

DARE TO LOVE

THE TRUTH AND DARE DUET

LYLAH JAMES

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DARE TO LOVE

AN ENEMIES-TO-FRIENDS-TO-LOVERS ROMANCE

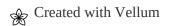
LYLAH JAMES

DARE TO LOVE

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To Catherine~

My suse, thank you for always supporting me. You're my sunshine.

A gripping, heart-wrenching and slow burn enemies-to-friends-to-lovers romance.

What happens when a dare goes too far?
Maddox Coulter. Reckless bad boy. Infamous playboy. He was my nemesis, then my best friend.

Maddox promised to always be there for me. I vowed I'd never leave him. We teetered over the line of love and obsession for many years. The irresistible attraction between us became more — it burned us and we laid in the ashes of our mistakes. Our relationship was something precious and we fought, we bled... and we fell deeper into this game of love.

We were never meant to cross paths in the first place because Maddox held a secret that would be the cause of our ruination.

But maybe it was kismet...
Truth or Dare?

Truth: He loved me. I loved him. But it was never simple.

Dare: I dare you to read our story. Nothing is what it seems to be.

DARE TO LOVE is the complete TRUTH AND DARE DUET collection and a never seen before Christmas Novella.

DO YOU DARE

TRUTH AND DARE DUET, BOOK ONE

LYLAH JAMES

PROLOGUE

LILA

His presence was a warm heat behind me as we walked into the bar. He was close; really, *really* close. I could *feel* him. I could *smell* him. He was so close, yet so far out of reach. A dangerous temptation dangling right in front of me.

I wanted to turn around and wrap my arms around him, bask in his warmth. We've hugged and cuddled plenty of times before, but since the Charity Gala, everything has been different.

He has been different.

Somehow, there was a wall between us now. I couldn't break it or walk around it. It was exhausting and scary — watching the change in him, seeing him so...cold and withdrawn from me. Sometimes, it felt like he was battling something inside his head. I waited silently for him to come to me, to speak of his worries, so I could find a way to soothe him. Like always.

Except...it started to feel as if I was the problem. As if he was hiding from me.

A week in Paris. This was supposed to be fun and exciting. An adventure for us. Day one and it was already going to waste.

I chewed on my bottom lip as we walked further inside the dim room. It wasn't overly crowded, but everyone here looked fancy. After all, this was one of the famous hotels of Paris; wealthy and posh people came here often. "I didn't think the hotel would have its own bar. Fancy. I like it."

"It's nice," he replied. There was a roughness in his voice, except his tone was robotic. No emotions whatsoever.

What's wrong with you? What did I do?

I paused in my steps, expecting him to bump into me. He didn't. Instead, I felt his arm slide around my waist as he curled it around me. Our bodies collided together softly, and I sucked in a quiet breath. His rock-hard chest was to my back, pressing against me, and I could feel every intake of breath he took. His touch was a sweet, sweet torture.

Fuck you, for making me feel this way, for tempting me and leaving me hanging and...for making me fall in love with you...

"This way." His lips lingered near my ear as he whispered the words. He steered me toward the bar stools.

We sat side by side. From the corner of my eye, I watched him as he ordered our drinks. His voice was smooth, and it slid over my skin like silk. Soft and gentle.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice the man standing next to me until his hand touched my shoulder. I swiveled to the left, my eyes catching the intruder. Yes, intruder. He was interrupting my time with *him*.

Maddox Coulter – the balm to my soul but also the stinging pain in my chest. He was sweet heaven and the bane of my existence.

"Remember me?" the man in the suit asked with a tiny grin.

Yup, I did. He was the owner of the hotel. We met him when we checked in yesterday.

"I saw you across the bar, and I knew instantly, you had to be the pretty girl I met last night." His English was perfect, but it was laced with a husky French accent. I had to admit, it was kind of sexy. Mr. Frenchman stood between our stools, separating Maddox and me. He blocked my view of Maddox and I. Did. Not. Like. That.

"Thank you for helping us yesterday," I replied sweetly, masking my irritation.

His emerald eyes glimmered, and his grin widened. Mr. Frenchman was your typical tall, dark, and handsome eye candy. And he wore an expensive suit that molded to his body quite nicely. "It was all my pleasure."

I nodded, a little lost at what else I could say. I wasn't shy or uncomfortable around men. But this one was a little too close for my liking, and since I had zero interest in him, even though he could definitely be my type, given the fact that *someone else* had all my attention, I didn't want to continue this conversation.

"Lucien Mikael." He presented me with his hand. I remembered he told us his name last night, but I didn't tell him mine. I took his palm in mine, shaking it. "You can call me, Lila. It's nice to make your acquaintance."

Instead of shaking my hand, he turned it over and brought my hand to his lips. He kissed the back of it, his lips lingering there for a second too long. His eyes met mine over our entwined hands. "My pleasure, *ma belle*."

Oh dear. Yup. Mr. Frenchman was flirting.

I glanced around Lucien and saw that Maddox was lounging back in his stool, his long legs stretched out in front of him, a drink in his hand, and he was staring directly at me. His face was expressionless.

Lucien turned to the bartender and said something to him in French. I didn't understand the words, but I quickly figured out what he said when he turned back to me.

"It's on me. A treat for a lovely lady."

I was already shaking my head. "Oh. You didn't have to –"

His hand tightened around mine. "Please, allow me."

"Thank you."

Lucien opened his mouth to say something else, but he was interrupted by the ringing of his phone. "Excuse me, *chérie*."

As he moved away, I caught sight of Maddox again. Our eyes met, and I stopped breathing. His gaze was dark, and his jaw was clenched so tightly that I wondered if it'd crack under the pressure. I could see the ticks in his sharp jaw as he gritted his teeth. His face – I didn't know how to describe it. Anger made his eyes appear darker, almost deadly. A shadow loomed over his face, his expression almost threatening. There was a predatory feel in his glare as he watched me closely.

He constantly pushed me away, putting more and more distance between us. Why was he so angry now? I couldn't tell. I. Couldn't. Think. Especially when he stared at me like *this*.

Maddox was maddening. He pulled and pushed; he loved and hated. I always thought I understood him better than anyone else. But right now, he confused the hell out of me.

"Lila." My eyes snapped away from Maddox, and I looked at Lucien. He was apparently done with his phone call, and his attention was back on me. Before I could pull away, he gripped my hand in his once more. "If you need anything while you are in Paris, please call me. I could take you sightseeing. I know many beautiful places."

He let go of my hand, and I turned my palm over to see his business card.

Smooth trick, Mr. Frenchman. "Umm, thank you."

Lucien leaned down and quickly placed a chaste kiss on both my cheeks before pulling away. "Au revoir, *chérie*."

I didn't watch him leave. All my attention was on the man sitting beside me. He took a large gulp of his drink.

"He likes you," he said, once Lucien was out of hearing range.

"Jealous?" I shot back immediately.

A smirk crawled onto his face, and he chuckled, his wide chest rumbling with it. "He wants you, Lila."

My stomach clenched, goosebumps breaking out over my skin. My breath left me in a whoosh. His words were spoken dangerously low, although the harshness in his voice could not be mistaken.

"How would you know?" I retorted, angry and confused. He played with my feelings, turning my emotions into a little game of his. Maddox had me in knots, twisting me around like a little plaything.

He grunted, shaking his head, and then he let out a laugh. As if he was sharing an inside joke with himself. "I'm a man, like him. I know what he was thinking about when he looked at you like that."

"Maybe he wasn't thinking about sex. Maybe he's a gentleman. Unlike you." I was playing with fire, I knew that. I was testing him, testing *us*.

"*I dare you*," he whispered so softly, I almost missed it. Maddox looked down at his glass, his fingers clenched around it. Even in the dim lights, I could see the way his knuckles were starting to turn white.

He was giving me a dare *now*?

He didn't finish his sentence, and I wondered if he was contemplating his dare. Maddox's jaw flexed from obvious frustration. For a brief moment, I thought maybe he wasn't angry at *me*. Maybe, he was angry at *himself*. He was fighting *himself*. Could it be that the problem wasn't me?

He drank the rest of his drink in one gulp and then slammed his glass on the counter, before swiveling around in his stool to face me. Maddox stood up and walked a step closer to me, until my knees were touching his strong thighs. He leaned forward, caging me in between the counter and his body. Our gaze locked, and he licked his lips. He had me captivated for a moment until he mercilessly broke the spell.

"I dare you to sleep with him."

I reared back in shock. *Wh-at?* No, I must have misheard him. This couldn't be...

"What?" I whispered, my throat dry, and my tongue suddenly heavy in my mouth.

Maddox's eyes bore into mine, staring into my soul. When he spoke again, his deep accented voice danced over my skin dangerously. "I dare you to fuck him, Lila."

A trembling started in my core and then moved through my body like a storm. Not just a quiet storm. A tsunami of emotions hit me all at once, reckless in its assault. I submerged under the dark waves, suffocating, and then I was being split open, so viciously, it sent tiny cracks of my heart and fissures of my soul in all directions. I clamped my teeth together to stop myself from saying something —anything that would make it worse.

We had done too many dares to simply count on our fingers. Countless silly dares over the years, but we had never dared each other to sleep with other people. Granted, I had asked him to kiss a girl once; they made out, but it was years ago. But our dares had never crossed that line.

Sex... that was never on the table. We never explicitly talked about it, but it was almost an unspoken rule.

"What's with that look, Lila?"

My eyes closed. I refused to look at him, to look into his beautiful eyes and see nothing but pitch black darkness. He wasn't looking at me like he used to. The light in his eyes was gone.

It scared me.

It hurt me.

It was destroying the rest of what was left of me.

"Look. At. Me."

I didn't want to. I didn't want him to see the hurt in my eyes.

"Open your eyes, Lila," he said in his rich baritone voice.

I did as I was commanded. He crowded into my personal space, forcing me to inhale his scent and feel the warmth of his body. "Are you serious? Or are you already drunk?" I asked quietly. It was hard to breathe with him this close.

"I never take back a dare."

And I never lose. He knew that. We were both very competitive, and to this day, neither of us had backed down from a dare.

Maddox's hand came up, and he cupped my jaw. His fingers kissed my skin softly. He smiled, but it didn't match the look in his eyes. "What's wrong? You don't want to do it?"

"I don't play to lose." Asshole.

Maddox leaned closer, his face barely an inch away from mine. Our noses were almost touching. My heart fluttered when he tipped my head back. *Take back your dare. Take back your dare, Maddox. Don't make me do this.*

He curled his index finger around the lock of hair that had fallen out from my bun. His minty breath, mixed with the smell of alcohol, feathered over my lips. I wanted to beg him with my eyes. Maddox tugged on my hair slightly before tucking it behind my ear. He moved, and my eyes fluttered close once again...waiting... a desperate breath locked in my throat, my chest caving, and my stomach clenching.

He pressed his cheek against mine, and his lips lingered over my ear. "Don't disappoint me, *chérie*."

My body shuddered, and I breathed out a shaky breath. He tore my heart open and left me bleeding. He pulled away and stared down at me.

Maddox was mocking me. Taunting me.

He never stopped being a jerk. He just hid it behind a sexy smile and a nonchalant expression.

I thought he had left his asshole ways behind. But no, I was wrong. So goddamn wrong about him. About *us*.

Friends. We were friends.

I thought maybe... he wanted *more*. More of me. More of us, of what we were or could be. I was so goddamn wrong.

Maddox Coulter was still an asshole behind a pretty mask.

And I was the stupid girl who fell in love with her best friend.

LILA

hree and a half years ago

"MOTHERFU—" My mouth snapped shut before I hissed out another painful breath as my knees threatened to buckle under me.

The coffee table stared back at me innocently, and I glared in response. *Little shit.* I gave it a kick, with my uninjured leg, just for the heck of it.

My morning was a mess already, and I fought the urge to take out my anger on the coffee table. Granted, it just bruised my knees, but in reality, the fault was mine.

My alarm didn't go off, which obviously meant I woke up late. *Very late*. First period classes had already ended, and it was halfway through second period. Then, in my struggle to get dressed hurriedly, I ended up tearing a hole in my white and pristine school blouse. Great. What a lovely morning already.

Scrambling away from the little table, I ran out of my grandparents' house and quickly locked the door behind me. I had to catch the bus in two minutes, or else I was going to be mega-late. The next bus wouldn't be here for another thirty-five minutes.

As I ran to the nearest bus stop, I quickly went over my morning list in my head. Four very important things. Phone – yes. Earphones – yes. Keys – yes. My English assignment – yes.

Everything seemed to be in order. Now, I just had to make it on time for

my third period class, so I could submit my English essay on time. Or else...

I shook my head, refusing to even think of the consequences. My heart started to race and beat erratically at the mere thought of getting a zero on this assignment.

No way. It would ruin my perfect record of straight As. My grandma liked to joke and say I was paranoid and a little *too* OCD about my marks. My grandpa, with a proud little laugh, would say I was a perfectionist. They weren't exactly wrong.

My perfect GPA, plus my thousand hours of community service and volunteer work, would get me into Harvard. And it was all that mattered. Harvard was my path. It was my destination, and it was where I belonged. Maybe my grandparents were right. Maybe I was obsessed with the idea of "perfection." But I didn't care. If perfection would get me everything I wanted, then *Miss Perfectionist* I'd be.

The bus came on time, and I successfully climbed in without any more bad luck. My favorite seat at the back of the bus was waiting for me. It gave me the perfect view of the whole bus, and it was a window seat. Once my earphones were in, "Hands to Myself" by Selena Gomez started to blast in my ears. I leaned my forehead against the cool window and watched the world move.

This was probably my favorite part of my morning routine. I'd always been an observer, and one could learn a lot in a ten-minute bus ride.

Not long after, the bus came to a stop, and I walked out; I stopped on the pavement for the briefest moment to stare at the large and old, yet hauntingly beautiful and fancy, building in front of me.

The Berkshire Academy of Weston.

The private school for the rich and the corrupted. Kids of infamous judges, senators, government associates, and some of the highest paid lawyers and doctors in the United States.

I wasn't one of them. My father *was* a high school teacher. My mother *was* a nurse. And I was the quiet and poor girl amongst all the famous, wealthy spawns of the devils themselves. I didn't belong here. But I *chose* to be here.

48.2% of Berkshire Academy of Weston graduates end up at an Ivy League College – Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, or Harvard.

That little fact was the reason why I chose to enroll in this school during my junior year. Now, I was a senior at Berkshire. A few more months, and I'd be out of here.

I took in a deep breath and inhaled the fresh September air. It wasn't too cold yet. The fall season had just begun, and the leaves were just starting to turn red, orange, and yellow. It was a beautiful time of year – the time where the trees end up naked, silently awaiting their rebirth once again. The end of something beautiful, while waiting for a new beginning.

"Lila!"

My thoughts came to a halt, and I turned to see Riley coming my way. She waved animatedly, and I couldn't help but smile. Riley was a sweet, wild girl, and my only friend at Berkshire.

Her pretty blonde locks bounced as she hopped over to me. "Are you late, too?"

I nodded with a sigh. She perked up cheekily. "No way! Miss Smarty Pants is late? Jesus, I need to write this down. ASAP."

The urge to roll my eyes was strong, but I refrained from doing so. "You have Advanced Calculus next, right?" I asked, switching the subject.

I usually loved to join in on the teasing, but I wasn't in the mood today. Waking up late had made me a tad grumpier. My knee was sore and ached every time I took a step – a constant reminder of how *amazing* my morning had been so far. Grumpy Lila was no fun.

Riley looked thoughtful for a second. "Yeah. I do," she responded after a long second. "You?"

"English. We have twenty minutes before our classes start."

"I actually need to see my teacher before class. Did I mention I hate math? Yeah, I probably did a hundred times. We have a test next week, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to flunk it." Riley's normal cheerfulness disappeared, and her brows tensed with a frown. She looked deeply saddened for a moment, but just as quickly, her expression changed, and she was back to happy Riley once again. "I'll see you at lunch?"

I grabbed her hand before she could leave. "If you want, I can help you this weekend with Calculus."

She smiled brightly, her whole face shining like the moon. "Really? Thank you, babe. How about we talk more about it at lunch? We can pick a time and place."

"Sounds good to me." I let her hand go, and she waved before running through the gates.

I looked down at my phone. Fifteen minutes until my next class. It was

enough time for me to grab an iced latte. *Perfect*. Maybe sugar would help my mood.

The coffee shop was only a few feet away, sitting right next to the campus. It was pretty much only visited by the students of Berkshire. It wasn't lunch yet, so when I walked in, the shop was fairly quiet. I ordered myself an iced latte with extra whip cream and went to stand next to the heater. "Sugar" by Maroon 5 continued to play in my ear, and I softy hummed along to the song.

When a blast of cool air hit the back of my legs, I turned around to see a group of loud boys walking into the coffee shop. I instantly recognized a few of them from my classes. The Bennett Twins were part of the group. The boys kept the door opened, standing right at the entrance. Half of the group were wearing the required Berkshire uniform – pants, shirt, tie and blazer. The other half were in their gym clothes or football uniforms.

Jocks. Ugh.

Rich. Loud. Foul-mouthed. Annoying. A bit *too* wild. Everything I stayed away from, and everything I despised.

Whatever.

Ignorance was bliss. I turned back around and focused on my playlist instead, my foot tapping impatiently on the floor. The barista was taking forever, and I desperately needed my sugar. I could feel the group of boys coming closer to me, and I half-listened to them order their own drinks. In my peripheral, I could see them pushing each other around, bumping shoulders, and shaking with laughter. Their teasing rung louder than the music blasting in my ears.

"Here you go!" I lifted my head up when the voice called out in a singsong tone. Finally! My mouth watered as the young lady handed me the iced latte, and I almost drooled at the sight of extra whip cream. *Heaven*.

"Thank you." I cleared my throat and sent her a grateful smile. *God bless* your soul, woman.

I swiveled around while simultaneously putting the straw into my mouth. But I never got the chance to take the first sip of my heavenly goodness. Nope. My happiness only lasted for two seconds flat.

Before I knew what was happening, a rock-hard wall bumped into me. I heard someone swear under his breath. It happened fast, too quickly for me to catch on until it was too late. The world spun and tilted on its axis. My eyes closed as I expected the impact of me hitting the floor, but my face didn't

kiss the ground. I stayed suspended in the air, my body bent backward.

Someone was holding onto my arm...really...really tightly. Two heartbeats later, I was back on my feet again. I finally opened my eyes, and a shaky breath expelled from my lungs.

The first thing I noticed was that his navy colored blazer was wet. My coffee... "Shit. Sorry. I am so sorry," I muttered, absolutely horrified.

Then, I inwardly groaned. First – why was I apologizing? *He* bumped into *me*. His fault. Not mine. Second – My iced latte was gone.

My heart was still beating too fast and too hard after the little scare, and it felt like it would thump right out of my chest. *Wait...*

I looked down at myself and saw that my white shirt was soaked, and my pink bra was now quite visible to everyone. Oh, that was where my iced latte went. *Amaaazing*.

Mood level: Extra grumpy with just a touch of bitchiness.

I let my eyes travel the length of the *wall* that bumped into me. Okay, not a wall then. He was definitely human. But a rock nonetheless. I had felt those hard muscles when he knocked me over. It was like a truck hitting me, and I swore he must have given me a concussion from that whiplash.

My gaze went up and up...and up. *Jesus Christ*, he was tall. I was basically a midget next to him at five foot two inches.

My eyes stayed longer on his stomach, and for a brief moment, I wondered if he had six-pack abs. His wide chest caught my attention next. He was tall and lean, but still muscular and a bit bigger for his age. I could instantly tell he played football – his strong arms and muscular shoulders told me so, and he had a gym/sports bag thrown over his right shoulder. His school blazer molded to his upper body perfectly. Deliciously.

Sweet Mother Mary... I was supposed to be angry, right?

When my gaze finally landed on his face, my eyes decided they'd been blessed. A classic gorgeous boy. Chiseled jawline that could give you a papercut if you touched it? Check. Piercing eyes? Check. Thick eyebrows? Check. Plump lips made for kissing? Check. Intense good looks? Double check. He was a fine specimen, and I wanted to put him under my microscope for a closer look.

His dirty blond hair was curly and the tight curls ended a good inch or two above his shoulders. It gave him a surfer look, a bit wild and outgoing.

Wait. Hold up.

I stumbled a step back and took a good look at his face. My lips parted,

completely dumbstruck, and I choked on my saliva silently. *Are you kidding me?*

Out of everyone... out of 325 boys at Berkshire, I had to bump into HIM? He eyed me up and down, his gaze scanning my body leisurely like I had done to him. My cheeks flamed, not because he was checking me out – no, because he had obviously caught *me* checking *him* out. Could this day get any worse?

He cocked his head to the side, his deep blue eyes flashing with mischief. His eyes caressed my bare legs and then he followed the path up. My beige school skirt came to mid-thigh, only a few inches above my knees. He seemed to take great pleasure in watching my bare skin.

Slowly, his gaze moved up. Mister-Who-Bumped-Into-Me blatantly stared at my boobs. He was so goddamn obvious. The corner of his lips tilted up, and he gave me the perfect swoon worthy smirk.

He chuckled, a deep laugh that came out roughly from within his chest. "Well, I guess that'll perk them up a little."

Huh?

His buddies snickered and chortled with laughter. Cole Bennett, one of the twins, even doubled over and wheezed like he had just heard the best joke of the century.

I followed his gaze to my chest and then I looked back at him. Wait...was he...did he...just...?

My body tensed, and I straightened my spine. "Excuse me?"

My brain had finally caught on, and I could feel the steam coming out of my ears. How dare he!

I crossed my arms over my chest, my cheeks burning hot, and I held back an irritated growl. Yes, my boobs were *petite*. The two mounds were almost non-existent compared to the other girls my age, and they basically stopped growing when I was fourteen.

But. He. Did. Not. Have. To. Rub. That. In. My. Face.

Oh wait, I forgot. He was an asshole. *The* asshole.

Maddox Coulter.

Berkshire Academy's Star Quarterback.

Reckless bad boy. Infamous playboy.

The Casanova of the senior class and its golden boy.

And yes, a Class-A jerk, with unparalleled levels of douchebaggery.

Maddox was well-known in Berkshire. His face was catalogued into

everyone's brain and heart, and I wanted nothing to do with him. Except, out of 325 boys in our school, I had to bump into him today.

He was still smirking, and I let out an irritated sigh. "Are you going to apologize to me or not? You bumped into me," I seethed, shoving my empty cup between us.

His dark blue eyes narrowed on my boobs again. Apparently, Mr. Coulter had a short attention span because he chose to ignore my words and decided to focus on my tits instead. The same tits he just insulted.

I crossed my arms over my chest again and glowered at him and his buddies. His gaze finally met mine, and I hated that he had such beautiful eyes. He didn't deserve them.

Maddox shrugged, quite nonchalantly. "You were in my way. Whoops." *Is he serious?*

He took a step forward, his bigger body closing in on my small frame. "I have an extra shirt in my locker. I'll give it to you, considering the one you're wearing is soaked."

His voice lowered into a raspy tone when he spoke his next words. "But one condition. If I give you my shirt, I get to keep your bra. It's *cute*. I love the little flowers on them, baby."

I stumbled back, aghast. I knew he was immature, rude, and vulgar, but this was a whole other level of douchebaggery. *Murder is a crime*, *Lila*. *You could go to prison for a very long time*.

My eyes narrowed on him. "You know what? I don't have time for this. Go take your shitty attitude and try to impress another girl with it."

Maddox blinked, his goofy smile disappearing for a nanosecond, before his eyes lit up, almost as if he loved me rebuffing him.

I swiveled around, dumped my empty coffee cup into the garbage, and decided to walk away from Maddox. Too bad he was standing in my way, refusing to budge. I inwardly rolled my eyes and pushed past him. He was standing so close that I was forced to touch him, our bodies slightly rubbing against each other as I went by. A cocky smirk was plastered on his stupidly handsome face.

Fine. He wanted to play... then I'd play.

After taking two steps forward, I did a little side twist, which allowed my bag to hit him. *Bullseye*. When I heard a hiss of pain, I knew that the corner of my bag had bumped into his crotch, and his dick probably felt the impact, too.

I turned my head and gave Maddox a look over my shoulder. He had doubled over and was cupping himself between the legs. "You were in my way. Whoops," I said lazily, repeating his earlier words.

My middle name is 'Petty Bitch.' I didn't have time for a reckless bad boy, but I also wouldn't let him play me like his other fangirls.

His ocean blue eyes locked on mine, and they darkened the slightest bit. Maddox straightened his spine and stood at his full height again. He was imposing, his presence almost owning the whole coffee shop. I sent him a sugary sweet smile before walking away.

If I didn't leave this coffee shop in one minute, I was going to be late for my English class.

The intensity of his gaze burned into my back. I could feel the heat of it, of *him*. My cheeks flamed, and my body grew warmer. I knew he was looking at my ass. I could *feel* it.

Maddox Coulter was officially on my shit list.

LILA

was on time for my English class and successfully submitted my essay – all thanks to the spare shirt I had in my locker. The one I wore this morning was soaked from my spilled iced coffee by the boy who shall not be named.

As soon as the bell rang, indicating the start of class, Mrs. Levi started her lecture about Greek Mythology. She went back and forth from the textbook and writing notes on the chalkboard.

Science might be my passion, but English was my favorite subject. I loved reading, loved learning about the language - every little piece of it. My interest began with Shakespeare, although it was Edgar Allen Poe who made me fall in love with English.

"Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before."

I may or may not have memorized most of his poems after reading them over and over again. There was just something eerily beautiful with the way he weaved his words together.

"Medusa has several myths about her life, the most common ones are of her death and her, rather, painful demise." Mrs. Levi's voice snapped me to the present as she introduced us to the history of Medusa. "This will be our focus for the next two weeks. Your next assignment will be based on this particular topic, so make sure you're doing your research at home and come to class with your questions. The essay will be fifteen percent of your final mark. We'll be discussing it in more depth the next couple of days."

She continued to talk about Medusa, and I wrote down all my notes,

marking the important ones with my red pen. I liked to keep my things organized, even though to other people, it seemed a bit too OCD.

Halfway through Mrs. Levi's lecture, my hand paused, and my pen came to halt. It had been a few minutes now, and I couldn't ignore the *feeling* anymore. My skin prickled, and my back seemed to warm under someone's intense stare. I could feel the tiny hairs on my arms stand on end. It was a strange feeling, and I couldn't concentrate on Mrs. Levi anymore.

I always sat in the front row of all my classes, but usually, I was invisible to everyone.

Today though... someone was staring at me *hard*.

It was impossible not to *feel* it.

The stare burned into my back, scorching me... waiting for a reaction, until I was forced to peek over my shoulder.

Our eyes met first.

Mine – widening with surprise. *His* – with amusement.

My jaw went slack, and I stared back, hard. No way.

He was sitting in the last row at the back of the class, in the corner, next to the wall. There was a large gap between us, but I still felt him.

Maddox Coulter had both his elbows on the desk, his fingers threaded with his chin resting on them. His blue eyes danced with mischief, and when I continued to stare back, his lips crooked up in a lazy grin.

Well... shit.

I faced the front of the class again and mentally berated myself. Could this day get any worse?

How could I have missed him?

It was only the third week of school, and I never paid attention to whoever was sitting at the back. My focus had always been on Mrs. Levi and whatever she was teaching.

Knowing Maddox, he had probably skipped more than half of the classes in the past three weeks. I knew of his reputation. He rarely came to class, and when he did... he came with drama and a whole lot of assholery.

I mentally face-palmed while chewing on my lower lip, nervously. In the heat of the moment, I acted without thinking; granted, he was the douchebag in this situation, but nobody ever crossed Maddox without dealing with the repercussions.

With my best nonchalant expression, I quickly peeked over my shoulder again. He was still staring... and he caught me looking, *again*. His eyes were

the deepest blue, shimmering with intensity. He lazily rubbed his thumb back and forth across his squared jaw while he cocked his head to the side, raising one lonely eyebrow almost mockingly.

Maddox watched me like he was sizing up his *prey*.

I didn't like the look he was giving me, and I didn't have any interest of being on his radar.

He might be *the* player, but I wasn't about to be played. *Try again*, *Coulter*.

Giving him the most exaggerated eyeroll I could muster, I sent him a frigid smile and then turned back around to face Mrs. Levi.

During the rest of the class, I tried my hardest not to pay attention to Maddox. It was the longest fifty minutes of my life as I fought hard not to fidget in my chair. He continued to stare, and I could feel it – feel him smirking and silently taunting me.

My fingers clenched and unclenched around my pen, and when the bell finally rang for lunch, I let out the deepest sigh of relief.

"Maddox, I'm going to need you to stay back for two minutes," Mrs. Levi announced, with a hard look.

"Can't, Teach. Got stuff to do."

"You either stay or you have detention for two weeks. Decide, Mr. Coulter."

There was one very important fact about Mrs. Levi, and it was why she was my favorite teacher: she took no bullshit from *anyone*. She wasn't intimated by Maddox or *who* he was.

All the students looked back and forth between Mrs. Levi and Maddox, holding their breath and *waiting*.

"Class, you may leave for lunch."

There were groans and whispers as everyone got up and started piling out of the classroom. Everyone had been waiting for drama – with Maddox in the middle of it. *Ha!*

I stood up too, following the herd. Curiosity got the best of me, and I looked back over my shoulder, one final time. Maddox was still sitting back in his chair, his arms crossed over his broad chest. His gaze followed me as I walked out of the class, and by *me*, I meant my ass.

I noticed Colton Bennett, twin number one, standing beside Maddox's chair. They muttered something to each other, and Colton's gaze found mine before he chuckled at something else Maddox said.

Maddox might be on my shit list, but... I had a feeling I was on his now, too.

~

RILEY WAVED at me as I stepped into the loud cafeteria. She was already sitting at a table, and I smiled, walking to her. "Hey!" She spoke through a bite of her chicken sandwich. "I got you one, too."

"Thanks, babe." I settled opposite her and took the sandwich she offered. It was our thing. Sometimes, I would buy her lunch, and other days, she'd return the favor.

"So, what exactly do you need help with in Math?" I munched on my cold sandwich and watched Riley pout.

"Everything," she mumbled, pouting even harder. "It makes no sense to me! The only genius who can help me is you."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Why do I have a feeling this friendship is only one-sided?"

"Bitch, yes, I'm using you for your abilities to teach me Math."

It was a lie; we both knew that. Riley and I stared at each other for a second before we chuckled.

We became friends during junior year, after Jasper – another football star of Berkshire Academy -- broke her heart. That was a tamed way of putting it. They dated for six months; he was the perfect gentleman at first. When she finally gave him her virginity, he broke up with her two days later. She later found out Jasper had been cheating on her all along, and he only dated her to win a stupid bet. He spent the rest of the year spreading stupid rumors about her. She lost her cheerleader friends and sweet Riley...? She became another outcast. I was there and watched her crumble – going from Miss Popular to a nobody.

What happens when outcast number one meets outcast number two? Of course, they became best friends. I was the new student, and Riley was my first friend. It was a done deal.

"So... I heard whispers in the hallway," she started, eyeing me closely. "Huh?"

"About a girl who dumped coffee on Maddox Coulter this morning." Riley left the sentence hanging before taking another bite of her sandwich.

My heart thudded in my chest, so hard and so fast. Choking back a cough, I quickly sputtered, "Dumped coffee on him? Excuse me! He *bumped* into *me* and spilled my coffee down the front of *me*."

Riley sat back in her chair, taking the last bite of her lunch. "I didn't say it was you, but thanks for confirming that," she replied around a mouthful. "Your name was mentioned once, but I didn't want to believe anything until I heard it myself from you."

Sweet Lord! Rumors were already going around?

"So, he bumped into you?" Riley pushed, looking quite amused at this sudden turn of events.

"Yes," I hissed under my breath. "He didn't even apologize! My shirt got wet, but thank God, I had a spare in my locker."

"Why am I not surprised? Do you think Maddox is the type of guy to apologize? Think again, babe. I've known him since elementary school. Coulter doesn't apologize. *Ever*. Everyone bows down to him."

I huffed in response, and Riley shrugged. "He's the golden boy."

To the people of Berkshire Academy, he was a god amongst mortals.

To me? He was just another boy who had too much power in his hands and didn't know how to use it. Maddox was no hero to me.

If he expected me to worship the ground he walked on, like all of his fangirls, he was about to be thoroughly disappointed.

Riley leaned forward and tapped me on the nose with her index finger. "Stay out of his way, Lila. He'll mess you up so bad and leave you broken. Boys like him can't be trusted."

Her voice was thick, and I could see the emotions playing on her face. Jasper really broke her. Her scars were not visible; she hid them with a pretty smile, but I knew she still hurt inside.

"Don't worry. I have no plans to play his game."

Riley squinted at me. "I don't believe you. You're competitive by nature, Lila. If he pushes, you're going to push back twice as hard."

I bit my lower lip and gave her a sheepish look. She was right...

"How about this? I promise not to fall for him."

"One less girl in Maddox's harem," she agreed.

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, today is Thursday. How about we meet up on Saturday? I'll go over whatever you need help on with you then."

Riley nodded before her cheeks flushed. "You'll have to start at the beginning. Don't kill me."

"This is going to be a loooong Saturday." She kicked me under the table, and I hissed out a laugh.

"Bitch." Riley threw her empty plastic bottle at my head, laughing.

The rest of my day was uneventful. I stayed out of Maddox's way. There were a few whispers in the halls about me, but I ignored them, too.

I felt pretty confident that, after today, everyone would forget about the coffee shop scene, and Maddox would most definitely forget about my existence. He had plenty of girls to distract him.

Except... I had never been more wrong in my life.

The next day, my nightmare began.

LILA

he next morning, I found Maddox outside our English class. He was leaning against the wall, his long legs crossed at the ankle with his hands stuffed in his pockets. His expensive leather shoes were shiny and wrinkled free. He was missing his navy blazer, but his pristine white shirt was rolled to his elbows, exposing his strong forearms. His tie hung loosely around his neck.

He was *pretty* to look at - I had to admit, but the sight of him annoyed me.

There was a curvy blonde girl attached to his side, practically plastered against him. She whispered something into his ear, but he wasn't paying attention. Maddox looked bored, and the poor girl was trying too hard. *Run away*, *don't fall for his charms*. I wanted to shake some sense into her.

The moment his gaze fell on me, he slowly grinned.

My blood simmered, and I pressed my lips firmly together, refusing to acknowledge him. I tilted my chin up and marched forward. If I ignored him, he'd go away – I told myself.

Too bad it was nothing but false hope.

When I tried to walk into the classroom, Maddox pulled himself away from the girl. She protested, but it died in her throat when she noticed it was useless.

He shifted sideways and placed his arm out, blocking the door and effectively stopping me from stepping inside. "Hey, Garcia."

Maddox threw me his signature smirk in an attempt to *melt* me. I rolled my eyes. "Coulter," I said in acknowledgment. "You're in my way."

I tried to push past him, but he didn't budge; granted, he was a whole foot taller than me, but Maddox was an immovable wall. "It's quite comical that you think you can move me."

There was just *something* about Maddox that irritated me. It was like he had hit a nerve I didn't know I had. He made me feel edgy. I didn't know why I felt like that, but I was defensive around him.

"A knee between your legs will move you alright. So, either you move with no injuries, or your baby making machine will be in danger." I cocked my head to the side while holding my bag over my shoulder and waiting for him to move.

My lips crooked up in my fakest and sweetest smile.

Maddox stared me down for a second before he eventually moved, bending slightly to his waist and putting his arm out to motion inside the classroom. "Ladies first. After you."

I rolled my eyes a-fucking-gain because he was so goddamn annoying. Pushing past his hard body, I walked into class with a huff and settled in my chair. He sauntered inside like he owned the room and walked past me to his desk at the back of the classroom.

Maddox purposely brushed against my shoulder as he did so. "Whoops, my bad," he muttered gruffly. I could hear the laughter in his voice.

My fingers clenched into a fist, but I held back.

My days continued like this.

I noticed him following me around. Sometimes, he would call out my name loudly in the hallways, bringing everyone's attention to me. Other times, he would purposely bump into me in class or the cafeteria. I often caught him doing nothing but following silently behind me. He knew it annoyed me, and he did it on purpose. To. Irritate. Me.

A week ago, I was completely invisible to Maddox Coulter.

Now, I was the center of his attention.

The deal breaker was when he broke into my locker and stole my spare shirt. He even left a note: *What's the color of your bra today?*

Actually no, that wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was when he decided to reenact a scene from Romeo and Juliet in the cafeteria...

He was Romeo, standing on the table, and loudly confessing his undying love to Juliet for the whole room to hear.

Who was Juliet?

Oh me...

He was being dramatic and overly exaggerated his performance for one reason only: to embarrass me.

Everyone stared... snickered... laughed, until Riley and I were forced to leave the cafeteria; we ended up having to eat lunch under a staircase. I hated hiding, I hated the attention, and Riley... she was about to blow up.

Maddox was waiting for a reaction, he was egging me on... pushing and pushing, waiting for me to *snap*, like I did in the coffee shop. But I vowed I wouldn't play his stupid games.

He would eventually stop, I convinced myself. He'd grow bored of me soon enough, I told myself. I was wrong again.

On Thursday, a week after handling his nonsense, Maddox still hadn't given up.

"Uh-oh. He's here. Maybe we should make a run for it now." Riley went to stand up, taking her lunch tray with her.

"Sit down," I hissed. "We're not running away. We're going to eat lunch, and we're going to ignore him."

"He's coming our way," she reported, shaking her head. "Oh shit, here we go again."

My back straightened, and I prepared myself for what was coming. I nodded at Riley, letting her know it was okay. Her eyebrows pulled together with a frown before she leveled a hard glare at whoever was standing behind me.

I felt Maddox before I saw him. His presence surrounded me, and I locked my jaw, gritting my teeth together. He grabbed the chair beside me and turned it around before sitting down, straddling it. Maddox leaned forward, using the back of the chair as an armrest. His friends settled around our table, grabbing their own chairs and joining us. Riley released a long, exasperated sigh.

Without speaking to me, he reached for my tray and grabbed my apple. With great annoyance, I forced myself to look at his face. His long dirty blond hair was pulled back into a small, messy man-bun. The rest of him was immaculate. The small diamond stud in his ear glinted in the light, briefly catching my attention. Maddox locked eyes with me, before taking a bite of my red apple. "Hmm juicy."

"That's my apple."

"It was lonely. I'm giving it some attention," he said, taking another huge

bite.

I dropped my fork with a loud clank. "Put. The. Apple. Down."

Maddox was unfazed. "Or what?"

"You'll regret it, Coulter."

He let out a deep chuckle, as if my threat meant *nothing* to him. "You're all bark and no bite, Sweet Cheeks."

Sweet Cheeks? Excuse me...?

"You know what you remind me of? A little chihuahua trying to fight a bigger and stronger dog when she knows she can't win. Careful or you'll end up with a nasty bite, Garcia."

I snatched my apple from his hand and leaned forward, bringing our faces closer. "Did you know that chihuahuas are known as an aggressive breed when they're moody, and when they *do* bite, they bite *hard*. Careful, or you'll end up with a nasty bite, Coulter."

I brought the apple to my mouth and took a bite before I realized what I was doing. Maddox's eyes flared before his lips quirked up. "I think we just shared our first indirect kiss."

Oh, for God's sake!

Colton snickered before stealing a brownie from Riley's tray. She hissed, and her eyes hardened with a glare. The girl before Jasper would have exploded. The new Riley? She stayed quiet.

"That was a lousy kiss. You can do better than that, man," Colton said, his six-foot-something frame shaking with mirth.

Maddox grabbed my chair and pulled me closer to him, the four legs making a loud screeching sound. The whole cafeteria was watching now. I could feel their stares burning into me.

"What do you say, Garcia? Shall we put on a show for these asswipes?" His voice lowered, holding a suggestive tone.

"Not interested. Your lips probably hold more disease than a pig's asshole." I handed him back the apple, giving him my best smile. "Consider this charity. Next time, I won't be so gracious."

The boys hollered at my response.

Maddox stared, his blue eyes pointedly holding mine. He was still grinning. I didn't know why he kept doing that – smiling like he was having the best time of his life verbally sparring with me.

I found it neither entertaining nor funny.

Pushing away from the table, I stood up and grabbed my empty tray.

Riley followed suit, and we left the cafeteria. Maddox and his buddies didn't follow.



MRS. LEVI GAVE me a nod of approval, and I let out a relieved sigh. "That was a fabulous explanation, Lila."

"Thank you." I started to take my seat, feeling quite pleased with myself. I had spent two hours last night writing my essay, rereading all my notes and writing out this analysis.

"I disagree." A deep baritone voice interrupted my happy moment.

Heat crept up my neck, and I flushed under the sudden scrutinizing stares coming from the rest of the class. Including *his*.

"Excuse me?" I said through gritted teeth, turning around to face Maddox. He was sitting, laid-back, in his chair.

Maddox leaned forward in his chair, crossing his arms over the desk. When he spoke, his tone was flat and disinterested. "Sometimes we're thrown into a difficult situation where we need to make a difficult choice. Sometimes, it's not the best *or* the right choice. But maybe, it's the only option we have."

"Could you elaborate on that, Maddox?" Mrs. Levi demanded.

"Throughout Greek history and mythology, Medusa has always been viewed as a villain. You made a good point that Athena is an anti-hero, but you also went ahead and painted Medusa as a villain, yet again. Medusa was once a very beautiful woman - one who was an avowed priestess of Athena. She spent her days and nights in Athena's temple. Here's what we all know... she was punished for breaking her vow of celibacy. Athena cursed her, and Medusa became the woman with serpent heads. But... was it really her fault? History said she had an affair with Poseidon. Some say he seduced her, but the article that Mrs. Levi assigned us to read revealed that it was a lie to hide the fact that, in reality, Poseidon had raped her. She was never given the chance to plead her case or to speak for herself. Poseidon said Medusa seduced him, and in a fit of anger and jealousy, Athena cursed her. Once turned into a monster, she brought terror to the temple and anyone who stepped foot inside was instantly turned into stone. Now, it's easy to categorize Athena as the antagonist. After all, *she* was the one who gave the

magical mirror to the warrior, which was used to turn Medusa into stone and eventually killed her. But could it be an act of mercy?" Maddox paused, cocking his head to the side, thoughtfully. "Maybe Athena regretted turning Medusa into a monster. Maybe Athena discovered the truth about Poseidon. Maybe... killing Medusa was the only way of granting her peace. Neither Medusa nor Athena is a villain. I would say they're both anti-heroes who were thrown into a very shitty situation."

"Wow... umm that's a very interesting way of looking at it, Maddox. A very in-depth analysis, I have to say." I could hear the shock in Mrs. Levi's voice. She probably wasn't expecting that.

Me? My whole body strummed with embarrassment.

"Your analysis would have been better if you took a moment to think outside the box. Consider this constructive criticism," Maddox said, his gaze on mine. "I hope you don't mind my little tip."

I bit on my lip, trying so hard to hold back from saying something stupid in front of the class. "*Thank you*." The words tasted bitter on my tongue.

Pressing my lips firmly together, I retook my seat.

I was hyperaware of Maddox staring at me. He hadn't skipped one English class since he made it his goal to irritate me. Maddox made sure I could feel his presence at *all* times.

He didn't want me to forget – I was the prey; he was the hunter.

As soon as the bell rang, I was the first one out of class. It was hard to admit... but I was running away.

Riley was already waiting for me in the courtyard. "Uh oh. That expression tells me Maddox pulled another one of his asshole moves again."

I threw my hands in the air, holding back a frustrated scream. "He embarrassed me in front of the class."

"What did he do this time?"

Riley and I settled down, cross-legged, on the cold grass. I handed her the sandwich my grandma packed for us this morning, Riley's favorite. Turkey, lettuce, cheese and homemade smoked mustard. We bit into our sandwiches while I recounted what happened in class.

"Are you pissed that he was right and made a smarter analysis than you... or, are you pissed that he called you out in front of the class?"

"I—" My mouth snapped shut because Riley...was right. She knew me so well. I'd always been competitive by nature.

I made an aggravated sound at the back of my throat before admitting the

truth. "Okay, fine. I'm pissed he had a better analysis, *and* I'm annoyed he called me out like that. And, he called it *constructive criticism*. Maddox can shove it up his ass. He was trying to embarrass me."

"We've established that. You're on his shit list, but you're letting him get to you, babe."

I chewed aggressively around my last bite. "I'm not."

Riley was right, though.

Maddox Coulter, with his pretty smirk, pretty eyes and surfer hair, was having the time of his life messing with me, and I was letting him.

I clenched my fists on my lap. Not anymore.

LILA

irst, I heard my mom scream.

Then, there was silence. It happened within a nanosecond.

The world tilted suddenly, my vision blurring, before everything went black. I sunk into a very dark place. For the longest time, I stayed there... awake... fading... heart beating... numb... lost...

The silence slowly faded away, a buzzing noise replaced it, filling my ears. It felt like the only thing inside my head was static.

My throat was dry, scratched raw from the inside, and I couldn't make a sound.

Mommy? Daddy?

I couldn't see anything. Everything was so dark... so empty...

I remembered the sound of crushing glass, mixed with the distinct cracking of bones breaking. I remembered my mom screaming, and my dad... I remembered...

Pain came next.

My bones and fragile organs felt like they were being crumbled and smashed into a tiny, suffocating box. I couldn't breathe. It hurt so much. My torso burned like acid was being poured on it. There was a knife dug, painfully, into my chest... no, not a knife... I didn't know... but it hurt. It felt like a knife or a hammer being pounded into my chest.

I blinked... forcing myself to breathe. I couldn't. My lungs contracted with such force that I was afraid they would fold into themselves. When I coughed, agony strummed through my body, and my cracked lips parted with a silent scream.

Mom... Dad...

I couldn't speak. The buzzing noise wouldn't stop in my ears.

The taste of coppery blood pooled in my mouth; it tasted bitter, and I could feel it soaking my tongue and the inside of my mouth. Blood...?

No...

How...

What...

I remember...

The fight...snow outside... in the car... mom... dad... me...

I remember the screams...

My bones felt like they had been mangled together, and my chest, it was being carved open. I lifted my head up a bit and looked down at my chest to see... blood. Everywhere. So much blood.

I sucked in cramped air and tried to scream, tried to breathe, but my lungs refused to work.

No. No. No. Please. No. Oh God, no.

MOM, I wanted to scream. DADDY.

The pain never ended. The darkness never faded away.

I woke up with a gasp, my mouth open in a silent scream. Drenched in a cold sweat with my heart beating way too fast, I tried to suck in desperate breaths.

Ten. Inhale. Nine. Exhale. Eight. Inhale

I didn't die. I wasn't dead.

Seven. Exhale. Six. Inhale. Five. Exhale.

It was only a dream, I told myself.

Four. *Inhale*. Three. *Breathe*. Two. *Exhale*.

My chest hurt; the pain was almost crippling.

One. *Breathe*, damn it.

Hot tears stung my eyes as I held them back from spilling over my cheeks. I rubbed my chest, trying to alleviate the hammering ache. A whimper escaped past my chapped lips, and I choked back a sob.

Don't cry. Don't you dare cry.

I breathed through my nose, the fear slowly receding back, and I locked a cage around it. The pain and the taste of coppery blood faded away, and my senses came back to me.

Just a dream, I told myself.

Except...

My eyes closed, and I sniffed back my unshed tears. I did as my therapist had trained me to do--count backward from ten and breathe. So, I did, and while doing so, I locked the *memories* away.

Once my racing heart calmed to a soothing beat again, I got off the bed and started my morning routine.

While combing my hair, my eyes fell on the picture frame on my nightstand. A picture of me on my thirteenth birthday. I stood in the middle with my parents on either side of me. We were laughing; our faces smudged with cake icing.

My lips twitched at the memory, a phantom of a smile as I reminisced our time together.

I laid the hairbrush down beside the small frame. My fingers slid over the picture, caressing their faces. "I miss you," I whispered to them. "But I'm okay. I promise you. *I'm okay*."

They kept smiling back at me.

"Lila!" My grandma's voice broke through the moment. "Breakfast is ready."

"Coming!"

I grabbed my bag and strode out of my room. Sven Wilson, ex-military man and now a retired veteran, my dearest grandpa sat at the breakfast table. With a newspaper in his hand and Grandma Molly making us pancakes, it was a typical morning.

"Good morning," I greeted them with a smile.

"Sit, sit. You're going to be late."

"She's fine. Lila is rarely late for her classes," Grandpa said. He winked before taking a sip of his tea.

I winked back because I knew he had my back. Always.

Grandma handed me a plate and patted me on the cheek. "How's school, sweetie? You've been holed up in your bedroom or the library. We haven't had time to talk."

"It's going good," I replied around a bite of my pancakes. "I like my teachers. Do you guys need help at the store? I can come over during the weekend."

Grandpa waved a hand, shaking his head. "No need. We can handle it."

I held back a smile. He refused to acknowledge that he was getting older, and they did, in fact, need help. Both of them were in their seventies, and they could no longer run the grocery store on their own. But Sven Wilson

was stubborn.

"How about we put a hiring sign up? I'll do the interviews and even train them for a few days."

"Maybe that's a good idea," Grandma agreed, a tender smile on her lips.

"Got it. I'll put the sign up this weekend. I'm sure you'll get plenty of students who want to work part-time."

I quickly finished my pancakes and stood up. "Thank you for breakfast." After quickly pecking them both on the cheek, I waved goodbye and ran out of the house.

The cold breeze of October hit me, and I breathed in the morning scent. It poured last night. The smell of grass after the rain teased my nostrils, and it soothed me.

If it were any normal day, I'd say today was going to be good. But my days were no longer *normal*. Not since Maddox decided I was his plaything.

It'd been a week since the Medusa argument, and Maddox was still irritating as always, if not worse.

God give me patience.



I was standing in line in the cafeteria, waiting to get my food, when I saw him. Our eyes met, and Maddox stalked closer, as if he was on a mission. *Shit*.

I quickly put my earphones in and stared hard at my phone. Maddox came to stand behind me, the heat practically rolling off him. I could sense people staring at us, again... waiting for another dramatic scene. I'd quickly become everyone's favorite joke.

Berkshire Academy was a shark tank.

You see, in Berkshire, only the strong survive. The weaker are preyed on, chewed up, and spit out like garbage.

Maddox was on the top – the pack leader. He was *the* King, and he wore his crown with a cocky grin. He was untouchable to his rivals, and he was every girl's favorite dick to ride.

And I wanted nothing to do with him.

His body brushed against mine as he slid closer to me. Maddox nudged me with his elbow.

I ignored him. "Hey, Garcia."

I scrolled through my playlist, refusing to acknowledge him. "Damn, are you ignoring me?"

When I didn't reply, Maddox let out a mock gasp. "You wound me."

I rolled my eyes for the umpteenth time but continued to ignore him. I didn't expect him to be so bold, but when he reached forward to pull my earphones out, I released a low frustrated growl.

My body swiveled around, and I faced him. The first thing I noticed was that he was wearing his full Berkshire uniform today. The navy blazer molded to his chest and shoulders like it was tailored made, especially for him, and the beige slacks didn't hide how strong his thighs were. Instead of putting his hair into another messy man bun, he left it loose today. The tight, blond curls ended up a good inch above his shoulders.

"Do you know that when people have headphones in... it means they don't want anyone to speak to them? That's the universal sign for Stay-The-Fuck-Away-From-Me-And-Don't-Speak-To-Me," I snapped, loud enough for the people around us to hear. *Ugh*.

If looks could kill, he'd be seven feet under right now. Irritation bubbled inside of me at the fact that I had been checking him out.

Yeah, he was hot. So what? Maddox was a fine specimen to look at. Too bad, he had an aggravating personality.

Maddox leaned closer, a little smirk playing on his lips. His hot breath feathered over the skin of my exposed neck, and when he whispered in my ear, his voice was low and deep. "I'm not everyone though. I'm special."

He pulled back, his blue eyes glinting with mischief. "And I know you want me to talk to you. We didn't see each other yesterday, and I wasn't in class today. Miss me, Sweet Cheeks?"

Ha! I had two very peaceful days, and I wasn't complaining.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I let out a laugh with absolutely no trace of humor. "Cocky much?"

"I love the sound of that word coming from your lips." His gaze shifted to my lips for a second, watching them with rapt attention before he met my eyes again.

I felt the blood rush between my ears and I attempted to hold back my growl.

"Say it again," he calmly demanded, which pissed me off even more. "Slowly this time."

I took a deep breath before letting it out. I was trying so hard not to punch this dude. "Listen, Coulter. You need to back off, or I'm going to do something really bad."

"Like what?" He was testing me, pushing and pushing – waiting for what I'd do, or what I was capable of.

"I don't know. Maybe punch your dick so hard it'll retreat back into your asshole. Have you ever heard of personal space?"

My body was tight as a bowstring. He was too close to me, so close I caught the scent of his cologne and aftershave. He smelled clean and...

I didn't like the way my body suddenly decided to appreciate the way he looked or what he smelled like. "Take a step back. Now," I growled.

Maddox took a step *forward*, crowding into me and forcing me against the wall. His blue eyes darkened and all signs of mischief were suddenly gone. "I don't listen well to demands. I think you know that already. I always do the opposite. Did you, by any chance, want me closer?"

I brought my hands up and pushed against his chest, but he wouldn't budge.

"You're so full of yourself."

"You could be full of *me*. Time, date and address. You choose, Sweet Cheeks," he rasped in my ear, his lips whispering over my skin.

What... the... hell?

A voice interrupted us before I could explode. "Next."

The lady at the end of the food line called again. "Next!"

Maddox pulled away, and I could finally breathe again. I hadn't even realized I was holding my breath or that my heartbeats had been strangely irregular.

I shouldn't be feeling this way. I wasn't weak.

No, in a tank full of sharks – I would *not* be preyed on.

Straightening my spine, I pushed past him without a second glance.

Fuck you, Coulter.

And game on.

LILA

o you want to go to the haunted house this year?"
I couldn't remember the last time I'd been to a haunted house. I hated them as a kid, but my dad would always hold my hand through them. With him, I was safe, and nothing about the haunted houses scared me.

Every Halloween, Berkshire Academy builds its own haunted house on the school grounds. It was a tradition that started a whole decade ago, and to this day, we still honored it.

I took a bite of my pizza, chewing while I contemplated Riley's question. "I guess we could check it out."

She clapped her hands, her face lighting up with excitement. "I heard it's scarier than last year. They're going all out this time. It'd be fun! How about some girl time? We go to the haunted house then a sleepover at my place? Movie and pizza?"

Riley continued to chatter with enthusiasm while I tried to ignore all the eyes on me. It was difficult when they made it so obvious. The cafeteria had become a nightmare now. I could have tucked my tail between my legs and made a run for it; I could have hidden – but I was never one to accept defeat.

Since Maddox had made me his prey, I'd been the center of attention. A year ago, when I enrolled at Berkshire, I got used to all the judgmental eyes.

Lila Garcia, the 'poor' girl. I didn't have Louis Vuitton shoes or Chanel bags or the latest iPhone. I didn't prance around with a kilo of makeup on my face nor was I a cheerleader who constantly rubbed herself against the jocks. I wasn't a *follower*.

I'd always been the outsider, but after a few months of critical eyes on me and their constant judgment, they had forgotten about me. I blended into the crowd and soon became invisible. It made life easier.

Until Maddox.

Now, the girls looked at me with contempt, like I was the dirt under their feet. They gawked at me with envy because I had Maddox's attention while the boys stared at me with obvious interest.

None have made a move though.

Riley said I was Maddox's trophy. Nobody would dare to approach me. The moment he laid eyes on me, I became untouchable to the rest of Berkshire Academy.

Ha, lucky me.

Riley snapped her fingers at my face, causing me to flinch. She smiled sweetly. "Ignore them, Lila."

I hummed in response before taking another bite of my cold pizza.

"So, haunted house and then sleepover?" Riley asked again.

"Okay, I like that idea. I'm not a big fan of haunted houses though."

"I'll hold your hand. It'll be romantic! Me and you, walking through the dark. I'll protect you from the bad guys." She cooed, like a romance hero — way too dramatic.

"Funny. Very funny. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were into pussies."

She paused, looking thoughtful for a moment. "I kissed a girl once. A few years ago. It was a dare, and I liked it. She had really soft lips, and she said I was a good kisser. Wanna find out?"

When she leaned across the table, puckering her lips up, I let out a small laugh. "Um no. Stay away from me, Riley."

"I'm disappointed," she said with a cute pout.

Riley's gaze landed behind my shoulder again, before she blushed and quickly looked away. "Okay, that's it. What's going on?"

"What?" She feigned innocence, batting her long lashes at me.

I half-looked over my shoulder before facing her again. "Him. You keep looking at him and blushing. What's up?"

"Nothing." She was too quick with the denial. I called bullshit.

"Riley, who is he?"

I saw the moment she gave in. Her eyes softened, and she chewed on her bottom lip. "That's Grayson."

"And?" I kicked her under the table, demanding more answers.

"I heard some whispers in the hallway. They weren't really nice. He was bullied a bit last week. Jasper and his friends were being assholes, but Grayson just ignored them and walked away. Apparently, he was living on the streets for a while before he was recently adopted by a famous lawyer and his wife. They can't have kids. We don't know much about him yet, but he's in two of my classes."

I looked over my shoulder again, finally taking a good look at Grayson who was sitting at the far end of the cafeteria in a corner by himself. "I didn't know you were into nerds."

Grayson wore a black pair of glasses perched on his nose, and he was reading a book. I could see the appeal and definitely understood why he caught Riley's eye.

"He's a nerd, but did you see him? He's hot with a capital H O T. But he's kinda moody. He doesn't really talk to anyone. Typical loner. But he's smart and we bumped into each other last week. Remember the bruises on my knees? Yeah, Grayson took me to the infirmary after I fell down, and he noticed my knees bleeding."

Aha... I remembered that incident. I had found Riley in the infirmary; she was alone, but now that I remembered – she had been blushing heavily and was a stuttering mess.

"Well, at least he's not an asshole."

Riley let out a dreamy sigh. "He's sweet. Except he barely spared me a glance. I said *hi* to him a few times, and he just...ignored me. Apparently, he doesn't like when people talk to him."

"I didn't think the nerdy ones were your type..."

The last boy Riley dated was a jock and an asshole. After Jasper, it made sense why she'd swear off all the guys like him.

"Fine, I'll confess my secret. I like nerds. There's just something attractive about them."

I couldn't deny that Grayson was indeed appealing to the eye.

"Hot and moody nerds, you mean."

Riley popped a piece of mint gum into her mouth. She looked over my shoulder again, where her new crush was sitting. "Exactly," she chirped.

I quirked up an eyebrow at her. "Grayson, specifically."

"Yeah. Too bad he won't even look at me." The pout was evident in her voice.

"Is that why you wore extra makeup today, curled your hair, and rolled your skirt higher?"

I already knew the answer, but I still wanted to hear it from her.

A nervous laugh bubbled out of her, and she twirled a lock of hair around her finger. "You noticed that?"

My sweet friend. Gripping her hand over the table, I gave her a small, comforting squeeze. "Just be yourself, Riley. If he likes you, you'll know."

She let out a sigh, her eyes moving to Grayson one last time before she focused on me. "So, what's up with you and Maddox?"

I crooked my finger at her, and Riley leaned closer, as if we were about to share a secret. It kind of was -a secret.

"He wants a fight? I'm going to give him a fight."

Riley's face lit up, and a huge smile spread across her lips. "We're going to be bad?"

Well, if she put it that way... then yeah, we were about to be very bad.

"Oh, we're going to play his games, but with my rules."

She slapped the table loud enough to rattle our trays and smirked. "I'm in!"

My lips twitched, and I held back my own smile. Maddox was about to be bested at his own little, shitty game.



"CAN YOU SEE HIM?" I asked, leaning closer to Riley. It was two hours after school, and we were hiding in the hallway, which also overlooked the huge football field. Where, very conveniently, the boys were practicing. They had a very important game in a week, and I heard the coach was being extra hard on all their asses.

"I can't believe we're hiding with binoculars, Lila. But yeah, I can see him. He's playing just fine. Did you put a lot of the powder in his pants?"

"No, just a little, but enough to make him lose his mind."

An unladylike snort came from Riley. "You're so petty."

I let out a mock gasp, but the urge to defend myself was strong. "He started it."

"Aha! Okay, he just stopped in the middle of the game."

"Yeah?"

Riley looked into her binoculars, her shoulders shaking with mirth. "Oh, he looks confused. The coach is walking over to him. Lila!" she whispered-yelled, before bursting into laughter. "He's scratching at his inner thighs now. Oh my God, he looks like a monkey. The boys are hollering. Oh, oh, shit. He's walking back this way. Ohhh, he looks pissed!"

Good.

"How pissed?" I demanded, feeling mighty proud of myself. Maddox was made of rock. He was untouchable, and if little ole me, Lila Garcia, could get him *this* pissed off – then I won.

"He's reaaally mad. He's still scratching himself. You should see the look on his face!"

Riley handed me the binoculars, and I looked through them. True to her words, Maddox was marching across the field like a mad bull. His face was filled with rage, his nostrils flaring like a wild beast. He was seething, and I could bet, he figured out what happened. Maybe not *who* was behind the prank, but at least *what* was done to him. It should have scared me, the brutal look on his face, but I couldn't help but chortle with laughter at the way he couldn't stop scratching at his muscled thighs and crotch.

As if he could sense me, his stormy eyes connected with mine through the binoculars, although I was sure there was no way he could see me. Riley and I were hidden perfectly.

But just in case, I lowered myself to the ground. "Hey, are you sure... it's safe? I mean, I wanted to prank him, but what we did isn't too extreme, right?"

Riley waved away my concerns. "Nah. He'll be fine. The itching powder doesn't leave any lasting side effects. It's harmless. I kinda feel bad for Maddox Junior though."

My jaw clenched as I remembered the cafeteria scene where he had cornered me. "He deserves it after the comment he made in the cafeteria. He propositioned me for sex, like I'm some kind of paid who—"

Riley slapped a hand over my mouth before I could finish my sentence. "Shh, he's coming in."

We both ducked around the corner, the same time Maddox stormed into the building and right into the locker room.

"I feel like a spy," Riley announced in my ear, giggling softly.

Basically, we were *spying* on him.

Riley and I snuck closer to the locker room. The door was partially

opened, and we peeked inside. It was empty, since everyone else was on the field – except Maddox. From where we stood, we could hear the shower running.

"He must be itching really bad right now."

I shushed Riley when she couldn't hold in her laughter any longer.

"Can you see him?"

I stood on my tip-toes, trying to get a look inside. "Nope."

A few minutes later, the shower turned off and then I did see him.

"Oh," Riley whispered behind me.

Yeah, oh.

Maddox was bare chested, with a towel wrapped loosely around his hips. His body was still wet and glistening as if he didn't care to dry himself the moment he stepped out of the shower. He roughly rubbed another towel through his long curly hair, before running it over the rest of his body.

I hated him; I truly did, but there was no denying it; something about his physique was making my lady brain go mushy and all my lady parts tingle. I inhaled deeply as I took in the sight in front of me.

Maddox furiously wiped the ringlets of water from his muscled chest until his skin was glowing pink. I tried to look away – it was the decent thing to do, but I failed miserably. My curious eyes found his torso, and I bit my lip, mentally slapping myself but I. Could. Not. Help. It.

It was like studying an expertly, carved statue in a museum. Beautifully chiseled chest, strong arms and well-defined masculine thighs. Auguste Rodin would have begged to sculpt a man like Maddox Coulter since he was damn near close to rugged perfection.

"Even his nipples are sexy," Riley whispered.

My heart slammed in my chest, and I bumped back into her. I had completely forgotten she was there with me, and she was also getting an eyeful of Maddox.

I watched as he wrenched his locker open and rummaged through it. The effects of the itching powder were still not gone since he was still scratching at his crotch.

I could tell the moment he read the note I left him. His back went rigid, and the muscles of his shoulders clenched tensely. Maddox turned sideways, giving me a perfect view of him as he scrunched my little note in his fist.

How does your crotch feel? - Lila

First rule of enacting a well, plotted out revenge plan: always leave a note

behind, so your nemesis knows it's you. Play dirty but don't be a coward.

He muttered something under his breath and shook his head, before he did something unexpected. I knew he'd be furious, and he was, but then his lips twitched. Maddox rubbed his thumb over his full, smirking lips.

"Uh oh," Riley muttered from behind me. "I'm not sure I like the look on his face."

"Ladies, what are you doing here?" Another voice joined us, loud enough to have my heart leap in my throat, and I choked back a gasp.

Riley and I jumped away from the locker room, and we swiveled around to see a teacher giving us *the* look. Oh shit, busted.

"It's late. Why are you two still on school grounds?" She demanded with her hands on her hips.

"Um, we forgot something," I stammered, looking back toward Maddox while contemplating my escape.

Maddox's head turned toward me at the same time, and through the partially opened door, for only a nanosecond, our gazes collided. His deep, ocean blue eyes flared in surprise, and I could swear his stare burned through me, causing a warm flush to spread through my body. Then... the moment was gone.

Riley grabbed my hand, already pulling me away. "Sorry! We're leaving."

We sprinted out of the school, and once we passed through the Berkshire's main gate, Riley and I came to a halt.

"Shit. That was close," Riley panted with her hands on her knees.

"So worth it though."

She straightened her back, one perfect eyebrow raised. "Are you sure? Maddox is not the type who is going to let you off the hook. Revenge is a dish best served cold. He's going to get you back, probably not tomorrow or the day after, but he will – trust me, and I don't think it's going to be pretty."

"He shouldn't have messed with me. I'm prepared for anything he's going to throw my way," I responded, fighting back a smile of my own.

I remembered the look in Maddox's eyes when our gaze briefly met in the locker room. I didn't admit it out loud, but I wanted to see what Maddox could do and how far he was going to push me. It was too tempting to mess with him, to retaliate after seeing Maddox's reaction – he started this game, and now, I was all in.

MADDOX

he girl on my lap grinded against me. Her tits were practically spilling out of her tight red dress, and she shoved them in my face. I gripped her ass in one hand and smoked a blunt with the other. Miss-Fake-Tits let out a moan, which sounded straight out of a porn video.

Although I've seen better acted porn. She was inexperienced and quite an amateur. Trying too hard, with too little self-respect.

Easy pussy, easy fuck. I didn't have to hunt for them; they landed right on my lap.

"Maddox," she purred in my ear. My jaw twitched as I caught a whiff of her strong perfume and the stench of alcohol was strong on her breath. She was drunk and humping me like a bitch in heat.

Any other day, I'd be all up in her pussy... tonight, my dick was not in the mood.

Or I guessed, I was not in the mood for *her*.

On the opposite couch, Colton had his tongue shoved down a girl's throat. Brayden and Cole were in a heated conversation about this week's football match. We won, big time. Leighton High School wasn't even worth our time. Knox, our best linebacker, was missing, but he was probably in a room lost in pussy.

And I was fucking bored.

Drunk and bored.

The party we crashed was lame, and I needed some kind of action, something to get my blood pumping – something dangerous. I was itching for a fight and a good lay. Too bad the girl on my lap had absolutely no effect on

my dick.

Her lips parted, and I felt her tongue on my neck. She sucked on my throat, biting teasingly. "Let's get out of here. Go somewhere quieter."

"If you wanna fuck, we do it here."

She pulled away, her green eyes hooded and confused. "Here?"

I lifted an eyebrow, amused. The only reason she was sitting on my lap and humping me was because she needed to sleep with a Berkshire football star, so she could go around and rub it in the other girls' faces. I was her ticket to being Miss Popular at Leighton Public High School -- Berkshire's rival.

"Too shy for a little audience?"

She looked around, stammering, "No-o."

I squeezed her ass, not even bothering to be gentle about it. That was a warning. "I don't do sweet girls."

Nah, sweet girls didn't do shit for my libido.

Feisty girls, though, yeah... they made my dick hard.

Full of sass with brown eyes, black hair, curvy hips and a pretty Latina ass that would make any man drop to his knees, begging for a taste.

Goddamn fucking trouble she was, but she was exactly what I wanted.

Lila Garcia.

Too bad she didn't want me anywhere near her.

I took a hit off the blunt one last time and exhaled a puff of smoke, not bothering to move my head away. I knew I was being an asshole, but hey... chicks like her wanted jerks like me – so who the fuck cared?

Dropping the now useless blunt onto the ashtray, I leveled her with a look. She scrunched her nose, but her eyes flared with determination. What she didn't realize – I ate girls like her for dinner before spitting them out two hours later, no guilt with one very satisfied dick.

I curled a hand around the back of her neck, bringing her head closer. "You want a taste of me? We do it *my* way."

She looked around again, her cheeks flushed, and she was already a little bit out of breath. "Do you even know my name?"

"Do you know mine?" I threw back, although the answer was obvious. Of course, she knew who I was. Miss-Fake-Tits was only here to use me like I was about to use her. Fair game.

"Who doesn't? You're Maddox Coulter. And for your information, my name is Madison."

She thought she was special. Newsflash – she wasn't the type of girl I'd wake up the next morning with. I arched an eyebrow with a *tsk*. "Here's the thing, I don't need to know your name to fuck you."

Miss-Fake-tits, er... *Madison*, wrapped her arms around my shoulders. Her hips moved in a circular motion, quite tempting as she practically grinded against me through our clothes. Any passerby would have thought we were fucking.

She let out a fake giggle. "Didn't your mommy or daddy teach you some manners?"

She was teasing; it was only a joke.

But the silent rage inside me bubbled over, threatening to burst through, without any care of the consequences. Fuck her. And fuck mommy and daddy dearest, too. Manners? No, they didn't teach me any – just like they didn't give a shit if I lived or died, either.

I crashed the party because I wanted to *forget*.

But Madison, aka *Bitch*, right here, just pissed me off even more.

She reminded me of why I was *here*, made me think of my parents when I was so hell bent on forgetting their existence.

Daddy dearest caught me smoking today, lounging on the couch and watching TV. He walked in with his business associate. Oh, he knew I smoked, except he never cared. But Brad Coulter didn't want me to set a bad example in front of his business partners; his image had always been more important than my health.

"You don't smoke in my house," he hissed in my face, taking a threatening step toward me. There was a time when my father was taller and bigger than me. He used to be intimidating, and his words were law in our house. But that time was long gone.

Now, I was bigger... taller... meaner.

He didn't scare me.

Now, he just pissed me off more often than not.

"I've been smoking since I was thirteen. Never knew we had a rule. You didn't seem to care before, father."

His lips curled up in disgust, and I felt it. I fucking felt it – his anger, his disappointment, his revulsion. My hands clenched into fists, and I exhaled through my nose. At a young age, I had quickly learned how to mask my emotions until I became a solid wall of nothingness. You'd cut me open, and you'd find something hollow inside.

"I constantly question if you really are my son."

When I was seven years old, my heart had frozen in my chest. But his words, to this day, could still burn me like acid in my veins. My father held an arrow in his hand, the tip of it aflame, and it was aimed right at my chest — my goddamn heart was his target.

"Nah. I'm definitely your son. You're an asshole, I'm an asshole. It runs in our blood."

His blue eyes – the same as mine, darkened and his face was vicious.

"Brad." My mother's soft voice interrupted us. "They're waiting. Let's go. Maddox, go back to your room. This deal is important to your father."

I heard her unspoken words. Please, for Christ's sake, don't ruin it.

He took a step back, his jaw hard and twitching. Without sparing me another glance, he walked away. I saw the look in my mother's eyes, her parted lips, and I waited for her to say something. But there was nothing left to say, so she walked away, too.

And so, I'd been dismissed. I saw my parents after three weeks, and without even a greeting, I had been brushed off and forgotten. Yet again.

Just like ten years ago...

When I had needed them the most. I was left behind, locked away in the dark... forgotten.

"Maddox," she purred in my ear again. I blinked, the past going out of focus, and I crashed landed in the present.

I had called Colton after the 'fight' with my father. He didn't have to ask me questions, he *knew* what I needed. So, here we were. Crashing Leighton's party, knowing full well we were about to piss off a whole bunch of people.

Yeah, that was exactly what I needed.

A good fight, a good fuck.

Marley – wait, no – Madison rubbed her hands over my chest and shoulders. "You're so big and strong. So hard, in all the right places."

She was so eager to please me, so eager to be *just* another girl on my list.

My fingers tangled in her hair, twisting the thick blonde strands around my fist. My knuckles dug into her scalp, and she winced, before quickly hiding it with a fake-ass smile. Without care, I pushed her on the ground. She collapsed to her knees with a low whine, her wide eyes blinking up at me, unfocused, confused, and with way too many expectations.

