweatshirt is soft and smells like him.

“The thought of waking up and having you be gone again ... doesn’t even break my heart. It broke before. It ... it feels like my heart would be shattered.”

He inhales a deep, ragged breath.

“I’m scared, Coy. I’m scared of this not being feasible. If this can’t work out between us, a part of me thinks that we should just walk away now and preserve our friendship and let it be. It’s better than having to lose you all over again.”

“You don’t have to lose me.”

“You say that now,” I tell him. “But you don’t control everything. I mean, I lost my mother. She didn’t choose that. I’m about to lose my father.” I take in a shaky breath. “I want to be with you so much that I can’t stand it. Being in your arms feels like the one place in the world I should be. But it comes with the possibility of so much pain ...”

He pulls me closer and holds me against him. I can hear his heart beat through his shirt. It’s hard and rhythmic and so steady. I wish I could close my eyes and just stay right here forever.

“I know you’re scared,” he says. “And I’m happy you feel comfortable enough to tell me that. But why don’t you look at it the other way? Like instead of the possibility of having your heart broken, you have the possibility of having someone to help you through shit?”

I nod.

He grabs my shoulders and peels me away from him. A slow smile touches his lips.

“I love you, Bellamy,” he whispers.

My eyes go wide as a quick uptake of breath fills my lungs.

“I should have said that to you so many months or even years ago ’cause I’ve loved you since the day I made you eat that taco out of a leaf, mud, and grass,” he says.

I laugh, the memory coming back to me.



Tears fill my eyes.

My brain screams at me that I'm too exposed—that I've gone out on a limb for him before, and he's broken my trust. But as I sort through that emotion and try to rationalize it, I realize it's not fair to him ... or to me.

I know he loves me. I feel it when he touches me, and I see it in his eyes. I've never felt like this about anyone, and I've never felt like this around anyone either.

But is that enough?

Because I know how the world works. It's cruel and evil, and just because you love someone, it doesn't mean they're yours forever.

He nudges me. "I was kind of hoping you'd say it back."

I sniffle. "You know that I love you too. I love you so much that it scares the shit out of me."

Pride ripples across his face. "Let's agree that this might get complicated and that we're going to have to take it day by day."

"And we have to communicate and be honest."

"And we have to make each other a priority."

I nod, liking the sound of this. It helps to soothe the vulnerability that rears its ugly head.

"We have to communicate," I say.

"That's our weakness. We've never communicated well—unless it was with threats," he says, laughing.

I laugh too.

It almost feels too good to believe, the answer to the manifestations that I didn't put much faith in.

But the longer he holds me and doesn't rush me and the more things that he whispers into my ear about flights and cell phones and promises of everything that I've ever wanted, I find myself doing the one thing I've always feared more than anything else—I've put my trust in him.

My breathing evens out as soon as I make the decision. I'm without reservations but not without fear. But I figure a little fear is healthy.

"My mom is making meatloaf," he whispers in my ear.

I laugh out loud. "Your mom makes great meatloaf."

"We should totally go get some before my brothers eat it all."

I hold my breath. "We?"

"Yep. I told you, I'm all in, baby. This is just the way it's going to be now. You're going to have to trust me. If not, it'll be really fucking awkward when I'm ringing the phone off the hook and showing up in the middle of the night when you refuse to answer."

"Knock first in case Suit is here," I joke.

I think steam comes from Coy's ears. I stop it with a kiss.

"Let's get meatloaf," I tell him.

He readjusts our hands, locking our fingers together.

"Are you going to hold my hand all the way over there?" I joke.

He looks up at me stone-faced. "Hell, yes I fucking am. Might as well just go in guns blazing and let everyone know. Because I want them to know that when I am not here, they are now responsible for you too."

"No, Coy," I say, shaking my head. "That's ... I don't ... No."

He spins me around and captures me in his arms. "You're mine now. You better get used to this."

As I look into his eyes, I don't think it's going to be hard to fall madly, stupidly in love with him. And that might be a good thing.

And it might not too.

SEVENTEEN

## COY

“There better be meatloaf left,” I say as we step into Mom’s kitchen.

I close the door behind Bellamy.

The room is loud and chaotic like it always is when my brothers gather for dinner. Wade stands next to the pantry with our father, talking about something that’s guaranteed to be mind-numbingly boring. Holt and Oliver sit at the table with cups of coffee and smug little grins on their faces. Boone is perched on the counter, his hand in a bowl of Chex Mix while he listens to Holt’s girlfriend, Blaire, rattle on about something that seems to hold his interest.

Mom, on the other hand, busies herself around everyone with a sponge in her hand and a contented smile on her face.

I wrap an arm around Bellamy’s waist and hold her close to my side.

“If we knew you were coming, Bells, we would’ve saved you a piece,” Holt jokes.

“There’s enough for both of you,” Mom tells me and Bellamy. She shoots Holt a look. “You be nice.”

“It smells great, Siggy,” Bellamy tells her.

Mom beams. “Come in here and let’s fix your plates.”

We follow her to the stove. Kettles and pans sit on the stovetop with the remnants of dinner. Because Mom can only cook for an army, plenty of food is left.

Mom hands us plates. “What did you two do today?”

“I golfed earlier and then hung out at Boone’s,” I tell her as I motion for Bellamy to fill her plate first.

“I gave him life advice,” Boone says before filling his mouth with Chex Mix.

“Are you that desperate?” Oliver asks. “For fuck’s sake, Coy, hire a therapist. Or bring me a bottle of gin and I’ll give you all the advice you need.”

Blaire turns around and faces us. “Boone just shared a few semi-remarkable observations with me. I think he’s on the precipice of enlightenment.”

Everyone laughs but Boone. He screws up his face.

“I don’t want to be enlightened.” He sighs. “No more podcasts for me while I run. I’m going back to songs about cars and money.”

Dad laughs. “Of course, you listen to songs about two things you know nothing about.”

Even Boone can’t help but laugh at Dad’s joke.

They continue discussing Boone’s obsession with cars and podcasts while I take my turn piling food on my plate. Bellamy exchanges hellos with Blaire, and I realize they have never met before. It doesn’t seem to bother either of them, though, and they banter back and forth with an ease that makes me happy. It feels natural.

*It is natural.*

Something my dad said to me a few days ago right in this very kitchen filters through my mind.

*There will come a day when you just know. And then it’s over.*

I force a swallow down my throat.

When he shared that thought with me, I remember thinking it didn’t sound fun at all. That having my life *over*, as he suggested, sounded as boring as watching the same show on television for the rest of my life.

But if this is what he meant, my life doesn't feel *over* at all. I thought I wanted someone who didn't need me at their beck and call, who didn't need me to make compromises to make her happy. *Yet ...* maybe I do want her to need me. To make compromises. *Odd.*

I watch Bellamy tease Boone, making Blaire laugh. She reminds me of my mother and how she just fits in and makes everyone feel comfortable.

It's a good thing. A *very* good thing. A very good thing that I have to make sure I don't mess up—for her and for me.

Mom sets two glasses on the table across from Holt and Oliver. Bellamy and I sit down.

“Thank you, Siggy,” she says. “This looks great.”

“Thanks, Mama.”

Mom ruffles her hand through my hair as she walks by. “You're both very welcome.”

My two oldest brothers watch Bellamy and me. They've spent the least time with her out of our family. Holt and Oliver were both older than us and didn't want to be bothered by our shenanigans. Mostly because they were up to their own bullshit and only needed us to cover when things went awry.

Still, they look curious and maybe even pleased.

I scoot my chair a little closer to Bells without even thinking about it.

“What have you two been up to?” I ask my brothers.

Oliver smiles. “Celebrating.”

“Why?” I ask before popping a piece of meatloaf into my mouth.

“Rosie retired.” Holt sits back in his chair. “Finally.”

Bellamy laughs. “Are you just excited for her or what? I'm getting weird vibes here.”

Oliver laughs too. “Rosie is one hundred years old. She should've retired half a century ago, but Holt and I didn't have

the heart to fire her.”

Holt looks over his shoulder toward Wade and smirks. “We even tried to pawn her off on Wade once.”

Wade hears his name and switches his attention to the table.

“You liked Rosie, didn’t you, Wade?” Oliver teases him.

“I did. She was efficient and polite,” Wade says.

“I remember this,” I say, stabbing the green beans with my fork. “Rosie got her feelings hurt so you guys took her back, right?”

Oliver nods. “We did. We’re suckers.”

“But now she’s going to ride off into the sunset with her grandkids—”

“Must be nice!” Mom interjects, firing a very pointed look at Holt.

“Tell her,” Holt says, pointing at his girlfriend. “I’ll put a baby up in that as soon as she lets me.”

I look at Blaire. She’s trying to hide her embarrassment.

“That’s ... Let’s discuss that somewhere not amid your entire family, please,” she says, grinning.

Holt wiggles his eyebrows at her.

“So, now we get to replace her,” Oliver says. “Rosie, not Blaire.”

Bellamy sets her fork down next to her plate. “I saw the perfect retirement house today. I think it’s probably sold, but it would’ve made the perfect place to just go and relax and enjoy your life.”

I set my fork down too. “Is that the one you went to with Riss?”

She nods.

“Where was it?” Oliver asks.

“I honestly have no idea.” Bellamy laughs. “It was on Bittersweet Court. I just remember that street name because it felt so lovely.”

Boone hops off the counter. “Hey, yeah, Riss was telling me about that place. Apparently, you’re quite the little realtor.”

“You are?” I look at her. “What happened?”

She blushes as my brothers, except Wade, look at her.

“I just ... I don’t know. I told this couple who was looking at the house with their actual realtor all the things I’d do to it if it were mine.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Connie, that’s the realtor’s name, wasn’t doing the house justice. And it broke my heart that it was starting to get dilapidated. So I sold it. I think. I mean, *I* didn’t,” she stammers. “I just ... maybe I helped.”

She looks so proud of herself that it makes me proud of her.

I grab her hand under the table and lace our fingers together.

She looks at me, her cheeks flushing.

“Have you ever thought about being a realtor?” I ask her. “I can see you being great at that. You can be *so* convincing.”

Holt snorts. “Oh, like she had to convince you to see the light about the two of you. You’ve been in love with Bells since you were toddlers.”

I don’t know whether to agree or disagree with that.

My brothers snicker at my expense.

“What’s not to love?” I ask, squeezing Bellamy’s hand.

Her brows raise as if she’s surprised about my semi-declaration in front of my family. I pause, waiting to see if I’ll feel the same. If I’ll regret it. If it was an impulse statement stemming from her proximity or hormones.

But with each second that passes, I feel more content.



*There will come a day when you just know. And ...*

It's a weight off my shoulders, a burden I've been carrying that I didn't even realize. The tension that always sits at the bottom of my skull, the undercurrent that swims through me every day that something is not quite right—it's gone.

I could never put my finger on it. I always attributed it to residual stress, or being behind on deadlines, or anxiety about the press, or ticket sales, or balancing everything in my life.

But it's clear at this moment it was none of those things.

It was not having her.

My brain, my heart—fuck, *my soul*—knew what I needed. I just didn't listen.

I smile at her, and when she smiles back with a happiness that encompasses her, a shock of fear pelts my heart.

*What if I ruin that? What if I fuck it up? What if she can't handle my life or sees something in the media that makes her second-guess me?*

*What if ... what if she realizes she doesn't love me, after all?*

*What if she realizes I'm not good enough for her?*

My body stills as my palms begin to sweat. Bellamy's smile wobbles as she takes me in. She reads me like only she can and squeezes my hand back.

Our heads all turn as the side door opens. Larissa and Hollis walk in together.

The volume increases as everyone shares hellos, and Mom ushers them into the kitchen to get food. Bellamy and Oliver strike up a conversation about houses, and Holt gets sidetracked by Blaire.

Hollis slips out of the kitchen and crouches down beside my chair.

“Hey, man,” he says. “I got into town pretty late last night. I was going to call you today.”

“No worries. How have ya been?”

He nods. “Pretty damn good, I guess. You?”

I glance at Bellamy. She rests her chin on her hand as she listens to Oliver drone on about architecture.

“Pretty damn good, too,” I say, turning back to Hollis. “I’m probably going to have to get an album together quickly coming up, so if you have any inspiration or poems or lyrics, fire ’em my way.”

His eyes twinkle. He loves music as much as I do. It’s happenstance that we met—two guys from different places and very different lives. But from the moment he walked into the library upstairs on New Year’s Eve and sat at the piano, our friendship has been the easiest, coolest, and most organic connection I’ve ever had with a guy.

He works his ass off. The eagerness this dude has to learn and absorb is wild. His creative streak and natural talent are insane, and if anyone deserves to have a chance to better himself, it’s Hollis Hudson.

Without a doubt.

“I always have ideas,” he says, stealing a glance at Larissa. “Feeling really inspired lately.”

A melody that began to surface in the middle of breakfast starts to trickle through my mind again.

“Yeah. Same.” *Finally.*

We exchange a smile that says everything that needs to be said.

Larissa barrels into the room like the shot of sunshine that she is. She does a little dance at seeing Bellamy and me together.

“I love this!” she squeals. “I don’t have to pretend the other one of you doesn’t exist. Hooray!”

“Tone down the excitement, Riss,” Holt says, shaking his head. “It’s not like you didn’t see this coming.”

She makes a face. “I didn’t. I mean, I totally did. I’d just started to give up on it happening.”

“You do know we’re sitting right here, right?” Bellamy laughs.

“Yeah. *Together.*” Larissa makes a face. “Holtie, if you’re done, can I have your chair so I can eat?”

Holt grumbles but gets up. Oliver stands, offering his chair to Hollis.

“Do you guys want to double date tomorrow? We could do brunch,” Larissa offers, looking at us expectantly.

Bellamy shifts in her seat. “I have to take Dad for a scan tomorrow,” she says quietly. “I won’t be home until the afternoon.” She looks at me and tries to deflect from the topic of her father. “No Bree for you tomorrow.”

I grin as if that’s a relief, but internally, my stomach twists.

I don’t know what a scan means or what the implications of that are, but I can tell it’s eating at Bellamy. And I’m irritated she didn’t bring it up before now. *With me.*

*Doesn’t she know that I want to know this? I want to know everything.*

Mom rounds the corner as she wipes her hands on a white towel. “Where are the two of you going?” she asks my brothers.

“Blaire and I are flying to Chicago for a couple of days in the morning,” Holt says. “I need to tie up a few things here before we go.”

“I’m going to see Gramps,” Oliver says. “Did you make him a plate?”

Mom nods. “Yes. Don’t leave without it. And tell him that he’s coming next week or we’re sending your dad over to get him.”

Holt looks down at me. “Will I see you before you leave?”

Bellamy slips her hand out of mine. I whip my head to her to see her attempting to hide the nervousness in her face.

“Yeah. For sure,” I tell him, even though I’m not sure at all. “I’ll find ya before I go.”

“Cool.” He takes his keys out of his pocket. “I’ll see everybody later.”

“Bye, guys,” Oliver says, following him to the side door where Blaire is standing.

“See ya, kids,” Dad says. He walks past the table and knocks the wood with his knuckle. “We’re going to watch a movie upstairs. If you guys wanna come ...”

I look at my girl. “I think we’re going to head back to Bells’s house and watch a movie together.”

Relief washes across her pretty features.

Dad nods. “It was nice seeing you today, Bellamy. Let me know if you or your old man need anything, all right?”

“Thank you, Rodney. I will,” she says.

Dad pauses as if he’s going to say something else before disappearing around the corner with Wade.

The air in the room changes—especially between Bellamy and me. I know that a chord was just struck with her about me leaving, and she’s probably dying for an answer.

*Well, me too.*

I watch Boone try to toss pieces of Chex Mix up in the air and catch them in his mouth.

