

COLLEGE VIRGIN &

DARK BULLY

Next Door

ENEMIES TO LOVERS/SPORTS ROMANCE BIG BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND & CURVY SHY GIRL, HATE LOVE, AGE-GAP BOOK

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College-Virgin & Dark Bully Next-Door: Enemies to Lovers/Sports Romance

Big Brother's Best Friend & Curvy Shy Girl, Hate Love, Age-Gap Book



Forbidden Daddy Steamy Novels

[Kathilee Riley](#)

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Prologue

Sky

Two Years Ago

I almost died twice in one week.

Once from humiliation, the other from grief.

Humiliation happened four days ago.

Today, I'm grieving.

There are no tears. God, I wish there were tears. Maybe then, I wouldn't feel so heavy. My heart wouldn't feel like it's being crushed in my chest. I wouldn't be wishing for the earth to swallow me up, to bury me alive.

To kill me.

From the outside, you'd never guess that these morose thoughts are in my head. Whistling softly, I gently pull the freezer door open. My eyes scan the thin boxes of frozen pizza, then coast over to the frozen beef patties I love so much. I wet my lips, already tasting the juicy burger I've been craving all day. The melted cheese, warm bun, pickles and onion—

Slam!

I stare at the closed door, and if anyone was looking at me right now, they'd get the first glimpse of pain. It's odd that I can openly express an emotion for something my brother would consider trivial, yet I'm like a blank canvas over what happened yesterday afternoon.

Maybe he's right. Maybe I needed to see a therapist after the incident four days ago. I definitely should see one now.

But I won't.

Instead, I'll work on my mental health the 'Sky' way.

I open the lower section of the fridge. I roll my eyes at the salad kit I'd brought at that vegetarian place this morning. It's not enough to soothe the pain that's twisting my insides right now. I need real food. Comfort food.

Alas, comfort food is what got me in the position where I almost died four days ago, so I can't succumb to temptation. Another blast of humiliation like that, and you can just go ahead and write my obituary.

Pulling out the box, I consider what that obituary might say about me. Five feet tall, two-hundred-pound, bug-obsessed freak, for sure. They'd probably mention that I'm a foodie and that if I'm not buried in a book, I'm out in the wild (my backyard), snapping photos on my DSLR camera.

The lid snaps open as I rest my butt on the stool around the kitchen island. That part where they mention your surviving family, would Dad dare include her name? He'd better not. I'd haunt him for the rest of his life if he does.

I stab a piece of lettuce with the fork as the kitchen door opens. Without even looking, I know it's my brother, Chase. It's not only the scent of his cologne that gave him away. The only other occupant in this two-story dwelling is about a block away, drowning his sorrows in bottles of beer.

Chase sidles up to me, his red-rimmed eyes reminding me that he has always been the sensitive sibling. He always shows what I feel. We'd always joked that he joined the empathy line twice and stole my portion. For once, I envy him. Maybe I wouldn't feel so intense if I could just let it all out.

He peers into my bowl and shakes his head, then mutters, “Fuckers. Look what they made you do.”

“They didn’t make me do anything, Chase. It was a wake-up call. I really do need to lose the weight.”

“It should be on your terms, not as a result of—” His fingers grip the edge of the counter, anger hardening his face. “They should count themselves lucky that you begged me to let it go, but if they come near you again, I swear, I’m going to fuck them up, anyway.”

“Peter wouldn’t dare, and Ashton has already left,” I mumble around a mouthful of sliced apples and cucumbers.

“He’s smart, that piece of shit. I can’t believe he hurt you like that.” He slaps the counter. “Fuck my promise to you. If Ashton ever shows his face in this town again, I’m going to punch it. Punch it hard.”

A mental image of his ex-best friend—our neighbor—flashes across my mind, and I know Chase is the lucky one. They’re the same height, but Ash has got a fifteen-pound advantage, thereabouts.

Plus, he’s a boxer.

An amateur one, but I’ve seen him in action, back when we were all friends. He’d knock Chase out in a heartbeat. Chase knows that, too.

Which means my brother is either stupid or really angry.

Considering he graduated near the top of his class in high school and is doing quite well studying finance in college, I know he’s not stupid.

Which means he’s angry.

On my behalf.

I reach out and squeeze his slender arm. “I love you for looking out for me. I’m going to miss you, especially since...”

Chase squeezes my hand, sighing knowingly. “I still can’t believe Mom did that to us.”

“I can’t believe it, either.” That slashing pain returns even more intensely this time. I drop the fork and push the bowl away.

None of us saw this coming. Mom was the glue that kept this family together. She was our nurse, our private chef, our therapist, filling this house with so much warmth and light. Oh, she loved to laugh, and you couldn’t help feeling happy and fuzzy whenever that musical sound filled the room. It was infectious. She was infectious. There was never a dull moment around her.

Then, she stopped laughing.

And smiling.

There was no more cooking. No nursing.

Mom stopped giving a listening ear.

She became withdrawn after a redundancy exercise at work left her jobless. I thought she would be happy staying at home. How many times did she express wanting to quit so she could take of us, anyway? I’m sure it’s not about the money since Dad’s landscaping company made enough to keep us afloat.

I didn’t understand it. None of us did.

Even witnessing her depression, we still weren’t prepared for what happened next. Getting home from school yesterday afternoon and seeing her empty side of the closet, all her personal effects gone, that note on her dresser, the memories will keep haunting me for a while.

My sweet, amazing family,

*I love you. I just can’t do this anymore. Maybe one day
you’ll understand and forgive me.*

Mom

I hate that she signed it, ‘Mom’. She should’ve signed it, Claire, her legal name. Moms don’t abandon their families. They certainly wouldn’t have left such a short and cryptic note. We deserve more than a scribbled message on a piece of construction paper.

“Listen.” Chase clasps my shoulders, giving me a stare that reminds me of whenever he’s ready to give a pep talk. “We’re going to get through this, you hear me? Dad just needs a moment to handle this shock, but he’ll be here for you. I know that. Besides, I’ll only be a few hours away. Whenever you need me, I’ll be there.”

“I know.”

My face crushes against his cotton shirt as he pulls me into a fierce hug, one that improves my mood a little, but I know it won’t be enough. Especially after he leaves.

Something tells me he’s wrong. It won’t get better. Dad won’t be here for me. The way he stormed out of the house after he saw the empty closet, not even checking if we were okay, not coming home until the wee hours of the morning, then leaving again without even a word to us, that’s very telling. At least, to me.

Chase thinks he needs a moment, but I suspect that, like Mom, he’s already checked out.

My cellphone vibrates on the counter next to us. My finger swipes across the screen, and I read the reminder from my best friend, Bonnie. Like I needed a reminder about going for that run with her later this evening. I wasn’t kidding when I told Chase about that wake-up call. I’m going to shed these pounds, even if it kills me.

And I’m going to survive living in this broken house.

At least, for the next two years.

Chapter 1

Ashton

Two Years Later

Back when I was ten, my Labrador Charlie got into a fight with an Alsatian from next door. Within minutes, he got his ass beat. From the front lawn, I watched, helpless, as he scurried across the street with his tail between his legs, completely defeated.

In this moment, I know exactly how he felt.

I put the second-hand Mustang in park and breathe a deep sigh, letting out the anxiety for what I'm about to do. There's no escaping it. I have no other choice. Life has whipped me even harder than that dog whipped Charlie.

The front door flies open as I emerge, and a petite, dark-haired woman sails out, her arms open wide. "There you are! Finally!"

She throws her arms around me. I hug her back, resting my chin on the top of her head, and she gets lost in my embrace. She has lost some weight since the night I last saw her two years ago. Not enough to make me worry. She still looks amazing.

"Hi, Mom," I mumble.

Mom pulls back, beaming. "It feels good to hear your voice, especially since it's not over the phone. Welcome home, my angel."

I almost smirk at the remark. If she knows exactly what I've been up to in San Francisco, she'd know I'm definitely no angel. I'm not interested in ruining that illusion for her, though. I give her another hug, then kiss her cheek. "Thanks, Mom."

"Well, if it's not the prodigal son returning home," a dry murmur comes from behind me.

Dad.

He and Mom have always been like night and day, never seeing eye-to-eye on things but making it work, anyway. Their contrasting personalities couldn't be any clearer now. Mom smiles like she just won the lottery, while the iciness in Dad's green eyes could freeze boiling water. He's definitely not happy that I'm here. After our last conversation, I can't blame him, either.

"Hello, Dad." I was almost tempted to say, "Sir," since his scowl reminded me of my high school boxing coach.

He tilts his head to my car, the curls of his dark hair bouncing from the movement. "Need help with your stuff?"

"No," I reply, surprised by his offer. "It's just a couple of bags. Thanks anyway."

Dad harrumphs, then looks me up and down. With a loud scoff, he turns and heads back inside. I watch him go, seeing another contrast. Unlike Mom, he's put on some weight. Only it's pure muscle. Running a construction firm has definitely kept him in shape.

"Give him time, sweetie. He'll come around," Mom assures me as the door closes behind him. "He's still in shock, too. After the way you stormed out that night, no one thought you'd ever want to set foot back in this house." She grimaces. "Well, those were your exact words."

And I meant them. Every word.

When you're nineteen years old and don't know a thing about what's out there, you say shit. Stupid shit. Back then, I felt invincible. The world was my oyster. I had plans to dominate the boxing industry, one win at a time. I did well back in high school, led the team to several championships, and I knew—or thought that getting to the big league would be smooth sailing.

But it wasn't.

Which is why I'm here with my tail between my legs like good 'ol Charlie.

I open the back door and remove my luggage, a duffel bag, a backpack and a large, hard side suitcase I'd 'borrowed' from an old flame. It reminds me that I'd promised to let her know when I was safely home. Pulling the phone from my pocket, I do just that, keeping my text short and impersonal. I don't want Laura to get any ideas. I saw the hope on her face when I picked up the suitcase yesterday morning. The last thing I want to do is hurt her.

Again.

"Let me take that bag for you," Mom offers, reaching for the duffel bag. Before I can stop her, she lifts it, then staggers with a groan. I unburden her quickly, my muscles tightening from the effort. A flash of pain shoots across my shoulder. The bag makes a thumping sound when I drop it on the brick-paved driveway.

"What do you have in there, a dead body?" she asks with a huff, earning a chuckle from me.

"Nope," I reply, swinging the backpack over my shoulder and grabbing the other luggage.

She leads the way inside, and I'm amazed how nothing has changed in the last two years. They haven't even moved the furniture around. The three-piece, brown couch set stands in that same circle, with the wooden coffee table in the middle. Dad and I bought that fifty-inch flat-screen TV on Black

Friday, three years before I left. The walls are still painted off-white. Even the yellow curtains haven't been changed. Or maybe they have. Mom loves yellow, and I don't know shit about curtains. They might not be the same ones.

“Where's Peter?” I ask as Mom leads me upstairs. “I thought my little brother would've rolled out the red carpet for me. He'd been riding my ass to come back home.”

Mom sighs, turning the handle of my bedroom door. “He's somewhere with his friends, up to no good, I presume. I've gone hoarse trying to keep him in line. Your father insists that I should let him be. Boys will be boys,” she ends in a deep tone, and I assume she's mimicking Dad.

Peter was always Dad's favorite, so I'm not surprised at his response. What surprises me is that my brother still hasn't grown out of his childish ways. He's eighteen, for fuck's sake.

I quickly scan the room. Like everything else, nothing has changed. Except the sheets, I think. The queen bed, that dark oak dresser, the futon couch I'd begged Mom to buy when it was on sale five years ago and my study desk sitting by the closet.

“I sure hope he's not harassing poor Sky. God knows she's going through enough.”

My mind conjures a memory of my best friend—well, ex-best friend's kid sister. Her chubby, innocent-looking face and that long, blonde hair she always wore in a messy ponytail. Peter had been picking on her for years. Harmless pranks, so I'm sure she's used to it. However, I'm concerned about the last part of Mom's statement.

“What do you mean by ‘she's been through enough?’”

Mom gives me a puzzled frown, resting the bag on my bed. “I thought you heard what happened. Haven't you and Chase kept in touch?”

“No, and it’s a story I’d rather not talk about.” I catch a glimpse of a crestfallen look, then add, “Not right now. Can you tell me what happened to Sky?”

“It’s not just Sky. Chase, too. Well, and David. Claire ran away two years ago, a few days after you left,” she informs.

“Seriously?”

Wide-eyed, she nods, then glances furtively at my half-opened door. “David hasn’t told us what happened, but there have been speculations. People are saying she ran off to be with another man.”

“Wow.”

“There’s no proof that it’s true, but oh... I feel so sorry for Sky. Chase has been away at school, and she’s practically there alone.”

“What about David?”

She rolls her eyes, plopping on my bed. “When he’s not drunk, he’s buried in his work. He hardly makes time for Sky. Dan says it’s because she looks just like Claire, and he hates that reminder. We’ve tried an intervention, but it only worked for a few days.”

“Damn...” I sit beside her. Something moves inside me that feels like pity. Well, I think it’s pity. I’m not used to this sensation or any emotional reaction at all. Two years of self-training left me with an emotional deficit I’d been content with.

Half an hour back home, and the factory settings are already being restored.

Courtesy of Sky.

I picture the girl who used to bother me and Chase when her best friend wasn’t around, begging us to include her

in our games. We'd send her to play with Peter, and her feisty response would earn her a spot in our crew.

When we got older, I got obsessed with teasing her. For some reason, I enjoyed pushing her buttons, evoking her sassy, cutting responses. I would hit below the belt, and she'd go for the jugular. All harmless fun.

Until it wasn't.

Mom goes over to open the blinds, which gives me a view of her rose garden and the Bennett's backyard. The incoming nightfall casts a dark blue shade on their mid-sized pool. I remember the summer nights when I used to scale that wall for a swim. There was no need to sneak, though. The Bennetts let me use it whenever I wanted. Pretending to sneak around added to the thrill.

"Reach out to Sky when you get settled, will you? Seeing a familiar face might improve her spirits."

I respond with a nod before she goes out. Maybe I will. Maybe I won't. After what happened two years ago, Chase probably won't let me touch his sister with a ten-foot pole.

Rising from the bed, I start unpacking, only pausing when I feel a cramp in my shoulder. It's uncomfortable but nothing to alarm me. It certainly won't stop me from what I came back home to do. I might be at rock bottom now, but starting next week, I'll be making my way to the top.

I close the drawer with my knee, still rubbing the injured shoulder. Two surgeries done to repair the ligaments, Six months in recovery, ten thousand dollars in debt and a ruined amateur boxing career.

Well, that's what my last doctor said.

I don't believe him.

Telling me 'you can't' is a sure way to light a fire under me, and hell, there's one blazing under me right now. Dad may be right. I am the prodigal son. Unlike that character, I'm not

home to stay. I have a plan. Rock bottom will not be my hangout spot for long.

Something moves past my peripheral vision as the drawer slams shut. I twist my head to look out the window, then do a double take. There's a naked woman in the bedroom next door.

Correction: almost naked. She's actually wearing panties. They're lace, so she's practically naked, anyway.

Her back is turned to me, but I can see the edges of her boobs. She's standing in front of the mirror, her slender arms lifted, both hands clutching a bunch of her blond hair.

I'm a pervert for staring, but I can't stop.

I should turn away and close these blinds, but my eyes remain glued to that vision. She is a vision, even from behind. I take in her cinched waist, the curve of her hips, the way those panties hug her ass. My cock stirs in my pants, reminding me I haven't been laid since the night before my opponent put me in that goddamn hospital. Whoever that guest is over by the Bennetts could probably be my first.

Unless she's married.

Or engaged.

Or works for the police department. I slept with a cop once, and it didn't end well. I almost spent a night in jail after telling her it was just sex.

The blonde's head suddenly shoots up, then she whips around, her hands covering her boobs. Something that feels like shock zings up my spine. I move directly to the window, peering over there, unwilling to believe what I'm seeing.

Her face darkens with a scowl. With an arm now covering her chest, she yanks the comforter off the bed, wraps it around her, then storms toward the window. Her stiff middle finger is the last thing I see before her blinds zip shut.

I back away with a shocked chuckle. I stare down at the rock-hard erection in my pants.

No way.

No fucking way.

No way in hell was that Sky Bennett.

That curvy vixen was not the chubby, adorable little girl I used to chase around with my water pistol.

It can't be.

There's no way I just got a hard-on for my ex-best friend's sister.

Chapter 2

Sky

“They’re not going to bite, Sky. Pinky promise.”

I shoot a skeptical glance at the brown-skinned girl standing at my closet door. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Bonnie. If my memory serves correctly, half of them have fangs.”

“Don’t be dramatic. It’s only a quarter of them.”

My soft chuckle fills the closet space.

“That’s better.” She sticks out her hand. “Come on, one step at a time.”

“One step toward my doom, you mean.”

Bonnie lashes me with a stern glare. “We decided not to entertain that negative energy, remember?”

With a sigh, I emerge from the closet, my arms wrapped around me. “Yeah, that was before I looked in the mirror just now.”

“You look amazing. Stop.” She fans me off.

A part of my brain knows she’s right. The other side refuses to accept it. Staring back at my reflection, all I see is that two-hundred-pound girl who was the butt of every fat joke. I get glimpses of who I am now, but it’s fleeting. I still can’t believe I achieved this goal.

“Your days of hiding behind those baggy clothes are over,” Bonnie mutters, resting her chin on my shoulder and

peering at my reflection. “Tonight, we unveil the new you. Come on.”

She heads out of my bedroom and I follow, unease filling me with every step.

The sound of music and laughter greets me as we get to the foot of the stairs, and I pause abruptly, the rapid pounding of my heartbeat blasting in my ears as a memory hits me.

“I can’t do this,” I whisper, whipping around and bounding up the stairs. Bonnie catches up to me halfway. She grabs my arm to slow me down.

“Deep breaths, Sky. Relax.”

“Why did I think this was a good idea? Nothing’s changed, Bonnie. They haven’t changed.”

She sighs. “I guarantee, no one remembers that awful night.”

“Right, until they see me in this.” I sweep my hand down my body.

“Let me prove it to you.” She offers me her hand once more. “Trust me.”

I scoff. “Only because you’ve had my back since middle school,” I reply, taking her hand.

Still, my entire body shudders as we head through the back door. The hard concrete under my sandaled feet reminds me of the night I wished the earth would open and swallow me. I hope this isn’t another trap. Another cruel joke.

No. Bonnie wouldn’t hurt me like that—

My thoughts come to a sudden halt. I lift my gaze from the paved patio floor to dozens of eyes staring back at me. Everyone freezes. Even the music has paused. The urge to turn tail and run is even stronger now, but Bonnie’s grip tightens on my wrist.

“Don’t you even think about it,” she mutters through a smile.

With my breathing on pause, I brace for the jeering, maybe a bottle or two thrown at me, but nothing happens.

At least, not for the next thirty seconds.

I almost startle as the loud pop music suddenly resumes, and the crowd unfreezes. Most of them go back to bumping and grinding. A few are still gaping at me.

“Bonnie, you promised small. This isn’t small!” I complain in a harsh whisper, looking over no less than half of the senior class that’s now partying around or in my pool. When I had glanced out the window fifteen minutes ago, I literally saw five people down here.

I chew my bottom lip and pull my cover up tighter around me as if the fabric isn’t lace and will actually hide the dark green bikini Bonnie practically wrestled me into. No wonder she went through the trouble of distracting me with the outfit, so I wouldn’t notice all these people coming in.

Although my entrance turned out way better than I’d been worrying about all day, the party was still far outside my comfort zone. I can still feel the anxiety shaking me up. I feel like a can of pop – ready to explode. My dad isn’t here, Chase is upstairs gaming, and without Bonnie grounding me, I’m alone. I’m not really the ‘friends’ type after all, and the graduation party was just supposed to be people I talked to - which meant like five. Not the thirty-plus people she insisted on inviting.

I’m already calculating the issues. “No one is allowed in the house wet, and there are no towels. I should just call it off entirely.”

Bonnie shakes my wrist impatiently. “Look, you’re taking a semester off, but most of these people ... you’ll never see them again. What do you have to lose, Sky?”

“You mean more than what I’ve already lost?” I hiss as she nudges my back.

“I understand high school wasn’t the greatest, but the purpose of tonight is to go out with a bang. This is the last time they’re going to see you. You want this to be memorable, don’t you?”

I shrug. “I guess—”

“Jesus Christ, Sky,” Maddox, a guy from the track team interrupts, staring me up and down. “You look... wow.”

Bonnie beams as my wide-eyed stare remains fixed on his handsome face. Six years of high school, and he’s never said a word to me until now.

My best friend jabs my side with her elbow, and I blink. “Um... thank you?”

“I mean, I knew you’d lost a ton of weight, but this...” His hand runs up and down my frame. “I can’t believe you’ve been hiding all of this under those baggy clothes you wear.”

“It’s called the element of surprise,” Bonnie offers.

“Oh, trust me, I am.” Maddox bites his lower lip.

The obvious interest in his eyes makes my stomach flip, and not in a good way. I force a smile, and his puzzled expression is the last thing I see before I move off. A few of my schoolmates greet me with thumbs-up gestures as I hurry along the edge of the crowd.

“Great party, Sky!” yells a girl from my math class. “Who would’ve thought you had it in you?”

I respond with the same forced smile I just gave Maddox and move on.

“Lose that cover-up!” a guy calls. “Show off that banging body!”

“Sky, breathe,” Bonnie says from behind me. I didn’t even notice her following me.

“I am breathing,” I mumble as she falls in line with me.

“Which is why it looks like you’re ready to explode. I’m going to loosen you up if it’s the last thing I do.”

She doesn’t give me a chance to reply, just tugs me toward a lounge chair by the pool. “Just stay here for a few minutes and give me a chance to show you how fun this can be, okay?”

I try to cling to her even as she leaves. A few guys walk by, and I pull a pillow in front of me, wrapping my legs and arms around it as if it could save me. My springy blonde hair isn’t going to do the job, even if it’s mermaid-level long – meaning I could probably go topless, and no one could see but even knowing that doesn’t help here.

Bonnie’s standing by the makeshift juice bar, her elbows resting on the counter as she talks to an old fling. She bites her full bottom lip as he flirts with her, his hand caressing her arm. Knowing my best friend, they’re probably making plans to hook up when the party’s over.

The bartender slides two cups toward her. She takes them and offers her cheek for the guy to kiss before she sweeps herself away and comes to me. With an arched eyebrow, I stare at the cup she’s offering me.

“It’s not alcohol. I know you’re a prude,” she says.

I shove her gently. “Just because I didn’t give it up in high school doesn’t mean I’m a prude.”

She scrunches her lips at me. “One, I meant alcohol. Two, you took yourself out of the game, gorgeous.”

“Really? I don’t think anyone’s starting a line to date me.” I snort, clutching the pillow tighter.

“Well, why would they when the sign says “closed” in all caps?” She says. “Are you honestly telling me that if you made eye contact with any of these guys here, they’d turn around and walk away?”

“Not now.” I shake my head. “Not when I’ve lost all this weight.”

Bonnie sits up, giving me a stare that reminds me of the time Dad caught me in the cookie jar when I was eight years old. “Let me remind you, you were still fabulous with the weight. Your confidence was another story. It still is.”

“What are you talking about? I’m confident.”

“No, you’re sassy when you get pissed off. There’s a difference.”

“Okay, fine,” I concede. “I admit, I’m not great with boys. They’d come and talk, I’d forget how words work, end up talking about bugs, then they’d run – not walk.”

She takes a drink from her cup, then lounges next to me, trying to pull the pillow away until she actually throws it across the deck. I keep trying to cover up.

A year ago, I finally shed my baby weight, and after wearing a new outfit to school and getting stares and some whispers, I decided it was a no go. The less attention I get, the better.

“Any guy would be lucky to be with you, Sky. You know that right?” she asks.

“And you know that a man is not necessary for survival,” I remind.

She groans and falls back. “Uh-uh. I don’t know about that bit.”

I poke her. “I’m serious. In all species. Like there are spiders who *eat* males who approach them because it’s better. I don’t need a man to achieve my goals.”

“Needing and wanting are two different things. We can *survive* off ramen noodles, but that’s not living. I want donuts, and I want cheeseburgers and pizza and all the other things in the world.”

“Sound logic, but I’m independent, and I love it.”

That’s true. It is. I remember seeing how my dad deteriorated after my mom left us. He became a shell of himself. He relied heavily on Chase and me—mostly me, since my brother lived five hours away on campus. With his help, I took care of the bills, ensured the house was kept clean, made the meals, did the laundry. I’ve lost count of how many times I had to force out of bed and make him go to work. It’s like the roles have been switched, and I hate it. The worst part ... the absolute worst part was his missing smile.

He *needed* my mom. He told her that constantly, asked her how he’d ever survive without her and ... and then he had to find out. I don’t want to be like that broken man, ruined by the person he loved most.

I can’t be the girl staring at a door, waiting for it to open so the one person I *need* will walk back in. Because they won’t. I know that. Once a person leaves, they leave. Second chances only happen in movies, and I’m not about those kinds of feelings.

“Mhm. I know that look,” Bonnie cuts into my thoughts.

“What look?”

She folds her lips, staring at me like she’s debating what to say. “Okay, I’m only going to bring this up once ...”

“Don’t.” I hold up the drink and down it. “I will do a shot before I discuss anything related to *that*.” Not really a that – a him. But I shake my head. “He knows this house—this party is off-limits.”

“Yeah, but his asshole brother doesn’t, though.” Bonnie jerks her head toward a blond guy with tousled hair who’d just stopped by the juice bar. She catches my glare and raises her hands. “I didn’t invite him. Hand to God.”

My fists curl into my cover up as said asshole – Peter – takes his drink from the bartender, moves off, spots me, then stops, gaping. With a wicked gleam on his face, he comes looking me over with a long whistle. “Damn. Sky Bennett, is that you?”

I try to grab for the pillow, but that’s a hollow dream. Obviously. It’s gone, just like any chance of me avoiding this conversation. I adjust my hair, so it better covers my breasts and try to cover my belly with my arms.

“You grew up. Not the girl next door anymore, are you?”

I glance at Bonnie, and she narrows her eyes. Peter hasn’t been nice since we were twelve. I don’t know what changed. We were friends, and then he hated me with a burning passion. An overnight flip. He started shoving me, calling me names and picking up on every insecurity. Not to mention the ultimate sin he committed against me.

“Who knew you could be hot under all that weird?” He snorts. “Almost makes up for the resting bitch face.”

“Funny, you being drunk almost makes up for the lack of personality,” I bite back.

“If only I didn’t know you, I might be interested. Then you go and open your mouth.” He shakes his head, tsking. “You should only open it for a dick to go in.”

Bonnie flies up from the lounge chair. “You filthy piece of shit—”

“No.” I grab her arm. “He’s not worth it, Bon.”

Peter chuckles at me. “Must be nice having a guard dog to defend you, huh?”

“Fuck all the way off.” Bonnie swings her hand toward my side gate. “You weren’t invited, and you’re trespassing.”

“Call the cops. Report me. Oh—no, you can’t.” With a smirk, he walks away.

Bonnie glowers at me as Peter gets lost in the crowd. “I wish you’d stand up to that guy already. He’s gotten away—still getting away with murder, you know.”

“I told you, he’s not worth it.” My voice sounds calm, but inside I’m seething. Bonnie’s right. I should bring him down a peg or two, especially after what he did to me two years ago.

“Hey.” Bonnie jiggles my arms. “Let’s put those thoughts of Peter in the trash where they—and he—belongs.” She points over to where a group of girls from our gym class are dancing nearby. “You get along with Giselle and her gang, don’t you?”

“If by ‘getting along,’ you mean they’ve never teased me about the baggy clothes I wear, then, yeah, I guess.”

“Great. Come on.”

It takes time to shake off Peter’s comment, but Bonnie gets me awkwardly dancing with the other girls. We enjoy each other. And for a few happy minutes, I lose myself in the music and the fun. But it’s just too much when a few guys get involved, especially when one of them zones in on me, his body brushing my ass. Too much going on, too many people to watch out for.

I shake my head at Bonnie and move off before she can stop me. I walk around the side, open the fence door and then slip along, nearly brushing the fence, when more people come in. Older people, definitely not eighteen-year-olds. I ignore that, just like I ignored the fact that the bartender is definitely serving alcohol from behind that makeshift counter. I press myself to the concrete wall of the house in the dark, trying to catch my breath.

Too many people, too much potential chaos. This is why I’ve never done parties. My backyard is like a writhing

pile of snakes like I've seen on TV. A bunch of horny people, alcohol, and little clothing. Bad things are going to happen. We'll be lucky if the police aren't called. And I can't forget all the "what ifs."

Deciding to sneak back inside through the front door, I hurry along the side of the house. The roar of a car engine jerks my attention to the driveway next door. A dark car pulls up, its bright headlights beaming on the patio.

My body pauses as the headlights dim to nothing. I stare at the driver's door. Why am I staring at the driver's door? Why am I still standing here, anyway? I should be consistent with what I've been doing since he moved back here two weeks ago. I should keep hiding from him—

No, not hiding. *Avoiding* him.

Yes, that's better.

Radiohead plays on full blast, the souped-up Mustang bouncing as he keeps pressing the brakes. I will myself to move, but it's like I'm transfixed. Somewhere deep below lies the shameful awareness that I actually want him to see me.

It's crazy.

I'm crazy.

I should move.

Yet, I remain rooted to the spot.

The vibrating windows settle as the engine shuts off. A tall figure emerges in slow motion, then moves around the passenger front door.

Peter's meaner, older brother. The bane of my existence. The *'that'* I refused to talk to Bonnie about.

Ashton Warren.

He's much larger than when he left two years ago, wearing a tank top that shows off his muscular arms and his broad shoulders. The pair of trunks give me a generous view

of his sculpted thighs and calves. The curve of his thick chest reminds me of a pillow. A rock pillow. Is there such a thing? If there is, it definitely reminds me of that. It seems he actually pursued his dream of boxing.

I scoff. *He's good for something, at least.*

His copper brown hair is curly and kept short, shaved on the sides. He has a scruff beard now, and it makes him look...

Hot.

Mouthwatering.

No!

I shake my head. He's a dick. I'm not going to think of how attractive he is.

He called me a witch when I was little and would poke dead things or look for skeletons of frogs. He called me a weirdo for liking bugs. He yanked my hair and pushed me into the pool when he got bored. His pranks often had me rushing to Mom in tears.

Yet, those name-calling and pranks don't compare to why I hate him so much.

Not even close.

It's been two years. I should let it go. For some reason, it's hard to move on. Hard to forget.

Ashton pulls the passenger door open, and a cute brunette steps out, wearing a bodycon dress that barely covers her lady parts. Well, at least until she pulls it down, and it falls at mid-thigh.

I wonder if she knows.

Would she be okay with knowing she's not the first girl he's taken home since coming back to town? Or that she won't be the last?

Ashton might've changed physically over the last two years, but he's still a man whore. Guys like him will never stop being a dick.

I press myself against the wall as they head up the driveway, and I hope where I'm standing is dark enough to keep me hidden. Within a minute, they'll get inside his house, and I'll be safe enough to get through my front door.

Five seconds later, I realize tonight is *really not my night* when they head toward me. There's nowhere to run, not without them noticing me.

Fuck.

I rub my forehead and hope, if there's any magic in this world, the wall will swallow me.

Yep. Definitely not my night.

Squaring my shoulders and arranging a smile, I wait for them, bracing for a snide remark from him, although he might be on his best behavior, considering he's with a date. Who am I kidding? Ashton gives zero fucks about what anyone thinks of him. He proved it after what he did to me.

He glances at me in passing, then does a double-take, his eyes skimming my body. "Sky?"

"No, Earth," I reply with a scoff, folding my arms beneath my breasts.

Ashton's gaze flies everywhere, and my body comes alive under his scrutiny. His eyes fly up to meet mine, and I catch a hint of guilt on his face. I'm not sure what it means. He clears his throat. "What are you doing alone in the dark?"

"Meditating."

He scoffs at my dry reply.

"Can we go, baby?" his date purrs in a beautiful soprano voice.

“I’ll meet you in there.” God, even Ashton’s voice is pure sin.

But I’ll reroute that in my brain. It pisses me off. I hate that my body gets all tingly and warm from his voice alone. I remind myself that I hate him and that steamy thoughts of Ashton have no place in my head.

“Sky.”

I refuse to look. He won’t have power then. But I feel him close to me. Warmth rolls off his body. Then, the sound of leaves breaking right near me. When I look up, he’s right there, one hand on the wall, blocking me in place.

“You’ve been hiding from me.”

I scoff, though my cheeks get warm. I hope it’s dark enough to hide my blush. It’s a surprise that he’s noticed since he’s been so busy the entire time. I’ve seen him leave the house every morning with a gym bag slung over his shoulder. He usually doesn’t return home until afternoon.

Deliberately sidestepping the question, I glance down at his outfit. “You’re not graduating. This isn’t your party.”

“Come on, bumble bee,” he says, using a term he used to call me. “Don’t be all cold and pouty. It’s not a good look.”

I look Ashton over slowly, taking in every bit of his big body compared to mine. Then I shrug. “Neither is yours.”

“I know that’s a lie,” he purrs. “You’d kill to get one touch.”

I duck from under his arm, irked that he’s actually teasing me. Does he have a memory loss, or something?

“I hope you treat your girlfriends better. Caging someone against a wall is predatory at best.”

He chuckles. “You don’t want to play with me?”

I pause in what was supposed to be a dramatic exit. I swallow hard. “No.”

“You used to love playing with me. You’d follow Chase and me around, wanting to be included in everything, no matter the game.” I don’t feel him right behind me, and he doesn’t touch me. Yay for small miracles. But he continues. “Aren’t you happy I’m letting you in now?”

“Fuck off.” I hiss. “You weren’t invited to my party. You or your brother. So how about you get him out before he gives me more shit?”

Ashton’s brows lift. “I’m just messing with you, Sky. You know that. Why the hostility?”

“Because you’re a dick,” I snap.

“Am I missing something?”

“Your date.” I shove my thumb toward the side gate. “Go see about her. Forget about me.”

“Ah.” Ashton cocks his head with a smirk. “Is this because I left two years ago without saying goodbye and that I haven’t been around since then?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I haven’t thought about you once.”

He taps my nose with a chuckle. I draw my head back, shooting him a nasty glare. “You were never a good liar, Sky. It’s okay to be mad at me. I’m sorry for not keeping in touch.”

I hold my glare. *Yep. He’s definitely had amnesia.* I can’t believe he’s standing here looking so innocent, pretending that shit-show never happened.

“Go and enjoy your party,” he motions, even though he’s right there, and I’d have to edge by him. A dangerous gaze plays in his eyes. “Go on.”

“It’s not my kind of party,” I reply, picking grass between my toes.

“I figured as much. Bonnie talked you into it, didn’t she?” he says knowingly, and I shrug.

“Well ...you might not be enjoying yourself, but congrats anyway.”

“On?” I’m waiting for the sass and sarcasm. That’s what he’s known for.

“Graduating is a big step. You can get away from all the shit you’re over. Plus, now you can have some grown up fun.” He winks, a dark brow curving with the movement.

With that, he continues ... toward his house. I blink at him. What about his date?

Yes, that’s it. Remember he has a date. Several dates. Remember you’re mad at him. You will always be mad at him because being anything else would be worse. An attraction to him would definitely be worse.

Even if I put that incident aside, even if two years ago never happened, an attraction to Ashton Warren is a no-no.

Ashton is a serial heartbreaker.

Yes, I might not have seen him in years, but I *know* his reputation hasn’t changed. Back then, he never kept a girl for longer than two weeks. He used them, then dipped out as soon as he was done. A leopard never changes its spots; isn’t that what they say? That’s his life, whatever. I’m sure the girls want it as much as he does, but I don’t want to waste any of my firsts on him.

So I shake it off. No curiosity. No questioning what he does. It’s not like our lives overlap. I can just ignore him. His stupid brother, too. I can get through one more summer with both of them. It’s fine. It’s fine. I’ll make sure it is.

I go inside and upstairs, texting Bonnie that I’m not feeling well. She offers to come up, but I tell her not to worry about it. I turn and grab pajamas and stare at them for a moment. Fuck them. I flop into bed and scrub my eyes, trying to kick Ashton Warren out of my head for good.

But someone who's been lodged in there for years isn't so easy to kick.

Fuck him for bringing up the past, all those soft memories I want to push down. When the music at the pool turns up, I pull a pillow over my head and scream.

Chapter 3

Ashton

Fucking Sky Bennett. I look down at my cock and grab my shirt in both hands. I throw it and hiss through my teeth. I had a beautiful girl on my arm. One that was ready to party and have a good time with the bonus of being right next to my house, and now I'm alone, in my room, looking at the pink light in Sky's room with a raging boner that just won't get the picture.

There was a time when I looked at her as just a little weird kid. A spunky little weird kid who would know the weirdest facts that were wrong for every situation. I remember teaching her to swim after Chase asked me to. I try to remember her showing me bugs and me slapping them out of her hand and that sad, pouty face she'd give me as her nose and cheeks went red.

Seeing her now, all grown up...

A movement across the way captures my attention. From my place on the edge of my bed, I watch as Sky gets up and paces her room. Every line of her body, the body I tried desperately not to stare at earlier, is highlighted by the chandelier light overhead. Even after two weeks, I'm still flabbergasted. When did she get so... sexy? Where did the chubby girl with the waist-length pigtails go? She still has a little meat on her bones, but every curve is now defined. Now, she has a firm-looking ass I'd like to bite, tits I want to have in my face, shapely legs I can picture wrapped around my waist

Oh, fuck.

I let out a hot breath and shake my head. “No. We’re not doing this. Not to her.”

But my cock is at attention, and I have to do *something* about it. I drop back in bed and kick out of my trunks. I wrap my hand around my cock and try to think of any of the girls I’ve been with. Any of them. But it doesn’t do the job.

I groan and give in. Those curves, the way Sky smelled when I was close to her, that sharp tone, the fact she didn’t throw herself at me like the other girls do, didn’t let me touch her, all of it was so hot that it took me an embarrassingly short time to finish.

Then I clean myself up and lay there, naked, staring at the old poster of a band I used to like right next to the Rocky poster.

Two weeks haven’t yet passed since I’ve been back home, and Sky Bennett is already driving me insane.

“The things these kids are into nowadays,” Dad grumbles as I enter the dining room. He’s sitting around the dining table, his eyes glued to the newspaper in his hand. “Bungee jumping off the Royal Gorge Bridge.” He scoffs. “Bastard’s lucky only his feet got broken. Why they take these risks, only God knows.”

“Morning, Pops,” I mumble, taking my seat and reaching for the coffee jug at once.

“Morning.” His eyes fly to me, and the irritation deepens on his face. “Speaking of risks, have you given any thought to what I said yesterday?”

I pause mid-pour, then rest the jug on the table. “I already told you, I’m not going back to college. I told you that two years ago when I dropped out, and I haven’t changed my mind.”

“What good has that decision done, huh? You got a broken shoulder from that stupid boxing match. Medical bills ate up all your earnings. You’re broke. In debt—”

“Which is why I’m here,” I interrupt, masking my irritation with a calm tone. “I explained what I needed to do, and you agreed to support me.”

“Correction. Your *mom* forced me to agree. Don’t get it twisted. I’ll never support a dream that keeps hurting you. A dream that could kill you.”

I want to point out he faces a wide range of hazards on his job that could kill him even faster than a boxing injury, but I won’t. He’s the lion, and my hand is now resting in his mouth.

“This should’ve been a hobby, nothing else. Those high school awards were great, sure. Was I proud of you? Yes. But a boxing career wasn’t part of the plan. You should’ve finished college, then come work for me. Instead, you got caught up and gave up our dream.”

No, your dream, Dad. Not mine.

Muffling a sigh, I take a seat around the table while he keeps going.

“What was I to do? I let you go like you wanted. I knew it wouldn’t work. I knew you’d come back. Silly me for thinking you’d learn your lesson, that you would listen to my advice this time. Yet, here you are, still closing the door on college. Pathetic, if you ask me.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, the disappointment on his face triggering a dip in my stomach as well. It bums me out that I can’t make him proud, but I need to follow my dreams.

“You have a right to your opinion. I respect it, and I respect you.”

“Mhmm. I hope that’s not your attempt to butter me up. I’m still giving you six months to get your act right and get out

of my house. Until then, I expect the rent on time.”

“Understood.” Suddenly, the thought of breakfast isn’t so appealing anymore. I bid my excuse and rise from the table.

“Leaving in half an hour, you hear me?” Dad calls gruffly as I walk off. “You don’t get to be late because you’re the boss’s son. And don’t think of riding that noisy, gas-guzzling thing you call a car. You’re riding with me.”

“Heard,” I mutter in reply. Mom stands by the kitchen sink as I head toward the back door. I detour, giving her a quick peck on her cheek.

“Good morning, Mom.”

“Good morning, Sweetie.” She stares up at me fondly, then brushes the hair from my face. “Don’t let his grumpiness get to you. He means well.”

“I know.” I accept the side hug she gives me, then continue on my way.

Fresh air. It’s weird how a deep inhale immediately settles me. I draw in another breath, and as I release it, I see Sky step through her back door.

She’s carrying something in a dark tank that’s being hidden by her long hair. I watch as she sets the tank down, takes the lid off and then dip inside. My eyes roam her ass, and I silently acknowledge that maybe I’m not a leg guy anymore. Or maybe it’s just Sky’s ass that I like. I’m tempted to find out if it’s as firm as it looks.

My attraction to her is no surprise. She’s a beautiful girl, even with her tousled hair and the T-shirt that’s two sizes too big. What surprised me was her hostile response last night. I can’t remember doing anything to offend her—well, except the teasing all those years ago. Those were innocent, childish gestures meant to deliver no harm. I can’t imagine her hating me for that.

Maybe she's not mad at me. Maybe she's pissed at life, at her mom for leaving. God knows *I'd* be furious about *that*.

"What are you staring at?" Peter's voice suddenly comes behind me, and I turn as he closes our back door. He looks over at Sky. "Oh. Chubby Sky ain't so chubby anymore, am I right?"

I shrug, watching as she closes the lid and picks up the tank. She glances over to us, then does a double take, flips her middle finger at us and storms inside.

"Is it me, or is she mad at both of us?"

It's Peter's time to shrug, but I swear there's a flash of guilt on his face. "Sky always has a stick up her ass. You know that."

"She's always been intense, but not with us."

"I don't know, man. I find it hot, though, no lie."

The back door flies open, and Dad sticks out his head. "Ready in five, Ash!" he barks.

"Duty calls," I mumble to Peter. "See you later."

"Yeah, let's see if you get home in one piece. A boxing ring has nothing on a construction site, you know that," he calls after me.

I wave in reply, then hurry upstairs and get dressed in a T-shirt, jeans and a pair of boots Dad lent me last night.

Then I'm up in a tense car ride with my dad while he grumbles about my choices, about how I shouldn't have given up on business school, how he'd been dying to train me to take over. And I don't say a word. He doesn't want me to, and defending myself would just start a fight. Then I'm slinging bags of dry concrete, working muscles I don't work at the gym.

It's a hard ten-hour day, but I get home around four and see Sky leaving. I pause, taking in the loose jeans and looser

T-shirt that says she's Wild about Nature. I hose off my shoes and see her eyes flick to me.

She used to look at me with something other than hate. There had been admiration and ... I don't know, something else there. Something that made me want to push her down just so she wouldn't look at me like that.

And now I want to tug her braid, drag her against me and steal all her attention. But she just keeps walking. So I get cleaned up and go to the gym. I beat the bag into submission and work on improving my footwork. My previous trainer had pointed out that it might have caused my downfall. Frank, my current trainer agrees. So, I spent the next two hours doing double leg-step jumps, feet crossovers and using a goddamn skipping rope. Back to the basics. Anything to start winning again.

"You should reactivate your Instagram account, Ash. Put yourself back out there," Frank suggests as I cool down. "Sadly, it's going to take more than your talent. The scouts need to know you're back in the game. They need to see you working, training, rebuilding. The best medium is social media."

Back in LA, I'd hired a social media manager who doubled-up as a photographer. I don't have that kind of money right now, and I definitely can't ask Frank to double-up as my trainer and photographer. He's already training me at half-price.

Still, I promise him I would, and after toweling off, I head out and get back home in time for dinner. Instead of heading inside, I get out of my car and just cross my arms on the top.

I let out a harsh breath. I'm sore all over. I honestly feel like I'm going to fall over. As I move off, I stumble a little, then steady myself. From my peripheral vision, I see Sky watching me, but as soon as our eyes meet, she looks away.

Normally, I'd give her a flirty look to ruffle her feathers, but I'm just too tired. I stumble again and then actually fall over. With a groan, I embrace the asphalt as it opens my elbows. I close my eyes even as the heat radiates through me.

The setting sun through my eyelids makes everything red, but then it's dark. Before I can open my eyes, my head gets lifted by soft fingers. I open my eyes like a baby doll as I'm pulled up, my gaze meeting Sky's.

Her hair is back in a bun, and her eyes are filled with concern. She shakes her head when I try to move. "No, you just passed out. Relax for a second. Here."

She pulls water out of a backpack or something and hands it to me. I just stare at her until she puts the bottle to my lips. She obviously isn't happy to be doing this, I can tell by how she's pursing her lips until they're white.

"Drink, fucker."

I part my lips and drink happily. After a long gulp, my hand wraps around hers, grazing her fingers. She comes to a dead freeze. Proof I can still get under her skin. I can still get her all bothered.

But she doesn't lean in, doesn't try to take advantage of the situation, and she just waits for me to drain the bottle before pulling away like it's nothing. Like she didn't just swoop in and try to save the day.

And that twists me up even more. I want to make her as crazy as she's driving me. If she acted like everyone else around me, then it would be different. I wouldn't want to prove I'm affecting her just as much, that something weird passed between us the night I saw her half naked. Well, mostly naked. You get the point. Bottom line, I haven't stopped thinking about her since then. I'd love to know if I'm the only one.

I brush a loose lock of her hair back and sit up. She draws back and visibly relaxes. “Good, you’re fine. Fantastic.”

“Sky.” I catch her hand and pull her closer.

“I did my civic duty. That’s all,” she insists, falling back on her bottom. I hiss as I move, and she looks at my elbows. “You’re bleeding.”

“Not the first time. Won’t be the last.” Why do I feel like there’s a canyon between us now? Why do I want to fix that? “You haven’t even said my name since I’ve been back.”

She snorts.

“What ... what have I missed out on?”

“You don’t care, so don’t ask.”

I mean, she’s not entirely wrong. I’ve perfected the art of not caring. I don’t care in general. People are simple. They want the normal things. Sex, money, fame, ways to get further in the world. And they’ll use whoever they can to get there. Because everyone is just like me. And I know that’s how I am.

She gets up and pulls up an olive backpack. She slings it over her shoulder.

“From sexy to sad in one day. There’s the real Sky,” comes Peter’s chuckle from our doorway.

Sky flashes another middle finger at Peter before going on her way. I pick myself up off the ground, closing my eyes as the pain settles in. Managing my pain is the focus, not her. Not Sky. She’s just an old friend. That’s all. I’ll get over it as soon as she starts following me around with that ‘play with me’ puppy dog eyes.

Licking across my bottom lip, I fight myself. I want to chase her, want to continue this conversation and know we’re fine. But she slips through my fingers, just like that.

And I have a feeling this is her goal for the whole summer. But the next day, I see her when I get home from

work. She's obviously frustrated. I can see it all across her face, the red stains stamped on her cheeks.

She catches me watching her, and I brace for another flip of her middle finger. Instead, she tucks her hair back, dips her head and goes on. Why do I feel another urge to chase her and find out what's bothering her?

Peter rests his arm on my shoulder, startling me. "We're going to dinner with them," he says, staring at Sky's departing form.

"We're what?"

"Yeah. With Chase and ... Sky." He snorts her name. "And our parents. Apparently, they want to celebrate us making it through high school."

"Shitty timing," I huff. I'd booked a session with my new trainer, Frank, who had connections to the circuit. I don't want to get on his bad side by not showing up. Besides, I only have six months to get back out there.

My brother tsks, patting my back. "I'd make it perfect timing if I were you. Especially when you're walking on eggshells around here."

Fucking hell. It's easier to go with what Dad wants when I know there's no winning. I have to choose my fights. At least in some degree, right? So, after calling Frank to reschedule—during which I endure a mini-lecture about taking the training seriously—I get a much-needed shower, throw on a button up, roll it up my arms and pull-on jeans.

A part of me hopes I can snag at least some alone time with Sky to find out what's happening inside her head. Not that I should care that she's hostile with me. She's too young for me. Too immature. All good reasons to avoid her for the summer and continue keeping my life easy and breezy. Beautiful – like those damn Cover Girl commercials.

We arrive first, then settle at our reserved table and wait for the Bennetts to get here. Fifteen minutes later, they show up, the reluctant looks on Sky and Chase's faces telling me why they're late. Mr. Bennett doesn't look like himself, either. He looks older. Not a dark hair in sight. Wrinkles line the corners of his eyes.

Something tugs on my heartstrings. Pity. I feel sorry that they're going through this.

Mr. Bennett greets us, but Chase looks even more pissed as he sits down. I notice he's grown out his dirty blond hair, so he has it back in a bun. I also notice he keeps glaring between me and my brother.

Chase and I had a serious falling out two years ago, so we're not exactly best buddies, but why is he staring at my brother like that?

A protective instinct kicks in, but I make myself behave. Because Sky looks bothered as hell. She's wearing a dress that is a size too big and covers her arms down to her elbows. And I hate that she feels the need to wear that much while knowing what's underneath. She could get whatever she wants from any man if she'd just show off a bit more.

All through dinner, I try to fish for her gaze, for anything that tells me I'm on her mind. Any long look, any brush of her foot against mine, but it doesn't happen. Just conversation. Her dad talking her up when it comes to how well she's doing with her photography and how proud he is of Sky graduating.

"Speaking of proud," Mom begins, pushing her food around the plate. "Have you heard from Clair recently?"

Sky freezes with her fork in mid-air, her expression paling. Mr. Bennett's face is all red. Chase is the only one who appears calm—well, if you minus the hard glares he keeps throwing at me.

Mom notices their reaction and blushes, too. “I—I’m sorry, that was out of line.”

“No, it’s fine,” Mr. Bennett softly assures her, although his expression says otherwise. “Let’s just change the subject —”

“Excuse me, I need fresh air,” Sky interrupts, flying out of her seat. She goes off without waiting for a reply.

“Oh, dear. I’m afraid I upset her,” Mom says sadly, lifting herself out of the seat. “Maybe I should go see how she’s doing.”

“I’ll do it.”

All eyes are on me. Chase looks about ready to murder me.

“She’s my sister, which means it’s my job. *I’ll do it*,” he says firmly.

“If Ashton wants to do it, let him,” Mr. Bennett says to Chase.

“But, Dad—”

I’m already getting out of the chair, anyway. Let him try to stop me. I don’t know what his deal is, but I’m not passing up on this chance to have a decent word with Sky to find out what’s really going on.

My eyes sweep the front of the restaurant as I exit, and I spot her standing at the end of the pathway to the parking lot, hugging herself and staring off into god-knows-where.

After a few deep breaths of air, I head toward her. She sees me coming and rolls her eyes. I’m halfway there when a guy approaches from the other end and swats her ass in passing. “Looking good, baby.”

I keep a neutral expression until he gets to me, then I grab his throat and slam him against the wall. “You ever lay a

hand on her again, and I will *end* you, fucker,” I growl.
“Understood?”

Wide-eyed, the stranger nods vigorously. Sky gently taps my back.

“He’s not worth getting into trouble, Ash. Let him go.”

With a huff, I shake him before releasing his sorry ass. He runs off as I turn to Sky. She’s flushed, nervous, and I don’t like that look on her face, the one that says she’s just glad he didn’t do more than swat her ass. I take her hand and jerk her into an alcove where we’re pressed close together.

“Is that fucking *normal* for you?” I demand.

She looks up at me, no starry-eyed gaze, no swooning. But her eyes dilate, and her lips part for a moment. She blinks, looks around and shakes her head. “I ... it’s happened a couple times.”

“Who.” It comes out as a half word since I try to bite it.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re not my older brother,” she says sharply.

“No. I’m not.” *Thank God*. But I continue watching her, holding her dilated gaze while trying not to lose myself in those bluer-than-the-ocean eyes. God, they’re so beautiful. How are they this bright, even in the dark?

