

CLAIMING
WHAT'S

Mine

AVA GRAY


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BLURB

Staying away from him shouldn't have been this hard.

Killian was everything I didn't want but was *dying* to have.

Killian "The Killer" Doyle

An underground fighter

Bad boy

Heartbreaker

There's no wonder my parents warned me about him.

I constantly heard these two words – Stay away.

But the three words I feel for him give me sleepless nights.

I love him.

I have since the first night we spent together.

He tried to resist me, but there was no going back.

I had to pull myself away, for my own sanity.

Trusting Killian was tough.

And keeping my pregnancy a secret from him was tougher.

But the time has come.

I'll have to go back and tell him.

And I can only imagine what would happen next...

AUBREY

Mondays have never been my favorite day, but little do I know that today is going to be the day that changes the entire course of my life. Because today I will meet Killian Doyle.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. Which is really no surprise because when it comes to Killian, it's all I've ever done. I run straight to him, don't think anything through and wonder how I end up in trouble.

I'm working from home today and my eyes feel blurry after staring at a computer screen for the past eight hours. I close my laptop and stretch. I'm done for the day and it feels good. I don't love my job, but as a marketing manager, I get paid pretty well. Technically, I don't even like my job a little, but I'm on a good track, carefully laid out by my parents, and I'll be able to save enough money to retire and live comfortably.

I'm only 28 and I guess I still have time before I need to worry about retiring, but my parents always taught me to be prepared. Thomas and Theresa Reed are practical and straight-laced and instilled those same qualities in me. It's not always fun being the responsible one, but that's me. To a tee. I can always be counted on to get the job done. Good 'ol reliable Aubrey.

With a sigh, I run a hand through my shoulder-length, golden blonde hair and it occurs to me that everything I've ever done has been for someone else. My parents, my friends, my teachers, my employer. Lately, I've been thinking a lot about doing something for myself. I'm not exactly sure what that

even means, though. Maybe take a vacation? Problem is there's nowhere that I really want to go and, other than my best friend Tori, I have no one to go with me.

What a safe, boring, predictable life I lead.

It's never bothered me before, but over the last few months something changed. Deep down, a part of me that I suppressed and ignored began to rise to the surface and now that part of me wants to be acknowledged. I'm craving something new and exciting. An adventure maybe?

I honestly can't quite place my finger on what's missing from my life. I just know that I want...*need*...a big change. I've considered quitting my job and I've always yearned to do something more creative. But, I can already hear my parents: "You need a reliable source of income and we didn't pay for four years of business school for you to suddenly decide to be a flake and quit a job full of security."

As much as I dislike my job, they'd rip me a new one if I walked away from it. Especially without some sort of plan in place.

I feel like I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. Do I choose my happiness or continue to follow the path that my parents have laid out for me? I don't like confrontation and I'm a people-pleaser so the idea of going against them makes my stomach hurt. No, I guess the best decision is to suck it up and stay where I am.

Am I being ungrateful? A brat? Should I be more appreciative? Probably. But, at what point should my happiness trump theirs? Maybe I am just being whiny and I'll get over this slump if I give it more time. Possibly take that vacation by myself.

It's more than being miserable and unsatisfied with my job, though. Lately, my parents have been putting pressure on me to get married and start a family. Let's face it— I have zero prospects when it comes to a husband. Unfortunately, they believe that they know exactly who should put a ring on my finger and that is my ex-boyfriend, Benjamin Styles.

Technically, there's nothing wrong with Ben. On paper, he's perfect— a successful private asset manager who makes millions of dollars a year and a pillar of society. We met after I graduated college when my parents introduced us and I thought he was nice and fairly attractive. He asked me out and we dated for a couple of years. It was easy, comfortable and completely blah.

To be honest, Ben always felt more like a friend and dating him was almost like having another job. He expected me to always be on his arm, the perfect trophy girlfriend, and attend an endless array of social functions with him. I had an image to maintain and it became exhausting. I wanted more. We lacked passion and intimacy. It wasn't a true relationship and I ended up feeling more like his possession than his girlfriend. He never really took the time to get to know me or ask me questions about what I loved, what my future plans included and what I needed and wanted out of us and out of life.

For two years, I ignored the protests and misgivings of my heart and stayed by his side. I kept telling myself that things would get better. But, of course, they never did. It got to be too much and when I broke it off, he couldn't understand why and my parents were devastated. Me, not so much. It was a damn relief.

In my book, an ex is an ex for a reason and Ben is a perfect example. I can't imagine he's changed all that much so why in the world would I want to get back together with him? My parents say it's time to get married and they think he's the perfect catch. But, I want so much more. Unfortunately, I don't think that kind of magic and insta-spark actually exists. At least if it does, it has eluded me my entire life.

Just once, I'd love to look out over a crowded room, connect gazes with a man hot as sin and feel an electric chemistry that consumes us both.

Unfortunately, that doesn't exist in the real world and instead of Prince Charming sweeping me off my feet, I need to decide whether or not to settle down for the rest of my life with a total frog.

I suppose that's not completely fair. Ben isn't ugly or unfortunate-looking. He's just...Ben. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown suit.

A part of me wonders if I should give it another go with him or if I'm completely crazy for even considering it. If I don't, I might end up alone and if I don't ever have a family of my own, my parents would freak out. This is why I need Tori in my life. *My best friend is the complete opposite of me*, I think, as I head into the kitchen and grab a bottle of water. She's daring, adventurous and doesn't listen to anyone.

It's June, my favorite month, and I walk outside on my front porch and enjoy the early evening. I live in a nice suburb just North of Chicago where it's safe, I know my neighbors and it's far enough away from the city that the air is clean and the traffic is non-existent.

A breeze rustles my hair and I sit down on my white wicker couch and take a sip of water. The striped cushion beneath me is comfortable and clean. Just like my life. I curl my feet up beneath me and gaze out at the quiet street. And, it suddenly hits me like a bolt of lightning—I'd give all of this up for an ounce of excitement.

Maybe the Universe hears me because from that moment on, it's like a whirlwind blasts into my life and launches me on an entirely different path. One that I was never prepared to take, but one that changed my life completely with the sweetest highs and the most heartbreaking lows.

"Hi, Aubrey!"

Jimmy Lahey, the little 10-year old boy who lives next door to me with his mom, heads up the walkway and waves. He's small for his age, but feisty, and he always makes me laugh.

"Hi, Jimmy. How's your summer break going?"

He steps up onto the porch and shrugs a narrow shoulder. "It's okay. Way better than being in school, but kinda boring. I wish something exciting would happen."

You and me both, kid, I think. "Well, what did you do today? It's beautiful out."

“That’s just it!” he exclaims and throws his hands up. “My mom wants me to hang around here while she’s at work all day so I can’t go down to the lake and fish or meet my friends at the park.”

“I understand her wanting you to stay close to home, but that probably does get a little boring.”

“So freaking boring!”

I chuckle at his theatrics.

“At least I have karate tonight.”

“You’re taking a karate class?” I ask and he nods, eyes bright with excitement. “That’s so cool. What color is your belt?”

“Yellow, but I’m just starting out. I have a really good teacher, though, so I bet I’ll have a black belt by the end of summer.”

I hide my smile. “That’s very ambitious, Jimmy.”

“My teacher is ‘The Killer’ and he used to fight people in cages.”

I raise a brow. “Killer?” Good Lord, what kind of karate school was Mrs. Lahey taking her kid to?

“Well, his name is Killian, but when he was an MMA fighter, they called him ‘The Killer.’ Isn’t that so freakin’ cool?”

“Hmm, if you say so.” I don’t know anything about MMA fighting or whatever it’s called, but I can’t imagine getting any enjoyment out of watching two grown men beating the crap out of each other in a cage. Sounds like a sadist’s sport.

Some Pixar tune fills the air and Jimmy grabs his cell phone out of his back pocket. I can’t help but smirk because he’s so cute. “It’s my mom,” he says and answers the call.

He plops down on the porch step and I listen to their conversation. “But, Mom, I can’t miss karate! I’ll get too far behind and then I’ll never get my black belt.” He swipes a frustrated hand through his messy brown hair and frowns. “But, why can’t you leave work? It was the one thing I was looking forward to all day.”

When I see his eyes tear up, my heart constricts. “Jimmy? Can I talk to your mom?”

He looks up at me. “Mom, Aubrey wants to talk to you.” He swipes at the snot that threatens to run down his nose. “Because I’m sitting on her porch.”

When he hands me the phone, I clear my throat and toss him a wink. “Hi, Mrs. Lahey. Oh, no, he’s fine,” I say. “If you have to stay late, I’d be more than happy to run Jimmy over to his karate lesson.”

“Oh, Aubrey, I’d appreciate that so much,” Mrs. Lahey says. “Are you sure? I can give you gas money.”

“That’s not necessary and I don’t mind at all.” I know Mr. Lahey took off a few years ago and it’s been tough on Jimmy and his mom. I like to help people out, especially someone who could use a break. Besides, I’m a people-pleaser so this is right up my alley. “Just let me know where to take him.”

“Thank you so much, Aubrey! I’ll text you the address and then I’ll pick him up at 8pm. You’re a lifesaver.”

“No problem,” I say and hand the phone back over to Jimmy who grins from ear to ear. While he finishes up talking to his mom, I wonder if I should change out of my t-shirt and little comfy boxer shorts? But, why would I? I’m not even going to get out of the car.

A half an hour later, I pull up to a gym that looks like it has seen better days. It’s in an okay section of town, not the greatest, but certainly not the worst, I suppose. Jimmy unbuckles his seat belt and grabs his little gym bag. “Have fun,” I tell him.

“You need to walk me in and sign the book,” he says.

I glance down at my outfit which is one step away from pajamas and sigh, wishing I had taken the time to change. “I do?”

“Yep.” He hops out of my Honda Civic and tosses his bag over a shoulder.

With a sigh, I turn the car off and grab my purse. I guess it doesn't matter that I'm practically in my pajamas. Who am I going to see? A bunch of ten year olds and some old karate master? Big deal.

I follow Jimmy across the street and he pulls the door open and runs ahead, leaving me on my own. *Thanks a lot*, I think, wondering what book I'm supposed to sign. I head up the hallway and walk into the large gym. Jimmy is already on a huge mat that faces a wall of floor-to-ceiling mirrors and chatting with other kids in his class.

Feeling a little unsure, I glance around, looking for this mysterious book, when I hear a deep voice behind me.

"You lost?"

I turn around and suddenly find myself looking up into the brightest pair of blue eyes that I have ever seen. They're a deep, dark blue and remind me of that spot where the ocean drops off and, for a moment, my words get caught in my throat as I stare at a man who takes me completely off-guard. Who quite literally takes my breath away.

It's an unfamiliar sensation, but one that I can't deny. "Um, a little," I admit, finally forcing myself to speak. A crooked grin lifts the edge of his mouth and he's so good-looking that my eyes burn. His lower jaw is covered in a light scruff and he is the very definition of unrefined masculinity. That stunning combination of blue eyes and dark brown hair makes my stomach do a little flip. He has a lean, fit build that's apparent beneath his snug t-shirt and loose shorts and I can't help but stare at all the tattoos that cover his muscular forearms and then disappear beneath the edge of his sleeves.

It's wildly attractive.

"I'm supposed to sign a book or something." I pry my eyes off his tattoos and dare to meet his baby blues. "I dropped Jimmy off."

"Right. It's over here," he says and motions for me to follow him over to a counter where a ratty-looking ledger lays.

I walk over and pick up the pen which hangs from a string attached to the side. While I scribble my name, I can feel him watching me.

“Normally Mrs. Lahey drops Jimmy off. Are you a friend?”

I place the pen in the book’s crease and turn to look up at him. He’s well over six feet tall and my heart skips a beat. I’ve always had a thing for tall men so the fact that Benjamin is 5’9” on a good day and when he’s wearing his lifts always left me a little envious of women who had to stand up on their tippy-toes to circle their arms around their man’s neck.

“Neighbor,” I clarify. “She’s working late and he seemed pretty upset about missing class so I offered to bring him over. He ditched me right away,” I say with a nod in Jimmy’s direction.

His deep chuckle causes a tingle to run through my entire body. “That was nice of you. Will you be staying?”

“Ah, no. Mrs. Lahey is picking him up at 8.”

“That’s too bad,” he says. “I have a seat right up front for you.”

I’m not sure if he’s teasing or serious. “Maybe next time,” I say, trying to keep my voice light. I swear I see something flash in those blue eyes of his, but I can’t be certain because he’s got me all in a dither.

He nods, gaze gliding down my t-shirt and boxer shorts. I feel my cheeks burn and that crooked smile lifts the corner of his mouth again. “Well, it was nice meeting you...I don’t even know your name.”

My mouth opens and instead of saying my name, I lick my lips. I don’t even mean to do it, but his gaze drops and darkens. “Um, Aubrey,” I finally manage to say.

“That’s a pretty name.”

“Thanks.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around, Aubrey,” he says and begins to turn away.

“Wait!” *Oh, crap.* I didn’t mean to say that, but now he’s looking back over his shoulder and I’m dying to know what his name is and how I can make sure Mrs. Lahey works late again so I can drive Jimmy over here and see Mr. Tattooed Badass. “You didn’t tell me your name,” I say, sounding so lame I want to crawl under a rock.

Those blue eyes of his sparkle. “Killian,” he says slowly, pronouncing each syllable in that deep, sexy voice of his. Then, he moves off to teach his class and I can’t help but check out his tight ass in those long shorts.

God Almighty, the man is sex on a stick, I think, forcing myself to look away.

So, I guess I just met ‘The Killer’ and I’m not going to lie. I feel like he just slayed me.

KILLIAN

Up at the front of the class, I welcome my students with a bow and they all bow in return. As I lean forward, my gaze moves to the gorgeous blonde heading back down the hall and out the front door. She is the sexiest thing I've seen in a long time and I can't help but admire her long legs in those tiny, barely-there shorts.

I stand up straight, squeeze my eyes shut for a moment and find my focus. I have a class full of kids to teach karate to so right now is not the time to be fantasizing over blondie. Maybe later tonight when I'm alone in bed...

I start the class with some warm-up punches and kicks. A couple of parents sit in folding metal chairs along the wall and a part of me is glad that Aubrey didn't stay. She would've been a major distraction that I don't need right now. There's too much already going on in my pathetic life and a woman's inevitable drama is the last thing I need or want.

Despite my reluctance to get too deeply involved with one, I love women—the way they smell so good, how soft their skin is and all those tempting curves. I'm the complete opposite with hard, sharp edges, eternally bruised knuckles and a mouth that would make a sailor blush. The colorful tats that run up my arms and over my chest give me an edgy look and the rougher women I usually take to bed like to trace them with their tongue or fake nails.

But, the blonde who just left couldn't be further from my normal lay. I go for the Sure Thing and nine and a half times out of ten, the woman hits on me first. Most of them are like

my neighbor Lola who lives in the trailer next door to me. She's divorced and no stranger to a one-night stand. With a couple of kids and a no-good ex, she works two low-paying jobs and gives a good blowjob. Not great, but good enough to get the deed done.

A woman like Aubrey, though, makes me think of satin sheets, expensive champagne and bubble baths. Normally, I would never look twice at a high class lady like that because she is completely out of my league. She probably already has a boyfriend and I can picture him perfectly: some rich prick who wears a sharply-creased designer suit and works in a highrise building downtown. He puts cream and sugar in his coffee because he can't handle drinking it black and his choice of alcohol is from some dusty bottle high up on the shelf behind the bar that a schmuck like me can't afford. And, he probably doesn't even like the taste. Just the fancy label and price.

I hate douchebags like that. Gimme a cold beer, worn jeans and my leather jacket. And, my fighting gloves because I'd love to punch him in his pretty boy face.

"Okay, let's break off into partners and practice sparring," I tell the kids. I'm a firm believer that you can't learn martial arts without sparring. You can learn to kick, punch and block, but to know how it works in a real environment, in an actual fight, practice that puts learning in motion is essential.

Since I'm a former MMA fighter, I should know. Mixed Martial Arts is a full-contact sport that combines several different fighting techniques including wrestling, judo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) and boxing. Though some people think being a karate practitioner wouldn't help much in the cage, they couldn't be more wrong. Karate gave me an extremely well-developed talent when it came to controlling distance. I knew how to stay just outside of my opponent's striking distance and this allowed me to pick and choose when to strike. This style controlled my opponent and forced him to come into striking distance which was when I would attack with a lightning-fast strike.

My gaze wanders over the kids, mostly 8-12 year old boys with a few girls sprinkled in, and I remember me at their age. I

was small, weak and had no idea how to even throw a punch, much less defend myself from the bullies who tormented me on a daily basis. I guess they picked on me because I was the poor Irish kid from the wrong side of the tracks and they were bigger. Kicking my ass was too easy and it became a sport for them.

Until the day I fought back.

After an especially bad beating, I found the nearest karate studio and vowed revenge. That's where I met Mac "The Knife" Moretti who became my mentor and trainer. He believed in my scrawny ass for some reason and stuck with me over the years. It all began in a very "Karate Kid" kind of way so that's why it's still one of my favorite movies and I love the Netflix show. Only thing I look forward to watching other than the fights.

Mac taught me point fighting where whoever lands a clean strike, punch or kick, wins a point. This encouraged me to hit and not be hit and I think that is what honed my fast striking speed and accuracy while also teaching me to be incredibly elusive. The karate training and point fighting tournaments provided a solid foundation for MMA fighting.

Unfortunately, I got cocky, partied too hard and let my success go to my head. Then, last year I got my ass handed to me in the biggest fight of my life. Fucking humiliating. It snapped me back to reality and I stopped fighting to focus on cleaning up my act.

That's what I told Mac, anyway.

In all honesty, I think I may be a bigger mess now than I was before. Emotionally, anyway. Physically, I'm in prime condition. I've cut back on the drinking and smoking and even though I still indulge, I can control myself. Now, I'd never even consider having a sip of alcohol before a fight and when I showed up last year to fight Bobby "The Bull" Torres, I was half-tanked.

What a fucking disaster.

I'm ashamed and embarrassed by what happened so what the hell else was I supposed to do other than disappear from the MMA scene, tail between my legs? I know some people whispered about a comeback, but I have zero interest in returning to the cage. I do, however, participate in the local underground fighting ring. The very real possibility of returning to an MMA fight and getting my ass kicked again on national TV doesn't appeal to me. It's a risk I'm not willing to take no matter how much Mac harrasses me about it. One of these days, the tough Italian will get it through his thick skull that no means no and this isn't a fucking Rocky film. Losing is losing and there is no redemption for me. In the meantime, I tell Mac the same thing every time he brings up returning to the world of MMA: Fuck no.

Thing is, I am a fighter to the bone. The urge flows through the blood in my veins and when I'm in the cage, I thrive. Kind of explains why I feel like a withered piece of dog shit left to bake in the sun. I stopped doing what I love most and I won't allow myself to go back. Underground fighting keeps my skills honed and sharp, gives me a taste of what I love, but it isn't the same as MMA. There's respect, support and money in the MMA world and when I'm throwing jabs and kicks at some overweight fool in a ring made up of bales of hay in some shitty barn out in the middle of nowhere, it leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

I'm better than that, but what the hell can I do? Beggars, or in my case washed-up cowards, can't be choosers. Because that's exactly what I feel like. A goddamn coward who can't seem to get his shit together.

Ah, well. I'm coming to accept the fact that I'll never make the kind of money I used to or have fans scream for me like they did when I fought in the cage. Unfortunately, the bills keep coming and underground fighting prize money can be a couple grand on a good night. It's not enough and I'm struggling financially, but my pride is more important than a fat paycheck.

Teaching karate to kids doesn't pay much either, but I really enjoy it. It's one of the few things I genuinely look forward to

in my pathetic life. Probably because I see myself in these little punks, remembering when I was their age and floundering in a sea of bullies. It's important to me that they can defend themselves and not be harassed like me when I was ten.

My gaze zeroes in on Jimmy who Aubrey dropped off earlier. He dances too close to his sparring partner and the other kid gets a hit in and Jimmy groans. "Watch your footing," I say, walking over. "Gauge your distance and don't let him get so close."

He nods and bounces on his scrawny legs, circling his opponent, a determined look on his face. *Fuck, the kid reminds me of myself way back when.* When Jimmy starts forward, I hold up a hand. "Wait for it," I say. "Study your opponent, watch how he moves and when he strikes. Stay out of his zone...then strike hard and fast."

Jimmy hits the other kid's chest, bounces back out of his reach and I smile. "Good job, Jimmy. Watch your balance," I tell the other kid.

When eight o'clock arrives, so do the parents. As usual, a few stragglers come late, but everyone is gone by quarter after. I head over to the small, musty-smelling office and exchange my gym shorts for a pair of worn jeans and slip a pair of socks and black boots on my feet. I stuff my shorts into my bag, swing it over my shoulder and head out, locking up behind me. Compared to the places I trained while in MMA, this place is a dump. But, I don't do it for the money. I do it for the kids and I know better than anyone that poor kids want to learn martial arts just as much as rich kids. And, they should have that opportunity.

I walk over to my motorcycle, a vintage Triumph, and swing a leg over the side, sit down and settle the small gym bag between my legs. As much as I hate helmets, I slip it on and buckle the strap beneath my chin. I don't have the kind with the visor because it restricts my vision and if I have to wear one then it's going to be the open style that looks like an old World War I helmet.

Works for me, I think, and kickstart my bike. It takes a couple of tries, but the engine eventually rumbles to life and I guide her out onto the street. I love my bike and she's the only one in my life that I can say that to. Except, of course, my mom. I love Shelly Doyle to bits and would do anything in the world for her.

My piece of shit dad left us when I was a few months old so I never knew him. It's always been just me and my mom against the world and that's alright with me. She's so strong and I admire the hell out of her. She works as a manager at a nearby restaurant, a pretty fancy one, and she's finally talking about retiring. She deserves it. I only wish I had more money to take care of her better.

The wind blows and the smell of rain hangs heavy in the air. I love when it rains. I find something soothing and comforting in the way it cleans the air and hits the roof. But, I really don't want to get caught in a downpour while riding my bike so I gun it and head toward home.

Home for me is Happy Trails Trailer Park. Stupid, fucking name, but I can afford the low monthly rent and I don't mind being out a bit further. My suburb isn't the greatest, but it's quiet and all working class families. Despite Chicago's Prohibition history and the Irish and Italian gang rivalry, my neighborhood is a melting pot of Irish and Italian immigrant families who help, support and look out for each other.

The moment I pull my bike up under the cheap awning of my trailer, it starts to sprinkle. I undo my chin strap and look up to see my neighbor Lola Simonetti saunter over. She's a short, curvy brunette and makes a mean lasagna. She's also made it abundantly clear that she wants more from me than an occasional fuck, but that's all I'm willing to give her at this point.

Lola is nice and all, but sometimes I can't deal with her. She's a divorcée with a couple of teenagers and a penchant for bad boys. Guess that's why she's attracted to me. Her ex-husband cheated on her and she forgave him. Three times. Then he took off with his secretary and she never heard from him again. That was ten years ago and she's lived here next to me for

about two years now. Her kids seem all right and keep busy so when they aren't around, Lola always comes a-knocking on my door.

I glance over her shoulder and it looks pretty quiet over there. I know what she wants, but frankly, I'm not in the mood right now. I'd much rather sit in my chair, have a beer and listen to the rain.

"Hiya, Kill," she says in a breathy voice. She fiddles with the strap on her tank top, gliding a finger beneath it, drawing my attention down, and I notice she doesn't wear a bra.

"Hey, Lola," I say and get off my bike. I lay the helmet on the seat, grab my bag and turn to look into her dark eyes. She's right in front of me now and touches a finger to my chest, swirling it in a circle around my nipple.

"Kids are gone all night," she says, eyes hopeful. "Wanna come over and get lucky?"

I have to hand it to her— Lola never minces words and I guess I can appreciate that about her. There are no games between us and we're just two healthy, consenting adults who use each other every now and then to get off.

But, not tonight.

"As nice as that sounds, I have some things to do tonight." Not really, but I don't want to hurt her feelings. Lola means well and she's never been anything but kind to me.

She sticks her lips out in a pouty frown. "Ki-illll," she murmurs and trails her hand lower, brushing it downward, over my abs and heading straight for my dick.

I snatch her hand and give it a squeeze. "You're a peach, honey, but I really can't tonight." I let go and she places her hand on a curvy hip.

After a long-suffering sigh, Lola nods. "Fine be that way. But, if you change your mind, you know where to find me." With a little smile, she spins around and races back over to her trailer, dodging raindrops.

I let out a relieved sigh, open the door and step into my sad little place. After dropping the gym bag, I throw a window open and then grab a beer out of the fridge. I crack it open, take a long swig and sigh. I have nothing to do tonight, but Lola didn't need to know that. Sometimes, I just want to be alone.

The curtains lift and blow inward and I drop down in my worn chair and breathe deeply. The rain smells clean and I love that ozone smell. I sink back further into the faux leather cushion and lift my feet up onto the matching ottoman. After another sip, I close my eyes and listen to the rain patter against the metal roof above me.

An image of Aubrey fills my mind and I wonder what it would be like to have a woman like that. So pristine and beautiful. I'm sure she probably went to some fancy college and lives in some richie-rich suburb. I imagine she shops and meets friends for lunch and probably does yoga in her spare time.

"Hmmm..." I make a humming sound in the back of my throat and picture her lean body stretching and twisting into poses on a mat. No, not on a mat. Under me. Those long legs wrapped around my waist as I pound into her, hard and fast, making her take me to the hilt.

I'd make her body buck, force her to scream my name and then she'd come harder than she ever did before. Certainly harder than with her financial geek of a boyfriend.

It's nice to have my fantasies because I'm sure I will never see that blonde princess again. Her dropping little Jimmy off today was a complete fluke.

Little do I know, I am about to get to know Aubrey Reed a whole helluva lot better.

AUBREY

Bright blue eyes the color of sapphires swirl through my mind and no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to get Killian out of my head. His tattoos, the messy brown hair that falls over his forehead and the motorcycle parked in front of the gym all scream one thing— he is a bad boy and all roads lead to heartbreak.

But, maybe Killian is the very excitement that I need in my well-ordered life. Everything feels stale and I want to shake things up. What better way to do that than have a torrid affair with the smoking hot karate instructor?

I've never had an affair in my life and I honestly wouldn't even know how to go about it. Killian is so damn hot and probably has multiple women throwing themselves at him. Who am I? Just some uptown girl who does what she's told and doesn't like to make waves. But, right now, I feel like making a few. In fact, I feel like splashing all over the damn place. Killian strikes me as someone I could definitely do that with, but he also intimidates me.

I can't even imagine what it would be like to be with a man like Killian, but I really want to see him again. But how? All week long, I ponder this question and by Friday night, I still don't have the answer.

My best friend Tori Simpson sits on the couch next to me and we've just finished off a pizza, bottle of wine and the latest Passionflix movie. I'm not going to lie— it's got me all riled up and thinking up all sorts of sexy scenarios with Killian.

With a sigh, I set my empty wine glass on the coffee table and turn to face Tori.

“What is with you?” she asks and runs a hand through her sleek dark hair. Tori is everything I’m not and I love her for it. She’s loud and I’m quiet; she’s a brunette and I’m a blonde; and she doesn’t take crap from anybody whereas I try not to ruffle any feathers. “You keep sighing and have this far-off look in your eye. I swear, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were pining over someone.”

“Well...” I pick at the edge of my fingernail and decide to spill it. “I met this ridiculously hot guy on Monday and can’t stop thinking about him.”

Tori’s brown eyes go wide as saucers. “What?” she squeals. “Who is he?”

“That’s the problem. I know less than nothing about him and the only reason we met is because I dropped my little neighbor off at karate practice and it was his hotter than hot teacher.”

“A karate instructor? Ooh. That sounds promising.”

“You know me— I never just see a guy and get all weird like this. But, Tori, I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“This is so exciting! I’m opening another bottle of wine and I want details.”

I can’t help but laugh at her enthusiasm and a few minutes later, Tori refills my glass and I start to tell her how Jimmy needed a ride to karate and I ran into his teacher, Killian. The moment I mention his name, her jaw drops.

“Are you talking about Killian ‘The Killer’ Doyle?”

“Um, I’m not sure what his last name is but Jimmy did call him ‘The Killer’.”

“Holy shit!” she exclaims. “I have to text Mike.”

Mike Laskey is Tori’s boyfriend and I know that he likes watching fights on TV, but I’m not sure why she needs to talk to him. “About what?”

Tori turns to face me completely, tucking her legs beneath her. “Mike used to follow Killian’s career when he was an MMA fighter. He’ll know details which means we can get the scoop on the new love of your life.”

I roll my eyes. “He’s not the love of my life.” Although, I have to admit, it doesn’t sound too bad.

“I’m just so glad you didn’t say Ben’s name. I probably would’ve puked up my pizza if you wanted to get back together with that dud.”

A half snort-half laugh erupts from my throat. “He wasn’t that bad.”

“Oh, my God, Aubrey, that man is the biggest snoozefest. The day you dumped him, I had a mini-orgasm.”

I burst out laughing and nearly spill my wine.

Truth be told, I can’t deny it. Ben Styles’ personality leaves a little to be desired and he’s not going to win Mr. Congeniality any time soon. Or, ever. “My parents are pushing for us to get back together.” I hadn’t told Tori this yet because I knew she’d have a vehement reaction.

And, she proves me right when she jumps up off the couch and looks ready to blow. “No! I swear to God, if you let them bully you into getting back with that loser, I will unfriend you.”

“You can’t unfriend me, Tor. You’re my best friend.”

“And, as your best friend, I forbid you to ever say that man’s name again. From this point forward, B.S. is dead to you.”

I smirk and shake my head. She always comes up with good nicknames for people and B.S. always cracked me up. Even when I was dating him.

“Say it,” she says in a stern voice.

“B.S. is dead to me.”

“Good.” She taps a message out to Mike and then leans back, still eyeing me, and takes a sip of wine. “You and Killian. Now that’s something I can get behind.”

“Really? Why?” I’m curious why she thinks I should go with a man who probably goes through women like a kid with allergies goes through tissues. Not like I’m the relationship expert, but I got the impression that “The Killer” isn’t a one-woman kind of guy.

“Because he’s exactly what you need. Danger, excitement and some hot sex.”

A blush heats my cheeks and I take a long sip of wine. I know she’s right, but I don’t comment.

“Hell, Aubrey, you’ve never even had a proper orgasm.”

“Tori!” My face turns a deeper shade of red. “That’s not true. I’ve had orgasms...just not from a man.” When I’d confided in her that Ben never did anything much for me in the bedroom, she bought me a vibrator as a gag gift.

Tori rolls her eyes. “Because B.S. couldn’t find your G-Spot even if you gave him GPS directions.”

I want to deny it, but it’s true. Ben never took the time to find out what I liked when it came to sex and since he’s the only man I’ve ever slept with, it was a huge disappointment. For the longest time, I wondered if something was wrong with me. Especially when he could barely get it up. There were a lot of times he made up excuses and said he was stressed or too tired to have sex. Tori said it sounded like we were a couple who had been married for 50 years. But, I imagine even those couples started hot and heavy.

After realizing we had zero chemistry in the bedroom, I gave up even trying. It seemed like too much work and I really wasn’t that interested in going out of my way to please him when he never tried to please me. So, I shoved the sexy lingerie into the back of my drawer and used the vibrator when Ben wasn’t around.

“Think of all the toe-curling orgasms Killian could give you. Because, Aubrey, you can tell that man knows exactly what to do with his goods.”

“Maybe. Probably. But, that doesn’t mean he has any interest in me. We couldn’t be more opposite.”

“Who cares? Opposites attract and we’re not talking about long-term commitment here. Killian Doyle is a fuck boy and you, my friend, need to get laid properly. I have a feeling that Killian is just the man for the job.”

“Okay, so what if he is? How do I get his attention? Or, better yet, even run into him again?”

As if in answer, Tori’s phone beeps with a text back from Mike. She swipes a finger across the screen and her dark gaze scans his message. “He says Killian left MMA fighting last year after losing a big fight. Sounds like it was pretty scandalous.”

“How so?” I ask, beyond curious.

After some more typing, Mike responds. “He showed up drunk or high or something and got his ass kicked. Mike says it was a humiliating blow and ended his career.”

“Oh, great.” An addict. That’s all I needed in my life.

“But, he cleaned up his act and fights in the local underground clubs now.”

“Underground? Like Fight Club with Brad Pitt?”

“It’s more organized than that, but yeah. They have these fights every week at secret locations and you bet on the winners. Mike took me to a couple, but it’s been a while.”

I raise a brow. The more I find out, the less appealing Killian Doyle should be. But, it’s almost having the opposite effect on me. I picture his tattoo sleeves and warmth coils low in my belly. I remember seeing some Chinese characters inked on his forearm and I wonder what they mean.

Hot as hell crosses through my mind.

“Do you know when he fights next?” I ask. I want to see him again and determination floods through me.

“Mike says you never know who’s going to show. You don’t even know where the fight takes place until a few hours beforehand.”

“Oh.” My hope of ever seeing Killian again deflates. “I can’t exactly show up at the gym again.”

Tori tosses her phone aside and grins. “Sure you can. Doesn’t little Jacky need a ride to karate again?”

“Jimmy.”

“Whatever. My point is you should offer to take him and then strike up a conversation with Killian. Give him your best bedroom eyes and invite him out for a drink. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“He could laugh in my face.”

“Aubrey, have you looked in a mirror lately? You’re gorgeous.”

“Thanks,” I mumble.

“Play your cards right and you could have Killian eating out of your palm. Or, you know, eating you out.”

Oh, God. The thought of his mouth on me makes my insides twist with desire. “You think?”

“I know. Trust me, he’s just a man and if you dangle your sexy self in front of him, he will bite.”

“I’m not sexy, though,” I remind her.

“You just need to work on it a little. It’s all about getting into the right mindset and setting the stage for seduction.”

I frown. “I don’t think I can do it.”

“Of course you can.”

“He’s so tall and...” I swallow hard. “Masculine. It’s intimidating.”

“Do you want to see this guy again or not?”

“Yes, but-”

“But, nothing. Get your ass in the game and seduce him. Trust me, it’s going to be easier than you think.”

“I don’t know.”

“Jesus, Aubrey, we need to work on your self-esteem.”

“It sucks,” I admit.

She places a hand on my arm and tugs my sleeve. “It shouldn’t. Killian or any other man you show interest in should be grateful and appreciative of any attention you give him because you’re beautiful, smart and funny. It’s not your fault that you dated a douche who made you doubt yourself.”

I hated that I doubted myself, but she was right. When the only man you ever had a relationship with didn’t want to touch you half the time, it gives a girl a complex.

“So, are you gonna go for it?” Tori asks and pours herself more wine.

“I can’t exactly steal Jimmy, but if Mrs. Lahey happens to be busy or work late again, I can always offer to take him to class.”

“That’s not good enough. We need to make sure you bump into Killian again sooner rather than later. What if he’s sitting at home right now and thinking about you?”

“I seriously doubt it.”

“Well, how did he act around you?”

I think back and picture our interaction and goosebumps raise up on my arms. I rub them away and finish my wine. “He asked if I’d be staying to watch the class and when I said no...” My voice trails off as I remember his exact words.

That’s too bad. I have a seat right up front for you.

When I tell Tori, she screeches. “What else?”

“He said it was nice meeting me and asked my name. After I said Aubrey, he said that’s a pretty name. And then he said maybe I’ll see you around. It was all very casual.” *Wasn’t it?*

She gives me a sly smile. “We need to figure out a way for you to run into Killian Doyle again, babe, because I have no doubt that you and he are going to indulge in a fuck-a-thon.”

I shake my head, but can’t deny the tingle that runs through my body.

KILLIAN

It continues to rain for the next few days and my mood turns sour. I have a shitload of bills due in the next week and no paycheck on the horizon. Luckily, I get a call from Rivera and he asks if I want to fight tomorrow night.

Fuck, yeah, I do.

Someone dropped out of the underground fight scheduled and I jump at the chance to win some cash. Hopefully since it's a Friday night there will be a big crowd and that means a bigger pot. I want to get some practice in so I decide to face the rain, hop on my bike and head over to the gym to work out.

Since the weather is bad and it's the middle of the afternoon, the place is quiet. Only a couple of other people work out. I decide to run on the treadmill first and then do some strength training. Afterwards, I'll finish up with the heavy bag.

An hour later as I'm punching and kicking the shit out of the bag hanging from the ceiling, I hear a voice that I haven't heard in almost a year. Gravelly with a touch of rasp that he probably obtained from when he used to scream at me all the time.

"Killian 'The Killer' Doyle," Mac says and I stop mid-punch and slowly turn around to face my old mentor and friend.

He looks pretty good considering he's a craggy, grumpy, salty old fighter with a chip on his shoulder. Mac "The Knife" Moretti is in his mid-50s and tends to swear in Italian and eat too much pasta. He still wears the same corny t-shirt that says "Italian Stallion" in white, green and red due to his love for the

movie “Rocky.” I think he always wanted to be my Mickey and help me succeed, but he should’ve chosen someone else. I’m a fuck-up and I let him down. He should’ve seen it coming, though, and I still don’t understand why he took me under his wing or what he ever saw in me.

Despite the fact that he trained me since I was ten, we had a huge falling out last year and parted ways. Of course, it was after the disastrous fight with Bobby “The Bull” Torres. Mac said some terrible things and I said some things that were probably even worse.

I grab a towel and wipe the sweat off my face, still trying to process the fact that Mac is here. “Mac ‘The Knife’ Moretti,” I respond back, keeping my voice and expression neutral. Even so, emotion tightens my chest and I realize how much I’ve missed this asshole.

“Why’re you hanging out in this dump? Almost looks like you’re training for something.”

Mac was always too perceptive, but I don’t have any secret plans so I just shrug. “Nope. Just like to stay in shape.”

“Uh-huh.”

He eyes me closely and it might sound stupid or sappy, but all the good memories flood me. When he took me under his wing and taught me how to defend myself, how he gave me my first beer to celebrate winning my first karate tournament and, most of all, how he was always the father figure I never had after my dad left.

I grit my teeth together and then give him a half smile. “I can’t lie. I missed you, Mac.”

“Heard you got your shit together. For the most part,” he says and crosses his bulky arms over his chest.

“I cut out a lot of toxic shit, but I’m far from perfect.”

He nods, studies me closely. “You’re fighting underground?”

I get the feeling that he talked to someone so no point in denying it. “I am.”

“Fighting is in your blood. You wouldn’t be able to quit if your life depended on it.”

I knew he was right. Like always. I think that’s why I used to get so angry. When Mac would tell me what to do, I didn’t always want to listen. The times I rebelled, I always ended up being wrong and he was always right. It used to irk me.

“Little bird told me you teach karate here.”

“A few times a week,” I say and pull off my protective gloves. “The kids seem to like it and the owner needed someone so I volunteered. It even pays a little.”

“Anything else I should know? Are you engaged or married?”

I tilt my head and give him my driest look. “Do you know me at all?”

Mac barked out a laugh. “Even the toughest fall when the right woman comes along.”

I raise a brow, but don’t comment. In the back of my mind, I see Aubrey, but it’s only because I think she’s beautiful and I’m still having a hard time forgetting her for some reason. It’s strange how one brief encounter that was non-sexual can have this kind of lasting effect on me. It’s never happened before and I’m not sure what to make of it.

The other day when the kids had karate practice again, I kept my eyes on the door, waiting for Jimmy to walk in with Aubrey. Hoping, praying and imagining it. Then, Mrs. Lahey came in and signed the book. I don’t think I’ve ever been so disappointed in my life.

I’ve resigned myself to the fact that I’ll probably never see her again.

“What about you?” I ask. “Old Italian curmudgeon like you settle down in the past year?”

“Actually, yeah.”

My eyes widen. “What?” I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “Are you pulling my leg?”

“She’s my younger sister’s friend, a widow and seduced me with the best lasagna I’d ever eaten. Even better than my mama’s. What can I say? It was love at first bite. After we tested the goods in the bedroom, we got hitched.”

“Congratulations,” I murmur. *Wow*. I scratch at my eyebrow, still trying to wrap my head around some woman willingly marrying Mac. I guess miracles do happen. *Good for them*.

“So, when’s the underground fight?” Mac asks.

“Tomorrow night.”

He seems to want to say something more, but hesitates.

“What?”

“You’re too good for that crap, Kill. You should be fighting in the cage.”

I sigh and slap my gloves together. “MMA would never take me back.”

“What if they would?”

My head snaps up. *Impossible*. I broke rules— moral and ethical ones— and they didn’t like that. I knew there would be consequences for my behavior and instead of accepting the punishment, I gave the whole organization the finger and quit. I’d be willing to bet that MMA doesn’t have many fond feelings or memories when it comes to me.