“We’re going to get going,” I say, getting to my feet. I take Bells’s empty plate and carry them to the dishwasher. “Mom, we’re leaving.”

She walks to me and kisses my cheek. Then she turns to Bellamy and engulfs her in a mom hug.

I watch my girl’s eyes close, and as she sighs, I wonder how many hugs she and my mom have shared over the years when Mom knew Bells needed one.

*God, I love my mom.*

“Sweetheart, you come by any time. And now that you and Coy are friends again,” she says with a grin, “I expect to see you around more often.”

Bellamy smiles shyly. “Thanks, Siggy.”

“Of course.” Mom winks at me. “You be good to her.”

I wink back at her, earning me a smack on the arm.

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, Coy.”

I take Bellamy’s hand and lead her to the door.

“See you guys later,” I call out to whoever is still hanging around.

“Bye,” Bellamy says as a chorus of goodbyes fills the room.

We step outside into the chilly air. I tug off my sweatshirt and hand it to my girl.

She holds it in her hand. “What are you doing? Disrobing right here? Can’t you wait to get back to my place?”

“Put it on,” I instruct her. “It’s cold.”

“I have on a long-sleeved shirt. You’re now in a T-shirt.” She holds it out to me. “You need this more than I do.”

“Put. It. On.”

She tries to hold out but gives up quicker than I expect and slides it over her head.

“There. Happy?” she asks.

“Happier.”

She snorts and heads toward the gate.

EIGHTEEN

# BELLAMY

My breath is shaky. My hands tremble as I pick up my purse.

It never gets easier.

I was awake most of the night. Coy slept peacefully beside me after we watched movies until after midnight. He was so sweet and gentle and so tender. It was as if he knew I was a nervous wreck.

The insurance papers are tucked in a sturdy manila envelope. They must not weigh half a pound, but they feel like dead weight as I adjust the strap of my purse on my shoulder.

Coy left within the three hours I managed to sleep. I woke up with a pillow laid in his place and my arm draped over the center of it.

He made me promise last night that I tell him when I needed him. He made me swear that I'd be open with him about the things going on in my life. I felt like it was an intentional poke, a specific prod to get me to open up about something in particular. And I wanted to.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

It's not easy to verbalize the things going on inside my head. It's as if I let them out, they become real. That the world will latch on to my fears and twist them into some sick reality.

Besides, I don't know how to talk like that. I don't know the rules of sharing the things that you know will make you cry.

*Do you just spew them out in the middle of a conversation about Netflix? Is it all right to bring them up in the middle of dinner when you're both concentrating hard on your banana pudding? Do you have to tiptoe around the topic and see if the other person is ready before you go all-in with your deepest fears?*

Hell if I know.

And I think the only thing harder than telling Coy that I'm ready to puke at the thought of what the doctor might say today is getting the impression he wasn't ready for that conversation.

So, I spare myself that potential landmine and just navigate it like I know how—alone.

It's one less variable to contend with.

I leave the house and lock the door behind me. Every step toward Dad's feels like I'm walking right into a new puddle of hurt that I'm going to have to traverse, and I'll have to do it with stillness and dignity. Because I can't freak out. That would freak Dad out.

I'll have my cry, if it comes to that, in the shower by myself.

I blow out a breath as I get to the back door. I enter the hallway and go through the kitchen. Dad is sitting in his recliner.

He presses the mute button on the television.

"Hey, there," he says, wincing as he scoots to the edge of his chair. "You ready?"

"Yup. Let's go."

I put a hand under his armpit and help him to his feet. He wobbles a bit before he can get a firm grip on his walker. We make it slowly to the foyer.

"I get my scan today," he says. "It's going to be a good day, Bellamy."

"I agree. Hang on so I can get the door."



He waits patiently, his knees shaking a bit as I get the door propped open so he can get outside. The walker rattles as it hits the concrete porch, and I vaguely realize that sound has become a constant when I'm with Dad.

And I hate that. So much.

I get the door locked, and then we start toward the car. Dad shivers, the wind seeming extra cold to his frail bones.

“You doing okay?” I ask him. “Want to take a break?”

He nods, wheezing a bit. “Let's keep going.”

“You know, if you'd let me get you a wheelchair, it would be a lot easier for you.”

“Last resort,” he says, fighting through his lack of oxygen. “Dignity.”

“I know, Daddy,” I say, looking into the sun in hopes it'll dry up my eyes. “I understand.”

We get to Dad's car that I pulled up to the sidewalk earlier. I get the door opened. Dad gets himself and his walker turned around so that the back of his legs hit the seat. Then, in a stroke of courage, he drops himself into the seat.

“You did it,” I say, helping him pick up his legs and get his feet on the floorboard.

He looks up at me, his cheeks rosy. “Thank you, sweet girl.”

“Of course.” I give him a big smile and shut his door.

I fold the walker up and get it in the trunk. Just as I get to the driver's side door, I hear a familiar voice.

“I'll drive.”

My head whips to the side as Coy comes through the gate. He's wearing jeans with no holes and a gray sweater. His hands are shoved into his pockets as he watches me warily.

“What?” I ask.

“I'll drive.” He stops in front of me, smelling like leather. He holds his hands out. “Keys, please.”

My bottom lip quivers as I hold on to the key ring.

Coy's breath billows in front of him.

I want to launch myself in his arms and wind my fingers in the fabric of his sweater and have the cry I'll need to put off until later. But I don't do any of that because I'm not sure why he's here.

"I have to take my dad to the doctor," I tell him.

He smiles. "I know. And I said I'll drive."

A wave of emotions rushes over me like a tsunami. My throat squeezes shut as tears pool in my eyes.

He leans forward and looks me in the eye. "Unless your dad objects, I'm going, too."

I shake my head. I'm afraid to speak because my tears will certainly fall.

"I'm fine," I say, my voice thick with emotion.

"You are fine. And I'll make sure of it." He pulls me into a quick hug. "But if you don't start sharing shit with me ..." He leans back and wipes a tear off my cheek. "This makes you nervous, doesn't it?"

I nod.

"Why?"

I shrug. "I don't want to get used to it."

He touches my lips lightly with his. "Get used to it."

He snatches the keys from my hand and grins.

"How did you know?" I ask as he opens the back door.

"I heard you mention it at dinner, and you acted weird about it, so I figured it was important. You wouldn't take the bait last night and tell me, so I got up super early and got ready and waited for you to walk outside. Then I ran over."

My heart fills with so much ... *love*, that I think it might burst.

I'm in trouble here. I'm in deep. Because, whether I want to admit it or not, I'm already used to this.

I just have to pray that I don't lose him somehow.

My gaze switches to my dad in the front seat.

I have to pray I don't lose him either.

Coy ducks his head in the car. "Hey, Joe. Good morning."

"Morning, Coy," he says, smiling as he still tries to catch his breath.

"Care if I drive you this morning? I can wait in the car while you two go in if you want. I just want to be there to help out however you need me."

Dad is as pleased as a peacock, although I do see him quickly wipe under his eye, and *that* nearly causes a sob to leave my chest. "I'd like that very much."

"Good. It's done then," Coy says. "Get in, please, Bells, so we can get on the road."

There are a million things I want to say. A hundred more things I want to do. But I climb into the back seat instead because that's what I have to do.

Before Coy closes the door, I hold up a hand. He looks at me with his brows pulled together.

"Thank you," I tell him softly.

He grins. "Of course. I love you."

My insides turn to mush as I look at the handsome man in front of me. *Three words*. Did I ever think I'd hear those words from Coy?

I'm still a little wobbly from last night's comment after Holt suggested Coy had been in love with me since we were toddlers.

"*What's not to love?*" He said it so confidently, but I saw conflict in his eyes just moments later, as if he, too, was surprised by his comment.

But this morning, he's showing me that he loves me. And that speaks volumes.

"I love you, too," I tell him. *And I do. With all my heart.*

"Well, I love you both, but I'm cold, so can someone turn on the car?" Dad asks.

We all laugh.

NINETEEN

# BELLAMY

Coy stretches his legs out beside me.

“Are you doing okay?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah. I just don’t understand why they have you come and then sit and wait for two hours. By the time we get home, Dad is exhausted.”

My father sits in the chair to my right, his head bent forward, and his eyes closed. His lips flutter, telling me he’s asleep.

I can’t blame him. After waiting at the hospital for the PET scan and then driving to the cancer center for the results, I’m tired too. And all I’ve had to do is wait.

Nurses and staff walk by, ushering patients in and out of the double doors that lead to the exam rooms. A large, oval-shaped desk sits on the other side of the reception area. The women sitting behind it keep stealing glances at Coy.

It was the same thing at the hospital, just less obvious. I wasn’t positive they knew Coy was Kelvin McCoy, the country music star. There was a chance they just thought he was a super good-looking guy.

But these women? They know. I feel it.

He must realize this. How could he not?

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey, what?”

“I think the women behind the desk recognize you.”

He looks over my head for a moment before switching his attention back to me. A warm, knowing grin spread across his face.

“At least they seem to think I’m hot,” he teases.

“Not what I was getting at.”

“What were you getting at then?” He twists his lips. “Do you want me to kiss you right here?”

“I’d rather you not.”

He shrugs. “That would let them know who’s boss.”

“Okay. And then one of them pulls out a phone, and it gets shared on social media? I’m good. Thanks.”

He sits back, the amusement sliding off his face. “You do realize that’s going to happen at some point, right?”

My body stills.

Somehow, I hadn’t thought of that.

To me, he’s just Coy, the boy next door. To everyone else, he’s a big freaking deal.

My brain spins, posing various scenarios for me to consider.

Unflattering pictures from the beach.

Speculation of my sexual history.

Gossip about why I was at the grocery store.

*All of those things—will they come? Are they now inevitable?*

“I, um ...” I clear my throat. “Wow. Okay. I hadn’t really thought about that,” I admit.

“We’ll add that to the list of things to figure out then,” he mutters, clearly not looking forward to that discussion.

I open my mouth to respond when a nurse in turquoise scrubs announces my dad’s name at the door. I wake Dad and

then get him to his feet. Coy appears with a wheelchair that gets no objections from the patient.

Dad grabs my hand. His palm is cold, his fingers wrinkly. He looks up at me with fear-stricken eyes. "It's going to be okay."

I nod. My words of positivity are stuck in my throat.

"How fast do you think we can get back there?" Coy asks, standing behind Dad. "Want to time us, Bells?"

The distraction is just what we need.

Dad laughs. "Oh, I think we better not. My blood pressure can't take that much fun anymore."

Coy winks at me and stands to the side. "I'll be right here when you guys get out."

"Oh, no," Dad says, shaking his head. "You're coming too."

Coy looks at me. Uncertainty etches across his features. He silently asks for direction, for my approval.

I want to tell him I need him. But I don't.

"Yeah, come back with us," I tell him instead. It serves the same purpose without making me feel weak. "Maybe they'll push us to the top of the schedule if they think it'll impress you."

He laughs. "Don't count on it."

We make it to the doorway, then walk down a long hall. Nurses and doctors buzz about, each welcoming us with a smile.

I always wonder how they're so kind and uplifting when dealing with this crap day in and day out.

We get settled into the exam room. The nurse asks my dad a few basic questions and then leaves us to wait.

Again.

My heart beats on a quickened tempo. It's not even like *it hits* harder or faster. It just moves on a different scale that



doesn't exist without this type of stress.

Coy sits beside me. His leg bounces, but that's his only tell. Otherwise, he's as calm and sturdy *and present* as he can be.

I look into his eyes and try to tell him how thankful I am to have him here. How much it means to me that he showed up today—not just for me but also for my dad.

I'm stronger because he's here. I feel more capable of handling whatever the doctor might say. I didn't expect to be. I expected the opposite.

There's no pity in Coy's eyes or resentment at being kept away from his life. He doesn't look at me differently. If anything, I feel closer to him in this exam room with my father and a stack of magazines between us than I ever have.

I reach for his hand. He gives it to me readily.

"You guys want a butterscotch?" Dad asks. "My mouth gets so dry."

"I'm good," I tell him.

"Have you ever had a butterscotch-dipped ice cream cone?" Coy asks Dad.

Dad shakes his head. "No. Sounds good, though."

"It's the best thing I've ever eaten. They have them at this ice cream place in Nashville. I get the butterscotch shell and then the crunch coating on top of that. You'll have to try it one day," he says.

Dad nods. "Can you get it in a waffle cone?"

"Yeah, but I like a good sugar cone, myself. It lets the focus shine on the butterscotch."

"Spoken like a true connoisseur," I tease.

Before he can respond, the door opens, and Dr. Helm walks in.

I squirm in my seat and say a silent prayer for good news.

“Hi, Joe,” he says in his usual cheery way. “Hello, Bellamy.”

“Hi, Doctor,” I say as Dad just waves from his wheelchair across the room.

Dr. Helm sets his computer down on the counter and sits in his roller chair. He takes off his glasses and spins around to face us.

“Who is this?” he asks, pointing at Coy.

“That’s my son-in-law,” Dad says before we can speak up.

My eyes nearly fall out of my head. “I—” I begin, trying to clean up the disaster my father just made, but Coy cuts me off.

“I’m Coy, sir. It’s nice to meet you.”

The doctor looks at the three of us. He finally lets it go.

“So, Joe, how have you been feeling?” he asks.

Dad shrugs, moving the candy around his mouth. “I’ve felt better. Felt worse. You know how these things go.”

“I do,” Dr. Helm says. “How has he been eating, Bellamy? Drinking? Sleeping?”

“About the same,” I say, fighting through the tightness in my throat. “He eats a few bites of soup here and there. Some yogurt. Melon—a lot of melon. He wants a hamburger now and then, and I make it, but he only eats half of it, maybe.”

Dr. Helm nods. “Well, that’s all okay as long as he’s eating something. But I’m going to give you a prescription to pick up that will boost his appetite a bit. Okay, Joe?”

“Whatever you say, Doc.”

Dr. Helm grins. “What about you, Bellamy? Are you doing okay? This isn’t easy for you either.”

Coy squeezes my hand.

Every female in the universe knows never to ask *how you are doing* when you feel like your life is a violent roller-coaster ride. But, somehow, I keep the tears back.

“I’m doing okay. Better lately,” I add, my voice dropping.

“That’s great. I’m glad to see you’ve gotten married or ...” The doctor clasps his hands together in front of him. “Whatever this is. I know you like to do it all on your own, but it’s important to have a support system. I’ve been telling you that for months now.”

“She has one hell of a system,” Coy speaks up. “My family lives next door. Now that she’s actually family, she’s going to have so much support she’ll beg for it to stop.”

Dr. Helm laughs. “Good luck to you. This one ...” He whistles through his teeth, making us all laugh.

Our laughter subsides as Dr. Helm picks up his computer. He places it on his lap and pulls up a screen.

The fun in his features washes away and is replaced with his *doctor* face—the one that makes me feel like he tricked me into relaxing and that he’s about to end my world.

I scoot to the left of my chair out of instinct. Coy must notice because he leans forward and to the edge of his chair so that we’re even closer.

“Your blood work and PET results came in,” Dr. Helm says, clicking around on his screen. “We have some good news and some not so good news.”

“Give me the good news first,” Dad says. His voice is tight and controlled. His face blank and prepared. “Let’s hear it.”

“Well, your blood counts look good. I’m surprised,” he says. “Looks like Bellamy is quite the nurse. So, good work on that.”

“Thank you,” I say, although it feels weird to thank him. I let it go.

Dr. Helm sighs. “Now for the bad news.”

I look at my father. He stares straight ahead at Dr. Helm. His hands lay flat on the wheelchair rails; his feet are balanced against the floor. I can only imagine what he’s feeling and have wondered so many times if I’ll feel that way too.

But I push that out of my head and focus on what the doctor says next.