Her pink lips parted, *waiting*, and I figured why-the-fuck-not. With one hand, I unbuckled my jeans. "Let's put your deepthroating skills to good use,

shall we?"

Her face lit up, and she scooted closer between my thighs. Maybe she wouldn't be such a bad lay after all. At least she was willing to suck dick. Some bitches thought they were too pretty and fancy to be on their knees.

A loud snarl came from outside, making all of us pause. There was more shouting, and through my hazy mind, I realized Colton was no longer in the same room. Brayden and Cole looked at each other, too, confused.

"Isn't he from Berkshire?" The whispers started to get louder.

Brayden and Cole shot off the couch at the same time as me. Miss-Fake-Tits shrieked as she fell back hard on her ass. "What the hell?"

No fucks were given.

I buckled up my jeans before marching outside, Brayden and Cole following closely behind. *Ah shit*.

Colton was standing in the middle of the front lawn, smiling like a goddamn maniac, while he was surrounded by a bunch of Leighton boys.

"Your girl wanted her pussy eaten," he announced, loud enough for all of us gathered to hear. "You weren't doing a good enough job, man."

The girl in question, who was the same girl on his lap a few minutes before, sputtered a half-ass excuse. Her face was bright red, and she hid behind her friends.

I noticed Samuel, Leighton's Quarterback, charging forward. Ah, so he was the boyfriend. This was also *his* party, and *we* weren't invited.

Yeah, we were trouble with a capital T.

Colton was able to block the first punch, which only served to piss off Samuel more. He was livid as he tried to bring Colton to the ground, quite unsuccessfully.

It was a fair fight...until it wasn't.

The Leighton boys came forward, surrounding Colton until he was trapped.

"Fuck no," Brayden growled.

My jaw locked, and the fire inside me burnt like lava, liquid hot and fiery. We cut through the mass of people, the itching need to fight putting all of us on an adrenaline rush.

Without giving it much thought, I yanked one of the boys away, and he fell backward. Weak and useless.

Samuel spun around, his face red and a mask of fury. My fingers curled into a fist, and before he could blink, my fist made contact with his face. Not

so pretty face anymore, huh?

He roared but swiveled back around quickly, blocking my next hit. The alcohol was fucking with my senses now, and he caught me in the ribs. The pain coursing through my body fueled me to fight harder and meaner.

He lunged at me, swinging but missing. I could hear the others fighting, the brawl getting louder and messier.

This wasn't just a fight. It was retaliation. It was a fight based on ego -- who had the bigger balls, who was stronger.

I drove my shoulder into Samuel's chest, slamming him into the ground. He tackled me back, but I was able to land solid punches into his gut. We were both walking out of here with at least one cracked rib.

My father's disappointment – *punch*.

My mother's lack of care – *punch*.

My fucked up childhood – *punch*, *punch*, *punch*.

The suffocating darkness, a constant reminder – *punch*.

My knuckles were bleeding and raw, my left eye was swollen shut, but I. Couldn't. Fucking. Stop.

Brushed-off and forgotten.

Enraged and lost.

Through my hazy brain, I heard Colton shouting. My head snapped toward him, seeing him rush toward me. My eyes widened for a nanosecond before the bottle cracked against my temple.

My body slumped forward as the ringing of my ears amplified, my chest caving in as I tried to *breathe*. My heartbeat slowed and the metallic taste of blood filled my mouth.

My vision blurred, and I didn't see the punch coming.

I only felt it.

My jaw cracked, and I fell back, my head hitting the ground.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Fucking breathe.

The world slowed.

I blinked. Once. Twice.

Silence replaced the ringing in my ears as the world went black.

LILA

ou're late, Mr. Coulter."

My head snapped up at Mrs. Levi's voice and Maddox's name. Everyone seemed to have the same train of thought since we all looked up at the same time as Maddox walked into the classroom. Contrary to his usual swagger and smirk, he was brooding and quiet.

Except that wasn't what caught my attention.

No, it was the fact that his beautiful face was messed up.

His left eye appeared swollen and that side of his face was heavily bruised. He had a band-aid on his eyebrow, and there was a cut on the corner of his full lips. It looked painful, and even I winced at the sight of him like *this*. Instead of a man bun, his curly hair was left loose, and I had a feeling he was hiding behind them.

People talked; Berkshire's hallways were never without rumors. There was always something going on. A new break-up, a new student, a bully, someone caught cheating. There was always some kind of drama.

Yesterday, when Maddox didn't show up at school, we heard there was a fight between Leighton and Berkshire boys. They said Maddox landed in the hospital with a slight concussion.

I had brushed off the rumors and thought it was a peaceful day – finally.

But now, seeing Maddox like this...

He didn't spare me a glance, taking his seat at the back of the classroom. I waited for the warmth that would always accompany his burning stare, but I felt... *nothing*.

Glancing over my shoulder, I took a peek. Maddox stared down at his notebook, a frozen statue in time. He didn't stare back, didn't tease, and unlike the last few weeks, the playful Maddox disappeared. In his place was a bitter, sulking boy.

I turned away and looked at my own paper. Why did I care? I shouldn't be bothered by his change of attitude. He was having a shitty day, so what? Everyone had bad days. Hell, *I* knew the exact meaning of shitty days.

When the bell rang, I didn't move from the chair. I couldn't bring myself to, even though I should have gotten up and walked away. *Like always*.

Instead, I found myself waiting.

Maddox walked past me, without a word or a fleeting look. He didn't bump into me, didn't pull my hair, didn't throw me one of his annoying smirks. *Nothing*.

I blinked, confused at my own mixed feelings.

I didn't care; I shouldn't care.

Any other decent person would have ignored Maddox and moved on – probably be thankful for another peaceful day.

Me?

I found myself following him.

Oh, how the tables have turned.

Maybe it was the fact that I was ready for him today. The last few weeks, Maddox had been a constant pain in my ass, and as much as I hated to admit it, I'd grown used to him being a jerk. The verbal sparring and the pranks became a part of my daily routine, and somehow, I found myself *disappointed* that Maddox wasn't in the same mood.

"You're dumb," I muttered to myself as I followed behind Maddox, only a few steps away. "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

Turn back. Walk away. Now.

You see, there are two sides to Lila. The indifferent side of her and the intrigued Lila – I was currently the latter.

Something about Maddox was different today, and it intrigued me. I had always liked puzzles, and Maddox Coulter was a difficult one to solve.

Maddox stopped by his locker, and he carelessly stuffed his books in there. His irritation was apparent, and he wasn't even trying to mask it. No wonder everyone was keeping their distance from him. The students stared, but quickly scrambled away, when he directed his scowls at them.

I should have kept my distance, too. Ignored him and walked away.

But apparently, I liked to play with fire and to push my boundaries. Maddox and I were playing tug-of-war. It was an everyday battle between us.

Stopping a mere foot from him, I leaned my shoulder against the locker next to Maddox. "Is it shark week?" I remarked with a grin.

He didn't spare me a glance, but his lips had thinned into a hard line, his jaw tensed. Maddox's blue eyes darkened, but he otherwise ignored me. The scowl on his face was intimidating, but it only made me want to push his buttons even more. "Did your period attack you today?"

He blew out a breath before slamming his locker shut. His knuckles were red and bruised. The wounds on Maddox only made him appear more brutal... and slightly *broken*.

Maybe that was why he piqued my interest.

My grandma always said I was fixer. Since I was a kid, I always picked up the stray cats and the injured birds. Our house was a tiny zoo for all my little friends.

Too bad Maddox Coulter was not a friend.

He was my nemesis, and I didn't want to fix him, I reminded myself.

"What do you want?" he asked, his voice low and hard. A shiver ran down my spine, and I stood up straighter, hiding the obvious effect he had on me and my body.

"Just wondering if you need a tampon. Or, do you already have one stuffed up your ass? Is that why you're so grumpy?"

"For fuck's sake," Maddox grumbled.

"Ah. Definitely shark week." I waited for him to snap, but he only gritted his teeth together, so hard I wondered how his jaw didn't crack under the pressure. "It's okay, you'll eventually get used to all the messy hormones. If you need any advice on how to deal with it, I can make a PowerPoint for you."

"Not in the mood for your pranks, Garcia."

"You love my pranks."

My stomach dipped when his chest rumbled with a low growl. "Get out of my way."

He tried to walk past me, but I was having none of that. Could be my curiosity or my stubbornness, but I wasn't ready for him to leave.

I sidestepped into his path. Maddox squared his wide shoulders, standing taller, and his eyes narrowed on me. "*Move*." There was a warning in his voice, but I chose to ignore it.

"Are you okay?" I asked before I could stop myself.

I told myself I wasn't worried nor did I care, but still... the question popped out before I thought it over.

Maddox leaned down toward me, bringing our faces closer and crowding into me. I fidgeted with the straps of my school bag, holding myself in place and refusing to step back. He didn't intimidate me.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you *care*, Garcia." My breath caught in my throat when our eyes made contact. He held me there, in the moment, before he flashed me a sardonic smile. "What is it? Finally decided to sit on my dick? I might make an exception for you. I'll tell you all about my day if you let me in your pus—"

"You know, two minutes ago, I actually cared. But never mind, I take it back now. You're still a jerk, Coulter."

Maddox pulled back, straightening to his full height again. "Always have been, always will be. Remember that, Sweet Cheeks. Ain't no pussy gonna tame me and definitely not yours."

Good. Lord.

The urge to smack him was strong, and the urge to slap myself for being stupid enough to care was *also* strong.

I came to a very important conclusion: I preferred Maddox silent. Why did I even try to get him to talk? The moment he opened his mouth, I realized why I *despised* him. He was an asshole, through and through.

I shuffled through my bag and took out two very important items, shoving them in his hands. His dark eyebrows pulled together in confusion.

"Tampons and chocolate," I explained with a fake smile. "You're welcome. Have a good day, Maddox."

I pushed past him, and just before I walked away, his lips twitched.

Did I just get Maddox Coulter to smile?



"CAN YOU STOP FOLLOWING ME?" I paused and then turned on my heels quickly. Maddox caught himself in time, coming to a halt, so he wouldn't bump into me.

After our 'conversation' right before lunch, the rest of the day took a sudden turn. Maddox decided to follow me around; he was like a lost puppy –

Riley's words, although I only found him to be irritating, so maybe more like an *annoying* puppy.

I wished we could go back to 'silent, brooding' Maddox. That version of him was ten times better than *this*.

I looked up at his bruised face, making sure to harden my heart at the sight of him battered and bruised. "Stop. Following. Me."

He shrugged, nonchalantly, and then stuffed his hands into the pockets of his beige slacks. "Can't do that. I'm having fun looking at your ass. By the way, do you mind if I warm my hands up?"

Exasperated, I let out a tiny growl from under my breath before I could stop myself. He was smiling now. As if pissing me off was his favorite pastime.

"That's sexual harassment, Coulter."

"You looking at my dick print is sexual harassment, too, Garcia."

My eyes widened at his words, and I felt the air being sucked out of me. "Wha-at? No…no I wasn't," I sputtered. My gaze fleeted to his crotch before I could stop myself. Shit. Biting on my lip, I blinked and looked away – anywhere but at *him*.

Maddox let out a throaty chuckle, and my eyes snapped back to his. He gave me his signature smirk, his dimple popping, creating a sexy indent into his left cheek. "You were, Sweet Cheeks. You were probably calculating how thick and how long I am, too."

My jaw snapped together, and I hissed through gritted teeth, "Shut. Up."

"Want me to tell you?" He quirked up a mocking eyebrow. "Or, you want to check for yourself? It's a little cold today, maybe you can warm my dick up with your little hands."

He acted as if he was reaching for my hands, but I slapped him away. In a blink, his arm snaked out, and he gripped my wrist, pulling me closer until our bodies were *almost* touching. My neck craned up, so I could stare into his face – he was too tall compared to my own tiny height. The top of my head barely came to his shoulders.

"You are disgusting," I hissed, feeling my cheeks warming up under his dark, teasing eyes.

His breath feathered over my cheek; his lips way too close to my ear. "I am proudly *filthy*, Sweet Cheeks, and so are you. For having these dirty, dirty thoughts."

I suddenly felt hot. Sweat beaded on my neck and between my breasts.

My chest heaved with a shallow breath as my insides shuddered at the mere proximity of him.

His lips grazed my earlobe, and my body tensed. I tried to twist my arm out of his grip, but it was pointless. My other hand landed on his hard chest, and I shoved him back. "Fuck off."

He let go of my hand and took a step back, his bruised lips quirking up on the side. "See you tomorrow, Garcia."

I flipped him the finger and started walking away. Asshole.

LILA

felt him before I saw him.

His enticing scent engulfed me as he pushed against my back, barely touching, but still way too close.

"What do you want, Coulter? Was today not enough for you?" I asked with a heavy sigh.

It was not a good day, not after the stupid prank Maddox pulled on me. My wet hair was currently soaking the back of my Berkshire's blouse, the soft material sticking to my skin. I was irritated and absolutely exhausted. One more class left and then it was the weekend. Two blissful days without Maddox.

"Looks like you were able to wash your hair." He chortled at his own lame joke. "Sorry about the feathers, but it was payback. Don't be such a grumpy ass, Garcia. You can be a sweet ass, though. I'll eat it."

I swiveled around and leveled the douchebag with a glare. "You think gluing feathers in my hair is funny?"

I wanted to throttle him and his stupid, smirking face.

"Don't exaggerate. I didn't use glue. I used flour, water and feathers. Simple and harmless. Anyway, you looked cute with a nesting head."

Mr. As shole here glued, oh wait, my bad - pasted feathers into my cute beanie with flour and water. So, naturally, when I put on my beanie, all the sticky feathers transferred to my hair. No, I didn't look at my beanie before putting it on. Who does that, anyway?

My fists clenched and unclenched as I sucked in a deep breath and held back a snarl. Maddox rubbed his jaw, and against my own accord, I took notice that his face was healing up nicely. His bruises were barely noticeable, and his left eye was no longer swollen, black and purple.

He was back to his sexy, irritating self. *God give me patience*.

Maddox closed my locker, leaning against it like he owned the thing. I gave him a blank look, waiting for this to be over. The hallways were empty, except for the two of us.

"The pink hair prank? That was actually a good one, I'll give you that. The feathers were payback for the pink hair you gave me."

Ah, the pink hair. A few days ago, after Maddox left a butt-plug in my locker, *a gift*, he had written in his note – I decided to retaliate. The need for revenge was strong, and it was easy. I had sneaked into the locker room while Riley kept guard outside. I found his personal locker and switched his shampoo with temporary pink hair dye.

"Itching powder though? Lame as fuck, Garcia."

"It was a reminder."

He arched an eyebrow, waiting for me to explain.

"That's what happens when you lay around with whores. You end up with an itchy dick. Also, a reminder that I'm not someone you can mess around with. *Remember* that next time you proposition me for sex like a paid whore."

"That was a nice thought, except... I don't need to pay someone for sex. My name comes with a label, baby. Maddox-Coulter-Will-Fuck-You-So-Hard-You-Will-See-Jesus."

"Where did you find that definition? Dickpedia?"

"If you open dickpedia to the word *orgasmic*, you'll find my name there."

I rolled my eyes while mentally facepalming myself. Why did I even bother to have a conversation with him? It was completely useless. The only thing that came out of his mouth was sex, sex and more sex. Or something completely dumb.

"You know what your problem is?"

"What?" I raked my fingers through my wet hair, frustrated.

"You want me," he said, as calmly as if he was announcing the weather. *Oh*, *it's sunny*. *Oh*, *you want to fuck me*. This man was mentally unstable, period.

"Excuse me?" I placed my hands on my hips, astonished he could even come to *this* conclusion.

"You want me, but you don't want to admit it. You're fighting the

chemistry." Maddox lazily eyed me up and down. There was no embarrassment, no awkwardness from him. He was practically undressing me with his eyes, and he was being so casual about it. When he spoke again, his voice lowered to a deeper tone. "Does fighting with me make you wet? We could fight in bed, let's not waste time here."

"If your brain was as big as your ego, maybe you'd be more appealing."

Maddox grinned harder and then let out a deep chuckle. "I'm not sure about my ego or how big it is, but I can assure you, I got something big here." He cupped his crotch and raised a mocking eyebrow.

Annoyed, I pushed away from the wall. He was so goddamn rude, immature and vulgar. "You think every girl wants you. You really think you're every woman's wet dream, don't you?"

"I know I am."

Maddox moved closer, forcing me to take a step back. He stalked me, coming closer and closer until I was forced to press my back against the wall. I shivered, not because of him, I told myself. Because my hair was wet and cold and now that I was plastered against the wall, it only caused my wet blouse to stick onto my back like a second skin.

He leaned forward, bending his head to be level with me. His lips caressed my ear, and it tickled. I went to pull away, but he was quicker. His arms came up, and he caged me against the wall, his palms on either side of my head. He barely touched me, but his body was so close, his heat pressing into me, caressing me and causing a warm flush to spread throughout my body.

My thighs quaked, and my lower stomach tensed with his close proximity. "And you know what? One day I'm going to be your wet dream, too. Picture this: You'll be alone in bed at night, unable to sleep. My face flashes in front of your eyes and your stomach clenches. Your thighs are spread open and your pussy feels warm but strangely, empty. There's an aching need in the pit of your stomach. You won't be able to stop yourself. Your hands find their way into your panties, and you feel how wet you are with your fingers. You bite on your lip to keep from moaning. You touch yourself slowly, a little confused. A little frustrated. You'll think: Why can't I stop thinking about him? You're going to hate it, but you'll still love it. And you know what you're going to do?"

My skin was on fire, my body burned, and I couldn't *breathe*. My stomach dipped and twisted as the air felt like it was being sucked out of my

body.

My heart stuttered when I felt his body pressing into me, finally *touching* me.

"You'll finger your pussy while imagining it's me on top of you, pressing against you, and it's *my* cock fucking you. Not your little fingers," Maddox breathed into my ear, whispering the dirty fantasy as if he was making dirty love to me.

Horrified, I could only blink, trying to remind myself to breathe. He shouldn't be able to affect me this way, he shouldn't be able to control my thoughts like *this*.

I was not weak, no... Maddox... couldn't...

He pulled away slightly to look into my face. His eyes were so blue, I almost drowned in them. "It won't happen today. Or tomorrow. Or next week. But one day, for sure. And no, I'm not being cocky. Cocky is for boys who don't know what they're doing. Me? I know exactly what I'm doing. I know for a fact it will happen. Fight it if you can."

He pushed away from me, and the cold washed over me as if I had been carelessly dunked into the ocean.

I silently gasped for breath as Maddox walked backward, away from me. The look on his face was something I've never seen before.

"I dare you, Lila."



I PADDED barefoot into my room, fresh from my shower and still wrapped in nothing but my fluffy towel. My phone pinged with a message, and I walked over to the nightstand to see it was from Riley.

What time are you leaving?

I typed out a quick message back. I'll catch the bus in 20 minutes.

The three little dots appeared on my screen, indicating she was typing.

If you want, I can pick you up, and we can go together.

My thumb paused over my phone as I read her sentence. My ears rang with the distant sound of glass shattering and bones crushing. The taste of metallic blood filled every corner of my mouth, and I almost choked on it. Except, there was no blood. I was choking on my own saliva, and the air surrounding me turned heavy, cold...suffocating.

My fingers trembled as I typed back my message to Riley. *I can't. You know I can't. I'm sorry. I'll take the bus.*

She knew the reason, and I also knew she was only trying to help, but there was no need. I was beyond helping when it came to...

I shook my head, clearing out the blurry flashes in front of my eyes and refusing to think of the night my whole life changed.

Grabbing my blow dryer, I leveled it over my head and made sure to work through every tangled strand of hair with my comb. Once my hair was dry and shiny, I made a French styled twin braid on top of my head with twin ponytails. It was cute and made my face look rounder and more symmetrical.

My reflection through the floor length mirror stared back at me. My hand traveled to my chest over my towel, where it was slowly coming undone. The top of my breasts came into view, and my eyes caught the scars. The long, jagged white lines snaked straight down from the middle of my petite breasts.

I let my towel slip through my fingers, the full scar now visible through the mirror. The skin around it was a bit pinker than the rest. It was healed up properly, but I didn't think it would ever completely fade away. Sometimes it ached, like a ghostly echo of the real agony I went through.

Pain washed over me like a raging storm, and my knees threatened to buckle under me. My eyes burned as tears hung on my lower lashes, and I furiously blinked them away, refusing to cry. My heart wailed, but I refused to shed any tears.

I slowly brought my hand up and lightly brushed it down the scar, tracing the pink-white lines. The tips of my fingers barely touched my skin, and I clenched my hand into a fist, holding back my tremors.

They said I stopped breathing on the operating table – I died for a moment before they brought me back.

I wondered... if maybe. . . it would have been easier if I really was dead.

But then I remembered... I was alive for them – my parents.

I averted my gaze from the mirror. It has been four years since I got the scars, but I still couldn't look at them for longer than two minutes. They were a beautiful reminder that I was alive... but also an ugly reminder of that night and all that I lost.

Grabbing my ripped jeans and a matching sweater, I quickly got dressed, so I wouldn't miss my bus. My grandparents were still at their grocery store, so before locking the door behind me, I made sure to turn on the alarm.

The moment I stepped out, I was thankful the sweater was my first option

when the cold air hit me. It was mid-October; the sun was already at the horizon, and the Haunted House opened in less than an hour.

The bus ride was short, and Riley was waiting for me outside the main gate of Berkshire. This year, they used the gymnasium and the outer field as the haunted house. Apparently, it was a big project, and I could see that. Everything looked expensive and... creepy.

Creepy and scary things were not my forte. Hell, I didn't even watch horror movies because they would give me nightmares for months.

Shit.

"I'm not sure I like this haunted house idea, Riley."

She pulled at my arm, dragging me across the field and toward the fake mausoleum. "Don't be a scaredy cat. Let's go. I already paid for our tickets, and it'll be fun!"

I dug my feet into the grass right before we could pass through the creepy, wooden door. "Wait, Ri—"

With one harsh tug, she pulled me forward before I could contemplate my decision. *Okay, that's it. I'm going to die.*

The moment we stepped inside, we were swallowed by darkness, and the screams of previous victims who have entered this dark place. "And if I die?"

"You're exaggerating," Riley muttered under her breath.

She wrapped her arm around me and guided us through the darkness. "I can't even see anything!"

"That's the point, Lila! It's called a haunted house for a reason, smartass."

She was laughing now, but there was nothing funny about this situation. A loud growling sound came from behind us, and I jumped at least two feet high. Someone was close, way too close to us. I could feel them stalking us in the darkness, their hot breaths on our neck.

"They're behind us," I whispered, my heart taking a dive into the pit of my stomach. The temperature was cold, but I had stress sweats. The air was thick and almost suffocating, or maybe that was just me. My hands were clammy, and I clenched onto Riley's arm.

She let out a shaky breath. "I can feel them, too. Just keep walking."

We walked further into the labyrinth looking path. Metal chains clanged close to us, as if someone had been tied to them and they were restlessly pulling at the chains. None of it was real, I reminded myself. They were live humans with costumes and wickedly good make-up.

I peeked to my left and wished I hadn't.

One very vile zombie man, his face bloodied and disfigured with his eyes pure white, walked out of the shadow, a mere inch away from me. His mouth was opened, and he snarled right into my face.

My lips parted with an ear-splitting scream. Riley jumped, and she let out a shriek, too. Grabbing my hand in hers, we made a run for it.

At every corner, there was a different horror waiting for us.

A bloody clown. Mass zombies. Ax murderers. A creepy nun with a white face and black, rotted teeth. They were snarling and quite terrifying. Another loud shriek came from Riley and I when they reached out to touch us.

They weren't supposed to get this close, right?

Wrong.

Riley forgot to mention this Haunted House was supposed to give us the real experience. As in, the actors were going to be touching us and getting really close.

"Holy shit balls!" Riley screamed as a seven feet man with a bloody chainsaw came forward. I pulled her arm and guided us to the other corner. We moved from room to room, stumbling through tiny dark hallways as dozens of creepy arms reached out to touch us.

"Are you scared?" I whispered again. The exit was near, I could see the fluorescent light ahead.

Riley didn't respond, but I noticed the change in her. Oh yeah, she was freaked out, too.

My heart was pounding like crazy with my whole body trembling. My knees were weak, and I wondered how I was still standing.

We finally walked through the exit and stepped outside through the backdoor. Riley giggled, although I could tell it was forced. She was definitely scared while we were in there. "See, that wasn't so bad. It was freaky but fun."

The heavy pressure on my chest was still there, but I finally took a deep breath.

Fun, ha. No.

"You look spooked," she teased, bumping her elbow into my hip.

"Shut up." I returned the favor, laying a soft punch on her arm.

We could hear other people screaming from the inside. Poor souls. If I had a choice, I wasn't going back in there. Once was enough.

"Are you happy now?" I demanded with a smile, turning to face Riley. My heart was still racing a mile an hour, adrenaline and fear still coursing through my veins.

My smile froze and died when I caught sight of what – who was standing behind her. Riley's gaze went over my shoulder, and her eyes widened, her lips parting as if to let out a scream.

Chills ran down my spine, my heart leaping in my chest.

Someone was standing behind me, just like the creepy mask man was standing behind Riley, too. His arms reached out for her, and my heart thudded so hard in my chest, it *hurt*.

Bile burned my throat, and I tried to warn Riley. Except, none of that happened.

One second I had my feet planted on the grass and then I felt a pair of hands on my hips, before I was airborne.

He lifted me up, hoisting me over his shoulder. I hung upside down, and I still couldn't find my voice. My breath stuck in my throat, and my whole body went limp in fear. Riley shrieked and from my position over his shoulder, as he strode away, I found the mask man holding and dragging Riley backward.

No. No. Wait!

The man carrying me marched through the field, taking it toward the back of the Mausoleum.

Oh My God. No one was coming to save her, no one could hear us scream. We were alone and...

My whole body was cold and numb... I couldn't feel anything, except fear.

I could be molested or... raped.

He was going to kill me.

This was not part of the Haunted House.

This was not an actor.

My pulse thundered in my throat and my vision blurred with black dots as I stayed limp, upside down over his shoulder.

From the distance, I heard Riley scream again, the sound filled with so much terror.

Alarmed, my body started to prickle with awareness, and I began to struggle against my captor. "Let me go. Let. Me. Go."

He laughed, like a mad man. The laugh sounded right out of a horror

movie.

"If... if you think you're going to rape me... think... again. Let me go, asshole."

The hiccups between each word made my threat sound less...threatening. Humiliated and panicked, my eyes burned with unshed tears. The lump in my throat made it harder to speak.

My captor kept marching, my head and arms swinging back and forth as I laid heavily over his shoulder.

"Someone... is going... to come and find us."

He laughed again, his hands clenching over my ass, his fingers digging in my flesh. That did it. I let out a shriek and started to struggle harder. My fists thumped on his back, but he barely even flinched.

Realizing my advantage in this position, I drew my knee back before slamming it forward between his thighs. I missed my target, but he hissed.

His hand came down on my ass, hard. He tsked, taunting me.

I was so close to bursting into tears, dread and horror filling every cell in my body. I continued to wrestle with him.

If I was going to die, I'd die fighting.

When my knee slammed forward again — missing its target once more — he finally relinquished his hold on me. My captor dumped me on the grass, without a care, like a sack of useless potatoes.

He had taken me away from the mausoleum and the haunted house and deposited me behind the school – where no one could see us, no one could come to my rescue.

I inched back, still on my ass. My whole body shook with tremors, and I finally faced *him*.

My chin wobbled at the sight of him, a deep sated fear instilled inside of me. I was going to die tonight. This man was going to hurt me. *That's it*.

I survived on the operating table only to be left to die in the field behind Berkshire Academy.

His face was covered with a black purge mask, with glowing red LED lights. He had a dark hoodie on, with its hood over his head, and black ripped jeans.

The sight of him was right out of my nightmare.

He moved forward, and I put my hands out, as if to ward him away. "Don't come near me. Don't touch me."

Please.

The pit of my stomach quaked, and I really thought I was going to piss myself in fear.

Purge mask man stalked me as I kept inching back. The cool wet grass soaked through my jeans, but I didn't care.

He was having fun, feeding on my fear and silently taunting me.

He stopped a foot away and squatted down in front of me. His arm reached out as if to touch me, and I shrank away. "Touch me and I'll break your arm. I'll do it."

He pulled his hand back, tsking again. He shook his head, as if he was disappointed in my threats. Slowly, he brought his hand to his face and pulled the purge mask off.

Uneasiness tickled down my spine, my body filled with apprehension.

The mask came off and dark blue eyes met mine.

Full smirking lips and a face I knew very well.

"Maddox," I breathed.

"Boo," he rumbled.

All the horror and confusion slipped away, replaced with anger. My jaw snapped together, and I clenched my teeth.

"Are you freaking serious?"

The previous chill running down my spine disappeared as my blood boiled.

"Why are you so set on terrorizing me?" I snarled. Jesus Christ, he almost gave me a heart attack. Fury rolled off in heated waves. Seething, I curled my legs from underneath me, sitting up. I still couldn't stand up, since my legs were still shaky and weak.

He grinned, almost boyishly, except I saw the mischief in his eyes. I was dancing on the edge of danger with this boy. Against my better judgement, my gaze traveled the length of his body as he stayed squatting down in front of my kneeling form. He was hard and sculptured everywhere, in all the right places. *Definitely not a boy. Man. Fuck. Whatever-he-is.*

"It's fun," he finally said, snapping me out of my thoughts and forcing my eyes away from his body. I looked into his icy blue eyes instead.

I was stunned into silence for a second. "It's fun?" I sputtered. "It's fun to scare the shit out of people? Was that your friend who took Riley away, too? This is not funny!"

Maddox shrugged like it was no big deal. I could feel myself glaring at him, my eyes turning into slits as I regarded my nemesis with utter distaste. If

I could breathe fire, I would have fumes coming out of my nose.

My jaw clenched at the way he kept grinning. It made me angrier. It unsettled me. "What are you? A psychopath? Because that's the only explanation. No sane person thinks it's fun to scare someone else to the point they thought they were going to die!"

I fought the urge to punch him and claw his beautiful eyes out. What was it about him that make me lose all my control?

Oh right. Maddox Coulter was an asshole.

He cocked his head to the side, one side of his lip turning up slightly. Maddox then released a deep chuckle, his wide chest vibrating with a decadent sound. "That's new," he whispered, his voice raspy. It made the tiny hair on my bare arms stand up.

"What?"

He was still smirking. *Fuck you*, I mentally slapped him. "I have been called many names before. Been swore at so many times, I lost count about three years ago. But being called a psychopath? That's a first."

I gaped at him. Was this guy joking or seriously just insane?

Maddox brought his head closer to me, his body leaning into mine. He brought warmth with him, and I didn't like that. He wasn't supposed to be warm. He wasn't supposed to smell nice. He wasn't supposed...

"I like it."

His lips were only an inch away from mine. His face so close I could feel his minty breath feathering over my skin. I stayed still, completely still. If I moved, our lips would touch.

My fists clenched, and I squeezed them over my thighs. "What?" I breathed.

"I like it. You calling me a psychopath. It's new. It's different." He was still too close. He was still grinning like a fucking loon. He was still so warm...he still smelled so good...

My body seemed to overheat with his presence. My heart thudded in my chest. "You are crazy," I whispered.

His eyes glinted with something mischievous and roguish. "Wanna see just how crazy I am, Sweet Cheeks?"

LILA

here always comes a time in your life when your tenacity is tested, and when that happens, you have two choices: you either run away with your tail tucked between your legs, or you stand up for yourself.

Maddox has been playing me, pushing and pushing until I reached the end of my rope and snapped. He wanted to remind me he had the power to make me lose control.

He craved the hunt, to be the hunter – the predator, to be at the top of the food chain, doling out punishments as he deemed necessary.

Being an asshole was his way of living, I guessed he didn't know how to be anything else.

He knew exactly how to make his victims feel small to the extent that all you can do is cower away.

My blood pumped hot. Shaking away the terror and fury coursing through my veins, I stood up. Maddox pulled away and came up to his feet, too, standing to his full height. The crooked grin plastered on his face infuriated me, but I channeled all my frustration.

"What do you want from me, Maddox?"

He raised one perfect eyebrow, without saying a word, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans and rocking back on his feet, quite nonchalantly.

"You're the most frustrating person I've ever come across."

"Why, thank you. I take that as a compliment." He was still smirking.

My mother always told me to avoid trouble and look away. The least attention you give to bullies, the more disinterested they'll become.

Maybe she was right.

Still staring at Maddox, I took a step back. "Have a good night, Coulter."

I pivoted on my heels to march away, but his taunting voice stopped me. "Giving up so easily, Sweet Cheeks? I must have been wrong about you."

My fists clenched at my side, and I came to a halt. I *really* should have listened to my mother's warning.

But I never, ever turned down a challenge. Maybe that was my mistake... *Show time*.

I swiveled around and stalked forward until I stopped in front of him. Maddox's gaze drifted to my mouth, where I was chewing on my lip – not in nervousness, but to put Maddox exactly where I wanted him.

My hand landed on his firm chest. His eyes widened slightly since this was the first time I've touched him willingly. A roguish smile played on his lips, and I *pitied* him.

He thought he won me over. Too bad, Maddox. Don't play games with a girl who can play them better.

He should have heeded my warning the first time.

I rubbed my hand over his chest, sliding it down toward his stomach. The black hoodie did nothing to hide all the hardness of him. His muscles tensed under my slow, exploring touch, and his eyes glinted with something devilish.

Down and down I went, until my fingers halted on his hips, right over his belt. I hooked a finger into the belt loop and pulled him closer to me, our bodies colliding together softly. Maddox let out a small chuckle, playing along.

Standing on my toes, I brought our faces closer, bringing my lips mere inches from his squared jaw, and I leaned in, so I could whisper in his ear. "I know what you want from me."

"Oh, do you?"

"You've made it abundantly clear. I can give you what you want. One unforgettable night."

"See? That wasn't so hard. Don't know why you've been playing so hard to get." His hands landed on my hips before they curled around my back, squeezing my ass.

"You want a taste of this ass? You can have it. Fuck me sideways, fuck me front and back, put me on my knees, get between my thighs. Put me on your dick, and I'll ride you until the sun comes up. I'm on the pill. If you're safe, we can ditch the condoms, and you'll feel every inch of me. Have you

ever fucked a girl bareback? I can be your first. I'll even show you my deepthroating skills. You want filthy? I can make your *filthiest* fantasies come true, Maddox. You can have it all, baby."

My teeth grazed his earlobe before I bit down softly. His throat bobbed with a low groan.

"In your dreams," I breathed in his ear.

I released him and pushed away from his body. His eyebrows curled together in confusion before realization dawned in his eyes. He reached for me, but I sidestepped him, tsking. It was *my* turn to taunt him, and by the look on his face, he hadn't expected it.

Oh no, Maddox Coulter underestimated me.

I winked, and my lips curled into a satisfied smirk. "See you tomorrow, Coulter."

I walked backward, enjoying the look of complete shock on his face. My gaze slid over him, from the top of his messy blond hair down to his brown leather boots.

"Oh. You might want to take a cold shower to help with *that*," I said, pointing toward his semi hard-on, which was indecently poking through his jeans.

Whoops.



Maddox

I COULDN'T REMEMBER the last time a girl had knocked me on my ass. Probably never because it was impossible. *I* played the games, and *they* were my catch.

How did the tables turn?

Lila marched away, shaking her plump ass as if to tempt me further, with her long black hair teasing the curve of her hips. She gave me one last haughty look over her shoulder before she disappeared around the building, and I was left dumbstruck in the middle of the field with a goddamn hard-on.

I should have known – she was fierce. I underestimated her, but honestly, I didn't expect her to give me goddamn blue balls.

With pink lips and a sultry voice, she was a siren with a filthy mouth and I. Was. A. Goner.

There was just something about Lila Garcia that I wanted to explore. I thought she was an interesting plaything at first. *Now?* I rubbed my thumb over my jaw, still staring at where she had disappeared. Her scent still lingered around me. It was some sweet perfume, nothing too heavy or cheap like the other bitches I had hanging around me. It was soft and sweet, and my tongue slid out over my lips as if I could taste her.

I was spellbound, my palms twitched and my dick – yeah, that bastard was more than interested.

I wanted to see how far I could push before she exploded into tiny little pieces at my feet.

Sure, Lila was feisty and oh, so fucking sassy, but for how long? How long would it take to break her and mold her into a pretty little thing like I'd done with all the others?

She was fucking trouble.

Guess what?

I wasn't the type to shy away from trouble.

Come at me, Sweet Cheeks.

LILA

walked into my grandparents' grocery store early Sunday morning. We weren't opened yet, but they had been here for an hour, getting everything ready for a busy day. I usually came in to help them during the rush hour, but otherwise, they had part-timers helping them daily.

I walked further inside toward the back storage. "Gran?"

"In here, sweetie," she called out.

Smiling, I stepped into the storage room. "Do you need my hel-"

My smile slid from my face as I came to halt at the door, facing the one person I never wanted to see here.

What the hell?

"You," I said, my voice filled with accusation.

Maddox grinned, still holding one huge box in his arms. "Good morning, Lila."

My mouth fell open, dumbstruck. *No way*. "What are you doing here?"

Grandma patted his arm as if she had known him for the longest time. I wasn't sure I liked the way she was smiling up at him. "I hired him yesterday. He came looking for a part-time job, and since we're hiring, he got the job. He said he's from Berkshire. You won't be bored at work anymore since you two are friends."

"Friends?" My jaw went slack, and I couldn't formulate a better sentence. *Friends? What? How? Who? What? When?*

"Yes. I told Mrs. Wilson how close we are. I didn't know this store was owned by your grandparents. What a surprise," Maddox explained, with a shit-eating grin.

Bullshit. The look on his face told me the truth. Maddox knew exactly what he was doing, and he was here on purpose. His mission was to make my life miserable, in every way. I wanted to knock the smile off his face. So, he was stalking me now. Great.

"Yes, what a surprise," I muttered, plastering a fake pleased look on my face. Gran appeared too happy for me to break the news to her.

This is my enemy, and he's an asshole. Don't fall for his easy smile and charming looks. This was what I wanted to say, but I bit my tongue and held back any snarky remarks. I'd deal with Maddox on my own.

"I just need help to organize the inventory. Sven will be here soon," Gran announced, patting me on the back as she walked out of the storage room, leaving Maddox and I alone.

Once she was out of hearing range, I stalked forward. My whole body strummed with anger. I wouldn't say I was a violent person, but I was feeling quite violent at the moment. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He turned his back to me, lifting another box over his shoulder. He carried it into the walk-in freezer and deposited it on the self. Maddox walked out and went for another box, but I sidestepped into his path.

Leaning back against the wall, he crossed his ankles and his arms over his chest. Today, he was wearing a black shirt and black jeans, ripped around his knees, with brown leather boots like he wore the night at the Haunted House. It was strange seeing him in anything other than the Berkshire uniform.

He looked... normal. Instead of the Berkshire star quarterback I despised.

"I asked you a question. What are you doing here?"

Maddox cocked his head to the side, giving me an amused look. "Working, Garcia. Simple as that."

Impatiently, I tapped my foot on the ground, not falling for his stupid games. To work? Yeah, right.

"You don't need to work. Don't your parents give you an allowance? Your credit card is probably unlimited."

For a brief second, I noticed the way his eyes darkened as if he was disappointed in *me*. But it was gone too quickly, leaving me wondering if what I saw was real or just my imagination. He tsked, shaking his head.

"See, that's your problem. You assume too many things."

I wasn't assuming anything. He wasn't just rich; Maddox was filthy rich. He didn't need a part-time job, especially not at my grandparents' grocery store. He didn't *ever* need to work.

In fact, he didn't even need to be here, in *this* neighborhood, where didn't belong.

But no, he had to be here. The only two days I had without Maddox being a jerk every minute – my only two peaceful days, he had to come and ruin.

"How did you get my grandma to agree to this?"

"That was really simple. I smiled."

A frustrated sound came from my throat, and I rubbed a hand over my face. "Maddox," I grumbled under my breath.

He pushed away from the wall and walked past me to lift another brown box. His shirt stretched over his shoulders as he placed it on the top shelf and diligently arranged all the boxes in expiration date order. "She thinks I'm charming and sweet. Trust me, this is the first time someone has called me *sweet*. Shocking, right?"

I didn't think that was the correct description for Maddox. He was anything but sweet.

"You need to leave. Now."

He shook his head, his messy hair slowly coming undone from his man bun. "Can't. I like it here, and I like your Gran. Your grandfather, though, he's tough. No worries, I'll figure something out."

I grabbed the box he was holding and slammed it back on the ground. The storage room was starting to feel hot or maybe my blood was just boiling.

"Damn, Sweet Cheeks. It's too early for you to be this angry. Are you always this grumpy?" Maddox mocked with a rough laugh.

Yes, since you came into my life.

I stepped closer, lifting my chin up to meet his eyes. "Listen, Maddox," I said, stabbing a finger into his chest. "This is not a joke. You have a problem with me, then it's only me. I don't know what you want but don't bring my grandparents into this fight between us."

Maddox leaned forward, getting into my face. The laughter was gone, and his face was a blank canvas, devoid of any emotions. The change in him was so sudden, confusion clouded my mind. "Why do you always think the worst of me?"

I could've been fooled, but I knew better.

It was my turn to laugh; as fake as it was, I really was amused by his question. "Probably because you've only ever shown me the worst of you. If there was any good in you, I would have seen it already. Too bad you're only focus is on being a douchebag."

Maddox opened his mouth, probably to rebuke me, but I was already turning away, ignoring anything else he had to say. I lifted the box next to my feet and started organizing the messy shelves. Inventory days were always crazy and busy.

Maddox and I worked quietly. He didn't try to speak to me again, and I wasn't interested in holding a conversation either. The silence was tense and heavy, like an impending thunderstorm looming over our heads, dark and cloudy. An hour later, the storage room was somewhat organized, and all the boxes, old and new, had been put away on their designated shelves.

Lifting one last box, my arms trembled under the weight, but I still pushed it above my head, reaching for the rack. Except, the box was too heavy, the shelf was too high, and I was too short to reach it, even with me balancing on my toes.

Damn it.

I cursed under my breath when the box started to wobble in my hands and a surprised shriek came from me when I could feel it tilting back over my head. The box was going to fall, and I didn't have the strength to keep hold of it.

But before it could slip through my fingers, another pair of hands grabbed the box.

"I got it." His whisper crept along my neck. "You can let go."

I did, and he pushed the box onto the shelf with ease. Maddox was too close, and I didn't like it. Maddox obviously didn't understand the meaning of personal space. His mere presence annoyed me and having him this close had me on edge. I wasn't sure why, but everything about Maddox just made me feel... *irritated*.

I was thankful he saved the box, though, so I uttered a quick *thank you* as my arms fell down to my sides.

His breath was hot on my skin as he pressed closer, barely touching me. I slid away from under his arms before turning to face him. His gaze moved up and down my body, and the burning intensity of his eyes urged me to cross my arms over my chest.

"You're tiny," he grunted.

I hissed under my breath. He insulted my boobs the first time we met and now he had to make me feel *small*. "I'm not. I'm five foot two."

He let out a scoff. "And I'm six foot three. A whole head taller than you. You're literally bite-sized."

"You're just a giant, not average."

His crooked smile should have warned me of what was coming. "You're right. I'm far from *average*, Sweet Cheeks."

Yep, I walked right into that one.

"Wanna see for yourself?" he asked with no shame.

"Keep your dick in your pants and keep your hands to yourself," I warned. Stalking past him, I took the broom and started sweeping the storage room. I expected him to leave now that we were done putting away all the inventory but that wasn't the case.

He leaned against the wall opposite to me, making himself comfortable. Maddox took a small box of cigarettes from his pocket.

My voice was sharp when I spoke, "You're not allowed to smoke in here."

Maddox made a derisive sound in the back of his throat as he flipped the tiny box over his fingers and around in his hand. "I won't disrespect your grandparents like that. I'm just checking how many I have left."

I could almost hear his unsaid words. Stop assuming the worst of me, Lila.

Ignoring the silent jab, I continued with my sweeping. Even with me not looking at him, I could feel his stare burning into the back of my head. He was staring *hard*.

Maddox stalked me with his eyes, and I didn't like how he could make me feel... small.

"So, are we not going to talk about the elephant in the room?

"What elephant?" I grumbled, distracted.

"The hard-on you gave me two days ago."

Oh. I had been trying to forget all about that night, but he had to bring it up. Of course, since I left him dumbfounded. Not a lot of people has the chance to push back on Maddox. I gave him a taste of his own medicine, and he obviously didn't like it.

I stopped sweeping and held the broom up, leaning my arm on it. "Oh that. Did the cold shower help?"

"It didn't. I had to use my hand." If I didn't know better, I'd say there was a note of petulance in his voice.

"I didn't need to know that."

He shrugged, quite nonchalantly. "You asked, I answered. Can I borrow your hand next time though?"

Oh, for fuck's sake. "That's going to be a hell no, Coulter."

His lips twitched, and I *almost* rolled my eyes. "You're boring, Garcia," he taunted once again.

"I'd rather be boring than be your next hookup."

Anything was better than being his next meal. To put it simply, Maddox was a lion – it was quite easy to see the resemblance. When given meat, lions pounce without a second thought. They devour their meal, messy and savagely. Once they're done, they spit out the bones, and with a belly full, they walked away.

That was Maddox.

He devoured anyone in his path, without care of the consequences, and he'd spit out the bones once he had his fun. Guys like Maddox would play with you, tear you apart, layer by layer, piece by piece and then lay you down – fragmented and empty -- because they took everything from you.

Maddox pushed away from the wall and took a step toward me. "You hate me that much?"

He actually looked curious, as if he wanted to pick apart my brain to see inside, to delve into my thoughts. He wanted to see beyond my wall. Too bad, he was the wrong person to break through it.

"It's not about hate. I'm simply not excited about your existence."

It wasn't about hate. That was too black and white. No.

Boys like Maddox have already stolen enough from me...

My heart thudded in my chest, and I looked away. Boys like him... they *ruined* me.

Placing the broom back in its corner, I walked toward the door without sparing him a glance. "You should ask Gran what else she wants you to do. I'm going to take a ten-minute break."

Maddox blocked my way out. "Let me change your mind. Spend one afternoon with me."

His words speared me with shock, making me stumble back a step. *What?* Why would he...

Maddox truly didn't understand the word 'boundaries.' How did we go from enemies to him asking me to spend an afternoon with him?

Well played, Coulter.

He looked at me expectantly, as if he really wanted me to consider his offer.

I scoffed back a laugh that bubbled in my chest and threatened to escape

through my throat. Was I a joke to him? Wait... I knew that answer.

"And what? You'll have me putty in your hands?" I asked with a quirked eyebrow.

He grinned, losing the expectant look on his face. He was back to being a jerk. "In my arms and on my dick, yeah."

I leaned forward, pushing my body against his. He never hid the fact that he appreciated the way I looked. My body tempted him; I was aware of that. *So, two can play this game.* "Is this your way of asking me out on a date?" I whispered, my voice sultry but dripping with sarcasm. If he was smart enough, he'd catch that.

Maddox stared down at him, his lips crooked on the side. "I don't date. Ever. My favorite pastime is having girls on their back or on their knees for me."

"You. Are. Disgusting," I growled.

He shrugged.

Pushing away from him, I tilted my chin up, both to look at him and in defiance. He wasn't winning me over. "Tell me something, do your fangirls know how you think of them?"

"Most of them know and don't care. They're using me the same way I'm using them. Sex, fun and popularity. Three things they want and three things I can give them. They're happy with the arrangement. Those who aren't, I show them the door. Simple."

"So, girls get hot and bothered because you're a jerk."

"That's the appeal, Sweet Cheeks."

I opened my mouth but then snapped it shut when I couldn't find the appropriate words. I was speechless.

"Lila!" Grandpa's voice broke through our silent battle, and I flinched away. "Can you come and help me with this?"

"Coming!" I called out.

I tried to push pass Maddox, but he didn't budge. On the contrary, he moved forward, forcing me to take a step back and away from the door.

"So, what do you say?" he grumbled.

A frustrated sound spilled from my throat. "What?"

He kept moving forward, and I walked back a step, two... and three. "One afternoon. Give me an hour of your time, and I'll change your mind."

"Not interested, Coulter. You're not even worthy of one hour of my time," I bit out, glaring up at him through my lashes.

He slid closer against me, and I stumbled back into the wall. Shit. "So, you're saying, if I kiss you right now, *really* kiss you… the way you should be kissed and then I slide my hands into your panties, I won't find you wet for me?"

Cocky much? I bristled at his words, and my fists clenched at my sides. He brought his face closer to me, staring into my eyes as his hands landed on either side of my head.

"Lila!" Grandpa called out again, louder this time. He sounded closer than before. If I didn't leave right now, he was going to come and find me in the storage, room and he was going to see Maddox and I... *Oh God*.

"Kiss me and I'll make it so you don't have the ability to kiss another girl ever again," I warned.

"Challenge accepted."

Maddox leaned down as if to kiss me, his lips a mere inch from mine. I turned my head to the side, and I could feel his minty breath feathering against my cheek.

"Move," I growled.

"Lila," he breathed, closer to my ear. His voice sounded deeper, edgier... like he really imagined kissing me.

I kept my head turned, refusing to give him access to my mouth. My eyes landed on his forearm as he kept me caged against the wall. I could feel the bulge between his legs pressing against my hips, and I bristled with anger and displeasure instead of being turned on.

I didn't know why, but I expected something better from him. When he asked to spend one afternoon with me, looking adamant... for a brief moment, I almost believed he was serious about changing my mind.

The muscles in his forearm, where he had rolled up his sleeves, tightened, and I struck out, without thinking much about it. I bared my teeth and clamped down on his arm, biting.

Maddox let out a hiss of surprise, and I lifted my gaze to his. He had pulled away, only slightly to stare down at me. I grabbed his outstretched arm and bit down harder when he didn't make a move to pull away. He froze for a second but then stayed still. I continued to put pressure, where my teeth were clamped down on his flesh.

He didn't even flinch. *No*, he did the opposite.

Slowly, his lips quirked up into a tiny smile. His eyes glimmered with amusement, and he cocked his head to the side, waiting... and the bastard

appeared not to be bothered by my action.

With an angry huff, I released his arm and pushed away from him. Mr. Pain-In-My-Ass looked down at the bite mark and then grinned a slow, lazy grin. "I always knew you liked it rough... but I would have never guessed you were into biting."

Holding back a frustrated growl, I pushed him hard enough to have him stumble back a step. I shoved my middle finger into his stupid, smirking face before stomping away.

His amused chuckles followed me, even as I left him behind in the storage room.

Don't kill him. That's murder. Do. Not. Kill. Him.

LILA

ater that day, Riley and I were lying in my bed, going through her Advanced Calculus homework. Riley had planned to major in business and after go to law school, that was her parents' expectations, which wouldn't be difficult for her since she loved Law and Politics.

Her weakness, though, was math. Absolutely everything that had to do with math. It was sucky for her since if she had to major in business, she had to pass her calculus courses with flying colors.

Enter me: Her best friend, her tutor and a genius in math. Lucky her.

"I don't understand shit," she whined, flopping on her back. Riley closed her eyes and threw an arm over her face, hiding from me.

I gave her a gentle nudge with my toes. "Let's try the question one more time."

"That's the third time. I'm a hopeless case. There's no way I'm getting into Harvard if I flunk Calculus."

She was exaggerating. Riley was in no way flunking Calculus. She was currently in the mid-eighties, since she had been busting her ass night and day to practice all her equations and solving extra math problems. Riley Jenson was dedicated to a fault.

"Practice makes perfect, right?" I cajoled, gently. "One more time, babe."

She lowered her arm a bit and peeked at me. "Then we can watch *Riverdale*?"

"One episode," I reluctantly agreed.

"Binge watch the whole season?" Riley gave me puppy eyes, the ones she

had mastered, which almost won me over.

I pinched her shin. "Now you're pushing it, Missy."

She hissed, pulling her feet away, and her bottom lip jutted out in a pout.

"Let's go back to the question."

Riley nodded and sat up, focusing back on her notebook. I explained the steps to her again, she nodded along and gave it one more try.

Twenty minutes later, she let out a shout of victory. "I did it!"

Yes, she did. Just like I knew she would.

The happiness on her face was infectious, and I found myself laughing with her as she did half a twerk on my bed.

We spent the next two hours working on our homework. Once we were done and had put all our stuff away, I went down to get us snacks while Riley loaded *Riverdale* on Netflix. She wanted to binge watch while I was settling for only two episodes. It was going to be a battle for sure.

Halfway through the first episode, Riley started to get edgier. She was sneaking glances at me, and I noticed the way she was practically poking a hole through her blouse.

I knew Riley long enough to know this was a sign of nervousness, and it had nothing to do with *Riverdale*. I waited for her to speak instead of pushing for information. If something was wrong, she'd tell me on her own without me having to force it out of her. It was a silent understanding between us. Riley has never pushed me about my past. I told her bits and pieces, and she accepted them without demanding more. I did the same with her. She only gave me what she wanted; we established this understanding early in our friendship.

Her silence didn't last for more than fifteen minutes. "I have to confess something."

I paused the episode and faced her. We were both sitting cross legged on the bed. "What is it?"

Riley swallowed hard and chewed on her lip, her brows pulled together in nervousness. Her body was strung tight with tension, and I didn't like the dreadful look on her face.

She licked her lips, took a deep breath and started. "On Friday, after Maddox pulled you away and Colton grabbed me..."

The night of the haunted house? Confused, I nodded and waited for her to continue. "Yeah?"

"He pulled me behind the dumpster..." Riley trailed off, her eyes wide

and glassy.

"Yeah. You told me. They are both assholes. If I could, I'd report them—" Riley shook her head and cut me off, sharply. "No, listen. I didn't tell you everything that happened."

And then she... blushed. She averted her gaze for a second, and she went back to poking holes in her shirt.

"Riley...?" I slowly questioned.

She let out a loud, frustrated sigh. Her cheeks were tinted pink, but there was a guilty look in her eyes. "I messed up. I don't know how it happened but it just... happened. One minute, I was screaming at him and I even punched him; he was laughing like a stupid, madman and then he pulled me close and... it just *happened*. I didn't think. I wasn't thinking."

She was babbling, talking too fast, but I caught the gist of it. For her sake, I carefully concealed my shock. But... oh my fucking SHIT!

"Riley, did you... I mean, you two...?"

"No! We didn't have sex," she sputtered and blushed even harder. "We made out. Oh God, I can't believe I'm saying this. But he pulled me into him and just slammed his lips on mine. I think it was the adrenaline. I was so scared, and then I was excited and like, my heart was beating so fast, I felt dizzy and then I just kissed him back."

Don't freak out, Lila. Don't freak out.

"What happened?" I calmly asked, even though I was anything but calm.

"Colton pulled us down, so I could sit on his lap. And we just... um, kissed."

"And?"

Riley buried her face in her hands, letting out a choked scream. "I'm horrible. Jasper was right. I'm a whore."

"What? Riley!" I scooted closer to her and pulled her hands away from her face, so she would have no choice but to look at me. "Don't say that!"

"We kissed. I don't know when it happened, but he unbuttoned my jeans and put his hand inside and... he *touched* me, and it felt good, Lila. I know this sounds stupid, but it felt really good. It was crazy and everything was happening so fast."

She broke off, looking at me like I could save her from whatever she was going through in her head. My poor Riley. I was shocked, speechless, so I could only pat her arm.

"Ifhame," she muttered too fast for me to catch.

"You what?"

"I came! He was just touching me and... I orgasmed on his lap while we were sitting beside a disgusting, smelly dumpster."

My jaw went slack, and I stared at her. Riley let out a cry, looking so conflicted and heartbroken. "I don't even like him! God, I like Grayson, and I let Colton touch me like that. I'm horrible. Just like Jasper said."

I snapped out of my shock at her words and grabbed her shoulders, shaking her. "Riley, you are not. Stop that."

Her chin wobbled, and she bit harshly on her lip. She was so red now, her cheeks, her ears and her neck were all flushed. "Colton is the first guy... I mean after Jasper. I haven't been with anyone else. I haven't even kissed anyone since Jasper. I couldn't bear it, and then with Colton, it just happened."

"Oh honey. Come here." I hugged her close, and she hiccupped back a sob. Now that she had finally confessed what was eating her on the inside, her mixed emotions had bubbled over, and there was no stopping them.

"He probably thinks I'm stupid and a slut."

"Hush." I soothed a hand down her back, comforting Riley in the only way I knew how. I sucked at comforting people, but I hoped my presence was enough for her.

"He's going to spread rumors like Jasper did. I'm so scared to go to school tomorrow. What if I walk in and everyone stares at me like... before... when Jasper... the whispers, the snickers, the laughs behind my back."

I pressed a firm hand on her back. "Not all boys are like Jasper, sweetie."

"I know..."

"It's okay."

She lifted her face and pulled out of my arms. "He hugged me."

"Colton?" That was... shocking.

"Yeah. After, my... um, orgasm. I think I was in shock. And I teared up. I wasn't crying, but I mean, there were tears. He noticed and broke the kiss. Then, he just hugged me. We didn't speak. That's when you found us. I heard you calling out my name, and we broke apart."

Oh wow.

"He apologized," Riley confessed gently. "Before I left, he whispered he was sorry."

I didn't know what to say. Colton and Maddox were cut from the same

cloth. Both were playboys, and both were assholes. It was almost impossible to imagine Colton doing something as sweet as to hug and apologize to Riley.

"Not all boys are Jasper," I said again.

She nodded, her eyes glassy with unshed tears. Riley was always so cheerful, so full of life. The conflicted look on her face tore my heart apart. "Does that make me a bad person? I don't like him. I want Grayson."

"No, it doesn't make you a bad person. Like you said, it was the adrenaline and in the spur of the moment. It happens, and no one has the right to judge you. If Colton hugged you and apologized, then I don't think he's going to spread rumors about you. I guess, he's not like that."

As I said the words, I came to a shocking realization.

Maddox and his buddies were one big package of douchebaggery. They were jerks, they constantly played with girls' hearts and all they cared about was sex, sex and more sex. But I'd never seen them spreading any stupid rumors about other students. Sure, they were irritating — but they had never done anything to ruin someone's reputation. Not like Jasper had done to Riley.

I guess... that was one good thing about Maddox and his friends.



Monday morning, Riley's fear was put to rest when we walked through the gates of Berkshire, and everything was normal, like any other day. It appeared that Colton hadn't spread any rumors, and I could tell Riley was finally able to breathe better. She was back to her smiling self in two seconds flat.

We went to our respective classes, and the day continued without any more drama.

Except... with Maddox being a constant presence in my life, I only had three hours of peace and quiet until it was time for lunch.

The hallways were empty as I walked out of Mrs. Callaway's office, my Chemistry teacher. Our meeting ran longer than expected, and everyone was already in the cafeteria, since it was halfway through lunch now.

I made my way to my locker to deposit my textbooks, only to stop dead when I noticed who was standing there. Maddox leaned against *my* locker, looking like he owned it. He was everywhere I went, everywhere I wanted to

go – he was *there*. A constant thorn in my ass.

I was starting to believe there was no escaping Maddox Coulter once he checkmated you. And that was exactly what he did to me. He put me on his radar, and then *checkmate*, I became his unwilling prize. No matter how much I fought and pushed back, he was there, pulling me just as hard and pushing back harder. It was a never-ending cycle, and it was starting to get tiring.

Letting out a sigh, I walked forward. As I grew closer, I noticed he had a toothpick between his lips, his dirty blond locks were rumpled and let down, instead of the man bun, and his Berkshire coat was missing. His white shirt was untucked and his tie hung loosely around his neck.

He looked like an imperfect canvas, flawed and wild. But like every piece of art, you couldn't take your eyes off him.

It was my first time seeing him like *this*. His godly appearance had been replaced with something imperfect and... humane.

"What do you want?" I asked, stopping next to him.

He chewed on his toothpick, thoughtfully. "You hurt me," he said, simply, as if he was announcing the weather.

"When? How? Oh right, probably in your nightmare." I punched in the code to my locker, opened it, and slammed my textbooks inside.

He finally stared down at me, his lips crooked and his eyes lit with mischief. "So, you agree, you're a pain in my ass?"

Me, a pain in *his* ass? This was the joke of the century.

"I'm not roses, Maddox. If you're going to make my life difficult, I'm going to be the thorn that pricks you. Don't expect me to be all smiles, hearts and googly eyes. I'm not that girl."

He kept the toothpick in the corner of his mouth as he spoke. "I know you're not."

When I didn't answer, he slowly rolled the sleeves of his white shirt up to his elbow. The same arm I bit yesterday. He shoved his arm into my face and a huge, red bite mark stared back at me.

My eyes widened at the angry looking mark. I grabbed his forearm for a closer inspection. That couldn't be from when... I bit him, right?

"You hurt me," he said again.

I... did.

"Look at it. It hurts so bad; my arm has been aching the whole time."

My gaze flew up to his, and I would have thought he was serious if I

didn't notice the twinkle in his eyes.

"I don't remember biting you that hard, and it was yesterday morning. It's been a whole twenty-four hours. It's impossible that the bite mark would still look like this, except if..."

I let my words trail off, and I squinted at him, now suspicious.

"You think I bit myself? Damn, Garcia, you really are cruel. Why would I cause such pain to myself when I have you to do it?"

He shoved his arm in my face again. "Now kiss it better," Maddox demanded, "or, I'll tell the principal you bit me."

Sweet Jesus, he really was impossible.

"Go ahead," I hissed under my breath. "I'll tell him how you've been harassing me!"

Maddox had the audacity to look innocent. He let out a mock gasp before his bottom lip jutted out in a small pout. "Me? You're the one who got physical with me, Sweet Cheeks. Every. Single. Time. If I didn't know better, I would say you're trying to get me to touch you."

My stomach dipped, and my frustration bubbled to the point where I thought I'd do something worse than bite him. *That's it.* I couldn't deal with him anymore.

I threw my hands up in defeat. It took everything in me to accept it, but I was done. "You know what? Truce. We're even with each other. Let's stop here."

Maddox looked at me for a second longer. His gaze seared into mine, burning through my walls and forcing itself to peek into my soul. I clamped up and met his gaze with a hard look.

He lifted a shoulder, a lazy shrug. "Fine. Truce. But you need to kiss my boo boo better first."

Is he really serious?

So, this was his game? He really wanted my lips on him, somehow. Jerk. But fine, I'd play. "Fine. I'll kiss your *boo boo* better before you go running back to your mommy crying."

I brought his arm closer and slowly bent my head down to the bite mark. It did look ugly and painful. For the briefest moment, I felt bad and guilt gnawed at me before I pushed it away.

Before my lips could touch him, Maddox crowded into my space. I sucked in a harsh breath when his arm curled around my waist and he pulled me into him. Our bodies collided together softly and time came to a halt.

Tick...tock...

His heat seeped through his clothes and mine, and I could feel the flush on my skin. My heart skittered, and I could feel the beat of his own heart against my chest.

Something pulsed between us, electrifying and powerful... a brief moment in time... something that lasted for only a nanosecond.

His other hand came up and his fingers slipped behind my head, curling around my nape.

My brain screamed at me, angry and confused.

His breath feathered over my mouth; I blinked, and his lips crashed against mine.

I gasped into his hungry lips. My hands landed on his chest, and I *tried* to push him back, but he clutched the back of my neck as he deepened the kiss. With his arm still locked firmly around my waist, he swiveled us around, and my back slammed into the locker. My heart dipped into my stomach when he pushed against me, and he lifted me up, only allowing my toes to touch the ground.

I didn't know if I should kiss him back... push him away...

My mind went blank as he licked the seams of my lips. His chest rumbled with a small groan when his teeth grazed my bottom lip before he bit down. I hissed into his mouth, even though I was trembling in his arms. The gentle bite stung, and I could feel the blood rushing through my ears. Slowly, he pulled his mouth away. The taste of him, mint and tobacco were heavy on my swollen lips.

"Now we're even. Truce, baby," he whispered in my ear, his voice deeper and darker.

My breath caught in my throat as he untangled himself from my body, and I slumped against the locker. I couldn't... *breathe*.

Shock and rage coursed through me, a sea of mixed emotions, too deep while the tides were too violent, I was drowning into the bottomless ocean.

Maddox gazed down at me, and he lazily swiped his tongue over his red, swollen lips as if to taste the remnant of our kiss. "You taste sweeter than I thought."

His lips twitched, and with a ghost of a smile, he strutted backward and away from me. I let out a choked gasp... finally able to breathe.

I inhaled sharply, sucking in desperate breaths as he winked at me, and then rounded the corner out of my sight. My hand slowly crept up to my chest, and I left it there, over my rapidly beating heart.
His lips had tasted like... sin.

And I hated myself for reacting the way I did to his kiss.

LILA

walked through the door of my grandparents' home and stumbled onto the couch. Gran leaned against the kitchen's doorway, having heard the door open. She watched me closely. "What's with that face, sweetie?" "Nothing," I grumbled, rubbing a hand over my face.

"That sigh tells me it's definitely something." She took a seat on the opposite couch, waiting for my answer. I knew she wasn't going to rest until I told her what was actually bothering me. "Is someone bothering you?"

Someone? Yes, your precious helper aka Maddox, my enemy.

I groaned in defeat. "There's someone..."

She gave me a knowing look. "A boy."

"Yes, a boy."

"What boy?" Grandpa came down the stairs, and he settled beside me with a hard scowl on his face. He was a tad overprotective.

The last boyfriend I had was two years ago. We dated for about four months before I lost my virginity in the back of his dad's pickup truck in the dark. The next time we made out, he noticed my scar and the look of disgust on his face still burned through my memory. Leo broke up with me the next day. When Pops found out, without any of the nasty sex details, he lost his shit. Since then, he had been wary of any boys who came around.

"It's someone from school," I finally admitted, leaving Maddox's name out, since they both thought highly of him and it'd break my Gran's heart if she ever found who the real Maddox was. Granted, yes, he was the perfect helper on Sunday, and he really did work hard, so I couldn't really ruin his image just because he was an asshole to me in school. Right?

"Is he being rude to you? Do I need to file a complaint to the Headmaster? Molly, where is my rifle?" He stood up, his back straight and his jaw hard as granite. My sweet grandpa, even in his old age, he was fierce.

I grabbed his arm and pulled him back on the couch again. "No, no. He's just... a bit annoying."

"A bully?" Grandpa inquired. His intense stare burned holes through the side of my face. This was his *if-you-lie-to-me-I-will-find-out* look.

"Not exactly. I won't let him bully me. You could say I've been a pain in his ass, too. I dyed his hair pink."

Gran snickered. "Did you know that's how our love story started?"

"You dyed Pops' hair pink?" I gasped, my jaw going to slack.

"Not exactly. It was during summer camp. Your grandpa was a sweetheart, but his friends were vexing. You see, I didn't mean to dye his hair. It was meant for his other friend who stuck gum in my hair."

"She had to cut off her beautiful locks." The forlorn look on his face as he stared at Gran, as if he was remembering that day very clearly, made my romantic heart sing.

"Yes. But Sven went into the shower first and... he came out with white hair."

"Jack Frost," Pops mumbled under his breath.

"A handsome Jack Frost." Gran lifted her chin, a twinkle in her pretty brown eyes. "That's how our love story started. We hated each other until he kissed me at the end of summer. We parted ways, but he followed me. He said he was going to marry me, and he'd win me over. He did."

I was already shaking my head before she could finish her sentence. Love story? Maddox and I? Ha. I refrained from letting out a mocking laugh. "Oh no. There's no love story between us. He's my...."

My what? My nemesis who kissed me? Confused, I couldn't find the right word to describe him. The definition of our relationship was... complicated. He was a jerk, but he wasn't exactly a bully, since I fought back just as hard. Sure, he was my enemy, but he also kissed me, and my treacherous heart had done something weird in my chest. We were both passionate about our ongoing war, but it wasn't *hate*.

Pops patted me on the knee, always on my side, always so encouraging. "If he's making your life hard, make him miserable. Don't be shy. Make him bend the knee," he said fiercely.

I swallowed past the knot in my throat, refusing to admit that Maddox

and I had anything more than war between us. It was a battlefield between us. Turning to Pops, I gave him a tender smile. "You've been watching *Game of Thrones* again?"

"It's... *interesting*." He gave his wife the side-eye, his lips twitching with a half-smile. There was something in his look, and when Gran's flushed under his appraising gaze, my own eyes widened, and I fought a gag. Oh shit, I didn't want to know.

"Right. I need to shower, then I'll help with dinner." I got up to kiss Gran on the cheek and Pops on his balding head. They both chuckled as I walked away.



The Next Morning, I walked down the halls of Berkshire. It was a whole hour before the bell rang, to indicate the start of the school day. There were barely any students roaming the school halls. Berkshire was participating in a science experiment, and if we won Regionals, we would be representing our state. Today was our first meeting. I, of course, joined. Science was my drug, plain and simple.

I was marching down the halls when something caught my eyes, making me come to a halt. Not something: *someone*. Through the window, I caught sight of Maddox sitting outside on a bench.

I didn't even think he'd be up this early since they didn't have football practice today. Why was Maddox here?

He stared at the empty field; his elbows perched on his thighs as he smoked his cancer stick.

It was starting to grow cold in Manhattan, and we now needed a sweater or thicker jacket before stepping out. Maddox was only wearing his Berkshire uniform, as if the cold wasn't bothering him, as if he had grown immune or numb to it.

But that wasn't what made me stop and stare. No, he was alone.

He was never alone; he was always either surrounded by his fangirls or his friends, or he was annoying me.

I placed a hand over the window as I studied him from afar. There was no reason for my heart to ache, but it did. Something clenched in my chest, like a fist holding my heart tight. Sitting on the bench, in the cold, with a cigarette

between his lips, he looked like a sad, lonely god.

Maddox stood up, his longish hair falling across his face, hiding himself from my view. He took one last inhale before dropping the cigarette on the ground and stepping over it.

His hands curled around the back of his neck, and he looked up at the sky. His blond locks fell away from his face as a gust of wind breezed past him.

Eyes closed, he turned toward me and...

The agonized look on his face made me suck in a harsh breath.

His pain was stark and on display for all to see, but there was no one looking at Maddox except *me*.

He looked like a beautiful canvas being torn apart as sorrow bleed through him.

For the first time since I've met Maddox, I felt something other than annoyance. I really shouldn't have cared. I convinced myself I didn't, that I only felt bad for him because I had a habit of tending to strays.

But Maddox wasn't a stray or a wounded animal.

He wasn't mine to soothe.

But still...

"Why do you always think the worst of me?"

For the first time, I decided to not be a judgmental bitch and wondered what his story was.

"See, that's your problem. You assume too many things."

I did assume a lot of things, but that was only because Maddox had only ever showed me one side of him – the asshole side.

This side of him? The pained, broken one – it spoke to the inner part of me, to my little caged heart. Because I remembered staring into the mirror, my own reflection staring back at me, with the same expression on Maddox's face.

Broken.

Lost.

Lonely.

Scared.

His eyes opened, and my lips parted with a silent gasp as our gazes met. He couldn't see me... right?

But oh, he did.

He watched me, silently, as I'd done to him.

Something unspoken crossed between us, something... personal.

He lifted his chin in silent acknowledgement before he walked away, fading out of my sight.

The heavy weight on my chest didn't lift away. My heart cracked for a boy who probably would forget about me soon enough.

My fists clenched. I shouldn't care.

I didn't care.

LILA

didn't know you were a stalker, Sweet Cheeks." His whisper crept along my neck, causing me to shiver. I didn't hear him approach me. I had been too lost in my thoughts; I hadn't even felt him coming closer.

It was after school; the bell had just rung, and all the students were filing out.

I swung my bag over my shoulder, closed the locker and turned to face him. "I wasn't stalking, Poodle."

"Poo-what-the-fuck-dle?" He asked, confused.

I didn't even know why I said that. Maybe because he caught me off guard, or it was the fact he insisted on calling me *Sweet Cheeks*, and I needed to retaliate. Or maybe it was because I needed to feel in control again after what I saw this morning. I barricaded my heart, feeling the coldness seeping through me.

But one thing was true.

Maddox was definitely a Poodle.

One eyebrow popped up, and I stared at him, watching as realization dawned on him. His hand came up, and he touched his curly hair. "Poodle? Seriously, Garcia?"

"Poodle," I said again.

His nostrils flared in brief annoyance before he turned the table on me. "So, stalking is your new hobby?"

Clutching my bag tighter to me, I repeated, "I wasn't stalking."

"I caught you red-handed," Maddox said, his voice gruff.

"What's your problem, Coulter?"

What I really meant to ask was... what... who hurt you?