“What are you saying?”

“I think you should return to MMA and I’ll train you again.”

Now it’s my turn to burst out laughing. “Fuck, Mac. Did you forget what happened last year against Bobby?”

“Of course not. It wasn’t just humiliating for you, Killian. I became the coach who couldn’t control his fighter. When we parted ways, people wrote us both off.”

I know he’s right and I feel bad. *Christ, I am the world’s biggest loser*. A complete fucking idiot. What the hell was I thinking when I showed up to fight my nemesis after snorting two lines of blow and drinking an entire bottle of Jack Daniels? I had partied all night, hooked up with women I don’t

even remember and thought I was God's gift to the fighting world.

By the time I stepped into the cage, my heart was pounding, I was grinding my teeth and itching to kick The Bull in his ugly face. Turns out, he clobbered me off my pedestal and pounded me into the ground. Even though I was pissed, I'm in a place now where I can freely admit that I deserved it. I guess it was good for me to get knocked down a few pegs. Humility never hurts anyone.

Still, though, the idea of returning to MMA fighting makes my stomach clench with anxiety. I'd have to face everyone I told to go screw, apologize relentlessly and play nice. I'm not good at groveling and I rarely apologize.

I just don't see it happening. "Sorry, Mac," I say. "Not interested."

He glances around, eyeing the worn equipment and floor mats with tattered edges, and makes an unimpressed sound in the back of his throat. "Because you're doing so well out on your own?"

My eyes narrow. My pride is a huge part of the problem, but I'll never admit it. When I walked away from MMA, I didn't look back and that's just how it's got to be. "I don't need your low blows." I toss the shabby gloves in the corner and cross my arms, feeling defensive.

"Just stating the facts, Kill. You're wasting your energy and talent here. When you fight and have your head screwed on straight, it's fucking magic. I wanna see that again, be a part of it. Don't you miss that?"

"I mean, yeah, of course. But, at the same time, I won't go back. I made a decision when I walked away and that's it."

"You don't need a paycheck?"

"Everyone needs a paycheck," I say through gritted teeth.

"I can get you a really big one if you listen to me for once in your life."

Anger rises within me and I dig my fingers into my upper arms where they're crossed. I don't like being pressured or talked down to so I'm sure Mac can see when a muscle jumps in my jaw. "No one controls me. Especially not you, so lay off."

He raises his hands and takes a step back. "Alright, alright. Chill out. Jesus." He lets out a long breath. "I'm trying to do something good for both of us. You're the best damn MMA fighter I've ever seen, Kill, and I hate that you're wasting away in a place like this when you should be training in the most prestigious gyms in the country and travelling all over the world to fight the best of the best."

I don't say anything, just mull over his words.

"You were always such stubborn shit."

My mouth edges up. "It's my Irish blood."

Mac rolls his eyes. "Don't be a dumb mick. I'm going to leave, but think it over."

"I already did."

"Killian-"

"Sorry, Mac."

Mac shakes his head. "Underground fighting is a poor man's sport and a complete waste of your talent."

"Says the wop who never made it himself."

Mac slaps a palm against his forehead. "Cazzo! It's like talking to the wall," he grumbles. Then he takes a step closer and shoves a thick finger against my chest. "I am your teacher, your mentor and your friend. I want what's best for you, so listen to me for once in your goddamn life."

When I don't say anything, just tilt my chin up in that stubborn way I do when I'm annoyed and refuse to give in, he throws his hands up.

"You really do love to fight. Even when it's something good and in your best interest." Mac turns and walks away, leaving me to ponder his parting words.

Do I fight everything? Even the good things?

Deep down, I know Mac is right. I've made such a mess of everything over the past year or so and now he wants to help me clean up my reputation and get my career back on track. So, why the hell am I fighting him?

I really am a glutton for punishment. Maybe I like being miserable.

Whatever. I can't think about this now and I need to finish working out. I may have looked like a complete idiot in the cage the last time I fought MMA, but that's done. When I fight now, I make sure to prepare and that means training and complete focus.

I grab a bottle of water, gulp half of it down and drop it next to my gloves. Then, I move back over to the bag and jump into the air, spin and catch it with a hard roundhouse kick. With bare fists, I punch the bag hard with my knuckles, forcing myself to endure the pain.

After all, I fucking deserve it.

AUBREY

When Saturday morning rolls around, I have a little bit of a headache from drinking too much wine so I pop a couple of aspirin. Since it's June in the Midwest, the produce stands and greenhouses are busy and overflowing with freshly-picked fruits and veggies. I grab my purse and head to my car. I don't have to drive too far from the city, just a little into the country, and I pull up to my favorite place to buy fresh strawberries.

The place is hopping and I grab a basket and wander past flats of flowers, hanging baskets with impatiens and begonias and make my way to the back section of the building where tables are piled high with fruit and vegetables. Berry season is in full swing so I choose a basket of strawberries, raspberries and blueberries. I catch a whiff of something sweet and wander over to the table covered in baked goods. Everything looks and smells delicious, but I decide on a strawberry cupcake and cinnamon coffee cake.

After I pay and get back into my car, my phone buzzes. It's my mom and I sigh, not overly enthusiastic to talk to her. Theresa Reed, other half of Thomas Reed, is in her mid-50s and a successful lawyer. I know that my parents love me and only want to see me lead a successful life, but I'm realizing they're a huge part of the reason I'm feeling so unsatisfied lately. I've spent far too much time trying to please them and ignoring my own wants and needs. But, I want to change that.

Starting now.

"Hi, Mom," I say as the call echoes throughout my car.

“Where are you? You sound far away.”

“I just picked up some fruit and pastries from Monette’s. What are you doing?”

“Monette’s? Why would you go there? Valencia’s produce is far superior.”

Because I like Monette’s better and I’m the one who’s going to eat it. “Because I like this place, too.”

“Hmm. If you say so,” she says. “Your father and I are attending a fundraiser tonight and wanted you to come along.”

Ugh. “I can’t,” I say, refusing to bend to their will. There’s no way I want to spend my Saturday night rubbing elbows with a bunch of uptown snobs.

“Why not?”

I rack my brain. “Because I have plans with Tori.”

“I’m sure your plans can wait,” she tells me in a dry voice. “Important people will be there tonight and you really need to extend your social circle.”

“I’m happy with my social circle.”

“Let me clarify— you need to start interacting with the *right* kind of people. Your future depends on it.”

I don’t say anything, just tighten my grip on the steering wheel. A part of me feels like I’m suffocating under their constant wants and demands. All I want to do is throw off the noose and run free.

“I’m sure it’s fun to sit around and gossip with Tori,” my mother continues in her prim and proper voice, “but if you want to make something of yourself, you need to get your act together. You’re going to be 30 before you know it and you’re not even close to being serious with anyone. Who do you plan on marrying if you don’t ever go out and meet the right man?”

The right man. *And, who exactly is that?* I wonder. An image of Killian flashes through my mind. All those vibrant tats and bad boy vibes. I can only imagine how my parents would react

if I introduced him as my boyfriend. They would shit twice and die. Then probably forbid me to see him.

That's part of the problem. I'm 28 years old and still worried about my parents grounding me. Well, obviously, not really, but in a way, sort of because I can't seem to do anything without fear of their disapproval. A rebellious streak that I've never felt before is rising within me and I wonder how this is all going to play out.

Right at that moment, Tori beeps in and I tell my mom I have to go. "Hey, Tor," I say. "Good timing. You just saved me from another one of Mother Theresa's lectures."

"What about this time?"

"No prospective husband."

"Well, I don't have a husband for you, but I do have intel about an underground fight taking place tonight and a certain karate instructor who plans to be in the ring."

My pulse thunders. "Killian is fighting tonight?" I ask, a little too breathlessly.

"Yep. Wanna go with me and Mike?"

"Hell yes," I say without hesitation. The idea of seeing him makes my blood heat up and my stomach does cartwheels.

"What do I wear?" I ask, suddenly nervous. I run a hand through my blonde hair and think of all the things that I suddenly need to do—pick out an outfit, shave, shower, paint my nails. I glance at the clock on the dashboard. "What time?"

"You are too funny," she says, clearly amused by my sudden anxiety. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you sound nervous. How much do you like this guy?"

"I barely spoke to him for five minutes." But, I am dying to see him again.

"Oh, so this is like insta-lust," she says in a teasing voice.

"I mean, do I think he's hot? Of course. What red-blooded female wouldn't? But, that doesn't mean I'm planning my future with him."

“Sounds like you wanna get laid.”

My face flushes. “I’d be a liar if I said I’d turn him away. But, I seriously doubt I’m his type.”

“Not this again. Work on your self-esteem, babe. You’re every man’s wet dream.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but-”

“Killian Doyle is a bad boy and we all know that bad boys tend to fall for good girls.”

“Maybe in the movies. But, he’s going to be fighting so I’m not counting on anything other than admiring him from afar and then wiping the drool off my chin.”

Tori bursts out laughing. “Want me to come over and help you get ready?”

“Would you?”

“What are best friends for?”

When Tori arrives at my house later that afternoon, I’m debating between jeans and leggings.

“Jeans,” she says. “We want to make sure he gets a clear view of your ass. Whenever you wear leggings, you pair them with a longer shirt and you need to put the goods on display tonight.”

I suppose she has a point, but I doubt that I will have the opportunity to actually speak to the man of the hour. He’s going to be in the ring fighting not having a flirty conversation with me. “Okay. Which shirt?” I hold up a blue one and then a red one.

“Neither,” she says, scrunches up her nose and walks over to my closet.

I laugh. “See, I need you.”

After some rummaging, she pulls out a plain white t-shirt with a V in front. “This with your leather jacket. Simple, yet effective. And, wear a black bra under it. Guys dig that.”

I've already done my makeup and painted my nails a deep blood red. After I get dressed and slip on a pair of worn boots, Tori takes a step back and we look at my reflection in the mirror. My long blonde hair hangs just past my shoulders in loose, bedhead waves and even though I'm wearing darker makeup than usual, something about me still screams sweet and innocent.

"How can you have your boobs pushed up, be wearing killer boots and a leather jacket and still look like this sweet innocent thing?"

"I was just thinking the same thing. I'm going to stick out like a sore thumb."

"Maybe that's a good thing," she tells me with a sly smile.

By the time we reach the secret location of the fight later that evening, I'm sweating buckets. My nerves feel more taut than a guitar string and I have no idea what to expect. Mike tells us a few more things about Killian and it just makes me start picking at my nail polish. God, I've never been this on edge in my life. I'm going to see him soon and it makes me giddy.

After we park out in the boondocks because there is such a big crowd, we start walking toward a huge barn. A girl in a tank top and jean shorts stands at the door and we pay a small cover charge to get inside. The smell of hay lingers in the air and I look around at all the people drinking beer from plastic red cups and talking. There's an air of excitement and anticipation and knowing I'm a part of it gets me pumped. My energy ratchets up and I don't feel nervous anymore. I'm completely vibing with the atmosphere and chomping at the bit to lay my eyes on Killian.

"Where do you think he is?" I ask, looking all around.

"Chill out, tiger," Mike says and tosses me a smile. "I'll go grab us some beers and why don't you two find us a good spot upfront?"

"C'mon," I say and tug Tori toward the area surrounded by stacked hay bales. I want to make sure I have a prime, first-

rate view. Close enough to get a good look at those stunning blue eyes of his.

We move through the crowd and I walk straight to the edge of the ring. “Can’t get much closer,” I say and Tori nods.

“That’s for sure. I just hope we aren’t too close.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Mike sidles up alongside us and hands us each a cup spilling over with cheap beer. I guzzle some down. “We’re in the danger zone,” Mike says. “Close enough where you could get splashed with blood.”

I grimace. I don’t like to think about Killian actually getting hurt and the first tinge of worry twists my stomach. “He’s going to win, right? I thought he’s really good...right?” Doubt fills my voice and I take another fortifying drink of alcohol. The last thing I want to do is see Killian get killed a few feet in front of me.

Mike shrugs. “You just never know. He’s going up against Brunswick the Bear.”

“Bear?” I practically squeak. That doesn’t sound very reassuring.

“The guy’s huge,” Mike confirms.

“Oh, God.” I rub my index finger against my temple.

Mike laughs. “Don’t worry. In this case, big means slow and Killian is light on his feet. The guy really knows how to dance just out of his opponent’s reach and then strike hard and fast like a snake.”

His words make me feel a little bit better, but when the announcer steps into the ring, my nerves become a tangled mess. We have to sit through several other fights first and it’s a good warm-up for me because I have no idea what to expect. This is my first underground fight. Some of the match-ups leave me cringing and they get a little too brutal for my taste. I don’t like seeing people get hurt and the last guy needs to get carried out of the ring.

Shit. It's crazy. I don't even know Killian Doyle and I am so damn nervous for him.

Finally, it's time and I hold my breath as the announcer introduces Brunswick the Bear and Killian "The Killer" Doyle. Loud cheers and whistles pierce the air as the fighters appear on opposite sides of the ring. The hay bales magically close them in together and I get my first good look of Killian, the underground fighter.

I release the breath I've been holding and a million butterfly wings flutter inside of me. He's even better looking than I remember and a fierce attraction flares inside me. I get the urge to hop the bale of hay and throw myself into his arms. *Silly.* I shake my head and focus on Killian's amazing body.

The man is built like the perfect fighter— slim, athletic, ridged abs and muscled arms. I've never seen so much toned, smooth skin and the power that ripples beneath makes my breath catch. He brushes a dark lock of hair off his forehead and punches his gloved fists together.

Good God. I think my womb just contracted.

While I'm trying to get a better look at Killian's hotness, the fight begins. Killian moves like a pro, bouncing on the balls of his feet and keeping just of his massive opponent's striking distance. The Bear might be huge, but he also lumbers around and tends to swing and miss. Killian is too fast on his feet. Everything about him is fast— his jabs, punches, movements, footwork.

He's going to win. There's no doubt in my mind and when Killian launches a fist into the Bear's jaw, following it with a kick to his side, I cheer so loudly that it makes Tori and Mike burst out laughing.

But, I don't care. I am so into what's happening and yelling and cheering for Killian that the rest of the world seems to fade away. It's only him and I'm so impressed by his speed and technique. I didn't place a bet, but I should've bet on Killian.

Everything is going great and Killian wins two rounds. In the third round, the Bear manages to get a few good hits in with his meaty fist and I feel the first twinge of panic. “C’mon, Killian!” I scream.

Suddenly, it’s as though time stands still. Everyone else fades away and Killian glances up, gaze connecting with mine, and something passes between us.

It’s only a moment and it passes quickly when the Bear slams a fist against the side of Killian’s temple. “Shit,” I hiss. I can’t stand seeing him get hurt and that had to have made him see stars. But, all of a sudden, Killian gets a new surge of power and attacks with a barrage of punches. The Bear lifts his gloves, trying to block the blows, but Killian is a man on fire. When the Bear drops, Killian flicks his tongue over his bloody lip and the announcer grabs his arm and lifts it up into the air.

“The Killer wins!”

I jump up and down, clapping until my hands hurt and cheering until my voice is hoarse. I feel like a fan at a boy band concert who just got a personal serenade during the Pay Per View special.

The hay bales part and Killian slips out of the ring and disappears into the crowd. I strain to see where he goes but, to my disappointment, I quickly lose sight of him. Two more fighters enter the circle, but I’m not interested.

“Your man won,” Tori says and knocks her plastic cup against mine in a sloppy toast.

“Yeah, he did,” I say, eyes glued to the back of the shadowed barn. “I’ll be right back.”

“Go give him a victory kiss!”

I ignore her and push through the throng, determined to find him. I’m going to do something about this wild attraction. I’m just not exactly sure what yet.

There’s a door at the rear of the barn and I push through it and step out into the cool, dark night. The noisy sound of cicadas fills the air with their mating song and it reminds me of tiny maracas. A light mounted above the back door brightens the

area a little and the scent of cigarette smoke fills my nose. I turn to see a shadow lounging against the side of the building, off to the side.

I suck in a breath when I realize it's Killian. He smokes a cigarette, still shirtless, and sweat glistens on his face and torso. When I take a step closer, moving into his shadows, recognition flashes across his face.

"Jimmy's neighbor," he says, exhaling a stream of smoke. "What's a nice girl like you doing here?"

I try to ignore my thundering heart and tilt my head. "You forgot my name, didn't you?"

Those blue eyes of his move down to my lips and pause for a moment before flicking back up. "No," he says simply.

I swallow hard and move closer. "You're a good fighter. Congratulations."

He inhales and then a stream of smoke erupts from his nostrils reminding me of a bull about to charge. I look down and quickly check out his tattoos. His arms and shoulders are covered with designs and they wrap around and cover his chest. *So hot.* A tingle spreads through my body and pings right between my legs.

I can't deny it. I am so hot for Killian Doyle that he could take me right now, right here behind the barn, and I would shout a hallelujah as he fucked me hard.

Who am I?

I squeeze my hands into tight fists and tamp down on my unruly desire. It's probably mostly one-sided, anyway.

"See anything you like?" he asks in a lazy voice.

My gaze snaps up to his face and I blink, embarrassed. God, was I ogling him that blatantly? My face heats up and I cross my arms over my chest. "Sorry. I've just never seen so many tattoos on anyone before."

He considers my words for a moment then smirks. "Not your thing?" He quirks a dark brow and that lock of hair falls across his forehead.

I want to reach out and brush it away, but I don't dare.
"Actually, I like them. A lot."

The air between us seems to heat up and Killian pushes off the barn wall and stands up straight. He has a predatory look in his blue eyes and my heart pounds when he steps closer. As he moves more into the light, I can see blood crusted on his lower lip and a pretty bad bruise starting to swell along the side of his face.

"You're hurt," I whisper. Without thinking, I reach out to touch him. But, I don't follow through and my fingers hover over the bruise, on the verge of making contact, but uncertain.

Killian, completely frozen, stares at me with an intensity that threatens to make my knees give out. Instead of touching the injury, my fingertips lower and lightly graze his stubbled jaw. When his eyes slide shut for a moment, I pull my hand back as though it got burned. "I'm sorry," I mumble.

"Don't be," he says, voice low, and tosses the remainder of the cigarette. He reaches down and plucks my hand up, turning it over and tracing his index finger across it. "You have the softest hands I've ever felt."

I let out a shaky breath and watch, mesmerized, as his finger traces the lines on my palm. When he looks up, our gazes collide and it's like sparks ignite the night.

"Is the rest of you this soft?" he asks.

KILLIAN

I know I'm being bold, but I don't care. Something about this woman inflames me and the come-hither vibes she's giving off make my dick ache. I've never been with anyone like her before and it's making me really curious. So soft, so beautiful, so feminine. I breathe her enticing scent in and it's like smelling a dewy bouquet of fresh-cut roses. And, I'm not talking about your grandma's old lady, synthetic perfume. I mean the intoxicating scent of a dark red rose with thick velvety petals.

The urge to pull her into my arms and kiss her overwhelms me and when I reach for her elbow and tug her closer, the back door to the barn opens and a couple of people walk out.

"There you are!" a woman says.

I pull my hand back and it's probably for the best. Pulling this beautiful rose into my dark world would make her wither and die.

"Killian, great fight," the man says and offers his hand.

I shake it and nod in appreciation. "Thanks."

"I hope we didn't interrupt anything," the woman says with a coy smile.

I'm pretty sure Aubrey blushes, but since it's dark, it's hard to tell.

"Killian, this is my friend Tori and her boyfriend, Mike."

We all exchange a greeting and all the heat I felt earlier evaporates, leaving nothing but a chill on my sweat-covered

skin.

“Well, it was nice seeing you again,” Aubrey says and gives me a shy smile.

God, she’s so damn gorgeous. “Yeah, you, too,” I say. When she turns to walk away with her friends, I know that I have to see her again. “Aubrey-”

She turns around, brow hiked up in surprise. Did she really think that I forgot her name?

“I still have that chair waiting upfront for you,” I tell her. “In case you drop Jimmy off again.”

A stunning smile lights her face. “Good to know.” Then she gives me a little wave before heading away. Right before she turns the barn’s corner, she looks back over her shoulder and our eyes connect. I’m not sure what that look communicates exactly, but the electricity between us leaves me painfully aroused.

After Aubrey disappears, it’s like all the light’s been sucked out of my world. If she doesn’t show up at the gym Monday with Jimmy or even just by herself, I’m going to find her. Somehow, I vow to hunt her down and take up where we left off.

The rest of my weekend proves uneventful and consists of me sitting in my leather chair, eating fast food, drinking the occasional beer and daydreaming about Aubrey. I don’t know what it is about her that has me so enthralled, but by early evening on Sunday, I need to get out of my trailer to get some fresh air and clear my steamy thoughts. I can already see the small sliver of moon hanging high in the darkening sky above and the incessant chirping of the cicadas fills my ears. It’s a soothing sound for me, much like the rain, and I can’t imagine living in the city where, instead, I’d hear the constant beep of car horns and the low rumble of congested traffic. I suppose it’s nice being close to the city, but I tend to avoid it and I certainly don’t want to live in some dingy apartment in the middle of a bunch of skyscrapers.

I much prefer my dingy trailer in a more rural area.

For a while, I think about Mac's visit the other day and how, deep down, I know he's right. I'm a good fighter and I'm wasting my abilities fighting underground for peanuts. But, if I return to MMA, it's not going to be a smooth ride. I lost a lot of fans and respect so I'd have to work hard to regain my reputation.

I'm definitely not scared of hard work. Everything I do when it comes to fighting, I go above and beyond. I don't believe in short cuts if you want to get better. You have to work your ass off and sweat a lot to achieve any sort of success.

Hell, if the organization was smart, they wouldn't even want me back. But, I know Mac knows people, the *right* people, and he has the ability to pull the strings to make it happen.

So, why am I dragging my feet? What's holding me back?

The main thing is my pride. If I return to the cage and lose or have to face a room full of former fans now booing and hissing insults, it's going to suck. But, that's the most likely scenario and something I'd have to face.

I don't know what the hell to do, I think, and look up at the stars beginning to pop into view like bright pinpoints.

All I know is I won't be rushed into a decision. When I finally do decide what to do, it's going to be what's best for me. Screw everybody else.

At ten minutes to six the next day, I'm strangely nervous, hoping like crazy to see Aubrey walk into the gym. I'm crouched down on the floor, retying my shoelace, when Jimmy runs in and meets his friends on the mat. My gaze shifts to the hall and, not far behind, I see her. I stand up, heart kicking hard against my chest, and walk over to greet her.

"You came," I say, noticing how nice she looks in a short summer dress that shows off her long, shapely legs.

She gives me a shy nod. "Mrs. Lahey had to work late again so I figured I'd drive Jimmy over and take you up on that offer to stay and watch the class."

"I'd like that," I say, feeling like a lovestruck school boy. "Sign in and I'll get you set up front and center." While

Aubrey turns to sign the book, my gaze dips to admire the back of her bare legs. *So fucking beautiful.* She spins back around with a smile and I motion for her to follow me.

There are a few metal chairs along the side of the room and I grab one and drag it a little closer. No other parents stay to watch tonight so it's just her, me and a bunch of kids.

"Have a seat," I say with a flourish of my hand. "Do you want anything to drink? I've got a couple of waters."

"Oh, no, I'm fine. But, thank you."

I swear she flutters her long lashes at me and my heart and dick swell. *Shit, I need to keep it together.* "Okay, then. Enjoy the class." I walk away before I embarrass myself and grab a bottle of water and swallow half of it down, trying to cool off. She's got me overheating and I can't have that right now.

"Sensai Doyle, are you ready?" one of the kids asks. "It's after six."

"Yep," I say, trying not to pay attention to the gorgeous fucking blonde that makes my entire body thrum in awareness. Once I get into the groove, though, class actually moves quickly. I can feel her pretty blue-green eyes on me, but I don't dare look over. I help the kids, teach them some new moves and spar with them. Overall, it's a good class and the two hours fly by in a blur.

As parents begin to arrive and pick up their kids, I make sure that everyone has his or her gym bag and is ready to go. I tell Mom or Dad about class if they ask and when Mrs. Lahey shows up, I finally allow myself to look over at Aubrey who waits patiently.

"Oh, Aubrey, you didn't have to wait," Mrs. Lahey says. She tugs on Jimmy's uniform, straightening it. "But, thank you for bringing him over. I swear, my office thinks none of us has a life outside of work."

"It's no problem," Aubrey says and walks over. "Killian invited me to stay and I figured I may as well...in case you had to, um, stay later."

“Well, we appreciate it. Don’t we Jimmy? Tell Aubrey thank you.”

“Thanks, Aubrey.”

“Any time,” she says in a meaningful voice and looks at me.

Our gazes collide and it’s like a rush that makes me want more. *So much more*. Luckily, Mrs. Lahey is completely oblivious and too busy making sure Jimmy has everything in his gym bag.

“Okay, then. Thank you again and we’ll see you later. C’mon, Jimmy. Do you want McDonald’s for dinner? I am too tired to cook.”

“Yes!” he yells and pumps a fist into the air.

“What? You don’t like my cooking?” she asks, pretending to sound hurt.

“I do, Mom. But, I like McNuggets even better sometimes.”

I chuckle as they walk out and finally turn my utter and full attention on Aubrey. One look at those amazing sea-colored eyes and I decide to go for it. “Do you want to go get a drink?”

I practically hold my breath as I wait for her to respond.

“Sure,” she says.

Relief pours through me. “Great. There’s this little hole-in-the-wall bar not too far away. The drinks are strong and there’s dancing and darts.” *Christ, that sounds lame*. A woman like Aubrey probably goes to fancy restaurants in the city to get wine and dine.

“That sounds great.”

Doubt creeps in and I frown. “Are you sure? I mean, we can go somewhere else if you want,” I offer.

“No, it sounds perfect.”

“Okay. Let me change quick.” I slip into the office and don’t bother shutting the door. Hell, if she wants to look, she’s more than welcome to it. I drop my shorts and pull my jeans on and trade my tennis shoes for boots. After stuffing my shorts and

sneakers into my gym bag, I hit the lights off and then remember that I only have my motorcycle. *Shit*. “Do you mind riding over on my bike?” I ask as I walk out, slipping into my leather jacket. The last thing I want is to make her drive.

“Not at all.”

After turning the main lights off, we head down the hallway and step outside. I lock the door and guide her over to my bike. “Here you go,” I say and hand her the extra helmet. As I strap mine on, she fumbles around with the buckle on hers. I reach over, slide my fingers past hers and help. “I got it,” I say, unable to ignore the spark of electricity when we briefly touch.

“Thanks.” She studies the bike for a moment like she’s never seen one before.

“You’ve got a funny look on your face,” I say.

“I’ve never been on a motorcycle before.”

“Really?” I slide a leg over the seat and sit. “Well, hop on, and let’s see what you think.”

She starts to lift a leg then lowers it and adjusts her dress. “Um...my skirt is a little short for this.”

I hold out a hand to help her then turn away. As much as I’d like to catch a glimpse of whatever lays beneath her skirt, I’m not a creep. When her hand grasps mine, it’s like a bolt of lightning sizzles straight through me. I swallow hard and feel her sit down behind me. I pull her hand around to my front and hold it against my abs. “Hang on tight, okay?”

“Okay.” Her other hand slips around and her fingers clasp together. I feel her warm touch through my thin t-shirt and her fresh rose scent surrounds me. It’s enough to make my composure slip a notch. I start the bike and when we move forward, her grip tightens and I can’t help the smile at my lips. Something about having Aubrey’s arms and long legs wrapped around me feels so fucking right.

I pull out into the street and hit the gas. She gives a half-laugh, half-squeal and crushes her face and breasts against my back. Even through my leather jacket, I’m intensely aware of her

warm body wrapped around me. This is going to be the best bike ride of my life.

“How’re you doing back there?” I ask.

“Good!”

I can hear the excitement in her voice like she’s doing something she shouldn’t be doing and the beautiful rebel inside of her loves it. The longer we ride, the more comfortable she seems to get. I reach down and cover both her hands with one of mine, relishing the feel of her warm fingers. They begin to twine through mine and I’m so glad I didn’t bother to put my riding gloves on.

Concentrate on the road, I tell myself. But, it’s damn hard with our fingers gliding in and around each other. When I feel her breath against my neck, I stifle a groan and then spot the bar in the distance. *Thank Christ*. Much more of this torture and I’m going to pull over to the side of the road and kiss her senseless.

I pull up beside another bike and turn the engine off. “Watch your leg when you get off. Don’t burn it on the exhaust pipe.” I help her slide off and get an eyeful of sexy thigh. As she shoves her skirt back down, I unbuckle my helmet and get off. She hands me her helmet and I set it next to mine on the bike’s seat.

I glance up at the crooked sign that reads Rusty’s and wonder again if bringing her here was a mistake. “I know it’s a hole-in-the-wall, but I promise it’s fun,” I say.

“It’s perfect,” she assures me. “I just want to unwind and not think about life for awhile.”

“Let’s do it,” I say and open the door for her. The bar and grille, run by a former biker, caters to a working class crowd. No suits or fruity drinks here. They serve beer and hard liquor and greasy food that hits the spot. A honky-tonk, no-name band plays on the stage and a crowd dances to the beat. Customers also play darts and pool off to the side where they can still enjoy the music but hold a conversation without yelling.

I lean down to talk into her ear and her fragrant blonde hair tickles my nose. “You wanna beer?”

“I’d love one,” she says.

We wind our way over to the bar, find a couple of empty stools to sit on and I buy us beers. “Hungry?” I ask.

“A little,” she admits.

“What sounds good?” I grab a menu and flip it open. “Grease, grease or grease?” She laughs and I look over, consumed by the tinkling sound and the happy look on her face.

“I love french fries, but you can’t go wrong with mozzarella sticks.”

“So let’s get both and we’ll share,” I suggest.

“There goes my diet!”

She laughs again and I can’t help but let my gaze wander down her slim figure. It’s perfect and she’s crazy if she thinks she needs to lose weight. “You don’t need to lose an ounce, sweetheart.”

“Thanks,” she murmurs and takes a sip of beer.

It doesn’t take long for the food to arrive and we devour it all and order two more beers. I can tell she’s loosening up, enjoying herself, and I find myself wanting to know more about her. “Do you live around here?” I ask.

“I’m over in Maple Glen.”

Of course. Maple Glen is a rich suburb just outside of Chicago and actually not too far from my place. But, the neighborhoods may as well be on different planets. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a marketing manager,” she says and drags a fry through the pile of ketchup.

I watch her pop it into her mouth and chew. “And what exactly does that mean?”

She thinks for a moment, swallows her food. “Well, I work on websites, print material, do a little designing every now and

then. Basically help people market their business.”

“Do you like it?”

“Honestly? No. I hate it.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“Because it’s a good job with security and it pays well.” She looks down and frowns. “God, that sounds lame.”

“Not at all. I think most people would love to have that kind of stability.” I look into her pretty blue-green eyes and can see how they cloud over when she talks about her job. I grab a mozzarella stick, dip it in the marinara sauce and bite the end off. “If you could do anything, what would you do?”

“Like my dream job?”

I nod and take a sip of beer.

“I’ve always wanted to own my own graphic design company and freelance. I love when I get to be creative and working from home is the best.”

“Then that’s what you should do.”

“Easier said than done. Especially when my parents would kill me if I ever left my job. My dad helped me get it.”

I raise a brow. “Don’t they want you to be happy?”

“They want me to be successful. Unfortunately, happiness isn’t something that factors into the equation. What about you?”

“What about me?” I ask carefully. I really don’t want to confide that I’m a washed-up fighter who can barely make ends meet.

“Do you enjoy fighting?”

“I love it.”

“So, how does one become a fighter? You just woke up one day and decided you wanted to kick the crap out of people?”

I chuckle and eat another fry. “No. I was actually the one getting his ass kicked and one day I had enough. I met Mac who took me under his wing and began training me to defend myself.”

“Who was kicking your ass?”

“There was this group of kids who didn’t like me. I was smaller, weaker and had a big mouth. It didn’t go over well.”

“And so this Mac taught you how to fight back?”

“Exactly. I started with karate and that led to a mix of other martial arts. Eventually, I went pro and then I quit.”

“Why?”

I shrug, not wanting to get into it. “It lost its appeal.” I finish my beer, toss my greasy napkin on the bar and stand up. The band is shredding it and the crowded floor overflows with couples. “You wanna dance?” I ask, hold my hand out and give her my most dazzling smile.

AUBREY

Even though I'm not much of a dancer, how can I say no when Killian's smile lights up my entire world. He's taken me by surprise in more ways than one tonight and I want to enjoy this evening as much as possible. "Sure," I say and place my hand in his. It's big, rough with callouses and consumes my entire hand. "I have to warn you, though— I have zero talent on the dance floor."

"Guess we'll just have to figure it out together," he says and pulls me along.

As we snake our way through the crowd, I feel on top of the world. I see how other women look at Killian Doyle and they don't want to be friends with him. Longing and lust fill their gazes. Being at his side, holding his hand, makes me feel more special than I've ever felt before.

The song playing is fast and when we finally stop in the middle of the dance floor, surrounded by the raucous crowd, I suddenly feel foolish. Even after the two beers I drank, I don't know what to do. But, Killian doesn't give me a chance to dwell on my insecurities. He sweeps me into his arms, spins me around and I laugh, wrapping my arms around his neck, completely lost in his midnight blue eyes.

He's well over six feet, much taller than me, and I have to tilt my head back to meet his startling blue eyes. We may not be professional dancers, but Killian makes it easy and fun. I can't stop laughing as he sends me spinning out and then reels me back in close. At the end of the song, he dips me and then pulls me back up.

A slow song begins and he tugs me against his long, hard body. I slide my fingers through the back of his hair and my nose gets up close and personal with his neck. His scent fills me, so very masculine with a light trace of soap. Simple and exactly what I would expect. He's not a man who would wear an expensive, showy cologne and I like that.

He lowers his head, dropping his nose in my hair, and I wonder if he likes the way I smell, too? His hands trail up and down my back for a moment and then settle low, hovering right above the curve of my rear end. I am so aware of the way our bodies fit together. A perfect match and suddenly I'm wishing there weren't so many people around.

God, I want him to kiss me.

I lean into him more, pushing my breasts against his chest, and feel him draw in a breath. As we turn, he shifts, slides his thigh between my legs and lifts me just a bit. My dress hikes up and I feel the rough texture of denim between my bare legs and pressed against my middle. My thin panties don't provide much of a barricade and when he moves his leg just right, the friction makes me want to whimper.

I struggle to keep my desire under control but, in the end, a shaky sigh escapes my mouth and despite the loud music and crowd, I know he hears it. I think he's as tuned into me as I am into him and the heat between us threatens to combust.

I've never felt a desire like this before and it leaves me feeling off-balance and unsure what to do. I'm not the type of girl who has a one-night stand, but for the first time in my life, I'm considering it. Killian is making me want things that I shouldn't.

But, I can't help it. For once in my sheltered life, I want to throw caution to the wind and put my needs and desires above all else. I'm so damn tired of pleasing everyone else and maybe it's time to do something for myself. Just have a night of hot, passionate sex with no strings attached like Tori said.

I don't even realize the song has ended and the band moves off the stage to take a break until Killian pulls back and runs a hand through my hair. As everyone clears off the dance floor,

we still stand there, swaying to our own music. Those incredible blue eyes of his hold me captive and my gaze lowers to his lips.

For a long moment, it's like we're frozen in time, suspended in this alternate universe where it's just him and me. And, then his head lowers and his mouth moves toward mine. Oh, God, he's going to kiss me and every nerve-ending in my body explodes in anticipation.

"Aubrey?"

It takes me a second to snap out of the lusty haze that holds me captive. Killian steps back and I turn to see who just said my name. *Oh, no*, I think, when I recognize the biggest gossip from my office. My stomach clenches and all the magic disappears in a poof as reality crashes in all around us.

"Hi, Doreen," I say, not sounding very happy. God, talk about shitty timing. Frustration slams into me and I just want to leave with Killian.

"I've never seen you here before," she says with a little smile and ogles Killian with her beady eyes.

"Oh, Killian, this is Doreen. We work together." Ugh, I am so annoyed.

"Hello," she says, very obviously checking him out.

"Hi," he says, voice cool.

Hmm, maybe he's just as aggravated as me by the untimely interruption. "If you'll excuse us," I say and reach for his hand. "We were just going to-" *Kiss.*

"Play darts," he finishes, saving me from embarrassment.

"Oh, sure. Well, nice seeing you," she says.

As we walk away, I frown. Doreen is completely annoying and likes to butt into everyone else's business. She also just interrupted what would've probably been the best kiss I've ever received in my life.

"Sorry about that," I murmur.

We stop in front of an open board and Killian reaches for the pile of darts. “Not your fault. Here you go.” He hands me some and we back up. “So, what’re we playing for?”

There’s no mistaking the heat in his low voice and all I can think about is kissing him. How am I supposed to concentrate on darts? “I don’t know,” I say and arch a brow. “Any ideas?”

His blue eyes seem to grow darker. “Care to make a wager?”

My heart speeds up and I’m feeling adventurous. Killian definitely has a way of making me throw caution to the wind and I’m up for just about anything. For everything. “Okay.”

“If you win, what do you want?”

Here’s my chance. I keep saying I want excitement and something new to happen in my life. Do I lay my cards on the table and let him know that I’m interested in him? Killian doesn’t strike me as the type of man who is looking for a relationship so would I be able to accept one hot night with him with no other expectations?

Oh, God, suddenly I feel sick and like a coward. “Umm...” *Shit*. Why can’t I just bat my lashes and turn into a seductress?

Because that just isn’t you, Aubrey, I remind myself.

“How about this?” he says, rescuing me from making a fool out of myself. “You think about it and then let me know because I already know what I want.”

Killian oozes confidence and I envy him. I wish I could put on a sexy face and voice and have him eating out of my hands because right now, he has me twisted right around his finger. I lean closer, mesmerized by his pretty blue eyes. “And, what is that?” I ask.

“We’re playing a PG-rated game, right?”

I bite my inside cheek. *Be bold, be sexy*, I tell myself. “I think we should. Tonight, anyway,” I add and his mouth edges up.

“Then how about if I win, we continue where we left off on the dance floor, find a nice, quiet spot with no interruptions and have that kiss.”

A shot of heat spikes straight to the V between my thighs and I press my lips together. “I accept your wager, Mr. Doyle.”

He holds out his hand and I shake it. His grip is strong, firm, but he doesn't try to flaunt it. We shake for a moment too long, gazes locked, and then he clears his throat and releases my hand. “Okay, then, Ms.-” He moves up beside me, dart in hand. “What's your last name?”

“Reed.”

“Aubrey Reed. Gotta middle name?”

“Unfortunately,” I mumble. “I hate it.”

“Well, now you have to tell me. Can't say I'm a big fan of mine, either.”

“What's yours?”

“You first.”

“Amelia,” I say and wrinkle my nose in distaste.

“Aubrey Amelia Reed. That's pretty.”

“It's a family name and I'm the one who got stuck with it.” I shrug. “Spill it. Tell me yours. Is it Hank or something equally as terrible?”

When I grin, his mouth opens in shock. “How did you know?”

I blink, not believing I could be right. “Oh, my gosh, I'm sorry. It's not that bad.”

He runs a hand down my arm and smiles. “Just kidding. It's Joseph.”

“That's a great name. Why don't you like it?”

Killian throws a dart, a little too hard, and it hits the board, a few circles short of the center bull's eye. “Because it was dad's name.” The moment the words leave his mouth, he looks surprised. Like he didn't mean to actually tell me that.

“You don't get along?”

He shrugs. “I wouldn't know. He left when I was a few months old.”

“I’m sorry. It must have been hard growing up without him around.”

“I had Mac.” The tone in his voice tells me the conversation is over.

I throw my dart and it pierces the edge of the board. “Dammit,” I swear and Killian laughs.

“If that’s any indication of your talent for throwing darts, you may as well just give me those lips right now, sweetheart.”

His words make me smile and I toss him a flirty look. “Maybe I wanna lose. Did you ever think about that?”

Killian turns and runs a finger up my arm. “Do you?”

“Maybe,” I say. “Problem is, I can be very competitive.”

He launches another dart. “You don’t like to lose?”

“It depends,” I say, continuing the flirty banter.

“On what?”

“Well, I think losing to you right now wouldn’t be such a hardship.”

Killian turns and takes a dart from my hand, his fingers caressing mine. “Because you want me to kiss you.”

It’s not a question and he’s right. I do so damn badly that I can already imagine what it would feel like and it’s turning me on like nothing ever has before. I lick my lips. “Guess you’ll have to wait and see.” I pluck my dart back out of his hand and throw it. Bull’s eye. I give him a triumphant smile. “Your turn.”