“While the cancer has not spread—and that’s more good news,” he says, “it also hasn’t shrunk. And we were hoping that we’d see it recede this time after having used the new chemo we’ve been trying. Remember?”

I nod. “So, what does this mean?”

“Well, we have two choices. One would be to try this chemotherapy a little longer and see if something changes. I’m happy with the containment. That’s not a bad thing. If that’s all we get from it, it’s better than the alternative,” Dr. Helm says.

“What’s the other choice, Doctor?” Coy asks.

He watches the doctor with an intensity that surprises me.

“Well, there’s another chemo drug we can try,” Dr. Helm says. “We’ve been putting this one off for a while because the side effects can be nasty. We have ways of making them more manageable, and some patients do really well with them. But it’s impossible to predict how someone will react.”

Dad frowns.

This is not what he wanted to hear. This is not what I wanted to hear. But it’s not the worst-case scenario, and I focus on that.

“What do you suggest?” I ask. “If the current medicine is working—”

“It’s not.” Dad’s voice is loud and clear. “I want to try the new medicine.”

“Are you sure?” I ask him.

I remember the side effects that Dr. Helm laid out a few months ago when we considered this option. Intense nausea. Lack of an appetite. Hair loss. Peripheral neuropathy. The list goes on and on, and quite frankly, I’m not sure Dad can endure that. The entire process has the potential to weaken him, and he’s already the weakest I can see him getting.

My heart begins to splinter in pieces as I imagine him having to go through all of that.

*It's so unfair.*

Dad looks at Coy. Coy nods.

“You have my word,” Coy tells him, his voice just above a whisper.

Dad looks at me, his eyes blurry before he looks at Dr. Helm.

“I want to try the new medicine, Dr. Helm. Let's give it a shot. What do I have to lose?”

“Your life,” I tell him, blinking back tears. “You have your life to lose.”

Dr. Helm sits quietly, fading into the background of the room. I can't see him past the tears anyway.

“Bellamy, I don't have a life right now anyway,” Dad says. “This isn't how I want to live.”

My lips shake as I try to regain control of myself. “You have me to live for. I need you. You can't just play with your life like this. Don't you see that?”

A single, solitary tear drips down my father's face.

“I've lived for you my entire life,” Dad says, choking back emotion. “I've held on and fought and gotten up every single morning just for you.”

Tears flow down my cheeks in heavy rivers. My insides twist into tight, unbearable knots as I feel my grip on life slip.

I know he's right. I know he's fought for me and lived for me, but I'm not ready for him to give that up yet.

“All I wanted to do was to make it long enough for you to find someone to love you like I do,” he says. “I knew it would be Coy. I just had to wait long enough.”

Coy bows his head.

“You're going to be fine, Bellamy,” Dad says. “And I'm not dying today. But if I do, then I'll get to see your mother

again, and I'm so ready for that day."

A sob escapes my throat as I listen to his words.

"It's time," Dad says, looking at Dr. Helm again. "I want to start the new medicine as soon as it's available. And that's that."

With a nod, Dr. Helm stands. "I'll let the nurse get the instructions ready and get everything approved. But, in the meantime, if you all need anything at all, don't hesitate to call me."

I nod, unable to speak through the emotion in my throat.

Coy stands. "Thank you, sir."

"Of course," Dr. Helm says. "It was nice to meet you."

"You too," Coy says.

The doctor leaves the room, and a nurse returns.

"Do you all need a few minutes?" she asks, reading the room.

"We're good," I say.

She props the door open and goes to my father. She unlocks the brakes on the wheelchair.

"You two can follow us out," she says brightly before pushing Dad out the door.

I turn to follow them, but Coy stops me. His eyes have a kindness, a depth of concern that I've never needed more than I do this moment.

"You okay?" he asks, wiping my tears away with his thumbs.

"No."

He pulls me into his chest and presses a kiss to the top of my head. "We're going to figure this out, okay? We're going to get through it together."

His words comfort me. They give me hope.

*He gives me hope.*

And while it scares the shit out of me to need someone like I need him, I can't deny it. Not anymore.

I can't control this cancer journey any more than he can control his music career. But maybe he's right. Perhaps we can get through it together.

"I love you," he whispers.

"I love you, too."

TWENTY



## COY

“Are you comfortable?” I ask Joe.

He sags against his recliner and motions for me to hand him the bag of chicken strips we got him on the way home.

“Here you go. Dinner is served.” I fork the bag over.

He takes it from me but doesn’t release my gaze. “Thank you, Coy. I knew you had it in you.”

“I can always give up chicken strips to the hungry,” I say, trying to deflect the conversation from going back to something dark. “Want honey mustard? Barbecue sauce? My mom has a stash of Chic-Fil-A sauce in the cabinets that she thinks is hidden. I could grab some of that, but you’d be sworn to secrecy forever.”

He grins. “You know what I mean. Thank you for being there for Bellamy.”

“I told you I would.”

“And I’m going to hold you to that.”

I look over my shoulder. Bells is in the kitchen, getting her dad a glass of ice water.

My heart begins to pound in the way it does before I do something really, really fucking stupid. I’m well acquainted with the feeling. But instead of making me nervous and ready to puke like it usually does, it feels ... right.

I turn back to Joe. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t know when I would do this. Maybe not even for a while. But ...” My throat tightens. “If I were to ask Bellamy to marry me, would that be okay with you?”

He drops the bag in his lap. His eyes fill with tears as he sits with the most peaceful look on his face.

He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t need to. The way he reaches for my hand says it all.

“I’ll make her the center of my world,” I promise him. “And I’ll get her chicken noodle soup with no carrots and throw her the biggest birthday parties the world has ever seen.”

“Coy ...”

Tears spill down his cheeks as he looks up at me. He struggles to maintain his composure.

I swallow my own emotions.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt better about myself than I do right now. Despite winning awards and selling out some of the country’s biggest stadiums, tonight I feel incredible.

*Joe believes in me. He has faith that I’m not a fuckup. He doesn’t care what other people say about me because he has confidence that I can be what Bellamy needs.*

*Fuck.*

I take a deep breath to rein in my complicated feelings.

“That’s a yes, then, right?” I joke.

He laughs as he grabs a tissue from the box beside him. The takeout bag rustles as he moves.

“I can rest easy now,” Joe says, blotting his eyes.

“Not that easy.” I make a face. “If you die tonight or something, I’m not marrying her out of spite.”

He bursts out in a fit of laughter that makes him start to wheeze. The sound of the eruption causes Bellamy to run into the room.

“Oh, my gosh,” she says, looking terrified. “What’s happening? Is he okay?”

Joe’s body bounces in his chair as he dabs the tears streaming down his cheeks from both our moment and his coughing fit.

“He’s fine,” I say, tossing Joe a wink. “Swallowed wrong.”

Joe nods emphatically. Once he gets himself together, he pulls his daughter in for a hug.

“I love you, Bellamy,” he says.

“You, too, Daddy,” she says, pulling back. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m the best I’ve been in a long time.” He opens the bag. “Now you two get out of here so I can eat my chicken and watch my show. It’s time for *Family Feud*.”

Bellamy takes a deep breath. She wants to say something, but she’s struggling to find the words.

I lay an arm around her shoulders.

“I’ll get her out of here,” I tell him. “Enjoy your show.”

He waves his napkin in the air and doesn’t bother to look up.

“That’s our cue to leave,” I whisper to Bellamy.

She doesn’t look ready to go, but I take her hand and lead her out anyway.

I know she’s exhausted. I also know she likes time by herself when she’s overwhelmed, and hearing her dad opt in for the new medicine today undoubtedly overwhelmed her.

We walk toward the backyard. Bellamy doesn’t say anything. She just puts one foot in front of the other.

I stop at the path to the gate. “Want me to head to Mom’s?”

“What? No. I mean unless you want to.”

“You know I don’t want to,” I say, stepping toward her. “I want to be where you are.”

She nibbles her bottom lip before freeing it in a moment of determination. “I want you to be where I am too.”

“Good.” I take her hand and swing it between us as we walk to her house. “I’d have come right back anyway. I would’ve left you alone for ten minutes. Tops.”

She laughs as we enter her house.

“You hungry?” I ask since she didn’t order anything at the chicken place.

She shakes her head. “Do you mind if we just go lie down for a little while? My head hurts.”

“Lady, I never mind getting in your bed.”

We walk down the hallway in silence. We take off our shoes and climb into Bellamy’s bed without saying a word. She curls up next to me with her head in the crook of my arm and sighs.

I close my eyes. Her breathing evens out so smoothly that I wonder if she fell asleep.

I brush her hair off the side of her face so I can see her. Her lashes are so long, her cheeks the prettiest shade of pink.

*How did I not realize I was in love with her forever ago?*

“I appreciate that you went with us today,” she whispers.

“Stop thanking me.”

“But I ... It means a lot to me.”

“Well, you mean a lot to me.”

The question is on the tip of my tongue. Asking Bellamy to be my wife could spill so easily from my lips if I let it. *But shouldn’t that kind of thing be done with sparklers and fireworks?*

I have no idea how to get engaged. I don’t even have a ring, and if I pop the question—the biggest question of my life

—and don't have Mom help me find the perfect ring, I'll never hear the end of it.

And it won't be quite as perfect of a moment.

Bellamy Davenport deserves a perfect moment.

But I'd ask her right now. I'd ask her to be my wife right fucking now. I don't want to do it after such a bad day, though, and I don't want her to ever think I did it out of guilt. Or because I'm impulsive. Or that I didn't mean it.

Because I fucking mean it.

I can't imagine my life any other way.

*"You'll know, and then it's over."*

Dad was right. I know. And I'm done. No more running from her or us.

I snuggle her closer.

"I'll have Bree tomorrow," she says. "You up for playing catch?"

"I believe I'm teaching her a curveball, but yeah."

She strokes the spot where Bree nailed me on my first day home. "I can't believe that didn't leave a nasty bruise. Hopefully, you can say the same tomorrow."

"No shit."

She smiles against me. "I've always said I didn't want kids. When we were growing up, Riss always wanted to play with dolls and babysit other people's kids. I just wanted to ride bikes or play in the creek."

"And that's why I've always loved you."

Her body shakes with a gentle chuckle.

"What?" I ask her.

"I'll never get tired of hearing you say that."

"Good. Because I'll be saying that a lot over the years."

She raises her head and looks at me with wide eyes as she searches my face.

“You mean that. Don’t you?” Bellamy asks.

“I mean it more than I’ve ever meant anything in my life. I’m going to be here for you. And your dad. And whatever else happens in your life.” I grin. “This has been a long time coming. It’s what should’ve happened years ago. I’m just thankful we’re here now. And if we had to go through all that before just to get here, then I’m glad for it. As long as I have you now. Forever.”

She sits entirely up. Her motion prompts me to sit up too.

She bites her fingernail.

“Stop,” I tell her, chuckling. “You’re making me nervous.”

Her hand drops right away. “At some point in the future, do you want children? Or a child? Any of them?”

That specific question, directed at me, coming from her beautiful lips, stirs something deep inside me.

I shift around in the bed until the tightness eases a bit.

“I’ve never seriously considered having kids,” I tell her. “But, right now, the answer is that I would like to have them. One? Three? Ten? I don’t know. But I think you and I would make pretty spectacular kids together.”

Surprise streaks across her face.

“I know you just said you didn’t want them,” I admit. “And if you don’t, then I don’t. I want you way before I want anything else.”

It’s the most real thing I’ve ever said in my life.

The whole room blurs around Bellamy and me. Nothing else matters.

My chest rises and falls as I wait on her response. But she could take all night, and that would be fine. It doesn’t matter what she says. I’ll give it to her.

“I’d like to have kids with you too,” she whispers. “Someday.”

The vulnerability in her eyes shines like a diamond. The shield she usually throws up when things get serious or hard isn't there.

Seeing her like this does something to me—something extraordinary and painful all at the same time.

I scoop her up and plant my lips on hers as I lay her on her back.

Her hair fans out around her in a silky cloud. She reaches up and touches the side of my face.

My heart feels like it's absorbed all my love for this crazy, gorgeous lady, and it's about to explode.

A smile that I've never seen from her sneaks across her cheeks. It's not wicked or mischievous like usual. It's wide open. Unguarded. A little shy.

It's fucking beautiful.

“Will you make love to me?” she whispers.

I blink. Twice. “Baby, you never have to ask me that.”

I reach for the bedside table for the condoms when she grabs my wrist with her hand. Her grip is firm and purposeful. I move my eyes from the table, over the blankets, and to her.

She shakes her head. “Can we not use them? Just this once?”

Fire flames through my veins.

I swear I misunderstand. Yet when I look into Bells's blue eyes, I know I didn't.

I fight a broad, stupid smile and look at her like she's an angel on Earth.

“If you don't hurry up, I might change my mind,” she teases.

*There she is.*

I slip off my jeans as she shrugs off hers. They fall together to the floor.

I hover over her perfect, curvy body. She grips my hips with her hands.

“We’re going to be okay, aren’t we?” she asks.

I nod because I see it too. *I can do this. I can be all the things she needs me to be.*

*All the things I want to be.*

“You can count on it.”

She rewards me with the biggest smile I’ve ever seen.

I slide inside her with nothing between us. She doesn’t close her eyes, doesn’t make snarky comments, or tease me about going slow.

It is, without a doubt, the best night of my life.



TWENTY-ONE

# COY

The closet door opens. Then closes.

Clothes hit the floor.

A hairbrush sweeps through Bellamy's hair, the sound much louder than I ever realized that brushing hair can be.

Then, as if I wasn't prodded awake enough, the curtains are pulled back, and sunlight shines in the room.

"What. Are. You. Doing?" I ask, covering my head with a pillow. "I thought we were sleeping in today."

"Who said that?" Bells asks.

"I don't know. Me. You. Logic?"

She laughs and sits next to me on the side of her bed. "Bree will be here in a little bit."

I groan.

"I'm going to assume you want to put on some clothes before she gets here?" Bellamy asks.

I peek out from beneath the pillow. My brain is still a haze from sleep, and my body just wants to pull her under the blankets and have a lazy day together.

"Can you cancel?" I ask.

"No. It's my job. You can't just cancel."

I grin sleepily. "I had a number-one album most of the year. I'm pretty sure I can cover your pay."

She takes a pillow from beside my head and hits me with it.

“Fine,” I grumble, yanking the blankets off my body. My cock is on high alert with a fine morning wood. “Look at what you’re missing.”

She gets up quickly and walks to the other side of the room. “I’m not going to touch it, or I will end up canceling, and then I’ll lose my job.”

“Again, I can pay you.”

“Will you shut up?” She laughs. “Get dressed, and then we can talk.”

I grab myself and jack it a few times just to get a reaction out of her. Her eyes go wide, and she bites her bottom lip.

“We could do some oral reciprocation,” I offer her. “My tongue on your pussy and your little mouth right here.”

“I don’t have time.” She pouts. “Why do I have to be a nanny?”

I snort and sit up.

A phone rings on the dresser. Bellamy keeps her eyes glued to my cock as she picks it up.

“Maybe it’s Lauren canceling again,” she says, whimpering as I stroke myself again.

She brings the phone in front of her. “Oh.” The playfulness leaves her face. “This is yours.”

My hands fall from my body as a cold chill kills my hard-on. I take the phone from Bells and look at the screen.

Meadow.

“I’ll call her back,” I say, hoping Bellamy doesn’t hear the strain in my voice. “I think she wants to talk contract.”

And when I need to leave.

The idea of leaving Savannah causes a visceral reaction inside me. It’s an intuitive, buried-in-the-depths-of-my-guts

kind of feeling that Meadow's call isn't just a scheduling or contract issue.

It's more.

Something I'm not going to like.

I look at Bells and smile. "Rain check on the oral?"

She nods, her eyes weary.

"What time is it?" I ask her.

"Eight. Or close to it."