Why can’t she just thank me so we can move on? Why does she have to turn every simple thing into something I don’t fucking understand? She doesn’t cave like she used to, she just keeps that defiant gaze on me.

“What?” She shoves me. “What do you want me to say?”

“I’d like an answer or at least a fucking thank you.”

“Guys slap my ass on dares. Okay? I’ve heard the bets. I know I’m just ‘a bug-obsessed creep’ to quote someone.”

I close my eyes, hating that those words ever slid from my mouth. “I was a dick. I’m sorry.”

Sky releases a long, deep sigh that I feel right down to my toes.

I lower my head, trying anything for control. It backfires immediately. Because I can smell whatever perfume she’s wearing, and it makes me dizzy. My stomach tightens as I brush my nose across her throat. Her breath catches, and I feel her hand soften against my chest.

It would be so easy to lick her, from her shoulder up to her ear. Does her skin taste the same way she smells? Like melons and ... flowers? Electricity dances on my nerves, and I think I groan, but I’m not sure if it’s me. It can’t be me, can it?

I draw back just enough to see her face and god, that look, all flushed, eyes wide and wild, the way her head is tipped back. Is that how she looks when she comes? No! I don’t want to know. I don’t *need* to know. I can’t do this.

But I bury my face in her hair and clutch her dress on her hip.

Chapter 4

Sky

What the fuck is he doing? Ashton Warren *can't* actually be touching me. He can't want me. Which means this is a game. Just another bet. Or he senses an easy lay where he can leave right after without remorse. And I know it, so why am I just letting him hold me like this?

"I'm ... I'm used to it." I say, not sure why.

"Used to what?"

"Being the butt of a joke," I admit. "It's fine, but ... you need to let me go."

He nods but still doesn't move. His breath rushes across my skin, fast and intense. The warmth blooms on my skin, spreading and rippling out until I have to close my eyes. Because this is wrong. He's a good pretender. He's good at acting and lying and everything in between.

I take a deep breath, then push his hand from my dress. "Nothing has changed from two years ago. You're still an ass, and I'm still me. Now let go."

Ashton backs away from me, folding his thick arms on his chest. "Are you still upset that I left without saying goodbye? Sky, I thought we put that behind us the other night."

"Not enough for *this* to be okay," I insist, moving my finger between us. "And only a cocky asshole would think I'm upset because we haven't spoken in years. Get over yourself."

“Enlighten me. What did I do?” he asks.

“That must be a trick question,” I scoff, remembering the text message he sent me that night. “I’m not going to play mind games with you. Just... stop touching me like we’re lovers. We’re not even friends.”

He watches me with those damn dark eyes, and I just ... Fuck, how is he more attractive than he was when I last saw him? Like every day just makes him more impossible to resist. But he’s not himself. Maybe it’s the wine he’s had. Maybe it’s because I spoiled his date the other night. He’d never do this or be gentle with me unless he wanted something. And I won’t give him a damn thing.

“You’re right,” he says, taking a step back.

“Stop cornering me. Don’t play with me like I’m a toy.” My voice shakes, though.

He nods, and before he can say anything else, I hear Chase and Peter coming. They’re bickering. Whatever temporary insanity took Ash over, it’s gone now. He goes to break up the fight, which is apparently about Peter teasing me. I already told Chase not to worry about it, but I guess he’s trying to make up for not being around these last three months. Chase is wasting his time. I’m already immune to Peter’s childish jabs. He’d already done his worst two years ago.

Chase backs off with a warning at Peter and I give myself a timer. One minute for them to get back into the restaurant before I follow. An extra fifteen seconds to get over the lingering effects of my interaction with Ash.

Make that twenty.

No, thirty.

But even in the car ride home, I can feel his hand clutching my dress, his nose skimming over my throat, his breath against me. And in my bedroom, the first thing I do is look out the window to see him there.

He has his hands on the back of his head as he paces. I feel the same. I'm frustrated, I'm confused, and I don't understand anything. But looking at him won't help. Especially when I see him going for his shirt. I drop my curtain and turn around, my hand on my chest.

"This is stupid," I tell myself.

And I can't be this stupid. Two years ago, I would have died at that contact. I would have given into whatever he wanted, even with his reputation as king of one-night stands. My blood would have boiled, I would have given him my first kiss, I would have given him my special moments. I would have fallen over myself to have more of him.

But I'm stronger now. I'm better now. I've seen what emotions do to people. I know ... I know I'm stronger than what I feel.

And the next day, I proved it by going out with Bonnie. We get cupcakes, and I lick the frosting while still thinking of Ash. Fucking Ash. I can't stand him. How he thinks he just has a right to me. That he can just touch me, use that childhood nickname he gave me and be protective. He doesn't own me. I'm not his.

"You're stuck in your head," Bonnie says, pointing at me with the cupcake wrapper. "And turning the boys on."

I look over her shoulder and see two guys just staring at me openly. I swallow hard, then take the bottom off my cupcake and put it on the frosting to eat it like a sandwich. I eat it quickly, and the guys seem to snap back into their conversation.

"What's going on, babe?" she asks, taking my hand across the table, ignoring there is actually frosting on my fingers.

"We had to have dinner with Peter and Ash and their parents last night, and it felt ... bad," I whisper.

She leans her head to the side. “You had to?”

“Yeah. Dad insisted. He wanted to celebrate before Chase goes back to school, and apparently, Ash coming home is something crazy and new.” I roll my eyes and pick at another cupcake, just taking a chunk with my fingers. “It was hard.”

“Well, yeah. Your two tormenters right there, and you’re forced to talk to them!” She gasps.

I shake my head slowly. “Mom wasn’t there. The last time we all had dinner, she was, and it got to me. I walked out because I couldn’t ... I couldn’t handle it. It was too much.”

Bonnie hugs me, then licks the frosting off her fingers as she sits back. Then we head back to my room with the rest of the cupcakes. She keeps trying to get me to talk about my mom, but I can’t. She left more than my dad. She left me and Chase too.

She’s texted me, but I can’t talk to her. She up and packed her things when we were all out of the house. She knew she was leaving and said nothing at all. And I can’t reconcile that. I can’t talk about it or move forward or do anything to fix it, so what’s the point of thinking about it?

“But that can’t be all. You hate being around Peter and, on top of that, Ash?”

I shrug.

“Oh no,” she points at me. “Hell no. You can’t still have a crush on him. You can’t. He’s a total dick after what he did, and if the rumors are true about him and girls ... No way, Sky.”

“I know.”

“And if you end up with him, I’m going to be mad. Really mad,” she continues. “I mean it. He’s treated you like shit, and he’ll only treat you like a toy and toss you to the side when the next shiny thing comes along. You deserve better.”

I hug her again and nod. “I know.”

We spend the rest of the day together, doing facials and having fun; then, when she heads out, I look at the time. I might be able to get something in. Right? Something, anything in terms of what I like to do, things Bonnie won’t do.

Like snapping photos.

But when I open the front door, and the sun is basically down, I sigh. I change into the swimsuit that didn’t get any use before. I pull on a giant t-shirt to cover myself up and sit down on the edge of the pool, sliding my feet into the water. I kick a little and think about getting into the water.

I watch the ripples play with the light and look over the forests behind our house. It’s a perk of living in Indiana. Plenty of trails, lots of streams, plenty of bugs in summer, and on top of that, lots to do.

Leaning back, I close my eyes and smile to myself. Someone splashes me, and I look over at my brother. Chase sits down and nudges me. “All good?”

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

He ruffles my hair, and I try to control the mess he’s made until I huff. A gentle sigh leaves his mouth, and I look at him curiously.

“What?”

“Just thinking about your rejection email,” he mutters. “I’m sorry.”

I shrug to give him the impression that I’m not disappointed by being rejected for the summer internship at a photography studio in town, but my stomach still sinks with the feeling. I really thought I had it in the bag. A three-month work experience was all I needed. Now, I’m forced to wait.

“It means deferring a semester, but what the heck. I’ll make up for it, anyway.”

“You’re right, but... is it worth it? I know you wanted to get into that photography club—”

“Not wanted,” I interrupt my voice a little firm. “I still want to. Need to. Do you know the doors that club will open for me after college? At least three of my photography idols have been mentored there.”

“I know that. You’ve been reiterating that fact since you applied for college.”

“So, you understand that I can’t get in without that internship.”

“Yes, Sky, I understand all that. Now, what are your plans going forward?”

“Well, their only feedback was that my photos weren’t interesting enough. They need more grit, they say. More passion. The thing is, I thought my photos were giving all that. Now, I’m not sure how to start over.”

“I’m positive it will come to you. Just don’t let anything distract you, okay?”

Everyone thinks I’m just going to fall all over myself because of a hiccup in my plans. But I’m not that person. That girl who saw the best in everything and let her emotions guide her died when Mom didn’t come back through the door.

“I’m allowed to worry. I’m your big brother. My job is to protect you.”

“And I love you for that, but Chase, it’s not always necessary. Like that fight with Peter at dinner. Don’t go to war with him on my account.”

He breathes out a conceding sigh. “You’re probably right, especially when I know he gives you hell because he wants you.”

“That’s not true,” I reply with a frown. Peter hates me guts for some reason. I’ve never seen him look at me with

anything but disdain.

Chase shakes his head. “You just don’t see it. That’s fine. I like that you’re innocent. I just don’t want you getting all tangled up in *someone’s* web. And I know you’re on your way to being great.”

“Don’t get sappy on me.”

He nods once, then shoves me into the pool. Laughing, he gets up and goes inside as I spit water in his direction. I spread out, but I can barely swim in my shirt. I see the lights in the house go out, and I don’t care. I just want to float and stare at the stars.

But, of course, that’s too much to ask for. A splash ruins my peace, and I push to my feet, looking over to see brown hair floating on the water. The devil himself. I narrow my eyes at Ash as he pops up. If he weren’t so damn gorgeous, he’d be easier to hate.

He spots me and gives me a guilty smile. “Don’t tell your dad.”

As if Dad would care. Ash knows he’s free to use the pool whenever he wanted, yet he still sneaks over the fence. He just likes living on the edge. Always have.

“One of the best perks of living close to you is being able to hop the fence and take a swim,” he finishes.

Without a word, I tread the water and get out, then move toward the stairs. I’m not giving him the time of day. I learned my lesson. Just one half-good deed, and he thinks we’re fine. There’s no way.

“Hold up, Sky,” he calls.

Of course, now he’s in waist-deep water, showing off his body in a way that is absolutely not allowed. The water clinging to his skin, beads rolling down along the lines of his muscle. I want to lick it off.

“Good, you look, I’ll talk.”

I narrow my eyes at his face. “Don’t be a cocky asshole with me.”

“Can I ask for a favor?”

“Which I would say yes to, why?”

He pouts and folds his arms over the edge of the pool as I walk to the lounge and sit there, frustrated and damp and desperately wanting to take my own shirt off so I can feel less suffocated.

“I’m trying to make it back to the amateur league, and I need content for my Instagram page. Photos, specifically. Someone might have mentioned you’re actually taking photography seriously.”

“Yeah. My dad. At dinner,” I remind. “We were both there.”

“Oh, yeah.” He has the grace to look sheepish. “I’d really appreciate it if you could take some photos of me while I train. I’ll throw in free boxing lessons.”

“No way.”

“Come on, you didn’t even think about it.” There’s that damn pout again. It used to make me melt for him.

“I don’t have to. I don’t *like* you,” I remind. “And I have plenty of reasons not to. You treated me like crap!”

“Let me prove I’ve changed as much as you have,” he insists. “You can name how. I promise, I’ll be good.”

“Something tells me you don’t know the meaning of the word.”

“Please, Sky,” he nearly purrs, pulling himself out of the pool and moving closer to me. “I really need this.”

“Tell me why.”

He huffs, and there's the frustration I remember. Because he's not getting his way. I arch an eyebrow at him and hold my foot out, putting it against his chest so he can't keep gaining ground.

"Absolutely not." I push my toes into his chest. "No closer. Why do you *need* this, and why does it *have* to be me?"

"Because you'll do it for free if I ask nicely enough."

I laugh, actually laugh. Is he that cocky? That sure of himself? That's total bullshit, and it's not happening. I won't cave. He rubs across the inside of my foot, and I fight the tremor.

"I'm not playing this game with you. I'm not playing *any* games with you. Do you get that? Anything friendship we had as kids, you went and ruined."

"Sky. Just ... just listen, okay?"

"No! Because you're not listening to me. I said no. You're not respecting the boundary and that's really shitty behavior. I'm not one of your flings who's going to bend over just because you say so. I don't *need* this."

He considers that for a moment, rubs his hand over his chin, but hasn't let go of my foot. "But you haven't walked inside."

Because I'm a fucking idiot.

Chapter 5

Ashton

I stroke the inside of her foot again, bothered that her hard stare doesn't soften, not even a little. For some reason, she's furious about some childhood teasing and doesn't want to hear a thing I want to say. And I don't know how to deal with her.

But I force myself to take a step back even though I don't want to. In fact, that's a better reason to take another step back. I put my hands up and see Sky actually take a breath. She swallows, glances at the back door and then back to me.

She's curious. I know she is.

"Why me?"

"You're here, Sky. I want to prove I'm not the bastard I used to be."

Because, for some insane reason, I can't stand that hateful look in her eyes. The lack of trust, the way she's determined to look too deep and rip through every angle I'm trying. She's waiting for me to pull the rug out from under her. I can't blame her.

Maybe my teasing scarred her. Unintentional bullying; maybe that's what I did. Her reaction is a result of that trauma, it seems. I don't know. I'm not a shrink.

But I know I can't take it back.

And I know Sky is pure temptation. I shouldn't be alone with her. Not when I know she's eighteen, legal and

hotter than she has any right to be. There are too many ways to talk to her, and I can't find the right one to get me what I want.

"I'm just an annoying tag-along, remember? The girl who doesn't know she's a girl." I hate her quoting me.

"I'm ... wanting to make up for that."

"By having me spend time with you even though I hate you and not paying me for work?"

"If I could pay you, I would!" It bursts out of me before I can control it. Calming myself, I go on. "I'm in a tight spot, Sky. If I could afford it, I'd pay you in a heartbeat."

She watches me carefully, and I can practically see her processing what I'm telling her. I'm not sure she believes me. Which means I have to prove myself. I take a slow breath, trying to calm the frustration, the borderline rage. "Look, I will leave right now, leave you alone all summer and keep my brother out of your life if there's no way I can get you to say yes."

Sky still doesn't give me an answer.

"I still don't see anything in it for me." She's pragmatic, more so than I remember. She used to do things because they excited her because it was an experience. I miss that girl.

"There has to be something I can help you with, right? Some way you can punish me that you'd enjoy."

I know there's plenty of ways I'd like to punish her sexy ... whoa. *Down boy*. I'm in swim trunks and don't need to let Sky know that she turns me on. Not here or now. That would undo everything, and I need this. I need her to do this because there has to be a way she'll do it for free. I need *someone* to support me when my family won't, and my friends just want to drink and party.

"Beg," she says.

I stare at her. Just stare. There's no way that word just came out of her mouth. A wicked smile curves up her lips, and she nods. "On your knees. Beg me. And mean it."

"Sky."

"Are you serious about this or just talking out your ass again?"

"This is borderline blackmail," I growl.

But when she folds her hands over her knees and keeps watching, I get down on the concrete. Fuck my pride apparently. "Please, Sky. I'm begging you to help me. I know you're smart and have an artistic eye and so much experience with a camera. Please do me this huge favor?"

She stands. "I'll think about it."

"*What?*"

She walks all the way to the door, dripping wet. Then takes off her shirt, and I can't breathe. She's in that damn swimsuit again, and my world comes to a halt. This view is so much better than the one from my room. The bottom curves of her ass are on display, her delicious thighs, delicate hips, and I catch her cleavage when she turns to lay her shirt over the back of the lounge chair.

Is every inch of her really this sinful?

She has to be dating someone. Has to be. No wonder my brother is still tugging on her pigtails in a more dickish way.

"Your begging needs work. Plus, if you think begging is enough to get you off the hook *and* get me to do something for you, you've killed too many brain cells while drinking. I'll let you know."

I want to say something, but my mouth is cotton. She walks inside, leaving me there trying to think about puppies, World War 2, my brother, and that one professor who spit

when he talked so I don't show exactly how much she turns me on.

This was supposed to be easy.

And Sky won't let anything be easy. Not a damn thing.

I wait a full day. Then another, then another. I take out every bit of frustration in training. The sexual frustration, how pissed I am that Sky is the new object of my lust, and the absolute fury that she's essentially telling me no.

When I get home and through a shower, I'm ready to bang on her door and demand that she lets me in or gives me an answer. But she's right there, watching me with that same 'I have your ass' grin.

She walks to me in jeans that hug her curves and a T-shirt. That backpack slung on her shoulder. "I'll do it."

The breath whooshes out of me. Yes? "You made me wait this long for a yes?"

"If."

"Skylar Constance Bennett-"

"If you come hiking with me today. Survive it, and I'll do it for free. If you don't, you're paying me ten dollars an hour. Choose."

I don't like her underselling herself, but I don't like her terms either. Physically, I can hike for miles without going out of breath, but I'm not big on the outdoors. Growing up here, it was expected that I'd love hunting, love hiking, love anything to do with nature, but that gene skipped me. I'm an indoor man, and that's one thing I've never hidden, which means it's the one thing she's throwing in my face.

But Sky and her damn infinite patience is going to wear me down. I groan. "Today?"

"Right now actually."

"If I have plans?"

“Oh, no. You have to pass up some pussy for a day.”
She traces an invisible tear down her face.

It’s such a low blow that I can’t help but laugh.

She doesn’t pull her punches. She doesn’t hide how much she doesn’t like me. She doesn’t give an inch, and for some reason ... I love it. Maybe because she’s not falling at my feet like every other girl I’ve met.

“Fine.” I say. “You win. I’ll go.”

“I’m calling the shots. You’re driving.”

“Full of demands. Isn’t it exhausting?” I tease, despite walking her to my car.

“Well, I have to prepare to spend time with you. It just might kill me, after all.”

“And yet you’re trusting me to take you out into the woods alone.” I get in the car and see her do the same. “Seems like a risk.”

“I can take you. Don’t you remember I won our wrestling matches?”

“Used to. These muscles aren’t for show.” I flex my arm just to show off.

Her eyes trace my bicep, and she shrugs despite the slight blush. “Good, you can lift yourself over trees. I’ll put your height to use too.”

“Still a firecracker,” I murmur.

“You threw enough at me.” Always with a dig. At least I don’t have to control my mouth around her.

“Buckle up,” I order.

She watches me, eyebrow raising as she sits back. Even at my worst I never wished any physical harm on her. I’ve been in an accident or two and was damn lucky I had a seat

belt. She's getting one. I reach over her, grab it and buckle her in without dropping her eyes.

I don't miss the way she sucks in a deep breath, and her eyes widen. She may not *want* to be into me, but that alone tells me that she doesn't feel *nothing*. I make sure my fingers don't skim her body, but that obvious flare that tells me she wants me to ... It's a win. I smile and pat the top of her head.

"All ready to go. Are you sure you don't need a booster seat?"

"Start the fucking car."

"Ask nicely."

She swallows. "Please start the fucking car."

"You have a dirty mouth." And she's damn lucky I have some self-control. I don't want to wash her mouth out with soap, I want to show her all the better things she can use that tongue for. I close my eyes for a moment. "Tell me where I'm going."

She leads me to Pokagon State Park, and the ride is almost silent. I turn the radio up, she turns it down, over and over until I see her grin with satisfaction as I fume. She's definitely making me pay for just fitting in and surviving life with friends.

This is going to be a test, and I know it.

She wants to prove to me that I don't want to spend time with her, but I get to stare at her ass all day. That alone is a fucking reward. Plus, I want to get her talking.

"Let's play a game."

"Why?"

"It's still a twenty-minute drive, bumble bee," I remind. "Truth or dare."

"Get the fuck out of here with that."

“Truth it is. Does my brother really get under your skin?”

“I don’t think about him when he’s not around. He’s a pain in the ass, but I can deal with him.” She lets it roll off her shoulders so easily.

“Truth or dare, dick.”

“Truth.”

“Why did you come back here?”

My lips curl into a tight fold as I contemplate my response. When we were kids, I remember boasting to Chase how I was going to make it big. Be like Rocky Balboa. Years later and I’m no closer to that dream. It feels terrible. I feel like a complete failure.

“I’m starting over,” I mumble. Simple and true.

Sky nods as if she totally gets it.

“You’ve always loved Rocky. Remember, he had to start over, too.” She says it so softly, I almost ask her to repeat herself, but I let the silence sit between us.

I didn’t expect her to remember anything about me really. Only the bad. But we used to watch Rocky together. Her brother and I would act out the scenes, and she’d rate our acting. She’d always end up giggling.

“Truth or dare?” I finally ask.

“Truth.”

We keep playing back and forth, keeping things safe. Until I park. I say truth because I’m mildly terrified of what she’ll dare me to do. She faces me, actually faces me without a trace of anger.

She licks her top lip, and I see more than confusion, there’s some hope there. It’s thin, it’s small, but it’s something that makes my chest squeeze. Two arguments, a bad choice, and me begging, then a twenty-minute car ride to get that.

“Why do you still call me bumble bee?” she asks.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You can’t answer a question with a question. You didn’t call me that except to get under my skin,” she huffs while slinging her backpack over one shoulder.

“Because you were always doing things. A busy little bee. Flying around, stinging me if I got too close or wild. It fits now more than ever,” I murmur.

She slams the car door, stares at it, then motions to the trail. “Let’s go.”

Something in my answer must have been wrong. Why the fuck can’t I get a read on her?

Chapter 6

Sky

I kick myself again for agreeing to this. I was sure he'd say fuck it and pay me or tell me to pull my head out of my ass or try some more of that charm. But he isn't doing any of that. He's letting me choose the path, and we're sticking to it. He doesn't try to touch me, to corner me, nothing.

And it's damning, just like him answering my questions. I glance back at him and watch him spray himself down again with bug repellent. I almost tell him to stop because he doesn't know half the chemicals in there, but whatever. It's his body, not mine.

"How long has it been since you've been out here?" I ask, stepping carefully to try and avoid making too much noise.

"Whenever I last went camping. Maybe at seventeen?" He guesses.

"How can you possibly enjoy any of Indiana from inside?" I shake my head.

Sure, it's freezing, below freezing in winter. But right now, early summer, it's perfect. Even if it's sweltering. I can already feel sweat dewing at the back of my neck. I sweep my hair up in a pony and tie it high up.

"No one enjoys Indiana, Sky. They leave it," he corrects, catching up with me as I turn off the path. He points at the cleared area, then groans and follows me. "Never the easy way."

“If this were easy, this wouldn’t be your punishment.” I roll my eyes, then grin as I hop over a fallen tree.

Before Ash can follow me, I get down on my knees and brush away some of the dry leaves. Under, where it starts to get muddy, are plenty of bugs. I’m sure of it. I grab a handful of dirt and see some good quality bugs but nothing exciting.

I let them back in the earth and brush my hands off on my jeans. I sit back on my heels and look at Ash. He’s glancing around, obviously not sure about things. We continue going deeper in the woods, and I shove him. He shoves me back.

“So, what’s been going on, bumble bee?”

He keeps asking, and I don’t really know why. I do know that he wouldn’t keep asking if he didn’t care. But my eyes still flick to him. “Let’s take a break on that log there.”

When we sit down, I take a long drink of water. I pass it to Ash, and he arches an eyebrow. “Not afraid of my asshole quality being contagious?”

“It’s either take the risk of becoming a bigger asshole, or I have to drag your passed-out self through the woods,” I remind. “And I might be tempted to make sure your head hits every rock I find.”

“Threatening concussion?” He takes the water from me, and our fingers brush. “There are better ways to achieve that. Namely with a bed involved.”

“Aren’t you used to them with boxing?” I ask, ignoring his comment.

He leans back, and I can’t resist looking at his arms. They’re so thick now. Actually, all of him is. If he were just as ugly as he is on the inside, I wouldn’t even have an offer to consider. But it’s not terrible being out here with someone—

And just like that, a lightbulb goes off.

I know exactly how I'm going to get that internship.

Ash says something softly, too soft for me to actually hear. I rub the back of my neck and roll my head. "Ready to keep going?"

"Guess there are worse places to be if you want to keep going," he says, giving me a more genuine smile.

We get a bit further, and he points out a bug. "This?"

I grin and snap a photo. "Milkweed bug."

The red color is amazing on the tree. There's actually a whole cluster, a cluster that Ash hasn't noticed. A cluster that's slowly crawling on him. I bite my lip and take another picture, then another.

"We're not doing pictures of me yet," he complains.

"I agree. But I figured I'd get the shot before you freaked out."

"Why would I freak out?" he asks, then his throat tightens. "Sky! Why would I freak out?"

I let my camera drop to my belly and point at the bug. He gasps, but there's a grunt in there, too, then he tries to brush them off, takes his shirt off and takes me down with him. We fall, roll, and slide down a steep little cliff and into a stream. I gasp as the chilly water soaks me through.

Ash lands on top of me, panting. I want to be mad, but when I see his panicked look, still trying to brush bugs off as he slips and falls back into the water, it makes me laugh. I laugh again when he gives me an incredulous face.

"What is so fucking funny, Bennett?"

"They're harmless bugs, Warren." I splash him.

He tackles me, and we end up wrestling in the water. I grunt and sit on top of him, victorious. I hold his arms down, but he rolls me easily before I can dangle spit over his face like I used to.

“Got you now, Sky,” he chuckles.

I try to kick him, but he changes our positions, so he’s between my legs, holding my arms under the water. I struggle, but his arms are iron, not moving, barely flexing. He chuckles but then softens, showing the real Ash that I remember.

I try to get my leg around him, and he adjusts my hands so only one is holding down both wrists as he grabs my thigh and pushes it down. “Don’t push it.”

I squirm and definitely feel something there. I blink a few times. “Do you have something in your pocket?”

“Nope.” His voice is low, husky. I swallow hard.

Now, I realize our position. He’s shirtless, his chest and abs all on display. I’ve tried to wrap my leg around him. He’s panting above me, and my chest heaves with every breath I take. We used to play around like this. It used to be fine, but now ... A heat stirs low in my belly.

“Ash you’re ...” He’s *so* hard.

“Ignore it,” he whispers.

His voice is so dangerous, he reminds me of a copperhead snake. They blend in so easily, then take you by surprise, biting and pumping in venom. I gulp down and feel the blush across my cheeks. This is stupid. Being here is stupid, all of this is wrong and ... and I’m not even fighting him.

“Um, you’re Okay,” I whisper.

It happens, Bonnie told me that. It can be from the wind or from any kind of friction. It’s not because of me. There’s no way it’s because of me. Ash is older. He goes out with eights on the hot scale, I’m a four.

I shiver. And he looks down at me. “Fuck, you must be cold.”

He picks me up, tries twice to carry me up the steep drop off and fails. We sit there for a moment in the mud. My eyes flick to the hardness tenting his jeans a little, and I bite my bottom lip, forcing myself to look away.

“So ...”

“So, you’re fine,” he nods.

The awkwardness makes me snicker. I try to control it, but when he gives me a face, I can’t stop myself from giving in to the giggles. He throws a clump of dirt at me. “You started this.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I climb up the embankment myself, and Ash clambers up after me. Once we’re back on dry land, I realize exactly how soaked I am.

Ash offers me his shirt. “Um, here.”

“Am I going to get cooties?” I tease.

“Only one way to find out.” He rubs my face with his shirt, taking care of the mud, then along my jaw.

I watch him the whole time. He hesitates before taking my hand. “I didn’t ask.”

“It’s okay,” my mouth says before my brain can process.

He cleans up my arms, slowly, surely. “I remember doing this after you got in a fight with that poor neighbor boy. He didn’t know what hit him. But then he went and broke your nose.”

“You did worse,” I remind. “I think you broke his arm.”

“Close,” he murmurs. “Not entirely, though.” He pauses and looks me over, really looks at me. “He wouldn’t have taken that fight if he could see you now.”

I blush and try to free my neck of my curls. I look Ash over. “You’re still ... dirty.”

“My thoughts are, but you know that already, don’t you?”

“Please, I don’t need you all muddy to know that,” I huff.

“Because you can read minds, too, can’t you, little witch?” He chuckles. “Always know what I want to say.”

“Not hard when you wear it on your face.”

“Something you’d prefer putting on my face?”

“A bug.” I arch an eyebrow.

He rolls his eyes but motions to where we were. I don’t mind the sudden change in conversation. Anything to forget how he followed me up to my old tree house after that fight with the neighbor boy, took care of my hands and reminded me I was not Rocky. How he sat with me and told me how to change my punch.

My stupid, moony self had wanted to kiss him. I hadn’t tried, but when he’d hugged me and told me how good I was, how proud he was, I’d felt like I was glowing all day. I swallow that knowledge and shake my head.

“Bumble bee.” I turn around, and he’s right there. Ash, glorious with his damp hair matted to his forehead, still trying to curl.

I take an unsteady breath, and Ash clears his throat. “We should go get warm before we, uh, get sick.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

And just like that, we’re back in the car and on the way to my place. An empty house with no one in it. I chew my bottom lip. Bonnie’s still at her summer job, Chase won’t be home until late since he’s on a double today, and Dad ... he won’t be home until he has to.

I stand at Ash’s car and stare at my house. “Do you want to discuss the terms of the agreement ... over pizza or

something?”

“Sure.” He chuckles. “But, let me get dry first, and then I’ll come kick your ass at video games while we talk.”

“In your dreams,” I snort. “Don’t I own you in Mario Kart every time?”

“You used to,” he says. “But I went and played against college boys and upped my skills. I’m going to own you.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Absolutely. If I kick your ass, we’ll play truth or dare for real. If I don’t ...”

“If you don’t.” I barter. “You have to hold my tarantula.”

“Creepy as always.” He flashes a wide smile, the boyish one I remember. “I’m in.”

“Not too creepy?”

“It’s on the line, but nothing less than I expect from you.”

God damn, why does that sound like a compliment I’d love to bask in forever? I run into the house and get through a warm shower, pulling on lounge pants with pizza slices on them and a black t-shirt.

We’re just hanging out. We’re discussing the agreement, it’s nothing more than that. Ash is just using his charm and our old memories to get what he wants. Nothing else. I see right through it. Even the wrestling was a fluke because I started it. But ... what if ... what if I’m about to make a huge mistake just by letting him in the front door?

Worse – what if I enjoy it?

Chapter 7

Ashton

This is stupid. I feel like I'm asking for trouble, but I can't get Sky out of my head. It's even worse after our wrestling match in the stream. The water plastered her clothes to her skin, showing off everything. And my stupid idea to rub her down with my shirt only made me want to rip hers off.

But I asked. I made sure it was okay to touch her, even with a shirt. Definitely not my style, but it's getting harder to remember how to play my usual games around her. I groan as I jerk off in the shower. I hate myself for doing it, at least a little bit. But then I slap my palm against the tile as I finish and have a clearer head. I'm fine now.

We'll just talk and play games and maybe I can ask more about her, what's going on with her mom leaving, how she's coped. I can't imagine my mom just leaving and not coming back. It would be hell.

But talking to her about her will make her like me more, make her easier to figure out. She'll show me how to act around her to get what I want, and I can be done with this damn ... interest.

I drag on clothes and walk over to the Bennett house. I knock, and Sky opens the door, looking far too comfortable. But this is the version of her I know how to deal with. Soft, comfortable, nervous. The her that doesn't know what she offers that isn't tempting me or telling me to beg.

She waves me in and shuts and locks the door behind me. Like she's worried someone is going to follow me in. She

clears her throat and motions to the couch. “So, I’m not actually doing this for free.”

My brows lift at her. Did she miss the part where I had no money? “You’re not?”

“Not exactly,” she replies. “Though I’m going to need your permission, anyway.”

I recline on the couch as she proceeds to explain that she wants to submit my photos for an internship. Which makes me aware that she’ll be around much longer than the next three months. I’m also aware of how tempting her presence will be.

“Hell yes, you can use my photos. It’s a small price compared to the favor you’re giving me.”

She smiles, a huge, genuine one. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it, bumble bee.”

With an eyeroll and a scoff, she sits beside me. “Did you really survive the hike, though? You got all wet and ...” Her eyes flick down to my crotch.

My lips curl in a smile. “And.”

“Plus, the whole bug thing,” she reminds, refocusing. “So did you actually survive?”

“Considering you didn’t bury me there or drag me out, I’m thinking yes.”

“Eh, you’re pretty pale for ‘alive’.” She uses actual fucking air quotes.

I put her hand on my chest so she can feel my heart, but the heat from her fingers radiates across my skin. My heartbeat picks up for some stupid reason, and I let her hand go. She jerks back. “Okay, point to you.”

We order a pizza and go back and forth over toppings. I hate green peppers, and she’s insisting on them, unwilling to budge. She crosses her arms over her chest and gives me a hard look. I sigh, and we agree to do half and half.

Then she puts something on TV, offers me a drink and sits back down. “So ... I’ll be taking pictures, nothing else?”

“If you can figure out the best way to use Instagram to promote me, I’m all ears.”

We talk about that for a while, and she definitely has some good advice, but I can’t resist giving her shit, and she can’t resist moving closer bit by bit. I rub my jaw and shake my head. “You did not.”

“I did!” She insists. “I bailed on prom after getting the dress. I came down for photos, and it just felt wrong. Dad wasn’t too upset. Not like Bonnie was. She said I stood her up – well, her and the date she had planned.”

“Truth or dare,” I interject.

She looks at me for a long time before shoving a huge bite of pizza in her mouth. Some things don’t change. “Truth?”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

She actually spits out her food. It goes everywhere. I pat her back, rub in circles and try to ease her coughing until she grabs her drink, takes a sip, then another, and calms. Her eyes meet mine from under her lashes.

No makeup right now, just her, red face, soda clinging to her bottom lip, and one long lock of hair in her face. She swallows. “No. I went on *one* date, and I’m pretty sure I looked like a cat being hugged.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I try to hold back my laugh.

“You know, struggling to get away, pushing away. All that.” She acts it out, and I crack. She shoves me. “Don’t laugh! He was trying to get me to kiss him.”

“Must have been a brute.”

“I’ve met worse.” Her eyes flick to me and then away.

I know I have plenty of making up to do. We play a round of Mario Kart, and I win. She gapes at the TV. “No way. Best three out of five.”

We shove each other, fumble with the controllers, yell at each other, then she sits on my lap, right in my view. She moves with the track, but god damn, this woman. I toss the controller. “I give this game.”

“What?”

“I give.”

I press my forehead to the back of her shoulder and feel her freeze. “You ...”

Yeah, I’m fucking hard *again*. Because of this wild creature that’s determined to drive me up a wall. She sets her controller to the side. “We can call it a draw.”

“Being nice now?”

“Shut up.” She skitters off me, pushing to the far corner of the couch, but her eyes are all dilated, and she can’t seem to look away from my face, like if she does, she’ll look somewhere else. “You won. Two out of three, so truth or dare it is, I guess.”

“I’m spared from your tarantula?”

“Dracula is a sweetheart. He’d never hurt you.”

“Clearly, that’s why you named him Dracula.” I roll my eyes.

“What, would ‘Cuddles’ have been a better name?” She gives me a half smile. “Truth or dare, asshole?”

“Truth.”

“Why did you send that text message?”

My brows furrow as I search my memory. “What message?”

“The one you sent that night.” A soft blush covers her cheeks as she dips her head. “Don’t make me spell it out. It’s still embarrassing, even after all these years.”

Two years later, I still cringe when I think about the text message I sent Chase that night. Back then, I felt betrayed. Furious. I didn’t consider how the words would hurt anyone, I just wanted to get them out. I understand why Sky would be affected by that. He’s her only sibling, after all.

“Okay, so that wasn’t my finest moment, but I swear, it won’t happen again. I’m sorry my actions hurt you, truly.”

“Are you?” she asks, a shapely brow lifted.

“Yes. If I could take it back, it would.”

Sky gives me a long stare, then reaches for the remote, her throat bobbing as she swallows. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Let’s watch a movie or something.”

“Does that mean you don’t hate me anymore?” I tease, nudging her side, wanting to see her smile.

She snorts, and my insides get warm with relief. “The jury is still out on that, buddy.”

“Good enough for me.”

I relax on the couch as she puts a movie on that’s supposed to be background noise, but we both end up sucked in. Until I nudge her again. “Truth or dare.”

“Truth.”

“Why didn’t you kiss your date?”

“Another truth,” she replies immediately.

I arch an eyebrow. “Who do you want to kiss?”

“No, no. That’s too close,” she argues. “You can’t. You ...”

I gently brush my fingers over her calf, then hook behind her knee and drag her closer to me. I’m getting an

answer, but I don't think I really care which one it is.

"Whichever one is easier."

She braces against my chest, eyes wild, there's not a 'no' on her face or her lips. She takes another unsteady breath, another gulping swallow that moves her whole throat, and she shivers. "Breathe, Sky."

She sucks in a breath and shrugs. "I had a terrible first date. I can't have a bad first kiss, too. I know it's silly and romantic. But ... I want the kind of kiss that makes me feel good, that drives me wild, that sets a high bar, not one out of obligation and ... yeah."

"Doesn't sound stupid," I disagree. "Or silly. My first sucked. You deserve to have a good one."

"Truth or dare?" She says it so softly I almost miss it.

"Dare."

She glances at the movie. "I dare you to ... to choose a better movie."

I do, easily, choosing a horror that I love. She groans. I know how much she hates horror. Because she's jumpy. And she proves it by jumping at the first scare and clinging to my arm. I wrap my arm around her slowly since she's clinging to my shirt.

"Truth or dare?" I ask in her ear.

She trembles, then looks up at me. "Dare?"

"I dare you to say my name."

Her fingers brush across my chest, then my shoulder, slipping over my arm. "Ashton Warren. Why do you care what I think?"

"You don't sugarcoat a damn thing. You don't hedge to spare my ego." I hold her gaze. "And you're pretty fucking cute when your feathers are all bristled."

She huffs, but her face goes red. She looks at the movie, gasps, then hides her face in my shoulder. I grin and rub down the back of her neck. She mumbles something against me.

“What was that?”

“Why are you confusing me with all this?”

“Am I? I thought I was pretty straightforward.” I almost yell at myself. I know it’s a lie. Because I don’t know what I want. But I like this. I like us teasing one another. I like us playing around. I like our conversations. I like being myself most of the time. I like all of this more than I should. “I’m ... curious about you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Okay, are you curious about me?”

“Define the word?”

I groan. “Are you fucking interested? You’re letting me touch you, inviting me over, you’ve checked out my boner multiple times.”

Her mouth opens and closes a few times like a fish out of water, then she takes a sharp breath. “I shouldn’t be.”

“Which means yes.”

“You have a big fucking ego,” she says.

“You make plenty big,” I tease.

“You make my head all ... cloudy,” she admits. “Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

“I dare you to actually behave. None of ...” She looks between us.

I motion for her to finish. When she doesn’t, I groan. “Do you want me to stop touching you?”

“No. I dare you to tell me why you’re ... curious?”

“Because I can’t ever predict what you’re going to do or figure you out. Not to mention you’re fucking hot, I say, before letting my head fall back so I can look at the ceiling instead of her. “Even if you’re barely legal.”

“Oh, thanks. Porn references make me feel all fuzzy,” she hisses. “But this doesn’t make any sense at all. I’m just the annoying kid sister. The one you never wanted around. You should be pushing me away and ... and telling me I’m ridiculous. Not ... this.”

“Would you prefer that?” I ask, serious, focused entirely on her.

She shakes her head so slightly, I’m not sure she notices. I rub down her back, then cup my hand around the back of her neck. I know my hand is pressing against her thigh. Her tongue flits across her bottom lip, and now all I can think about is how she tastes.

What is wrong with me? Why do I want her like this? Why don’t I care about all the potential problems? Does she feel the electricity cracking between us, the heat that spreads across my skin every time we touch?

I brush my nose along hers, angling, just in case she wants more than I’m giving. “Truth or dare, bumble bee?”

“Truth,” she rasps.

“Can you handle this?”

She looks me over slowly, glances at the movie, then to me. I rub my thumb over the back of her neck and into her hair. “You’re distracted.”

“Says the guy who’s ignoring the movie and is ... hard. Raging hard. Did you stuff something in-”

“I’m not confused, Sky.” I brush my fingers over her jaw as her breath fans across my face. Her perfume is so

intoxicating, and so is she. So sweet, honest and responsive.
But I could live a thousand lives and never deserve her. “I’m a
fucking idiot.”

Chapter 8

Sky

I swallow hard. I'm so lost right now. I've haven't been this close to anyone but Bonnie in years, a lot of years. And none of those people compare to Ash. His hands on me, looking at me like I just might be the best and worst thing to ever happen to him. But that heat ... holy shit, the heat.

I feel something like lava in my belly, heading lower, and I feel like I shouldn't be wearing pants. I'm burning up, burning under his gaze, and I don't know what to do. He asked me if I could handle something, and I still don't know what he means.

Ash adjusts me ever so slightly, so I'm half on his lap, my forearms against his chest, that same hand tangled in my hair as he rubs my thigh that's draped over his legs. Is that my whimper or his?

"Say something," he orders, but his voice is low and husky and like velvet on my skin.

Since when does he smell so good? It's soft, a barely there kind of smell that makes me want so much more. A little bit of spice, maybe something like leather? I lean closer and feel his breath across my jaw, stroking just under my ear.

I lick my bottom lip, and he groans, hand tightening on me. I wrap my fingers in his shirt to push him away, but ... but his lips look so soft and inviting. My heart is leaping out of my chest, thundering against my ribs, and his hardness kind of feels good against the inside of my thigh.

“You have to open your mouth and say something, Sky.” His eyes sharpen. “Or I’m going to do something so fucking stupid.” Why do I feel like the ‘stupid’ he’s talking about is probably better than any ‘smart’ thing I’ve ever done?

“Ash,” I breathe.

His nose brushes mine, then the ghost of his lips across my jaw. “Please.”

Just that word, all breathy and ragged, like he’s actually begging, does me in. I lean forward, then hear a honk outside. I squeak and look at the front door nervously. His fingers tighten in my hair.

Oh god. This isn’t a dream. I’m on top of Ashton Warren. Hell, I almost *kissed* Ashton. After just one day together? How stupid am I? I know better.

“Jesus, Sky.” He rests his forehead against my shoulder. A shiver dances down my spine, and I swallow. “That was too close.”

I run my fingers through his hair after a moment. It’s dry, soft, crazy soft actually. I massage both hands over his scalp, pulling at his hair lightly. Ash rubs the back of my thigh, and the biting grip of his fingernails on my neck softens.

He moves his head to my chest, giving me more access, so I keep running my fingers through his hair. Then, since I’m apparently allowed, I slowly stroke along his neck, then over his shoulders. They’re tense as hell, but maybe it’s muscle and not knots.

“That feels good,” he whispers.

I jerk my hands away, holding my arms up while keeping my elbows against my side. What am I doing? I can’t forget who he is and what he put me through. He apologized, but is it enough?

Ash just turns his head to the side and hugs me, both arms around my waist. His lips press to the inside of my

shoulder.

“I thought you hated me.”

“I do.”

“I like the way you hate me, then,” he amends. The silence stretches between us until he grabs one of my hands and puts it on his head.

It’s too cute and too ... him. I smile to myself and brush through his hair again. Big bad, slutty boy next door likes to have his head pet. “You’re giving me amo for later.”

“Worth it.” He rubs his head into my hand.

I blink a few times, and Ash kisses my wrist before giving me a soft smile. “I should call you teddy bear instead of bumble bee now.”

“Don’t you start with that bullshit. We’re not friends, we’re just ... confused.”

“Sure.” He kisses my palm. “I’m *real* confused.” Another kiss that sends little sparks of pleasure through my skin. “Obviously.”

I swallow and feel my hips roll as he continues his trail of kisses up my forearm, stopping at the inside of my elbow. For some reason, my skin buzzes from the light touch of his lips there. There goes all my sass. Instead, I look to the side and drop my hands.

“Sky?”

“This doesn’t make things okay.”

“Nothing I do or say can make that shit from last time okay. I know that.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, and I *am* sorry. I’m sorry for all the shitty things I said and did even before that night. Those fucking teasing, the

insults, all of it. I was a dick-for-brains, and I know it. You didn't deserve any of it."

"No, I didn't."

He shrugs with a sudden smirk. "I mean, you *are* a little creepy and witchy and weird as hell since you like bugs."

I can't help chuckling, though I slap him, anyway. "So much for that apology, dickhead."

"If you weren't all that, I wouldn't be right here apologizing. Own your personality."

What the fuck am I supposed to say to that? I cave for half a second and brush my fingers through his hair again. "You are stupid."

His eyes do that fucking smolder thing again, and he pulls me back down, so I'm not taller than him on my knees. Warm, safe, so good. I rub over his chest and feel his forehead brush mine.

"I'm a fucking idiot," he sighs. "Because all I want to do is kiss you."

"Because I'm not interested in you?"

"Because I like you," he whispers. "Because I've liked spending the day with you, bugs and all, more than I've liked any date in years. Not to mention you're fucking sexy when you're hot and bothered."

"I was not!" I yelp.

He grins softly and brushes my hair from my face. "I know you're not ready, Sky. And I know you don't really want to kiss me. I'm not going to do anything."

"That's why?"

"I'm not going to fuck up your first kiss," he snorts. "I have some fucking respect."

He didn't used to. What was that thing I heard on T.V.? That boundaries are sexy? The fact he clearly wants to make a move, clearly wants to kiss me, even if it's just a kiss because I'm here, but won't ... is hot. Really hot.

I fist the hair on his neck. "So don't fuck it up."

"What?"

Fuck letting him make the first move then. I rub my thumb under his bottom lip. "If I'm giving it to you, then don't fuck it up, Ash."

He groans and pulls me closer, our lips so close to touching. "Why are you saying yes?"

"Take it or leave it," I order.

He hesitates a moment, then his mouth comes down on mine. Despite his hands clinging to me, his mouth is soft, just his lips feeling it out. I adjust on him and change the angle. Aren't people supposed to use tongues?

I part my lips just enough to try, which breaks whatever was stopping Ash. His hand in my hair jerks my head back, and my eyes flick open as his tongue slips into my mouth. His eyes are clenched shut, and then his tongue strokes mine, and I'm lost.

My eyes fall shut, and I cling to him. Fire races through me, all-consuming, as Ash claims my mouth with soft licks and deep explorations that leave me feeling vulnerable and seen and appreciated for the first time in my life.

A soft sound echoes between us before he changes the angle and lets me try my tongue. This time, a moan that's definitely not mine echoes in my mouth. I fist his shirt and pull myself closer, needing more, needing everything he has to offer.

I'm going dizzy, wild, and everything in between.

Finally, I come up for air and touch my bottom lip softly. Ash is panting against me, his forehead on mine. “Holy shit, Sky.”

“So that’s what it’s all about”, I murmur.

He laughs, actually laughs, and I join in. He tosses me to the side and swats my thigh. “Feisty little thing, seducing me to get your first kiss out of the way.”

I stare at the ceiling a moment before sitting up and biting my bottom lip. Ash’s gaze catches on that motion, and he leans forward, cupping my cheek in his hand. “Tease.”

“I’m ... I’m not.”

His tongue follows the indent of my teeth, then he sucks my bottom lip between his. Another round of his tongue before he bites my bottom lip. I whimper, and he pulls me towards him, kissing me again to soothe the pain.

This time, when he lets me go, I hide my face against his shoulder. “We shouldn’t have done that.”

“I feel like I deserve a shot or a thumbs up or more of you playing with my hair for that.” He rubs my back. “Anything?”

“I’m not telling you to get the fuck out. Take the win,” I grumble, my cheeks neon red.

“Such a dirty mouth.” He lifts my chin. “But are you okay with what we did? Really?”

“Don’t want to lose your progress, right?”

“I don’t want to lose *you*,” he clarifies, completely serious. “I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“I’m okay. We’re okay,” I say but gently press against him. “But that’s all that’s happening. We’re not going up to my room. We’re not dating. We just ... got caught in the moment and-”

“And I will happily make out with you all summer,” he says, still serious, ending my arguing pretty effectively. How was I supposed to expect any of this? “And earn plenty more of your brand of hatred.”

“Jackass.”

“Yes, darling?” He grins. “Can’t handle my romance?”

“You’re ignoring all of the elephants in the room.” I pull further away. “No one can know about this. My brother hates you. My best friend hates you. Once I’m done with this internship, I’ll be leaving, and you ...” I’m not going to start throwing accusations. “We’d never work beyond right here and now.”

“Sky.” He pouts.

“I’m drawing a boundary, okay?”

“You think that kisses like that happen every time? Hell, I’ll take whatever I can get from you. Even if that just means photographs, but I’d really like more. In whatever capacity I can have you.”

I cover his mouth. “No more.”

He keeps mumbling against my hand while I glare at him. He untangles himself from my legs and arm, then pats my head softly before stroking all the way down my neck. “Think about it. I know your answer is always different in the morning.”

“Ash.”

He takes the pizza and walks to the door. He only turns when he has it open. “Talk to you tomorrow.”

“You’re ... but ...”

“I’m a little too riled up to be this close to you right now. Plus, you might get tired of my boner, and then where will we be?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “You’re a dick.”

“Nah, you’re just thinking of mine.” He winks and shuts the door behind him.

Before he leaves, though, I see his hand dip back inside to lock the door and shut it again. I flop back on the couch and shake my head. How the fuck did that happen? Today was supposed to be about his punishment, then negotiating terms. How exactly did we get to making out on the couch?

A scream echoes on the TV, and I quickly turn it off before running up to my room. I just sit there for a moment, unable to process what *just* happened. I cover my mouth with my whole hand. I kissed Ash. I made out with Ash. It was my first time. And he wants more.

Of course, he does. He always wants more. And a kiss won’t win him any prize. If this is some bet, he’d build up my trust, fuck me, and leave. Maybe get some pictures in the process. And I know that. Rationally and logically, I know it.

But when I look across the yard and see him in his room, all that flies out the window. He’s shirtless again, sexy as hell, and wearing a huge smile – a winning smile. He picks up his phone and types something.

There. He’s just going back to his slutty ways. Finding some girl who will actually take care of the boner he has instead of just kissing him and scuttle away.

My phone buzzes as I blow out a breath to ease the tightness in my stomach. I look at it, surprised to see a message from him. We only exchanged numbers earlier today. Of course, he put himself in as “stud”.

I can feel you watching me.

I gulp and toss my phone to the bed. He waves from his window, giving me a naughty smile before I close my curtain. I run my fingers through my hair and then flop back. God, if only that weren’t so good. If only he wasn’t so hot. If only ... if only he weren’t Ash.

Chapter 9

Ashton

God damn this woman. Sky is intoxicating and doesn't know it. The way she was practically riding my leg while watching me with that starry gaze I missed, her kiss all innocent and gentle until she surrendered control. She's a mix of innocent and sassy, which makes me ... think. I can't just *feel* around her or do whatever I want.

She is confusing and intense, and I know she doesn't know how much that turns me on and makes me question myself and everything else.

I get through most of the workday until one of the guys I went to high school with – Tyler – comes up to me. “Want to do something tonight? It's Friday. We can go get some drinks and have a good time.”

Hesitating feels unnatural. It should be an obvious yes. It sounds like a good night out. They expect me to say yes. Probably expect me to pay just like my high school and college friends. But it's a good time. I can flirt, get Sky out of my system and have fun.

He motions to some of the other guys. “We just want to hit the bar and destress. There's some buy one get one thing going on, so we can all afford it while bitching about work.” He catches himself with a contrite look. “No offence to your dad.”

“Yeah, no problem. Sounds much needed.”

“A celebration because you’ve made it through your first week without serious damage.” He pats my back.

I grin. “Tonight, like later, right?”

“Hell, yeah. We’re not going in the middle of the day.” He laughs before pushing his red hair back. Tattoos flex on his forearms as he takes off his top shirt. “Just give me your number, and we’ll get everything straightened out.”

We exchange numbers, and I leave work feeling pretty good. Granted, I’m the boss’s son, but maybe they don’t give a shit. Or they don’t care at all about that and just want to hang out. I don’t mind either way.

I get to the gym, where Frank puts under a grueling one-hour workout before letting me work on improving my technique. Sweat slicks my face as he constantly drills me, but then he suddenly goes silent. When I turn, I see him talking to Sky. She puts a hand on her hip. I smirk at her, leaning against the bag. Her eyes flick to me, she snaps a picture, and my trainer moves to block her sight.

“Frank,” I call out.

He looks over.