He cocked his head, scanning me. "You."

"Huh?"

"You're my problem, Sweet Cheeks."

Maddox stepped closer. "That kiss..."

"Won't happen again," I finished for him. "That was your only taste of me, Coulter. First and last. Memorize it and sear that kiss in your brain because it's the only one you'll get."

"Harsh," he mumbled. "I like you when you're a spitfire, like a little annoyed dragon."

I lifted my chin, squinting at him. "I'd like you better if you were nicer."

"Nice?" He let out a booming laugh that had other students turning around and focusing on us. "If you're looking for Prince Charming, you kissed the wrong frog."

Maddox Coulter was neither Prince Charming nor the... villain.

He was something else, and I didn't know where exactly to place him.

"I didn't kiss you. You kissed me."

"Same shit." He combed his fingers through his hair, pushing the stubborn locks away from his eyes.

"We're going in circles, Coulter." I pushed past him, making sure we didn't touch. "Have a good day."

His hand snaked out, and he grabbed my wrist, pulling me back into his chest. His heart thudded against my back, and I stayed still. The crowded hallway faded away as his voice lowered to a mere whisper, speaking only for me to hear. "Next time, make sure you don't stare at me with such a heartbreaking expression. Anyone would have thought you cared, except I'm no fool."

He was referring to his morning, when he had caught me watching him through the window.

Oh God.

His deep voice rolled down my spine. "Don't fall for me, Lila. I'll break you."

Conceited much? Why would he think I'd fall for him out of all the other options I had? Maddox was the last person I wanted in my heart.

"Falling in love with you is the last thing I want. Rest assured, even if you were the last man on earth, I would neither fuck you nor love you; you're too

ugly for me."

"Me or my heart?"

"Both," I breathed. *Lies*.

He let go of my wrist, and I could feel the burn on my skin, where his touch had just been. His breath feathered next to my ear. "Good."

I took a step away from him. He followed, to my irritation. "One last thing. If I can't kiss your lips, can I kiss your pussy instead?"

My... what?

Anger coiled inside me, and I swiveled around, glaring. "Didn't your parents teach you any manners?" I spat out through clenched teeth.

Maddox instantly lost the teasing look, and his face hardened to granite. The change in him was so quick and confusing; it felt like I had been dropped into the rabbit hole.

"No. They didn't. They never cared enough to teach me anything," he simply said, his eyes empty.

My mouth opened, although I didn't know how to respond. My brain stuttered for a moment in shock as my heart dropped to the pit of my stomach. Maddox didn't wait, he walked past me, and I lost him to the crowd before I could call out to him... to *apologize*? For what?

I didn't know. Shit.

Shock and confusion coursed through me, and for the first time, I realized that I truly didn't *know* Maddox.

What's your story, Maddox Coulter? Who are you?



"Table eight," Kelly said, handing me a tray of warm food. I nodded, bursting out of the kitchen and going straight to the table she told me.

The soles of my feet were burning and the high heels were not helping. The restaurant I worked at was nice, the ambiance was pretty and welcoming, and because we were the only *Grill and Bar* restaurant for miles, this place could get hectic. I wasn't allowed to work at the bar, though, since I was still underage. I was hired two months ago, and I only served tables. The tips were good enough to keep me here, even though the job was tiring, and some nights, I could feel the exhaustion in my bones.

I swore under my breath when another customer tried to catch my

attention, waving his arm with irritation.

It was a busy night, much busier than the last few days, and we were short two servers. Both of them had called in sick last minute.

"Coming," I called to him.

I served table eight their dinner, a tight smile on my face. "Let me know if you need anything else. Enjoy," I said, chipperly. It was fake, I was feeling anything but chipper.

I went back to the man who was waving, fishing out my small notepad from the pocket of my apron. As I got closer to his table, I noticed that he had already ordered and ate his food. The plates were empty in front of him. Ah, so he needed the bill then.

I handed table five his bill and went along to the next table. The rush came and went. Hours later, I was dead on my feet and wishing I was in my bed. Kelly, my co-worker, who was also busting her ass, gave me an exhausting look as she passed me. "Table eleven. Can you grab it for me? I need the bathroom."

I nodded. "I got it."

I straightened my apron, took a last bite of my sandwich, wiped the corners of my mouth and made my way to the awaiting table.

I saw that he had already been served. "Hi, would you like anything else?"

My smile froze on my face, and I choked back a gasp. *Are you kidding me*?

Mr. Stalker aka Mr. Pain-in-my-ass aka Maddox grinned at me, an almost boyish look on his face with decadent mischief in his gaze. The second thing I noticed was that his poodle hair was gone. Holy shit, he cut it? Maddox's long, shaggy dirty blond hair had been cut short. No more man buns, no more surfer swagger. Did he cut it because I called him Poodle? I didn't think he was *that* offended, but I figured it bruised his ego.

"Yes. You," Maddox said.

I recovered from my shock, picked up my jaw from the floor and snapped my mouth shut. "Excuse me?" I asked stiffly, still reeling from disbelief.

He pushed his chair back, extended his legs in front of him and crossed his arms over his wide chest. "You asked if I wanted anything else, I gave you my answer. *You*." His teeth grazed his lower lips and he eyed me up and down in my waitressing outfit. "I've been wondering if your pussy tastes like cherry, too."

Oh, for Pete's sake.

"Maddox," I hissed.

"Lila." My name rolled off his tongue, like he was tasting it.

"What are you doing? This is my workplace."

He quirked up an eyebrow. "I'm here for the food. I approve, by the way. Five stars for the food, five stars for your service."

"You're stalking me," I deadpanned.

"I am," he admitted, calmly and without any shame.

This was getting out of hand. It was unacceptable, but I couldn't even say anything back. Not while I was still working. My boss was somewhat of a bitch, and I couldn't risk pissing her off, so I bit my tongue and *smiled*.

"I'll give you the bill. We close in thirty minutes," I said, as politely as I could, the corners of my eyes twitching with the effort to keep from snapping at Maddox.

Turning on my heels, I walked away before he could say anything else. I prayed he'd be gone by the time my shift ended.

When the clock struck eleven thirty, I hurriedly fumbled with the strings of my apron. I went into the bathroom and quickly changed out of my waitressing uniform, jumping into my jeans and yanking my beige sweater over my head. Done and done. I had fifteen minutes to catch my bus, and it was the last bus for tonight.

As I walked out of the restaurant, I prayed... and hoped...

But nope.

There he was, standing against the lamp post next to the bus stop.

Deep breaths, Lila, I told myself.

My lips tightened into a firm line as I walked to the bus stop, stopping next to Maddox but refusing to acknowledge him. He was starting to become unbearable. Why did I even *feel* something for him before?

The smell of cigarette was strong in the air, and I rolled my eyes. "Smoking is bad."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Cancer and shit." From the corner of my eyes, I saw him take another long drag before exhaling a puff of smoke through his nose.

My lips curled in revulsion. "I don't care if you die, but you're probably going to give me cancer along the way if you keep smoking around me like this."

It was a horrible thing to say, I knew. But for someone to care so little about their own life and health, it made me pity the poor fool. He really

didn't know what it meant to precariously hang between life and death. He didn't know how scary and lonely the door behind death was. I saw it, and it still haunted me to this day.

Maddox let out another puff of smoke before he looked down at me. "Why do you hate me so much?"

A mocking laugh spilled past my freezing lips. It was colder than I anticipated, and I wasn't dressed properly for the weather, stupid me. "Wow. Are you *that* full of yourself you can't figure out why I despise you so much? I thought you were smarter than that."

"Well, I want to hear it from you. I don't like to speculate."

Oh really? I didn't think he was ready for this, but I humored him anyway.

Fighting another shiver from the cold, I hugged my waist and turned slightly toward Maddox. The ripped jeans were a bad idea since my legs were numb now. But I refused to show any sign of being frozen to death, least of all in front of *him*. "First. You still haven't apologized for bumping into me in the coffee shop."

He let out a mocked gasp, filled with disbelief. "What? You're still pissed about that day? It's been two months!"

I locked my jaw, silently bristling. "I don't care how long it's been. I appreciate it when people take responsibility for their mistakes and apologize when they're wrong."

"I'm sorry."

My jaw went slack, and my eyes snapped to his. Wait...did...Maddox Coulter just apologize to me? Was something wrong with my ears? Maybe I was dreaming. Yup, that must have been it. "What did you just say?"

He threw the rest of his cigarette on the ground, squashing it with his leather boot. He kept his eyes on me, his face devoid of any mischief. He looked... serious. What a confusing man. I couldn't tell which side of him was real anymore. "I said I was sorry," he rumbled, the expression on his face genuine.

I narrowed my eyes on him. "Apologies don't count when they're not sincere."

"You confuse me, woman. First, you want me to apologize. Then when I do, you tell me not to. Pick one, Garcia."

"When someone says he's sorry, he should mean it. Apologies need to be sincere or else it's useless and, frankly, a waste of time. Mean it or don't say it

at all. I don't accept half-assed apologies."

Maddox brought a hand up, holding it over his chest. "Jesus. You're harsh, Sweet Cheeks."

"Second, you've been annoying me non-stop, always following me around, and you find every reason to irritate me! Whether it's in class, at lunch or outside of school. You do know that personal space exists, right?"

He looked thoughtful for a second, and I thought he really was considering my words. But then he opened his mouth, and I wanted to smack him. "Girls love it when I'm in their personal space," he admitted as if it was the most obvious thing.

"Full of yourself and absolutely cocky. The list is growing at an accelerating rate."

"So, you hate me because I give you attention?" Maddox took a pack of gum out of his pocket, popped one in his mouth before offering me one.

Against my better judgement, I took it. He was offering; I needed something to keep me distracted. "I *despise* you because I don't want the attention you give me."

"Anything else?" The corner of his lips tilted up, a small grin on his face. There was nothing taunting about it. In fact, he looked *pleased*.

"You keep calling me *Sweet Cheeks* even though I have told you a thousand times to stop. And you keep using vulgar language. You're rude and immature and inconsiderate to other people," I whisper-yelled.

"But you call me *Poodle*." Was that all he got from my rant?

"I call you *Poodle* because you call me *Sweet Cheeks*. I believe everything is fair in love and war."

He stood closer, bending his head, so he could whisper in my ear. "And what do we have between us? Love? Or war?"

"War," I said through gritted teeth.

"I approve," he said too quickly, popping his gum. "Anything else?"

"Yes," I practically screamed now, "You. Kissed. Me."

"Ah. So, you hate me because I stole your first kiss?"

Was that what he thought? That little shit.

A sigh escaped me, and I rubbed a hand over my face, trying to chase away the cold. "That wasn't my first kiss, Maddox. And I despise you because you did it without my permission. That... was unacceptable."

He rubbed his cheek with his thumb and shook his head, still grinning. "Goddamn it. You've got a lot of rules."

My lips curled. "And I guess, you're one who hates rules?"

Maddox flashed me a wicked smile. "I break 'em, Lila. I love to break rules."

"It makes you feel extra manly?" I taunted.

"No. It makes me feel alive." His confession made me still, and I stared up at him, watching his expression for any lies, but all I saw was sincerity.

For a moment, Maddox's pained face flashed through my brain: outside in the cold, sitting on that bench, looking so lost. I didn't want to admit it before, but there was *something* about Maddox that really intrigued me.

I couldn't forget that look on his face, it was tattooed in my memories. Maddox Coulter was more than Berkshire's star quarterback. He was a complicated puzzle, and I wanted to tear him apart, layer by layer, so I could study him, delve into his soul and learn all his secrets.

A gust of wind breezed past us, and I quickly patted my hair down. This time, I couldn't hold back the involuntarily shudder that racked through me. Maddox took notice, and he frowned, his eyebrows pinching together. "Why don't you have a proper jacket on?"

I hugged myself, rubbing my hands up and down my arms. "I didn't think it was going to be this cold. I thought the sweater would be enough."

Before I could finish my sentence, and before I knew what was happening, he shrugged off his jacket and pushed it toward me.

I eyed the jacket, suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

Maddox circled my wrist with his finger and dragged me closer. He placed the jacket over my shoulders and gave me a pointed look, his face hard, until I succumbed and placed my arms through the sleeves. "Keeping you warm. I'm a man, Lila. I know you don't like me and think I'm an absolute asshole."

His lips twitched when I scoffed. "Fine, I'm an asshole sometimes."

I gave him the look. Are you serious?

"Okay, all the time. But I still know how to treat a lady right."

Treat a lady right? What a joke.

But still... my heart warmed. His scent was still heavy on the jacket, and I chewed on my lip when I noticed how good the smell of him was.

Maddox buttoned up the jacket for me and tugged the collar higher and closer, so my neck was covered. "There. Cozy enough?"

My lips parted, but I didn't know how to answer, so I only gave him a tiny nod.

He pulled back and looked me up and down, a frown appearing on his face. "Jesus Christ. You're so tiny."

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks."

I expected another joke coming from his lips. Instead, he looked tense and his brows were curled with a frown. "Are you sure it's safe for you to be out here like this, so late?"

Huffing in response, I rolled my eyes again. As if he cared. "I don't need a knight in shining armor. I can take care of myself."

His blue eyes were so bright and vivid under the moonlight. It was tempting to get lost in them. But when he opened his mouth, he squashed down all the effects he had on me. "I'm not going to be your Knight because I know you aren't a damsel in distress. You're more like the dragon in the fairy tale."

My lips curled and against my better judgement, I found myself smirking. "If I could fry you right now, I would."

It was easy to get lost in the easygoing expression on his face What were we arguing about before? Shit, I got sidetracked.

His devious grin was back, but there was something... pleasing about it. He was mocking me like before, being a bully, but this was a war with no venom. "I bet I'd taste good as an omelet."

"Do you always have a reply to everything?" I asked, not expecting a particular reply since I already knew the answer.

Now, he was smirking like the devil. As if he had won this round. "Were you born this sassy or do I bring the sass outta you?"

I blinked, my brain stuttering at his question.

I was petty, yes. I never backed down without a fight, yes. But this newfound sass...

Swallowing past the heavy ball in my throat, my gaze skittered away from him. Maddox tended to make me feel on edge, like I was about to jump off the cliff. He irritated me, non-stop. But as bad as it sounded when I admitted it, I had grown used to him being a jerk. The ongoing battle between us was exhausting, but it had been something I started looking forward to. Our pranks and verbal sparring had become something I had grown used to.

The realization had me taking a step back.

I had always been competitive, but I had never found a proper opponent. Not until Maddox.

His gaze shifted behind me, and his smile slid off his face. "Your bus is

here," he said, breaking through my muddling thoughts.

The bus came to stop in front of us, and I started forward, leaving him behind. My hands were shaking as I tried to take off his jacket. He held my hands in place, over the buttons. "Keep it. You can give it back later," he said, his voice gruff and thick.

"Have a good night," I breathed, stepping into the bus.

"Oh, Lila?"

I peeked at him over my shoulder. He had his hands shoved into the pockets of his pants, a few stubborn strands of hair falling over his eyes. "You don't hate me," he stated firmly before cracking a smile. "Sweet dreams, Lila. I might visit you there."

My lips twitched, and I turned away before he could see it. If you google Maddox's name, Cocky will be his definition. Maybe that should be his middle name. Maddox 'Cocky' Coulter.

I swiped my card and took a seat at the back of the bus. As it drove past where we had been, I saw Maddox still standing there, staring at the bus as I left him behind.

He was right.

We were at war, two very fierce opponents.

But...

I didn't hate him.

Realization dawned on me that I didn't loathe Maddox as much as I thought I did. Things just turned out to be a bit more complicated because it would have been easier if I hated him.

MADDOX

ate is a strong word.

It's a bitter but sweet fucking poison. It's like cocaine, and once you've had a taste, it's damn addictive. It becomes something more. It infiltrates your system, running through your veins, until you can't see anything other than red rage.

Hate kept me going.

Rage kept me alive. It became the oxygen I breathed.

See, I didn't hate my parents.

I *loathed* them.

I wasn't angry at them. No, it was something more. The rage festered over the years. I tended to it, watered it and watched it grow into something nasty and ugly.

Years ago, I found out it was easy to hate but so damn difficult to love.

But no matter how deep my hatred ran for them; I still looked into their eyes and hoped to see something *more*. Love for the child they brought into this messed up world and forgot to look after. *Me*.

My mother and I stood opposite of each other in the hallway of our home. She had a cashmere shawl wrapped around her shoulders and the moonlight shone through the window, casting a glow on her face. I was the carbon copy of my father, but I had my mother's eyes. I waited for her to acknowledge me, I waited for her to smile and say a few words. I waited to see if she'd ask me if I ate today or if she wondered how school was. Something simple, something small... but something other than silence.

It had been two weeks since we saw each other. We lived in the same

goddamn house, but my parents were never here.

She clenched her shawl tighter to her body and walked toward me. It was way past midnight; I had come home late, yet again, after partying with Colton and the boys. I smelled of alcohol, weed and the scent of cigarette was heavy in the air, clinging to my clothes.

Her eyes met mine for a half second before she averted her gaze. Her lips parted as if she wanted to speak, and my heart thudded so hard in my chest as I *waited*.

The look on her face told me she didn't *hate* me, maybe she even cared... but when she closed her mouth and walked past me, I realized... she didn't care enough.

My heart plummeted to my feet, bloody and weeping, as mommy dearest walked over it and walked away from me.

I marched to my bedroom and slammed the door close, knowing full well my parents wouldn't hear. I was on the opposite side of the house, the distance between us too big.

The bottle of liquor, sitting patiently on my nightstand, called to me.

I wasn't an addict, but I needed it. Tonight, at least.

Grabbing the bottle, I sank into my couch and watched the shadow dancing over my walls in my dark room. I took a long swig of the bottle, feeling the sweet burn in my throat.

Rage... Hate... I breathed it in.

My head swam, the air was thick and hot.

To everyone, I was Maddox Coulter – the golden boy, star quarterback and Berkshire's king.

To my parents, I was a disappointment.

To myself? I was just the boy trapped in the closet.

Hate was cold fire; there was no warmth from it.

My eyes fluttered close. Before I became lost in the space between sleep and consciousness, a mouthy girl with pretty brown eyes and black hair came to haunt me.

I slowly smiled.

Fuck, she was something else.

The Next day, I walked through the halls of Berkshire as if I was on display. If I didn't know better, I would have thought I forgot to wear clothes this morning, but no, I was definitely dressed. Their eyes burned into the back of my head, and the whispers followed me. They made no attempt to hide their curiosity; some of them — Maddox's fangirls — even looked at me with open distaste.

Shit. Now what?

Riley popped next to me out of nowhere and gripped my arm. "You owe me an explanation," she hissed in my ear.

Confused, I looked down at her. "Why? What did I do?"

"The rumor," she started, but then trailed off as her gaze skirted over my head. Riley scowled hard, and I turned around to see Maddox and Colton walking through the entrance.

I stayed rooted on the spot as he sauntered toward me. My brain told me to run. The look on his face was anything but *nice*. Mischief glimmered in his blue eyes, and a smirk twisted his full lips. Uh-oh.

The hallway became quiet, as if awaiting a long, overdue dramatic scene. I could feel everyone holding their breaths, anxious and curious as they stared back and forth between Maddox and me.

I tried to backpedal out of his way, but he ate up the distance between us with three long steps, stopping right in front of me. "Coulter," I said in greeting, eyeing him with suspicion.

Maddox dipped his head to my level, breathing against my lips. My heart stuttered, and I froze on the spot. His lips skated over my cheek in a chaste kiss, and he lingered there for a second too long. "Good morning, Lila," he said, his breath warm against my skin.

I felt the stares on us, the silent gasps coming from the others at Maddox's public display of affection, even though it was anything but affectionate. He was teasing me, making me the center of attention because he knew how much I despised it. This wasn't good.

I pulled back, glaring up at him through my lashes. Without a word, I stalked past him, but his voice followed me as he called out across the hallway. "Don't forget to give me back my jacket, *baby*."

Double shit!

I snuck a quick look to my left to see people staring at me with openmouthed expressions. Holding back a growl, I didn't spare Maddox a glance as I stomped away with Riley at my heels.

When we rounded the corner to a fairly empty corridor, she grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stop. "You kissed him!" she whisper-yelled, her face a mask of astonishment.

A groan escaped me. "Is this why everyone's staring at me like I've grown two heads?"

"Someone saw you two kissing at your locker two days ago, and you know how quickly rumors spread," she admitted.

The rumors in Berkshire spread like a wildfire, untamed and unstoppable. The people were hungry sharks in the tank full of blood. They probably thought Maddox and I were dating now due to the kiss and then the jacket comment made by Maddox.

"Well, here's one important fact. I didn't kiss him. He kissed me."

"He kissed you?"

I threw my hands in the air. "Yes," I growled. "Why is this such a big deal?"

Riley's eyebrows popped up, giving me a look that said the obvious. "You kissed Maddox Coulter after declaring war on him. Yeah, babe. It's a pretty big deal."

"Whatever. It won't happen again."

She followed me, hooking her arm with mine. "Is he good, like the rumors say? I heard some girls say he can tongue-fuck your mouth like he'd tongue-fuck your pus—"

"Riley!"

She let out a smothered giggle, and I instantly knew she was teasing me on purpose. Such a brat. "Sorry, but you should see how you're blushing right now."

Ignoring the warm heat against my cheeks, I leveled Riley with a glare, and she pouted, but, thankfully, chose to remain silent.

I left Riley at her Calculus class before making my way to English. When I walked inside, Maddox was already there, sitting in his usual spot. He had his legs thrown over his desk, his ankles crossed. Two girls surrounded him, and they were giggling at something he must have said, except he didn't look interested in the conversation; in fact, he looked like he needed to be saved from them. Why couldn't they see that?

A little self-respect would go a long way. He didn't want them; it was as clear as the sunrise in the morning and the moon in the night sky. The thing about Berkshire was that everyone wanted to be on top of the food chain. The only way to get there? Date a popular jock, it was as simple as that.

Maddox was the biggest fish in the tank, the best catch, and every girl wanted to get her hooks in him.

His gaze slid to me and the corner of his lips quirked up into a small smile. Maddox gave me his signature smirk, followed by a wink that had dozens of girls melting at his feet.

I lifted my chin in silent acknowledgment before taking my seat.

Soon enough, class started. Mrs. Levi began her Shakespearean lesson for this semester; we were studying *Hamlet*. She wanted to start the lesson with a *Hamlet* movie, the popular one with Robin Williams.

"It's the best adaption," Mrs. Levi explained. "But the projector isn't working. So, I'm going to need someone to get the TV from the storage room. Lila, do you mind?"

She looked at me expectantly, and I nodded.

"Any volunteer to help?"

I held back a groan. No, no, no...

"I'll go with her," Maddox said smoothly.

Mrs. Levi clapped her hands together. "Oh, great."

I marched out of the classroom, making my way to the storage room at the end of the hall. Maddox caught up with me easily. "You don't look happy, Garcia."

"Oh look, you're back to your annoying self," I countered.

From my peripheral vision, I saw him give me a lazy shrug. "You shouldn't be surprised."

Actually, I wasn't.

"Did my jacket keep you company last night?" He said the words like he was whispering a dirty secret.

Of course. Everything had to be dirty with Maddox. He probably thought I sniffed his jacket while I masturbated. Fun fact: *I didn't*.

I huffed. "I have it in my locker. I'll give it back to you after school."

"Are you asking me to meet you after school? A date?" A shocked gasp spilled from his lips, but it was fake. I could easily sense the mocking smile in his words.

"No," I growled. "Come to my locker. I'll return your jacket to you, and

we both can go on our merry ways, separately."

He didn't have a chance to refute me since we were already standing at the storage room.

A note glared back at us, and I rubbed a hand over my face. "Great," I muttered under my breath. "The light isn't working."

I snuck a glance at Maddox, and he looked a bit... apprehensive. Hmm. "Can you keep the door open for me while I get the TV?" I asked.

Maddox shrugged.

The door was heavy as we pushed it open, and I walked inside. It was dark, but the lights from the hallway illuminated the inside enough for me to spot where all the TVs were kept against the back corner of the room. Aha, there it was.

Each TV was sitting on its own small four wheeled shelf, and all I had to do was roll one out. Easy peasy. *Not*.

When I tried to pull, it didn't budge, not even an inch. Goddamn it.

I took a peek behind the TV and saw that there was no way I could roll it out of this storage room. All the cords were tangled up together.

"Maddox, can you help me with the cord? It's stuck, and it's dark in here. I can barely see anything."

"Just pull it," he rumbled, impatiently.

"If I could, I would," I hissed. "It's stuck. Help me."

He was silent for a moment before uttering, "Ask nicely."

"Are you fucking serious?"

"Say please.

"Please," I said through clench teeth.

He tsked. "Say the full sentence."

I straightened, bringing my hands to my hips, as I rolled my eyes. "Maddox, can you help me with the cord, please?"

"Good girl," he praised.

He pushed the door wide open, holding it against the wall, and stared at it for a second, waiting. "It's not going to close. Hurry," I called out.

When Maddox was sure the door wasn't going to close and lock us into the storage room, he sauntered inside. He looked behind him once, staring at the open door for a second longer, before coming to stand beside me.

"Move aside," he demanded.

I rolled my eyes, again, but still did as I was told. Maddox reached behind the shelf, trying to find the cord. "Damn it, what is this?"

"Exactly. It's all tangled up with the others." There were four TVs in all, and they were pushed together into a tiny corner. We hadn't used them in the longest time, since we got the new projector screens, so they had been sitting here, collecting dust.

He let out a frustrated groan before starting to untangle the cords, which would take a lot of patience to do. The space between the rack and the wall was too tight, and I could see he was having trouble. "Here, let me get my flashlight. That might help," I suggested.

I fished out my phone from my pocket, but before I could turn it on, a loud banging sound echoed through the room. We both flinched, and Maddox lifted his head in surprise, hitting the top shelf in the process. He let out a string of curses.

Before I knew what was happening, we were surrounded by complete and utter darkness.

Shit, the door closed.

And... double shit, we were locked inside; the note had said that the handle was broken.

"No...no... No!" Maddox bellowed, rushing for the door through the dark. Huh? Was he scared of the dark? Who would have known Maddox Coulter, with his cocky smirk and eyes that could melt you on the spot, was scared of a little darkness?

I successfully turned the flashlight on, already thinking of teasing him like he would have done to me. My gaze slid to Maddox just in time to see him bumping against a shelf in his hasty attempt to reach for the door. The metal rack crashed to the floor with a loud, booming sound, and Maddox fell to his knees before he scrambled up again. He slipped over the broken shards and fallen liquid, crawling toward his escape.

No, wait. *No.*.. he wasn't just scared of the dark. This was something more.

A heavy weight settled on my chest, my throat closed and my breath stuck in my throat. Shocked, I stayed rooted on the spot as Maddox came completely undone.

Cool, collected and flirty Maddox was replaced by a stranger. He blindly reached for the door, grabbing the broken handle and pulling himself to his feet. Maddox hit the heavy door with his palm. "No, no! Please! No, no, no. *Please*," he repeated under his breath. "Don't do this, please Let me out of here! Don't leave me here. Don't do this. No, no, please! *Don't*."

He repeatedly hit the door, his open palm connecting with the surface with such hard slaps that it should have hurt him. "Help me, help. Please, don't leave me here."

Maddox scratched at the door, as if he was trying to rip it free from its hinges. He was trying to break through. His fingers clenched into tights fist as he started banging on the door, violently. His screams echoed through my ears, and my heart thudded hard against my ribcage, I felt his *pain*. His agony was a reminder of my own silent suffering.

"I can't... I can't breathe. I can't," he whimpered, his voice cracking.

Thump – thump – thump.

"This is what death feels like, and you're going to die alone," a voice whispered in my ears.

My lips parted with a silent cry as I fought to breathe, but I couldn't. I really couldn't.

My breath came out in sharp, hallow panting, and my vision grew darker and blurred. I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed down on my eyelids. A kaleidoscopic of stars fluttered behind my closed eyes. Help me, help. Please, help me.

I thought maybe I was having a heart attack; yet, there was no physical pain. But my whole body vibrated, my skin crawled like I was picking apart my flesh and trying to jump out of my skin.

"This is what death feels like."

I can't breathe.

Help me.

"Help me," Maddox screamed.

My thoughts fluttered away, and my heart kicked in my chest, pushing me forward. I snapped out of my frozen state and rushed to his side, my own hands trembling. "Maddox," I said softly, trying to break through his madness. "Maddox, please."

He banged on the door harder, and I noticed his knuckles had been split open from his attempts to break free from the storage room. Oh God, he was hurting himself. "Maddox!" I said louder, grabbing his arms and trying to pull him away from the door. He resisted and shook me off him.

"Maddox, no! Please. Don't do that. You're hurting yourself. Just..." I scrambled, trying to figure out what to do, what to say, so I could break through to him, reach Maddox in the place where he was lost. I had to pull him out.

"I need to get out. I need to get out. Get me out of here!" His fist pounded continuously on the door, a sob racking through his body. His voice was hoarse as he screamed brokenly. "Get me away from here. Get me out of here. I need to get out... I can't breathe! I need to get out."

He went to punch the door again, but I grabbed his fist, holding his hand in my own. It was a risk. I knew he was so lost in his head that he could have hurt me. Unintentionally. But it was important for him not to hurt *himself*.

It was becoming clearer that he was suffering from a panic attack. I knew exactly what it looked it, what it *felt* like.

"Please," he whimpered. "Get me out of here. Please. Please. Please."

I held back a choked sob as he started pleading, each word spilling out of his mouth like a goddamn arrow straight to my heart. I bled *for* him.

He started mumbling something I couldn't hear, his breathing ragged and loud as he struggled to breathe.

When he realized he couldn't break free, Maddox crouched down, his head dropping to his hands as he fisted his hair, pulling at the strands. The mumbling under his breath grew louder as he shook his head back and forth. "Please, please. I need to get out. Help...Help me...Please."

My chest grew tight at the sight of him like this.

My knees weakened. When I couldn't hold myself upright any longer, I knelt down beside his trembling form. My hand landed on his chest to feel his heart pounding, hard and erratic, as if it was beating right out of his chest. His shirt was drenched with sweat, sticking to his body like a second skin.

I knew what it felt like to suffer like this. Chest caving in, all the air being sucked out from your lungs, a fist clenching your heart so tight, blood rushing through your ears, your lungs can't seem to work properly and then it happens... *suffocation*. The need to crawl out of your skin, as if your body is not your own anymore, chasing an escape you couldn't even see through the fog.

The tremors kicked in and Maddox started shaking. It started with his hands before his whole body quaked as he struggled to do a simple thing as inhale and exhale.

I had to get him to breathe first, it was the only way to ground him into the present, to bring him back from wherever he was lost inside his head.

Maddox held his head in his hands, his body rocking back and forth. "No, no, no. Please. Please," he begged.

"Maddox," I spoke softly. "Maddox, I'm right here. It's okay."

A tortured sound came from his throat, and my eyes burned with unshed tears. This was... hard. So fucking hard.

This wasn't Maddox.

This was a boy, frightened and lost.

I gripped his hand and pulled it away from his face, holding it with both of mine "I'm right here, Maddox."

His eyes were squeezed shut; his eyebrows pinched and his face... it was a mask of raw pain. He was tormented by something, his past... maybe, I didn't know, but whatever it was, Maddox was still hurting. I could almost taste his suffering in the heavy air surrounding us.

Squeezing his left hand, I spoke firmly. "Look at me, Maddox. I'm right here. Look at me, okay? Please."

When he kept his eyes closed, I changed tactics. "Breathe with me, baby. Can you do that? Can you breathe with me? I'll count. Maddox, you can do it. I know you can."

He sucked in a ragged breath, his chest rattling with the effort. "There you go. Slowly. Breathe with me. I'm right here. I'm not leaving you. It's going to be okay."

I squeezed his hand again, counting to three out loud. "Inhale," I instructed.

He did. He slowly sucked in a breath.

I counted from four to six now. "Exhale."

Maddox let out a harsh breath.

Squeeze. Inhale. Squeeze. Exhale.

One. Two. Three. Inhale. Four. Five. Six. Exhale.

When his breathing slowly became less ragged, I whispered, "I'm proud of you. That's good. Do it again, Maddox. Breathe with me. Stay with me."

His eyes opened, and I realized whatever I said had gotten through to him, so I repeated it again. "I'm proud of you. Stay with me."

I inhaled, showing him how to do it, and Maddox breathed in a shaky breath. Somewhere in his tortured blue eyes, I saw him trying to hold onto his own sanity. I stared into his dark and bottomless eyes, seeing something I had never seen before. Fear and misery consumed every part of him.

I saw myself in him, and we bled together, our pain seeping through us, similar to how tears would leak from our eyes. Maddox looked at me as if he was staring at something he was about to lose.

"I'm not going anywhere," I soothed gently, rubbing my fingers over the back of his knuckles.

He was still shaking, but he wasn't struggling to breathe anymore.

I remembered my mother singing to me when I was a child, a sweet lullaby as she'd put me to sleep. When I'd suffer from my own panic attacks, my therapist told me to play the lullaby on YouTube. It had helped calm me down. I knew everyone rides out their panic attacks differently, but maybe... maybe I could...

Right now, Maddox looked like a child who needed someone to hold him. So, I did.

I knelt between his thighs, so I was close to him, and held his hands in my own. I continued to rub my fingertips over his bruised knuckles, letting him feel my touch.

My lips parted, my heart *ached* and I sung him my favorite lullaby.

"Lullaby and good night, In the sky stars are bright, May the moons silvery beams, Bring you sweet dreams, Close your eyes now and rest, May these hours be blessed, Till the sky's bright with dawn, When you wake with a yawn."

I saw brief recognition in his gaze. His eyes turned glassy, and he had a faraway look, like he wasn't seeing *me*, because Maddox was somewhere else.

"Lullaby and good night, You are mother's delight, I'll protect you from harm, And you'll wake in my arms, Sleepyhead, close your eyes, For I'm right beside you, Guardian angels are near, So sleep without fear," I sung gently.

His lips quivered, and panic welled up inside me. I messed up; I shouldn't have sung to him. He was just starting to calm down and now...

Maddox curled his arm around my waist, and he pulled me against him, his head dropping to my shoulders. The world stilled except for our pounding hearts, beating together like a broken violin, shrieking with violent, pained sounds. A silent sob racked through his body, and I felt wetness on my neck where Maddox had his face hidden.

He was *crying*.

In silence.

He suffered in silence.

His tears carried the weight of his pain.

My emotions became jagged as my chest ripped open, a knife digging

itself into my little, fragile heart. It was so hard to swallow past the heavy lump in my throat. Emotional pain bore invisible scars; yet, these scars could be traced by the gentlest touch, I knew that.

Breaking apart was hard. It stung with every breath taken.

Recovering from it was the hardest.

Sometimes, the pieces can't be put back together because they're mismatched, missing or completely shattered, making it an impossible feat.

Tears slid down my cheeks, and I choked back a cry. My own voice cracked as I continued to sing the rest of the lullaby.

He pulled me tighter into his body, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, holding him to me. I remembered how it was, coming out of my panic attacks, the adrenaline rushing away as I came back to the present. Everything would hurt, and I'd always feel so lost.

This was Maddox right now.

So, I held him.

Because he needed to be held, even if he didn't say the words.

He needed me.

Maddox trembled in my arms, his whole body shaking with his silent cries and tremors. As the lullaby came to an end, I pressed my lips against his cheek. "You're going to be okay, Maddox. I got you."

Thump – thump – thump.

There was a hollow ache in the pit of my stomach.

I embraced him.

He didn't let go.

His breathing smoothed out, and his pounding heart slowed.

"I got you," I soothed, running my fingers through his soft hair.

His arms clenched around me, and he nuzzled his nose into my neck. *Hold me tighter*, he said without any words.

I got you.

LILA

addox and I were still wrapped in each other's arms when the door of the storage closet opened, and the janitor peered inside with a look of horror on his face.

"What are you two doing in here?" He held the door open, and the light from the hallway bathed the inside of the dark room.

Maddox's grip on me tightened at the new voice, and he kept his face buried in my neck. His silent tears soaked through my blouse as I smoothed a hand down his back. "I'm right here," I whispered in his ear before looking up at the janitor, who was limping inside. He had a bad leg, the rumors said it was from a military accident. He had been working for Berkshire for fifteen years now, and he was loved by everyone. Sweet Mister Johnson.

"We got locked in by accident," I explained, motioning toward the TV with one hand. "We had to get the TV, but the door closed on us."

Mr. Johnson looked down at Maddox and I, where we were still kneeling. I was practically sitting on his lap, and his arms around me were tight. Maddox was a sinking ship; he was drowning in the wreckage of a wounded heart, and I was the anchor holding him together.

I got you.

My heart couldn't bear to let go, even though I knew I had to. Eventually.

"Is he okay?" Mr. Johnson looked mildly curious, but mostly worried.

I nodded. "Could you grab the TV for us, please? The cords are all tangled up together."

"Of course. Let me get it. Which class are you guys in?"

"Mrs. Levi."

"I'll bring it. Get back to class." He waved, shooing us away.

"Thank you, Mr. Johnson."

My nails grazed Maddox's scalp in a soothing manner as I ran my fingers through his hair. "Maddox?" At the sound of his name, he pulled away from me and stood up. I could tell he was still shaky, his body swaying before he found his footing again, and he refused to look at me. Still holding onto his hand, we walked out of the storage closet. His breathing has evened out now, and his face had hardened, his eyes lifeless.

Maddox was shutting down... shutting me out.

"We can grab a bottle of water from the vending machine," I suggested, gently.

When I tried to squeeze his hand, he ripped it away from me. Like I was some kind of disease and he didn't want to be infected. "Madd—"

"Stay away from me," he said, and it sent chills down my spine. His voice was like a thunderclap, furious and strained.

"Maddox," I started, but he cut me off.

"Don't." That was a warning, and I should've listened; I really should have because for the first time, I saw a different Maddox.

A boy filled with rage, but blue eyes that held a broken song.

When I tried to grab his hand again, to stop him from walking away and shutting me out, he swiveled around without warning, and I almost fell into him My lips parted with a silent gasp when he grabbed my arm in an unyielding grip and slammed me against the wall. Maddox towered over me, his jaw clenching and his eyes darkening. He looked like a raging warrior, riding into battle with the promise of death in his gaze.

His head lowered, and his breath caressed over my lips. "Tell *anyone* about this and I. Will. Ruin. You. Lila," he warned, his tone thick with threat.

"I would never..." I breathed as my body went cold.

He bared his teeth with a low growl, silencing me. "It's been harmless fun between us, but, trust me, breathe a word about this to anyone else, I will make sure you're never able to walk through the halls of Berkshire again without wanting to cower and hide away in fear."

"Maddox, listen. I-"

My heart stuttered, and I forgot what I was about to say when his hand slid up my arm, and he wrapped it around my neck. His fingers tightened around the base of my throat, but it wasn't a punishing grip. It didn't hurt, but it was a silent promise, a warning, a deadly threat.

"I will ruin you. You'll beg for mercy, and I will show you none, Lila." His voice was a sharp sword carelessly slicing through me.

Maddox pushed away from me as Mr. Johnson walked out of the storage room.

"Everything okay here?" he asked, his gaze going back and forth between Maddox and I.

Maddox swore under his breath, loud enough for me to hear before he stomped away.

In the opposite direction of the class.

He was... leaving?

My voice caught in my throat as I watched him walk out of the building, the double doors closing behind him with a loud bang. I flinched as he disappeared out of my view.

Clearing my throat, I gave Mr. Johnson a tentative smile. "He just needs... a minute by himself."

"He's an angry young man," he commented. "Reminds me of myself after I was discharged from the military."

"He just..."

Mr. Johnson waved me away. "No need to explain. Here's the TV."

I swallowed past the burning lump in my throat, mumbled a quick *thank you*, before grabbing the TV stand and rolling it toward the classroom.

I expected him to come back later, but he didn't.

There was no glimpse of Maddox for the rest of the day. I walked through the halls of Berkshire, looking for him, but he was... gone, and I felt his absence like a sharp sword slicing through me.

Maddox's mixed emotions might have been justified in the moment, but not toward *me*.

I hadn't done anything to deserve being on the receiving end of his anger. Especially not after the time we had spent in that dark storage room.

My gran always told me I was a curious little thing, but this wasn't just about curiosity. This was the *need* to know the real Maddox, the one he hid behind a cool façade and a bad boy mask.

Because the Maddox in that closet, the one I held in my arms... he was a lost boy, and he reminded me of myself after I had woken up from my coma.

Maddox

The scent of a heavy cheap perfume touched my nostrils, and I almost gagged at how strong the smell was.

My head hurt.

My body ached.

What the—?

My eyes split open, and I stared at the ceiling of... *not* my room.

Ah fuck. Why couldn't I remember anything? There was an empty hole in my memories, and all I remembered was...

The pounding headache had me wincing as I rolled over to my side as my stomach twisted with nausea. The bed shifted with another weight and a low moan came from the person beside me.

I let my head drop to my pillow and closed my eyes as the memories came flooding back.

The storage. A reminder of my fucked-up past, carelessly thrown into a living nightmare. *Lila*. Fucking hell, Lila. She was with me. She held me.

She goddamn held me in her arms and rocked me like I was a child.

Lila... sang to me.

A lullaby.

The same one my mother used to sing to me. She had a habit of coming into my room to put me to sleep. She'd sing to me and kiss me on the forehead before turning off the lights and closing the door behind her.

Good night, Sweetheart. Sweet dreams.

Good night, Mommy.

That was all...before.

Before things changed, and I became a stranger to my own parents.

And Lila...

Shit! I remembered walking away from her, threatening her.

A pained groan escaped me when I realized what a shithead I was. Lila was the one good thing in that moment, and I ruined it with my anger and ego.

No, I had been...scared.

"Hmm," someone mumbled next to my ear. My eyes closed as I remembered the party.

I had been drunk and needed to fuck the anger out of my system. It led

me to this... grabbing a bitch at Brayden's party. The hotel. Alcohol and sex, then I passed out.

"Hey babe." Her hand smoothed down my naked chest, and my skin crawled at the touch. None of the girls I slept with were allowed to stay after a sex marathon. I hated the after-sex-talk, and I loathed sleeping beside them. It gave them unnecessary expectations that I wanted *more* than just sex.

I grabbed her hand and pushed it away. The mattress shifted again and another weight beside me rolled over, throwing a leg over my hips.

Wait... another?

I guess I didn't grab a bitch, I picked two.

"Get out," I growled.

The one to my left let out a sleepy snort. "Excuse me? It's four in the morning."

"Yeah, get the fuck out." I threw an arm over my face, waiting for them to do as they were told.

"You're an asshole. We're not leaving." This one was from the woman to my right. I could imagine the haughty look on her face without even having to look at her.

I sat up in bed without sparing the two of them a glance. I pushed Miss-Right-Bitch out of the way and climbed out of the huge, king-sized bed. She let out a nasty snarl, and from the corner of my eye, I saw her grabbing the bedsheet and trying to cover up her naked self.

Miss-Left-Bitch was silent but still sitting in *my* bed.

"I paid for this room. So, either you leave, or I call security to have you thrown out. I'm saving you some grace and keeping your dignity intact by only kicking you out and not having you thrown out. Now, Get. The. Fuck. Out," I warned while putting on my boxers.

I turned around, giving both of them a pointed look. "I'm going to take a piss. You have two minutes to leave this room before I have you thrown out. You wanted a taste of Coulter? You got it. Now, shall we go on our merry ways? In case you're wondering, no... I'm not putting a ring on your finger."

Blondie's eyes turned into slits as she glared at me. "Are you always like this?"

The bedsheet was still scandalously wrapped around her curvy body. It was tempting, I had to say. But my dick didn't rouse at the sight, so that would be a no for me.

"I don't even remember your name."

She let out a gasp, her hand flying to her tits in shock. Way overdramatic. This wasn't some goddamn soap opera.

The pounding headache was making it difficult to focus, so I blinked several times, trying to clear my blurry vision. How much did I drink? I couldn't remember shit.

"Two minutes," I snapped, before walking away. The bathroom door closed behind me, putting the lock in place, in case either of them had the stupid idea to join me. I didn't usually say no to shower sex, but I wasn't in a mood for another sex session. My head was killing me, my body was sore and so was my dick.

After taking a piss, I walked out of the bathroom to see that Blondie had left, but her 'friend' was still here. Black hair, exotic sun-kissed skin and brown eyes, she looked like she had just walked out from a magazine.

And those chocolate brown eyes reminded me too much of Lila.

"My name is Tammy," she introduced, breathlessly, with a thick British accent. "I mean, you didn't ask for our names last night."

That was because I didn't need to know her name to fuck her. Nameless and faceless. There were countless women before her; she was just another lay. I was probably just another man on her list, too.

She only had her skimpy panties and bra on, her big tits practically spilling out. Any man would take their time with her body, but I wasn't that man.

Tammy sauntered over to me, stopping an inch away. Her tits brushed against my chest, and she smoothed her palm over my abs, sliding down toward my dick. She cupped me in her warm hand, rubbing me through my boxers. "C'mon, babe. Don't be like this. I thought you said we could go all night. We barely just started. Now that Jenna is gone, it's just us."

My patience was thin, and I snapped, roughly grabbing her arm and pulling her toward the door. On our way, I grabbed her black dress off the couch and dumped both outside the door.

Her face was a mask of fury, her lips parted, probably to curse me, but I slammed the door before she could go on a rage-filled rant. What a typical scene.

Yeah, I was being an asshole.

But fuck, I didn't have the strength to deal with girls like her right now.

I sank into the bed with my head still throbbing.

Sleep took over within a minute, but it was no beauty sleep.

"Run and hide. I'll count to twenty before coming to find you," Nala said to me with a giggle. We were playing hide and seek. It was my favorite game to play with Nala because I was smart, and she could never find me.

Mommy said I was the smartest.

That was why I always won our games.

Nala started counting, and I ran to the basement. She wouldn't find me there. I had to find the perfect hiding place. Our house was huge, and there were corners to hide, but Nala knew almost all of them by now. We had been friends for a few weeks, and she discovered all my hiding spots. So, I had to find a new one.

The closet!

I closed the door behind me and snuck under the shelf. Perfect spot. I was going to win again. Mommy showed me this spot when we were playing last time.

I waited and waited...and waited for Nala to find me.

It must have been a long time because my knees were starting to hurt from staying in the same position for too long.

I crawled from under my hiding spot and went to the door.

My heart froze when the door didn't budge.

I pulled harder.

It didn't open.

"Mommy," I called out, but then I realized...

My parents weren't home. Daddy said he had a business meeting, and they would be home late. They were always busy, always leaving the house in the morning before I woke up and coming home later, after I'd gone to bed. That was why Nala was here to keep me company. She was Mrs. Kavanaugh's daughter, our maid.

I pulled at the door even harder.

It wouldn't open.

No, no, no.

"Nala! Nala, I'm here. In the basement. Nala, come find me!"

I slapped the door, punched and kicked and screamed. My throat started to feel dry, and tears slid down my cheeks. I didn't like crying. I had to be strong, like daddy. He never cried.

But I couldn't... stop... the...tears...

"Daddy," I yelled, feeling myself go cold.

Scared... I was so scared and cold. Why was I so cold? My teeth rattled, and I shivered, feeling more tears slide down my cheeks. My face was wet as I cried more.

I didn't like this.

Why couldn't I open the door?

Why? Why?

I pulled and pulled, but the door was too heavy for me, and it wouldn't open.

"Mommy, please! Mommy! Daddy!" I screamed.

Why couldn't anyone hear me?

Maybe... maybe... they'd eventually realize I was missing, and they'd come find me later. Mommy knew of this hiding spot; she'd know where to find me.

I sank to the ground, bringing my knees to my chest.

Mommy and Daddy would find me, I knew they would.

"When they come home, they'll search for me," I murmured.

I had to be strong. Strong like Ironman. I had to be strong like Daddy.

I didn't know when I had fallen asleep or for how long, but when I opened my eyes again, it was dark.

So dark, I couldn't see anything.

The lights, what happened to them?

Oh no.

I couldn't see...

I couldn't breathe...

"Mommy!" I scrambled up, searching for an escape.

I punched the door, but my hands were too small, and they started hurting.

But I didn't stop.

I punched and screamed louder. "Mommy! I'm here. Daddy!"

It was so dark. I didn't like it; I didn't like the darkness. I never did. It scared me, that was why mommy always left my night light on.

"Help! Help me! I'm in the closet... help... me..."

I couldn't breathe...

I couldn't breathe....

"I can't... help.... I can't... breathe... mommy..."

My heart was beating too fast.

I couldn't see anything.

It was dark, so so dark.

My body shuddered, and I stumbled on the floor, next to the door, still scratching and punching.

"Can't... breathe... daddy... please... please... come find... me! Please..."

I cried.

I didn't want to; I had to be strong, but I couldn't stop.

I cried harder.

"I'm... scared..."

My hand went numb until I couldn't feel it anymore. "Don't... leave me here... mommy. Help," I whispered when I could no longer scream.

Everything hurt.

My head. My throat. My hand. My body.

Everything.

And it was so dark. There was a monster in the dark, like in the movies. I could feel it watching me, and my skin crawled.

The monster kept watching me; I couldn't see it, but it was there.

I still couldn't breathe.

"Help..."

Mommy and Daddy had promised they'd always find me wherever I hid. They said they could **feel** me because I was their baby, and they'd always know where I was.

They... lied.

They didn't find me.

"Don't... leave... me alone," I begged, but I could barely hear the words. "Please."

My body swayed sideways, and I fell to the ground, my head touching the cold tiles of the closet. I curled into a small ball, trying to chase the cold away.

Come find me, mommy.

Don't leave me, daddy.

"Please... I'll be... a good boy. I... will... never ask... for another toy... or chocolate. I will...never cry again... I promise. I promise... I will... be good, a good boy... promise, mommy. Please, daddy... please..."

They lied.

They didn't find me.

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"Help me."
They left me with the monster in the dark.
"Please."
They forgot me.
"Mommy... daddy..."
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I JERKED AWAKE, gasping and breathless. My body was so cold; I was numb and shaking like a leaf during a storm. The bedsheet was soaked with my sweat, and I swallowed past the heavy lump in my throat.

It was just a nightmare.

Lies.

How could it be *just* a nightmare if it followed me when I was awake?

My heart pounded in my chest, and there was a dull pain.

The world spun, and I wanted to vomit as my stomach churned with nausea. The pain in my head flashed hard and heavy.

Breathe. Fucking breathe. Goddamn it.

Slamming my fist into the mattress, I let out a snarl. Hate. Anger. Self-loathing. Pain, so much fucking pain clashed together, and my head swam with all the emotions. Fuck this, FUCK!

I rolled over and grabbed the bottle on the nightstand.

I convinced myself I wasn't an alcoholic, but tonight... I had to drink, had to forget.

Taking a long sip, I felt the alcohol burn down my throat, and I winced, my brows furrowed tight with pain. My temples twitched, and it felt like I was sticking hot needles into my eyes as I continued to drink from the bottle.

My stomach heaved as I remembered how I called out for my parents, but they never came... and then I remembered crying on Lila's shoulders, like I had done before in that closet when I was seven years old.

Lila saw me at my weakest, and I hated her for holding me like that, as if she cared.

She didn't.

No one did.

My heart thumped harder, almost angrily, and it pumped acid through my veins, except I was...drowning.

It was then I realized that you didn't need water to drown.

Just like there hadn't been any real monster in that closet when I was

seven years old, but the monsters had been in my head, and to this day, I couldn't escape them.

My body swayed, heavy and lethargic, as I took one last gulp before throwing the empty bottle on the floor. I fell back on the bed, sinking into oblivion.

Sweet fucking silence.

LILA

ran pushed a box in my hand. "Storage, please."
She patted my cheek affectionately before rushing away to help the customer waiting for her. Gran was always on her toes. That was exactly why I told them to hire more people to help in the store. Old people were stubborn to the bone.

My gaze slid over to the windows as I walked out of the storage. When I caught sight of who I was looking for, my heart skittered a beat.

Black hoodie, ripped designer jeans and leather boots.

Maddox looked almost too good to be true. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was some kind of fallen angel. But he was anything but.

Maddox stood outside, his hood over his head as he smoked his cigarette in the cold. He had his hands shoved in his pockets, and his head bent low, staring at the ground.

Something had shifted between us since *that* day.

A week had gone by. Maddox was still his usual asshole self, but sometimes, I got the feeling he was purposely avoiding me.

The only time I saw real mirth in his eyes was when I hid a pink, glittery dildo in his locker. It was during lunch, the hallways crowded and bustling with students, when Maddox opened his locker. Mr. Big Ben aka Mr. Dildo slapped him square in the face while everyone around him gasped and promptly started laughing.

I had winked and sashayed away, satisfaction coursing through my veins, after seeing the look on his face. I made him grin, a real smile since that day we had been locked in the storage room.

The dildo prank was two days ago.

Yesterday, he retaliated with fake cockroaches in my bag and my sweater. I remembered throwing my bag on the ground, screaming bloody murder, while the students burst out laughing like it was the best joke of the century.

It was humiliating to say the least. I wanted to be mad. I had every right to be, but the moment I had spotted Maddox laughing, all my anger faded away.

Poof, just like that.

"He doesn't look very cheerful, does he?" Gran came to stand beside me, watching Maddox through the window. "He came in early today to help with inventory, and he hasn't eaten anything yet."

"He didn't have lunch?"

It was almost three in the afternoon.

A customer called for Gran, and she patted me on the arm before walking away.

Before I could think through my actions, call my instinct to help, I had grabbed a wrapped sandwich from the fridge and was walking out of the store.

Maddox looked up as I approached. He took one last inhale of his cigarette before throwing it on the ground and crushing it under his feet. He blew out a cloud of smoke before licking his lips, eyeing me up and down. "What's up, Garcia?"

Silently, I pushed the sandwich toward him.

He quirked up an eyebrow. "Is this a peace offering?"

"Gran said you didn't eat," I said as an explanation. I was just being... *nice*. There was nothing to it.

Maddox grabbed the sandwich from my hand, our fingertips touching briefly, before I quickly pulled away. "Careful there, Lila. You're starting to look like you care."

My eyes snapped to his, and I glared. "I'm being a decent human being. Give me back the goddamn sandwich if you're going to be an asshole."

Maddox was already ripping through the wrapping before I could finish my sentence. He took a huge bite, chewing hungrily. "Sorry, Sweet Cheeks. You can't give a hungry man food and take it away. Just like you can't put a pussy on display in front of a horny man and expect him not to devour you."

I blew out a breath. He was absolutely impossible. "Does everything have to be sexual for you?"

Maddox took another bite of the sandwich. "We were born to be sexual beings. Why not embrace it?"

I leaned against the window, watching the cars drive by, as Maddox devoured his sandwich in big bites. He was obviously hungry. Once he had polished the last bite, I broached the forbidden topic.

"That day... in the storage room," I started.

I didn't have to look at Maddox to feel the change in him. When he spoke, his voice said it all. "Speak of this again, and I will mess you up so fucking bad—"

"Why are you so full of anger?" I cut him off before he could finish his threat. "I'm not your enemy."

He let out a humorless laugh. "That's a pretty ironic thing to say considering our *relationship*, if you'd even call it that."

"It is ironic, isn't it?" I finally turned to look at him. He had a shoulder against the window, facing me. His eyes were bright blue in the sunlight, glimmering and hiding something darker.

Who was the man behind this mask?

"But I'm not going to hurt you. That was never my goal. I've only been trying to get even with you."

Maddox and I had been playing a game of cat and mouse. It was infuriating but harmless.

He cocked his head to the side. "So, you're saying, you won't hurt me unless I hurt you first?" he questioned with a rough, gravelly voice.

"Yeah, it's only fair. If you hurt me, I'll make you regret it."

"You're the first girl who hasn't fallen at my feet and begged me to fuck them."

"What does that make me?"

He grinned, wolfishly. "My prey."

I let out a laugh, instead of being offended like I would have been two months ago. "You have a one-track mind, Coulter."

"You're running circles around my head, Garcia."

Was that a... confession?

I backpedaled away from him. "Gran will expect us back to work in two minutes."

Swiveling around, I went to walk away but then stopped. There was a sinking feeling in my stomach, a gut-wrenching feeling that I was about to do something so stupid. But I couldn't stop myself. I had always been a girl who

planned ahead, never doing something so... reckless. After life punched me in the face and left me scars, I vowed I would never be foolish.

Always in control.

Always cautious.

But apparently Maddox's reckless habits had been rubbing off on me.

I marched back to Maddox, standing a mere foot away. So close I could feel his warmth.

"You know what? I think me and you can be really good friends," I announced, the words spilling out before I could stop myself.

Yeah. Stupid, right?

His eyes widened a fraction before he scoffed. "How does me wanting to get in your panties equal to us being good friends?" He eyed my hand, the one stretched out between us. "And are you really waiting for a handshake?"

Goddamn it, what was I thinking?

Heat burnt my cheeks in embarrassment. "I'm trying to be civil here," I said through clenched teeth. "I just think... if we're so good at being enemies, imagine us being on the same side?"

It was true. I was tired of fighting with Maddox, day after day, over and over again. It was time to call truce, to end this war and to start over.

There was an unreadable gleam in his eyes when he spoke. "You'll bring Berkshire to its knees, Sweet Cheeks."

I'm going to bring you to your knees. I kept that tidbit to myself.

Maddox looked thoughtful for a second. He rubbed a thumb across his square jaw before giving me a simple nod. "Fine."

Wait...really? I blinked, waiting for him to laugh and call me pathetic.

He didn't.

Maddox stared at me expectantly.

Holy shit.

I swallowed past the nervous lump in my throat, and this time, I showed him my pinky. "We solemnly swear to not share any animosity between us anymore and we'll play nice."

If Maddox thought I was being stupid, he didn't show it on his face. "I solemnly swear not to be an asshole, but I'll still think of sixty-nine ways of how I can dick you down every time you look at me or shake your ass my way."

"Maddox!" I hissed, heat blooming in my cheeks at his crude words. I was no saint, but damn it, he knew how to make a girl blush.

He let out a throaty chuckle, the sound coming deep from his chest. Maddox wrapped his pinky around mine, squeezing it the slightest bit.

My lungs burnt, and I realized I'd forgotten to breathe.

This is it, I reminded myself.

The end of something; the beginning of something else.

I didn't know how serious Maddox was or if he'd keep his words... I didn't know if he knew the meaning of *friends*, I didn't know what tomorrow would bring us, if he'd be back to his usual asshole self, but I knew one thing – I no longer wanted to be on the opposite side of Maddox.

"Friends?" I breathed.

"Friends," he agreed.



Maddox

I WATCHED LILA WALK AWAY, back into her grandparents' store. I scratched my three-day old stubble over my jaw, thoughtful.

The door closed behind her, hiding the perfect view of her ass from my feasting gaze. I had to remind myself to look away because, fuck me, Lila could bring any man to his knees with an ass like that.

Our eyes locked through the glass window, and she was *smiling*. A genuine fucking smile.

Lila waved at me to come inside, and my feet followed. If I was a puppy, my tail would be wagging back and forth.

Ah, for fuck's sake.

Friends?

Friends.

I paused at the door, blinking as I came to a sudden realization.

The moment Lila aimed for my dick in that coffee shop, I was fascinated. Girls were usually on their knees for me, worshipping my dick like it was the best meal of their lives. I never had a girl who wanted to cause Maddox-Junior pain instead of pleasure, until Lila.

When she had smirked over her shoulder before walking away, I was instantly intrigued. Who was this girl?

I made it my mission to find more about her, to study her... and to break her. She was my pet project, and I had wanted to bring her to her knees. Someone feisty as her? It would be sweet when she'd finally *beg* me.

Two months later...

Lila Garcia just fucking friend-zoned me.

Well, shit.

A laugh bubbled from my chest. Little Miss Perfectionist was ballsy, I had to admire that. I never had a girlfriend before. If someone had a pair of tits, Maddox Junior had a one-track mind. Sex. Plain and simple.

Lila had three things that made me weak: tits, pussy and ass big enough for my greedy hands.

I scoffed at the thought. This was going to be interesting. I wondered how long she'd last. The games have changed; the tables have turned, and I was going to play her game now.

Who was going to break first?

The player or the prey?

Well, this was going to be fun.

LILA

firm hand landed on my ass, squeezing the soft flesh like its personal stress ball. The warmth of his body radiated against my back and the familiar, spicy scent of his cologne filled my nose.

"Take your hands off my ass. We're friends, Coulter."

When he didn't let go, I elbowed him, and he let out a small *ouf*. Maddox came to my side as we walked to our English class. "Wait, I thought you meant friends with benefits. Because that's the only type of *friends* I do."

I rolled my eyes. Day three of us being friends, and Maddox was still an asshole. A somewhat bearable jerk, but still a jerk. Apparently, he couldn't grasp the concept of *just friends* and was still trying to cop a feel.

Well, I couldn't really fault him since he caught me eyeing his dick print again yesterday. He didn't say a word, but his stupid smirk was enough.

"No. I meant normal friends. As in, you respect my boundaries, and I respect yours. Stop. Getting. So. Touchy."

"So, you mean, I can't slam you against the wall and fuck you?"

Sweet Jesus, help me, or I was going to murder this dude.

Exasperated, I gave him a look that said it all. "That's the opposite of friends, Maddox."

"Well, that's disappointing. You've seen how good I am on the field, but I was looking forward to showing you how good I am at thrusting."

There was a flash of mischief in his eyes, and my lips twitched. He was being annoying on purpose, the dumbass. Sure, we were still stumbling over this new friendship thing, but it wasn't so bad. At least, I didn't find any more cockroaches in my sweater today and no pink dildo for Maddox.

As expected, when we walked into Mrs. Levi's class, all eyes were on us. The attention had me on edge, but with Maddox constantly at my side, I was starting to get used to it.

People always stared, after all, Maddox was the center of attention. He loved it, practically feeding off it. His chest puffed out like a proud peacock, eyes gleaming, and his signature smirk plastered on his full lips. Girls fawned, and guys burnt with jealousy.

Now that I was on Maddox's side, more like he kept me next to him all the time, we turned heads wherever we went. People assumed we were sleeping together, and I was his latest conquest. Some said I was his girlfriend.

No one believed we were just...friends.

Even Riley was suspicious at first, but she finally understood the nature of our relationship when Maddox stole my apple, and in revenge, I sprayed ketchup on his crotch. Childish and stupid, right?

But there was just something about Maddox that made me feel...carefree.

I ditched the front row and followed Maddox to the back of the classroom, where he always sat. Settling next to Maddox, which put me in the middle of him and his friend, I gave Colton a nod in greeting.

He smiled and fist pumped Maddox. "The whole school is talking."

My lips flattened in a straight line. "They need to stop gossiping."

"That's their job. To gossip," Maddox said with a lazy smile. "What's so bad about being my girlfriend, Garcia?"

"Because I'm not."

"You sure?" Colton shot back.

There was one thing I learned during these three days.

Colton and Cole were twins, but they were nothing alike. Cole was more reserved, the quiet type. He didn't always hang around with us, and he was less of an asshole and more of a gentleman. In fact, you'd think Colton and Maddox were twins because... they were both pompous jerks. Attitude and personality, both were fuckboys and infuriating.

Now that Maddox and I were *friends*, that meant his friends were mine. Poor Riley got dragged into this mess, too.

Riley was ready to deck Colton any time now, and I wanted to raise my white flag in defeat, but refrained from doing so. My mama didn't raise a quitter.

"If you two are going to gang up on me, I'm going back to the front row."

I went to stand up, grabbing my bag with me.

Colton raised his hands up in mock defeat, and Maddox grinned. "Keep your ass seated on that chair, Garcia. I'll drag you back if I have to."

I plopped back on the chair. "I'm not your pet, Coulter."

He leaned closer, his lips next to my ear, so he could whisper while Mrs. Levi started her lesson. "You're kinda cute when you're pissed off."

"Shut. Up."

He sat back in his chair, looking quite satisfied with himself, like he had just tamed a dragon. As if. I ignored him and focused on the lesson instead. Sure, he was distracting, but I wasn't going to let him affect my perfect GPA.



HOURS TICKED BY, slowly... so goddamn slow...until the final bell rang. It was a long day of being scrutinized and glared at, and the whispers followed everywhere I went. It didn't matter if Maddox and I were enemies or friends; I was an outsider, always had been and always would be.

Some were curious, some were just plain mean about it.

I heard she's poor. She's probably just fucking him for money.

Desperate whore.

She's not even that pretty.

Do you think she's sleeping with Maddox's dad, too? I wouldn't be surprised if she has a sugar daddy.

Oh my God, that's so funny! Both father and son. Her hole is probably so stretched out.

She might be fucking her way through the whole football team.

They didn't understand why Maddox was so fascinated by me, their words, or why me and not them. Honestly, neither did I. Maddox was somewhat a mystery even to me. Why did he put me on his radar?

Riley let out a huff, her face red with anger. "What is wrong with them?"

"Just...ignore it," I said, breathing out a tired sigh. "They'll eventually grow bored and choose another victim."

"It's not fair."

No, it wasn't, but I was learning to accept my fate.

Riley, bless her heart, looked ready to attack someone, but I pulled her back.

"You have dance practice, right? Don't be late." I nudged her toward the door.

She let out a sigh and gave me a sad look. "You can't them walk all over you, Lila. I did that. I let them bully me to their satisfaction and they took everything from me. My friends, my popularity, my pride... until I had nothing left. They are like vultures. They won't stop until they break you apart. You need to show them who's boss because *you are*."

After all, I had nothing to be scared of. Maddox was on my side now. His friend. His only friend who was a girl. I had more power than any of the girls he slept with. He was king, and as much as I hated it, that made me the unofficial queen. Berkshire Academy was my kingdom.

But no one wanted a cold queen. The last thing I wanted to do was have them despise me any more than they already did.

Once Riley left, I walked into the bathroom since my bladder was close to exploding. The bus wasn't going to be here for another fifteen minutes, so I had enough time.

I was washing my hands when it happened.

When they rounded up on me.

In the mirror, I caught sight of four girls. I recognized two of them. Bethany, probably the most popular girl in Berkshire, and her best friend, Suraiya. The other two girls were familiar, but I didn't know them well enough to know their names.

They circled around me, and I shut off the tap, shaking away the droplets of water from my hands.

"Can I help you?" I asked, suspicious of their sudden appearance.

"She can speak," Bethany mocked, with a fake innocence.

"If you've got nothing to say, I'm leaving." I walked past her, and she grabbed my arm, digging her long nails into my skin. I didn't flinch, but it stung like a bitch.

"Not so fast, *Garcia*." She said my name like it was a stain.

"What do you want?" I wasn't scared, but I didn't like how there was one of me and four of them. They crowded around me, trying to be intimidating.

Bethany smiled, though it looked every bit as fake and malicious as she was. "I just wanted to give you a little...warning."

I laughed. "Maddox? Right, of course. Go ahead, give me your warning."

I tried to appear unfazed, but I knew what was coming. They were here for a reason. The fact that I wasn't cowering or begging for them to spare me

angered them.

"Let's just say, I'm trying to save you some face. Maddox will grow tired of you, soon enough, and he'll drop you like yesterday's trash. You're going to be hurt because that's what he does. He breaks girls like you for a hobby."

I returned her fake smile with one of my own. "Oh, like he grew tired of you and threw you out like yesterday's trash?"

The corners of her eyes twitched, and her smile slipped off her lips.

I wasn't done yet. If she wanted to be a bitch, I was going to show her how to play the game right.

I shook her hand off me, tsking under my breath. "I remember that day. Gossip tends to travel fast."

Last year when I was still the new girl, Maddox and Bethany slept together. The next day, she publicly claimed she was his girlfriend, but he turned her down in front of everyone by saying: *You were a good lay but not good enough to earn the title of my girlfriend*.

It was harsh, and things turned ugly that day.

But Bethany was rich and spoiled as well as the cheerleading captain. She was Miss Popular and gossip like that didn't affect her. Sure, her pride was wounded, but she bounced back quickly and kept the title of queen bee.

She growled and lashed forward, backhanding me in the face. I didn't see it coming, and it *hurt*. The metallic taste of blood filled my mouth when I tried to lick my aching, bruised lips. Her friend kneed me in the back of my legs, and I fell to my knees.

"You're easily disposable, Lila. I claimed Maddox a long time ago, and all the girls of Berkshire know he's my property. That's the same as playing with fire."

Maddox... her property?

My stomach cramped, and I busted out laughing. This was probably the most hilarious shit I've heard in this decade.

They looked at me like I was a maniac. Maybe I was.

I was about to get my ass beaten, and here I was laughing at my assailants.

Bethany hissed, her face growing red. Poor little, insecure Bethany.

She pressed her thumb against my bleeding lip, and I forced myself not to flinch. She smirked and pressed harder. It hurt so much that unshed tears burnt the back of my eyes. "You're as pathetic as I thought. Dirt poor, not beautiful enough, so easily forgotten and so easily replaceable that you had to

grab onto the richest and most popular guy."

Her voice told me everything I needed to know.

I was poor and beneath them. Maybe I wasn't as pretty or as rich as Bethany and the rest of Berkshire, but... Bethany, she felt *threatened* by me.

"I don't slut shame, but I can smell a bitch from a mile away," I said lazily. "You smell of jealousy. Very stanky. Go take a shower, sweetie."

Bethany gave me a disdainful sneer, her face twisting, and I saw all the ugliness she hid beneath the sweet girl mask that everyone loved and bowed down to.

She was Berkshire's official Queen, a pretty face with a nasty soul and a hideous heart. Her minions still had their hands on me, holding me in place and keeping me from attacking them. They had successfully trapped me; my arms twisted painfully behind my back and their knees were pressed into my shoulder blades, keeping me close to the ground.

Bethany crossed her arms over her huge tits, smirking down at me. "How would your grandparents feel if they lost their grocery store? Their only income and source of survival? They've had the store for fifteen years now, right? I guess, it's time to close down."

So, she did her research on me.

Bethany brought her face closer to me, and I saw the evil glint in her eyes. "Tsk, how sad would it be to watch them beg my daddy? I can ruin you and your little family. All I have to do is snap my fingers, and I'll watch you burn to the ground."

Rage bubbled over. She thought I was weak. She and her minions thought I was helpless.

Bethany gripped my jaw, her long nails digging into my sensitive flesh. "Where's Maddox now? Your hero is not here to save you."

I let out a small laugh.

Maddox, my hero?

She was mistaken.

I was my own hero.

I didn't need him to protect me or my family. I was my own protector in this story. Like Maddox once said, I didn't need a prince charming or a knight in shining armor.

Bethany's first mistake was standing too close to me. She had underestimated me. Once again.

My head reared back before I brought it forward, slamming my forehead

into her nose. Hard.

She screamed, her wails piercing, as she pushed away from me. I twisted my arms away, kicked back at my attackers before standing up on my feet again.

I wasted no time and grabbed Bethany by the throat before she could escape and slammed her against the bathroom's wall.

"Don't. Fuck. With. Me," I hissed. Blood gushed from her nose; it wasn't broken, but I knew it was probably painful.

She glared at me, but too bad she was no longer in control. Her friends tried to grab my arms, to pull me away from their queen bee, but I held her tighter. Her throat was small and delicate in my hand.

"Don't fuck with me," I repeated. "You won't like the consequences. You might not like to get your hands dirty, but I don't mind. After all, I'm a poor, dirty rat, right? You don't threaten my grandparents. You don't threaten me. Because trust me, I will destroy you. I have my ways, Bethany Fallon. That's your first and only warning."

I pushed away from her, and she gasped for breath, wheezing. "You... bitch."

Suraiya tried to grab me, but I sidestepped out of her way. "You'll end up with a broken nose, too," I warned.

She smartly took a step back, and I *smiled*. Yeah, maybe I did look like a maniac in the moment, but Riley had been right. I couldn't let them walk all over me.

Bethany's minions surrounded her as she moaned and cried about her nose. I gave them a final glance and walked out of the bathroom.

I wasn't Miss Popular; I wasn't rich or the cheerleading captain... but the lack of these titles didn't make me weak because I was no doormat.

The next time they threatened the people I loved, I'd show them my teeth and claws.

LILA

stumbled out of school, my legs feeling a bit shaky. My knees were bruised from where they had slammed me on the bathroom floor. My lips throbbed, and I could feel a headache coming. That was one hell of a slap, kudos to Bethany.

As I walked through the main gates, the bus drove past me, and I stood there, dumbfounded. Damn it, I missed my bus. Fists clenched, I held in the urge to cry because now was not the time for it.

It was cold. I was moody and in pain.

But I. Would. Not. Cry.

"Lila!"

My steps faltered at the sound of Maddox's voice. Huh.