"Shit." I scrub my hand over my face. "It's too early for me to deal with Bree. Can I go to Mom's and get a shower, and you can bring her over in an hour or so?"

She nods again.

I get to my feet and walk over to her. "It's you and me. Right? No matter what Meadow has to say or what happens otherwise, it's you and me."

A slow smile ghosts her lips. "Yes. It's you and me." She kisses me softly. "Now go before Bree gets here and sees you naked."

"I'd be more worried about Lauren seeing me."

Bellamy laughs and picks up my clothes off the floor, and hands them to me.

I get my jeans and sweater back on with an audience of one.

"Want to go with me to take Gramps to dinner?" I ask her. "I haven't seen him yet and want to before I leave."

"Sure."

"He loves Judy's, this place downtown. It's pretty good. I can call him and make sure he doesn't have a pressing golf re-run on television tonight."

She laughs. "Sounds like a plan."

I kiss her again. "Now I'm going to head out before I run into Lauren and Bree. I just don't have it in me this morning."

“Go.” She swats my ass. “I’ll see you in an hour or so.”

I make my way through her house and down the path toward the gate. My stomach churns as I get farther away from Bellamy’s house.

My phone feels like a bomb in my hand. As soon as I’m on the other side, I open my telephone app. There’s a missed call from Meadow and a voicemail.

I click the icon for the message.

“Hi, Coy, it’s Meadow. I hope you’re having a good morning so far. I need you to get on a plane and get back to Nashville today. We have a meeting with the label at nine in the morning. Apparently, Willa went out over the weekend and stupidly made some statement to a paparazzi about you—which I’ve already contacted her about—but it’s going to break today, and that’s not going to do you any favors. We need to get in there and get this contract signed and the ink dry before they can change their mind. Call me back as soon as you get this.”

I stop next to my parents’ trash can.

My blood runs cold as I look at my phone.

There’s too much to process to be able to do it quickly or well.

*Meadow’s words fly through my brain like a kite on crack.*

*Stupidly made a statement.*

*Going to break today.*

*Not going to do you any favors.*

*Change their minds.*

My brain immediately picks up on Willa making a statement that will break, and concern flips to Bellamy.

“What the fuck did Willa say?” I wonder out loud.

I press Meadow’s name. Every ring heightens my anxiety, and when the call goes to voicemail, I see red.

“Hey, Meadow, it’s Coy. Look, I don’t know what Willa said, but you better let her know that I’m not fucking with her. My name shouldn’t be tied to hers at all, but thanks to you, I guess it is. If she uses my name to get sympathy or hurts my reputation any more, I will sue her fucking ass. Got it? Let her know. And I can’t just come back to Nashville tonight.”

My gaze travels over the fence.

I can’t leave Bellamy right now. Not this quick. I need to be here until Joe starts the new chemo at the very least. I need to make sure she knows we’re solid before I jet off for Tennessee.

“I had a family emergency yesterday, so I’ll come back to Nashville in a couple of days, a week at most. Change the meeting. Call me if you have questions.”

I end the call.

*Fuck her.*

I throw open the kitchen door and march inside. I sift through the big paparazzi websites on my phone as I make my way upstairs.

Finally, I find it.

*Is Kelvin McCoy Headed to Rehab?*

I skim the article.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I say as I read.

Anger and disbelief shatter the happiness I’ve built over the past few days, and I’m pissed that I pulled up the article at all.

It’s total bullshit and to think that people can print this kind of thing and get away with it is bizarre and disgusting.

My phone buzzes, and Meadow’s name flashes on the screen.

“You better have handled that,” I bark.

“Calm down.”

“Really?” I squeeze my phone so hard that I think it might break into two pieces. “You want me to calm down when your prodigy is out there trying to ruin my motherfucking life?”

“Don’t use that language with me. I’d appreciate it if you could be professional.”

I laugh angrily. “Me too, Meadow. Me. Too. But the unprofessionalism started when you concocted this whole thing with Willa and then let her call the shots. You haven’t taken my side one fucking time and—”

“Yes, I have. I can’t control Willa. And she didn’t make that statement. Her new boyfriend did.”

“No, she did. The onus is on her. It’s on you, really, in my opinion.”

My voice raises to a level that I’m not proud of. I suck in a breath to try to calm down.

“She’s going to put out a statement today that says things were misconstrued,” Meadow says.

“She’s going to say it’s a bunch of garbage. That it’s not true. At all.”

“I’m taking care of it.” Finality oozes from her tone. “Now I need *you* to meet me in Nashville in the morning so we can get this contract finalized before they change their mind again.”

I sigh. “I don’t even know what they’re offering. And you expect me to run back and sign something?”

“I’m sending you and your attorney a copy this morning. It will be there by lunchtime.”

“And I’ll look at it for a couple of days and let you know.”

I hit the speakerphone button and set my phone on my desk. I’m too angry, too shaky, to hold it. I need to move, to pace, to rid myself of some of this energy before I blow.

“That doesn’t work,” she says.

“Too bad.”

“Coy, look, I’m not pulling punches here. I’ve expressed to you—repeatedly—why this contract is on shaky ground. I want to get you the best deal I can, but for that to happen, you need to cooperate.” She releases a frustrated breath. “I negotiated this all weekend. It’s the best deal we’re going to get. Two albums, one in June and one in January—”

“That’s crazy—”

“That’s fair,” she says over my start of an objection.

I growl into the air.

“It’s good money. Good royalties. The terms are solid. Soren Benson is Bob’s replacement post-merger, and he wants to meet with you in the morning. I’ve told him what an amazing artist you are and how the press has the wrong image of you. *How you are working on it*,” she emphasizes. “I painted you to be the face of their label in country music for the next three decades, and now you have to back me up.”

I close my eyes and grind my teeth together.

“If you don’t show up tomorrow, Coy, this deal might go down the drain, and I don’t think we’ll get anything even close to it again.”

I consider saying no. I consider telling Meadow that I’ll be back on my terms, and she can deal with the fallout then. But when I put myself in that position, I think about all the work I’ve done that will have gone to waste.

Starting over at another label won’t be simple. Or quick.

The dead time factored into all of that could very easily be a career-ruining moment for me.

I walk over to the window and look at the Davenport’s house. My heart bleeds for them.

Can I risk not going?

Can I risk leaving?

I hang my head and sigh.

“Coy? Are you still there?” Meadow asks.



“Yeah.”

“Tomorrow at nine. You will be here, right?” she asks.

I cover my face with my hands and say a prayer that I’m doing the right thing.

I can go and then come right back. I’ll figure it out.

“Yeah,” I say, my voice rough. “I’ll be there.”

“Great,” she chirps in relief. “See you then. Travel safe.”

The line goes dead.

TWENTY-TWO

# BELLAMY

“Hello?” I ask, holding a hand wet from the dishes up in the air.

Water trickles down my forearm until it hits my elbow. Then it drips methodically into a pool of suds in the sink.

“Hey, Bellamy. It’s Lauren.”

“Hey,” I say, glancing at the clock. “What’s up?”

“We were on our way over, and Bree threw up in the back seat. Like, everywhere. The floorboard, down the window seal, all over the seats.” She sighs. “We won’t be seeing you today.”

On the inside, I squeal.

On the outside, I frown.

“Oh, darn it. I was looking forward to hanging out with Bree today,” I say. “Tell her I hope she feels better. Do you need me to bring anything to you? Soup? Gatorade? Vodka for you?”

She laughs. “No, thank you. I appreciate it.”

“No problem. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Talk to you later, Bellamy.”

“Goodbye, Lauren.”

I end the call and then double-check that it’s disconnected. Once I’m sure, I dance across the kitchen.

Water drips down my arm and onto my foot.

“Crap,” I say, laughing at myself. I rinse my hand and dry it off on a towel.

My energy went from zero to one-hundred at the sudden change of my day. It feels like a little gift from God that I’m free to be with Coy. I knew he would be dealing with his contract this week, but after the call from Meadow already this morning, I want to spend as much time with him as I can.

And, hopefully, get some kind of definitive answer on what it means for us when the contract is resolved.

I take a deep breath.

“This is going to be fine,” I tell myself. “You have nothing to worry about. Just trust the process. Manifest your future.”

I laugh at myself as I pull up my text app.

Me: Good news! Bree is sick. That sounds horrible. That’s not what I mean. Anyway, do you want to come over?  
\*winks\*

Immediately, his reply pops up.

Coy: On my way.

I look down at my shirt. It’s soaked from the dishes because I can’t seem to wash a glass without taking a bath right along with it.

I bite my lip as a crazy idea pops into my head.

It’s so ... unlike me. But it might be fun.

It would *definitely* be fun.

I giggle.

“Screw it.”

I race to my bedroom and strip naked. The air is cold on my skin, and my nipples harden. I run a brush through my

hair.

Just as I reach for my red satin robe, a knock sounds at the door.

A surge of excitement blasts through me as I slip the fabric against my skin. I start to tie it at my waist but decide to leave it open in a moment of confidence.

And leave my body on display.

“Who are you?” I ask myself as I pad down the hallway.

*Well, he’s the one that promised oral reciprocation.*

My body hums with anticipation. My heart fills with the comfort that being with Coy brings. It’s the only place I can find that sensation, and I never want to let it go.

I check the peephole to make sure it’s him before I open the door.

I lean against the doorframe and grin. “Hey.”

He looks me up and down, clearly not expecting me like this. He smiles appreciatively.

“Well, hello to you,” he says, stepping inside. He kicks the door closed. “Come here.”

I step in front of him. My heart thunders in my chest as he drags his gaze up and down my body.

I can’t believe I’m doing this. I’m usually entirely too self-conscious to stand naked in the daylight in front of a man.

But, with Coy? I feel beautiful. Confident. Like ... *me*. The *me* I’m supposed to be. The *me* that’s buried under insecurities and fears and obligations.

The *me* that loves *him*.

I stand on my tip-toes and kiss him. He kisses me back, but there’s a hesitation that has me pulling away before I’m ready.

My brows tug together as I peer up into his eyes.

The humor and mischief that I usually see in them are gone. Instead, uncertainty takes the stage in Coy’s handsome features.

I feel my spirits fall.

I grab the dangling ends of my tie and cover myself.

*Something is wrong.*

I know it.

*But he wasn't gone that long. What could've happened in that little while?*

I open my mouth to ask but then it hits me: *Meadow.*

Fear licks at me. It's a form of oral that I wasn't expecting.

I back away from him as he wars with himself, biting his fingernail and shifting his gaze to the floor. Whatever this is about isn't good. If it were, he wouldn't look so miserable.

"Just tell me," I say, crossing my arms over my chest in defense. As if, somehow, my posture will keep whatever Coy is about to say from inflicting damage on my heart.

"It's ... not a big deal."

"Cool. Then tell me."

He clears his throat. "Meadow called."

"I know."

"No, she called again." His Adam's apple bobs as he forces a swallow. "And I have to go to Nashville."

*Okay.*

"I knew that."

He stills. "Today."

My arms drop slowly to my sides. What does Coy mean *today*? Like now?

My brain scrambles to make sense of this development—one that takes me by surprise. There are so many things that are still up in the air. He can't just go.

But he'll have to.

I take a deep breath and try not to let my anxieties take over.

“Did something happen?” I ask. “This seems ... sudden.”

“There’s going to be a story drop today—it’s already on some sites—that says I’m either going to rehab or that I’m there now or something. I don’t know.”

That doesn’t make any sense.

“Why would that be a headline? It’s not true,” I say.

“I know. But apparently, Willa Welch and a new boyfriend of hers or something ran into a photographer last night and said something about it. So, naturally, that gets printed because I’m the easy target. It makes for a good headline.”

“So, because some girl you use to date—”

“Fake date.”

“A girl you fake dated,” I say, correcting myself, “can just say what she wants, and then that’s it for you?”

“Apparently.”

I close my eyes and try to stay calm.

*Breathe, Bellamy.*

“There’s something else,” he says carefully. “Meadow texted me on my way over here. There’s a picture of us at the hospital yesterday. Meadow’s team is trying to get it pulled, but I can’t guarantee that it’s not going to show up somewhere online.”

My breathing gets shallow. I stare at Coy in disbelief. “You’re kidding.”

He shakes his head.

“Who is it of?” I ask.

“You, Joe, and me.”

“It’s of my dad?” I ask, bewildered. “At the hospital?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of ... monster would do that?” My jaw continues to drop. “I mean, I knew those women at the desk figured out it was you, but they took pictures of *my dad*?”

“Yes. And you,” he says, fiddling with the hem of his shirt.

*Lord, help me.*

“What are they saying about it?” I ask. “Is that why you’re ‘at rehab’? Because you’re at an oncologist with an old man?”

He shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know. It doesn’t make any sense but, in this world, it doesn’t have to.”

I pace a circle around the room, licking my lips.

“They could say anything, right? Like, if they can say you’re at rehab, they could say anything about any of us. People could show up here. Call my dad. Hound us.”

He nods. “Yes, that could happen. But it won’t. No one bothers my family. If it does happen, I’ll hire security for you. You know that.”

My shock turns into disbelief. “Hire security? What? Coy ... how do you live like this?”

“It’s the business. I mean, I’m used to it. But ...”

“But I’m not.”

I walk to the couch and sit down. I try to process this.

This is a lot. More than I bargained for, and I should’ve thought about this, but I didn’t.

*But it’s fine. I’m fine. It’ll all be fine.*

I look up at him. “So, you’re leaving. That’s what you’re telling me.”

“Yes. I have to. Meadow says I’ll likely lose my record deal—or, at the very least, my position in negotiations—if I don’t show up tomorrow morning. I don’t have a choice.”

*Everyone has a choice.*

*Except my dad. He didn’t have a fucking choice about cancer.*



“When will you be back?” I ask.

“Honestly, I don’t know. As soon as I can. But I’ll be here for you. I *am* here for you. If you need me, call me. I’ll answer.”

*“If you ever need me, all you have to do is call.”*

My stomach flip-flops as the words he whispered to me all of those nights ago on the boat come ringing back. I squash down the shot of bile that threatens to launch up my throat.

“So, that’s the plan then?” I ask him, swallowing hard. “You just go on to Nashville and I just ... call you when I need you?”

“No. No. Not at all. I’ll come back as soon as I can and as often as I can. You can come to Nashville too.”

I shoot him a look that calls him out on that. I’m not going to be able to go to Nashville until Dad ... And he knows that.

A lump the size of Georgia lodges in my throat. When I look at him this time, it’s with a heavy stroke of fear.

My phone rings and interrupts my panic. I glance at the table and see my Dad’s name on the screen.

I pick it up, ignoring a look from Coy.

“Hey, Daddy. You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he says. “Did you remember that I have to get that blood work repeated today?”

I sigh. “I forgot. Can we go this afternoon? It doesn’t matter, does it?”

“No. I just have to fast for the test. If we could go before it gets too late, I’d appreciate it. I’m hungry.” He chuckles. “I hate to be a pain, Bellamy. I can call a nurse to take me, if you’d rather.”

I blow out a heavy, tired breath.

Dad is hungry and he can’t eat until after his blood test. A test that *he needs*. And here I am, delaying the inevitable fact that Coy is going to choose to leave. *He’s going to leave*. And

he's going to do it with no real guarantee that he will come back.

Like last time.

*I need to get myself together and prioritize what's important in this moment.*

“No. Absolutely not,” I say, fighting back the tears. *How did I forget?* “I’ll be there within the hour.”

“I’ll see you then, baby girl.”

“Bye, Dad.”

I hold my phone with both hands and feel the weight of everything pile on my shoulders.

“Is everything okay?” Coy asks.

I nod.

“What is it?” he asks.

I lift my head and look at him.

I know Coy loves me. I believe him when he says it. I feel it when he touches me and I can see it in his eyes. But, if what he tells me is true, he loved me the night on the boat. And look how that ended.