Killian grins. “You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

I give a little shrug and return his smile. The night continues and it is, without doubt, the best date I have ever had. Killian possesses so many qualities that I would want in a man. He’s interesting and, even though we talk about a lot of different things, he still manages to remain mysterious. He makes me laugh a lot and when he listens to me, I feel like I’m the only one in the room, the center of his attention. He’s considerate and keeps a possessive hand on my lower back whenever we

move around the bar. And, the fact that he's so ridiculously hot is a bonus.

It's getting late and I wish I didn't have to get up and go to work in the morning. As though he can read my mind, Killian takes the empty glass from my hand and sets it on the table. We're sitting in a shadowed booth in the corner of the bar and his warm thigh presses against mine. We've been over here for almost an hour, getting to know each other better, and I am buzzing from the alcohol I've consumed and Killian's attention.

"Do you have to get up early for work?" he asks.

I nod. "Unfortunately." My gaze dips to the dark scruff on his angled jawline and then slides over to his lips. "I could always call in, though," I say, letting him interpret it any way he wants. My daring side hopes he takes me back to his place and into his bed, but the sensible side of me is terrified.

"If you keep staring at my mouth like that, I'm going to kiss you right here," he murmurs.

"You did win," I remind him.

Killian lifts a hand, cups my face and stares at me so intently that I feel like he's peering into my very soul. Then, his big hand slides around to cup the back of my neck and he pulls me closer. Our lips hover so close, on the verge of meeting, and his warm breath against my skin fills me with awareness.

"I think it's time to claim my prize," he says and captures my lips in a slow, steamy kiss.

Oh. My. God. Everything going on around us completely disappears and all I can do is clutch the edges of Killian's leather jacket as his mouth moves against mine. He takes his time, in no rush, as though he's savoring me, and I feel tingles down low. When his tongue brushes mine, I let out a soft sigh and, a moment later, we break apart, coming up for air.

We're both breathing too hard and my heart pounds in my chest. I can't believe how I'm reacting to him. Like some sex-starved hussy.

"We should probably go," he says in a low voice.

Oh, God. Is he going to ask me to go back to his place? I am a tangle of nerves as he slides out of the booth and then takes my hand and helps me stand up. His fingers thread through mine and we head toward the exit. The place has thinned out and quieted down since the band finished up an hour or so ago.

I wobble slightly and Killian pauses. “You okay?”

“Just a few too many beers,” I say with a chuckle and a hiccup that comes out of nowhere. I gasp and cover my mouth. He laughs, lets go of my hand and slides it around my waist to help steady my tipsy gait.

“Do you have any idea how adorable you are?”

I just shake my head, but I’m too bombed to be embarrassed. We walk outside and the cool, night air feels so good on my skin. Killian guides me over to his motorcycle and while he’s grabbing the helmets, Doreen appears by my side.

“He looks like a yummy handful,” she whispers a little too loudly, voice slurred, gaze dropping to admire Killian’s ass. “Delish. Have fun slumming it tonight, honey.”

Doreen walks away and when Killian turns around, I know he heard her comment. I can tell by his locked jaw and the blank look on his face. That teasing smile is gone and I couldn’t be more mad at Doreen’s cruel and completely insensitive comment.

“Ready?” he asks and hands me a helmet.

“Killian-”

But, he gets on the bike and wraps his fingers around the handlebars in a white-knuckled grip. “Let’s go.”

My chest tightens and I slide onto the bike behind him.

KILLIAN

I know what that bitch said isn't Aubrey's fault, but I can't help but get pissed. I glare at the dark road ahead, completely sober, and know that Doreen was just speaking the truth. Aubrey is way out of my league and far too good for a guy like me.

The trees along the side of the road zip past and I ease up on the throttle. I feel Aubrey pressed against my back, clinging to me, and the last thing I want to do is get in an accident. The bike slows down a bit and I press my hand over hers and hold them both. They've slipped lower and rest against the top of my belt buckle, a little too close for comfort. The idea of her hands on my dick makes it surge against my zipper.

When we were sitting in the booth earlier, I got the impression that she wanted me to take her back to my place. There's nothing I would enjoy more— seeing Aubrey stretched out on my bed and sinking deep inside her lush, sweet pussy. But, Doreen's comment left a sour taste in my mouth.

Is that what this is all about? Is Aubrey just slumming it with me?

I have a hard time believing that because she seems like such a genuine person and I think we both had a really good time tonight. But, realistically, we have no future together. She is smart, beautiful and successful while I'm a no-good bum who lives in a trailer park.

And, that's another thing. Would she look down her nose at where I live? She's probably used to some fancy-ass place in

Maple Glen with a manicured lawn that costs a small fortune to maintain with a sprinkler system that turns out twice a day for exactly seven minutes.

It doesn't take long to return to the gym's parking lot where Aubrey's Honda Civic sits beneath a sodium vapor light, all by itself. I pull up beside it, turn the bike off and help her down. At this point, I don't even want to get off my bike. For two reasons— one because I have a raging hard-on and two because I'd be tempted to ravish her right here.

And, she deserves better than that.

She looks at me expectantly and, against my better judgement, I reach my hand out and pull her back over, tug her right over my leg so she's straddling it. It's like we're back on the dance floor and I slide a hand behind her back. Before I start having doubts again, I slant my mouth down against hers and kiss her. It's harder, deeper and demanding. She answers me back, meeting each move with one of her own, and our tongues tangle.

I want this woman more than I think I've ever wanted anyone before. The thought leaves me feeling a little uneasy, but I don't dwell on it. Instead, I grasp her hips and encourage her to move her hot center up and down my thigh. The alcohol dulls any inhibitions she may have and she clutches my jacket in clenched fists and whimpers into my mouth.

When I pull back, she's like a ragdoll in my arms. I also realize she's a little more drunk than I thought. The chrome on her car gleams beneath the parking lot light above us and I decide she can't drive home like this. I reach into my back pocket, pull out my phone and ask for her address.

"Aren't we going back to your place?" she asks.

"No, sweetheart. I'm calling an Uber for you."

Her face falls, but I also sense a bit of relief there. "Okay," she murmurs and tells me her address in Maple Glen. "I thought you were going to be my first." She drops her face into my chest and my head snaps up from the Uber app.

"What?" I ask, convinced I didn't hear her right. *Her first?*

She turns her face and looks up at me. “What?”

“Your first what?” I need clarification on just what exactly she means. I can’t imagine she’s a virgin, but who the hell knows?

“My first one-night stand. I’ve never had one. Never even considered it until you.”

I stroke a hand over her soft, thick hair and smile. “As much as I’d like to take you to bed right now, I think you need to sober up a little. We also agreed on a PG-rated evening,” I remind her. Hell, I’ve never been one to worry about keeping my word before so I don’t know why I feel the need to start right now. “And, to be honest, I wouldn’t mind getting to know you a little better first.”

“Really?”

“I had a really good time tonight, Aubrey. Best night I’ve had in a long time.” I don’t know why I’m telling her this. Probably because she won’t remember any of this in the morning.

“Me, too.”

I can’t help myself. “So, you aren’t just slumming it with me like your friend said?”

She pushes up and frowns. “Doreen is not my friend and I am so sorry you heard that. She’s rude.”

Suddenly, we both realize how near her hand is to my groin, far too close and curled around my inner thigh. A breath away from my aching dick which she has to notice is threatening to tear through my zipper. When she doesn’t pull her hand away, my eyes slide shut and I let out a shaky sigh. “Sweetheart, you better watch that hand or you’re going to find out real quick how much I want to take you home.”

“I’d go,” she whispers and squeezes my leg.

“Jesus,” I hiss and pull her up onto my lap. Her arms wrap around my neck and the kiss is hot and wet. I thrust my tongue into her mouth, circling hers, and she writhes in my lap making the situation in my jeans all the more precarious.

Headlights flash across the parking light as a car pulls in and we look up. It's the Uber and right in time before I embarrass myself and explode. Aubrey places one last kiss at the corner of my mouth and slides off my lap.

"Do you want to go out again?" she asks.

"I'd love to," I say. "I put my number in your contacts when you went to the bathroom at Rusty's. Ball's in your court, sweetheart." The last thing I wanted to do was pressure her, especially if I was just a fun diversion from her normal, uptown life.

"Sneaky," she says and then gives me one last smile. "Bye, Killian Joseph Doyle."

"Bye," I murmur and hope to God this isn't the last time I see her. I want her to call like she says, but I'm not going to hold her to some drunken promise. "Aubrey," I say and she glances over her shoulder. "Take a couple of aspirin before bed."

I can pretty much guarantee that she's going to wake up with a hangover.

She throws me a cocky, sloppy salute and walks through the car headlight beams, giving me a glimpse straight through her dress.

I swear under my breath and wonder what the hell is wrong with me? I could've taken that gorgeous ass home with me and fucked her all night long, but instead, I turned into some noble knight and sent her on her way, leaving me sitting here alone and throbbing.

I must be losing my damn mind.

All night long, I toss and turn. I can't get Aubrey Reed out of my head. When I finally manage to fall asleep for a few hours, I dream about her. I wake up sweating and kick my sheet off, once again wondering why I didn't bring her home with me. I've done it with women that I've liked a hell of a lot less so why did I let the one I'm most curious about leave?

Sleep eludes me and I finally crawl out of bed just as the sun rises. I'm a ball of anxious energy and I decide to go for a run.

I pull on a pair of gray sweatpants, a t-shirt and tennis shoes then head out, determined to exercise my stress away.

I run along a trail through the nearby woods and wonder if Aubrey will call or text. Maybe when she wakes up alone in her bed with a hangover this morning, she'll realize that she dodged a bullet. After all, what could I possibly offer someone like her? She's so classy and elegant and I'm nothing but a guy down on his luck.

Okay, well, I could offer her a night of pleasure. I have plenty of confidence in my bedroom skills and no doubts when it comes to seducing a woman and finding the secret places that make her scream.

But, I feel like Aubrey deserves more. Hell, maybe I'm more of a stand-up guy than I ever gave myself credit for being.

After my run, I take a quick shower and drink two cups of hot, strong black coffee outside at the small table under the awning attached to the trailer. It's going to be a beautiful day and I feel this odd buzz of excitement. I have no idea why, but I have this gut feeling that something good is about to happen to me.

Call it a premonition maybe, but I know it for a fact when my phone buzzes later with a text from Aubrey: *Thank you for last night, Mr. Doyle. And for the suggestion to take two aspirin before bed. It definitely helped.*

My heart thuds as I type back a response: *You're welcome, Miss Reed.* My finger hovers over the keyboard on my phone as I decide what else to say. I really want to see her again. Tonight. *Are you free later?*

I hit send before I can change my mind and see those three floating bubbles as she types a response.

Sure, she writes. *What did you have in mind?*

I have a lot running through my mind, but none appropriate enough to say. *How about an evening picnic?*

Sounds charming. I still have to pick up my car. Meet you at the gym?

Perfect. See you at 6.

I hit send and then pop up out of the chair. Time to head to the store and pick a few things up.

Six o'clock rolls around and I've been waiting for 20 minutes already since I got here early, buzzing with anticipation. I organized a basket and cooler full of snack foods like cheese, crackers, fruit and wine. It sits on the seat of my bike and I lean against it, arms crossed, waiting.

When a car pulls into the parking lot, I see Aubrey. She hops out of the Uber and walks over, a smile lifting her mouth. "Hi," she says. Completely sober, she reverts back to the shy woman I remember. Her shoulder-length, blonde hair hangs in loose waves and she wears another cute little sundress.

"Hi," I say and push off my bike. We stop in front of each other, not quite sure what to do, and I lean in and place a kiss on her cheek. "Ready to go on a picnic with me?"

"I can't wait. Where are we having this picnic?"

"You'll see," I say with a mysterious smile. "C'mon." I throw a leg over my bike, sit and then help her slide on behind me. As much as it shouldn't, it feels right with her arms and legs wrapped around me again. As if she's exactly where she's supposed to be.

I pull out of the lot and turn toward the special spot where I'm going to take her. It's a small hill, hidden away, and overlooks the city. The view, especially at night, is spectacular. It doesn't take long to drive there and after going down a secluded path in the woods, it suddenly opens up and I park the bike.

Aubrey gets off and wanders to the edge of the hill, eyes wide. "Oh, wow," she says. "This is amazing. How did you find this place?"

I walk up beside her, carrying a blanket, and I'm glad she finds it as pretty as I do. "I kind of stumbled on it when I was out riding my bike one day. I've never seen anyone else here either so that's pretty nice."

While I spread the blanket on the grass, Aubrey admires the view a bit longer. Then she walks over, kicks her shoes off and sits down across from me, watching as I spread out the food.

“Want some wine?” I ask and she nods. I open a bottle of red, pour some in a plastic cup and hand it over. “Sorry I don’t have a glass.”

“Thank you. It’s perfect.” She takes the cup and gives me a funny look.

“What?”

“This is the nicest thing ever. So thoughtful.”

“No one’s ever taken you on an evening picnic before?” I tease and take a sip of wine.

She shakes her head. “No. Not on a morning or afternoon one either.”

“Maybe you’ve been hanging out with the wrong men,” I say. I open up the container with the cheese and crackers. “Help yourself.”

“I’ve really only had one boyfriend,” she says and places a slice of cheese on a cracker.

Jealousy flares within me and I know I have no right to have that kind of reaction. Aubrey isn’t mine and she never will be. As much as it makes me want to grind my teeth and punch something, she can date whoever she wants. *It’s none of your damn business*, I tell myself.

Even so, I’m nosy as hell and want to know more. If anything, just to torture myself. “What happened?” I ask.

“I didn’t love him,” she admits, meeting my gaze. “I tried and he was everything I should have wanted, but something was missing.”

“What?”

Aubrey’s face flushes and she takes a sip of wine. “A spark.”

“No chemistry?”

“He had more chemistry with my parents than me. They loved him and they’re still pushing for me to get back together with him, but...”

I wait for her to continue, but she just shrugs. “Maybe your parents should date him,” I suggest in a dry voice and she laughs.

“They would probably be very happy together.”

I can feel her gaze on me, studying me, and I look up into her pretty sea-colored eyes. “What are you thinking?” I ask.

“It occurred to me that I dated Ben for two years and never felt what I feel when I’m with you.”

My heart thunders in my chest as I reach for a strawberry. “What do you feel?” I ask carefully.

“Giddy, excited, nervous. A bunch of different emotions that make me feel all twisted up inside.”

Her candor ignites a fire deep in my belly. There’s a charm and innocence about Aubrey that’s really growing on me. She’s the type of woman who would make a wonderful wife and mother. Someone I have no business stringing along.

As much as I tell myself to leave her alone, that she’s off-limits, I can’t help it. I scoot over, reach out a hand to cup her face and capture her lips in a slow, heated kiss. When my tongue invades her mouth, she welcomes it with her own and slides a hand up my arm and grips my shoulder.

I feel her nails dig into my upper arm when I tilt her head and deepen the kiss. God, I want this woman, but taking her would be so wrong because I have nothing substantial to offer her in return.

Thunder rumbles in the distance and we break apart. I look up at the sky and see quite a few dark clouds rolling in. Typical Midwest weather and a side-effect of the Great Lakes. One moment, it’s sunny and the next it’s pouring.

“Do you think it’s going to rain?” she asks with a worried frown. “Should we pack up?”

As I try to quench the rising storm inside me, I narrow my eyes, studying the distant sky. “Hopefully it’ll blow over.”

Suddenly, fat rain drops begin to sprinkle down on us and we both jump up and begin to throw everything back into the

basket and mini cooler. The rain starts to fall harder and we laugh, realizing we're about to get soaked.

"What do we do?" she asks. "Wait it out under a tree?"

"Not sure when it's gonna stop," I say. The dark sky looks ominous and now lightning strikes over the city. "There's an old barn on the other side of these woods. We can hang out there til it lets up."

Aubrey nods, we grab the blanket and food, then make a mad dash through the woods. Once we hit the clearing, a large barn looms into view. It looks like it's about to hit the dust, completely abandoned, but it should offer protection from the storm.

We haul ass and stumble into the barn, laughing, gasping and looking like a pair of drowned rats. The smell of hay and long-gone horses and cows hits my nose. It's a bit musty and rain plinks down from several holes in the roof, but, for the most part, it should keep us dry and safe.

Well, I guess it's a little late for the dry part.

"I love the rain," I announce and throw my arms out.

"You're crazy, you know that?"

"Haven't you ever danced in the rain before?"

"No!" she exclaims and bursts out laughing. "Of course not."

"Do you want to?"

My question catches her off-guard. I drop the blanket and extend my hand. "We're already wet," I say.

"I guess you have a point there," she says and places her hand in mine.

With a smile, I tug her forward, back outside, and into the misty, wet evening. The rain falls in a steady sprinkle and I pull her against my body then spin us in a circle. She tightens her arms around my neck and I lean down and capture her mouth in a slow kiss that must make steam rise between us. When we finally pull apart, Aubrey throws her head back and

laughs as the rain falls on her pretty face and clings to her lashes.

“I’ve never felt so free,” she says.

Our bodies move, completely in sync to the music in our heads. I’m hyper aware of the way our bodies mold together, how perfectly they fit and the warmth radiating off of her. It feels so good, so right.

“If I end up catching a cold from dancing in the rain with you, it will have been well worth it.”

“I don’t want you getting sick,” I tell her and after a few more steamy kisses and twirls, we go back inside the barn.

I’m soaked to the bone and when I look over at Aubrey, my groin tightens. *Shit*. Her dress is plastered to her body and I can’t miss her pebbled nipples or the way the material clings to the mound between her legs.

Fuck. I can’t help it. I stalk over and swoop Aubrey back into my arms, kissing her hard.

God, I love the rain.

AUBREY

There's something different about the way Killian is kissing me right now. It's hot, yet there's a possessive edge that wasn't there before. It's also full of desperate need and I can feel the desire pulsing off his big body in waves.

And, I'm loving every second of it. I drop my head back, offering my throat, and he lowers his mouth and runs his tongue along the sensitive skin there. A shiver racks through my body and he instantly pulls back.

"Are you cold?" he asks.

"Just keep warming me up," I say and pull his head back down, offering my mouth which he begins to consume all over again. *Oh, God.* I've never felt this kind of all-consuming need and it's pummelling me fast and furious, making it hard to catch my breath or think clearly. Sensations rule me and I push my body into Killian's, open my mouth wide and we devour each other. I've never experienced a kiss like this— so raw and passionate that it leaves my knees weak.

Killian's hands curve around my rear end and I gasp into his mouth when he squeezes and lifts me up. My legs instantly wrap around his waist and I settle over the very large bulge pushing against the front of his jeans. I drop my face into the curve of his neck, panting hard, and then flick my tongue against his earlobe. He groans, shifts me in his arms and, as if they have a mind of their own, my hips begin to undulate.

Want and need drive me to the edge as Killian kisses me deeply, hands beneath my dress, kneading my ass.

“You’re killing me,” he whispers.

I circle my lower body against him and realize I’m hot and throbbing. Dripping for him. “Killian,” I murmur, shoving my hands through his hair. “I want you.”

“Jesus, Aubrey,” he says, voice raspy. “I am so fucking hard right now.”

“I know,” I tell him and reach down between our bodies. When I start to slip my fingers down the front of his jeans, he grabs my hand and yanks it back up.

“You first, sweetheart,” he says and kisses my hand. He sets me down, spreads the blanket over the ground and extends his hand. When I take it, he pulls me close and we step onto the soft material. Next thing I know, he drops to his knees in front of me.

Heart in my throat, I look down and Killian gazes up at me with smoldering blue eyes. He reaches under my dress, hooks his fingers in my panties and slides them down. *Oh, my.* Next thing I know, his head is under my dress and he lifts a thigh over his shoulder. I grab onto his shoulders for support and gasp when his hot mouth latches onto my wet center.

Sensations rock me and I struggle to balance on one foot as he licks, thrusts and sucks with that very wicked tongue of his. Ben never did this to me, said he hated oral sex, but why am I not surprised that Killian seems to not only know exactly what he’s doing, but seems to be enjoying it thoroughly. My entire lower body begins to pulse and vibrate against Killian’s lips. When he pulls my clit into his mouth and sucks, I’m done. The leg holding me up buckles and he catches me as I go down, carefully laying me back on the blanket.

And, he doesn’t give me any chance to recover. He flips my skirt back up, exposing me to his eyes which glow hotter than a blue flame, and dips his head again, taking up where he left off. It’s all too overwhelming, too good, and I writhe as he traces and probes my slit with his tongue. When his fingers get

in on the action, one slipping inside me, my hips buck and my panting and whimpers increase, echoing throughout the barn.

Up above, I see holes in the roof, the night sky above, and rain drops fall inside. I barely notice the chill anymore, though, because Killian has me so hot. That mouth of his works me hard, right to the edge, and suddenly everything tightens and then releases in a series of glorious waves that ripple through my whole body.

It takes me a second to realize I just had my first orgasm from a man.

I feel exhausted, completely sated, and Killian slides up my body and catches my mouth in a slow, sensual kiss. It's strange because I can taste myself on his lips, but that just makes the moment more intimate. Then, he rolls onto his back and, shoulder to shoulder, we both look up at the hole in the roof above us and the rain drizzling through it.

"No one's ever done that to me before," I admit.

He turns to look at me, dark brow shooting up. "Never?"

I shake my head. "Ben said he didn't like it."

Killian lets out a derisive snort. "Idiot didn't know what he was missing because, sweetheart, you have the sweetest, juiciest pussy and it deserves to be worshipped."

I can feel my cheeks burn and I bite my lower lip.

"He never talked dirty to you, either, did he?" Killian guesses.

"No."

"Well, I encourage it," Killian says and reaches over to trace a finger along my cheek. "I'm going to whisper hot, dirty words in your ear and go down on you until you come so hard, you can't fucking see straight."

A shaky sigh escapes from my lips. "Should I, um, return the favor?"

His gaze slams into mine and I think he wants to say yes, but something holds him back. "What's your blowjob experience?" he asks.

“Non-existent,” I admit.

“Christ, Aubrey. You’re practically a virgin.”

“Is that bad?”

He trails a finger down my bare arm and his mouth edges up.

“No, sweetheart. But, it makes it harder for me to do what I’m about to do.”

“And what is that?”

“Take you home.”

When he pops up, I just blink, not sure that I heard him right.

“Wait, what?” I sit up and shove my dress back down.

“Sounds like the rain is about done so we better go before it starts to pour again.”

I’m not sure what to say. Is he rejecting me? I thought we were on the verge of having sex and now he wants to take me home? “Killian? Did I do something wrong?” I hate asking, but I have to know.

His blue eyes pierce straight through me. “No, of course not. God, Aubrey, you’re too tempting.” He helps me up and pulls me into his arms. “But, if we don’t leave right now, I’m going to bend you over that stall door and fuck you so hard you’re going to be screaming for more.”

My eyes widen.

“Let me guess,” he says, voice dry. “Ben had one go-to position. Missionary.” I don’t comment, but my silence is a pretty clear yes. Killian kisses me then moves away. “You deserve better than a dirty barn. When it happens, I promise you, it will be in a warm bed and I’m going to take my time and do everything I can to keep you coming all night long.”

“I think I’d like that,” I murmur as Killian takes off his jacket and slips it over my shoulders. It’s so warm and I pull it closer, inhaling his scent mixed in with the leather.

He smirks, gathers up the blanket and I scoop up the picnic basket and discreetly grab my panties, stuffing them in a pocket.

I don't want to go home yet, just somewhere warm and cozy where I can cuddle with Killian. "I don't suppose we could stop at your place so I can dry off a little?"

He hesitates then looks down at the ground. "Aubrey..." He sighs and runs a hand through his damp hair.

My teeth begin to chatter and he takes pity on me.

"Okay," he says reluctantly, "but I don't live in some fancy house or suburb. Just a small trailer."

He almost sounds ashamed and I lay a hand on his scruffy face. "Killian, I don't care where you live." I place a kiss against his warm lips and he seems to relax a bit.

The ride over to his place is freezing even though I'm huddled up against his back and wearing his jacket. The wind whips my wet hair around and shivers make me press as closely as I can to the heat emanating from his body.

"Almost there," he murmurs and holds my cold hands in one of his big, warm ones. He's oozing off heat and I feel like an ice cube. He turns into a dirt driveway and I see a sign that says "Happy Trails Trailer Park." I can feel him tense and I hate that he doesn't want me to see where he lives. I can't imagine it's as bad as he's acting.

A moment later, he pulls up under an awning and turns the bike off. He helps me slide off and I look at the neat table with a couple of chairs and the decent-sized trailer. It's bigger than I thought it would be and it appears well taken care of.

Killian unlocks the door and I follow him inside to see a cozy setup. The place is simple, masculine and I can't explain it, but instantly I feel right at home. I can feel Killian studying my reaction closely as I walk around, inspecting everything. When I finally turn to look at him, he shrugs. "I know it's not much," he says. "But-"

"I love it," I interrupt.

He blinks in surprise. "You do?"

"There's something very cozy about it. It makes me feel safe."

His features seem to loosen and he gives me a crooked smile. “You are safe with me, Aubrey.” Then, he notices I’m wet still and he motions toward a small bathroom. “There are some dry towels in there. I’ll grab you something to change into so you can get out of that wet dress.”

“Thanks,” I murmur, slipping his jacket off. I lay it over a chair and head into the bathroom, beyond ready to peel this wet dress off. I yank it over my head, drop it in the sink and quickly wrap a towel around me, tucking it under my arm.

A moment later, Killian knocks on the door. “I have a few things for you,” he says and I open the door. His gaze dips to the towel wrapped around me and he swallows hard. “Um, I wasn’t sure what you’d prefer.” He shoves a pile of clothes at me and I can’t help but smile. “I’m going to change,” he mumbles.

I close the door again and lift his clothes up and breathe deeply, relishing the clean laundry scent. He’s really too cute, I think, and look at my options— a t-shirt, sweatshirt, pajama bottoms and sweatpants. I end up deciding on the sweatshirt and roll up the pajama bottoms a few times because they’re far too big and long.

I try to fluff my damp hair and fix my smeared makeup, but I’m just a mess no matter what I do. With a sigh, I walk out and find Killian at the stove, stirring something.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Making some hot chocolate. I know it’s June, but it’ll warm you up.”

My heart swells a little at his concern. “It sounds delicious.” I expect a packet of Swiss Miss, but Killian combines cocoa powder, sugar, water and a pinch of salt in a saucepan.

“Wow, homemade cocoa. I’m impressed.”

“My mom used to make it for me. After tasting this, you’ll never go back to crappy powdered packets.”

He stirs it until it comes to a boil, lowers the heat and adds some milk. “Do you like to cook?” I ask him.

“I try, but usually just stumble through it and hope for the best.” He removes the pan from the heat, stirs in a little vanilla and then pours the liquid chocolate into a couple of mugs. “What do you want on top? Whipped cream, marshmallows, chocolate chips, sprinkles?”

You, I think. “How about marshmallows and chocolate chips?”

He slides a look in my direction. “That’s what I like, too.” After adding the toppings, he hands me a mug. “Careful, it’s hot.”

We walk over and sit down on the couch. He pulls a blanket over and we cuddle up together beneath it. I’m not sure what I expected when I came back here, but it wasn’t this. The way he’s taking care of me, warming me up and making me comfortable is so sweet and unexpected. I blow on the cocoa and study him over the rim of the mug.

My initial thought upon meeting Killian Doyle was merely a hot bad boy who could add a little excitement and much-needed spice to my boring life. But, now, he’s making me feel a lot more emotions than just lust or desire. He’s showing me what it would be like to be his girlfriend.

And, that scares me.

The rain starts up again and the sound of it hitting the top of the trailer is soothing. It’s cozy in here though and the hot chocolate is warming me up fast. I also enjoy the heated looks happening between me and Killian. “This is so nice,” I say.

He cocks a dubious brow. “What is?”

“Being here with you, drinking cocoa and listening to the rain.”

Dammit, I think. *I really, really like this man.*

The realization hits me hard and, to my surprise, we end up talking for the next couple of hours. Before I know it, it’s almost 11pm when I get a text from my mom: *Where are you? Your dad and I stopped by earlier, but you didn’t answer.*

“It’s my mom,” I say and write a vague response back: *With a friend.*

“Is it past your curfew?” he teases.

I roll my eyes. “No. But, I do have to get up early for work tomorrow.”

“And, we need to get your car out of the gym parking lot before it gets towed.”

“I don’t suppose you can give me a lift?” I ask with a little smile.

“Any time,” he says and we head out.

The rain finally stopped and just as I’m getting on the back of his bike, a woman pulls up next door. She gets out of her car and walks closer, dark eyes on me and she doesn’t look pleased.

“Hi, Killian,” she says coolly.

He nods. “Aubrey, this is my neighbor, Lola.”

The short, curvy brunette’s gaze skates over me, and I’m sure she doesn’t miss the fact that I’m wearing Killian’s clothes. It probably looks like we just slept together and I tighten my arms around his waist. “Hello,” I say.

She gives me a tight smile. “I made some extra lasagna earlier. If you want, I can bring some over.”

“I already ate,” Killian says. “But, thanks.”

Her mouth purses and Killian hits the throttle, leaving Lola in our wake. From the jealous, possessive vibe going on, I have a feeling that she has her sights set on him, but I try not to let it bother me.

Killian takes me back over to my car on his bike and we exchange a very long goodbye kiss. By the time I’m in the driver’s seat, heading home, my heart pounds, pulse races and I’m breathing hard. Good God, the man leaves me in knots.

After dreaming of Killian all night, I wake up wishing I was in his bed, in his arms. I decide to do something about that very soon.

The work day actually goes by fast because I’m so busy and every time I get a spare second, I think about last night and

dancing in the rain with Killian. I let out a soft sigh, caught up in my delicious memory when my mom texts me, inviting me to dinner with her and my dad. She says they're going to be in the city tonight and they want me to meet them at some restaurant near my office. As I'm trying to think of an excuse to get out of it and see Killian instead, I remember he teaches a karate class tonight. I don't want to come off as needy so I decide to wait until I hear from him and just meet my parents for dinner.

When I arrive at the restaurant later, I spot my parents at a table and head over. After exchanging hellos, I'm just sitting down when I hear a voice from my past. "Hello," Benjamin Styles, my ex-boyfriend, says and shakes my dad's hand. "Thank you for inviting me to dinner."

Stunned, I watch him give my mom's shoulder a touch as he compliments her new hairstyle and then our gazes lock. *Sonofabitch. I've been bamboozled.*

"It's so nice to see you, Aubrey," he says and sits down beside me.

I can't believe this. I glare at my parents and then force a polite smile toward Benjamin. "You, too," I say between gritted teeth. I am so mad right now, I could spit. This whole thing is a ploy to get us back together and I do not appreciate it.

In spite of their meddling, I would never be rude to Ben. We may not have worked out as a couple, but this isn't his fault. He attempts to engage me in polite conversation throughout the meal and I do my best to respond, but not offer any hope of rekindling things.

As I'm finishing my salad, my mom says something sneaky about how she misses seeing Ben around and, if I'm smart, we'll pick up where we left off. When he looks at me with a smirk, I blurt out, "I'm seeing someone."

"What?" my dad practically shouts.

"Who?" my mom demands.

I pull in a deep breath. “His name is Killian and he’s a former MMA fighter.”

My mom stares at me with a completely straight face. “You’re joking, right?”

“No,” I answer with a frown. “He’s really amazing, actually, and hopefully you’ll get to meet him soon.” There, I did it. I can relax and not worry about any of this because I’ve made it known that I’m dating another man.

“Well, this is news to me,” my dad says, sounding a little disgusted.

“I’m sure it can’t be too serious,” my mom says with a little, conspiratorial smile at Benjamin. “First of all, I haven’t heard a word about him. And, second, a former fighter?” She laughs. “That doesn’t sound very financially stable.”

Anger bubbles up inside of me and suddenly I feel fiercely protective over Killian. “I have a good job and can support myself, thank you very much. I do not need a man’s money.”

“Of course not, darling. But, a combined income can do so much more.”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek. How dare they insult Killian? All I want to do is leave and I vow not to say another word until this charade of a dinner is over. Benjamin must be able to tell I’m upset because when my parents conveniently leave to use the restroom at the same time, he turns and apologizes.

“You didn’t know I was coming, did you?” he asks and I shake my head. “If you’re uncomfortable, I’m sorry.”

Some of the tenseness drains out of me. “It’s not your fault. I’m just so tired of them trying to control my life.”

“It never bothered you before,” he states matter-of-factly.

“Well, it bothers me now,” I admit. “I’m sorry if they gave you any impression that I wanted to get back together.”

For a moment, he doesn’t say anything. Then, he lays a hand over mine. “Are you really seeing someone?”

I pull my hand away. “Yes.”

“Hmm. Well, if and when he hopefully screws things up, give me a call. I’d really like to give us a second shot.”

I’m not sure how to respond to that, but I am not interested. “I’m sorry, Ben, but I’m really happy with Killian.”

My parents reappear and I stifle a sigh, ready for this evening to be over. I want to go home and call Killian. When the server returns and asks if anyone would like dessert, I shake my head and set my napkin on the table. “No, thank you,” I say.

My dad pays the bill and we head toward the exit. My parents hug me and I try not to be mad at them. I know they only want the best for me, but that is not Benjamin Styles. Ben turns toward me and smiles. “Let me at least walk you back to your car.”

“That’s really not necessary,” I tell him.

“It’s dark and downtown isn’t a safe place for you to be wandering all alone. I insist.”

I’m hardly going to be wandering the city, but I don’t feel like arguing so I just nod and we walk out. How I missed the curvy, brunette waitress who kept an eye on me the entire night, I have no idea. I think I was too annoyed to notice, but Lola, Killian’s neighbor, definitely noticed me.

KILLIAN

Aubrey Reed. The woman keeps infiltrating my thoughts no matter what I'm doing. Honestly, I'm still trying to decide what to do with her. I don't do serious relationships and the women I normally take to bed are like my neighbor Lola. They're like me. They don't expect some big house or fancy car. The trailer is fine, a roof over our heads, a place to get hot and heavy for the evening and then they go home.

But, Aubrey is unlike anyone I've ever met. She's sweet, innocent and deserves so much more than what I can offer. I think that's what keeps tripping me up and why I didn't drag her into my bed last night. I want to somehow make it special for her.

I shove a hand through my hair and can't believe we ended up talking. After that steamy encounter in the barn, bringing her back here in that soaking wet dress that clung to every curve... I made her hot chocolate.

Maybe I'm crazy or getting soft. Hell, I don't know. All I do know is that Aubrey is growing on me to the point of me wondering when I'm going to see her again. I grab my phone and shoot her a text: *hey, sweetheart, what are you doing tonight?*

A moment later, my phone buzzes with her response: *I don't know, handsome, what are we doing?*

My chest tightens. No one ever refers to me as handsome. I'm more used to hot, bad and the occasional toxic. Dammit, I

want to see her right now. Instead, I invite her to my fight tonight. When she accepts, I offer to pick her up and drive us to the just-announced location.

Later that evening, I pull up in front of the address Aubrey sent me and a wave of nerves hit. Maple Glen is a nice neighborhood with nice houses and nice people so I'm not sure what the hell I'm doing here because as I turn off my motorcycle, it's pretty clear that I don't belong.

But, then I hear someone call my name and see a familiar face. "Sensai Doyle!"

It's Jimmy from my karate class and he looks thrilled to see me.

"What are you doing here? Did you come to visit me?"

I clear my throat, shove my hands into the pockets of my leather coat and my fingers wrap around something silky and thin. Her panties from last night, I realize, and stifle back a groan. "I, ah, actually came to visit Aubrey."

We both look over when the front door opens and she appears with a little wave.

Jimmy looks from me to her and a sly smile curves his mouth. "Is she your girlfriend?" he asks me in a low voice.

"I'm working on it, kid," I say, panties clutched in my hand, and smile in her direction. *Minx*.

"Good because she's really nice and so are you."

I pat his shoulder with my other hand. "Thanks, Jimmy." I head up the rest of the walkway and jog up the porch steps two at a time.

"Hi," she says.

I can't help it. I grab her, yank her close and kiss her thoroughly. When I hear Jimmy laugh behind us, I pull back with a smirk.

"Do you have time to come in?"

I nod and follow her inside. The place is exactly what I would expect. It smells good and the decor is feminine and homey

with candles, fresh flowers and stacks of books strategically placed on tables and shelves. Hell, I can't even remember the last book I read. Probably some classic that they forced me to read in my high school literature class.

"Do you want anything to drink?"

"I'm okay, but thanks." I do want something from her, but it's not a beverage. When I pull her back into my arms, she shoves her hands through my hair and offers those tempting, full, shiny lips of hers. I manage to smear her lip gloss all over the place and drink deeply, savoring the feel of her tongue as it slides against mine.

When we finally separate, she looks up at me, her sea-colored eyes glowing. "Killian..."

I drop my face and nuzzle her neck. "Hmm?"

"Do you want to, um, stay here tonight?"

A fire flickers to life inside of me and my groin grows heavy. "There's nothing I want more," I say and straighten up to meet her gaze. "Are you sure?"

She lays a hand against my face and I turn my cheek into her palm, loving the soft, tender touch. "God, yes," she says and I can't help but chuckle.

I slide my hands down her hips and over her pert ass, drawing her against my arousal. "Can you wait a few more hours for this?"

She makes a soft humming sound in the back of her throat. "We don't have time now, do we?"

"Not for what I'm going to do to you."

Aubrey swallows hard. "We better go then," she says, voice raw with need.

I don't trust my voice to not crack so I just nod, take her hand and we leave. I decide not to mention finding her silky panties in my pocket because I'm not giving them back.

It doesn't take long to get to the location of the fight tonight. It's in some empty warehouse downtown and the place is

already jam-packed. I don't really want to leave Aubrey alone and just when I'm on the verge of taking her into the fighter's room with me, I spot Mac.

"Had a feeling I'd see you tonight," Mac says and takes a long look at the way my fingers are laced through Aubrey's. "You went and got yourself a girlfriend?"

"Aubrey, this is Mac Moretti, my old trainer. Mac, this Aubrey Reed. And, yes, you nosy old bastard, we're seeing each other."

I hope she doesn't mind that I say it that way because we've hardly declared what exactly it is we're doing, but when she looks up at me and smiles, I know it's okay.

He huffs out a sound of disbelief then cocks a bushy brow. "You look like too nice of a girl to be hanging around this bum here."

"Maybe he's the one who's too good for me," Aubrey says without missing a beat.

Even though it's not true, what she says means a lot to me and I squeeze her hand.

"How about you leave your girl with me, Kill? I'll keep an eye on her while you fight."

I turn toward Aubrey and she stands up on her toes and whispers good luck in my ear. I nod and give her a quick kiss. I've got a fight coming up and I need to get my damn head in the game. Problem is, all I can think about is going back to her place and spending tonight in her bed.

"Knock 'em dead, Killer," Mac says as I turn and head for the side room where the fighters all gather.

A dozen or so guys wait around for the action to start and I'm up against the mean-looking sonofabitch in the corner with his arms crossed and glowering at everyone else. *Fucking figures*. They did a lottery earlier and guess I'm just lucky like that. I roll my eyes and know there's nothing I can do about it.

By the time it's my turn to go in the ring, I am so ready to get this done and get out of here. It's been almost an hour and a

half since we got here and, in my head, I've fucked Aubrey in every possible way and position. And, it's been glorious.

"Doyle and Jackson, you're up!" a voice calls.

Finally. I head out and walk through the small opening where they separated the hay bales, throwing a few punches, warming up. Walt "The Whip" Jackson, my opponent, stalks past me, a sour look on his face. I don't know or care what his problem is and all I want to do is get through the next five to ten minutes.

Unfortunately, my mind isn't on the fight. It's on Aubrey and what I'm planning to do to her tonight. So, in round one, it isn't too hard for Jackson to knock me upside the head really fucking hard. Boom, he wins and I'm left staggering. That's all it takes to snap me out of my romantic reverie and zone me in on the here and now.

In round two, I fire back with a couple of quick jabs, dodge his fist and circle around to hit him in the side with a kick and I win. Next round, Jackson charges, coming at me hard and fierce. I can see the rage in his eyes and he wants to take it out on me.

I bounce out of the range of his swinging fists and I know I need to be vigilant. I wouldn't be surprised if he tries to hit me with a sucker punch. Just as the thought flits through my head, I hear Aubrey's voice over the crowd, cheering for me.

I love it, soak it up, glance up and try to spot her in the throng.

Bam!

Then I drop like a sack of potatoes. *Fuck me*, I think, laying on the ground as the announcer comes over and lifts Jackson's arm into the air and declares him the winner. I gather what remains of my pride, pop up and give my opponent a sharp nod of acknowledgement. I can bitch and moan and be a poor sport or I can admit he whipped me fair and square.

Besides, all I want to do is get out of here and spend the entire night pleasing Aubrey. I find her and Mac outside and while she looks concerned, Mac just shakes his head in disgust.