"Lila, what the fuck?" he called out. I looked over my shoulder to see him running toward me. His mouth was curled in a dark scowl as he approached me.

My dark hair fell as a curtain around my face, and I looked down at my feet. I didn't want him to see the bruises, didn't want his pity or his stupid, mocking laugh.

But Maddox, being Maddox...

He crowded into my space, his front pressing against my back. His arm curled around my waist, and he pulled me into his body.

"How did this happen?" he asked, his voice low and serious.

"What do you want?"

"The back of your skirt is ripped. Doesn't look like an accident. Who did this?"

What?

I pushed away from Maddox and reached behind me to realize that he was right. There was a large tear in my Berkshire skirt, big enough for my panties to be visible and everyone could see it. No wonder I felt the cold breeze on my ass.

Anger flared up inside me, and I let out a shuddering breath.

I didn't want to cry because I was hurt or humiliated. They were tears of outrage, and I swiped at my cheeks, refusing to let Maddox see them.

"*Lila*," Maddox said slowly. The sound of my name came from his lips so softly, as if he cared. It was stupid, but my heart still did a silly jump.

He grasped my shoulders and turned me around to face him. I kept my face lowered, but he was having none of that. His fingers grazed my cheeks, and he brushed my hair away from my face.

When he let out a string of curses, I knew he saw the bruises. His hand clenched my arm, and he dragged me to the bench. I tried to pull out of his grip, but he held tight.

He sat me down and knelt in front of me, looking like a dark, angry warrior. He was...pissed?

"Who did this?" he asked, his voice hard and strained.

"Your girlfriend," I shot back. I wretched my hand from his grasp and crossed my arms over my chest. "She isn't too happy about our friendship status."

His eyes turned into slits, and he gave me a hard look. "Bethany," Maddox hissed under his breath. "She's going to regret this."

I scoffed at that. "I don't need a protector. I can take care of myself."

His lips twitched. Even though his expression was hard and serious, the humor was back in his blue eyes. "No, you're right. You're the dragon."

Ha. Very funny.

I rolled my eyes and looked around us. Most of the students had gone home already, and I was probably two or three of the few who took a bus, since everyone had a car or a driver to pick them up. Perks of being rich, I guessed.

"What are you doing here?"

Maddox dragged his fingers through his hair, still short since his last haircut. I couldn't decide if I liked the long hair better, but I missed his poodle hair.

"Coach needed to speak to me. I was about to leave when I saw you

walking out of the building and noticed the tear in your skirt. Nice panties, by the way. It reminds me of your cherry lips."

Mental facepalm incoming: 3...2...1.

Maddox brought his hand up, his thumb brushing over my sore lips. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

I gave him a sheepish grin. "I can tell you about the part where I broke her nose and choked her."

"Atta girl," he praised out loud. "I was almost worried you were going to tell me you didn't fight back."

He grabbed my water bottle from my bag, and I watched as he wet his handkerchief. Against my nature, I stayed silent and *watched* him. His eyebrows furled in concentration, his lips in a firm, straight line, and his eyes darkened as he studied my bruises.

Maddox pressed the wet handkerchief over my lips, rubbing gently to clean the dried blood. I flinched but stayed still for him. He then swiped it over my cheek, which was almost on fire. Bethany's ring must have caught my skin. I let out a sigh when I realized it would be a nasty green or purple shade tomorrow.

"I don't like how you got hurt because of me," he finally admitted. Maddox touched my cheek, his thumb hovering over my wound. His touch was gentle and soothing.

"Feeling guilty, Poodle?"

His eyes snapped to mine, glaring. "It's not funny."

"What's not funny, *Poodle*?"

"Lila," he warned.

"Yes, Poodle."

"You're hurt!"

I pressed my finger over my cheek and winced, then gave him a nod in confirmation. "Yup, I can feel that."

He fumed, silently. His jaw clenched, and I swore I heard his teeth grinding together. Finally, I let the poor guy out of his misery. "I don't blame you. Bethany was a bitch. I dealt with it, and it's over now. Little scratches can't hurt me because they don't leave permanent scars."

Maddox stood up and offered me a hand. I grabbed it, and he pulled me up to my feet. "Fine. Let me drive you home."

The world came to a halt at his words, and my knees weakened.

I suddenly forgot how to breathe as my eyes watered. Sweat trickled

down my forehead and between my breasts. I choked on my saliva as the gutwrenching feeling in my stomach had me wanting to throw up.

The long, jagged scar between my breasts throbbed with a ghostly ache, a reminder. It wasn't painful anymore, but my body and my mind remembered the pain.

"No," I choked out.

Maddox gripped me by the elbow. "For fuck's sake, Lila. Just let me—" "No!"

He didn't understand; he didn't fucking understand.

I stumbled back and away from him, desperately trying to count backward.

Ten... nine...eight...

"Lila."

His voice sounded so far away, as if I was submerged under water, and he was yelling at me from the sky.

Seven...six... five...four...three...two...one.

I opened my eyes and took a shuddering deep breath. Maddox was staring at me with an unreadable expression, and it angered me, not knowing what he was thinking.

Was it pity? Or was he judging me? Did he even notice I just had an anxiety attack?

"I'll take the bus... thank you for the...offer though," I spoke, trying to hide the tremors in my voice.

He took a long moment but finally gave me a slow nod. Maddox silently peeled his blazer off his body. I didn't expect it, but he stepped closer to me, his body flush against mine. He was a whole head taller, so he towered over me. He wrapped his arms around my waist, and I stilled, my lips parting in shock. When I looked down, I saw him tying a knot with the sleeves of his blazer around my hips. It laid heavily against the back of my ass and legs.

He was... covering up my ripped skirt.

"I got you," he breathed in my ear, before pulling away.

I opened my mouth to say thank you, but I couldn't find the words. Maddox looked over my shoulder and gave me a small smile. "The bus is here."

I nodded, still stupidly silent. Say something, damnit. Anything.

His hands were shoved in his pockets as he watched me climb into the bus. I settled in the back, like always. Maddox was still watching me.

I pressed my palm against the window, and he grinned, boyish and sexy. *Thank you*, I mouthed as the bus drove away.

~

THE NEXT MORNING, as I stepped out of the house, Maddox and his car were there waiting. He rolled down his window and beckoned me over.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "Stalker much, Coulter?"

He handed me a brown paper bag. "Good morning to you, too, Sweet Cheeks. You look better today. No bruises, I see."

My bruises, which I had successfully been able to hide from my grandparents, were covered with makeup. I shrugged and took whatever Maddox was offering me. "Makeup did the trick."

I peeked inside the bag. Mint. Chocolate. Muffin. Oh my God!

"You-"

"You're welcome," he said.

I let out a laugh. "Seriously, what are you doing?"

"I thought you said we were friends."

I eyed him suspiciously. "We are."

"So, I'm getting you breakfast. You and Riley tend to share lunch, right?"

I couldn't decide if this was sweet or dorky, neither of which suited Maddox Coulter. I gave his SUV a once over. "I'm not getting in your car if you're trying to bribe me with my favorite muffin. For all I know, you could be a kidnapper or an axe murderer."

Maddox winked. "I'd make a sexy axe murderer, admit it."

I rolled my eyes, for the umpteenth time, and took a bite of my mint chocolate muffin. "My bus is here," I muttered around a mouthful. I bent down, so we were eye-level and gave him a smirk of my own. "You can follow me to school. Like you followed me home yesterday. You need to improve your stalking skills, Coulter."

The look on his face was comical. Busted, Poodle.

I winked and sashayed away.

We rode to Berkshire separately, although it didn't quite feel like it. The muffin he gave me kept me company. I tried to devour it slowly, but mint chocolate was my one and only weakness.

Maddox was waiting for me at the gate when I stepped off the bus. He

hoisted his bag on one shoulder and gripped my hand. Surprised, I looked down at our interlocked fingers as he pulled me into the building. Wh-what?

"What are you doing?" I asked with caution.

"Holding your hand."

His hand was warm and strong. I wasn't sure how to feel about it, but I didn't pull away. "Why?"

His eyes briefly met mine before he went back to staring everyone else down. "Because I need the world to know they can't mess with what's mine."

It was on the tip of my tongue to rebut him. I didn't need a savior, didn't need to cower behind Maddox's back because I could handle all the haters on my own. Yesterday, I let my claws out and I was no longer worried about using them.

But when I saw the look on his face, hard and serious—I swallowed the words.

Something in his eyes told me he wasn't going to budge on this matter.

I didn't know *why* I kept silent and let him hold my hand. It bugged me why I did it, but then I pushed the feeling down.

We marched through the halls, and the students stepped out of our way, like the ocean parting in half for us to walk through.

I bit my tongue, held my chin high and kept my hand in Maddox's. His grip was firm, but comforting. I expected the whispers to follow us but was met with...nothing.

BY LUNCH TIME, I couldn't bite my tongue any longer. The day went on just like this morning. The other students avoided eye-contact, no one glared or sneered at me and no one dared to approach me. Even Riley found it odd.

When Maddox reached for my fries, I slapped his hand away and leveled him with a look. "Did you do something? Did you threaten people? They're acting weird."

Riley gave me a grunt of agreement.

Maddox took a bite of his sandwich, simultaneously throwing an arm around the back my chair, before glancing around the cafeteria to give his *kingdom* a once over. "I think you were threatening enough for both of us."

"Huh?"

"Bethany's nose isn't broken, but you did a number on her. Gossip travels fast."

"They're scared of me?"

"They're scared of *us*," he amended.

I picked at my fries, no longer hungry. "Am I going to get in trouble... for hurting Bethany?"

Colton pushed back against his chair, rocking on the two back legs. "No, you won't. We took care of that already."

My eyes snapped to Maddox, frowning. "So, you did threaten someone."

The side of his lips quirked up. "I have my ways."

I should've been mad; I should've told him to mind his own business.

I really should have.

But then I had a brief moment of realization – he was *protecting* me. Even though I told him numerous times that I didn't want him to. It was a very different Maddox, from the one who was jerk to me and it was shocking to the say the least. I was curious how far he'd go... to be my friend.

The moment Maddox and I did that pinky swear outside of my Gran's grocery store, it became obvious that my business was his and his was mine. It was an unspoken understanding between us.

We both shared a smile.

And that was it.

The beginning of something Maddox and I weren't ready for.

That day, we somehow sealed our friendship.

Friends?

Yeah, friends.

MADDOX

hree weeks later

LILA SLAMMED her thick textbook closed and growled low in her throat. If she thought she was being intimidating, she was highly mistaken. That was a kitten growl, cute and harmless.

"You're distracting me. Stop!" she said through clenched teeth, keeping her voice low since we were both huddled in a corner of the library.

"What am I doing?" I feigned innocence because, seriously, my favorite pastime was annoying her.

She was studying for our upcoming calculus test while I was watching... porn. Okay, fine. Not exactly porn. But Tumblr was *nasty*, and I was making a habit of showing Lila all the videos I came across. Miss Garcia didn't find that amusing, but it was hilarious to me, so she was growling and hissing. Like I said, a kitten.

I didn't know if I had a semi-boner because of the videos I was watching or because Lila was sitting across me. Probably a bit of both.

"Do you realize you're the most frustrating person I've ever met in my life?" she finally snapped. I bit my tongue to keep from laughing.

I'd give her credit, though, for lasting three weeks as my *friend*.

I thought she would break, but no, Lila was fierce, something I greatly admired about her.

She plugged her earphones in and went back to her textbook. Her

notebook was filled with equations as she did the practice questions over and over again. Over the past few weeks, I've learned a few things about Lila:

- 1. She was a perfectionist.
- 2. She wanted to get into Harvard and was still waiting on her confirmation letter to come through. Every day, she grew more anxious, although she tried hard to hide it.

Since I got a football scholarship, I already had an early acceptance to Harvard.

- 1. She loved her grandparents dearly.
- 2. She was way too competitive.

Two minutes later, Lila gave up. She snatched her earphones out and glared at me. I tried to wipe the grin off my face, but damn it, it was hard when she was being so... *cute*.

"I know you're getting into Harvard with a football scholarship but don't your marks need to be just as good, or you could lose your scholarship?"

I swiped out of Tumblr as she ranted. My textbook and notebook laid in front me, untouched. "Yeah."

"Then, why are you not taking any of your classes seriously?"

Ah, so she was on my case. I refrained from rolling my eyes and shrugged instead. "I don't care."

"So, you're okay with not playing football after high school and losing your scholarship?"

That made me pause.

I didn't care about school or Harvard... but football was my kryptonite. Similar to how Lila was my favorite drug of choice, sweet and so fucking addictive.

I was MC – Maddox Coulter, Berkshire's reckless quarterback and Casanova.

But there was just something about Lila that kept me...grounded. It wasn't exactly a bad thing but it wasn't a good thing either. I didn't like how she could get under my skin, and I didn't like how she could read me so easily. It made me feel... weak, like that time in the closet. She saw

everything I didn't want anyone to see. And even now, she could see through me.

"It doesn't matter. I'm getting into Harvard either way."

"Because your parents are going to buy your way into Harvard. Gotcha."

My head snapped up at the tone of her voice. She sounded... *disappointed*. In me.

My parents were on the Board of Directors for Harvard. It didn't matter if my marks weren't good, I wasn't going to lose my scholarship. They'd make sure of it. After all, that was all they ever did for me. Pay my way through Berkshire, throw a cheque at me, give me a fancy car for my birthday although they were never actually present on the day... it was all ever materialistic to them. Harvard was no different. Maybe paying for me to get in Harvard would actually remind them they did in fact have a son.

"You're getting into Harvard because of your parents." She paused, giving me a look as she studied me. "How about for once in your life, you don't depend on your parents' money and reputation. Why don't you do it for *you*? On your own. Through your own hard work and failures... and success on your own merits."

Her eyes bore into mine, looking...searching into my soul.

My jaw clenched and the muscles in my cheeks twitched. "Thanks for the pep talk, Garcia. Do I need to slow clap?"

"Still an unapologetic asshole," she whispered. Lila looked thoughtful for a second before she leaned closer, her face a mere inch away from mine. "I dare you..."

Bewildered, I let out a laugh. "What?"

Lila didn't laugh. In fact, I'd never seen her more serious. The look on her face made me capitulate, and my laughter turned into a coughing fit as she waited, patiently.

When I cleared my throat, she nudged her chin high and gave me another one of her I'm-serious-right-now looks. "I dare you to get into Harvard on your own, to keep your scholarship without your parents' help."

I blinked.

Then blinked again.

She was kidding, right?

"Chop chop. Gotta work your ass off, Coulter." Lila paused and gave me a mock gasp. "Oh wait... don't tell me, are you chickening out? Gonna lose this dare? Tsk, so disappointing. Here I thought *the* Maddox Coulter will

never turn down a dare."

She was goading me, waiting for a reaction.

Fuck it.

She got me.

Lila got the reaction she wanted.

I gripped the back of her neck and brought her face closer to mine. She had to lean forward, half of her body bending over the table. Her lips parted with a silent gasp, and her eyes darkened. "I accept this dare."

Her lips twitched, and she smirked. Yeah, I was definitely rubbing off on her. Miss Perfectionist was now a she-devil.

"Good luck because you're about to get your ass kicked. First level of this dare, you have to pass this calculus test."

"Easy fucking peasy."

"Really?" She raised an eyebrow, not at all convinced.

"I'm a genius, Sweet Cheeks."

Little did she know...

She cocked her head to the side, her hair falling over one shoulder. Lila looked every bit the wet dream she was - sexy, smart as hell, bold and passionate.

And my friend.

My dick was regretting this and begging for mercy.

Goddamn it.

She gave me a sugary smile. "Game on."



FOUR HOURS LATER, Lila closed her textbook. She leaned her head back against the chair and stretched, a small groan escaping her lips. I didn't know how she did it, but Lila barely came up for air in those four hours. Her eyes barely came off her textbook.

I closed my own notebook and studied my little friend. "Ready to go home?"

"Yeah, I'm exhausted." She piled her things in her shoulder bag and stood up.

"Will you let me give you a ride this time?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

Lila paused. "No."

I didn't push because the day she lost her shit on me was still a vivid memory in my mind. She panicked when I asked her to get in the car; I saw it in her eyes, on her face and the way her body trembled.

My fists clenched at my sides. The question was on the tip of my tongue as her lips pursed.

"The bus will be here in ten minutes. You can leave now if you want."

I stood up next to her, and we walked out of the library. "I'll wait."

Because...

Just... because.

We waited at the bus stop. Lila shivered, and I could hear her teeth rattling from the cold.

"Lila," I started.

"Hmm?"

My lips parted; I went to ask the question that has been burning inside me for the longest time, but I couldn't form the sentence. Lila lifted her head up and stared, waiting.

"You refuse to get in a car... is it because of your accident?"

Lila gave me a wide-eye grimace, and I instantly regretted probing. The crestfallen look on her face, as if she had been sucker-punched and viciously thrown into a lake where she couldn't swim back up for oxygen – *that* almost gutted me.

Her eyes were tortured, and they reminded me of myself when I looked in the mirror.

"Your parents..."

"They died in that car accident," she whispered. Each word felt like they had been torn from her throat, raw and painful. "I was... I was the only one... the only survivor. They... died...they didn't... pull through."

I cupped her cheek. "Is that why you can't get in a car?"

She nodded, one slow nod. Lila silently spilled her secrets, so trusting of me, and my heart thudded in my chest.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the bus approaching. She must have noticed it too because her eyes darted that way, and she quietly sniffled.

Lila looked like she was swallowing a bitter lump of tears. My fingers brushed against her cold cheeks, and she gazed at me with burning eyes, her chest heaving.

One single tear trailed down her cheek, and I caught it before swiping it

away.

I'm sorry, I wanted to say.

She gave me the tiniest smile, so strong yet so delicate. *It's okay. Thank you*, her eyes told me.

Lila took a step back, and my hand fell away from her face. I wanted to keep her pinned to me, wanted to hug her... but when she nudged her chin high and regarded me with red eyes, shining with fierce intensity, I let her go.

She didn't need me to swoop in to be her hero or her protector.

Long after the bus had disappeared from my view and she was gone, I stayed at the bus stop, with an overwhelming set of emotions swimming inside of me.

What started out as a game for me was not a game anymore.

Lila was truly and honestly my...friend.

The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her. In fact, I didn't like the thought of her hurting at all. I didn't know when or how it happened. But too soon, Lila became someone important to me.

Maybe it was when she hugged me in that dark closet and sang me a lullaby.

Or when she had offered me that tuna sandwich.

Or maybe it was when I wrapped my pinky around hers and did that silly pinky swear.

But somehow, Lila Garcia became more than just my prey.

She was someone I wanted to protect.

From the world.

From *me*.

LILA

wo months later

I STAYED by my locker after the last bell rang, keeping a close eye on Riley and Grayson. She approached him, blushing and stuttering as she asked him about yesterday's homework. It was an excuse to talk to him. They chatted for less than five minutes before Riley gave Grayson a warm smile and bounced away.

It was so quick; anyone would have missed it. But I was looking and I caught Grayson watching her leave, his stare intense and his lips twisting with amused smile. Grayson rarely ever smiled.

From the corner of my eyes, I noticed someone else watching the encounter. Colton had his hands shoved in the pockets of his beige slacks as he leaned against his locker. His jaw clenched, and I swore the corners of his eyes twitch. No, that must have been my imagination.

But something was up with him, and it piqued my curiosity.

I snuck a glance at my phone, half expecting a text to pop up, but... nothing. Damn it, I was starting to worry now.

"Colton," I called out as he walked past me.

He paused and jerked his chin up at me in greeting. "Sup, Lila?"

"Did you see Maddox today? He's not replying to my texts or answering my calls," I asked cautiously.

An unreadable expression passed over Colton's face, and he scratched his

chin before looking down at his own phone as if waiting for it to light up with a text, too. "No. He's not replying to mine either."

That was weird. Maddox never went radio silent on us, well... *me* before today. In fact, he was always the first to pester me in the early morning and until late at night with his horrible and silly jokes.

Maddox: What's black, red, black, red, black, red?

Me: Idk. Let me sleep.

Maddox: A zebra with a sunburn.

He always found a random joke to tell me at night; that was our goodnight. At first, I didn't know if it was weird, annoying or... sweet. But after a few weeks, I'd grown used to it and had come to expect it every night after I climbed into bed.

Maddox: What's green and sits crying in the corner?

Me: Bye.

Maddox: The Incredible Sulk. C'mon, admit it. This one is funny.

Me: Ha. Ha. G'night.

Maddox's face faded into the background as I focused my attention on Colton again. "Is something...wrong? What about the surprise party we're throwing him later today?"

Two months after our truce and the beginning of our friendship, Maddox had successfully passed the semester with good enough marks to keep his scholarship at Harvard.

I knew Maddox would never back down from a dare because he was no loser. But Maddox Coulter forgot to mention he was a genius. Not Einstein genius, but we all thought he was never paying attention to his classes. Apparently, he *was*, and he wasn't braindead like I believed. In fact, Maddox was probably smarter than me, and this was something I begrudgingly admitted. His brain was working overtime to catch up on his classes, and he did it. Quite successfully.

One semester down.

One more to go.

After our exam marks came in, we decided to throw Maddox a little surprise party. Just his close friends, nothing too big. That was supposed to be tonight.

Except Maddox was nowhere to be found.

"Sometimes..."

I looked at Colton, waiting for him to continue. "What?"

"He likes to disappear for a day or two," Colton slowly admitted.

"So, something is wrong?"

He must have seen the alarm on my face because he was already shaking his head. "Not exactly. It's just... some days, Maddox gets low. He doesn't like to be around people when he's feeling like that."

I grabbed my shoulder bag and slammed my locker close. "Do you know where he is right now? Where he goes when he's like this?"

Colton gripped my shoulder, his face intense as he pinned me with a harsh stare. "Listen, Lila. It's best you leave him alone when he's like this."

"He's my friend," I claimed out loud.

Colton let out a humorless laugh. "He's my best friend. So what?"

"I know him." I wrenched away from his grasp and glared.

"I know him better than you," he said simply. "I've known him since we were kids."

But he hasn't seen Maddox like I had... trapped in that broom closet, screaming to be let out... crying and begging for someone to save him.

Colton didn't see that Maddox. I had. I held him and sung to him.

I gnawed at my lower lips, Colton's warnings ringing in my ears, but my need to run to Maddox and to make sure he was okay was strong.

"Don't do it, Lila. Leave him alone. He'll come back when he's ready."

I hefted my bag over my shoulder and stepped away from him. "Here's something you need to know about me, Colton. I don't listen well to warnings."

"You can't fix him," he said to my back.

No, I couldn't.

But that was the thing... I didn't want to fix him.

I wanted to hold his hand.

Nothing more; nothing less.

So, I did the opposite of what Colton told me. I took a bus to Maddox's house, er... mansion. That would be my first stop, and I hoped he was there. If not, then I was about to go on a wild goose chase. If he didn't want to see me, I'd leave – but after making sure he was *alive*.

The Maddox I knew didn't disappear and go radio silent on his friends.

No, the Maddox I befriended was an annoying, pestering jerk. Like the time he gave me roses.

Maddox was walking toward me with... flowers? What the hell?

I leaned against my locker and gave him a look, a look that said – what

are you up to now?

He halted in front of me with a smirk I wanted to smother with a pillow. I raised an eyebrow and nodded to the flowers in his hands. "What are those?"

"Roses," he said, looking mighty proud of himself.

"For you." I rolled my eyes.

"They're dead, Maddox."

He gave me a petulant look, like a child who had their favorite toy taken away. "Yeah, dead like my heart because you won't let my dick anywhere near you because you friend zoned me. So here you go. Roses for you, Garcia."

"You need to see a shrink. I don't think you're mentally stable," I announced, already walking away from him.

He fell into step beside me. "You won't accept my roses? I'm hurt."

My lips twitched. Okay, it was really hard to stay serious when Maddox was in one of his pranking moods.

"You're so fucking silly. I don't know if I should laugh or... be concerned."

"Anything to see that smile on your face," he said with a grin.

And it was then I noticed, I was smiling. It had been a frustrating day, one of those days where nothing seemed to go my way. I was feeling moody and a tad bitchy, but here I was...

Instead of being annoyed with Maddox like I would have been before our truce, I was smiling. Damn it, this wasn't good. He couldn't have me smiling so easily.

"Are you flirting with me, Coulter?" I still couldn't wipe the grin off my face.

"Are you falling for it, Garcia?" He shot back, his eyes dancing with mischief.

"No," I deadpanned.

"Good. The harder you play to get, the more fun this game is."

"I'm not playing hard to get. We're friends," I stretched out the last word, putting more emphasis on it. Because obviously, Maddox didn't understand the meaning of 'just friends.'

Maddox let out a small chuckle. "Oh, I know. Besties forever. I'll do your nails and you'll do my hair type of shit." He paused, glancing down at me with a wicked smirk that should have warned me of what was about to come

out of his mouth. "That won't stop me from trying to slide into your ass though."

I missed a step and stumbled forward before quickly regaining my footing. Sputtering, I glared at him. "My... ass...?"

Why did my voice come out like a squeak? Damn you, Maddox. You and your filthy mouth and dirty thoughts.

Maddox put himself in front of my path, so he was walking backward, facing me. "I'm an ass man, baby. You got enough to fill my two hands. And my hands are big enough to handle you."

Hmm. Oh really? He was almost too easy because I just found the MC's weakness.

"My ass makes you weak?"

He nodded. "Weak to the fucking knees."

I paused, lifted my chin up and regarded him with a regal look. If I made him weak in the knees, then...

"Great. Get to your knees and beg for it then. You might change my mind if you ask nicely."

He blinked, looking bewildered. "Wait, really?"

"Try and we'll see."

I forced myself not to laugh at the hopeful expression on his face. Poor baby. Maddox quickly got on one knee, in a proposal stance and presented me with the bouquet of dead roses. He gave me his most sincere look and asked, "Can I please fuck your ass?"

He said the words as if he was asking me to marry him, and this was some grand proposal. Don't laugh, Lila. Don't. You. Dare. Laugh.

I brought a hand up, tapping my index finger against my jaw in a thoughtful manner. His eyebrows furrowed, and he started to look suspicious.

I let my own smirk show. "Hmm. Not nice enough for me. Sorry, try again next time."

"What?" He let out a mock gasp, but I caught the grin on his face before I stepped around him.

Giving him a final glance over my shoulder, I winked.

"What a man would do for a piece of ass," he grumbled loud enough for me to hear.

I marched away, and maaaybeee, I put an extra sway in my hips – giving him a good look of the ass he wanted so much but couldn't have. What could I say in my defense? It was fun teasing a man like Maddox.

I smiled as the memory faded away, and the bus came to a stop at Maddox's place. I had been here a few times, even got to know his butler, Mr. Hokinson. I didn't know people in this day and age had butlers, but apparently, people as rich as the Coulters did, in fact, have butlers.

I waved at the guard and walked through the gate. Mr. Hokinson was already at the door, as I expected. He must have been alerted by the gatekeeper the moment I stepped foot onto the property.

"Good afternoon, Miss Garcia," he said politely with a slight southern drawl and a little bow. Cute, old Mr. Hokinson.

"Is Maddox home?" I asked, sounding hopeful even to my own ears.

He gave me a tentative nod, as if this was a secret. "He is, Miss Garcia. But he hasn't left his room since this morning. He didn't come down for breakfast or lunch, so we know to leave him alone."

My fists clenched at my sides. "And his parents?"

Mr. Hokinson swallowed, averting his gaze from mine, but didn't answer. Ever so loyal, what a joke.

"I wish to see him."

He sidestepped into my path when I tried to walk around him. "I'm sorry, but I can't allow you."

I raised an eyebrow and gave him a polite smile, even though I was feeling anything but. "Please tell me, Mr. Hokinson. Did Maddox tell you to keep me outside? Has anyone specifically said I'm not allowed into this house? Because from what I remember... Maddox said I can come and go any time I want. I have free rein, don't I? Even you're aware of that."

The old man blinked and pursed his lips in silence. "Are you going against his words? I'm not sure he's going to like that."

"He-"

"I just want to know if he's okay, and I'll leave," I interrupted before he could give me another excuse. Before Mr. Hokinson could stop me, I walked around him and into the house.

I took the stairs two at a time to his room. His door wasn't locked, but I still knocked. Once, twice... four times, but there was no reply.

With caution, I opened the door and peeked inside. Nothing. Empty. Bare. No Maddox.

I walked inside to find the heavy drapes still down, blocking any sunlight from entering the dark room. There was something gloomy about the atmosphere. His bathroom's door was open, though, and I could hear the water running.

There he was...

My brain stuttered for a moment and a shocked gasp escaped me. The sight of him had me stumbling and rushing into the bathroom. "Maddox!"

No. No. Please, no.

I fell to my knees beside the overfilled tub. He sat inside, fully clothed with an empty bottle of...

God, no.

Maddox stunk of alcohol and cigarettes. I almost gagged at how heavy the smell was. His eyes were closed, his head barely staying above water. My heart fell to the pit of my stomach, cramped and twisting with nausea at the distraught look on his beautiful face. There were shadows under his eyes, as if he didn't sleep the night before.

I cupped his cheek. "Hey, Maddox." I gave him a gentle shake.

His bloodshot eyes fluttered open, and I could see the naked pain in his eyes. Maddox, strong and carefree Maddox, looked... beaten. Not physically. There were no injuries marking his body, but he looked wounded in spirit.

"Oh, baby. What happened?" He didn't respond, not that I was expecting a reply.

"Go away," he grumbled under his breath. God, he was pissed drunk. How many drinks did he have?

"And leave you in the tub like this?" I asked gently. "I can't leave you now, Maddox."

Maddox closed his eyes, his shoulders slumping further into the water. "Don't... need a... lecture."

There was a strain in his voice – a voice that used to be full of warmth – now so cold and… empty.

"We need to get you to bed. You can sleep this off, but you need a bed. Not a tub full of ice water."

Maddox was stubborn, but so was I.

He gritted his teeth, a storm flashing across his face. "Fuck... off. *Leave*." "No."

He let out an empty laugh. "Then how about... you shut the fuck up... and sit on my face instead? Be a nice... give me good... pussy and cheer me... up, why don't you?"

That was drunk Maddox speaking, I reminded myself. He was barricading himself against me, trying to be hurtful and mean – to push me

away.

I blew out a frustrated breath and reached under his armpits, pulling him up. He sat forward, and the water sluiced onto the sides. I turned off the running tap with one hand while supporting Maddox's limp body against the crook of my arm. "I'm going to ignore what you just said. But still, you need to get out of this tub before you catch pneumonia," I mumbled. "Don't be a jerk."

His clothes were soaked through, and I couldn't get him in bed in this state. Shit.

His eyes closed, and his head slumped over my shoulders, with his nose buried in my neck. A shiver racked through my body because Maddox was practically freezing as I dragged him out of the tub.

"I'm sorry," I said in a low voice. "But I'm going to have to get you out of these clothes."

Maddox was going to catch a cold if I left him like this. He mumbled something under his breath as a response. He settled on the edge of the tub as I peeled his wet shirt over his head. It wasn't my first-time seeing Maddox shirtless, but I still found myself pausing to stare.

Maddox was ripped, sculptured and...

No, stop! Don't look.

I averted my gaze and worked efficiently, trying my hardest not to stare longer than I needed at his naked body. He slurred more profanities at me, but I chose to ignore all of them. Once he was clad in his grey sweatpants and a shirt I found lying on the floor in his room, I dragged Maddox out of the bathroom.

My knees almost buckled under his weight. "Jesus, you're heavy."

He snorted in response as his body shuddered violently.

I *hated* this.

I was angry, so goddamn furious, that nobody thought to check on him. His parents or Mr. Hokinson. Anyone, damn it! What if I hadn't found him when I did? He could have accidentally drowned himself or... worse.

I was livid and fuck...

My heart *ached*.

How could Maddox be so careless? Didn't he understand how precious life was... and how easily it could slip out of our grasp? In a blink of an eye... everything – *gone*.

Tears burnt the back of my eyes, and I sniffled. "Why, Maddox? God,

why?"

"Stop being a bitch... come and sit on my dick if... you won't stop yapping..." he slurred.

"I'm going to throw you on your ass if you throw one more insult at me, Maddox," I warned him. He stumbled and jerked out of my grasp, swearing under his breath.

"You're all bark and no fucking bite, Garcia," Maddox snarled, his eyes opened into slits.

He was angry – about something. I didn't know what, but if I could take a lucky guess, it had to do with his parents.

I understood that. But he didn't have to be an asshole.

When he stumbled again, his legs giving out under him, I grabbed his arm and hauled him to bed. Once he settled on the mattress, he swatted my hand away. It didn't hurt, but it still stung.

With my hands on my hips, I squinted down at him. "Don't do this, Maddox. I'm going to walk away."

The warning gained me a reaction, a small one. He opened his bloodshot eyes and stared at me, his expression a mask of unfiltered pain. "Then go. That's what they always do anyway. Walk away."

Goddamn it, did he have to hurt my heart like this?

I rubbed a hand over the ache in my chest, attempting to relieve the dull pain there.

"There is no reason for you to be mean to me when I'm only trying to help," I said softy, running my fingers through his wet hair. "Don't push me away."

Maddox let out a mocking laugh and closed his eyes. So be it.

I got off the bed and was only able to take a step away before he grabbed my hand. Firm and strong, even in his state. "Don't go. Don't leave...me," he croaked. The cracks in his voice made me pause. "I'm scared... scared of being alone."

I settled back on the bed again, all fight leaving me in one breath.

Maddox wasn't complicated in ways everyone liked to believe. Once I got to know him, I really saw him, the real *him*, and realized that he only hid behind a mask.

"You can't do this, Maddox. You can't be an asshole and then ask me to stay with that look on your face." Like a kicked puppy, a lost boy, a broken man. My sweet Maddox, with a heart of gold.

"Don't wanna lose you," he mumbled. Maddox grasped my hand in his, albeit clumsily, because he was still really drunk. Our fingers interlaced together, and his hold tightened.

I gave his hand a squeeze in comfort and in warning. "I don't do toxic relationships."

His eyes cracked open, and he gave me a small smile. There was something melancholy about it. He had the appearance of a desperate man, starving and reaching blindly toward *something*, but it always escaped out of his grasp before he could grab hold. Maddox was breaking my heart, and there was nothing I could do to end this suffering.

"We're not in a relationship."

I knew that but I still asked. Maybe I was a glutton for pain. "Then, what are we?"

His gaze fixated on me again, eyes so blue they looked like the midwinter sky – beautiful yet dreary. "You're... more," he whispered the confession. "Don't leave, *Lila*."

He said my name like a prayer, as if he was whispering all his hopes to heaven.

With that said, he closed his eyes again, and this time, he was no longer conscious. I looked down at our hands, and I swallowed back my tears. "What are you doing to me, Maddox?"

Before I could think twice about my actions, I climbed under the comforter and joined him. His body was still cold, but slowly regaining its warmth. Under the strong smell of alcohol and tobacco, his scent still lingered. Warm, rich and earthy...

I didn't know when it happened or why I didn't realize it until now, but Maddox's familiar scent brought me comfort.

I curled into his side; our fingers still intertwined. He needed me; he needed his friend. "I'm not leaving. Pinky swear."

Maddox was bad.

There was a boy once, a boy just like him, who ruined me and left me scarred.

Maddox was everything I stayed away from; he was everything I didn't need in my life.

I told myself... never again. I'd never let myself be weak around men like Maddox.

But no matter how much I tried to walk away, to put distance between us,

to somehow end this *friendship*... he wouldn't let go.

He was bad. He smoked, he was too hasty about life, he liked to break the law, he broke girls like me – he left a trail of shattered hearts behind him, and he didn't care about anything. I thought... maybe it was because no one taught him how to care for another human being.

I saw a few glimpses of the Maddox he tried to hide from everyone, the Maddox who just wanted his parents' approval – *that* Maddox was starving for attention.

There were a hundred reasons why he was bad for me.

But all those reasons became insignificant when I realized he didn't want to hurt me. At first, I was skeptical. I was waiting for Maddox to do what he was best at – break hearts.

But he didn't.

Weeks went by.

Two months passed.

I realized Maddox Coulter was a little bit ruined, a little bit messy, a little bit broken -- a beautiful disaster.

Like *me*.

All those reasons were no longer important, because every morning, he'd wait outside my grandparents' home, he'd hand me a muffin and follow my bus to school. Every afternoon, he'd sit with me and *study* – something he hasn't done in years. He hated studying, he hated opening a textbook, but he did it anyway. Because of a dare, because of me – he did it for me.

It was silly, it was something so little, yet...

I couldn't let go of my friend.

He was annoying but hilarious. He was the world's biggest asshole – a douchebag by definition. In fact, he'd take that trophy home. Asshole of the decade.

He angered me, made me want to scream in frustration, he drove me utterly crazy, but as much as he had me sighing in exasperation and rolling my eyes... he made me smile.

Maddox was out of his mind: too careless, too reckless, too foolish.

But he was the chaos to the perfect world I had built around me – a world where I kept my heart carefully guarded.

Miss Perfectionist, he liked to say.

Hmph. Maddox made my world a little bit less... perfect.

LILA

s I came awake again, for the fifth time this night, I realized it wasn't night anymore. The heavy curtains were still drawn, but I could see the sunlight through the slits.

My hands landed on a wall of muscle, warm and strong. I could feel his heart beating under my palm. My gaze slid up his chest, neck, squared jaw and finally, his eyes.

I realized two things.

One - I spent the night with Maddox, and I slept for over twelve hours, and he had slept even more.

Two – Maddox was awake, and he was staring down at me with an unreadable expression.

"Hi?" I mumbled.

Shit, shit. Shit!

I meant to leave in the middle of the night, after making sure Maddox was alright.

But I must have passed out and now...

This wasn't my first time sleeping next to a man. Well, my ex-boyfriend and I shared a bed a few times. But he was a boy. A lanky, inexperienced boy. Maddox was not a *boy*.

I wasn't shy or inexperienced, per say.

But I wasn't sure I liked the way Maddox was staring at me. The expression on his face made my stomach flip and clench. A shiver racked through my body; except, I wasn't cold. In fact, I was very, *very* warm. Maddox was a human heater.

His eyes were dark and intense, no longer dull or bloodshot.

"Stop looking at me like that," I grumbled, pushing away from his body. The sight of his dirty blond, disheveled hair, eyes glinting with something unspoken, full lips slightly parted, wide and strong shoulders — there was a masculine aura around him. He made me feel small and... feminine.

"What are you doing here?" he finally spoke.

I sat up, chewing on my bottom lip. "You don't remember..."

Maddox rubbed a hand over his face and rolled over onto his back. "I do. But, I mean, in my bed. Not that I mind, but I just didn't expect it when I woke up. Nice surprise there, Sweet Cheeks."

Ah, so he was back to the normal Maddox.

"I fell asleep," I admitted. I didn't know how to make this not awkward. "But I should probably leave now."

I got off the bed, but the sound of my name from his rough, sleepy voice made me pause. "Lila."

"Yes?"

I glanced back at him. Maddox was on his side, facing me and propped up on one elbow, \casual and at ease. There were so many differences between the two Maddoxs I had seen in the last twenty hours.

"Thank you," he said. There was something akin to *affection* in his voice. My chest tightened with an unfamiliar emotion. My mouth opened, but I never got a chance to tell him it was okay.

A knock sounded on the door, and Mr. Hokinson's voice came through. "Your parents are asking you to come down for breakfast."

There was a flash of annoyance and twisted fury on Maddox's face. "You can tell them to fuck off, thanks."

"Good morning to you, too," Mr. Hokinson said before his steps faded away.

"Maddox-" I started.

"No, Lila," he growled.

He climbed off the bed and went into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. I flinched at that and stood where I was, waiting for him to calm down.

Ten minutes later, he was standing in front of me again. Arms crossed, he leveled me with a warning. "Stay out of this."

"What happened yesterday?" I shot back.

He surprised me by answering. "Bad day."

I took a step forward, reaching out to him. "Maddox..."

In a moment of renewed anger, his chest vibrated with another threatening growl. His jaw clenched, and I wondered how it didn't crack under the pressure. "I called my father to tell him about my final marks."

Oh no. No, I didn't like where this was going.

"He hung up on me because he was too busy. When he came home, I mustered up the courage and told him. You know what he said?"

I shook my head. *I'm sorry*.

His lips curled up into a snarl as he mimicked his father's voice. "Who did you bribe for those marks, Maddox?"

Hot, nasty fury coursed through my body. *For* Maddox. He continued, spitting out the words like they burnt him from the inside.

"He doesn't believe in me. Father dearest probably thinks I fucked my way through my teachers to pass my exams. So, you see? Lila, it doesn't matter. If I get into Harvard on my own or if I passed my semester. None of this fucking matter!"

My heartbeat pounded in my chest. "Yes, it does."

"No," he hissed.

I stalked over to where he was standing and cupped his cheeks. "Look at me! It does matter, Maddox."

He tried to jerk away from me, but I didn't let go. "I don't care what your dad says, but you worked your ass off for this. I saw it with my own eyes. You should be proud of yourself. And if you can't believe it, then let me tell you. I am so proud of you. Got it?"

His lips thinned into a straight line, his eyes going distant. "Lila-"

"I'm proud of you," I whispered, rubbing my thumb over his clenching jaw, the muscle relaxing under my touch.

His eyes squeezed close. "Fuuuuck," he muttered under his breath.

I let out a small laugh, hoping it would rub off on Maddox. "Well, Poodle. That's one way to put it."

His eyes snapped opened, clear as the sky, and he grasped my hand, pulling me toward the door.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

There was a renewed urgency in his voice when he spoke. "Breakfast. Let's go."

Well shit...

"Um, can I brush my teeth first?"

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, we were sitting at the table with his parents. It was my first time meeting them, and his father barely gave me a once over before going back to his tablet. His mother sent me a tentative smile before avoiding eye contact. She munched on her toast while an awkward silence fell upon us.

"We didn't know you had someone over, Maddox."

His father's voice was deep and uninviting. There was a harsh coldness to it. Mr. Coulter gave me an unappreciative glance, and I frowned. Did he...?

Holy shit, he thought I was Maddox's fuck buddy or last night's conquest.

And he probably though Maddox brought me to the table just for the sake of causing a ruckus. Well, that explained one thing. Maddox got his assholish ways from his father.

I cleared my throat. "My apologies, we haven't met before. I'm Maddox's friend."

"Friend?" His father gave me a dismissive flick of his hand.

"Brad," his wife warned in a low voice. The tension in the air was palpable, so thick someone could choke on it. My throat went dry, and I tried to swallow several times.

"What's your name?" Mrs. Coulter seemed to be more... approachable. The lack of judgement in her eyes had me relaxing, a tad bit.

"Lila. Lila Garcia."

She gave me a half-smile. "You can call me Savannah. How did you and my son meet?"

I took a small bite of my toast. I had been hungry before, although I was not anymore. My stomach twisted with knots, and I knew I couldn't have more than a few bites. "Maddox and I met in Berkshire Academy."

His father's head snapped up, and he speared me with a look. "Berkshire, you said? I don't recognize your last name. Who are your parents?"

He thought I was one of them... the wealthy and the corrupted. After all, Berkshire Academy was a tank full of those.

I took a slow sip of my water, trying to soothe my parched throat. "I live with my grandparents."

I jerked my chin high and returned his look with one of my own. I wasn't ashamed of who I was.

"Lawyers?"

Was this a goddamn interrogation?

I shook my head, pursing my lips in displeasure. "No, they own a grocery store."

"That's nice," Mrs. Coulter jumped in before her husband could utter another hateful word. He was staring at me as if I was a pest. As I stared at Brad, I could see the resemblance. Maddox was a carbon copy of his father. The same hair, same eyes, same angry look on their faces.

"So, have you gotten any college acceptances yet?" Savannah tried to break through the tension, looking back and forth between Maddox and me.

I nodded, chewing on the bite I just took before answering. "Yes, to Princeton, but I am hoping for Harvard."

Maddox's father let out a huff. "Harvard? It's not easy to get in."

My shoulders straightened, and I gave him a tight smile, trying to look polite. If Brad saw the irritated look on my face, he ignored it. "Oh, I know, but I've been working for this for years now," I told him. He didn't scare me, not with his judgmental stares or his cold smile.

Maddox finally spoke. "Lila is one of the top five students at Berkshire."

There was a hint of pride in his voice, and my cheeks heated. I quickly took another bite of my toast before swallowing it down with the tea I had in front of me.

Brad tsked, looking only slightly impressed. He regarded me with a curious look as if he was finally seeing me in a different light. He gave me a sharp nod before his gaze focused on Maddox. "Well, that's good to hear. Maybe you can teach my wayward son how to be responsible."

I wasn't touching Maddox, but I *felt* it as if it was my own – his muscles tightening, his body rigid as a bow – he was ready to sprint away or lunge at his father's throat. There was fire in his eyes and ice in his veins. My hand slid over to him, and I placed my hand on his thigh, holding him down, even though I was no match to his strength. His muscles rippled beneath my touch, and his own hand landed on mine. His breath expelled in a jerky rush.

I got you.

I leveled Brad with a cold stare of my own. This was a battlefield. Maddox and I on one side, his parents on the other. Our words didn't cause any physical wounds, but our looks and the words spoken were sharper than any knife.

I'd go to war for Maddox.

And this was war.

"Maddox is working really hard," I started, my eyes flickering from his father to his mother. "He passed this semester with high marks."

Brad looked incredulous. "Oh, did he?"

I held onto my temper and gave them a smile. "Yes. You should be proud of him since he did it all on his own."

Savannah perked up. She was obviously trying to break the ice, but this situation was already too frosty. "That's good to hear! Maddox, why didn't you tell us?"

He tensed, his fork clanking against the plate. "I did."

Her smile dissolved. "Oh."

I realized one thing in that moment. Savannah wasn't ignoring Maddox's existence, although it appeared like that on the outside. But now that I really *looked* at her, I realized she was scared of her son. Maddox intimidated her, and knowing him, he made himself less approachable around his parents.

Maybe I was wrong. Savannah was *trying*, but it was too little... too late.

"We're done here," Maddox announced. He stood up, roughly pushing his chair back and dragging me with him.

"Maddox," Brad called out after his son, his voice threatening and so... cold. "You will show respect."

Maddox wasn't listening. We were already marching away. He didn't stop, even after we were the through the gates of his house. We walked for an hour, side by side. There was an unspoken understanding between us as we walked in silence until we reached Berkshire.

Today was Saturday, so the building was closed. I snuck a glance up at Maddox. He was breathing hard, his lips curled back, and his eyes dark.

He held so much anger inside him, so much disappointment. I could *feel* it, deep in my bones. Maddox felt betrayed, hurt and deceived. He held more pain than he showed to the world.

I gave his hand a squeeze. "You have to train your mind to be stronger than your emotions or else you'll lose yourself every time," I said softly.

His eyes locked with me, and the intensity of his gaze caused my stomach to flip. "Why are you here?" There was a sudden harshness in his voice that had me flinching.

My lips parted, confused. "What?"

"Here," he gritted out. "With me. Why? Why didn't you walk away?"

"Because you're my friend," I simply replied. *Because I care*.

Maddox released a shuddering breath as if he needed that confirmation.

So young and so angry. If only I could make him smile again.

A sudden spark of an idea had me silently gasping. Of course, I could make him smile. I knew exactly how.

I let go of his hand and pointed at the building next to Berkshire Academy, opened every day, even the weekends. The library.

"I dare you," I started.

"For fuck's sake."

"I dare you to go in there, no clothes except your boxers."

He paused, watching me with his mouth agape. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious." I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Naked?"

I nodded, fighting back a smile. "Only your boxers."

Oh, this was going to be a sight to see.

"They'll call the police," Maddox said, still looking at me as if I had lost my mind.

"That's the point, Poodle."

He blinked, still looking surprised. "Holy shit, I corrupted you," he gasped.

My lips quirked up. "Do you dare, Coulter?"

Maddox smirked, a playful and sinful as fuck smirk. "I accept this dare."

He quickly pulled his clothes off his body and handed them to me. He was partially... naked. His Calvin Klein boxers hung low around his hips, the crevice of his ass visible and my throat was suddenly parched. Fully clothed Maddox was... sexy.

Partially naked Maddox was... gulp

We were just friends, but damn it, I was a hormonal teenager who wasn't scared to appreciate a fine specimen like Maddox Coulter.

"Stop looking at my ass, Garcia."

"Stop prancing around me naked, Coulter."

He sneaked a glance over his shoulder. "I've a feeling this was your way of getting me naked. Are you feeling tempted, Sweet Cheeks?"

"Tempted to kick your ass to Mars, yes."

He grinned. "Liar."

Fine, I was a liar.

"Damn, it's cold!" His teeth were chattering as he rubbed his hands up and down his arms.

I stuck my tongue out and waved toward the library. "Off you go."

He jogged toward the entrance. "Do a little twerk," I yelled after him.

His warm laughter was heard through the cold breeze. I stalked after him and waited at the entrance, watching Maddox's spectacle through the large glass windows. He pranced around the library, completely at ease and with a cocky smirk. He was completely comfortable in his skin. The people stared, speechless and in shock. A girl had her phone out, probably filming him. Some laughed, others looked outraged.

Maddox paused in front of the old librarian, who was blushing and sputtering, bent down and did a half twerk against the granny before running off.

I couldn't hold my laughter in anymore. My stomach cramped, and I wheezed as he sprinted out of the library, the librarians and security guard at his heels.

"Run!" he hollered at me, his smile wide and infectious.

I took off, and we ran.

We didn't stop until we lost them. Hiding behind the dumpster, I tried to catch my breath.

"You're crazy," he gasped through his laughter.

I elbowed him, grinning. "We make a good team, don't we?"

He smiled.

A real and sincere smile.

My chest tightened, and my stomach did a crazy flip, like little butterflies dancing around in there.

Maddox might seem like he had the world at his feet. He was Berkshire's king, and he ruled with a cocky grin, though no one saw the pain behind that playful smile. To the world, he had everything everybody else wanted: money, status, friends, a scholarship and two beautiful, successful parents. He was untouchable.

But he was still human.

Maddox Coulter wasn't invincible. He had multiple cracks and scars in his soul.

He was a simple, seventeen-year-old boy, who only wanted his parents' approval, with a little messy childhood and now, he starved for attention.

I made him smile.

I did it. And I'd continue to do so.

One dare at a time, I'd chase his smiles – because I realize Maddox needed someone who cared enough about his happiness and his anger. And I

did.

LILA

he crowd cheered so loudly that I wondered if my eardrums were ever going to be the same. Excitement bubbled in my chest, and I felt giddy as the players strode out of the tunnel, leading to the football field. Maddox liked to have me accompany him to his practices but this was my first actual game. I knew absolutely nothing about football but I had to be here for Maddox. This was important to him, hence it was important to me.

"MC! MC! Go Berkshire!" the girls screamed from behind me.

Holy shit, this was huge and it was exhilarating.

The cheerleaders were doing their own thing as the game started. All eyes were on the Berkshire players. I held my breath, and I couldn't tear my eyes off the field. Riley grasped my hand in hers, and she was screaming at the top of her lungs.

Maddox probably just scored a point because the crowd went wild, batshit crazy wild. I knew it was him because of the swagger as he trotted around the field, soaking up all the attention. He banged his fist against his chest, and our cheerleaders cheered even louder. I was too far away to see his face, but I could imagine the cocky grin. Yeah, this was definitely MC – Maddox Coulter, all macho and arrogant.

Tonight was the last football game of the season. Due to the snow in January, the game got pushed back a few weeks. It was still cold, but our Berkshire boys were crushing the other team. I didn't understand much about football or any sports for that matter, but when Riley and our people cheered, I did too.

I tried to keep an eye on Maddox, but everything was happening too fast,

so I had no idea what was going on.

The audience hollered once more, "MC! MC! MC!"

They were calling out to Maddox. He was the star football player, after all.

There was one last touchdown before the field and crowd erupted. We... won?

Holy shit, we won! Not that I was surprised or anything, but WE WON!

I was never much of a sports fan; I didn't much care about football, but this was Maddox's passion – his whole fucking life. He was happy, which made *me* happy.

Riley jumped, and I danced in my spot, laughing. "We won!" she shrieked.

My heart thumped so loudly that I could hear the beats in my ears. What a night.

Maddox paused at the edge of the field, and I was standing in the front row, courtesy of being the quarterback's friend. He took off his helmet, smirking. His breathing was ragged, but the expression on his face was one of pleasure and bliss.

Maddox wiggled his eyebrows at me as the girls surrounded him. A cheerleader rubbed herself against him, grabbed his face and landed a big kiss on his lips.

Okaaayy then.

More girls joined the group, all of them trying to cop a feel of Maddox. I sincerely worried for his ego. This couldn't be healthy for a seventeen-year-old boy. So much arrogance and cockiness.

He spared me a glance, challenging me with his gaze. I remembered the words he spoke to me before the game.

Riley stood beside me, completely oblivious of what was about to happen. Maddox waited, giving me an infuriating look, as if he expected me to lose this stupid dare.

Sincerely, fuck you, Maddox Coulter.

As another girl wrapped her arms around him, I lunged into action.

Do you dare?

Ha. Ha. Ha.

Riley let out a shocked gasp as I grabbed the back of her neck and pulled her forward. My mouth landed on hers, and her eyes flared in surprise. I pressed my lips harder against hers before pulling away. She wiped her mouth, sputtering and glaring. "What the *hell*, Lila?"

Shrugging, I gave her a sheepish look. "Maddox dared me, sorry."

"If I win the game, I dare you to kiss Riley," he said, amusement flashing in his eyes. This was probably some woman on woman fantasy for him.

"You can't be serious!"

His lips quirked up. "Do you dare?"

I turned to face Maddox again, and he was chuckling. I flashed him the middle finger, and he laughed even harder. Maddox pulled away from all the girls as they tried to grab him, vying for his attention, but he shook his head.

He said something to them and pointed at me. Everyone turned to stare at the same time.

Suspicious, I squinted at him as he made his way to me.

"What did you say to them?" I asked with my hands on my hips. My eyes narrowed on him.

He smirked. "Told them my girlfriend was getting jealous."

Huh? Wait... what?

I was in too much shock from his words that I didn't see it coming until I was flung upside down and over his shoulder.

"Maddox!" I screeched.

He swatted my ass. "Be nice. These girls are driving me crazy, and you're my escape plan."

"Let me down. Now!" I banged my fists into his back, feeling his muscles clench under my attack.

"How about you be docile for five minutes?" He rumbled with a chuckle.

Docile? Excuse me, DOCILE?

I hit him with my fist again, although I was pretty sure he didn't feel anything. "What am I? Your pet?" I snapped.

Maddox hummed, thoughtfully. What a douchebag.

"You're such a wild chihuahua," he said.

"Careful, or you'll end up with a nasty bite, Coulter."

His shoulders shook with silent laughter. "Bite me then, Garcia."

I rolled my eyes as he stalked away from the crowd with me over his shoulder, caveman style.

Once we reached the boys' locker room, he let me down, and I blew my hair out of my face. "Why are we here?"

"I need a shower and then we'll be on our way to the bonfire. Berkshire is celebrating tonight. I need my favorite person there."

I crossed my arms over my chest as he sauntered toward his locker. "You do realize if you keep grabbing me and throwing me over your shoulder like this, they will never believe that we're just friends."

We were already getting weird looks. No one believed we were just friends. Maybe that was partially our fault.

Maddox and I spent way too much time together. He'd hold my hands, kiss my cheek or throw an arm over my shoulders while we walked down the halls. He stole bites of my lunch, and we continued to play silly pranks on each other. At first, I hated the public displays of affection, but they grew on me, just like the rest of Maddox's quirks. He still made inappropriate jokes, but he never tried to do anything... more.

Maddox gave me a nonchalant half shrug. He removed his shoulder pads and stripped off his jersey before throwing it my way. "A souvenir, Sweet Cheeks."

"You really don't care?" I asked.

He didn't bother to hide his amusement at my question. "Lila, people's opinions don't matter to me. You shouldn't care either. They live to gossip while we're living our lives to the fullest. So, who cares if they think we're friends or we're fucking?"

Okay, true. Point taken.

Two hours later, we were celebrating with the rest of the Berkshire students around bonfire. There was a lot of us here but the open field was big enough so it didn't seem crowded. Bottles and cans of beer littered around us. A few guys were already a tad drunk, and they were laughing about something, pushing each other around.

Maddox walked over with a beer in his hand and a paper plate in the other. "Got you some Hawaiian Teriyaki Chicken skewers."

I smiled, taking the plate from him. "Thanks." I looked around, seeing all the smiles. "They sure love celebrating."

He took a long pull of his beer before wiping the corner of his mouth. His legs were lazily spread apart, and he was wearing black ripped jeans, expensive leather boots and a hat that probably cost more than my bra. Maddox looked like he owned the world – a god amongst us mere mortals.

He licked his lips, grinning. "This is nothing. The real celebration is at Colton's house next weekend."

My brows furrowed at that. "I don't want to know."

I munched on my grilled skewers while slowly nursing my own beer. A moment later, Maddox tsked. "I'm bored. Let's cause a little trouble."

He stood up and went to the middle of the field. He spread his arms out, smirking. "Let's play a game," he announced.

The others hollered in agreement.

Oh, no.

His gaze found mine, mischief flashing in his eyes. I glared, trying to look severe, but my own lips twitched with a smile.

Here comes trouble.

MADDOX

glanced down at my phone for probably the hundredth time, waiting for a text back. She wasn't replying. I left school early today when Lila missed the first two classes. Now, I sat in my car in front of her grandparents' home like a goddamn stalker. Worry gnawed at me because it was so unlike Lila to ghost me, and she never missed her classes.

I did the same shit a few weeks ago. Bailed on her and ghosted everyone who tried to reach out to me. I didn't expect her to turn the tables on me, and I didn't like it, not one bit. Now, I understood how she felt when I wasn't answering her phone calls and she found me in that tub, freezing and pissed drunk.

Was she hurt?

Did something happen?

Why. The. Fuck. Won't. She. Reply. To. My. Texts?

Goddamn it!

I slammed my fists against the steering wheel, slightly unhinged at the mere thought of Lila being hurt.

I went to their grocery store today and found out that her grandma was home. Sure, I could have spoken with Sven, her Pops, but I'd rather not. He liked me enough, but he didn't seem to trust any boys around his little Lila, even ones who were her friends and didn't want to get in her pants.

Okay, that was a lie.

I still wanted to get in her panties.

Maybe he could read me better than I thought. Was I that obvious?

Oh, she was my friend, but I still wanted to fuck your granddaughter. Up

and down, sideways, on our knees, every possible position.

Well, yeah. No wonder he didn't like, *like* me.

I rang the doorbell, and Lila's grandma opened the door, a pensive look on her face. She looked tired and weary. At the sight of me, she smiled a little. "Maddox, what are you doing here?"

"Hi," I said, peering behind her shoulder, expecting Lila to pop up. "Is Lila home? I tried to contact her, but she isn't answering, so I grew worried."

She was silent for a moment, her eyes turning glassy. "You don't know?" She spoke the words so softly that I almost missed them.

My heart skittered a beat, and I started sweating. The blood rushed through my ears and my heart hammered in my ears. "Is... something wrong? Did something happen to her?"

She shook her head. "You don't know what today is?" she questioned, but then answered her own question before I could say a word. "She didn't tell you. I'm not surprised. My Lila always suffers alone."

Suffers... alone?

Fuck, no. She would never. Not alone.

Lila had *me*.

True, she didn't need a hero to save the day, but the more I got to know her, the closer we grew – I wanted, no – I *needed* to protect her. Maybe it was to return the favor since she took care of me when I was at my weakest or simply because I...cared. I'd ever confess that out loud to her. She'd sock me in the face because Lila Garcia hated to be pitied.

Except, I didn't pity her.

I just wanted to... protect her.

"What are you saying? Is she hurt?"

Her grandma gave me a heartbroken smile. "She's been hurting for a long time."

That... hurt. Right there, in my fucking chest.

Mrs. Wilson leaned against the doorframe, looking more haggard than her age. "Did you know that Lila never cries? Never, except one day of the year. On that day, she cries alone; she hides her tears from everyone. That's the only day she lets herself feel pain."

My heart nearly spilled out, and I rubbed my chest, trying to alleviate the ache. It didn't stop the pain. It infiltrated my veins and my blood, for *her*.

Her shoulders shook and slumped, as if she had finally been released from a heavy burden she carried. "My Lila is strong with a fragile heart," she whispered.

"Where is she right now? Where can I find her?" Even I could hear the urgency in my voice, the desperation.

And I was not a desperate guy.

But Lila made me feel many things I'd never felt before. Not for any other girl.

"Lila left this morning. She's at Sunset Park. You'll find her sitting on a bench."

I nodded my thanks and took a step back, clenching my car keys in my hand. Sunset Park, I'd find my Lila there.

"Maddox?"

I paused and glanced over my shoulder. "Yes?"

"Are you Lila's friend?"

Confused, I blinked, and my brows furrowed. Grandma was well aware we were friends; we had been for months. But she stared at me, expectantly, as if her question held more meaning behind those simple words.

And I realized they did.

That question was powerful because it made me *think* about how important Lila was to me, how close we were and how much she meant to me. One simple question, and it put our whole relationship in perspective.

Yes, I respected the hell out of Lila. She was smart, funny, wild and... caring.

Yes, I still wanted a taste of her. Wanted it since I first laid eyes on her.

But she meant more.

We had each other – she got me and I got her.

Suddenly, the idea of us being more than friends became taboo. Because if we were ever more than friends, we risked losing what we had now. A silent understanding. A friendship based on honesty and loyalty. Lila saw behind all my bullshit and didn't let it deter her. She pushed and pushed until I cracked open in front of her. Lila and I were alike in so many ways, yet still... different. Maybe that was why we suited each other so well as friends. We balanced each other.

She was the calm in my reckless life.

I was the chaos in her peaceful one.

"Lila's my best friend," I finally confessed, with a curl of my lips.

Grandma looked thoughtful for a moment before she gave me a melancholy smile. "Take care of our girl. She refuses to let any of us lend her THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I was sitting in my car at Sunset Park. My gaze found Lila the moment I parked and turned off the engine. Like her Gran said, I found her sitting on a bench, alone. Sweet Lila was cuddled up in her winter coat, trying to stay warm against the cold. I couldn't see her face from where I was, but I didn't like what I was seeing.

She was hunched over the bench, her legs up on the seat with her arms wrapped around her knees. Lila looked... lost.

I stayed in my car for a few more minutes, giving her some time by herself. I knew *why* she was here. Sunset Cemetery Park.

Her parents were here.

Did you know that Lila never cries? Never, except one day of the year. On that day, she cries alone; she hides her tears from everyone. That's the only day she lets herself feel pain.

And I knew what that day was, what today was, and why it was so important for Lila.

Sweet Lila – the fiery dragon with a fragile heart.

I stepped out of the car when I couldn't stay away any longer. The cold wind blew hard, and Lila hugged herself tighter. There was a magnetic pull between us, and I walked toward her without even realizing my feet were taking me to her side.

She didn't move when I settled at her side on the bench, didn't look up, didn't even acknowledge my presence. Silently, I grasped her hand and pulled it away from her knees. She clutched my hand, and I squeezed hers in return, a silent vow.

I'm not letting go, Lila.

She didn't speak, and I didn't dare break the silence. Lila quietly sniffled and dashed away her tears with her other hand, but she couldn't keep her cries in. She cried her little heart out, a desolate sob coming from a person drained of all her hopes and dreams.

As if realizing now that she was holding onto my hand, she tried to wrench it away from me. I held fast, squeezing her hand in comfort. "Go… away," Lila murmured.

I stayed silent, refusing to utter a word, but also refusing to leave.

Minutes probably turned into hours as I sat with her. She cried until I

thought there would be no tears left, but she still cried. She didn't speak again and neither did I. Lila needed to grieve in silence, but I'd be there with her. I was staying, and I'd fight any motherfucker who'd try to make me leave.

Each sob that racked through her body wrecked my stupid heart even more. A whimper escaped her, a tortured sound, and she gripped my hand harder, her nails digging into my skin. Her other hand came up, and she clutched her chest, a broken sob slipping past her lips. Her whole body was shaking, whether it was from the cold or the force of her tears, I didn't know.

The sound of her struggling to breathe through her crying decimated me.

"It... hurts," she whimpered. "It... hurts... so much, Maddox."

Her breathing was ragged, gasping, and her body slumped forward as if all the strength had left her body. She shouldn't be able affect me so strongly, but wild emotions swirled inside me as I breathed in her pain and suffering.

Watching the Lila I knew, the strong and confident Lila, break apart like this...

There was a phantom ache in my chest, like an invisible knife digging and twisting viciously into my flesh – the pain becoming unbearable.

I grabbed her before she could slide off the bench, her body weak in her grief. Our knees dug into the damp mud, but I didn't care as I pulled her into my arms. She was half sitting on my lap, her face buried in my neck as her tears soaked through my shirt and against my skin.

"Why doesn't it... stop? Why? Why!?" She wailed. Her tiny fist clenched around my shirt. "It hurts... even more. Every time... every year. The... pain... just never goes... away."

I didn't know what to say, didn't know what to fucking do, so I just held her. I was never good with words of condolences, never had anyone to comfort until Lila.

For fuck's sake, the moment a girl started shedding a few tears, I'd be running the other way as far as I could go. Girls and tears were the one thing I didn't do, nope... never.

Until Lila.

Life had broken her.

Just as it had broken me.

Maybe it was why we found each other.

Call it fate, kismet... or maybe it was God's doing...

Lila was meant to hold my broken pieces together; just as I was meant to hold the shattered pieces of hers.

No, she didn't fix me, and I didn't fix her. We just... held each other; it was that simple.

"I got you," I said softly against her temple.

She trembled in my embrace. "They didn't deserve... to die. They didn't!"

I murmured soothing words to her as she wailed her agony. "Why did they... die... and why... me... why am I... here? I want... to go... to my mom and my... dad. I don't... want to be here. I don't!"

I'm sorry, so so sorry, baby girl.

The pain flowing from Lila was as palpable as the frigid wind around us. Such agony and such a lonely, broken soul.

More time went by, and eventually, her sobbing turned into hiccups and quiet sniffles. Lila was still on my lap, face still tucked into the crook of my neck and her fingers still clutching my shirt as if her life depended on it.

I brushed her hair out of her face, my thumb rubbing over the trail of her tears. "I got you."

She hugged me tighter.

"Can I meet your parents?" I asked.

Lila gave me the tiniest nod. She stumbled out of my lap and stood up on shaky legs. I did, too, trying to ignore the tingles prickling through my legs after sitting in the same position for too long. She took my hand in hers, and we walked toward her parents' headstones.

"Hey, mom," Lila said, her voice cracking. "I've got someone for you to meet."

Catalina Garcia.

The sun shines brighter because she was here.

Beloved mother, wife and daughter.

She pointed at the tombstone beside her mother. "And that's my dad. Dad meet Maddox, Maddox meet Dad." A small, wobbly smile appeared on her lips. "And no, daddy. He's not my boyfriend."

Zachary Wilson.

A gentle man and a gentleman.

Loving father and loving husband.

What a beautiful memory you left behind.

My throat clogged with emotions, so I nodded in greeting. "It's good to finally meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson."

Lila knelt down in front of the headstones. She brought her legs to her

chest and wrapped her arms around her knees again. I realized, now, that she was trying to physically shield herself from the pain. I joined her as I tried to understand what I was feeling. There was a heavy weight on my chest, and it almost made it harder to breathe. Lila was eerily quiet for the longest time before she finally spoke.

"You scare me," she whispered.

"Why?" You scare me, too.

"Because I trust you. Because I want to tell you what I've never told anyone before."

Same, Lila. Fucking same.

"Do you know what hurts the most?" Lila said, sniffling. "The regret." I waited for her to continue to tell *her* story.



Lila

"I THINK I'll always carry that regret in my heart because the last thing I said to my parents was that I hated them. I remember whispering it in the back of the car, but I don't know if they heard it or not. Because right after I had said those words, I heard my father scream, and my mother cry out. Then... the car... I was in the air... and the next thing I knew, everything hurt. So much pain."

A single tear escaped and slid down my cheek. I dashed it away, almost angrily, because right now, anger tasted bitter on my tongue while the pain laid heavy on my heart.

"I was only thirteen, well... almost fourteen. So young, so foolish, such a stupid, stupid brat. They wouldn't let me attend a birthday party that all my friends were attending. Mom said they didn't know the girl whose house I was going to, so they didn't feel comfortable with me going. Dad didn't think it was safe because it was too far from our neighborhood, and they didn't know the parents. I wanted to go. I wanted to have fun with all my other friends. But they refused, and I was so, so angry. We were in the car, and we were arguing. Then I said... I hate you."

The memories were vivid in my head, as if it were just yesterday. I could

almost hear my parents' voices, and if I closed my eyes, I could see them.

I looked away and blinked away the burning sensation in my eyes, but the tears didn't stop. "I didn't mean it. I *didn't*. I just said it because I was angry, but I didn't mean it, Maddox. I... didn't. Those were the last words I said to my parents. That is my deepest regret," I broke off, letting out a pained whimper. I choked on my shame. "It... hurts because I will never get to tell my parents how much I love them. I will never feel my mother's arms or my dad's warm hugs again. My mom will never sing me happy birthday in her silly voice, and my dad will never tickle me because he loved to hear me laugh. He said my laughs sounded like a chipmunk."

I ducked my head, hiding behind the curtain of my hair. "Sometimes, I forget what it is to feel okay, to feel normal because I'm filled with... so many unspoken emotions."

Maddox was silent, and I wondered what he was thinking about. Did he pity me? Could he feel my shame? I didn't want to be pitied, though... for the first time since my parents died, I just wanted to be held.

I'd been pushing the people who cared about me away: my grandparents and Riley. They tried, but I always shut them down because I hated being pitied, I hated the sympathetic look on their faces. When Gran suggested therapy, I refused to see any shrink. Talking about my feelings to a stranger? Letting them see me at my weakest? No way.

Realization dawned on me, and I choked back a sob. By pushing them away, I was causing myself more pain. I needed someone to talk to.

I needed to be held.

I needed to cry and have someone tell me it was going to be okay.

Sniffling back a cry, I dabbed my tears away. Maddox was here, and it was ironic because of how much I despised him when we first met.

"Do you know why I hated you so much before?"

He let out a dry laugh, without any humor. "Because I was an asshole?" If only he knew the truth...

Maybe it was time.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "No, I despised you, hated the mere idea of you, because you reminded me of my parents' murderer."

His head snapped up, and I could almost hear his heart beat rattling through his chest.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

There was a moment of silence, his lips parting as if to speak, but he couldn't say a word. His eyes bore into me, searching, and I saw matching pain in his. My words hung heavily between us, and we both bled from the invisible gunshot, a festering open wound.

I swallowed past the heavy lump in my throat, my whole body shaking with tremors. "We wouldn't have gotten into an accident if we hadn't been hit by a drunk driver that night."

Four years had gone by, and I was still haunted by the memory.

"He was seventeen and very drunk, way above the limit, especially for someone underage. The road was slightly icy, so he lost control of his vehicle. Our cars were travelling the opposite direction, and he hit us from the front. I still remember the bright headlights flashing in front of me as his car crashed into ours."

"He-"

"He should have been jailed for a long time. He should have been punished, right? Maddox, right?"

He nodded, his eyes red. Don't give me such a tortured look, Maddox. My heart is already breaking.

"He didn't," I said, hugging myself tighter. "He didn't even spend a night in a cell; he wasn't punished, and he walked away from the accident, unscathed. Do you know why?"

"Why?" Maddox whispered, but he already knew the answer.

"He was the rich and spoiled son of a wealthy and influential attorney who had the whole world at his feet. His dad swept the accident under the rug and was able to get his son out of trouble. I was in a coma for a few weeks, and when I woke up... I found out the case was closed and had been filed away. We were told the chauffeur took the blame and had been pardoned by the law; except, he wasn't the one driving that night... *that* boy was. I know because I did my research after I woke up. My grandparents helped, and we tried to open the case again."

"Lila," Maddox breathed. His head fell into his hands. "Goddamn it."

"I was in the hospital, still recovering from my injuries, when the dad walked through the door. The look on his face, God, I can still see it so clearly. There was no remorse, Maddox. *Nothing*. He didn't care that I just lost my parents because of his son. He didn't care that I was practically crippled in a hospital bed, in pain, in so much fucking pain. He took out a

check..."

"No," Maddox let out a curse. "Fuck, no. Lila, *no*." He banged his fists against the wet, muddy grass.

I laughed and laughed, dry and empty and cold. "Yes. He offered me one million dollars to stay silent. He said he'd give me more if I'd just shut up and leave his family alone."