*What is really different now except for the fact that our lives are even more complicated?*

*Was I crazy to think this could work out between us?*

He's going to bolt out of here today, and I have no idea when he'll be back. He's given me promises that he will and that means something, sure. But it leaves a wonky feeling in the pit of my stomach that maybe he's saying those things to bide himself time because we haven't made a plan. There are no plans.

Meanwhile, I'll be here, dealing with my life and its messes, and, at the same time, checking my back for photographers at the hospital.

*While he's in Tennessee, hoping just figuring out his career ... and not our relationship.*

It's too much. And it'll be too much for Coy also. He doesn't deserve to be weighed down with all of this either. Especially not with the months that I know are just ahead with Dad's new medicine. Maybe he just realizes that too. *Who am I to blame him?*

My eyes well up with tears.

Maybe it already is getting to be too much.

Maybe that's why he's so quick to leave.

"What was that call about?"

"I have to take Dad for tests today."

He nods, running his tongue around his mouth, obviously picking up on my trepidation. "I wish we had more time to talk this out. Or for me to take you and Joe—"

"Well, we don't," I say, getting to my feet. "We both need to get started on our days."

He picks up on my tone. It's borderline angry, but not at him—just at the world. It's also sad. And frustrated. And if I had the luxury of time and space and selfishness, I'd take a hot shower and cry.

But I can't do that because I don't have those things.

"Bells ..."

He reaches for me, but I don't go to him. It kills me not to run into his arms. It causes me physical pain to keep from getting the much-needed—*short-lived*—comfort that I've found in him.

I love him. I love him so fucking much. *But .. what's the point?*

Hope got me into this mess and now logic has to get me out.

"Stop crying," he tells me.

"I can't just *stop crying*."

He grits his teeth. "You told me you wouldn't do this."

"What are you talking about? What am I doing, Coy?"

“You’re pushing me away.”

“Well, you’re running away and I think you told me you wouldn’t do that too.”

He twists his neck back and forth. “I have to go to work. You know that. What do you want me to do?”

“That’s the problem. There’s nothing you can do but go to work.” I shrug helplessly because I’m not going to beg him to sit down and really hash this out with me. If he wanted to, he would. “I love you. I do. I love you more than I ever thought I could love anyone. But we have to be real here.”

“I am being real.”

He invades my personal space and puts his arms around me, locking his hands at the small of my back. The contact causes a river of tears to stream down my face.

“Stop crying,” he tells me.

“I can’t just stop crying.”

“Then stop pushing me away and this can be different.”

I want to argue with him. But he’s right. I *am* pushing him away.

A part of it is from fear. I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that to myself. But the bigger reason I’m putting a wedge between us and a shield over my heart is because I know it’s the right thing to do.

“The last few days have been wonderful,” I tell him, my voice thankfully staying even. “You have been amazing. But I remember now why I don’t let myself have that level of hope. Because it’s ... unrealistic.”

“What’s unrealistic is you discounting us without giving us a chance.”

“I gave us a chance—more than once. And I thought maybe this time would be different. But ... you didn’t even ask me to weigh in on it, Coy. You didn’t even include me in your choice. Do you even realize that?”

He slow blinks.

“You came in here and told me what was happening. And that’s fine,” I say. “But it tells me what this is going to be, and I’d like to think that I’d have some input about things.”

He stands in front of me. If I reached out, I could touch the side of his face. I could play with his hair or touch the lines in his stomach.

But that would make things worse.

“I’m sorry we waited so long to get on the same page. And I’m even sorrier that we fell off of it so quickly.”

His eyes grow wide. “What are you talking about—sorrier that we fell off? What the hell, Bellamy?”

“This will never work.”

“The hell it won’t.”

His tone gets under my skin. It’s as if he doesn’t realize that this is infinitely harder on me than it is on him.

Much to his dismay—and mine, I pull away.

“I really, *really* need you to go. What’s going to happen is inevitable, and it’ll be easier if I have fewer memories to process at three in the morning, okay?”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

My body stills as the tears move silently down my face.

Even though the words tell me he wants to stay, I hear the wobble in them. And I see something else too—a lack of an actual action. *Proof* that he means the things he says this time.

I want to take him at his word, but I’ve done that before. And I can’t be stupid again.

I reach out and touch his face for the last time. My heart shatters, the pieces so small and jagged that it’ll never be able to be put back together again.

“You need to go,” I say, my voice clogged with emotion. “Now.”

I close the distance between us and press a kiss to his cheek.

With a final look at him, I turn and walk to my bedroom.

My back hits the wall as my legs give out. I try to control the sobs emanating from my chest as I shake violently.

I look toward the door through the mass of tears and hope—*stupidly hope*—that he comes for me.

But he doesn't. And when I hear the loud thud of the front door shutting behind him, I know that's what I need to do too.

*Put him behind me. Get up. Move forward.*

Alone.

TWENTY-THREE

## COY

I jam my clothes into my suitcase.

“Fuck this,” I mutter as I slam the lid shut.

*Zip!*—the sound shoots through the air as I race the track around the perimeter of the luggage shut.

My head is so loud. Snippets of my conversation with Bellamy mixes with her laughter from yesterday and the sound of us kissing in the moments before things were ruined.

I sit on the bed and hold my head in my hands.

“I don’t want to leave,” I say out loud.

My voice is murky from the angst that fills every inch of my body. It’s dread and an anguish so deep that I’m not sure that I’ll ever claw my way out of it.

The worst part of it all—besides seeing Bellamy in so much pain—is the rejection. Because that’s what it is at the end of the day.

She rejected me.

Her points were valid. I understand what she was saying. But, if she really loved me—if she wanted this to work as badly as I do, she’d want to try.

And she doesn’t.

She just wanted me gone.

*Knock, knock!*



I look up to see my mom standing in the doorway. Concern paints her face, and that doesn't make me feel any better.

“Hey, kiddo. Are you okay?” Mom asks.

“Does it look like it?”

She frowns as she enters my room. “What’s happening? I heard all this racket coming from in here and wondered if you were packing up your things or if Boone was up to no good.”

Her joke makes me smile—sort of.

Mom sits beside me on the edge of the bed and puts her arm around my shoulders. “Talk to me.”

I cover my face with my hands and press my fingers into my skin. The pressure of my fingertips on my forehead strangely helps me calm down.

A little bit.

Enough to talk to my mother without screaming.

“I’m heading back to Nashville,” I tell her.

The thought of being there now feels incredibly wrong.

The house that I love so much—the one that I had designed to reflect this one, the one I grew up in—doesn’t seem sufficient.

Sure, it’s filled with my music trophies and pictures of me with various important people in the music industry. There are memories everywhere I turn that remind me of the crazy, wild life that I live. Every piece of furniture, every stone in the fireplace, was hand-selected. The bed is the comfiest in the history of beds.

It has everything a man could ever want and everything I’ve ever dreamed of. It is, by all accounts, the pinnacle of my career.

Still, it lacks something that I just now realize.

It lacks a smile when I get home from the studio. It lacks a warmth that only comes from being lived in and loved in. It

lacks a sink full of dishes because you got sidetracked after dinner and fell asleep wrapped around the woman you love.

It lacks a heart and a soul.

It lacks Bellamy.

“You’re heading back now?” Mom asks.

I nod slowly. “I have to be there at nine in the morning. Meadow says there’s a very real chance that I’ll lose my contract if I don’t.”

“That must be really difficult for you to have to leave on a moment’s notice like that.”

“Yeah.”

“May I ask how Bellamy reacted?”

I sigh and then look at Mom. “I’ll give you one guess.”

Mom sighs too. “I’m sorry, Coy.”

“Me too.” I spring to my feet as emotions begin to stream through me once again. “What do I do, Mom? Do I just not go? I mean, isn’t that what I’m facing here?”

“Did she give you an ultimatum?”

I narrow my eyes at her and stop walking. “You know she didn’t do that.”

To my surprise, Mom smiles.

“I really don’t think this is anything to smile about,” I tell her, annoyance thick in my tone.

“Then you’re not looking at it the right way, sweetheart.”

“Are you kidding me? You expect me to smile right now? Do you think I’ll ever smile again?”

I watch as she stands like she has all the time in the world. There’s a contentment in her features that has me reeling.

“Why are you not upset for me?” I ask her. “Don’t you see how much this fucking sucks?”

“I do, Coy. I honestly do. And I’m sorry that it sucks for you, and I’m sorry, too, that it sucks even more for Bellamy.

Because she has to sit over there and wait for you to leave. And then she has to go on with her day knowing that you'll be signing contracts, singing songs, and returning to your luxurious life ... not thinking about her. And her life."

I balk. "You think that I won't think about Bells every minute of my life? You don't even know how I feel then."

She places a hand on my shoulder. It just sits there, her palm against the blade, like she's some kind of Jedi that can fix my problems with her touch.

*I fucking wish.*

My emotions rise again, threatening to swamp me with their intensity. I glance through the window at the Davenport house and wish that I could turn my phone off, throw it away, and run to Bellamy's and forget this ever happened.

But I can't. That's not how life works. That's not how my life works. The slander against me can literally ruin my career. And future. All my hard work for nothing. All my compromises, pointless. All my sacrifices, moot.

And not to mention the many people who rely on me. The charities I support, the writers that pen lyrics for me. The fans that use my music as a form of therapy or a way to express their love. There are droves of people across the world that rely on me. And walking away from my label—if it were something I could even consider—would be a travesty.

Even if it causes me to give up the one thing I want more than any of that.

I look at my mom.

"Do me a favor?" I ask her.

"Of course."

"Help her. Treat her like she's ..." I force a swallow down my throat. "Treat her like she's my wife, okay?"

Her eyes grow wide for a split second. "Coy ..."

"I was going to ask her. I thought I needed a ring ..."

I look out the window again.

*Would things be different if I had asked her already?*

My heart cracks again, and I wonder how much is left to break.

Mom pats my shoulder before turning towards the door.

“You do what you have to do, Coy. We’ll take care of Bellamy.” She stops at the door. A soft smile spreads across her cheeks. “If you need *anything*, call me. Understand?”

As I watch her smile grows more expansive, I think I know what she means. And I think that if I let myself dwell on that too long, I might do crazy things.

I’ve already been rejected once today. There’s really no sense in getting it again.

“I get it,” I tell Mom as I tug my suitcase off the bed. “Thanks. I’ll call you when I get home.”

“Be safe,” she says as I walk by her.

I don’t stop until I’m at the rental car. I don’t stop moving at all until I back out onto the road.

And I don’t look in my rearview mirror as I drive off toward the airport, either.

There’s no reason to.

The only thing behind me ... is everything.

No big deal.

*Because she has to sit over there and wait for you to leave.*

---

## **Bellamy**

I slam the dishwasher door closed.

*He’s gone.*

I would bet that I knew the moment he drove away a few hours ago. I lay in the bathroom trying to scrub all scents of Coy off me, when a sudden yet slow chill raced over my body. It was as if an energy drained from me, like a part of my heart withered away

I sat there and cried.

“No more tears,” I tell the empty kitchen. “I’m not crying anymore.”

I throw the last bag of dried-up grapes from the refrigerator into the trash.

“If nothing else, at least I stress cleaned. The outside will look like I have it all figured out.”

*Which is the motto for my life.*

I sit at the kitchen table. My entire body sags. I think about how that last thought is so unbearably true.

Pretending to be okay is something I do well. Putting on a show for others is a trick I mastered a long time ago.

I had to. It was a survival mechanism. Joking around and appearing to have it all together made it easier for everyone around me to deal with when Mom passed away. It was much easier to get a smile out of them than it was having them cry and tell me it would be okay. All that did was make me think that there was an option where it might not.

“This time, it will be harder. It’s more personal. But you can do it.”

I smile at myself for trying to keep going even though I know I’ll be in bed with a gallon of ice cream and a box of tissues before the night is over.

*Knock, knock!*

The sound ripples through my house. My heart only half-jumps in my chest.

I know it’s not Coy.

Still, I stand and walk to the door, pushing out the ridiculousness of me opening it naked just earlier this

morning.

I was so fun then. So full of hope.

So stupid.

I peer through the peephole and gasp.

Slowly, I open the door.

“Hi, Bellamy,” Siggie says. She gives me a soft smile.  
“How are you?”

“Meh.”

“I know. I’m *meh* too.”

I open the door even more. “Do you want to come in?” I ask.

She’s never been here before. Not once. So when she steps inside and her heels click against the hardwood, it feels like my world shifts.

“That son of mine is a hard-headed one,” she says, looking around the living room. “This place is adorable.”

“Thanks.” I wrap my arms over my middle. “It used to be a pool house slash game house. But then Dad redid it for a nanny when Mom died.”

“I remember that.”

*Of course, she does.*

I watch her check out a picture of me from when I was a baby. From the side, she reminds me so much of Coy. They both have full lips and the longest eyelashes. He has her cheekbones, too.

“You were so cute,” she says, placing the photograph back down. “You’re still beautiful, of course, but those cheeks.” She grins. “I forgot you had cheeks like that.”

“They wouldn’t be as cute on me now.”

She laughs. It makes me smile.

“I respect you, Bellamy,” she says.

The compliment catches me off guard. “What?”

“I do.” She moseys around my living room as if she feels totally comfortable in my space. “I’ve watched you grow up and endure some of the biggest heartbreaks a person should ever be expected to handle. And, yet, you did it at such a young age and with so much grace.”

I don’t know what to say to that. So, I don’t say anything.

Siggy stops moving and faces me. “You remind me so much of your mother.”

That’s it. That’s all it takes.

My chest heaves as I hold back a sob.

“She was so smart and quick-witted. She could get more done in a day than I could in a week,” she tells me. “I remember seeing her outside in the flower beds first thing in the morning. I would be struggling to stay awake and she’d be out there on her knees with half a day’s work in.”

Siggy laughs quietly to herself.

“Do you remember her cornbread? Or her fried okra?” She touches her stomach. “That woman could cook.”

“I remember the cornbread,” I say, pissed at myself for crying again.

She smiles at me. “I’ve watched you from across the fence and think about how proud she’d be of you. She would get a great joy out of watching you stand up for yourself and sticking to your guns.”

I know what she’s talking about. I get the thinly veiled reference to Coy.

“Sometimes we don’t have a choice,” I say softly, sniffing.

Siggy walks across the room and stands in front of me. She looks down at me sweetly.

“You and my son are two very special people,” she says. “You were destined for something greater than the mundane, for a love that’s bigger and brighter than the ordinary.”

I latch on to the genuine kindness in her eyes and hold on for dear life. She's always been such a stronghold for me, someone I've looked up to and respected.

*She's loved me like my mom would have. Unconditionally.*

"Sometimes we have to go through unforeseen challenges in order to get to where we need to be. It's like the world knows we'd settle so it pushes us to reach a little harder, to reach for a little more." She grins. "Don't give up on Coy. Don't give up on love, sweetheart."

I nod, unable to piece together a response.

She pats me on the shoulder before heading to the door.

"If you need anything at all, come on over. The kitchen door is always unlocked—mostly because Boone sneaks in to go grocery shopping in my pantry because he's unable to find a store on his own." She opens the door and fire me a look.

I laugh.

"Love you, Bells."

I nod, my face pinching together as another round of tears disregard my orders and flow down my face.

She shuts the door behind her.

I sit on the edge of the couch and feel my world turn upside down again.

If only things could be different. If only ...

*Don't give up on love, sweetheart.*

"I'm sorry, Siggy. I think love gave up on me."



TWENTY-FOUR

## COY

Every light in the house is on. It's kind of like noon in the middle of the night.

My bag sits unpacked on my bed in the other room. My sweatshirt that still smells of Bellamy is thrown over a chair in the living room—the exact place I decided I couldn't take it anymore.