"Are you okay?" Aubrey asks and frowns.

“I’m fine.”

“Way to go, Kill. Where the hell were you? On the damn moon? You handed that match to Jackson without even trying.” Mac spits on the ground.

“You win some, you lose some,” I say.

“You shouldn’t have lost that one,” Mac says.

Again, I know he’s right, but I don’t give a shit. “Are you ready?” I ask Aubrey and she nods.

“You’re wasting your talent doing this part-time hustle crap,” Mac reminds me. “Wasting your whole damn life.”

“It’s not up to you, Mac,” I say and pull Aubrey with me. Christ, he’s starting to get on my nerves.

“Nice meeting you,” Aubrey calls out and Mac grunts in response.

We’re both quiet on the way back to her place and Mac’s words keep tumbling around through my head. Maybe I am wasting my life, but it’s none of his goddamn business. I reach down for Aubrey’s hand, lift it to my lips and kiss her palm.

The moment we step into her place, I pounce. She tastes so good and smells like a garden of fresh roses. After exploring her mouth for a minute, I pull back and realize that I really need to jump into the shower before this goes any further. I probably smell sweaty and disgusting.

“Sweetheart, can I rinse off in your shower?”

“Sure,” she says. For a moment, I think she might offer to join me, but shyness gets the better of her. “It’s this way.”

I follow her upstairs and into a bathroom, admiring the sway of her hips. She reaches for a fresh towel and washcloth and sets it on the counter beside the sink.

“Thanks. I won’t be long,” I say and pull my shirt over my head.

“How’s your head?” she asks and takes a step closer. “Can I see?”

I shrug and then glance at my reflection in the mirror, noticing the welt on my temple that's starting to turn black and blue. I lean back against the counter and Aubrey walks up and touches it very lightly with her fingertips.

"We should put some ice on it," she says.

I nod and watch as her fingers slide down my jawline and then drop to touch my chest. The breath expels from my lungs when her hand drops lower, glides over my abs and dips down, hooking over the front of my jeans.

"You excite me, Killian," she murmurs. "But, you also make me really nervous."

I lay my hands on her hips and frown. "Why're you nervous?"

She swallows and traces her fingers back up my chest. "Because I'm scared I'm going to disappoint you."

For a moment, I don't have any words. "What are you talking about? That would never happen," I assure her.

"I've only been with one other man and, um, I don't think he liked having sex with me," she confides, her voice barely a whisper.

Her creamy skin flushes in embarrassment and I grasp her face in my hands. "I already told you— Ben is an idiot. Being with you is going to be one of the highlights of my life, sweetheart. I can't fucking wait."

A shiver runs through her body and it irks me that she wasted even one minute of her precious time with Benjamin Styles. I take her hand, kiss it and then lower it between us and press it over the front of my jeans. "I have been hard for you all day. I've never wanted anyone this much, Aubrey."

She sucks in a breath and I let go of her hand and reach for the hem of her short, little dress, slowly pulling it up and over her head. I drop it on the counter, rake my gaze over her baby pink bra and matching underwear, then lean down and capture her mouth, kissing her deeply. Trying to convince her with my lips, mouth and tongue that she is perfect in every possible way and that I have never desired a woman more in my life.

When we finally come up for air, I nod to the shower. “Will you join me?”

AUBREY

My heart stampedes against my ribs like a herd of wild horses at Killian's invitation. I never stepped foot into a shower with a man before, yet my head nods, seemingly of its own accord. I have a feeling this experience with Killian is something that I don't want to miss.

His mouth edges up and he reaches behind me and unfastens my pink satin bra. As it slips down my arms, I bite the inside of my cheek, watching his reaction closely. I've never felt so vulnerable and self-conscious in my life, standing before this man in only my tiny panties.

He sucks in a sharp breath, bright blue gaze feasting on my breasts, and then his hands are on me, cupping, toying with my nipples. His hands are big and rough to the touch, but so gentle against my skin.

"Christ, you're beautiful, Aubrey. So damn perfect," he says in a raspy voice.

Killian dips his head, trailing kisses from one breast to the other and then pulls a nipple into his mouth. I drop my head back and whimper. It's all too much. I'm feeling things so intensely and every nerve ending seems to respond to his touch like it never responded to anyone before. Or like it never will after.

In this moment, I know that Killian Doyle is the only man for me.

It's like he casts a spell over my body and, as far as I'm concerned, he can have it. When he finally stops sucking and

teasing, I want to fall to the floor and melt. But, he flips the water on, helps me out of my satin panties and then shoves his jeans and boxer shorts down his muscled thighs and kicks them away.

My gaze drops and then so does my jaw. Killian is very well-endowed and ready to go. I blush to my roots when I realize he's watching me.

"I don't want you to be nervous," he says and pulls me into the shower with him. "I'm going to make you relax so you can enjoy everything I'm about to do to you."

The warm water hits my body and Killian pulls me close, turns me around and begins kissing my neck. My head drops to the side to give him better access and he moves the wet strands aside, leisurely licking and sucking, surely leaving his mark. My body sags against his hard, lean chest and, as he continues to kiss the sensitive place where my neck and shoulder meet, his hand moves down my body and between my thighs.

I moan as his fingers stroke and swirl and sink into my depths. The sound of my raspy breathing sounds foreign to my own ears. Like it's someone else and not me who is sliding closer and closer to the precipice. I need something, anything to grab onto, and I find Killian's muscled forearm and dig my nails into his skin as a cry erupts from my lips.

Sensations pummel through my body, rocketing outward from my hot center and shooting across every synapse like a shooting star. When I collapse in his arms, I wonder if that's us. Hot and bright in the beginning, but destined to burn out and fade.

The thought makes me sad so I shove it to the back of my mind, turn around and we kiss. It's hard and hungry, full of desperation. I want this man so badly that I ache. When we finally break apart and gasp for air, I can't wait any longer. "Please," I murmur, pressing into his hard, naked body. "I need you."

Killian hits the water off, grabs a towel and scoops me up in it. Then, he heads toward my bedroom and tingles of excited anticipation burst through my body like little electrical shocks.

I'm still nervous, but desire trumps nerves. At this point, desire trumps everything and I can't wait until Killian is deep inside me.

He lays me on the bed and our damp bodies entwine, legs and arms tangling until I'm not sure where he begins and I end. His mouth devours mine and his hard cock teases at my hot, wet entrance. I have never been so wet in my life and it has nothing to do with the shower.

"I have to go grab a condom, sweetheart," he says, nibbling at my ear and I can't help but smile at the tickling sensation.

"Hurry," I whisper. The moment his heavy body heaves off me, I feel utterly naked and exposed. It's like my blanket of protection was just ripped away and the cold air makes me shiver. I sit up, pull the blankets down and cover up, hating the loss of his body heat.

Killian returns in record time and slips under the sheet, dragging me over, covering me again with his hard body. "I only have two," he says and frowns.

"Then let's make good use of them," I say and trail my tongue up his tattooed bicep.

He tears the foil packet open, rolls it on and moves between my legs. Again, he starts to tease me, fisting his cock and dragging up and down my slit.

"Killian," I gasp.

"Is this what you want?" he asks, voice low and husky.

"Yes," I cry and arch up.

"Then it's yours," he says and starts to push inside me, slowly, carefully, and I cry out as my body stretches, stings, trying to accept him. He pauses. "Okay?"

I nod. "You're really...big," I tell him.

His lip curls in a smirk. "We were made to fit, sweetheart." Then he pulls back out, circles his hips and bends my leg. He slides back inside, this time all the way, and my hips buck when he reaches down between our bodies and massages my throbbing clit.

“God,” I whimper as waves of sensation pound through me all over again.

Killian shifts above me, bends my leg further and starts moving faster, in and out, angling my body just right and until I’m clawing my nails down his back. He knows exactly what he’s doing, just how to make me scream. He doesn’t let up and manages to keep a steady rhythm that makes me crazy and literally hits me in the exact right spot. Again and again.

Oh, my God. My entire body clenches around him and I sink my teeth into his shoulder as my lower body contracts and pulses. It’s like some dazzling display of fireworks just went off inside me and I cry out, drop my head back against the pillow and look up at him, a little dazed.

Killian’s dark blue eyes glow in triumph as my entire body vibrates, my release rumbling through me. “That’s it, sweetheart. Don’t hold back...give it all to me.”

“Shit,” I hiss, hit by multiple orgasms.

Killian lifts himself higher on his elbows and powers into me with a few more strokes. Then his entire body goes rigid and he groans as he comes moments after me. He collapses beside me, breathing hard and I hear him swear under his breath.

For a long moment, neither of us says anything. We just lay on our backs, trying to get our rapid breathing under control. I stare up at the ceiling, unable to believe how utterly amazing that was and wonder why it never even came close like that with Ben. But, I know. I never even felt a fraction for Ben what I feel for Killian.

Killian Doyle makes my universe light up. When he’s in the room with me, it’s like everything is suddenly beautiful and bright. The stars shine when Killian smiles and when his blue eyes hold mine, butterflies take flight within me. It all sounds silly and poetic, but it’s how I feel. How he makes me feel.

So very special.

The mattress shifts and I watch him walk to the bathroom. *God, that body.* All tight with long, lean muscles and so many tattoos. I want to take my time and explore each one, find out

what they mean and what they taste like beneath my tongue. A moment later, Killian crawls back into bed beside me and pulls me into his arms.

I love the feel of his warm, smooth chest against my back, his leg thrown over mine, holding me so close and tight as though I belong to him. I've never belonged to anyone before, nor have I wanted to, but Killian makes me want to be possessed.

“Killian?”

“Hmm?” He brushes my hair back, smoothing it away from my face.

“Will you stay here all night?”

“Is that an invitation?”

“Hell, yeah,” I whisper and turn in his arms.

His mouth edges up. “I'd love to,” he says and pulls me on top of him.

I straddle his thighs and run my hands down his chest. “So, only one more condom, huh?”

He barks out a laugh. “We might have to make a run to the drug store.”

I raise a brow and reach down, circling my fingers around him, stroking him back to life. “There's no maybe about it.”

“No rest for the wicked, huh?” he asks, then lets out a long, low groan.

As he hardens and lengthens before my eyes, filling my hand, I give him a light squeeze. “Not tonight.”

It's not long before another shattering orgasm racks my body and, at the same time, Killian's hips lift off the mattress and we both cry out. I collapse against his chest, body completely spent, mind utterly blown.

“My God, you're a pro at this,” I say and his chest rumbles beneath my cheek with laughter.

“Am I hitting all the right spots?” he teases in a husky voice.

“You’re finding places I never knew existed,” I admit and he chuckles, running a large hand along the side of my face.

“You’re so beautiful, Aubrey. I’d spend the rest of my life pleasing you, if I could,” he says.

My heart speeds up as I try to figure out just what that means. But, then he lifts me up and pads off to the bathroom. My head spins and I can’t help but start picturing a future together. Killian never struck me as the type of man who wants to settle down, but his words have me thinking otherwise now.

I don’t want to scare him off, but I’m damn curious where this is going to go. A moment later, he slides back into bed and pulls me into the curve of his body. Maybe I’m overthinking things, reading too deep into his words and actions.

But, I’m dying to know.

“Killian?”

“Hmm?”

Shit. Now I’m too nervous to ask. I chew on my lower lip and realize I should just probably be quiet and not ruin a good thing. Killian is here, in my bed and just gave me multiple orgasms. Why do I want to ruin it and ask about tomorrow?

He reaches down and turns my face so he can try to read me. “What, sweetheart?”

“Is tonight it for us?” His big body tenses.

“Is that what you want?”

I pull back and sit up. “No. But, I’m scared that’s all you want.”

Killian straightens up, back against the pillows, and drags me onto his lap. “C’mere,” he whispers and lifts my face up to his. “I want to be with you for as long as you’ll have me.”

My chest tightens and a smile tilts my lips. “Then I should probably warn you that I’m going to want you for a really, really long time, Killian Doyle.”

“Then I should probably warn you that you’re going to end up stuck with me, Aubrey Reed.”

“Just the two of us. I like the sound of that.”

“Us against the world,” he murmurs. Killian’s mouth captures mine, lips and tongue caressing and teasing in a slow, lazy way that leaves me feeling sated and relaxed. Afterwards, I snuggle down into his arms and we drift off to sleep.

I have never slept better in my life than I do tonight, cocooned in Killian’s warmth. I love the sound of his quiet, steady breathing, the rise and fall of his chest and that masculine smell that is all him. He makes me feel safe, protected and, dare I say, cared about. I know it’s silly to even think about the “L” word, but I can see myself falling so hard and so deeply for this man.

My dreams are full of Killian, too. Endless steamy kisses, his hands all over my body, exploring every curve and then him sinking deep inside me and bringing me endless ecstasy. At some point, I’m not sure if I’m awake or dreaming when I feel his lips brush mine. I open my mouth, welcoming the kiss, deepening it, and feel him move over me.

As the sleep cobwebs fall away, I realize it’s really happening and I wrap my arms around his neck and push up into his body. God, he’s so hard and hot. Big, heavy and throbbing with life. I skim my hands down his back, round the curve of his taut ass and squeeze.

“I’m so goddamn hard for you.”

“Fill me up, Killian,” I whisper. “*Please.*”

“Fuck, Aubrey,” he growls, settling between my legs.

When he thrusts into me, I cry out and meet his hard, possessive strokes. He pounds into me without mercy and my legs wrap around him for dear life. It’s the ride of a lifetime and with each glorious thrust, I savor the friction and the way he moves, bringing me so much pleasure, I could die.

It’s hard, hot and dark as I scream his name and my entire body shudders in a climax that leaves me shaken. Killian roars through his release and when his hot seed fills me, I think we both realize at the same time what we just did.

Two condoms. That's all we had yet we just had sex for the third time.

"Fuck," he hisses and pulls out. "Shit, Aubrey, I'm sorry."

We'd been so caught up in each other, in our own little world, that neither of us had been thinking about protection. Just satisfying the desire that raged out of control.

I can feel a warm stickiness between my legs and it dawns on me that there's a very real chance I could get pregnant. *Oh, my God.* How could we have been so careless? I quickly calculate where I am in my cycle and I shouldn't be ovulating now.

"I think we're okay," I whisper. "I'm not ovulating right now. I don't think," I add and bite down on my lip.

"You don't think?"

"I mean, I shouldn't be." When he raises a brow, I shrug. "I'm not a chicken, you know."

A half-laugh, half-snort bursts from him and he presses his forehead against mine. "If you want, we can get you a morning-after pill. Just to be safe."

I frown, not comfortable with that idea. First of all, I think it's fine. And, second, I don't have it in me to do that. If I got pregnant with Killian's baby, I'd figure it out.

"I'm not worried," I say and lay a hand against his stubbled cheek.

His body relaxes and he wraps his arms around me. Tightly. I feel him drop a kiss on my shoulder and he whispers, "You should be."

As we drift off to sleep, I wonder what exactly he means by that.

KILLIAN

They say time flies when you're having fun and when you're falling for someone, it zips by in the blink of an eye. June melts into July and the last few weeks become a blur. Aubrey and I spend every spare moment with each other and this is the best summer of my life.

We have a good time together whether we're hanging out at my place or hers or we're drinking and dancing at Rusty's or she's at karate class just watching or cheering me on at one of my fights. I've been running and working out every day and haven't lost since that night against Jackson. Knowing she's out there makes me want to win and work harder than ever before.

I look forward to seeing her after she's done working and spending the long, hot nights making love to her. Love is a word I don't say, though. As much as I enjoy our time together and despite my growing feelings, the word freaks me out. Other than my mom, no woman has ever heard those words from me. I know Aubrey is different, but I'm not sure how she feels and my throat closes up and I break out in hives at the very thought of saying the "L" word.

Tonight, I'm feeling especially nervous because I'm introducing Aubrey to my mom. I've never done anything like this before. Never brought a woman home to meet her. I didn't realize how much I was dropping Aubrey's name until my mom gave me a little smile and said she wanted to "meet the girl I couldn't stop gushing about."

I think that's a bit of an exaggeration, but when we pull up to the little house across town where my mom lives, I know she's right. I've been gushing non-stop.

"You can pull into the driveway," I tell her. Aubrey insisted on driving over instead of taking my bike because she said she didn't want to look windblown with helmet-hair when she met my mom for the first time.

We get out and she smooths her dress and touches her face with a fidgety flutter of fingers. I can tell she's nervous and I reach for her hand and pull her over to my side. "She's going to love you," I say.

"I hope so."

As soon as we step onto the porch, the door swings open and my mom appears, all of her attention zooming in on Aubrey. And, she literally lights up like the Fourth of July. "Hello, you must be Aubrey," she says with a huge smile, not even giving me time to introduce them. "Please, come in. I'm Shelly."

"It's so nice to meet you," Aubrey says. "Thank you for inviting me to dinner."

"Oh, beautiful and polite!" My mom's smile turns to me and I step over and hug her. "Hi, honey."

"Hi, Mom." I kiss her cheek. Ever since my dad took off when I was a baby, it's only been the two of us against the world. Truthfully, I wouldn't have it any other way. I have my mom up on the tallest, highest damn pedestal there is and thank God that she put up with my bullshit when I was younger and helped me get through my rebellious years.

"I hope you like traditional Irish food," she says.

"I'm sure I'll love it," Aubrey says and we head into the dining room where my mom laid out the nice plates, glasses and silverware.

My chest tightens when I realize how much trouble she went to and I pull out Aubrey's chair and follow Mom into the kitchen to help her bring the dishes out. She hands me a plate of Irish soda bread, a bowl of salad and tosses me a wink.

“I love her already,” she says.

“I knew you would,” I tell her.

“Go take that out and I’ll bring the pie.”

Back at the table, I set the dishes down and then sit down beside Aubrey. My mom brings a big, round dish of homemade Irish stew pie out which looks a lot like a chicken pot pie with a flaky crust over all sorts of good stuff.

“It smells so good,” Aubrey says, sniffing the air.

“This is Irish stew pie which is basically stew baked into a flaky pie crust. The filling is beef, potatoes, carrots and onions in a thick and creamy tomato sauce. And, that’s a Shamrock salad made of asparagus, sugar snap peas, snow peas, arugula and spinach with a mustard vinaigrette dressing.”

“Yum,” Aubrey says, eyeing everything.

After our plates are full, we dig in and I can tell Aubrey loves everything.

“So, tell me how you two met,” my mom says, looking back and forth between us, blue eyes sparkling.

I glance over at Aubrey who chews on a piece of soda bread. “She dropped her neighbor off at my karate class,” I say.

“Twice,” she adds. “And, then I hung around after he invited me to stay and watch the class.”

“Twice,” I say and my mom chuckles. “Second time was the charm and then we went out for a drink afterwards.”

“And when was that?”

“About four weeks ago,” I say. It’s still hard to believe that I’ve only known Aubrey for a month. As cliché as it sounds, a part of me feels like I have known her forever.

Introducing a woman to my mom is so new and she overflows with questions. Shit, I can hear her gears turning. *She’s already picturing grandchildren*, I think, and run a hand through my hair. Suddenly, I’m wondering if this is a mistake. A suffocating panic hits me and I choke on a piece of bread. As I grab for my glass of water, Aubrey lays a hand on my arm.

“Are you okay?”

I force a nod and try not to be too concerned that Shelly and Aubrey have hit it off like best friends reunited. I have a feeling that this could be trouble— for me.

God, I’m a selfish asshole. I should be happy that my mom likes my...

Girlfriend?

Fuck me. I have never called anyone that before and a wave of anxiety strikes me in the chest like an opponent’s fist. *Is that what she is?* I wonder. Just because we had a few fun dates and slept together never made anyone my girlfriend before. So, what the hell makes Aubrey Reed so damn special?

As I’m trying to figure it out, my mom brings the peach cobbler out and drops a dollop of vanilla ice cream on each plate. Her cobbler is the best and I breathe in the sweet cinnamon spice that fills the air.

“Your favorite,” my mom says and hands me the dessert.

“Thanks.” I stab a plump peach covered in crumbly streusel and sweep it through the ice cream, closely watching the interaction between Aubrey and my mom.

“Oh, wow,” Aubrey exclaims, savoring a bite. “This tastes like heaven. I have to get the recipe.”

“Thank you, honey. Just remind me after we finish up and I’ll write it down for you.”

They talk for another half an hour, laughing over the rest of dessert and then a cup of coffee. I know that I’m being a little quiet and a couple of thoughts hit me at once. I’ve always had my mom’s full attention and now she’s giving it all to Aubrey. I know I sound like a fucking brat, but I’m not used to sharing her. Also, I can totally see these two ganging up on me in a heartbeat and I’m not sure I like that.

Maybe I’m just being an idiot.

After my mom and Aubrey finish bonding, I help clear the table and start washing the dishes. Aubrey sidles up beside me and grabs a dish towel, drying them off after I rinse them.

“Do you always do the dishes?” she asks in a teasing voice.

“The cook never does the dishes,” I tell her. “It’s not allowed.”

“That’s a nice rule,” she says and stacks another dry plate. She lowers her voice and smiles. “I really like your mom.”

“She’s the best.”

“I bet she had her hands full with you.”

“Me?” I ask, all innocence.

“I have a feeling you were quite the troublemaker growing up.”

I flick my hand through the water and splash her. Aubrey squeals and whacks me with the end of the dish towel. I love how playful she is and, even though my hands are full of suds, I grab her waist and pull her up against me.

“Killian,” she gasps. “Your mom-”

“Loves you,” I finish in a firm voice and drop my lips to hers, kissing her thoroughly. My tongue brushes her lower bottom lip and I taste peach juice. Combined with her sweet rosy smell, I’m a goner.

We hang out for a little longer and then my mom hugs us both goodbye. On the ride back to her place, it begins to sprinkle and I turn in the seat, studying her gorgeous profile. My heart speeds up and I feel damn lucky to have this woman in my life. But, a big part of me is scared that I’m going to mess it up.

But, not tonight. No, instead, I’m going to take her in my arms while the rain pours down outside and bring us both all kinds of lusty pleasure.

Aubrey has work the next day, so I find myself back home early. It’s already getting hot, so I go for a run before it becomes too unbearable. An hour later as I’m heading back up to my trailer, dripping sweat, I spot Mac sitting at the table, feet propped up on a chair.

“Make yourself comfortable,” I say in a dry voice and swipe a hand across my brow. I snatch a bottle of water off the table

and crack it open.

“Glad to see you’re training, Kill.”

“I’d hardly say I’m training. I keep in shape, that’s all.” I swig down half the bottle.

“Well, maybe you should start training.”

I narrow my eyes, breathing heavily. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mac grins from ear to ear. “I spoke with my contact over at MMA and they want you back.”

I freeze, bottle halfway to my lips again, and frown. “What?”

“On one condition— a rematch against Torres.”

“Are you fucking crazy? I said I wasn’t interested.” I’m pissed that he went behind my back after I said no.

“And, I didn’t believe you.” Mac drops his feet off the chair and shoves up. He points at me, enunciating each word with a jab of his chubby index finger. “You’re a fighter, Killian Doyle. Through and through. It’s in your blood. You need to stop dicking around with amateurs and get your ass back in the cage.”

I shake my head, feeling angry and cornered. “I already told you-”

“Are you fucking scared, Kill? Is that the problem?”

I bristle, finish my water and crush the plastic bottle. “Not interested,” I repeat and stalk toward my trailer door.

“With more training, you’ll win. I know you will.”

I wish I had as much faith in myself as Mac did. “Sorry, Mac,” I mumble and go inside. I hear him swear behind me as the door closes. My mood plummets, I clench my fists and look around for something to hit. Instead, I end up kicking the side of my chair and hiss out a vulgar string of curse words at the pain that shoots up my leg.

Frustration boils up within me and I pinch the bridge of my nose. If I’m being honest, a part of me would love to go back

and get in the MMA cage. The money was incredible and I could spoil my mom and Aubrey like crazy. My mom could retire early and I could take Aubrey on a trip to some faraway, exotic place. I could also get out of here and buy a nice house.

A shaky sigh erupts and I slouch against the wall. Going back to MMA and facing Torres in a rematch scares me half to death. Last time, I fell hard and made a complete fool of myself. The jeers and hateful words felt like a barrage of fists below the belt and I ran away like a dog with his tail tucked between its legs.

Where the hell did my courage go? *When did I turn into such a complete and total pussy?* I wonder and push off the wall. Because I know that Mac is right, but after the way things ended and how my career wound up in the toilet, I just don't think a rematch with my nemesis is a chance I'm willing to take.

My pride is a huge factor and the idea that Torres could kick my ass again makes me wary and a little bit sick to my stomach.

I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror on the wall and feel a wave of disgust rumble through me. "You're a fucking coward," I tell myself. My eyes slide shut and I hope Aubrey doesn't call me tonight because I am going to be really shitty company.

And, even though it's 10am, I go over to the fridge and grab a beer.

AUBREY

Work gives me a massive headache and I am in a very grumpy mood by the time 5pm rolls around. Everything that could have gone wrong does and I can't wait to get out of here. I haven't heard from Killian all day and I don't feel very well.

Maybe he needs a break from me tonight.

Maybe you could use a break from him, too, I think. But, I know that isn't true. Killian is always the highlight of my day. Lately, though, I'm starting to wonder where this is going. Because one thing is for sure—I am falling in love with him. Totally and completely. Looking into those amazing midnight blue eyes of his gives me all the feels. Exploring his lean, muscled body and tattoos sets my heart tripping and my lower body throbbing.

Problem is, I have no idea what he thinks of me. I know he enjoys my company, in and out of the bedroom, but he doesn't ever mention how he actually feels. Am I just a fun summer romp? Something that will fizzle out by the end of the season? Over by the first frost?

I am terrified to mention the word “girlfriend,” “boyfriend” or, God forbid, “relationship.” If I did, I think I'd see a Killian-shaped hole in the door. I knew going into this that he was a bad boy and an underground fighter. Someone who hit rock bottom last year, high and drunk, a royal mess who left his career after a humiliating loss.

I think the thing that bothers me the most was something he said to me a couple of weeks ago. We were laying in bed and I mentioned how I was annoyed by something my dad had said.

“Dads can really fucking suck. That’s why I’m never going to be one.”

I remember tensing up, not sure how to respond. “I think you’d make a great dad,” I finally said.

But, he shook his head. “No desire. Being a father never appealed to me and, trust me, no kid would want a bum like me for his dad.”

His words carved a hole in my heart.

On the way home from work, I tick off all of the reasons why we aren’t compatible: emotionally unavailable, not financially secure, fear of relationships, complete opposites.

And, then I think about the one thing that trumps every negative thought in my head: I think I love him.

God, my parents are going to die of heart attacks if I bring Killian home. My mom has asked about him a few times since I mentioned him at dinner the night I blew Ben off, but I’m always vague and don’t offer any information about him. I know they won’t approve just as surely as I know the sky is blue. And, that gives me anxiety because I want them to love him.

Yeah, like that would ever happen, I think. They’re going to take one look at his ink, leather jacket and motorcycle and make a snide comment. Killian isn’t exactly subtle, either, and I don’t want to have to play referee when they all hate each other at first sight.

I pull up into my driveway and drop my head against the steering wheel, not sure what to do. When I hear a tap at my window, I jump and see Jimmy. I roll the window down and manage to force out a bright smile. “Hi, Jimmy.”

“Hi, Aubrey. Any chance you can take me to karate? My mom is stuck working late again.”

My heart thumps at the thought of seeing Killian after my long day. “Sure. Hop in.”

We arrive at the gym ten minutes later and, as usual, Jimmy takes off before I’m barely out of the car. Halfway to the building, a man approaches me, but I’m not really paying attention until he calls my name. With a frown, I turn and see Mac Moretti.

“Hi, Mac,” I say. The closer he gets, I realize he looks a little unsteady and when he’s standing right in front of me, there’s no doubt about it— he’s bleary-eyed and, I’m guessing, three sheets to the wind.

“I’ve been racking my brain, trying to understand why Kill won’t return to MMA, and I finally figured it out,” he slurs.

I take a step back, not expecting this attack. “I’m sorry?” Whew, the grizzled, old trainer smells like a bottle of booze.

“No, you’re not. You’re happy he’s teaching karate to a bunch of brats, wasting his time fighting nobodies for peanuts and sitting in a busted-up trailer, remembering his glory days.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, putting my hands on my hips.

“Ever since Kill met you, he hasn’t been himself. He knows he needs to get his ass back in the cage and redeem himself, but he’s too busy bangin’ you. Loosen your hold on his balls a little, will ‘ya?”

A flash of anger fires through me. “Killian can do whatever he wants.”

“Yeah, right,” Mac scoffs. “You think he wants to be in there, teaching karate to kids?”

My mouth opens, closes. “Yes, I do,” I finally say and cross my arms.

“He wants to fight and he won’t because of you. Whether you know it or not, you’re making him give up his dream. Trying to make him something he’s not.” He shakes his head in disgust and turns, stumbling away. “Don’t fool yourself,” he says over his shoulder. “Killian ain’t the kinda guy who can

commit to anything or anybody. And, trust me, when I say the last thing he wants is a family. He pushes everybody away.”

Mac’s words ping through me like a poisonous text lost in cyberspace, filling me with doubt. Did Killian give up his dream because of me? But, why? And what exactly am I making him into? I never told him he couldn’t return to MMA fighting so why does Mac blame me for Killian’s reluctance?

Oh, my God, did Killian tell him something? Blame me? I rub my aching temple, not sure what to believe. *Shit*. I still have to sign in for dropping Jimmy off, I realize. When I see Killian inside, I’ll be able to read him and I’ll be able to tell if something is bothering him. See if there’s any truth behind Mac’s accusations.

I step into the gym, gaze searching for Killian and realize he’s already started class. Our gazes meet and his mouth edges up in a smile. I give a little wave and head over to the small book on the ledge and sign my name.

When I turn back around, Killian is in the middle of teaching the kids a new defensive move and I lean up against the wall and watch, admiring how patient he is with them. He demonstrates and then walks up and down the rows, correcting and helping each student until they have it down.

I can’t help but smile, touched by his willingness to help them learn and get better. I could never picture Ben having the patience or fortitude to deal with 20 kids like this and my heart fills with love. I know that Killian would make a good father. I just wish he could see that.

Don’t fool yourself. Killian ain’t the kinda guy who can commit to anything or anybody. And, trust me, when I say the last thing he wants is a family. He pushes everybody away.

Mac’s words reverberate through my head, but I don’t want to dwell on it right now. Instead, I just want to soak in Killian’s presence and enjoy being in the same space with him, able to watch him do his thing.

A moment later, my phone dings and I reach into my purse. It’s my mom and she asks if I want to meet her and my dad for

dinner tomorrow night. *Ugh.* I text back a reply: *not if you're going to invite Ben again.*

I'm inviting you and the new man you're seeing, she responds and my heart nearly stops. *Don't you think it's time to introduce us?* she asks. *If he's serious about you, he should want to meet us.*

I glance up at Killian and swallow hard. As much as I'd like to introduce them, I know my parents and I can predict how they're going to act. Like pompous jerks. Unless, maybe, they realize this is different and Killian means more to me than any man before.

My finger hovers over the keyboard and then I type back: *I'll ask him if he has plans.*

The moment class ends, I walk over to Killian and he gives me a quick kiss on the cheek. After all the parents pick up their kids and Mrs. Lahey thanks me profusely for dropping Jimmy off, we are finally alone. Without an audience, he pulls me into his arms and gives me a proper kiss with lots of tongue.

I laugh and pull back. "I feel violated after that kiss, but in the best possible way."

He leans down and nips my earlobe. "How was your day?"

"Not great," I say and trail my hands down his muscled arms. "But, it's getting better now."

"I'm glad," he says and dips his head to kiss me again.

As much as I enjoy kissing him, I pull back and think about my mom's text. "So, my mom just invited us to dinner tomorrow night."

I feel Killian tense and then release me. "Really?" he asks and reaches down to grab his gym bag.

"Are you up for it?"

"I don't know," he admits. "What exactly have you told them?"

"What do you mean?" I don't like the way he's clearly pulling away.

“About us.”

“Just that I’m seeing you.”

He nods and when I pin him with a questioning stare, he lets out a sigh. “I mean, it’s kind of a big deal. Don’t you think?”

I frown. “I met your mom.”

“Right and she thinks you’re great. Just like I knew she would. But, from what you’ve told me about your parents, they seem a little…” His voice trails off.

“Seem a little what?” I ask, getting annoyed.

He shrugs. “I just get the feeling they’re not going to approve.”

“You don’t know that.” He cocks a brow. “Alright, maybe I haven’t painted them in the best light, but I love them and they’ve done so much for me.” My voice drops and I stare at the colorful tattoo on his arm. “I want them to get to know you. And, vice versa.”

“Okay,” he says in a low voice.

My head snaps up. “Really? You’ll go?”

“If it means that much to you, of course, I will. But, fair warning, I’m expecting them to hate me on sight.”

“They’ll warm up. Eventually,” I add and scrunch my nose.

He reaches out and traces a finger down the slope of my nose. “Parents never like me.”

“But, I bet their daughters do,” I say.

He gives me a crooked grin and reaches for my hand. “What’s the plan, sweetheart? My place or yours?”

We end up having a very steamy night at his place. The kind of night that makes a girl’s toes curl just at the memory.

The following evening, I am a nervous wreck. I’m standing near the front door of the restaurant, waiting for Killian, and my parents are already inside having a drink. I feel nauseous, literally sick to my stomach. I’d chalk it up to nerves, but it

seems like more. Like maybe I'm coming down with a touch of the flu.

When he finally arrives, helmet tucked under his arm, my gaze travels down his outfit and I smother a grin. Killian wears a light blue button-down shirt, untucked but clearly ironed, and a pair of black pants. And, of course, his boots. I can tell he tried and that touches my heart.

"Are you ready?" I ask and reach for his hand.

"No, but let's do this," he says and presses a kiss to the back of my hand, looking around like my parents are going to suddenly jump out and attack him.

"They're already inside, loosening up with a drink."

He nods. "Good."

When we reach the table, my parents stand up and I introduce them to Killian. My dad shakes his hand and my mom squeezes out a smile. We all sit down and, after a moment of silence, my dad takes a sip of his bourbon. "So, what exactly do you do, Killian?"

My heart drops into my high heels and I fiddle with the cloth napkin in my lap.

"I'm a Mixed Martial Arts expert," Killian says and toys with the edge of his fork. "I retired from MMA fighting last year and now I teach karate."

I release a breath and think that sounds pretty damn impressive. I glance over at him and smile. "Killian is really talented," I say. "I've seen him in the ring."

"I thought you retired?" my mom asks.

Oh, crap. I bite my lower lip and realize I should've just kept quiet.

Killian clears his throat. "From MMA professional fighting, but I still fight in the local club circuit."

"Like fight clubs?" my dad asks.

"I guess you could call it that," he says and reaches for his water.

“Aren’t those illegal?”

“Some,” Killian says vaguely.

“So, how did you two meet again?” my mom asks.

God, I feel like they’re giving us the third degree. While Killian’s mom thought our meeting was endearing and cute, my parents look less than touched.

“So, you teach karate to children,” my dad clarifies.

“That’s right.”

“And, that pays the bills?”

“Dad,” I scold. “That’s really none of your business.”

“Of course, it’s my business. If a man is interested in my daughter then he damn well better make good money so he can pamper and take care of her.”

Oh, God, I suddenly feel like I’m on an airplane that just took a nosedive.

“I do alright, sir,” Killian says in a low voice.

“Seriously, Dad. You’re acting like Killian just proposed or something.” I try to make a joke of it, but no one seems amused.

When Killian bristles next to me, I realize I just hit a nerve. I look over and something that looks like annoyance flashes in his dark blue eyes. *Shit, I am making a mess of this*, I realize.

It’s a relief when our food finally arrives and everybody can focus on the plate in front of them. But, my stomach is roiling and the scent of steak and potatoes makes me suddenly want to hurl. “Excuse me,” I murmur and drop my napkin on my chair. I make a mad dash for the bathroom and throw up everything I ate earlier for lunch. I press a hand to my forehead and it feels clammy.

For a long moment, I lean against the stall door and breathe. I feel off, like I’m getting sick, and the last thing I want to do is go back out there and deal with my parents belittling Killian. I suck it up, though, rinse my mouth and study my pale complexion for a moment before heading back out.

I sit back down at the table, spread my napkin across my lap and push my plate away. When I look up, faces appear tense. *Oh, great.* What the hell happened while I was in the bathroom puking my guts up?

“Everything okay?” I ask looking from my parents to Killian whose jaw is clenched so tight that it looks ready to snap.

“Great,” Killian says between gritted teeth. He reaches for his wine glass and finishes it off in one, long swallow.

I can only imagine what my parents said to make him this pissed. But, Killian won't meet my eyes and my parents finish their drinks and leisurely chat about the weather. Eventually, the waiter brings the check and my dad reaches for it.

Killian unbuttons his cuffs and rolls his shirt sleeves up to reveal the bright ink on his forearms and, while it makes my stomach flutter, I can see the disapproval on my parents' faces. He reaches over and scoops his helmet up. “Are you coming over?” he asks.

A blush heats my face and I can't believe he just asked that in front of my mom and dad. It's getting late and I really didn't want to announce that I planned on spending the night at his place. I throw him a look, but he doesn't seem to care because he just raises a brow.

“Actually, I'm not feeling very well.”

“You barely touched your dinner,” my mom says.

“I'm sure a good night's sleep is all I need,” I say.

Killian shoves his chair back and stands up. “I'll walk you out.”

I nod and walk around and hug my parents. “Thank you for dinner.”

“Don't forget, we're going to Maestro's for your father's birthday this weekend,” my mom says. She slides a look in Killian's direction. “And, there's no way to add anyone else to the reservation.”

I flinch at her words, knowing the shot was directed at Killian. “Mom-”

“Goodnight, dear. Go home, rest up and I’m sure you’ll feel 100 percent better in the morning.”

Killian snakes his fingers through mine and turns his attention to my parents. “Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of her.”

My mom’s face blanches as Killian tugs me toward the exit.

KILLIAN

I am fucking fuming as we walk out the restaurant door. From the moment I walked in, I knew her parents hated me on sight. Just like I said they would. And, then, when Aubrey left to go to the bathroom, they made their feelings quite clear.

My bike is parked right in front and I stalk over to it, practically dragging Aubrey behind me.

“Killian! Slow down,” she says, jogging in her heels to keep up.

I abruptly stop and she bumps into me.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I hiss. “That went fucking great, dontcha think?”

“I suppose it went as well as expected.”

I drop her hand and turn to face her. “Meaning what exactly?”

“My parents can be a little, um, judgemental, but it’s only because they have my best interests in mind.”

“Is that really what you think?” I ask.

“What’re you inferring?”

“I’m not inferring anything. The truth is, your parents have an agenda and if you can’t see that then you’re blind.”

Her mouth drops open. “Killian-”

“Aubrey, dear?”

I turn and see her parents waiting not too far away for the valet.

“If you want a more civilized ride home, you can come with us.”

My blood boils as I pull my helmet on and slide a leg over my bike. “C’mon,” I grumble, but Aubrey doesn’t move. “Are you coming or not?” I snap.

“I think I’ll get a ride home with my parents,” Aubrey says in a quiet voice.

I look into her strained blue-green eyes and give a sharp nod. “Suit yourself,” I say and kickstart my bike. I am so pissed right now that I can’t see straight. I roar away from the curb without another word or look at any of them.

As the cool night air hits my face, it also helps cool my temper. I mean, really? What did I expect? That Thomas, Theresa and I would become best friends tonight? I bark out a harsh laugh and rev the engine. Parents always hate me so this is nothing new. But, the fact that it’s Aubrey’s parents doesn’t sit well with me.

Goddammit. I wanted to impress them, but all they did was look down their noses at me like a bug that they wanted to squash. Then the moment Aubrey left the table, they pounced.

“What are you doing with our daughter?” her dad demanded. “Because if you’re just using her until you meet your next play thing then why don’t you just walk away right now.”

“Aubrey has a good reputation and you’re going to destroy it,” her mom said, eyeing me like the devil incarnate. “What kind of life can you give her? You don’t even have a real job.”

“There’s a good man interested in our daughter and you’re screwing things up, Doyle. Be a man and bow out. In the long-run, you’re just hurting Aubrey.”

“It’s selfish is what it is,” her mom added.

Their sharp words cut like a knife through my heart. Am I just being a selfish asshole? When I think back over this disaster of a night, I realize Aubrey didn’t say much or stand up for me

and that stings. If her parents had the nerve to say all of those things to my face after knowing me for an hour, I can only imagine what they're telling Aubrey.

I pull up under the awning of my trailer, yank the helmet off and throw it. *Fuck*, I think, and rake my fingers through my hair. Everything is so messed up and I don't know what the hell to do. A frustrated sigh tears from my throat and the crunch of gravel makes me lift my head. All I want to see is Aubrey approaching, but it's Lola.