“Sky’s allowed. I took your advice. She’s helping me with getting my online presence back,” I say. “So as long as her camera stays on me, she should be fine.”

He nods, then shoots me a glare. “I didn’t tell you to stop.”

So, I keep going. I spar, then hit the weights again before a cool down session, while Sky snaps random photos of me. Frank tells me to hit the showers and keep up whatever I’m doing outside of the gym since my strength is obviously getting better.

Sky stands outside, staring at the sheets of rain coming down when I find her. She looks at her rather expensive camera, glances at the downpour, then sits on the smoking

bench. I join her and sit close but without touching her. Anything we do, if we move forward at all is on her, even if I should just cut and run now.

But I'm dying to have more than her mouth on mine. I want all of it, to see if we actually have chemistry or are just mouthy. I'm going to fucking behave. I will. Sky is important to me in more ways than one, and I'm not going to fuck up the effort I've been putting in now.

I'm not into self-sabotage.

Intentional self-sabotage, anyway.

"Would you like to see the pictures?" Sky says after a long moment.

"Sure."

She slides across the bench and flicks through them. I wince at my face as I see the first one. I look either incredibly pissed or stupid as hell. She laughs and shows me two different photos. One where I look focused, my body tensed, then the one where I'm leaning against the bag with a smirk.

"These two came out the best in terms of your face and ... body." Her cheeks flush. "With the punching bag anyway."

She goes through more of me fighting my partner. There are two photos of me resting on the ropes, and both look good. I should be paying her despite winning the challenge. She's a damn good photographer.

"Those are good, Sky. Really good."

"Such a vocabulary," she snorts.

I want to stroke the back of her neck or push her wild hair behind her ears, lose my fingers in it and kiss her until she's dizzy. She puts her camera back in her bag and takes a slow breath before folding her hands in her lap and meeting my eyes. Serious, business-like, and guarded as hell.

"I thought about the ... offer."

“Was it an offer?” I try to keep myself from smiling. “Or a list of things I want?”

“There’s a lot I haven’t done ... for reasons. I think I could experiment with you. But serious relationship shit isn’t an option. You’re not built for it – obviously – and I don’t want a real one. And no one can know.”

“That never works, Sky. People always find out.” I nudge her. “Haven’t you ever seen a rom-com?”

“That’s what I’m offering,” she shrugs. “Or we can try this awesome thing called friendship.”

“Ah, so I can keep kicking your ass, and you can’t complain about it?” I tease. “And you can tease me nonstop with what I don’t get to touch.”

“Okay, rethinking my offer now.” She stands up, glares at the rain, and hesitates.

“I’ll agree,” I say seriously, while staring at the ground. I brace my elbows on my knees. I know this is going to crash and burn, but she’s gone in winter anyway. What do I really have to lose?

Nothing but the pattering of rain answers me. I finally raise my head and find Sky looking at me. “So enthusiastic.”

“I told you, I’m taking what I can get.” I stand up and walk to her. “Let’s see how long this lasts.”

She gently steps away from me. “Which means nothing in public. I don’t want to be pitied as another one of your conquests.”

“I was going to suggest using my umbrella.” I hold it up for her to see. “So, you can get to your car safely.”

She bites her bottom lip, then admits that she walked here, which naturally leads to us in my car. When I stop in her driveway, she takes a deep breath, still avoiding my eyes. “I’ll send you the pictures.”

“Sky.” I brush my fingers over hers. “I’m not going to jump you.”

“I know,” she nods, but I see her relax a little. “Even though you’re supposed to be a man whore.”

I take her hand and kiss her wrist, gently biting until she actually looks at me. I arch an eyebrow. “That sounds like good advertising. Girls don’t talk about shit lays.”

“Yes, they do,” she whispers. “But I know you leave girls as soon as you fuck them.”

“Bullshit.” I snort. “I don’t get to that point with a lot of my flings.”

I pull her closer to me. She’s more honest when she’s flustered. She takes an unsteady breath. “I was just thinking ... like there are benchmarks or like ... a list of things I kind of want to experience.”

“And?”

“I don’t know if this is one I want with you.” She untangles herself from me.

Ooh, a challenge. “Is it that pesky romance rule in the way?”

“Maybe.” Her face burns.

I nod and turn my eyes to the windshield. Forcing her to talk or to try is going to get me hit, and I know it. So, I watch the rain roll down the windshield. Apparently, being honest with Sky gets me farther than being suave. “I still have a lot of things unchecked on my list.”

“You have one?”

“Doesn’t everyone? But I get it. Sometimes, you want the buildup to the moment, and if you say it, then there’s not really a reward in getting it. Like yesterday, with the whole petting my hair thing. Asking someone to do it isn’t as good as it just happening.”

“Tell me one of yours? One that you did check off?”

I think about that for a while. “It’ll bring up another girl.”

“That’s fine. I’m not really a jealous person.” She shrugs.

This is bullshit because everyone is ‘not the jealous type’ until they’re with someone they’re afraid to lose. “I always wanted that ‘making eyes across a room, leading to making out and a good night’ thing, and I got it at a frat party. This hot girl and I kept running into each other, catching each other staring, and then it turned into a make-out session and some extras. Not sex, but close. Then I never saw her again.”

“I see.” She rubs her bottom lip.

“Anything for you?”

“Not so far.” She shrugs. “I should go.”

She doesn’t reach for the door, though. I roll my eyes and lean over, kissing her cheek. “Have a good night, Sky.”

She turns to look at me, her nose brushing mine. “That’s it?”

“Your pace,” I remind. “I’m already touching you without asking.”

Her eyes study me intently. “Is this how you normally get girls?”

“Nope.” I gently stroke over her knee. “I’m an impatient ass with charm to spare. Who needs restraint?”

Her eyes narrow, and she kisses me fully on the mouth, her tongue stroking between my lips. She pulls away before I can do anything and sprints to her house. I shake my head slightly. She’s going to be dragging me along like a dog on a leash. I can tell already.

Especially when she drops her keys twice trying to get in the door. I open the window and yell out. “Trouble finding

the hole, bumble bee? I can help!”

“Shut your face!” She shouts back.

Once she’s inside, I cruise next door, run inside, and check the time. I still have a bit before I go out with the guys from work. So, I have plenty of time to relax, bother Sky, or even take a nap. Which sounds the most amazing.

We should have a nap date. I text Sky.

Dating isn’t a thing we’re doing. She responds after a solid two minutes.

Before I can reply because napping is clearly not a real date, Peter comes in and glowers at me. “Something going on with you and Elvira next door?”

“Nope,” I lie easily.

He parts his feet in a firm stance, his hands gripping his waist. “You just dropped her off.”

“Yeah. She’s helping me with some social media shit, and it’s pouring. I can’t have my pictures getting ruined.” I text Tyler, asking when we’re going to meet at the bar ... and what bar. “Anything else? I’m going out with the guys tonight.”

“Not Sky?”

“Why would I be going out with Sky?”

My brother continues to watch me, then looks over my shoulder. Sky is struggling with her shirt, stuck in it with her arms above her head. She falls over, and I laugh. I shut my blinds because that view is for me and me alone, but I return my attention to my brother. More lies to come.

“Yeah, I’m interested in *that* kind of strip tease,” I say sarcastically.

He jabs his index finger at me. “Keep your hands off. She’s mine.”

“Clearly, because Sky just *loves* childish assholes.”

“It’s not childish. It’s strategic,” he defends.

Smothering a chuckle, I reply, “It would probably work if you were ten, Peter. Grow up.”

“Whatever. I’m playing the long game.” He points at me again. “Don’t get in the fucking way, Ashton. I’m serious. I’ve had my eye on her and made sure no one else has fucked her or kissed her or claimed her. She’s going to be mine and mine alone.” He pokes my chest. “I know how to handle her.”

“Sure.” Is that issue number one I spy?

Peter shoves at me, but I don’t budge. “I’m serious. I’ve been working on her for years. You fucked up my opportunity once, and you’re not going to do it again.”

“What the fuck does that even mean, dude?”

He storms out of my room without a reply, and I just stand there. He doesn’t have a chance with Sky. Not if he got his tips from some pickup artist ... or me. So I don’t need to worry about any of his bullshit. I’m just going to head out with the guys, enjoy my Friday night and not let him stand in the way.

And that’s exactly what I do. I drink with the guys, tell stories that make everyone laugh, and realize how drunk I am when I drop my keys twice, then try to get my house key in the car door. Tyler pats my back.

“No driving for you. Let’s go.” He puts me in his passenger seat, and I fall in and out of a nap on the ride over.

The car soon slows down. “I keep forgetting the boss’s house. Which one is it?” Tyler asks.

I push to a sitting position and squint through the window. The entire neighborhood looks blurry. “Right here is fine.”

“You sure, man?”

“Positive.” I stumble out and walk up to the nearest house, hesitate, then walk around the side, pushing open the back gate. I see a pool and groan. Wrong house. I’m so tired, though. I don’t care. I can’t make myself care.

Pulling out my phone, I text Sky, asking if she’s ready for the naptime date. Then I smile and let my head fall back against the fence.

Chapter 10

Sky

I stare at my phone. What the hell is he talking about? I nervously check the front door, trying to be as quiet as possible as I run through the house. There's no one standing outside, so my eyes go to the back. I slowly creep out of the sliding glass door at the back, look in the pool, on the deck, and don't see anything.

Groaning, I call Ash. I hear his phone go off and follow it to see him lying in the grass around the side. I sigh and lift his chin. "What kind of trouble did you get into?"

"My teddy bear," he hums, pulling me down and into his lap to hug me. He buries his face in my neck, but I can still smell the beer on him and sigh. Of course, he's drunk. "You're so comfortable."

"You're drunk," I say.

He nods. "And horny."

"Keep it in your pants."

"Is it out of my pants?" He gropes between us, his knuckles brushing my upper thigh. I should have put pants on. Why the hell *didn't* I put pants on? Ash seems to realize it at the same time. He turns his hand and strokes along the inside of my thigh. "Sky ..."

I grab his hand and hold it above his head. "No. Behave. Why are you here?"

He gives me a dopey grin. “You’re hot when you’re bossy.”

Closing my eyes, I fight the urge to slap him. I rub my forehead. What am I supposed to do with him? Ash rubs over my hips, then tugs my hair a little. When I open my eyes, I watch him tug and release my hair; it springs back up.

“Slinkies.”

“Hey. Asshole!” I snap my fingers. “How are you getting home?”

“Screw home.” He hugs me and rests his chin on the top of my head. “This is comfy.”

Ash keeps rubbing me and doesn’t push for anything else. He just sits there. I sigh and move away after a moment. It’s nice to be held, and he feels good, really good actually, but he’s drunk.

“Ash, listen to me.”

“I like how you say my name.” He continues anyway. “And how you feel. Soft all over.”

He rubs my legs to prove it. Then his mouth rubs over my neck. Clumsy but not terrible. The tremble of his breath over my damp skin makes my eyes close. Even drunk, he’s good at seduction. I hold his shoulders in place.

“Behave.”

“It’s no fun. Dare.”

“I dare you to go home,” I challenge, pointing to the door. “Or no more head rubs.”

He pouts, a devastating, honest pout. “But you do it so well, Sky. It’s my second favorite.”

“Second?”

“I like kissing you more.” He rubs his nose along mine. “I almost don’t believe I was your first. I like your mouth. All

feisty, then so nice.”

I know I’m blushing like crazy. “You shouldn’t be so honest.”

“You like honesty. Your spider scares me. You kinda scare me. All different than before. Independent and angry.” He cups my face between his hands, pushing my cheeks together until I’m sure I have fish lips. “How am I supposed to do anything for you when you want to do it all yourself? Don’t you need me? Even to fight your battles or shit?”

“No.” I push his hands away. “I only need me. It’s better that way.”

“Boring,” he says, then kisses the corner of my mouth. “You don’t want to kiss me?”

“You’re *drunk*.” I stand up. “Leave.”

“You’re breaking my heart.”

“Funny. Leave.” I point.

Instead, he wraps both arms around one of my legs, even with one hand creeping up my thigh. “I’ll do whatever you want, so I can stay ... especially if it’s naughty.”

I try to pull out of his grasp and end up falling, but instead of hurting myself on the concrete, Ash is there, arms around me. He groans and rubs the back of his head. “I think you knocked some sobriety into me.”

“Good,” I whisper. “You need to go home before we get in trouble for being out here like this.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m plenty fun, but I’m not doing anything with you when you’re drunk. Go home,” I say softly. “Please, Ash.”

He sighs and kisses me quickly, a gentle press of his lips. “Since you asked so nicely ... and aren’t wearing pants.”

“And you’re walking a fine line.”

He stands up with me and cups the back of my head. “It’s convincing as hell. A kiss would have been, too.”

“I’m not going to take advantage of you. Go home. Don’t text me until your head hurts and you’re hung over.”

He salutes me and walks away. As soon as he’s gone, I collapse to the ground, sigh, and hold my face in my hands. It would have been so easy to just be with him, to let him stay on the couch, fill him up with water and take care of him. Especially when he’s feeling so honest and open like that.

How am I supposed to deal with all of his emotions and thoughts just on display? I could have asked him a million things. But rather than think on it, I put myself in bed. I don’t need the headache that comes with Ash right now, honest and sweet or not.

I force myself to sleep. I have plenty to do tomorrow. Bonnie and I are going out, and I have to make sure that there’s no evidence of Ash on me.

In the morning, Bonnie and I head out as soon as the sun is up. She points out different animals before nearly driving them away because of how she stomps through the woods. I get plenty of photos, anyway, and the morning passes quickly before we stop by the lake to cool off.

I spread the blanket on a patch of leaves, and I sit with my legs tucked underneath me. Bonnie leans back on her arms, her smiling face turned upward as she basks in the soft breeze.

“Got a lot of decent photos,” I comment, scrolling through the camera.

Bonnie leans in and looks them over with me. “They’re amazing. I bet that photo studio won’t reject your application if you send these.”

Oh yes, they would. These are very similar to the ones I’d sent the first time I applied, and they didn’t accept them. It would be a waste a time to repeat the same mistake.

“Wait a minute... isn’t the deadline already gone?”
Bonnie asks.

“Um... yeah, it was yesterday.”

“And? Did you re-apply?”

“Yup. I sent some photos I’d taken while hiking the other day.” I keep my eyes glued to the camera, hoping she doesn’t read the lie on my face.

Bonnie—nor anyone in my family—can’t know that I re-applied using those photos of Ash. She can never find out that I’m associated with Ash like this.

“Well, I’m keeping my fingers crossed this time.”

I cross my two fingers, waving them at her. “Me, too.”

Now, there’s a long, uneasy wait until the end of summer before I’ll know what they decide.

Bonnie gets to her feet, brushing imaginary debris off her butt. “Come on, let’s go for a dip before the crowd comes.”

Setting the camera down, I shimmy out of my shorts but keep my T-shirt on, knowing people will eventually show up. The thumb-ups from my party are still fresh on my mind, but I’m not a hundred percent comfortable being half-naked with people around.

Bonnie and I have a good time, splashing each other and cooling off.

Then Peter and his friends show up.

It was good while it lasted.

He looks me over and shakes his head. “Love that you went with the T-shirt cover up again. Thanks for not putting me through that torture.”

Bonnie looks about ready to get into his face, but two of his friends distract her, getting her talking about a new video game as I wrap up in a towel.

I don’t need this bullshit. “Leave me alone, Peter. I’m not interested in an argument today.”

“Oh, come on, Elvira. What would your summer be without me pulling our pigtails?” Peter asks, actively tugging on my hair.

I slap his hand away. “Look, it’s not my fault you have nothing better to do.”

He opens his mouth to reply, but I’m done with his crap.

“Since you always tell me I’m not hot enough or too weird, why the hell do you keep messing with me? You should be hanging with some girl who isn’t ... unless those girls have decided *you’re* not good enough.” I put my hand on my hip. “Is that what it is? Your special brand of charm just doesn’t measure up?”

He sneers at me. “You’re a fucking piece of work.”

“And I haven’t forgotten the stunt you pulled two years ago. You’re lucky I stopped Chase from beating your ass.” I get his face, tossing my damp hair over my shoulder. “Keep fucking with me, and I’ll change my mind. Your brother won’t be enough to save you, either.”

Bonnie untangles herself from the guys as I turn away from Peter’s red face. “Way to go, Sky!” she exclaims, falling in line with me.

“For what?”

“Finally standing up to that dick, duh,” she replies. “I still hate how he got away with murder. His asshole brother, too. I’m just glad you gave him a piece of that don’t-fuck-with-me attitude I know you have.”

I shrug, my feet skimming the leaves on the forest floor as we trudge along. “Honestly, I was being nice. I could have really gone for his ego, a.k.a. his dick size.” I haven’t forgotten when he used to run around naked as a seven-year-old.

“Oh, that would’ve been a solid blow,” Bonnie guffaws. “Next time, be sure to use that material.”

“For his sake, I hope there won’t be a next time. Enough about Peter, anyway. I need to catch some butterflies for pinning. I almost have my collection done.”

“Eew,” she complains. “I can’t believe you murder them like that.”

“It’s okay. I usually look for dead ones, but otherwise, they don’t live long.” I explain the whole process.

“The man who steals your heart has an uphill battle, Sky.”

“Huh?”

“Trying to fend off all that sexy talk about pinning and whatnot.” She giggles.

I realize she’s teasing me when she kisses my cheek and waves at me, getting in her car and heading home. I look at my basically empty house and sigh before taking off my T-shirt and heading right back to the pool. I kick my feet in the water.

It’s not that weird to collect bugs, is it? I could collect worse things. Like tattoos or men, or ... or other things. I kick my foot harder, and my heel hits the wall, making me flinch.

At least I get a whole day without Ash. I still have plenty to think of when it comes to him, and I don’t have the

faintest idea where to start. I know he's texted me twice, but I'm sure he doesn't remember last night anyway.

Still, I look at my phone as I get in bed and see him saying the exact opposite. And encouraging me to take advantage of him next time.

There won't be a next time. I'll just let my brother find him instead.

I try to make the next day just as Ash-free so I try to figure things out. After being home alone for hours, done with cleaning up and cooking, too bored to even watch TV, my dad comes in. He grumbles about a hard day and goes right to bed without even stopping to eat the dinner I prepared, or to even check on me.

I curl around a pillow. Dad's misery is exactly why I have to keep my distance from Ash. He'll make me need him, want his company, then ask me to change my life for him, little bits at a time, until he's everything to me, and I can't allow that. Hell no. Like Mom, he's going to break my heart, too.

After another hour and a text from my brother saying he's not coming home, I feel cold in a way that blankets can't seem to fix. The movies just make it worse, seeing people who would kill for each other, die for each other and everything in between ...

I text Ash. *I'm bored.*

He replies almost at once. *I can fix that. I just need a yes, please.*

Me: *I don't do please.*

Ash: *Why is hatred so hot on you?*

Why is *this* the guy I can't get out of my head? That stupid, needy side of me is in control and wants his attention. I almost invite him over, but then I throw myself in the pool.

My new bikinis might as well get some use. After a thorough swim, I head upstairs to get changed.

Bikinis look good, too.

I read his text and look out the window to find him watching, reclining on his bed with a sexy smirk, shirtless, gorgeous, and entirely focused on me.

Restraint. It's best for both of us. It is. I know that, but damn, I'm so tired of being good, of doing what I'm supposed to do. So I undo the top of my bikini while watching Ash.

He stands up and braces himself against the window. I undo the other clasp and make sure my hair is covering my breasts before letting my bikini fall to the floor. My phone vibrates angrily on my dresser, and I pick it up without looking away from Ash.

His voice is husky and hot, pricking every nerve across my skin. "What are you doing?"

"Whatever the fuck I want."

Chapter 11

Ashton

I lick across my bottom lip and fight the sudden throbbing hard-on I have. Fucking Sky with her top off, her hair barely covering her breasts, watching me with that ‘come get me’ dare in her eyes.

She reaches for her bottoms, and I grab my cock as if that will stop it from twitching in my pants. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

Her hand pauses, and her eyes flick back to me. I show her that I’m actively rubbing myself, and she takes an unsteady breath. “That’s not my fault.”

“Oh, yes, it is. Want me to come over there and prove it?”

She walks closer to the window so I can’t see below her hips, adjusts and then holds up her bottoms. I groan. “You’re driving me up the fucking wall, woman.”

“Sounds like you should do something about that, then. Shouldn’t you?”

“Don’t tease me.” My hand slips under my boxers, and I stroke my cock again. “Unless I’m coming over there so you can tease me for real.”

“You wouldn’t know what to do with me,” she argues, playing with a lock of her hair.

I groan, unashamed at how good it feels to touch myself while watching her. She shivers and bites her bottom

lip, chewing it a little as if thinking.

“I know exactly what I’d do with you, Sky,” I argue. “I’d lick every inch of you, touch you slowly, softly, and make sure you know exactly how good I can make you feel.”

Her eyes widen, and I swear I can tell she’s blushing from here. “I thought you wanted me to hate you.”

“Nope.” I grip my cock tighter and pant. “I said I like the *way* you hate me. Kissing me and touching me and being sassy.”

She swallows unsteadily.

“Either invite me over or shut your blinds.”

“No.”

“Then you’re going to enjoy a show. Stay on the phone.”

“You ... you just assume I want to see your cock?”

“Shut your blinds if you don’t.”

I take a few steps back so I can grab some lube and watch her as I drag my boxers down. Sky takes a step forward, and I smirk as I slowly jerk off for her. I give the head extra attention before thrusting into my fist. Her hand teases low on her belly, and I groan.

“You can touch yourself, too.”

She takes an unsteady breath, then jerks her curtain shut. I chuckle, then moan, picturing her wicked mouth wrapped around my cock. I keep going, letting it build up by thinking about her tongue, the way she kisses me, those sexy bedroom eyes she’s flashed. Fuck, it takes me so little time to come apart. I give a long moan as I fill my hand.

I glance at my phone and see that the call is still going.

And I hear a soft little whimper and panting. Slick, wet sounds, too. I groan, release my cock but smile. “Are you

enjoying yourself over there?”

“N-no,” she gasps.

“Then you clearly don’t care that you made me come.”

She doesn’t answer, but I hear another barely softened gasp.

“And you don’t want to come too? Don’t you want my fingers buried deep inside you as I kiss you? Don’t you want me to show you why everyone gets excited about sex?”

She lets out a long, loud moan, then muffles herself. I smirk. “Now that we have that out of the way ... what did you do today?”

She swallows. “I ... I need to clean up.”

“You’re going to hang up on me? So cruel.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow if you fucking behave.” No venom in her voice this time, just pure satisfaction. “Call it incentive.”

“The very best kind, bumble bee.”

She’s quiet for a long moment, just breathing slowly. “I hate you, Ash.”

“Of course, you do. Talk to you tomorrow.”

I hang up and clean up. After two days off, I feel rested enough to take on the week. And now, with some added excitement, I’m ready to plow through tomorrow and get some time with the only girl I’ve met who hates me openly and honestly.

Pathetic, absolutely, but I don’t care. I’m excited.

Tyler picks up on it at work. “I know that look.”

“What look?” I ask.

“Like there’s a woman behind the grin that’s been on your face all day. You have a date or something?”

“Or something.” I chuckle, thinking of how mad Sky would be if I called what we’re doing a date.

“Ah, in the gray area. My lady kept me there for a while,” he says, opening another bag of cement. “Said she didn’t want her heart broken.”

I hesitate and nearly lose the bag on my shoulder. Tyler tears another one open. Is that what it is? “How did you find that out?”

“Asked.” He shrugs. “Women are pretty simple despite what people say. Just talk to them like you would a dude, plus a little sweetness, feed them, cuddle them, fuck them, and don’t cheat on them. Simple.”

“You clearly don’t know the girl I’m after.”

He claps the cement dust off his hand and motions for me to start stirring. I do as I’m told. “Are you *after* her like you actually like her, or do you just want pussy?”

“I know I don’t *just* want her pussy.”

“Not good enough.” Tyler pats my shoulder. “You either want the girl, or you don’t. Think about it – do you like spending time with her and shit? Would you be okay if some other guy was spending time with her, too, or is she just convenient and not repulsive?”

I just stare at him. Even the idea of my brother making a move on her makes me frustrated as hell and has me almost seeing red.

He sighs. “I knew it. Hook up culture is a plague.”

“It’s fine if that’s what both people want,” I argue, trying to cool myself down and accept that’s all Sky wants. Is it because of my damn reputation? To check things off her list?

“Yeah, both people,” he stresses.

Dad yells at us to get to work, and we do as we’re told. I think about that on the way home, in the shower, and until I

end up knocking on Sky's door. She opens it up and jerks me in, locking the door behind me. She's wearing comfortable-looking shorts and a T-shirt that's a little too large.

"You're pretty brave, strolling up my driveway so casually. What if someone sees you?"

"And if they did?"

She shoots me a glare mixed with frustration and annoyance. "We talked about this. No one can—"

"Know. I got it." Curbing my own frustration, I follow her into the living room. "I take it that your dad and Chase won't be home anytime soon."

"That's right."

We sit on the couch, and I glance behind us, where a bunch of butterflies are pinned among beetles. "Did you make that?"

"No. I bought it. It was cheap. They're fake," she mumbles, pulling one of her knees up to her chin.

I want to bring up the conversation I had with Tyler today, somehow, to get a better understanding about what she wants. She pushes me away, texts me, teases me, and pushes me away again. I don't know what to do with her.

"Sky ..."

"This isn't a date," she says immediately. "Just to be clear."

"I remember the rule."

"Good."

She turns on the T.V., and we sit there for a while, I nudge her. "You were going to tell me about your week, right?"

"I re-applied for the internship," she begins.

“Good for you,” I reply, but she looks worried. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Well, I won’t hear from them until the end of summer, which makes me nervous. What if they reject me again? Can I handle deferring another semester?”

I think about it for a second. “I’m almost positive you’ll get in this time. You used my photos, after all.”

She scoffs and punches my arm. I laugh.

“Seriously, though. Even if, by some weird chance you don’t get in, it won’t be the end of the world, will it?”

“Close enough,” she mumbles. “I can’t get into that photography club without internship experience. That studio is my only hope.”

“And you need to get in because?”

Sky goes on to explain her career plans, and I finally understand. I’m not worried for her. She’s going to do just fine. She smiles gratefully when I tell her that.

“Thank you.”

I squeeze her arm. “Now, tell me about the rest of your week.”

“I hung out with Bonnie. Got some good photos for my blog site. Ran into your dick of a brother. We came back and ... shit.” She jumps up.

“Sky.”

“I have to feed Drac.”

“The ...”

“Come watch.” She takes my hand, and I find my feet moving with her.

I *hate* spiders. It’s not a fear thing like with bugs, it’s a hate. They’re big, they bite, they’re ugly and mean. Sure, they

eat bugs but fuck them. They could all disappear, and I'd be happy.

But somehow, I end up standing in front of Sky as she sticks her hand into the tarantula's tank. She stands on her toes to be able to get her hand flat, and I notice her shorts ride up, showing off more of her legs.

Fuck, she's hot. Hot enough to put up with a spider being close by

"Good boy," she croons.

I realize I'm blushing for a second before she shows the spider. She strokes its abdomen and ... it just sits there. Huge, hairy, kind of blue, but the size of her entire palm. Jesus, this thing could take out a small bird ... maybe a toddler. I blink at her and hold my hands up.

She holds him out to me. "Want to try? You don't get to hold him or anything, I don't trust you like that, but you can pet him."

"No, thanks. Really."

"Wimp." She tries baiting me.

I glower at her. "Don't push. I'm giving you time. Give me ... not this."

She shrugs and strokes it again, just two fingers, which is fucking wicked, considering what she was doing with her fingers last night. I look away. "How can you stand that thing?"

"He's so pretty! He's a cobalt tarantula. Really mild, nice most of the time. The males are calmer than the females. I think he's pretty great. He's pissy when I clean his tank, but he's never bitten me or anything. Easier to keep than a dog, too," she says excitedly.

I look at the spider again. It doesn't look as horrific as some. I swallow hard. I can't pet it. No way. Never. She looks

around. “Can you get me a Tupperware? I don’t know where I put mine. I might as well clean his tank out, too.”

I get one from the kitchen, and she gently sets him in it, no lid necessary. He just sits there like a prisoner while she cleans out the tank and goes over how to take care of a spider as if I’ll ever have one. Once it’s ‘clean,’ I guess, she mists it with a spray bottle, then picks the spider up gently. He scurries over her arm, and she sighs.

“Not now. You need to eat,” she scolds.

When the spider goes for her neck, I nearly slap it off, but she simply picks him up and sets him in his tank. He explores slowly, and she rolls her eyes before reaching into a thing I didn’t notice. She pulls out some worms and tweezers.

“He doesn’t like a new tank, so I always feed him after cleaning. Are you strong enough to drop a bug in with tweezers?”

“For someone who likes bugs, you’re mean to them.” I take the tweezers and grab one of the squirming gross things. It’ll be nice to watch it die. “I’m sure they tell their friends.”

“Their friends get eaten, too.” She bumps my hip with hers.

I drop the bug in, and we press close together to watch the tarantula grab it and disappear into its little hole. She secures the top of the tank carefully. She beams at me, a full smile, like when we were kids. Her eyes all squinted, teeth showing.

Fuck. My heart beats off rhythm, and I swallow hard. She’s not allowed to look at me like that, but I want to keep that smile on her face too. I grab her and throw her over my shoulder. She beats my back, reminding me I’m supposed to ask for permission before I manhandle her. Instead, I drop her on her bed and lay next to her.

She cringes away while trying to calm her breathing. She's still assuming the worst in me. "You have to *beg* if you want me to fuck you, Sky. Trust me, after the spider thing, I'm not in the mood."

She settles and tells me more about her day, then asks about mine. I talk about work a little but leave out the conversation between Tyler and me. We wiggle closer together until I see her shiver.

"Are you cold?"

"Just about always."

I cuddle her close, rubbing her back. Sky stays still for a long moment, then nuzzles my neck. "Stupid space heater."

I grin and rub down her back, stopping just above her ass. "It's okay to like it."

She hesitates, then wraps an arm around me. "This is new."

"Bad?"

I feel her say no and kiss the top of her head. She lifts her head to look at me. "Don't want to run screaming from the spider?"

"Running never crossed my mind."

I stroke her cheek and brush my nose along hers. She swallows but doesn't pull away. So I take the fucking incentive and kiss her like I've been thinking about kissing her since our first make-out session.

Her tongue moves against mine with less hesitation this time. She sucks my bottom lip, teases me with more, and just like that, my restraint snaps. I clutch her hair and devour her mouth, savoring her soft moan.

She presses closer and change angles. It's shaping up to be a good fucking summer.

Chapter 12

Sky

Kissing Ashton is amazing. It's almost obvious why girls fall under his spell because I'm convinced his mouth is magic. At least when he uses it like this. He strokes through my hair and along my neck, sending crackles of electricity across my skin that makes me sizzle with need.

Groaning, I pull my mouth away from him, trying for some control.

"This isn't a date."

He sighs. "I know that, Sky. You've said it over and over again. We're not dating."

"I mean it," I say as he kisses along my neck slowly, but I'm not sure if I'm talking to him or me.

When he licks up my throat, my insides melt and pool in my stomach, all warm and sloshy and ... what if he licked other places? Or followed through on that damn comment he gave over the phone about licking and kissing every inch of me.

"Not dating, just exclusively having fun together," he purrs against my jaw. "Better than tugging on your pigtails."

"Well ... yeah," I admit.

Ash takes off his shirt and tosses it to the side, which earns him a glare. He rolls his eyes and puts my hand on his chest. "I like to be touched. Pretty much constantly, just about everywhere."

“Except here.” I trace my finger up his side and watch him squirm. “You’re still ticklish.”

He rolls on top of me and pins the offending hand by my head. “Take that secret to your grave.”

“Make me,” I challenge.

He chuckles and kisses me again. “So sassy.” Another kiss, slower, deeper. “Stubborn.” This time, he bites my bottom lip and tugs softly. “Sexy.”

“Got stuck at S in the dictionary, didn’t you? T has pretty good words, too.”

“I can think of a few,” he says, but then he glances at my door. “Do I need to worry about a certain brother coming in? One that hates me?”

I shake my head slowly.

“Your father?”

I look to the side, and Ash sits up. “You’re home alone on the regular, aren’t you?”

“It’s not a bad thing. I get to throw all these wild parties,” I huff.

Ash shakes his head. “Well, that settles it. We’re making food.”

Which sounds suspiciously like a date, but my growling stomach makes it clear that I don’t have the high ground here. We go to the kitchen and start making mac and cheese since that’s really all I have the ingredients for. I haven’t yet done our monthly grocery run.

Ash sings off key and flat at the same time, just narrating what we’re doing like a dummy until I elbow him while laughing. “Don’t quit the boxing.”

“I like your laugh,” he says as if my insult doesn’t mean a single fucking thing.

“Shut it.” I point at him with the spoon. “Or I’m going to stuff crunchy pasta in your mouth.”

“I’d rather have you take care of my mouth another way.”

I heat from my toes to the top of my head with that comment alone. He has to know what he does to me. “Will it get you to stop being sweet?”

“To you?” He considers it, then wraps his arms around me, pulling me tight against him. “As long as it makes you blush like that, hell no.”

I can definitely feel something hard against my lower back. Something I can’t ignore, even if I should.

“Are you always hard?”

“Around you, it’s pretty fucking constant,” he says in my ear.

I don’t know if it’s his words or the way his breath catches on my ear that makes my thighs clench. It shouldn’t be this easy for him to make me wet. It’s actually pathetic. Reminds me of the phone sex that never should have happened.

Because I know the second we actually do have sex, the magic will be gone. Ash will be satisfied, and he’ll move on no matter what he says. So I have to hold out until just before I leave. Or until he gets bored of me and leaves me be, virginity intact.

“Do I turn you on at all, Sky?”

I blink a few times and face him. “What?”

“Well, come on, it’s not obvious for you like it is for me. If this is just about experiencing things, you should get used to saying how you feel.”

“I don’t have any feelings that are important right now.” Because I’m putting a cap on the bottle that holds them

and stuffing it deeper inside me so it can't cause problems.

“Why?”

“Why what?” I almost throw the spoon into the boiling macaroni.

Ash smooths down my arms and kisses along my shoulder. The softest brush of his lips across my skin raises goosebumps, even though I don't want to admit a damn thing. I let out a shaky breath. “Why what, Ash?”

“The feelings thing. You're very focused on *not* having them, which is impossible. Even if my relationships don't last long, I can say when I'm turned on, when I like someone, when I'm interested in a girl, when the sparks fade. I can say I'm pissed at my high school friends, that I love my Dad, even if he doesn't support me.”

“I love my Dad, too,” I say. “Ta-da.”

Ash keeps kissing my skin until I shiver. His hands keep mine in place. “I'd like to try something.”

“Is it more talking?”

“No. Clearly, you fucking hate that shit,” he chuckles.

He makes another tour of my throat, all the way up to the hollow of my ear and back down to my shoulder. Then he bites me, hard. I whimper, but it feels good. The pinpricks of pain mixed with the soft suck of his mouth, then his tongue soothing the bite. He licks up my throat again before exhaling over the damp line as he moves back down my throat.

I shiver and realize I'm rubbing myself against him. He groans and slides one hand slowly up my arm, then around my belly, just below my breasts. I try to swallow, but all I can picture is his hand sinking into my pants.

He'd find me so wet, so eager. And wouldn't his fingers be so much better than mine? All practiced and skilled. I bet

he could make me come right here in the kitchen before the macaroni is done.

I rock my hips back against him again, and he bites my ear. “I should punish you for seducing me.”

“You liked it,” I say, sure. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t have come.”

“And you liked making me come, or you wouldn’t have touched yourself ... which is something I’d love to watch.”

I have nothing to say to that. My brain is completely blank. So I turn around slowly and fit my mouth to Ash. We’re going to ruin each other in this situationship. I know it. The further we go, the more time we spend together, the worse it is going to be, so why the hell am I kissing him like I could survive on kissing him alone?

“Sky.” He breathes against my lips. “I think the macaroni is done.”

But I keep watching him, his dark eyes, the wild glint to them. Hesitantly, because I don’t know what is allowed, I touch his face. Ash leans into my touch and presses his forehead to mine. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I’m sure you have plenty of ideas.”

“And a fuck ton of patience for not putting them immediately into action,” he murmurs.

“Remind me to put a gold sticker on your forehead,” I snort.

We finish cooking, and I package some of it up for Dad, hoping he’ll eat today since there’s something easy for him to dig into. The rest goes into two bowls, and then I clean the pot and strainer and everything else we’ve used.

Ash dries and leads me back up to my room. We eat and talk about old times, like when I was determined to climb higher up in the tree than anyone and fell, breaking my arm.

Ash was the first to sign my cast and drew a picture of the tree. He always was an asshole.

“It meant a lot to me that you signed it back then.”

“I can still sign you now.” He reaches around my desk and grabs a Sharpie.

“Ash!”

But he’s already drawing on my arm. “You clearly need some ink to be at peak bad-ass level.”

I laugh and see his smile. “Don’t move, this is permanent. Says so on the marker.”

It only makes me laugh more. When he finishes, he nods. I look at my arm and see the worst drawn spider ever along with “Dracula approved.” It’s small as shit as far as gestures go, but it means more than him signing my cast. I can’t even put it into words that wouldn’t go straight to his head and give him leverage.

And all relationships are a battleground. The first one to give loses power. If I lose any kind of power with Ash, he’ll get everything. I have so much more at stake than he does.

He feeds me a few bites of mac and cheese, then devours his own entirely. I finish mine and then sit there with him in bed, not really sure what to do. I kick my feet a little, and Ash turns my chin.

“Do you want to kiss me?”

“Sure.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “You either want to or you don’t. No gray area bullshit, Sky. You’re too good for that.”

My stomach does that squeeze thing, just like my thighs, and I nod. “Yes.”

His thick arm pulls me close, and he feasts on my mouth, licking deep, staking claim and kissing me until all I can do is suck his tongue. He groans and pulls me onto his lap,

wrapping me up like I'm the only person in the world he could possibly want.

I melt against him, running my fingers through his hair, down his neck and along his shoulders. He behaves, though; his hands never leave my back or shoulder except to dip into my hair.

After telling myself not to think, I grab his hand and guide it down to my ass. Ash kisses along my jaw. "Want me to touch you here?"

"Yes," I encourage.

He groans and uses both hands on my ass, grinding me against him. He nibbles my throat and continues grinding against me. My hips roll with his, and he pants before growling against my skin. "You're testing my restraint, woman."

"It should be tested." I grab his chin, watching surprise flit across his features, then turn his head to the side so I can kiss down his neck.

I'm sure I'm terrible at it, considering it's my first time, but Ash's hands tighten on me, and he lets out a groan. "Use your teeth, I know you want to bite me."

And he's right. I dig my teeth in, and I swear I feel his cock twitch in his pants as he jerks me down tighter on him. He lets out a ragged breath, and we trade off biting, kissing, making out. I'm so close to overheating, though. I can't think straight.

I want his hands all over me, want to know how good he can make me feel. I swear he can read my mind when he flips me back on my bed and slowly edges my shirt up. "Tell me when to stop."

I nod slowly but watch him continue dragging it up until it pools under my chin. "Fucking hell, Sky. You're kryptonite."

“You can ...” The rest of the sentence gets caught in my throat. But Ash waits, kissing me softly like he can pull the words from my mouth. I nod. “Take off my shorts – only my shorts.”

“You’re trying to kill me.” He narrows his eyes. “Going to give me a heart attack.”

Since he doesn’t, I do, lifting my hips and guiding my cotton shorts down so I’m only in my underwear. I tell myself it’s just like being in a swimsuit. But Ash’s eyes stroke over me like a caress, and I *know* it’s different.

“Do you have any idea how much I want you?”

I lick across my bottom lip as I take in how hard he is right now and the little tremor in his arm as his fingers knot in my shirt. I meet his eyes. “Show me.”

Chapter 13

Ashton

Fuck, I'm tempted to show her exactly how badly I want her. But I'm not pushing her limits. Considering I was Sky's first kiss, I know she hasn't done anything else, which means being slow, being sure, being careful.

Plus ... I *want* to take my time with her.

"Sky." I hesitate. I sit next to her instead of continuing to hover on top. "We should stop now."

"Pussy," she says without venom.

I stroke over her soft skin, brushing my fingers along her side before stroking just above her purple panties. A simple gray bra and unmatching panties have never been sexier. She's gorgeous, and I know that from seeing her in a bikini, but this is something else entirely.

"I ..." I don't have the words to tell her I want to be gentle and go at her pace.

Even though she's literally begging to be touched. Her thighs squeeze together, and she squirms a little as I circle her belly button. "Is this okay?"

"Yes," she assures. "You can touch me ... or let me touch you."

"Shut up," I growl, kissing her hungrily. I hate how she just says things because she wants to. I hate that she can just exist without putting on a front for anyone at all. I hate it because I haven't figured out how to do it yet.

Sky groans and licks into my mouth. It's not enough that she's the most gorgeous woman I've ever been with; she has to be an excellent kisser, too. Every flick of her tongue is tailored to me and me alone. She grabs my hand, and I expect her to stop me, but instead, she slowly puts my hand on her chest, guiding me to cup her breast.

I moan, and my fingers tighten on her obediently. Her back arches, and she nibbles my bottom lip. I savor it and let my body roll against hers. I keep waiting for her to shove me off, to tell me to fuck off, anything but encouraging me to continue.

But when her hips rise to meet mine, I'm powerless to tell her no. We groan together, tasting the sound on each other's tongues and honestly, making out has never been hotter. My mouth flows down her throat, and my eyes flick to hers.

She nods slowly, biting her bottom lip.

I kiss across the exposed skin of her chest, covering the curves of her breasts, then licking between them. Sky gasps, and her hand moves up my arm and tangles in my hair. I lick across the top curve of her breast again.

"Talk to me, Sky."

"That feels good," she whimpers. "Touch me."

"Give me details," I whisper against her skin.

She opens her mouth, then shakes her head and kisses me again. Her hand guides mine down her belly and to her underwear. I was enjoying how hard her nipples were, poking through the bra, but this ... fuck.

She's all wet and hot and sinfully perfect. I lick where her bra meets her skin and feel her shiver as my fingers rub against her clit with only thin fabric between us. Sky grinds down on my hand.

“Fuck just,” she groans, then moves my hand inside her underwear. I freeze entirely and meet her eyes. She sits up to kiss me. “No point in doing it halfway.”

I press my forehead to hers and chase her as she lays back down. “You are going to be the death of me, gorgeous. So hot and cold.”

She licks along my bottom lip. “Yes or no?”

I push two fingers lower, finding her completely shaved and so fucking soft. I groan and kiss her hungrily as I rub her wet clit. Sky whimpers and moans, not hiding a single sound from me as she turns away so I can kiss her throat.

This is so much better than listening to her over the phone. Her nails drag down my back, and her body arches against mine. “Oh, fuck.”

Every sound out of her throat makes me harder. Jesus, I’ve never enjoyed fingering a woman so much. The first time was a landmark, but after that, it was the same shit. I push one finger inside her, and her eyes roll back as her lips part. The blush spreading down her chest is intoxicating.

I lick down her chest and gently bite her breast. Sky digs her nails into my hair and jerks me against her, kissing me hard and deep. I groan and push a second finger into her. Sky grinds on me as I keep rubbing her clit with my thumb.

She’s so fucking wet, soaked, and all for me. When I meet her eyes, they’re dark and wild and holy shit. I groan and push my hard on against her. Sky jerks her bra down so her breasts spill out and pinches her nipple while rolling it between her fingers.

“You’re so fucking hot,” I pant, leaning forward to lick her nipple. Her back arches, and she lets me lick, kiss, suck as much as I want.

“Fuck! Fuck!” She moans and bites my throat, hard, really hard.

I know she's close, which is amazing in itself, but I curl my fingers every time I thrust them deeper, and her head falls back as her pussy tightens around me. "Ash!"

Holy fuck, my name has never sounded better than on the edge of her orgasm. I smile and kiss her once, twice, a third time, but I keep finger fucking her until she comes again. Then she grabs my wrist as she pants and squirms.

"Enough," she gasps.

I suck my fingers after pulling them out of her and can't believe how sweet she tastes. I lick again, then kiss her hungrily, demanding and thorough until I force myself to get off her because my cock is actively throbbing in my pants.

"What?" She sits up, one hand bracing between her legs, the other trying to cover her breasts as she shakes.

"I don't want to ... embarrass myself." I motion to my cock.

I lean back and actually stroke myself through my jeans. My whole body twitches. When was the last time anyone had this effect on me? Real or porn? I glance at Sky and see her eyes on my hand. "If I ... if I touched you ..."

"It would be a fucking dream." I undo my belt slowly, watching her eyes widen. "What do you think was on my mind when I was jerking off over the phone?"

"Some porn star."

"No porn star is near as hot as you. You are ..." I tug her towards me by her shirt and kiss her, "better than anything."

"Oh," she breathes, then glances at my hard on again. "So ... if I wanted to use my hand on ... on you?"

"Go for it. Whatever you want." I fold my arms behind my head. "Your speed."

She licks across her bottom lip as she pops my button, then edges the zipper down. “I’ve heard that’s boring. Bonnie says using her mouth is ... better.”

I groan and curl my fingers into a fist. “Whatever you want. Experiment. Go crazy ... just ... don’t punch me in the balls.”

Sky hesitates, then I lift my hips to let her drag my jeans down. She stares at my boxers and my cock straining against the fabric. She drags them down and just gapes again. Her hand wraps around my shaft, then she slowly moves up and down.

Her slow, clumsy touches have me insane. It’s so different and new and knowing it’s Sky doing it ... fucking hell. Her hand tightens around the head of my cock, and I groan. “Lick your hand, baby.”

Her eyes flick to me, and I see her tremble. I wrap my hand around hers. “If you want to keep jerking me off.”

She nods and licks across her palm while watching me. The extra lubrication makes everything twice as sensitive. My hips flex into her hand. I close my eyes, happy to just enjoy her exploration, but then her lips brush my cock.

I open my eyes and watch her lick across the tip. She pauses, spreads her lips around the head and sucks a little. Jesus, fucking ... I can’t. Even that little bit is so hot I have to restrain myself. I watch her push her hair back from her face and go down again, slowly. Her teeth lightly skin me, and I feel my legs twitch.

“Careful,” I murmur. Her eyes flick to mine, all shadowy and hot, and she opens her mouth wider, continuing down until she gags. I snap my teeth together and inhale carefully. “Fucking hell.”

I make myself keep my hands in the sheets instead of on the back of her head like I want. She needs to find what’s comfortable for her. And watching her figure it out is fucking

gold. Her raw lips slide up and down my cock. Her mouth is tight, wet, perfect, and when she uses her tongue, I can't stop the needy growl that comes out of my throat.

She's too damn good. It's going to be a miracle if I last more than another minute. But then Sky wraps her hand around the base of my cock and pulls some X-rated movie shit. She changes the angle and takes me deep, over and over again. I knot my fingers in her hair, trying to slow her down, trying to let her drag it out, but even gagging doesn't stop her from continuing.

It's maddening.

"Sky!" I moan. "Easy, slow."

But she only slows a little, not nearly enough. I pant, trying to regain control, but when her eyes meet mine and she moans while taking me as deep as she can, I know I'm in fucking trouble. Her cheeks hollowed, her messy hair, red face and demanding eyes.

She sucks me hard, and I hiss.

"Fuck, I'm close."

But she doesn't draw back, she keeps going, over and over, and holy shit. I come, harder than I have in years. My eyes roll back, and I pull her hair as I thrust into her mouth hard. She makes a muffled sound, but I twitch again as her tongue drags over my sensitive skin.

Sky pops off me and swallows twice before wiping just under her bottom lip with her thumb. Her eyes drag over my body, and she pulls her knees up. "Was that okay? Did I-"

I crush her doubts under my mouth, kissing her hungrily. She moans and kisses me back, welcoming me on top of her as I make the absolute most of this moment. When I finally draw back to put myself away, I see fear in her eyes again.

"That was ... amazing, Sky," I assure.

She watches me redo my pants and adjusts herself quickly. “So ... I guess I’ll see you ...”

“Are you kicking me out?”

“Aren’t you going?” She demands. “You got to come, so now you go.”

“Just for that, I’m demanding a movie, so I don’t feel cheap.” I flick her off.

She puts something on, but I’m fuming. Okay, fine, I was that asshole who banged women and left, but I’m not just going to dip after Sky gives her first blowjob. No way. There’s a level of asshole I won’t stoop to, and when she’s involved, I feel like I need to do better ... be better. I want to be a guy who could actually deserve her instead of just skating by.

Which is fucking terrifying.

Chapter 14

Sky

In the middle of the movie, I glance at Ashton again. We're not even cuddling. I'm wrapped around a pillow, and he's leaning on a dragon plush. I clear my throat. "How long are you staying-"

"At least until the end of the movie unless you want to kick me out," he huffs, pissy.

"You shouldn't have an attitude after getting a blowjob." I'm getting more frustrated the longer he's quiet.

We just pushed so many of my limits, and I'm okay with it, I am, but this after just sucks. I don't know what changed, but I don't like it. Maybe it's better that we're pissy, it will keep me from actually getting attached to him, right?

Because this is not allowed to be the best night of summer so far. Bonnie's supposed to claim that on the regular.

"It was a great blowjob," Ash says, finally looking at me.

"So, what's the fucking problem?" I demand.

"You really thought I would just leave right after?"

"We're not a couple, and girls say you come and go. Literally. Why am I any different?"

He takes a moment and pinches the bridge of his nose. "I like you, Sky. I don't want to make you feel like shit."

I don't want to say anything to that. Because anything I can say will sound either super shitty and mean or it will fuck

my own marbles. I could tell him it wouldn't be a first for him to make me feel like shit. I could say that I like him, too, or that I'm sorry for assuming, but none of it feels useful.

I grab our bowls instead. "Need anything from the kitchen?"

"Yeah." He sits up.

I wait for him to fill me in, but he tugs me by the hem of my shirt and kisses me softly. He releases me just as easily. "Seconds of that, please."

My blush doesn't fade until I grab us some water. We clearly need it. We just need to cool down. That's all it is. I offer him a water bottle, but he catches my hand with his. "And what I asked for?"

Hesitantly, I lean forward and kiss him. I sit closer, and we drink water while watching the movie. I should be watching the movie anyway, but I can't seem to focus on it. Not with Ash right next to me.

I feel like I should be touching him, we should be holding hands, cuddling, talking, something, but nothing comes to mind, and everything feels wrong. But it doesn't stop me from overthinking it or wishing I could read his mind for the entirety of the movie.

He stands and stretches at the end. "I should probably get home before your brother or dad gets here."

"Yeah." I nod, not bothering to say that Dad wouldn't even notice.

"Walk me out?"

We find his shirt, and I lead him to the door. Before I open it, Ash lifts my chin. "I had a good time, Sky. Maybe next time, you'll actually want to cuddle after."

"Maybe next time, you'll take the initiative," I argue.

“It’s not like you were waving a neon sign asking for attention. Your ‘fuck off face’ is pretty convincing, though.” He rubs his thumb over my bottom lip. “I can’t read your mind. If you want something, you have to tell me.”

“Finally found one of your limits,” I say, avoiding the conversation.

Ash just watches me another moment before pecking my lips and heading out.

I force myself to bed and have the most useless sleep a person can get, filled with dreams I don’t want after plenty of tossing and turning. Ash sends me a text asking if I have plans for Friday night since he has a boxing match that he’d like me to photograph.

I agree, then text Bonnie, asking what she’s up to. I need a distraction from Ash. Unfortunately, my bestie is working until three. So, instead, I go on the bug hunt again. I take some photos, especially when I spot a rattler.

They’re a rarity since they blend in so well. Once its tail starts going, I take the necessary steps back, even though I feel like I get it. I wish I had something that would get people to back up as quickly as the snake does. “I get it. Thanks for the warning. Keep up the pest control.”

I continue, spotting a possum in the branches and smiling. The sunshine through the leaves turns them emerald and makes me feel like I’m in some enchanted forest. All the life around here. If I look hard enough, I can see a million little worlds that don’t give a shit about me.

Being insignificant to other creatures and people makes me breathe easier. All my problems seem smaller in comparison. Ants trying to survive and get food back to their colony to ensure that babies can grow and eat and continue building a whole maze of a home is so much more important than my petty issues.

I see a doe through the trees and snap a photo of her when she raises her head. She continues chewing grass while trying to decide if I'm a threat or not. When she keeps eating, I feel my heart warm.