I walk to the thermostat and turn the heat up. It'll be a fucking sauna in here in an hour. But I bet it will still feel cold.

An unopened pizza box sits on the kitchen counter. I was an asshole for ordering a pizza so late—especially one I didn't really want. So, I tipped the delivery driver fifty bucks. At least I made someone smile today.

It's so quiet that I swear I can hear a buzzing sound coming from my light bulbs.

*Is that even possible?*

I scratch my head and contemplate how I'm going to spend the night. There will be no sleep happening. I don't even want to consider lying down and giving myself the mental space to remember Bellamy's tears.

I can't quit thinking of it now. *How terrible will it be if I close my eyes and try to sleep?*

My phone rings, and I grab it before the first burst even stops. I almost throw it at the wall when I see that it's not Bellamy.

*But of course, it's not her, you asshole.*

“Yeah?” I say, holding the phone to my ear.

“Yeah. You sound just like I thought you would.” Holt laughs. “I’d ask how you are but answer received.”

I run a hand over my face. “Did you just call to piss me off?”

“No. I called to talk some sense into my little brother.”

“Holt,” I growl, “I’m not in the fucking mood.”

“Good. Because, if you were, this conversation wouldn’t be necessary, and your ass would be back in Savannah where it fucking belongs.”

His irritation, bordering on anger, surprises me. *He’s angry at me?*

“You know, it’s usually Wade that I fantasize about punching in the face. But, tonight, it’s you.”

“If you think you’re big enough, little boy, try it.”

I roll my eyes and, when I do, my fight response flees.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I’m just ... pissed.”

“As you should be.” He sighs. “Do you want to rehash it? Or do we want to accept that Mom told Boone who told me? I know that a few details will be wrong, but I think I get the gist of what happened.”

I walk into the living room and feel the exhaustion of the day settling over me.

“I’m not rehashing shit,” I tell him.

“Good. I’ll get right to it then. You are fucking up.”

“Fuck off, Holt,” I groan as I sit on the couch. “

“Why? So you can go mope around and think about how sad it is that you let the best thing that ever happened to you get away? What kind of brother would I be if I did that?”

I half-smile. “The kind that wants an album dedicated to him.”

He snorts. “Spare me the dramatics.”

I sigh loudly in hopes that he reads the message: I don’t want to do this.

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask him. “I have to be here in the morning. And then, if I’m honest with myself, I’m going to have to be here to get started on an album that they want *by June*. Which is impossible if you don’t already know that.”

“I agree. You had to go.”

“So?” I lean my head against the cushions. “So, what are my choices? Bellamy isn’t going to come here. I can’t even ask her to do that. And she’s like freaking out right now and saying that our lives won’t mesh and this isn’t the right time for our relationship, and ... She doesn’t want this now. And I can’t blame her.”

“No, you can’t. But what you can blame yourself for is the fact that you didn’t really try.”

My head springs off of the pillow. “What?”

“Shocking to hear the truth, isn’t it?”

“What the fuck do you even know about what I tried, and I didn’t try?”

“Well, first, you didn’t reach out to me to help you. You come to me for everything, Coy. Who did you call when you needed a new attorney over that fast food bullshit? Me. Who did you call when you couldn’t decide what house to buy? Me. Who did you fucking call when you thought you had ankle cancer—which isn’t a fucking thing, by the way—and you didn’t know whether to tell Mom?”

“I actually called Oliver for that. You just happened to be in the same room. And,” I add, “I was very, very drunk *with Boone* and *in Vegas* when that happened. Not sure you can use that here.”

“The point is that you didn’t try if you didn’t ask me for help.”

Slowly, I lean my head back on the couch.

He's right. As usual, I do hate that he's right, but it's true. Every damn thing that I've been unsure about, when I've needed more council or just a sounding board I trust, it's Holt that I call. He's never bullshitted me—*which is why I don't call Boone*—he's never been unnecessarily condescending toward me—*which is why I don't call Wade*—and he's never laughed at me sense of defeat. *Thank you, Oliver.*

I trust Holt with my life. *Fuck.*

Holt exhales into the phone.

I can hear the exasperation in his tone. But I'm tired too.

“You are the most creative person I know,” he says, his voice softer this time. “Why don't you take some of those skills and apply them to your current situation?”

“Oh, I don't know. Maybe because I don't hold the keys to my future.”

“That's a cop-out.”

I groan as my head starts to pound. “It is not.”

“Hell if it's not. Look, get outside the box, Coy. Think. You know how this industry works. Figure out a way around it and tell me what to do.”

“What do you know about the music business?” I snort.

“Not a damn thing. But I know people that do, and I know other people that will figure shit out if I pay them enough.”

My shoulders soften as a small smile slips across my lips.

Why can't the music industry feel like this? Why does it have to feel like I'm going from this supportive place to a lion's den?

It doesn't have to be this way. There has to be a way to make music designed to make people happy—and me money—without sacrificing yourself. Or your life. Or your soul.

I sit up and balance my elbows on my knees. My head throbs, and I expect that it will for days.

“Did you know that Blaire left me?” he asks.

“When?”

“Last year. Not long after we first got together. A bunch of shit went down, and Blaire took off to Chicago.”

*Impressive.*

“I didn’t know that,” I admit.

“I called her and texted her and left her these messages that explained, in detail, how I deserved another chance. It was this sappy pouring of emotions that did one thing wrong.”

My brows pull together. “What was that?”

“*I told her.*” He chuckles. “I didn’t show her jack shit. Being the smart woman that she is, she didn’t believe me. Why should she? Why should she listen to some asshole promise her the world when she deserved someone to go out and get it?”

*He and Boone have been spending too much time together.*

Holt sighs. “When you decide that you can’t live without her—remember this. Show her that you love her. Show her that you mean forever.” He takes a long, deep breath. “Loving someone is action. It’s communicating and compromising and working your ass off. Just telling Bellamy you love her—it’s not good enough. It’s a decent start, but it means nothing at the end of the day.”

I bite my lip and think about what he’s saying.

*I’ve seen that.* The relief on her beautiful but stressed face when I told her I was driving her and her dad to the doctor’s appointment. She hadn’t asked anything of me, but I showed her that I loved her by my action.

“There’s no excuse in the world for you not to figure this out. And if you don’t figure it out soon, man, you might run out of time,” Holt says.

“I just need to get through tomorrow.”

“Okay. Do what you have to do. I need to go crawl in bed with my girl.”

I groan. “Rub it in.”

“I fully intend on doing just that.”

I make a face and laugh despite my mood.

“Call me tomorrow,” Holt says. “And don’t listen to Boone. Period. He might’ve been good for advice once, but that’s his one-and-done.”

My laugh is loud this time. “Don’t I know that.”

“Later, Coy.”

“Bye.”

I sit back on the couch again and close my eyes.

*God, let me figure this out. Please.*

But when I open my eyes, everything is the same.

TWENTY-FIVE



# BELLAMY

Lauren: I still have a puker. Bree wants Coy to know that she's been watching videos on throwing curveballs.

I force a swallow.

Me: I'll tell him. I hope she gets better.

Lauren: Me too. There's a reason I'm not a nurse.

I blow out a breath and look up at the sky. The sun is warm on my face despite the chill in the air. I read online that getting enough Vitamin D and sunshine was supposed to help chase the blues away.

*Let's pray that works.*

I straighten my sweatshirt and fill my lungs with the crisp air.

*You will get through this day. And then tomorrow. And then the next day. Look at all of the days you've made it through when you thought you couldn't.*

I got up and took a shower. I made my bed. I fried an egg and toasted bread, and then I poured myself a cup of coffee.

I took out the trash and wiped the kitchen counters. Then I made sure Dad's nurse came and he had his medicines. Then I

came home, sat at the table, and had the one cry I'm allowing myself today.

Routine helps. The one foot in front of the other mantra is solid.

My personal care routine when facing adversity is just to keep going. Eventually, you can look back and see how far you came.

*This time, when I look back, I'll see Coy.*

"Nope," I tell myself. "We are going forward."

I walk across the yard and into my dad's house. Game shows play in the living room. I grab a pear out of the basket on the table on my way through the kitchen. I'm not hungry, but I can fiddle with it.

"Hey," I say as I round the corner. "How are you today?"

Dad looks rested. His skin is warmer, and his eyes less gaunt.

"Not bad," he says. "My nurse was here and helped me get a bath. She ran to the store for me." He takes me in. "How are you?"

"Eh."

I sit on the love seat and sigh.

"Why does this show look like it was taped in the seventies?" I ask.

"Because it was."

"Oh." I watch the host that is obviously wearing a toupee bop around the screen with a fake smile. "Do you think these things are rigged?"

"Probably. Isn't everything? If you're going to turn it on, you just have to suspend belief."

"That's what you have to do in life, too," I mumble before I can catch myself.

Dad grabs the remote and mutes the television.

"What's going on, Bellamy?"

I toss the pear from one hand to the other. “Nothing. Coy went to Nashville this morning.”

“When is he coming back?”

I shrug. “If we were on a game show, that would be a great million-dollar question.”

Dad doesn’t laugh.

“Hey, that was funny,” I say, even though I’m not laughing either.

Even though it’s not funny at all.

He waits to see if I explain what’s going on—because something clearly is going on. I shrug instead and look at him blankly.

I won’t cry in front of him. I won’t.

“Want me to see if I can bake these pears?” I ask him, tossing the one in my hand up in the air again. “You can put brown sugar or honey or something on them—and cinnamon, I think. Saw it on a cooking show.”

“Bellamy, please. Stop it.”

“Stop what?” I take in his raised brow. “Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

He rocks back and forth in his chair, trying to get every last discernible morsel of information out of me without having to poke.

Finally, he speaks.

“He will come back,” he says simply.

“Probably for the next holiday.”

Dad keeps rocking. “Probably for you.”

I squeeze the pear. “Only if he’s stupid.”

“Bellamy!”

“What?”

Dad huffs. “I didn’t raise you to be like this.”

“Like what? Realistic?”

“No. Pessimistic.” He shakes his head. “Do you not have any faith in Coy?”

I blow out a breath. “Are you siding with the enemy again?”

He rolls his eyes.

“I was kidding.” *Kind of.* “Look, I told him to go focus on his work. He has come contract and agent issues.” I mentally throw fireballs at Meadow. “He needs to take care of that.”

That’s all true. None of that is a lie.

“And I told him that once it’s taken care of and that he knows that he can come home or if he’s touring or ... whatever,” I say, searching for words, “that we could maybe try again.”

And that’s also true. Mostly.

I see a shadow cross Dad’s face, and I worry he thinks I sent Coy away because of the appointment yesterday. Because of him.

“There was a picture leaked of the three of us—Coy, you, and me—from the hospital yesterday,” I say as nonchalantly as possible. “I don’t think I’m ready for that kind of life.”

True. Totally.

Mostly.

Kind of.

“What would that do to Bree?” I ask, strengthening my argument. “Could I watch her if there was a chance of someone taking her picture and putting it in the Expose or some other rag magazine?”

“Well, I didn’t think of that,” Dad says.

I sigh, relieved.

“Me either. There are things I didn’t think of that could have a profound impact on our lives. I shouldn’t jump into things, right? Didn’t you teach me that?”

Dad looks at me like he's not sold on my argument entirely.

"If this is the case," he says, "then fine. You should wait to jump head-first when you're sure. Because you should never commit to someone's heart unless you're ready to take care of it in every way."

I nod.

"But if you're lying to me," he says, pointing a finger my way, "then when that boy comes for you, you better take him back."

"If he comes at all, it'll be a long time from now."

Probably never.

Dad chuckles. "Bellamy, listen to me. He's going to come back. You better be ready."

"How do you know that?"

He grins. "You told me."

"I did not," I scoff. "You're losing your mind. Do I need to order a head examination?"

"No. You don't. You told me that he'll come back when you gave him your heart." He smiles sweetly. "You wouldn't have done that if he didn't deserve it."

Tears well up in my eyes as I try to stay calm. To not cry. To stay strong and hard and unbendable.

Like I used to be.

But it's harder now. Something has changed. And I think it might have to do with what Dad just said.

I gave my heart to Coy. No amount of staying stoic or going forward or playing hardball will get it back.

So, I guess I have to live with it.

"I'm going to bake those pears," I say, sniffing. "Brown sugar or white?"

Dad laughs. "Brown."

“Okay.”

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand.

“Bellamy?” Dad calls.

I stop at the doorway and turn to face him. “Yeah, Daddy?”

“A life without tears is a life unlived.”

I nod, tears flowing down my cheeks freely, as I turn and walk away.

*Seems like I'm living life all right. Way too many tears though.*

TWENTY-SIX

# COY

“I look like a monkey.”

No matter how much I mess with my tie, it’s crooked.

That’s the least of my problems.

My eyes are bloodshot. My hair is a mess and refuses to cooperate, no matter what I do. Couple all of that with the fact that I have the temperament of a wounded badger, and you have a very moody artist headed for a meeting with an agent he’s probably going to fire.

Bellamy didn’t take my call last night. In her defense, I wouldn’t have either. A part of me hopes that she just turned it off so she could get some rest, but the other, bigger part of me knows that’s not true.

She hit me with the *Fuck You* Button.

And I deserve it.

“Meadow,” I say to my reflection in the mirror, “I don’t give a shit what happens today. I’m going to Savannah this afternoon. So fuck. You.”

Holt’s stupid advice—that isn’t so stupid—kept me up last night. Around and around, his words rolled in my head, and I couldn’t quiet them until dawn.

Life doesn’t have to be this way. I shouldn’t be a puppet in some fucked-up puppet show in conference rooms.

I shouldn’t have to give up my life and my rights to make music.



It's bullshit.

The only way around this mess is crazy and could totally backfire. And, if I'm honest, I'm scared of it. *What good would I be to Bellamy if I couldn't take care of her?*

I mess with the tie for one last time before saying to hell with it and heading into the kitchen.

My house feels like a rental. The inspiration I usually find here is gone. The stillness that I typically relish only makes me crave the laughter in a guest house in Georgia.

There's no part of me that wants to go to this meeting. And, when I think about the reason I'm going, it's hard to pinpoint it. Sure, Meadow said that I would lose my contract, and I've worked so fucking hard to get to where I am.

But ... where am I?

Do I even want to be here?

I thought long and hard last night about what *here* really meant. It's not just Nashville or in my house or this place in my career. Here isn't just at this point in this web of experiences and emotions.

Quite frankly, I loathe just about everyone in this particular experience.

I despise lying and that I had to lie—to fake date a woman I didn't even know—to look like an upright guy. I *am* an upright guy. Maybe a little wild here and there, but I'm a good person. My parents raised us all to be honest and real and this world here, it's anything but. *And I loathe that.*

I take out a glass and pour myself some water from the tap. Just as I'm about to take a drink, my phone buzzes.

I grab it, hoping that it's Bells.

It's not.

Meadow: Are you prepared to be responsible for your future today? Tell me that you're home.

Her words burn through me like a lit match. *Condescending, much?*

*No. I'm not home. I'm here.*

The thought speeds through my brain like a train going warp-speed.

I sit the glass down and grip the countertop.

*Home.*

The word conjures up images of heated, ridiculous arguments and then laughter with Bellamy. sleeping Bellamy. Scents of bacon in the morning. My mom's kitchen, with my brothers packed around—even Wade—and Joe's living room with his game shows up way too loud.

It's playing the piano with Hollis and Fourth of July parties on the boat. It's Bells's face when I walk in the door and the moss dangling from the southern oaks that line the streets.

It's knowing that people have your back. It's knowing that you have theirs. Home is safety and support and ... love.

And it's where I should be.

“Fuck.”

I reread Meadow's text.

*Are you prepared to be responsible for your future today?*

A knot twists, and grows, and groans inside my body. It wraps around my heart and yanks it until I pay attention.