"You okay, Kill?" she asks.

She wears the server's uniform from the restaurant where she works so I assume she just got off. "Fine," I force out.

"You don't sound fine, darlin'," she says and picks my helmet up off the ground. She hands it over and I mumble a thanks. "If there's anything I can do..."

I immediately shake my head, having no interest in any kind of sexual invitation.

"I was referring to dinner. I have some food I brought back from the restaurant. If you're hungry?"

"I already ate," I say. I slide off my bike and turn toward the trailer's door. "But, thanks, Lola."

As I take a step up, her next words make me pause.

"I saw your girl recently," she says. "She came in during my shift."

I turn around, cock a brow. "And?"

Lola shrugs. "If I were you, I wouldn't get too invested. She was with some other guy."

"*What?*" The word erupts from my throat like molten lava from a volcano.

"I'm only telling you this as a friend. Looking out for you, 'ya know? They looked awfully cozy, that's all. It made me mad, Kill. I can see how much you like her, but she's just going to hurt you. Too rich for your blood," she adds with a sly look.

Who was she at dinner with? And if it was completely innocent then why hadn't she told me? I know her parents want her to get back together with her ex, Ben something or other, but there's no way Aubrey would have gone to dinner with him behind my back.

"Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find me."

As Lola walks away, a million thoughts race through my head. Does Aubrey want to get back together with her old boyfriend? I know how much influence her parents have over her, over her entire life, and they clearly want me out of the picture. Have they already brought Ben back in and assume it's only a matter of time before Aubrey caves to their wishes like always.

Aubrey is the good girl who always did everything she was told...until me. *Why did she ever like me to begin with?* I wonder, suddenly suspicious. I'm not her type, not reliable or dependable or financially stable. Does she just view me as the bad boy she could use to add a little excitement to her predictable life? A way to piss off her parents for a hot minute? Give her the orgasms her ex couldn't?

Jesus. I stalk up into the trailer and slam the door shut behind me. I have so many questions I want to ask her, but I think I'm too upset to hold an adult conversation right now. The best thing is to cool off, get my emotions under control and not jump to conclusions.

But, I've never been very good at doing the right thing.

I pull my phone out of my jacket pocket and hit Aubrey's number.

"Hi," she answers, voice low and tired.

She sounds like she doesn't want to talk to me, I think. "Hey. Just making sure you got home okay."

"I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"I'm just--"

Her voice cuts off and I wait for her to finish the sentence.

“Tired,” she says.

Lame. So fucking lame. “So, on a scale of one to ten, how much did your parents hate me?”

“That’s not fair.”

“Really? Do you think they treated me fairly?”

“Killian...can we not do this right now?”

“Why are you defending them? You don’t think they were rude and judgemental?”

“I’m not defending them-”

“You didn’t defend me, either.” Okay, maybe I’m being petty and acting like a baby, but I’m pissed.

“I’m sorry, Killian, but I was too busy puking in the bathroom to play referee between you and my parents. God.”

“You’re sick?”

She lets out a weary sigh. “I think I’m coming down with the flu.”

For a moment, I don’t know what to say. Am I being a total dick? Probably. And, now I’m about to be an even bigger one. “Why didn’t you come home with me?” I won’t admit it, but it hurt my fucking feelings.

“Is that what this is about? You’re mad because I didn’t spend the night? I told you, I don’t feel well. Why’re you being such a jerk?”

“*Me?* Do you have any idea what your parents said to me while you were in the bathroom? How they made sure to let me know what a piece of shit I am? How I’m not worthy of their precious daughter?”

“Stop, please,” she says. “I can’t do this right now.”

“Can’t do what? Stand up to your parents?”

“I think...I need a few days.”

“What do you mean?” I demand.

“Maybe...” She draws in a quick breath and then spills it.
“Maybe we should take some time apart.”

A chill strikes through me, leaving me ice cold. She’s done. I can feel it in my bones. Her fucking parents won and now I’m out like last week’s trash. “Take all the time you need, Aubrey,” I say and hang up. I throw my phone across the room and it hits the wall and lands on the floor with a dull thud.

“Fuck!” I roar. I squeeze my eyes shut, drop my head back and know I just messed everything up.

AUBREY

Not seeing or talking to Killian every day would normally make me sad, but I spend the next couple of days at home in bed, too sick to worry about the drama between him and my parents. Tori comes by to check on me and she brings me a grocery bag with soup, crackers and ginger ale. She fusses over me and presses a cool washcloth to my forehead when I start burning up.

By the end of the week, I'm finally feeling better and it occurs to me that Killian hasn't called or texted once to make sure I'm okay. It hits me that he hasn't done quite a few things. Like tell me how he feels and if he sees a future with me. It seems I'm good for sex, but not much else. My heart squeezes at the idea of him not caring for me as much as I've grown to care for him.

The summer is winding down now and I can't help but wonder if I was just a summer fling for him. Someone he had fun with, but now he's ready to move on. Am I a complete fool to think he cared? At least a little?

Ugh. It feels like it.

When I finally roll out of bed and take a shower, I realize it's been a week since he hung up on me. *Jerk.* I also realize that I have my yearly physical this afternoon which I almost completely forgot about. I'm about to call and cancel when a sudden wave of nausea hits me out of the blue. I lean over the toilet and hurl.

God, what is going on? Just when I thought I was feeling better...

I decide to keep the doctor's appointment and I'm damn glad I did.

A few hours later, I'm trying to pick my jaw up off the floor. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Eight weeks pregnant," my doctor repeats.

My eyes slide shut. It can't be. We've used protection every single time. *Except that one time*, a little voice reminds me. *Oh, my God.* I massage my fingers against my temples and tears burn the back of my eyes. What the hell am I going to do?

When the doctor starts going over all of my choices, I shake my head. "I'm having the baby," I say in a firm voice. There's no doubt in my mind. This whole thing may be unexpected and scary right now, but that is not the baby's fault.

Baby...

Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God.

"Is this why I've been so sick?" I ask.

"No, I think you did just have the flu. The morning sickness was just an added bonus," she jokes.

Hysterical.

After my doctor finishes the mother-to-be spiel, sets up my next appointment and hands me a bunch of pamphlets, I walk out to my car, feeling numb and lost. I unlock it, slide into the driver's seat and lay a hand against my flat stomach. It doesn't feel real yet. But, eventually, I'm going to start showing because Killian's baby is growing inside me.

Killian, the man who hates his father and never wanted to be a father.

I lay my forehead against the steering wheel and wonder how I'm going to find the courage to tell him. And, my parents. I let out a shaky breath and I wish I could disappear. Maybe

come back when the kid is ten and everything is right in the world again.

But, that's not possible. I'm going to have to dig deep and be brave even though fear is planting its roots in my heart and mind. Because, really, no one is going to be happy about this. My parents are going to flip out and Killian is probably going to run for the hills. Without their support, it will be hard, but I don't care. If my parents and Killian both choose to not be involved in the baby's life then that's on them.

Maybe I should relax and stop jumping to the worst case scenario. They might surprise me. Yeah, right, and I might just win a million dollars, too.

First things first. I decide to tell my parents and I invite them over for dinner. I am in no mood to cook so I get carryout from a nice Chinese place nearby and when they arrive that evening, my heart is in my throat and I feel like I'm going to pass out.

"What's wrong, Aubrey?" my mom finally asks as we're finishing up.

I haven't been able to tell them yet and it's been nearly 45 minutes. *Coward.* "I, um, have something to tell you," I blurt out. I take a deep breath and before they can ask anything, I just say it. "I'm pregnant."

For a stunned moment, neither says a word. Then, my mom sits back in her chair, looking pale. "Please, tell me it's not his."

"Are you referring to Killian?" I ask, bristling.

She forces a nod.

"Yes, Killian is the father."

"Oh, God Almighty," my mom declares and presses a hand to her forehead.

My dad shakes his head, mouth turned down in total disappointment.

"How could you be so careless, Aubrey?" my mom asks.

I want to tell them how in love I thought I was, but the words stick in my throat. We never said we loved each other or even entered into a committed relationship. So, what have we been doing these last few months? Just fucking? It felt like so much more than that.

Or, so I thought.

I haven't talked to Killian in a week and maybe he's happy about that. Maybe he's already moved on and forgotten all about me.

"I know you guys are disappointed-"

"You have no idea, young lady," my dad says.

I frown. "I am 28 years old," I remind them. "I'm sorry you don't approve of the man I'm sleeping with, but it's really none of your business."

"Fine, Aubrey," my mom says. "Go sleep with the whole city if you want, just to spite us, if that's what you want to do."

"That's not what this is about," I say, suddenly weary. "I care for Killian. A lot. And, I know you don't like him, but he's my baby's father."

"Well, where is he? Have you even told him yet?"

I look down and pick at the corner of the table cloth. "Not yet."

"Do you really think a man like Killian will step up and be a good father?" my dad asks. "You have no idea how much work and money it takes to provide for a family. He barely has a job."

"I have no idea what he is going to do after I tell him," I admit and the fact that I know him so little breaks my heart a little bit. I wish I could say with complete confidence that Killian will be the best dad in the world.

But, after what Mac said and what Killian himself said, I can't.

"So, don't tell him. You need a reliable man who will take care of you. A man like Benjamin Styles, but that might be too late now," my mom adds with a frown.

“Oh, my God, stop with Ben! It’s over and I am not getting back together with him. Ever!”

My parents exchange a look. I have no idea why they believe he’s the only suitable man out there for me, but it’s getting on my last damn nerve.

“He’s a good man, Aubrey,” my mom says and I finally lose it. I am so fed up with the way they’re speaking to me and trying to control my life.

I jump up and tears scald my vision. “I went out with Ben because you liked him, but I never loved him or felt anything more than friendship. We aren’t compatible and I don’t know what it will take for you to understand that! For chrissakes, he couldn’t even give me an orgasm!”

My mom blanches and my dad looks at anything but me. But, I am not done. Not even close.

“And, let’s get something straight,” I continue, unable to stop now that I’m finally releasing all the frustration I’d kept at bay and hidden away for so long. “I don’t need a man to take care of me. I also know that it takes a lot of work and money to provide for a child, but I refuse to strong arm some man into stepping into a role that he doesn’t want.”

I blink and the tears finally fall, streaming down my face as emotion consumes me. “If Killian doesn’t want to be a father then I will figure this out on my own. And, if you don’t want to be grandparents to my child then—” my voice cracks. “Then, don’t. I’m not going to force anyone to be a part of our lives.” I swipe at the wetness on my face and suddenly remember Killian’s words from our phone conversation.

Do you have any idea what your parents said to me while you were in the bathroom? How they made sure to let me know what a piece of shit I am? How I’m not worthy of their precious daughter?

I’d been half-delirious with the flu and it didn’t really register until now.

“When we went out to dinner last week, what did you say to Killian while I was in the bathroom?” I ask.

“The truth,” my mom says.

My gut twists and I grip the edge of the table hard. “What?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“That he’s going to ruin your life and surprise, surprise, he did.”

My dad shakes his head. “He’s being selfish, honey.”

“How so?”

“I accused him of using you, called you his plaything, and he didn’t deny it. He probably already has a new woman in his life. Don’t fool yourself. Men like that don’t change. They just leave after getting what they want.”

I feel like my heart sits in a vise and my parents are slowly cranking it shut. “You don’t know him,” I whisper.

“We know his type,” my mom says. “And, they’re all the same.”

Suddenly, I want to talk to Killian. Maybe my parents are right, but for once I hope they’re wrong. I hope it with all of my heart and soul. “I have to go,” I say and swipe the tears off my face.

“The moment you tell him you’re pregnant, he’s going to break your heart,” my mom predicts.

Is she right? Maybe, but I have to know.

I grab my purse and race out the door, determined to clear the air with Killian. On my way over, I run through every possible scenario of potential reactions— from shock, but willing to work it out, all the way to angry and telling me to take a hike and that we’re over.

But, the best reaction would be if Killian pulls me in his arms and tells me he loves me. That no matter what, he will stay by my side.

By the time I pull into the driveway where the sign reads Happy Trails Trailer Park, my hands shake and my heart is about to burst from my chest. I’ve never been so nervous in

my life and I have to pull the car over and get my shit under control the moment his trailer comes into view.

A lamp glows inside and I see his bike parked under the awning so I know he's home. Just as I lift my foot off the brake, the door swings open and Lola appears. His neighbor who clearly has the hots for him. My lips part as I watch her step down and I see she's wearing the same light blue button down shirt he had on last week at dinner.

And, she just finished fastening the last couple of buttons.

Killian walks down the steps behind her in a pair of low-slung jeans and my heart catches. He looks so handsome and it hits me how very much I've missed him this past week. I turn the car off and slide out.

I can see they're talking, but I'm still too far away to hear what they're saying. Lola catches sight of me first because Killian faces the opposite direction and, just as I reach them, she leans in and gives him a long, lingering hug as she whispers something in his ear.

I clear my throat and they jump apart.

Killian looks at me like I'm a figment of his imagination and Lola gives me a triumphant smile before hurrying away.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I say.

"You didn't. We were done," he says. "I mean, she was just leaving."

He's acting weird, almost guilty, and I don't like it. I want to know why Lola was wearing his shirt and why she was in his trailer, but I bite my lip.

"Is there something I should know?" I ask. I'm totally projecting, but I can't help it. It hurts my feelings that he ignored me all week and now he's hanging out with Lola. My dad's words fill me with doubt.

I accused him of using you, called you his plaything, and he didn't deny it. He probably already has a new woman in his life. Don't fool yourself. Men like that don't change. They just leave after getting what they want.

“Did you sleep with her?” I blurt out. I have to know or it’s going to drive me crazy.

“What? No.”

“I’m not just talking about tonight.” He looks away, shifts his weight and I have my answer. “I can’t believe it.”

He lets out an annoyed sound. “Can’t believe what? That I had a sex life before you?”

I don’t like his tone and my walls shoot up, trying to protect me. “No, of course, not. But-” My voice cuts off abruptly and even though I planned to tell Killian about the baby, I can’t anymore. This isn’t how I want it to happen. We’re both angry and being defensive.

“Why are you here?” he asks.

He doesn’t look very happy to see me and all I’ve done is think about him for the past seven days. Suddenly, this is all feeling very one-sided and I feel like the world’s biggest fool.

“I don’t know,” I say. “It’s pretty clear that you don’t give a shit about me anymore so I really don’t know why I came over, Killian.”

“Me?” he asks, sounding completely shocked. “What about you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You made it pretty clear whose side you were on and it wasn’t mine.”

“Oh, my God!” I yell, so upset that my vision blurs. “Why do I have to choose? What is wrong with you? Why can’t everyone just act like adults and get along?” The pressure of dealing with my parents, being pregnant and now facing Killian is about to push me over the edge.

“Calm down,” he says.

But, I can’t. My whole body shakes and tears prick my eyes, but I’ll be damned before I let them fall. I am so tired of everyone telling me what to do and what I need. For the first

time, I'm going to do what's best for me. And, right now, I need some answers. "Why didn't you call me, Killian?"

His midnight blue eyes seem to darken and then narrow. "You said you wanted space. Time apart. I gave you that and now I'm the bad guy? What the fuck, Aubrey?"

"I was sick and you didn't even care enough to check in on me."

Something flashes in his eyes. Regret maybe? But, then it's gone. "You tell me you need space and now you're crying because I didn't call. And, you accuse me of not being an adult? Because right now you're the one acting like a goddamn child."

His words hurt and it's like he's purposely pushing me away. "What is happening with us?" I ask and clench my fists. "I can't do this push/pull thing. I need to know you're all in...or if you're not."

There. I laid it all out and everything going forward hinges right here on his answer. I hold my breath, hoping to hear that he's all in and that he never stopped caring about me.

"Honestly, Aubrey," he says and shoves his hair off his forehead. "Right now...no, I'm not."

My world suddenly stops turning and a sickening dread pours through my gut. Stifling back a sob, I spin around and run away. I hear him call my name, but I jump in my car and hit the gas. All I want to do is get as far away from Killian Doyle as possible.

As far away from everyone as possible.

KILLIAN

“**A**ubrey!” I yell and chase after her car. It kicks up gravel and a stone catches my cheek. I swipe at the blood, ignoring the sting, only focused on the retreating taillights of her Civic.

“Shit!” I stop, hands on my legs, trying to catch my breath as she pulls out of the trailer park. Well, no doubt about it. I couldn’t have fucked that up more royally if I tried. *Dammit.* I kick my boot against a stone and gravel dust fills the air.

The timing of this whole situation couldn’t have been any worse. Lola had stopped by with a bowl of spaghetti for me and, of course, she spilled it on herself so I offered her my clean shirt. It was the blue button-down that I never wear. Well, that I’ve only worn once and that was when I met Aubrey’s parents. I told her to just keep it because I really don’t want any reminders of that dinner fiasco.

As usual, Lola was being far too friendly and a part of me wonders if she dumped the sauce on her shirt on purpose. *Whatever.* It doesn’t matter because the damage is done.

Aubrey’s parting words haunt me: *I need to know you’re all in...or if you’re not.*

I didn’t want to lie to her. Am I falling hard for her? Yes. Am I ready to walk down the aisle and get married when we have so much to still work out? No. Do I want kids? No. There is just so much that we haven’t talked about and she probably wants the platinum band with the huge diamond and everything that comes with it.

Everything that she deserves. But, honestly, I can't give that to her right now. Or, maybe ever.

You should've said yes, a little voice says.

Seeing Aubrey lightened my soul for about three seconds and then it all went downhill fast. I don't understand why she got so pissed when I gave her the space she asked for and, truthfully, it killed me. All week, I've been obsessing over whether or not I should call, text or stop by her place. I didn't want to bother her or pressure her especially when she wasn't feeling well.

It looks like I fucked up. But, really, am I surprised? Fucking things up is my specialty and if you give me a decision, it's pretty much a guarantee that I'll pick the wrong option. All my life, I can never quite seem to get my act together or do what's right.

And, it's not for lack of trying.

Things just never work out and this is exactly why I avoid relationships. I'm doomed to let not only her down, but also myself. My mom used to say I'm too hard on myself and maybe that's true, but I deserve it.

I think I have too much of my father in me. From what I've learned from my mom, my dad was a bum. Good for nothing. Except probably a roll in the hay. He couldn't get his shit together, knocked my mom up and took off three months after I was born. Thirty two years later, I still haven't met him and I have no idea where he is— if he's even alive or dead.

His blood runs through my veins and you know what they say — the apple doesn't fall very far from the tree. Hurting Aubrey is the last thing in the world I wanted to do, but here we are and now she's somewhere crying. As usual, I screwed up.

Back at the trailer, I sit down in a chair, run my hands through my hair and then drop my head between my shoulders. Other than my mother, Aubrey is the only woman I have ever cared about. What am I supposed to do, though? Her parents hate me and she probably thinks I just cheated on her.

I release a huge sigh and decide to let things cool off for a few days. I think we both need some time to think and chill out. Neither of us is going anywhere and I don't want to rush over to her place and get all crazy because emotions are currently running high. I'm going to ride this fight out, gather my thoughts and see how I feel by the weekend. That should give us both enough time and then I'll go over to her place and we can have a rational discussion. Lay our cards out on the table and decide what to do about everything.

All I know is I want her in my life and I'm a fighter. So, if I need to fight for Aubrey then I will.

It turns out, I just made the worst decision possible.

When Saturday rolls around, I drive my bike over to Aubrey's house, but her car isn't there. Deciding to wait for her, I head up to the front porch and sit on the steps. Jimmy comes running over a minute later, a baseball glove on and a ball in his hand.

"She's gone," he says, tossing the ball between his hand and mit.

"What do you mean gone?" I ask. The first twinge that something isn't right hits me and I stand up.

"She left."

I frown and jog up the stairs to look into the window. The furniture is still in there, but all of her personal touches and knick-knacks are gone. I spin around, panic flaring. "Where'd she go?"

Jimmy shrugs. "I don't know."

"Did she say anything?" My voice rises an octave and I go back down to the sidewalk where Jimmy stands. "Does your mom know anything?"

He shrugs again.

I pull my phone out and text her: *Where are you?*

Ten minutes later, there's still no response.

Okay, this isn't good, I realize. I'm worried and, even though I don't want to do it, I have no other choice but to talk to her parents. I do a quick search online and my phone immediately reveals their address in a swanky uptown neighborhood. I say a quick goodbye to Jimmy, hop back on my bike and gun it over there.

Forty minutes later, I'm standing in the fancy foyer of the Reed's home, trying not to squirm under Aubrey's mother's intense glare. "You're the reason she left," Mrs. Reed says, face pinched.

"I need to talk to her."

"I think you've done quite enough, Doyle," Mr. Reed says, voice full of accusation.

What the hell is that supposed to mean? "It was a mistake. I don't know what she told you, but nothing happened between me and Lola."

"Who's Lola?" Mrs. Reed asks, hands on her hips.

Oh, shit. "My neighbor," I explain. "But, forget that. Where is Aubrey?"

"That's a damn good question. She took off and didn't even tell us where she was going. She left a note saying she needed space and she wanted to start over."

A frown pulls my brows together. "Start over?"

"Obviously, you chased her away. You and this Lola person."

"I need to talk to her," I insist. "I can't believe she wouldn't tell you where she went."

"Thanks to you, I think our relationship with Aubrey is destroyed," Mrs. Reed says.

It's like a slap in the face and I flinch. "I never did anything but care about your daughter."

"Give us a break," Mr. Reed snaps. His eyes narrow and he studies me closely. "Did she talk to you before she left?"

I shake my head. "No. Why?"

Her parents exchange a relieved look with each other. “That’s good,” he says.

“Look, she’s not picking up her phone and-”

“That’s because she left it on her kitchen table. She’s gone, Doyle. What aren’t you understanding about that?”

“Whatever you did,” Mrs. Reed says, voice like ice, “you broke her heart. She wants nothing to do with you so leave her alone.”

“Please, leave,” Mr. Reed says and points to the door.

I let out a breath, my shoulders sag and I feel like these two just jumped me and stuck a shiv in my gut. But, it’s clear that there’s nothing else I can do. They aren’t going to help me. I’m not sure if they’re lying or not, but I’m starting to believe that Aubrey actually did take off and didn’t let anyone know where the hell she was going.

I turn and let myself out. My heart feels like a lead weight in my chest and I walk down to my bike not knowing what the hell to do. There’s no one else who could help me and if Aubrey left her phone then I have no way to reach out to her.

At a loss, I go back home and do the only thing I can to numb the pain— I start drinking myself into oblivion. Six beers in, there’s a knock on my trailer door and I jump up, visions of Aubrey in my head. But, when I throw the door open, it’s Mac. I sigh, turn around and drop back into my chair.

“Thanks for the warm welcome,” Mac says in a dry voice and steps inside. He eyes the empty beer cans and ashtray full of cigarette butts. “What’s your problem? You look like shit. Someone die?”

I crack open another beer and take a swig. “It feels like it.”

He lifts a shaggy, salt and pepper brow.

“Aubrey is gone.”

“Where’d she go?”

“I don’t know. We had a fight, I think she and her parents had a fight and she just took off.”

“I’m sure she’ll be back. Why’re you being so dramatic?”

I sit up and reach for my pack of cigarettes. “She cleared her place out, Mac,” I tell him and light it up. I inhale, letting the acrid smoke fill my lungs, and hope I get cancer and die. Preferably tomorrow.

“Kill, I don’t wanna be a dick here, but maybe it’s for the best.”

“It’s not for the best,” I snap and lurch forward. Hot ash falls off the end of my cigarette and drops to the floor. Maybe I’ll fall asleep with a cigarette in my hand tonight and everything will just burn down, taking me with it. I know it’s a morbid thought, but I don’t care.

Because I’m finding out pretty fucking fast that I need Aubrey in my life. Without her, it’s like the light went out and I’m floundering by myself in the darkness.

“Christ,” I swear and rake a hand through my hair. “I fucked up, Mac, and I don’t know what to do now. I can’t even get a hold of her.”

Mac sighs and clasps his hands over his gut. “I don’t envy you, Kill. I made the mistake of falling in love once and it nearly destroyed me. But, you know what? I was brave enough to do it again with my Lucy and it was the best risk I ever took. I survived heartbreak and you will, too.”

Am I in love? I wonder. There’s a dull ache in my chest and it feels like someone crushed my fucking heart. It hurts, no doubt about it. But, love? I’ve never been in love before so I have nothing to compare it to, but not seeing Aubrey is like a TKO and I’m laying on the floor, dazed and in pain.

“I know you don’t want to hear this right now,” Mac says, “but, I think you and Aubrey were just a summer romance. I mean, face it. What did you really have in common?”

I don’t have an answer for him.

“You see. It never would’ve lasted. Remember her fondly and move on. The women love you, Kill. They always have and your bed ain’t gonna be empty for long.”

“That’s not the point.” I inhale the rest of the cigarette down to the filter and then stub it out in the ashtray.

“Here’s what I think. You fell hard for this girl, harder than you ever fell for anyone before, and now that it’s over you’re gonna mope around for awhile. But the sun keeps coming up and you’ve gotta keep gettin’ up each morning with it.”

I give him a wry look. “Thanks for the wise words, Sensai. I don’t know what I’d do without you, Mac.” I roll my eyes and grab my beer.

“It couldn’t hurt to focus on something else, you know.”

I let out a weary sigh, knowing what’s coming next.

“Just hear me out before you start that sighing, crying, woe-is-me shit. I talked to my connection at MMA and they offered a deal for a rematch with Torres.”

“Mac-”

“Five hundred grand.”

I can’t help it. My jaw drops open and I’m not going to pretend that isn’t a lot of zero’s.

“Based on his popularity and your notoriety, they think the response will be epic. And, think about it, Kill. That’s not even taking into consideration bonuses, sponsors and endorsements. If you win, the fans will have a field day. You’ll be able to start your own business if you want. Maybe even do a PPV special. The sky’s the limit.”

It’s really tempting and a part of me even considers it for a moment. But, that niggling voice in the back of my mind warns me that I will become a laughingstock if I lose again. Now, I’m considered more of a villain. But, if Torres kicks my ass again, I will be the village fucking idiot. A meme or GIF that people will send to each other when someone does the world’s stupidest thing.

“I’m sorry, Mac,” I say and finish off my beer. “But, I just can’t. So, please, stop asking.”

It’s clear Mac isn’t happy with my decision since he would’ve pocketed 10 percent of that money, but I don’t care. Right

now, all I can think about is Aubrey and how badly I screwed everything up.

I really am a chip off the old block.

AUBREY

The moment I realized that I loved Killian and he didn't love me, I knew I had to get far, far away from Chicago. Perhaps it was an impulsive move, but for once in my life, I wanted to regain control. No parents breathing down my neck and trying to make my life choices, no Benjamin Styles hovering in the background, no job that I hate and no Killian who had the power to shatter my heart.

Hell, who am I kidding? He smashed it to smithereens.

I need to know you're all in...or if you're not.

Honestly, Aubrey...right now...no, I'm not.

I hadn't even told him about the baby yet. God, if he was already halfway out the door then that surely would've done it. The moment I found out I was pregnant, I realized it wasn't just about me anymore. I had a whole other little life to consider and I came to the conclusion that leaving Chicago and starting over was the best option.

I did it fast—packed up my stuff, put the house up for sale, found an apartment in Los Angeles and quit my job. Then, I hopped in my car with tears streaming down my face and drove away.

And, now here I am in the City of Angels, all by myself, at least until I give birth. I don't know anyone here, but I always wanted to live somewhere warm with palm trees. And, California is far enough away that I won't be tempted to drive back.

The only person who knows where I am is Tori and I made her promise not to tell anyone. I need to decompress, focus on the baby and figure my life out. It's exciting, but scary. For the first time that I can remember, I'm not worried about what anyone else thinks and I'm on my own, free to make my own decisions without any pressure and I'll either reap the benefits or learn from my mistakes.

So, here I am, sitting on my small balcony in my tiny apartment in North Hollywood, working on a freelance job for a client that Tori referred my way. For once, I'm doing what I want and it feels good. Creativity flows and I design a logo for a personal trainer who's trying to get more clients and build her business. The money isn't great yet, but I'm working on building up my clientele and luckily I have plenty of savings that I can live off of until things pick up.

The weeks turn into months and my pregnancy goes smoothly. I actually enjoy it and I talk to the baby growing inside of me constantly. After all, it's just the two of us against the world. When I'm 18 weeks along, I find out that I'm having a boy. It's bittersweet and I have a feeling he's going to be a miniature Killian. With my luck, he's going to be a constant reminder of the man I loved but who didn't love me. I can already picture the dark hair and midnight blue eyes.

The year flies by and the holidays are a little lonely, but I cope. I'm still deciding on a name, but I'm pretty sure it's going to be an Irish name. A new neighbor moved in next door a few weeks ago and even though he's cute, I'm five months pregnant and it's obvious. Nevertheless, my neighbor Scott always stops by to talk to me and make sure I'm okay. He sees I'm pregnant and alone so he probably feels bad for me. But, he seems like a nice enough guy.

On New Year's Eve, I've just settled down on the couch, ready to watch a movie, when I hear a knock on the door. To my surprise, it's Scott.

"Hi, Aubrey," he says, dimples in full effect. "Happy New Year."

"Thanks," I say.

“Staying in?”

I nod. “Just going to watch a movie and probably be asleep by ten.”

He chuckles. “I hear you. New Year’s Eve is so overrated.” He glances over my shoulder and seems to be trying to figure out what to say next. “So, um, I don’t suppose you’re up for some company?”

“You’re not going out?” I ask, surprised.

“Nah. My friends took off for Big Bear and I’m not really in the mood for a party.”

I’m honestly taken completely off-guard and my hesitation probably makes me appear rude.

“But, if you want to be alone, it’s cool. I get it.”

“No,” I say and take a step back. “C’mon in. If you don’t mind a chick flick and some sparkling apple cider?”

Again, those dimples flash. “Let’s do it.”

I don’t know much about Scott, but we end up talking instead of watching the movie so I find out he’s originally from the Midwest like me, he’s 30, a bit younger, and moved here to work in the music industry. I haven’t interacted like this with another adult in months so it’s nice.

Scott is cute with dark blond hair and brown eyes and he’s funny and polite. And, the best thing is, I know I’m safe with him because there’s no attraction on my end. As sweet as he is, I’m not scared I’ll lose my heart like I did before.

When he asks me what I’m doing in Los Angeles, I bite the inside of my cheek, not sure what to reveal. “I needed a change. New scenery.” I’m not sure if he buys it, but I’m not about to pour all of my problems out on him.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but are you and the father still…” His voice trails off in a question. “Still together?”

I swallow hard and feel a prick in my heart.

“Sorry,” he instantly apologizes. “That’s too personal.”

“No, it’s okay.” I look down at the blanket covering my lap and pull at the edge, twisting it. “We’re not. It didn’t work out.”

“No offense, but he sounds like an idiot.”

I look up and smile. “Thanks.”

Scott makes it his mission to look after me once he finds out I’m a pregnant woman all on my own in the big city. It’s nice to have someone show concern and drop by to talk or just hang out every once in awhile. I don’t get any other company and I appreciate the thoughtful gestures he makes like bringing me fresh fruit from the Farmer’s Market or changing a light bulb that I can’t reach.

Like the old adage, time flies. I’m due in April and Tori comes out to spend a couple of weeks with me. When the contractions start, she’s at my side and it’s a relief. Scott is also over and he grabs my bag and ushers us both down to his car.

“You don’t have to drive us to the hospital,” I say, but he insists. I’m so grateful to have friends with me during this time because I am scared. The pain gets worse and by the time we arrive at the hospital, I’m doubled-over, clinging to Tori, and Scott runs in to get help.

An orderly appears, helps me into a wheelchair and then sweeps me into an elevator and up to a room. Nearly 24 long hours later, with Tori by my side talking me through the pain and feeding me ice chips, I give birth to a baby boy. After they clean him off and place him on my chest, my heart swells.

“You did good,” Tori says, leaning in and running a hand over the fuzzy black hair on the tiny infant’s head.

“Thank you for being here.” My eyes fill with tears and I can’t believe that I am a mother. “He’s so tiny,” I whisper, in awe.

“He’s perfect,” she says. “Well? What did you decide to name him?”

When he looks up at me with those bright blue, Irish eyes, I smile. “Aidan.”

Tori grins and squeezes my arm. "I love it."

It's nice to have Tori staying with me and helping with the baby. I haven't asked her about Killian yet, but on her last night, I can't help it. Curiosity gets the better of me and after I put Aidan down to bed, I walk back into the living room where she's packing her suitcase.

"Do you ever see Killian?" I ask.

Tori looks up and gives me a half-smile. "I wondered when you were going to ask about him."

"I try not to think about him, but now that his mini-me is here, it's kind of impossible not to," I admit.

"I haven't been to any fights with Mike lately, but he did mention seeing Killian fight a few times."

I nod and plop down on the couch. As much as I try not to think about him, I do. And, ever since having Aidan, I've been sad. I guess it's to be expected, especially now that Tori is leaving and I'm going to be well and truly on my own. It's hard not to wonder what my life would be like if Killian had decided to be in it. Everything that I'm experiencing with Aidan, Killian and I could've been going through together.

But, no, there's no point in dwelling on what could've been. Killian never wanted to be a father and not telling him about my pregnancy was the best thing I could've done.

Right? I wonder.

I just didn't want to burden him or guilt-trip him into some sense of responsibility. But, maybe I'm wrong. When tears burn my eyes, I grab a pillow and bury my face in it.

"Honey," Tori sits down next to me and pulls the pillow away before I can suffocate myself.

"I did the right thing, didn't I?" I ask, feeling utterly confused.

But, she doesn't look too convinced.

"What?" I ask. "Tell me, please."

Tori shifts and makes a face. "You ran away so fast. I just feel like maybe..."

I raise a brow, desperate for advice.

“I don’t know. It’s your life, but maybe you should’ve gotten some closure first.”

“With Killian?”

“And your parents. They’ve asked me a thousand times where you are and I pretend not to know.”

“They didn’t want anything to do with Aidan.”

“Maybe they’ve had a change of heart. He is their only grandchild.”

I let out a breath and consider her words.

“They seem sad, Aubrey. I think they really miss you.”

I swipe a tear away and wonder again if I’m being selfish by running away. Am I just being a coward, unable to face my problems? “Am I a terrible person, Tor?”

“No, of course not,” she says and hugs me. “I just think that sometimes people make mistakes, say things they don’t mean and it might be worth a shot to try again.”

“You think I should call my parents?”

“I do. I’m not saying let them control your life again or even move back to Chicago, but you should probably let them know that you’re happy here and that you and Aidan are doing great.”

I end up taking Tori’s advice and send a letter to my parents with my phone number and a picture of Aidan. I tell them that we’re doing well and I don’t know what to expect, but a few days after I send it, my phone rings. It ends up being my mom and she sounds relieved.

“We’ve been so worried,” she says. “I’m so happy you finally reached out. God, honey, you could’ve been laying in a ditch somewhere and no one would’ve known.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I just needed some time to figure things out.”

“Aubrey, why did you run away?” she asks, voice ragged with emotion.

The anguish in my mom’s voice catches me by surprise. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. But, you were pushing so hard about Ben and it felt like you didn’t want anything to do with my pregnancy or the baby.”

“I know,” she admits. “We just want to see you happy and successful.”

I want to say that I am, but that’s not quite the truth. Sadness has become a permanent resident in my heart and I’m blowing through my savings because L.A. is so expensive and my company is crashing before it ever took off. I feel like I’m on life support and now I have a child to take care of. It’s beyond overwhelming, but I know I can do it. I refuse to return to Chicago with my tail between my legs and admit defeat.

“Thank you,” I say. “But, I felt like I was suffocating in Chicago and I had to get away.”

My mom sighs. “I’m sorry you felt that way. But, you need to understand how it looks.”

“How what looks?” I ask, confused.

“Well, you being a single mother. People are going to ask questions about who the father is and we can’t very well say a washed-up fighter who left her.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and realize nothing has changed. She and my father are still only worried about outward appearances and it kills them that I had Killian’s baby. A part of me really thought she’d tell me how much they missed me and that they’d be on the first flight out to meet their new grandson.

I look over at the bassinet where Aidan sleeps like a little angel. “I have to go, Mom.”

“Aubrey-”

“Thank you for reminding me why I left.” I hang up and let out a frustrated sigh. *It’s going to be okay*, I tell myself, and wander over to run a finger along Aidan’s baby-soft cheek. He

gurgles in his sleep and love makes my heart swell. “It’s just us, baby boy,” I whisper. Killian’s words come back to haunt me and I sigh. “Us against the world.”

In all of my life, I’ve never felt so utterly alone. But, time doesn’t stop and I refuse to sit around and feel sorry for myself. Days turn into months and then, unbelievably, into years. It seems insane that three years pass in what could only be described as the blink of an eye and my handsome little boy is now three.

We celebrate with a homemade cake and Aidan amazes me every day. He’s the happiest boy, so full of curiosity and enthusiasm. He has this zest for life and he’s into everything, constantly keeping me on my toes. He’s walking, talking and his bright personality is larger than life. I’ve never seen a kid smile so much and with every day that passes, he looks more and more like Killian.

Those midnight blue eyes and his dark hair make me think of his father every single day. Two peas in a pod when it comes to the looks department. I have no doubt that Aidan will grow up to be a heartbreaker. I just hope I teach him to let the girls down easily if he isn’t interested and to treat them all with kindness and respect.

The day after Aidan’s third birthday, we’re on the floor, playing with a new truck when he doesn’t seem to be quite himself. He seems extra tired today and a little short of breath which concerns me. I wonder if he’s coming down with something when he suddenly falls over.

“Oh, my God,” I cry and crawl over and scoop him into my lap. “Aidan!” Panic slams into me like a runaway truck and, after what feels like an eternity but is probably no more than a few seconds, Aidan opens his blue eyes and looks up at me. He starts crying and I run a shaking hand over his thick, dark hair.

My heart thunders as I reach for my phone and call his pediatrician. After I explain what happened, the doctor asks me some questions and suggests we get some tests done. He

refers me to a pediatric cardiologist and I am completely numb when we go in for the appointment.

At the Children's Hospital, I answer a ton of questions and Dr. McCall, the specialist, examines Aidan and runs numerous tests on him including an electrocardiogram. The ECG records the electrical activity of Aidan's heart and even though it is noninvasive, the sticky electrodes on his tiny chest make my own heart constrict.

After an exhausting gamut of tests and procedures, the doctor informs me that my baby has a heart defect and needs surgery to fix it.

My precious, little Aidan needs open heart surgery or he won't live to see his fourth birthday.

KILLIAN

I blast my opponent in the kidney with my knuckles and then swing my fist upward and hit him in the jaw. He drops like a box of rocks and I go down, too, straddling his middle and letting loose with a barrage of punches until blood spatters through the air. The referee has to yank me off of him and it's clear I won the fight, but people begin to boo and hiss because I took it too far.

"Fuck off," I say and spit as some overzealous guy in the audience yells an insult at me. I've had it with these underground fights, but it lets me burn off steam and take out my frustrations. I walk away with a decent chunk of change, enough to pay off a couple of bills, and hopefully buy some groceries. More specifically, beer.

When I get back to my trailer, I toss the prize money on the counter and take a shower. I turn the water as hot as I can handle, until it's practically scalding, and flex my hands, staring at my bruised and bloodied knuckles. I know I lost it tonight in the ring, beat that poor guy to a bloody pulp, but I don't feel a thing. I'm numb.

After my shower, I pull on a pair of worn pajama bottoms, grab a beer out of my otherwise empty fridge and drop down in my chair. I feel edgy, irritable and the fight tonight didn't help relieve it. I'm yearning to head over to the gym and pound on a punching bag until I collapse, but it's too late and they're closed. I also don't work there anymore and I don't have enough money to afford a membership.

I quit teaching karate to the kids almost a year ago and figure they're better off without me. I'm a bad example, toxic and not someone they should be looking up to or trying to emulate. All I do is fight, every night that I can, and if I'm not doing that then I'm here in my chair and drinking myself into a stupor. I've lost weight and I know that I look like shit with a full beard and shaggy hair, but I can't seem to muster up anything within me to actually care.

As I light up a cigarette and contemplate running down to the convenience store to grab more beer, there's a knock at the door. I wonder if it will go away if I ignore it. I am not in the mood to deal with Lola or Mac so when the door opens and Mac walks in, I groan.

"I'm not home," I grumble and inhale.

"Glad I brought this," he says and drops a fast food bag on the table beside me. "When's the last time you ate, Kill? You look like a damn skeleton."

I reach for the bag and pull out a cheeseburger which I inhale. Shit, I guess I was hungrier than I realized. As I'm sucking down a carton of fries, Mac sits down in the other chair and frowns.