See? I say to myself. *I don't need Ash to have fun. I don't need Ash at all.* As long as I remind myself of that, I won't get confused. Wanting him hurts my self-esteem but needing him will be total devastation. So, I just *won't* need him.

And that's how I survive the next two days until Bonnie can finally come over for a sleepover. She laments over a new fling who's no good in bed while we paint each other's nails, then we watch a movie we've dedicated to each other until she nudges me.

"Something has to be new in your life, girl. I refuse to accept that you're just home alone all the time."

"Well..." I search my mind for an interesting event, but nothing comes close to the steamy encounter Ash and I had recently. "I've been seeing some really cool wildlife lately. Look at these photos!" I move through the camera and am careful to avoid the photos of Ash. I show her the different bugs, the possum, the deer, but she barely looks at them. "Don't give me that look."

"What look, the one that says you need to get a life?"

"I do have a life. I have my blog. Which, I might add, has gained a twenty-percent increase in traffic."

"Good for you. It still doesn't change the fact that your life needs a little color."

Oh, best friend. If only you knew how colorful my life is.

"Speaking of having a life, is your brother really still working doubles?" Bonnie asks.

“I don’t know why you keep asking that question when you know the answer. Family game night will never recover,” I say sarcastically. The silence stretches, and I shrug. “It is what it is, Bonbon. Chase works. Dad ... is still recovering.”

“It’s been two years,” she grumbles. “He’s supposed to be the adult about it.”

“Let’s just ... watch the movie,” I suggest.

But when we get set up on my bed, she looks out my window and whistles. “Ashton Warren is an absolute asshole, but what a view.”

I peek out the window and see him working out. He sits up and rubs his face with a towel. I shove Bonnie before he can spot us, and she giggles. “You know I’m just teasing. He’s a world-class, heavyweight dick.”

“Yeah,” I murmur. I hate keeping this from her. I hate being unable to share this because she’d fly off the handle and stage a whole intervention.

“I mean it. He’s going to have to deal with so many rounds of reincarnation just to make up for the shit he’s done in this lifetime.” She rolls her eyes. “I feel bad for whoever he ends up with.”

“Maybe he just needs a slap in the face to realize he has to change.” I shrug.

Bonnie stares at me for a long time, then shakes her head slowly while her eyes stay on me. “Either you’re too forgiving, or you haven’t shaken your crush, and I don’t know which one is worse.”

“Bon,” I start.

“No. No. Seriously, I would disown you if you ever ended up like one of his flings. Like, I love you, but we have first-hand experience knowing what a dick he and his brother are. Not just *a* dick. They’re a bag of dicks. Moldy dicks.”

“Eew,” I laugh.

She points at me. “Exactly. Don’t make me slap some sense into you.”

We go back to watching a movie, then head to the pool. We have a pretty easy night, and she darts away in the morning, kissing my cheek and saying she loves me.

Leaving me to consider her comments all by myself. I linger on the porch, assembling my thoughts. Playing with Ash was bad from the start, but realizing it could cost me Bonnie is ... hard. Maybe I should just put an end to it entirely.

A shadow crosses my vision, making me glance up. Peter takes a seat next to me like he just belongs there. I scoot further away. “What the hell do you want, Peter? I didn’t invite you over.”

“I was passing by and saw you sitting here. You looked ... scared.”

“Why do you care?” I bite out. “You love making my life a living hell. You should be happy. Why aren’t you?”

“I mean, yeah. It’s fun to get you pissy, but I noticed Chase isn’t really here, and your dad’s away a lot ... are you ... good?”

My eyes flick towards him. There’s no way both brothers would be nice to me in one summer. Peter snorts. “Don’t stare at me like I got a brain transplant. I’m trying to be decent. Don’t make it hard.”

“Did you lose a bet?”

“I’m just trying to be nice, Sky. Not everything comes with an ulterior motive.”

“After the crap you pulled two years ago, I don’t believe that one bit. I don’t need your concern, either.”

“Oh, fuck this and fuck you,” he hisses.

He storms away, grumbling about how ungrateful I am, but I just don't know how to process this shit. He's been nothing but a dick to me for years; why would he suddenly change? Why would his brother?

I fly up from the seat, my heart pounding in my chest.

Unless they have some kind of bet.

Another bet.

I consider that for a moment. I've seen plenty of nineties movies. Did they plan to up the ante from what they did two years ago? Did they bet to see who could nail me first? Am I just a pawn? Has anything really changed?

There's no way I mistook the sincerity on Ash's face when he apologized. No way would he hurt me again after saying sorry. Peter might be having an epiphany, right? Standing up to him might've been better than I thought.

I hope.

I hate that I can't even talk to anyone about this because Bonnie is determined to hate both of these guys forever and doesn't want to hear anything about them. My brother would knock Ash out for even kissing me, let alone anything else.

Who else do I have?

I'm feeling suspiciously jealous of ants and their giant families right now.

Chase gets home as I'm getting ready to go to Ash's match. He stops in my doorway and leans against the frame. "Going somewhere?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Out," I reply simply, gesturing for him to move.

"Not until you tell me where you're off to wearing a pair of jeans that actually fit." He points at me. "Do you have a

date or something?”

It’s on my lips to lie about the date, but he’ll just keep asking questions, and I’m no good at lying, anyway. I pull myself to full height, brace myself for his outburst, then mutter, “I’m going to Ashton’s boxing tournament.”

“The fuck you are!”

Yup. There it is.

“Over my fucking dead body.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Chase. It’s only business. Ash hired me to photograph him for his boxing profile.” It’s a pro-bono hire, so it’s not a total lie.

“Why the hell didn’t he hire someone else? Why you?”

“Why not me?” I fire back. “You told me how talented I was. Maybe he thinks so, too.”

“I don’t give a shit what he thinks. You shouldn’t either. Not after what he and Peter did to you.” He pounds his fist. “I’m still ready to tear their asses off for making you cry.”

Chase has a twenty-pound weight advantage on Peter, but he’s no match for Ash, especially now. I don’t want him getting into a fight over me, either.

“Look, that night was a shit show, but I’m ready to move past it. Like I told you, this is business. I’m only going to see how well he can take a professional punch.”

My brother shakes his head, but his expression simmers. “For your sake, I’ll let it go. For now.”

“Thank you.” Relieved, I throw my arms around him.

He tightens his arms around me. “Can I get in on the match? I’d give anything to see him get knocked out tonight.”

“Sure. A ride would be nice.” I meet his gaze, trying to be chill and not give anything away. “But none of your shit music.”

“Just when I think we’re going to have the wholesome brother-sister relationship.” He pretends to sniff. “Also, you went halfway with the change-up. Would it kill you to dress in shirts that fit you?”

He goes to get ready, and I change into a shirt that is my size just to make my brother eat his words. Not because I want Ash’s attention. He doesn’t even need to know I’m there other than showing him the photos later.

Which is what I swear I’m going to commit to until we get there, and it starts. I take pictures and promise myself everything is fine. Ash takes a punch, and I grab my jeans. A part of me wants to trip the other dude for fucking up Ash’s face because I like kissing it, but that’s stupid.

I’m stupid. I know better. So, I take another picture.

Ash pulls himself up, and I watch his feet work, try to see the patterns between the two. They go back and forth, and I notice that the opponent keeps leaving his left open to attack. It makes sense since Ash is using his right hand every time.

Doesn’t he remember when we were kids, and he’d surprise Chase with the left hook? I look at my brother, and he shakes his head. He keeps commenting with the crowd.

The first round gets called and I sneak past Chase and go over to Ash’s corner, where his coach is already drilling the heck out of him.

“The left is open! Strike with your left, Ash. Don’t make that mistake again, you hear me?”

“Heard, Frank.” Ash glances over and sees me. He comes over at once, throwing his arms over the ropes and smiling wearily. “Hey, bumble bee.”

The bell sounds for the next round and I snap a photo of him, then I find my seat. Within minutes, I watch Ash drop the guy with his left fist. He throws his hands up, and I snap

another shot as the crowd roars around us. Chase pats my shoulder. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Are you kidding me? The match is barely over.”

“I’ve seen enough.” He points to my camera. “I’m sure you have, too.”

“Sky!” Ash shouts from the outskirts of the ring. Frank keeps dabbing his bloody face with cotton, but Ash’s eyes are on me.

“Why the fuck is he calling you?” Chase’s arm comes down around me like a leash. “We’re going *now*. I got my taste of bloodshed.”

I give Ash a fleeting look, a silent ‘good job’ and obediently go home with my brother. It’s better this way. No temptation to touch, to kiss, to reveal a damn thing. We’re not a couple. I don’t need him. So why can’t I help but think about playing nurse?

Chapter 15

Ashton

“Good job, son.” My dad says when he walks in to see me icing my face. “I heard you got a K.O.”

“I did.” I’m still trying to process “good job” coming from his mouth as he looks through mail.

“I still don’t understand how this will make you successful in life, but what the heck.”

I swallow a snappy reply.

“You dropped out of college after only a year,” he grumbles. “Do you know how much money and time you wasted when you could have been learning the business?”

“I get it. You’re disappointed. Thank you for the daily reminder,” I grit out.

“Don’t get cheeky with me—”

“Dan, give him a break, will you?” Mom asks softly, coming into the living room.

Dad breathes out a long, conceding sigh, then walks away. Mom kisses the top of my head. “He’s proud of you in his own way.”

“Sure,” I snort.

She pats my shoulder. I haven’t seen Peter today; he didn’t bother to show up for dinner and hasn’t made an appearance tonight, which is weird. He likes to be up my ass about this kind of shit.

He'd give me crap about having bruises at all, ask how little the loser was and generally be an annoying little brother until we end up wrestling or until we get a little too close to getting along. But instead: radio silence.

Are all my hard hours learning how to please people really crashing and burning this summer?

My phone vibrates, and I see an email from Sky, which pushes all worry about my brother out of my head. She's sent me a few photos. They're pretty good. But then she sends the one of me getting decked with a caption, 'my favorite'.

I roll my eyes, text her thank you and ask why she didn't hang around.

She just sends back her brother's name.

Yep. Say no more.

Chase and I parted ways on a sour note two years ago, but I can't help feeling like his anger runs deeper than the text message I sent. Sure, I was harsh, calling him a back-stabbing piece of shit who should burn in hell, but I can't imagine him being so hostile over that.

Especially when I sent an apology voice note after I left town that night.

The one he didn't reply to.

With a sigh, I push the memories to the back of my head and get through a much-needed shower, then do another round of ice on my face in my room. But I don't want to leave the conversation with Sky at that little exchange. I hadn't seen her since Monday, and she's not the most avid texter.

Annoying but true. There's plenty about her that bugs me. How she doesn't want to ask for things or tell me what she wants, the lack of texting, the way she can wind me up like a fucking top, blow me, and then retreat completely. But all of that just makes me want to know more about her and find out what makes her tick.

I rub the bruise she gave me Monday. It's barely a green mark now. But I want her to renew it, to dig her teeth into me again, moan for me again, cuddle me close, even the innocent stuff feels intense with her.

Fuck. If she's not going to take initiative, I'll lead by example. I'll do it even when my logic is screaming at me to blend in and fill the mold she's given me. I call her and see her sit up in bed to give me a face before picking up her phone. "Yes?"

"How was the fight?"

She shrugs. "Gave me good material for your Instagram page."

"Did you enjoy it?" I push.

"Maybe ..." She flops back, and I picture her rubbing her forehead. "I didn't like seeing you get punched the first time. I wanted to hop on his back and distract him."

"Like you used to do to me?"

"Yeah. Why did you have to be told to use your left? You loved using it against my brother."

"Forgot in the heat of the moment," I admit. "Sucks, but when my blood is boiling like that, the brain isn't always working."

"I can relate."

"Are you avoiding me, Sky?" I ask, dropping all pretenses.

"No."

"Are you upset about what happened?"

"No."

"Then what's with the rift?" I groan. "I can't do shit if you don't talk to me."

"We're not in a-"

“Shut. Up,” I hiss. When she doesn’t finish that same damn line, I relax a little. “Can you just answer one single question straight? Can you not push me away for one conversation?”

She’s silent for a long while, so long I’m not sure if she’s going to say anything at all. “I don’t want to like you, Ash. That makes everything harder. I have so much I’m trying not to feel on a regular basis that I don’t want to like you, feel anything at all, or think about the consequences of someone finding out what we’re doing.”

“Are you embarrassed to be seen with me?”

“No.” There’s no hesitation. “I’m afraid of how my brother and best friend will react. Like how you’re afraid of spiders.”

“Can I come over tomorrow?”

She exhales. “Yes, but later in the day. Chase is going out with friends around one.”

“Got it. See you then.” She doesn’t hang up like I expect. I smile. “Yes?”

“You fought really well tonight. You’re a step ahead of Rocky.”

She hangs up right after that, but I fall asleep with a huge smile on my face. Sky has no idea what she does to me, how she makes me feel, or how she inspires me to do better and be better. But I’m going to keep pushing until I can win over her brother, her bestie, and show her we could do more than run around behind closed doors. Even if it will only earn me her company for a few months until she heads to college.

The smell of fried bacon hits my nose as I bound down the stairs while yanking the T-shirt over my head. It's one of the things I've missed being away from my family all these years, home cooking. Granted, I won't get used to it. Dad gave me twelve months to get my shit together, and I intend to surpass that goal. Six months. That's *my* deadline.

I find Peter sitting around the dining table, already digging into breakfast. He looks up as I enter, throws his waffles down on the plate and shoots me a glare. "You're fucking things up again."

"Is this *still* about the girl next door?"

"I can't even be nice to her without her being suspicious and rude. What did you do?"

"How about you stop looking for a scapegoat, Pete? Why would she trust you when you haven't given her a reason to? If you keep picking at someone, it's bullying, not flirting. She probably thinks you're setting her up to be the butt of a joke." It's obvious after talking to Sky, after understanding how my teasing hurt her.

He complains about how impossible girls are and how unfair it is that no matter what he does, he can't get *even* Sky to look twice at him like she's the lowest level of girl. He'll learn one way or another.

Peter heads out after breakfast with one of his stoner friends, and I watch the clock tick until one-thirty. I head over to see my not-girlfriend, and she immediately sits me down on the couch, narrowing her eyes at my face.

"You look like crap," she mumbles.

"Sky-"

She holds up her finger and goes to the kitchen. I see her come back with an ice pack. I lean back. "Hell no. I already did the ice thing."

"Let me play nurse," she orders.

“Where’s the costume?” I challenge.

Sky narrows her blue eyes at me, then drops the ice a little too close to my dick. “Hey, watch out!” I screech.

I mock-glare at her curvy ass as she sails upstairs without a word. My mouth flies open a few minutes later when she comes downstairs in a terrible nurse’s costume. Not sexy at all. She’s wrapped up from shoulders to knee in a stiff white dress with some red hems.

“Not a word, you hear me?” she says sternly as I hold back my snicker.

I throw up my hands, and she sits beside me, holding up the ice. “I’m expecting a sponge bath after this,” I murmur.

“Expect disappointment. Give me your face.”

“Ask nicely.”

Instead, Sky climbs onto my lap and pushes the ice against my face. I flinch, and she softens a little. “Let me take care of you for twenty minutes, and I’ll talk to you.”

“Bribery?”

She just keeps staring at the ice pack. I slowly rub up her thighs, pushing the hem of the dress up with each climbing inch. “So talk.”

“I like reliable things. Math, sciences, reading, swimming, photography. Anything that has a formula I can rely on really.” Her hair falls over half her face. “I like watching the same shows and movies over and over. It makes me feel ... secure.”

“Okay.”

“You ... you aren’t reliable. People in general aren’t.”

“No, that’s the fun. They can always surprise you,” I say softly.

“They can ... leave or misunderstand or be plotting behind your back, just change for no reason.” She adjusts the ice again. “And, normally, if I’m confused about people or a person, I talk to Bonnie, and I can’t do that when it comes to ...”

“Me?” I guess.

She carefully meets my eyes. “I don’t know if what you’re saying is honest when you’ll do whatever you can to fit in. I don’t know if you’re just going to flip your switch back and not want me around. I don’t know shit, and I hate not knowing.”

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“There’s no ‘how to’ book I can read about people. There’s no way to just know, even after reading psychology articles dumbed down for people like me.” She takes a calming breath. “I feel lost.”

“I have a habit of telling the truth since I started boxing. I’d forget all my lies, and it would come out anyway, considering all the concussions,” I tease. Then I rub her back when she doesn’t acknowledge that. “You can ask me anything, Sky.”

Sky sits there for a while, processing.

“If something happens between us, you’ll know. It won’t be like last time.” I take her hand, moving the ice off my face. “I’m trying to be more ... myself.”

“Because you want to fuck me?”

“No.”

“So you don’t want to fuck me?”

“Sky,” I growl. “I don’t *just* want to fuck you. You told me no relationship shit, and I’m trying to hold onto that. I’m not going to manipulate you into sex.”

She takes a slow breath. “You’re not easy to trust.”

“Try actually talking to me instead of just getting stuck in that head of yours, no matter how pretty it is.”

“Suck up,” she says as she blushes.

I twirl her finger in my hair. “Aren’t you going to kiss my wounds better, nurse?”

Sky laughs, then kisses the corner of my eye, my nose when I point to it, my jaw, my shoulder, and when I point to my split lip, she hesitates. Her fingers brush through my hair, easing the tension I feel until her lips gently press to mine.

She sucks my bottom lip and threads her fingers through my hair again. It’s double the pleasure. I kiss her back, licking along the valley of her lips until she lets me in. Slowly, she melts into the kiss, stops thinking so damn much, and enjoys herself.

When I draw back, she hugs me, wrapping her arms around my head. “I don’t like you being all beaten up, Ash. Use your left more and read the other person’s footwork, okay?”

I cock my head curiously. “How’d you get so technical with your advice, anyway? Don’t tell me it’s from those boxing videos Chase and I watched back in the day.”

“Not really.” Her shoulder lifts with a gentle shrug. “Chase still watches boxing, and I join in sometimes. I think it’s his way of keeping in touch with you. He might hate your guts, but he still misses you.”

It makes my heart smile, and I acknowledge her comment with a nod. Probably not today or even tomorrow, but Chase and I will make amends.

“Anyway, just take my advice, k?”

I smirk. “I’m not useful to you with a dislocated finger and a bruised-up face?”

“Not when your fingers and face are your best features,” she huffs. “Plus, you’re a good boxer. If you would just focus a little more, you’d make pro. I’m positive.”

I chuckle and adjust her on my lap so she’s cuddled against me better. Then her words sink in. She just ... believes in me? That easily. No. I’m not pushing on that. Not yet. “Let’s put something on T.V. and relax today. You only have the greenlight for making out, no seduction.”

She rolls her eyes, but I see her relax a ton with that said. We watch some sitcom re-run, and she kisses across my jaw softly. “I like when you rub my legs.”

I do exactly that, savoring how soft she is against my palm. “Anything else?”

“I like it when you’re all cute, asking for kisses and respecting my boundaries,” she whispers against my neck. “And your cologne.”

“I’ll give you a sweatshirt next time, something to keep you warm when I’m not around,” I promise.

We stay curled up for a while, talking about nothing in particular. She gives me sass regularly, but anytime she gets up, I pucker and don’t let her go until she pays the toll with a kiss. Every time, a smile lights her face, and I finally feel like we’re getting somewhere.

Sucks for Peter, but I’m not going to miss my shot at my chance with Sky just because he fucked up while I was gone. Sky’s going to make her choice one way or the other, and I’m going to make sure I’ve at least put my best foot forward.

Chapter 16

Sky

The next morning, I enter the laundry room to find Chase at the mutual laundry basket, staring at the nurse's costume. I quickly throw it in the wash and grumble about needing my own laundry basket for at least the sixth time.

"I'm not asking. I don't want to know," Chase says.

"Don't you have work?" I mumble, dumping the rest of my clothes inside and then pressing the start button.

"Not on a Sunday. I'm all yours." He locks his arm around my neck and ruffles my hair. "Looks like you have to suffer."

"I'm wishing even more that I'd gotten that internship," I huff, shoving out of his grasp to fix my hair. "Now I'm stuck with you for the rest of the year. Who knew you'd be *twice* as annoying this summer?"

"I have to cram it all in now before you're off and doing amazing things," he shrugs, then pauses at the door, his expression simmering. "I know I ...I..."

"Oh, no." I hold up a finger. "No deep, soul-touching conversation. We don't do that here."

Chase rubs my shoulder, blinking away the emotion from his eyes. "Proud of you, kiddo."

"You too, giant." I shove him aside, then make my way down the hall. "Go make some poor girl question her life choices."

“For that, I’m staying home all day, just to see a day in the life of Sky Bennett.”

He sits on the couch and throws his arms over the back, giving me an expectant stare.

I smirk. “Let’s see how long before you survive.”

I pin some bugs I’ve collected, making sure to write their scientific name and pin that, too. After that, I get online and restart a series I’ve been watching – even though I haven’t seen the last episode. No matter how great or terrible a last episode is, I can’t stand watching them. It’s like closing a favorite book, one where you’ve fallen in love with the characters, falling into the story, and never wanting to leave. But when the last episode finishes, the only options are to re-watch or walk away, and I hate both.

Chase gets bored quickly, which is fine with me. It means I can keep living my life without my brother standing over my shoulder. I text Bonnie a few times, and she complains about a cleaning day at her place.

I still manage to catch her on the phone later when I’m relaxing by the pool. She turns on Facetime and makes a frustrated sound when she sees me. “I’m so jealous of you being poolside.”

“You’re not missing out on anything.”

“Says the girl with a pool.” She rolls her eyes. “Anyway, I remember you saying you had to go to one of Ashton’s matches. How was that? Please tell me he’s a bruised banana right now!”

“He’s definitely bruised,” I say, picking at my cover up. “I saw him take plenty of hits.”

“How was it? Delicious? Amazing? The perfect revenge? Take me to the next one!” she yells.

I hear a car door slam and get a text from Chase, saying he’s heading out. I sigh, and Bonnie’s face changes. “What?”

“Chase just went out.” I rub my feet together slowly, knowing what his abrupt departure means. “Dad must be home.”

“Do you want me to come over? Screw it. I’m on the way.”

“Bon, I’m okay.”

“And I’ll make sure you’re better. Just give me like an hour, and I’ll be there, if that,” she insists. “I deserve some fun, and you deserve some company.”

Company itself is currently falling over my fence. I stare at Ash, then shake my head quickly.

“Why are you shaking your head like that?” Bonnie asks.

“Sorry, thought I saw a cardinal.”

“See, you’re clearly in need of fun if you’re hallucinating birds. And I deserve some pool time. Win-win.”

Ash sets his towel down at my feet and rubs up my leg. I hold the phone steady, trying so hard not to give anything away. “An hour?”

“Or less, why?” She looks me over. “Do you plan on inviting someone else over? A boy, maybe?”

“No.” I roll my eyes.

“You should tell me if you’re seeing someone, Sky. I’d be happy for you. You should see someone! Give the male population a chance – other than the worms that try to be men,” she insists.

I kick at Ash and shake my head. “Who would that be, Bonbon?”

“The Warren brothers, obviously. Moldy dicks, remember?”

Ash quirks his thick brows at me, humor dancing in his eyes.

“Ugh, you need soda and wings A.S.A.P. I’m on my way. Love you!”

Bonnie hangs up, and I push at Ash again. He chuckles. “You said you liked it when I rubbed your legs.”

“You heard Bonnie. She’s coming over.”

“In an hour.” He motions to the pool. “You don’t want to swim with me?”

I hesitate. I know he wants me to be more open about things, but I don’t like being open. It’s not like I have giant walls up or anything. And Ash is so good at jumping fences, I bet he can climb walls, too.

“It’s a simple question, Sky.” He takes off his shirt and dives into the pool. He pops up, spits water at me and flashes that stupid boyish smile. “Yes or no.”

I slowly take off my cover-up and slide into the pool. The cool water laps at my skin as Ash lays on his back, floating. I watch him and swim in a wide circle around him, staying out of reach. He rolls over after my third lap and tries to hide his amusement.

“You look like a shark, Sky.”

“Are you here to swim or see me?”

“Both.” He stands and runs his hands through his hair.

“To try for a repeat of ... of Monday?”

“I still have a dislocated finger,” he reminds. “Is it a crime for me to like spending time with you?”

“Yes.”

He offers me his wrists. “Then slap on the cuffs.”

I walk to him and wrap my hands around his wrists. Even touching him like this makes me nervous. Ash just

stands there. I tighten my hold on him, then swallow and pull his arms around me.

“Hi,” he murmurs against my damp hair. “Miss me?”

“You’re entertaining.”

“A glowing review.” I feel his nose brush my temple and close my eyes.

“You can’t be here when Bonnie comes over. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” he sighs and lets me go. “I have another match on Wednesday. I’m inviting some friends from work to come, too. Maybe you’d like to go out with us after.”

“Ash,” I warn.

“Not as my girlfriend or anything. As my photographer.” But something is weighing on him, I can tell. “They’re good guys.”

“I thought we made an agreement. No one was going to know. That we’d keep everything just between us,” I remind.

He walks to me, standing above me, then raises his hand to stroke my cheek. He waits a moment before actually touching me. I close my eyes for a long moment, just enjoying the way he feels against me. Why is it so easy to let him touch me?

“I told you I’d take what I could get with you,” he whispers.

“And you’re pushing for more,” I say.

“Because I fucking like you, Sky. I like our time together. I like listening to your stories. I like joking around with you.” He takes an unsteady breath. “I like just being me around you.”

“Stop,” I whisper.

“Why is that so fucking hard for you to hear?”

I swallow, and when I open my eyes, I realize I'm leaning into his hand, that he's closer than I thought he'd be. I open my mouth, hoping words just appear, but they don't. I put my hand over his, turn and kiss his palm.

"I haven't done this shit before. I'm going to get stuff wrong. It's terrifying."

"It is or I am?"

"Both!" I complain.

"So making out with me is easier than talking to me right now?" He clarifies.

"I like kissing you. I stop thinking," I say.

"Then kiss me." He shrugs. "We're good at that."

So I do, I kiss him like I can pour every thought that won't make it to my mouth into him. I hug myself to him and welcome his arms around me. Ash leans down to wrap my legs around him, too, and carries me to the edge of the pool. The concrete against my back is rough and scrapes me as I rub myself against him. He feels so much better, warm and muscular, skin so soft and ... and it's so easy to lose myself in Ash.

His tongue gently strokes against mine, slow and perfect and ... ugh. How is it possible to hate him when he can kiss like this? When he's so determined to listen to me? To know me? I draw back slowly.

"I'm not in the middle of some bet you have with your brother, am I?" I ask.

Ash gapes at me. "Where the hell did *that* come from?"

"The answer, please."

"No," he scoffs. "No, Sky. I can't make bets about you because you're too damn unpredictable but why would I want to?"

"Sorry," I rub my forehead. "I'm paranoid."

Ash takes a slow breath, then kisses my neck while rubbing my thigh. “At least you asked, that’s progress, right? Coming out of your head a little for me.”

I nod but kiss him again. It’s easier. He’s right. I prefer kissing him. Kiss after kiss piles up, and his hands slide further up my thighs as I tighten my legs around him. I draw back, wanting to say something. I don’t know what, but Ash nips my bottom lip and pulls me back to him.

I groan and give in. He tastes too good. Feels too good. I manage to pull my mouth away. “Touch me, dumb ass.”

He chuckles and licks up my throat. “That wasn’t a nice way to ask.”

“I’m not a nice person.”

“Lies.” He bites my throat lightly, then cups my breast, fingers pushing under my top and circling my nipple until I grind against the hardness growing in his pants. “I like your sass.”

I drag his hand down my body as our eyes hold. He swallows. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I whisper against his lips. “Touch me.”

Ash groans and pushes his fingers into my bottoms, rubbing my clit slowly as I moan and cling tighter to him. “Do you like my bruises better than ...” I gasp against his throat. “Than from fighting?”

“Fuck, yes,” he pants. “Be as rough as you want with me. I can handle it.”

Two of his fingers push inside me and curl against that perfect spot in my pussy. I groan and bury my head in his throat. “Ash.”

“This what you want?” He growls in my ear before licking across my skin. “Or would you rather have my tongue here.” He flicks his thumb over my clit.

My eyes flutter shut, and I nod. "I would."

"Next time," he groans, thrusting his fingers in again as pleasure sparks across my nerves, threatening to drag me down. "I like making you moan."

"Fuck." I kiss him again, hungry and demanding, and ooh, he just feels so fucking good.

Panting, I roll my hips against his hand and take his fingers deeper, over and over again. His mouth across my neck, over my shoulder, and the soft brush of his fingers down my back feels twice as intense while he's fingering me.

"I'm close," I whimper. "Please."

"You want to come?"

"Yes!" I yell.

Ash groans and picks up the pace. My eyes roll back, and I tighten my hold on him. Just as I feel my body tighten and ecstasy sweeps through me like a tidal wave, I dig my teeth into his neck, biting hard to muffle the moan that drags from deep inside me.

He rubs over my clit again, making me jump, and he chuckles. "I think I need a repeat of that."

"I'm supposed to ..." I can't collect my thoughts. I laugh softly and slide my arms around his neck, kissing across his jaw. "You're good at that."

He kisses me again. "Wednesday, at least come to the match?"

"Okay," I agree.

"Early, so I can get a kiss for luck." He kisses the tip of my nose. "If you can."

"You're being all soft and sweet."

He hugs me tightly. "How else am I ever going to deserve you?"

We stay in silence for a while. I don't know what to say to that, and I don't think he *meant* to say it. Not really. I shiver and feel the hair on the back of my neck prickle. My stomach is dragged down by some sinking, gut-twisting thing.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” My conscience sounds a lot like Bonnie. “*This* is what you do when I'm not around?”

Ash jerks back from me, and I turn to see my best friend is actually here.

Or ex best friend. Oh, fuck.

Chapter 17

Ashton

This is ‘abort mission’ level bad. Bonnie hates me. She hates me more than Sky ever did because she had to make up for Sky’s softness, when she was soft. Sky scrambles out of the pool. “Bonnie, I-”

“You lied to me.”

“I never lied!” Sky insists.

“Well, you certainly didn’t tell the truth!” she yells. “After what that asshole did to you, how can you even hang around him like this?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Sure, I’d been unintentionally mean to Sky years ago, but I doubt a few misguided pranks warrant this venom coming from Bonnie’s mouth.

“Bon, let me explain. Let’s just talk about it, okay? Please.”

Bonnie takes a deep breath and pushes her fingers to her temple. “I can’t right now. I need to cool off, or I’m going to say something I’ll regret.”

“Don’t leave,” Sky begs. “I can’t lose you.”

That hits me like an axe. Sky Bennett saying that she can’t lose someone – as if she needs *anyone*? And that someone happens to be Bonnie, who’s looking at me like she’d kill me with some of the food in the bag she’s carrying and only worry about how to dispose of my body.

“The bargain bin dildo leaves, or I do,” Bonnie says.

Sky slowly turns to me. Her eyes are watery, and I want to believe those tears are for me, but I know better. I snap my teeth together and pull myself out of the pool. This is Sky’s chance to show me she feels something between us. The three of us can talk this out. I know we can.

“Please, Ash?” Sky asks softly, catching the fierce determination on my face. “Just go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“I mean in total, not just tonight,” Bonnie says darkly. “I love you, but right now, I’m running really low on respect for you.”

Tears spill over Sky’s cheek, and she takes a step back when I reach out to touch her. “I’ll keep working for you.”

She gives me that little bit, then takes Bonnie’s hand and practically drags her inside. I’m left there, soft as can be, confused and angry as fuck. We got around an argument and a potential argument. We made out, I finger fucked her in the pool, and now she’s tossing me to the side like *I’m* the asshole? Who’s doing the coming and leaving now?

And who’s getting rejected for trying to be better?

I grit my teeth, grab my towel, and walk back to the house. I don’t care if my family sees me. I don’t care if my dad complains about water spots on the floor. I need to get to my punching bag. Now.

Peter stops me in the hallway to my room. “Were you seriously in their pool again?”

“Yeah. So what?”

“Did anyone see you?” Peter demands.

“I’m not in the mood.” I shove him to the side.

“Dick.”

“Fucker,” I growl back, then slam my door as I get to my room.

I finish toweling off, toss my trunks into the laundry, then drag on pants. I take my frustration out on the punching bag after putting in headphones, but it doesn't feel any better. I throw myself into bed, then turn up my 'screaming nonsense' as my mother calls it, until it threatens to blow out my eardrum.

There's no reason for me to be this pissed. It's been, what, two weeks? Maybe? That's nothing. Girls and I have parted in less time. I'm all about connection, after all. If I don't feel it, I don't force it. And I'm not one to drag things out. Hooking up is fine as long as everyone has the right expectations, but Sky went and fucked up my expectations.

I thought we were going to get farther. Not necessarily sexually. But I want to talk to her. I want to understand this shit. I feel the intensity, the potential between us. I want to compromise. I want to be good for her. I ... it doesn't fucking matter what I want apparently because Sky's making her choice over there without thinking of what she wants, only what she needs.

And she *loves* not needing me.

After another five minutes, I text her not to worry about coming Wednesday. I think about telling her I don't need her kind of luck, but I manage to delete that message instead of sending it.

"Fuck!" I yell into my pillow.

I toss my headphones, then sit up to see if Sky has her window open. She does. And clearly doesn't notice. Because Bonnie's pacing and pissed and ... crying? Sky gets up and hugs her tightly, squeezing her. I don't know what they're talking about, but if they're hugging, that means I'm not in the doghouse, I'm at the fucking pound.

What the hell is going on? Am I missing something?

Sky brushes across Bonnie's cheek, then takes a very obvious deep breath. She points my way without looking, and

I duck. I'm not going to be caught being interested. But even though I'm pissed, hurt, and everything in between, I'd kill to be a fly on that wall, learning exactly what they're fucking talking about.

Since that's not possible, I go for a run, work out until I can barely function, then pass out. Work and working out keep me busy until Wednesday. I ask for tomorrow off, offering to work Saturday instead.

Standing in front of my dad's desk in the hot, barely fanned-off trailer, Dad looks me over and shakes his head. "No fucking way."

I gape. "What?"

"This job comes first, not your hobby."

"It's not a hobby, Dad. I can't make it back to the league if I don't dedicate myself to—"

You're lucky I don't have you working six days a week. You need to learn the value of dedication to *this job*. Of putting your nose to the grindstone and keeping it there. I don't care how the fight goes; you're coming in tomorrow."

When I continue to stare, he shoos me out of the office. I take a slow breath, then another and another. Tyler pulls me to the side and offers me a cigarette, then a blunt. I reject both. I have to be clean to fight.

"Sorry, man. The boss runs a tight ship, and he doesn't let shit slide. Me and the guys are still going to come to support you. Ken and Nate are excited."

"I'm probably going to fight like shit."

"Well, you look like shit, but either way, we get some violence and beer. What could be better?"

I give him a high five, and we slug through work. I stand in the locker room later in the day, staring at myself in the mirror. My silky shorts nearly brush my knees as I curl my

taped hands into fists. I kind of want to take out this mirror, say fuck this fight, and go find some back ally where there are no rules.

Closing my eyes, I rest my forehead against the cool glass and try to remember what I need for the fight, nothing else. I hit my toe against the floor. Focus on the footwork, use my left if their guard is down. Duck and play defense as needed instead of just going all out. Use my anger instead of letting it use me.

“Use my anger. Don’t let it use me,” I repeat out loud.

I hear a camera click and look over, seeing Sky. Her hair is tamed in a braid or mostly tamed, but there are plenty of locks escaping. She looks away from me and glances at the photo.

“I told you not to come,” I growl, despite my heart dancing in my chest.

Her head lifts, and I see the remorse in her eyes. I harden my resolve. “I wanted to talk to you,” she mutters.

“Doesn’t that break the agreement you made with your best friend?” I push off the mirror and grab my gloves. “I don’t have time to talk.”

“I talked to Bonnie.”

“I’m sure you did. Probably didn’t drag her into your house to fuck her.” The sound of the Velcro tearing apart calms me a fraction, but just a fraction. “I get it. We’re done. You want to finish the job. Cool. Doesn’t mean we’re going to spend time together, hang out, whatever.”

“Now you’re assuming?” She scoffs.

“I’m saying what’s obvious, something you *never* do.” I turn around as I stuff my hand in the glove. She takes another picture but doesn’t answer. I nod. “It was my mistake thinking you wanted more than a dick to practice with.”

“I never said that was what I wanted!” she yells at me.

“Well, what do you want, Sky? You don’t want a relationship, you don’t want more friends, you don’t want just sex. You need to figure that shit out before you start involving other people.” I hit the locker next to her, and she gasps, nearly dropping her camera. I take a slow breath as I watch her lips tremble. “Because you’re not the only one that’s fucking hurt right now.”

“Ash.”

“Don’t fucking start with me. When you figure out what you want, call me. Until then, do what Bonnie tells you to do, follow along, play the submissive role like you do with everyone *but* me.”

I storm away from her, walk into the ring, and get my ass handed to me. It’s a shit performance on my part and definitely not something I can afford. But I last all the rounds, and he’s the top guy in this area and weight class.

He offers me his glove, and I give him a fist bump. “Not bad, kid. Just get your head back in the game.”

“Easier said than done,” I pant.

He nods, and Coach Frank hands me my ass a second time, ordering more gym time, more dedication, more focus, more of everything that I can possibly give. But I have a feeling it won’t be enough.

I see Tyler, Kenney and Nate waiting for me. They offer to take me out drinking, but considering we have work tomorrow, and I already feel like shit, and I can taste my own blood, I’m not in the mood to drink, party, or anything else.

“Raincheck for Friday, when I’m in one whole piece?” I offer.

They look at one another, and I expect to be called a killjoy, a letdown, some fucker with a stick up his ass for

saying no, but Tyler agrees. “Honestly, sounds way better than getting drunk on a Wednesday.”

“Yeah, Dara’s got ribs ready.” Kenny rubs his beer belly. “If anything, we should go get fed. She always cooks for an army.”

I glance over and see Sky with Bonnie. Bonnie’s got her arm around her, and they walk away together. She’s damn good at that walking away shit. So I nod. “Sounds better than getting drunk.”

“Hell, yeah!” Jack bounces on his toes.

“But you gotta shower, man.” Kenny points at me. “Dara will kill me if I let you in the house smelling like that.”

We laugh, and I get through a shower before joining them and heading over for some much-needed positive time with the guys. We talk shit about work, Dara encourages us to play poker and shamelessly helps Kenny.

They’re a great couple. He watches her with absolute adoration, and she makes sure to be involved with all of us, just a part of the group, having fun and being a hell of a host. By the time I make myself leave, I feel better.

Until I get home, ignore my father yelling, and head upstairs. A huge part of me wants to text Sky for any reason. To apologize for the locker room talk. To ask about the photos, anything.

But I grip my phone tighter in my hand, set my alarm, and put myself in bed. I didn’t say anything that’s not true. And Sky is going to have to grow up sometime, have to open up. She has to give an inch if she wants to be in any kind of relationship, no matter how flimsy.

I’m not going to push or fight for our potential if she won’t.

Chapter 18

Sky

Talking sucks. I'm more convinced of that than ever. I laid everything out for Bonnie. I didn't have a choice. It was either come clean, absolutely and completely clean, or lose her. So now she knows everything. Me forgiving him. Ash and I spending time together. Ash being gentle and trying to fix everything. Ash not being at all what his reputation said he was.

Bonnie comes back into my room wearing my p.j.s and sits with me in bed, wrapping her arm around me. "You know, I've always said you had a huge heart, and you prove it all the time. I still can't believe you forgave Ash for what he did."

I lean into her embrace, my eyes coasting through my window and into Ash's room. "He apologized. I saw the honesty on his face, so... yeah, I forgave him."

"You're the bigger person, sweetie," she replies. "It's been two years, but I still can't get over the horror I saw on your face that night. Ash pulled many awful pranks back then, but that... it was cruel. Especially when he knew you had a crush on him."

"Maybe Peter put him up to it," I suggest. "He probably didn't know there would be others around."

Bonnie eases me away, staring down at me with disbelief. "Wait a minute. You didn't ask him why he did it?"

"Why would I? It's already past, Bon. I just wanted to move on. He apologized, and that was good enough. I made

peace with what happened, and there's no use regurgitating that awful night."

"But—"

"Bon, please. Let's talk about something else."

She sighs. "Fine. For the record, I felt such satisfaction when he got his ass whooped tonight. He shouldn't have said what he did."

And I'm kicking myself for telling her about our little fight before the match. "He wasn't ... he wasn't wrong, though," I admit. "It shouldn't even matter! We've been seeing each other for two weeks. That's nothing. And you're worth it."

"And you know where I stand." She hugs me and rests her chin on my shoulder. "I'm sorry for being a massive, dinosaur-sized bitch. A bitch-osaurus-rex."

I laugh once and lean my head on hers.

"Ultimatums don't belong in friendships. I just wish you would have told me from the start. I mean, I felt righteously angry on your behalf. He was such a douche, and his brother, well. Peter's just trying to one-up his brother in the bullying department." She breathes out a hefty sigh. "But if you've forgiven him, I have no choice but to follow your lead, I guess. Especially since you like him enough to let him do the stuff you told me about..."

"I don't know what I want," I whisper. "You understand why I forgave him, but Chase ... he's a higher hurdle. And I don't *need* Ash to be happy. I don't. I *need* to that internship. I *need* to get into that photography club in January. There's plenty I need."

"We already had this talk. If you want him, that's enough."

"And go through hell for what? For Chase to hate me? For him to fight Ashton? For Peter to make our lives an even

bigger hell? To go through twice this pain when I leave because there's no way I'd stay for him. No fucking way. Absolutely none."

She lets me go and flicks my forehead. "That's the first stupid thing you've said."

"What?" I demand, rubbing the same painful spot.

"Did he ask you to stay for him? Did he even hint at it?"

"No, because I made it clear over and over again that we're not ... we *weren't* in a relationship."

"Okay, super simple here. Do you want to be friends with him?"

"No!" I shout, then shake my head. "No. I couldn't stand seeing him seeing other girls. It would drive me fucking insane."

"Do you want to keep being bang-buddies? If you're not exclusive, he can see other people."

I swallow that bitter jealousy.

"Then I think it's pretty obvious what you *want*. You only get one life."

"But--"

"You've chosen to study bugs, even though it's super weird and super limited field. Because you want to – I might add. You decided to grow up and ensure your dad pays the bills on time and that everything is taken care of – because you want to. Forget what I think about him. Forget Chase. Why can't you choose him because you want him, too?"

I suck my bottom lip and sigh.

She tucks my hair behind my ear. "The longer you wait to talk to him about this, the harder it will be."

"I hate talking."

“Sucks, that’s life; embrace it.”

I try to smother myself with a pillow but enjoy another sleepover with Bonnie. We watch shows, braid each other’s hair, do face masks, give each other foot massages, and just relax.

But when morning comes, she’s gone, and I’m left alone again.

Which means I make a beeline out of my house after feeding Dracula. Unfortunately, by the time I get to the park, it’s pouring. Groaning, I turn around and go home. I’m not stupid enough to be out on my own in a storm. I just needed time in nature. I just needed to spend time alone doing what I love. Why is that so fucking hard?!

I park, grab my steering wheel, and scream. When it’s not enough to calm what I’m feeling, I scream again.

After letting everything out about Ash, all my other bottled feelings opened up, demanding to be talked about, given attention, to choke me. I punch the steering wheel, hear a dull honk, but feel pain radiate up my wrist and arm.

I’m sure that’s a *great* sign. Fantastic.

I shake my hand out and slam my car door, cursing at my knuckles, the car, the rain, and everything else I can think of. I even curse at my house, ready to toss myself to the ground and throw a full-on temper tantrum.

Someone suddenly grabs my shoulders, making me shriek with surprise. I’m turned around to meet Ash’s intense stare. The chaos inside me comes to a stop. He’s breathless, dirty, and looking me over to figure out what’s wrong.

I shake out my hand again, feeling stupider with every passing second. Ash stands there a long moment before he says a word. “Can I touch your hand?”

“Why do you want to? I’m just some confused little girl.”

“Because you’re hurt, and I’m trying not to be a dick,” he says sharply.

I offer him my hurt hand, and he looks at my finger. “Dislocated. What did you do?”

“Punched my steering wheel.”

“This is going to hurt. Take a deep breath.”

I do what he says, and he jerks it back into place. A whine leaves my lips, and I jerk my hand back as I try to hide my tears. Ash reaches out for me. My stubbornness tempts me to turn and run, but I close the distance between us. Our bodies collide with a wet smack. I breathe into his warm neck, catching his faint scent that’s still unwashed by the rain.

Ash soon breaks our embrace, taking a slow breath. “I’m sorry, by the way ... I shouldn’t have lashed out like I did.”

I nod. “I wanted to tell you, I talked to Bonnie and explained that I liked you.”

“Past tense?”

“Maybe.” I look to the side and then hug myself. “How is the rain this fucking cold in summer?”

Ash chuckles, then jerks his head toward the empty garage. “Is it safe to assume your folks aren’t around?”

“Not for a few hours,” I reply.

Again, he gestures with his head, and I allow him to guide me to the front door. He follows me up to my room without question, and I grab a towel, tossing it at him before I grab clothes and change in my closet.

I come out in a huge T-shirt and sweatpants that are definitely too long. Ash scrubs the towel over his head, then tosses it in the clothes pile. He motions for me, but I divert to Dracula, watching him stalk one of the crickets I gave him.

“If I did like you ... would that matter now?” I ask, rubbing my arms. “If I said that I still wanted to go slow, still keep it from our families, would you yell at me again?”

His eyes are half-closed, making it hard to read him. “Yes and no, in that order.”

“Hypothetically ... what would ...” I shake my head once and take a shaking breath. “How would you react?”

“I’d ask why you want to keep this up,” he murmurs.

“Because, hypothetically, if I like you for more than the sex stuff, I don’t want to lose it, even if we only have until January and even if my brother hates you, and I hate your brother. And hypothetically, I want to meet your work friends and spend time with you and don’t want to picture you with other people. Hypothetically ... I’d want to be exclusive and secret-ish.”

“Then I’d say that would make you my girlfriend, even if I can’t call you that around other people.”

Dracula attacks the cricket, and my feelings get all jumbled in my throat. “And that would mean telling you things, not just ... making out when I don’t want to talk?”

“I think that’s a given for us to move forward in any direction, Sky.” I hear my bed creak as he adjusts. “Can you look at me for this conversation?”

No. No is the first thing that comes to mind. Dracula feels safer to watch. But I have to push through this. I’m not going to have Bonnie to beat sense into me or walk me through how to fight my battles when I get to college, and it’s not fair for me to rely on anyone for that. The last two days she and I spent together were all about her trying to coach me through this problem, and she shouldn’t have to. We should be able to talk about her and fun things and not just my issues.

Slowly, I turn to face Ash. He’s braced himself on his elbows, still watching me carefully, like I’m the dangerous one

here. I don't like that mistrust in his eyes. But I've earned it. I know I have.

“What do we need to do – both of us – so you can actually talk to me about real shit? How can we fix the stuff that isn't working between us?”

My heart tries to lodge itself in my throat to keep me quiet. God, how can I not like him when he says things like that? Things that are so obviously not a ploy to get into my pants or hiding an ulterior motive?

I rub at my nose. “Everything wants to come out right now, but I don't want to be a whiny brat. I have a good life, and I feel like I shouldn't be bothered by stupid shit that some people would love.”

“Hypothetically – if we were talking about us, would you actually work for our relationship?”

“Yes.”

He motions me forward with a finger, and I cross the room without thinking about the steps. Instead, I climb on top of him and wrap my arms around his neck. Ash freezes for a moment, then his arms wrap around me. He's still damp, but I don't care. I squeeze him and take a deep breath of his cologne, closing my eyes and letting myself enjoy how he feels against me, around me. Familiar, good, mine.

“I missed you,” he breathes into my neck. “Can we cut the hypothetical bullshit now?”

“Yes,” I sniff. “Give me another chance?”

“I think that's my line since I assumed the worst and yelled at you.” He tightens his arms around me. “But we have to talk, Sky. All this distracting and distancing doesn't make me feel like I can trust you. It makes me all confused about how to approach you and what to say. It's not helping anyone.”

“But ...” I take another slow breath and feel the fight just ... leave. “Okay.”

“Anything, something. Just ... let me in a little bit.”

“I hate being alone so often,” I say against his neck. “Chase is always working. I haven’t spoken to my dad since the dinner we had together, and he’s just ... like a ghost. Mom didn’t just leave him, she left all of us. Instead of losing just her, I feel like I’ve lost them both.”

“Sky.” He rubs my back.

“And I was so afraid I was going to lose Bonnie. She’s been through everything with me, and I couldn’t handle that, no matter how much I like you. That’s why I had to talk to her and couldn’t explain right then. She was too mad.”

Ash lets me talk in circles, ramble, complain, curse, and everything else for a long while. After I talk myself out, he gently lays me down in bed. “I’m going to get ice for your finger, and I’ll be right back.”

“I think you have to wear the nurse’s costume to be ice certified,” I mumble.

Ash kisses my forehead and brushes my hair back from my face. “You couldn’t handle me in that costume.”

I laugh hoarsely and stay in bed until he comes back with ice. The second he puts it on my finger, I kiss him. It’s a quick peck, then I draw back. “I didn’t ask.”

“You have blanket permission.” He holds my injured hand down, pressing the ice around my finger as he climbs on top of me. “So come here and try that again. It wasn’t make-up worthy.”

I lick across my bottom lip, and Ash groans, resting his forehead on mine. “Please, Sky.”

I press my lips to his slowly. Changing the angle, I do it again, swiping my tongue across his bottom lip until he opens for me. Ash lets me control the kiss in every way – the pace, the intensity, all of it, but the fact he’s so willing to give up

control goes right to my heart. It thuds uncomfortably in my chest.

Lacing my good hand in his hair, I pull him closer, and Ash takes over, feasting on me like we haven't kissed in years. I cling to him, devour him, take everything he gives and demand more.

When I feel him harden against me, I draw back. "Are we really going to do this?"

"Prepare for more of this talking shit, Sky. I'm going to be greedy for it."

"Just talking?"

He grins wickedly. "Maybe not *just* talking. I like the other things you do with your mouth, too."

"What am I going to do with you?" I run my fingers through his hair.

He groans and presses his head to my chest. "Make out with me, sass me, keep petting my hair, whatever else you want short of yelling."

I swallow hard. "I hate you, Ashton."

"Makes me feel all warm and fuzzy." He kisses my chest.

Chapter 19

Ashton

I stay with Sky, wrapped around her, only moving to put the ice on the table after what feels like twenty minutes. She adjusts in my arms once, then again, until I roll to the side and arch an eyebrow. She sits up and puts her ear to the door, waits a minute, then comes back to me, pulling my arm around her like it's a seat belt she has to have.

I nuzzle her neck and press a soft kiss there. "No pictures after that last fight?"

"I've had a lot on my mind," she mumbles, her fingers stroking my hair. "I'll send the decent ones tonight."

I kiss her neck again and tighten my hold on her. Seeing her cursing up a storm in the rain, slamming the door, all of it was so unlike her, I had to do something, and I'm glad I did. Apparently, getting her all ruffled keeps her from lying to me and gets her talking.

"I like you," I tell her softly. "Even when you're cursing at your car."

"Because you're a dummy," she grumbles.

I start to let her go, but she rolls and takes my hand in her bad one, making her hiss. I roll my eyes and kiss her forehead. She rubs her good hand over my stubble. "Don't pull away."

"You insulted me!"

She bites her bottom lip, and I can actually see her defenses coming back up. I turn her chin roughly so she's facing me. "Stay here, with me. Not locked up in your head."

"I don't know what to say to your compliments. Makes me feel like I'm being set up for something. I'm not ... not used to compliments."

"Try saying nothing or saying something nice back," I advise.

She shoves me slightly. "That'll just inflate your ego more. You don't need the help."

"You're right." I run my nose over hers.

I want to know she actually cares about me, though. She said she hypothetically likes me more than for sex, but here we are, curled up in her bed, and she's gone quiet on me. I need assurance. And I should probably start sharing, too.

"Sky," I whisper.

She grips my shirt and pulls me closer. *Oh, I know, baby.* Anytime we're this close, I feel hunger and need pulse through me. I'm hot all over, with the threat of ecstasy teasing my veins. I take a ragged breath and try to draw back a little.