Then I cried.

And cried... and cried.

"We... lost...the... case," I hiccupped back a sob, but I was only choking on my own saliva. "Money and power and too many connections, he had everything, and we stood no chance against him."

"He paid off the judge?" Maddox growled, his words laced with anger.

"I assumed he did or he didn't have to. They were buddies."

I tried to breathe, tried to stay alive, forced myself to survive. *Inhale*, *exhale*.

I wanted to scream until I pass out and forget all of this happened. Maybe when I'd wake up, I'd find myself in a world where my parents were still alive, and we were living happily ever after.

"When you're rich, you can pay for someone's silence, buy life and death, play god and win. That's what he did. I'm a mere mortal... I lost."

"I'm sorry."

I am too.

"I hated you because you were a reminder of the boy who ruined me and stole my life from me," I croaked, my ability to speak fading. I rubbed my chest, over my scars. "So rich, so spoiled. Such a brat with so much arrogance."

Maddox made a sound at the back of his throat; it sounded almost like a silent cry before he spoke. "I'm sorry," he said again.

With all my strength gone from my body, I couldn't sit up anymore. My body swayed, and I fell onto my back and closed my eyes. I was drained of everything, all the pain, all the suffering... my past and all the memories.

I felt... empty.

And numb.

I didn't have to open my eyes to *feel* him. Maddox settled on the cold grass and laid down beside me. I felt his warm breath against my neck. He was really close.

I breathed in the fresh air, and there was a comfortable silence between

us. It lasted for a long time, and I soaked it in, the warmth from his presence. Until Maddox broke the silence.

"Tell me about your parents. How did they meet?" he asked gently. So, I did.

I told him about an unlikely love story.

"My mom was the only Hispanic in their neighborhood, and all the other kids would pick on her. My dad was apparently one of her bullies until she grabbed him one day and slammed her lips against his then pulled back, looked him straight in the eye and told him, 'If you can't shut up, I'll shut you up.' He said he fell in love with her right then and there. My father always told me to be with the person who makes your heart beat a thousand miles an hour," I told Maddox.

We stared at my parents' headstones, and I wondered if they could feel me since I was so close to them? Were they watching over me?

There was a dull ache in my chest, but I didn't feel like crying anymore. Maybe I'd finally spent all my tears; because even though it *hurt*, the urge to cry was gone.

Until next year, until I allowed myself to break down again. I hated being vulnerable. The last time I was; I had been in a hospital and I couldn't give my parents' the justice they deserved.

I didn't know why I let Maddox see me like this, why I allowed him to see my weakness... but all I knew was the moment he sat on that bench next to me and held my hand, I didn't want him to let go.

I didn't even cry at parents' funeral until everyone was gone, and I was alone. Except the moment Maddox touched my hand – the dam broke, the cage around my heart shattered, and I hadn't been able to stop crying.

We sat there for a long time. The sun was starting to go down, the sky turning a bright orange. I guess this place was called Sunset Park for a reason; it had the best sunset view.

"Do you believe in love?" Maddox asked, roughly.

What a strange question in a moment like this.

"Yes. But I've long decided that it's not for me. Not anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to lose anyone else." I've suffered enough loss for a lifetime, and I survived it, but I didn't want to test my luck.

How much pain can a person bear before they break down completely? I was stronger than the magic of love.

I wrapped my arms around my knees and brought my legs closer to my chest. I laid my head over my knees and turned to look at Maddox. He was staring at my parents' headstones, looking thoughtful.

"Do you believe in love?" I asked him back. My cheeks felt tight from the cold and my dried tears. My face was probably blotchy and red, but I couldn't find myself to care in the moment.

This was Maddox, my best friend.

He blinked, as if he wasn't expecting the question. "I don't know."

Curious, I pushed for more. "What do you mean?"

"I used to think love was fake. It didn't exist. Love is too complicated and shit. No one belonged to me before. I was never close enough to love someone or to even understand the meaning of it."

Wild emotions clogged my throat, and my heart flipped like a caged bird, beating its wings, looking for an escape.

"And what do you think now?" I whispered the question.

Maddox faced me, his blue eyes staring into mine, looking right through my cold exterior, pushing right through my walls and knocking at my caged heart.

When he spoke again, his voice was deep and rough. His words were a silent confession.

"Now, I have someone to lose, and I know it will break me. I know what it means to fear losing the person who means the most to you. That person has the power to destroy me."

Silence fell upon us, and I couldn't find the words to convey what I was feeling. I turned my head away from his probing gaze and went back to staring at the headstones.

Seconds turned into long minutes, but we sat there in comfortable silence.

"Maddox?"

"Yeah?"

I took a deep breath and made my first promise to Maddox. "You won't lose me. Ever."

He was quiet for a moment, and I thought I messed up, until his hand came into the line of my vision, and he showed me his pinky.

"Promise?" he asked softly.

I hooked my finger around his. Maddox was warm and familiar. He felt solid and safe. I wanted to cling to him and never, ever let go. "Promise."

He flexed his pinky around me and then he smiled.

For the first time today, I smiled, too. *Pinky swear, me and you... forever.*

LILA

o, is it like...a date?" I asked. "A real date?"
I couldn't see Riley's face through the phone, but her giddiness was apparent as she let out a small squeal. "Well, yeah. I mean... he called, and he asked if we could grab dinner, and he told me to dress warm since it tends to get a bit colder at night," she breathed, each word laced with excitement. "And Lila, his voice... over the phone... I think I almost orgasmed. Holy shit."

I fell back on my bed, a wide grin spreading over my lips. "Honestly, I didn't think Grayson was going to do it," I said. "I mean, ask you out."

He was so reserved, so quiet and didn't mingle with the rest of the Berkshire students.

In fact, he was a loner.

Riley didn't give up though.

She giggled, and I heard some rustling in the background. "It's been three months. It's about time he breaks down and ask me out. I can't decide what to wear. Jeans or a dress? He said to put on something warm, but maybe a dress is fitting? Something cute or something sexy?" She paused, thoughtfully. "I don't want to come across as easy or trying to fuck on our first date. But I also want to feel pretty and sexy."

After Jasper, Riley had sworn off any Berkshire boys. She said they were all the same, and the pain of what Jasper did was still too fresh, even though it had been over a year since their breakup. It was the first time I'd seen her *this* excited; I just hoped Grayson didn't end up breaking her heart.

Although, I liked to believe that he was into her as much as she liked him.

He was always subtle about his feelings but I had seen him sneaking glances at Riley and trying to hide his smile. There was a look in his eyes when he watched her – something akin to adoration.

The same look I had seen in Colton's eyes, too.

I wasn't sure if I should've talked to Riley about Colton, but she was happy with Grayson and that was all I wanted. He was a good guy, and Riley liked him. The end.

She made her decision. Colton would just have to accept it.

"Remember the black dress you wore last Christmas? The mini one, V cut? You looked cute but smoking hot," I offered.

Riley made a sound of agreement. "Oh, that one! My boobs look nice in that dress. I can wear those new high heels boots I got!"

"Atta girl. There you go. What time is he picking you up at?" I looked at the clock and saw that it was almost six pm.

"Umm... an hour. Shit, I gotta get ready. Talk later?"

Her happiness was contagious. "Yeah, babe. Text me when you get home. I want to hear all about it."

Riley let out a small giggle before she mumbled. "He better kiss me, or I'm going to be reaaally disappointed."

Oh yeah, he better.

Because I wanted to know all about that kiss.

We said our goodbyes and hung up.

Riley was happy...

The ringing of my phone jostled me out of my thoughts, and I stared down at the screen. Maddox. His name flashing on my phone screen reminded me that I was supposed to be angry.

I answered the phone, and Maddox cut me off before I could say anything. "Come outside. Now," he demanded. The low rumble of his voice had my stomach fluttering before I remembered to hang onto the anger.

Ugh, asshole.

"What do you want?" I shot back, rather rudely. What he did was... unforgiveable.

"Lila." There was a warning in his voice.

"Maddox," I hissed.

"I'm outside. Come out. Now."

"Maybe if you say please." The sarcasm dripped from my mouth easily. *Watch out, I got my sassy pants on today.*

There was a frustrated growl before I heard him sigh. "Please."

Huh. That was shocking.

My lips flattened in a straight line. "No."

"Are you still pissed because I ate your muffin?"

"You stole my muffin!" And it was the last one.

"I thought you didn't want it. You left it on the table."

I growled in response. He was silent for a second before he laughed. The jerk actually *laughed*. "Are you on your period?"

"Fuck you." I ended the call with a growl.

Yes, I was on my period.

Yes, I was cranky. Because this asshole, aka my best friend, ate my mint chocolate muffin.

A second later, my pinged with a message. *Come out, please. I'm sorry about the muffin.*

I typed a quick text back. Why?

My screen flashed with another message. Just trust me.

I rolled my eyes and bounced off the bed. Maddox wasn't going to give up. For all I knew, if I didn't come out of the house, he was going to come in and get me.

I stepped out of the house to find Maddox leaning against his car, arms crossed. At the sight of me, he licked his lips and winked. My breath caught in my throat because he was so sinfully handsome. Then I remembered he was my best friend... and I was supposed to be mad, right?

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared. "What do you want?"

Maddox crooked his index finger at me, beckoning me to come closer. I did.

"Come closer. I'm not going to bite, Garcia."

"You're annoying me, Coulter," I snapped.

He tsked before he looped his arm around my waist and pulled me closer. I stumbled against him, and our bodies clashed together.

A cocky grin spread over his lips. "I can't decide if I like you feisty or I like you quiet."

I huffed and blew my hair out of my face, before squinting up at him. He sobered, the mischievous glint in his eyes gone. My heart dropped to my stomach, and my palms started sweating.

"Lila, do you trust me?"

My eyes flared in surprise. "Why are you asking?"

"Answer the question." His gaze didn't waver from mine, absorbing me and holding me captive.

I shook my head and tried to move away from him. "What's going on?"

I didn't like the look on his face. Something was up, and I wasn't going to like it.

"I want to try something with you," he slowly explained.

"Jump off an airplane? Scuba diving? Bungee Jumping? Rafting? Something stupid and thrill seeking?"

Maddox loved the adrenaline rush, loved any outdoor activity that would have my heart spilling out through my mouth. We went mountain biking a few weeks ago. Well, *he* did, and I watched from the sideline, convincing myself not to pass out.

It was too dangerous, too reckless... everything that Maddox needed in his life. The thrill and the rush through his veins. He *lived* for it.

Maddox shook his head, the expression on his face still too serious. "No, this isn't about me. This is for you. But I want us to do it together."

"Maddox, spit it out." Nerves gnawed at my gut as I waited for him to speak.

Still holding me in his arms, Maddox turned us around, so I was facing his car, with my back against his front. I was trapped between him and the car.

My breath expelled through my lips with a harsh exhale, and my knees quivered. His hands landed on my hips, and his breath feathered next to my ear. He reached around me and pulled the passenger door open, his intention clear.

No. No. No.

I was already struggling against him before he could say a word. "Maddox—"

"Do you trust me?" He said in my ear.

"No, I don't." My throat convulsed, and every muscle in my body turned to ice. There was a roaring in my ears, and my heart pounded so hard it felt like it was about to beat right out of my chest. "I... can't," I wheezed. "Don't make me do this."

"Lila, do you trust me?" The baritone of his voice reverberated through my bones, commanding and strong – grounding me and forcing me to face reality. My hands shook, and I started sweating, even though the spring air was cold against my skin. I swallowed. "No."

"Don't lie, Lila." His hands tightened on my hips.

My lungs burned, and I couldn't breathe.

The panic began with a cluster of sparks in my abdomen. My skin itched, feeling too tight around my flesh. My own body was causing me to suffocate. Chest heaving, breath coming out in gasps and tears threatening to fall, I crumbled to the ground. Maddox came with me, not letting go. My heart jumped in terror, in fear, and each breath I pulled into my body became painful.

Why? Why was he doing this to me? Why, Maddox?

There was a hurricane of emotions coursing inside me, threatening to burst through. I couldn't stop shaking, my mind playing continuous tricks on me.

"Breathe," Maddox said, his voice breaking through the chaos in my head.

"I... can't."

Breathe! Damn it, I told myself.

I clutched my chest and gasped. Ten... nine... eight...

The world around me slowed and became a blur, my blood turned to ice and my body felt... *numb*. There was a vicious pounding in the back of my head and the veins in my neck throbbed.

"I believe in you," he whispered.

Seven... six... five... four...

"Breathe, baby."

Three... two... one.

For the longest time, we stayed just like this.

My head lolled backward onto his shoulders. "Is this fun to you? Seeing me like this...?"

His lips brushed my temple, softly. "No. But I'm about to help you conquer your fear. You only live once, Lila."

"I... can't do it today," I confessed.

Maddox shook his head. "Not today, not tomorrow... but maybe next week. We're going to keep trying."

My chin wobbled, and I nodded my head.

I did try. For five days, I tried. Maddox successfully got me closer to his car. Every day, he opened the passenger door, and I'd crumble to the ground, shaking and gasping.

Day by day, I tackled my past and pushed past my fear until my body threatened to give out.

On day six, I could barely step out of my grandparents' house. My legs were shaking so badly that Maddox had to help me walk down the gravelly path to his car.

Again, my knees weakened, and I slumped forward.

A sob escaped past my lips as the crushing anxiety made its way into my body once again.

"I'm... sorry," I choked.

Maddox waited for my panic attack to recede, his presence commanding and his hand steady on my back. He dominated my panicking, soothing me with a gentle touch.

I lifted my head from his shoulder, and his intense, beautiful eyes locked with mine. Panic coursed through me, making my eyes wild and my face white as a ghost, but he didn't stare at me like I was some pathetic loser.

Maddox waited patiently. Because he believed in me.

I chewed on my lip as I tried to calm my breathing. The muscles in my body spasmed, but I fought to stay conscious.

"Put me in the car, Maddox." I tried to sound firm, but my voice only came out as weak as the cries of a newborn kitten.

He pressed his lips together, searching my eyes. Maybe he saw the resolve in them because he nodded. We got to our feet, and I struggled to stand upright. This time, when Maddox opened the passenger door, I climbed into the car on unsteady legs. I slumped into the seat, my heart banging viciously against my ribs.

He placed the seatbelt around me as I held onto my seat, knuckles white, fingers aching with how tight I was holding on.

He pressed his thumb over my full lips, putting them away from my teeth. "Trust me," Maddox rasped.

Trust him? I did, wholly and truly, with all my heart.

That was the scariest part.

"We're doing this."

He grinned. "No, *you* are doing this."

Maddox closed the door, and I watched him move around the car to the driver's seat. He climbed in, and I took a deep breath. His hands were on the steering wheel, waiting.

"Do it, Maddox." *I trust you*.

"Before we do this, I need to tell you something," he paused. I cocked my head, waiting. "Those yoga pants you're wearing should be illegal, Garcia."

My lips parted, and a sudden laughter bubbled up from my chest.

"Maddox!" I was still laughing when he turned the ignition, and, without me realizing, the car started rolling forward.

My smile slipped off my face, and I gasped.

"Oh God." My breath stuttered.

That night... the memories...

Everything hit me at once, and I was drowning, sinking... dying.

I can't breathe.

Maddox grasped my hand. "I got you." His deep voice was soft but powerful, with a rich silky tone. "Lila."

My eyes closed, and I breathed through my nose.

Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one.

I was dying.

"You're not dying," a voice said to me.

His voice.

Maddox.

"I am." Mom... dad... I love you. I love you so much. Can you hear me? I'm sorry.

A warm hand folded around mine. "I'm right here. You're not dying."

So warm, so strong, so familiar.

Cold wind brushed against my sweaty, overheating skin.

"Open your eyes, Lila." No.

"Trust me," he said.

Anguish twisted my stomach. I pressed a hand over my chest, trying to rub the ache away. My eyes fluttered open as I wheezed through each breath.

My window had been rolled down, hence the breeze brushing up against my hair. And...

Oh my God.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Maddox spoke.

I couldn't blink, couldn't take my eyes off the pink and orange sky. The sunset. We were apparently driving over a hill, and I recognized that it wasn't too far from my house. I never knew the sunset could be so beautiful up here, like this...

I couldn't stop the tears burning my eyes and threatening to spill. They slid down my cheeks, and I choked back a cry.

"Maddox," I breathed, my hands shaking in both fear and... something else, I didn't know. Maybe in relief?

"Look out and feel the wind, Lila. I got you. You're safe."

I brought my head closer to the window and felt the breeze against my face. More tears spilled down my cheeks. My stomach churned with an anxious feeling. Panic and fear thrummed through my veins.

But...

I was in a car.

Maddox was driving.

I was... alive.

My lips wobbled with a smile. "Hey, Maddox?"

"If you're about to confess your undying love to me, I'm going to tell you to stop right there, Sweet Cheeks," he rumbled.

"Still an asshole, I see."

Maddox chuckled, and my stomach fluttered. *Thank you*.

"Friends?" I asked, showing him my pinky. It was something so silly to do, but it was *us*.

He grinned and hooked his finger around mine. "Friends."

Maddox drove for hours, until the sunset disappeared and the stars came out in the dark sky. He eventually stopped the car over a hill and cranked up the radio, which was ironically playing Lauv's *There's No Way*. He reached behind him to the backseat and handed me a small brown paper bag.

I peeked inside and smiled. A mint chocolate muffin. I took a bite, my eyes going to Maddox to find that he was already looking at me.

I didn't have to confess my undying love to Maddox. What we had; it was an unspoken understanding with unsaid words and a feeling we couldn't explain. Love was too simple of a word to describe it because love was black and white. Love or don't love – there was not really an in-between.

What we had... it was a kaleidoscope of colors.

MADDOX

don't like him," I growled, folding my arms over my chest. I stayed rooted in front of the door, as if I could somehow stop her from leaving.

Lila rolled her eyes, bent over and touched her toes. She stretched, and I had to look away because, goddamn it, her ass looked good in those jeans.

I was pissed at my own reaction and this whole situation. And I didn't exactly know *why*.

"It's not up to you," she said in a sing-song voice. Somedays, I wished she was intimidated by me. It'd make this whole friendship thing easier, but nope. Lila Garcia was feisty, and she constantly butted heads with me. "You're not going on that date with him. I am."

Yeah, that was exactly my problem.

She was going on a date.

With someone. Grayson's friend. A date that Riley set up. Now that she had a boyfriend, she was under the assumption that Lila needed a man in her life, too.

Well, too fucking bad, she already had a man. *Me*.

"I don't trust him," I said again.

Lila faced me, hands on her hips. She was wearing makeup, which she rarely did. Ripped jeans, ankle boots and a black tank top that should be illegal. Sure, Lila didn't have big boobs, but her tits looked juicy in that tank top. Juicy, sinful, forbidden... and—

She even painted her nails. She looked... beautiful. For *him*.

"You never even met him," she argued. My jaw clenched, and I was

about to pop a vein.

"He could be a fucking murderer for all we know!" He could hurt her...

And he wasn't *me*.

Lila's eyes turned to slits, and she nudged her chin high, giving me that haughty look of hers. She really mastered that look that says — You're not the boss of me and I can do whatever I want.

"I've met him twice, and he's a gentleman, Maddox. Stop it."

"I don't like it. I don't like him," I said for the hundredth time tonight. "What if he touches you, and you don't want him to?"

Touch... her. He could touch her and fucking kiss her...

She rubbed her forehead, her eyes looking bleak. Lila was already tired of my bullshit. "Maddox, stop it. You're not going to ruin this date for me."

"He could... hurt you."

A smile ghosted her lips. "Daren can't and won't hurt me."

Daren? Even his name sounded dumb. I imagined Lila moaning out that name, and the urge to pummel his face, someone I had never met before, was strong.

"Can you give me a guarantee that he won't hurt you?" I shot back in my defense. "I won't complain and let you go on this stupid date if you can give me a hundred percent guarantee."

I was playing dirty because I knew she couldn't.

I didn't know why I was reacting this way when Lila told me she was going on this date. There was an uneasy feeling in my stomach and a heavy weight on my chest.

"You're acting like a jealous boyfriend, Maddox," she warned, her lips twisted in displeasure. Her words were laced with a warning.

Jealous... boyfriend?

Jealous... me? Ha.

"I'm acting like a caring *friend*," I amended.

She snorted, quite unladylike. I loved that about Lila. She wasn't fake around me, and she wasn't vying for my attention. Lila didn't mold herself to fit my standards. She stayed true to herself and gave whoever dared to douse her fire the middle finger.

Lila fixed up her winged eyeliner and glanced at me through the floor length mirror. "No, you're being a child. A petulant, bratty child. You went on a date last week, and I didn't stop you. Does that make me any less caring?"

"I didn't go on a *date*," I mumbled, fighting back a grimace. She didn't need to know the details.

Her eyes hardened. "No, you're right. You don't date. You fucked her."

I rubbed my forehead and sighed. This was getting us nowhere, and I was only growing more agitated as the seconds ticked by. Dickass-ren or whatever his name was, was about to pop up any minute now, and Lila would be on her way... to her date...

Jealous?

No, that wasn't it.

Lila and my relationship was clear – there were no hidden feelings and no secrets. We cared for each other, deeply, but that was it. The mere thought of us being anything *more* was a forbidden idea, and my stomach churned.

I'd rather have Lila like this, than risk losing her later because our feelings were fucked up. There was no going back if we crossed that line.

"He'll hurt you," I said one last time, hoping it'd change her mind.

It was just the idea of her being with another guy, as close as she was with me, that didn't sit well with me. I wasn't jealous.

I was just a bit territorial of my best friend.

Lila stared at me for a moment, the expression on her face unreadable. Her gaze was unflinching, and her small fists clenched at her side. She looked like she was having an inner debate with herself.

She swallowed, her throat bobbing with the small action. Then she did something I least expected and sure as hell wasn't ready for it. Not at all.

My eyes widened as Lila dragged her tank top over her head, letting it slide through her fingers. She stood in front of me in her jeans, boots and bra. Lila wasn't shy, never was. In fact, she could be as crass as me if she wanted to, and most days, she was. She had always been bold and confident.

The determined look on her face should have warned me, but I was too focused on her... chest.

I inhaled, and my dick twitched, straining against my jeans. Shit. "What the fuck?"

"What do you see?" she asked calmly.

I see... tits. Titties I could fuck. "What are you doing?" I groaned. "Lila?"

She took several steps forward until we were standing toe-to-toe. Lila was my little midget, so tiny that the top of her head barely came to my shoulders. She had to nudge her head back to stare up at me because I basically towered over her.

Her gaze was somber as she waited. "Maddox, look at me."

My fists clenched and unclenched. I kept my eyes on hers, refusing to let my gaze wander... down. I'd probably bust a nut if I did. "I am."

"No, you're not. Look. At. Me. Look closer," she persisted in that same soft voice.

I did... and I finally saw what she wanted me to see.

"Do you see now?" she breathed.

My heart stuttered, and I lost my breath as my stomach tightened. My eyes fell to her chest, where her breasts were clad in a lacy, black bra.

And I saw...

Pink and white jagged lines... scars...on her beautiful pale skin. Right at the center of her chest and between the two heavy mounds.

"No," I choked. Jesus Christ, sweet Lila.

Before I could stop myself, my hand came up as if to touch her. When I realized what I was about to do, I stopped an inch away from her skin.

Lila took my hand in hers and placed it on her chest, right in the middle, where her scars laid. She let out a shuddering breath the moment I touched her. Her heart thudded hard against my palm.

"Is this—?" I couldn't finish my sentence.

Lila nodded. "From the accident."

My shaking fingers brushed over her scars, feeling the slight bumpiness on her skin, whereas the rest of her was soft and smooth. "It's ugly," she whispered, trying to hide a grimace, but her face said it all.

"You're beautiful," I confessed, my voice strained.

And she truly was.

Lila had been through hell and back. That was the most beautiful part of her; she was a woman who wore her pain like a diamond choker around her neck. Strong, unyielding... a survivor. Lila Garcia straightened her own crooked crown because she didn't need anyone else to do it for her.

Lila let me in, not because she *needed* me.

It was because she wanted me - as a friend, a companion and a partner.

She gave me a bittersweet smile. "Daren can't hurt me because I'm already hurt. He can't break my heart because it's already broken. Do you understand now?"

I nodded. Lila exhaled in relief.

I stepped closer, our bodies pressing against each other. Mine – fully clothed. Lila's – in a state of half dressed. Her skin was warm underneath my

touch. She peeked at me through her thick lashes with a look in her eyes that should have told me *something*... but I couldn't understand what she was trying to convey.

She breathed.

I breathed.

The world came to a stop, and the colors faded away, leaving us in a state of black and white.

Lila shivered, a silent tremor running through her body. It wasn't from the cold because her room was hot, and I was sweating. Her gaze fell to my lips before they wavered, and she looked back at my eyes again.

My head descended toward hers, and my lips brushed against her forehead, a simple kiss. Lila sucked in a harsh breath, and her eyes closed.

I'd never given a girl a forehead kiss before. That shit was cheesy, but it came natural with her. It wasn't like I could kiss her... lips. Lips that looked so soft, so kissable. She'd sock me in the face if I ever tried.

So, we settled with a forehead kiss. That was safe and friend-like.

"Lila?"

"Hmm?"

"You're a beautiful dragon," I said.

Her shoulders shook, and a small laugh escaped past her lips. "Dragon, eh?"

"Dragon," I agreed. "Daren should be worried because you'll probably eat him for dinner if he accidentally steps on your tail."

I closed my eyes and breathed in her scent – she smelled of peaches from the shampoo and body lotion she used.

Lila slowly pulled away, and I let her go. She grabbed her tank top, and once she was dressed again, she checked her phone. "He said he's on his way to the restaurant."

"Can I chaperone?" I asked, only half joking. Actually, I was serious.

Lila wasn't amused. "No, Maddox," she said. There was a note of exasperation in her voice.

She walked past me and out the door; I watched her go with a sinking feeling in my stomach.

I considered following her to the restaurant and keeping an eye on them, just in case, Dickass-ren tried to do any shit to my girl-*friend*. But Lila would never forgive me, and I'd rather stay on her good side. She could be brutal, and she had sharp claws.

I never thought of myself as a possessive person... but apparently, I was. Of our friendship. *Well, fuck.*

LILA

watched as Pops let out a robust laugh at something Maddox said. Grandpa said something else of his own that had Maddox shaking his head and grinning. Sure, Maddox worked for my grandparents, but only Gran had welcomed him with open arms. Pops was a little apprehensive; he always had been with any boys hanging around me.

He said he didn't trust them, and he was right.

But Maddox and I had been friends for months now, and Pops slowly started to warm up to him. In fact, if I wasn't mistaken, they were on the same team now.

Project: Don't let Lila date and protect her at all costs.

It only took two weeks for me to realize my best friend had been right about Daren. Dickass-ren, as Maddox liked to call him, was indeed an asshole who was only interested in sleeping with me.

Grandpa was a hard man to win over, but I wasn't surprised Maddox did. He was... genuine, and even Pops could see that. I was just glad that the two men in my life were finally getting along, well enough for them to share a beer and watch a football game together while discussing sports.

Oh, you know. A usual Sunday night.

Maddox had spent the day with us. Gran even dragged him to church, and he went without complaint. I never pegged Maddox as a religious person and neither was I, but I humored Gran every Sunday and let her drag me to church. Sure, I did believe in God, but if He really loved me, my parents would have still been alive. So yeah, God and I didn't share an amicable relationship.

We had brunch together, then went over to the grocery store for inventory day. After we closed for the night, Pops invited Maddox over for dinner and football. If I had to guess, Pops was a tad lonely, missing a buddy to talk with and he was making a truce with Maddox.

"I think they're best friends now."

My eyebrows rose, turning to Gran as she helped me put the dishes away. "They are?"

"Your Pops doesn't laugh like that with just anyone." She smiled, glancing back at them. "Trust me, I've known him for too long time and been married to him for decades."

Well, yeah, it was Maddox after all. He could easily win anyone over. That was my best friend, ladies and gentlemen.

The men hollered from the living room, and I was guessing it was probably a touch down for their team. I grinned, watching the two most important men in my life finally bonding. Maybe if my dad was here too...

My chest ached, and I rubbed the spot, trying to alleviate the pain. Somedays, the skin around my scars would itch and the scar itself would *hurt*, like I was pouring kerosene on already burning skin. The doctor said it was all in my head. The pain wasn't physical anymore, but my brain and body were used to it, and sometimes, they liked to remind me of the pain.

I thought of the day I showed Maddox my scars. It was weeks ago, although it felt just like yesterday, the memory still fresh in my head and my skin still burning from his touch.

Maddox had brushed his fingers over the marks left on my body, touching my past, lingering over the jagged and ugly lines, tracing the dents of my soul and the rough edges of my heart.

He didn't run away, not like Leo did after taking my virginity. I didn't see the look of disgust or revulsion on his face. Maddox didn't flinch.

He stayed and called me a *dragon* – that was Maddox's way of telling me what I needed to know.

And when his head had descended toward mine, I thought he was going to ruin everything by kissing me that night. For a brief moment, maybe I had wanted him to, but then I felt an immense rush of relief when he didn't.

My phone pinged with a message, snapping me out of my thoughts. It was from Riley.

Quick question. Does this make me look slutty?

She had a tight black dress on – one that molded to every curve of her

body. Her boobs were practically slipping out, and she had on red lipstick. Her blond curls bounced off her shoulders, in a Marilyn Monroe style, since she cut them last week. Riley was pouting in the picture.

Slutty and cute. I texted back. He's gonna be shooketh. If he doesn't fuck me tonight, I'm going to taser him.

I choked back on my laughter and disguised it with a fake cough before Gran could ask me what I was laughing about. Poor Riley was dickprived, or in Riley's words, she was suffering from dick deprivation. Grayson was being a thorough gentleman and courting Riley, his words, because she didn't deserve anything less.

I agreed, but apparently, he was withholding sex because he thought Riley wasn't ready yet after the fiasco with Jasper. They were doing everything else, except sex — well, a home run. Riley did say they were on third base. She spared me the explicit details except she mentioned how good Grayson was with his tongue, and she saw Jesus. Lucky her.

They had been dating for a while now, and Riley... well, she was deeply and irrevocably in love with Grayson. I didn't doubt Grayson's feelings for her because it was apparent in the way his eyes followed her every move, the way his gaze searched for her in a crowded place and how he always had a possessive arm around her hips. Sure, he was *gentle* – but it was obvious he was trying to tone down his territorial instincts. Anyone could see that.

Especially after all the testosterone went flying across the room last weekend at Colton's party. That was... intense, to say the least. They both wanted Riley. Riley already made her choice, but Colton was having trouble accepting that.

You should just tie him to your bed and sit on him. Problem solved.

I was only half joking when I sent the text, but then... apparently, Riley didn't get the joke. *Holy shit. That is the best idea*.

I quickly typed back a message. Wait! I wasn't serious.

My phone pinged with a message a minute later. I am. Thanks, babe (;

Oh God. Grayson had no idea what he was about to walk into.

"Is that Riley?" Grandma asked. "Tell her I'm sad she didn't come over for brunch today."

I nodded, fighting back a giggle. Sorry, Gran. Riley was a tad busy right now. Busy convincing her boyfriend she was ready to be dicked down.

As I put the last plate away, my eyes found Maddox. He was intensely focused on the football game, a pleased smile on his lips. The indent in his

left cheek, a small dimple, winked at me as he let out a laugh at something Pops said.

He looked... at home with *my* family. Like he belonged here, with us, not in the cold and sterile Coulter Manor, alone with his dark thoughts.

"Lila," Gran said softly. I looked back at her, and her eyes were glassy as she watched Pops and Maddox, too. "He does a good job of hiding it, but that boy needs a family; he needs love. He's far too young to hold such pain in his eyes."

She patted me on the arm and walked away to join them in the living room, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

He had *me*.

Some days, I wondered if *just friends* would ever be enough for us. We friend-zoned each other; well, basically, *I* friend-zoned *him*, but he eventually went along with it, which means I've tried to date other guys and he still fucked around with some girls, but they never lasted for more than four days. The last one only made it three days; he kicked her to the curb because she called me a bitch for accidentally cockblocking them.

It only made me roll my eyes, but I had never seen Maddox drop a girl so fast. He was pissed, although that was an understatement.

That night when I showed him my scars, we had a moment. Maddox and I had looked at each other a little too long to be *just friends*. That eye contact was more intimate than any words or touches would ever be. There was something unspoken between us, and in that moment, I almost thought he was going to... kiss me. It was both mixed signals and my own overthinking.

He didn't kiss me.

I had been both relieved and... disappointed.

Although now that I thought about it, it was better this way. Just friends. He was safe and familiar. Being anything *more* would ruin what we had, and I wasn't ready for that.

Our eyes met as I walked into the living room and joined him on the couch. Folding my legs under me, I leaned against his side and sipped my tea. Maddox casually looped his arm behind my shoulders, probably doing it without realizing. His fingers drummed against my biceps as he continued watching the game.

As the football game came to an end, Gran and Pops retired upstairs for the rest of the night. Maddox searched Netflix, and we settled on watching *Anabelle*. Maddox loved horror movies; I hated them. "I'll keep you safe." He grinned with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

I popped a tiny pretzel in my mouth from the bowl of party mix chips. "Actually, I think you're going to use this to your advantage to scare me, aren't you?"

Maddox gave me a half-shrug, but he pressed his lips together to avoid smiling. Jerk.

Halfway through the movie, I realized Maddox was handing me the pretzels and ringolos because those were my favorites while he ate the other chips.

Yeah, it was the little things. I needed my partner in crime. I didn't need a lover in Maddox. Friends were better than a boyfriend, right? Too much drama came with a relationship. Whatever Maddox and I had, it was safe from any unnecessary drama.

My eyes fluttered close as I fought to stay awake. Before I lost consciousness, I felt his lips brushing against my forehead.

"Sweet dreams, Lila."

Just friends, I reminded myself.

LILA

stood on the stage, the light in my eyes blinding me for a moment, before I blinked away the blurriness. My gaze found Maddox in the crowd. He was dressed in his graduation cap and gown, a lazy smirk on his lips. He winked, which helped with my nerves.

We were graduating today.

We fucking did it, as Maddox would say.

I shook hands with the Headmaster as he handed me my diploma. My hands trembled, and I smiled as pictures were taken. I walked down the stage, my stomach twisting and feeling beyond exhilarated. I was excited but I also hated having everyone's attention on me.

This was my dream – everything I had worked my ass off for in the last few years.

I remembered the day I received a white envelope – an envelope that held the fate of my future in it.

"I don't know... I mean... what if... it could be a... rejection letter," I stuttered, my heart galloping a mile an hour. "Do... they send out... rejection letters?"

"You're freaking out, Lila. Calm down," Maddox said in his smooth voice.

"Calm down?" I screeched. "This," I waved the envelope at his face, "is everything I ever wanted, and what if it's not what I think it is?"

He raised his hands up in mock surrender, and I plopped back on my bed. My whole body was shaking. "I can't open it, Maddox."

"Lila," he started.

"No, I can't." My stomach twisted with nausea. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Lila, I don't think they send out rejection letters." Maddox rubbed a hand over his face, and I could tell he was fighting back a smile. What an asshole. He was laughing as I freaked out. I was a little miffed.

"How about I open it?" he suggested.

I popped up and bounced off the bed like a jack-in-the-box. "Yes! You do it!"

Shoving the envelope in his hand, I paced the length of my room. Sweat beaded my forehead, and I swiped it away.

Maddox tore open the envelope, and my stomach churned harder. Oh God, I really was about to throw up.

My eyes closed, and I reminded myself to breathe.

The sound of him opening the envelope filled the room. My heart thudded, and I inhaled... exhaled...

"Open your eyes," he said, his voice sounding closer to me. He was standing right in front of me because I felt the heat coming off him. The closeness of him helped... calm me.

I squeezed my eyes close.

"Eyes on me, Lila," Maddox demanded more forcefully, his voice deep and thick. "Now."

Helpless against his command, my eyes snapped open, and I tearfully stared up at him.

He was... smiling.

My knees weakened, and I grasped his arm to stay upright.

"Congratulations, Lila Garcia."

The breath I'd been holding shuddered out of me. Maddox waved the letter at me. "You're about to go to Harvard."

A loud squeal left me, taking Maddox by surprise. I launched myself into his arms, unable to contain my excitement. He hefted me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, laughing. "I got in!"

His arms came around me, one hand on my back and one hand planted firmly on my ass as I clung to him.

"You did it," he murmured in my hair, with such pride in his voice that my heart nearly burst out of my chest.

I breathed in his musky scent before pulling my face away from his neck. Our faces were mere inches away from each other. His prominent Adam's apple bobbed in his throat as he swallowed. Maddox nudged my nose with his, and his minty breath feathered over my lips.

"You did it," he said again.

"Thank you. For opening that letter, for not leaving my side, for holding me, for forcing me to face my fears... and for being my friend."

Maddox hugged me back. "You're welcome."

I untangled my legs from his waist, and he settled me back on my feet. "You need to tell your grandparents."

I licked my dry lips and nodded.

Harvard, here I come.

I had gotten my acceptance letter two months ago, a little later than usual, but when I found the envelope in our postal box, my heart had dropped and the first thing I did was call Maddox. I didn't understand *why* I did it, but I knew I needed him with me.

He was at my house in less than ten minutes, out of breath and smiling.

Maddox never left my side as I freaked out, and he didn't leave when I told my grandparents the news either. It meant a lot to me, that he stuck by my side. I never expected us to go from enemies to friends...to best friends.

The rest of the graduation ceremony was a blur. Soon enough, we were outside under the blue sky with the sun shining on us.

Grayson had Riley in his arms, and they were laughing and kissing. Each student found themselves surrounded by their family. My gaze lingered over the crowd, looking for Maddox's parents.

Please be here, please be here. Don't hurt him anymore.

They were nowhere to be found.

I seethed, anger simmering through my veins and gut. How dared they? They should have been proud to have a son like Maddox.

Yes, he was a troublemaker − a total misfit.

But damn it, he was sweet, and his heart was pure. He worked his ass off to graduate with honors. Time and time again, he proved himself to the world that he wasn't just a rich and spoiled kid.

My fists clenched at my sides, and I growled. They didn't deserve to share this day with Maddox.

There was a tap on my shoulder, and I swiveled around, coming face-to-face with Maddox. He stood tall, his shoulders squared, and I had to admit, he did look hot in Berkshire's navy-blue graduation gown with his cap on top of his head.

His lips curved in an easy smile, and I searched his eyes, looking for the disappointment I expected to see. But there was none.

It was then I realized that he no longer expected anything from his parents. They were strangers to him, not a *family*. Because they had never been here for Maddox for the most important days of his life – his football games, his birthdays, his graduation.

"What's up with that kitten growl, Sweet Cheeks? Did someone step on your tail?" he teased.

I swatted his arm. "Watch it, Coulter."

"You don't scare me, Garcia."

"I'll bite you."

"Bite me then," he dared.

I snapped my teeth at him, and he threw his head back, chortling. My anger at his parents melted away at Maddox's laughter. I refused to bring up the topic of his parents not attending the graduation ceremony. He was happy, right here and right now, and that was all that mattered.

I crossed my arms over my chest, pouting.

His laughter died, but he was still smiling. Maddox shoved his hand in his pocket, and he fished out a teal Tiffany box. What...?

My lips parted in surprise as he snapped open the small box. No way!

Shock coursed through my body. "Maddox," I breathed, shaking my head. My cap slid down, and I fixed it on top of my head again, still staring at the box he was holding.

It was a necklace, exquisite but simple, with only a sterling silver charm.

"A dreamcatcher," I whispered, my fingers brushing over the intricated webbed floral centerpiece and the delicate feathers attached to the round center.

"Now, we've got matching dreamcatchers."

I let out a laugh at that. The memory from a few months ago flashed in my mind.

"What is this?" Maddox asked, giving the object in my hand a weird look. He appeared unimpressed.

"A dreamcatcher, silly." I gave it to him, and he looked even more confused.

"Why are you giving me a dreamcatcher?"

I realized Maddox sometimes had bad dreams.

We fell asleep together last night, on his couch, while we were studying,

and he had woken up from a nightmare. He didn't speak of it, but the bleak look in his eyes broke my heart. He couldn't go back to sleep and ended up going to the gym that was open twenty-four-seven.

Maybe it was fate or just pure coincidence, but as I was scrolling through Instagram, I found an ad for dreamcatchers.

Sure, it was a silly thing to give to him, but I remembered the dreamcatcher my mom used to hang on my headboard when I was a kid. She said it'd keep all my bad dreams and monsters away.

I didn't really think much of it when I ordered it. True, Maddox and I were too old to believe in this, and he was obviously too macho for something so childish, but maybe...

Damn it.

I didn't even know why I got this dreamcatcher, and now, I was doubting myself. The first gift I ever gave Maddox was a dreamcatcher. Oh, what a story to tell the world and our friends.

His eyebrows rose. "You seriously expect me to hang this on my bed?"

It wasn't the response I was hoping for. My shoulders slumped, and I chewed on my lips, the feeling of bitter disappointment gnawing at my stomach. I thought maybe he'd be a bit more... appreciative?

I rose to my feet and squinted down at him, hands on my hips. Fuck him. "Look, if you don't want it, you can throw it away. It was cheap anyway, so I don't care."

Maddox didn't say a word. He just went back to looking at the dreamcatcher as if it was the weirdest thing he had ever seen.

I had thought he threw it away, like I told him to.

Except the next day, when I walked into his room... there it was.

The silly dreamcatcher I gave him, hanging onto his headboard. It looked so out of place in his bedroom, but Maddox kept it, close to him, right next to him while he slept.

We never spoke of it again, but every time I'd walk into his bedroom, that was the first thing my eyes would notice, and it'd always be there.

And months later, Maddox still had it. It was my first gift to him.

The dreamcatcher he didn't want but never threw away.

I flipped my curled hair over my shoulders and stared up at Maddox. "Can you put it on me?"

He took the silver necklace out of the Tiffany box, and my throat went dry as his hands slipped around the back of my neck. He stood close, crowding into my space, but I couldn't complain. His body heat caused me to flush, and his fingers were warm against my skin — a teasing touch, so featherlight that I barely felt it.

Maddox placed the necklace around my neck and the dreamcatcher charm laid on the base of my throat where it belonged.

"Beautiful," he rasped, his breath caressing the tip of my earlobe. It made me warm and breathless, though we had been this close so many times: we hugged, we slept in the same bed, and Maddox would give me piggyback rides. We were always touching, one way or another, but some days... it felt more than just a friendly touch. Like today.

My eyes fluttered shut as his thumb brushed against the pulsing vein in my neck. His touch lingered there, feeling my heartbeat through my throat.

"The necklace or me?" I asked, my eyes still closed. Why... did I just ask that?

"You," he said. "Always you." His voice was soft and hot, leaving me feeling things I couldn't explain, couldn't put into words.

I leaned into him, my palms landing on his chest. The hard thump of his heart had my eyes snapping open. Maddox's gaze flickered to my lips. His hands fell to my curve of my shoulders, sliding down my arms, and his fingers curled around my hips.

A single heartbeat passed between us.

I pulled back, breaking the moment between us. Maddox blinked before releasing a shuddering breath. My skin still burnt from where he had touched me, and I hated how cold I suddenly felt from pulling away from him.

Maddox took a step back, too, pulling us farther from each other. He ran his fingers through his hair, which he kept short since the first time I called him Poodle. He thought it'd make me stop calling him that stupid pet name if his hair was no longer long and curly like before.

Ha, he thought wrong.

Once a poodle, forever a poodle.

"Pictures!" Gran said. She waved Riley over, who came forward with Grayson.

"Closer everyone," Pops demanded as he held a camera in his hand.

Colton and the boys — Brayden, Cole and Knox — all whom were Maddox's teammates and close friends, surrounded us. Riley stood beside me, with Grayson on her side, while I stood next to Maddox. We formed a semi-circle and Gran was smiling from ear to ear.

"Say cheers!"

"Cheers," we called out and the camera's shutter clicked.

Picture perfect.

The moment our circle broke apart, we were surrounded by the other Berkshire students. I lost Maddox in the crowd, all the girls vying for his attention one last time. They were probably hoping he'd take one of them home for a graduation fuck fest. Colton and the boys had their own little harem around them, too.

I found Grayson and Riley, holding hands as they stood under a tree, watching from a distance. Grayson looked slightly relieved that Colton's attention was no longer on his girlfriend.

Riley was convinced that Colton didn't have any feelings for her. She was either in denial or she truly was blind to the tension between Grayson and Colton, which was extremely palpable.

Gran came to my side, pulling my focus away from the lovebirds as she hugged me, surprising me by her strength. "So proud of you, Lila. Your parents would be, too."

I blinked back the tears at her words. "Is it weird that I felt like they were with me during the ceremony? Like they were right there, watching me?"

"No, sweetheart. It's not weird because I know they're watching over you." Pops rubbed my back. "You've grown into such a beautiful and smart young lady."

"I'm going to miss you two when I go to Harvard," I confessed, choking back my tears. My heart was heavy in my chest as I realized I only had a few weeks left with my grandparents before I moved away to a whole different state.

Gran cupped my cheeks, smiling. "You have Maddox and Riley with you."

In the end, Riley, Maddox, Colton and I were going to Harvard. Cole got accepted to Yale and that was where he was going. The other boys were leaving for Princeton or Dartmouth.

I sniffled, nodding. "Yeah, but they aren't you."

Even Pops looked crestfallen – I was his little girl – the one he raised and his only grandchild. Pops was rarely emotional but times like this reminded me just how much he loved me and Gran. He placed a chaste kiss on my forehead. "You're going to be okay," he said with strong conviction.

Hours later, I found myself in Maddox's car. We no longer had our cap

and gown on, but instead, Maddox was wearing a white buttoned up shirt, black slacks and a black tie. He was... in other words, sinfully sexy, but I wasn't about to tell him that. He rolled up his sleeves to his elbows and flexed his forearms, his hands on the steering wheel.

"Where to, Sweet Cheeks?" he asked, flashing me a half smile. There was light in his blue eyes, and it glimmered with teasing mischief. "The world is ours. Let's cause some trouble."

My lips curved upward. "You've got a bad reputation, Coulter. Stop trying to corrupt me. I'm a good girl."

Maddox didn't give a damn about his bad reputation. In fact, he loved being a bad influence. Such a rebel and a troublemaker.

"Good girls do bad things sometimes," he drawled. "It's me and you, Garcia."

"Me and you?" I breathed.

Maddox and I against the whole world. Partners in crime and best friends.

"Me and you," he agreed, starting up the car. "So, where to?"

I raised an eyebrow, smiling because there was only one answer to that question. "I have a dare, but it's dangerous."

I loved the way his eyes lit up to the word *dangerous*. Such a rulebreaker.

"Do you dare?" I asked.

Maddox grinned, a devious grin, and I had my answer.

Who would have known it end this way? From that day in the coffee stop, to us being enemies... and then calling truce, being friends... and to *this* moment? Maddox and I had come a long way *together*. Fate really had a way of playing with us.

I used to despise him.

And now he was the most important person in my life.

hree years later

I TAPPED my foot against the asphalt, waiting for Maddox to show up. I shot Riley a text, letting her know I was going to be late for dinner. She was cooking tonight, her infamous ravioli dish. We were celebrating since she finished her thesis last night. We were currently halfway through our second semester in our third year at Harvard.

While I had gotten accepted into Harvard for Chemistry, Riley was studying Sociology. She was planning to pursue a post-graduate degree in Criminal Law.

Colton was majoring in Statistics while Maddox was studying Business, although he wanted to pursue a football career. Him getting a business degree at Harvard was just to appease his parents, although he did say he enjoyed it. At the end of the day, football was where his heart belonged and he was really good at it.

I still couldn't believe it had been three and half years since that day in the coffee shop – the day I spilled my ice coffee on Maddox and the rest was history. I tried to think of a moment when I hated him, but although we had been enemies for a short period time, I never truly *hated* him. Sure, I had despised his arrogance and douchebaggery attitude, but it wasn't hatred.

Maybe that was the reason why it was so easy for us to go from enemies to friends to best friends.

Such a strange twist of fate – from that day to now, almost four years later.

There was a tap on my ass and I rolled my eyes, knowing full well who it was.

"You got to stop touching my ass, Coulter," I warned.

He chuckled and walked around me, coming into view with his glorious self.

A lot had changed in three years. Maddox, for instance, had grown bigger. He was already brawny in high school from playing football and working out, but now, he had packed on extra muscles. His shoulders were half a size bigger than before and now twice the size of my own. His biceps bulged, his arms full of veins and muscles. He filled out the black shirt he was wearing, the fabric stretching tight over his wide chest. He had a sixpack before and now he had eight. His abs were hard and cut. My fingers itched with the memory of touching them. I had seen him shirtless countless times and had seen his progress from seventeen-year-old Maddox to twenty-year-old him.

Me? I was still the same. Same height, same weight — still a midget compared to Maddox, and he took great pleasure in reminding me of that fact every time he manhandled me and put me where he wanted.

His blue eyes glimmered in the sunlight. He eyed me up and down, his gaze lingering longer on my bare legs. I wore denim shorts that were frayed at the end and a black long-sleeved shirt with a brown leather jacket over it and ankle boots. It was March, and the weather was slightly hotter than normal. To our surprise, spring came early this year.

"My eyes are up here, Maddox," I teased.

He glowered, and I fought back a smile. I stuffed my hand in my bag and pulled out his phone charger. "Here you go. Thank you for letting me use it."

I handed him the charger and waved for him to go. "I'll see you tonight. You're going to be late for your next lecture. Go!"

"I'm always coming to your rescue." He tsked with a slight grin. Maddox gave me a finger salute as he started to backtrack. "Always at your service!"

"I don't need a knight," I said, loudly enough for him to hear a few feet away.

"I know you don't. You're not the damsel in distress who I need to save."

My heart warmed, and my lips twisted in a smile. "You're right. I guess I am more like the dragon, eh?"

"A cute and sexy dragon," he called out.

Maddox jogged across the open field toward his building. Since our programs differed greatly, his classrooms were on the opposite side of the campus while mine were on this side.

He faded away in the distance, and I strode away to our apartment building, which was only about a ten-minute walk through the campus.

I took the elevator up to our apartment, which was on the third floor. I found Colton at the door with a girl in his arms. They were kissing, and by the look of it, they were about to fuck in the corridor.

I cleared my throat, and he peeled himself away from the chick, his eyes hooded. "Sup, Lila?"

My eyes narrowed on the girl beside him. Her mocha skin glistened with a sheen of sweat, and she flushed. It appeared like they had clearly already fucked on the way here.

"Are you coming over for dinner or...?" I asked.

He gave me a half shrug, his gaze moving to the apartment next to him. "She didn't invite me."

I grimaced and smiled sheepishly at him. Things were tense between Colton and Riley – well, tense was an understatement at this point in their 'relationship' or whatever they had.

To put it simply, they... *hated* each other.

But that story was for another time.

I opened the door to my apartment, the one I shared with Riley, which also happened to be next to Maddox and Colton's; we were neighbors.

"Baaabee, is that you?" Riley called out.

Colton's jaw clenched at her voice, and he grabbed the chick, pulling her into his apartment. The door closed with a bang behind him.

"It's me," I said, walking inside.

Her back was to me as she stood in front of the stove, humming a song under her breath. She had sweatpants and a shirt on, her blonde hair up in a messy bun. Riley spared me a look over her shoulder. "Did you get the garlic sticks I asked for?"

I lifted my arm up, showing her the grocery bag I was holding. "Gotcha. It smells good in here."

She brought the spatula to her lips and blew on it. "Wanna taste?" she asked, cheekily.

I nodded, and she offered me the spoon. The richness of the sauce hit

every one of my taste buds, and I moaned. "Yummy!"

We set up the plates, and she placed a bottle of wine on the table. "Is it just us? Is Maddox coming?" Riley asked as she took her seat at our small dining table, opposite of me.

I shook my head, piling some ravioli on my plate. "No, he missed his lecture this morning, so he's attending a later class today. Isn't it too early for wine? It's not even six yet."

Her lips curled up. "Lila, it's always time for wine, and we're celebrating today."

Riley loved to drink – wine and margaritas in particular. She had been obsessing over red wine lately. It was her favorite and now my favorite as well. We were besties for a reason, right?

Riley swallowed a bite of her dinner and then gave me an inquiring look. "How's it going with Landon?"

My heart stuttered. Landon, my boyfriend of five weeks.

"Good," I said, moving a piece of my ravioli around in my plate.

Riley sighed, carefully placing her spoon on her plate, before leveling me with a look. "Lila, don't give me that shit."

I chewed on a piece of ravioli before swallowing it down with red wine. I drank half of my glass before slamming it back on the table. "He's not replying to my text."

Riley let out a curse. "Did you call him?"

"I'm not that desperate," I snapped.

"Lila," she sighed. I refused to look at her because I didn't want to see the sympathy on her face.

Landon pursued me for three months before I finally gave in. He was a good guy: smart, sweet and nice. At first, I refused to give in since I thought I was his rebound. Landon had broken off with his long-term girlfriend four months before he turned his attention to me. But he courted me, flowers and all, and he was different than the other guys.

Maddox was hellbent on keeping us apart because he believed Landon was no good.

But then again, that was his excuse for every guy I dated over the years.

Granted, none of them really lasted for long – four months maximum.

Sex wasn't some sacred thing to me. I wasn't a virgin; I had a few hookups here and there, but I never had a one-night stand. I needed the intimacy before and after sex, and one-night stands didn't give me any of that. I've had a few boyfriends over the years, but Landon was the one I felt... comfortable with, enough for me to give in and have sex so soon into our relationship.

That was three days ago. And he was acting weird since then.

Leo was the first guy to turn away with disgust when he saw my scars. Since then, I either had sex while half-dressed or when we were in the dark—dark enough they couldn't see the jagged, pink lines between my breasts—just so I could spare them the disgust or shock they'd feel if they saw it. I didn't need or want their sympathy either.

My scars never bothered me, and I wasn't really embarrassed of it.

But maybe I was lying to myself.

Landon... he saw my scars. He didn't really flinch away, but I noticed the way he kept his gaze averted during sex. He didn't look at my boobs and kept his eyes on my taunt stomach or the spot between my legs instead.

I'd be flattered... if I thought he was focusing on my pussy, but I knew he was just trying to avoid looking at the marks on my chest.

He didn't act weird afterward, so I believed everything was okay.

Until yesterday.

Landon wasn't replying to my texts, which was unusual. He had always been very attentive... until now.

"Damn it," I growled and poured more wine in my glass. "Maybe he's just busy."

"Too busy to send you a single text?" Riley stabbed her ravioli with too much aggression. She was a tad bit overprotective of me. Maddox was probably rubbing off on her. "It'd take him two seconds," she added.

I cleared my throat and took a slow sip of my wine. Drinking too much and too fast would have me tipsy in less than an hour. "It doesn't matter."

She made a face at me. "He's an asshole."

I shrugged and continued with my dinner, shoving a spoonful into my mouth.

"You don't care... if he breaks up with you?" she asked slowly.

"I'm not in love with him if that's what you're asking," I said around a mouthful.

It was true, I didn't love Landon. He was nice, and I *liked* him.

But that was it.

"Maddox-"

I cut her off. "He doesn't know and you won't tell him." I leveled Riley with a hard look, and she leaned back against her chair, looking only a bit

intimidated. "If he finds out Landon is ghosting me or if he thinks I'm hurt over this, which I'm *not* honestly, he's going to kill Landon."

Riley cocked her head to the side, thoughtfully. "Didn't you... um, spend the night over at Maddox's last night?"

"We fell asleep while binge watching *Friends*," I amended. I woke up in *his* bed in the morning; he carried me to bed after I had fallen sleep, and I had been all cozy against *his* pillows and *his* blankets while Maddox slept on the couch.

"Do you think maybe the issue is Maddox? Not that I'm saying he is, but you know how all your exes were sensitive about him. Maybe Landon is too?"

She raised a good point.

Maddox *loathed* every guy I dated.

Consequently, they hated him, too. And none of them were too happy of my relationship with Maddox. They didn't like that we were *that* close. They didn't approve of Maddox having access to my apartment. He could come and go freely and vice versa. They didn't like that I attended all of Maddox's football games and some of his practices.

It was a lot to juggle, and granted, yes, it made sense why they didn't approve of Maddox's relationship with me.

But none of them came close to what or who Maddox was to me.

I wasn't going to fix what I had with Maddox to suit these guys. Maybe that was the issue in all my past relationships, but I wasn't willing to change anything between Maddox and I.

My stomach twisted at the thought of losing Maddox. The mere idea of being without him made me sick.

We were best friends; no one and nothing was going to change that.

Not Landon... and none of those girls Maddox messed around with.



"LILA!" Maddox called out from the bathroom.

I settled back into the couch and stuffed a handful of sweet caramelized popcorn into my mouth.

"What?" I responded, before taking a sip of my energy drink. I was a bit tipsy from all the red wine I had tonight with Riley. She was passed out in our apartment, and I had come over to our neighbors' place to bring him dinner.

Colton and his new conquest had disappeared when Maddox came home.

Maddox walked out of the bathroom with only a towel wrapped low around his waist, bare chest and his v-line teasing me. You see, I've seen Maddox half naked many times over the years. But each time, my mouth watered at the sight of his wide, muscled chest and washboard abs and that nipple piercing. He had gotten it one night when he was out partying with his football team. They had been pissed drunk and they went into a tattoo and piercing shop. The rest was history.

I never considered a nipple piercing sexy, but on Maddox? *Puuurfect*. Yes, I just purred.

I was his best friend, but I wasn't blind, and I had a pussy, which meant that I appreciated the male species. A lot. Including my best friend.

Was I drooling? I wiped the corner of my mouth just in case.

Maddox huffed and gave me a look that bordered between comical and exasperation. "Did you get in my phone and change your name to *My Main Chick*?"

Oh.

I had been a bit drunk when I did THAT a few nights ago. And then I had been too lazy to change it back.

I shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. "Well, yeah. Because I am your main chick. All the other girls are just your side chicks."

Maddox opened his mouth and then shut it, falling silent. He blinked and then just shook his head.

I gave him a cheesy smile. Maybe I was more than just tipsy.

"It's okay, though. You can fuck around with them. At the end of the day, you come back home to me. And I know I'm better," I muttered around another mouthful of popcorn, sending him my best smile.

He growled and the sensitive area between my legs clenched. Shit, this was bad.

Abort mission, abort mission.

Maddox ran his fingers though his wet hair, exhaling sharply. "For fuck's sake, woman! My only side chicks are your other personalities. And there are like twenty-five of them."

I paused midchew. Ouuh-kaay.

He showed me his hand, ticking off each list with his fingers. "Grumpy

Lila. Lazy Lila. Pouty Lila. Funny Lila. Lila when she's sleep-deprived. Sugar high Lila, like right now. On her period Lila. Normal Lila."

My mouth opened then closed. My lips parted again, trying to say something. When I found nothing to say, quite speechless, I stuffed another fist of popcorn in my mouth and chewed in mock aggression.

"Do you want me to go on?" He paused, giving me a blank look as if daring me to argue with his claims.

I had no legit argument, and I had lost this round.

"Whatever," I mumbled. "Go shower. You stink."

"You're impossible." Maddox shook his head with a slight curl of his lips. He walked back into the bathroom.

"You love me," I yelled loud enough for him to hear even with the door separating us.

"YOU ARE A PAIN IN MY ASS."

"You still love me, though," I whispered, once I heard the shower turn on, with the silliest grin on my face. I knew he did because if he didn't... we wouldn't have lasted this long as a friend.

MADDOX

s I walked out of my class, my phone pinged with a message. It was from Bianca. *R u coming over tonight?*

Did I want to? No. I'd rather be home with Lila, watching some stupid Korean series with her, which most of the time were cliché and too cheesy for my taste. Riley was obsessed with anything Korean: K-POP and K-Dramas. She made Lila watch one of the shows *once* and then...*BAM*, Lila was now a K-Drama obsessed, too. We were currently watching some period/historical drama called *Scarlet Heart Ryeo*.

I had to admit, though, that shit was good.

So, did I want to go over at Bianca's tonight? No, I didn't. Bianca was too...clingy. I didn't even go on any dates with her. We fucked a few times, and she declared herself my girlfriend.

I didn't correct her. She was now going around the campus, telling everyone she was Maddox Coulter's *girlfriend* – flaunting our relationship status in everyone's face. Including Lila's.

Lila would just roll her eyes and subtly put her hand in my back pocket, which would make me *smirk* because, damn it, Lila sure knew how to push all these girls' buttons. They were jealous of Lila and my best friend? She firmly believed none of these girls were ever good enough for me.

So, Bianca, my girlfriend?

Ha.

More like recent fuck buddy – but okay, I'd humor her. For a while.

I typed out a one-word response. Yes.

After all, it was Friday. Lila and Landon were supposed to have date

night.

My jaw clenched at the thought, and my teeth gnashed together. Why couldn't Lila see he wasn't the man for her? There was something off about him, and apparently, I was the only one who could see that. I didn't like him, period. Why? I didn't know.

I just didn't want him anywhere near my Lila.

"Yo, Maddox!" Turning around toward the voice, I saw Jaxon jogging over. He was Harvard's linebacker, one tough motherfucker. He was a beast on the field.

His dark skin glistened with a sheen of sweat, and he flexed his neck left and right. "Can I crash over at your place tonight... and the rest of the week?" His brown eyes pleaded with me.

"Let me guess, Rory kicked you out? Again."

Jaxon grimaced. "She's pissed because she found a lipstick mark on the collar of my shirt. Told her I didn't mess around with any bitches," he sighed, rubbing a hand over his tired face. "It was before the game when I was hugged by one of the cheerleaders, but Rory doesn't believe me. I'm no cheater, man. But she's driving me fucking crazy."

Jaxon was faithful to his girlfriend of five years. They were high school sweethearts and shit, but Rory was one fucked-up bitch who had major trust issues. I wasn't about to tell Jaxon that, though, because he'd pummel my face into the ground.

"Yeah, you can crash at my place," I said. Oh, the drama.

He slapped me on the back and nodded. "Thanks, man. I owe you one."

"You owe a lot. Pretty sure you live at my place more than yours."

He grinned. "I'd say you were goddamn lucky you didn't have to deal with a psycho girlfriend, but I can't complain. She's the best thing in my life."

I didn't need a girlfriend.

Lila Garcia was already the best thing in my life.

As Jaxon jogged away, my ringtone blasted through the pocket of my black slacks. I held back a growl of annoyance and checked the screen. I picked up the phone after seeing it was Riley calling. "What?"

"Lila has been locked in her room for the last two hours; she won't come out, and I think she's crying. That asshole. Landon, it's him. You need to come because Lila isn't opening the door for me," she rattled out in one breath. "Maddox! Are you listening?"

I was already sprinting toward our apartment. "I'm coming," I growled.

Red, hot anger coursed through my veins, and I swallowed it down, but it grew in my belly. I felt it pounding through my blood, vicious and brutal.

If Landon had caused my Lila any pain... if he hurt her...

I took the stairs two at a time, stumbling in my haste, but I couldn't find myself to care. The door to her apartment was opened, so I hustled inside. Riley was pacing the length of their living room, worry etched over her face. Colton was leaning against the wall, also looking a bit pensive. That was the only time I had seen the two of them in the same room without being at each other's throat.

"Maddox," Riley said, looking relieved at the sight of me.

I walked past her and stood in front of Lila's bedroom. The door was locked, like Riley said.

"Lila?" I called out, pressing my ear to the door. There was a sound of her sniffling.

She was... crying?

No.

FUCK, NO.

My gut churned as my fist pounded on her door. "Lila, open the door."

There was no response from her. "Open the fucking door or I'm going to break it down. Trust me, I will."

"Go away," she called out weakly.

My heart stuttered. "Lila," I said, trying to keep my voice gentle. "Baby, open the door. *Please*."

"Just... go away, Maddox."

My eyes pinched close, and I rested my forehead against her door. "Don't do this to me. Don't shut me out. Don't hide from *me*. I'm not going to walk away, and you damn well know it. Let me in, Lila."

Whatever Landon had done to my girl, he was about to regret it for the rest of his shitty life.

"If you don't open the door, I'm going to think the worst, and I'm going to hunt down Landon... and I might end up in prison tonight."

I didn't give a fuck if I was about to spend the rest of my life in jail because I was still going to hunt down Landon either way, even if she did open the door.

He made her cry - that was a death penalty.

"You're not killing anyone," she mumbled through the door.

"Open the door then," I pushed.

There was some shuffling around and then she unlocked and opened the door. Lila came into view, but she kept her head casted down, her black hair covering half of her face.

I placed my finger under her chin and nudged her head up. Her eyes were red, but there was no sign of tears. "I'm not crying," she said, begrudgingly. "I don't cry."

That was right.

Lila never cried, except for one day of the year. She hated being vulnerable and the only time she ever allowed herself to be, was on the date her parents died.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were red, a clear sign that she wanted to cry, but she was holding her tears in.

Lila pressed her palm over her forehead and squeezed her eyes close. "I'm just... God, he made a fool out of me."

"What did he do?" I asked through clench teeth.

"I was his rebound," Lila said, her voice small. She swiped at her cheeks even though there was no evidence of any tears. "And he has been cheating on me... with his ex. I guess they're back together now, but he was a coward and didn't tell me. I don't understand. Why did he... why did he sleep with me... if he was already back with *her*? I mean, he basically cheated on both of us."

Riley let out a curse under her breath from behind me.

Colton hissed. "He's dead meat."

Anger simmered in my gut. The more she spoke of her situation, the angrier I became.

It consumed me, and my skin itched with the need for revenge, to *hurt* him, like he hurt Lila.

My Lila.

My fingers curled into fists as the fury slid through me like acid, burning inside the pit of my stomach.

Riley pushed past me and enveloped Lila into a hug. She whispered something to her, and Lila nodded. They talked quietly to each other. "I'm more angry than hurt. Embarrassed, too, because I let him touch me... we had sex... because I *trusted* him."

Lila's head came up, her gaze finding mine instantly. "Maddox—" she said, but her eyes flared, probably from seeing the look on my face.

"Maddox, no."

Lila came forward, her arms out as if to grab me, but I sidestepped her reach.

She called out after me as I stalked out of the apartment. "Maddox!"

I wasn't listening; I was too far gone to stop now.

I charged down the stairs, faster than I knew I could and climbed into my car. The passenger's door slammed shut, and I looked up. Colton settled in the seat.

"You're not stopping me," I snarled.

"No, I'm coming *with* you." He cracked his knuckles, his lips splitting into a deadly grin. "He fucked with one of ours."

After breaking every known traffic law, we were at Landon's apartment two minutes later.

"You stay out of it," I warned Colton. My Lila, my fight.

"I'll let you beat the shit out of him, but I'm just here to keep you from killing him."

Colton rang the doorbell. I heard a high-pitched giggle through the door – a woman – and anger boiled deep in my veins. It churned with the hunger for destruction.

I wasn't thinking clearly, I fucking couldn't.

All I could *see* was Lila's sad eyes and blotchy cheeks as she tried to keep her tears inside.

The door opened, and there was Landon.

His eyes widened in shock, and I pushed forward. He stumbled back inside his apartment, gaping like a fish out of water.

"What the fuck?" he sputtered. "You can't just push your way inside like that."

"We can't?" Colton taunted.

"What's going on?" the woman asked. She was partially naked, the look on her face telling me she had just been fucked, multiple times.

Landon pointed toward the door. "Get the hell out of my apartment. Now."

I took a step forward, a promise of violence. He saw through me, and his eyes darkened. He shoved at my shoulders, wanting to assert his dominance in this fight, and I *snapped*.

Lunging forward, I grabbed him by the throat. He retaliated quickly, landing a punch in my gut. I quickly threw my weight on him, sending both

of us crashing into his glass table in living room.

"Oh my God!" A shrill voice screamed.

I felt his nose crunch under the force of my punch. It was so loud, it vibrated through my ears.

Grabbing his hair, I pummeled his face over and over again. "You," punch, "don't," punch, "fucking get," punch, "away," punch, "so easily," punch, "after hurting," punch, "Lila."

He broke Lila's trust and embarrassed her by cheating on her. *Motherfucker*.

Landon struggled against me, and he knocked me in the jaw, hard enough that I stumbled back. The sound of fists against flesh was all I could hear. Blood leaked from my nose, and I punched him in the ribs again and again.

"Stop! Help! Someone help!" The stupid voice was screaming once again.

I drew my fist back and ploughed it into his stomach. He coughed and sputtered blood. Stars burst in my vision when he got me in the head, but I shook it off.

There was blood on my knuckles but I. Could. Not. Stop.

"Maddox! Maddox, no."

Lila. Her voice broke through the red haze, and I blinked, seeing Landon's bloodied face.

Hands grabbed my back and arms, trying to pull me away from Landon. My eyes connected with Lila's brown ones, and she looked completely... distraught.

For Landon? For this fucking asshole?

Lila whimpered. "You're hurt. Oh God, Maddox. Oh no."

Me?

"Ah fuck," Colton roared. "She called the police. Shit!"

Lila's face crumpled, and she pushed her face into my neck. "No, no, no."

I stumbled away from Landon, and his bitch came forward, falling to her knees beside him.

"Maddox," Lila said softly.

"I got you." I wrapped my arm around her, lifting her so her feet were dangling an inch from the ground.

She let out a choked sob. "No, you don't. They're going to take you away. Landon is probably going to press charges. *Why?*"

Why?

Fucking why?

Because I can't bear the thought of you hurting. Because watching you hold back your tears for an asshole like Landon has me losing my mind. BECAUSE HE FUCKING HURT YOU.

I never got a chance to say any of that to her. Glancing up over her shoulder, I saw the cops walking inside the apartment. They looked around, studying the mess.

"That's him, Officer," the woman cried, pointing at me.

Lila was shaking her head, holding onto me tighter. I had Landon's blood on my hands; I broke into his house... there was no getting out of this. And I wasn't the least bit sorry for turning Landon into my punching bag.

"Colton will take you home, Lila," I rasped in her ear.

She gave me a stubborn shake of her head. "I'm coming with you."

"No," I deadpanned, with my hand gripping her chin. I made her look at me. "Colton will walk you home, and I'll see you in the morning."

"But-"

"No, Lila."

Her face hardened. "You don't tell me what to do."

"I am, right now. Do as you're told." She glared. Lila was stubborn, and I knew she'd sit with me in jail if I didn't get her home. There was no goddamn way I was letting her spend the night in a cell, even if it was with me. "Please."

I placed her back on her feet, and her chin wobbled. She turned to face the cops. "It's only a misunderstanding, officers. It's my fault."

"Misunderstanding or not, you're under arrest." One of the officers was staring directly at me. I nodded, compliant. There was no point arguing with them.

Colton had to drag Lila away from me as I was handcuffed, my hands behind my back.

"Please," Lila pleaded. "Can I just... hug him?"

The officer who handcuffed me beckoned her over. She slid closer to me, pressed her nose against my throat. "I'm sorry. This is my fault."

Lila sniffled, and my heart twisted. My lips brushed against her forehead, and she hugged me tighter. "I'm sorry."

"I got you," I said again.

Her teary eyes were the last thing I saw as they pulled me away from her. Lila brought her hand up and she touched her dreamcatcher necklace at her throat, as though it soothed her.
It gutted me, because she was crying for *me*.

LILA

couldn't sleep, there was no way I could when Maddox was in jail, and here I was, in my nice and cozy bed.

He was locked away in a cell because of *me*. My gut twisted with guilt, and I stared at the ceiling through the darkness. Colton had to drag me home with Riley right on our heels.

After convincing me to get in bed while he handled the matter, Colton left.

Why didn't he stop Maddox from getting into a fight?

Why wasn't I fast enough to stop him?

Why... why... why?

I always knew that as much as Maddox was laid-back and easy-going most of the time, he was also short-tempered and easily triggered.

The guilt became harder to bear because if I only had put on my big girl pants and didn't cause a scene, Maddox wouldn't have run off to beat the shit out of Landon.

But I had been hurt and embarrassed.

Not that I cared much about Landon. I wasn't heartbroken, but I felt... *used*.

Used and discarded after he had his fun with me.

If Landon didn't want to be with me, he could have easily walked away. I wasn't clingy; I had no expectations. But he cheated on me, after I let him inside my body.

That hurt me.

And I had been furious.

I wasn't 'crying' because he broke my heart. They were angry tears, at him... and myself, because I trusted the wrong guy.

I felt foolish, but I didn't think Maddox would react the way he did. Everything happened so fast, and before I could have grabbed him, he was already out of the door.