Every time I've thought about my future in the last week, it was only about Bellamy. It might've included this contract, but really only in what way it would affect me *not being home*.

I gulp.

I stand at the counter and stare into space. Snap, snap, snap!—all of the pieces of my life fall into place.

Except one. Except for the one where I failed my responsibility.

My phone buzzes again, and I look down.

Hollis: Emailed you some lyrics. Tentatively titled Say It. Couldn't sleep. It's weird how inspiration hits you.

*Say It.*

Hollis's text mixes with Holt's advice. They slam together in a dizzying revelation.

I grab my phone and type out a text.

Me: You're a genius, Hollis.

Hollis: Wow. Okay. Thanks.

I laugh as I race back through the house. My head spins so fast that I don't know what to do first.

So, I do the first thing that comes to mind.

ME: Meadow, you're fired.

THEN I DO the next thing that comes to mind. I call Holt.

"Hello?" he says.

"Hey, I need a favor ..."

TWENTY-SEVEN

# BELLAMY

“Well, this isn’t my best look.”

Brownie batter stains the front of my shirt. I wipe my finger between my boobs and scoop it off. Then, after considering that the shirt is freshly laundered, I shove my finger in my mouth.

There’s no sense in wasting good brownie batter.

The door squeaks open in the living room. I bend my neck to the side to see who it is.

“Hey,” Larissa says. “What are you—ooh, Bells. Let’s not.”

I pull my finger from my mouth. It makes a popping sound just as Boone comes around the corner.

“What?” I ask.

“That’s ... a look,” Larissa says, making a face. She takes the bowl away from me, tugging at it when I try to resist. “Gimme.”

I pull it towards me pretty hard. When I release it, it sends Larissa stepping back a few paces.

I grin. “Serves you right.”

“Someone is hateful.” Boone sticks his finger in the bowl. “But this looks good.”

“You two are disgusting,” Larissa says.

Boone nods, licking the remnants off his hand. “Damn good.”

“Thank you,” I say, nodding back at him. “I didn’t use eggs, so that’s why it’s a little heavier than usual. Figured there’s no reason to torture myself with salmonella too.”

“I’ve seen the men you sleep with. Salmonella is the least of your concerns,” Larissa says, scraping the batter into the garbage disposal. “Now, go get yourself cleaned up.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because I have to go to a couple of consultations today, and Hollis thinks I’m going to die,” Larissa says, looking at me over her shoulder. “I promised him I wouldn’t go alone.”

“Take Boone.”

“I’m going.” Boone looks unamused. “Not happy about it.”

“Then why do I have to go?”

Larissa sighs. “Because Boone can only go to the first one. So I need a rider for the second. And ...”

“And she’s dropping me off at the office on the way back through,” he says.

“And that’s near the second stop.” Larissa dries her hands as she looks at me. “So, it makes no sense for me to drive across town to get you. Just come now.”

She looks pleased with herself.

“That just gave me a headache,” I tell her.

“But I need to be there in like twenty minutes,” she says. “So, hurry, please.”

I lean against the counter. “But what if I had plans today?”

“You don’t,” Larissa says.

“I did, but here I am,” Boone says with a sigh.

Larissa rolls her eyes. “Anyway, just hurry up so we can get this over with. Okay?”

“Fine.”

I pout as I walk to my room.

I intentionally avoid my bed just like I did last night when I slept on the couch. I might never sleep in it again.

Then I throw on some sweats and an oversized sweatshirt. Sneakers complete my cozy ensemble. I decide my messy bun looks messy, and that’s the actual definition of the updo, so I head back to my friends.

Boone laughs.

Larissa’s eyes go wide. “You could’ve ... tried.”

“Excuse me? Are we going to a fashion show?” I hold my hands out to the side. “Either take me like this, or I’m turning on Bravo, and you can tell Hollis to buy you a GPS.”

“Why are you so difficult?” Larissa sighs. “Can you put on jeans?”

“I hope the Housewives are on,” I say, heading to the couch.

Boone chuckles and grabs the remote before I can. “You look fine. Let’s go, Riss, before we lose her to reality television.”

I pat him on the shoulder as I head for the door. “You’re a smart one, Boonie.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he mumbles.

We pile in Larissa’s car. I wave to the nurse that’s switching out shifts as we back out of the driveway.

The sun is bright for so late in the evening.

Larissa hits the highway, and we head out of town.

“What’s this design like?” I ask, using my hand as a visor.

“I’m not sure,” she says. “The first one is a ... I have to modify my plan for a job I was hired for. It doesn’t fit the new requirements, and the owner wants something completely different. The second one is for class. I have to check out this

old hotel and just sketch something for a grade. It's not a big deal."

"Sounds like the first one is a dick," I say.

Boone laughs.

Larissa giggles too. "Not really. Just ... specific. It needs to be perfect."

"I was thinking today that I might see about being a realtor," I tell them. "I enjoyed that the other day and I was pretty good at it, if I do say so myself."

A song comes on the radio, and Boone turns it up. I could have a conversation with them if I almost shouted, but I don't bother.

I rest my head against the window and think about Coy.

I should've texted him back today. It was wrong not to. But I just needed a little space before I reengage with him. Otherwise, Lord knows what I would do.

*Probably get on a plane and head to Nashville.*

The thought makes me smile, even though it's impossible.

*You told me that he'll come back when you gave him your heart. You wouldn't have done that if he didn't deserve it.*

He does deserve it. I deserve it too.

I toy with the phone in my hand and hover my thumb over his name. Every time I nearly go for it and text him, I wonder if he's still in meetings. If Meadow got the images pulled. If they cleared up the rehab story. If the contract worked out. And then I pull my hand away and don't text him at all.

He needs this time to get his life together. And I need to give him that.

Larissa flips on her turn signal, and I look up. Moss drapes off the branches of the trees on either side of the road.

I sit up.

"Hey," I say, looking around. "This is that street we were on the other day."



“Yeah,” Larissa says. “Bittersweet Court. Um, the first place we have to go—the one with the re-design, is the house you loved.”

“Didn’t they like your idea? Well,” I say, taking the blame, “I did spitball a bunch of stuff that day. I don’t have a clue about landscape design, but they seemed to like what I was suggesting, so I just went with it.”

Boone laughs. “Well, I guess you made some fucked-up suggestions, and now Riss has to go back out and get a better vision.”

“It was the kids thing,” she tells me, looking at me in the rearview mirror. “You brought up little kids, and now they want things to accommodate a whole gaggle of them.”

I sit back in my seat again. “Well, that’s good. That house was built to have a family.”

“Apparently, they agree,” Boone says as we pull up.

Three trucks sit in the driveway ... next to Boone’s car.

“Why is your car here?” I ask him.

Larissa pulls to a stop. Seatbelts are unfastened.

“I ...” He looks at Larissa. “Oliver and I came out earlier. We wanted to make sure the, um, construction guys weren’t going to pose a problem for Riss.”

We climb out of the car.

“But isn’t that why I’m here?” I ask, confused.

“Yeah, because a couple of them didn’t check out,” Larissa says. “Anyway, let’s go.”

We head across the lawn and around to the side of the house. It’s just as breathtaking as I remember it. But, with each step we take, a weird feeling comes over me.

I take in the backyard and all of the activity taking place. Four construction men with tape measures and pencils and paper stand near the back door.

Larissa and Boone wander off to a large hedge near where I said the pool should go, and I notice that there are little colored flags stuck in the grass in that area.

*Wow. Herbie and Janet really took my advice to heart.*

“What are you guys doing?” I say to the men. I keep my distance because I don’t know which one is sketchy.

“Building an enclosed porch,” the tallest one says. “Which was a great idea. Can you imagine this house with a big porch on it? And there’s going to be a real wood-burning fireplace too.”

I smile ear-to-ear. “It was my idea.”

“Good idea,” he says, grinning. “Do you know if we can put the trim from the kitchen in the garage? We’re supposed to use all of the original woodwork that we can. But with the new appliances and paint and recessed lighting, we’re going to have to pop a lot of the trim off and save it.”

My heart melts at the love that’s being put into this house. And a bit of pride comes in, too, that I had a part in that. Small, maybe, but at least I helped. That feels good.

“I’m sorry,” I tell the man. “I don’t know. This isn’t ... my .... house?”

My jaw hits the grass. My eyes go wide before they fill with tears. My legs wobble as I swear my vision is playing tricks on me.

Coy breezes out of the house.

He’s wearing a black suit and tie. His chin drops, his eyes grow serious as he walks confidently across the backyard. His gaze fixes on mine in a way that only his can.

I try to speak, but it comes out as a squeak.

“Hey, baby,” he says, stopping just in front of me.

“You ... what are you doing here?” I look over my shoulder at Riss and Boone. They’re smiling cautiously. “Coy? I don’t ... understand.”

He grins. It's soft and vulnerable and makes me want to jump and wrap my legs around his waist and hold on to him for the rest of my life.

I have missed him. I didn't even realize how much until this moment.

"What happened today?" I ask him.

"A lot." He grins again. "I woke up, fired Meadow, got a plane ticket home." His lips twist together. "Bought a house."

"You did? Where? I .... *Oh, my gosh.*"

The construction guys watch us like we're on a soap opera. Larissa beams behind me. Boone just shakes his head with a cheeky grin on his face.

My head spins as I try to get a hold on reality.

"Holt told me where I fucked up," he says. "I needed to show you that I'm serious. That we are forever. That you can't run away from me, push me, tell me that it's not time. But, damn it, Bells—it's you and me. Or I don't want it."

"Coy ..." I say, trying to catch my breath. "What did you do? Did you buy this house? How? How did you know?"

"You mentioned the house at dinner at Mom's. And Larissa explained how much you loved it. Boone contacted Herbie and Janet, and Holt contacted the realtor and put the earnest money down—which I'll pay him back for next week. Oliver called up a title office, and Wade knew a contractor that owed him a favor." He scratches his head. "Now I owe Wade a favor, and that disturbs me."

I giggle at the playfulness in his eyes. My heart swells.

"In all fairness, this isn't in our name yet. You can't just buy a house in a day and get it recorded. But it'll be done fast enough, and Herbie and Janet ... Well, they love you and happily signed a form Oliver sent them to allow us to do whatever we wanted in the meantime."

*This isn't in our name yet.*

"Coy ... I'm still confused."

He smiles. “Don’t be. It’s really simple. The label threatened to walk away, but my lawyer intervened, explaining what Meadow had actually done. She explained all the Willa crap and ... I don’t know. She’s taking care of it. And she fully supports my boundaries which is crazy. Anjelica is my new agent. You’ll love her. She’s *so* not an asshole. I mean, I’ve talked to her once this afternoon, but she gave me good vibes.”

I laugh, feeling the stress on my shoulders start to release.

“And Anjelica promises me that we’ll figure this out. And we will. No matter what happens, as long as I have you, it’s worked out.”

I gaze up at him and take him in—his beauty, his flaws, his perfection, and his mistakes.

God knows I’m not perfect, either. But maybe we’re more perfect because of our shortcomings. Perhaps you have to find your wounds and heal them as you go to be whole.

I reach up and grab his shoulders and pull him down to me. I press my lips against his.

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me into him and holds me for so long that I don’t think he’s ever letting go.

Which is fine with me.

“I should’ve trusted you,” I tell him. “I’m sorry. I got scared.”

“And I should’ve done a lot of things differently, Bells. And I’m sorry I didn’t. You were right. I didn’t consult you. I didn’t really know that I could as I’ve done things solo for a long damn time. I’d forgotten how a good team functions, because I’d forgotten how good we are together. How much I can rely on you and your thoughts and input. And your love.”

I play with his tie as I think about last night.

“You know, I’ve been let down so many times in my life that I almost expect it,” I say softly. “I act bubbly and happy, but a lot of the times, I’m just looking around for what’s going to go wrong next.” I look up at him again, my hand stilling

around the fabric. “I knew if things went wrong with you that I would never recover. Because I gave you my heart and—”

He kisses me again. This time, it’s deeper. More passionate. Full of promises.

When he pulls back, he smiles.

“We have one more decision to make,” he says. “And we need to make it pretty quickly.”

“Okay.”

He looks over my shoulder and smiles at Boone and Larissa. A small laugh escapes him before he looks back at me.

“What name do you want to put on the Deed?” he asks.

I balk. “I don’t understand.”

He grins. “Bellamy Davenport,” he says, getting down on one knee.

“Oh, my gosh. No!” I gasp. “*Oh, my gosh. Coy!*”

He gazes up at me like I’m the only girl in the world.

“Will you do me the honor of being my wife?” he asks.

I sling my arms around him. The momentum knocks him back onto the grass, and I land on top of him.

My hands go to his face as I kiss him again. And again. And again.

Finally, Boone and Larissa appear next to us.

“Did she say yes?” Boone asks. “Because Mom keeps texting me and asking, and I’m not sure what to say other than you’re making out in front of a construction crew.”

We pull apart and laugh.

Coy moves his hand out to the side. A black box sits in his palm. He opens it with his thumb.

“Will you marry me, Bells?”

The ring is a simple gold band with diamonds down the sides. A diamond is set in the center with a halo of smaller

diamonds around it.

“This is ... too much,” I stammer. “I ...”

“Get ready to be spoiled,” he says. “I’ve waited for this my whole life. You have no idea what’s coming.”

“Oh, I think we do,” Larissa jokes as she and Boone walk away.

Coy and I laugh as he slips the ring on my finger.

“I’m going to love you for the rest of my life. You can try to wiggle your way out but I guarantee that you won’t win. I’m just ... I’m done living without you. There’s nothing that’s worth making you frown or sad or cry. Just ... don’t fucking cry.”

I laugh and try to blink back my tears.

“So ... I’d really like you to say yes,” he whispers.

I look at the man under me. The boy I fell in love with so many years ago. The guy that’s been my neighbor, my friend, my enemy, and my lover.

My fiancé.

“I would be honored to be your wife. So, yes,” I say. “Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.”

He rolls me over onto my back and kisses me again. This time, the construction crew cheers.

This time, I don’t stop him or ask questions or hold on to any reservations at all. I don’t ask him for a plan or if he’s going to come back.

Because I know.

Love will always find you. You just have to trust the process. And that’s only possible when you trust the person you love.

# EPILOGUE

## **Bellamy**

The house is bustling. Voices stream from every room on the bottom floor. Lauren and her husband talk to Rodney about a business deal that I don't understand. Siggy is in the kitchen, cooking a massive meal with Larissa by her side. They insisted on doing the work for our housewarming party so I could rest.

Daddy sits in a recliner in the corner. He loves the earbuds that Coy got him to listen to the throwback episodes as loud as he wants. He let Hollis's Grandma Judy borrow one, and they sit together watching a re-run of Jeopardy.

Holt, Blaire and Oliver sit at the table. They're engrossed in some office shenanigans that have plagued them for weeks now, it seems. Wade chats with Hollis near the steps, and Boone is outside with Coy and Bree.

I walk to the window and watch them. Bree stands in the middle of the yard, just to the right of where the pool will go in a few weeks, and throws a ball to Coy. Boone stands farther back and taunts his brother.

My heart is so full, so warm. I never dreamed that my life could end up this way.

I step out into the enclosed porch wrapped in windows so you can still see the lawn from inside the actual house.

A baby swing sits next to the fireplace. It's entirely too early to be putting up baby stuff, but Coy can't resist.

I put a hand on my stomach and watch as Coy takes a swing. Bree's giggle drifts through the air as Coy swings wildly and misses the ball.

"I got you! Strike one," she shouts.

Laughing, I sit on the swing that Rodney made in a shop behind their house. Coy says it's the first thing he's ever actually made. I don't know if that's true or not, but I love it just the same.

"Hey," a voice says from the doorway.