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't be," I mumble.

"You're a hot fucking mess, kid. Have you taken a look in the mirror lately?"

"Nope. Nothin' there I want to see."

"Well, maybe you should take a good, long look. You're falling apart."

I shrug, already tired of this conversation. "What do you want, Mac? You think some McDonald's is gonna get me to agree to fight Torres?" I laugh and lick the salt off my fingers.

"No. Not McDonald's, but how about Aubrey Reed?"

I stop chewing and look over at him. The food suddenly tastes like cement and I have to force it down my throat. "What about her?" I ask carefully.

“I know where she is,” he tells me.

For the first time in three years, something in my heart flutters to life and I sit up straighter. “Where?”

“What does it matter?”

My eyes narrow and nostrils flare. “Tell me,” I say, voice low and lethal.

“Kill, you barely have enough money to fill your bike with gas, much less buy a plane ticket to California.”

“She’s in California?” When he nods, I sink back in my recliner, thoughts spinning. All this time, she’s been out West. I wonder what she’s doing, where exactly she’s living and why she never once tried to reach out to me.

Because she thinks you’re an asshole, I remind myself.

Mac scrunches his nose, nudges a crusty dish away that’s been sitting on the table for about a week now and sighs. “Yep. Been living out there for the last three years. That’s what I heard, anyway.”

“From who?”

“I’ve been doing some coaching at the gym. Some people actually appreciate what I can teach them, ‘ya know.”

My eyes narrow and I stub the rest of my cigarette out. “Mac-”

“Anyway, I overheard some guy say his girlfriend just visited her friend named Aubrey in Cali. We got to talkin’ and it sounds like your girl.”

“What’s his girlfriend’s name?”

“Tori.”

Tori Simpson, I bet. I let out a breath. It has to be Aubrey.

“You wanna know what I think?” he asks.

“Not really.”

“I think you should find her, talk things out. It’s obvious you won’t let yourself move forward and you’re still hung up on her. I thought it would pass, but it’s going on three years now, Kill. You stopped living, became a damn recluse. And, don’t

even get me started on that beard of yours. You look like a goddamn mountain man.”

I scrape my hand over my beard and know he’s right. About everything. I have stopped living, taking care of myself and I honestly didn’t give a shit if I went to bed tonight and never woke up.

Until he mentioned Aubrey.

Suddenly, my mind buzzes and I’m trying to come up with a plan. But, Mac is right. I barely have enough money to pay my phone bill. How the hell can I afford to get all the way out to California?

I let out a sigh and rake a hand through my long hair. “Is this where you say ‘I told you so’?”

Mac’s mouth edges up. “Whatever do you mean?”

“If I would’ve gone back to MMA then I’d have enough money to jump on the next flight out of here.”

“Okay, listen up. I’m going to say this once and you better fucking pay attention. Got it?”

I nod. Even though he drives me crazy sometimes, I love Mac like a crazy uncle you dread seeing because he embarrasses the hell out of you. He’s also the father I never had and I’ll always be grateful to him for teaching me how to defend myself and introducing me to the martial arts world.

“You wanna win your girl back? You gotta clean yourself up and make some money. No self-respecting woman wants a freeloading bum who looks like a damn yeti.”

I scratch my bristled chin. “Okay. I can shave and get a haircut tomorrow, but-”

Mac holds a hand up and I stop talking. “I said listen.”

I press my lips together and wait for him to continue. He’s thoroughly enjoying this and I struggle not to roll my eyes.

“I have a friend who owns an MMA gym in L.A. He thinks you got talent and never should’ve left the cage. I told him a

little about your situation— how you're reluctant to go back— and he made an offer.”

“Offer?” My eyes narrow and I'm not sure if I like where this conversation is going.

“He'll fly you out, you do some training at his gym and consider returning to MMA.”

“That's it? Just consider it?”

“That's it.”

“What about Torres and a re-match?”

“That's not part of the deal, Kill.”

Huh. It sounds like a win-win situation and I'm instantly trying to spot the catch. “What's in it for him?” I ask, eyes narrowing. “It sounds suspect.”

“Well, if you do return to the cage, he'll want to be your sponsor. Don't ask me why, but the man has a lot of faith in you. More than you ever had in yourself.”

I nod, considering his words. “If I do go, where would I stay?”

“There's a small apartment above the gym. All yours for as long as you're there.”

For the first time in three years, I feel a flicker of hope. Getting Aubrey and my career back would be the best thing that could happen to me, but I know that there's no guarantee. Suddenly, I feel like the world's biggest asshole. “I'm sorry, Mac,” I mumble. “I've been such a hot, fucking mess and all you've ever done is try to help me and-” I choke on the words. “I've been an ungrateful shit.”

“I ain't gonna argue with that, Kill.”

A half-laugh, half-snort erupts from me and I make a decision. “I wanna do it.”

Mac nods slowly, but doesn't look nearly as happy as I thought he would.

“What?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I just think you should keep in mind that it’s been almost three years since you last saw each other. For all you know, she could’ve up and married some SoCal surfer.”

He has a point, but I’m going to try not to dwell on that. Instead, I’m going to focus on finding her and making things right again. Even if she does have some new guy in her life, I need to see her. To know that she doesn’t hate me for the last things I said and did. I was scared, a fucking coward, and didn’t know how to admit to myself or her that I was falling in love.

That she meant everything to me.

During the last three years, my feelings haven’t changed. If anything, they’ve grown stronger because I miss her so goddamn much it hurts. I stand up, feeling more determined than I ever have in my life. “Mac,” I say, “I’m going to California.”

“There’s one more thing you should probably know,” he says and shifts, suddenly looking uncomfortable. “The last time I talked to your girl it was outside the gym and I, ah...well, I wasn’t too nice.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I had a few too many cocktails and blamed her for you not wanting to return to fighting.”

“Mac-”

“I know, I know. It was a shitty thing to do. I just hope I didn’t put any doubts in her head, you know? I’m sorry, Kill. Sincerely.”

I release a sigh. “It’s fine. I know you didn’t mean it. The only thing that has kept me out of the cage is my own damn pride. But, I’m going to work on it, Mac. And, I’m going to get my girl back.”

He raises a bushy eyebrow and grins. “Good luck, Kill. If you need anything...”

“Thanks, Mac,” I say. “No matter what a dick I might be, I love you like a dad.”

“I know, kid. I know.” He thumps my back shoulder with a meaty palm and then pulls me into a big bear hug.

The next afternoon, I land at LAX and take an Uber to Studio City where the MMA gym is located. Instead of paying the bills, I brought all of my prize money and I’m not happy that the Uber ride cost almost \$80. Traffic here sucks, but the one-hour commute gave me plenty of time to track down Aubrey’s current address in North Hollywood.

When I walk into the state-of-the-art gym, duffel bag over my shoulder, the owner, Sam Kline, heads right over and grasps my hand in his, pumping it hard. “Killian ‘The Killer’ Doyle,” he says, voice laced in awe. “I can’t tell you what an honor it is to meet you. I’m a huge fan.”

“Thanks,” I say, a little embarrassed. “Great place.” I look around at all the fancy equipment and Sam offers to take me on a tour. He introduces me to every person we pass and I’m starting to feel like some kind of celebrity instead of a former fighter fallen from grace.

Sam talks my ear off and the guy has a passion for MMA fighting. He tells me how he followed my career and then mentions how honored he is to have me here to train.

“I haven’t decided to return to the MMA world,” I tell him, making sure my stance is clear.

“I know,” he says. “But, I’m not going to lie. I’m hoping I can lure you back.”

I make a noncommittal sound and Sam takes me up to the small studio apartment over the gym. It’s nicer than I thought it would be and I drop my bag on the floor.

“Make yourself at home. You can have access to the gym and all its equipment 24 hours a day and any trainers you want will work with you personally. I’m not going to lie— I’m on a mission, Killian. I’m going to try to get you back in the cage.”

Yeah, I’m on a mission, too. I’m going to try to get Aubrey back in my life.

After organizing the few belongings I brought, I decide to head over to Aubrey’s place and scope it out. I’m nervous as

hell, practically having damn heart palpitations, as I head over to the North Hollywood address I tracked down online.

I have the Uber driver drop me off a little ways past the apartment complex on Magnolia Boulevard and hop out. I run my hands through my hair which is still too long, but I didn't have time to get it cut. At least I shaved and now have a much more presentable scruff coming in, though. As I approach her place, my nerves kick up a notch. Just knowing where she is, that she's so incredibly close, fills me with an indescribable joy.

As I'm deciding what to do, a car pulls up to the curb and I instantly recognize the Honda Civic and the blonde head in the driver's seat. I swallow hard and duck behind the nearest tree, still trying to figure out the best way to approach her.

I've only got one shot at this and I can't screw it up.

The door opens and when she gets out, my world starts to turn again. She's just as beautiful as I remember, but her hair is much longer, in a ponytail that reaches all the way down her back, and she looks thinner. I feel a pull like I've never felt with any other woman. I don't know what it is about her, but Aubrey Reed is the reason my heart beats. I just wish I would've told her that three years ago.

I let out the breath I've been holding and take a step forward as she opens the back door and leans inside. Maybe she has groceries or shopping bags back there, I think. But, when I see it's a small child she lifts from a car seat, I freeze mid-step.

Aubrey balances the toddler on a hip and swings her purse over a shoulder. Then, she closes the car door and I hear the click of the locks. For a long, stunned moment, I don't know what to do so I just stand there and watch her walk up to the front door, unlock it and walk inside.

My eyes slide shut and I lean back against the tree, my thoughts ricocheting around my head like a ball bouncing around in a pinball machine.

Is the child hers? Is she married? Is she happy?

“Fuck,” I hiss, hope sinking faster than a torpedoed ship, and slap a palm against the tree’s rough bark. *Am I too fucking late?*

AUBREY

The last week has been hell and I am an emotional wreck. Aidan needs heart surgery and I am a freelance graphic designer with basic health insurance. I can't believe how selfish I was to leave my job in Chicago which had full medical benefits. I told myself I needed to focus on myself and my happiness, but it never occurred to me that I might need nearly \$100,000 to save my three-year-old son's life.

I've never cried so much as I have since meeting with the cardiologist and hearing Aidan's diagnosis. How can this be happening? He's barely even three and the sweetest baby in the whole world. Life is so damn unfair. The idea of putting my little man through open heart surgery, of a surgeon breaking his tiny chest open and working on his fragile heart, shreds me. But, if I don't get him the surgery, he may not live to see his next birthday.

I have no option but to make it happen. The first thing I do is look into getting a loan, but quickly realize I am not an ideal candidate and get hit with multiple denials. Second, I bite the bullet and call my parents. As much as I dread asking, they have the money to help me. I just never expected to hear an ultimatum that leaves me gutted.

Basically, after I explain the desperate situation, my parents tell me they will help if I move back to Chicago and basically do as they say. Let them dictate my life. Without any other feasible option, I reluctantly agree. I have no choice in the matter and Aidan's care is my number one priority. He is the

little, bright light shining in my life and I would do anything for him.

I explain that the cardiologist is here, though, and that I want Aidan to continue seeing him and get the surgery done here. My parents aren't thrilled, but promise to wire me some money for a downpayment. At least now I have a plan and I call and set up the surgery. The doctor schedules another exam with us and I'm feeling a bit of relief. Until my mom calls me back the following day.

"Aubrey, your dad and I had dinner the other night with Benjamin Styles and, for whatever reason, he still has an interest in you," she tells me and my heart sinks.

I can't believe this. It's already happening and I'm still in L.A. From 2,000 miles away, they're still trying to control my life.

"We shared your, ah, current situation. It didn't seem to phase him that you are a single, unwed mother and he mentioned asking you out when you return to Chicago."

"Mom-" I begin to say, but she cuts me off.

"I know you said you don't love him, but now it's about more than just you. Think about it. If you're smart, you will make things work with Benjamin. Best case scenario, he proposes, you two get married and you can pass the boy off as his son. It will save a lot of unwanted questions and embarrassment."

I know they haven't made peace with the fact that Killian is Aidan's father, but this is going too far. And, *the boy?* Really? "Your grandson's name is Aidan, Mom," I remind her in a cool voice. I feel like a wounded animal, backed up into a corner and I'm trying not to lash out because I need help, but I'm scared and feel threatened.

"Aubrey, do I need to remind you that you called *us* for our help? Well, we're trying to help you. Trying to fix everything that you messed up."

I release a long sigh and look over at Aidan who sits on the floor and plays with his blocks. "I know, Mom. I'm sorry." I have to suck it up and do whatever they want. It's the only choice I have if I want Aidan taken care of and I suppose it

wouldn't be the worst thing if I gave Ben another chance. I could grow to care for him again, I try to convince myself. Aidan should have a father figure who wants to be in his life and if I have to make a sacrifice for that to happen then I will.

But, I know that I will never love him or feel even a fraction of what I felt for Killian.

It's a depressing thought, but I can't be selfish again. Every decision I make from here on out, I am putting Aidan's best interest first and foremost. He needs surgery, so I will move back to Chicago. He needs a father, so I will go back to Ben. He needs grandparents, so I will play nice with my mom and dad.

What other option do I have?

Hopefully, I'll be able to find a good job, too, and start saving money again. Living here has obliterated the savings I did have and pursuing my dream of freelancing just doesn't pay the bills. At least not here in a city where my monthly rent is astronomical. More than I'd be paying for a house back home.

I also miss Tori. A lot. I pick up my phone and tap her name. I need to hear a friendly voice and some words of encouragement. When she answers, I don't mean to, but I instantly burst into tears.

"Aubrey, what's wrong?" she asks, voice full of worry.

I half-sob, half-hiccup through my dilemma and explain poor Aidan's diagnosis. She commiserates with me and when I get to the part about calling my parents, she swears.

"Are you kidding me? Aidan is their grandbaby and they should be throwing money at you to make sure he gets that surgery. I'm sorry, Aubrey, but this is too much. Even for them."

"I know, Tor, but what can I do? My baby needs me to take care of him and I'll do anything. Even marry Ben."

"You shouldn't have to do that. Or, anything you don't want to. Their demands are ridiculous and they're so worried about appearances that they forget about the importance of love.

Maybe they are happy with a marriage of convenience, but that doesn't mean you should have one."

"I know," I whisper. "But, I'm at my breaking point and out of options."

"What if you had another option?" she asks.

"I already tried borrowing money and the banks laughed in my face."

"No, I mean what if someone else would pay for Aidan's surgery?"

"Who?" I ask, completely at a loss.

"Killian."

For a moment, I don't say anything. Then, I force a laugh. "First, Killian doesn't even know that Aidan exists. And, second, he barely had enough money to cover his own bills. How in the world would Killian be able to pay for a surgery that's almost \$100,000?"

"Well, I just heard something and I was going to call and tell you..."

My heart pauses beating for a moment. "What did you hear?"

"Killian is training and word is, he's returning to MMA."

My world tilts a little and I don't know how to respond. "Really?" I try to sound nonchalant, but I want more details.

"That means some big paychecks are coming his way. And, the other thing is-" she abruptly cuts off and I'm squeezing my phone so hard, it's probably going to crack.

"What?"

"He's in L.A."

"*What?*"

"Yeah, that's what Mike said. There's a big MMA gym and he's training there, getting ready to make his big comeback."

It takes me a moment to process her words and the fact that Killian is here in the same city with me leaves me feeling edgy. One of the reasons I left Chicago was to put distance

between us and here he is again. For a long minute, I don't know what to say or think.

"Aubrey, I know you still care about him. Maybe this is a sign..."

"You think I should talk to him?"

"I think he should know he has a son."

I release a ragged sigh and watch Aidan play. He's such a good little boy and a part of me thinks I should tell Killian. Even if he doesn't care. "I know," I say. "He might not want to be a father, but he is one."

"He also should have the option of being in his son's life. People change, Aubrey. He said he didn't want to be a father three years ago."

"Do you really think he'd do a complete 180?"

"You never know," she says. "I do think that he should help pay for Aidan's care, though."

"I can't ask him to do that. I've kept Aidan a secret all this time and then I'm going to ask Killian for money the second he gets a big paycheck? It seems wrong— like I'm using him."

"Aidan is Killian's responsibility as much as yours."

I know she's right, but the last thing I want is for him to think I only reached out because I need money fast. Because if I track Killian down, I'm not doing it for the money. I'm doing it because it's only fair that he knows what is going on and that our baby's health is in jeopardy.

"Oh, God," I whisper, not believing the fact that I am about to ask this. "Do you know where this gym is?"

Apparently, an MMA gym is different from other gyms and there's only one big one here. Tori and I find out that it's run by Sam Kline and located in Studio City. She's convinced it has to be the right place, but I won't know until I go over there and find out.

It's still early in the day and the sooner I get this over with the better. My nerves are a mess and I have no idea what Killian's

reaction will be to seeing me after I ran out on him much less when he finds out that Aidan is his. *Oh, God.* By the time I reach the gym, I'm shaking.

Maybe I should've waited until tomorrow to do this, I think. But, no. I have to buck up and just do it. What's the worst case scenario? Killian tells me to take a hike? *I can handle it,* I tell myself. I keep the mantra going strong through my head as I push Aidan's stroller ahead of me and stop at the counter in the corner of the enormous gym.

I can do this, I can do this, I can-

My gaze immediately lands on him, sparring on a nearby mat, shirtless, sweating, determined. He's more lean now and even more handsome than I remember. I can't look away and when the girl behind the counter asks how she can help me, I can't seem to find my voice.

As though Killian feels my presence, he pulls his attention away from the fight, lifts his head and our eyes meet. His mouth drops and, in that moment of distraction, his opponent's fist knocks him upside the head and he spins. He quickly rights himself, says something to his sparring partner then turns all of his attention on me.

Dark blue eyes pinned on mine, Killian stalks over and I suddenly wish the floor would swallow me up. I get the horrible, sinking feeling that this was a very bad idea.

KILLIAN

I can't believe she's here and, for a moment, it's like I'm seeing a ghost. But, the closer I get, it's clear that Aubrey Reed is flesh and blood. And, for whatever reason, she's here to see me.

I can't even figure out what I'm feeling because my emotions are in such a tangled upheaval right now. Everything from anger to lust to fear to happiness courses through me and by the time I reach her, all I want to do is pull her into my arms.

But, instead, I stop in front of her and glance down at the toddler in the stroller who looks up at me with curious blue eyes.

"Hi, Killian," she says in that same voice that haunts me every night in my dreams.

I look up and my heart thunders against my ribs. "Hi," I say, voice wary, but hopeful. This is the woman who broke my heart and left without a goodbye. I have to be careful and not jump to any assumptions. I have no idea why she's here, but a part of me is so damn glad to see her.

"Can we talk?" she asks. "If you're too busy I can come back."

"No!" I say a little too forcefully. There's no way in hell I'm letting her out of my sight again. "We can go up to my apartment."

She nods and I lead her over to the stairs. Once there, she hesitates. "I got it," I tell her, lean down and pick the stroller up, carrying it up the flight of steps. At the top, I set it down

and my heart gives a strange kick when I look at the little boy. I want to know who he is, but I'm scared that she's going to tell me she's happily married. The very thought is crushing.

Aubrey pushes the stroller into my studio apartment and looks around while I grab a towel, wipe myself off and pull a t-shirt on. I push a few things over on the couch. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting company."

"It's fine." She sits down and seems to be debating what to say next.

"Killian-"

"Aubrey-"

We both speak at the same time and then abruptly stop.

"You go," I say. I am so damn curious to know what's going on in her life, but, at the same time, terrified to find out.

She takes a deep breath then reaches down and grasps the boy's little hand. "I'm not sure where to start." She must see my curiosity because she addresses the elephant in the room first. "Killian, I want you to meet Aidan..."

This time when I look at the little boy, I take a closer look and there's no missing his dark hair and midnight eyes that look so similar to mine. As the realization hits me, my gaze snaps back up to Aubrey's and I see the truth in her eyes.

"...your son," she says in a soft voice.

To hear the words come out of her mouth, confirming the thought that just flickered through my head, leaves me stunned. The floor seems to drop out from beneath me and I sink down in the chair across from her. If someone asked me my name at this moment, I don't think I'd be able to reply.

The moment turns awkward because I can't find the words to express what I'm feeling and she brushes her hand over his head, waiting.

"I know it's a lot to take in-"

"We have a son together?" I ask, trying to comprehend the fact that I am a father. The one thing I always said I never wanted

is now a reality and I'm not sure how I feel about it. But, I do know how I feel about finding out now when the kid looks almost three years old.

I am pissed.

"Yes."

"And, you never thought to tell me? Until now?" I can't believe this. How could she have kept something this huge a secret from me? I feel completely betrayed. Like everything we ever had together was bullshit.

"I'm sorry. You said you didn't want kids and when I found out I was pregnant--"

"Is this why you ran away?" I ask in disbelief and rake a hand through my hair.

"I left Chicago because I needed a fresh start. It all became too much and I didn't know what else to do."

"You could've talked to me, Aubrey," I say, getting more and more upset. "You didn't even give me that courtesy."

"I know and I'm sorry. But, for once in my life, I put my wants and needs first."

"But, it wasn't just about you. You were pregnant with my child, didn't even tell me and then just disappeared. I tried calling you. Hell, I even went to your parents' house, trying to track you down."

"You did?"

The disbelief in her voice irks me. "Did you have that little faith in me? In us?"

"I didn't think there was an us, Killian," she says, voice rising. "I came to your place that night to tell you about the baby and then Lola came waltzing out in your shirt. How do you think that made me feel?"

I shake my head. "Nothing happened. She spilled sauce on her shirt."

"It doesn't matter. What mattered was when I asked if you were all in and you said no. How could you do that to me?"

“I said no because we had stuff to figure out. But, I never wanted to stop being with you.”

“You didn’t say that,” she cries. “When I needed reassurance, you brushed me off.”

“I didn’t brush you off!”

“Yes, you did! I was pregnant and scared and I came to you looking for support.”

“You should’ve told me!” I jump up, beyond pissed. “Keeping it a secret and running away was a really shitty thing to do.”

“You didn’t want a baby!”

“You have no idea what the hell I wanted!” I hate that we’re shouting, unable to see the other’s point of view. “What you did was so fucking selfish,” I grind out.

Suddenly, Aubrey bursts into tears and I feel like the world’s biggest asshole. But, I’m so conflicted. With a sigh, I sit down beside her. “Please, stop crying.”

But, sobs rack through her thin frame and she buries her face in her hands. “I didn’t know what to do,” she admits, shoulders shaking. “My parents were so mad and I thought you didn’t want me and-”

“Your parents knew?” I ask. She snuffles and nods. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that they didn’t say anything to me, but it still stings. God, her tears are killing me. Without thinking, I reach out and wipe my thumb across her damp cheek. Aubrey looks up at me with bright, watery blue-green eyes the color of the sea and my heart lurches. I take her face in my hands and look deep into those haunted eyes of hers. “I am so goddamn mad at you,” I say, but without any force. My thumb caresses her cheek and when her eyes slide shut, I lean in and press my forehead against hers.

We sit like that for a long moment, letting our breathing and emotions settle down. My hands lower and my fingers twine with hers. Then, I hear some soft baby talk and we break apart and look down at Aidan. I’m not sure what he’s saying exactly, but Aubrey lets go of my hands, reaches over and pulls him out of the stroller’s seat and into her lap.

“Aidan,” she murmurs, smoothing his thick, dark hair back.
“This is Killian.”

A smile tugs at my lips and I reach a tentative hand out. “Hi, kid,” I say.

“Hi, hi, hi,” he says and gives me the biggest damn smile I’ve ever seen. Even though he’s a combination of both me and Aubrey, he resembles me so closely it’s a little unnerving. There’s no denying who this kid’s father is and, as scary as it is, knowing he’s mine, there’s also something about it that intrigues me.

Maybe being a dad isn’t something I need to freak out about.

I can feel Aubrey watching me and I look up and meet her inquisitive gaze. “He seems like a good kid,” I say. Aidan grabs my finger and tugs it and something inside of me shifts as I realize this little boy is my flesh and blood. *My son*. My chest tightens and emotion clamps down on my heart.

“He’s the best. So smart and sweet.”

When her voice catches and tears fill her eyes all over again, I let go of Aidan’s hand and frown. “What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t want to dump all of this on you at once, but-”

“Tell me. Whatever it is, I want to know the truth.”

“He’s sick,” she says and swipes the tears away with the back of her hand.

A nauseous feeling fills me and I look down at the little boy who appears so happy and healthy. “What’s wrong?” I ask, dreading her answer, but knowing I need to hear it.

“He has a heart condition. I just found out and I took him to see a pediatric cardiologist. He needs open heart surgery.”

“Jesus,” I hiss, completely shocked.

“It’s serious but, thank God, it can be fixed. I’ve been such a mess because I don’t have the money to do it and I was on the verge of going back home and begging my parents-”

I hold up a hand. “Stop. Forget your parents. I’m going to pay for whatever he needs so don’t even worry about it.” I tilt her

chin up and force her to look me in the eyes. “Okay?”

“Killian-”

“Okay?” I repeat more forcefully. When she nods, I lean over our son and press a kiss to her lips. “He’s going to get the best possible care. I promise.”

“Thank you,” she whispers. “I don’t want you to think I just came to you for money, though.”

I honestly don’t know why she finally came to me so I wait for her to continue.

“You’re right. I’ve been selfish. Instead of staying and talking to you, I ran away. I know it’s not an excuse, but I was so damn scared.”

“Why, though? Did you really think I’d turn you away?”

“I was scared because...” Her sea-colored eyes clash with mine. “I didn’t think you wanted me anymore.”

Her words make me sad. “Aubrey, sweetheart, I’m sorry.”

She blinks back a new onslaught of tears. “I’ve missed you so much, Killian.”

“I’ve thought about you every day for the last three years,” I tell her. “Do you know how completely wrecked I was when you left without a word?”

“I’m so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“You were the only good thing in my shitty life and after you took off, I folded. I didn’t care anymore. About anything.” Her hand covers mine and emotions surge, overwhelming and choking me.

“Kill...” She laces her fingers through mine. “Can you ever forgive me?”

I know that I have to be honest with her. “It’s not really about forgiving you, Aubrey, because I’d forgive you for anything a thousand times over. It’s just...I can’t forget that you left without a word. Without even a note or a number where I could reach you. And, now to find out we have a child together...” I see the turmoil on her face and I know it

matches mine. “You didn’t even tell me you were pregnant or give me a chance to take responsibility. Just made the choice for me that I wouldn’t be in his life. As freaked out as I might have been at first, I would’ve stayed by your side. I never would’ve abandoned you. And, now we’ve lost three years together.”

A sob rips from her throat and she covers her mouth.

By leaving, she destroyed the trust I had in her. But, not the love. The love was always there and I hate seeing her so upset like this. “Aubrey, baby, don’t cry. Please,” I murmur. Aidan looks from her to me and bursts into tears himself. I let out a shaky sigh and don’t know what the hell to do. We’re all a damn mess.

Aubrey bounces him on her knee and calms him down. “I should probably go,” she says. “I know you need to train and-” “I’m going with you.” Our gazes collide. “We can pick up some food, talk and I’d like to get to know my son a little. If that’s alright?”

“That would be nice,” she says.

We grab some In-N-Out burgers and go back to Aubrey’s apartment in North Hollywood. It’s small, but nice and after eating, the three of us sit on the floor together and play with Aidan. The kid is a riot and so full of life. It’s hard to believe he’s sick. Aubrey explains his condition more and how the doctor told her not all congenital heart defects can be detected before or right after birth.

Aidan has an atrial septal defect (ASD) which is an abnormal hole in the wall that divides the two upper chambers of the heart. And, because the hole is in an unusual position, they can’t go in and fix it with catheterization. Open heart surgery is the only option.

I can see the fear on Aubrey’s face when she talks about it and my own heart twists at the idea of this little guy going under anesthesia.

“They use a heart-lung machine to take over his respiratory function so the heart will be still,” she explains, hands

shredding a tissue in her lap. “Then the surgeon will make an incision in his chest and they’ll close the hole with a patch or sew it shut, depending on how big it actually is. It just sounds so scary and he’s so little.”

I wrap an arm around her shoulders and pull her closer. “I know, sweetheart, I know.” I press my lips to her temple and my eyes slide shut. I don’t know how we got here, but I’m so grateful that we’re together again. I missed this woman too damn much.

“Earlier I told you I was scared because I thought you didn’t want me anymore,” she says. “But, the thing that scared me the most...”

I freeze, lips against her head, waiting for her to go on, breathing her rose scent in deep. God, I missed it so much.

“...is that I was falling in love with you.”

Her admission makes my breath catch. “I was falling in love with you, too,” I say. My voice sounds husky and desperate.

The air between us seems to crackle and I press my lips against her temple again, drag them down to her cheekbone. I want to turn her in my arms and kiss her thoroughly. To make up for the last three, senseless years that we spent apart.

Suddenly, Aubrey pulls away. “It’s time for Aidan to go to bed.” She reaches over and touches my arm. “But, I hope you’ll stay.”

Heat floods me and I know that look in her eye. “I’d like that.”

AUBREY

Maybe inviting Killian to spend the night is a mistake, but I don't care. We've been apart for too long and I've missed him so damn much that I ache for him. I've been lost in fear and sorrow, feeling so utterly alone, and all I want is to spend tonight in his strong arms.

After I tuck Aidan into bed, I walk back out to the living room where Killian sits on the couch, waiting for me. I hold my hand out and when he wraps his big hand around mine, I tug him up and lead him down the hall to my bedroom.

I'm not playing games and when we cross the threshold, my gaze meets his and I start getting undressed. He needs no invitation and pulls his clothes off so fast I can't help but smile. The moment we're naked, he pulls me into his arms and his mouth covers mine.

God, it's been too long. The kiss is hot and demanding and we writhe against each other, trying to make up for lost time. My hands slide around his neck and up into his shaggy hair. It's too long, but I don't mind. The strands are just as soft and thick as I remember. His hands slide down my back, over my rear end, and he lifts me up against his steel length.

A whimper escapes from between my lips and I push closer, gyrating against his hardness. "I need you," I whisper. "So damn much."

"Take whatever you need, sweetheart."

I reach down between our bodies and wrap my hand around him, stroking, squeezing. “Fill me up, Kill. Make it all go away.”

Killian sweeps me up into his arms and carries me over to the bed where he lays me down. As his muscled body slides up over mine, nothing ever felt so right. It’s like two halves of a puzzle coming together again. We fit so damn perfectly.

He kisses me long and hard, tongue plunging deep, swirling, exploring, reconnecting. We’re both bubbling over with need and I’m beyond ready, burning up for him.

When he pulls back, we’re both panting, and he gazes at me with what looks like wonder in his beautiful midnight eyes. “Christ, Aubrey. I’ve dreamed of this so many nights. Wanted you so badly I ached.”

“Me, too,” I say. I grab the condom that I left on the nightstand and rip it open with trembling fingers. He takes it from me, rolls it on and positions himself at my hot, wet entrance. I lift my hips, begging for him, pleading, needing this more than I’ve ever needed anything before in my life. “Do it. *Please.*”

Killian sinks inside me with one, smooth stroke and we both groan in absolute ecstasy. “Oh, God,” I murmur. “Keep going.” He lifts my leg and slides deeper and I bite down on his shoulder.

It’s all too much and I cry out as he begins to thrust harder and faster, filling every empty corner of my being. I’ve missed this man so much and being with him like this again is a miracle. So much has kept us apart— people, misunderstandings, distance. And, now here he is, back in my arms, back inside me, and emotion hits me so hard that my chest constricts and hot tears fill my eyes.

His heart thunders against mine and we’re both panting, bodies rocking together, grateful for this moment in time. The pressure builds, scorching hot, and ignites an inferno between us. Pleasure takes over, pushing us to the edge, and our gazes collide as an epic release rumbles through both of our bodies. A scream rips from my throat and I drop my face into his chest, the aftershocks pulsating through me, and breathe hard.

Killian rolls off me and disappears for a moment to take care of the protection. When he returns, he settles down next to me. He lays his head on my pillow and I turn to face him. I'm not sure how long we just lay there and look at one another, absorbing each other's energy. He traces a finger down the side of my face, as though he can't believe I'm really there. I lay my hand against his heart and thank God for the thousandth time that he's here.

For the longest time, we communicate without words. Just through looks and touches. We've never been on this same deep level before. Never been so intimate. And, the beautiful thing is it's completely effortless and natural. It's strange how time away has brought us closer together.

"Are you okay?" he finally asks.

"I will be...have to be for Aidan. I'm so glad you're here, though," I say.

"Me, too." He pushes my hair back, circles his fingers over the curve of my ear. "I'm not going anywhere, either."

I have no idea how involved he wants to be in my life, but I think he plans to be in Aidan's and that makes me happy. "I know I dumped a lot of information on you earlier. I didn't want to scare you away."

"You could never scare me away, sweetheart. Don't you get it? You're a part of me and I'm never letting go."

"Of me?" I ask, unable to believe it.

"Yes, of you," he says and plays with a lock of my hair. "And, of our little boy. I want us to figure this out because you're not allowed to run away from me ever again. Got it?"

I smile. "Got it."

"Us against the world, right?"

"Right." I brush a hand through his dark hair and he smirks. God, his eyes shine like two bright sapphires and the resemblance to Aidan is uncanny.

"It's too long, but I didn't have time to get it cut."

“I don’t mind. Mine’s way too long, too. But, being so busy with Aidan doesn’t leave me much free time to get to the salon.”

“I like it,” he murmurs and lifts a strand to his lips.

“Can I ask you something?”

He nods, twirling my hair around his finger.

“What made you finally decide to return to MMA fighting? Mac had been trying to talk you into going back forever.”

“Well, I came out here with no intention of going back. Not really. But, Mac dangled you in front of me like bait, told me you lived here, and if I agreed to some training and said I’d consider returning then I got a free plane ticket to LAX.”

“You came out here for me?”

He traces a finger down the side of my face then leans closer and his lips capture mine in a slow, possessive kiss that makes my toes curl. When he finally pulls back, a soft sigh escapes my lips. “Yes,” he says simply. “And, after you told me about Aidan’s condition, I made my decision. I’m going back in the cage and I’m going to win so I can pay for his surgery. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“Killian,” I whisper, so full of love for him. “Do you have any idea how much this means to me? How much *you* mean to me?”

“If it’s even half as much as you mean to me then I’m a lucky man.”

I grab his face and kiss him hard, sliding my tongue against his, and moving up and over to straddle him. With my left hand, I grab another condom because this amazing man is about to get so lucky.

Technically, we both get lucky. Five more times.

When morning comes, panic washes over me and, for a brief moment, I worry that last night was only a dream. But, Killian lays next to me on his back, hand thrown over his head, breathing deeply. I watch him sleep, chest rising and falling

with even breaths, and my heart swells with love. There's no denying it. I love Killian Doyle so much it hurts.

I slide out of bed, slip my robe on and tiptoe down to check on Aidan. My heart catches when I look down into the little toddler bed and see Aidan still asleep and in the same position Killian is in— on his back, hand over his head. *So sweet.*

It's still early and if he wants to sleep in then that's fine by me. I brush my teeth and use the bathroom quickly then wander back down to the bedroom and slip under the sheet. Killian stirs and I crawl over and lay my head against his chest. His arm drops down and wraps around me, pulling me closer.

In the last three years, there's been no one else. Just thoughts and dreams of this washed-up fighter who stole my heart, body and soul. And now he's back in my bed and I'm going to do everything I can to keep him here. I vow never to lose Killian again.

Despite what he said last night, I don't want to pressure him or scare him away. He said he's going to fight again in MMA for Aidan, but I hope he's doing it for himself, too. Because if there's a re-match against Torres which is most likely inevitable and, God forbid, Killiana loses, I don't want him to ever blame Aidan or hold him accountable. Or me, for that matter.

It's a sticky situation, but it's a risk we have to take.

I feel Killian's warm lips press into my hair and I smile. "Morning, sweetheart," he mumbles.

"Good morning," I say and lift up to balance myself on an elbow and look into his sleepy, dark blue eyes. He yawns and I lay a hand against his stubble-roughened cheek. "Want some coffee?"

"God, yes," he moans. "Thanks to you, I didn't get much sleep."

"Get used to it," I say and hop out of bed. While he stretches like a big cat, I go down to the kitchen, turn on the machine and it's not long before the scent of strong, black coffee fills the air. I can hear Killian up and moving around in the

bathroom and after a quick sip of coffee, I hear Aidan wake up.

I walk over to his room. “Good morning, sleepyhead,” I say and open the blinds. He’s already crawling out of bed and babbling about something. When we reach the bathroom, the door swings open and Killian stands there in his worn jeans, shirtless, and smelling like peppermint toothpaste.

“Hey, buddy,” he says and kneels down. “Did you have a good night’s sleep?”

Aidan nods, suddenly shy, not used to seeing a strange man in the apartment. I’m going to have to explain how Killian is his father at some point and I suppose the sooner we do it, the better. I guide Aidan into the bathroom and point to the toilet. “Do your thing,” I tell him.

“I’ll go get my coffee,” Killian says, stands up to his full height and presses a kiss to my cheek.

I watch him walk away, all loose hips and low-hanging jeans, and heat rushes through my lower body. Even though we spent all night getting to know each other’s bodies again, I’m craving his touch like it never happened.

Damn, that man holds a power over me like no one else.

A few minutes later, we join Killian in the kitchen and I sit Aidan down in his booster seat at the table. While I get a bowl of cereal ready for him, Killian drags his own chair closer and I watch from the corner of my eye as he starts telling Aidan a story.

I set the bowl and a spoon in front of Aidan, but he’s so absorbed in Killian’s story that he barely notices. And, the moment Killian reaches behind Aidan’s ear and reveals a cookie, Aidan laughs. As he bites into the cookie, I sit down and reach for my mug.

“You always were quite charming,” I say.

“Me? Nah.” He sits back and finishes his coffee, eyeing me with hooded, blue eyes.

“So how do we tell a three-year-old that you’re his D-A-D?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Never had to do it before.”

“I guess we could just lay it all out there.”

“We could.”

Or, you should wait, a little voice warns. Just in case Killian decides to split because this turns out to be more than he bargained for. But, even if he does leave, Aidan should know who his father is and, besides, Killian said he’s here to stay, I remind myself.

“Aidan, honey, this is Killian and he’s going to be here a lot because he’s your Daddy.” Who knows if any of what I’m saying makes sense in the mind of a child who is three, but it feels good to say it.

“That’s right,” Killian says. “So, any advice you need about toys or naps or girls, you let me know.”

Aidan giggles, crumbs on his face from the cookie, and reaches into his bowl to scoop out a handful of cereal.

“Use your spoon, sweetie,” I tell him. Killian watches Aidan closely, a smile hovering at his lips, and my mouth edges up. “Well, Daddy, what do you think? Are you ready for a toddler?”

“If you made it through the terrible-twos, I can make it through the rest,” he says.

A dark thought hits me and I pray Aidan still has lots of time. We have a doctor’s appointment with the cardiologist today and I hope Killian can come. When I mention it, he nods.

“Of course, I’ll be there,” he says in a reassuring voice.

And, all I can think is how nice it feels not to be alone anymore.

KILLIAN

Spending time with Aubrey and getting to know Aidan is pure joy. I feel like I have something to look forward to again. They're giving me a reason to live and to be the best person I can be. It's my job to make sure they're both happy and taken care of and it isn't something to be taken lightly. I'm all in and once I make that decision, I know there's no turning back.

We meet with the pediatric cardiologist, Dr. McCall, later that day so he can run a couple more non-invasive tests on Aidan. Then, we all sit down together and he goes over the surgery in full detail for both me and Aubrey. He answers all of our questions and clarifies everything in the hopes of making us feel better. I can't say it sets me at ease any, knowing the things this poor little guy is going to have to face, but he's a tough kid and I know he'll make it through.

He's scrappy like me and that's a quality that can take you far in life. Trust me, I know.

When they place the sticky electrodes on Aidan, I reach for Aubrey's hand and squeeze. He's such a good kid and doesn't fuss or cry. That tiny spine of his is made of steel and he inspires the hell out of me.

I need to up my game and train like I have never trained before. Besides just the gym, I'm going to incorporate some non-traditional methods a la Rocky Balboa. Whatever pushes me hardest, works me until I'm ready to pass out, that's what I need to do. For the first time in my life, I have other people to

take care of besides myself. Aubrey and Aidan became my little family overnight and I will not let them down.

After we leave the Children's Hospital, the three of us stop and get ice cream. Aidan is way too short to see the 31 flavors to choose from so I scoop him up into my arms and let him lean against the counter and look through the glass. I walk him from one side of the counter to the other and name every single flavor. I feel Aubrey's gaze on us and glance over to see her smirking.

"What?" I ask.

"He always wants the same flavor," she tells me.