Then I walked in on him beating the shit out of Landon, not that I cared if my ex was hurt or not. But Maddox was wounded too and that guilt became much harder to bear.

When the cops came, it took everything in me not to beg them to take me with them. Goddamn it, I'd sit in a dirty cell with Maddox if it meant he wasn't alone behind those bars and I was with him.

Landon was pressing charges. His precious girlfriend attacked me after the cops left and her sharp nails have left a nasty mark on my arm. I returned the favor by punching her boobs before Colton pulled me off her and dragged me out of the apartment as I cursed them through their next lives.

My door creaked open, snapping me out of my thoughts, and I squeezed my eyes shut. There was a relieved sigh, and I peered at the door from behind my comforter.

"She's asleep," Riley said softly to the person behind her. Probably Colton.

I was right, because a second later, his hushed voice came through. "Good. It's been a long night for all of us."

The door closed, and I sank back into my soft mattress. My body was still tense, and I couldn't find a comfortable position.

It was a long time before I fell into a restless sleep.

Hours later, I jolted away when my bed dipped under a heavy weight. Someone settled behind me and a strong arm slid around my hips, pulling me back into *his* body. Hard and familiar... warm and solid... strong and safe.

Maddox.

He curled his body around mine, and my ass was nestled indecently against his groin. He didn't shift away like I expected him to. He kept me there, my back against his front, so close not even a string could fit between us. We'd laid in bed many times, but this was... different.

More intimate, less 'friendly,' and there was an unspoken tension between us. I licked my lips and cleared my dry throat, feeling the way my stomach dipped and fluttered as he touched me.

Maddox pushed his other arm under my neck and tucked the back of my

head against his shoulder. I released the breath I was holding and inhaled his familiar scent, also catching a whiff of alcohol. Did he drink before coming home?

"Landon dropped the charges?" I asked in the dark.

I felt him shake his head. His arm tightened around mine, as if making sure I couldn't escape or maybe he was scared I would.

Little did he know...

"Then?" I pushed for more.

"My father handled it," he confessed, his voice a raspy croak.

Ah, so his father bailed him out. Shit. He found out. *Bad. Bad. Bad.* Colton and I thought to keep this incident lowkey and hoped Brad Coulter wouldn't find out his son was in jail.

I guess Maddox's father had eyes and ears everywhere.

"Was he pissed?"

"He didn't message me, didn't call me either. Didn't even talk to me. He handled everything behind my back and without talking to me. I only knew he did it after I was released, and Colton came to pick me up."

Oh. So, his father hadn't even bothered to speak to him, to ask what happened, why it happened or how his son was even doing.

I snuggled deeper into his embrace and slid my hand into his, the one on my hip. I squeezed his fingers. "I'm sorry."

He expelled a long breath. "I'm not. He deserved every punch I threw at him. I think I broke his nose. Nobody makes my Lila cry. No one. I won't fucking allow it." He slurred his words a bit. Yeah, he was definitely a little drunk.

My eyes filled with tears. I didn't peg myself to be an emotional person, but Maddox made me *feel* so many things at once.

Sorrow... fear... anguish... hopelessness...

My heart thudded in my chest

"Maddox?"

"Um, yeah?"

"I love you," I whispered.

His arm flexed around my hips. "I know." His hold tightened around me in the slightest bit. His lips feathered over my forehead in a whisper of a kiss, before he placed his cheek on top of my head again. "I love you, too."

It wasn't the first time we had said those words to each other but my heart danced in my chest. Without lifting my head, I brought my hand up, showing

him my pinky.

"Friends?"

Maddox hooked his pinky around mine, and I could feel his smile without even having to look at him.

"Friends," he said.

My eyes closed, and I fell asleep to the sound of his heartbeat.

IN THE MORNING, I woke up to an empty bed. For a brief moment, I wondered if it was all a dream, and Maddox hadn't come home. But when I breathed in, I caught the familiar, musky scent that he left behind. My body still tingled from where he had touched me.

After quickly freshening up, I walked out of the bedroom to find Maddox sitting at the kitchen table, staring out the window. The morning sunshine shone through the glass, and Maddox looked beautiful sitting there. He was shirtless, with only his grey sweatpants on. It was the perfect sight...but my chest tightened at the look on his face.

My wounded warrior.

He had a black eye, and his lips were cut and swollen. His ribs were turning into an ugly shade of purple and green.

"Want some coffee?" I asked, hoping to get him to talk and lighten up his mood. Last night was hell for all of us. I needed to make sure he was okay.

But his next words were not what I expected.

"Am I a disappointment?"

I flinched. "What!? Maddox, what are you-"

My next words caught in my throat when I saw the expression on his face. Utterly defeated, a look that could only be described as *heartbroken*. Like a beaten puppy, whimpering silently as it suffered.

My heart caved inside my chest at that look, and I walked over to him, kneeling between his legs. He spread his thighs wider, encasing me against his body.

"Why is it that whatever I do is never enough?" he said, his words choked.

"Maddox," I whispered.

I saw the phone in his hand and finally put two and two together. Grabbing the phone from him, he didn't stop me, I searched through his messages. The most recent message, two hours ago, was from his father.

You keep disappointing me over and over again. I can't believe I almost thought you had finally been redeemed from your messy ways. This is the last time I will bail you out from things you fuck up.

Oh Maddox. My poor, sweet Maddox.

"I'm sorry," I breathed, looking down. This was all my fault. Why did I ever let Landon in my life?

I grabbed his hands, holding onto him, letting him know he wasn't alone. It was then I noticed his knuckles were bruised, and there was some dried blood left on it.

Shit. That was from last night. He didn't clean himself up.

I got up and quickly and went to get to first aid kit to clean his wounds. His knuckles were slightly swollen, but thankfully, not broken. I attentively cleaned his bloodied knuckles, wincing as I brushed the antiseptic wipes over the broken skin. Maddox showed no outward emotion. He was silent until I finished with his left hand and grabbed his right hand to do the same task.

I kept my movements slow and careful as I cleaned his wounds and wrapped a bandage around his hands. He probably didn't need them, but the bandages would keep them clean, so there would be no infection.

His eyes raked over my face before his gaze slid away – looking bleak and distant, lost.

"I got into Harvard. I worked for it. I worked so goddamn hard that I was able to keep my full scholarship for three years. I'm on top in my football career. Why is it not enough? Everything I do... it's *never* enough. I always, somehow...end up lacking somewhere. Always somehow disappointing him. It's never enough, Lila."

"No. No. No!" I rushed to say. "Baby, no. Maddox, everything you do is enough. It's more than enough. You. Are. Enough. Please don't say that. I'm sorry about last night. I'm sorry your father is an asshole. I'm sorry he never told you he's proud of you. But *I* am. I'm so proud of you, Maddox Coulter. Everything you've done, everything you do... it's enough," I said in urgency.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes as if soaking in my words. He entwined our fingers together and clutched onto me. I squeezed his hands back. *I'm here, Maddox. I'm here, and I'm not leaving. Me and you, forever.*

I wanted to ask him what he needed right now. From me. If I could lessen his guilt, his suffering in any way, I would do it. Without a second thought.

As if he could read my mind, his eyes opened, and he leveled me with those beautiful blue orbs. I saw everything I needed to know.

"Can you..." he paused and swallowed. "...hug me? Please?"

He whispered those words so brokenly, like he was scared I'd refuse me, like a child begging for affection. To have someone *just* hold him.

I nodded, mutely, because my throat was closed up as I choked back a cry and forced my tears away. I couldn't let him see me cry.

I stood up, and he pulled me into his lap. Maddox buried his face in my neck. "I got you," I said, softly in his ear.

His grip tightened on me.

Maddox got hurt because of *me*; he got into a fight for *my* honor. The realization was overwhelming because I had underestimated his protective instincts for me and how much he actually cared.

I felt him breathing against my throat, and under my palm, his heart slowly started to beat at a calmer pace. His lips brushed against the pulsing vein in my throat and maybe he hadn't meant to do it or he didn't want me to feel it, but I did. My body was hyperaware of his touch.

"I got you," I said again, as a reminder. My fingers combed through his hair, and slowly, he started to relax in my arms. The tension left him, and my aching heart soothed itself at the fact that Maddox was going to be okay. He was strong enough to be okay.

Once he lifted his head up, I smiled at him. "Okay now?"

His lips curled up in a half smile, and he nodded. "I guess I just needed a hug from my Lila. I swear you're my goddamn therapy. Why waste money on a shrink if there's a Lila in your life?"

I let out a laugh and smacked his arm. "Oh, shut up."

He was grinning now, his eyes lighter, his expression calm.

"So, how about I make you pasta?" It was his favorite thing to eat whenever he was feeling low.

"Woman, you know I'd never say no to your pasta."

"Okay, sit tight then."

Pasta for breakfast. Hmph. Who cared? If that shit made my Maddox smile then we'd have fucking pasta for breakfast. Every. Damn. Day.

LILA

end me a picture. Wanna see your sexy face.

I opened the text from Riley and then stared around the loud club. We were sitting at a corner booth with pretty bad lightning.

Still, I humored Riley and brought my phone up, deciding to please her with one picture. She wasn't able to join us for a night out since she had an essay due tomorrow morning. Riley pouted as I left our apartment with Maddox, Colton, Jaxon and Rory. She made me promise to send her photos of us being pissed drunk, so she could live vicariously through us.

I ruffled up my hair a little, then pursed my lips in a sexy pout. Just when I was about to click the perfect photo, I was suddenly jostled. Something wet touched my cheek, and I reared back in shock. Maddox's head fell into the crook of my neck, and he inhaled deeply before pulling away, giving me panty-melting smile.

"Eww, did you just lick me? What is wrong with you, Maddox?" I growled, slapping his chest and shoving him away. But he was a wall of muscles so moving him was an impossible task.

He gave me a mock pout. Yeah, he was a little drunk already. "I thought we were supposed to lick the ones we love. I licked you, so you're mine."

I blew out an exasperated breath before hissing. "Are you a dog?"

Maddox paused, as if he really was thinking about my question. And then he shrugged. "Doggy style is my favorite position to fuck. And I'm also your Poodle."

Before I could have stopped him, he leaned forward and licked my cheek once again, leaving a wet trail behind.

His mouth moved to my neck, licking me there, too. Against my own accord, my thighs trembled, and my core clenched as his lips brushed over my throat. "Maddox!" I whisper-yelled. "Stop licking me!"

He leaned back, and his lips quirked up dangerously. "Why? It gets you wet?"

"No," I barked, suddenly feeling the urge to smack him. "Because your *girlfriend* just walked in, and she's coming our way. Oh, she doesn't look very happy."

Maddox looked toward the entrance before sinking more into his seat, as if trying to hide from the raging chick coming his way. "Ah. Shit," he whispered.

Bianca wasn't exactly his 'girlfriend' anymore. They broke up when Maddox didn't show up the night he was supposed to go over to her house. The night he got into a fight with Landon and ended up in jail.

The next morning, Bianca threw a huge tantrum and even called me a 'homewrecker' and 'bitch' for trying to steal her man. Maddox dropped her so fast I thought she'd suffer a whiplash.

Her man? Yeah, right.

Maddox was never hers in the first place.

A week after their breakup, she still didn't grasp the idea and has now turned into a stalker. Bianca stopped at our table, hands on her hips, and glowered at Maddox. "I need to talk to you."

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "I'm busy, as you can see."

"Now," she snapped.

My eyes widened at her tone, and Maddox tensed. "You don't get to come here and make demands. I'm not your boy toy, Bianca."

She tapped her foot, impatiently. "You owe me a better explanation for breaking up with me, Maddox."

Maddox rubbed his eyes and slurred a bit as he spoke, "I don't owe you shit. And we were never together in the first place. We *fucked*, that's it."

The distaste was clear on her face as she gave me a nasty look. "It's because of her, isn't it? You're choosing her?" Bianca said in a shrill voice, pointing an accusing finger at me.

Here we go again.

Another 'girlfriend,' same drama.

Maddox growled low in his throat, the sound so threatening even I winced. "Listen—"

My phone rang, breaking through the tension, and Maddox stopped midsentence. I gave him a sheepish look and slid out of the booth, phone to my ear.

I walked away from Maddox and Bianca as they continued arguing with each other.

"Hey, Bea?" I answered the call.

"Lila, shit. We're in trouble," she gasped.

"What? What is it? What happened?" I strode out of the club since it was too loud to hear anything Bea was saying over the phone.

Bea was a professional dancer, and my chorographer of the dance club at Harvard. Two years ago, I joined the club as a hobby and soon realized that I enjoyed dancing. It was therapeutic.

I wasn't the best dancer, but I also wasn't too bad. In between my studying and waitressing part-time, I needed something to do to relax and just unwind. Dancing seemed to do that for me.

"Owen is hurt. He broke his leg from a biking accident. He. Can't. Dance," Bea said, out of breath. I could feel her freaking out through the phone.

"Owen is hurt?" I asked, because I couldn't believe what I just heard. "How bad is it?"

"He's okay. He's home, and he just called me. Owen isn't in a lot of pain, but it's bad enough he won't be able to dance for the next three months. *Oh God*."

Oh shit.

That didn't sound good.

A month ago, our club partnered up with a non-profit organization that put on charity events for people with disabilities. This year, the fundraising event was for blind people.

Our small group of dancers were supposed to present a show for the attendees at the event who would be contributing to the charity.

Owen was my dance partner.

Shit!

"There's no backing out now. This is top-notch, Lila. The organization, the event – *everything* – has to be perfect. We're representing Harvard. We no longer have a dancing partner for you anymore, and *you* open the show!"

My throat went dry, and I tried not to panic, but Bea freaking out like this was causing *me* to freak out. "Bea, you need to calm down. We can figure it

out."

"The event is in a week!" She screeched loud enough I had to pull my phone away from my ear.

She was right though. We couldn't mess this up. Every dance number at the event was a couple's dance; the organization specifically asked for a partner dance since they thought it would be more attractive to the attendees.

I took in a deep breath, trying to calm my rising panic. I was used to perfection — my grades and my work. I was obsessed with it, although I wasn't always like that.

My therapist said it was my way of dealing with the death of my parents – chasing perfection and wanting to always be in control.

Right now, everything was happening the opposite of what I wanted.

"So, we need to find me a new dance partner?" I questioned Bea.

"Even if we do, who's going to learn the dance in less than seven days?" She took a shuddering breath and let it out. "It's not possible."

"Nothing is ever impossible," I said.

"Your optimism is admiring but not suitable for the situation since we are thoroughly fucked!"

"I'll find a dance partner," I announced with conviction. There was no giving up after we'd come this far. The event was happening. Owen was hurt, but we had to find a way to make it work.

And I knew exactly who was going to help me.

Even if I was about to hear him grumble about it for the rest of our lives.

"Lila-"

"I know someone."

"Who?" she asked suspiciously.

My corner of my lips curled up. "Maddox."

I had struck Bea into silence, only her breathing could be heard over the phone.

"You're serious?" she whispered, as if we were sharing a secret.

"Yup."

"Holy shit. You mean, The Maddox, right?"

"Yup." I grinned harder.

"Holy shit," she said again.

We said our goodbyes, and I walked back inside the club. Maddox was going to hate it, but I knew he'd never say *no* to me.

Back at our booth, I saw that Bianca was nowhere to be seen, and

Maddox was nursing a beer. "Where'd she go?"

"I handled her," he said, not giving me any more details. "What's up?" Maddox seemed to have sobered up a bit.

"I need to talk to you about something."

His eyes narrowed on me. "Is it bad?"

I half-shrugged. "Not exactly. Do you want to go home?"

Maddox stood up without saying a word, and I guessed I had my answer.



Maddox

"No," I calmly stated. "Not happening."

"But Maddox," she dragged out my name, pleading with her eyes. When I shook my head firmly, she stomped her foot.

She peeked at me through her lashes. "This is really important to me."

Then Lila got a look on her face, a look that should have warned me of what was coming.

"Lila-"

"I dare you."

Jesus Christ, this woman!

"Take that back," I warned, my voice low.

Lila smirked. "No." She crossed her arms over her pert tits, pulling my attention to her chest.

I was a goddamn weak man.

Weak to my fucking knees for Lila Garcia because she was the one temptation I couldn't have.

She was wearing a crop top that should've been illegal. Her dreamcatcher necklace hung around her neck; Lila never took it off after I put it on her three years ago. Her stomach was taunt, and her belly button looked cute, and as fucked up as it was, a brief image of me licking her belly button and her giggling flashed through my mind. My mouth watered at the thought.

I shook my head and cursed myself. No, I couldn't.

This was... not happening.

Never, fucking ever.

Even though it grew harder every year to remind myself that we could only ever be friends and nothing more.

Every time she smiled at me, it became harder not to kiss her.

Though, I had refused to admit that even to myself. I refused to even entertain the idea of touching Lila in a manner other than 'friendly.'

But I was little drunk, and I couldn't get the image out of my head. She was standing in front of me with a crop top and shorts that hugged her curvaceous ass like a second skin, her pink lips glistening and her black hair falling over her shoulders.

Lila looked like a Rated-R Snow White. I wanted to slide between her thighs and make us both forget that we were best friends.

No. FUUUCCCK. NO!

That was drunk me thinking of that shit. Sober Maddox would never think of fucking his best friend, I told myself.

"Maddox, are you listening to me?" Her voice broke through my burning thoughts.

I swallowed and forced myself to look away.

"Yeah," I said, my voice deeper, hoping she didn't notice the way I strategically adjusted the pillow over my lap.

"Do you dare?" she asked cheekily.

I sighed, running my fingers through my short hair and pulling on the strands. "This isn't going to be fun, Lila."

She was asking me to be her dance partner. I wasn't much of a dancer, but I wouldn't say I completely sucked. This was important to her; I was well aware of that fact.

It was the fact that I was going to be too *close* to Lila for a whole week, especially since it had started to become harder for me to control my urges – my dick – around her. *That* bothered me. After the incident with Landon... there had been an unmistakable tension between Lila and I.

We both refused to acknowledge it, going on with our lives, but it was there, and it was becoming harder to ignore.

I didn't know why... I was feeling *this* way.

And I didn't understand what it was.

Angry at myself, I held back a growl, and my eyes snapped to Lila's. She was waiting for an answer, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

Lila Garcia was my best friend, and the last thing I wanted to do was lose her because I couldn't keep my dick in my pants.

I'm drunk, this is why, I convinced myself.

She tapped her foot impatiently. Any other girl doing that would have annoyed me, but *Lila* tapping her foot was cute as fuck.

"C'mon, Coulter. Are you about to lose to me?" She tsked. "It's a simple dare."

Simple?

Little did she know...

She grew cocky when I didn't reply, her competitive nature shining through. Lila knew I'd never turn down a dare, and she knew exactly how to get her way.

"Fine, I accept the dare," I said, my teeth grinding together. "You're going to regret this, Garcia."

Lila pressed her lips together to keep from smiling, but she lost the fight. A beautiful smile spread across her lips, and she laughed a bit, the little happy sound shooting straight to my heart.

My fingers curled and uncurled at my sides.

What is wrong with me?

LILA

y body was on fire.

I fought back a shiver, and my pulse throbbed in my throat.
His hands traveled up my arms, slowly... taking his time, as if he was memorizing every inch of my exposed skin. His touch was so soft, so featherlight, but it felt as though he was writing a word, painting a picture or playing a song on my skin. My breath caught, and my heart raced, tripping over itself because it could longer beat in a normal rhythm.

Our eyes connected through the floor length mirror. The intensity of his gaze made my stomach do a crazy flip, and my thighs trembled.

Maddox was wearing a black sleeveless shirt, the muscles in his arms on display, and they clenched and tightened with every move he made. His whole body was a work of art. I wore a tank top and shorts, comfortable enough for dancing.

His blue eyes smoldered with *something* I couldn't read – dark and intense.

Friends, I told myself.

We were best friends.

But friends didn't look at each other the way we did.

The past five days had been sweet torture.

Sweet because I spent every waking hour with Maddox.

Torture because I spent every waking hour with Maddox.

Dancing... touching... breathing so close to each other's lips... but reminding myself to pull away.

I refused to acknowledge what I was feeling. It was forbidden.

Or maybe I didn't really comprehend my own wayward emotions.

Why does my body react the way it does when Maddox is close?

Why does my heart hurt... when he's hurt?

Why does my stomach flutter when he's touching me?

We were friends, weren't we?

Being anything more than friends could risk what we had for the last three years and whatever we had was *beautiful* the way it was.

"Lila?"

His voice, a deep timbre that traveled down through my body and all the way to my toes, snapped me back into the present.

"You just stepped on my toes," he mumbled, his breath against the tip of my earlobe.

I quickly apologized and went back into the position I was supposed to be in.

Our eyes locked, and I moved my hips against his. He followed my movement, and his grip tightened on my waist, his fingers almost digging into my flesh, and it didn't seem like he noticed.

Our height difference had the curve of my ass right at his groin, and my eyes fluttered close, my cheeks flushing in embarrassment and... something else.

Maddox made a sound at the back of his throat, and I looked at him through the mirror. His face hardened, and his eyes grew darker, his pupils dilating.

He grasped my hips and spun me around, taking me by surprise. He pulled me closer, our bodies clashing together. His hand skimmed over my bare thighs, right where the shorts ended, and he slowly lifted my left leg up, hooking my thigh around his hip. Fire licked its way through my veins, and I burned hotter.

Maddox dipped me low, and his warmth seeped through my clothes all the way through to my bones.

"You look a little red, Garcia," he rasped. "Am I too hot for you?"

He pulled me back up, and my heart thudded in my chest. I turned around and rolled my eyes, trying to look indifferent to his stupid remarks and his close proximity.

Maddox chuckled low, his chest vibrating with the sound, and I felt the vibration against my back. "You're rolling your eyes at me, I know. I can see your reflection in the mirror, Lila."

My eyes narrowed on him, and I swiveled around again, swatting his chest. "Concentrate on the dance, Maddox."

His arm snaked around my waist, and he pulled me hard into his body. I stumbled into his chest. "I have you," he muttered softly, and his arm tightened around my waist.

Maddox fished out the white blindfold from his pocket, and he covered my eyes, stealing away my ability to see. I was supposed to be blindfolded for half of this dance, making it trickier. It was all about trusting your dance partner.

It forced me to feel every one of his moves, his steps, our matching rhythm, our shuddering breaths and the heat coming off him. My body was even more hyperaware of Maddox's closeness to me.

His warmth left me for a brief moment and our song, the song we were supposed to be dancing to, filled the tiny dance studio.

"Time of my Life."

There was no way Maddox and I could compete with the original dance and actors from the movie *Dirty Dancing*; they were legends, but it was my favorite movie and song and it was perfect for *this* dance.

Blindfolded, I waited for Maddox to return to me.

I could feel him somewhere around the room, *watching* me. The heat of his gaze had my stomach clenching.

The longer he took, the more nervous I became. Tick, tick, tick.

His body brushed against my back, and I sucked in a breath. I squeezed my eyes shut behind my blindfold and reminded myself to breathe. His hand drifted down, his fingers whispering over my body. My ribs, my stomach, my hips. Maddox touched me like I was a made of glass, fragile to his exploration.

Maddox pulled me into him, and he started to move. I followed his steps through our mixed tango and contemporary dance.

He gripped my hips and twirled me left and right before I fell back into his arms. My heart raced faster, and his breathing was ragged. I imagined his hard face and eyes that were so blue I drown in them. Beautiful.

Mine.

Oh, I wished.

I embraced the music and swayed with the flow, matching Maddox's rhythm and letting him lead me through blindly. I was at his mercy.

After spinning me around and with my heart in my throat, Maddox pulled

me back into his body. With one hand on my waist, he grabbed my thigh and slowly brought my leg up to his hip. I hooked my ankle around his thigh, right under his ass. I was breathing hard now, and I wished I could see his face.

His breath brushed my nose. "Is this right? That's the correct move?" Maddox asked, his voice deep and gruff.

I nodded, mutely. Then, he slowly dipped me low. I released myself into his arms and let him move me. With me bent backward, his body molded over mine. He pressed his face against the crook of my neck. It was just part of the dance, I told myself.

Maddox inhaled.

I exhaled.

He brought me back up, and my leg fell from around his hip. He spun me around to the right and then one quick twirl to the left before Maddox brought me closer to him again. Our movements were synchronized.

I lifted my arms up, and his hands slid down my waist, just below my ribs. I swayed and moved my hips to the music. His fingers tightened on my waist before he lifted me up. My feet left the floor, and I wrapped my legs around his hips before he bent me backward again.

When we were finally standing straight up, I hugged him close, burying my face in his neck. I felt slightly dizzy, my heart beating too fast. But so was his.

Body against body. Chest to chest. I felt his heart beating to the same maddening rhythm as mine. Maddox twirled both of us around once.

My stomach tightened as I slid down his body, and my feet touched the ground once again. His fingers grazed my flushed cheek, and I wondered if he could feel how hot I was. Maddox removed the blindfold as he was told to do during our dance practices.

I blinked, and our eyes locked together.

His face shone with sweat, and my hair was sticking to my sweaty forehead and cheeks. His eyes narrowed on me, hungry and searching. Blazing with *something* – I didn't understand, I couldn't explain.

The expression on his face... I wished I knew what it was.

Maddox took a step back... then another and another, walking backward from me. The song was coming to an end; this was our final move.

Once there was enough distance between us, he crooked his finger at me, beckoning for me to come to him.

I did.

I walked, and then I took off running, one final lift, the same climatic lift as the one in the movie.

Once I was close enough to Maddox, I jumped. His hands gripped my hips, and he lifted me up and over his head. Strong and firm, he kept me steady.

Oh God.

Every muscle in my body tightened. I released a shaky breath as I slowly slid down the length of his body, feeling every hard inch of him. My palms pressed over his chest, sliding down his ribs and abs.

"I got you," he rumbled.

Do you?

Once I was touching the ground again, I curled my arms behind his neck, and our foreheads pressed together. His lips brushed against the tip of my nose, and my eyes fluttered close.

I can't breathe.

I swayed, dizzied by the mere proximity of Maddox. My heart hammered in my chest. He exhaled, and his minty breath was on my lips.

Don't kiss me.

Kiss me.

No, don't ruin this.

A loud clap against the silence of the room had me flinching away. My eyes flew open, and Maddox's darkened as he pulled away.

I swiveled around and faced Bea. When did she get here?

"Lila!" she squealed, clapping her hands. "That was amazing... explosive! Oh my god!"

Bea walked further into the room, looking quite pleased. If there was any tension in the air, she ignored it.

She fanned herself. "The chemistry... Sweet Jesus, have mercy on us. Just wow! No one would believe you two are just friends. That was... yeah, wow." Bea pointed at Maddox and I. "This is exactly what I was looking for. You need chemistry with your dance partners. You need the audience to *feel* your dance even though they aren't dancing."

Her smile widened. "Oh, I'm so excited. Thank you, Maddox. For doing this on such short notice."

"Lila asked," he grumbled, running his fingers through his hair. "I couldn't say no."

Bea turned to me. "Are you guys hungry? We can grab lunch."

Maddox took a step back, pulling further away from me. He grabbed his duffel bag, his jaw clenching and his body tensing. "No. You go ahead. I'm leaving."

"Maddox-"

But he was already stalking away without glancing back at me. Without a goodbye.

My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach.

The moment between us was gone, the spell broken.

It was better that way, before either of us made a mistake we'd both regret for the rest of our lives.

Friends?

Friends.

LILA

walked in on Riley and Colton. They both looked furious, glaring and spitting venom at each other. He had her caged against the wall, and their heads snapped toward me as I walked inside the apartment. Colton pulled away from Riley as though she burned him, and Riley was glaring daggers at his back.

Without a word, Colton left and slammed the door behind him. Welp, this wasn't looking too good.

The animosity between Colton and Riley was getting out of control.

I cleared my throat, and Riley sniffled. Her face crumpled, and she choked back a cry. "I hate *him*."

"Colton or Grayson?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Both," she hissed, fury burning in her eyes. She stomped into the kitchen and filled herself a glass of water.

"What happened?"

"Grayson called," she deadpanned.

Oh. Shit.

She made a sound at the back of her throat. It sounded like a whimper. "Why did he call? After so long... why?"

I placed my shoulder bag on the counter and sat on the stool. "What did he say?"

Riley huffed, her lips twisting with a sneer. "Nothing."

My eyebrows rose, and I waited. "He called, I picked up. He didn't say a word. I could hear him breathing over the phone, but he's such a damn coward. I hung up."

Poor Riley.

Three years ago, I thought Grayson was the best choice for her.

Two months after graduation, he broke her heart.

Grayson wasn't going to attend any universities. Riley wanted to do a long-distance relationship. Hell, she even thought of quitting Harvard and moving back, just so they wouldn't have to break up. She was ready to put her heart on the line for him.

But Grayson was adamant and said it wouldn't work out. He wasn't willing to do long distance, but Riley knew it was a bullshit excuse. Something had been up with him, something he had been hiding from all of us. We figured it had something to do with his adoptive parents and his past, but he wouldn't say a word.

She wasn't ready to give up on him though. After going back and forth, making things difficult on Riley, he left. Grayson broke up with her right before the start of our first year at Harvard.

Grayson was back in Manhattan, and Riley was *here*.

She was still very much in love with him, and I knew, if Grayson showed up now, she'd give him another chance.

Enter Colton – who thought after Riley's break-up, he'd have a chance with her.

Oh boy, did he try. He cared for her, any one could see that clearly. If there was someone who could heal Riley's heart after Grayson broke it... it was Colton.

But Riley refused to give into his advances. Tension brewed between them, growing much volatile every day.

"I miss him," she confessed, her voice barely a whisper. "If only he had given us a chance."

I grasped her hand in mine and squeezed. "I'm sorry, Ry."

She swiped away a tear, almost angrily. "Do you think maybe... Grayson has a good reason for staying away?"

Something bothered me about that day.

The frantic and desperate look in Grayson's eyes as he pushed Riley further away from him. And the words he roared.

"I'm protecting you, damn it!"

Protecting Riley? From what? From who?

She let out a humorless laugh; her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "He's had three years, Lila. Three years I've been waiting for him, three

years for him to realize we could have been so good together, but he gave up on *us*."

I hugged her, and she fell into my arms, crying softly. She had been holding it in for so long. My heart ached for her.

For all three of them.

Once her cries turned into tiny hiccups, Riley pulled away and rubbed a hand over her face, as though getting rid of any evidence she had been crying over Grayson.

She half-smiled, the corners of her lips twisting slightly. "How was the event? Where's Maddox?"

I left the stool and went to the fridge, taking out last night's leftovers. "The event was great. It was pretty... exhilarating, and they loved the dance. The fundraising part of it was a huge success, too," I told her. "It was fun."

And it truly was. The whole night was pretty epic until...

Riley appeared curious when she asked, "Maddox didn't come home with you?"

No, he *ran*.

The moment our dance ended, Maddox left. He didn't even stay for dinner, and with him gone, just like that, without so much as a word, I could barely eat. My food stayed untouched in front of me, and for the rest of the night, I *smiled* while my heart was breaking – hidden from everyone's eyes. I suffered while they enjoyed the rest of their night.

How could he? Why did he leave?

Why didn't he say goodbye?

Why?

A subdued anger burned in my stomach, threatening to break through. I couldn't understand why Maddox was acting the way he was – why he was running away from me, pulling further and further away from me.

Anger and... fear.

Because it felt like we were hanging on by a thin thread, and it was about to snap, catapulting us into two different world and away from each other.

Maddox and I... if we weren't careful, we were about to *break*, to shatter, and there would be no turning back once that happened.

Me and you, he had promised.

I hoped he was keen on keeping his promises.

My chest tightened. Don't break me, Maddox.

"Lila?" Riley's soft voice broke through my stormy thoughts.

"He left. I don't where he went," I admitted out loud, the words tasting bitter on my tongue.

Riley stared at me, her eyes searching. "You don't see it, do you?" she said gently.

"See what?" I shoved a piece of roasted chicken in my mouth.

Her lips twisted. "Nothing. When you see it, you'll know what I mean."

"What-"

Riley shook her head and stood up. "I've had a long day. I'm off to bed. Are you going to sleep soon?"

I nodded. "Probably."

Riley paused at the door of her room and glanced back over her shoulder. "Stop hiding and stop ignoring it. You know what you feel. You're just refusing to acknowledge it."

Without waiting for a reaction, she closed her door. I stood there, mutely. What was I supposed to do with her cryptic words?

It felt like there was a hole in my chest, and I was bleeding out. There was no way to stop the flow of blood. I *bled*, the knife digging into my heart carelessly.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The dam broke, my blood flowed, and I lost those pieces of me I had carefully glued together.

Tears of frustration blurred my eyes.

I was so...confused.

Between wanting Maddox and not wanting to lose him.

For years, I'd swallowed down my confusing feelings and kept them locked away in a forbidden place, refusing to acknowledge them. My throat itched as I forced back a cry, and my lungs seemed to collapse.

You know what you feel.

No! I didn't!

I couldn't.

Never.

Stop hiding and stop ignoring it.

I... couldn't.

I chewed on my lip until it bled, and my knees buckled from the realization – what I felt for Maddox, it was so much *more* and I was damn afraid to acknowledge it.

Why was this so hard?

MAYBE I WAS STUPID.

Maybe I had completely lost my mind. It was the only explanation to why I was in Maddox's apartment, waiting for him to get home. It was almost midnight, and the last time I had seen him was...

When he had left the event right after our dance.

Maddox still hadn't come home yet.

I wrung my hands in nervousness, the feeling of anxiety pooling in my stomach. God, what was I doing?

Why was I even... here? At his place, waiting for him.

Stupid, stupid Lila.

What was I going to do when he came back? Hug him? Kiss him?

Nothing.

I'd stare at him, and he'd look into my eyes, that would be it. Because we were... friends.

Such a brutal lie it was. Friends...

The closer we became, the more I noticed smaller things about Maddox. What he loved, what he enjoyed, what pissed him off or annoyed him, his quirks and his ticks, and with every new thing I learned about him over the last three years, it became harder to pull away.

To ignore whatever was brewing between us; yet, we refused to acknowledge it.

He slept with other girls.

I dated other men.

We were best friends.

It was simple to the world, to *him*, but I was battling a war on my own.

My head fell into my hands and a choked sound escaped me. What am I doing?

The clock ticked with every second that went by, and when I finally couldn't take it anymore, I snapped to my feet. No, I shouldn't have been here.

This was a... mistake.

I was confused and...scared...and feeling too much.

The last thing I needed was to be this close to Maddox if he came home. I had to leave. Shaking my head in desolation, I strode for the door.

I never reached it because the door swung open and Maddox entered his

apartment, stumbling inside drunkenly. Sweet Mother Mary, he was out... drinking?

He halted at the sight of me, and his lips curled. "Lila." He breathed my name like a whispered prayer to the heavens above.

Was he praying for absolution or destruction? Because whispering my name like *that* could only destroy us.

He slammed the door closed behind him and stalked forward.

"You're drunk," I accused, taking a small step back.

He hummed, smiling. He stood in front of me, our chests barely touching, and my gaze met his. "You're so beautiful," he blurted out.

God, he was completely out of his mind. Maddox wasn't just drunk; he was *really* drunk.

He bent his head and stuck his nose against the crook of my neck, inhaling sharply. Was he...sniffing me?

"Beautiful," he breathed, before his body slumped forward into mine.

"Maddox!" He was so heavy, my knees almost buckled under his weight. "Maddox?"

Did he just... pass out?

I took his shoulders in my hands and tried to shake him awake. He groaned, but otherwise, didn't move. Shit.

With the rest of my strength, I dragged his heavy body into his room. Maddox barely made any effort, because he was practically dead to the world. How much drink did he have? And why?

God, I was so tired from asking that question – *why?*

I pushed him on the bed, hating that he drank so much in one night. Before I could pull away, his arm curled around my waist, and he tugged me forward, and I fell on top of him.

His throat bobbed as he groaned. I shifted over his body, trying to break free, but for someone as drunk as Maddox, he was still too strong for me. His arm was a band of steel around my hips, keeping me locked against him. He wasn't letting go.

I shifted away but then sucked in a harsh breath when I felt...

My throat went dry. This wasn't happening.

His cock strained through his jeans, the bulge pressing indecently into my stomach.

"Lila." My name on his lips sounded like poetry. So right, so perfect... so filthy.

I pressed my hands over his pecs and pushed. "Maddox, let go."

He did the opposite.

Maddox rolled us over until I was underneath him, trapped against his body. My legs fell open, and I gasped as he settled between my spread thighs. His eyes split open, hazy and filled with... *hunger*.

His gaze fell to my lips, and he lingered there, his eyelids hooded.

"Maddox," I whispered.

"Say it... again. My... name."

I was utterly helpless in his arms. "Maddox." His name echoed from my lips.

"Again," he demanded.

"Maddox."

He released a shuddering breath before bending his head, pressing his face into my throat. He nuzzled me, his lips caressing my skin. I trembled, goosebumps breaking over my flesh.

He ran his lips down my collarbone, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin there, and I let out an involuntarily shudder. "Don't," I warned, but it was a weak attempt.

Maddox hummed low in his throat, his chest vibrating with the sound. He lowered his body over mine, forcing me into the mattress. He wrapped around me like a cocoon.

We were chest to chest, hips to hips, his hardness against my heated core – so fucking close. There was not even an inch of breath between us.

The area between my legs throbbed, and I clenched, seeking for something but feeling... *empty*.

Maddox was still nuzzling my throat, kissing me as if it wasn't atypical, as if we weren't best friends, as if everything around us would crumble as we remained intimately wrapped in each other's arms.

"Fuck," he grunted against my skin, and his hips jerked, pressing against the most sensitive part of me. My lips parted, shocked, and a silent gasp escaped me.

My hands fumbled toward his shoulders, and my nails dug into his back.

This was so wrong.

Stop.

Don't stop.

Maddox swiveled his hips before grinding against my pussy. We were both fully clothed, and my best friend was humping me like a horny teenager.

And I didn't want to stop him.

How long had I forbid myself from imagining this? Too long.

He was drunk; it wasn't his fault. I was fully aware, and it would be my guilt to bear.

We should have stopped.

No, don't stop.

Maddox grinded his erection against me. He was so hard; I could feel him through the layers of our clothes. My core grew hot and wet. Molten desire spread through my veins, and my stomach dipped to my toes.

His breath hitched, and I let out a moan when his hips jerked again, the zipper of his jeans pressing hard against my sensitive core through my shorts. The friction left my body wanting more, and I became needy. My pussy clenched as the need to be filled became strong.

Maddox thrust into me, again and again, the motion too similar to fucking.

My thighs trembled, and my heart seized.

He kissed his way down my throat, biting and sucking softly at my skin. His palm caressed the curve of my breasts, feeling the heavy mounds in his hands. His grunts and his groans were music to my ears, even as I tried to remind myself how wrong this was.

It's wrong. I released his shoulders and pushed a hand between us.

This is wrong. My fingers traced my wet slit through my shorts.

Maddox rubbed against me again, and it was a delicious sensation that had my eyes fluttering closed.

I shoved a hand into my shorts and tugged my panties aside. My eyes blurred with tears as a whimper echoed from my lips. It felt so good, even though it was so wrong.

"Fuck, goddamn it," he cursed, the muscles in his neck corded, and his face tensed.

His thrusts grew jerkier and faster. He was chasing his orgasm, climbing toward something forbidden between us.

My thumb slid over my swollen clit, and my hips jerked up. I was so hot, and my fingers glided over my wetness. My knuckles brushed against my pussy lips, feeling the way my core contracted. I was so turned on; I'd never been this wet before. I gathered my wetness with two fingers and rubbed my pulsing clit. Pleasure spiked through me and my back bowed.

The feel of Maddox's lips against my throat and his hands kneading my

breasts had my eyes rolling back into my head. His thumb skimmed over my hardened nipple through my top, and I shuddered. My body easily responded to his touch, and I realized I had been craving *this* for the longest time.

"Lila," he groaned out hoarsely. "Fuck, Lila. My Lila."

Maddox humped me, thrusting, and I rocked my hips against his in unison, finding a rhythm between us. I imagined he really was *fucking* me. No clothes, no barrier between us, and our bare bodies pressed together in the most intimate way two human beings could be together.

The image of us fucking was so decadently sinful and filthy. My calves tightened, and my whole body clenched as I climbed up and up toward my release.

I rubbed myself faster before sliding my thumb over my clit and pinching it. My vision blurred, and my whole spasmed as I choked back a gasp before biting on my lip. Wetness pooled between my thighs, coating my fingers and panties with my shameful release. Wet and sticky, I continued to rub myself in leisure strokes, feeling the little twitches of my pussy after my orgasm.

Maddox thrust *hard*, and I gasped before a moan spilled past my lips. He tensed above me, and his hips stilled, his head thrown back with a low, deep grunt. Warmth spread through his jeans, and I could feel it through my shorts. He just came.

Maddox's eyes pierced me for a second and then he slumped over my body.

The moment was gone, and I was instantly filled with shame and immense guilt. My stomach twisted, bile coating every inch of my mouth.

What have I done?

There was absolutely no excuse. Maddox had been drunk, and I took advantage of the situation for my own pleasure. He probably wasn't going to remember this tomorrow morning...

But what if... he did?

My heart thudded in my chest, and I swallowed back a sob. I removed my hand from my panties, the stickiness on my fingers a harsh reminder of our actions. I stretched my arm out and kept the hand I pleasured myself with far away from us.

Maddox buried his face in my shoulder. His body went slack, and I felt him soft snores against my skin. The heaviness of him sank into me like a warm blanket, and for a brief moment, I imagined how it'd be to fall asleep in his arms every night and to wake up next to him, just like this. As much as the fantasy was sweet, it would only have a bitter ending.

My fingers slid through his hair, my nails grazing the back of his neck softly, just the way he liked it. My lips parted, wanting to whisper my secret, but I felt choked. The heart is a traitor, and, in that moment, I could feel all my defenses crumbling to the ground.

Maddox grumbled something under his breath, and it sounded like my name. His arm tightened around my hip, and my arms curled around his shoulders as a lone tear slid down my cheeks. I didn't want to let go... but I had to.

"If I love you, I give you the power to destroy me. I'm not strong enough for that. I can't be just another girl to you, Maddox. I need to be more; I deserve more, and I don't think you can give that. I can't risk *us* and what we are. We're beautiful... just like this. Friends."

I prayed Maddox woke up in the morning with no memory of what we had just done.

I'd take this secret to my grave, and I would bear this guilt on my own.

MADDOX

Meek later

My fingers drummed over my thighs as I waited for Lila to come down the stairs. I left her an hour ago to get dressed, and if we didn't leave in five minutes, we were going to be late to the gala.

I was in a tuxedo, which was appropriate for the evening gala we were attending. It was an auctioning event and dinner, my parents being the guests of honor. My dad called me last night and *demanded* me to be present. I told him to fuck off and hung up with absolutely no intention to attend the gala. I didn't give a shit if this was important to him or that it was appropriate for me to be there to show my face and support to my parents.

It was Lila who convinced me.

The gala was being held in California, and she wanted to visit the beach. Lila said it was a great opportunity for a small vacation after such a long semester, and I couldn't say *no* to her. I could never refuse her of anything.

So, we took a plane here. We'd go to the gala tonight, and tomorrow, I was going to teach her how to surf.

The sound of heels clicking against the hardwood brought my attention to the stairs. Lila came into view, and my breath caught in my throat.

Breathtaking.

She descended the stairs carefully, a silky black off-the-shoulder dress clinging to her slender curves and fluttering around her feet, which were adorned with glittering silver heels. It was plain and simple, yet elegant with a thigh high split. Her creamy thigh was visible through the gap as she walked toward me, a silver clutch in her hand.

Her hair was piled up on her head, in a bun, with a few curly strands of black hair fanning her cheeks. Her dreamcatcher necklace hung between the valley of her breasts, and she wore a smile that made my knees weak.

She did a slow spin. "So, how do I look?"

Her pouty red lips had my dick straining against my black slacks and I stifled a groan.

"Pretty," I rumbled.

Lila pursed her lips, pouting. "Just pretty?"

I took a step toward her, unable to stop myself. "Gorgeous. Beautiful. Exquisite. Stunning. Lovely. Angelic. Breathtaking. Ravishing. Elegant. Bewitching. Alluring. Heavenly. The angels would bow to you because they can't compete. So. Fucking. Exquisite."

Her lips parted, a hitch in her breathing, and she blinked at me through her long, thick lashes that should have been unnatural but everything about Lila was natural. "You said exquisite twice," she breathed.

My fingers skimmed over her bare arms. Her skin broke into goosebumps and a small shiver racked through her small frame. "Because you're twice as exquisite," I confessed, in a raspy croak.

My body burned with a sensation I knew too well, and my pants grew tight around my groin as my dick became harder in her mere presence. I didn't even have to touch her, and I was already leaking cum at the tip.

It was lust, I told myself.

But I lusted after other women before, and whatever I felt for Lila didn't come close to *lust*.

And I hated myself for feeling this way.

Just like I hated myself on that morning, a week ago. I woke up to be an empty bed, but I still felt Lila's presence next to me. It was a dream; though, it had seemed so real, so vivid.

And my boxers had been sticky with my release. I couldn't remember the last time I had a wet dream and spilled cum in the middle of the night like a horny teenager, but Lila... *fuck*, she invaded even my dreams with her sweet voice and sinful touches.

I dreamed of fucking her... my best friend. The same friend I made countless pinky swears with.

Friends?

Friends.

I destroyed the innocence of our relationship – the sweetness of our friendship. I made it into something... dirty, and it was no longer pure and no longer untouched by my forbidden desires. It was my guilt to bear for the rest of our lives.

Little did she know...

Sweet Lila, I fucked up.

Her lips curled. "Such a sweet tongue. I'm almost jealous of all the girls you've said those things to."

My heart squeezed at her words. "Your jealousy is not needed because I've never called another woman those words."

No one had ever measured up to Lila since she came into my life. No other woman had ever been... beautiful or *exquisite*.

Her eyes widened before she quickly tried to mask her surprise. "Liar."

I cupped her elbow, steering her away from the stairs. "I don't lie."

Lila mumbled something incorrigible under her breath before she rolled her eyes. We walked out of the beach house, which was owned by me – well, my parents. We had a caretaker who cleaned up and kept the house safe while we weren't here. My parents and I used to spend a lot of time here when I was younger, a child.

Before everything changed and I became a stranger in my own goddamn house and to my own parents.

A limousine was waiting for us outside. Lila let out a breathy laugh. "Seriously, a limo?"

I shrugged, halfheartedly. "The host for the gala tonight arranged it. Apparently, he sent a limo to all his guests."

Her eyes crinkled to the sides as her smile broadened. "Damn. I don't what it means to be *that* rich. Pardon me for being a lowly peasant."

We climbed into the limo, and the driver peeled out of the parking space, taking off through the neighborhood I was familiar with. The drive to the gala was short, and we were only about fifteen minutes late due to traffic.

We walked into the ballroom, and all eyes fell on us. Lila's fingers tightened around my elbow, gripping me hard, as though her life depended on it. *I got you*.

I met my father's gaze with a hard one, and he jerked his chin at me in greeting. My mother smiled, though it was tight. Probably fake, too, but I

didn't know any longer since I long stopped caring if it was real or fake.

The moment we descended the stairs, I was surrounded. I was Brad Coulter's son –prestigious, important and held in high honor.

The night ended before it started. My bow tie suddenly felt like it was restricting my air flow, and my skin itched. This was exactly why I didn't want to attend this gala because all they were talking about was when I'd take over my dad's company – asking about the future. He built an empire, and I was the only heir.

I was approached by businessmen left and right. They laughed, and we shared a drink, appearing as courteous as I could be.

I loathed it.

Lila stayed by my side until she was pulled away by the wives. I kept my gaze on her, watching her every move. She didn't know these people, and I knew this was beyond her comfort zone.

But she was here for *me*.

My date for tonight, my friend and my ally.

A slow song came up, and the couples spilled onto the dance floor. This was my chance. I nodded at the gentlemen and made my brisk escape, stalking toward Lila. Her head snapped up as if we were connected by an invisible thread, and she could *feel* me coming for her.

Her brown eyes brightened, and a small smile twisted her lips with relief.

"Maddox." My name spilled from her lips, and my chest squeezed.

"Sorry, ladies. Can I steal my date away for a dance?" I asked, offering Lila my hand. She giggled and took my hand, and I whisked her away.

"My savior," she whispered as we joined the other couples on the dance floor.

"I thought you didn't need a savior or protector."

Her eyes narrowed on me, and she pinched my bicep. I swallowed back my laugh. "Forget I said that. I take it back," she grumbled.

Beautiful Lila, sweet Lila.

My hands landed on her hips and hers curled around the back of my neck. The second her soft skin touched mine, I realized what a mistake it was.

We were *too* close, after I'd been trying to put distance between us.

Her body pressed against mine, and my fingers teased the top curve of her ass before I gripped her hips again. She swayed to the music, and we slowly started dancing.

This was a bad decision, and my dick was pissed at me.

Her cheeks were flushed, and I wanted to ask her what she was thinking about.

Was it as forbidden as my own thoughts?

Did her desires match mine?

I shook my head, trying to clear my mind.

"What's wrong?" Lila asked, her voice delicate. She tilted her head to the side, her eyes sparking with curiosity.

My eyes swept over the ballroom, and my gaze landed on my father's. He was watching us dance, an unreadable expression on his hard face.

Anger burned like acid in my veins at the fact that we were in the same room. I didn't want him anywhere near my Lila.

I bent my head, my nose brushing over the tip of her ear as I whispered, "Let's get out of here."

LILA

is voice was gruff when he spoke, "Let's get out of here."

Maddox dragged me out of the ballroom, and I tried to keep up in my heels. I knew he was going to hate tonight. As much as he was cocky and arrogant and he loved the attention from the chicks, he loathed being surrounded by people like his father – talking business and mingling with them.

The subject of him taking over his father's empire one day as the only heir was something we never discussed. He refused to talk about it, and I knew he had no intention of taking over.

Instead of waiting for the valet, he took me around the building to the parking lot. "There's our ride," he said under the moonlight of the California sky.

I halted in my step, forcing Maddox to pause, too, as I took in what was in front of me. Maddox chuckled, and he let go of my hand, striding over to his motorbike. His bike?!

I gaped as Maddox climbed onto the beast of a bike – one that was similar to the one back home -- and offered me a helmet. He looked sinful in a tuxedo, with disheveled hair, straddling a bike. I licked my lips, hating the feeling of my heart racing at the sight of him being so devilishly handsome.

I had never seen a man so overtly masculine, so confident in his own skin and with such a dominant aura. The sensitive area between my legs pulsed with need.

"You coming, Sweet Cheeks? Or do I need to steal you away?" I blinked, still shocked. "How...where did you find this bike? We came in

a limo."

A crooked smile graced his perfect lips. "I was already planning an early escape." He winked.

I strode over and took the heavy helmet he offered. Maddox helped me buckle the chin strap, his fingers lingering longer at my jaw.

I swallowed and let out a nervous laugh. "Why does it feel like we're doing something very, very bad? Like we're some naughty kids... when in actuality, we have done much worse than running away from a stupid charity gala?"

"Because if my father finds out we ran, he's gonna skin me alive," he said with a slight twist of his lips.

My eyes narrowed on him. "Ha. Funny. Very funny."

I looked down at my long dress and figured this could be a problem. We weren't really clothed for a bike ride. But thank God for the thigh high split. It allowed me to bunch my dress up and tie a knot at my thighs; this way, the fabric wouldn't get trapped in the monster wheels.

"Where are we going?" I asked, curiously.

His gaze fell to my bare legs, and I could swear he swallowed, his eyes darkening in the slightest bit.

"Some place not *here*," he announced smoothly, the deep baritone of his voice vibrating through my bones, all the way down to my toes. My body temperature spiked, burning with unspoken and forbidden need.

He offered me his tuxedo jacket, and I took it, pulling my arms through the sleeves and wrapping myself in his smell – his cologne and his familiar manly scent.

"Well, let's go. Steal me away, Coulter." I pulled down the visor of my helmet, obscuring my face from his gaze, a perfect hideaway for my flushed cheeks.

I straddled the bike behind him and wrapped my arms around his middle. It wasn't the first time he took me on a bike ride. We had plenty of those during our times together.

We rode for a long time, the breeze in my hair and Maddox's warm body against my front. It was... comforting.

This... this was exactly why I didn't want to risk losing him.

This was why I kept my secret and locked away the night we spent together, the heated moment between us. Maddox didn't remember our time together, and it was better this way. Even though I was the only one left haunted by the memories of us, me fingering myself as he humped me through our clothes.

Every time I stared at him, I remembered the look on his face as he orgasmed. My body tingled at the memory of his lips on my throat and his palms kneading my breasts.

It became harder for me to keep my untamed desires in check.

Maddox eventually came to a stop and the sound of crashing waves filled my ears. "We're at the beach?"

He helped me off the bike, before straightening up to his full height. Maddox unbuckled the chin strap and pulled the helmet off. Once the weight was gone, I almost groaned in relief.

His thumb stroked my collarbone in a delicate manner before he caught himself and pulled away. "I brought you to my favorite spot. Let's go."

He grasped my hand in his and pulled me forward. My heels sank into the sand, and I stumbled forward, a surprised giggle spilling from my lips. Yeah, that wasn't going to work. I kicked off my heels, my bare feet sinking into the soft sand. It felt so nice.

We walked closer to the waves, hand in hand. I could see the reflection of the full moon in the ocean, and the sound of the waves were melodious to my ears. We came here last year, with the rest of our friend group, on our summer vacation. It was good to be here again, but this time – just the two of us.

I didn't want to admit it... but it was intimate.

Maddox and I settled on the sand, watching the waves crash against the shore. We fell into a comfortable silence, and I watched him from the corner of my eye. His face was hard and pensive, with shadows under his eyes. Maddox was okay without his parents in his life, but every time they made their presence known... I've seen Maddox retreat within himself — a place filled with anger and hate. He battled his inner wars on his own and in silence.

My heart ached because I wanted to hold him.

I wanted to soothe him, save him and to love him in ways he has never been loved before and in ways only I can love him.

If only he'd let me.

If only he was mine.

If only...

"Are you cold?" His voice echoed through my ears, and I shook away the

muddling thoughts.

"No, not cold." I went back to staring at the ocean. The urge to dip into the water was strong. "I want to take a swim."

"We can, tomorrow."

"Or..." I left the sentence hanging.

Maddox read my mind, and his eyes narrowed on me. "Lila," he warned.

"Troublemaker. I learned from the best." I blinked at him in fake innocence. "I dare you to go skinny dipping. Right now."

He gave me a blank stare, before releasing a sigh. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Well, I don't think this is that big of a deal. You dared me to wear a potato sack to the club last week! Do you have any idea how embarrassing that was?"

The tension in his shoulders unraveled. Maddox half-shrugged. "Can't be as embarrassing as you making me wear a fake pregnant belly. I was waddling around campus all fucking day, Lila."

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. Oh, that was a sight to see. I'd never seen Maddox so offended in his life, and Colton still wouldn't let him live down that fateful day.

Over the years, Maddox and I have done countless dares. Some of them wild and crazy. Some just plain... stupid and embarrassing.

Maddox taught me how to enjoy life, how to let go of fear and the need for control and to just... *live*.

I wasn't just surviving any longer or simply going through the motions of life after the death of my parents.

I was... living and breathing life.

"So, do you dare?"

Maddox stood up and slowly unbuttoned his white shirt. He tugged at his bow tie, and it fell on the sand beside me. He peeled off his shirt, and my mouth went dry.

His stomach clenched, his abs rippled, and my stomach pooled with heat. My eyes traveled up the length of his torso up to his chest. His strong pecs and his nipples...

My pussy tightened. The silver nipple piercing shone under the moonlight.

I had to remind myself to breathe. My gaze slid up to his face. Chiseled jaw. Full lips. Nose that was slightly crooked, but it was only noticeable if

someone paid close attention and his eyes blazed a deep blue – as deep as the ocean--eyes that could see inside my soul.

"I'll get in the water on one condition. You have to do it."

"Is that a dare?"

"No, I'm not wasting a dare on that."

"You think I'll get in just because you asked?"

He smirked. "Yes."

"So cocky." I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest.

Maddox toed off his black, shiny dress shoes and kicked off his slacks. He left his boxers on and strode toward the waves. "Don't be a chicken, Garcia," he called out over his shoulder.

Oh no, he *didn't*.

I held back a growl and came to my feet, glaring at his muscled back. I should have thought more about it... skinny dipping with Maddox was a bad idea, but I didn't think.

I made silly decisions around Maddox.

I shrugged off my dress and my bra. Covering up my breasts with one arm, I left my lace panties on and jogged toward the water.

Maddox was already waist deep, wading through the cool water, before I jumped on his back. "Boo," I said in his ear.

It was too late to realize my mistake.

My bare tits pressed against his back. Skin to skin. My eyes widened, and my breath stuttered.

Maddox tensed, inhaling sharply, as my puckered nipples rubbed against his shoulder blades. I squeezed my eyes shut, silently berating myself.

"Troublemaker," he grumbled without any heat. Maddox reached behind him and grabbed my thighs, keeping a hold of me. I loved swimming, but it was night, and I couldn't see a thing. The water was too dark, and the ocean wasn't a place to trust. There could be *anything* in this water.

I clung to Maddox, already regretting my dare.

Maddox chuckled, his back vibrating with the sound. My nipples hardened into two aching tips, and we both ignored it. I told myself my nipples were only reacting to the cold ocean, not because of Maddox.

"Don't be a chicken." He was keeping this from being awkward.

"Asshole," I hissed, swatting his bicep.

Slowly, I untangled myself from his back and waded through the water, away from him. I kept afloat on my back, looking at the dark sky.

How did this happen...?

How did Maddox and I go from being enemies to friends... to best friends... to *this*?

Something slimy touched my feet, and I jumped, snapping out of my thoughts with a terrified squeal. Maddox swam over to me, and he pulled me into his arms. "What's wrong?" he asked urgently, his hands sliding down my bare body, searching for any injuries.

Whatever it was slid over my foot again, and I shuddered. "Something just touched me!"

I wrapped my legs around his waist, peering into the water, as if I could see something, but it was too dark.

Maddox stroke my back. "It might just be a fish, Lila."

"Um, I want to get out. Now."

My thighs tightened around his waist, and it was then I realized...

Maddox's eyes darkened as if he just came to the same realization. My core was seated right above his hard length, the thin layers of our underwear the only barrier between us. Chest to chest, hips to hips, skin to skin.

My lungs squeezed, and I forgot how to breathe. My hands curled around his shoulders.

Time halted, and the world came to a stop.

The look on his face was something I'd never seen before, and I wished I knew what he was thinking. His jaw ticked, the muscles twitching. His pupils were dilated and dark, his blue eyes stormy with unreadable emotions. We looked at each other a little too long to be *just* friends.

"Lila," he rasped. His head descended toward mine, his breath feathering over my lips.

I saw it in his eyes; Maddox was going to kiss me.

No, don't.

Yes, please.

His lips parted, captivating me. He pressed me closer to him.

My heart stuttered, and my stomach twisted, butterflies raging inside. I could feel his hardness between my thighs. Maddox, of course, wasn't unaffected. He was a guy, after all. His dick jerked, pressing against my pussy through the layers. I was hot, my core molten lava, and aching.

He just had to slide my panties to the side and thrust into me.

He could...

I was open to him; my thighs were spread around his hips.

As though unable to stop himself, he rocked against me, slightly thrusting up against my pussy.

A small whimper echoed through my lips, and my eyes fluttered close.

It was then he snapped.

Maddox roughly pulled away, the water rippling around us harshly. He slipped out of my embrace, forcing my legs to fall away from his waist. "It's cold. We should get out," he said, his rich voice hoarse. It sounded like he was swallowing the words and having difficulty speaking.

My chest cracked open and a searing pain racked through my body as Maddox swam away from me without another word.

Feeling more alone than ever, I ducked my head under the water and came back up for air, hoping the coldness would ease the heat of my body and clear my mind.

It didn't work.

Slowly, I got out of the water. Maddox was sitting on the sand, still half naked, with his back to me. My throat seized with emotions I couldn't explain, and I settled on the sand with him. Back to back, facing opposite directions. I watched the waves, letting it soothe my bleeding heart.

After a while, our breathing had evened out, our bodies no longer wet from our skinny dipping. Maddox cleared his throat. I turned my head to the side, keeping our backs pressed together. His hand came into view.

He was showing me his pinky.

God, Maddox.

Unshed tears blurred my vision.

"Friends?" he asked in a low voice.

I hooked my pinky around his. "Friends."

We both lied to ourselves, but it was better that way. It had to be.



Maddox

A LOW GROAN escaped me before I could stop myself. Grabbing my pillow, I stuffed it over my face as my hand strayed toward my cock. This was so wrong; I shouldn't want her. Not like this. Never like this.

So. Fucking. Wrong.

Last night, our bodies pressed together in the water under the night sky – I almost lost control. I almost fucked her, right there.

And for a brief moment, I thought Lila was going to let me.

We were both edging toward something dangerous, and I didn't know how to stop.

Because all I could think about were her lips – the way they part when she says my name; her eyes – the way they darken when she stares up at me. Her smooth neck – the way I wanted to bite her soft flesh and leave my marks there. Her hands... the way I wondered how they'd feel around my cock. Her goddamn tits, small and perky, perfect for my hands. She was made for me.

Funnick.

I palmed my cock, squeezing at the base before pumping my length in my fist.

She was in the room adjacent to mine. The walls were so thin, she could probably hear me jerking off. But I couldn't stop. I tried, goddamn it. I tried.

I was hard, aching and... I wanted her. More than I had ever wanted anything in my life.

I shuddered as I imagined thrusting two fingers into her sweet cunt. She would clench around me, moaning, and I'd pull out, teasing her until she was writhing with need, before pushing the same two fingers inside her mouth and demanding she taste herself.

Such dirty, filthy thoughts.

Ragged, guttural groans spilled from me, and I muffled them with my pillow. I pumped my cock with my fist, angry for feeling this way but filled with so much need that I couldn't force myself to stop. The muscles of my thighs tensed, my dick heavy and swollen in my palm as I got closer to my release.

So. Fucking. Wrong.

So. Fucking. Right.

Thick ropes of cum sprayed my stomach and coated my palm as I came, spurt after thick spurt, and I kept fisting my cock, pumping it, until my body twitched and a ragged, breathless groan came from my lips. "Lila."

LILA

he unmistakable pressure between us was becoming harder to ignore. A month after our time in California, which was tense and awkward, the situation between Maddox and I was still same.

Maddox had become rigid, and the distance grew between us.

I wished there was a way to fix this, but it was clear there was no going back, no matter how much either of us wanted to.

I was sitting on my couch, staring at the TV, although I wasn't really watching the screen, when Maddox walked inside my apartment. He wore a blank expression and had a piece of paper in his hand. The last time we saw each other was two days ago, after our last exams. This semester was officially over.

"We're going to Paris," he announced. "Me and you."

Me and you. I almost laughed, a cold-humorless laugh. It used to be cute when we'd say that, but now, it *hurt*.

Me and you. But for how long, Maddox? We were already at the breaking apart.

"Paris, why?" I croaked, before clearing my throat. I didn't want him to read the emotions on my face.

"It's my birthday in four days. Daddy dearest gave me tickets to Paris as a present. Well, he mailed them to me."

This meant his parents, obviously, weren't planning to spend Maddox's birthday with him. In all the years we'd known each other, I'd never seen his parents celebrate his birthday. No hugs, no love, no affection. It made me angry, so furious with the way they always treated Maddox.

He deserved better.

He wasn't as complicated as everyone thought. Maddox Coulter was just a misunderstood boy who needed and deserved someone to fight for him – to show him that he was worth it.

And I was going to be that person. Even if I couldn't do it as his lover, I was going to do it as his best friend, at least.

Because, truly, he was worth all the love – all the love he never had but deserved.

"I've never been to Paris," I finally confessed.

Maddox finally cracked a sincere smile. "I know, and you're going to love it."

City of love. And two best friends who didn't have the courage to acknowledge whatever this was between them.

What were the odds? Fate really did like to play cruel jokes on us.

I dragged my nails over my thighs. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow night. That's enough time for you to pack, right?" Maddox asked, walking further into my apartment, but still keeping a distance between us.

I nodded and then patted the couch. "Join me. I'm watching *Friends*. It's the pivot scene."

Maddox looked indecisive, a troubled tension hanging between us.

Please say yes.

Please don't leave me. Again.

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing with the movement, and his eyes flickered to me and then the TV. Relief coursed through my veins when he took a step toward me and settled on the couch beside me, not saying a word.

A moment passed between us, I smiled – almost a timid smile, and we turned to face the TV at the same time.

A few minutes later, the brutal tension dissolved, and our shoulders shook with silent laughter at the scene we were watching. Our knees were touching, the briefest touch, but my skin tingled. My pulse raced like a freight train, and my heart palpitated; he was laughing, and I was laughing, and the world had never felt so right in that mere second.

I wanted to cherish this moment, so afterward, years later, when Maddox and I had been torn apart by our unspoken feelings, I'd remember what it felt like to be this close to him.

LATER THAT NIGHT, sleep didn't come easy. I tossed and turned, thinking about Maddox and our upcoming trip to Paris. Was this going to be a mistake? Maybe. Probably.

But I couldn't say no, and I wanted to spend this time with him.

Just the two of us.

The ache between my legs was back again, my body tensing with frustration.

Ever since that night – the night Maddox was drunk, my body had been on fire, burning, skin tight with need and aching.

And no matter how much I masturbated, I still felt so *empty* after, never fully satisfied.

My clit swelled and throbbed. Reaching over, I grabbed my second pillow and pressed it between my legs. My eyes squeezed shut as I rocked my hips, back and forth, against the pillow, trying to alleviate the pulsing ache in my pussy. I underestimated how much I wanted Maddox.

My need intensified, and I throbbed harder. Pushing a hand between my thighs, I shoved my panties aside, and my fingers grazed my folds, pushing my wet lips apart and then moving higher to my swollen clit. I rubbed and pressed against the bundle of nerves there, while grinding my pussy faster against the pillow, rubbing my exposed, sensitive flesh against the soft fabric. The friction almost had me losing my mind, but it still wasn't...enough.

My hand matched the rhythm of my hips. My index finger probed my entrance, and when my pussy clenched, seeking to be filled, I slowly thrust my finger inside. Oh God, oh God!

My breath hitched, and I grew hotter, my sticky wetness dripping between my legs – a reminder of how wrong this was, but I still moaned out Maddox's name.

I pinched my clit, rocking my hips faster. I imagined it was Maddox between my legs. I imagined it was his cock pushing against my entrance, not my small fingers.

I imagined him pulsing inside me, filling me... thrusting inside... grunting out my name.

My body tightened, and my hips jerked against the pillow as I rode out my mini orgasm; my panties were drenched and my fingers wet and coated with my release. A low whine spilled from my lips, "Maddox." I rubbed my finger over my wet folds, imagining it was his lips on my pussy, before I pulled my hand out of my panties. My legs were slack against the pillow; my inner thighs still sticky with my release.

I didn't have the energy to get up and change. My eyes fluttered close, and I fell into a restless sleep.

Maddox invaded my dreams. I felt his kisses... saw his handsome face... felt his touch sliding down my body.

Hot tears slid down my cheeks, because it was only a dream, only my fantasy.

MADDOX

was angry. At myself, at Lila, at everyone... everything and at fate.
I'd lost my way with Lila, and I didn't know how to pull her out from under my skin.

We landed in Paris, and my stomach twisted with fury and unwarranted possessiveness as men stared at Lila. Their gaze followed her, lingering over her ass. I told myself I wasn't jealous – just protective of her. These assholes wouldn't know how to handle a woman like Lila.

By the time we reached our hotel, frustration gnawed at my gut, and I was just so damn angry, I couldn't think straight.

Nothing made sense – not my reaction to Lila or the stormy emotions I couldn't understand why I was feeling.

Friends didn't think about fucking each other.

But that was exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to hear her moan my name, I wanted her to whimper as my dick stretched her tight cunt, I wanted... *needed*... Lila.

This wasn't just lust. I craved her lips and the sound of her voice. She made me feel unhinged, my emotions too wild to control. I loathed how easily Lila could break through my barrier – she could rip me apart and put me back together, again and again – I was her more than willing victim.

I wanted to possess her. And I *couldn't*.

Lila was sunshine mixed with a little hurricane, and I was getting swept away. I was going to put a stop to it.

It had to come to an end and soon, before we both did something we'd regret for the rest of our lives. I was willing to peel Lila off from under my

skin, even if it left me bleeding and mortally wounded.

My eyes flickered to Lila, watching her smile at the receptionist. Sunkissed skin, soft lips, pinkened cheeks and brown eyes that captured me since that day at the coffee shop, almost four years ago.

"Bonjour," a voice broke through my thoughts. "How are you doing today?"

A man appeared at Lila's side, suited and standing tall. His gaze landed on her tits first before they lifted to her face.

Lila nodded in greeting, and they shook hands. He introduced himself as the owner of the hotel, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiled at Lila. It was written all over his face.

He wanted her.

My blood boiled, and I swallowed down a growl.

His hand brushed against Lila's arm. "Please, if you need any help today, you can come and find me. A lady like you shouldn't have to go through any trouble alone."

Lila let out a small laugh. "Oh, I'm not alone." She stepped closer to me and place a hand on my arm, smiling. "Maddox is with me."

Mr. Owner, I didn't catch his name nor did I care, eyed me up and down. "A friend, I see?" he asked, with a thick English accent.

He was checking to see if I was his rival. If he only knew...

Lila, oblivious to what was happening, replied, "Yes, a friend. We're so excited to be visiting Paris together."

The moment Lila admitted we were *friends*, his eyes lit up with triumph.

I instantly hated him.

He was practically undressing Lila and fucking her with his eyes, and she had no idea. Or she was playing coy...

My chest tightened. Was she interested in him...? Lila was smiling, her body relaxed, and she *giggled* at something he had said.

By the time we got to our rooms, I was seeing crimson red. I'd never been so angry in my entire life.

"He said they have a fancy bar. Maybe we should go tonight after we've rested?" Lila asked, rubbing her tired eyes. "I need sleep right now."

She stifled a yawn and peeked up at me through her lashes. I nodded, mutely, and walked into my room, closing the door behind me.

My skin prickled with the need to hit something. I ripped my shirt off and quickly undressed, getting in the shower. I turned the water to cold, letting it

seep through my bones. My body numbed, but my mind was still a storm of mixed emotions. It was that feeling when I didn't know what the fuck I was feeling.

I quickly soaped up my body, my hand drifting to my dick. I stroked myself once, and my eyes squeezed shut. An image of Lila drifted behind my eyelids.

Perky tits, pink nipples, cute as fuck belly button, taunt stomach, curvy hips, and an ass I wanted to sink my dick in.

My cock jerked as I put more pressure on it, fisting the length from base to tip. My hand glided over my dick easily through the cascading water. Precum covered the tip, and my balls grew tight between my legs.

Sometimes, as messed up as this was, I wondered if I could just fuck her and get rid of this itch. But Lila wasn't someone I could fuck out of my system. It was years of built-up tension and sexual need between us. One simple fuck, one hot night... would never be enough.

Because the moment I had one taste of her... I'd need more...I would never be satisfied.

My stomach caved, and my thighs tightened as the pressure built, and it finally released. My knees weakened, and I pressed my forehead against the tiles, thick ropes of cum spilling over my hand instantly washed away by the water. I fisted my dick until every last drop was spent and then I cursed. So. Fucking. Weak.

This had to end, now... tonight...

LILA

is presence was a warm heat behind me as we walked into the bar. He was close; really, *really* close. I could *feel* him. I could *smell* him. He was so close, yet so far out of reach. A dangerous temptation dangling right in front of me.

I wanted to turn around and wrap my arms around him, bask in his warmth. We'd hugged and cuddled plenty of times before, but since the Charity Gala, everything had been different.

He had been different.

Somehow, there was a wall between us now. I couldn't break it or walk around it. It was exhausting and scary — watching the change in him, seeing him so...cold and withdrawn from me. Sometimes, it felt like he was battling something inside his head. I waited silently for him to come to me, to speak of his worries, so I could find a way to soothe him. Like always.

Except...it started to feel as if I was the problem. As if he was hiding from me.

A week in Paris. This was supposed to be fun and exciting. An adventure for us, but it was day one and it was already going to waste.

I chewed on my bottom lip as we walked further inside the dim room. It wasn't overly crowded, but everyone here looked fancy. After all, this was one of the most famous hotels of Paris; wealthy and posh people came here often. "I didn't think the hotel would have its own bar. Fancy. I like it."