"Do you want to go out tomorrow with some of my friends? You'll have an 'x' on your hand since it's at a bar, but I'd really like to ... to have you there."

She considers it, then nods slowly. "I don't have any other plans."

What am I going to do with her? All of these half commitments. I rub over her bottom lip with my thumb. "All you have to say is yes."

"I'll say what I want! You know what I mean," she argues.

"It's the emotion behind it that matters to me, missy," I whisper.

“I *want* to kiss you,” she says. “A lot.”

I groan and give in, kissing her hungrily, I pet her hair and down her neck as I kiss her again and again. We have some making up to do, timewise now. Sky rubs herself against me and kisses across my neck when I release her mouth.

“Sky,” I warn.

She wiggles her hips against mine. I shake my head despite the fact I’m actively trying to keep my face in check, so I don’t smile. “You are not allowed.”

“I thought making up involved a sexual component,” she whispers against my neck. “Don’t you want to teach me that?”

She is not allowed to say things like that. It’s not fair. It gets me hard right away and distracts me from the conversation I’m trying to have with her. Her hand brushes over my cock, even through my jeans, and I let out a ragged breath.

“Fuck. Focus.”

“I am.” She licks up my neck. “On you.”

“You have a hurt hand.”

“I don’t need my hands.”

“Fucking hell, woman.” I roll on top of her and see her giggling. She tries twice to get my pants off, then gets frustrated. Yeah, her finger’s swollen and painful and not being able to use it means she can’t get the button undone. I nod. “Behave until your finger is the normal size.”

“If you’d help-”

I kiss her, just kiss her, sliding my hand into her tangled mess of hair and my other arm around her tightly, so her arms are glued to her sides. She mumbles against my mouth at first, then gives in, returning the kiss and calming down, just like I need.

This time, when I let her go, I peck her nose. “When you’re not injured, you can use me however you want – sexually speaking.”

“Promise?” Her eyes stay on me.

“I thought you liked me for more than my dick.”

“Yeah, but I like your dick, too.” She flops over to hide her face after that statement. I take a slow breath, reminding myself Sky is new to relationships, sex, flirting, fucking, all of it.

I pull her back to me and wrap my arms around her. “My dick likes you, too.”

“Only two out of ten for that line.” But I hear the laugh in her voice.

After a whole lot of silent cuddling and a few conversations that aren’t as heavy as our earlier ones, I head home. Light and free, I whistle to myself as I walk. The rain has let up, and I know the storm will pass. Sure, we’ll have more work tomorrow since it was halted today, but even that can’t hurt me. I spend the whole day proving my father wrong.

As I walk up to the front door, my cellphone chimes. It’s a message from Frank, letting me know a scout from LA found my Instagram page and called him to verify who I was. Frank says there’s a chance the scout might show up for my finale match. Fantastic news if I’m well prepared, a disaster if I don’t get my head in the game.

It’s not rocket science. I need to narrow my focus even more than I already have.

With a determined smile, I get inside and volunteer to help Mom with dinner. Her eyes widen with surprise, but she says nothing, only hands me an apron and points me to the counter where the vegetables are. For the next half hour, I get busy chopping, humming a *Radiohead* tune.

Mom bumps my hip with a question in her eyes.
“What’s got you so upbeat?”

“Life,” I mutter simply. I’m not ready to disclose that message from Frank. Not until there’s actually something to celebrate.

“I thought after the loss yesterday, you’d be in the gym,” she says.

“The boy doesn’t know the meaning of dedication,” my father grunts as he enters the room.

“I learned and can move forward,” I say, not bothering to specify.

My phone buzzes, and I reach for it, but Mom points at me. “Sweetie, you know the rule.”

“No phones in the kitchen,” I reply. “Want me to take care of the mashed potatoes next?”

“Yes, please.” She pats my shoulder and continues working on the meatloaf.

As we cook, Dad reads the paper until Peter comes down. They get to talking, and I notice how much Peter is like Dad when we’re home. He’s assertive, determined to get his way and unwilling to compromise. He barks every sentence like an order and treats a conversation like a confrontation.

Mom rubs my back, drawing my attention. “I like seeing you so happy, Ashton. I just wish you weren’t so bruised.”

“You don’t need a new car, and I’ll prove it!” My dad bellows, walking out to the garage with Peter hot on his heels.

“You’re different,” Mom says, distracting me.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s a good thing. It reminds me of when ... well.” She puts the meatloaf in the oven. “When your Uncle Mark

met Aunt Pam. Couldn't stay down. Always with a bounce in his step, glowing, everything."

Answering feels like a trap. So I turn on the mixer for the potatoes instead. Mom waits until I'm done. "You have the look of a man in love, sweetie."

"Who?" Peter asks, suddenly leaning on the counter like he's been here for the whole conversation. "Who's in love?"

"No one." I point at Mom.

"I was just saying, doesn't Ashton seem so much happier lately?"

"Yeah, but he's not that way with girls. Especially not right away. There's the checklist."

"Only two things on it. Single and connection," I remind him.

"Until you get to fuck them and add 'good in bed' to the list."

Mom just hands Peter the swear jar, and he drops a dollar in it casually. He continues to watch me like he's waiting for me to slip up and give a name. I'm not that stupid. I'm stupid enough to date the girl next door, but I'm damn sure not going to talk about it. Especially considering she's made me rip up my checklist and try things differently.

Peter continues to stare at me, waiting for something, anything. He raises an eyebrow.

"Well? Do I know her? Should I warn her that you only have enough stamina for two weeks when you're in a good mood?"

He drops another dollar in the swear jar for talking about sex in front of Mom. My hands curl into fists. "Watch your fucking mouth."

Peter's eyebrows shoot up in surprise, and I drop a five in the swear jar. Mom's making bank today. He snorts. "Pussy. You're no fun anymore."

Another dollar in.

"Let me know when dinner's ready." I kiss the side of Mom's head and pat her hand. "I don't want to deal with this dick right now."

Peter calls me a spoiled sport as I head up to my room and take my new frustration out on the punching bag. *Sky and I agreed to keep our relationship a secret*, I remind myself as my knuckles ache.

Which means I can't defend her or think about what Peter tells her whenever he gets the chance. Not that she's exactly receptive to him. I've worked to get back in her good graces, he hasn't. And I've been lucky as hell.

I grab the bag and press my head against it. I just stand there holding it, panting. I'm supposed to be cooling down until tomorrow at the earliest, but I don't care about that. Boxing is the only way I know to deal with my anger, my confusion, and all the other shit in my life I can't change.

And I'm tired of feeling like I'm being pushed around by the ocean. I'm just a jellyfish going wherever the current takes me, wishing I had the power to swim.

My phone buzzes once, then a second time. And continues. I pull it out of my pocket and see Sky's number. I answer the phone. "Sorry for not answering. I was in the kitchen."

She's silent for a long moment, then I hear her exhale. "What's wrong?"

I blink a few times and look out my window. She's watching me with her lion's mane of hair all fluffy, in just a little excuse of a shirt. She scratches at her hair. "I'm serious. What's bothering you?"

“How do you know something wrong?”

“You’re hugging your bag, not answering me, and ... your face.” She says. “I notice shit.”

“It’s almost like you like me.”

“Don’t deflect.”

“My brother popped my bubble,” I say softly. “Want to talk until dinner?”

“I’ll listen,” she says, then I see her tarantula on her chest.

I smirk. “Put Drac on. He’ll sympathize better.”

She huffs and takes a breath. “I want to help.”

Yeah, she doesn’t hate me. Not even close. That wild, pissy lion next door is going to fall for me, it’s just a matter of time. The only question is: what the hell are we going to do when we’re forced to face the bullshit waiting in the wings?

Chapter 20

Sky

Ash and I take a break from the phone for dinner, and I realize I'm not shaking or dying from our talk. I congratulated him on the news about the talent scout—although he says it's nothing concrete, I empathized with him about his dad's opinion on his boxing and his dropping out of business school. I listened to him gush about how sweet his mom is and how he'd take on a bear to protect her or his dad.

But he's over Peter's bullshit. Apparently, Peter said something, but Ash refused to tell me what. He doesn't like talking about Peter, which is confusing because I talk about Chase. Maybe it's an older brother thing.

I try not to think of anything as I lie down to go to sleep. It's been a good day. Things are fixed with Ash – honestly a miracle and a lot of work, things are good with Bonnie, my hand is finally chilling out, and I feel good.

That's good, right?

So why do I feel like I'm preparing for a jump scare? A shiver teases my spine, and I toss and turn in bed, then I finally give in to sleep. I wake up at close to noon. Groaning, I look through my photos of Ash and send him a few good ones from his last fight and then sit downstairs, hoping to see my dad.

I keep telling myself that I'm going to talk to him. That I'm going to have at least a conversation with him about him being more present, at least invite him to dinner. But when Dad comes in, he looks at me like he's forgotten I exist.

“Sky?” he greets me softly, his eyes squinting at me. If he’s drunk, there’s no telling. I can’t smell any liquor on him.

“The one and only, Dad,” I mutter, spreading my arms.

He makes a sound like a snort and walks past me.

“I’m going out tonight,” I call after him.

He doesn’t even pause, just nods. “Make good choices.”

That’s it. Then he goes upstairs. No concern about telling me to adhere to curfew, nothing about not drinking, nothing about who I’m going out with. I narrow my eyes and feel spite spread along my nerves. Now I want to get wild just to get his fucking attention and snap him back into gear.

So I go upstairs and grab a dress Bonnie got me for my birthday that I swore I’d never wear. It’s not ridiculously sexy, but it’s tight, molds to my body, and comes down to barely mid-thigh. It’s red, spandex and cotton, and when I pair it with black wedges, I feel like I’ve dialed up to an eight instead of my normal three. I do some makeup to top it off, put on a dash of perfume, then grab my worn-out leather jacket.

I walk downstairs, making sure to walk in front of my dad’s room. “I’m leaving now.”

He grunts. But when I get downstairs and hear the fridge close, the hair on the back of my neck shoots up, and a zing slithers down my spine. If I didn’t know better, I’d think Dracula was crawling down my back.

I didn’t think about Chase.

And Chase will haul my ass back inside, toss me in my room and tie my doorknob to the bathroom door so I can’t leave. He’s done it before. He’ll do it again.

Swallowing, I turn around slowly.

Chase appears, a Ziploc bag of ham between his teeth, bread in one hand, mayo in the other. Our eyes meet, he looks

me over, and the bag of ham falls to the floor. Fuck. I sprint to the door, but Chase is faster, wrapping his arm around my middle and tugging me back while shoving the door shut.

I scream as my bad hand is grabbed, and Chase releases me with a healthy dose of concern on his face. I check my bruised finger and shoot him a glare.

“Where the hell are you going dressed like that?” He booms.

“Wherever I want! Dad doesn’t care!” I sneer.

We glower at one another, and he points at the stairs. “Shorts. Now.”

“I don’t need shorts. I’m eighteen. I can dress how I want no matter where I’m going.”

“You are my little sister, Skylar Constance Bennett. I’d be a shit brother if I let you walk out of the house like this unless you’re ...” He looks me over again, eyes widening, then leans back. “You’re going on a date?”

“Maybe.” I take another step towards the door.

“I want to meet him.”

“That’s Dad’s job, not yours.” It’s a low blow, and I regret it right away, but I know I said it loud enough for Dad to hear. I rub my forehead slowly.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s okay. Chase fans off my apology, then jerks his chin toward the door. “Is he picking you up?”

“Um... no. I called a cab,” I reply, thinking quickly.

“Do you want me to wait outside with you?”

Panic flares inside me, and I hope it’s not stamped on my face. “The streetlights are on, so I’ll be safe.” I point to the bag of ham on the floor. “Don’t you have a sandwich to make?”

“It can wait.”

His cellphone rings, and he pulls it out of his pocket. I’m surprised by how his face reddens in the split second it takes for him to glance at the screen. “I need to take this,” he mutters.

Relief floods me. “I’ll be back before midnight, okay? I’ll text you every hour.”

“You better.” His eyes are still on the screen.

“At least someone cares,” I mumble, walking out and closing the door behind me.

I say a quiet thank you to Chase as I scuff my shoes against the concrete porch. I’ve tried giving Dad time. I’ve tried goading him. I drew the line at Bonnie’s idea to fail a test or start a fight in school to get his attention.

Something has to slap him back into reality, right? I curl my fingers into fists, then whimper and look at my hand. “I’m over you. Heal faster. I eat my veggies.”

“So mean.” Ash’s deep tone suddenly comes at me, and I see him leaning against his Mustang. “I think your body would thank you if you did a little positive-”

That’s all he gets before I wrap myself around him. Ash pauses, then rubs my back. “Ready to talk again?”

I shake my head. “Get me out of here?” I don’t know how long Chase’s phone call will be.

He walks us over and opens the car door for me. As we head toward the bar, Ash rubs his hand over my knee. “I like your dress.”

“Thanks.” I look down at it.

We shoot the shit, dancing around the things I don’t want to talk about until the silence and heavy metal music hums between us. I play with my painful finger. “Chase grabbed my hand when I tried to leave.”

I expect Ash to say something right away, but instead, I find him looking at me in the glow of the red light. I swallow. “It hurts now.”

“Can you ... give me context?”

“My dad barely looked at me when I said I was going out. There was no conversation. He didn’t ask about dinner. He didn’t ask about where I was going. Nothing that annoying dads are supposed to do. So Chase did as soon as he saw me. Because I don’t look ... like me.”

“You look beautiful, Sky. A little nervous, but definitely hot.” The light turns green, and he focuses ahead. “I don’t know how to help with your dad.”

“I’m more venting.” I let out a woosh. “Trying to see if it helps.”

“So far?”

“I’m not thinking about it as much.”

But when we get out of the car, and I realize that this is a *bar* bar, meaning minimal college kids, plenty of bikers, smoking inside, a live band, wooden floors, regulars, and everything in between, I cling to Ash.

This is the opposite of my scene. I swallow hard and dig my nails into Ash’s arm, even though he’s already holding my hand. He pauses. “You good? If you want to do something else, we can.”

“Just ... don’t let go of me?” I ask softly, eyeing a few people who are definitely eyeing me. “Or don’t go too far.”

He kisses the top of my head. “Don’t worry, baby, I’m big and scary.”

I take in his bruises and that ‘come fight me’ face and lean against him. “You’re better than Dracula now.”

Ashton walks with his head held high after that. He high-fives a guy at the bar after I have a new black Sharpie X

on the back of my hand. I turn to see it in the light, and then Ash tugs on me. I blink a few times and wave at the three guys in front of me.

“This is Tyler.” Ash introduces me to the younger-looking guy who has a farmer’s tan, short bright red hair, and a beard.

“This is Kenny.” The beer belly is the number one feature, but his friendly face is a close second.

“This is Nate.” He motions to the last guy, who looks wiry and hasn’t left the frosted tips in a previous decade.

I wave. “Sky.”

“So you’re the one starting all the questions.” Tyler looks me over. “Never mentioned by name, but no guy asks questions about how to figure a girl out without having a girl in mind.”

I feel my face heat, and my hand softens in Ash’s.

I don’t know why that makes me feel special and ... better. But it does. Kenny notices my hand. “Damn, what have you been fighting?”

“Steering wheels,” I grumble.

“Maybe you should take Ash on in the ring. I’m sure you could beat him easily,” Kenny laughs.

I feel whatever was squeezing my chest give up the fight. Ash orders a beer and a coke, and we all find a booth and manage to squeeze in. Ash keeps me by the wall and stays against me. They talk about work, give him shit about the fight, telling him they signed up to support someone who knew what they were doing, not someone confused.

“Blame this one.” Ash rubs my neck.

“What?” I blink and unwrap my mouth from my straw.

“You had me all frazzled and worried after that fight of ours,” he sighs. “Couldn’t focus on the fight when I had you

on my mind.”

“Aww,” Nate says, patting his chest. “My boyfriend says that kind of thing to me all the time – not about fighting, though. He blames me for not being able to focus while working from home.”

“How is Ash at work?”

“Focused.” Kenny snorts. “Only shoots the shit on break. As if he’ll get fired for not working nonstop.”

“He has to as he’s the Boss’s son. Has to be a role model.” Tyler barks out a laugh and nearly falls out of his chair.

I’ve never seen Ash so quiet. He seems to listen more here, flashing a smile, joining in on a laugh and sometimes getting a comment in, but he’s the least rambunctious of the bunch. Occasionally, he’ll rub my leg, adjust my cup for me, or pet my hair without even looking at me, which makes me feel even more sparkly. But these guys don’t urge him to chug drinks, don’t treat his quietness as anything other than normal.

Is this who he is when people give easy answers? The real ‘at ease’ Ash?

“What do you do, Sky?” Kenny asks.

I talk about collecting bugs and how I’m taking a semester off before college, then bring up my budding photography career and my blogsite. Ash happily shows the photos I’ve taken and leans back with a wide smile.

Nate is just staring at me. “I’m still stuck at you collecting bugs.”

“Well, she can’t be perfect.” Kenny chuckles. “What do you do with them?”

“Pins them to scare me.” Ash nudges me. “Just like the spider.”

I gape and instantly get to defending Dracula, which gets me involved in the conversation a lot more. When some girls come by, looking for a dance partner or some ‘friends’, I expect at least one of the guys to hop up.

Kenny flashes his wedding band and gives his apologies, even though none of them are looking at him. Nate says they’re not his type, making me snicker. Tyler says he’s taken and still the girls linger. One of them leans over to flash everything but her nipples, and my hand tightens on Ash.

I can’t compete with those boobs, but it’s taking a whole lot of restraint to keep jealousy from getting out of my throat.

Ash rubs my thigh again. “I’m very happy where I am.”

“I bet you’d be happier on the dance floor,” the redhead pouts. “I’m sure you have moves on moves. Let your little sister stay here.”

“Girlfriend,” Ash corrects, voice harder than necessary. “And I’m not interested in dancing when I’m hanging out with my friends.”

She snorts, says he’s missing out and walks away. I kiss his shoulder, over a particularly bad bruise. He doesn’t know how much that ‘girlfriend’ come back means to me. And I can’t remember why I didn’t want the position to begin with.

He beams and tucks my hair behind my ear. “Not the jealous type?”

I stick out my tongue.

“Come on, sweetheart, give him a real kiss,” Tyler encourages.

“Yeah, stop being so formal. We can handle it,” Nate encourages.

I gape, turn red and feel Ash looking at me almost expectantly. Instead, I finish my soda in one go.

That gets everyone laughing again. Tyler and Nate get up to get another round, and Kenny motions to us. “More?”

“Water,” we both say.

He grins. “Sky, don’t let these idiots intimidate you. Tell them to shut their traps whenever you want. You don’t owe anyone a thing.”

When he heads to the bar, I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. Ash looks at my hand on his, both on my knee. “I’m glad you’re here, but we can go whenever.”

“You just want a real kiss.”

“Hell, yes, I do,” he winks. “Am I that easy to figure out?”

I press my lips to his softly. “You get harder to figure out every day, Ash.”

Chapter 21

Ashton

When we wave bye to my friends, I wrap my arm around Sky. She's still fighting giggles at Kenny's last joke. One at my expense, of course. Him saying his two-year-old is more destructive than I am. That I should tag the kid in on my next fight.

I grumble to myself as we exit the bar. Sky cups my face between her hands and flashes that same bright smile I've missed. "Don't listen to him. I know you kick ass."

"Oh, you *know*?"

"I was there," she insists. "I took the pictures. It's only a matter of time before your dad is eating his words about you not making it."

I wrap my arms around her. God, her support is amazing. It makes me feel validated, real. Before I can say anything to that, I hear a wolf whistle. Some punk asshole is riding up on a skateboard, eyeing Sky like she'd be a good lay. He kicks the board up and into his hand.

"How much for a ride on her?" the skinny kid asks me. "She looks all new and shiny."

His friends laugh, and Sky shrinks a little against me. I shake my head. "Don't start."

"Oh, come on, Warren. We all know the rumors. You keep girls for a fuck, then toss them to whoever's next in line. Tell me, is that your wingman smile? Knock the girl down a

peg, so she'll give your friends a chance? I call next in line on this one."

"Last chance," I warn.

"How many little girls have you ruined because of daddy issues and-"

Sky kicks him in the balls. No warning, no clever wording, just the toe of her shoe deep in his crotch as he turns purple and falls on top of his skateboard. His friends laugh and turn their hyena jeering on him.

I rub Sky's back. She glowers at them. "The next one that says shit about my boyfriend gets to experience life with an empty sack."

They glance from her to the guy who's still trying to catch his breath on the ground and drag him away. I'm still there processing that 1. Sky called me her boyfriend, and 2. Sky just kicked a dude in the balls for talking shit about *me*, not her.

Has she suddenly realized I'm not in it to steal her v-card or to win some bet?

She bats her eyelashes. "I didn't want you to get hurt and not be able to fight later. Did I undermine your masculinity?"

"Hell, no." I kiss her full on the mouth. "Get in the car before I forget why I'm controlling myself."

She gets in, panting, a wildness in her eyes as she buckles up. I speed out of the parking lot and zoom around town, listening to her laugh as she turns up the radio and enjoys the high of a fight. When I finally park at an abandoned house and turn down the music, she runs her fingers through her hair.

"Is this why you fight? This ... feeling?"

"Partially."

“I get it.” She unbuckles and leans across the console to kiss me. “It’s a rush. It’s wild. It’s kind of a turn on.”

I undo my seatbelt and pull her over my lap, kissing her until I absolutely *have* to come up for air to avoid passing out. Although, if that’s how I go, I don’t think I’d mind. Ashton Warren – died from kissing Sky Bennett. Damn good for a headstone.

She drags her fingers through my hair. “Tonight was fun. I’m sorry I can’t shove my hands in your pants yet.”

Wow, and dirty talk. Tonight is amazing. “Your finger’s still bruised.”

“I’ll have to take care of myself then.” She sticks out her tongue. “Now I’m high on fighting and horny. All your fault.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I growl while thinking of the sounds she makes, what it would be like to actually *watch* her masturbate.

I kiss her again, licking into her mouth, running my tongue over hers, enjoying the electrical storm that rips through me anytime she rolls her body on mine. I groan and slide my hands over her ass, pulling her down to grind on me properly. Her little whimper echoes in my mouth, and I bite her bottom lip as I draw back.

“You taste good,” I tell her. “And I’m really fucking happy you came out with me.”

She rests her hands on my chest and finally, *finally*, I see that starry look in her eyes. The excited almost-grin that she tries to hide by biting her lip and bouncing a little. My little bumble bee is still in there. Buried a little further down but still here.

I hug her. “I’m serious, Sky. Kenny already asked if I can drag you to his house one night next week for dinner.”

I hear her take a deep breath, threatening to suck all the oxygen out of the car. “You really had fun? Even with me

there?”

“Absolutely, you made the night better.”

“I’m ... I’m glad you invited me. I liked being your girlfriend in public.”

I try to pull her face up, but she fights me. I laugh.
“That’s a good thing.”

“It’s terrifying. Because I don’t want to lose you. And it scares me.”

“Welcome to relationships.”

We head home after a little bit more cuddling and kissing. When I drop her off, she says that she can probably sneak me in, but I’m *sure* Chase is waiting for her. I tell her we’ll figure it out, then drive around the block and head inside.

Mom is still up, reading some frilly and flowery romance. She looks up at me over her glasses and smiles.
“You’re still smiling. The date went well?”

“Very well,” I beam.

“Any details for me?”

“None as good as your book, Mom,” I chuckle before heading up to bed.

Even though it’s Friday, I know I’m going to have a long day at the gym tomorrow. I’m going to spend a solid number of hours in. And I know, I know, that I’m going to want to see Sky. Hell, I’d see her most days if I could make it happen.

My phone buzzes, and it’s a message from Sky. She says that Dracula noticed she was gone. Then sends me the picture of the spider trying to climb the wall. It’s still a horrible little creature. I don’t want to touch it. I don’t want to be near it, but the fact that he’s actually out and about is different.

I text her back: I noticed, too.

She starts typing, deletes, starts typing, deletes, then finally says: I enjoyed it. We should do it again.

Fuck, yes. Just ... I throw my fist up in the air. This is the best win in the world.

My phone dings again: I saw that.

I laugh, and we end up texting all night, something I've never done with a girl, with friends, anyone. It's the kind of thing I thought I'd hate, but I don't mind it. And I don't mind waking up to a meme about someone asleep and drooling.

Rather than push my luck with Sky, I dedicate to my gym entirely. I ignore everything but the workout in front of me. I take on the punching bag. Do all the working out, the footwork training, the everything until I'm a panting, exhausted, sore husk of myself. And then I do it again on Sunday, beating the shit out of myself and anything put in front of me.

This is how I can get my own future, defined by me, maintained by me, with no one else to blame for a loss and no one else to thank for a win. It's just me in the arena and that's how I like it. I appreciate the support, need it, thrive on it, but I like testing myself and knowing that it's *me* making my dreams come true, not my last name, my family, or anything else.

When I finally rest for the night and grab some water, I feel accomplished. It's been a wild week, too many changes, but I've taken action, made changes, taken charge. I'm a slightly more sentient jellyfish.

Coach Frank pats my shoulder. "We won't see another loss with this kind of dedication. Good job. If you keep this up, that talent scout could be leaving with a smile."

I nod to him, start to the showers, then see Sky, looking lost as hell. She has on a giant T-shirt and shorts that I know are hidden under it. Her hair is tamed in a braid, and she keeps glancing at the glass door like she should leave.

Smirking, I walk up and twirl her under my arm. “What are you doing here, bumble bee?”

“I ... I can’t even take my steering wheel, so I figured, I would see what this was all about.”

“Not until your hand is healed.” I hold it up and show it to her again.

“It’s barely bruised. Barely sore,” She argues.

“I’m saying no. But, if you’re that desperate for some physical time ...”

She shoves me. “Don’t come on to me. I want to get in the ring, lash out, defend myself. Punch all the people who call me creepy.”

“Because they’re right?” I tease lightly. “Creepy and cute.”

She huffs, glances around, then bumps my foot with hers. “Be careful in public.”

“Yeah. Yeah,” I mumble. “No one here cares about anything but their workout. I have to hit the shower. Stay?”

She blinks a few times, processing the slew of things I just threw at her. She nods finally. “Yeah. Okay.”

I get through the world’s fastest shower and get ready to go. Everything in me wants to take Sky’s hand, squeeze her and pull her closer to me. Just so anyone thinking they have a shot knows she’s off the market. But I know she’ll jump, and I’ve been enjoying the lack of wall between us, or ... the lowering of her wall.

Once we get to our cars, I lean against mine. “Your place or mine, Sky?”

She glances around the empty parking lot, takes a deep breath. “You that desperate to get into my pants again, Ash?”

I don’t answer right away. How does she always manage to distract me with sex?

“Your silence sounds like a resounding yes. Luckily for you, my house is always empty, so we can-”

“Can we put a pause on the sex talk for two seconds?” I ask. She meets my eyes and nods once. I take a slow breath. “I need you to actually talk to me about us.”

“Didn’t we do that yesterday?”

“You kicked a guy in the balls for me. You supported my boxing career, said you had a good time, called me your boyfriend. Is that all real shit? How you actually feel or just what you think I want to hear?”

She blinks at me a few times. I don’t know why I’m asking, not really. I just know that I’m *very* good at telling people what they want to hear, and I want to be sure that’s not what’s happening here. That I’m not getting excited because she’s saying what she thinks I want her to.

“I know you’re new to talking about what you like and want, but I need to know for real how you feel.”

She swallows. “I meant what I said. I don’t say anything because someone *wants* to hear it. I say it because I think it or ... feel it.”

I take a slow breath and kiss her softly. “Okay, you can now resume your very sexy dirty talk, and we’ll head to your house.”

She agrees. I park in my drive way, sprint to her place and box her against her front door as she laughs and shoves against me. Once we’re inside, I throw her over my shoulder, kick the door shut, and drag her to her room.

Sky swats my ass and gives me hell before I pin her on her bed. She’s panting, all flushed, and still giving me that smile. I kiss her nose. “I don’t know if you can handle boxing. You keep losing at basic wrestling.”

“I didn’t lose in the woods.” She sticks her tongue out.

I take it as an invitation and try to bite it. Instead, she kisses me, soft and slow, like I've learned to expect when she makes the move. One kiss turns into two, then three, then I lose count, abandoning control to make out like we both need.

I kiss across her neck, biting that spot she likes, and her hips meet mine. Her nails dig into my back and drag down, a tease I'd love to act on.

"I want to try something," she pants in my ear, voice all hot and seductive.

I pick my head up from her throat, confused. She slowly takes off her shirt, revealing a bra that definitely doesn't belong at the gym and thin spandex shorts. Holy fuck, I'm a lucky man.

"Sky." It should be a warning, but I think it comes out like I'm begging her.

"I know you're worried about my finger, but I ..." She kisses me again, softly, gently. The trade between her wildness and her softness is going to give me whiplash. She draws back and strokes over my arms. "I want you."

"Fucking hell, woman." I kiss her again and again, tearing her bra off her and cupping her breasts.

She tries to cover her breasts for a moment, eyes hesitant, unsure. I watch her swallow, then kiss her neck while trying so damn hard to control myself. "Tell me what you want."

"I'm not good at dirty talk."

I kiss her shoulder. "You're better than you think."

She shivers and slowly lets her arms fall from her chest. I drag my mouth across the top of her cleavage. "You're beautiful, Sky, every inch of you. Soft, and warm, and so fucking tempting."

Groaning, she tugs at my shirt and pulls it off to touch my chest, giving me a view that threatens to take my breath away. Her cheeks flushed, lips parted, eyes hazy and hungry, and her tits are fucking perfect. A little bigger than my hand, round and perky, nipples hard and begging for attention.

My muscles tighten under her hands as she strokes my abdomen. I make myself take a breath and press my forehead to hers. I want to tear the rest of her clothes off and show her how much fun we could be having, but control. Restraint. I might need divine intervention.

“Talk to me. Tell me what I’m allowed to do.”

Chapter 22

Sky

I was so sure after the night at the bar. I was sure I was ready to give him everything, to let him have my virginity, to offer it to him on a silver fucking platter, and now I'm all nervous and shaky and embarrassed. Is he going to notice that red little cut from thorns I got yesterday? Is he going to hate how I look? Worse – is he going to be entirely unimpressed?

“Sky,” he pants again, his whole body tensed and ready to pounce. “I’m not doing a fucking thing until you give me the okay.”

“Why?”

He kisses me hungrily, but he’s careful, keeping his hands on the bed, not on me. I shiver and lift myself, kissing him harder. When he draws back, he kisses across my jaw. “Because I want to know that you are as hot for me as I am for you.”

I shiver, expecting another kiss, but his hand ghosts up my side, and his lips brush my ear. “That you want me as much as I want you. That you’re eager to tear my clothes off. That you want my touch more than anything. That you’re burning for me and me alone.”

Moaning, I slide my hands over his ass and grind myself against him. “I am. Touch me. Anywhere skin is showing, touch me.”

“Good girl.”

“And kiss me.” I bite down his throat, trying to remember to kiss, too. “Please, Ash.”

He still takes his time, licking and brushing his lips across my throat until my skin is so sensitive that even the A/C makes me tremble. My back arches, rubbing my nipples against his chest and igniting another ripple of pleasure across my body.

“Please!”

Ash chuckles and licks over the top curve of my breast. “Are you begging me, Sky?”

“Yes.” I hook a leg around him.

He dips his head further down; the scruff of his light beard brushes my sensitive skin as he licks across my nipple. I squirm, wanting more. I *need* more. Ash wraps one arm around my back, holding me up so he can wrap his mouth around my nipple and torture me with his tongue. That’s what it is too, absolute torture.

“More,” I beg.

He groans and switches to the other breast, licking and biting until he gives that nipple the same treatment. But it’s not enough. I guide his hand between my legs and push on his fingers, so I grind against him just like I need.

I know I’m soaking wet, uncomfortably wet, and I need something to fix that. I need him. Ash rubs against me slowly, his fingers teasing through two layers of fabric, which is nowhere near enough.

“What do you want?” I ask breathlessly.

“You, Sky,” he groans, kissing me hard and hungry.

I take the opportunity and drag my bottoms down. Once the fabric is bunched around my knees, I realize I’m naked or basically naked. Fear pricks my mind, but I keep trying to kick out of my tangled mess of clothes.

Ash reaches down, untangles me, and tosses my clothes to the side without breaking our steamy make-out session. He strokes between my legs and moans, nipping my chin. “You’re so wet, baby.”

Nodding, I tug at his belt. He doesn’t stop me this time. Doesn’t stop me as I struggle with his button or zipper. He just keeps teasing me with that single finger, circling over my clit, stroking down to my entrance, then back up.

I’m a writhing mess by the time I have his jeans down far enough for his cock to pop free. I want him in my mouth, now. “Let me ...”

“Let you what?”

“Blow you.” My eyes flick up to his.

I’ve never seen his face so dark, so hungry. His jaw is tight, gaze focused, and the nod he gives me before adjusting beside me is so quick I almost miss it. I lick across my lips and wrap my good hand around him, stroking over his length slowly.

“Sky,” he moans, finger pressing into my pussy.

I whimper and muffle the sound around his cock. I take my time, sucking him slowly, circling the head with my tongue, then dragging it over his shaft as he cups the back of my head in one hand and works a second finger into my pussy.

Grinding my hips against his hand earns me that satisfying curl of his fingers where I need it most and the heel of his hand against my clit. My eyes flutter, threatening to roll back as I take him deep again, until he hits the back of my throat, and I gag.

Ash freezes and brushes his fingers through my hair. “Slower, baby.”

I nod and do as he asks using my good hand against my lips, so I don’t have to worry about gagging again. (Thank

you, porn for that tip). His face flushes as I blow him, and his breathing goes ragged as I feel his hips tense.

He rocks into my mouth, earning himself another moan, considering his fingers thrust deep at the same time.

“You’re so good with your mouth, Sky. Everything about you is ... fucking amazing,” he groans, fucking me faster with his fingers.

I try to match his pace, but he tugs on my hair, taking control from me as he uses my mouth the way he wants. I love it. I love him guiding me, love the way he makes this easy, hot, ecstasy itself.

My legs squeeze around his hand to soften the wet sounds of his fingers inside me, but he doesn’t stop. If anything, it feels like he’s even deeper inside me. I whimper and try to resist the pleasure that has me teetering over the edge, but Ash thrusts into my mouth again and adds a third finger to my pussy.

I fall apart, moaning as I let my climax take over and drag me into a deliriously happy abyss I don’t want to leave. Until I realize my mouth is empty. I open my eyes and see Ash adjusting despite his cock still tapping his belly.

“I didn’t finish!” I complain.

He laughs. “Oh, yes, you did. And I enjoyed every second of it.” Prying my legs apart, he kisses up the inside of my thigh. “Now, I want to taste you. Not just off my fingers.”

“But-”

“Then you can be a good girl, wrap that sassy mouth of yours around my cock again and blow me until I come.”

I groan and nod. He drags me down the bed, making me giggle, until he licks across my slit. I try to close my thighs again, worried about how I look from that angle, how I taste, everything that could make him get up and walk away.

Just as he's about to do more, I put my hand over my pussy. Ash slowly looks up at me. "Not ready for that?"

I shake my head. "No. Sex would be easier than that. I ..."

He doesn't wait for my excuse, just slowly kisses up my body before claiming my mouth with his. I feel his cock against me, almost right where I need it, and I grind against him. I don't want to be done. I'm not ready for him to eat me out, but ...

"All I need is a no," he whispers. "Never a reason."

"Never?"

"Never."

I nod and rub his sides. "You didn't ... you don't have a condom, do you?"

"Sky." The disapproval mixes with want in his voice, but I see the restraint all over his face.

"I told you, sex is easier. I'm ready," I insist.

Even that little voice inside my head that says he'll leave once he has everything is calm, knowing there's still one thing, at least, that he wants to do. Ash grinds against me until I swear I'm going to come from this alone.

I drag my nails down his arms. "Please!"

"Tell me again." It's a husky order that I'm more than happy to obey.

"I want you to fuck me."

Knotting his fingers in my hair, he jerks me against him and kisses me so hard, I'm starting to believe in spontaneous combustion again. Drawing back, he reaches into his back pocket, puts a packet in his mouth, then kicks out of his jeans.

I bite the wrapper to steal it and open it up. His smoldering gaze stays on me as I figure out which side is

what, then slowly roll it over his cock. Ash kisses me again. “That’s so fucking hot.”

My foot brushes his calf, and he takes a slow breath, “this is going to hurt, baby. I’m going slow.”

“Okay.” I brace myself for pain and instead of just thrusting in, he works my clit with his fingers, slow and gently while kissing me.

“Relax.” He hums against my mouth. “Tell me to stop if you want to.”

“I want this,” I say.

He kisses me again, distracting me with his tongue and the quick circles around my clit as he presses the head of his cock right where I need it, where I’m aching for him. But he’s right, as soon as he pushes in, there’s a burning pain that makes me breathless.

I push on his shoulders, and he holds still despite continuing to rub my clit. He kisses me softly. “Slowly.”

Swallowing, I try to relax. Ash’s fingers and drugging kisses are more convincing. He moves another inch, and my fingers tighten on his arms. The process continues, even though he’s trembling and moving so slowly.

When he’s finally inside me, completely and fully, I rip my nails across his skin. His breath rushes against my neck. “You’re so fucking tight, Sky ... are you okay?”

“Yes,” I pant.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No.” I turn his chin. “Faster.”

Groaning, he slides almost all the way out of me before rocking back in. This time, there’s pleasure, the same pleasure as I get from his fingers, magnified by at least ten. My back arches, and I let out a wild moan.

“Fuck.” He grunts.

I kiss the inside of his bicep as he picks up the pace, sending fire dancing across every nerve in my body, making me question why I ever waited to do this, why I denied myself so much. Ash keeps whispering in my ear, telling me how good I feel, how lucky he is, how much he wants me.

But I only half hear him over my heart thundering in my ears. My body moves against his, hips rolling so I can take him where I need him. I know I'm not going to last long, which means we'll just have to keep going and going like energizer bunnies until he's as satisfied as I am.

“Fuck, I need you to come, Sky.”

“So close.”

“Don't hold back.” He pulls me up and onto his lap, burying himself deeper inside me. “Be loud.”

I kiss him hard and hungry as we move together. I clutch him tight as I curl forward, biting his shoulder so hard my teeth almost hurt as I come apart. This is better than any orgasm I've ever given myself or he's given me to date. It's just too good, he's too good.

Ash's body shakes hard as we fall back onto the bed, and he thrusts into me again, gripping my hair like he's using it to hold onto life itself. He slumps on top of me, head on my chest as we pant together.

So, this is sex ...

Chapter 23

Ashton

Holy shit, we just had sex. And actual sex, not fucking. I'm afraid to move. Even though I feel like I'm way too heavy on top of Sky, and our skin is all sticky with sweat. And I'm still inside her. I take an unsteady breath and kiss her chest softly.

She hasn't said a word, only worked on calming her breathing. I know it was fucking excellent for me, even though I didn't last worth shit, but I'm terrified she's going to kick me out. Say that she's learned enough, and we're finished. I shouldn't be. She said she liked being my girlfriend in public, right?

Sky hasn't really given me a single thing to worry about recently. If I hadn't been an assuming asshole and let her talk to me at the gym, she would have told me she talked to Bonnie to keep us together.

But shit has been difficult and unlike most people, she's hard to predict. I never know what she's thinking, never know where she's at emotionally, which makes it next to impossible to know if she's satisfied.

Her fingers brush through my hair, and I close my eyes. The soft scratches and pets spread across my skin until I push into her hand and squeeze her tighter. I called her a teddy bear, and I don't think I've ever been more right.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Good," she murmurs. "A little dizzy."

“Am I too heavy?”

“No, Ash, she grumbles. “Shut up.”

I smile a little. “Shut up” and “I hate you” are definitely positive things from Sky. The best thing to hear, actually. I kiss her again, shift and kiss her throat, then kiss her, sucking her bottom lip between mine as I take her mouth the way I need to.

She kisses me back, soft fingers running down my neck. I flash a huge grin when I draw back. “I’ve decided I’m not moving. I’m just going to live right here on top of you.”

“But!”

I flop back on top of her, not hiding any of my weight, and she groans. “I have to clean up!”

“Nope.”

“Ash!”

I cover her mouth with my hand. “Getting all loud again? I thought you came.” She bites my hand, making me flinch. “So aggressive.”

But she kisses me again when I roll off her, grabs her shirt and runs out of the room quickly. I toss the condom, find a shirt in her dirty-clothes hamper and clean myself up before grabbing my jeans and dragging them on.

I flop in her bed and look over at her spider. He’s roaming around the cage, being his creepy self, but not even that can kill my mood. “Did you enjoy the show, Drac? Any comments? Constructive criticism?”

“Don’t talk to my spider about sex,” Sky advises, joining me on the bed. She pulls her knees to her chest and rests her chin there. “We’re not going to do that every time. Just to be clear.”

“Of course,” I agree. “Anything else?”

“Was I ... good?” Then she takes a deep breath. “I mean, I know I really only laid there and took it, but I think girls can be bad at sex, and I don’t want to be, but it was my first time, so if you say I was bad, I might just kick you in the balls.”

I rub over her leg. “You were very good, Sky. The blow job, the sex, being on top, telling me no. All of it.”

“You’re not mad I told you no to the ... other thing?”

“No.” I kiss her knee. “Better to tell me no than to tell me later you didn’t want it or weren’t ready.”

“Okay.”

“You can still tell me no for everything. Kisses, blow jobs, fingering, sex.” I list. “If you don’t want something, just tell me.”

She leans over and kisses me quickly before retreating. I’m not quite sure what to do with myself – again. After sex is normally cuddling, or getting up to do something, or eating. But Sky just kind of sits there, staring at the bed.

I shove her, and she shoves me back. “What?”

“You’re thinking in circles, aren’t you?”

“Listing things. I need to take the trash out, so no one sees the ... thing.” She glances at my dick. “I’ll need to wash my bedding today. Definitely need a full shower. I didn’t even check if Chase is home, and ... and I don’t know what to do with you.”

“You know just what to do with me.”

“Not right now,” she whispers. “Do we cuddle? Do we eat? Do we just get up and watch T.V.?”

“Whatever you want.” I tug one of her legs down. “I like cuddling.”

She cuddles close to me and kisses my chest softly. “I’m bad at this relationship stuff, and I don’t know how to get

better. I keep overthinking, and by the time I make a choice, the moment is gone.”

I squeeze her.

“And – and – I don’t want to get too attached.”

“Kind of fucked that we just had sex then, isn’t it?” My tone is harsher than I mean it to be. “Why?”

“I’m leaving in January. I am. Nothing is going to stop me. I’m going to college. I’m going to be in Arizona, studying what I love. I don’t want to leave Bonnie, I’m afraid to leave my dad alone, but I’m going.”

“You should,” I say, kissing her forehead. “Don’t let anything stop you.”

She doesn’t say anything to that, and we stay cuddled for a while longer until she grabs some bottoms, and we go to a drive through to get some food. As we watch T.V. together in the living room, she suddenly perks up with a gasp.

“Go to my room,” she orders.

“Chase?”

She swats me with a pillow, urgency stamped on her face. “Go!”

Jogging upstairs, I shut the door, but it’s not enough to muffle Chase’s booming voice. He asks if she’s been home alone all day and where their dad is. She replies that he’s doing some admin work at the office. Chase says okay and tries to ask her about the date, for what is clearly the third or fourth time and asks when he’s going to meet the guy and she turns that into a reason to leave and comes right up the stairs to shut her door hard.

“Upset?” I whisper softly.

“No. I’m being a little sister and giving myself a reason to lock up in my room,” she whispers back, taking a few steps toward me. “I have incentive here.”

“If you say the spider when I am laying right here as a hunky piece of man ...”

She joins me in bed, sitting on my lap, and tracing the bite mark – the painful bite mark – she left on me. “I love Dracula, but he’s not great with cuddling.”

“Almost a compliment. Try again,” I tease.

“You provide good cuddles, asshole.” She kisses me softly. “And now I have to figure out how to sneak you out of the house.”

It takes some clever maneuvering, and I make it into a spy movie, which irks Sky, but I end up pecking her lips before sneaking out the door. I’d be happy to do this all summer. Hell, I’d be happy to do it as long as she’s here.

But that nagging reminder that she’s leaving the state, going all the way across the country in just a few short months is eating at me. I write in a notebook I should have used for classes in college, trying to map out a pros and cons list.

No part of me wants to end what we’ve started, but keeping this a secret from our families while also going out and spending healthy time together is going to be tricky until Peter leaves for school, and Chase is back in grad school where he belongs.

And I hate it. I don’t want to hide her. I don’t want my brother thinking he has even the slightest shot with *my* girlfriend. Not to mention I feel so much pressure to show her a whole relationship, but there’s no way to hit fast forward on that.

Not to mention we’re going to approach the question of ‘what happens’ when she does leave. We haven’t been together long enough to decide a damn thing, so all I can do is offer her what I can.

The next day at work is a true hell. Instead of the normal eight hours, I find myself on a twelve-hour shift.

Rather than mixing concrete, I'm laying brickwork for the house, hauling beams, helping to set up x, y, and z, and actually putting my body to the test. By the time we're allowed to leave for the day, I slump against the newly finished wall, using my shirt to take care of the sweat dripping in my eyes.

Kenney nudges me. "What did Sky say about the invitation?"

"She was very happy to receive it." I sigh. "I haven't brought it up again."

"Wednesday, as long as you're not fighting."

"Nope. It's Friday this week." I glance at the time. "Fuck. I have to get to the gym."

I make it on time to training by the skin of my teeth. I change, throw myself into three hours of work, then drag my nearly limp body home. Even a shower doesn't revive me. At dinner, I sit quietly until attention is turned to me.

"Where have you been lately?" Peter asks.

"Hmm?"

"Like I know you train six days a week and work five days a week, but I never see you." Peter pushes his vegetables around his plate. "I figured we would hang out at least a few times."

"Tomorrow we can. Hit the gym with me." I shrug.

"But where have you been? What's so important?"

"A girl," my mom says simply, not pausing before putting her food in her mouth.

"A girl, huh?" My dad turns his attention to me. "Is that why you lost your last match? Girls will come and go. Stay focused."

Mom shoots him a look, and he instantly backpedals. "Until the right one sweeps you off your feet and then, of

course, give her attention. But if that's the case, we should meet her. If you're that serious, I mean."

"We were together for six months before you proposed, love," my Mom reminds him. "There's no 'serious' until they feel it is."

"If she's eating up all your time like that, I'd definitely like to know more," Peter says. "What girl haven't you already dated here?"

"Just because of that comment, I'm not telling you." I point at him with my fork. "How's *your* dating life?"

He grumbles about girls not making sense and how impossible they are to talk to until he changes the topic himself. Clearing my throat, I go back to eating, then excuse myself, offering to wash dishes in the morning so I can get some sleep.

By the time I drop my ass in bed, I've forgotten just about everything. My eyes start to close, but my phone buzzes, making me realize I've fallen asleep already.

I start, look through the window and see Sky with Bonnie. Bonnie is taking pictures of Dracula sitting on Sky's shoulder like a parrot. I shake my head slowly and go back to sleep, finding nightmares all about that damn spider and Sky growing another six arms.

When I jerk myself out of bed, I feel the tension in my muscles from yesterday and remember I have another long day today. I shoot Sky a message saying I hate being so busy I forget everything but work and I hope she's having fun.

It'll have to do since I've already committed to a ten-hour day and meeting my brother at the gym. I send another text telling her not to come by the gym, leave it at that, then go wash the dishes since I know my dad won't forget that promise.

“To another long day,” I say before downing my protein shake and heading out the door.

Chapter 24

Sky

“Why wouldn’t he want you to come by the gym?”
Bonnie asks, pacing my room.

I shrug. “It doesn’t matter. I’ve only shown up twice. He takes better pictures when he’s actually fighting.”

“What if he has a gym floozy?”

“He doesn’t.”

“You say that like you have proof.”

“I don’t have evidence he *does* have a floozy.” I roll my eyes. “Come on, it’s a sunny day. Let’s go for a hike.”

“Can’t we do a normal thing and go to the mall?” She taps my shoulder. “Maybe hide this hickey.”

I gasp and look down, then throw a pillow at her as she giggles. “Made you look.”

But Bonnie gets her way. We walk around the mall, window shop in our usual stores, then drags me into a lingerie shop. I try to pull away, even when she nearly jerks my arm out of the socket.

“Come on! You have a boyfriend now, let’s have fun with it,” she insists.

I stare at the lace, leather, and barely-there fabric. It is absolutely *not* me. And doing something like this feels like crossing a line. Bonnie looks at more than a few things, saying she’d love to wear it for someone but doesn’t have an occasion or a boy in mind.

“You’re going to college, you should definitely add it to your closet,” I decide. “There’s always Halloween.”

Giggling, she leads us to the corsets. We try them on, along with other bits of lingerie and silly costumes, making each other laugh. I try on a red lacy corset that could kind of double as a shirt and just stare at my reflection.

I actually feel ... sexy. Confidently sexy. Bonnie claps her hands. “Love it. You have to get it. It’s on sale, too.”

“What would I wear it with?”

“The red thong it comes with and nothing else.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

I shove her but tell her if she buys something, I’ll buy it. Naturally, she ends up buying some very intense leather lingerie. We get our purchase, and I keep trying to hide the bag as we walk around.

“What if someone sees this!” I hiss.

“Come, on, Sky. I thought you no longer cared what people think?”

“I don’t!”

I don’t want to, anyway. It shouldn’t matter. It really shouldn’t matter. I’m leaving right after New Year’s. I hold my head higher until some girls laugh, and I duck back down. Bonnie hits my hip with hers.

“You are a twelve out of ten, Sky. Don’t hide it.”

But how can I believe that just because she says so? She eventually takes me home, blows me a kiss, then drives off. I hurry up the stairs and toss my bag in the closet. I’m not wearing it. No way am I wearing it. There’s absolutely no way Ash or anyone else will see me in a corset and a thong. I’m not that kind of girl.

“Sky, can you come downstairs, please?”

Dad?

I rush downstairs and find him staring at the empty fridge. He doesn't turn to look at me, doesn't move, doesn't shut the door. I clear my throat. "Dad?"

"We should make a grocery list," he murmurs, finally closing the door. "I'll give you the money so you can go out and get some things."

"Okay."

"And we can do pizza tonight," he continues. "Maybe watch a movie."

"Okay ... " Why do I still have rocks in my stomach as he talks to me? I feel like I'm bouncing on my toes anyway. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," he nods. "Chase said you're dating someone."

"I ... am."

"You should invite him or her, I guess, over."

"We're not that serious yet." I immediately pump the brakes.

"I see. Just be careful. I'd hate for you to get invested in someone and leave." His eyes gloss for a moment. "You're leaving on the first, right?"

"Of January. Classes start the sixth. Fingers crossed that I have that internship under my belt before then."

"Right." He sits at the table. "Right."

"What kind of pizza do you want to order?"

"I'm not really hungry. I'll leave my card on the table." He sets it right there, then goes back upstairs.

Sitting down, I press the heels of my hands into my eyes as they burn. I sniff and force myself to swallow whatever I'm feeling. I'm leaving. I am. I have to. I can't stay here to take care of my dad. I can't stay here to make things

easier on him. I deserve to go to college and take the steps I need for a better life.

But why do I feel so damn guilty about that? Dad's an adult. He can handle living alone, even if he doesn't love it. Don't all parents want their kids to leave the nest? Don't they count on it? Then, he can start dating and move on with his life.

My phone buzzes, and I open it, needing a distraction before I end up crying like a little girl. It's a picture of Ash at the gym. He looks exhausted, sweaty as hell, with veins actually showing in his muscles.

The text that comes in next is simple: I'd rather be working out with you.

I ignore it, putting my phone to the side. I'm not in the mood for flirting. I don't want to think about sex. I don't want to think about Ash right now. It's not his fault. I just don't want to think at all.

So, I pull on a swimsuit, dive into the pool and stay at the bottom for as long as I can. Until my lungs are screaming, my lips trying to open for air or water, it wouldn't matter to them; then I come up, taking a deep breath just to do it again. And again. And again, until the guilt has been drowned.

I swim to the edge of the pool, then look into the house. Chase is there, talking to Dad. Based on how he's moving his hands and the way he's leaning into every word, I doubt it's a nice conversation. Dad storms out, and Chase rubs his forehead.

Our life is backwards, but it could be worse. It could be.

Chase comes out and tosses my phone on the chair. "It keeps fucking ringing."