"What do you want, buddy?" I ask. His nose is pressed against the glass and he bounces back in my arms.

"P-butta and chocolate," he announces.

"Every single time," Aubrey says.

"A man of my own heart," I say and order the same scoop for myself and a kiddie cone for him. "And what about you, beauty?"

She blushes, gives me this slow-blink that makes my groin tighten and, oh yeah, I know that look. "Pralines and cream."

"Two scoops of pralines and cream in a waffle cone," I tell the kid at the counter.

"Killian! That's way too much."

"We can share," I say and give her a smoldering smile.

I hand Aidan over to Aubrey and electricity zips up my arm when our hands touch. God, this woman is going to be my undoing. *Get it together*, I tell myself, and pay for the cones. We head outside and sit at a little wrought-iron table. Aidan sits on Aubrey's lap and she holds his cone as he licks, face already covered in chocolate. I realize I didn't get enough napkins and run back inside to grab half from the dispenser.

"Your son is adorable," the girl behind the counter says.

I look up and my chest tightens with pride. "Thanks. He's also messy," I add and she laughs. Back outside, I set the napkins

on the table and realize I'm still holding Aubrey's cone, too, which is melting fast. I sit down and hold it out to her. She leans over and licks the ice cream and I drop my head and lick the other side, catching a drip as it runs down the cone. Our gazes lock and heat flares between us.

"If we weren't here-" I say, my voice husky and full of promise.

"I know," she murmurs.

Desire thrums through my veins and when she takes another bite of ice cream, it's enough to drive me crazy. I continue to hold her cone, feeding her, and taking bites of hers and mine. The three of us end up making a sticky mess, but luckily Aubrey is prepared like any mother of a three-year-old would be. She pulls wet wipes from her purse and we all clean up.

After ice cream, we decide to take Aidan to the park down the street from Aubrey's apartment. His surgery is still weeks away but, for now, we want him to enjoy everything in life. The recovery after his heart surgery is going to be a long road and endless weeks where he won't be able to run around and play like a normal kid.

Aubrey and I sit on a bench and Aidan bounces off to play in a huge sandbox with a couple of other little ones. He's social and fearless, a little bundle of energy. But, we still keep a close eye on him and make sure he doesn't overdo it. Any stress on his heart isn't good and we need to monitor him for fatigue, shortness of breath, swelling and poor appetite.

"He's a good kid," I say, watching him dig in the sand.

"The best," Aubrey agrees. She sighs and turns to face me. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was pregnant that night, Killian. It's going to haunt me for the rest of my life."

I lace my fingers through hers and pull her hand onto my thigh. "Don't say that. We both messed up that night and now I just want to move forward."

"Me, too."

I lift her hand and kiss its back. "We're gonna be alright," I tell her. "And he's gonna pull through that surgery with flying

colors.”

She pulls in a deep, shaky breath and nods her head. “He has to.”

“He will,” I say in a confident voice. I lift her hand and kiss it. “When we get back, I’m going to call Mac. I need to start training hard and he’s the only one I want to train me.”

“I think that’s a good idea. He loves you like a son.”

“He knows how to push my buttons, but he’s the one who always believed in me no matter what.”

“I believe in you, Killian,” she says, blue-green eyes twinkling. “So much. And, I’m sorry I doubted you before.”

“You had every reason to, though. I flat-out told you I never wanted to be a father and I regret it. Because right now, it feels better than I could’ve ever imagined.”

Aubrey slides closer and leans her head on my shoulder and, together, we watch our son play. It’s one of those magical moments that happens in life and makes you believe that everything is going to work out and the road ahead is smooth.

Unfortunately, that isn’t always the case.

We go back to her apartment and Aubrey puts Aidan down for his nap. When she walks back into the living room, I sweep her into my arms and begin kissing her. My tongue is halfway down her throat and I’m lifting her shirt up when there’s a knock on the door. With a groan, I freeze and she pulls away.

“It’s probably that book I ordered online. I’ll be right back. Don’t forget where we were,” she says over her shoulder in a flirty voice.

“I won’t,” I say and shift in discomfort. *Talk about bad timing.*

She chuckles and throws the door open and I see some guy standing there. He’s clean-cut, smiling and holding a bouquet of sunflowers and a brown bag. “Hey, Aubrey. I picked you and Aidan up some strawberries from the Farmer’s Market.”

My eyes narrow and I stand up straighter and cross my arms. *Who the hell is this guy and why is he bringing Aubrey*

flowers? I wonder as a green spike of jealousy skewers me.

“Oh, um, hi,” she says. “That’s so nice of you.” She accepts the gifts and I clear my throat. Aubrey turns and motions my way.

Reluctantly?

“Killian, this is my neighbor, Scott. Scott, this is Killian... Aidan’s dad.”

Okay, at least she told him and it’s not some big secret.

Surprise flits across his face, but then it’s gone. “Oh, hey. Nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” I say, but it’s hardly true. I can see what he’s trying to do with the flowers and strawberries from a mile away. And, honestly, I don’t blame him. Aubrey is gorgeous and raising a child on her own so why not sweep in and play the knight in shining armor?

Well, she’s not alone anymore. Aubrey is mine and I’m claiming her now. I walk over and extend my hand. *I’ll play nice and be polite*, I think. *For now*.

But, the moment he pisses me off, all bets are off.

We shake hands, sizing each other up. Aubrey says she’s going to put the sunflowers in some water and the moment she walks away, Scott says, “You live in Chicago, right?”

I wonder how close these two are and how much he knows about our situation. “I do, but I’m going to be out here now.”

Scott nods, looking from me to Aubrey who walks back over, an unreadable look on her face. “Killian is here to train. He’s an MMA fighter,” she says.

“Really?” Scott raises a brow. “I don’t know much about it, but that’s cool.”

I can’t tell what he really thinks and I don’t care. I’m just ready for him to leave.

“Well, thank you, Scott,” Aubrey says.

“You’re welcome.” He steps back out. “Don’t forget— I’m always here if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” she says and closes the door.

For an awkward moment, neither of us says anything. I know I shouldn’t get mad and there’s no way it’s fair of me to expect that she remained alone for the last three years, but I did so she should’ve, too. I drank myself half-stupid all day and dreamed of Aubrey all night. Never even looked at another woman. I just hope I wasn’t the only one miserable and pining.

“He’s a really nice guy,” she says.

“I’m sure.” I don’t know what she wants me to say.

“He’s been a friend to me the last few years.”

“What kind of friend?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“The kind with benefits?” I can’t help it. I need to know.

“No. The kind who brings me things from the store and helps me change light bulbs. The kind who washes my car and who drove me and Tori to the hospital when I went into labor.”

Shit. I feel horrible that I wasn’t here for that. “I’m sorry for sounding like a jealous asshole.”

“The fact is, you weren’t here and he’s always been kind to me and Aidan. And, I really appreciate that. So, please, don’t be mad at Scott because he’s a good guy.”

“You were never interested in being more than friends?”

Aubrey shakes her head. “No, Killian. You’re the one who haunted my memory and dreams every single night. No one else.”

I yank Aubrey into my arms and kiss her hard. That’s exactly what I needed to hear. Confirmation that I am the only man for her. My hands slide through her hair, cup the back of her head and tilt it, angling it so I can deepen the kiss. I devour her, unable to get enough. When I finally lift my head, we’re both panting. “I’m so damn sorry I wasn’t there for you. It

should've been me taking you to the hospital and by your side the entire time.”

“I think we need to stop telling each other how sorry we are. We've both apologized for what we've done and we need to move on. Okay?”

I nod, take her face in my hands and kiss her again. “Let's focus on us. On our future.”

“And, our son,” Aubrey says.

“He's still asleep?”

“Probably for another hour or so.”

My mouth edges up. “Good to know,” I say and sweep her up into my arms. “I've got three years to make up for and that's what I plan to do.”

Aubrey smiles and begins kissing my neck as I walk back to the bedroom with every intent of ravishing her.

AUBREY

Mac flies out and is thrilled to hear Killian officially announce he's returning to MMA fighting. He's instantly all-business, calls his contacts and before I can blink, a re-match is announced between Bobby "The Bull" Torres and Killian "The Killer" Doyle.

Mac also takes a moment to pull me aside and apologize for the things he said to me the last time we spoke. I appreciate it and put it behind me. Right now, we all need to focus on Killian's training.

I've never been so nervous in my life. Mac and Killian begin intense training that includes diet, by which I mean Killian eats non-stop, exercise and endless sparring. Killian is a damn machine, getting up every morning when it's still dark to go out on a 10-mile run and then off to the gym to meet Mac. I miss seeing him during the day, but he's in my bed every night and we make up for lost time. Killian also makes sure that he's back at my apartment by six so he can have dinner with me and Aidan.

We've settled into a little routine and I love it. Dinner together then play time followed by a bath and a bedtime story. We tuck Aidan in and then Killian and I talk about our day and how his training is coming along. Afterward, we wind up in bed, in each other's arms. Things always tend to heat up and making love with Killian is the perfect way to end my day.

One morning, I'm up extra early because Aidan kept waking up all night, being extra grumpy. Killian is out on his run and I'm making coffee when the phone rings. I've finally gotten

Aidan back down to sleep so I grab it quickly and answer before the ringing wakes him up. I don't bother looking at the caller i.d. and I should have.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Aubrey," my mom says. "How's the baby doing?"

"Fine," I say carefully. "His surgery is coming up fast."

"And how are you managing to pay for the rest of it? We only sent a small deposit to help you."

Leave it to my mom to cut straight to it. I haven't told her about Killian being here yet and I've been dreading this moment. As far as she knows, I'm still deciding about taking her deal in regards to returning to Chicago and Ben. *Here we go.* "Killian is here and we're working things out. He wants to be in Aidan's life and mine."

For a moment, there's only silence. "Aubrey-"

"No, please just listen. I know you disapprove of him and every decision I've made since leaving Chicago, but this is my life and I'm not going to live it for you anymore."

"You're being ungrateful. After all your father and I have done for you."

"I appreciate all the good things you've done for me, really, but when it comes to choosing the man I want in my life that's my decision. And, I choose Killian."

"You're being so naive. He's going to leave again and-"

"Whatever happens, I'll deal with it. But, I won't sit here and listen to you speak poorly of the man I love." My heart somersaults. *There, I said it.* Maybe not yet to Killian, but it's out there. I love him so damn much.

"You're making a huge mistake. At least think of the baby, Aubrey. He doesn't need some poor excuse of a father coming in and out of his life and confusing him. Children need stability and a steady income to make sure they have what they need."

“Mom,” I say in as calm of a voice as I can muster. “His name is Aidan and you’ve never even met him. Killian has been a better father than you have been a grandmother.”

She gives a little gasp and I almost feel bad, but it’s true. She and my dad never came to visit me or Aidan. Other than a few photos, they’ve never even seen him.

The door opens and Killian walks in, dripping sweat.

“I have to go, Mom. If you decide you want to be in my life and Aidan’s, let me know.” I hang up and feel good about standing up to her. I refuse to let her or anyone else ever tell me what to do again.

“You okay?” Killian asks.

“I’m great,” I say. “I just told my mom that you’re here and I don’t care how she or my dad feel about it.”

He walks over and presses a kiss to my forehead. “It’ll all be okay. One day they’re going to come around.”

I shrug. “Maybe, but I have more important things to worry about right now.” I swipe his long bangs back, out of his eye. “Are you ready to watch Torres tonight?” We’re planning on going with Mac to watch Bobby “The Bull” Torres fight and take some notes. The fight with Killian is coming up fast and I’m so nervous for him.

“Yeah, I’m ready,” he says, a determined look in his dark blue eyes. “But, first, I’m going to do something I should’ve done awhile ago.”

He heads toward the bathroom and I follow him, curious. I watch him pull out some hair clippers and a soft buzzing fills the air as he cuts all of his hair off until it’s super short, cropped closely to his skull. He sets the clippers on the counter, runs a hand through the buzz cut and turns to me. “Well? Does it look even?”

I glide my hands through it and check. “Looks good,” I confirm. I’ve never seen his hair so short, but he could go bald for all I care. He would still have the same heart-pounding effect on me.

“I’m meeting Mac at the park for some training in an hour. You and Aidan wanna come?”

“We’d love to,” I say. “C’mon. I’m going to make you a huge breakfast so you have enough energy and calories to burn.”

It’s still early when we get to the park and Mac, or Uncle Mac, as we’re now calling him scoops Aidan up and starts explaining how he’s going to learn to fight one day just like his papa. Who knew the gruff, old, crusty trainer could be such a softy?

Mac tells Killian to run until he says stop and points to the steep steps built into the hill. With a nod, Killian takes off and launches up the stairs. “How long are you going to make him do that?” I ask, getting tired just watching.

“Once I think he’s gonna collapse, I’ll make him do it three more times.”

“Wow. You’re no joke.”

“Pain is nothing more than weakness leaving the body.”

“Were you in the military?” I ask, half-joking.

He nods. “Army Ranger back in the day.”

“Well, that explains a lot,” I say and give him a smile. I hand Aidan a shovel and bucket and watch him waddle over to the sandbox. “Thank you for training him. And, always pushing him to do better. I know he wouldn’t have done this without you.”

Mac eyes me for a moment. “Do you have any idea how crazy that man is about you?”

“I’m finding out,” I admit.

“After you left without a word to anyone, he lost it. Couldn’t get his shit together. He quit teaching the kids karate and threw himself into the underground fights. Almost like he was punishing himself. He damn near drank himself to death.”

My heart constricts. I knew Killian had missed me, but not to such a self-destructive extent. “He never told me he stopped teaching karate.” That makes me sad because he was so good

with the kids and they adored him. “Or, about drinking so much.”

“I suspect he wouldn’t. Killian grieves in private and likes to punish himself in the process. Back when we first met, when he was just a little scrapper, he used to purposely get into fights with this group of bullies even though they kicked his scrawny ass every single time. That didn’t stop him from starting shit, though. Maybe the pain helps him feel. I don’t know.”

“It all roots back to his dad leaving, huh?”

“All the best cowboys have Daddy issues,” Mac says. “He seems to be adjusting damn well, though, to being a father himself.”

“He’s been amazing,” I say, watching Killian hit the top of the staircase then turn around and start back down again. “I should’ve told him when I found out I was pregnant. Probably would’ve saved us both a lot of heartache.”

“You never know,” Mac says. “Things happen the way they do for a reason. Maybe you both needed the last three years to realize how much you actually needed each other.”

A smile curves my mouth. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I’m always right, kid,” he says and I laugh.

When Killian hits the bottom step, Mac motions for him to come over and I hand him a bottle of water. He sucks half of it down, breathing hard, then splashes some on his face.

“Alright, see this tree,” Mac says and points up above us. It’s a huge, towering Oak tree and we tilt our heads back and look up into the voluminous green canopy. “Climb it.”

Killian takes another swig of water, sets the bottle down and studies the best route up.

“Are you serious?” I ask Mac.

“I’m always serious when we train. Climbing builds strength, balance and muscles.”

I watch Killian grasp the sides of the tree and pull himself up. He chooses his hand and footholds carefully and boosts himself up to the nearest branch. “Be careful!” I call, shading my eyes against the sun filtering through the branches. “How high does he have to go?”

“As high as he can.”

Heart in my throat, I clasp my hands as Killian maneuvers through the branches above. Eventually, Mac tells him to come back down. For the next couple of hours, Mac directs Killian to run with rocks, use park benches as hurdles and do deadlifts with a huge fallen tree branch. There’s also a large tire and he has Killian flipping it along a pathway.

The amount of endurance and strength Killian exhibits begins to get me worked up. My God, I knew he was strong, but watching him lifting a damn tree without his shirt on, tats exposed and glistening with sweat, and him grunting and groaning has me biting my lower lip and pressing my thighs together.

After the workout at the park, all I want to do is drag Killian back home and have my way with him, but Mac says they aren’t done and that they’re going to the gym. I press a kiss to Killian’s lips, reach around and squeeze his taut ass cheek. “Save a little energy for later tonight, okay?”

His mouth edges up. “Count on it.”

While they go to the gym to continue training, Aidan and I hang out. I decide to cook a big dinner before we go to the fight because Killian needs to refuel. When he and Mac return a few hours later, poor Killian looks exhausted. But, his nose lifts and he moans at the yummy smells of roast beef, seasoned potatoes, green beans, a vinaigrette salad and freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies.

“I want to kiss you senseless, but I stink,” he says.

“Hurry up and shower then,” I tell him and laugh when he swats my behind.

It doesn’t take him long to rinse off, come back out and haul me into his arms for a long kiss. *Mmm*. He smells like soap

and tastes like peppermints.

“C’mon, let’s eat,” Mac says and pulls a chair out.

Soon we’re all sitting at the small kitchen table. “God, I’m starving,” Killian exclaims and stabs a piece of roast beef. I hand him the dish of potatoes and he dumps half of it on his plate.

“Eat up,” I tell them. Beside me, Aidan smashes his potatoes with his hand and I just shake my head.

“Delicious,” Mac says, digging into the food.

After dinner, we eat some cookies and it’s almost time to leave for the fight. Obviously, Aidan can’t come and, to my utter surprise, Killian didn’t put up an argument earlier when I had asked if it was okay to let Scott babysit. He’s done it before and he knows the drill.

Scott arrives a few minutes before we leave and I tell him to put Aidan down early if he’s grumpy. “And, help yourself to the cookies,” I tell him. “I just baked them.”

“There are a couple of beers in the fridge, if you want one,” Killian says and I can’t help but smile. He’s trying hard and it makes me happy.

I kiss Aidan goodbye, thank Scott and then lace my fingers through Killian’s. “Ready?”

He nods. “We’ll be back in a few hours,” Killian says.

“No rush,” Scott says.

The fight between Bobby “The Bull” Torres and Silas “Slick” Slade takes place in a good-sized arena and we follow Mac down to the front section, close to the cage. My heart begins to pound when I think about Killian doing this soon—trapped within that metal fence and fighting. Even though I’ve seen him fight underground, this is a whole new level and completely different.

The large crowd is pumped, loud and gulping down one beer after another. I’m not exactly sure what to expect, but when I get my first glimpse of “The Bull,” who Killian is going to fight, I don’t feel good about it. Even though he’s shorter than

Killian, the stocky man is beefed-up with thick, hard muscles that look like they can do some serious damage while Killian is built differently with long, lean muscles and more athletic.

Oh, God. I don't know how I'm going to handle their fight. I'm just grateful it isn't tonight. Killian might be ready, but I'm not.

He must sense my anxiety because he wraps an arm around my waist and lowers his lips to start explaining things to me. The moment his deep, soothing voice begins speaking, I lean into him and listen.

"The object is to defeat your opponent using striking, throwing or grappling techniques," he tells me. "Most fighters have a base style, like I have karate, but it's important to incorporate more to be successful."

"Other than karate, what styles do you know?" I ask.

"Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, judo, wrestling, Thai boxing, western boxing. You name it, I've studied it."

"And, you go three rounds, right?"

"For a non-championship, yes. Three rounds and no more than 5 minutes each round."

I nod and watch The Bull strike his opponent who then drops. "How can you two be in the same weight class? He's so short and thick."

Killian chuckles. "We're both Middleweight. I'm on the lower end at 170 and he's at the higher end around 185."

"So, he has like 15 pounds on you?"

"But, I'm quick," he assures me.

It's no surprise when The Bull kicks Slick's ass, literally wipes up the cage with him, and when it's all over, I'm a nervous wreck while Killian and Mac confer with each other.

Slick's trainer has to help him walk out of the cage because he can barely stand up and the image makes my stomach hurt. I have no idea how I am going to watch Killian and The Bull fight without having a nervous breakdown.

KILLIAN

I train like the devil with Mac, in and out of the gym, like my life depends on it. Or, rather, my son's life. Unlike the last time I fought professionally, I am 100 percent focused and committed.

My days are filled with running, the heavy bag, the speed bag, pull-ups, sit-ups and endless jump roping. I've never been in such good shape and my body is a lean, muscled machine. My endurance is at its peak and I feel like I could outlast any other fighter.

Finally, the day of the big fight with Bobby "The Bull" Torres arrives. I'm not going to lie and say I'm completely confident when I have a knot of nerves growing and tightening in my stomach as the hours tick down.

For four years, I fought Mac and refused to return to the cage. It was mostly out of pride and the idea that The Bull would defeat me all over again. But, now I have something to fight for other than myself. I have a handsome, wonderful, smart little boy who needs life-saving surgery on his tiny heart and I'm going to do everything in my power to win.

I have to win. There is no other alternative.

Right before we leave, I sit down with Aubrey and Aidan. I can't believe how much has changed within the past month or so and my heart fills with warmth. These two are the reason—for my willpower, my determination and my happiness. They're also my future and it hits me hard, like a punch in the gut, that I would do absolutely anything for them.

I reach behind me and pull out a little box. “I got something for Aidan,” I say.

Aubrey looks down at the box and smiles. “Aww. Aidan, honey, Daddy got you a present.”

Aidan waddles over, happy as always, and I hand him the box. The kid is like a mini ray of sunshine. His tiny fingers wrap around it and Aubrey helps him open it. She sets the lid aside and lifts a tiny pair of MMA gloves out that I had specially made. Because Mixed Martial Arts is the ultimate one-on-one combat sport, no other equipment is allowed. Just the lightweight padded gloves that allow you to move your fingers while also protecting your hands when punching, and I knew I wanted to get Aidan his first pair.

“Aww, they look just like yours,” she says.

“So we can match,” I say. “C’mere, buddy. Let’s see how they fit.” I help guide his little fingers in and show him how to throw punches against my hands. In no time at all, we’re bumping knuckles and he’s laughing.

Aubrey slides a hand over my thigh and I glance up. “You’re going to win tonight and I’m going to scream until I’m hoarse.”

“Are you talking about during or after the fight?” I ask in a suggestive tone. She laughs as I pull her onto my lap and place a lingering kiss against the soft skin of her neck. “Hearing your voice will give me everything I need to pull a win off.” I drag my lips up and press another kiss to her jaw. “I have a reason now.”

“You have two reasons,” she murmurs and cups my face.

When our mouths meet, it’s intense. Aubrey is everything I’ve ever wanted and more. My hands slide beneath her shirt and move over her lower back, relishing the silky feel of her warm skin. I’d love to carry her off, lay her out on the bed and sink deep inside her hot, wet body, but it’ll have to wait.

First, I’m going to beat The Bull. Then, I’ll collect my spoils. I also plan to tell Aubrey that I love her.

But, first things first. It's time to prove myself to the world, but, most importantly, to myself. The pressure is on and this time I'm not going to break under it. I'm going to adapt and thrive and kick some ass.

Once again, we recruit Scott to babysit and I have to admit—he's a stand-up guy. Last week, I ran into him in the hall and he wasn't afraid to confront me about my intentions regarding Aubrey and Aidan. The timing couldn't have been more perfect because I pulled out the small box hidden in the pocket of my leather jacket and opened it up to reveal a diamond ring. It had belonged to my grandma and my mom overnighted it to me after I told her I wanted to propose. I could've killed her for mailing it, but she said she got a ridiculous amount of insurance on it and the endless bubble wrap she used was obscene.

"After the fight next week, I'm going to ask her to marry me," I told him.

He nodded, absorbing the news like a champ. "They both deserve all the happiness in the world."

"And, I'm going to make sure they get it."

"I hope so." We eyed each other for a moment and then Scott let out a long breath. "You're a lucky man."

"I messed up once before, but never again." I placed the ring back inside my jacket pocket and manned-up. "Thank you for watching over them when I wasn't here."

"You're welcome."

We nodded, coming to an understanding and common respect right then and there.

After hugging and kissing Aidan goodbye, me, Aubrey and Mac head over to the arena. It holds almost 2,000 people and the place is sold-out. My nerves kick in and I do my best to suppress the wave of panic that hits me.

The black cage looms up ahead and Aubrey and Mac will be right there outside of it. Only Bobby, me and the referee will be inside when the fight begins, but Mac can be in with me during the one-minute rests between rounds. After changing

into my shorts and slipping on my fingerless gloves, we walk down through the crowd and I practice throwing some punches. When fans see me, some cheer and some boo. It's a mixed reaction, but I tune them out. Once we reach the cage, Aubrey gives me a quick kiss and I can tell she's nervous as hell.

"You've got this, Kill," she whispers.

I absorb her words of encouragement and then turn to the man who stood by my side through everything and is the only father I've ever known. Mac slaps me on the back and turns me to face the black mesh fence.

"We're back, baby," he says. "Now, listen up. You're going to go in there and remind Bobby-Boy how a winner fights. The past doesn't matter, only the present. You're The Killer for a reason and you're going to destroy that fucking bull, kid. Going to grab him by the horns and smear him across the floor."

I nod, flex my fingers and see Bobby "The Bull" Torres appear on the other side of the cage looking just as determined as me. *I can do this*, I tell myself.

"Go get him, Kill," Mac says.

The next thing I know, I'm in the cage and Bobby and I lock eyes. He's just as strong and determined-looking as I remember, but this time, I'm going to win.

I put my mouthguard in and walk to the center of the circular cage. Cameras perch up on the high black fence, recording everything. Hopefully, they'll capture my win and not another humiliating defeat.

After we go through the preliminary talk with the referee, I expect to bump gloves with Bobby and do this. But, he isn't feeling much good sportsmanship and decides to spit on the floor near my bare feet instead and the crowd roars.

"Let's do this, motherfucker," he growls and slips his mouthguard in.

"Back to your corner," the ref says.

If I needed any further motivation to win, he just gave it to me. Heart thundering, I head back over to my side and exchange a look with Mac. Seems like Bobby wants to put on a show so I'm about to give him one.

"Kill him," Mac grumbles and I nod.

Aubrey looks up at me, fingers clinging to the fence, and I lean down and kiss her through the chain link. I don't expect the audience to cheer in approval. "Be careful!" she calls as I turn and the fight officially begins.

I focus on Bobby, dancing around him and just out of his reach. My red shorts work on The Bull like a charm because it isn't long before he charges at me, steam practically pouring out of his wide, flat nose. I easily sidestep his predictable blows and stay just far enough away to piss him off. I quickly realize that he's not as good as he used to be and a smirk curves my mouth.

For nearly the next five minutes, we exchange jabs, punches and kicks, moving in and out of each other's reach, burning up energy fast. Endurance is key and it's easy to become exhausted fast if you haven't trained properly. But, I feel like I could take on the world right now. My energy, skill and confidence are at an all-time high and I'm in peak-performance mode.

And, I've also got the most beautiful woman in my corner, cheering her head off, and it gives me a shot of adrenaline. I charge forward, punch The Bull in his side multiple times with fast, hard hits and he falls back against the fence and doubles over. The referee awards the first round to me and I pump a fist into the air and head back to Mac and Aubrey.

One round down and won. *You can do this*, I tell myself as the crowd erupts in cheers. I'm a far cry from the man they saw almost four years ago when I lost. I'm here to win and I'm quickly proving to everyone that I'm a force to reckon with and they all better take me seriously. *The Killer is back, baby.*

After drinking some water and a quick back clap and encouragement from Mac, I bend down and go nose to nose with Aubrey. I get one minute of rest and I want to spend it

with her. Aubrey's blue-green eyes glow and my fingers grip hers through the holes in the chainlink. "I'm going to win this for you, sweetheart. For you and Aidan."

"I know. And, after you win, you're going to get a very big reward," she promises in a husky voice.

"Better than the prize money?"

"I guess you'll have to be the judge of that," she says and I grin. After another swig of water, Mac tells me to move it and I head back to the center of the cage to meet The Bull who is red-faced and all sorts of pissed. His anger fuels him and despite my quick feet and ability to stay just outside his reach, his reluctance to lose makes him reckless and he starts taking chances that he shouldn't.

Unfortunately for me, he gets some good hits in as we battle it out for almost another five minutes. Toward the end of round two, the crowd is going absolutely crazy all around us. I'm launching kicks, giving and taking hard-as-nails punches, and cuts and bruises erupt all over my body. No doubt about it, MMA is a brutal sport and fighters have died in the cage.

Just as I'm beginning to wonder if I'm going to get the strike I want in on time, The Bull charges and I dance backwards. Suddenly, he attacks and manages to hit me with an uppercut that snaps my head back and leaves me seeing stars. As he's declared the round two winner, I grunt and swipe a gloved hand over my bloody nose.

"Fuck!" I hiss and spin toward my corner. I yank the mouthguard out and shake my head, trying to clear it. Mac pulls me over and shoves a bottle of water into my hands. "Brush it off, Kill. You got this."

"Shit fucking shit," I swear as Mac shoves an ice pack against my chest and wipes the blood off my face with a towel. I'm guzzling water and when I look down at Aubrey, her pretty sea-colored eyes are round in fear. I know I must look like a mess to her, but it's all a part of the sport. The cuts, bruises and blood will fade, but if I lose this next round, I'm not sure I'll ever find peace within myself when it comes to MMA fighting.

You're going to win, I chant to myself. Not because of my stupid pride but because for the first time in my life, I have a reason. Two reasons.

“Oh, my God, Killian,” she says, eyes bright with unshed tears. She shoves her small hand through the fence and curves gentle, hovering fingers over my jaw. My eyes slide shut and I know what I have to do.

I press a kiss into her palm and toss her a saucy wink. “It’s almost over,” I say. “And, I got this.”

As I stand up straight, her next words hit my heart like Cupid’s arrow. “I love you!” she calls out.

New energy pulses through me and I drop back down, grip her hand and kiss her as best as I can through the cage. “I love you, too,” I say.

“Killian! Go!” Mac yells.

My minute of rest is over and those last ten seconds have been the best of my life despite the fact that I’m bleeding and hurting. I walk back across the floor, now spattered with drops of blood over the sponsor names, and feel a surge of love propel me forward.

It’s what’s going to propel me to a win.

Three judges sit around the cage and score each round, normally giving the winner 10 points and the loser 9 points. Right now, The Bull and I are dead even and if I want to win this match, I need a Knockout, Submission or Technical Knockout.

I replace my mouthpiece, slam my gloves together and bounce on the balls of my feet as I study my opponent. By now, I know that he’s going to come charging in like his namesake. He doesn’t have much finesse when it comes to his moves and he’s all bark with a side of bite. But, this time I’m prepared like never before and when the final round begins, I have so much energy flowing throughout my body, it’s like we just started.

We dance around each other and when he makes his move, I’m ready. I dodge his meaty fist, fake a move to the right and end

up going left. I get some good hits in and swipe his leg out from beneath him. We go down hard, scrambling, and I manage to get him in a hold, pinning him in place and he's huffing and fighting to break free, but I fucking got him. There's no escaping.

The Bull puts up a good struggle, but my hold doesn't weaken and he inevitably taps out. The referee calls it— Submission—and I pop up, triumphant. I've managed to tune the crowd out for the most part, but now I can't. They're going wild and their screaming, yelling and endless cheers and whistles practically raise the roof right off this place. Suddenly, Mac lifts my arm high up into the air and then Aubrey's there. I grab her, swing her around in a wide circle and capture her lips in a disgusting, bloody kiss.

Cameras flash all around us, but I don't pay any attention. When I pull back, I wipe my blood off her face with a finger and give her a lopsided grin. "Sorry, sweetheart."

"Don't ever apologize for kissing me," she says.

I am so high right now and I never want to come down.

"Kill, we have press to do. Lots of people want to talk to the winner," Mac says. "And after that there's going to be offers— lots of fucking offers, kid."

Mac is positively gleeful and I laugh.

AUBREY

As Mac drags Killian away, I have mixed feelings. I know that he has a lot on his plate right now and things that he needs to take care of so I decide to catch an Uber and go back home. I don't want to keep Scott there all night and I have a feeling Killian won't return for hours.

He's quite literally the toast of the MMA town right now. Talk about a comeback. I'm not sure if he noticed, but every time we touched or kissed, the crowd went wild. I felt their approval like a physical touch and I'm so glad they warmed up and then fully-backed him for the win.

I couldn't be prouder. A part of me is also a little nervous. It's almost like Killian is famous and everyone wants a piece of him. Just like Mac said, Killian is going to get an endless array of offers from interviews to sponsorships to future fights.

I let out a shaky breath and touch my lips where his salty blood smeared earlier. If Killian goes back to MMA fighting permanently and I have to watch this all the time, I don't know if I will be able to handle it very well. The brutality is nearly too much to bear and the very real chance that Killian could be severely injured scares me. Aidan just got his dad back into his life and I want to make sure Killian stays there.

When I get back to the apartment, Scott asks how the fight went and I tell him Killian won.

"Are you sure?" Scott asks.

"What do you mean?"

“I would’ve thought you’d be happier.”

“I’m thrilled,” I tell him. “It’s just...”

Scott arches a burnished brow and crosses his arms. “Just what? Did something happen?”

“We told each other I love you,” I say and smile.

“I’m glad. You really love him a lot, huh?”

“So much. Pretty much since the moment we met,” I say, sounding dreamy and knowing I’ll never forget walking into that rundown gym and looking into Killian’s dark blue eyes for the first time. Everything about him captured me and never let go.

“If you’re happy then I’m happy for you, Aubrey. But, something is bothering you so spill it.”

Scott has become a good friend and he’s always been there when I’ve needed him so I feel it’s okay to share my fears. “I guess a part of me is scared because his career is on the verge of launching into the stratosphere all over again and I’m wondering if I’ll fit into that life with him.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

I sigh and twist my hair back off my face. “I’ve never witnessed anything so brutal in my life. I don’t know how that can be considered a legit sport. If Killian goes back into the cage full-time, he’s probably going to be traveling all over the world and forget all about me and Aidan. And, just the thought hurts my heart.”

“Is that what he wants to do?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it.”

“Then why are you worrying? You could be stressing out over nothing.”

“Maybe.”

Scott studies me for a long moment. “You know, I have a pretty good idea that Killian wants you in his life permanently. So, don’t jump to any conclusions and just chill out, okay?”

I'm not sure why he would say that, but I hope it's true. "You think?"

"I know," he says. "Now give me a hug. You guys have been through too much and I have a really good feeling that you're going to get your happily-ever-after."

"Thanks, Scott," I say and hug him. After getting a quick report on Aidan and walking Scott out, I shut the door and try not to fret too much. Killian told me he loves me. Despite being worried about what the future holds, my heart fills with joy at the memory and I can't wait for him to get home.

After checking in on Aidan, I take a shower then crawl into bed and my mind starts working overtime. Doubts creep in and, by the time I hear Killian walk in, I've imagined him leaving me and Aidan 1,000 different ways.

I sit up in bed and when Killian appears in the doorway, I catch a glimpse of his battered face and gasp. "Oh, my God," I exclaim and slide out from beneath the covers. "Your poor face."

"It's been through worse," he says quietly.

"Come into the bathroom so I can fix you up." He lets me take his hand and I instantly notice his raw knuckles are covered in more scabs. With a soft curse, I guide him down the hall. "Sit," I say and pat the countertop.

Killian hops up, legs spread, hands clasped and watches me pull out the First Aid Kit. Then, I run a washcloth beneath some cool water and press it to the swelling on the side of his face. There are contusions, scrapes, cuts and too much dried blood. He looks like a wreck and my heart suspends beating while I tend to him.

"Hold this," I murmur and move between his legs. He keeps the cool cloth pressed against his temple and cheek while I tear open a hydrogen peroxide soaked pad and wipe the cuts on his face and knuckles.

"I'm really okay," he says.

I turn, throw the wipe in the trash can and feel emotions bubble up, constricting my throat. Hot tears scald my eyes and

I press a fist against my chest.

“Aubrey?”

I slowly turn around, not wanting the tears to fall, but soon they're streaming down my cheeks.

“Hey, c'mere.” Killian reaches out and pulls me between his legs, wrapping his arms around me. “Why're you crying? I won, remember?”

I laugh between my sobs and Killian runs a soothing hand up and down my back until I manage to pull myself together.

“Talk to me, sweetheart,” he murmurs in my ear.

I pull back, pick the washcloth up off the counter where Killian dropped it and dab at my eyes. “I'm so damn proud of you,” I say. “But, I can't stand seeing you hurt like this. I know it comes with the territory and it's all a part of the job, but I hate it.”

His long, unruly hair is all gone so I run my hand over his cropped head.

“If anything bad happened to you in that cage, Killian, I don't think I'd be able to handle it very well.”

“Why did you leave so early?” he asks.

“I'm really happy for you, but now that you're going back to MMA fighting, I don't want to be a burden.”

“Aubrey-”

“Wait, please hear me out while I still have the courage to say it.” He gives me a nod and I suck in a deep breath then spill my guts. “Seeing you win tonight was so amazing, but I also saw how everyone wanted you back. I would never stop you from pursuing your dream. You're a fighter, Killian, and it's one of the things I love about you. But, at the same time, I'm scared I won't fit into your life anymore. I don't want to be selfish and I want you to be happy, but I want you to know that other than being a good father to Aidan, I don't expect anything else from you. I just don't want to strap you down and have you resent me.”

“Were you the one who got hit on the head tonight?”

“What?” I ask, taken aback.

“Because, if I recall correctly, we exchanged some pretty heavy-hitting words earlier.” He grabs my hands and squeezes them. “I love you, Aubrey, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Tears fill my eyes again as his words sink in. “But-”

“No buts,” he interrupts. “Now do you still love me or was that just some crap you said to help get me through the rest of the fight?”

“Yes, of course, I do. I love you so damn much, Killian Doyle,” I say and squeeze his hands back.

“Good because I want to make this work. I want a life with you and Aidan, sweetheart. The question is, do you want a life with me?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “More than anything.”

He smiles, blue eyes glowing and says, “Pick a pocket.”

“What?”

“Right or left?”

He still wears his leather jacket and I frown, not sure where he’s going with this. “Left.”

Killian lifts a dark brow, reaches into the pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper which he presses into my hand. Curious, I unfold it and see it’s a check issued to him for-

“Oh, my God,” I whisper, eyes growing large at the amount typed on the line.

“I never mentioned how much I’d win, did I?”

“Um, no,” I say, still trying to comprehend all the zeros I see.

“It’s more than enough to cover Aidan’s surgery and then some,” he says. “Well worth a few cuts and bruises.”

“I don’t know what to say. It’s amazing, but...”

“But?”

“But, every time you got hit tonight, I felt it, too. You weren’t the only one in that cage. I was with you for every punch and every kick.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he says and pulls me against his chest. “I’m sorry to put you through that.”

When we finally release each other, Killian gives me a sly smile and hops off the counter. Then, he’s reaching into his right pocket and dropping down on his knee.

“What are you-” My voice cuts off when I see the small box in his hand and when he lifts the lid to reveal a diamond ring, my jaw drops.

“Aubrey Reed, being without you the last three years was a miserable and lonely hell. I don’t ever want to experience that again and I want— *need*— you in my life. I love you, I love our son and, if you’ll have me, I’m going to do my best to make you the happiest woman in the world. But, first, you gotta marry me, sweetheart.”

“Yes!” I exclaim and tears begin to fall all over again. “Oh, Killian, yes, yes, yes!” After he slides the ring on my finger, I throw myself into his arms and we tumble backwards on the bathroom floor. He grunts in pain and then chuckles when I gasp. “I’m so sorry,” I say.

“Just some bruised ribs,” he says.

I reach down, shove his jacket off and then carefully help him shrug out of his t-shirt. His poor body is battered and I lean down and kiss his chest.

KILLIAN

Nothing feels better than Aubrey's warm, soft lips against my skin. She kisses each bruise, every cut, and her tender ministrations leave me not only breathing hard, but also getting hard. "I seem to remember you promising me a reward if I won," I remind her in a husky voice.

"I'm getting there," she says, reaching for my zipper. She tugs my pants and boxer briefs down and the moment her hands wrap around my dick, I'm done.

With a groan, I drop my head back against the floor and enjoy the way she touches me, gliding her hands up and down. When her lips press a light kiss to my tip and then fully wrap around me, I reach down and thread my fingers through her long hair. "Jesus," I moan, hips lifting up off the floor.

Her hot, wet mouth is making me crazy and I'm not sure how much more I can take, but it's sheer heaven. Her head bobs, cheeks cave in and I pull her hair hard, on the verge of blowing. Before she can finish me off, I sit up and pull her onto my lap. She wraps her legs around my waist and my throbbing dick presses against her stomach.

She only wears the short t-shirt and a pair of silky panties, but they're in my way so I reach for them, slide my hands down the sides and rip them off. Aubrey gasps and I kiss her hard, sliding my tongue against hers, delving deeply into her mouth. She tastes minty like toothpaste and I devour her, unable to get enough.

I grasp her hips, lift her up and she positions her slick entrance just right. I thrust up as she sinks down and we both groan in relief. Filling her is the best feeling in the whole damn world and my fingers dig into her sides as our gazes meet. I'm doing my best to keep it together, draw it out, but I'm aching.