"It's nice," he replied. There was a roughness in his voice, except his tone was robotic. No emotions whatsoever.

I paused in my steps, expecting him to bump into me. He didn't. Instead,

I felt his arm slide around my waist as he curled it around me. Our bodies collided together softly, and I sucked in a quiet breath. His rock-hard chest was to my back, pressing against me, and I could feel every intake of breath he took. His touch was a sweet, sweet torture.

Fuck you, for making me feel this way, for tempting me and leaving me hanging and...for making me fall in love with you...

"This way." His lips lingered near my ear as he whispered the words. He steered me toward the bar stools.

We sat side by side. From the corner of my eye, I watched him as he ordered our drinks. His voice was smooth, and it slid over my skin like silk. Soft and gentle.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice the man standing next to me until his hand touched my shoulder. I swiveled to the left, my eyes catching the intruder. Yes, intruder. He was interrupting my time with *him*.

Maddox Coulter – the balm to my soul but also the stinging pain in my chest. He was a sweet heaven but also the of my existence.

"Remember me?" the man in the suit asked with a tiny grin.

Yup, I did. He was the owner of the hotel. We met him when we checked in yesterday.

"I saw you across the bar, and I knew instantly, you had to be the pretty girl I met last night." His English was perfect, but it was laced with a husky French accent. I had to admit, it was kind of sexy. Mr. Frenchman stood between our stools, separating Maddox and me. He blocked my view of Maddox and I. Did. Not. Like. That.

"Thank you for helping us yesterday," I replied sweetly, masking my irritation.

His emerald eyes glimmered, and his grin widened. Mr. Frenchman was your typical tall, dark, and handsome eye candy. And he wore an expensive suit that molded to his body quite nicely. "It was all my pleasure."

I nodded, a little lost at what else I could say. I wasn't shy or uncomfortable around men. But this one was a little too close for my liking, and since I had zero interest in him, even though he could definitely be my type, given the fact that *someone else* had all my attention, I didn't want to continue this conversation.

"Lucien Mikael." He presented me with his hand. I remembered he told us his name last night, but I didn't tell him mine.

I took his palm in mine, shaking it. "You can call me, Lila. It's nice to

make your acquaintance."

Instead of shaking my hand, he turned it over and brought my hand to his lips. He kissed the back of it, his lips lingering there for a second too long. His eyes met mine over our entwined hands. "My pleasure, *ma belle*."

Oh dear. Yup. Mr. Frenchman was flirting.

I glanced around Lucien and saw that Maddox was lounging back in his stool, his long legs stretched out in front of him, a drink in his hand, and he was staring directly at me. His face was expressionless.

Lucien turned to the bartender and said something to him in French. I didn't understand the words, but I quickly figured out what he said when he turned back to me.

"It's on me. A treat for a lovely lady."

I was already shaking my head. "Oh. You didn't have to-"

His hand tightened around mine. "Please, allow me."

"Thank you."

Lucien opened his mouth to say something else, but he was interrupted by the ringing of his phone. "Excuse me, *chérie*."

As he moved away, I caught sight of Maddox again. Our eyes met, and I stopped breathing. His gaze was dark, and his jaw was clenched so tightly that I wondered if it'd crack under the pressure. I could see the ticks in his sharp jaw as he gritted his teeth. His face – I didn't know how to describe it. Anger made his eyes appear darker, almost deadly. A shadow loomed over his face, his expression almost threatening. There was a predatory feel in his glare as he watched me closely.

He constantly pushed me away, putting more and more distance between us. Why was he so angry now? I couldn't tell. I. Couldn't. Think. Especially when he stared at me like *this*.

Maddox was maddening. He pulled and pushed; he loved and hated. I always thought I understood him better than anyone else. But right now, he confused the hell out of me.

"Lila." My eyes snapped away from Maddox, and I looked at Lucien. He was apparently done with his phone call, and his attention was back on me. Before I could pull away, he gripped my hand in his once more. "If you need anything while you are in Paris, please call me. I could take you sightseeing. I know many beautiful places."

He let go of my hand, and I turned my palm over to see his business card. Smooth trick, Mr. Frenchman. "Umm, thank you."

Lucien leaned down and quickly placed a chaste kiss on both my cheeks before pulling away. "Au revoir, *chérie*."

I didn't watch him leave. All my attention was on the man sitting beside me. He took a large gulp of his drink.

"He likes you," he said, once Lucien was out of hearing range.

"Jealous?" I shot back immediately.

A smirk crawled onto his face, and he chuckled, his wide chest rumbling with it. "He wants you, Lila."

My stomach clenched, goosebumps breaking out over my skin. My breath left me in a whoosh. His words were spoken dangerously low, although the harshness in his voice could not be mistaken.

"How would you know?" I retorted, angry and confused. He played with my feelings, turning my emotions into a little game of his. Maddox had me in knots, twisting me around like a little plaything.

He grunted, shaking his head, and then he let out a laugh. As if he was sharing an inside joke with himself. "I'm a man, like him. I know what he was thinking about when he looked at you like that."

"Maybe he wasn't thinking about sex. Maybe he's a gentleman. Unlike you." I was playing with fire, I knew that. I was testing him, testing *us*.

"*I dare you*," he whispered so softly, I almost missed it. Maddox looked down at his glass, his fingers clenched around it. Even in the dim lights, I could see the way his knuckles were starting to turn white.

He was giving me a dare *now*?

He didn't finish his sentence, and I wondered if he was contemplating his dare. Maddox's jaw flexed from obvious frustration. For a brief moment, I thought maybe he wasn't angry at *me*. Maybe, he was angry at *himself*. He was fighting *himself*. Could it be that the problem wasn't me?

He drank the rest of his drip in one gulp and then slammed his glass on the counter, before swiveling around in his stool to face me. Maddox stood up and walked a step closer to me, until my knees were touching his strong thighs. He leaned forward, caging me in between the counter and his body. Our gaze locked, and he licked his lips. He had me captivated for a moment until he mercilessly broke the spell.

"I dare you to sleep with him."

I reared back in shock. *Wh-at?* No, I must have misheard him. That couldn't be...

"What?" I whispered, my throat dry and my tongue suddenly heavy in my

mouth.

Maddox's eyes bore into mine, staring into my soul. When he spoke again, his deep accented voice danced over my skin dangerously. "I dare you to fuck him, Lila."

A tremble started in my core and then moved through my body like a storm. Not just a quiet storm. A tsunami of emotions hit me all at once, reckless in its assault. I submerged under the dark waves, suffocating, and then I was being split open so viciously, it sent tiny cracks of my heart and fissures of my soul in all directions. I clamped my teeth together to stop myself from saying something – anything that would make it worse.

We had done too many dares to simply count on our fingers. Countless silly dares over the years, but we had never dared each other to sleep with other people. Granted, I had asked him to kiss a girl once; they made out, but it was years ago. But our dares had never crossed that line.

Sex... that was never on the table. We never explicitly talked about it, but it was almost an unspoken rule.

Why would he even ask me to do such a thing?!

"What's with that look, Lila?" he taunted.

My eyes closed. I refused to look at him, to look into his beautiful eyes and see nothing but pitch-black darkness. He wasn't looking at me like he used to. The light in his eyes was gone.

It scared me.

It hurt me.

It was destroying the rest of what was left of me.

"Look. At. Me."

I didn't want to. I didn't want him to see the hurt in my eyes.

"Open your eyes, Lila," he said in his rich baritone voice.

I did as I was commanded. He crowded into my personal space, forcing me to inhale his scent and feel the warmth of his body. "Are you serious? Or are you already drunk?" I asked quietly. It was hard to breathe with him this close.

"I never take back a dare."

And I never lose. He knew that. We were both very competitive, and to this day, neither of us had backed down from a dare.

Maddox's hand came up, and he cupped my jaw. His fingers kissed my skin softly. He smiled, but it didn't match the look in his eyes. "What's wrong? You don't want to do it?"

"I don't play to lose." Asshole.

Maddox leaned closer, his face barely an inch away from mine. Our noses were almost touching. My heart fluttered when he tipped my head back. *Take back your dare. Take back your dare, Maddox. Don't make me do this.*

He curled his index finger around the lock of hair that had fallen out from my bun. His minty breath, mixed with the smell of alcohol, feathered over my lips. I wanted to beg him with my eyes. Maddox tugged on my hair slightly before tucking it behind my ear. He moved, and my eyes fluttered close once again...waiting... a desperate breath locked in my throat as my chest caved and my stomach clenched.

He pressed his cheek against mine, and his lips lingered over my ear. "Don't disappoint me, *chérie*."

My body shuddered, and I breathed out a shaky breath. He tore my heart open and left me bleeding. He pulled away and stared down at me.

Maddox was mocking me. Taunting me.

He never stopped being a jerk. He just hid it behind a sexy smile and a nonchalant expression.

I thought he had left his asshole ways behind. But no, I was wrong. So fucking wrong about him. About *us*.

Friends. We were friends.

I thought maybe... he wanted *more*. More of me. More of us, of what we were or could be. I was so goddamn wrong.

Maddox Coulter was still an asshole behind a pretty mask.

And I was the stupid girl who fell in love with her best friend.

LILA

waited, my heart thudding in my chest. His warmth behind me had my stomach twisting in anxiety. His shirt brushed against my bare shoulders. Maddox crowded behind me, and my gaze moved to Lucien.

He looked miffed as Maddox came between us. Lucien and I had spent the whole day together. He took me sightseeing while Maddox stalked us from a distance. Lucien didn't know, but I saw him, following us everywhere we went.

Lucien planned to take me out for dinner later at the Eiffel tower. He said it was romantic and beautiful up there. I knew from the look in his eyes that he was expecting something tonight.

A one-night stand?

And Maddox dared me... so it was happening. Tonight.

I tried to pull away from my best friend, but then the fireworks went off in the dark Paris sky, and it stole my attention. People cheered on the rooftop of the hotel where we were standing.

Someone had just gotten married; they were celebrating. The City of Love, indeed.

Because of the noise of the fireworks as well as the music and laughter that surrounded us, Maddox thought his secret was safe; he thought it was loud enough that I couldn't hear the words he whispered in my ear. But I *did*.

"If there's a God, He doesn't want me to be happy. Maybe it's my fault because I pushed you into the arms of another man. But He won't let me have you even though I begged him to let me love you freely. I can't remember the last time I asked Him for something. I guess... I'm not meant to have what I want. My parents. A family. You. You. You," Maddox whispered in my ear, his voice a low rasp.

Another set of fireworks went off, loud and booming into the sky.

His lips caressed my neck, warm and soft against my skin. "All of you."

He sounded so broken, so tortured.

If only...

Maddox and I...

We were more than friends but less than lovers. That was our relationship; there was no real definition. We were somewhere in the middle, tangling over the edge of something that could forever break us.

I turned around and his face held an expression of a wounded beast: a bleeding warrior, a broken boy.

"Lila," he started, his voice a gruff baritone, but Lucien came forward. He wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me into him.

Maddox's eyes clouded, and he stepped back, without finishing the sentence and whatever else he was about to say. Lucien's lips caressed my temple, and Maddox stalked away, disappearing into the crowd.

Maybe that was all we were or could ever be: an incomplete sentence and a story without an ending.

But his secret confession changed everything.

Maddox wanted me.

God, how stupid could we be?

"So, we shall meet in an hour?" Lucian said, breaking through my thoughts. "Is that enough time for you to dress?"

I nodded, mutely, and sent him a tentative smile before striding away.

I walked inside my room, grabbed a few things, and then stalked over to the adjacent room. His door wasn't locked, and I walked inside to find Maddox sitting in a sofa chair, staring out the window – into the dark night.

He was still in his black slacks, his tie hanging loosely around his neck, his rumpled white shirt unbuttoned and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His legs were stretched out in front of him. He had a cigarette between his lips and a drink in his hand.

Maddox looked... rugged. Angry. Intense.

He owned the room, his mere presence sending out a dominating mood. His gaze fell on me, and Maddox tensed. His whole body tightened at the sight of me. His face hardened, his expression dark and brooding.

I wished the situation was different, but there was no other way. I

couldn't unlove Maddox, and I didn't want to. We weren't something, but we weren't nothing either.

I sucked in a breath and hung on to my courage, while sashaying inside. I dropped the two dresses on the bed, and my lips curled.

My legs trembled, but I locked my knees together. "I need your help."

He simply grunted in response, his face flashing with uncontrolled frustration. I wondered if the thought of another man touching or making love to me was killing him and the fact that it was *him* who sent me into the arms of another man.

My stomach cramped, and I inhaled. Exhaled.

The room was growing hotter, and a sheen of sweat slid down between my breasts. I slowly pulled the robe off my shoulders and let it pool at my feet, standing in front of Maddox in my lace panties and bra.

His eyes widened before they narrowed on my bare skin.

I'd been half-naked in front of Maddox plenty of time before. This time, it was... different.

I grabbed the first dress and stepped into it, shaking my hips a bit, so I could pull the tight fabric over the curve of my ass.

Once the dress was in place, I turned to face the mirror, giving Maddox my back.

A single beat passed.

One breath.

Thud.

I caught his eyes through the reflection. "Is this sexy enough to tempt him into fucking me before we can even get to his bed?" I crooned.

I was playing with fire.

And I was about to get burned.

His gaze traveled down the length of my body. It was a red fitted, sleeveless dress, and the bodice cupped my breasts like a second skin with my tits practically spilling out. The dress was indecently short, and it was the best way to say - *fuck me*.

Maddox's fingers clenched the glass in his hand so hard, I thought he'd break it.

I smirked. *Am I breaking through your walls, Maddox?*

His eyes grew darker, a vicious glint in his gaze. I smiled sweetly, trying to appear unfazed by his reaction, even though my heart was beating so fast it threatened to burst through my chest, and my knees were so weak, I

wondered how I was still standing.

I licked my lips and blinked my eyes innocently. We were still watching each other through the mirror. "Can you zip me up?" I croaked. "I can't reach the zipper."

Another heartbeat.

A low exhale.

Thud.

Maddox stood up, tall and tensed, and the harsh look on his face had me whimpering silently. He stalked forward, eyeing me like a predator.

I was the prey, the willing captive.

Maddox pressed against my back, crowding into my space and pushing me closer into the mirror until the tip of my breasts were brushing against the coldness of it.

A silent gasp spilled from my lips, and his fingers skimmed over my bare back.

He inhaled and exhaled a shuddering breath.

If I died tonight, it'd be a sweet death.

We continued to watch each other through the mirror, our reflection staring back at us.

Not blinking.

Not breathing.

Maddox then slowly zipped me up, before his hands dropped to my hips, and he held me tight. Oh God, my heart catapulted in my chest.

"If he hurts you, I'm going to kill him," he growled low in my ear. His words were thick with threat.

My teeth grazed my lips, and I bit down, waiting for him to stop me from leaving, to take back his foolish dare. His grip tightened on my hips.

Stop me. Take back your dare.

Thud, my heart hammered in my chest. Goddamn it, Maddox!

Beyond frustrated and angered by his lack of words, my control snapped, and I swiveled around. Maddox didn't see it coming, and he stumbled back as I pushed him into the wall next to the mirror. He let out a grunt, and his eyes darkened in warning.

Dizzied by our close proximity, I swallowed past the lump in my throat. I cupped his jaw and pressed my body against his.

He didn't pull away, didn't breathe, didn't say a word. A line had been crossed, and we both knew it.

My mouth was so dry, I could barely speak the words: "It's my turn, isn't it?"

Standing on my toes, I brought our heads closer, my lips lingering over his. "I dare you."

Maddox tilted his head, and his fingers dug into my hips. "I dare you to kiss me," I breathed.

My heart stuttered as I said the words. Point of no return, this was it.

His eyes widened; his breath hitched.

One heartbeat. Thud.

Two heartbeats. Thud. Thud.

Then, Maddox pounced.

I cried out as his lips captured mine. Brutal. Harsh. Unforgiving.

Maddox Coulter devoured my lips like it was his last meal, and I fell into his arms, powerless.

I gasped into the kiss, which opened my mouth for him. His tongue slid inside, tasting me. He licked and kissed and bit on my lips. Savage and cruel.

Anger rolled off him in waves as we became cocooned with our lust and need for each other. He took his frustration out against my lips, and I returned his punishing kiss with a violent one of my own.

He hadn't been the only one struggling with this need... and hunger for each other.

I suffered, too.

My pulse throbbed, and my stomach fluttered. My whole body tingled as he spun us around, slamming my back into the wall. Maddox fisted my hair, his knuckles digging into my scalp. He growled a guttural groan and kissed me harder.

This was everything I ever wanted. Dizzy. Hazy. Full of desire and untamed hunger, I moaned into his kiss.

Maddox shoved my dress up, not so gently, and pushed my panties aside. "Is this what you want?" he grunted.

I moaned.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

He growled deeper. "You want to be fucked against the wall like this?" Yes.

God, Maddox!

I cried out when his thumb brushed against my clit roughly, sending tiny sparks through my body. He tsked darkly. "I didn't know you were such a dirty, filthy girl, *Lila*."

I was already so wet between my legs, his fingers glided easily over my folds. Maddox groaned as he felt my pussy clench against his seeking fingers.

"Fuck," he swore, pressing his lips against mine. He bit down, his teeth digging into my sensitive flesh. I clung to his shoulders, writhing in his arms.

Maddox pinched my clit, and I cried out, my body growing tight as a bowstring. He callously dipped a finger inside my pussy, and I clamped down.

"Lila," he said hoarsely.

He pumped his finger, once, twice. "Maddox, please!"

"Lila," Maddox whispered wretchedly. He pulled out, and I gasped when he thrust back inside with two fingers. He didn't give me time to adjust to his long, thick digits; he slid in and out in a punishing pace, dragging out desperate moans from me.

I was so close... so... so freaking close.

He pulled his fingers out.

"Maddox!" I gasped.

He shushed me, his lips capturing mine again. Maddox shifted slightly, and then I felt him – his hard length rubbing against my wet folds. He hooked my thigh around his waist, spreading me for him. My panties were still shoved to the side as his tip probed my entrance. His hips jerked forward, and Maddox groaned as he spread my pussy-lips with his cock, his tip seeking out my swollen clit.

He circled his hips, coating his length with my wetness. "How badly do you want me to fuck you?" There was a possessive glint in his dark gaze.

"If you don't fuck me now... I'm going to go crazy." My clit throbbed, and my heart was in my throat.

Every dream... every day I had been left wanting for Maddox...

This was finally happening. After years of refusing to acknowledge this tension between us, I had Maddox in my arms.

Our eyes met. Silent and breathless. Heart pounding.

Maddox shoved inside in one punishing thrust, stealing my breath from my lungs.

I cried out, and my body tightened. He stretched me; my inner walls spasmed around his cock as he seated himself inside my pussy, buried to the hilt.

His mouth brushed against my neck before it found its way to my lips again. I could feel his hardness pulsing inside me. A curse fell from his lips as he pulled out almost all the way, before plunging in again.

I looked down between our entwined bodies, watching his cock disappear inside me. Thrust, after thrust. The sound of us fucking filled the room, echoing around the walls.

His grunts, my moans.

His groans, my whimpers.

My name was a whispered prayer on his lips.

His name spilled from mine as I cried out.

He ground the hilt of his palm against my clit, and my eyes rolled back into my head as my body spasmed. I spiraled down as my orgasm hit. It was the most intense release I've ever had.

One brutal thrust later, Maddox held himself inside me, as deep as he could go. I felt his release, spurt after thick spurt, as he filled me.

My leg fell from his hip as I gasped for breath.

Maddox pressed his forehead against mine, and I saw instant regret in his eyes. Oh no, no. Please no.

"Lila," he rumbled.

"No." I pushed his chest, and he stumbled back. "Don't you dare," I warned.

His face twisted with a brutal look, but I pushed him again, until he was forced to take several steps back.

One final push, and he stumbled onto the bed, his back flat on the mattress. The look of surprise on his face made me smirk. I couldn't let him overthink this, not right now. Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow. But tonight was ours.

The only way to keep Maddox from pulling away was to... use my body against him.

I quickly got rid of my panties before leaning over his wide frame. "My turn," I croaked.

Maddox tensed as I pushed his black slacks to his knees. His hard cock jutted proudly toward his stomach. Long and thick, glistening with his cum and my wetness. My heart drummed wildly as I brought my head closer to his length.

My lips closed around him without warning, and his hips jerked up as he

shouted, "Lila!"

I took as much of him as I could down my throat, and I hummed, loving the feel and the musky taste of him in my mouth. "Fuuucck, Lila."

He fisted my hair, and I peered up at him. His head was thrown back in pleasure, and need pulsed between my legs. He thrusted into my mouth, silently demanding for more. His breathing was shallow as I sucked him and it was the biggest turn on to see him this affected by my touch. I licked the tip, following the thick veins coursing the length of him, before I deepthroated him again.

Maddox hissed and groaned. His thighs clenched, his stomach tensing as I repeated the process. Sucking and licking.

"Lila... stop... Ah shit!"

Maddox was close, and I pulled away. I straddled his hips, both of us still fully clothed. His hardness rested against my wet slit.

His blue eyes locked on mine. "Don't fall for me," he rasped darkly.

Too late, baby.

My lips curled with a smirk, hiding my true feelings. "I just sucked your dick. Who said anything about falling in love? I just want you to fuck me. Do you dare?"

Maddox glowered dangerously, and I moved my hips, slowly gliding down his length as I took him inside my body once again. His hands came to my waist, and he gripped me tightly.

His hips bucked against mine, impatiently. There was a warning in his gaze, so I started moving, bouncing up and down his cock.

He felt so good, inside me... against me.

I never wanted it to end.

Maddox sat up, and his hand wrapped around my neck. My eyes widened, and his fingers curled around my throat. His grip tightened, not bruising, but the pressure was there, and I gasped. Even though *I* was fucking *him*, he still stayed in control.

I moved up and down his length, finding my stride.

Until Maddox grew impatient.

He growled and flipped us over. Hands fumbling, teeth grazing each other, lips fighting for dominance, we tore at each other's clothes until we were skin to skin, bared and vulnerable to each other's desperate touch and hungry eyes.

Maddox flipped me over on my knees, and he spread my thighs apart.

Without warning, he plunged inside – one smooth, merciless thrust inside my body as he forced his cock through my tight channel.

His lips grazed the back of my neck, one sweet gentle kiss, even though he fucked me raw and deep, ruthlessly and filled with so much passion. My eyes blurred with unshed tears.

Maddox Coulter was fucking me.

My best friend was making love to me.

My heart cracked and withered.

I was powerless as he continued to ram himself into me, animalistic grunts spilling from his throat.

"Maddox!" I cried out his name, over and over again.

I didn't know where he ended and I began.

"Lila," he groaned in my ear, his breathing ragged. "My Lila."

Tears spilled down my cheeks, and my eyes closed.

Please don't let this night end.

Breathless, heart pounding, pulse throbbing, we found our release, moaning each other's name. We were utterly intoxicated by each other. I collapsed into the mattress, and Maddox slumped over me like a blanket. I teetered over the edge of consciousness, my body achy and sore, and my lips curled into a sleepy yet satisfied smile.

"Maddox," I breathed his name.

His arm tightened around mine. "Lila."

My eyes closed, and I slipped away... far, far away.

LILA

woke up, my body deliciously sore. It was a good ache, and my lips twitched.

And then I remembered, the night before flashing in front of my eyes like black and white polaroid photos. Snap, snap, snap, Click, click, click.

My head turned, and my eyes landed on a sleeping Maddox next to me, both of us completely naked. We fucked multiple times during the night, unable to quench our desire for one another. We passed out, woke up, and then fumbled for each other in the dark, over and over again.

I sat up, my heart hammering in my chest.

Last night had been filthy... beautiful... and everything I ever wanted and didn't know I *needed*.

But we crossed a line, and there was no going back. My stomach churned with nausea, and I suddenly felt sick.

Last night, even though I had been tipsy and Maddox had been drinking, both of us were fully aware of what we were doing. Now that it was the morning after and my mind was clear from the frustration and *need* that had been coursing through my body, I didn't know what to do with myself.

What happens now?

What if Maddox...?

What if he didn't want this to last, what if this was a one-time thing for him?

I didn't even know what I wanted as my mind filled with confusion. My heart was heavy with mixed emotions. My body ached from last night, but

my heart hurt.

Tears burned the back of my eyes, and I cupped my face, feeling stupid. For a moment last night, Maddox was mine, and I was his.

But that was it.

Just one night.

Maddox wasn't the type to commit, and I needed more from him than just a one-night stand. There was no point in risking our hearts when the thin thread between us had already snapped.

We couldn't undo what was done.

I had to walk away; I had to leave, though I would cherish last night for the rest of my life.

I eased off the bed and quickly wrapped my robe around me, before walking toward the door. I turned the handle but never got a chance to walk out. The door was suddenly slammed shut, and I was torn away from it. The world spun, and my back slammed against the wall.

Maddox loomed over me, his eyes dark, his dirty blond hair disheveled, and he was still... naked. I peered up at him through my lashes, my heart racing. His lips curled, and he looked enraged.

At me?

Because I was leaving?

Because of last night?

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked, his voice dripping with something akin to... possessiveness? His jaw tightened, and my stomach flipped. "Back to Lucien, so you can fuck him, too? Was last night not enough?" Maddox snarled.

I slammed my hands into his chest, pushing him back. But he was much stronger than me, and he crowded into my space with a low growl. Maddox kicked my legs apart and pushed his knee between my thighs, holding me captive.

His palm slid up my throat, and I felt the strength in his touch. I swallowed, my throat bobbing in his palm, and his hold tightened on my neck. The slightest pressure and my clit pulsed. His hand moved up, cupping my jaw.

His eyes were two dark pools, unhinged. "Is your sweet cunt that greedy, *Lila*?"

Holy Shit. Again. What. The. Fuck?

"Let go of me! What is wrong with you?!" I spat, raising my hand to slap

him. He clasped my wrist and jerked my hand down, pressing my palm over his chest.

My breath caught in my throat. His heart was pounding intensely. Thud, thud, thud.

There was a moment, between our heated glance and our volatile kiss, where time stopped and then...

His lips slammed over mine, and he took my breath away. He didn't just kiss me. Maddox possessed me, shoving his tongue in my mouth and licking every inch of me.

Punishing. Hard. Unforgiving.

My nails dug into the skin over his heart. He hissed against my lips, and to my utter surprise, his kiss gentled. Maddox pulled away, only slightly. His breath lingered over my lips, before Maddox pressed his mouth against mine again.

Sweet. Tender. Soft.

"I dare you to kiss me." We were already kissing, but I knew what he meant. He wanted me to kiss him like he kissed me; he wanted me to kiss him like we kissed last night... and he wanted me to repeat the words I threw at him.

"I dare you to stay." His lips touched mine again. *Kiss*.

My heart stuttered.

"I dare you to give us a chance." Kiss.

I forgot how to breathe.

"I dare you, Lila."

Then his lips found mine again, and he sealed his dare with a long searing kiss, kissing all the pain and doubt away.

EPILOGUE

LILA

Four months later

Maddox sat on the bed, his head in his hands, a choked sound coming from him.

"You're the best unplanned thing that has ever happened to me, Maddox. And I can't lose you. But you're doing everything to push... me away from you," I whispered, my voice breaking at the end. "You've been telling lies. Since when have you started lying to me, Maddox?"

After all we had been through... he tainted everything that we were with his lies.

His head snapped up, and his eyes flared with torment. He was decadently handsome, a little bit broken and a mistake from the beginning.

"I'm sorry," he choked out.

"Is that all you have to say?"

There were tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

If it hurts you so much, what kind of love is this?

I knew Maddox would break my heart, but a part of me hoped he wouldn't.

My heart wept, and a lone tear slid down my cheek. "They said you were trouble. I didn't listen. I took a chance on you. And now I regret it."

"Don't leave me." His hoarse voice cracked. "Please."

I took a step back. Maddox looked wounded, and my soul bled to see *him* hurt.

"Lila," he breathed my name. "Please."

I slowly shook my head. "Maddox." It pained me to say his name. "You broke your promises."

My feet took me another step back.

"No," he pleaded. "Lila, no."

I turned and walked away, leaving my broken heart at his feet.

I DARE YOU

TRUTH AND DARE DUET, BOOK TWO

LYLAH JAMES

PROLOGUE

MADDOX

I knew I'd eventually mess up. I knew I'd end up destroying the one good thing in my entire life. *Lila*.

Because that was the only thing I was capable of.

Destroying lives.

Ruining her.

Wrecking us.

I tried to protect her, since the day I made that stupid goddamn pinky swear for the first time. Ruthless in my endeavor to make sure she was always happy, always taken care of, by eliminating anything that would cause her pain...but I forgot to protect her from *myself*.

My lungs seized in my chest, and my throat closed. A choked sound came from me as I held my head in my hands, feeling the burn in the back of my eyes.

"You're the best unplanned thing that has ever happened to me, Maddox. And I can't lose you. But you're doing everything to push... me away from you," she whispered, her sweet voice breaking at the end. "You've been telling lies and keeping secrets from me. Since when have you started lying to me, Maddox?"

My head snapped up at her words. I didn't have an answer. I fucking wished I did.

Lies, no matter how big or small, was the quickest way to ruin something beautiful -us.

Lies and secrets...

Everything I'd ever done, every decision I made was to protect Lila.

But no band-aids would ever be enough to stop the open, festering wounds I've left behind.

"I'm sorry," I choked.

The torment on her face decimated me. "Is that all you have to say?"

My vision blurred – *goddamn it*– I had to remind myself not to lose my shit. "*I'm sorry*."

A lone tear slid down her cheek. "They said you were trouble. I didn't listen. I took a chance on you. And now I regret it."

"Don't leave me." My hoarse voice cracked.

Lila took a step back. My wounded heart lurched, and bile crawled up the back of my throat, bitter and acidic.

"Lila," I breathed her name. "Please."

She slowly shook her head, another silent tear leaving a wet trail on her cheek. "Maddox." She looked pained, and her lips wobbled. "You broke your promises."

And now she was breaking *hers*.

Her feet took her another step back.

"No," I pleaded. "Lila, no."

My voice caught in my throat as she turned and walked away, taking my bleeding heart in the palm of her hand and leaving me... empty.

I sunk to my knees, unable to stop myself, choking on the heavy taste of bitterness on my tongue. This couldn't be the end... it *couldn't*.

The door closed, even as I called out her name. Pathetically. Because for her... I was a fucking *weak* man.

Love made me weak.

Love destroyed lives.

Love ruined us.

She left.

My Lila left, as the pain piercing through my chest, became almost unbearable.

All my truths, all my lies collided together — my future with Lila now cracked open, bleeding and sending the broken fissures all over, as I knelt in the wreckage of it all.

Once again...alone.

Once again... lost.

She lied too.

She broke her promises, too.

You won't lose me, ever. Pinky promise? Pinky promise.

MADDOX

our months earlier

I COULDN'T REMEMBER the exact moment I realized what I felt for Lila was more than friendship.

Maybe it was the first time when Lila wrapped her little pinky around mine outside of her grandparents' grocery store.

Or maybe it was the time I woke up from a nightmare and found her sleeping beside me, the night she took care of me, pulling me out of the freezing tub, and didn't leave my drunk ass behind – the same night I realized what it felt like *not* to be alone.

It could have been any time from the first moment I laid eyes on her, any moment we've had in between, until our last moment together – when I saw her with Lucien and I knew I was about to lose her forever.

I never could quite understand my own feelings. Lila wasn't a monochrome in my black and white world, she was a kaleidoscope of colors. She had made my life less dull.

I didn't know if I could call it love then.

Or if it was love now...

What is love?

When I was seventeen years old, Lila sashayed into my life with all the fierceness of a dragon, sassy and stubborn. Like an R-Rated Snow White, with an ass that should have been illegal and a mouth that tempted me to

shove my dick down her throat.

At twenty years old, I realized that when we first met, Lila and I were two teenagers who were too young to understand what love was until we'd fallen too deeply into it.

"Just friends" was an easy way out, rather than accepting our growing feelings for each other.

It was around three in the morning when Lila fell asleep in my arms, breathless, sore and exhausted. She curled into me, pressing her soft, naked body against mine.

I watched her sleep, her pouty lips, her soft sighs and quiet snores.

Everyone has an addiction, mine just happened to be Lila Garcia.

My best friend

The same best friend I fucked last night.

There was no going back now; the line had been crossed, and now that I've had a taste of her, there was no way I was letting her go.

Lila was my favorite type of drug, and she was so goddamn addictive.

Her smell, her smiles, her laughter.

The way she moved, the way her face lit up whenever she talked about something that made her happy.

I breathed her.

Lila was so deep under my skin, digging deeper under my flesh, mixed with my blood, and pumping through my veins.

There was nothing calm and easy about what I felt for her.

My feelings for Lila were maddening. Like a storm that opens up the sky, violent and raging... *all-consuming*.

I couldn't let her go, not after tonight.

I'd never forget the sound of her moans, her little whimpers as she begged me to fuck her harder, the sight of her pink sex, glistening with need – for *me*. I'd never forget how she felt in my arms, naked and without restraint.

No, I couldn't let her go.

Not now. Not today, not tomorrow. Not ever.

Wrapping my arm around her hips, I pulled Lila closer. Her scent was all around me, on my skin, on my hair... on my lips...

I could still *taste* her on my tongue.

If I knew Lila, as well as I'd like to think I did, then...

Come tomorrow morning, she'd wake up and try to escape. We might

have been a bit drunk last night, but we both knew damn well what we were doing and the consequences of it. She was going to overthink this and try to put more distance between us.

Too bad.

Too. Fucking. Bad.

She was mine now.

I WOKE up to Lila leaving the bed. I peeked up at her through hooded eyes, half-asleep, watching her as she silently freaked out.

I waited – hoping she'd climb back in bed.

I was no longer drunk and could think with a clearer mind. And so could she.

Face me, Lila. Face what we've done and don't. fucking. leave. me.

She stumbled toward our discarded clothes and pulled on her robe. Lila sniffled, casting me a quick glance, but she didn't notice that I was awake... watching her walk away from me.

I waited for her to change her mind, waited for her to stay.

Make me your first choice.

When she reached the door, I sprang off the bed, my fists clenching.

Hell no.

Enraged and disappointed at her choice, I stalked forward and slammed the door shut. My heart thumped in my chest. Lila gasped when I gripped her arm and shoved her away from the door, caging her between the wall and my naked body.

She was a goddamn coward.

Lila pushed at my chest; her eyes wide.

"Where do you think you're going?" I asked, my voice harsher than I intended. My jaw tightened as I snarled through gritted teeth. "Back to Lucien, so you can fuck him, too? Was last night not enough?"

I knew I wasn't being fair, but I hadn't expected that, although it was there... the intense need to claim her.

She slammed her tiny fists into my chest, trying to push me back but unsuccessful in her poor attempts. I crowded into her space with a low growl, kicking her legs apart, pushing my knee between her thighs, holding *my* Lila

captive.

Maybe it was the adrenaline pumping through my veins, but I was so damn angry. At her. At myself.

For wanting her to stay.

I... couldn't... think... straight.

When Lila tried to push me away again, my palm slid up her neck. Her eyes widened as she stopped struggling, her lips parting with a silent gasp, and my hold tightened around her throat.

She came to *me* last night. She wanted me as much I needed her.

My gaze lowered to her pouty lips, begging to be kissed. My hand moved up, cupping her jaw. Slightly unhinged, with a fierce need to push her past her carefully set boundaries, I stepped over the line. "Is your sweet cunt that greedy, *Lila*?"

Yeah, I was an asshole.

But she was a coward for running away.

"Let go of me! What is wrong with you?!" she spat, raising her hand as if to slap me.

Finally, the reaction I was waiting for.

Before she could hit me, I clasped her wrist and jerked her hand down, pressing her palm over my chest. *Feel me*.

She hiccupped a soft breath, and I swore I could hear her heart pounding, just as hard as mine. Thud, thud, thud.

There was a moment, where time stopped, the world coming to a halt, before I slammed my lips over hers.

Feel me.

The moment our lips met, the world fell into a spinning silence.

Before we crash-landed. Gasping, kissing... fighting a silent war. She pushed me away and then pulled me harder against her.

Lila groaned into our kiss and opened her mouth for me. I wanted to *possess* her – her heart, her body… her mind. I must have completely lost it.

There was nothing sweet or gentle about this kiss.

I punished her with my teeth and my tongue, still mad that she even considered leaving me behind.

Walking... away... from... me.

My fingers gripped her nape, and she let me brutalize her mouth, whimpering but not pulling away. My teeth grazed her lower lip, feeling it swell, and the metallic taste of blood filled my mouth. I must have cut her...

or *she* bit me hard enough to draw blood. I didn't know. I didn't know where I started and she begun.

Her nails dug into the skin over my heart, and I hissed against her bruised lips. I pulled away, only slightly. Lila's chest heaved with every labored breath she took. Her lips were swollen and red, ravished. Beautiful. Mine.

My breath lingered over her lips, before I pressed my mouth against hers again.

Feel me.

Everything about this kiss was... sweet and tender.

I kissed her as if it was our first kiss – how I should have kissed her the first time – when we were seventeen years old. When we had been too young and too stupid.

Lila melted in my embrace, her arms curling around my shoulders.

"I dare you to kiss me," I rasped between our kisses, throwing her own words back at her. She dared me last night, it was my turn now.

"I dare you to stay." My lips touched hers again. Feel me.

My heart thudded in my chest. Lila trembled in my arms, but it wasn't from the cold. She dug her fingers harder into the curve of my shoulders.

"I dare you to give us a chance," I said, looking into her dark, muddled eyes. "I dare you, Lila."

When I claimed her lips again, I didn't let go.

I knew Lila was going to fight me on this, but I had to find a way to convince her to stay.

I wanted her to need me, the same way I needed her.

The perks of being Lila's best friend for almost four years...

I knew how to break through her walls, tear apart the carefully put together pieces of her heart.

And break her, I would – so I could put her back together and make her fall for me.

There was no other option.

LILA

e were going to break each other.

I couldn't find myself to regret last night because it was every bit as beautiful and wild as I had dreamed it to be. But I was already feeling regret for what was about to come. Heartbreak – that was the only ending.

I wanted him.

Maddox wanted me.

It *should* had been easy.

But...

What about after?

This – Paris – was our safe cocoon, but what about *after*…when we'd go back to the real world?

A groan escaped me, and my head fell into my hands, feeling helpless and so... confused. Maddox was simply maddening and so goddamn stubborn.

"Breakfast doesn't suit you?"

My head snapped up, and my gaze found his. My mouth went dry as I gaped at him.

Maddox leaned against the door that led to the balcony, where I was currently sitting. He crossed his ankles, and his lips twitched with a grin. He was barefoot and freshly showered, his hair still wet and droplets of water lingered over his bare chest and thick arms, as if he hadn't bothered to dry himself.

His jeans hung loosely around his hips, halfway zipped, unbuttoned and unbuckled. My eyes lingered over his wide chest far longer than I intended,

his nipple piercing catching my attention. The silver barbell was enticing as I remembered the feel of it on my tongue last night, my teeth grazing his nipple and the tip of my tongue flickering over his piercing.

I flushed at the reminder. My gaze lowered to his hard-cut abs and the perfect trail of hair, a shade lighter than the hair on his head, leading from his navel to his...

Oh shit, he wasn't wearing any underwear.

My head snapped up, but it was too late. Maddox had caught me checking him out, and he was now giving me a dirty smirk. There was a mischievous glint in his blue eyes as he walked into the sunlight and onto the balcony of our -his – hotel room. One of the finest hotels in Paris, our master suite had its own balcony, with a little breakfast area – an outdoor sofa and coffee table. It gave us the perfect view of the Eiffel tower. One could easily eat a French baguette, while admiring France's famous landmark.

Maddox stopped next to the coffee table and nodded toward the tray. "You haven't eaten yet. Not hungry?"

As if I could eat in this situation.

He perched himself on the coffee table, sitting directly in front of me and practically crowding into my personal space. Maddox reached for a chocolate croissant and brought it to my mouth, silently waiting, silently demanding. My lips parted, and I took a small bite.

He nodded in approval. "Good girl."

I chewed, the taste of rich chocolate on my tongue. Sweet and oh, so good. This was probably the best croissant I ever had. No surprises there; it was a Parisian specialty.

"I thought you'd build an appetite after last night's..." Maddox trailed off and took a bite of the croissant. "... vigorous *fucking*," he finished, still chewing.

I almost choked on my saliva as my face heated up. "Maddox!"

"Okay, my bad. I meant, vigorous *love-making*. Is that better?"

Once again, we were back to him taunting me. "No," I hissed.

He shrugged. "It is what it is. We fucked last night. Get over it, Lila. It's not as dramatic as you're making it out to be."

"Everything is just so easy for you, isn't it, Maddox?" I said, sitting up straight. "Sleep with a girl tonight, find a new conquest tomorrow. This is what you do, isn't it? Fuck and move on to the next available girl."

His eyes darkened, and he leaned forward, bringing his face closer to

mine. His breath fanned over my lips. "Who said I was moving on...? You're still here. I haven't kicked you out yet."

My heart thudded hard against my rib cage, but I still glowered. "Do you have to be such an asshole? We," I angrily motioned between us, "are best friends. What happened last night can't happen again. It was a moment of weakness...for both of us."

Maddox seemed unfazed at my outburst, as he brought the rest of the croissant to my mouth. I pressed my lips together, refusing to give him the satisfaction of feeding me and effectively shutting me up.

His lips twitched in amusement. "Open your mouth, Lila. Or I will force feed it to you. Don't tempt me."

I gritted my teeth, the urge to punch him strong. Yes, I was stubborn, but he was acting like his usual asshole self, right now, and I didn't like it one bit.

Warm breeze hit my bare chest, and I gasped, looking down. Maddox had pulled my white robe apart, untying the belt from around my waist without me even realizing.

Sneaky bastard. Why was I even surprised?

His hand snaked upward and inside my robe, before I could even *think*. Mischief flashed in his blue eyes as he cupped my breast, lazily brushing his thumb over my hard nipple. Heat flushed through me as my stomach fluttered and my heart raced.

"Eat," he demanded, rolling my painfully tight nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Maddox waited, his attitude aggravating, and his grin – so freaking annoying.

I opened my mouth and took a big bite, shoving the rest of the croissant in my mouth and biting on the same fingers that were feeding me. He hissed and pulled his hand away from my lips... and teeth.

I raised an eyebrow, cocking my head to the side. Two can play this game, Maddox.

He pinched my nipple, hard. A squeak left my lips, and he smirked.

"We can't be friends after I fucked you like I did last night," Maddox said, ever so crudely. I tensed, my lungs clenching at his words.

Don't do this, Maddox. Don't...please.

"If you think we can go back to being *just friends*, then Lila, you're more delusional than I thought."

I opened my mouth to snap at him, but he was already pushing me back

against the seat. "Maddox, what-"

He loomed over me, our chests touching, and his hands landed on either side of my head. Maddox caged me against his body. "Give us one week," he rumbled. His face was the most serious I had ever seen, his expression hard and sure. "Our time in Paris, seven days."

One week...

With Maddox? Not as his friend, but as his lover?

A fling? An affair...?

My eyes widened, and I was already shaking my head. My heart wouldn't survive a one-week affair. Maddox would wreck me, and I'd leave my bleeding heart in Paris.

His thumb brushed against my throat, over my throbbing vein. "*Lila*," Maddox breathed my name.

My breath hitched as my robe slid open. He knelt in front of me, his big shoulders settling between my spread thighs, pushing them farther apart. I breathed in, but my throat closed, as I ended up silently gasping instead. I was completely naked under my robe, and he took it as his advantage.

He lifted his head, his gaze hot and dark. "Your cunt looks thoroughly used from last night, Lila," Maddox said, unadulterated satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. My fingers curled around the cushion, and I dug my nails in, feeling a rush of heat coursing through me. My skin grew tight and warmth spread through my lower region, my sex growing damp. Damn him and his filthy mouth.

My eyes turned into slits as I glared down at his imposing self. I wasn't going to fall for it; I wouldn't let him sway me with sex.

Maddox's hand slowly slid up the outside of my calves, up my thighs... and...

I squirmed, my voice gone and the fight leaving me. He was meticulously slow, dragging out the suspense and forcing me to *feel* him.

Inch by inch, his hand slid upward, his touch scorching my flesh as he continued toward my center.

His slightly calloused palm felt rough against my sensitive skin, but his touch was... so light, he was barely touching me. Teasing and tempting.

Driving... me... crazy.

My heart thudded so hard I thought it would spill out of my chest. His fingers brushed against my folds, a soft touch, but I quivered in response.

"You're red and swollen," he rasped, his voice thick and hard. His fingers

spread me open, still ever so gentle. Maddox tsked, the side of his lips quirking up in approval. "... and wet."

"What... are you doing?" I questioned, slightly breathless.

His chest rumbled with a low growl. "Having my breakfast. You can't deny a starving man, Baby, and last night, I built up quite the appetite."

Goosebumps peppered my flesh, and my core tightened as Maddox lowered his head between my thighs. Maddox wasn't the first man to go down on me, but he was the first one to take his sweet time. To stare at my body like he was about devour me, and it still wouldn't be enough for him.

I ached.

I didn't know I could feel this way, this intense... fierce need inside of me. Desire pooled in the pit of my stomach, and my arousal leaked out of me. The moment his mouth was on me, my body tightened, and I felt a rush of wetness between my thighs. Holy shit!

Maddox took his time, lapping at my sex leisurely. He dragged his tongue over my wet folds, before circling around my clit. "Maddox," I choked, my thighs shaking. A whimper left my lips before I could stop myself, and my hands went to the top of his head in frantic need. My fingers gripped his hair, pulling him closer and silently demanding more.

Fire licked through my veins, and my eyes fluttered close. Maddox was *killing* me.

It would be a sweet, torturous death.

His touch was both tormenting and heavenly.

"Maddox," I breathed.

His tongue slid over my folds, and his teeth grazed my swollen clit. My back arched off the sofa, and my thighs tightened around his head. He sucked and lapped, licking every inch of me, until my whimpers rang like desperate pleas.

I wasn't prepared for it, when he shoved a finger inside of me, but I clenched around the hard intrusion. Seeking for more... needing more...

It hurt so good.

"Oh God!" I cried out, as he thrust his finger in and out, his tongue simultaneously working my pussy like his favorite meal. I guessed... I was.

"Ma – *Maddox*... Please..."

My stomach tightened, my thighs quivered, and the muscles of my calves were cramping, as I grew closer to my release. I climbed higher on the cliff, writhing and crying out, but Maddox didn't let me fall.

I throbbed, an intense beat that match my thudding heart.

I bit down on my lip, shaking, choking on my moans and on the precipice of orgasm. He dragged my pleasure out.

I just needed...

Just... oh...

The same moment he thrust two fingers inside of me, his teeth grazed my clit, a small bite that left a sharp sting behind. I bucked against his mouth and fingers, my lips parting with a cry.

I had not finished orgasming, before he was starting all over again.

"No..." I gasped, still sensitive and shaking with my orgasm. "Wait."

Maddox growled between my thighs – a warning – and went back to lapping up my wetness, sucking and licking. This time, there was nothing slow and sweet about it.

The first orgasm was for me. This one was for him.

His tongue ravaged me.

His fingers didn't stop their torturous ministrations, thrusting and twisting inside of me. There was nothing gentle as he fingered me.

Maddox was a mad man on a mission.

Molten desire, strong and lustful, coursed through my veins at the sounds coming from his throat as he tasted me, like a starved man, who would never *ever* get enough of me. His deep, primal groans were as sinful as the sound of my wet pussy – oh *fuck*!

My hips jerked, and his fingers bit into my thighs, leaving their marks there. His bruising grip was almost painful, but my muddled brain didn't seem to care one bit.

Stop.

My hips moved with his fingers, jerking and grinding against his face. I heard him groan my name against my tender sex as pleasure spiked through me, and my back bowed.

No, don't stop.

"Maddox... Maddox!"

My second orgasm threw me over the edge, and a loud moan spilled past my lips. My eyes rolled back into my head, as he gave my hypersensitive pussy one last lick.

What-?

Dazed, I blinked my eyes open, my body still shaking from the aftermath of my release. I couldn't...breathe.

Maddox lifted his head from between my thighs and regarded me, his blue eyes dark and raw. "You can have this all the time. Me, between your legs, worshipping your pussy. Say yes."

I finally came down from my high, and I shook my head, trying to clear my mind. "You're bribing me with sex? Maddox! This isn't about sex..."

His eyes hardened. "This is *more*. I know it, but you're not giving us a chance, Lila."

"What are you so scared of?" he asked, kissing the inside of my thigh, before giving me a playful nip.

Losing you...

Uncertainty flashed through me, but I was already losing this argument.

"One week..." I whispered. The look in his eyes, such raw emotions, almost like he was pleading to me, weakened my resolve.

"One week," Maddox affirmed. "For now. I might change your mind later."

I dug my nails in the back of his neck, not hard enough to hurt but in warning. "You can't seduce me."

His lips quirked up. "Can't I? Haven't I?"

Maddox left a trail of soft kisses across my navel, giving my belly button a playful lick, before he nipped my flesh teasingly. He didn't look like he was about to leave his spot between my thighs any time soon.

My fingers raked through his dirty blond hair. "If I remember correctly, I did the seducing last night.

Our gaze collided. His chest rumbled and I throbbed at the deep sound. "And I'm weak to my goddamn knees for you, Lila."

My heart lurched but all of this was too good to be true. This couldn't be happening, not with Maddox... not after years of friendship... not after years of playing it safe. Now, everything was complicated.

"You probably fucked someone else last week, and you're here, now, telling me you want me? Don't, Maddox." The words spilled out before I could stop myself, and my voice cracked. I bit my lip, hating that I'd shown him a sign of weakness.

Maddox was a predator; he'd pounce on my vulnerability.

Except he did the complete opposite...

"I haven't." His eyes bore into mine, smoldering with an intensity I couldn't put in words. "I haven't slept with anyone for... weeks."

I blinked, my chest caving in. "You've been celibate for months?"

"My dick doesn't seem to like the idea of another girl."

I shook my head, tensing, and tried to close my legs, but Maddox was still between my thighs, forcing them apart. "You *think* you want me... especially after last night. I won't lie, it was amazing. Whatever happened last night—"

I broke off with a choked gasp. *Smack*.

My body jolted, and a hot flash of pain seared through my pussy, before it quickly disappeared, replaced by a dull throbbing pleasure that lingered. Did Maddox just spank my...?

Oh God! I sputtered and glared, but he was already speaking, his voice almost furious. His tone held a dangerous warning and my mouth snapped close.

"That," he growled. "was the best fucking night of my life. So, don't tell me what I think and don't tell me how I feel."

Maddox grasped my wrist and placed my hand over his chest, his skin warm and smooth under my touch. His heart was *pounding*. Thud, thud, thud.

The hard glint in his eyes had softened by a fraction, but the intensity of his gaze was just as fierce. His words rippled across my flesh, and my heart stuttered, before caving inside my chest. "Don't tell me how I feel. You have no idea, Lila."

This was so... difficult.

A pained sound escaped me, but I quickly smothered it. Falling into Maddox's trap would be dangerous for my heart. I'd end up being just another conquest.

Maddox wasn't the type of man to settle down. I didn't think he'd ever be. He was too wild, too reckless, too... *wounded*.

I had always known Maddox would never be the type of man to do a long-term relationship.

This wasn't going to be an easy week or a simple affair. I was already tittering over the edge of a very dangerous cliff; I was already at risk of losing my heart and having it broken by Maddox.

But I had already lost this fight.

He moved up my body, and my legs instinctively wrapped around his hips. His lips skimmed over my throat, before he claimed my lips into a long kiss.

Maddox Coulter – my best friend, now my lover – was maddeningly irresistible.

He knew exactly how to twist my hearts into knots, and he turned me into

putty in his hands.

One week.

A seven-day affair.

Seven days to fall deeper in love with Maddox Coulter.

Seven days to have my heart... broken by him.

MADDOX

he hotel's bar was packed tonight. There were a bunch of men who attempted to look expensive and proper with their high-end suits and a drink in hand, as they surveyed the dim-lit bar. Supposed 'Gentlemen' but they were leering at the women, and it was clear as day, there was nothing *proper* about their thoughts.

There was another crowd of people who were too drunk to give a shit.

And lastly, we had the opportunists, the women and men who were here to catch the attention of someone who was probably as wealthy as the President of the United States – for a night of luxury and passion. Or, well... more than one night.

This was Paris' finest hotel, and daddy dearest probably paid a shit-ton for mine and Lila's stay here. My birthday present.

He threw money at me, in my face, even though, all I ever wanted was for him to acknowledge my existence with a simple "Happy Birthday."

I guessed he was too busy for that.

Yeah, fuck you, Dad.

Conversations swirled in a dirty cloud of smoke and the stench of cigarettes. My nose tingled at the strong smell of perfume surrounding me, and I downed my drink in one gulp. The alcohol burned my throat, but damn it, it was almost soothing.

"If you keep drinking like that, you'll be drunk soon enough. And here I thought, you were taking me out on a *date*."

Lila's sweet voice whispered next to my ear, her breath fanning over the back of my neck. My lips quirked up as her fingers slowly trailed up my

forearms and biceps, feeling every indent and curve of my muscles. Yeah, my girl loved exploring my muscles.

Years of vigorously spending my time in the gym, throwing all my aggression into working out and into the punching bags, had served me well.

I saw the way girls – younger *and* older – looked at me at the gym. Sure, my ego didn't need any more boosting; my dick was big enough for that.

But Lila was the only woman I wanted to look at me with hunger in her dark-brown eyes.

I swiveled around in my stool, and my arm snaked around her waist, pulling her to stand between my legs. Lila pouted, her red lips shimmering in the dim light of the bar. "The bathroom line was too long, and our room is too far away."

"Your hair looks fine," I said, once again. Tucking a stray strand behind her ear, my finger lingered below it, brushing against the column of her throat. "You look beautiful."

"Beautiful, huh?" There was a teasing look in her eyes, as she nudged her chin up, almost haughtily.

She was wearing a black sequin mini-skirt, with a small slit in the hem. The skirt wrapped around her ass like a second skin, and I almost growled at the sight. The black lace crop top hung on her curves, bringing my attention to her tits. This outfit should have been illegal.

"Sexy," I rasped, bringing our faces closer. "Ravishing. I'd throw you on the bar and fuck you into tomorrow," my voice lowered, whispering our dirty secrets into her ears, "until you beg me to stop because your cunt is too sore."

Lila flushed, and her breath stuttered.

"But then again, I don't want any other man to see your bare body or hear your desperate whimpers or... to see you come."

That was for my eyes only.

Mine.

For a week.

Until I could convince her to stay... for longer.

Lila was stubborn, too goddamn stubborn for her own good. I had to play this game right, or I risked losing her forever.

Four years ago, I played a vicious game – to break Lila.

Today, I started a dangerous one – to win her over.

"You have a one-track mind, Coulter."

"Yeah. You, Garcia."

She rolled her eyes, before brushing her lips against mine, a teasing touch. "I... have a feeling you've said this line to a lot more girls than me. Is this your strategy?"

If she only fucking knew...

Lila had no idea that I was doing everything the exact opposite I had ever done. I never chased after a woman, never had to win *anyone* over, never had to be romantic and never had to seduce.

I smirked, and girls fell all over me. My last name and my dick were seductive enough.

Until her.

My best friend: the pain in my ass and my favorite hellion.

"I dare you..." she murmured against my lips.

"Now?" My fingers clenched around her hips. It was her turn to give a dare. I used mine this morning, when I asked – *dared* her to stay.

"Quite ironic, isn't it? This is the same place you dared me to sleep with Lucien two nights ago."

I didn't want to remember that. The mere idea of Lila sleeping with that Frenchman had rage coursing through my veins. How? *How* did I think it would be okay for me to give Lila that stupid dare? How did I think it'd help me get over her?

Instead, I hated myself.

It made me want to fuck her, claim her even more.

The need to ruin her for any other man had been all-consuming.

Yeah, that dare didn't work out as well as I expected.

But it gave me something else instead. It gave me *Lila*, all of her: all of what I didn't have before but now I did.

"Go ahead, give me your dare." Minx.

Lila pulled away enough to stare into my eyes. Her gaze drifted to my lips, before she speared me with an unreadable look. "Remember the girl who tried to hit on you when we walked into the bar?"

Suspicious with where she was going with this, I refrained from answering. Lila was sweet like an angel and as devious as a she-devil. I didn't trust the glint in her chocolate eyes.

She nodded to my left, and I quickly glanced in that direction. Miss Blondie was staring at me with rapt attention. When she noticed me looking, her ruby lips spread into a full smile.

"Lila," I started.

She cut me off. "I dare you to dance with her."

My hold tightened on her. Lila was playing with fire. "Why?"

She lifted a shoulder, half-shrugging. "Because. We don't get to ask the reason behind a dare, Coulter."

What was going on in that pretty head of hers? Her expression didn't give anything away, but I didn't dare trust the nonchalant look on her face. Her body was tight as a bow string, and her hands were fisted at her sides.

Yeah, she didn't want me to dance with Blondie.

But then why... give me the dare?

I stared at her for a second longer, waiting for a reaction, but she didn't give any. Fine, a dare was a dare. Neither of us played to lose.

Lila's fingers twitched against my chest, as if she wanted to grab me and not let go. But, instead, she stepped from between my thighs and stood beside my stool, ordering herself a drink. Goddamn stubborn, she was.

I lounged back into my stool, gliding my tongue over my lips. My head cocked to the side, I crooked my finger at Blondie, indicating for her to come over to me. Her smile widened, and she scurried over, quick to please. She spared Lila a quick dirty look, before taking her spot between my legs.

"Hello, Handsome," she said in a thick accent I couldn't place. Blondie wore a tight red dress that molded to every thick curve of hers. Her face glimmered under the light, and she smelled of lilac and maybe...chamomile, but her scent wasn't more tempting than Lila.

Lila's was... intoxicating. I'd get drunk on her scent.

Addictive.

Crazy.

Mine.

"Parlez-vous Français?" I asked Blondie. Do you speak French?

Lila tensed beside me. Hmm, interesting.

"Un peu," she responded with a giggle. "How do you speak French? You're American. I can tell by the accent."

All thanks to mommy and daddy dearest. They made sure I was fluent in at least three languages from an early age. English, French and German. Brad, my father, said it was good for when I was older, when it'd be time for me to take over his empire. I have been trained, like a good fucking dog, since I was a kid.

"Comment est-ce que tu t'appelles, Blondie?" What's your name?

From the corner of my eye, I saw Lila clenching her glass. Her knuckles

turned white, and her lips were pursed in a hard line. She stared straight ahead of her, ignoring me and the woman in my arms.

"Serena. Et vous?"

"Maddox," I introduced myself, bringing her hand up to my lips and kissing the back of it.

"Oh." She blushed, biting her lip. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Maddox." My name rolled off her tongue like she was tasting it, *fucking* it.

"Tout le plaisir est pour moi, chérie." My pleasure, sweetheart.

Serena let out a small breathy laugh. "Charming, I see."

I curled a finger around her blonde locks, tugging her toward me. Her tits pressed against my chest. She wasn't wearing any bra, and I could feel her puckered nipples through our thin layers of clothing. "Do you... want to dance?"

Lila slammed her empty glass on the bar, and Serena flinched. My lips twitched, smirking. Oh yeah, my girl was incensed.

"Another drink. Strong," she practically snarled at the bartender.

Grinning, I let my hand wander to Serena's hips. My fingers tightened around her curves, thick and lush in the palms of my hands, and she gasped, her lips parting. A tempting sight, but it did nothing to my dick.

Sure, she was attractive.

A few months ago, I would have been all up in her pussy, probably banging her against the bathroom stalls. But not tonight.

I wasn't the least bit interested in Blondie, but if Lila wanted to play...

She needed to learn the rules, and then she had to play it better than *me*. She could turn this into a little game of hers, and I'd show her how it's really played.

When our eyes met, something sparked in hers, before she blinked it away. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was a little psychotic. Ah, life was never boring, when you had Lila Garcia in your life.

"This is a good song," Serena breathed in my ear. "Shall we?"

She grasped my hand in hers and dragged us to the middle of the room. We snaked through the warm and sweaty bodies, finding an empty spot on the dance floor.

Serena was biting on her lip, giving me the fuck-me-now look. Her hands landed on my chest, and she caressed me through my shirt. Her thumb brushed over my nipple, and I grasped her wrists, pulling her arms around my

neck. This was safe. Blondie pouted but, otherwise, went with the flow.

My eyes found Lila, and she was glowering. *Hmm. I see you, Garcia*.

As if she could read my mind, her face went hard, devoid of any emotions.

Nicely played.

Gripping Serena's hips, I pulled her closer to me, and we moved to the rhythm of the song. The bodies around us were practically dry humping each other on the dance floor. The bar was dark enough that nobody seemed to care.

Keeping my eyes on Lila, I pressed a knee between Blondie's thighs, and she was practically grinding against me. I jerked her hard into my body, and she took that as an invitation. Her arms unfurled around my neck, and her hands inched down to my abs.

We were close enough to where Lila was standing that I saw her expression go from emotionless to sour and *pained*.

I was just about to drop Blondie, enough of the stupid games both Lila and I were playing, when my gaze zeroed on...

Goddamn it!

What was *he* doing here?

Lucien stepped closer to Lila, her attention snapping to him. He grinned down at her and said something in her ear, causing her to smile. I nearly knocked both Serena and I over at the sight of my Lila smiling up at him. He got her another drink, and I watched as his hands trailed up her bare arms, with her still *smiling*.

Lucien nodded toward the dance floor, and Lila's gaze met mine, briefly, before she put her hand in his. Heat prickled the back of my neck, and I grew tense.

Lila wrapped her arms around Lucien's neck, and his hands were on her lower back, too low... his fingers were teasing the top curve of her ass.

An ass that belonged to me.

I could tell Lila was in tune to me and my attention on her, but she was purposely avoiding looking my way. Serena said something to me, but I wasn't listening. The bastard was holding Lila too close, and I swore she fucking fluttered her lashes at him. Where the hell had her reserve gone?

When Lucien leaned down, as if to kiss her... I was done.

Snapping forward, I let Serena go. She squeaked, protesting, but I was already stalking toward Lucien who was still holding my girl way too close.

Bitter jealousy raged through my veins as I cut through their intimate dance, separating them. "Sorry. You might want to find a new dance partner, Lucien. This one is taken."

Lila gasped as I gripped her wrist and started pulling her away. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

"We're leaving," I deadpanned, my heart hammering in my chest.

"You're causing a scene!"

Me? Causing a scene... when *she* started this stupid game of hers? For what? *WHY*?

I dragged her to the empty corridor, away from everyone and their prying eyes, pushing her back into the wall. I pressed against her body, caging her in.

"What is wrong with you? Maddox," she whisper-yelled. "Maddox!"

Her tiny fists thumped against my chest, her face red and her eyes darkening in anger.

"What were you doing, Lila?" I asked, deceptively quiet.

Her lips curled in a smile, although there was nothing warm about it. "Dancing. Like you were. Do you have a problem with that?"

She loved pushing my buttons.

"Careful," I warned.

Her eyes flared at the challenge. "Or what?"

My thumb rubbed over the vein in her throat, feeling it throb under my touch. "You won't like what I do to you, Baby."

"You don't scare me, Coulter."

"I know," I said. "But I should."

"You won't hurt me."

"But I will hurt him."

Her smile dropped. "Maddox-"

I leaned forward, bringing our faces closer. She caught her lip between her teeth, her eyes flashing with uncertainty now. "Scared for lover boy, your Frenchman?" I taunted.

Her hands landed on my chest, as if to pacify me. "It was just a dance, Maddox. You can't fight him because I danced with him!"

With a humorless smirk, I trailed my finger down the column of her throat and along the length of her collarbone. Her breathing pattern changed, a sharp inhale... a shuddering exhale.

"Why did you dare me to dance with her?" I asked softly, but the threat in

my voice couldn't be mistaken.

"Because..." Lila whispered.

"Because," I echoed.

She licked her lips, her eyes flickering with something fierce. Lila pushed against my chest. "You seemed to be enjoying yourself, so why do you care? *Blondie* was very much into it and oh, of course... your *French* was very charming, indeed."

Ah, ah. Silly... jealous, Lila.

She grimaced once she realized her slip, and her red pouty lips pressed into a firm line.

"You like my French?"

"It's mediocre," she shot back. "Lucien has a better accent."

I bit back a laugh. Lila really was testing my patience. Funny, I didn't know if she was doing it on purpose or if she even realized she was walking on a risky path.

Bringing my face closer to hers, my lips ghosted along her ear, and I nipped her earlobe. "Let's not play childish games, Lila. You and I both know it only has one ending."

"And what is that?" she breathed.

"You'll find yourself on your back with me, between yours legs."

I kept my hand around her throat, lingering over her pulse, while still keeping a firm hold of her. My other hand traveled south, snaking into her mini-skirt.

Lila's eyes widened, and she gasped, the sound barely audible. "Maddox..."

My fingers teased her slit through her panties. She looked frantically around us, as her fingers wrapped around my wrist, trying to stop me. "What... people... *Maddox*, someone could see!"

I traced the wet folds through the thin fabric, feeling her softness on the tips of my fingers. Her face flushed, and her lips parted, her breathing turning ragged.

"Are you feeling... hot?" I felt compelled to taunt her. My dick hardened and throbbed. My jeans were suddenly feeling very tight, and I hissed as her thigh brushed against my crotch.

Satisfaction coursed through me when I felt her wetness through her panties. "You don't want anyone to see... but you seem to like the idea of being caught with my hand under your skirt."

"No," Lila stammered.

I nipped her earlobe again, and she responded with a sharp hiss. "Liar," I breathed.

Slowly, I tugged her panties aside, feeling her bare pussy against my finger. My thumb circled around her clit, and she whimpered, her hand tightening around my wrist. In warning? Or, in desire... wanting *more*?

Her chest heaved, as she inhaled a ragged breath. Her hips bucked forward against my touch, seeking my fingers. Wanton need flashed through her dark eyes, as I rubbed her folds, using my two fingers to spread her lips apart.

Lila was all seven of the deadly sins, and I'd gladly be a sinner for her, for the rest of our lives.

There was no concealing what we were doing. Anyone who walked down this corridor would see us... my hand shoved deep inside her mini-skirt, her face flushed, lips parted with quiet whimpers, as she grinded against my hand.

Shoving a single digit inside her tight core, feeling her inner walls clench around it, I slowly fingered her. Lila tensed against me, as I curled my finger inside her, hitting her sensitive spot. Her reaction was instant. A choked moan escaped her lips, before she slapped a hand over her mouth, muffling the indecent sound.

My lips whispered over her, a gentle touch. She opened for me, and I kissed her. I fucking *kissed* her like I was a starved man, like she was the oxygen I needed to survive.

Lila gasped against our kiss when I pinched and tugged on her clit, feeling the little nub throb between my fingers.

"Such a beautiful liar," I rasped against her lips. "Tell me, Lila. Why did you do it?"

Dazed, she seemed to have a hard time focusing on my words. I thrust my finger back inside her cunt, dragging another moan from her. "I... Maddox... do what?"

"Why did you give me that dare?" I hissed, my voice so gruff, even I barely recognized it.

Another whimper from her as I pulled out from her tight heat. "I... wanted to see... Oh God, Maddox, *please*."

I teased her opening, feeling her clench – seeking out my fingers. "Tell me."

"Wanted to see how I'd feel..." she choked out, her eyes glassy with pleasure.

I rewarded her with two fingers inside her. "Go on."

Her heart pounded against my chest, feeling the vibration like it was my own heartbeat.

"If... I'd get jealous seeing you with another... woman. I wanted to see..."

"And?" I demanded, the word sounding harsh even to my own ears.

"I don't like it," she admitted, through her panting.

"Don't like seeing me with another woman?"

I asked the question at the same time I thrust my fingers inside, curling them in a way I knew would drive her wild. She pulsed around me, her wetness dripping and the sound of me fingering her was almost scandalous.

"Yes!" Lila hissed. "I hate it."

"Don't like me speaking French to another woman?"

Her eyes rolled back, as the heel of my palm pressed against her tender sex. "Maddox..."

"Answer me."

She glowered, a vicious glint in her gaze. "You never spoke French to me," she spat, before letting out a low moan. Her eyes widened, her face flushing even redder in embarrassment, and she bit on her lip, hard.

"Je veux te baiser."

Lila inhaled sharply at my French, her nails digging into my wrist. They'd leave her marks behind, that I was sure. It stung, the pain making my cock harder. She was probably drawing blood right now. I'd gladly bleed for her.

"What?" she whispered.

Lila's legs quaked, and her whole body trembled, on the precipice of her orgasm. She slapped her hand over her mouth again, muffling her desperate moans, as they kept spilling from her lips. My head lowered to her chest, my lips hovering over her tit.

"I want to fuck you. Right here, right now," I said, my voice throaty and husky. Goddamn it, I was about to spill in my jeans. My dick throbbed, practically weeping for a slice of heaven... and hell.

Her nipples poked through her crop top. The outline of the tight, hardened tip was tempting. My teeth grazed over the tiny nub through the thin layer before I nipped her, a sharp bite, as I rolled and tugged her clit between my thumb and forefinger.

"You can't," she cried out, as I dragged her release from her.

Lila threw her head back, her eyes closed. Her orgasm hit her, at the same time, my gaze found Lucien.

Perfect timing.

His face paled, a mask of shock and anger. His lips curled as he took a threatening step toward us. I cocked an eyebrow at him.

Lila came down from her high, and she gasped in alarm at the sight of Lucien standing there, watching us.

Frantically, she tried to push away from me. *Not so fast, little dragon*.

Gently pulling my fingers from Lila's skirt, I brought my hand up to my lips. "Oh God..." Lila whispered in horror, as if she knew what I was about to do.

Little does Lila know...

She ignited a possessive need inside of me. Something fierce, something dangerous, something... wild.

Her juices and her sweet, musky scent coated my fingers, as I licked them clean, keeping my eyes on Lucien.

He paused, his chest expanding and his face darkening dangerously. Lila's skirt was still bunched up to her hips, her thighs spread open for me, her panties obscenely tugged to the side. Her pussy was visible enough to Lucien, red and swollen from my fucking.

Fuck, I was going mad.

I wanted to smear my cum all over her pussy and have Lucien take a look, showing him what was mine and what he couldn't have.

Lila tugged her skirt back in place, quickly patting down her hair. Her eyes lowered to the ground in embarrassment. Her legs shook, still weak from her orgasm, and she stumbled forward, before I wrapped an arm around her waist, anchoring her to my body.

I licked my lips, tasting the remnant of her pussy juices. "My apologies, Lucien. My girl and I got a little carried away. We'll be finishing what we started in our room. If you'll excuse us."

Lila avoided looking at Lucien as we walked past him, but the moment we were out of his vicinity, she turned on me.

Her fist thumped against my chest, the action catching me so off guard that I ended up stumbling back a step. Shocked, my lips quirked up. Feisty, just like I liked it.

"You... are an asshole!"

Lila stalked away, her red heels clicking over the marble floor. She took the elevator, and still grinning, I took the stairs to the fourth floor. She was already in our master suite when I got there, pacing the length of it.

Her wild eyes met mine the second I walked through the door.

"That was completely unnecessary! What is wrong with you? You knew he was standing there, didn't you? Huh, for how long?" Gone was soft and pliant Lila in my arms as she orgasmed. In her place was my favorite hellion. In that moment, I realized... Lila wasn't fragile like a flower. She was fragile like a ticking bomb, and I just poked her.

"Maddox! I'm speaking to you. You can't treat me... treat me like a paid whore. I'm not someone you just throw against the wall—"

"...and fuck?"

Lila sputtered, her cheeks flushing red.

I tugged my shirt over my head and let it drop to the floor, stalking forward. "Let us get one thing clear. As long as you're mine, I will take you wherever I want and however I want."

She stabbed me in the chest with her finger. Lila was a midget, but damn, she had a temper and the attitude of a fiery dragon. "You will treat me with respect, Maddox."

I arched an eyebrow at her. "I will treat you with respect, yes. A perfect gentleman. I'll open the doors for you, I'll bring you your favorite mint-chocolate chip muffin, and I'll even hold your hand. I might even give you some dead roses. See? Perfect gentleman."

I bent down, my face hovering over hers. Her breath seized in her throat at my next words. "But I'll also bend you over and fuck you however I want, because I love seeing you trying to deny how wet I make you. I'll treat you like a princess, but I'll fuck you like an animal and like the dirty pervert I am, because you *like* it."