I look over to see Anjelica. She's so sophisticated in her black suit and white blouse that is set off with a fun pair of bright pink heels.

Coy's new agent is everything. She's smart and kind, but she can be aggressive if needed. She's become part of our family over the last few months, even standing up with Larissa as a maid of honor at our wedding.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she says, kissing me on the cheek before sitting beside me. "I had to have a little ball-busting competition before I could get over here. Spoiler alert: I won."

"I have no doubts."

She grins. "How's the little one?" She rubs her hand on my little belly. "Hey, princess. It's Auntie Anjelica."

"What are you and Coy going to do if it's a boy? The Masons are very male dominant, if you haven't noticed."

She laughs. "Trust me. I've noticed."

Our attention is drawn to the backyard as Bree squeals. She is chasing Coy, who is headed towards us with a hand on his jaw.

"This doesn't look good," Anjelica whispers.

Coy, though, is grinning. He pops the door open.

"Guess she's got the curveball down," he says with a laugh.



“I am so sorry,” Bree says, following her idol into the house. “I didn’t mean it. *Again*. Why do I always hit you?”

Boone steps inside the porch and notices Anjelica.

“Hi. Don’t give me anything to do. This is a family event,” he says before fleeing inside.

I snort. “I think Boone is scared of you.”

“Good. Holt told me to keep him busy, so that’s what I’ve been doing. Oliver and I have been spending so much time trying to get Coy’s new label off the ground that Boone’s had to pick up some slack.” She looks through the glass at the table of Mason men. “I don’t think he likes it much.”

“Time to eat!” Siggy calls, her voice cutting through the chaos like only a mother’s voice can do.

Anjelica gets up and offers me a hand.

“You go on. I want to stay here for just a while,” I tell her.

She smiles and disappears into the house.

I swing back and forth, feeling absolutely content. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and start to panic. *How can things be this good?*

I have to tell myself that it can. It *is*. That there will be hard times. It’s life. But as long as I have Coy, there will be good times too.

My hand goes to my stomach again, and I press gently. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you too.”

I look up to see Coy standing in the doorway. He holds a bag of frozen peas on his cheek.

“I love you too,” I say, laughing. “Is your face okay?”

“It would be better if you sat on it.”

My jaw drops as I look around to see if anyone heard him.

“Don’t,” I say, shushing him.

He bends down and kisses me—effectively shushing me right back.

“Are you coming in to eat?” he asks. “Or I can bring you a plate of food out here, if you’d rather?”

“I’ll come in. I was just enjoying ... *life*,” I say with a grin. “Dad loves his guest suite so much. He was telling me today about how nice it is to be in a smaller place with wide doorways and how he loves the elevator you had installed.”

Coy blushes. “I’m glad. And I’m glad Joe’s chemo is working. He told me the doctor said today that the big tumor shrunk.”

My heart leaps in my chest. “That’s exactly what Dr. Helm said. It was music to my ears.”

He sits beside me. “You’re going to be an amazing mom.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.” He bumps me with his shoulder. “Now, let’s go feed my baby.”

I snort, shaking my head as Coy pulls me to my feet. “I’m going to weigh five hundred pounds if you keep force-feeding me.”

He takes my hand and leads me to the kitchen.

“Just buy us a jet,” Oliver tells Holt. “For fuck’s sake. Coy is going to need it. Aren’t you, Coy?”

“Nope. You’re not dragging me into this,” Coy tells him.

Boone walks up next to us. “I think we need a jet.”

“No one cares what you think we need,” Holt tells him.

Boone opens his mouth to respond when his forehead marring. He pulls out his phone. “Hello?”

“What does he need a jet for?” Coy jokes.

“Are party jets a thing?” Oliver laughs. “I’m not discounting that as a legitimate reason for needing a jet. Add that to my list.”

Boone scratches his head. “No,” he says into the phone. “What? No. What are you talking about?”

He looks at Coy. There’s an odd look in his eye that I can’t pinpoint.

“You’re kidding me?” Boone asks. “Okay. Yeah. Sure. I’ll be there.”

He ends his call and looks at Oliver. “I gotta go. I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going?” Holt asks Boone, but he’s already half-way across the room.

Oliver and Coy shrug before Oliver turns back to Holt and continues their jet argument.

I take in the scene around me—one filled with so much love that it’s overwhelming.

To think that I didn’t believe I could have this is crazy.

To think that I had to do it on my own is even nuttier.

And to think that I almost pushed away the best thing that ever happened to me because I was scared.

I know better now.

Life’s not meant to be lived in fear. It’s not meant to be lived alone either.

It’s meant to be experienced. Life is meant to be lived, not survived. It’s for loving and fighting and complete mess making. Life is for taking risks and winning and losing and learning.

*Thriving.*

A wise man once told me that a life lived without tears is a life un-lived. I didn’t get it then, but I get it now.

As I watch Coy in the living room talking to my father, I know exactly what my dad meant. I could’ve taken the safe route and saved myself potential heartache. But I would’ve missed out on all of this.

“Hey, do you need help?” Wade says. “I could get Mom to get you something to drink, if you want.”

I smile at him. “I’m good, Wade. Thank you.”

And as my gaze finds Coy’s again and my heart swells so much it nearly bursts, I realize that’s not true.

I’m not just good. I’m blessed beyond measure.

And it’s all because of the boy next door—the one with the bad reputation.

THE END.

**Want to see where Boone went? Read RECKLESS, coming April 8<sup>th</sup>. [Preorder now.](#)**

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Reputation*. I hope you enjoyed Coy and Bellamy's story.

If you want to keep reading about the Mason Family, make sure you pick up **Restraint (Holt's story)** and get ready for Boone's story, **Reckless**. It will be out on April 8th. [Preorder here](#).

Please consider this your **official invitation to my reader groups**, [Books by Adriana Locke](#) (Facebook) and [All Locked Up](#) (Goodreads). I'd love to see you there!

Thank you again for reading. I'd be thrilled if you would **consider leaving a review for [Reputation](#)**.

In case you've caught up with the Mason family, **keep reading to meet my reader-favorite Landry family!**

With love,

Adriana

# CHAPTER ONE: SWAY

## **Sway**

### **Landry Family Series #1**

#### Chapter One

Alison

“This is a single girl’s paradise.”

“No,” I grimace, blotting the spilled cheese sauce from my shirt. “Paradise would be a tropical island with a hot cabana boy at my beck and call ... and an endless supply of mojitos.”

Lola laughs, the sound barely heard over the chaos of the kitchen. Chefs shouting instructions, event planners panicking, plates being dropped—the world of catering is a noisy endeavor.

I step to the side to allow Isaac, a fellow server and Lola’s gorgeous friend with benefits, to scamper to the ballroom a few feet away. He’s tall with a head full of dark curls and a laugh that makes you involuntarily smile. Lola is crazy for keeping him at arm’s length, but that’s how she operates. He has little money; she has limited interest.

“Cabana boys may have hot bodies and virility, Alison, but they lack two very important qualities: fame and fortune.”

“So, what you’re saying is that you’d take a limp dick over a hard one? Interesting,” I say, rolling my eyes and tossing the sauce-soaked rag into the linen bin.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, smart ass. I’m saying I’d take a solid bank account over a solid cock. Think about it—with all that money, he could never fuck me at all and I wouldn’t care.”

“If that’s the case,” I retort, grabbing another tray of drinks, “there are tons of opportunities out there to *not* get fucked.”

I laugh at the dreamy look on her face, partly because it’s hilarious and partly because I know she’s not kidding.

Lola and I are a lot alike. We both come from meager backgrounds and Luxor Foods is our second job. There’s no doubt we both would rather not be here because serving rich bitches can be a very humbling experience. But they are also the best parties to work because they tip. Very well. Of course it’s so they can feel above us most times, but we’ll take it. It’s money in our pockets, and if they get off on it in the process, good for them.

That being said, Lo took this job to afford her manicures, pedicures, and eyelash extensions. I do it to take care of my son, Huxley. Lola’s first job is working at a salon and her career goals include marrying up in the world. I, on the other hand, work at Hillary’s House restaurant during the day and go to school for journalism in hopes to one day write pieces that might inspire someone.

“Speaking of fucking,” she says, her eyes aglow, “did you see Mayor Landry?”

“I love how you segued into that,” I laugh.

“It’s a linear comparison. Tell me that fucking isn’t the first thing that comes to mind when you think of him, and I’ll call you a liar.”

Of course it’s the truth. It’s the first thing that comes to mind ... and maybe the second and third too.

Thoughts of the recently crowned Most Eligible Bachelor make me a swoony mess. Barrett Landry’s thick, sandy brown hair that always looks perfectly coiffed, his broad, friendly smile that makes you feel like you could tell him your darkest

secrets without judgment, his tanned skin, tight body, wide shoulders—the list goes on. But it all leads, as Lo so candidly pointed out, to thoughts of him stripped down and wearing only his charismatic grin.

I shiver at the thought.

“See?” she grins, wagging her finger in my face. “Linear comparison.”

“I’ll give you that. He’s *so* seriously fine.”

“Have you had a chance to get close to him? To breathe him in?”

“Breathe him in?” My laughter catches the attention of our boss, Mr. Pickner. He twists his burly body our way, letting us know we’d better get to work.

“I haven’t,” I say, turning back to Lola. “Even though I’ve been around men like Landry before—well, not quite like him, but as close as a mortal can be—I don’t think I could handle it, Lo. He scrambles my brain. I’d probably fall face first into him and dump the drinks in his lap. Then we’d *both* be wet.”

She swipes a tray off the table and shoots a wink at Isaac as he walks back in. “It would so be worth it if you played your cards right. You could probably get away with running your hands through his hair and maybe even licking his stubbled jaw. A kiss would probably be over the top, but his Southern roots would keep him from causing a scene and asking for security.”

“You’ve thought this through, haven’t you?” I ask in mock horror.

“Of course I have and every other woman in here has too. Hell, half the men probably have,” she giggles. “In my fantasy, he gazes at me with those emerald green eyes and leans in and —”

“Ladies! Back to work!”

We sigh as Mr. Pickner barrels by. He’s an overweight, balding, temperamental asshole of a man, but he owns the



premiere catering company in all of Georgia. So we deal. Barely.

Lola bumps me with her hip. “Seriously. Stop being so goody-two-shoes and go out there and snag you a man and a retirement plan.”

I bite my tongue. We’ve had this conversation a number of times before and she just doesn’t get it. I don’t fault her though. Most people don’t. They see the glitz and glamour, the designer labels and fine wine and get drawn in like a Siren’s call. That life looks too good to resist, too good to be true.

The thing is—they’re exactly right. It is.

She reads the look on my face and we start towards the door. “I know, I know. You lived like that once. It’s a fantasy, smoke and mirrors ...”

“Yup.”

“Well, I say I’ll play in the smoke as long as the mirrors make me pretty.”

I snort, pushing open the door to the ballroom. “You go right ahead and dig that gold all the way down the aisle.”

“I’ve got my shovel right here.” She shimmies her backside in my direction. “See that one over there?”

Following her gaze across the room, I see a man I know is one of the Landry brothers. There are four of them and two sisters, twins, if I’m not mistaken. I don’t really follow that kind of thing much, but they’re basically Georgia royalty, and even avoiding current events as I do, you can’t help but pick up on some of their lives. Every newscast, it seems, has something Landry-related even when it’s not election season.

“I’m going to check him out,” Lola says and takes off, leaving me standing with my tray of ridiculously overpriced champagne.

I roam the outer edges of the elegant ballroom, giving a practiced smile to each person that plucks a drink off the tray. Some smile widely, some try to chit-chat, some completely

ignore me like they probably do the paid staff at home. It's fine by me.

A few years ago, I attended events like this. Married to my college sweetheart, a newly minted judge in Albuquerque, we went to balls and galas and swearing-in ceremonies often. It was a magical time in my life, before the magic wore off and everything exploded right in my face.

“Well, aren't you a pretty little thing?”

I spin to my right to see an older gentleman grinning at me like a snake ready to strike.

“Would you like a drink?” I offer, knowing good and well by the color in his cheeks that he's already had more than enough.

“No, no, that's fine. I was actually just admiring you.”

Pasting on a smile and tossing my shoulders back, I try to keep my voice even. “Thank you, sir. Now, if you'll excuse me —”

“I was thinking,” he says, cutting me off, “how about you and I take a little stroll? Do you get my drift?”

“With all due respect,” I say through clenched teeth, glancing at the wedding ring sparkling on his finger, “how about you take a stroll with your wife?”

I swivel on my heels and head off as calmly as possible, blood roaring in my ears. I can hear his cackle behind me and I really want to turn around and slam my fist into his beefy face. It's behavior that's typical of people like this, thinking they can get away with whatever they want with the bourgeoisie. I just so happen to have an overdeveloped sensitivity to it, being that my husband did the same thing to me as soon as he got a little power.

Lola catches my attention as I pause to settle down. She points discreetly to the other end of the room and mouths, “Over there.” The gleam in her eye tells me she's spotted the mayor, but I can't see him.

I shuffle through the crowd and finally spy the man of the hour walking out, his arm around the waist of a woman that's been acting crazy all night. Her head is leaned on his shoulder, her hand resting on his backside. Laughing, I catch Lola's eye and nod to the exit.

"Bitch," she mouths as she approaches the same man that approached me earlier. I want to warn her, but don't. For one, I know it won't do any good, and for two, I can't take my eyes off Landry.

People literally part for him to walk through. It's like he's Moses. They're more than willing to be led through the Red Sea, divided by his power and influence, and into the Promised Land.

I'm off in space about what precisely that land might entail, when my shoulder is bumped, rustling me out of my Landry-induced haze.

"Excuse me," I say. When I realize who I've just ignored, my cheeks heat in embarrassment. "I'm so sorry," I stutter, handing Camilla Landry, one of the Landry sisters, a glass of champagne.

She's even more beautiful in person, a textbook example of poise and sophistication. In the media a lot for charity work with her mother, her face is easily identifiable with her high cheekbones and sparkling smile.

"Don't worry about it," she breathes, waving me off. "I can't take my brothers anywhere without women getting all mesmerized. Especially that one," she laughs, nodding to the doorway Barrett just went through. "Although, between me and you, I don't get it."

Her grin is infectious, and I can't help but return it.

"I'm Camilla," she says, extending her long, well-manicured hand like I don't already know.

I balance the tray on one side and take her hand in mine. "I'm Alison. Alison Baker."

"You helped clean up a sauce spill earlier. You put the lady that had the accident at ease when you took the blame and kept

the attention off her. I wanted you to know I saw and respected that.”

“It really was no big deal.”

“In this world, *everything* can be a big deal. Trust me. You probably just saved my brother a couple of votes.”

“Just doing my part,” I laugh.

She smiles again, her chic sky-blue dress matching her eyes and heels. “Well, on behalf of the mayor, thank you. He seems ... occupied, at the moment.”

I wink. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I didn’t see a thing.”

She nods, looking a touch relieved, and thanks me again before turning away and greeting the older lady from earlier, the one that spilled her dinner all over me. Camilla takes her hand and helps her into a chair.

Her elegance is breathtaking and she has a charm about her, an easiness even though she’s clearly blue-blood, that I’ve never seen before. It’s exactly what the kitchen is buzzing about with Barrett—a charisma you can’t quite put your finger on.

**Read on by clicking [here](#).**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Adriana Locke lives and breathes books. After years of slightly obsessive relationships with the flawed bad boys created by other authors, Adriana created her own.

She resides in the Midwest with her husband, sons, two dogs, two cats, and a bird. She spends a large amount of time playing with her kids, drinking coffee, and cooking. You can find her outside if the weather's nice and there's always a piece of candy in her pocket.

Besides cinnamon gummy bears, boxing, and random quotes, her next favorite thing is chatting with readers. She'd love to hear from you!

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