"Where did Dad-"

“Some crappy bar because he’s all upset about-” His eyes flick to me. “Nothing.”

“Me?”

“No, Sky.”

“He’s mad that I’m leaving?” I guess. “Or that I won’t bring my boyfriend over?”

“It’s not your job to worry about this. You’re eighteen. Enjoy dating, enjoy your time, and don’t you dare give up college. Being on campus with new people will be good for you. Getting to explore the world is good. Plus, think of all the new bugs, the scorpions, the spiders.”

“Arachnids,” I say.

“Exactly!” He nods. He glances at the house. “Pizza?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Sky.” He swallows. “You’d tell me if you wanted me to stay home or if you had a problem, right? If something big happened, you’d tell me?”

“Of course.”

He nods. “I’m going to go stop Dad from being a complete idiot then. Maybe you should go to your boyfriend’s house tonight or Bonnie’s.”

I can’t argue when he’s already slamming the sliding glass door to head out of the house. Pulling myself from the pool, I towel off, then look at my phone. Three missed texts from Bonnie, talking about how much she loves her new outfit, how I should model mine in the mirror until I feel sexy, and asking what my plans are for the weekend.

Two missed texts from Ash, asking if I’m okay, if I’m going to come to his match on Friday, and a missed call from him, too. My voicemail chimes, and I listen to the message.

“Hey, I’m worried about you. If that line costs me brownie points, you can call me a dick.” He says something to

someone else. “But I miss you, and I hope we can spend some time together soon. Don’t get all stuck in your head again, okay?”

I text him back: *I’m fine. Having an early night.*

And that’s what I do. I put myself in bed and try to read a book before I just scroll through social media with the TV on in the background. When I get another message from Bonnie, then a message request from a stranger, I just put my phone on silent and roll over. Dad and Chase get home around midnight, and Dad is a sappy mess.

“I miss her so much,” he slurs. “And now everyone’s leaving. What’s wrong with me, son?”

“You’re drunk. You have to get your shit together,” Chase hisses. “And keep it down, Sky’s asleep.”

“I don’t want her to leave. Make her stay. I’ll be better, I promise. We can do game night.”

“Get some sleep, sober up, and start being better tomorrow,” Chase orders.

I pull my pillow over my head and keep it there until I suffocate myself to sleep.

I wake up to the pealing of thunder, sit up, and shake my head, rolling back over and pulling my blanket over my head. Twenty-four hours without looking at my phone is fine, right? Taking a break from everything outside my bedroom is fine. I’ll be fine.

Around three p.m., I commit to being awake, then start a horror movie marathon in my room until my brother opens the door quickly, making me scream. He looks at the TV and sighs. “Sky, you hate horror movies.”

“Well, that’s what the weather said to watch.” I pick at my blanket. “I heard you guys last night.”

Chase sits on my bed and wraps an arm around my shoulder. “Don’t let it get under your skin. Dad can be a mess, but it’s not up to us to fix it. We *can’t* fix it unless he wants to make progress.”

“But if I stay-”

“He’ll feel like shit when he gets over this. He’ll beat himself up for making you miss out on life. A life you deserve. You worked your ass off to get into college, and I’m proud you’re not letting anything stop you,” Chase says, rubbing my back.

My eyes flick to the trash, and I remind myself I took it out, just like I was supposed to. I shift uncomfortably. My bed is for me and Bonnie or me and Ash. I don’t remember the last time Chase sat with me like this.

“I know this isn’t our normal shit.” He pinches me and chuckles sadly. “But I’m not shitting on you. I’m proud.”

“Even if it’s weird.”

“Oh, you’re entirely weird, but not because of the bugs. I’m just glad you can’t torture me with that damn ant farm anymore.”

I laugh, wipe my eyes and let out a sharp exhale. “Dad wanted me to get the groceries.”

“Already done.” He punches my shoulder. “No thanks to you. But I made sure to get you some of those popsicle things since you have a vendetta against ice cream.”

I stick my tongue out at him, and he does the same back while flicking me off. “Weirdo.”

“Creep!” I yell after him.

I get up and shut my door because he *never* does, then sit back down. I flinch at the TV screen and change it to some period piece with a romantic edge. Glancing at my phone as it lights up, I sigh and give in.

No matter how easy it is, I know I can't tune out the world forever. Even if I don't want to talk about this shit. The stuff that no one can fix, just like Chase said. Venting about it again isn't going to change anything.

I see only one text from Ash: *I'm here for you; all you have to do is ask.*

But I haven't, and I don't want to. That's too much for a new relationship and a fragile friendship. Especially one with a timer on it.

Chapter 25

Ashton

Fuck, I'm worried about Sky. Even at Kenny's for dinner, I keep hoping she's okay. I head out, only saying I didn't get around to asking her to come out. But I'm not willing to blow up her phone either. When I get home, I still see the light of her TV in her room and nothing else. Checking my phone, I know that she's read my text. I haven't seen her since Sunday, and sure, she doesn't owe me her time, but goddamn, am I impatient.

It's already late June. Rubbing my jaw, I try a phone call. After four rings, I'm sure I'm going to end up leaving another voicemail, but she picks up. "Hi, Ash."

"Hey."

The silence stretches. There should not be this much radio static after a greeting.

"Are you ...?" I rub my forehead. "Are we okay? We left things on an okay note, we're okay right?"

"Not everything is about us."

Is she purposefully pissing me off? Purposefully drawing back? "Then what is it about?"

"Me. Needing time to think. I have shit to process. I'll be at your match Friday. Until then, I need some time."

What does a person say to that shit?

"Baby-"

“Please.” I hear the threat of tears. “I don’t want to be around people right now. Give me until Friday.”

“Kenny missed you at dinner – not to add guilt, just to say you were missed. His wife, Dara, really wants to meet you,” I murmur.

Nothing.

“Friday?”

“Friday,” she agrees. “No surprise visits here. And I won’t surprise you at the gym.”

“That was just yesterday. My brother came to spar with me.”

“Oh.”

“I like you being there, even if you’re the world’s biggest distraction,” I chuckle. “I feel like I have something to prove with you watching.”

“Then you’d better win on Friday.”

She hangs up, and I slump down. Sky doesn’t need me. She doesn’t need me to fight her battles. She doesn’t need me for comfort. She doesn’t need me for help. And only being wanted occasionally is going to fuck with my head.

The one relationship I’ve been in that’s lasted longer than a month had tons of communication. She wanted me involved in her life to an almost uncomfortable level, and she let me play the hero more than every now and again.

Sky is the polar opposite, and if she’s feeling shit, talking to her is an uphill battle.

Still, I make it to Friday. Work, my family, Peter’s invasive, probing questions, and my workouts keep me so exhausted it’s hard to think at all. Now that I’m here and ready to get in the ring, I feel ready. I wrap my fists, listen to my hype-up music and try to focus on kicking ass. I turn to grab my gloves and see Sky here.

“Hey,” I murmur.

She tugs on her braid, then takes a step towards me.
“Was I bitchy on the phone?”

“A little,” I shrug, grabbing my glove and starting to tug it on.

Sky holds it so I can push my hand all the way in. She holds up tape. “Does this go on, too?”

“No, just the Velcro.” She puts it on, adjusts it twice, then pats it before picking up the other glove. She offers it up and meets my eyes. I sigh. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Family stuff,” she whispers. “I wasn’t in the mood for flirting or ... talking.”

“And you still aren’t?” I guess, shoving my fist into the glove.

She smooths the first round of Velcro before wrapping and sticking the second round. “I take a while to process. I’m like a ... a nineties computer.”

“But we’re okay?”

“You say that like I have other options?”

“You’ve made it clear you don’t need me, Sky. That’s kind of new to me. I don’t love it, but I’m trying to deal with it, but it ... it makes me feel disposable.”

She grunts and pulls out her camera. “Just because I don’t *need* you doesn’t mean I don’t *want* you around. I just suck at explaining and don’t feel like adding my problems to your shoulders.”

“My shoulders are broad. I can handle it.”

Sky strokes over my chest, sending tendrils of heat across my skin. I take a sobering breath. She gently kisses the spot over my heart. “Maybe you can handle me after your match. I’m here alone, no date, no chaperone.”

She's tempting me with a damn good time, and she knows it. Despite every issue we have to iron out, I'm a sucker for more time with her, touching her, kissing her, all of it. My lips curve up. "Does that mean I get a kiss for luck?"

"You get two." She stands on her toes and kisses me hungrily.

I grope her back with my useless boxing gloves and lick into her mouth. If she *refuses* to need me, I'm going to make sure she wants me enough that she's counting down the seconds until we can get out of here and get tangled up with each other. I suck her tongue, nibble her bottom lip and pull out every trick in the book before letting her go.

"Kick ass for me."

"Yes, baby," I promise.

And I do. I take plenty of hits, but remember to use my left, keep my frame flexible, bob, weave, take the open shots and use my head as much as I use my fists. I'm going to one up Rocky by winning, not just learning a valuable life lesson.

Once my opponent is down, I throw my hands up victoriously. After one bounce, I help the guy up, give him a fist bump, then spit out my mouthpiece and tear at the Velcro with my teeth. Sky holds up the camera as I meet her eyes and snaps a picture.

One step closer to the finale.

Adrenaline courses through my veins, making me invincible and sure. Sure that I want to throw her over my shoulder caveman style, claim her as my own, and drag her to the nearest private place.

But sanity returns. I ditch my gloves in my locker, get through a shower, change and find Sky waiting for me just outside the door. I tug her towards me and kiss her right there. She pushes against my chest, checking the hallway.

"Be careful."

“So you keep saying,” I murmur. “I’ll grab us food and meet you back at your place?”

“Yes, please.”

Sky pecks my lips, then a bruise on my jaw before walking away. I watch her, see her glance over her shoulder and wink before heading to my own car. She used to be a sucker for Taco Bell, so I take a chance and order half the menu for us since I know I’m going to eat a healthy amount.

Parking at my house, I dash across the yard and knock on her door. She opens it, glances at the stairs, then pulls me inside. Her finger presses against her lips. I nod, and we creep up the stairs. She edges by a door, her parents’ room, I think, then we get to her room, with the door shut and locked.

“Is there anything on the menu you didn’t buy?” She stares at the huge bag.

“I’m a growing boy. Hush.” I tap her nose. “Eat whatever you want.”

She inhales two tacos and hands me a soda from her mini fridge because, of course, she has one. We eat in silence, but then she turns the TV on and sits back against her bed. “You fought well. Really well.”

“I had incentive,” I say. “Going to share anything else about this silent week?”

“Ash, it’s ...” She undoes her braid. “Do you really want to know when we could be making out or un-making my bed?”

“Yes. I want to know you, Sky. You’re my girlfriend, remember?”

So she tells me, after a very long stretch of thinking. Tells me all about how her dad seemed fine, but then he brought up her leaving and shut down. How he fought with Chase, then went out to drink. How he came home saying he’d

do anything for her to stay, even be better. She digs her fists into her eyes until I pull her hands away.

Tears spill over, and I drag her into my lap. She cries into my shirt and clutches me. “I feel stupid crying.”

“Why?”

“I’m not a kid.”

“Adults cry all the time. It’s healthy to cry,” I assure.

She doesn’t argue. She pulls herself together way too quickly and rubs my sides. “It’s making me second-guess everything. The internship. That photography club I want to join. Going to Arizona, period. Would online classes be terrible? I could stay here. He’d get better if I put more effort into helping him. I mean, freshman year, do I really need to be *at school*?”

“Yes,” I whisper, even though I’d love for her to stay. “You absolutely do.”

“You don’t want me to stay?”

“I would love to have more time with you.” Because I fucking hate the idea of her not being right next door to me. “But college is important. Not just for school but for you as a person.”

“I could go to one closer.”

“You chose that school for a reason. Your mentors, remember? You’ll regret missing out on that opportunity if you don’t go.”

She groans and clutches my face between her hands. “Why can’t you just be a shitty selfish boyfriend and tell me to stay?”

“Sorry. I’ll be a pissy boyfriend for you later, bringing up this long ass silence and how well you talked about it and holding you to that standard from now on,” I warn.

“Apparently, I’m insecure as fuck.”

“You? You’re a demigod.”

“Which you don’t give a shit about.” I tap her nose. “Or you would have welcomed me with a hug on day one.”

Sky nods, then looks over my face. “No ice this time?”

“No. Keep that nurse costume in the closet.”

She blushes, jumps up and shuts the closet door, holding it shut behind her. I arch an eyebrow. “Hiding another boyfriend in there?”

“No!”

“A gift for me?”

“...No.”

“Something naughty?” I stand up.

She shakes her head aggressively, which means it absolutely is naughty and means I need to see it. But Sky, minx that she is, takes her shirt off, throws it at me, and instantly has me distracted because she’s not wearing a bra.

Her defiant eyes meet mine, and I arch an eyebrow as I lay my forearm against the door and look down at my too-hot-to-handle girlfriend. What to do with her? Throw her on the bed and ravish her thoroughly? Throw her on the bed and dive into the closet to find out what she’s hiding? Make her keep talking so she stops using sex as a fucking weapon?

Either way ...

I toss her over my shoulder, making her gasp, then drop her onto the bed. I fit my mouth to hers and lick deep while pinning her arms over her head. “You should tell me, Sky.”

“No.”

“I’d be very ... incentivized to make you come.”

“You already are.” She lifts her hips and grinds against my very obvious hard on. Sweatpants don’t hide shit. “You should put this to work after your win.”

“Now that I know you want my cock, you don’t get to have it.” I kiss down her neck, then bite her breast. She squirms on the bed until I lick across her nipple. “I’ll just have to tease you until you’re good for me.”

“Ash,” she pants. “Don’t tease.”

“I haven’t even *started* to tease you.”

I suck her nipple between my lips and circle it with my tongue, listening to those breathy moans that roll out of her throat as she tries to tug her wrists free. I grind against her, making sure to rub my boner right where she needs me. Sky’s body lifts off the bed to close the space between us as I trail kisses across her chest to her other nipple. I bite softly and she squeaks but doesn’t pull away.

Picking my head up, I press a kiss between her perfect tits and take in her lusty expression. “What are you hiding in the closet?”

“If you’re good, you might see it one day, asshole.”

“Soon then.” I nip her breast again. “I can work with that.”

Chapter 26

Sky

I shiver as Ash keeps licking and kissing across my chest. I don't want to think about our conversation or anything but the way he feels against me. When he grinds against me again, right where I need him, heat teases my nerves, begging me to give in and enjoy the moment.

“Ash.” I take a ragged breath.

He groans and kisses me hungrily, tongue plundering deep like he can find treasure in just my mouth. My eyes roll back, and I nod into the kiss. I want this. I want him however I can have him.

“You still want me?” I ask when he draws back.

“Why wouldn't I?” He jerks my hips towards him again.

“I just cried in front of you and ... was a bitch and-”

He kisses me again, slowly, softly, sinking deeper into me than I want him to. I feel like he's hitting bits deep inside my brain, my heart maybe, that I don't want touched, that's so damn uncomfortable.

“I like you,” he says against my mouth. “Even the sassy, sarcastic, crying, bitchy parts.”

I roll on top of him and kiss him again. Ash moans and strokes down my back, grabs my ass and drags me over him, encouraging me to roll my hips and take control. I pant and kiss him again, kiss along his neck and bite hard.

“You’re allowed to leave marks now,” I whisper.

“Don’t tell me that unless you mean it,” he chuckles, always ready to make a joke. “Because I’ll mark you up, Sky. Claim you as mine completely.”

I whimper and nod. “I mean it.”

He groans but lets me bite his chest instead of flipping us over. Ash’s cock twitches against me, and I nod again, rolling my body on his as I drag my hands over his sculpted chest and abdomen.

“You’re kind of ... different.”

He flips us then, holding me down again with a teasing look. “What kind of different?”

“The good kind. Better than I could have hoped.”

He kisses me hungrily, then tears off my pants. “Yeah, you get to come for that.”

I laugh, and then he flips me onto my knees. I look over my shoulder and wiggle my ass at him. He groans and gives me a hard swat. The sound echoes, and the sting spreads over my skin. I flinch, and he chuckles.

His zipper comes down, and he reaches into his pocket again, pulling out the condom. I feel weird in this position, just waiting, so I start to roll over, just to be forced back in place. The edge of his zipper bites into my thigh as he drags his nose over my back.

“Stay where I put you, Sky.”

“But ... I’m not doing anything.”

“And I’m enjoying the view.” His hand strokes over my slit, teasing me with one finger pushing deeper, rubbing my clit, then dragging to my entrance, dipping the tip of his finger in, then circling my clit again. “A lot.”

I drop to my elbows and spread my legs a little. He kisses the back of my thigh, then up to my ass. I squirm.

“That’s still a no.”

“I know, baby,” he croons. “When you’re ready, you’ll ask ... or demand since you’re so sassy.” That earns another spank.

But then Ash is against me, his cock nudging close. I brace myself, fingers tightening in the pillow. Ash kisses across the back of my shoulder. “It shouldn’t hurt as much this time. Relax for me.”

“Easier said than done,” I whimper.

So Ash kisses up my neck as his cock rubs against my clit, teasing me with almost bites, almost thrusts. I pant and roll back against him. He bites the back of my shoulder softly, a test, then harder until I whimper and squirm.

“You have no idea what you do to me, Sky,” he groans. “How crazy you drive me.” A soft lick over the bite. “How much I like you.”

“Fuck me, Ash,” I beg.

“You want me inside you?” He asks, cupping my breast and squeezing my nipple. His other hand teases my pussy. “Right here?”

“Yes!”

“Better than phone sex?” He demands like he’s just going to talk and do nothing.

“Yes. Please.” I wiggle against him. “I want you inside me.”

He groans and thrusts, no slow build-up this time. I gasp and feel pleasure tear through me. “Oh, fuck.”

“Better?”

“So much.”

He thrusts deep into me, hitting spots he didn’t touch last time. I bury my face in the pillow, trying to hide every

sound I'm making. The sound of skin on skin, of Ash grunting, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, keeping uneven time.

"Goddamn," I groan before biting the pillow.

"Not yet, you don't." Ash changes the angle, wrapping himself around me to turn my face and kiss me hungrily while grinding deep inside me. When he licks across my bottom lip, he thrusts back into me. My lips part, and he groans. "I love the faces you make when I'm inside you."

It's such a dirty thing to say, but it makes this even hotter, just like his body rubbing against mine, all over me, not a single place untouched.

"Ash, I ... I can't. You feel" Words are so hard.

"You can come, baby." I push my face back into the pillow, but he jerks my hair up. "But I get to hear it."

I whimper and bite my lip as he increases the pace again, wrapping his arm around my lower belly and squeezing so everything is so much more intense. My eyes roll back, and I bite my lip harder, trying so hard to be quiet. We have to be quiet. My dad is just one room away.

I lift my hand and cover my mouth as I come apart, softening every moan and yell against my hand. But Ash doesn't stop. If anything, he goes harder. Each panting breath echoes in my ear and makes my body tighten harder.

I'm shaking or quivering, hot and cold, everything at once. "Ash."

"Again," he orders, voice husky, barely there. "I want it again, Sky."

His fingers push between my legs, sliding along where our bodies meet, teasing and stroking. Everything is bliss, it's too good to be real, he's too good to be real. The delirium spreads across my body, and then I'm coming again, biting my hand this time because I can't let us be interrupted now.

Ash lets out a low moan as his body tremors and he finishes as I reach the perfect peak of my climax. Then we collapse. I squirm, body still rolling like he's inside me, even though he's rolled to the far side of the bed to take care of himself.

He drags me to him and kisses me back to life. I feel energy pulse out from my chest, radiating over my skin until I clutch at him and draw him back to me, begging for more, for everything.

"Fucking hell, Sky," he pants, hand on mine as I rub from his chest to his abdomen and back. "You drive me insane."

"Not a one and done?" I ask.

"Considering that was number two?" He chuckles. "Hell no. Keep this up, and I'm not letting go of you all summer."

I giggle and kiss across his chest. "I like you."

"Three damn good words to hear," he sighs, playing with my hair. "I'm glad."

We're quiet for a long while, and I try so hard not to overthink this. Not to play out every future scenario. I shiver, and Ash casually pulls the blanket over us.

"This is a damn good night," he murmurs. "I'm tempted to ask to spend the whole thing here."

"Sneaking you out in the morning will be harder," I hum.

But I hear a door open and close downstairs. I jump out of bed, lock my door, then realize exactly how naked I am. Ash looks me over with a wolfish hunger and motions me towards him with a finger.

I glance at the open window and dive for the bed. He wraps me up, moves the curtain in place, and cuddles me close

under the blanket. He starts to talk, but I put my hand over his mouth.

“Sky, you home?”

“Yeah. I’m getting ready for bed,” I yell.

Ash strokes down my back with just one finger, then cups my bottom, digging his nails in. I shake my head at him.

“Everything okay?” Chase asks. “I know things have been hard.”

“Very hard,” Ash mutters into my palm.

I wiggle against his hand as he tries to push between my legs. “I’m – I’m dealing with it.”

“We need to talk, Sky. There’s something you should know,” Chase says.

The scent of sex still lingers in the room. I’m sweaty, my damp hair is sticking to my face. The rumpled sheets tell their own story. Even if I were to hide Ash in the closet or under the bed, Chase would know something’s up the second he enters this room.

“Can we talk tomorrow? I’m exhausted,” I reply, my hand tightening against Ash’s mouth.

A short beat passes as I stare at the door, bracing for a persistent reply. My body slumps with relief when he responds with, “Yeah. M’ kay.”

Chase’s footsteps fade as he walks away, and I punch Ash’s shoulder while pulling my hand away from his mouth. “Fucker.”

“You’re cute when you’re frazzled.”

“Don’t you start with me,” I grumble.

“It’s not my first time having to be sneaky, bumble bee. This reward is a lot better, though.”

He kisses me, but I'm not thrilled with the idea of him so casually comparing me to someone else. Especially when I can't do the same. He's been my first everything. First kiss. First boyfriend. First sex. First painless sex. First man in my bed.

"I can tell you're thinking."

"What?" I ask.

"You stop kissing when you're thinking." He taps my head. "What?"

"You're my first in a lot of things," I say slowly. "And you have experience. I mean, you don't push for sex. You care more about talking to me, and ... I like that, I do, I just feel like I'm learning everything right now, and you already know all the rules."

"And?"

And it's not fucking even. Not close to even.

"It scares me," I simplify.

Ash kisses my forehead softly, then my temple. "Anything I can do?"

"Why are you with me?"

He pauses, obviously confused. He looks over my face slowly. "Sky, I *like* you."

"Yeah, but why? What changed?"

"Me."

Not the answer I was expecting, but I nod for him to continue.

"Being at school and feeling like a fucking ... idiot, a fish out of water, all of it ... it was hell. I realized before I left that I'd made you feel the same way, and you didn't deserve it. Chase could handle the punches I threw at him, but you couldn't."

I swallow as he cups my cheek.

“You’d been so sweet and wild ... and I come back, and you’re on the offensive, and it’s sexy as hell but raised so many questions, and the more I looked into it, the more I looked into you, the more time we spent together, the more I realized how amazing you are. When I realized you were around me for me ... not for what you expected me to be ... that sealed it.”

“Ash.”

“And how much I wanted to be with you, learn more, be the reason you smile, or a reason, even if it’s with a time limit.” He leans forward. “Sky, I don’t waste my time, and I don’t like wasting someone else’s. That’s why I mostly have flings, and why my few romantic relationships were short. I feel like we have something here, something good. If you don’t, now’s the time to tell me. Don’t drag it out.”

I suck my bottom lip as I look over his earnest face. Fucking hell, this man is going to ruin me. And I have the sneaking feeling that I’m going to let him.

Chapter 27

Ashton

I'm actually holding my breath while Sky processes this. Being open is easy with her. Being *me* is easy with her. Her support, her affection, the little clues she gives me about who she is, her life, all of it has my stomach in knots, my heart beating out of rhythm, my whole self on fire.

Dizziness is setting in, but finally, Sky kisses me softly. I kiss her back, breathing her in, hoping this means what I think it means and isn't a kiss goodbye. When she draws back, her nose brushes mine. "There's something here."

"Enough for you to stay my semi-secret girlfriend and maybe join us this Wednesday at Kenney's?"

"Yes to the first one and maybe to the second. I'm more worried about getting you out of here at some point."

"We'll wait until we hear snoring," I suggest. "Maybe we'll have to entertain ourselves with some T.V. and talking."

She gives me that genuine smile, the one that makes me feel like pure sunshine. She turns on the T.V., and I grab my shirt to drag it over her. I pull on my pants, and we settle into bed. My phone vibrates, and I see a text from my brother.

Opening it, so Sky can see, I look at the message.

He's asking if I went home with an adoring fan.

"Are you an adoring fan, bumble bee?"

"No." She kisses my bruised eyebrow. "I'm a critic."

"Of course, you are."

I type back that I'm with my girlfriend and will be home eventually.

He sends a gif of a guy humping his bed, and I roll my eyes before exiting and putting my phone down. Sky checks her own phone, sends a message, and puts it by mine.

"Bonnie."

"Of course." I pull her back to my chest. "Too bad you're all mine tonight."

"You should feed Dracula again," she murmurs.

I turn and see the spider a whole lot closer than expected. I jump, and Sky laughs against my neck. "He's in a cage, he can't get you."

"Do they bite?"

"He hasn't bitten me." But she considers it. "Anything with teeth can bite."

I tap my chest where the painful bite she left is still stinging. "I'm well aware."

"You bit me, too," she grumbles.

"And spanked you," I remind, tapping her hip. "I think you should keep my shirt."

"I think you should keep it in your pants," she bites back. "My family knows I'm *dating* someone. They don't need to think about it any harder. Me, wearing your shirt, putting it in the laundry could raise questions."

"Not to be a dick, but would they notice? You wear oversized shirts all the time." I lift her shirt and peek at her ass.

She swats at me. "Behave."

"I like my view, what can I say?"

We sit there in silence for a while, and she cuddles closer as we watch T.V. "I'll keep it ... until Wednesday."

I kiss her again and again, and then a third time because I have no control around her. Sky talks to me about what she's been up to, not at all talking about her mom again. But she yawns, dragging me into one, and I look at the time. It's nearly two in the morning. She rubs her face against my neck.

“You're comfortable.”

“So are you.” But I drag the blanket over her shoulder.

I don't want to leave, even with my arm almost numb around her and her hair sticking to my beard, I want to hold onto her. I press my lips to her head. “Want me to try and sneak out?”

“In a little bit,” she says through another yawn.

I wrap a second arm around her and let my eyes close. Just a little bit of time. Just a nap. That's all. A good, much-needed nap after excellent sex and a hard fight. I snuggle closer, press my face tighter against her and get as comfortable as possible.

Something moves, and I jump, looking around.

I'm definitely not in my room. I rub at my eyes and see Sky getting out of bed. I groan and sit up. She looks at me and kisses my cheek before peeking outside her room. After listening for a moment, she claims my hand and slowly walks me downstairs after I grab my phone and steal one of her damn oversized shirts to wear.

I pull her tight and kiss her before leaving.

When I get home, I kick off my pants, pull off Sky's shirt and tuck into bed. It's not quite as comfortable, but I'll definitely be able to sleep.

I get up when a pillow comes down on my face. Gasping, I sit up and look around. Peter arches his eyebrow. “Ready to spill yet?”

Groaning, I rub my face. “What time is it?”

“Fucking noon.” He motions to my alarm clock. “Okay, so I have this narrowed down. You always leave your car here, so she must come pick you up.”

“Sure,” I grunt, laying back down. “Let me sleep, dickwad.”

“Sure, bitch, after you tell me who you’re dating.” He sits on my bed. When I don’t answer, he thwaps me across my back. “Stop being a fucking asshole about it and tell me.”

“Not until it’s serious.” I grumble into my pillow. “Leave me alone.”

He hits me with my pillow, hits me again, then groans and finally walks out of my room. As if I wanted more time with him. I shake my head and force myself out of bed. Standing up, I stretch and take inventory of the damage from yesterday. My shoulders ache, my arms throb, but I only have two bad bruises to show from the fight. And that damn bite mark on my chest.

Sky’s a wicked little thing when she wants to be.

I look at my phone and see absolutely nothing there. No texts, no messages on social media, nothing. I rub my shoulders, get through another hot shower, trying to work out my muscles before grabbing some food downstairs, fully clothed.

My mom smiles at me. “Hi, honey.”

“Hi.” I kiss her cheek.

“Late night?”

“I should have just spent the night,” I grumble.

She laughs and rubs my arm. “As long as she treats you well.”

“She does. She can be prickly, but ... she’s good. Keeps my ego down.”

“And your dick?” Peter bounces in. “Give me a hint at least. Or I’m just going to start asking around town and be a huge thorn in your side.”

“You should worry more about your own dating life.”

“Speaking of, I’m going to go offer an olive branch to Sky. I thought about what you said. I gotta apologize.”

My hackles raise. I don’t have a thing to say. Not about his choice. I rub my jaw. “Don’t expect her to suddenly flip a switch and love you.”

“Nah. Maybe if I get in good with her, I can go for her hotter best friend. Bonnie is fu- ...” He glances at Mom and her swear jar. “Delicious. Plus, she’s more my speed, less weird.”

“Mm,” I say simply.

With that, he grabs the muffins on the table, puts them on a plate and walks out. My mom arches her eyebrow at me, and I give her the same look, waiting for her to give me an answer to whatever she’s thinking.

“You had a good win last night,” she says simply. “Maybe I’ll come to your next one.”

“You can’t yell at the person fighting me,” I remind. “You have to behave.”

“We’ll see.”

The next two weeks are easy, comparatively. Sky comes over to Kenny’s, and, of course, his wife, Dara, loves her. She has a good time but still isn’t open to PDA. My next match is another win, but Mom doesn’t show, which is good because with Sky and Bonnie there, both cheering for me, Sky getting pissy with the ref and taking pictures, I’m sure Mom would figure it out.

And I even manage to steal her for an actual date. It’s just a drive in, but I don’t care, I’m putting effort into it. She’s

still hesitant and nervous to do anything outside her own bedroom. We haven't had a repeat of our pool fun, not even a hike, but I'm hoping the drive in will fix it. I choose a horror-comedy mix that I hope she'll like.

I text her just before I leave and see her skitter out of her front door. She glances at my house, then jumps in my car and ducks like someone will see her. I laugh and pull out onto the road. We have to go to the next town over for the drive in, which means she starts to relax, but something is bothering her. I can tell.

The way she chews on her bottom lip, stares out the window, taps her toe to her own rhythm, rather than the music. I take her hand and kiss her palm. "Sky?"

"Your brother is pissing me off."

"The muffins?"

"He's angling." She doesn't provide any other information.

Be a good brother and keep my mouth shut about how he wants to be with Bonnie, or be a good boyfriend and out him. Before I can decide, she continues. "He apologized to me but did it horribly. Saying 'sorry if your feelings were hurt' and suggested me having another party at the end of summer, a goodbye party."

"That's not a terrible idea. Bonnie's heading out. Chase is leaving. Isn't there anyone else you want to see before they go?"

She shakes her head slowly. "I don't have friends outside of Bonnie." After a deep breath that humbles me all over again, she plays with her fingers in her lap. "This group of girls was really nice to me in my Sophomore year. But then they got all distant and bothered. I realized it was because they just wanted to swim at my pool and play the games and shit that I had. So, when I stopped inviting them over, they didn't have a use for me."

I squeeze her hand. “Fuck them.”

When we finally get to the drive in and park, Sky looks around, expecting to run into someone. I don't blame her. It seems to be a constant thing in Indiana, but I wrap my arm around her, pull her close, and kiss her every chance I get. She feeds me Twizzlers and giggles when I tear through them like an animal.

This is what dating should be like – fun. Us making memories that matter, kissing whenever we feel the urge, teasing and sassing each other without any kind of fear. I take her out to dinner at some hole in the wall restaurant, where we have a great time, and then comes the tricky part. Dropping her off.

“Sky, I'm not dropping you at the corner of the avenue.”

“Yes, you are. With your brother being all weird and mine being determined to meet ... you, this is how it has to be.”

She kisses me hungrily, then jumps out before I can stop her. I make sure she gets home safely either way, then park and hum to myself as I walk in. I grab an orange from the kitchen and head upstairs.

Another weekend for the record books. I'm starting to think this shit with Sky is the real thing. Sure, we still have to figure out how to tell our families and the huge question of the future, but I can hold out for three months until she comes home for spring break, right? Then, another two or so until summer.

Once I'm back in the league, I can move to different areas to fight. I won't have to settle for Indiana. Arizona could be an improvement. I think of all of that as I flop back in bed. I get a call and pick up the phone eagerly.

“I'm going to be a little busy this week, so I probably won't be as talkative,” Sky says.

“Everything okay?”

She swallows audibly. “Um ... so I found out what Chase wanted to talk to me about the other night. Apparently, my mom will be visiting soon.”

I sit straight up and see her holding Dracula, eyes on him and only him. Fuck, this is hard for her. “Sky.”

“Two years of nothing and all of a sudden ... Dad’s a mess, and ... there’s just too much going on. I’m sorry.”

“Do you want help?” I let the question hang. I’ve told her she just has to ask, but it’s my turn to offer, my chance to prove this is a serious relationship, not just me getting my hands on her whenever possible. I’m taking it.

Chapter 28

Sky

I hate that question. I'd rather focus on Dracula, charting his own exploration across my arm. He digs his little feet into my shirt and moves the fabric over my skin before making it to my shoulder.

"I don't know."

"I don't mean me being there, baby." He drops his voice. "I mean talking to me. You never talk about her. You ... you don't have to. It'll drive me crazy, but I'm trying very hard not to force you."

"I just don't know what to say."

It's true. I don't know what to think. I don't know how to feel. One moment I'm mad at Chase for keeping the secret that he's been talking to her all this time, making plans for her to visit; the next, I feel sorry for him. For Dad. That hope in our father's eyes will be fading soon, I just know it. Disappointment will run riot in this house, and I'll be forced to live with it.

Again.

When Chase told Dad, he immediately cleaned himself up. It explains why there's four new garbage bags sitting outside. He cleaned out his room, he's actually there. He's present and alive and all for the woman who left him.

"It's wrong," I whisper.

"I'm coming over."

“No!” I yell, startling my poor spider and sending him skittering away. I curse, drop my phone and bundle Dracula in a sheet. I set him in his tank, and he runs for cover. I apologize to him, slide the lid back in place and pick up my phone. “Please. Not right now.”

“Sky ...”

I look over at him through the window and see him pacing. I know he wants to help. He wants to support me, be here for me. I feel bad telling him no, but if I lean on him for this ... it’s too big.

Then I’ll need him, and when he leaves me, when I leave, either way, it will be so much worse. Leaving is hard enough, but with my mom coming in and riling everything up, my dad might be worse than he started and then who will pick up the pieces.

“I need to get my bearings before I can ask for help. I need to know how to even start to help this,” I insist. “I know you want to help, and that’s good. That’s enough for now.”

He takes a slow breath. “You frustrate the hell out of me.”

I chew my bottom lip.

“You don’t have to tackle everything by yourself. It’s okay to need someone else every now and again. If not me ... if it *can’t* be me, have Bonnie around.”

The fact he takes himself out of the equation surprises me. The last two weeks have been filled with sex, time together, texting, phone calls, and building his online profile. He’s even let me take videos.

His Instagram page is doing well, with constant engagement on his workout and fighting videos. Even if it’s mostly fangirls fawning over him, his numbers are increasing, and he has so much going for him. But he’s always focused on me, wants to weave himself closer to me, deeper into my life.

The fact he's willing to take himself out of the equation is shocking.

"I will."

"And keep me updated, at least. One text a day?"

"Okay," I say.

We linger on the phone, and he sighs. "You drive me crazy."

"Hate you," I murmur.

"Liar."

I hang up and try to sleep. I get an hour. Then I'm up because I hear others up. Dad is downstairs, cleaning up. I gape at him. He's a stranger. He's shaved his face, looks younger and almost seems happy.

"I knew she'd come back," he says to himself.

"Dad."

"I knew it, Sky. I just had to wait. Had to give her some time." He flashes a huge smile that lodges my stomach in my throat.

How can I possibly break his happiness with the obvious? That Mom isn't going to stay. I feel it in my bones. So all I can do is help him. We put things away, organize things, then sit. Dad talks excitedly and shares photos of Mom and us as kids.

But when Chase comes in, and I see the absolute pity on his face, I can't wait anymore. I can't be here. I can't sit and watch my dad have such pointless hope without saying anything. Chase takes a slow breath. "Dad, Mom's just coming for a few days."

The smile freezes on his face, but I swear I can see him shattering inside. I hug him. "It's okay, Daddy. You have us. We love you. We don't need her."

“She’s staying,” he says softly. “I . . . I know she is. We’re her family.”

“I don’t think so, Daddy,” Chase replies.

“She’s staying!” He jumps up, ripping himself from my arms, then goes upstairs, slamming the door.

“Why did you say that?” I exclaim.

Chase shakes his head at me. “We can’t give him false hope, Sky. That would be cruel.”

“And that wasn’t!?” I yell. “You couldn’t give him just one day of being happy?!”

“Don’t you yell at me!” He booms, making me sit down. “He needs to get his shit together! I’m leaving in less than a month, and you’re here for five more! You think I want to leave you here with him like that again? Without school to hold you over? Without Bonnie?”

I sniff and shake my head at him. “I don’t *need* you.”

“Don’t you start, Sky.”

“I’m not like you or him. I can be on my own just fine! I handled things while you were gone. I took care of him and myself. I made sure everything was taken care of! I’m strong enough on my own.”

“You shouldn’t have to be!” Chase raises his voice again. “You’re the child! He’s the parent! No one should have to do everything on their own!”

“Oh, screw this,” I hiss, then I storm out of the house, get in my car and scream until I’m breathless.

I want to run away, I want to throw myself at the woods, I want to disappear into the trees and just be done with all of this. But I can’t drive like this. I can’t. Bonnie’s at work. My phone shakes in my hand, but I manage to get Ash’s number up.

Staring at it for a long time, I almost call. I'm so close to calling. Until I see Peter. He waves as if we're friends, then heads out. I scream again and drive to a closer park, one that I know I can make it to. I follow the trails until I hit my favorite spot, right by a creek. I sit there, trying to focus on the water, to just breathe without the weight of all this shit on my shoulders.

I don't need my brother. I don't need Ash. I don't need anyone.

Putting my toes in the water, I take a few pictures of the stream through the trees, my feet, and post one online. Just proof that I'm alive. I shiver and hug myself. I stare at Ash's shirt. I guess it never made it to the laundry. I press my face to his shirt and actually feel myself relax.

I don't need him.

But he smells good.

And I like how he feels wrapped around me. I like our time together. And I don't want to leave him. God, I'm an idiot. A huge idiot. But there's so much on my mind. Too much on my mind. My mom will be here tomorrow for a few days, and then Dad's fallout.

I can't drag Ash through that without changing our relationship. I like us being casual, but going through that means admitting I'm with him because he wouldn't tolerate not coming over to check on me or having me over.

Still, my fingers act without my brain. I call him and stare at it when he answers the phone, still in my hand. He raises his voice, and I finally put the phone to my ear.

"Sky? Is this a butt dial? I'll talk to your ass. I'll do it all day."

"I'm not home," I say softly.

A long pause answers before he speaks. "Where are you?"

“I’m safe,” I assure. “I am. I just couldn’t be in my house anymore, and my fingers ... my fingers just dialed and ...”

“Do you want me there?”

I sniff and fold in on myself. The word gets caught in my throat the first time, then comes out as a sob. “Yes.”

“Tell me where baby.” His voice is so gentle. “I’ll be there ASAP.”

I tell him where I am the best way I can, then hang up and try to hold myself together. Maybe Chase had a point. This is too much. Too much outside my control, too much that I can’t handle alone, even if I want to.

Ash is panting when he arrives; he picks me up and jerks me into a hug. I squeeze him tightly and cry, just sobbing as if I haven’t in years. He sits with me and doesn’t let me go. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t try to make my shit better, just hugs me and lets me wipe my face and snot all over his shirt.

Once I cry myself out, he lifts my chin, looks at my face and kisses my forehead softly. He lets out his own heavy breath, then pulls me onto his lap. I cling to him all the same, tightening my fingers in his shirt.

“This is a good spot.”

“Yeah,” I agree, voice all sticky.

“We should have a picnic here sometime. Play in the stream.”

“It has leeches.” I wipe my nose on my own shirt, but that’s his, too. “I didn’t want to call.”

“I know.”

“I left without calling you. I thought about it, but I ...” I take a slow breath. “I’m going to talk.”

“Okay.”

I tell him everything. Tell him about Dad cleaning, helping him, Chase popping the happy bubble aggressively, our shouting match, how insane I feel. Even when it doesn't make sense, he just listens.

When I finish, I'm exhausted. Ash rubs my back and kisses the top of my head. "Holy shit."

"See."

"You're too fucking strong. If I put you in the ring, you'd slaughter every man," he whispers.

My brow furrows, and I look up at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Sky, that's so much shit on your shoulders, and you're upset, not because there's that much, but because you're having trouble juggling it. Do you know how insane that is? I get overwhelmed with my job, training, and wanting to be a good boyfriend and son. I got overwhelmed by school and feeling like shit."

"So?"

"So you're a badass and should own it." He hugs me again. "And not work yourself so fucking hard."

I wipe at my nose. "I don't know how to ... to not fix a problem if I see it. If I don't do it, who will?"

"Your dad needs to. Let the shit hit the fan and see how quickly it wakes him up. It'll be uncomfortable, and I'm not saying I agree with what Chase said, but doing everything for someone doesn't let them grow."

"But ..."

"But nothing. I'm right about this." His lips brush my ear. "And I know I'm right because you're the evidence."

I turn to look at him, and he kisses me softly. "You should never ask me again why I want to be with you. I'm

preparing to fight off every man who tries to seduce you right now.”

I croak out a laugh and wipe my eyes again. “Yeah. Yeah. Who doesn’t want a snotty, stubborn creep who collects bugs and has a tarantula?”

“Who doesn’t want a woman who is willing to take care of her own shit, push herself to be the best possible version of herself, bring others to her level, and isn’t afraid to kill her own bugs?”

We sit for a while in silence, and I wipe my eyes again and again. This is all new territory. Talking to someone about this as if it’s not mine to take care of and actually trying to think of it that way.

Should I let Dad fight his battles? Should I stop being so overbearing? Am I the reason he’s stayed the way he has for two very long years? I rub my forehead and feel Ash’s fingers across my arm.

“Wearing my shirt?”

“I didn’t realize it until I got here.”

“You look good in it.” He kisses my jaw. “And I’m glad you called. I get to help.”

“You’re a good boyfriend,” I admit.

He beams, eyes scrunching shut as he flashes his pearly whites. I take a picture, unashamed. He pushes my camera away and kisses me hungrily, licking deep into my mouth as he cups the back of my head.

I moan and thread my fingers through his hair, massaging. He draws back and leans into my hand. I keep rubbing him as I press my forehead against his chest. I’m not prepared for this Ash, the one who supports me, who takes on challenges *with* me.

“Is this the real you?” I ask on a pant.

“I’ve been real with you since our fight, gorgeous. You bring it out in me.”

This is the kind of Ash I could love.

Chapter 29

Ashton

The bubbling of the creek distracts me for a while. Every leaf that falls in gets swept away. I think I hear frogs, maybe bugs, I'm not sure which, but with the soft grass under me and Sky in my arms, I feel pretty invincible. I adjust her in my arms, and she slumps.

Adjusting her again, I find her asleep, completely knocked out even though it's the middle of the day. I stroke over her cheek. Her nose is still red, her eyes all puffy, but she's harmless, innocent when she's asleep.

Rubbing her thigh, I decide to let her sleep. I should probably be preparing for training, but I've never missed a day. So, after a few minutes of that gnawing on me, I call Frank and tell him I won't be able to make it today due to an emergency.

He says he still expects me to do some training on my own. I agree, then look down and find Sky awake. She hums in her throat and sits up. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize."

"I should get home. I can't ... I can't run from my problems."

"No, but you can take a break from them." I lay down with her by the water.

Her phone rings, and she pulls it out. It's Chase. She silences the phone and opens her mouth to talk before the

phone rings again. She groans. “What? ... I needed to get out. I’ll be back before tomorrow.”

I think I hear him say “no,” but Sky asks what the rush is.

Then she’s sitting up. “I have to get home.”

“Sky.”

“*Now*, now. Like fucking right now. Mrs. Robbins saw Dad leaving earlier, and he seemed totally out of it. We need to find him before something crazy happens.”

I take a slow breath and stand up. There’s no talking her out of it. I remind her three times that he’s an adult. That he has to face his own demons eventually, but she doesn’t care. She’s determined to do what she can.

After a full kiss, she gets in her car and speeds off. I can’t even offer to help with this. I want to help her, but her dad has to make his own choices. I get home and realize only Mom is there. She looks at me, my shirt, then gets up.

“Ash?”

“Can I trust you?”

“Of course!” She pauses, holding her hands up nervously. “With anything, honey. You know that. No matter what it is.”

I hesitate, though. This would break Sky’s trust. I glance around. “Is either Dad or Pete home?”

“No.”

“I’m dating Sky,” I say in a rush.

Mom nods like she expected as much. “And?”

“Her mom is coming home tomorrow; there was a fight at her place, and her dad is kind of ... missing. You and Dad were besties with him. Where would he go?”

My mom thinks about it, completely glossing over the fact I'm dating Sky, which I appreciate more than I thought I would. She taps her fingers on the counter. "We all used to go to this bar downtown. He's been a regular there, though, so I'm sure Chase is checking that."

"Okay."

"There was another spot. I just don't remember it clearly. He and Claire took a ton of photos there. It was close." She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I really don't know more. But I can go to a few places and see if I run into him."

"Just don't tell Sky I told you. And don't tell-

"Honey." She pats my chest. "You're good at a whole lot of things, but keeping secrets isn't one of them. Your car is here every time you go out with your girlfriend. You won't tell your brother who you've been dating. There's a sparkle in your eyes whenever Sky's name gets mentioned."

"So you ... you knew?"

"I suspected." She gives a soft smile and hugs me. "I just wanted you to tell me."

Oh. I blink a few times and hug her. "Thank you."

"I'm happy for you. And for her. I think she's had a crush on you since she was a kid. Don't you remember how she always wanted to share her toys with you? How she followed you around and would cry until you'd make up stories to tell her?"

"Not really."

"Well, you were only eight." She shrugs. "Be good to her."

I swallow hard and thank her again as she gets her keys. I still call Sky. "Any luck?"

"No." The panic is in her voice, which means she's feeling twice whatever she's showing. "Chase said I should

stay at home and keep an eye out for him. I can't just sit here."

"Okay, you should look through old photos. Maybe things with your mom? If she's on his mind."

"You're so fucking smart," she gasps. "Remind me to blow you later."

"Very funny."

"Totally serious," she insists. "I'll look for stuff and ... oh. Chase is calling. Gotta go."

I don't hear anything for a while, and Mom comes back, looking ... bothered. She pats my shoulder and glides to the kitchen to grab a beer. I've never seen her drink one. She takes a slow breath and looks out the window towards the Bennett driveway.

I see Chase walking his Dad in and Sky holding the door. Something tells me she's going to have her hands full plus some. Mom slides me a beer, and we drink together, saying nothing at all. Then we get started on dinner.

She's a stickler for routine. My eyes keep going to the Bennett house, and after the fifth time, Mom actually turns my face back to the food. "Don't lose a finger, and don't give yourself away."

That's enough to keep me in check for the night, even though I can't stop myself from checking my phone. I don't know why I'm worrying so much. It's not like Sky can't take care of herself. It's not like she hasn't proven it over and over again.

But I'm still worried.

And it keeps me from sleeping well. I take a few drinks of a travel sized-whiskey I have and wait for Sky to appear in her room. She doesn't. Or she's already gone to sleep. I don't know what to do with myself.

I text her and remind her I'm here if she needs me, no matter what that means, then let the whiskey work its magic and put me to sleep.

I get up and see a heart emoji in reply to my text. Groaning, I pry out of bed and go to the gym. I have to make up for yesterday. I go through the motions, but my heart isn't in it, and it's obvious. Am I really this easy to rile? Is it this simple to get into my head and rile me up?

"You need to keep your head where it belongs." Frank swats the back of my head. "You hear me, Warren? Where are you?"

"The gym."

"Then act like it. The grand finale is just around the corner."

So I block everything out, everything I can't fix, and take out my frustration on whatever's put in front of me. By the time we're done, I'm jelly but still buzzing with excitement. Not even a cold shower can calm me down. I want to do something; I want to power through something the same way I just powered through the workout.

But when I get home, my phone is still silent.

Groaning, I pace in my room. *Space, give her space, Ash. Don't push.*

"Don't do it," I tell myself again when I go for my phone.

After a few more slow breaths, I convince myself not to text her. I convince myself not to go out and drink. I convince myself to try to do anything *but* leave. Not because she might need me but because I'm afraid I'll end up at her place if I step out of the house.

Finally, after what feels like hours of restraint, of playing stupid games on my phone, of getting distracted while trying to play video games, I get a single text from her.

This is so fucked.

I insist I can come over, that I can help however she needs, but again, she says no, not right now. So I ask for details and get nothing. Not even a read receipt. Fuck! I know she's doing stuff, but I feel like she's teasing me with things. If I didn't know her brother, if she didn't know mine, I bet I'd be there helping, which is stupid and irritating and steadily ripping my nerves to shreds.

There's a knock on my door, and Peter comes in. He takes one look at me and pauses. "Not up for going out and playing pool with the guys, are you?"

"Fuck, yes."

He shrugs, accepts it, and we head out. I play like shit and drink beer after beer until nothing exists but this moment. I merge with old friends, laughing, being the asshole I told myself I'd grown out of being. I even let some girls flirt with me because it's not like I'm going to follow through. I'm not so drunk I'm tempted by a nice rack or ass. And my friends reap the rewards of my subtle hints at other guys being able to please. But soon enough, that leads to me to the bathroom, puking everything up.

Groaning, I rest my head on the toilet and feel my stomach roll again. I lurch, vomit, and groan. Peter comes in and shakes his head at me. "You used to be cool."

"Sucks to be a hero," I say, then throw up again. "I need to get home."

"You need food and water," he argues.

He fishes around in my jeans and pulls out the condom first. "Looking to cheat already?"

"Fucker," I hiss.

He takes my wallet and returns with fries and water. I manage to choke both down after cleaning up and feel better or good enough. Definitely not good enough to drive, but good

enough that I can deal with the motion of the car without having to stop every block.

Which means I sleep on the ride home.

When I get up, I'm still a little drunk, a little wavy, a little stupid. Which is why I'm tempted to go to Sky's house, beat the door until she opens, and flash a smile at her. I sigh. "Sky is pretty."

Peter slams on the breaks, skidding the car to a halting stop in the driveway. "What the fuck did you just say?"

"Isn't she?"

"Not the word I'd use," he says, then nods. "She's sexy as hell."

"That too," I murmur, eying her house. "I should go over there."

"You absolutely should *not*," he disagrees. "Not if you have any fucking sanity."

One step puts me on my ass. But I'm determined. Peter stands in my way. "Dude. One, her mom is there. Two, it's just after dinner time. Three, you're being a drunk fuck. Don't hit on the girl next door."

I blink up at him as shit gets really clear. "You don't really want Bonnie, do you? You want Sky."

"Shut up."

"You do." I narrow my eyes. "You're leaving in three fucking weeks. You can't have her."

"You don't think I fucking know that!" he shouts. "You think I don't know she doesn't look twice at me and hasn't since as long as you've been around? Even after that text message—"

"What?"

There's a long pause. Confusion swirls in my head as Peter stares at the ground.

"What are you talking about, dude?"

Peter huffs. "You're not *that* drunk for me to say shit you won't remember in the morning." He takes my arm. "Come on."

"The fuck does that mean?"

"We're going home." He points at the house. "I shouldn't have to be the fucking rational one."

His response cancels my inebriated curiosity, filling me with urgency instead. "I don't want to go home. Take me to Sky." I point again.

Sky, that smile, her laugh, the way she feels against me. I want her. And I want her now.

"I will deck you," he threatens. "Don't fuck this up for me."

"Fuck you," I hiss.

"Alright, boys," Mom comes out.

Peter throws his hands up and storms inside. "You take care of him."

I get up and make a beeline for Sky's house. Mom's gentle hand on my wrist stops me. I peck her cheek, then aim in the same direction. She doesn't let go. "Honey, not right now."