We look at each other for a long, suspended moment and the blue-green of her eyes sucks me in, promising a lifetime of heaven. I lean my forehead against hers, panting, and whisper, "I love you, Aubrey."

Her hands trail down my back, lightly so as not to bother any of the bruises or cuts, and she clenches around me tightly, pulsing with heat, desire and energy. "I love you, too. So very much."

I grab her, flipping her body over so she's beneath me, and begin to pump hard and deep, branding the woman I love. Claiming what's mine. I think she's always been mine, since the moment we met, but now it's official and I am never letting her go again.

The intensity of our feelings pushes us both to the edge fast. Aubrey cries out, her body spasming around me, and I give one, two more hard thrusts and then explode inside her silky, wet warmth. A series of tremors leaves me shaken and completely spent and I drop down, covering her, trying not to smother her, but barely able to hold my weight up.

Her arms circle around my neck, pulling me closer, all the way down on her and I let out a shaky sigh. "I could die happy right now," I whisper.

"You just asked me to marry you, Killian. Don't you dare talk about dying."

I smother a chuckle in her fragrant hair. "Baby, you have nothing to worry about because I promise I'm not going anywhere."

"So we're stuck together?"

I roll onto my side and brush her hair back. "I'm afraid so."

"Good," she says and pulls my face down for a long, sultry kiss.

Lucky for us, Aidan sleeps the entire night without a single peep so we have uninterrupted time together and we make very good use of it. I don't think we got more than an hour of sleep, but it was well worth-it.

Aubrey and I make a big breakfast in the morning because we're starving after our all-nighter and Aidan sits on his booster seat and plays with his cereal as we make pancakes and splash batter at each other. I've never felt so playful with a woman and when I see a spot of batter on her cheek, I grab her, yank her against me and lick it off.

"If Aidan were still sleeping, I'd pour this all over you then take my time removing it with my tongue. Long, slow licks," I murmur.

"We may need to find a babysitter and take a long weekend trip."

I nod, considering her words. I'm not sure how she feels about living here permanently and it's one of the things we need to discuss. After the pancakes are done and the syrup poured, I take a bite and wonder how to bring this up.

"Killian?"

"Hmm?" I take a sip of orange juice and wait for her to continue.

"Where do you picture us living?"

Obviously, she's been thinking and wondering the same things as me. "It's funny you ask because I was just going to ask you that very question. Are you happy here?"

"Honestly, I miss Chicago."

A smile curves my mouth. "Yeah. I wouldn't mind going back and maybe having a house in the country. But, still close enough to the city."

"I'd love that. With a little backyard for Aidan."

"And maybe a dog?"

Aubrey's face lights up. "I really miss the homegrown corn."

"And the thunderstorms."

We share a smile, remembering that night in the barn. “After Aidan’s surgery, let’s go back. It’ll be nice to be close to Tori again and you’ll love Mike, her boyfriend. He’s a big fan of yours, by the way.”

I chuckle. “You think she’d babysit and give us our long weekend away together?”

“I know she would.”

“And, if she’s not available, my mom will. She’s dying to meet Aidan and see you again.”

“I loved your mom,” Aubrey says. “Was she completely shocked when you told her?”

The call to my mom when I informed her she had a grandson happened about a week and a half ago. I’d been wanting to tell her, but with all of my training and spending time with Aidan and Aubrey, I hadn’t had time.

Of course, my mom couldn’t have been happier. Other than Mac and now Aubrey, she’s always been my biggest supporter. It’s also when I confided in her that I loved Aubrey and she insisted on sending me Grandma’s ring.

“My mom was Team Aubrey from the moment she met you,” I say and reach for her hand, lifting it up to study the ring on her left finger. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you last night, but this is my grandma’s wedding ring. My mom sent it when I told her that I loved you.”

“Oh, Killian,” she says, eyes shimmering with tears. “Do you have any idea how much that means to me?”

“Please, don’t cry. You know I can’t handle your tears.”

“It’s just...Mac and your mom have been so accepting and kind. I wish my parents would have been, too. I’m sorry.”

“No more apologies, remember? Especially for something that’s completely out of your control.”

She nods, laces her fingers through mine and we look over at Aidan who babbles incessantly over his bowl of cereal.

“What is he even talking about?” I ask and laugh.

Aubrey squeezes my hand. “How wonderful his new life in Chicago is going to be.”

The days leading up to Aidan’s surgery are magical. Having this little family that’s all mine is the best thing that has ever happened to me. It’s the one thing I never knew I always wanted. We go to the park, the zoo and the beach. We eat more ice cream than we should and spoil him rotten because in the back of our minds, we know next week isn’t going to be easy for any of us. Aidan’s recovery is going to take weeks and I hate to even let it enter my thoughts, but the possibility that something could go wrong leaves me stone-cold.

Apparently, Aubrey is having similar concerns because while we sit on a towel and watch Aidan build a sand castle, she puts our biggest fear into words. “What if something happens to him?”

“Don’t even say it,” I tell her. “Dr. McCall said he’s going to be just fine.” I meet her worried eyes. “They’re going to fix him.”

“I’m trying to stay positive, but the closer it gets, the more worried I get.”

“And, that’s completely normal.” I reach over and cover her hand with mine. “Don’t forget who this kid has for a father,” I say.

She smiles. “He is awfully stubborn.”

“And, really fucking determined. I don’t go down without a fight and neither will Aidan. He’s going to pull through with flying colors, okay?”

“Okay,” she says in a soft voice.

As we scoot over and help Aidan fill a bucket, I try to ignore the worry that gnaws at my gut. Nothing can happen to our child.

Nothing.

AUBREY

When the day of Aidan's surgery arrives, we put on brave faces for him and each other, but inside I'm a nervous wreck. I don't remember the last time I was so worried and when they wheel my little man away to fix his tiny heart, I lose it.

I turn, fall into Killian's arms and burst into tears. "What if that's the last time we ever see him?"

"Aubrey, don't. You have to stay positive," Killian tells me and strokes a hand up and down my back.

I do everything within my power to get a grip, but it's so damn hard. Aidan is my baby. The perfect little boy that Killian and I created together. If anything happens to him, I'm not going to be able to cope.

The surgery is going to take time so Killian and I find a quiet corner in the waiting room and do the only thing we can do—pray, comfort each other and wait to hear from Dr. McCall.

Worry eats away at my heart and Killian does everything in his power to help get my mind on other things. When he starts talking about growing up and the bullies who taunted him, I tilt my head and study the faded, yellowish bruises still healing from his fight.

"I have such a hard time picturing you being anything but this tough, little, scrappy kid."

"I was," he says. "But, I still got the shit kicked out of me on a daily basis."

“But, why?”

“I had a big mouth and, surprise, surprise, I liked to fight.”

“So, how did you actually meet Mac?”

“Did you ever see *The Karate Kid*?”

“Of course. I love that movie.”

“Mac ‘The Knife’ Moretti was my Mr. Miyagi. I stumbled into a karate studio with a broken nose and dislocated finger, trying hard not to cry and vowing revenge, when I saw him. He was teaching some moves to a kid my age and I watched, mesmerized for almost half an hour. After they finished, I walked right up to him and told him I needed to learn karate.”

“And he became your teacher?”

“Not exactly. He asked me why I wanted to learn and while I told him my story, he yanked my finger back into the joint and put a splint on it. Then, he told me karate is more than just fighting. It’s about self-betterment and self-defense. To be honest, those words never meant much to me until this match with Torres. It finally clicked.”

“What clicked?” I ask.

“That I could win every fight in my career, but if I had nothing real to actually fight for in my life then it didn’t matter.”

My heart fills with so much love and I lay a hand against his stubbled cheek. “And now you have something to fight for?”

“Now I have something to breathe for,” he says, dark blue eyes shining. “You and Aidan.”

“I love you, Killian,” I whisper.

Killian wraps his arms around me and tucks me into the crook of his arm. “Thank you for saving me,” he murmurs and presses a kiss to my head. “You’ve given me more than just something to fight for. You’ve given me something to live for, Aubrey.”

The hours seem to drag by and halfway through the surgery, as Killian and I are returning from the cafeteria after a bland meal

of hospital food, I stop in my tracks. My parents sit in the waiting room and I freeze, not sure what to do or say.

Killian feels my body tense and I can not handle an argument with them right now. My nerves are shot and I am beside myself with worry for Aidan.

“Aubrey,” my mom says when she sees me. She and my dad stand up and take a hesitant step forward.

“Hi,” I say carefully and look up at Killian who wears an unreadable expression on his handsome face. “What are you doing here?”

“We wanted to be here for Aidan’s surgery,” my dad says.

I just blink, not sure how to respond. I still can’t process the fact that they got on a plane and flew out here to see us. It’s been almost three years since I had Aidan and they’ve made zero effort to meet their grandson.

“Why the change of heart?” I finally ask.

“I would say we had more of a wake-up call,” my mom says.

“What do you mean?”

“Can we, ah, talk over here?”

I frown, take Killian’s hand and we walk over and sit down beside my parents.

“Hello, Killian,” my mom says.

“Doyle,” my dad says with a nod.

Killian nods back and our interlaced fingers tighten. My mom looks down at our hands for a moment and then sighs. “Aubrey, Killian...” Her voice cracks. “We’ve been horrible and controlling and we don’t expect you to forgive us, but we’re sorry.”

“So damn sorry,” my dad adds.

I have no idea where any of this is coming from or why, but a wave of emotion passes over me. The fact that they finally recognize how badly they’ve treated us is a huge step in the

right direction and to possibly mending our relationship. They're offering an olive branch and I really want to take it.

"Well, you know Patrice," my mom says.

"Your best friend," I clarify for Killian's sake.

She nods. "Last week, her daughter was in a terrible car accident and she didn't make it. I went over to see Patrice and she made me realize how precious and short life can be. When she asked me about you and Aidan, it hit me that I didn't know how you were doing or even what my grandson really looked like."

I swear, it almost looks like my mom is tearing up. Almost.

My dad nods. "The last three years just kind of got away from us. We wanted to meet Aidan, but just didn't make the time. It's no excuse."

"So, what are you saying?" I ask, looking from my dad to my mom.

"We want to be a part of your life again," my mom says.

"If you'll have us," my dad adds.

"It's not just me, though," I tell them. "If you want to see me then you have to accept Killian, too." I lift my hand and show them the ring which I think they already noticed. "We're getting married and you're going to have to treat him with respect or this will never work."

My parents nod, heads hanging like scolded children.

"I love your daughter very much," Killian says. "I want you both to know that I would do anything for her and our son."

I look over at him and smile. *This man...* Sometimes, I literally have no words for the way he makes me feel.

"We're willing to do whatever it takes," my mom says.

"And, if that means becoming frequent flyers and visiting out here once a month then that's what we'll do."

"I don't think you'll have to do that, Dad." They exchange a look and I smile. "Killian and I want to move back. We want

to be close to our family and friends and raise Aidan in a place with lots of land and fresh air.”

“That would be wonderful,” my mom says. “Because we really want to try, Aubrey. It’s been hard because what we thought was best for you wasn’t always the right thing. I think we finally understand that now.”

She and my dad share a look and I have a feeling there may be more to the story than they’ve shared so far. But, honestly, I don’t care because whatever it is, it’s bringing us closer together and filling our hearts with forgiveness.

“I know I never apologized for taking off,” I say. “But, I am sorry I never reached out and let you know I was okay.”

They nod and I’m on the verge of asking them how long they’re planning to visit when Dr. McCall appears. Killian and I jump to our feet and my heart thunders. I can’t read the expression on his face and I’m such a bundle of nerves that I could either burst out laughing or crying in the next ten seconds.

“Aubrey, Killian,” he says. “The surgery went better than I could’ve hoped.”

I let out a relieved breath and sag against Killian who wraps an arm around my waist. “He’s okay?”

“Better than okay. We went in and sealed the hole up. Aidan is as good as new.”

“Thank God,” I murmur.

“We’ve already discussed his recovery, but if you have any questions at any point, please reach out to me. Otherwise, I’ll see you at our scheduled appointments.”

“Thank you,” I say.

Killian extends his hand and they shake. “Thank you, Dr. McCall.”

After the doctor walks away, I turn and fall into Killian’s embrace. For a long moment, we hold each other, taking comfort in each other’s arms. *Everything is going to be okay.*

The thought washes over me like warm bathwater, washing away my worries.

My parents end up staying for a few more days and finally meet their grandson when he's back home, chest wrapped up in bandages and grumpier than he's ever been. But, who can blame him? He's just been through major surgery and the little man is only three-years-old. He doesn't understand why he hurts and why he has to spend so much time in bed. He doesn't like taking his medication, either, so Killian and I turn it into a game where we hide it and then give him a reward when he figures out where we stashed it. Even my parents get in on the game. They may never be easygoing and carefree with a compliment like Killian's mom, but they're trying.

And, I have to give them credit when they're down on the floor, crawling around in their designer clothes, pretending to look for Aidan's meds just to help out and make him giggle.

I know it's going to take time to mend our relationship, but it's getting there and that makes me incredibly happy.

After they leave, it's nice to have it be just the three of us again. Scott stops by with a huge stuffed bear and candy for Aidan and his little smile lights up the room. After he visits for a bit, I walk him to the door and tell him that Killian, Aidan and I are planning to move back to Chicago after Aidan is fully recovered.

"I'm going to miss you guys," Scott says. "But, you should be with your family and friends."

"We think so, too. You're going to be invited to the wedding," I tell him.

"I'll try to make it."

His words seem tinged with a bit of sadness and I wonder if Scott had hopes for us happening one day. I always made it clear that we were just friends despite the fact that he was an amazing guy. But, my heart always belonged to Killian.

"Did you let him down easily?" Killian asks, coming out of Aidan's room.

I turn and frown. "Do you really think-"

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Doesn’t matter, though, sweetheart, because you are all mine,” he says and pulls me into his arms.

“Since the moment we met,” I say. When Killian leans down and kisses me, I kiss him back with all of the love in my heart.

KILLIAN

Three months after Aidan's surgery, we trade in Aubrey's Civic for a roomier Ford Expedition, pack it up and head East. Aidan received the all-clear from Dr. McCall and, although he still needs plenty of rest and to take it easy for the next 6-8 months, he can slowly start playing and getting back to his old routine. We could've delayed the inevitable move back to the Chicago area, but we figure the clean country air will help speed his recovery up even more.

Aubrey and I find a cute house about 45 minutes outside of Chicago and, the moment we step inside, we know it's exactly where we want to live and raise our son.

Mac's been calling me with deal after deal and I have no problem signing my name on a pair of gloves or endorsing a sports drink so the money has been rolling in and helping us with our new life together. After what Aubrey said, though, I've been avoiding any agreement about returning to the cage.

I've had time to give it some serious thought and one night, Aubrey and I are sitting on the back porch after tucking Aidan in for bed, drinking homemade lemonade and looking up at the stars when I tell her my idea.

"What do you think about me opening up an MMA gym to train others?"

"I think that's a great idea," she says. "Where would it be?"

"Right here. Up the street somewhere. I am not driving into Chicago all the time and I figure if it's the best damn MMA

gym available then they'll come to me."

"Smart thinking."

"I miss teaching karate, too. I figure I could start up another class for kids. Hopefully, one day, Aidan will want to be in it."

"He will," Aubrey predicts.

"So while you do your graphic design company, I'll teach karate and MMA."

"I just got another new client," she informs me with a little smile.

We clink glasses and take a sip of lemonade.

"What about fighting?" she asks delicately. "I know Mac was talking about another match."

I can hear the fear in her voice and I don't ever want to be the cause of that. I reach over and take her hand in mine. "I've decided to officially retire."

"Really?"

"Really." She looks conflicted, though, and I frown. "What is it?"

"I want you to retire because you want to. Not because of me."

"I'm ready. Besides, I'm going to be 33 soon and, even though I'm in the best shape of my life, I don't want to wind up getting the crap beaten out of me by some 25 year old punk."

A smile curves her mouth. "I don't want that either."

"Good," I say and turn to scoot my chair closer to hers.

"I'd rather you save that stamina of yours for the bedroom," she murmurs.

"That sounds like a good retirement plan," I say and lean in to capture her lips in a soul-searing kiss.

As the seasons change, it's nice to be back home and share our first holidays with each other and the people we love. Aubrey and I also decide to set a date and we both agree that we want to get married on the day we first met, June 10.

We don't need six months to plan for the wedding because we have something simple and intimate in mind. So, that gives us both plenty of time to spend loving each other and Aidan. Her graphic design company keeps her busy and challenged and we break ground for the MMA gym on a cold day in February. By May, it's up and running and there's a huge grand opening.

The gym exceeds all of my expectations and MMA fighters from all over the world travel here to train. I have the highest-level equipment available and the best trainers on site, including myself and Mac who is as happy as a clam to have new students to mentor.

When June 10 finally arrives, I find myself nervous as hell and shifting in the brand new, very uncomfortable suit and tie that I'm not used to wearing. Mac walks over and slaps me on the back.

"Everyone's ready," he says and eyes me closely. "Damn, Killian, you look like you're gonna puke."

I pull at the tie choking me. "I'm fucking nervous, Mac. I'm about to marry the most amazing woman in the world and I'm still not sure what she sees in me sometimes."

"Nobody knows," Mac says and I punch his arm. "Ow," he cries and gives a shout of laughter. "C'mon, we need to get your ass up to the front of the barn."

I nod and follow him to the entrance of the rundown barn where Aubrey and I ran after the summer rain ruined our picnic four years earlier. But, it doesn't look so dilapidated anymore. We made sure it was cleaned out pretty well and the structure has been reinforced, though I did make sure they didn't cover the hole in the roof that we looked out of when we laid on the blanket together.

Strands of lights hang from the ceiling and battery-operated candles flicker in jars scattered all over. Several rows of satin covered chairs face forward and all of our friends and family fill them.

My heart pounds like a drum in my chest as I walk up the aisle and take my place upfront beside the priest with Mac at my

side, acting as my best man.

When soft music fills the air, I look up and see Aubrey's best friend Tori walking up the aisle, holding Aidan's hand. Aidan carries a bucket full of rose petals and he and Tori sprinkle them along the walkway. When they finally reach us, Aidan's eyes light up and he bolts into my arms with a boisterous, "Daddy!"

Everyone laughs and I kiss his plump cheek and guide him back to Tori. They sit down by her boyfriend Mike and Aubrey's mom. Nearby, my mom sits in her finest dress with a corsage of fresh gardenias on her wrist. She couldn't be more delighted and when our gazes meet, she barely contains a squeal of excitement.

Suddenly, Aubrey appears looking like an absolute vision in a flowy, white sundress, her hair pulled back and decorated with a spray of white sweetheart roses. She links her arm in her dad's and they walk up the aisle.

The closer they get, the more I realize how damn lucky I am. Things could've turned out so differently. But, they worked out in the best and sweetest way possible. Somehow, despite all we've been through, Aubrey and I found our happy ending.

When her dad hands her over to me, I feel a swell of emotion. "You look so beautiful," I say and lace my fingers through hers.

Aubrey smiles. "And, you look so handsome."

Together, we wave to Aidan and then turn to face the priest under an archway of lights and flowers. I can't say I remember much of what he says because I am so caught up in the gorgeous woman beside me who smells like a rose garden.

And then, all of a sudden, it's time for us to exchange our vows in front of everyone and I have the very real sensation that I might just actually puke. We turn toward each other and the moment Aubrey smiles at me, my panic melts away.

And, once again, everything is right in the world. The woman I love more than anything is about to become my wife.

“Killian Joseph Doyle,” she says, looking at me with shining blue-green eyes, “the moment I saw you, I knew you were trouble.” A few people chuckle. “I was the good girl and you were the bad boy, but somehow we worked right from the very beginning. It hasn’t always been the easiest or smoothest ride, but it’s been the best one ever and that’s because of you. I couldn’t imagine living my life without you and I can’t wait to spend the rest of it together.”

My heart fills and I squeeze Aubrey’s hands. “Since you went there,” I say in a teasing voice. “Aubrey Amelia Reed...” She cringes at her middle name and I smile. “It’s a lovely name, by the way.”

I clear my throat and continue. “I wasn’t ever a man who believed in soulmates or love at first sight, but the day we met, all of that went out the window. I couldn’t stop thinking about you and when we went out on our second date, we came here.”

A pretty flush colors her face and images from our steamy, wet encounter here fill my head.

“I remember dancing in the rain and laying on that blanket with you, looking up through that hole in the roof. You made me start wanting things that I didn’t think I deserved. That I never knew I even wanted. A family of my own never seemed likely until one day everything changed. Having a son with you has made me a better man and the fact that in a couple of minutes, I’m going to be able to call you my wife...” My voice chokes and Aubrey squeezes my hands.

And, all I have to do is look into her sea-colored eyes and know that everything is going to be alright.

“I love you, sweetheart, and I’m going to tell you every day for the rest of our lives.”

I swipe a thumb over her cheek, catching the tear before it can fall and ruin her makeup. The priest says a few more things and then we slip rings onto each other’s fingers and it is official.

“May I present Mr. and Mrs. Killian Doyle. You may now kiss the bride.”

I draw Aubrey against me and lean down, capturing her lips in our first kiss as husband and wife. Cheers and clapping fill the air and we pull apart, laughing, and look over at Aidan who claps so hard, with all of his little might.

I bend forward, motion for him to come over and he runs straight into my arms. I swoop him up into the air then lower him on my hip and grab Aubrey's hand. And, together, we walk down the aisle and toward our very bright future together.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later...

Killian and I just returned from a long weekend getaway together at a cottage up on Lake Michigan while Aidan stayed with his grandma Shelly who spoils him rotten. We enjoyed our quiet time together and spent our days exploring the woods, sunbathing on the dock and shopping and dining in the nearest little town. And, our nights were steamier than they've ever been. I'm happy to say the spark between us still burns so brightly and, if anything, has only gotten hotter.

After the last year and getting settled in our new home, getting married and starting our businesses, it was a much-needed respite. But, it feels really good to be back home, re-energized and with Aidan who will be turning five before we know it.

I sit on a metal chair at the edge of a mat and watch Killian teach Aidan some karate moves and our little man is a natural. He picks everything up so easily and I have a feeling he's going to be highly-involved with Mixed Martial Arts his entire life. How could he not, though?

The sight of Killian and Aidan sparring together makes my heart squeeze within my chest and it fills with such pure love. Talk about a chip off the old block. Aidan is Killian's mini-me and every day I notice another similarity between the two of them. Both have deep, dark blue eyes and nearly-black hair with bangs that fall in their eyes. They have stubborn streaks and both are filled with a deeply-rooted determination to do

whatever they focus their attention on accomplishing. They're even developing similar mannerisms and it's beyond adorable.

With their matching gloves, they circle around each other and Killian coaches Aidan through a series of moves. How my little man can already have an orange belt and be so close to going up to blue, I have no idea. He's still so small, but he's good.

Incredibly talented for such a little munchkin. But, when your dad is retired MMA champion Killian "The Killer" Doyle, what else can you expect? I predict he will be a black belt by the time he's six.

Mac wanders over a few minutes later and hands Killian and Aidan a bottle of water. He comes here every day and helps train and I don't think I've ever seen him happier. Instead of hounding Killian to fight, he has plenty of new blood to coach and encourage.

While Mac talks to Aidan and starts telling him some fight story, Killian walks over, reaches for my hands and pulls me up off the chair.

"Hey," he says in a low voice and drops a kiss along my jawline. "What're you doing over here all by yourself, looking so damn pretty."

"Just watching my two favorite fellas."

A smile curves his mouth and, even though I had been planning to tell him my news later, something makes me decide to do it now. I wrap my arms around his neck, stand up on my tiptoes and whisper, "How would you feel about expanding our little family?"

I feel him freeze then he pulls back, midnight eyes widening. He opens his mouth, closes it, seemingly at a loss for words and I chuckle. "What are you saying?" he finally manages to ask, mouth edging up.

"That you're going to become a dad all over again in about seven months."

A bright, wet sheen covers his eyes and they glow so incredibly blue. He sniffs, pulls me against him and squeezes

me in a hug, burying his face in my hair. “That makes me really, really happy,” he murmurs.

I pull back and lay a hand along his stubbled cheek. “It’s not always easy-going and my hormones are going to be all over the place,” I warn him.

“I don’t care. This time around, I’m going to be there every step of the way. I’ll drive you to every doctor’s appointment, cook you healthy meals for two and massage your swollen feet every night.”

I laugh and glance over at Aidan who shows Mac the new move he just learned. “Do you think he’ll want a little brother or sister?”

“If he has a little brother, they can spar with each other.”

“He can spar with a girl,” I say. “In fact, I have a feeling that any daughter of yours is going to have a lot of spunk and be just as good a fighter as your son.”

“A little Ronda Rousey?”

“If that’s what she wants to be.”

“I just hope she looks like you— long blonde hair and eyes the color of the sea.”

“Well, you have your mini-me, so maybe I’ll get one, too,” I joke.

“Do you have any idea how much I love you?” Killian asks, gently cupping my face in his big, rough hands.

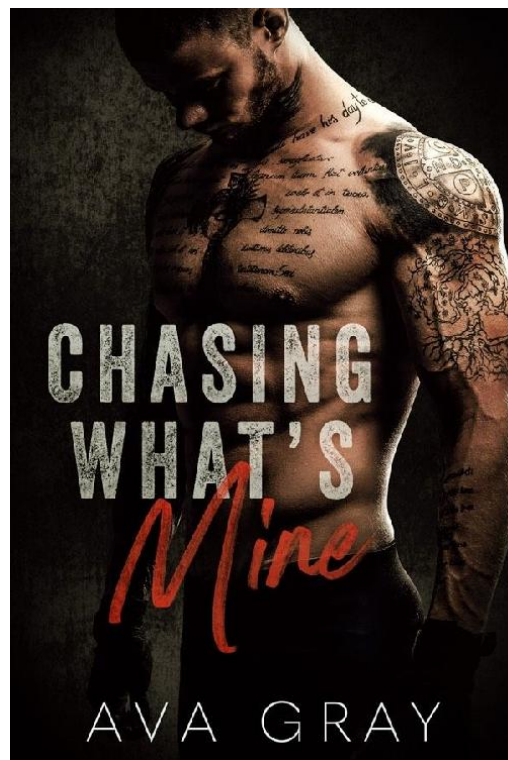
“Hopefully as much as I love you.”

“More.” He lowers his head, rubs his nose against mine.

“Not possible,” I tell him, push up on my toes and kiss him thoroughly.

No, Killian and I may not have had the easiest road to our happily-ever-after, but trust me when I say it was worth the fight and I would do it all over again.

EXCERPT: CHASING WHAT'S MINE



Hot, strong, scandalous.
Those are the three words I would use to describe my brother's best friend.

Dax is a UFC fighter... that alone makes him sound like trouble.

Because that's exactly what he is and has always been.
I've been trying to stay away from him since childhood.

But his piercing eyes that were full of trouble kept pulling me in.

It wasn't until we grew up that I finally gave up.

I gave up on trying to maintain a distance from him.

From his life that I couldn't quite understand.

Sleeping with Dax has led to three things:

A huge fight with my brother.

An unwanted pregnancy.

A scandal much bigger than my pregnancy.

Dax might have done something that could destroy my life.

My family calls him a monster... a murderer.

Unless he's proven innocent, there's no way I'll let this baby anywhere near him.

And there's no way I'll ever give him my heart.

Gemma

"This is exactly why I said I didn't want to be late," Aiden says, as he circles the block for the third time.

Cars are lined up on either side of the street and everywhere else we've looked for a parking space. TKO, the MMA training gym, is all lit up, music pumping out into the night, promising a killer party inside. If only we could get there.

"It's not my fault Gemma hogged the bathroom for two whole hours," Riley says, with a light-hearted chuckle. Then he adds, "I would've understood if it helped at all, but she still came out looking like a troll."

"Hey!"

And because I can't get to him in the back seat, Ciara lands a punch to his arm on my behalf.

“Ow!” Riley rubs his arm, nursing the tender area along with his bruised ego.

She’s officially my favorite of all his girlfriends.

“Stop being a dick to your sister,” Ciara says. “You haven’t seen her in months. Be nice.”

“Yeah, Dick, be nice,” I say, glancing over my shoulder just in time to catch him pulling a horrible face at me. “I came all this way to see your ugly mug, the least you could do is treat me like the Smith graduate I am.”

“Graduate this,” he says, and gives me the finger as he cackles with laughter.

I gasp in outright shock, and say, “I’m telling Mom!”

“Could you guys please quit it? I’m trying to concentrate. If you two don’t stop, *I’m* telling Mom.”

Riley forgets about me and reaches out to slap Aiden sharply on the back of his head. “Shut up and drive,” he says, laughing like a little kid.

Which sets off a whole other argument between the two of them this time. Ciara and I share a knowing look, and I shake my head as I go back to staring out of my passenger-side window. Having twin brothers is never boring. If they’re not ragging on me, they’re bickering with each other. Sometimes it’s hard to believe they’re six years older than me. Still, it’s moments like this that makes it feel as if I never left. It makes it feel like home.

“By the time we get there, the press party will have turned into a New Year’s Eve party,” Riley says.

His hands are deep in his jean’s pockets, and Ciara is hooked through his one arm as they amble along lazily. They make a really cute couple, and I have to stop myself from staring at them. This is supposed to be a fun night out, not me feeling sad about my deader-than-dead love life. So, I turn my attention back to the sidewalk we’re walking along. The night air is humid and buzzing with activity, typical for Vegas this time of year. It doesn’t matter where you go, there’s always

this hub of people to have fun with and get the business done. A stark contrast from Northampton.

“Pick up the pace and we might make Thanksgiving,” Aiden says.

Riley enjoys the little dig and shouts out, with his arms raised above his head in victory. “Ladies and gentlemen, he’s finally loosened up!”

His theatrics aren’t out of place on the busy street, and we all get a good laugh out of it. Considering the nightlife in the city, my brother is actually on the normal side of the scale.

“Seriously, though, Aiden,” I say, after my laughter has subsided a bit, “you could’ve at least tried to get closer.”

He rolls his eyes at me without breaking his trudging step. “You were right there with me, Gem. Did you see any other parking spots?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have gone for the heels,” Riley says. “Ciara went for the sensible choice, as you can see.”

“Leave my flats out of this,” Ciara says. “And leave your sister’s fashion choice alone. She looks great.”

She flashes me an approving smile, and I nod my appreciation. Ciara’s quickly becoming the big sister I never had, but desperately needed with Aiden and Riley around.

When we finally walk into the gym, I’m surprised by the transformation. I haven’t been back here in forever, but I remember clearly what it usually looks like. Gone are the mats and sweaty towels hanging from every fixture, and in their place are delectable spreads, champagne fountains, and some of the most beautiful people I’ve ever seen in my life.

“It’s like we stepped into the Playboy Mansion,” Riley says, with a quiet wolf whistle, his eyes practically popping out of his head.

Ciara elbows him in the ribs. “I’m watching you, Casanova.”

But I sympathize with my brother because the place is teeming with scantily clad, drop-dead gorgeous model types. They’re

handing out shots, posing for selfies, or just draping themselves over any available arm in the room.

I fiddle self-consciously with the narrow belt of my strappy summer dress. “I think we should start with drinks.”

“I think you’re right,” Ciara says, and walks with me over to the champagne fountain.

The whole area is awash in a golden glow emanating from the glasses that are lit from underneath, the bubbly continuously pouring down the careful tiers. There’s a couple ahead of us who grab two glasses from the bottom and move off to the side.

“Looks simple enough,” Ciara says with a shrug. “Let’s hope I’m not the Jenga idiot who makes this thing topple over.”

I hold my breath as I watch her slowly remove a glass from the tower. All sense tells me that it’s fine and these things are built to work this way. But I can’t help feeling like maybe she’s right and one wrong move will send the entire piece crashing to the floor.

“Maybe we should—”

My words are barely out of my mouth when Ciara turns to me with two glasses of champagne, her face lit up in victory.

“Cheers, girl.”

“Cheers,” I say, with a sigh of relief.

The bubbles tickle my throat with the first sip, and I instantly feel the drink going straight to my head. Like I knew it would; I’ve never been much of a drinker for this very reason.

“Are you always in your head this much?” Ciara asks. “Or is it just tonight, because your brothers dragged you out here on your first night back? Believe me, hanging out in a gym isn’t exactly my idea of a fun night out, either. So, you’re not alone.”

I scan the room absently and shake my head. “It doesn’t bother me. I know how close Aiden and Dax are, so it makes sense he’ll want to be here for this.”

And with that, my eyes land on just those two—Aiden and Dax, deep in conversation across the room.

It's like my skin gets several degrees hotter and there's not enough oxygen in the room. But I know the way I'm feeling has nothing to do with alcohol and everything to do with the guy my brother is talking to.

I bite my lower lip between my teeth.

Dax has this thing about him that I can't explain, but always fall prey to. It's been there since I first met him at my parents' auto shop, which now belongs to Aiden, when I was just fifteen. There were way less tattoos, but those tight muscles were bulging underneath his shirts already back then. His dark hair and heavy eyebrows always made his deep, dark eyes seem more intense. No matter what he was speaking about, I was enraptured.

"There you go again."

I blink a few times and look at Ciara standing in front of me, an amused expression on her face.

"What?"

She chuckles to herself. "That's what I want to know," she says. "What's so interesting in there that you keep disappearing?" She taps the side of her head and smiles.

"Nothing, sorry. I guess I'm still a bit jet lagged is all."

But she eyes me suspiciously, not buying my excuse for a second. So, there's something a four-year Pol Sci degree at Smith doesn't give you—the ability to lie and do it well.

Luckily, Ciara's the type of person who would rather drag her boyfriend over the coals than grill me about whatever it is she thinks I'm hiding. She's noticed that Riley isn't anywhere close to where Aiden and Dax are talking.

"I swear to God, Gemma, if he's being an idiot, I'm making a scene," she says, and goes off to look for him the crowd.

"Good luck," I call after her, but she's already blended in with all the other nameless faces around.

My social anxiety starts to kick in, the way it usually does when I'm in an uncomfortable space, and my first instinct is to hide. So, that's what I do. Carefully weaving my way through indistinct chatter punctuated with fake laughter, I make my way to the back of the gym where I know the dark hallway by the locker room will keep me out of sight.

"Where do you think you're slipping off to?"

My blood runs cold and goosebumps erupt all over my skin. I turn slowly and he's right there, smirking at me, looking like a gift from the gods. And I'm left feeling like no time has passed, and I'm still the fresh-faced teenager with a life-altering crush.

"Oh, hey," I say, immediately hating my voice for betraying my nerves so easily.

But he's gracious enough to leave it alone. This is where Dax is nothing like my brothers, who never abandon an opportunity to make fun of me.

"Did you really think you'd get through the night without at least saying hi to me?"

His smile reaches his eyes with a mischievous glint. My cheeks are on fire and unfortunately, I'm still no good at summoning the earth to swallow me whole.

"I didn't think you'd notice, what with the attention you're getting from everyone else," I say, motioning my head generally toward the room.

He waves a hand dismissively. "All part of the job," he says. "It means a lot that the people I care about are here, though."

I swallow hard.

"And the fact that Aiden managed to get you to come along, well, that's just a bonus. How the hell have you been? How's school? I want to hear everything."

And he looks as though he really is interested in me. Little old me, who has nothing on the gaggle of models flitting around the room. I feel about ten feet tall.

“Well, school’s over,” I say. “You’re looking at a recent Political Science graduate.”

“Holy shit,” he says, laughing admirably. “Congratulations, Gem. That’s awesome. What are you doing to celebrate?”

“Well, I came home to touch base, but my friends and I are heading off to Hawaii in a couple of days.”

“Days of nothing but lazing by the beach,” he says. “Sounds good.”

The way his eyes graze over me then, taking me in from head to toe, it’s almost as if he’s imagining me there. I cross my arms over my chest, feeling as though I’m standing in front of him in nothing but my bikini. It’s insane the effect he has on me with just a look. What’s even more insane is that I’m having this kind of reaction over the absolute last person on earth I should be feeling this way about. Dax Daytona has never been anything but trouble. I know this. I need to remember this.

“So, how did the press conference go? Sorry we missed it,” I say, trying to steer the conversation in a safer direction.

“These things are all the same,” he says. “They fake interest in my strategies, and then try to rile me up about my opponent. Try to get in my head.”

“But it did work, right?”

He flashes a half-smile and says, “What do you think? I’ve been training for this my whole life. In four weeks, I’m taking that title, no questions asked.”

I shake my head, laughing lightly. “The arrogance of a fighter. Always thinking you’ve got it.”

“The arrogance of an academic,” he says, shooting back without hesitation. “Always thinking you’re right.”

Our eyes lock in that moment, and the air between us instantly becomes charged. No longer light and humorous but weighted with something else. Something I feel we’re both too hesitant to acknowledge.

“So, who’s the lucky girl in your corner?”

I immediately regret asking that. Because what the hell am I thinking? It's none of my business, and asking that question is only going to make him think that I—

“Who's the lucky guy in yours?”

His lightning-fast reaction reflex isn't something exclusive to the ring, that's for sure.

“You need to ask? I came here with my brothers,” I say with a shrug.

I can't help feeling like I'm under some kind of intense scrutiny.

“Maybe next time you come around, don't bring them along.” His voice is low when he speaks, and it sends shivers down my spine.

There's no way I could be misreading this, is there? But just as the thought enters my mind, I see the look in his eyes, and I know. I read it perfectly clear.

“It's been a while,” he says, stepping closer to me. “We should catch up. Without all of this chaos going on.”

Catch up. Is that code for something? My body clearly wants it to be because I'm achingly aware of the knot twisting in my belly. The warmth rising between my legs. It's as though for all my efforts to escape the crowd, all I needed was to be fixed in Dax's gaze, the heat from his body emanating through the infinitesimal space between us, making me catch fire. We're entirely alone in this gym.

In the world.

“That would be nice,” I say, and swallow again. Hard.

What am I doing?

The wrong thing, Gemma. The most wrong thing of all wrong things ever. I can just imagine the look on Aiden and Riley's faces. My mom's face. Oh God, my dad! It would be enough to bring on another heart attack for the old man.

“There he is!” A loud shriek pierces the bubble around us, and a group of girls descend on Dax in a flurry of giggles and

groping.

“We were looking for you, Daxy baby,” says the one wearing a half-cup bra as comfortably as if it were a sweater.

The one with flaming red hair cascading over her shoulders holds up her cell phone and asks, “Can we get a selfie?”

Without waiting for a response from Dax, they all huddle closer to get in the frame, their faces are blank mirrors of what’s happening inside their heads. Or not happening, for that matter. It’s a stretch to think of them as having more than the one brain cell it takes to aim a camera lens at themselves. And even though this is supposed to be a posed photo, their hands are all over him, stroking his muscles, and one even creeps beneath his shirt. He looks pretty comfortable with all the attention, and that is probably worse than the bimbos giving it to him.

“I’m going to go find my brothers,” I say, hiking my thumb over my shoulder in no particular direction except away from this spectacle.

He doesn’t hear me, let alone notice as I turn and walk away. Which is neither here nor there and shouldn’t bother me at all. Because who am I to Dax “The Guillotine” Daytona? His best friend’s goody-two-shoes little sister, that’s who.

Yet, it does bother me, even though he’s not the kind of guy I should be bothered about. What I should do is leave childhood crushes in the past where they belong. Especially Dax. Someone like me has no business thinking these things about someone like him.

“Oh, sorry,” I mumble, as I bump into someone in passing.

I’m so lost in my head; it surprises me for a moment to find myself still in the packed gym. But the guy I just bumped into gets my attention. Not because he totally ignores my apology, but because of the look on his face and the purposeful way he’s striding toward Dax. The four-man posse of thugs following him only makes the whole thing that much more foreboding. They’re all very much out of place at this swanky

press party, looking like they crawled up from the street corner that they call home.

I look around to see if anyone else has picked up on this development, but everyone is too caught up in the party. Funny how the man of the moment is nobody's concern once the free food and booze rolls out. Rooted to my spot a few feet from where I left Dax, I watch as he shoos away his fangirls in anticipation of the conversation he's about to have with this guy.

His face takes on a cold, stony expression and his hands ball up into fists as the stranger comes to stand in front of him. There's restraint though, as Dax buries them deep inside the pockets of his jeans. I can clearly pick up on the way his jaw sets and his pecs flex under his shirt from here. He's holding back, but ready.

The two get into it then, and judging by the look on Dax's face, it's not good. I suddenly wish I hadn't been so hasty in my getaway. If I were closer, I might catch a bit of what is going on between them. I don't know why I need to know, but right now, it feels like I'm missing out on something big. So much for not being bothered.

"Here you are!" Ciara appears beside me and hooks her arm into mine. "I need a wingman at the caviar bar."

Thankfully she's too distracted by food to notice my preoccupation with Dax, and I'm able to come out of it without having to explain anything.

[Read the complete story here!](#)

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