"But." I see the door open. "But I love her, and I need to tell her."

"Yes, I know. Wait until you're sober, okay? It will mean more."

My stomach does hurt. And I'm pretty sure I have vomit breath. I look over anyway as Sky's mom walks out.

She waves to us, and I feel the irrational urge to fight *her*. But then I see Sky, arms wrapped around herself.

“I need to go there,” I insist.

“Later, honey. Give her until the morning.”

Sky shuts the door without looking over, and that settles it. I pout as Mom helps me up the stairs and tosses my ass in bed. She takes my phone and does a few other things while I try to fight my drooping eyelids.

“Mom. I love you too.”

“Means more when you’re sober, honey.” She kisses my cheek anyway. “Say it in the morning.”

Chapter 30

Sky

Two Hours Earlier

“She’s here,” Chase mutters, peering through the window.

Dad makes a sound like a cross between a groan and a whimper. He looks nervous. Keeps touching his hair and adjusting his button-up shirt. *A button-up shirt*, for hell’s sake. One would think we’re having a formal dinner with the mayor or something. It’s just Claire, the abandoner.

It’s not the best description, but you get the gist. She doesn’t deserve all this dressing up. That glow on Dad’s face is a stark contrast to how haggard he’d looked when we found him the other night at the hole-in-the-wall where he’d met Mom years ago. I know that glow is there because of her, and it irks the shit out of me.

She left! She fucking disappeared, leaving only a stupid note. Why is he now smiling like she’d left for a short trip or something? How can they be okay with this?

Even Chase is wearing a dress shirt that’s tucked in his jeans. Pathetic.

Her car engine shuts off as Chase releases the curtains and turns to regard me. “You could’ve least made some effort, Sky. Sweatpants and a T-shirt? Really?”

“I agree. Go put on a dress or something,” Dad says.

“I make an effort for people who’ve earned it,” I reply snappily. “Just be grateful I agreed to put up with this joke of a dinner, okay?”

Chase’s displeased expression fades as he opens the door. The petite, dark-haired stranger enters with a cautious smile.

Yes, I said, stranger.

No way this is my mom.

At least, not the mother I remembered. Gone are her long, silky locks. She’s wearing a pixie cut. She’s trimmer, dressed in a romper that fits her body so well, unlike the loose clothes she used to wear. Her skin has a healthy glow. There are no bags under her eyes anymore. She looks like someone coming back from two-week vacation.

In this case, a two-year vacation.

Away from us.

She hugs Chase first since he’s closer. My brother has been flip-flopping with his reaction to her coming back, but right now, his only response is raw emotion. He grips her tightly, his head resting on her chin. She breaks into a sob against his chest. A gift bag falls from her hand.

“I missed you,” comes her muffled response.

“Miss you too, Mom,” Chase mutters back.

I cross my arms on my chest as they break free. She looks from Dad, to me, then realizes he’s the safer choice. Dad makes the first move, though. He crosses the floor and starts crying even before they meet. Their bodies collide with a smack, and for the next five minutes—*yeah, I’m counting*, the only sounds in the room are their sobbing and the ticking of the clock on the wall.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she keeps uttering as Dad rubs her back.

He's consoling her. This is really shitty. Where was she when *he* needed consoling two years ago and everyday afterward? I don't understand; why is she getting a free pass?

What am I missing?

"Sky, please."

Her choked plea brings me to an abrupt halt on the stairs. My thoughts are already in my room, with the door locked and my EarPods stuffed in. I'm not a hypocrite. I don't want to be a part of this shit-show.

"What?" I ask without turning around.

"Can we talk? I need to explain."

Slowly pivoting on my heels, I face her with the hardest stare I can muster. "No need, Claire."

"Now, Sky..." Dad's warning tone comes at me. "She's still your mother. Be respectful, please."

I scoff. "No need, *Mom*."

"Quit with the sarcasm," Dad says. "I won't have it in my house."

I respond with a thumbs-up sign, turn to go, then think better of it. "You know what? This needs to be said. For two years, I watched you turn into a shell of yourself, hardly functioning like you used to. You paid Chase and I no mind. Your behavior forced me to grow up much faster than I'd like to. Then she shows up, and you're suddenly back to your old self. Not for me or Chase, but for the woman who left without warning. Do you think that's fair to us?"

Dad takes a step toward me, earnest filling his eyes. "I just want my family back together, honey. The only way is through forgiveness. Forgive your mom. Forgive me. Let's move forward, please."

"So, it's that simple. After everything she's put us through, I should just fall in line."

“Sweetie, that’s not what he’s saying,” she speaks up, stepping forward, too. “Let me start by explaining. We can take it from there.”

“Can you do all that explaining during dinner? I’m starving?” Chase interjects, picking up the bag Mom had dropped on the floor.

“Sky?” Dad prompts.

Three pairs of eyes latch onto me. After a long beat, during which I toy with the thought of running up to my room, anyway, I nod. My parents’ shoulders sag with relief.

We settle around the table with the roast beef and potatoes that Dad prepared—I’m still flabbergasted that he actually cooked—and after Chase hurriedly says grace, we dig in. I’d planned to tune Mom out, really, because I can’t imagine what would make her leave us like she did. Yet, I find myself listening as she talks.

And her words leave me even more pissed than ever.

I fly up, the plate with my half-eaten meal jostling as my thigh bumps the table.

“You left us because of stress. Is that a joke?”

“It’s not as simple as it sounds, honey. Chronic stress is a serious thing. It can cause deadly illnesses,” she replies calmly. She’s way too calm. Too confident. Dad and Chase welcomed her back with open arms, so I guess that’s why. Well, she won’t be getting any open arms from me.

“There are doctors for that. Therapists. You could’ve gone to see any of them. Instead, you ran away.”

“I’m not trying to excuse my behavior. I wasn’t thinking straight. Losing my job affected me more than I thought. I did the only thing that made sense at the time. I regretted it almost immediately, but I was too afraid to come back.”

I snort. I can't picture her being afraid.

"So, I tried reaching out to you guys. Your dad didn't respond. Neither did you. Chase's responses were lukewarm at best. I took that as a sign you didn't need me."

"So, why now? What changed?"

Mom glances at Dad, then Chase, then back at me. "Chase reached out to me a few weeks ago. He told me your father wasn't doing well and that he needs me."

I shoot Chase a betrayed look. He sighs, pushing the fork around his plate.

"I need my family back, too. I'm willing to fix the damage I made. All I want is your approval, Sky."

"My approval." I laugh dryly. "Since when does anyone need my approval around here? Everyone's been talking and doing shit behind my back, anyway. You can all continue. I'm out."

"Sky!" Dad calls after me. I hear the scraping of chairs, but I don't look back as I bound the stairs.

I scream into my pillow when I'm in bed. I hate everything. I hate that she came back. I *hate* knowing my dad still wants her.

And she looks so happy, which makes me hate her even more.

Why couldn't she be happy with us? What was so wrong with our family? With me?

I sniff and wipe at my face until my crying drags me to sleep.

When I wake up, it's to a knock on my door and the bright sunlight coming through my window. Chase eyes me cautiously as I open. With his fingers running through his hair, he apologizes for keeping me out of the loop, then announces that she's coming back tonight.

“Give her a chance, Sky. Please,” he begs as I roll my eyes. “For dad. You and I will be leaving the nest, and he needs company. He needs her.”

I give him a sharp thumbs-up, close the door, but his words stay on my mind. So, I spend the morning putting work into my appearance. I get through a shower, put on makeup to hide the bags under my puffy eyes and to make me feel more confident – like war paint.

Then I check my phone. I have no less than seven messages from Ash. Half of them make no sense. Him saying I’m prettier than any girl who hits on him at the bar. That he’d rather be playing with me than playing pool. Then one at four in the morning, “I wish you’d tell me the big things, Sky, and let me be there to help fight your dragons with you.”

I stare at that last one and swallow. Goddamn, he’s too good.

And it’s another thing I’m shit at. I can’t be a good daughter. I’m a shit friend. A shit sister. A shit girlfriend.

I text him back, saying I’ll tell him everything later as long as he doesn’t get involved in this specifically. It’s a compromise, right? It’s me showing effort.

“Sky!” Chase calls.

I adjust my dress and look in the mirror. I look a whole lot more put together today. With one more nod to myself, I walk downstairs and see my mom. Her blue eyes soften when she sees me.

“Oh, Sky, look at you. Beautiful. And here I was going to suggest we go to the salon together.”

“No thanks.” My voice is as dry as my eyes. No tears today. None.

She pulls back at my tone, and my dad gives me a look, but it doesn’t stop me from sitting next to him while Chase continues to tell Mom all about how he’s doing in college. I

hate that he wants her validation. I hate that Dad is complimenting him, too, acting like we have our life together and didn't go through hell.

And after an hour of us playing 'functional but broken family,' I can't take the hypocrisy anymore. I stand up, excuse myself and walk out the front door. Gulping down my frustration, I take a few deep breaths.

Just make it through the week, Sky. That's it. I've made it through every week before this, so I can make it through today. I can get through tomorrow, then I can make up plans with Bonnie if I need to.

A car door slams, and my brain comes to a dead stop. *Don't look. Don't give an inch. He'll take a mile. Don't. Don't*

But I can't stop myself. My eyes lift to meet Ash's. He's shirtless, hotter than any summer day I've ever seen, with annoyance laced into every feature. His jeans are covered in dust and dirt, but when he sees me, he drops what he is reaching for.

Don't. Stay put. You don't need him, I try to convince myself.

He nods to me once, glances at his house, says 'fuck it', and storms over to me. That gets me up. I push against his chest. "No. We talked about this."

"Yeah, and I'm done reining myself in." He cups my face between his hands. "Please, bumble bee. Let me be here for you."

"You can't." I cut the shit entirely.

Ash searches my eyes. "You *are* embarrassed to be with me."

"Don't fucking assume." I shove at him again, even though his hands feel so good on me, I want to melt. "I'm not embarrassed about you, I'm trying to get the timing of this right."

“What timing?!”

“Telling my fucking brother!” I cover my mouth as he takes a step back.

Ash goes through the whole spectrum of emotions before his brows furrow. “What?”

“If you walk in with me right now, Chase is going to lose his shit. He will yell and bitch, and with everything that’s going on, I ... I can’t take that right now.”

Ash continues to watch me.

“Well, something’s about to give. And I’m not sorry for that,” he says, eyes focused behind me.

“Aww, Sky, do you still have that crush?” Mom asks, raising my hackles. I didn’t hear the front door open. “Hi, Ashton. How are you? All big and strong now, aren’t you? Are you being nice to my little girl?”

I try to take a few deep breaths and try to calm down. To yell at Ash or my mom or myself?

“No, Mom. They’re nothing,” Chase explains before raising his voice. “Why the hell are you on our property?”

One bomb inside me goes off. I just lost one fight. My eyes drag up to Ash. He arches an eyebrow. “How do you want to do this?”

“Go. Home,” I order.

“Sky.”

“I mean it. I asked you to stay out of this.”

“It’s too late for that.” He reaches out for me, and I take a step back.

“Oh no.” That’s Dad. “Chase-”

I turn around to deal with my brother while trying to stop the chain reaction inside me that will lead to a complete breakdown. “Go back inside.”

“Did he fucking touch you, did ...” Chase catches up finally. I can’t believe it took him this long to put the pieces together. But I know *he knows* I’m dating Ash. He shakes his head at me. “Are you fucking kidding me, Skylar?”

“Chase, this isn’t ... It’s not-”

“It’s not what?” Ash demands.

Why now? Why is all of this happening now? I think my chest is collapsing in on itself, like some blackhole formed between my heart and lungs.

“Are you fucking *him*?” Chase demands. “Dating him doesn’t exist, so what exactly ...” He shoves me to the side. “What the hell are you doing to my little sister, jerk?!”

“Nothing that concerns you, Chase. Sky is an adult. She’s free to do whatever she wants!”

“Boys, please, tone it down,” Mom says calmly, her tone contrasting with the storm raging on our front lawn.

Chase whips around to glare at me. “I can’t believe you. After what he did, why the hell would you let him use you like that?”

“He didn’t use me—” I begin, but Ash cuts in.

“What did I do to Sky that was so bad, huh? Yes, the teasing got a little rough sometimes, but I did no harm. Plus, I already fucking apologized.”

With a growl, Chase steps up to him, his fists tightly clenched. “Teasing? No one’s talking about teasing, you dick. That little prank you pulled two years ago, remember it?”

Oh, hell. I slap my forehead. The last thing I want is to relive that awful night. “Chase, don’t—”

“What prank?” Ash asks, his face screwed with confusion.

“Are you really going to stand there and pretend like you don’t know?”

“I’m not pretending, dude.” The incredulity on Ash’s face is so heavy. “I seriously don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” I blurt. “Ash, you apologized... why are you lying right now?”

He turns to face me, his brows tightly scrunched with a deep frown. “*Apologize for what, Sky?*”

“For ganging up with Peter and embarrassing her that night, you piece of shit,” Chase snaps. “You did it to get back at me for snitching to your folks.”

“*What?*”

Ash is either wasting his acting talents, or there’s something very wrong here. His alarmed expression shifts from me to Chase, then back again. “Sky, what the hell is Chase talking about?”

My stomach tightens from hearing the quivering in his voice. I tell myself he’s putting on a show, straighten my shoulders and stare right in his face.

“In case you forgot— which I doubt you have, you bought me a thong swimsuit, left it on my bed, then sent me a text message to meet you by the pool wearing nothing but it. When I got downstairs, I found Peter and a bunch of his friends. They took photos of me, called me a pig in a wig, then leaked the photos to the entire school group.”

“Jesus.” Ash pinches the bridge of his nose. “I swear to God, Sky. That wasn’t me. I wouldn’t do that. You were sixteen years old, for God’s sake. Still underage.”

“The message came from your phone,” Chase cuts in.

“Peter must’ve gotten to it before I left that night.” He turns an appealing stare on me. “Bumblebee, I didn’t—”

“Don’t you fucking call her that,” Chase growls, advancing on him.

Ash blocks the blow Chase aims at him, then drops him with a punch.

I scream as Chase lands on the ground, a bruise blooming across his cheek. “Ash, stop!”

He backs away with his hands raised as I kneel down beside my brother. “I didn’t pull that cruel stunt, Sky. Please believe me,” he mutters.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. I need you to go,” I say softly, words pouring out before I can think.

“Are you serious?”

I get up and try to hide my shaking. “You just *had* to come over when I said no. You couldn’t give me time or space or anything!”

He grabs my hands. “Sky.”

“It was a no!” I shove him away, trying to clear my blurry eyes. “It was a no, and you ignored it.”

His face falls a little before he catches it, but this isn’t enough to ruin today. No, because the universe hates unfinished things. It’s either all or nothing, always. That’s how Ash is. That’s how the universe is. No fucking gray area.

“What the fuck?” Peter demands from behind his brother, then he tries to pull him back. “Are you still drunk?”

I whip around to glare at Peter. His brows lift as I storm toward him. Every pent-up anger, embarrassment and fear caused by this monster rises to the surface. He doesn’t even get to back away. There’s a sickening crunch when I punch his face with a tight fist.

“Sky!” Mom screams.

A pair of arms pull me back as I attempt to punch him again. It’s Chase. I struggle against his hold, but he gets some distance between me and Peter without effort.

“He’s not worth it. None of them are,” my brother mutters in my ear.

“What the fuck was that for?” Peter cries, gingerly touching his bloody nose. He gasps as Ash suddenly collars him. “Hey! Chill out, bro!”

“Chill out?” The venom in Ash’s voice is just as deadly as a snake’s. “Why the hell did you mess with Sky like that, and how the fuck did I get involved?”

Peter chuckles, and I suspect he’s trying to be casual, but I see the fear in his eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The swimsuit. The text message sent from my phone. Your asshole friends taking photos of Sky. Ring a bell?”

“No—”

Ash shakes him. “Time to come clean, or I’m telling Mom and Dad. Something tells me you won’t get that new car once they hear of this.”

The fear on Peter’s face deepens as he glances at their front door. “Okay, okay! Jeez. That was two years ago. You’d think people would move on already.”

Chase makes a sound in his throat and lunges at Peter. Mom grabs the hem of his shirt. “Not worth it, remember?”

He growls and retreats. Ash folds his arms on his chest and stares Peter down.

“You had the falling out with our folks, so I knew you were about to leave town. I snatched the phone from your room, sent the message to Sky, then deleted it.” He shrugs. “The rest you already know, I guess.”

“Why would you do that, you idiot?” Ash rumbles.

“I knew Sky had a crush on you, and I wanted to kill that crush,” Peter replies simply, shrugging again. “If you’d made it to the big league like you planned, none of this

would've come out. But no... you just had to get injured and come back home."

"You're sick," Chase supplies with a scowl. "I should beat your fucking ass."

"Not if I don't beat it first," Ash chimes in. "Since it's obvious you don't give a shit, I'm telling Mom and Dad anyway."

Peter's eyes widen. "Come on, Ash. It's not that serious."

"Isn't it?" Ash's gaze turns to me. "Did you apologize to Sky for putting her through hell?"

"She doesn't need his apology. She doesn't need you either," Chase speaks up. "You might not be involved in this mess, but if it weren't for her silly crush on you, her high school years would've turned out differently. The farther she stays from the likes of you, the better off she'll be."

Ash's brows lift as he regards me. "Is that how you feel?"

With a sigh, I glance down at my hands. Maybe Chase has a point. "Ash... I don't know."

He comes at me, cupping my face. I'm surprised when Chase doesn't butt in. "Sky, don't do this. Don't-

"I don't want to do this here or now." I glance back at my family, but Ash turns my head to face him, and I know he's not giving me a choice. "You're not going to like my answer if you make me say something right now."

"And I'm tired of waiting for you to actually be my girlfriend. We don't have the time for you to be on the fence anymore. You have to choose. Choose me or don't. Stop dragging me along behind you, using me when I'm fucking convenient and shutting me out when you're actually feeling something."

I shove him. “I told you from the start that our families couldn’t know. I’ve been trying, but that’s not good enough. That’s what you’re saying?”

“Sky, don’t try-”

“Fuck you.” I push his hands away and take a step back. “I’m not your girlfriend. I’m not your anything. Fuck off.”

His hands curl into fists, and Chase falls in line with me. I’ve seen that heat in Ash’s eyes in every fight. I’ve seen that tick in his jaw, the curl of his lips, all of it.

“My fault for assuming you were mature enough for this shit. My fault for thinking you could handle a relationship at all, right? My fault for pushing. My fault for fucking everything because you refuse to take a single bit of responsibility. Fine. Enjoy being miserable alone.”

I stare after him and swallow hard. No tears today. I promised myself that. Ash gives me one more minute, my heartbeat racing until this minute feels as heavy as an hour. Then he nods. “Hope you had fun.”

With that he walks away, collaring his brother again and yanking him along. I hold myself together as Chase and I head to where our parents are now standing at the front door.

“The fuck, Sky? Ash? Really?”

“Don’t shit on me for having feelings,” I snap.

“I was going to-”

I don’t want to hear it. My mom opens her arms to me like she didn’t run off and abandon our whole family. I hug my dad. I bury my face in his shirt, happy he smells like his old self so I can get rid of everything Ash made me feel.

Dad wraps his arms around me and rubs my back. Then he squeezes me – the most he’s touched me in two years. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“Me too, honey,” Mom adds, squeezing my shoulder. I stiffen.

“You should leave, Claire,” Dad says to her.

“No, Sky is-”

“This is too much. Come back tomorrow,” he replies softly. “I need some time alone with her.”

Mom seems put off by his response, but she finally nods. I hope she understands that this is what ‘baby steps’ mean. I see Chase pull her into a hug as Dad walks me inside and up to my room before he lets me go. He strokes under my eyes, only removing makeup since I’m actively refusing to cry. I don’t get to cry. I ended it.

“How much have I missed with you, Sky?” he asks, looking at me like I’m a stranger.

“Everything,” I whimper. “I had to do everything, Dad. I had to remind you to pay the bills, then take your phone and card to do it. I had to cook. I had to clean. I had to forge your signature. Chase and I ...”

“Sorry doesn’t cover that,” he whispers.

“No.” I shake my head. “It doesn’t. I want it to ... I wanted to give you time, and I wanted you to get through it without worrying about anything else, but ... but ...”

He nods and hugs me again. I hate a million and a half things, but I can’t hate Dad. He sits with me for a long time as we talk. I tell him about everything with school. I tell him about things with Ash – short of the things a dad shouldn’t know. I tell him about Bonnie leaving in two weeks and how much I’m going to miss her when she’s in New York. I mention the internship and how I haven’t heard from the studio and how I’m getting more nervous with each passing day. Hours pass as I just spew up everything I’ve been saving up until my throat is sore and my voice is hoarse, and the sun is low in the sky.

Dad listens, holds my hand tightly, doesn't try to defend himself, doesn't make excuses, just nods along, asks questions when he's confused, lets me go on and on until I've talked myself tired.

My dad lets me lay with my head in his lap and rubs my back until I feel like a kid again. He takes a slow breath. "Your mom leaving had nothing to do with you, sweetheart. It didn't. It was me. We never talked like we should have. I didn't know what was bothering her, and I never asked. She kept waiting until I did. By the time I realized how bad it was, it didn't seem like talking would fix it, and then I didn't get the chance to."

I nod, then sit up, remembering I need to clean Dracula's tank. My dad stops me. "Sky, you can't push things down and wait until the perfect time to deal with things because the perfect time doesn't exist. You're allowed to feel, even when it's inconvenient."

"Feelings complicate everything."

"And it's okay to need someone at specific moments as long as you don't depend on them for everything." His green eyes meet mine. "Not needing someone doesn't make it hurt any less when they leave."

I glance out my window to where Ash's curtains are closed.

"Love isn't something that waits until the right moment to strike. It's complicated and messy. There's a lot of good and bad in it. But if you feel it, if you're that lucky ... you have to take advantage of it, Sky. Learn from it, open yourself up to it, and give it a chance."

"Yeah, I already lost that. And I'm going to school in-"

"Listen to me," Dad insists. "You can fix everything if you try, and even if you can't ... it's worth it to try. Why else do you think I let your mom come back?"

“You thought she’d stay,” I whisper.

“If I worked hard enough, yes.” He stands and kisses the top of my head, hugging me again. “You’re strong in so many ways you shouldn’t be, so let yourself be weak too.”

That might have helped me two days ago. All it does is make me feel like shit now.

Chapter 31

Ashton

I fling myself into working out. I don't want to talk to my brother about that disgusting stunt he pulled. I don't want to talk to anyone. I just want to get out every bit of frustration I feel. Should I have waited to talk to Sky? Probably. But waiting just leads to more waiting with her. I know that.

I know it. When she doesn't take the leap, I do. It's always worked. So why didn't it this time?

It wasn't like I busted into her house, claimed her as my girlfriend, sat down and pretended like things were normal. She was alone, looking like a kicked puppy, looking like she was holding onto the end of a fraying rope and ...

Was it because her mom was there? Because I punched her brother when he aimed for me? Or was it the shitty prank that Peter pulled; did the memories of that awful night push her away from me?

Hugging my bag, I press my forehead against it. My breath whooshes out in hard pants that make me too hot against the slippery material.

We're not compatible. That's obvious, right?

So I should just move on, like I always have. Go to the bar, pick up a girl, get over Sky by getting under someone else ... It would be easy.

I slam my fist into the bag again.

I don't want another girl. I don't want sex. I don't want easy. I want Sky.

I want to beat the fucking stuffing out of this bag until it looks as shitty as I feel right now. My door opens, and Peter walks in.

"I can't even look at you right now, dude," I mumble. "Just get the fuck out."

"Not until you hear me out." He crosses his arms on his chest, giving me a hard glare that tells me he's even more stupid than I thought. He's this close to getting knocked out, and he doesn't even know it.

When I say nothing, he goes on. "I fucked up, I know that, but it happened two years ago. Sky got over that mess—"

I swing my finger toward my front window. "Did it look like she got over it back there?"

"Okay, fine. Let me rephrase. I thought she got over it. She lost the weight, glowed up a little. I swore she'd moved on. It was a stupid prank that got out of hand. It sucks that she's still hurt."

"Tell *her* that, not me," I snap.

"I probably will, when I'm sure she won't kill me."

"And while you're at it, grow the fuck up. You're not ten anymore. You're going off to college in a few weeks. There are some real shit out there and you need to be ready for them. Dump those childish ways. Now."

I expect a snarky response, but he nods somberly. "You're right."

"Huh?" I press my hand behind my ear. "I missed that. What did you just say?"

Peter rolls his eyes with an amused scoff. "You're right. Happy?"

"Not until you actually change, dude," I reply.

“Oh, I’m going to change.” He jabs his finger at me. “But first, you and me, we have beef, brother. We’re going to hash this out.”

I land another punch on the bag and cock a brow at him. “Sure about that?”

“Positive. In fact, let’s take this to the ring.”

I hesitate, then smirk. “Yeah. The ring sounds good.”

“Good. Because I need to beat the shit out of you.”

“We’ll see about that,” I reply with a chuckle, grabbing some gear.

With that, we go to the gym in the quietest car ride of my life. Peter won’t tolerate the radio, and he’s fuming. I can practically see the smoke pluming from the top of his head. Knowing his crush on Sky, I probably should have told him I was seeing her, but that would have caused two fights instead of one.

We get out, glove up and get in the ring. Peter comes out swinging wildly. “You were dating the girl of my fucking dreams.”

He manages to land one mild punch as I block the one coming for my face. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“Bullshit.” He reels and hits the ropes before regrouping. “You could have. You didn’t even hint at it! You let me think I had a shot!”

“Oh, come on, dude. We both know that’s not true.”

I block, treating this as a defensive exercise. He keeps ranting about it. How I always stole her focus. How he never had a chance at all. How I couldn’t let him have one fucking thing that he wanted.

Then he shoves me. “Punch me, asshole!”

I jab him in the shoulder, and he drops. He groans and sits up, panting, sweating, a complete mess. We’ve only been

going for ten minutes. Leaning forward, I offer him help up. He shoves my hand away.

“Explain yourself.”

“It happened. It was just because I was curious at first. She was so different and hated me, and then we spent time together and talked, and things happened, and I wanted more. I thought she did, too.”

He clocks me in the jaw hard enough that I rub the spot. He shakes his head. “Bullshit.”

“Fine, I fucking fell hard and fast, that what you want to hear?” I hit him back, hoping he’ll block. Thankfully he does, as it was a hard one. “I fell so hard I was looking to move to Arizona in Spring. I fell so fucking hard Mom knew.”

Peter glares at me, arms at his side. “Fell?”

He punches me out of the blue, hitting me in the stomach, then the face, dropping me to the ground. “As in you love her?”

I bite at my Velcro and toss my glove to the side before doing the same with the other. “Yeah. I fucking love her. Which sucks because she’s not going to look twice at me now. I ruined it.” I give him an even stare. “We both ruined it.”

“I shouldn’t have done that shit to her,” he huffs, struggling with his own gloves before looking away and stretching an arm to me.

I pull myself up and undo his gloves. “You think?”

He sighs. “Look, I knew being with her would be a long shot for me. But I had hope. I was a dick, and the more she responded to it, the more dickish I was. I dug my own hole. I can admit that. And you just dug yours.” He punches me with his bare fist, coming right in at my nose. “After digging yourself out because you’re the biggest fucking idiot alive.”

I feel the blood running over my face and wipe it on the back of my hand to see the bright red bloom there. I sigh. “I know.”

He comes at me again. “You don’t know. Sky deserves a fuck ton. If she even let you in a little, that’s huge. Bonnie and I were ... okay for a while, and she told me she never knew what Sky was feeling. Because Sky wouldn’t say shit. Since her mom walked out ... it was like she shut down anything that would make a person important to her.”

I grab the gloves and put them back instead of answering. It’s not like I didn’t know this ... I just ... I thought we were further than that. I wanted more. I felt like I was doing all the giving, that we weren’t even.

“Mom said something to me recently,” he says while going to get a towel. He shoves it against my face, so I can’t say a word. “That love is work. I asked her why she stays with Dad when she could leave just like Sky’s mom.”

I mumble something about Dad not always being a dick, but Peter doesn’t hear me. “She said that some days she has to love him ninety-nine percent, and some days, he loves her that much. That the fifty-fifty we’re taught is the easy part, but love isn’t easy.”

I push the towel away. “The point?”

“If you love someone even one percent, isn’t that worth holding out for them to give you the ninety-nine?”

“I should have kept it to sex. I didn’t mean to actually care. She wanted to learn shit, I was more than happy to show and ... and I don’t know.” I sigh.

“You made her choose, now you have to,” Peter grumbles. “And I’ll give you time because I don’t have a choice. I’m leaving.”

“Did my punch knock some wisdom into you or something?” I joke.

Peter doesn't smile back. "If you want her, fix it. If you don't, leave her alone ... entirely and completely. No dragging it out. No options for misunderstanding. Behave. Don't fuck it up like I did."

With that, he goes to the locker room to clean up.

I think about it when we get back home, and I ice my nose. Mom makes sure it's not broken, but then leaves me be. I stare at my closed window, wondering if behaving where Sky is concerned is even possible.

But I have to try, right? I have to let her come to me, if she chooses to, since I'm the one who fucked things up. And it's not like my life can just be placed on hold. I can't stop working, can't stop training or fighting.

So I'm going to have to control myself as long as possible and figure out what I want. I have to figure out if Sky and I can make this work ... and if I want to. I don't want to be a secret. I don't want to be the one doing all the needing. I don't want to be an insecure shit in our relationship because we'll just keep fighting.

Holding my head in my hands, I give into the physical pain since that's a lot easier to deal with. I trade between ice and band-aids. Mom gives me a tampon to shove up my nose so I can sleep and gently kisses my forehead.

She doesn't try to give advice or offer any insight. She just holds my hand for a minute and gives a soft smile. Sky would like Mom's approach to things.

"I'll come to your next fight, honey. As long as it's not with your brother."

"Last time I'm fighting that one. He waited until the gloves were off," I chuckle.

She brushes my hair out of my face and kisses my cut eyebrow. "Friday, right?"

I nod. “The most important match of the entire round. If I win this, I have a chance at making it back to the minor league.”

“Then make me proud, honey.”

And that settles it. Rather than driving myself insane trying to figure out what’s in Sky’s head or even trying to see her or reach her via phone, I just work. I work nine-hour days, train for three hours every day, throw myself into anything and everything that exhausts me to keep me from thinking.

But on Thursday, I look at my phone. I open my chat with Sky, trying to think of anything I could say. I could remind her that I have a match tomorrow and need pictures. I could ask her to be there. But I just stare.

That last text, begging me to give her time, that we can talk about anything and everything once her mom leaves. The text I ignored as soon as I saw her outside alone. The one I should have obeyed, even seeing her there, but I have a feeling that not even ignoring her at that moment would have saved us from ending up in this exact place at some point.

Because we just don’t work right now.

I need more than she’s willing to give. I may assume shit. I may act impulsively. I may have plenty of my own issues, but I can’t do *nothing* when I know she needs something. I don’t have it in me to ignore what’s obvious.

And without getting any information at all ... well, it’s just impossible. I don’t know what could have changed this. Other than us.

My phone rings, and I stare at it, not recognizing the number. I answer slowly, and then my ear is nearly blown off by Bonnie yelling about my match and making summer count. It takes four times for her to let me talk, and when she lets me, I explain.

“She ended things with me. Okay? I made her choose because I was tired of not knowing where I stood. And I couldn’t just ignore her being all upset. The half answers. The maybes. It was too much.”

“You’re a fucking idiot. She seriously cares about you,” Bonnie argues.

“How do you know?”

“Because she actually talks about you. She sucks at talking about how she feels, okay. And then you go and make her choose in front of her family and yours while her world is spinning out of control.”

“Yeah, and if someone you were crazy about kept pushing you away? Who kept using you when they wanted you but not actually letting you be involved in their life, how would you feel?”

She groans. “I get it, I just ... Fuck. This is a mess.”

“You and I have never been more on the same page, Bonnie,” I agree. “But if she and I aren’t compatible...”

“No. You are definitely compatible. The question is, are you guys willing to get over this shit and just accept each other instead of pushing for change?”

“I can’t be with her if she won’t talk to me or open up to me. I’m not capable of it.”

“Not even willing to try?” She counters.

I groan. Why am I having this conversation with my ex’s best friend? “Of course, I would try. But I can’t be the one fixing things every time. I can’t be the only one pushing or talking about how I feel.”

“I know. But you’d try if she came back to you?”

“Of course, I would. I like her. I love her.” I slump. “I just need certain things for us to work long term.”

“Got it. Bye.”

“Bonnie!” But she hangs up, giving me nothing but more regret after making me feel like shit.

Rubbing my forehead, I shake my head and push through to Friday. It sucks. Sky is ... amazing. She’s the first person I’ve loved enough to hold onto the words and let them mean something before I throw them out, and now, I might never have the chance.

On Friday, I stare at my reflection instead of getting ready for work. I just ... stare, unable to make myself do anything but that until my eyes water, and I wipe at them. “Fuck.”

Yeah. Anything with Sky is easier said than done. Including giving her up.

I push my curtain to the side before going to work and see hers drawn. As if nothing happened at all between us. It was just some kind of hyper-intense fever dream. In which case ... I’m ready to go back to sleep and have Sky to myself again – pathetic or not.

Fuck. I’m going to end up begging.

Chapter 32

Sky

I check my phone for the fifth time today. Just to ensure that I'm not dreaming, that the email I'd gotten is actually real.

It happened. Finally. I got the internship.

I should be happy. Bouncing for joy. Probably even doing somersaults in the middle of my bedroom, but it's bitter-sweet.

Sweet that I'm finally on the road to my dreams. Bitter that I can't share the news with the first person who crossed my mind.

I'm also sad because this confirms that I'll be leaving in January.

Leaving with unresolved feelings.

Leaving with a load of guilt on my shoulders.

Leaving the guy I've fallen in love with.

The cellphone vibrates in my palm. Bonnie has been up my ass, asking if we're going to see Ash's finale fight. She wants to see some action, real action, before she leaves. Because I haven't told her what happened.

That I ended my relationship with Ash.

Entirely.

Chase comes up and nudges me. "Bonnie's here."

"Cool."

“You can do better,” he insists, taking in my somber expression. It’s the same thing he’s said constantly. I get him, but at the same time, I still care about Ash. Too much. And keep regretting everything I said. “You can, Sky, and you said you didn’t want anything distracting you from school or life. See, you’ve finally gotten that internship. Focus on that.”

“I don’t want to hear anymore,” I whisper, the same thing I say every time he brings it up.

Bonnie walks in cautiously and looks between us. Chase raises his hand to pat my shoulder, then hesitates. He exchanges an unreadable look with Bonnie before leaving, the door softly closing behind him.

Bonnie sits beside me. “So…”

“Screw the fight. I ended things with Ash.”

“Yeah, he gave me the cliff notes version. Why didn’t you call me?”

“You were busy packing, so…” I bite my bottom lip and reach for Dracula.

Bonnie gets in the way. “Hell no. No deflecting. I’m here now. Talk.”

So I tell her everything. She flies on her feet when I get to the part that reveals what Peter did. Her hands curl into fists. “That fucker! And here we were, hating Ash all along.”

“Peter’s not even worth the anger, trust me,” I reply wearily. “It changes nothing. The breakup was for the best. It was going to end when I left, anyway. It’s not like I want to do the long-distance thing.”

“No one *wants* to do long distance, but they do because the person matters. Does he matter?”

“That’s not fair.”

“Oh, it matters a whole lot right now. Do you like that dumbass enough to have a conversation with him? Enough to

stay with him even when you can't actively fuck him?" When I stay quiet, she blocks me in again. "You're not touching Drac until you say something."

I sniff and cover my face with my hands. "Yes. I miss him so much. I'm so stupid."

She wraps her arms around me and lets me cry, lets me whimper, then pats my back. "Okay, wallowing ... wallowing is good for feelings, not good for fixing. Don't you want to fix it?"

"I do," I agree softly. "But I don't know if it's fixable."

We both look up as a knock sounds on my door. A second later, my father comes in. He stares at me for a long moment. "How are you doing, sweetheart?"

"Just the lingering dilemma," I sigh.

"You know what to do. Don't doubt yourself," he assures. "But be home by sunrise so I can pretend I have some kind of control."

He walks away, and Bonnie gapes at me. "I am so out of the loop."

"Mom came home for a while. Her visit just opened everything. We had a really long talk."

"If you can fix that, you can fix things with Ash ... if you want to. Do you want to?"

I try to think of how to verbalize it. How I crave his touch, how I miss his smell, want to talk to him and sass him and all of that, but I don't see us working in the long term. We're just too different, and he pushes me so hard, even when he's not around. But ... but I miss it. I felt like I was becoming better somehow.

"I don't know. I miss him. I miss him so much, but what if we're not compatible? He's ... him."

She thumps my shoulder with her fist. “That is what you get from this conversation?”

“I don’t know. I like who he is with me and around his real friends. But he pushes me all the time to talk and say things and go out and things like that, and it’s so not me.”

“Do you dislike it?”

“Not always. Talking isn’t great. Going out wasn’t bad. I liked seeing him with his friends,” I whisper. “And being invited to dinner at one of his friends’ houses.”

“That’s huge! That’s a guy version of ... well ... the same emotional level of giving up virginity. He wants people to know you chose him!”

“Well, that was then.”

“Show up. We have to go tonight. You gotta get the pictures, and you get to do the pushing,” she insists.

Which means I clearly have to look hot. Meaning I pull on the sexy lingerie, low-slung jeans and a black tank top that doesn’t hide a thing. I pull on a black jacket to hide some of it, and then we head out with my camera and phone and a good dose of Bonbon’s fucking positive ‘bad bitch’ talk.

By the time we get to the gym, I’m not ready to move.

“I just gave you my best pump up jams and damn good advice. Get out of the car,” she orders, pointing to the ground.

“But ... he’ll be there, and he’ll *hear* what I have to say.” It sounds so fucking stupid when I say it out loud.

“That’s the point of talking. Go,” she insists. “Now.”

A few more threats get me out of the car, then I find myself in the audience. I take a few deep breaths. I should talk to him before the fight, right? Or would that be worse because of the whole fighter’s mentality thing?

Or I should at least let him know so he doesn’t just *see* me in the audience and lose his shit. Something to stop the

shock if there is a shock. Or he won't react at all, which may be better, right?

But I can't move. The locker room is just too far away, and then I see Mrs. Warren. She waves to me politely, then sits in the front row with Peter. I sink lower. "This is a shit show. Let's go. Now."

"Funny."

The announcer seems to agree because he gets started, talking about the two competitors. He reads off Ash's stats, and the man himself steps into the ring, hands held high, determination etched into the tight muscle of his body.

Ugh, his body. Ash is so fucking hot that it's not fair. I feel like I'm drooling. Someone else does a wolf whistle, and I nod emphatically. He's gorgeous, of course, he's gorgeous, and, on top of that, he's driven and ambitious, and why the hell did I break up with him again?

The fight is intense, and when the other dude gets a cheap shot close to Ash's balls, I stand up. I start shouting at the ref and demanding some actual rules. Bonnie shouts next to me. In the middle of the silence, I yell for him to use his left.

Ash pauses for half a second and then hits with his left. The fight lasts another four rounds, but Ash doesn't let up. When the last bell sounds, and the ref raises his hands, the entire auditorium erupts in a roar. Ash's eyes scan the room. Is he looking for me? They land on his mom, and he shrugs.

At the end, I give three minutes before Bonnie says she'll take care of Peter. Fuck, I feel alive, like when I kicked that dude in the balls. I know it's the adrenaline, but I don't care. I run to the locker room, open the door, then pause.

The 'shouldn't do this' feeling strikes, but when I hear water running, I slowly creep in. The opponent, a bald, stacked dude, sees me, looks me over and grins. "Hey, hotness. You looking for something?"

“Not you,” I say simply.

“Oh, come on. I know fights make girls all hot and ready to go.” He looks me over again. “You know, I can give you a *very* good time ... if you ask nicely.”

“Not interested,” I repeat, stepping further in. “Did the word ‘no’ get all rattled in your brain after taking so many hits?”

He chuckles and pats my head. “You’re too young for me anyway, darling, but that mouth.”

“Is better than your aim? I know.” I snort.

“Hey, Ash, some smart-mouthed chick is here for you.” Then he whistles as he walks away.

Ash comes out of the shower with his towel slung low around his hips. He says something about groupies, then sees me. He comes to a dead stop and goes so pale I can see every single bruise that will be purple in a few hours.

“Sky.”

“Hi.”

He’s not allowed to look this delicious when I’m supposed to talk to him. I take a deep breath and close the space between us. “I wanted to talk. Actually talk. Not ... yell or be a bitch, and I’m sorry.”

“Sky,” he says, taking another ominous step forward.

“I should have started with I’m sorry. I was under so much pressure ... no ... that’s an excuse. I suck at this. I’m sorry for what I said and how I handled it. You wanted to help, and I couldn’t do it or deal with it then. I want to try, even though I should have talked to you after I cooled down and fixed things, but I was just-”

He pulls me against him and kisses me. My heart stops, then jumps into gear. I wrap my arms around his neck and

tease his tongue with mine. Ash consumes me. Entirely, completely, and totally. I'm just his. This simply.

When he draws back, my hands slide down his chest, and I bite my lip. "I want you. I was stupid and dealing with shit, but I want you, and I'm willing to talk. I want to include you in things. You can come and meet my dad as my boyfriend. Whatever it is."

"Don't say shit that you don't ... Are you serious?"

"No, I'm Sky," I joke as I brush my hand over his face. "You always forget to use your left."

"I fucking knew it was you. Only you support me that much." He kisses me again, then strokes my cheeks with his fingers as he gazes into my eyes. "Is this a dream?"

"Want me to kick you in the balls and find out?" Then I remember that punch he took. "Actually, is your ... thigh okay?"

"My goods are intact." He chuckles. "You can check if you want to."

I bite my lip and tug on the towel before shaking my head. "No. No. Talking. I'm here for talking."

"She says after cornering me while I'm naked in the locker room."

"Why aren't you mad at me?" I ask. "You should be, right? We both said harsh things, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled. I know you wanted to help. You kind of did."

"Did I?" He walks over to the lockers and lets his towel fall.

I groan as I look over his ass. I take a picture, and Ash glances over his shoulder, laughing. "Really, Sky? Taking a picture?"

"Well, who knows when I'll get you at this angle again. You could always model for catalogues," I murmur. "Or

calendars ... or become a stripper ... you could say no and tell me I missed my chance.”

“So many promising career choices.” He rolls his eyes as he avoids that last comment and steps into boxers before wiggling into jeans.

I know he’s letting me distract him, but he’s putting on such a good little show that I’m tempted to forget everything else. I bite my lip and rub my hands over his sides from behind. “Are you sure you want to get dressed?”

“Why?”

My hands spread over his abs, then up his chest as I kiss the back of his shoulder. “I’ve heard about this thing called making up. I think that comes before the talking.”

“Which means leaving the venue, Sky,” he hums.

“True.” I lick a bead of water off his back, and he groans. I press my forehead to his back. “I’m sorry again.”

Drawing back, I let him put on his shirt; then he kisses me hard and hungry. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” I pant, clutching Ash tighter against me. “So much.”

He pushes his hands under my jacket and kisses me again, and again, and again. I’m going to O.D. on his mouth at this rate.

“So, you two are back together?” The voice pulls me off Ash to see his mother. I cover my mouth with my hand, and she smiles. “Good. Remember what I said, Ash?”

“I remember, Mom.” He tightens his hold around me. “I won’t fuck up twice.”

That sounds a whole lot like we’re back together, but I still need the words. I need the conviction. I need to be sure.

Chapter 33

Ashton

Sure, we definitely need to do some talking, that's obvious as hell. But Sky came to me. I did nothing, I was patient, and she came back. Ready to talk, ready to explain, willing to dive in and do the work. That's enough for this exact moment.

My mom gives me a kiss on the cheek after mumbling, "Congrats," before walking away. Sky pushes her hair back and takes a slow breath. "So ... talking? I think we should do that first. I like being distracted too much."

"Let's go." I drag her to my car, but I hate the space between us. "Can I kiss you?"

"What, now?" Her eyes flick to me.

God, it's killing me. Finally, she nods. "Yeah. I mean, I want to make out and-"

I kiss her when she tries to buckle up, then kiss her again when she gives in, parting her mouth to welcome me back. Groaning, I clutch her tightly and devour her, memorizing the little sounds she makes when our tongues touch, how her body pushes against mine, her fingers claiming me wherever she can reach.

When I finally draw back, we're both panting, and the car is steamy. I rub my thumb across her bottom lip, and she kisses it softly. "I didn't stop wanting you. I almost texted you a hundred times."

I don't know what to say to that, and luckily, she keeps going. "How was I supposed to think at all with all that pressure around us? In one second, things went from bad to worse, and then we were in an anxiety-fueled nightmare!"

"I shouldn't have demanded an answer or pushed you that hard," I answer.

"And I shouldn't have just shut you down like that. But I did say no," she reminds me.

"I didn't respect it, and I said hurtful ... I shouldn't have called you immature or told you to go be miserable. You're not miserable," I say.

"I was, actually." She plays with her fingers and then struggles to get the buckle in.

I do it for her and see she's shaking. She pulls on the seatbelt like she needs the extra space to breathe. "Really miserable. Forced my dad to take care of me, but it brought him back. He's definitely not a ghost now."

"That's ... positive."

But I hate knowing I hurt her that badly. I was just impatient. Needy. After the half answers, the radio silence, the constant pushing to be in her life ... were we forcing things?

"If you agree to continue this ... I want more than us making out and hanging out in my room," she says, teeth chattering. "I'm going to push myself to share more and include you in more, to let you in and all that. But I need you to tell me that you're going to respect my boundaries and that you ... you want more than sex. I have to hear it."

"It's never been just sex, Sky," I say, clearing a spot on the windshield and rolling down my window. "I've wanted to take you on dates, to go hiking again – bugs and all by the way – and ... and I'm going to work on controlling how impulsive I am."

“I heard you’d been flirting with girls the night before everything ... happened. That you were drinking and with those shitty friends you used to have.”

I expect her to demand answers, but she doesn’t. I nod. “Yeah. I flirted, pushed the girls to my friends, got so drunk I was throwing up in the bathroom, and Peter had to drive home.”

“Oh.”

“And nearly fought him to get to you when your mom was leaving. My mom talked some sense into me,” I snort. “She said anything I’d have to say to you while drunk would mean more sober.”

“It’s true.”

“And then I fucked it up while sober, so maybe I should have knocked on your door, had you walk me home and whisper all that in your ear,” I tease.

She plays with her fingers. “What are we doing?”

“I think you have to tell me. You ended things, Sky. I was pissed, hurt, embarrassed, but my feelings haven’t changed. I want you and just you. I need to be your boyfriend or nothing at all.”

“I want to be together,” she says, the only thing that’s left her lips without a trace of hesitation since she came into the locker room.

I kiss her again, nearly dragging her over the console to have her. Sky whimpers, and I realize the seatbelt is cutting into her neck. I glare at it. “We need to get somewhere to make up.”

Her stomach growls. “Taco Bell first?”

“You have an unhealthy obsession with shit tacos.”

“Leave their tacos alone!”

Just like that, we're bickering and teasing each other again. We both stay gentle, pulling our punches, but I order for her without question and bring her to my room since my house looks a whole lot quieter than hers.

When we get to my room, we eat in silence, only the T.V. keeping us company. Of course, she only eats one of the two tacos she demanded. She starts tearing a napkin into little pieces, showing just how anxious she is. I take her hands, then pull her on top of me.

"Sky, what else do you want to get off your chest?" I ask.

The physical shit can wait. Her being in her head can't. Her eyes stroke over me, then she pulls off her jacket. "I have layers."

"I'll listen to everything."

"No. I mean ... physical layers." She rubs her fingers through my hair. "No more talking. Not right now. After."

"After?"

"Bonnie said I had to use the big guns to get you back." Sky trembles in my arms. "So, I did."

"All I needed was you coming to me," I assure her, kissing her to prove it.

Sky moans against my mouth and kisses me with her whole self, body rolling on mine, fingers stroking down the back of my neck and raising goosebumps. She renews the kiss, gently biting my bottom lip before licking over the same spot when I hiss.

Drawing back, she looks me over. "Are you too sore? Too many bruises?"

"You can play nurse tomorrow," I growl, lifting her up.

She squirms before I can drop her in bed, so I sit down and lean back on my arms. Taking a slow breath, she wiggles

out of her painted-on jeans. I reach for her, but she takes a step back. She's blushing as red as the silky panties she has on.

Hesitating, she reaches for her tank top. "I wasn't ready to show you when you almost went into my closet."

"This is the thing!" I feel my cock actually twitch in excitement. She makes me so fucking hard, so easy. "You're ... testing my patience."

"Good." She slowly edges her shirt up, then off, revealing a lacy corset that pushes her tits up perfectly and turns her body from soft and welcoming to absolutely fucking sinful. But she wraps her arms around herself. "I haven't ... haven't worn something like this ever."

"You should." I hook my arm behind her legs and pull her against me. She straddles my lap but doesn't sit on me like normal. I rub my hands down her back to her ass, feeling skin and groan, pressing my face to her tits. "You should always wear this."

"It's not silly?"

"Fuck no," I groan, kissing the top curve of her breast, then biting. "You're so far out of my league, Sky."

She shakes her head and lifts my chin. "I'm not."

Groaning, I pull her down to kiss me, fisting her lion's mane hair and devouring her however she'll let me. Slow, fast, intense, or gentle, kissing Sky is like tasting heaven itself. A glimpse at how good life can truly be.

Sky tugs my shirt off, breaking our kiss. I toss her onto the bed, and she giggles. "Never patient for long."

"You ruin me," I growl, kissing across her throat before biting my favorite spot. Her body arches against mine, and I grab a good handful of her ass. "Maybe I should take pictures of you to remember this."

“Next time,” she offers in a breathy pant that tests my control.

Groaning, I fumble with the top. It’s sexy as fuck, but I have a feeling it will look even better on the floor. She giggles and takes my hands, helping me undo the tiny little clasps that go down the front.

I press my lips to her skin every time more is revealed. When I get the last one, I beam. “Yay.”

She laughs again and sits up to wrap her arms around me. I toss the thing to the side and kiss her until her hair is a mess across my pillow. She gives me another playful nip on the shoulder, then kisses a bruise.

“I’m going to have to leave marks this dark.”

“Please do,” I groan. I jerk her thong and actually rip it, shrug, then finish the job. “And let me show you how crazy you drive me.”

But she keeps kissing bruises across my chest and abdomen, heat sinking deep into me, filling me up until I’m not sure if I’m going to last long enough to make her come. It’s too soft, too tender and sweet. Like she can take away all my pain and fix us with her gentleness, and I’m tempted to believe it.

She licks up my body and claims my mouth again. “I’m yours, Ash. All of me.”

I groan and kiss over her breasts, licking and sucking her nipple until she’s a moaning mess under me. I switch to the other as my fingers slide between her legs. She’s wet and ready for me, just like I hoped. I rub her clit in circles as she pants and drags her nails over my back. Even that threat drives me wild.

Her body rolls against mine, and I push two fingers into her, just like she wants. Her nails dig into my arms as she whimpers. “Yes.”

“You feel so good, baby,” I croon, licking the underside of her breast so she shivers.

My thumb keeps stroking her clit as I curl my fingers inside her. Panting and moaning, she writhes against me as I fuck her hard and fast with my fingers. She comes apart with a hoarse yell and then twitches as I continue moving my fingers inside her.

“I hope you’re ready for me,” I whisper in her ear. “Because making up takes a long time.”

“How long?” She rasps.

“All night ... maybe into the morning,” I growl, fingering her again until she gives in while biting my chest hard, muffling the cries leaving her throat.

I pull my fingers free and lick them as she watches, sucking them and savoring the taste of her pussy on my tongue. I reach into my pocket for a condom, but Sky grabs my arm and shakes her head slowly. “Not yet.”

“Okay.” I kiss her softly. “What do you want?”

“I’m ready for the ...” She swallows and takes a slow breath. “For you to use your mouth.”

It’s the one thing I’ve told her I want and haven’t gotten in bed. My heart beats three times faster and swells in my chest. I know it makes her nervous, but she’s willing to give it to me now? Trying to stop the thoughts bouncing my head, I force out the important question. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She nods. “If you ... if you want to.”

I groan and press my face to her throat. “Of course, I want to, baby. I want tonight to be perfect. For you.”

“For us,” she argues.

She spreads her shaking legs, and her hands slides between them, drawing my focus. She flashes her wet pussy for me, showing me everything I can have. My eyes stroke

back up her body to take in her wild blue eyes, her raw lips, the blush spreading over her cheeks.

“I’m *yours*, Ashton.” She insists. “All of me. My body ... my heart ... everything.”

“I love you.” It comes out before I can stop it.

Sky grabs me and tugs me down to kiss me hard and hungry. She devours me, not letting any kiss be the last, like she can *show* me that she feels the same without saying the words. Her hands rub down my back, then over my sides, like she’s everywhere around me.

Grinding against her, I nearly forget what I was just given permission to do. I’m too lost in her mouth and every touch. But I slowly chart a map of kisses and bites over her body until I reach her hips. My eyes flick back up to hers, asking permission again as I work on a hickey that only I will get to see.

“Yes,” she encourages. “Please.”

Love isn’t a strong enough word when it comes to Sky.

Chapter 34

Sky

Ash pauses again as he kisses across my thigh, and I instinctively reach to stop him. My hand slides back, and I swallow. I can't tell him I hate the inside of my thighs and all the stretch marks, that I'm worried about how I taste or the million other things that make me anxious about this exact thing.

"If you're not ready, I won't," he says in the gravelly voice that tells me just how horny he is. "We can skip this."

"No." I shake my head. "It's my own stuff. I'm ready for this with *you*."

That part is important. I didn't understand how important until I tried to imagine myself with anyone else. Giving anyone else my body, giving them the ability to hurt me, to know me, it's impossible.

Ash kisses my upper thigh again, then licks the spot where my underwear normally sits. I squirm but fist his hair tightly. It feels good. Every touch, every lick, kiss, all of it feels amazing. I just don't know what to do with myself.

He licks across my pussy, entrance to clit, and I gasp, my head falling back. As his tongue lazily circles that pleasure point again and again, my hips roll against his mouth, taking full advantage. I should have known he'd be good at this.

"Yes?" he asks.

"Yes," I answer, nearly choking on the simple word.

Every concern flew out of my head the moment he licked me. And now, with him trying different angles, paces and combinations, I'm just putty in his hands. Ash groans and jerks me tighter against his mouth, devouring me hungrily, like he's been starving for me and me alone.

I whimper and tug his hair harder as he hits a rhythm that threatens to make me come again. His lips wrap around my clit, and he sucks hard as his tongue continues to flick over the sensitive nub.

Holy fuck, I'm seeing stars, wondering why I never let him do this before, kicking myself for ruling this out. Sounds pour out of my throat, everything from begging and moaning to high-pitched breaths and something close to a sob.

He feels so good. His mouth, then his fingers, as he digs them into my thighs to keep me from closing my legs around his head. Looking down, I find his eyes on me, burning hot with lust and unspoken promises.

Ash flattens his tongue across my clit and wiggles it back and forth before sucking it again. I fall over the edge of sanity when he does that same combination again, faster. But he doesn't care that I'm spiraling through ecstasy, he just keeps going.

My own energizer bunny.

Every flick of his tongue sends electric currents through me, making me twitch and squirm, wiggle and writhe against his mouth. It's too much and not enough at the same time, over-sensitive and dull.

But the next orgasm hits me like a tidal wave, nearly knocking me out with the force of my release. I don't know where I am, if I'm floating, if Ash is still touching me, nothing. I'm just ... happy, content, completely and totally perfect.

A little brush across my side brings me back to the present, and I see Ash has his pants off and is climbing back

into bed. I groan. Of course, we're not done. Not even after coming four times.

"Ready for me, Sky?" he asks.

"Never," I breathe.

He chuckles and kisses me, his slick lips sliding along mine as I taste myself on his tongue. When he licks the roof of my mouth, he thrusts into me. I didn't even realize how empty I'd felt until now, with him stretching my pussy, pounding into me and sending a different kind of pleasure skittering and leaping across my body.

"Ash!" I dig my nails into him as he pants in my ear. "Oh fuck."

"Still like my cock after having my tongue?" He growls.

"Yes!"

"Is this what you missed, baby?" He nips my throat. "Me, buried deep inside you, making you come over and over again?"

"I missed all of you," I say. "Every part."

He groans and fucks me harder. His bed squeaks, and the headboard keeps thudding against the wall, but I can't make myself care, not when I'm with him. Ash grunts with every thrust, and I treat him to bites – across his sexy arms, his chest, his neck, marking him as mine.

"Mine," I finally say. "You're mine."

"All yours, Sky," he says before stealing a toe-curling kiss that makes me come.

He swallows every sound I make before flipping me over. He strokes over my spine as he thrusts into me again, just grinding so he brushes spots so deep and needy that all I can do is shake.

"Your back doesn't have a single mark on it," he hums.

“I know.” I rock forward, then back, so I can feel him really move inside me.

“Fuck.” He steadies my hips. “I’m not ready to be done. Hold still.”

“Make me,” I challenge.

His hand tightens, and he bites my shoulder so hard, I let out a hoarse cry. Ash soothes the mark with a soft kiss, but continues biting and kissing down my back without letting me move at all. It drives me insane. He’s right here, pulsing inside me, teasing me with what I want ... what I *need*.

I try again to move, and Ash chuckles. “Having some trouble there, Sky?”

I try again, and again, and just end up slumped over, held in place by his arms. But it breaks me, I actually laugh. “You’re a pain in the ass.”

“Oh, yeah? You want to hit that first, too?” He swats my ass. “Who made you so kinky?”

I groan as he moves inside me ever so slightly. “You, and you’d better finish the job.”

Ash licks up the back of my neck. “So demanding.” Another smack to my ass. “Lucky, I love you.”

I moan but can’t say anything because he starts thrusting into me again. My eyes roll back. The waiting just made everything more intense. He palms my breast, rubbing over my nipple until any thought of laughing is gone. It’s just us, doing what we’re best at.

Groaning, I thrust back against him. He lets me, rubbing my clit instead while whispering dirty things. But I’m convinced Ash could read the dictionary in my ear while fucking me, and I’d still come first. I try to resist, wanting more, needing more. I want this to keep going and going.

“Come!” He growls in my ear. “I need you to come.”

“I don’t want to be done.”

He moans and bites my ear as he picks up the pace, slamming into me as I try to grab the headboard to shut that up at least. It doesn’t do anything when I feel the ripple of my orgasm start in my curling toes.

Ash jerks my head to the side and claims my mouth in a soul-branding kiss that pushes me over the edge. I come hard, squeezing and feeling something different. Wetness spills out of me, gushing over his cock as he lets out some feral sound.

“Fucking hell, Sky.”

I whimper as my eyes roll back, and I slump into his pillow. My body keeps moving with his until he jerks me back onto my knees, kissing up my neck as he has me ride him. He thrusts up into me again and again.

“Energizer Bunny,” I manage to get out between whimpers and moans that just keep getting rougher.

“I’ll take that nickname, baby,” he croons before biting me again.

I come again, but this time Ash comes with me, his whole body shaking like an earthquake under me before we topple down on his bed on our sides. Each breath I take makes me feel like tissue paper – all flimsy and fragile.

Ash tugs me against his hard body after a minute and skims his nose over my throat, making me squirm. It’s too light and too good at the same time. “Ash.”

“You make me an animal,” he whispers. “Make me insane.”

I open my mouth, wanting to tell him I love him, too. I feel it ... I think, but I groan as he rubs my side and over my belly.

“I told you. All night. I’m not accepting anything less.”

“Sucks for you,” I tease. “I have to be home by sunrise. Or I’m grounded. Want to make a bet on the first thing I’m not allowed to enjoy?”

Ash chuckles and nips my jaw. “Me?”

“You.” I shudder again as his body moves against mine. “I need a break.”

I try to get up, but Ash wraps his arm around my middle and jerks me back down. I try again, but he just pulls me back into place. I laugh and swat at him. “Let me clean up.”

He watches me get up, a smile threatening his lips before he gives me one of his shirts and drags on loose boxers. We get to the bathroom, and I expect him to leave me alone, but he locks the door from the inside and jerks me close.

“Join me for a shower.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

But we get a shower together, playing around and doing absolutely nothing sexual. Ash peeks his head out of the door before we run back to his room, trying to keep our voices down as we shove the door shut and lock it.

Then we just cuddle. Ash tugs the hem of his shirt where it hits my thigh, then drags me closer. I snuggle closer, enjoying him in just boxers. Ash plays with my damp hair. “I like having you here.”

“I like being here,” I admit. “I like you.”

He chuckles and kisses my forehead. “Why do you like me, Sky?”

I think about it for a moment. “It doesn’t make sense really,” I warn. “I just ... I feel good when we’re together. When we’re joking around and sassing each other, I feel like the me I want to be. You push me a lot, but it’s not always bad. When we were apart, I kept wanting to tell you things and

cuddle you, to feel this.” I tug myself tighter against him. “I like who you are and how much more you add to my life.”

“Even if I won’t hold your damn tarantula.”

“The one who watches us have sex with all eight eyes?”
I tease.

He rolls me onto his back and bites my bottom lip.
“Just for that, you have to wait another ten minutes.”

“Oh, the humanity.”

“And I’ll introduce you to edging if you keep up that attitude.”

Despite his growly voice, I know he’s enjoying this. I know that he’s incapable of *not* making me come. And I know that leaving him is going to be next to impossible. I swallow.
“We have a bigger thing to talk about.”

“It can wait.”

“It can’t.” I disagree. “I got the internship, Ash.”

His expression brightens as he grins. “Yeah! Didn’t I tell you? You had it in the bag. I didn’t doubt for one second.”
He pulls me into a crushing hug. “Congrats!”

I can’t help smiling back, though there’s a lingering sadness there. “It means I’m leaving the first week in January. What happens then?”

“Depends on if you’re over me or not.” He kisses my nose. “A lot can happen in that amount of time. I hope we’re still together. I hope you’re willing to give long distance a try, if you can survive without my cock.”

“I made it eighteen years.”

“It’s different now that you’ve had it,” he grumbles but lays next to me, then wraps himself around me. “This is one conversation that *has* to wait. We can only have it when we’re close to that date.”

Slowly, I nod, then kiss his chest, rubbing his sides.
“What are your plans for tomorrow? It’s July Fourth, and my mom is throwing a little get-together. Kind of a ‘*I’m sorry for leaving*’ party, I think.”

He lifts my chin. “Want me there?”

I shake my head slowly, then swallow hard. “I *need* you there, Ash. To deal with my mom, to be my boyfriend ... to kiss me under the fireworks like I used to dream about.”

He beams, then kisses me hard and hungry. “Done.”

Chapter 35

Ashton

After another two rounds of mind-blowing sex, Sky falls asleep in my arms. I kiss the top of her head and keep her close. I know she has to be home before sunrise, but I'm keeping her until I absolutely have to give her up.

Even one week without her is too long. How the hell am I going to survive a month, two? I draw back to watch her, and she squirms, getting closer to me and irritating at least four of my bruises. I grit my teeth to avoid grunting out loud and then settle back against her.

"We can't do a real sleepover, baby," I whisper in her ear, even though she's asleep. "It would make me too greedy. I wouldn't want to wake up alone again."

She hums softly in her throat and clutches me closer, nails scraping over my skin. It's true, but I also can't imagine being with another woman now. Sky's given me just about everything – at least in bed – and I still want more.

Despite our fighting, our differences, the shit we've been through, I want to stay with her. I want to hold her. I want to hear about her day ... every day. I want to know every detail about her life, everything she thinks. And if that means waiting to be told yes, if it means talking about how her silence makes me feel, even if it means revealing how insecure I am, I'm willing to do it. In person, long distance, whatever. As long as I have her.

Brushing her hair away from her face, I kiss across her temple and cheek. She grumbles. "No more. Go to bed,

Bunny.”

I tip her chin up and kiss her softly. “I thought you didn’t want to get grounded.”

She jumps up, eyes wild but obviously exhausted. She looks around and shakes her head. “I have to get home. Oh, my god.”

I laugh and watch her pick up her things while laying on my belly. She’s so damn cute. Once she has her jeans on with my shirt and slides into her flipflops, she kisses me, then stops at the door.

“What time is it?”

“After three in the morning, baby.” I drag myself up. “I’ll walk you out and make sure you get home safe.”

I drag on pajama pants and lead Sky to the front door. She turns and kisses me softly. “I don’t hate you.”

“I know.” I tap her nose. “My dick is clearly the answer.”

She huffs, but I catch her and pull her back. “I love you, Sky. So much, that I’m not going to insist on following you to your room and sleeping in bed with you.”

Calming, she kisses me again. “My boyfriend has impulse control. Who would have guessed?”

“See you tomorrow?”

“Yes. I can’t be trapped with my family without some backup.” She kisses my neck. “As long as you can move, that is.”

“Oh yeah, and explain every one of the marks you left with my recent fight, right?” I wink. “Suddenly biting is allowed in boxing.”

She shoves me, but I watch her get inside her own house before going back to bed. I find that she left her jacket

and wrap it around one of my pillows before cuddling close, breathing in her perfume as I fall asleep.

When my door is practically kicked open, I groan and look up to see my brother. “Get up, dickweed. It’s after noon.”

I pull the pillow from under my head and throw it at him. “Shut up.”

“If you weren’t so busy fucking all night, you wouldn’t be tired,” he snorts.

I get up, ready to go after him, but he slams the door shut behind him, and I shake my head. I’m too sore anyway. My arms ache, my thighs, my back, my whole body feels like it’s cramping off and on. I sit back on my bed and see my door open slightly.

“One more thing,” Peter says. I arch an eyebrow. “Bitch.”

I grab for the door and chase my brother downstairs, ready to beat his ass for ruining my morning, but once I get him in a headlock, my parents come in. I blink at them stupidly, then release Peter just to flick him off.

“Get dressed, Ashton. No one needs to see all this.”

I look down at myself and see a bite mark on my lower abdomen, just above my pants that can’t be explained with the story of a punch when just about each of the teeth are outlined. I need to talk to Sky about how hard she fucking bites.

“We’ve been invited to join the Bennetts at a Fourth of July cook out and we’re taking them out on the boat,” he says sharply. “Let’s go. Get ready for the day.”

I grumble about it being a *break* day but get through a shower, drag on some swimming trunks and a tank top before looking at my bruised-up face. I shrug. Life of a boxer. Sunglasses hide the worst of it anyway.

I take a little extra time to get ready since I know I'll be seeing my girlfriend and actually be able to be her boyfriend, even around her parents. I can't look like a hellion. Once I feel good enough, I join my family and head over.

Mom nudges me. "A little warning next time please, Ashton."

"Hmm?" I ask.

"If you're going to have your girlfriend over, fix your bed and try putting on some music or turn up your T.V," she advises.

I scratch the back of my head. "Don't tell Sky you heard."

"I'd never embarrass her like that," Mom assures.

I see Dad rub down her back as she hurries to catch up with him and then he kisses her temple. He glances back at me and arches an eyebrow. I think he's the only one out of the loop when it comes to my personal life since Mom wouldn't say a word unless she was asked.

When we walk right into the backyard, I see Chase with some guys, Bonnie talking with Sky, and both of Sky's parents. Her mother comes over and touches her hair, and I see her cringe, but she stays put.

And she's in an outfit that has sin written all over it. Some shirt that ties around her neck and shows off a few of the bite marks I left on her and shorts that threaten to make me hard right here and now. Definitely not a teddy bear when she's teasing.

Bonnie bumps her hip as I drag my sunglasses painfully down my nose. Sky looks at me, blushes and sucks her bottom lip between her teeth. Her mother points out one of the bites, and I can practically hear the sarcasm from here.

She gets up and walks over, thanking my mom for bringing something, nodding to my dad, then walks to me. I

tip her chin up. “Rules on PDA?”

“Don’t manhandle me in front of my parents,” she says softly. “Also, you got me in trouble. “

“You were home on time.”

“With bite marks covering me,” she hisses. “I have two on the inside of my thighs, Ash!”

I kiss her softly, tasting her frustration, that sharp tongue, and then feeling her melt under my touch. She sighs and rubs my hips, pulling herself closer to me. I almost kiss her again, but I manage some kind of control.

“Are *you* upset with me?”

“No.”

“Good, because you got me in trouble, too. We need to talk about how hard you bite, bumble bee.”

“Your fault, Bunny.” She bumps my hip, then slides her hand into mine.

I stare at our hands as she leads me to the grill where her dad is standing with sunscreen all over his face. He looks up at us, and I scratch the back of my neck again. Yeah. It was a fucking terrible idea to mark my girlfriend up right before being introduced to her dad as the boyfriend.

“Daddy,” she says gently. “I’m dating Ash.”

He looks between us, then points at me with the tongs. “Stop leaving marks on my daughter.”

“As soon as ...” Sky steps on my foot. “Yes, sir.”

“And treat her well.” He gets closer. “And don’t you dare keep her from going to college.”

“Daddy, he already told me I have to go.” Sky wraps her arm around my middle protectively. “Over a week ago. He isn’t going to let me stay home and waste away.”

“Damn right. Need to put that brain to use. Maybe it will cut down on all the cursing and sarcasm,” I tease.

She huffs at me. “Prick.”

“Yes, dear,” I accept before she runs off to talk to Bonnie.

Mr. Bennett watches me for a long time. “Have you thought this through? You’re both on different wavelengths goal-wise. And she’s about to be all the way across the country.”

“Well, I’m hoping that by then, I’m good enough to choose where I want to fight. Tucson has some good options,” I mumble. “If she wants me there, that is.”

He looks me over slowly. “I’m serious about the marks. I don’t want to know what you two do. Stay out of her room while I’m around. Let me believe that my little girl is still sweet and innocent.”

“Will do.” I mean it. “As long as you allow us to go on dates.”

“Bring her home by morning, and I’m happy. I go to bed early, so anything else would be stupid to say.”

“Thanks, Mr. Bennett,” I say. Before I leave, I take a deep breath. “I know how much Sky loves you. She’s really happy that you guys are talking again.”

He motions for me to go on despite his smile, and I just happen to sit next to my girlfriend. She fans herself, and Bonnie smirks. “Go ahead, Sky. Take your shirt off.”

“No.” She goes red.

I grin. “Hiding something?”

She swats me. “You take your shirt off.”

“Can’t. Your dad wants to believe you’re innocent,” I chuckle.

Bonnie looks between us, then we're fucking around. Bonnie's trying to steal my shirt while I keep her away. I pick up Sky and use her as a shield until we're laughing and moving around the pool without getting in.

Then Chase gets involved. He stands in front of me while I still have Sky squirming in my arms. He grits his teeth. "I fucking hate this, for the record."

"Chase," she hisses. "You fucking promised."

He ignores her, giving me a stern stare that overrides the one her dad gave me. "Apparently, you make her happy. As soon as that stops, I'm kicking your ass."

"Fair," I shrug, then poke Sky's belly, making her squeal. She shoves me and runs off. "I'm sorry about how things escalated between us, man. That message I sent you..."

Chase sighs heavily, waving me off. "I deserved it. I shouldn't have ratted you out to your folks."

"Yeah, but still." I glance over at Sky while Bonnie keeps trying to take her shirt or shorts. She manages to steal my girlfriend's shorts, and Sky dives into the pool. I shake my head. "You and I have to get along for her. You know that, right?"

"Yeah," he smirks. "Let's see how today goes."

"I'm determined to make this work. I love her, and honestly ..." I swallow my pride again. "I miss you, man. A lot of people are manipulative dicks. And you're not manipulative."

He rolls his eyes, still smirking. "Don't get sappy on me because you're dating my sister."

He takes off his shirt and gets in the pool. Apparently, they want to do volleyball. I'm doomed to keep my shirt on for the day, so Peter joins in on Chase's team. Sky gets that damn competitive fire and goes all out until they accept defeat.

She huffs and grumbles as Chase's friends replace her and Bonnie. I motion her forward. "Come cool me off, baby."

"You want a beer or something?"

"Nope, just you in my lap," I say.

She rolls her eyes, gets herself a water and me a beer anyway. She shares the water with Bonnie as she leans back against me. Bonnie looks between us. "So, are you coming with us on the boat?"

"I was ordered to, but I don't know," I hesitate. "Do you *actually* want me there, Sky?"

"Please, Bunny?" Sky asks, looking up at me.

That damn nickname has me wrapped around her finger. Knowing what it means after last night in bed mixed with that hopeful, soft expression. "Fine."

"A nickname, Sky?" Bonnie asks, "how'd he get it?"

Now Sky's the one choking on her water and trying to avoid the question. I kiss her cheek and then one of the bites on her neck. "Welcome to a relationship."

Chapter 36

Sky

Bonnie won't leave me alone about the nickname I gave Ash. I can't believe I said it in front of her. It keeps me blushing and avoiding conversation all through dinner. Ash is asked no less than six times why he hasn't taken his shirt off and gotten in the pool, but he just says no one wants to see all the bruises he gets from fighting.

Which works until we're on his boat with tubing all ready to go. We're lucky there's a lake so close to home and that there's a public launch for it. The big circular tubes are tied to the boat, just waiting for people to get in. Bonnie and I go first after putting on life vests. Ash gives me a kiss good luck, keeping it G-rated since my parents are around.

I squeal as Chase jacks up the speed and Bonnie and I bump into each other. She yells over the waves. "Let's make a bet!"

"What kind?" I holler back.

"If I win, you explain the nickname. If you win, I won't ask again until I leave for school!"

"You're going down!"

We slam into each other over and over again until I manage to steer into her while turning, which tumbles her out of the water. She doesn't come up for a second, and I start to worry when a wave takes me out.

I gasp, drinking some lake water before I come up, sputtering and rubbing at my nose. I shove my hand high up in

the air, waving. Bonnie gets picked up first, then I haul myself onto the boat. Ash helps me up and brushes my soaking hair away from my face.

“You’re cute when you’re waterlogged.”

“Shut up,” I huff. I point at Bonnie. “I won!”

“I know,” she giggles. “I’ll ask again in two weeks.”

“Come on.” Chase pats Ash on the shoulder. “Like old times. An olive branch.”

I sigh and take off my life jacket, even though I’m not supposed to. I lay back on one of the seats, resting my head in Bonnie’s lap. Ash glances at me and arches an eyebrow. I nod once.

He shakes his head. “Alright, Chase. Like old times.”

He hands me his sunglasses, then takes his shirt off. I hear Bonnie gasp as she takes in his bruise covered body – a mix of hickeys and punches, except that one that definitely shows my teeth. I shake my head and cover Bonnie’s mouth.

She points, and I glare at her. “Dad’s patience is hanging on by a thread. I already got chewed out for my marks. Don’t point out his.”

Giggling, she zips her lips. My mom takes the opportunity to sit next to me and watches Ash and Chase get on the tubes. Thankfully, the life jacket covers the worst of my damage. Mom nods.

“Ash is good for you.”

I narrow my eyes, but being angry is so exhausting. I just bite my bottom lip as Dad cranks up the speed. I have a feeling he wants to dump them both out. Mom continues. “He’s mature enough for you and is a good balance for you. Outgoing and talkative and supportive.”

“Yeah,” I murmur. “He’s a good one.”

“I’m glad you have him.” Mom pats my hand. “Things are going to be okay, honey.”

I hesitate to accept that, but something in me actually believes it. “Yeah, it will.”

“We’re still taking those baby steps, I know, but I’m here if you ever need to talk about anything, okay?”

“Yeah... okay.”

I’m not sure if I’ll take her up on that offer anytime soon, but it feels kinda good that she offered. A flicker of hope fans in my stomach, and instead of putting it out like I usually do, I allow it to grow. Maybe someday, we’ll have that loving, mother-daughter relationship again. Just maybe.

I watch Ash kick at my brother’s tube as they both smile and give each other shit. Warmth spreads across my skin, something better than the sun. More hope. I’m hoping I can have it all. A best friend I don’t lose through four years at college. A brother I can still count on. Parents who’ll actually stick it out while I’m gone and a boyfriend who won’t hurt me.

Ash loses the fight, and we pick him up. All of us go multiple times until even Mr. Warren and Dad get out on the water. Chase drives the boat a bit slower until he’s told to speed up. Bonnie cheers with Mrs. Warren while Ash cuddles me against him, letting me lay between his legs with my back against his chest. I rub his arms around me and look up at him through his glasses.

“I really like you, Ash,” I murmur.

He lowers his head. “Well now that you said that, the magic’s gone. I loved you most when you hated me.”

I swat at him, but he catches my hand and kisses my palm. “You know I love you, baby. Enough to be working very hard not to have my tongue down your throat right now.”

I snuggle closer. “You’re just keeping me warm.”

“Of course, I am.” He kisses my jaw. “We can come out to the water as often as you want until it gets cold. What does a bug whisperer do in winter?”

“Stays inside with a space heater and a mountain of blankets,” I murmur. “Except for building one snowman for tradition.”

He chuckles and kisses my neck while braiding our fingers together. “Maybe I can manage to convince you to build two snowmen.”

“You’ll have to be very convincing.”

“I’ll make sure to warm you up after,” he purrs against my skin. “Hot chocolate, cookies, maybe even a homemade meal ... or something else if you want it.”

Chase clears his throat as he looks at us. Ash shakes his head. “We’re making plans for winter. What kind of soup does this one like?”

“I hate soup.” I stick out my tongue. “Chili is the best thing.”

“And she doesn’t like hot chocolate either.” Chase shrugs.

“What?” Ash gapes at me. “Oh, now we’re really done. I can’t be with a girl that doesn’t like chocolate.”

I shove him, then carefully slide my hand down my back like I have an itch, only to stroke along the top of Ash’s bottoms. He tightens his arm around me, jerking me back, so my hand is squashed between us.

“Fine. I’ll keep you around,” he grumbles.

“Of course, you will, Bunny.” I keep my voice low. “Because you just can’t resist me.”

He chuckles and kisses the top of my head.

After a long day playing on the water, we relax on the way home, then head out to another park to watch fireworks.

Ash holds me tightly while Bonnie and Peter talk. Ash picks at the blanket under us, and I pull his arms back around me.

“Thank you for today,” I say.

“Hmm?”

“For being there, pushing all my buttons, making me talk to people,” I shrug. “You’re good.”

“You say that now, but you’re going to hate me when I rub you down with aloe and refuse to touch you until you’re not a lobster,” he chuckles.

I roll my eyes but squeeze his hands. “You’re a really good boyfriend, and I feel ...”

He focuses entirely on me, ignoring my Dad glaring at us while his dad finally puts the pieces together. I swallow and meet his eyes. “I feel like I can trust you, really trust you.”

“Yeah?”

I nod. “And I’m going to try to fix things with my mom, slowly. I’m not quite sure how, though.” And just like that, I open up about everything as we wait for the fireworks.

I ask him for advice on bugs, on my pictures, if he’ll go hiking with me again because it was so much fun last time while we were together, and I’d really like to spend more time with him. I ask him if he can teach me some boxing basics so I can kick frat boy ass if they come up on me. I just spill everything that’s on my mind – which means a whole slew of things that don’t connect.

Ash listens, his smile spreading until he turns my chin and kisses me softly. He sucks my bottom lip, nibbles gently and draws back. “We have so much time, baby. I can teach you everything you want to know, and we can do plenty. I’m here. I’m wrapped around your fucking finger. And I’m ... I’m yours. Entirely.”

I lean back against him and rub his arms.

“What the heck?” his dad says loudly.

I laugh softly. “I think your dad just figured out who you were fucking last night.”

“Well, you were just so damn loud, I’m surprised the whole neighborhood isn’t filing a complaint.”

I gasp and shove him, but he falls while still wrapped around me, making me laugh. We get settled again and watch the fireworks together. It was always my favorite part of summer, but as I grew up and realized I wouldn’t have what all the other teen girls had – someone to kiss and make eyes at – it became my least favorite.

It’s romantic and sweet, and while Bonnie has never made me feel alone on any holiday, I felt like something was missing anytime I sat under the sparkling embers. Turning to look at Ash, seeing the fireworks reflect in his eyes and his lips part in wonder, I kiss his neck.

He’s the difference. Because I don’t want the fireworks to end. I don’t want to move, even when some of the soot lands close to us. I just want to hold onto this moment – my boyfriend, the man I dreamed about being mine for as long as I could remember, is right here.

“Pinch me?” I ask him.

Ash pulls his focus from the booming overhead and looks down at me. “Why?”

“I feel like I’m dreaming. This is too nice,” I admit, nuzzling his neck. “Having you, having all of this. It’s perfect, and ... and I’m not convinced it’s real.”

He chuckles and lifts my chin, kissing me once, then again, his tongue gently teasing mine as we draw out one kiss into a whole make out session. Tingles spread over my skin as I thread my fingers through Ash’s hair and meet every flick of his tongue with mine.

Just before I can lose myself completely, he pinches me. I gasp and draw back, looking at his fingers on my side. “Ow.”

“Guess it’s real,” he hums, pecking my lips. “I guess you’re stuck with me.”

I cuddle closer. The words are on my tongue, but they feel like they’re coming too soon. I can’t love him after such a short time. I can’t love him this much after we just got back together. It’s just the puppy love stage or the honeymoon phase. Whatever it is, it can’t be real, right?

It’s just because today has been perfect.

So, I bite my bottom lip and just watch the different colors bursting overhead, watch the streaks of light as they rain down over us and cover my ears like a little kid when it gets too loud. Ash keeps me close, covers me when the embers graze too close, and steals me behind our parents to devour my mouth properly, to make sure that I know how much he loves me without him having to say a word.

I smooth down his chest when he draws back and cups my cheek in his hand. “No more fighting for ... let’s say a month?”

“Sure,” I murmur. “Just keep kissing me like that, and we’ll be fine.”

“Keep talking to me.” He runs his fingers through my hair. “Tell me everything important when it happens, text me, keep being you and don’t push me away.”

I shove against his chest. “What, like this?”

He growls and jerks me back to nip my bottom lip. “Behave, baby, or I’m going to spank you.”

“I like you,” I murmur before kissing him again as the big finale threatens to blow out our eardrums and end summer early. “Which means I can’t behave.”

Chapter 37

Ashton

Over the next week and a half, everything is amazing. It's almost impossible to believe. I get why Sky asked me to pinch her on July 4th. Our sex life has had to slow down now that Dad figured things out and gave me a talking to about the right way to treat a lady, and her dad isn't blocking out the world.

But other than that, we've been in bliss. Things are still a little tense between Peter and Sky, not because she hasn't forgiven him after his sincere apology, but because she wants to make him sweat a little more. We've gone bowling with him and Bonnie. Chase even joined in on a video game day – although I'm pretty sure that's just because her dad insisted on us having a chaperone.

Things are going well, too well. The talent scout had shown up for the grand finale match, and from his discussions with Frank, there's a chance I could get signed to a minor league that will give me more exposure. My skills in the ring are getting even more advanced, yet I'm convinced something, anything is going to go wrong. At the end of training, the day before Peter is leaving for college, I linger.

Something tells me, I don't want to go home, but I can't figure out what. And I'm greedy. I don't want my bliss to end.

Groaning, I'm about to give in when I turn and see my girlfriend step into the ring. She has on leggings and a crop top with her hair in a pony. At least six other guys are blatantly staring at her ass.

Ah. Here's the hell. I have to survive not blinding every person in the gym. I wrap a possessive arm around Sky and haul her against my sweaty body.

"Eew!" She squeaks, obviously wanting to push against me but not being willing to touch me.

"Come on, gotta give me a kiss," I tease. "Or I just won't let you go."

She squeals again but gives me the quickest peck before I let her go. She throws a towel at me, and I dry myself off before hugging her again and kissing her hungrily. "What are you doing here?"

"We did hiking and movies and stuff with friends. Teach me to box."

"You already have a killer move."

As if she has to show it, she threatens to kick me in the balls. I grab her leg and twist it. She trips over herself and falls to the ground. I come down on top of her and hold her down. There are still two guys watching, so I flick them off as I kiss Sky's cheek.

"I just know to expect it."

"Well, I wouldn't want to hurt your second-best feature anyway," she grumbles.

"What's the first best?"

"Teach me something, and I'll tell you," she barter. "Or you'll never know."

I end up showing her a simple combination and some footwork. She likes it but likes hitting the bags even more. She beats them into submission, and I see a starry look in her eyes. She bounces a little, not caring about the tape around her fingers and wrists, not caring that she's a sweaty mess.

"Those frat boys better watch out," she giggles, then turns and kisses me happily.

I gently untangle myself. “You owe me an answer.”

“I like your brain, Ash,” she murmurs before kissing me again. “And the pretty head that holds it.”

I beam and devour her before pulling back and shaking my head. “The gym isn’t for making out.”

“Oh? So, then we should go back to my place. Since Chase is on a date and Dad is working overnight tonight?”

I groan and nod. “I have to shower, and you should, too.”

Once we get through that, it’s a race to her house. As soon as we get in the door, she hops around my waist and claims my mouth like she needs. She wraps her arms around my neck and moans as she kisses me hungrily.

Luckily, I’ve memorized the layout of her house from this specific excellent trait of hers. We get upstairs, and I work hard to make her come twice with my fingers and my mouth before I fuck her hard and deep like she loves. She nearly falls off the bed, making us both laugh.

I pull her back onto the bed and grab the headboard so it stops slamming against the wall as I fuck her. She giggles. “Maybe I liked that extra noise.”

“I like hearing you,” I argue, bending to kiss her hungrily.

That settles things until we finish together, and I flop down next to her. She pants, then rolls against my side, rubbing my chest and down my happy trail, stopping just above my cock. She kisses my chest softly, eyes on me.

I know what that means, considering how hesitant she’s been to do it lately and how gently she does it every time, like she’s trying not to get caught. She loves me. She’s just not ready to believe it or say it.

Rubbing my fingers over the back of her head and down her neck, I kiss her forehead. “You’re the first girl I’ve been able to laugh with while in bed.”

“That’s because you’re not that funny when you’re hard,” she teases.

I nip her fingers when she touches my lips, making her gasp. I kiss her fingers better and pull her tight. “I like it, Sky. I like knowing that one silly thing won’t end our fun because we can laugh and move on. I like being with you like this.”

She bites her bottom lip, then kisses me quickly. We clean up and sit together in our clothes. Sky takes care of her tarantula, then looks around, grumbling about Bonnie misplacing things and turns to me.

“How much do you love me?”

“I hate that question so fucking much.” I glare at her suspiciously. “Why?”

“Can you hold him for two seconds? I just have to do a quick clean and he’s so well behaved, and I trust you, so he’ll trust you.”

“Not how trust works,” I argue.

She pouts, that fucking devastating, puppy pout that gets to me even now. I close my eyes and stick my hands out. She nudges the hairy thing into my hands, and I watch him, not trusting a damn thing he does.

I manage not to shake ... or throw him, but the second he starts going for my arm, I feel the panic. “Sky. Sky, hurry up. He’s on the move. He’s doing shit!”

“He’s alive, he moves. It’s a thing, Ash. Give me another minute.” She insists. “You’re doing really well. It’s sexy and makes me like you even more.”

“Sky!” her name comes out choked as he moves up my arm.

I actually whimper as he keeps moving until she gently coaxes him into her hands, promising him crickets as if he's some puppy and will just understand. When she sets him back in his tank and closes the lid, she climbs on top of my lap and kisses me hungrily, devouring everything I want to say and every thought in my brain.

"You held him."

"Never again," I warn.

But her kissing is way more convincing. I'll do whatever Sky fucking wants as long as she keeps kissing me like she loves me, like there's no one else in the world she could possibly want more than me.

Groaning, I go for her shirt, and we go another two rounds before she pulls the blankets up around us and kisses across my neck and chest. "I'm so proud of you, Bunny."

"Yeah. Yeah," I grumble. "Held a spider."

"You don't know how much it means to me," she insists, snuggling closer. "I've been working so hard to talk to you more. To tell you things I feel and think. It's been so hard and sometimes I get mad because it's so easy for you, and it feels like I'm struggling to catch up, just like when we were little."

"Hey." I tip her chin up so I can watch her face. "It's not like that."

"But you just did something for me that's really hard for you," she says, getting that damn soft smile and bright glint to her eyes. "And even though you hate spiders, you did it for me, and you didn't drop him or anything. I'm so proud of you, and I'm so happy."

I kiss her and nibble her bottom lip.

We hear a car door close, and I curse as I struggle to get into my clothes. Sky laughs until I throw her clothes at her. She pulls them on, ignoring a bra and underwear. She simply

kicks those under the bed, pulls the comforter so it looks made and makes me sit while getting up to take pictures of Dracula.

“I’m telling you. He’s a star.”

“He’s a tarantula,” I correct, still frustrated that I held the thing. “Way too many eyes. Way too many legs.”

She laughs kicks at me before taking another photo. “Did you know they use a hydraulic system to power their legs. It’s all about their blood pressure pushing blood around. Isn’t that amazing.”

“So ... no muscles in their legs?”

“Nope.”

“I could take him,” I say surely.

A knock sounds on the door. Sky glances around the room before yelling, “Come in!”

Her dad enters a second later, looking between us. He arches an eyebrow. “How is everything?”

“I’m teaching Ash all about spiders,” Sky answers. “I even got him to hold Drac.”

Her dad shivers. “Make sure the lid is on tight. We don’t need him escaping again.”

“Again?” I glare at Sky as her dad chuckles and walks away. “*Again?* How many times has he escaped, Sky?”

“Not too many. Maybe ... five times? I’ve had him three years. It happens,” she shrugs.

“That’s it. I’m never spending the night. No way you can bribe me into that. Fuck no.” I start to grab my socks.

Sky takes my hand, glances at the door and pulls my hand up her shirt. I caress her breast because I’m not physically able to stop myself, but she doesn’t stop until my hand is over her heart. I can feel it fluttering under her skin. She sits on top of me and presses her forehead to mine.

“I wish I could wake up to you.”

“Sky,” I pant. “I ... if I ever wake up to that thing on me, I can’t promise I’m not going to throw the fucker across the room.”

She kisses me softly and nods. “Understood.”

I end up being kicked back home so they can have dinner as a family before Chase has to start his road-trip back to school in the morning. The next day, I say a long goodbye to Peter, actually hugging him at the airport.

“I’m going to miss you, kid.”

“Shut up, old man. I’m sure you’ll be the same woman-stealing fucker when I get back,” he huffs, handing Mom a ten dollar bill. “I’ll give you updates.”

I shove him while ruffling his hair and watch him head to security. The next day, Bonnie leaves, which means Sky doesn’t answer her phone. Shaking my head after work, I go to the same place I found her when she was really upset after everything with her dad.

She’s there, wiping her nose and trying to stop crying.

I wrap around her from behind, and she turns to cry into my chest. “Ten years!”

“I know.”

“And now she’s in another state!”

I rub her back in slow circles, letting her tell me fun stories about when they were together, how much she’s going to miss Bonnie, how much she wishes she would have gone to NYU, too. I listen to all her whimpering and rambling while actually joining in and sharing my favorite Bonnie moments.

She laughs and wipes her eyes. “I’m so glad that you made the efforts to be friends with her.”

“I owed her for putting my head on straight,” I admit. “She talked to me after we broke up, and it helped. She’s

wonderful.”

Sky nods and continues telling me things while I try to push my feelings down – taking a page from her book.

Five months and change from now, I’m going to be the one blubbering when my girlfriend gets on a plane and goes into a completely different time zone. And I’m not going to have a person to confide in other than maybe her dad ... or Tyler. Kenny and his wife did long distance once.

When Sky stops crying, she looks up at me and kisses me softly. “I don’t want to leave you like this.”

“Sky.” I cup her face between my hands. “You’re going to school.”

“I know. I just ... I wish you could come with me, I guess. I’m too weird to be in a whole university alone.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I promise.

And I know we will. Sky and I are good at figuring things out. Since May, we’ve managed to forgive and forget about the past, get into a relationship, try just about everything in bed, get me into a ranked position with boxing, break up, make up, and reveal our relationship to everyone.

If we can do that, we can do anything.

“I love you,” I remind her.

She groans and kisses me hungrily. “I’m yours, Ash. All of me.”

“You’re only saying that because you can’t behave around me,” I tease before kissing her again.

Epilogue

Sky

February

I can't believe how hard it was to leave Ash last month. All the video calls, the phone calls, the texts and pictures, it's not the same as having him. And for a solid two weeks, I was sure I was going to end up running back to him.

The holidays together, dates together, getting to be together anytime around his work and training schedule, plus my internship, it was like trying to put in two years' worth of moments so I wouldn't feel exactly like I do right now. Like I can't get comfortable.

I look at Dracula with his heat lamp, all happy in his bigger tank. I ended up in a studio apartment just off campus, and he gets the best upgrade he's had. And Arizona is beautiful, there's so much to see, a complete change in landscape and life and ecology, but I'm missing home. My dad and Chase. Even Mom. She and I are still a work in progress, but I think we're going to make it, especially since she and Dad are in a good place. They're seeing a marriage counselor and are discussing her moving back in. I'm genuinely happy for them.

It does nothing to change my loneliness, though.

I'm missing Bonnie.

Missing my boyfriend.

Wishing for the thousandth time since I moved that I told him I loved him on New Year's instead of getting chicken shit and telling him that Arizona was going to suck without him. I shake my head.

“No. If he were here, we wouldn't get anything done, right, Drac?” I ask my spider. “Homework would fall to the side. I wouldn't be in a conservation club. Wouldn't get to take all these photographs on the weekends.”

But it's a hollow victory when I'd rather have the man of my dreams with me. He spoiled me the last six months, and now I'm dealing with the withdrawal.

Bonnie texts me again, asking if I'm excited. Groaning, I call her. “Excited for what, Bonbon?”

“Valentine's day. Your first one with a boyfriend. Aren't you excited?” she asks.

“I'm not in the same state as him so ... that steals some of the magic,” I grumble. “Why are you so excited?”

“You know he's other bestie.” She snorts. “He's the right brand of asshole, I guess. And stop hating on Valentine's day. I bet he surprises you.”

“With what?”

She yells at someone, then says she has to go. I just stare at my phone and shake my head. Ash stopped his crazy surprises in August when he scared the shit out of me, and we got into a little fight over him and how much I don't like not knowing what's going on. It means I can't say no, and I don't like that.

But I even miss fighting with him and the making up and his soft apologies, the way he actually changed his behavior, and I changed mine. It always brought us closer together.

My phone rings, and I shake my head. I swear, Ash knows when I'm missing him. I answer the phone. “Hi,

Bunny.”

“What’s your address again?” he asks, not even bothering with pleasantries.

I blink in surprise. “Why?”

“Please, baby?”

I read it off again and hear something in the background. I roll my eyes. “Are you out with the guys again? I’m not explaining again that I can’t come home for Valentine’s day. One, it’s tomorrow, and two, I can’t justify a long ass flight just to be there for one day and then turn around. I’d miss classes.”

“I know,” he sounds breathless. “You love me, right?”

“Ash,” I hesitate. “You know how I feel.”

“So, you’re not going to be pissed when I tell you something?”

I narrow my eyes now and get up from my bed. “That depends entirely on what the fuck you’re going to tell me.”

“Well, see. There are some things I think are just better to say when we can see each other.”

“Then you should have Facetimed me. You know the whole ‘we need to talk’ and the ‘remind me to say something later’ comments give me anxiety.”

“I know. That’s why I’m not asking you to wait,” he says clearly.

I hear a knock on my door and groan. “Hold on. I think my food is here.”

I walk to the door, open it and see Ash. I just gape at him. My phone falls out of my hand, and he walks in, tossing his shit to the side before cupping my face between his hands and pulling me close to kiss me hungrily.

He kicks the door shut and presses his body against mine, feasting on my mouth, devouring me and finally picking me up so I have to wrap myself around him. I moan and get with the fucking program.

I bite his bottom lip, kiss him like my life depends on it and keep kissing him until we fall into bed together. He stands up, putting his hand out. “Nope. No sex yet.”

“You’re here,” I pant.

“It took me all of five seconds after you left for me to realize I didn’t have a damn thing keeping me in Indiana. Nothing that mattered. I’d planned to surprise you for spring break and hoped I’d get the transfer here.”

“Transfer?”

“But I said fuck it. I talked to Bonnie and Chase about it – by the way. I wanted their opinion when it came to moving across the country and surprising you,” he continues. “I can get a job at a gym training while I wait to get ranked over here or picked up by a coach or league.”

“Ash,” I pant. “Bunny. Slow down and explain this to me.”

He takes my hand and puts it over his heart. “I fucking love you, woman. I’ve been saying it to you for how long? I’ve been miserable. All the calls, the video chats, our dirty fun online, it’s not the same as being able to see your face. I know. I didn’t ask *your* permission. I crossed multiple boundaries if we’re including state lines, but I ... I couldn’t wait.”

My eyes water, and I dab at them uselessly. I sniff.
“Fucker.”

“I can get a hotel. For about a week, maybe. If this is pushing too far,” he swallows nervously. “I had to shoot my shot, Skylar. Because being that many miles from you, being three hours ahead, it’s too much for me.”

“I love you, you idiot,” I whimper.

Ash stares down at me, then lifts my jaw. “Say it again.”

“I love you, Ashton Warren. Your stupid, thoughtful, impulsive, mind reading abilities and all.”

“Fuck.” He scoops me up and kisses me again and again until we’re tumbling and rolling around in bed. He shakes his head. “Talking.”

“Right, Bunny.” I drag him against me. “Talking can wait.”

He laughs against my mouth and pins my hands above my head. “No. Because I’m kind of homeless.”

“The fuck you are. You live with me now. You came all this way, we’re going to split rent, we’re going to wake up together, even if it means morning breath and potential spider breakouts. And you’re going to be rewarded every minute you’re here for getting on that plane.”

He groans and kisses me again and again. Ash strips me down and proves his nickname all over again, making me come twice before the delivery man gets here, then another three times before I actually get to eat anything.

We lay in bed together as I feed him some of my veggie lo mien. I’m in his shirt, and he’s only got boxers on. I giggle as I stuff his cheeks full of noodles. “You’re cute.”

“I love you.” He presses his lips to mine, even though they’re useless right now.

I bite my bottom lip and rub my arm. I’ve said it twice, but it feels taboo to say it more. The more you say something, the less it means, right? I take a huge bite of food, and Ash doesn’t press me for more.

We make love again and again, each time more tender and gentler than the last until we fall asleep together, hair

damp from the shower.

In the morning, though, I'm sure I'm going to wake up alone, or with a spider to chase down. I swallow the growing dread and squeeze my eyes shut, burying my face into my pillow. A groan next to me draws my attention just before I'm jerked tight against a warm body.

"Bunny?" I half roll over to look at him as he smiles.

I feel his hard on nudging my ass.

"I was afraid I'd wake up alone, that everything was a dream," I whisper.

Ash lifts my leg and rubs his cock over my pussy. I gasp and arch back. He groans and then sinks into me slowly, inch by inch as my eyes roll back a little. He palms my breast in his other hand and rocks into me again.

"Not a dream, Sky. I'm real."

I groan as he treats me to morning sex, nice and slow, lazy, easy. I feel pleasure building on itself slowly, welling up inside me until I come apart, panting and whimpering. Ash jerks out of me and cums on my ass.

"Let's clean up and do this Valentine's day shit right."

I laugh as we get into the shower together. Watching my boyfriend brush his teeth and growl at me like a dog, then fight with me over the hot water until we end up having sex *again*, is too much.

By the time he actually has his clothes on and looks all rumpled and approachable, I've fallen in love with him all over again. I sigh as I watch him flop on the couch and point at Dracula.

"Listen here, eight eyes. You stay in that cage, and I'll stay over here. No problems. No arguments. We'll share Sky, and you just hole up when we're having fun."

I sit on Ash's lap and kiss him softly. "I don't want to leave home today. I just want to be with you."

He shakes his head. "You don't want to drag me out to the desert and show me bugs or have me take you out to a fancy dinner? Get you a present? Anything?"

"Dinner's fine," I whisper. "And I did get you a present, but that's for after dinner."

"You told me you love me finally. That's present enough." But he reaches into his pocket and takes a slow breath. "I got you one, too."

"Ash!" I shove him. "You flew all the way here and gave me you!"

He chuckles and pulls out a black box. It's not huge, but it's bigger than ring size. I narrow my eyes at him, though. I just said the 'I love you'. If he's proposing, he's going to be sad.

"Open it. It doesn't bite," he chuckles, then bites my neck. "Not like me."

I open the box and see a silver bracelet. As I hold it up, I see different charms. There's a stag beetle, a spider that looks like a black widow, another spider that looks like Dracula, a moth, a bee.

"Do you like it? It took me time to get all the bugs."

I groan and press my face to his chest. He clasps it around my wrist. "I love you. I love how much you love bugs, how fearless you are, how determined and ambitious. I love your prickly sarcastic side and the soft side that I get to see when you start getting talkative. I love you, Skylar Bennett."

I wipe my eyes and kiss him, holding his face between my hands. "I love you so much, Ashton. You're so fucking thoughtful and even when you're an asshole, you make me laugh. You push me in the best ways, and I love how you always surprise me."

“God, I’m so happy I took this risk.”

I shake my head, remembering what he said when Bonnie left. “It’s just because you can’t fucking behave with me.”

He hugs me tightly. “Not a fucking chance, baby. I’m wrapped around your finger and loving every second of it.”

“Just give me at least a year before you start thinking about wedding shit.”

“Thinking or talking?” He teases.

I giggle and kiss him again before we take a picture together, bracelet included and send it to Bonnie. She video calls me immediately.

“Ash! You did it!” She squeals.

He nods and kisses my cheek. “And you were right. She liked the surprise.”

“Both surprises,” I argue. “Thank you, Bonbon. Warning would have been nice.”

“It wouldn’t have been a surprise, and I’m a romantic,” she argues. “Now you two have fun. Call me later. Love you!”

She hangs up, and I put my phone to the side after that. I give Ash all my attention, happily listening to his stories about traveling, all the things he wants to see and do together, including how we clearly need weirder décor in our house.

With every additional idea, every comment that includes me, with every warm smile, my heart grows bigger and bigger. I shake my head and climb onto his lap, wrapping my arms around him as I play with his hair.

He groans and presses his face to my chest as I keep scratching his scalp and tugging his hair. “Sky.”

“I love you more than I can even put into words, Ash.”

“You don’t hate me?”

“Nope. I love you.” I kiss his forehead. “Can you handle that?”

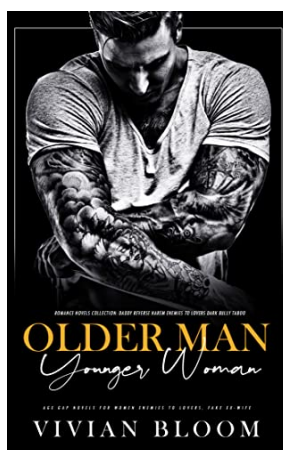
He beams. “I loved the way you hated me. I’m going to need a new word to describe how much I love you loving on me.”

“Better start studying the dictionary then.”

He beams and pinches my sides, making me squeal before laughing. “You loving me has me thinking about forever.”

“Forever sounds really good,” I say.

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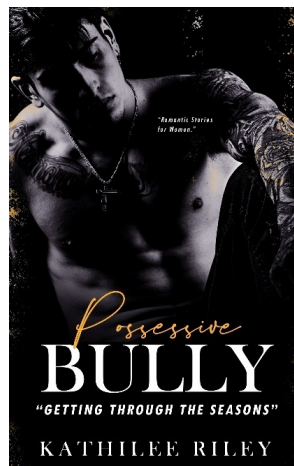
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SAMPLE

I thought my big, over-protective stepbrother was the
biggest prick ever,
Until Thanksgiving, when he brought home an even cockier
devil, Sawyer,
A tattooed rebel with jawlines of steel and dark piercing eyes
glinting with danger.
I can tell he's the type to fight in public brawls, someone who
would protect me if I'm his,
But I'm not his type, I am too young, too inexperienced, no

experience.

He has every intention of being the wicked menace to his best
friend's little sister,

Hell-bent on driving me up the wall, taunting me, teasing me,
torturing me, leaving me in puddles,

Yes, leaving me in puddles has become a sick little game to
him,

Loving to watch me squirm in need,

Knowing damn well he'll never cross the forbidden line
between us,

And my stepbrother will never let him either,

He knows Sawyer only uses shy, nerdy girls like me for a one-
night stands, I know it too,

Then why do I get so weak to his tease, his touch,

I vow to myself that I will never give in to him,

My V-card will be given to a gentleman who deserves it, not a
bad-ass bad boy like Sawyer,

But then I made a mistake, our lips touched ... [DOWNLOAD FOR](#)

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