Her eyes narrowed with rage, but she kept her face deceptively calm. Taking a deep breath, she took a seat on the couch, crossing her lithe legs. I followed her, standing close, so she had to nudge her chin high to stare up at me through her thick lashes. What a perfect position. This put her mouth right over my crotch.

Lila's eyes lingered over my torso for a second longer, before her gaze collided with mine once again. "Do you speak with all the girls like this? Do your conquests appreciate this... this crassness?"

"What do you think?" I asked, low and quiet.

"I think you're absolutely despicable."

"Oh yeah, I've been called that a few times."

"Oh, when? After leaving a massive line of sobbing, heartbroken girls?"

I clucked my tongue at her, as she goaded me. My hand cupped her face, and I rubbed my thumb over her parted, wet lips, smudging her lipstick. "You know me so well."

"This is why you never had a girlfriend! You obviously don't know how to tone down your asshole-ness!" She hissed, exasperated.

"Keep talking, Garcia. It's tempting me to throw you over my knee to show you exactly why they call me despicable."

Lila blinked, her face paling in shock. "Did you just threaten to spank me...?"

"I *promised* to spank you *and* fuck you. Go ahead, keep being a mouthy little thing." My hoarse voice seemed to drive her even more wild.

"Is this something you do with your other...fuck buddies, too?" she sneered.

Ah, so little Miss Lila was, in fact, territorial.

Jealousy didn't only run through my veins, but it was very apparent in hers. I knew it, and I was goading her, waiting for her reaction.

When I only smirked, she was miffed.

"Asshole."

My lips twitched. "Brat."

Lila let out a shocked gasp, and I stifled a laugh. We've been best friends for four years; I knew exactly how to push all her buttons.

"Did you just call me a brat?" *Yes*, *I did*. Especially after that stunt she pulled at the bar. Daring me to dance with Blondie when she damn well knew she was the only woman I wanted in my arms.

"Would you rather I call you a bitch?"

Outraged, she jumped to her feet and leveled me with a glare that would have had anyone quaking in fear. Me? Angry Lila just made my dick hard.

I could think of sixty-nine ways to fuck the anger out of her system, until she was a pretty mess under me.

"Why are we doing this?" she growled, fire burning in her dark eyes. Goddamn it, she was a tempting goddess. So tempting. So beautiful. Mine.

And I wanted to put her over my knees and tan her ass red for being so goddamn stubborn.

Her fists clenched at her sides. "You're one very annoying person, Coulter. Why am I still here?" she muttered the last sentence to herself, but it was loud enough for me to hear.

I grinned. "Because you like how my dick feels inside of you."

A heartbeat passed before she exploded. She threw the cushion at my head and narrowly missed.

I tsked, darkly. "You shouldn't have done that."

Stalking forward, I hunted her down, as she tried to escape me. But she was too slow, and a predator never loses sight of his prey.

I caught her easily and threw her on the bed. Lila bounced on the mattress with a shocked gasp, and I *pounced*.

She made a sound at the back of her throat, something akin to irritation, but it lacked fire. And she didn't push me away.

In fact, her fingers curled around my shoulders, as I pushed her thighs apart and lowered my head between them. Her skirt was bunched around her waist, and I snapped the strings of her panties, throwing the lace G-string over my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Lila breathed.

Her wide, brown eyes were hazy and laced with wanton need.

"Speaking French between your legs," I rumbled, my chest vibrating with the low growl. "Your pussy and I are about to get reacquainted on a... more personal level."

LILA

woke up in Maddox's arm, my body sore and my brain... fuzzy. Warmth spread through my body, all the way to my toes, and against my will, there was a stupid smile plastered on my face.

Warm and safe.

Happy and...

Loved?

No. My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach, a sudden hard dive that had me snapping out of my daydream. It wasn't love. It couldn't be. At least not from Maddox.

"Good morning." I had been so lost in my own thoughts, overthinking once again. But his voice, a deep timbre, brought me back to him.

The same low rasp as he spoke his final words to me last night, before falling asleep... after some vigorous... *fucking*.

Or... love-making, I guessed. I couldn't quite decide what it was we did last night. Maddox had been rough, taking me long and hard... then he had been gentle, taking his sweet time. Touching me with utmost care, like I was something fragile – breakable. He *confused* me.

"Best birthday ever," Maddox had rasped in my ear, before his breathing evened out. It was his answer to me wishing him *happy birthday* as the clock struck midnight, while he was buried deep inside me.

His twenty-first birthday.

Our fourth birthday together. Except, we celebrated this one quite a bit differently than the first three.

I turned over onto to my side to face him. His eyes were still closed, but

there was a flicker of a smile on his lips.

Folding my arms over his wide chest, I rested my chin on my hands. "Good morning," I whispered, before placing a chaste kiss on the corner of his mouth. I didn't know why I did it, but it was instinct. Almost like a habit I had picked up in the last twenty-four hours. I couldn't keep my hands or lips off him. "And Happy Birthday."

"When I open my eyes, I better find you naked."

It was impossible not to smile at his teasing. Maddox just seemed so... *happy*. "Open your eyes and find out yourself."

He hummed in response, and I felt his hand inching up my thigh, a soft caress. He cupped my bare ass and gave it a firm squeeze. Maddox popped an eye open, his lips lazily quirking up to the side with a smirk. "Soft and naked, I approve," he said, his sleepy voice gruff to my ears.

"You're insatiable," I teased.

His fingers trailed up my hips, and his arm circled around my waist, before he flipped us over. Maddox hovered over me, grinning. "That's four years of sexual frustration, Lila. Trust me, I'm not nearly done with you. In fact, I'm just getting started."

I hiked my legs around his hips, pulling him closer. His morning hard-on pressed against my core, and I could feel the stickiness where his cum had dried on me from last night.

"Seven days of carnal desires, huh? I was expecting some romance, but I guess I'll take what I can get." I only meant it as a joke, but gone was the teasing look on Maddox's face.

His expression turned serious, like he was really considering my words. Damn it, stupid me and my loose tongue. If this was a seven-day affair, I couldn't let this get any more serious than it already was.

His blue eyes flashed with something... I just couldn't place the emotion, before it was gone. His hand came up, and he cupped my face, his thumb ghosting over my cheek. "I've never had to woo a woman before. But I'm going to try. For you. I'm not much of a romantic guy, but I'll try. For you."

I let out a small laugh, but inside of me? I was a complete mess. Stomach fluttering, chest cramping, heart tightening... Holy shit. Did Maddox Coulter just say he was going to *woo* me?

Girlish delight filled me, but I quickly shoved it away. "Sheesh. I was only joking, no need to get all serious, Coulter."

His thumb feathered over my lips, a tender touch.

Stop. You're making this harder.

"I *am* serious. I'll give you romance, flowers and all, with a side of dick to go with it."

A snort escaped me, quite unladylike, and I smacked his chest. "I knew it! You can't do romantic to save your life."

Maddox's eyes darkened. "Was that a challenge?"

I chewed on my lip to keep from giggling. Me - giggling. Shit, the Maddox's charm was getting to me. "Maaaybe."

A deep rumble came from his chest. "Try me," he growled, before his lips crushed against mine, in one long, deep... searing kiss.

He *claimed* my lips.

He *stole* my breath.

One... simple... kiss.

Maddox *captured* my heart.

I expected him to want more, but he ended the kiss, pulling away slightly. "Get up. I'm about to give you my birthday present."

Dazed, I blinked at him. "Huh? That's not how it's supposed to work. It's your birthday, and I give you a present. Not the other way around."

Maddox grinned. "We're going on a date," he said more softly.

"A date?" I repeated.

He rolled off me, and I watched, as he ran his fingers through his blond hair. "Woo you," he mouthed.

Holy shit, Maddox was serious.

A date... I was going on a date with my best friend.

Wait... my lover?

Boyfriend?

Nervousness zinged through my veins, and my stomach twisted. This wasn't going to end well. No, all of this had just gotten way more complicated.

My breath halted when Maddox curled a finger around a lock of my hair and tugged, pulling my attention back to him. "You're overthinking, Lila. I can practically hear your thoughts."

"Maddox-"

"No," he cut me off. "If I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you around on our date, I will. Don't tempt me, Sweet Cheeks."

Maddox didn't make empty promises.

In fact, he always carried out his threats, one way or another.

I got off the bed and quickly grabbed for his shirt, pulling it over my head. "A casual date? How am I supposed to dress? Where are we going?"

He turned over onto his side and propped up on one elbow. The muscles of his bicep bulged, and the blanket slid down to his hips, barely covering his crotch. His bare torso and v-line were on display. That simple move shouldn't have looked this sexy, but Maddox made it downright sinful.

His ocean blue eyes flickered to my bare thighs, before he looked up. "You look good in my shirt," he said, his voice laced with something akin to... affection? Adoration? Something *more*...

"And you ask way too many questions, woman."

"But-"

Maddox shook his head. "Get in the shower, Lila. Or we'll never leave this hotel room."

Huffing back a response, I stomped to the bathroom. I locked the door, just in case he got any ideas. I needed some time alone to think, to prepare myself and my... heart for what Maddox had planned. Because, regardless of what I said or did... or how hard I tried to push Maddox away and to keep my heart in a cage, he made me weak.

I found my disheveled reflection in the mirror and groaned. The end result of a sex marathon.

Rubbing a hand over my face, I leaned against the sink. Everything was happening too fast. Two days ago... the mere idea of sleeping with Maddox was forbidden, almost taboo.

Now, I was so tightly entangled with him, there was no way out.

I didn't even know how to step back, how to go back to how we were before. My throat tightened with a choked sound.

Before Maddox, I didn't know how to fill in the missing piece. I didn't even know I was missing a piece of my puzzle until he sauntered into my life, with a dirty smirk. I didn't know I was incomplete until he made me whole.

Before Maddox... I didn't really *know* me.

I covered my chest with my hand, and my scars tingled as a reminder. After the death of my parents, I went on with the motion of life. I woke up, went to school, reminded myself to breathe, smiled because I was expected to, slept while praying the nightmares stayed away. And repeat.

I breathed.

I lived.

But I wasn't... alive.

Not until him.

My fingers grasped my necklace, feeling the weight of it, chasing the same soothing feeling it always brought me. The pendant, our dreamcatcher, felt heavier than it was before.

How could I risk losing him − losing *us*?

A soft knock snapped me out of my thoughts, and I swiveled around, glowering at the door. "What?"

"I can hear you overthinking, Lila."

"Shut up," I muttered to the door.

The door chuckled, well, *Maddox* chuckled. "Don't make me come inside. You know damn well a locked door will not keep me away if I want to get in. Better remember that next time."

"Is the word 'privacy' not in your vocabulary?" I shot back.

Maddox was silent for a short second before he replied, "No. Now, hurry. Our date awaits, milady."

"I'm not a lady *or* a princess." And yes, I was smiling because, damn him, I was falling for it again. His charm. His stupid attempts to woo me.

Even with a door separating us, I could imagine Maddox standing outside the door, smiling. "No, you're not, little dragon."

Little dragon.

My cheeks heated up. Damn it, was I... blushing?

Oh no, I was in big trouble.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I walked out of the bathroom to find our master suite empty. Maddox was nowhere to be seen, but he did leave me a present. On the bed, there was a white dress.

With a single... dead rose.

A dead rose? What the hell?

And then I remembered why.

Maddox and his stupid pranks. The last time he offered me roses – dead roses – he was on his knees, making a grand proposal to my ass.

This was his messed-up way of being romantic, but still staying true to *us*. Next to the dress, there was a blue Post-It Note. A handwritten note, with Maddox's not so elegant penmanship.

You look beautiful in white. Wear the dress.

Ah, this was Maddox. He didn't even bother to *ask* me to wear the dress

or say 'please.' He ordered me to wear it.

And where the hell did he even get this dress? It was pretty and elegant. A simple white, spaghetti strap silk dress.

I grabbed the dress and walked over to the mirror, before slipping it over my head. It came down to my calves, a few inches above my ankles. The dress was backless, with crisscross straps to a tie a knot.

"I'm beginning to think I made the wrong choice."

I gasped at the voice and swiveled around to face the intruder. "Maddox! You scared me!"

He stood at the entrance of the room and closed the door behind him. My gaze traveled the length of his body, slowly taking him in. Yes, I was taking my time to appreciate the view.

There was nothing wrong with eyeing your best friend, right? The same best friend I slept with last night...

Instead of his usual attire of jeans and a shirt, he was wearing black pants, a white buttoned-up shirt and a black tie. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, his thick forearms coiled with muscles. My stomach fluttered at the sight of him...all casual elegance and so sinfully looking.

Maddox sauntered over to me, his eyes dark and intense. "Now that you're in the dress, I don't want to leave the room," he said hoarsely.

"Why?" My voice dropped to a whisper. "Do you like it?"

He stood in front of me, a mere inch away. So close, I could feel the warmth of him. He smelled clean...his aftershave and favorite cologne mixed with his manly scent. I'd recognize his scent anywhere, even in a crowded room.

Maddox took another step, until our bodies were flushed against each other. His breath skated over my cheeks. I could smell the mint on his breath, and I'd bet he had gum hidden somewhere in his mouth. "I like it *too* much."

I swallowed, my mouth was suddenly dry, and my tongue didn't seem to work. "Um... can... you help me?"

There was a single heartbeat, a short second, a throbbing moment, before his hand came around my hips. Maddox turned me around, so I was facing the mirror. With my back against his front, we stared at each other.

There was a look in his eyes, the intensity of his blue gaze unnerved me. Eye contact was a dangerous, dangerous thing. It spoke a thousand unsaid words; words we were too scared to speak.

His fingers skimmed over my bare back, and I fought back a shiver. My

toes curled around the soft carpet, and my eyes fluttered shut as his head lowered to my neck. His lips whispered over my skin, and his teeth grazed my shoulders sharply, before laving his tongue over the bite.

I felt him inhale, breathing *me* in.

I exhaled a shuddering breath in response.

My heart catapulted in my chest when his lips ghosted behind my ear, a tender kiss. I didn't want him to stop touching me. There was magic in his touch, I was dizzy and drunk on Maddox.

His fingers worked the thin straps, and he tied a single knot, before his hands landed on my hips again. "Black is your color, but white makes you look like an angel who has descended on earth. Although, instead of bringing peace, you're wreaking havoc on my heart."

Thud. Thud. Thud.

My heart was falling... breaking... a loud shatter that echoed in my ears. I wasn't going to survive the next five days with Maddox.

His grip tightened on my hips. "Leave your hair down."

I licked my lips and eyed him through the mirror. "You're really demanding today." Like always.

Maddox half-shrugged before he flashed me a dimpled smirk. "You like it."

"Say please."

"What?"

"First step of wooing me: stop being such an arrogant asshole. Say please."

His thumb brushed against my hips, moving back and forth. It was a teasing touch through the thin fabric of my dress.

"Please." My womb tingled at the low rasp, his voice thicker than usual.

Holy. Shit!

Maddox Coulter just said please.

"Shall we, little dragon?"

I nodded, simply speechless. He really was serious about wooing me. Maddox didn't have a single romantic bone in him, but he was *trying*.

I wasn't strong enough to escape his attempts.

I just knew...

By the end of our Paris affair, I was going to lose my heart to Maddox – the heartbreaker.

HOURS LATER, my feet were sore from walking around the streets of Paris, and my stomach rumbled with hunger. I was just thankful Maddox had suggested I put on my flats, instead of heels, when we left the hotel this morning.

Now, the day was slowly coming to an end.

And what a beautiful day it had been.

A date, a... real... date with Maddox Coulter.

We spent the morning at the Modern Art Museum. True, it was boring for Maddox, but he did it for me. He knew how much I loved museums and viewing collections of art over hundreds of years. Paris was rich with culture, and I'd never grow tired of exploring the heart of France.

For lunch, we settled for a small picnic at Champs De Mars, a 60-acre garden that used to grow vegetables and grapevines in the sixteenth century until it was repurposed for military training by Napoleon's nearby academy. Today, we could just enjoy the view of the garden while having lunch.

We later explored the Trocadero gardens and had our dessert there, from ice cream vendors. Maddox had his favorite mango flavor, and I chose chocolate mint.

Everything had been so... perfect. As childish as it sounded, I didn't want the day to ever end.

It would have been the same scene if we had explored Paris as friends. A normal outing between two best friends. We would have gone to the same places, ate the same food...

But this was... different.

Maddox held my hand. In fact, he barely let me go. He secretly whispered dirty words in my ear, while we explored the museum. We shared kisses while we ate our ice cream, our lips quivering and numb.

He was completely in tune with me, always reaching out for me, watching me closely, *touching* me.

His romantic side was finally showing, and I got to be the first woman to see it.

It was special, I told myself.

But it was also a short affair, I reminded myself.

"So, where to now?"

Maddox grabbed my hand, tugging me to him. He folded his arm around

my shoulder, anchoring me to his side. He lowered his head, so he could whisper in my ear, "Your last surprise."

"It's really not fair. It's your birthday, and you won't let me do something for you," I mumbled, even though my heart was doing somersaults in my chest.

Maddox placed a quick kiss on the corner of my lips. "You already are." "Hmm."

"You're spending the day with me. That's enough."

"A date," I said cheekily.

"A date," he affirmed, with a warm, dimpled smile. It transformed his face. Maddox looked happy, and he suddenly appeared younger than before, more his age. All casual, carefree and young.

He was always busy with school and football, always worrying, always tense. It was a burden he carried as he tried to make his father happy, even though if you asked him – he'd lie and say he didn't give a single fuck what his father thought of him.

He was a good liar, like that, hiding his pain behind the mask he wore, showing the world he was *the* Maddox Coulter: cocky, arrogant, rich—Berkshire's star quarterback and now Harvard's.

To the world, he had everything. Parents. Money. A scholarship. His football career. Girls at his disposal.

He was a king, and he wore his crown, filled with thorns, with an unmatched arrogance and a dirty smirk to go with it.

But deep inside, all Maddox ever wanted was acceptance and love.

So he worked endlessly for it... and always ended *disappointed*.

But right now? The usual tensed line on his forehead was smoothed out, his blue eyes practically alive, and his smile was…real.

Oh damn it. There goes my heart again.

Once we were back at the hotel, we waited for the elevator. "So, what's the surprise?" I asked again, growing a tad impatient. He was dragging the suspense out far too long now.

"It's waiting for us on the rooftop." Maddox winked, as he took a step back, as if to walk away.

Confused, I grabbed his hand and tugged him to me. "Are you telling me you're about to climb up the stairs to the rooftop?"

He eyed the elevator, and I could practically feel him sweating at the mere thought of entering the tight enclosure. "Maddox, you can't climb fifteen flights of stairs. That's crazy! We don't have to go to the rooftop. Let's go back to our room."

"No," he snapped, before shaking his head. "Sorry. It's just... I had them prepare this especially for us."

"Maddox-"

He gritted his teeth, his jaw growing hard, so much so that I wondered if it'd crack under the pressure. "Take the elevator, Lila. And I'll be there in a few minutes. The stairs are not a big problem."

"But-"

"Lila, no."

"You're serious?"

His expression turned stern. "Yes. Don't argue with me on this, little dragon. You won't win this one."

The elevator pinged, and the doors slid open. Maddox was already backpedaling from me. "To the rooftop, Lila. I'll see you there."

I got into the elevator and watched him leave, as the door slid closed once again. I punched in the button for the last floor, which would take me to the rooftop. I didn't even know we were allowed up there.

The hotel was fifteen floors, and it took me a few minutes to get where I needed to be. When I got to the top, there was a hotel employee at the door. He smiled kindly, before he let me out, sliding the glass doors open for me. I stepped onto the rooftop, which, in fact, was a wide-span terrace.

Holy shit.

I slowly took a few steps forward, taking everything in. The terrace had been transformed into a romantic arrangement. The set-up was right out of a movie or a romance novel. Oh yeah, I was definitely being wooed. Rose petals and scented candles on the ground, creating a pathway for me. There was a table set for two, but it was the view that had me in complete awe.

Oh my God!

I must have stood there, in complete shock for a whole minute.

"Surprise," he exhaled in my ear.

I didn't even flinch or gasp. I felt him before he spoke. Maddox's hands curled around my hips, as I leaned against the metal railings of the rooftop. His breathing was coming out harsher, his chest heaving against my back, and I could feel his heart thudding. He climbed up fifteen flights of stairs for *this...* for us.

He pressed his warm lips on my bare shoulder, a soft kiss. "Sunset, the

Eiffel Tower and dinner."

My breath hitched. "What did you do?" I whispered, still in shock.

"Wooing you," he easily responded. "I promised you romance."

So he did.

And Maddox delivered.

Flowers... romance... sunset... Paris...

What else could I ask for?

Falling in love with my best friend was never meant to happen, but being romanced *by* my best friend? I guessed, there was no going back after this.

The city of love lived up to its name. Not even Maddox and I could fight it.

We had been told this hotel had the best view of the city and right here...on the rooftop? The view was absolutely magical as the sun began to set behind the Eiffel Tower, and we could see the whole French Capital.

As the sky turned yellow and orange, the sun lowering itself over the horizon, I could only stare and marvel in its beauty.

"Shall we? Dinner awaits."

Maddox gripped my hand in his, and he tugged me to the table. He pushed my chair in and took a seat across from me. Dinner was served by the same waiter I met at the door.

"Real roses, huh?" I nodded toward the vase on the table. That was a great addition, if not a total surprise. I'd expected dead roses again.

His lips curled up, a teasing smile. "I thought I'd change it up a bit."

I looked around the terrace, admiring the view. "How did you plan this?"

"I have my ways." I couldn't imagine Maddox going to the concierge and asking them to prepare this. It didn't really suit him and his cocky ways, but I guessed...

He really did surprise me today.

Maddox poured us both a glass of wine. I took a slow sip, nodding in satisfaction, when the red wine hit all my taste buds.

"Since you wouldn't let me get you a birthday present, we'll have to go tomorrow," I started, cutting up my steak into tiny pieces.

Maddox shoved his fork into his mouth, his eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean?" he asked around a mouthful.

"I thought we could get a tattoo."

His eyes lit up instantly, and I continued, "Last year, you wanted to get matching tattoos, but I wasn't ready. I thought this year... we could. Your

birthday present."

Matching tattoos... something that was *us*.

"Lila," he said my name in a low growl.

"Yes?" My stomach did another flip, and I *loathed* how much Maddox could affect me.

That was a lie. I didn't hate the feeling. In fact, I was starting to love it. Too much.

"If you weren't eating and across the table from me, I'd have turned you over and fucked you into next week."

My hand flew to my mouth, as I coughed back the steak that was now stuck in my throat. I clumsily reached for my glass and took a huge gulp. He grinned, before taking a sip of his own wine.

I didn't realize he'd be *that* happy about the matching tattoos.

"You have to stop doing that," I mumbled, after my coughing fit.

"What? Making you blush? It looks cute on you, Sweet Cheeks," he said, ever so arrogantly.

Damn it, damn him.

The rest of the dinner went by, with Maddox dropping casual dirty remarks and me rolling my eyes. He was absolutely impossible.

But I had four years to get used to all his antics.

Once the table was cleared and while we waited for dessert, I pushed my chair out and walked over to the railing. The sky was dark now, and the Eiffel Tower was lit up for the night.

It was... breathtaking.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Maddox rising from his seat and striding toward me with purpose. He exuded confidence and arrogance, the way he prowled over to me. His body moved behind me, his wide chest pressing into my back. I could feel the strength of his body against mine.

A shudder rippled through me, as his finger skimmed over my bare back, gently tugging at the lace knot there, but not hard enough to have it come undone. His teasing touch lingered, my skin rising with goosebumps.

His hand slid up, oh so slowly. He brushed my hair aside, and his lips feathered against my nape. My heart *thudded*.

I suddenly felt really, really warm. All over. Inside, outside... my fingertips... my core.

Oh God. His touch was sweet, sweet torture. A slice of heaven, with a touch of hell.

Maddox kissed his way to the curve of my shoulders. "I knew I had no right to touch you, to want you, to crave you like air, but I did. I knew it was wrong, but I didn't want to stop. So, I took. And now, I'm *obsessed*."

A shiver ran down my spine, and I almost whimpered in need. My body shuddered as his words hit me like a violent tide, sweeping me away. His chest rumbled with a low guttural sound. "I'm a mad fucking man for you, Lila Garcia."

My sex clenched in response. "It's not fair," I whispered. "I can't push you away if you keep saying things like this, whispering these words... You're making this so much harder, Maddox."

His teeth nipped the side of my neck. His hand curled around my throat, and he turned my head to the side, his lips brushing against mine.

Kiss me.

That was the only thought I had before his mouth was on mine. He didn't pause, didn't wait for me to think, didn't wait for me to catch my breath...

Soft but demanding.

Gentle but passionate.

Sweet but all-consuming.

Fire licked through my veins, and my body went soft in his arms. For a short second, my world felt off balance, before it finally felt... *right*. Every part of me came alive, as the drums crashed and banged in my chest. My soul cried in triumph, as I finally allowed myself to... *feel*.

Maybe this was the moment I fell for him. Recklessly. Irrevocably. Wholly.

Maybe this was the moment I realized I never wanted to let go.

We kissed, like two drowning lovers lost at sea, our lips seeking each other amidst the crashing waves. Lips. Tongue. Teeth. We kissed like it was the end, and our lips would never meet again. The rhythm of our hearts matched our crazed desperation. Maddox tasted of all things holy and sinful in this world; he tasted like every forbidden thought I had at night coming true.

He tasted like red wine, and I was a little heady, a little drunk on him.

Our lips parted from each other, as we caught our breath, chests heaving.

"Bend over. Pull your dress up," Maddox rasped in my ear.

I swallowed, my heart racing, and my stomach clenching with anticipation. His fingers unwrapped around my throat, but I could still feel their searing touch on my flesh, as if he had *marked* me. His hands lowered to

my waist, and his fingers gripped my hips. Maddox brushed his nose along the length of my nape.

I exhaled a shuddering breath. "People are going to see."

The buildings were so close to each other, anyone could see us if they were looking out of their windows. And what if... the waiter walked in on us?

His chest rumbled with a growly sound. "Let them. I want the world to see me owning this sweet pussy. Bend over, Lila. Now. Show me how wet you are for me, and I'll give you what you need."

My eyes widened at the command in his voice, and my body bent to his will, before I could really process what was happening.

"I'm waiting." His voice had hardened, a slight gruff in his tone. "Your dress, Lila," Maddox reminded me, when I stayed bent over the railing.

My trembling hands clenched the fabric of my silk dress, and I slowly slid it up. I couldn't see his face, but his eyes were practically burning holes into my back.

Warm. Intense. Hard.

I pulled my dress up over my ass, and it bunched around my hips, as I stayed bent over. The thong I wore barely covered my flesh. My ass cheeks were on display, my bare legs shaking, as I tried to keep myself still for him.

This was highly inappropriate.

But maybe it was *why...* the fact that it was *inappropriate...*had me wanting more. I grew damp between my thighs, my wetness coating my underwear. My body was tight with anticipation.

"Maddox," I breathed, waiting for him to say something... to touch me.

But he stayed eerily quiet. I could hear his breathing, could feel him behind me, but he didn't make a move to touch me.

His legs brushed against mine, and I let an involuntary shudder. The fabric of his pants seemed to feel rougher against my skin, even though I knew that wasn't the case. I just felt more... in tune with Maddox. My body was hyperaware of every touch, every breath... every movement.

When he *finally* touched me...I almost moaned in relief.

The tips of his fingers brushed across my back, and his hands slid down to my ass. He cupped it almost possessively, before moving closer. His body molded over me, bringing his chest firmly against my back. Maddox kicked my legs open, forcing them further apart.

The slight coldness of the railing seeped through my dress, as I kept my

chest pressed against it. My nipples pebbled, and my lips parted, a silent gasp escaping.

He rubbed his palms over my ass, caressing the soft globes. His voice lowered to a throaty timbre. "What am I going to do with you."

I licked my lips. "Was that a question?"

"No, a statement." Two fingers slid inside my thong and between the crease of my ass, rubbing the soft spot there. Right...there. Holy shit! I clenched and bit on my lip, *hard*. "I'm going to do a lot of things to you, Lila."

I gasped with mock indignation. "You won't..." *Smack*.

It was a light tap compared to the spanking he had given me during our sex marathon. After manhandling me the night before, this was almost gentle. This one was just enough to sting before feeling more pleasurable.

He popped his hand over my ass again, and I bit my lips, holding in the moan that threatened to escape. My hips lifted on their own accord, as he rubbed the spot immediately, making me feel hot and aroused.

Smack. Smack.

He spanked me harder. Two quick swats that slowly burned my flesh, and this time, I couldn't help but moan out loud. The heat between my legs intensified, and I *throbbed*.

It was painful: sweet torture.

Oh, sweet heavens!

"Maddox." My voice came out soft and breathy. I could only imagine how it looked if someone caught us. Me, bent over with my dress around my hips, Maddox spanking me, as my wetness dripped down the inside of my thighs. The image was so... dirty... so... lewd, I couldn't help but feel even hotter.

I arched into his body, as he peppered my ass, alternating between light and hard swats. He caressed my arched bottom, teasing both of us.

I felt him kneel behind me, his face leveled with my ass now. He slid my thong down my legs, and the soft fabric gathered around my ankles. I tried to close my legs, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by all of *this*.

"Show me your pussy, Baby."

The pressure in my chest built up. My thighs clenched together at his words, but his hand landed on my ass so hard that I flinched, crying out, and my legs instantly fell open. "Show me, Lila. Show me how much you want

me."

Maddox nudged my legs open wider with his knees. His palms rubbed the globes of my ass, as my hand sneaked between my legs. A slight moan whispered across my lips, as I touched myself. I bent forward more, pressing my upper body against the railing and arching my hips up. Maddox's fingers dug into my flesh, and he pulled my ass cheeks apart, just as I spread myself open, showing him my entrance.

He swore under his breath, and I closed my eyes, feeling my body flush under his intense, penetrating gaze. "You are so fucking beautiful, Lila."

Of course, he'd say that. I was at his mercy, wide open for him to do as he pleased.

Maddox let out a low grunt. I felt his breath on my ass cheeks, before he gently bit down. I let out a small screech, my whole body clenching tightly, as he speared my heated core with two fingers at the same time. I bucked against him, crying out and feeling myself grow more damp.

I *pulsed*, throbbing with an intensity I couldn't really describe.

Maddox continued to thrust his fingers in and out of me, and I shamelessly started to move with him, grinding against him.

"Maddox...Maddox!" His name was a gasping prayer on my lips. My legs started to shake, my knees growing weak, as he relentlessly continued to tease me. "Oh...Please! Please. *Please*."

He slowly pulled away. The feeling of emptiness made me cry out, and I blindly reached for him. "I got you," he muttered in my ear.

Don't stop now.

I wanted everything he was giving me and more. "Don't move."

His body warmth left me for a mere second. I heard the sound of his belt unbuckling, his zipper being pulled down... and then he was on me again.

Crowding into my space, pressing against me, filling my senses with his touch... his scent... his... *everything*.

His hard length jerked between us, and the tip of his cock pressed against my core. He guided his length toward my center, slowly rubbing the head around my clit.

My fingers dug harder into the metal railing, as Maddox thrust inside slowly...so slowly, punishing both of us. I felt him, inches by inches, until he was deep inside of me. Jesus Christ! Over the last two days, I've had Maddox inside of me multiple times, in multiple positions, but every time felt like the first.

His breathing was ragged, his chest heaving with each breath. My eyes widened, as he rolled his hips slightly, making me *feel* him. All of him. There was no space between us. And I couldn't *breathe*.

I was stretched fully, but the discomfort was barely there. He slowly pulled out and pushed back in a second later, with the same slow and torturous movement.

My gaze found the lit-up Eiffel Tower in the night, as Maddox took me from behind.

Oh God, this was his *surprise*.

Romance and dick on the side, he promised.

Yeah, he delivered.

Maddox grunted my name, the sound so primal, my womb clenched in response. His slow pace picked up, his thrusting became jerkier. Harder. Deeper. His fingers wrapped around my hair, curling his fist around it, until his knuckles dug into my scalp.

"Look to your left, eyes up," Maddox growled, his voice hoarse, ragged. I did.

My lips parted with a silent gasp as Maddox thrust back inside of me, his cock hitting me so deep, my toes nearly left the ground. "Do you see him?"

I whimpered in response.

Someone – from the silhouette, I'd guess it was a man – was watching us from the building beside us. All the buildings were so close together, and the man was only a floor higher than us, so there was no denying it – he could see *everything*.

A strangled sound escaped me. I would have thought maybe he didn't see us. After all, it was dark outside, or maybe he had been preoccupied. Except, from the silhouette, it was obvious, as the man pulled his dick out from his pants and started jerking off.

While...watching... us.

"Lila," Maddox growled my name. He pulled out, almost completely. His hard length pressed against my folds, and I clenched, feeling empty. "Bad, bad girl. Are you giving him a good show?"

With one hard thrust, he rammed back inside, and my lips parted with a silent scream. *Maddox!*

Maddox didn't pause. We both made a strangled sound, a groan... a whimper.

This was quick, hot and *filthy*.

My gaze didn't sway from the man. Maddox slammed into me again, as I watched the complete stranger make himself come at the sight of us fucking.

My moans grew louder; Maddox's grunts sounded harsher in my ears. "Lila. Fuck, *Lila*."

The tension in my core tightened, my womb shuddered, and my pussy convulsed around Maddox's hard length. I tried to swallow my scream, but when he pounded inside me, hitting that sweet, sensitive spot... I let go.

My eyes closed, as I came so hard my knees weakened, and my legs almost gave out. He found his release too, his body clenching as he spasmed against me.

"So. Fucking. Beautiful," Maddox groaned.

The stranger found his release, as well, before he tucked his dick back inside his pants, gave us a tiny wave and walked away from his window.

Jesus, God! Holy shit!

Maddox curled his arm around my waist, keeping me upright, as I wobbled against the railing of the rooftop.

What... did... we... just do?

I blinked away the fuzziness, but my brain didn't seem to work. My heart was rocking so hard against my rib cage, I thought it'd leave a nasty bruise. My body felt like a limp mess... I was just so...

I couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't...

Maddox slowly pulled out of me, and I flinched at the sudden empty feeling. His lips pressed against my shoulder before he spun me around and pulled me into his arms. His suit was in disarray while my dress was rumpled. My hair was probably a mess too, adding to my disheveled appearance.

"Pretty romantic, don't you think?" Maddox rasped in my ear, as his cum dripped down my thighs.

"That's a whole new meaning to romance, Coulter," I said breathlessly.

Maddox chuckled, before claiming my lips in a long kiss. "I aim to please, Garcia."

Oh yeah, I was very pleased.

Maddox Coulter could do dirty romance very well.

MADDOX

ur time in Paris had come to an end. One week. A seven-day affair.

And now I just had to convince Lila to stay with me... forever.

But forever was a long time. Forever was just a daydream, a pretty fantasy, I thought.

I guessed, I just had to convince her that we were good together. Really fucking good. Good enough for us to work out as a couple and last for a very long time. As cheesy as it sounded (cheesy didn't suit my character, but for Lila, I'd be my own version of cheesy romantic), I could see my future with Lila.

I didn't do love, or I didn't *think* I did. But she was everything I ever wanted, and it scared the living shit out of me. She was a slice of heaven, with hellish fires.

By the end of tonight, Lila Garcia was going to be my girlfriend.

It didn't matter if I had to tie her to the bed and dick her down good enough to convince her. If she wanted romance, I was prepared to give her that, too. That and everything else she wanted. Lila wasn't going to friendzone us any longer.

I could already feel her barrier coming up, shutting me out. I knew she was worried; I was too. As we walked out of the airport, Lila kept a careful distance between us. A distance that wasn't there during our stay in Paris. Of course, it wasn't there, I was all up in her pussy in the last seven days.

And We. Weren't. Going. Back. To. Being. Just friends.

Fuck that. My dick agreed.

"I'm glad to be back home," she said, hefting her travel bag over her shoulder. "I'm worried about Riley."

"She'll be fine," I soothed, reaching for her hand. It was out of habit, almost like an instinct, that was now instilled in me. To touch her, to hold her, to kiss her.

Lila shied away from my touch, and I held back a growl. Goddamn it! Her lips were pressed in a firm line, as she avoided looking at me. I grabbed her suitcase and rolled it toward my black Bentley. "I had Colton drop off the car for us."

"You didn't have to do that," she said, placing her bag into the backseat. "We could have taken an uber home."

"I knew you wouldn't like that." I shoved our suitcases into the trunk, before walking around to the driver's side. Lila settled in the passenger's seat.

She might have gotten over her fear of cars. She was okay with driving around with me, but she wasn't comfortable getting in a car with just anyone. Not yet, at least.

I was probably an asshole for thinking this... but I liked that she'd only get in a car with me. That I was her protector. She trusted *me*. Only I had seen the sides of Lila, she never wanted others to see.

I'd seen Lila strong and powerful.

I'd witnessed her fragile and vulnerable.

Lila nudged me with her elbow, her lips quirked up to the side. "That was very thoughtful of you, thank you."

Really, Lila? We were back to sharing pleasantries and being... *friendly*?

The more reserved she appeared, the more I wanted to tease her, probe her temper and evoke her passion.

The more distance she put between us, the more I wanted to devour her.

Leaning in, I cupped her face and stole a kiss. Her lips parted against mine, and I shoved my tongue in her mouth, tasting her. I sucked and nibbled on her bottom lip, until she let out a small whimper that sounded so needy. The sound traveled all the way to my dick.

Well, shit. Not now, big guy.

I pulled away from the kiss and licked my lips, tasting the remnants of her cherry lip gloss and the mint gum she had in her mouth... which... I now had between my teeth. She didn't even notice I stole her gum. Her brown eyes were glassy, her cheeks tinted with pink blush, and Lila fluttered her lashes at

me. Yeah, I got her good.

"Why did you do that?" she breathed, bringing her fingers to her plump well-kissed lips.

Because you're mine.

I clunked my tongue at her and started the car. "I was just checking if you'll turn into a princess. But alas, you're still a frog — wait, no. Still a scaly, terrifying dragon, I see."

Lila swatted my arm, a small breathy laugh escaped past her tempting lips. "As if you're a prince. Ha!"

"You're no princess, and I'm no prince charming."

She rolled her eyes. "What are you then?"

"Your king, Baby."

Lila's throat bobbed in response. She turned to face her window without a smart comeback, like I expected. She ducked behind her hair, shielding her face from me. Hiding away, shutting me out...

Run, Lila. Run, little dragon. The faster she ran away from me, the harder I was going to chase her.

The drive to our place was rather quiet, and I gave her that. I allowed her the silence, gave her one last chance to overthink *this*, before I'd swoop in and turn her world upside down.

Fifteen minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot. Lila hurriedly got out of the car, before I could say a word. Was she thinking of making a beeline to her apartment without even acknowledging me?

What - the - fuck?

Lila and I were just stepping out of the car, when Colton rolled into the lot in his yellow Ferrari. Last month, he had the latest Jaguar Sport – in green. He liked his cars, like his women: flashy, bold and extravagant. Arrogant little shit, no wonder we were best friends.

We watched, as he jogged around to the passenger's side, opened the door and out stepped... Riley?

Double – what – the – fu–

She wobbled out in her cast and grimaced as Colton wrapped an arm around her shoulders, helping her hop over to us. She waved, a little smile on her face. "Lila!"

Lila dropped her bag at my feet and raced over to Riley, before enveloping her friend into a tight hug. Colton *reluctantly* released his cargo into Lila's arms and took a step back.

I walked over to the little group and bumped fists with Colton. Riley and he barely tolerated each other, and I was damn curious how he convinced her to let him help. I glanced down at the grocery bags he was holding. I could see there were vegetables, chocolates and... tampons. Yeah, that grocery bag definitely did *not* belong to Colton. He appeared to be Riley's personal chauffeur and... helper?

"How's the leg?" I nodded toward Riley's blue cast.

Her lip jutted out, a sad pout. "It's fine now."

Lila made a strangled sound at the back of her throat, sounding both pissed... and cute with the look of outrage on her face. "I can't believe you waited a whole day before you called and told me about your accident! You broke your leg, what the hell!"

"Fractured," Colton amended. "Not broken. She's lucky I was next door and heard her cry out."

"You shouldn't have climbed up that ladder when you were home alone. It was never stable." Lila's forehead creased with worry as she fretted over her friend. "You could have been hurt worse!"

"She could have just called me, and I would have fixed the broken cabinet," Colton mumbled under his breath.

Riley hissed, her eyes flashing with annoyance. "I had it all handled if it wasn't for the cat jumping into my ladder. Rory asked me to cat-sit for her while she and Jaxon were away this weekend." She faced her nemesis, glaring. "I didn't... and *don't* need your help, Colton."

"Funny. I'm the one who drove you to the hospital in the middle of the night."

Her shoulder straightened, and her lips curled up in distaste. "Because *you* insisted."

"You were in pain."

"Who cares? I was fine on my own and could have called 9-1-1!"

"I care," Colton growled.

Riley opened her mouth to snap back at him, but then paused at Colton's confession. She blinked, opened her mouth again, before finally shutting up. No smartass comeback? Huh, interesting.

"Whatever," she mumbled under her breath. "How was your trip, Lila?"

Lila's gaze found mine, as she turned red. She blinked away and sputtered out a half-ass response to her friend. "Oh, fine. It was fine. Everything was nice and fine."

"She said *fine* three times," Colton muttered to me, soft enough the girls didn't catch it.

Riley never shut up, and she asked way too many questions all the time. Surprisingly, today, she seemed more thoughtful. I didn't miss the way she kept glancing between Lila and I, almost suspiciously.

"Was Paris like everything you imagined?" Colton pushed, a cocky grin plastered on his face. The shithead caught on easily. Of course, he did.

Lila let out a choked laugh. "Oh, yeah. Everything was..."

"Fine," I finished for her.

Her head snapped toward mine, and her dark eyes burned darker. "I was going to say, everything was *magical*."

"Was the sex *magical*, too?" I *grinned*.

Lila gasped, absolutely outraged.

Riley stumbled back and almost fell flat on her ass, if it wasn't for Colton grabbing her.

Colton let out a holler, before disguising it with a coughing fit. His shoulders shook with his silent laughter.

"WHAT?" Riley screeched.

"Maddox," Lila hissed. Her hands fisted by her sides, and I was pretty sure she was contemplating decking me. Gotcha, little dragon. There was nowhere for her to run now.

I grinned harder. "My dick is magic, Babe. Don't be embarrassed to admit it."

I ignored my girl, who was glaring daggers at me, and turned to our friends with an announcement. "She's my girlfriend, and she's moving in with me."

Riley blinked.

Colton smirked.

When Lila started to protest, I leaned down and claimed her lips, not giving a shit that we had an audience or that she was going to murder me in our sleep. I *kissed* her, fuck the consequences. "Shut up."

She pulled away from the kiss, opened her mouth to tell me off, but then snapped it shut again. She chose to glower instead.

"Lila?" Riley questioned softly.

My girl was already taking a step back, like she was about to bolt. Not. Fucking. Happening. I lunged forward and drove my shoulders into her hips, lifting her off the ground, slinging her over my shoulder. One hand gripped

her ass firmly, while I hooked my other arm behind her knees and pinned them against my chest.

Lila let out a shout and started struggling, but there was no use; I had my precious cargo over my shoulder.

Neither Riley nor Colton tried to stop me, as I marched to our building. I took the stairs to the third floor, careful not to jar her too much. My heart thudded hard in my chest, and I knew I was playing with fire.

But then again, I had a habit of loving dangerous things. They called me heartbreaker, thrill-seeker and danger-devil.

And Lila?

She was danger with a big, red sign. Damn it all to hell, I *craved* her.

Lila let out a string of curses and peppered my back with her tiny fists. Once she came to the realization there was no point in struggling, she let out a soft cry and went limp over my shoulder. That was better. I lived for her fiery attitude, but, sometimes, I preferred her docile.

I walked down the corridor. When we passed hers and Riley's apartment, Lila snarled. "*My* apartment is next door."

I walked through my apartment and shut the door behind us. "This is *our* apartment now."

I smacked her ass once – because, why not, she was mine now – and she gasped, before I placed her back on her feet. Grinning, I raised an eyebrow.

She gaped at me, her mouth hanging open. "No," she sputtered.

"Get undressed."

"Excuse me?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "No. This is kidnapping, Maddox."

I stood in front of the door, blocking her way out of my apartment. "Undress. *Now*. Or I will do it for you."

"Maddox," Lila warned, taking a tentative step back. Her eyebrows furrowed, and she paused, giving me a suspicious look. "Why?"

She was finally catching on, smart girl. I took a step forward; she took one back. "Because you can't run away when you're naked. Simple logic, Sweet Cheeks."

"Maddox," she started, before lowering her head, ducking behind her goddamn hair again. She shook her head slowly and muttered to herself, so softly, I almost missed it. "This can't happen."

Lila sounded so heartbroken, so lost...and I didn't like that. Didn't like the way she hid from me, didn't like the way she seemed to give up on *us*,

before she even tried to make it work.

Anger and desperation rolled off me as I stalked forward. "What are you so scared of?"

"You," Lila breathed, when I paused in front of her, a mere inch away. So close I could smell her lavender shampoo, so close I could feel her warmth, so close I could *taste* her fear. My heart slammed against my rib cage.

"You're scared of me?" I trailed a finger up her arm, and she gave me a small shiver in return. "I'll never hurt you, don't you know that?"

Lila licked her lips, still keeping her eyes downcast. "Not physically."

Taking her chin between my fingers, I lifted her head up. She closed her eyes and drew in a shaky breath. "Look at me," I said to her, my voice hoarse even to my own ears. "Look at me, please."

My grip on her chin tightened, and she fluttered her eyes open, gazing right into mine. Misery etched her expression for a split second, before she blinked it away.

I had gotten a glimpse of something so good, and I didn't want to lose it, lose her. I broke my rules for Lila Garcia, and this wasn't our ending. We were not an incomplete story or a half-written page. We were the whole goddamn book, and I needed her to see that.

I cupped her jaw, as I watched her say a million unsaid words to me with her sad eyes. "I've put my whole fucking heart in your hands, Lila."

Her throat bobbed, and her pretty brown eyes turned glassy. Her next words, her littlest whisper, was my undoing. "You terrify me."

My sweet Lila. If only you knew what you do to me.

"The feeling is mutual." A soft confession, a gentle promise.

I released her and quickly pulled my shirt over my head and threw it on the floor. Lila licked her lips, and her attention went to my bare torso, before her head snapped up again. I could see her trying to fight me, having an internal battle with herself.

She wanted me.

But she was scared of having me.

"We were perfect just the way we were before, Maddox. I don't want to lose that."

I let out a chuckle at her weak attempt. "Yeah, Babe. It's a little too late. We stopped being *just friends* the moment you let me all up in your pussy without a condom."

Lila shot me a fierce glare, and I grinned harder. She was so easy to tease.

I gripped her shirt and started pulling, but she smacked my hand away. "Maddox!"

I paused, watching her resolve grow weaker under my gaze. I wasn't going to forcibly undress her. A heavy feeling wrapped around my chest, as I realized she could end this, push me back and walk away.

Thud. Thud. "Do you want to walk away?" I asked, as my voice hardened. "If that is really what you want, I'll let you go."

Uncertainty swirled in her eyes, and my palms grew clammy.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

My fingers clenched the fabric of her shirt, waiting. My head lowered, and I leaned my forehead against hers. "Walk away, Lila. Now," I breathed against her lips. Not touching, not kissing... I *waited*. I was giving her a choice, a way out. Now... or never.

My heart lodged in my throat, as I waited for her to make up her mind. *Thud. Thud. Thud.*

She finally sighed softly, her lips parting, and she leaned into me, curling her arms around my neck. "*Maddox*."

My name was a whispered prayer on her cherry lips. I loved the way my name sounded, the way it rolled off her tongue, like she was tasting sweet candy.

Goddamn it, my chest tightened, and I let out a ragged exhale. "Whatever we had before, it wasn't enough. You know it; I know it. We're perfect now."

I pulled her shirt over her head, and she let me. The rest of our clothes quickly followed until we were both naked. Leaving our discarded clothes on the floor of the living room, Lila's arms went around my neck again, and I hoisted her up. She wrapped her legs around my hips, and I walked us to my room. Her lips found mine, as we tumbled together onto the bed, and I slid between her thighs, hovering over her.

A flash of uncertainty flitted in her eyes again, before she blinked it away. I didn't want her to regret this, regret not walking away. I rubbed my thumb across her jaw, and the touch seemed to make her feel at ease. "I'll always be your best friend, Lila."

The worry slowly melted away from her face, and there was a small coy smile on her lips, a smile that went all the way down to my dick. "But you're also my boyfriend now?"

My heart skipped a fucking beat.

Boyfriend. A relationship...

I had never done a relationship, nothing as official as *this*. My dick was happy enough with all the chicks who eagerly landed on it for a fun time.

But Lila wasn't just a chick looking for a fun time.

She wanted a relationship, romance... boyfriend and girlfriend.

And fuck me, I wanted that, too.

I gave her my signature smirk, guaranteed to melt anyone on the spot. "It could be worse."

"What could be worse than this?" She rolled her eyes, but I could see the worry receding from her gaze. She turned soft under me, her hands sliding over my back, dragging her nails over my skin, like the tempting minx she was.

"I could be your husband."

She smacked my shoulder with her tiny fist. "Maddox!"

I clasped her wrist and jerked her hand down, pressing her palm over my chest. My heart thudded at her touch, and her eyes softened. *Feel me*.

"I live for the adrenaline rush, Lila," I said, keeping my voice low. "I love any adventure that gets my blood pumping, my heart racing... I love anything dangerous, anything wild, anything beautiful enough that makes me want to capture it. *You* are my favorite adventure, Lila Garcia."

She hiccupped back a gasp, before catching her bottom lip between her teeth. Her fingers splayed over my chest, caressing me with her sweet, torturous touch. "You're my favorite adventure too, Maddox."

Her other hand curled behind my neck, and her fingers glided through my hair, pulling at the curled strands. My lips brushed against hers, feeling her soft moan. "I want to wake up every morning at 6 AM, while the world's still sleeping. I'll look beside me, and you're there. I want to fall asleep knowing that you'll be the first sight I see when I wake up. I want every ordinary day with you. I want your bad days; I want your tears and your laughter. Give it all to me, Lila. Be my girlfriend."

She returned my kiss with a fierce one of her own, before she pulled away, just enough to whisper the words, "What if we go back to hating each other?"

I grinned down at her. "Then, we'll just hate fuck. Problem solved."

Her brows furrowed, and she tensed beneath me. "I can't hate you. My heart won't allow me. Even if you break me one day, I won't be able to hate you. That terrifies me, Maddox."

"Lila," I murmured, feathering my lips across her cheek. "Lila... Baby, can you stop overthinking for one minute? Just for a minute. Tell me what you *want*."

Her forehead creased with a tensed line. I kissed down her throat, and she gave me an involuntarily shudder. Her throat bobbed, as she swallowed hard, then my kiss whispered over the throbbing veins on the side of her neck, feeling her heartbeat against my lips. "Stop overthinking."

My head lowered to her chest; her bare tits were a very tempting sight. The white and pink jagged lines between the two heavy mounds called to me. I lightly touched her scars with my mouth, kissing her past away with silent promises.

I knew Lila was scared of feeling too much, scared of losing the people who mattered to her. She kept her heart locked in a silver cage behind her chest, like an Ice Queen.

Too late, though, I had already broken through her barriers. I just needed her to accept it now.

Lila whimpered the moment my lips touched her scars, her nails digging into my shoulders, and I groaned at the sharp sting. "Don't," she said, letting out a soft cry. "It's ugly. Stop, Maddox."

My sweet, sweet Lila. Fierce and fragile. She wasn't weak; she was *never* weak. But she was vulnerable.

I let my kiss linger over her scars, feeling the jagged, bumpy lines under my lips. "You're so beautiful. You don't even know what you do to me, Lila."

Her nipples hardened at my rough voice, and her skin flushed. I cupped her breast in my palm and brought my mouth to its puckered nipple. Lila let out a soft mewl, as my lips wrapped around the little bud.

"You are so perfect," I breathed against her flesh. Goosebumps flashed across her skin, and she trembled in my arms.

My teeth grazed her nipple, and I bit down gently. Lila rewarded me with a gasp and then a fevered moan. I knew I had her exactly where I wanted her. She was trying hard to concentrate on her thoughts, but when I started sucking on her tits, she arched her back. Her hands came to my head, almost frantic in her need, and she pulled at my hair, crying out my name.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice thick with desire.

When she didn't give me a verbal response, I switched to her other breast and gave it the same attention. At my sharp bite, her nipple swelled in my mouth, and her back bowed off the bed.

"You," Lila breathed.

I smiled, before sucking on the pink swollen bud, chasing the sting away. I was finally in her head.

"What do you want, Lila?" I asked again.

"Maddox," she whimpered, "hurry, please."

"Answer me."

Her legs hiked up, and her ankles hooked below my ass. There was an urgency in her voice now when she spoke. "You."

My head lowered further, licking and nipping her taut stomach. I swirled my tongue around her cute belly button. She clutched the back of my head, a small impatient sound echoing from the back of her throat. "What do you want?"

"YOU!" Lila screamed, almost brokenly. "Oh God. You. Maddox, you. Goddamn it, I want *you*!"

I smiled, feeling the urge to beat my chest like a caveman. Lila Garcia was officially mine.

Raising my head, I regarded her with a look of triumph. "I dare you to be my girlfriend, little dragon."

Her eyes grew darker than before and flashed, like molten lava – mixed with lust, fear and annoyance. "Yes," she hissed.

I lowered my head between the apex of her thighs and buried my face in her heavenly scent. She was wet, hot and ready. I licked her slit and circled her throbbing clit.

"Just fuck me already," Lila growled, her hips grinding into my face, hard. Her pussy was practically smothering me, and I loved every bit of it.

"Gladly."

Mine.

LILA

he moment Maddox fell asleep beside me, I sneaked out. No, I wasn't running away. But I needed to breathe, without him stealing away all my breath, to think, without having him distract me with his touch, his mouth... his very impressive, very *distracting* cock.

I knew he didn't play fair. He never did, but Mr. Coulter was such a dirty player. Using sex to turn me soft and have me sidetracked. Every. Single. Time.

I wasn't exactly complaining... but I needed some time away from Maddox.

And I needed my friend. She'd be able to help me process these past seven days.

I found Riley on the couch when I walked into our apartment. Her head snapped up at the sound, and she gave me a curious look. "Is Maddox's dick finally sore enough you guys couldn't go on anymore, or did you happen to run away?"

She knew me too well. I plopped down on the couch beside her and stole some popcorn from her bowl. Her casted leg was propped up on the coffee table and YOU, on Netflix, was playing on the TV. Riley was mildly obsessed with Joe Goldberg.

"Isn't this your third time watching season one?"

"It's my fourth now," she mumbled around a mouthful on popcorn. "You were gone for a week, and I had nothing interesting to do. Joe entertained me."

"I'd think Colton was entertaining enough." I spared her a sideway

glance, watching her reaction.

Her face hardened, and she munched angrily on her popcorn. "He's an asshole."

"An asshole who helped you," I reminded her.

Colton wasn't exactly the bad guy, but he was too much of a shithead. Riley barely tolerated him, and he was making it worse on himself by spouting bullshit half the time. Why couldn't he just say something *nice* for once...?

I shook my head. He was friends with Maddox, after all. Those two were absolutely impossible to deal with.

I'm going to woo you. Romance with a side of dick.

Okay, maybe Maddox wasn't too bad. He sure did romance pretty well... and he, of course, was efficient with his err, male appendage.

I pinched myself in my leg, shaking myself away from my daydream. This was exactly why I had to get away from Maddox. I couldn't stop thinking about how good he felt between my thighs, on top of me, and how perfect his lips felt against mine.

"Who cares about Colton," Riley paused, before turning on her side to face me. "I need to know what happened in Paris."

Of course, I had been waiting for that question. The suspense was probably killing her, as it would have if I were in her place.

I cleared my throat, dragging my nails across my thighs. The expectant look on her face was making me nervous. "Paris was... something else."

"You know damn well I'm not speaking about the city. What happened between you and Maddox?"

"He... well, *we* succumbed to the tension between us. It kinda just happened, without us really even realizing it. But it was too late then."

I let out a soft sigh and closed my eyes, leaning my head back against the couch. "I wanted him; he wanted me. We're both adults, who I guess, couldn't keep their hands off each other."

Riley was silent for a minute, soaking in my words. She shifted beside me, and I popped one eye open, as she drew closer to my side. "And now?"

Now?

My heart slammed against my rib cage and... forget butterflies, I had the whole damn zoo fluttering around in my stomach. "I guess, we're dating?"

Her eyes narrowed on me. "Was that a question or a statement?"

I swallowed, feeling the lump in the base of my throat. I dare you to be

my girlfriend, little dragon.

"I'm his girlfriend," I finally confessed out loud.

Holy shit! I. Was. Maddox. Coulter's. Girlfriend.

The realization finally hit me, like an arrow straight through my heart. My head swam, the room became blurry and the world tilted, catching me off balance.

"Lila? Lila!" Riley grabbed my elbow, and I realized she was shaking me. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"Maddox is my boyfriend," I choked.

"Oh. It looks like it finally hit you," she deadpanned, with a trace of humor.

"I lost," I mumbled.

"Huh?"

"Remember when I first bumped into him at Berkshire? I told you I wouldn't fall for his charms. So, I basically lost." My head fell into my hands, and I sucked in a shaky breath.

Four years later... I had fallen hard for *the* Maddox Coulter. Star quarterback, reckless bad boy, infamous playboy. Who was once my nemesis but now my best friend.

Riley fell back against the couch, howling with laughter. Tears spilled down her cheeks, as she choked back on her maniacal laughter when I glowered. "Oh, shut up!"

"I'm sorry," she wheezed. "But this is actually hilarious. I remember how stubborn you were. You were so determined not to fall for him. Remember those days? Ah, the good ole days."

I shoved my middle finger in her face, and she laughed even harder. Rolling my eyes, I elbowed her in the ribs.

She gasped and then grinned. Mischief flashed in her wide grey eyes. "How's the sex? Please tell me his dick game is as good as it has been hyped up to be."

I flushed, feeling the heat go up my neck and on my face. "Better than the hype," I admitted hoarsely, my lips twisted in a rueful smile.

The sex was... mind-blowing.

But it was the intimacy that had my heart clenching and stomach fluttering like a silly teenage girl with a new crush.

It wasn't just physical with Maddox; it wasn't just sex - no - it was more. Maddox took his time to learn how I liked to be touched and to know my

sensitive spots.

I was naked, vulnerable, and opened to him, body, scars and all, but he made me feel like I was the most beautiful, the most desired woman on the whole damn planet. The intimacy between us transcended the physical... it was all about the *feel*.

That made the sex mind-blowing.

That and his... very thick, very long, very girthy... *distracting* cock.

My sex clenched, at the reminder, and I squeezed my thighs together, feeling the pulsing need in the pit of my stomach.

"Well, at least you're getting some," Riley said, reaching for her popcorn again. She placed the bowl on her lap and shoved a fistful in her mouth. "My vagina is as dry as the Sahara Desert."

"Maybe Colton can help with that." I shot her a shit-eating grin, knowing full well it would grate on her nerves.

Riley was visibly outraged by my suggestion "Colton is going to keep that thing between his legs to himself." Her nostrils flared, and she grunted in irritation. "If he brings his north pole anywhere near my south pole, he might have to say goodbye to his babymaker."

"North pole?"

"Yeah, because it points up," she explained, as if I was dumb.

I waggled my eyebrows at her. "I'd love to read a smutty scene of yours."

Riley cleared her throat, straightened her shoulders and started in her best narrating voice, "As his north pole came close to my south pole, my center pooled with warm, creamy liquid. Our copulation was sweaty and hard. My rhythmic wails could be heard across the city as the wet friction of our sex grew louder. His bulbous rod jumped inside my sacred tunnel, as he found his release."

I hollered. "Ew, no, stop!"

Riley winked, before bursting into laughter. "I think I cringed so hard my face is twitching."

I nodded in agreement. That was absolutely awful. "Never mind. I don't want to read your smutty scenes."

She patted my knee, before turning back to the TV. "So, what are you going to do?"

"With Maddox?" I asked, although I already knew what she was asking. "I want to give us a chance. Maybe he's right; maybe we could be good together."

"You two were meant to cross paths, Lila. As enemies, as friends... as lovers."

"Since when are you a champion for Maddox?"

Her grey eyes snapped to mine, but they were smiling. "He makes you happy. I think that gives him plenty of bonus points."

Maddox did make me happy. I curled my feet under me and settled back on the couch. "Thank you, I needed this talk."

Riley offered me a handful of popcorn. "My pleasure, babe."

She started episode nine of YOU, and we settled in, finishing up season one and starting season two right after.

Five hours later, although time had seemed to fly by, there was an insistent knocking on our door. Riley turned down the volume, and I walked over the door. I barely had it open before someone rammed into me.

Maddox-

My thought came to screeching halt at the raw expression on his face. Something akin to crazed desperation and... fear. His emotions wrapped around my chest and squeezed, until I couldn't breathe.

His frantic gaze landed on mine, and they darkened almost dangerously. "You," he accused, sounding out of breath. "You left."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I came to see Riley."

He prowled forward, his jaw hard and his expression tight. Maddox only had his boxer shorts on. He hadn't even bothered to wear his clothes in his attempt to hunt me down.

"I wasn't running away," I whispered, pressing my palms over his chest.

His heart was racing, too fast, too hard, too wild. Oh, baby. I stood on my tiptoes, and my lips brushed against his, in my attempt to calm him down. "Take me back... home."

Maddox let out a ragged breath, as if he could finally breathe again. His arm curled around my waist like a band of steel, and he practically dragged me back to his apartment next door.

His mouth moved with mine, and *I* kissed *him*. Taking control of the kiss, I nipped on his lips and then slid my tongue inside his mouth. He hoisted me up in his arms and closed his door, before slamming my back against it. He wasn't careful, he wasn't gentle, and, in this moment, I couldn't find myself to care.

Maddox groaned into my kiss, and I could feel his thickness against my

stomach. Could feel how *hard*...warm, how... heavy he was.

"I didn't have a good dream," he grunted like the words pained him.

My heart dropped, and my arms tightened around him.

"Woke up to an empty bed. It made it worse." His confession surprised me.

Maddox had never let himself be vulnerable around me, not willingly. Sure, I had seen his bad sides, his *worst* sides. I had seen him at his breaking point, but he hid his pain with a perfected mask and would never admit to something like this. His tightly put together defenses were down.

Right now, Maddox Coulter was the rawest and truest version of himself. Open to me and vulnerable in my arms.

My lungs squeezed, as I shuddered back a cry. "I'm never leaving you, Baby." The endearment spilled from my lips before I could overthink it, but it felt... *right*.

"Lila." There was so much pain contained in that single word, my name on his lips, whispered like he was a dying sailor at sea, seeking asylum from his impending demise.

"Pinky promise?" A little piece of my heart chipped off.

My Maddox: mine.

He always wanted to be my protector... and I wanted to return the favor.

Lips on lips, forehead against forehead, hearts thudding together, bodies entangled – I whispered, "Pinky promise."

Four years ago, I met a cocky and selfish asshole. He was everything I despised and everything I thought I didn't need in my peaceful life.

Today, I held the same man... a different version of him, in my arms.

And I kissed him.

Then, we made love.

Raw, passionate, crazy love...

It was everything I didn't know I needed until now.

LILA

Two months later

atching Maddox's football games never got any less exhilarating. Every time I watched him walk through the tunnel that led to the football field with the rest of his team, heard the crowd go crazy as Maddox strutted about with his typical swagger and arrogant smirk – my chest tightened, and I could feel myself shaking with excitement.

He loved the crowd, as much as he loved playing football and being on the field. Maddox enjoyed the attention of his fans. The energy, the spectators screaming his name, as he threw a perfect spiral for a touchdown.

It was the first home game of the season, and our players were putting on one hell of a show. Harvard hadn't lost to Brown University in three years. If they won this game, which would have been Maddox's fourth win... It would be a record-breaking, and I wanted to be *that* girlfriend who praised her man for their success.

Maddox has played for the team since his freshman year, and this would be his fourth and final season.

Yeah, it was silly.

But I was so damn proud of him. Maddox Coulter was an exceptional player. Okay, yeah... I was definitely bragging – but that was my right and my duty as his girlfriend, wasn't it?

Maddox said their coach was riding their asses about making sure to win this home game.

It was my job to motivate him...

Withhold sex until he wins this game.

It turned Maddox into a grumpy bear the last two days. I'm a growing boy, Babe. Need pussy, three times a day, like people need food.

It was hard to withhold sex, since Maddox could be *really* convincing – both him and his dick.

But if Harvard won, then he was in for a real treat.

I smiled as the crowd went insane, once again. Excitement bubbled inside my chest, as I joined in the cheers. Another touchdown by my man.

I had heard that the Brown's defense was weak, and the score on the scoreboard at the half -21-7—proved that fact to be true.

I couldn't help but laugh as Colton scored a touchdown and strutted around the field like the arrogant asshole he was. He paused a few yards away from where Riley and I were sitting in the front row. I watched him and Riley make eye contact, only briefly... but it was monumental.

Colton grabbed his crotch, winked and smirked, before he swaggered away.

Riley blushed.

What. The. Hell?

"Is there something you need to tell me?" I grumbled under my breath. The tension between those two was thick and intense, but I'd like to think that Riley's accident had driven her and Colton to being civil with each other. Civil enough that we could all have dinner without them being at each other's throat.

They weren't exactly friends. Not yet.

But Riley was beginning to tolerate him a bit more.

It was... something, at least.

She choked back a nervous laugh. "Nope. Nothing yet. Except I saw Colton's penis yesterday."

"You WHAT?" I grabbed her elbow, forcing her to look at me.

She hissed at my outburst, but her cheeks flushed even brighter. "It was an accident. I walked in on him... You forgot to tell me he was showering at your place."

My place – mine and Maddox's.

After coming back from Paris, Maddox was adamant that I moved in with

him. It was hard saying *no* to him, so I didn't see a point not to acquiesce to his demand. We had known each other for four years and were already practically living together. All I had to do was move my clothes over to his place, next door, and that was it.

Nothing much changed.

Except that now I went to sleep in his arms and woke up with his head between my legs.

Which always made for a *good morning*, indeed.

Riley didn't complain much about the move, since I was only next door.

Colton had to move out, since he believed Maddox and I needed privacy... which was true. Apparently, Maddox had a thing for kitchen sex – while I was prepping his meals.

Riley didn't have a housemate anymore, but she said she didn't need one. Not that she had trouble paying for the apartment on her own. Riley came from a family as rich as Colton's and Maddox's. Sure, she hated using her family's money, but she had a trust fund with multiple zeros.

Riley was a bit of a recluse, like me.

Sure, we had a lot of girls approaching us, but we quickly realized they didn't want to be *our* friends; their end game had been getting to either Maddox or Colton.

"Colton's new place is getting renovated. He's only staying with us for three days," I explained. Colton had moved into one of his parents' townhouses.

He apparently liked his new place better. It was much bigger than our apartment and had a backyard pool, so he was back to hosting his lame parties again. *Pussy and alcohol* – he'd said. *Best. Fucking. Combination*.

My attention flickered to Riley. "So, what happened after that?"

She grimaced. "Something I regret."

Oh shit. OH. SHIT!

"Did you and—"

"No," she practically screeched. "We kissed, that's it. And then I left. Well, *I* kissed *him*. You should have seen the look on his face."

"Was he still naked? When you two kissed?"

She nodded and then chewed on her lip, looking a bit nervous. "It was a moment of weakness. I saw a nice dick, and my vagina was like: *Hello there*, *Mister. How are you doing today?*"

I coughed back a laugh, as she elbowed me in the stomach, her lower lip

jutted out in a pout. "Stop laughing at me. At least you're getting some action."

I grinned, my attention going back to the game. Twenty minutes later, the crowd roared, and I could no longer suppress my own cheer, as I jumped down from the bleachers and ran toward Maddox. He was coming right for me, jogging across the field, with a wicked grin plastered on his face.

The scoreboard read 42-7. Half of those points were from Maddox's touchdowns.

The cheerleaders surrounded him and his teammates, like always. But his attention was all on me. I paused a few feet away, but Maddox didn't make me wait for too long. He pulled away from his harem and sauntered over to me. My gaze darted to the crowd; everyone was watching as MC – their favorite quarterback – made his way to me.

He wiped his forehead with his thumb, and he arched an eyebrow at me, looking way too cocky for his own good. My belly pooled with warmth, and his scrutinizing gaze had me feeling all kinds of hot.

I laughed, as he picked me up, twirled me around once, before he smashed his lips down against mine. I smiled into the kiss, my heart feeling like it would burst at any moment. Maddox shoved his tongue in my mouth, stealing my breath away, as he kissed me *long* and *hard*.

This was our first public display of affection. Sure, we went out on dates, shared a few kisses here and there, but no one had been paying any attention to us. We were a normal couple, on normal dates, doing normal dating things.

Unlike right now...

Everyone's attention was on Maddox Coulter.

They were *all* watching, and I could feel their burning stares on my back, both judging and curious.

My heart hammered in my chest, as Maddox cupped my ass cheeks and hoisted me up, giving me no choice but to wrap my legs around his hips, my ankles hooking right above his ass.

This was a public declaration. A silent confession by Maddox. I was his girl, and he was *mine*.

Sorry, ladies. Maddox Coulter was officially off the market.

My chest heaved, and I was breathless when he pulled away from the kiss, just long enough to grin down at me - a very happy grin - before he claimed my lips once again.

Maddox walked off the field, with our lips still locked in a passionate

kiss, one that was driving me utterly insane. Hungry lust gnawed at my stomach, and my thighs clenched around his hips, my clit practically pulsing with need.

"You might end up with a bruised pussy tonight," Maddox muttered. "That's two days of sexual tension."

I nipped his earlobe before my mouth latched on his throat, biting and then soothing the sting with my tongue. "I'll hold you to that."

Maddox groaned when I traced my tongue over his Adam's apple. I knew that was a sensitive spot of his. I let out a small, breathy giggle, and his fingers dug into my ass cheeks. "Minx."

We didn't make it back to our apartment.

Actually, we barely made it back to the car.

I was just glad it was dark enough that no one saw me riding Maddox in the backseat.

Maddox groaned against my lips as he bucked upward, thrusting inside me one last time, before he stilled. His body shuddered as he found his release, and my sex clenched around him. My stomach tightened, as I felt thick ropes of cum filling me.

It was a good thing I never missed my pills.

He buried his head into my chest, as we struggled to catch our breaths. My mind was complete mush, and my body was still shaking from my orgasm.

His hands moved down to my thighs, and he caressed me with the softest of touches. "Give me five minutes, and I'll be ready to go again," he grunted, as he circled my inner thigh with his thumb. He pressed his hand between us, where we were still locked together.

His index finger skated over my clit, and I whimpered. I was still so sensitive after our first round.

"Maddox?" I breathed.

"Hmm?"

"Maybe... we should go home first."

His face was still buried between my breasts, and I felt him inhale. His hard length twitched inside me. "I'm happy right here. Tucked away inside your pussy. Ain't moving, Babe."

"Are we going to spend the night here?" I questioned with a small laugh.

"No," he said, raising his hips to give me a half-thrust. Just enough to remind me that he was still inside me, semi-hard. "But I'm way too comfortable right now to move. Fuck, Lila. You're tight and so soft."

My hand curled around his neck, and I pressed my face into the curve of his shoulder. He smelled sweaty, musky with the fresh smell of grass. His favorite cologne lingered around his manly scent. I licked my lips and tasted the remnants of his minty kisses.

My stomach did stupid, silly somersaults, and my heart squeezed.

God, I still couldn't believe it, still couldn't wrap my head around the simple fact: Maddox was *mine*.

I no longer felt any uncertainty about it, but fuck it, my feelings for him still scared me shitless. I wondered if he felt the same way.

But then I felt silly.

Of course, he felt the same. I often caught him looking at me, his blue eyes smiling and warm with affection.

Sure, we never said those three little words to each other, but I liked to believe it wasn't needed. Not yet, at least.

While I didn't doubt Maddox's feelings for me, we were still so new. I wanted our first time saying those three words to each other, and it was probably the romantic in me speaking, but I wanted it to be *special*.

Maddox tucked stray hair behind my ear, and his lips caressed my temple. "You're so goddamn beautiful, Lila," he said in his deep, raspy voice.

My chest fluttered, and my eyes closed, as I shoved my face into his chest and inhaled. I was addicted to him and his scent. It was like I wanted to breathe him in, all the time. Who knew you could get addicted to someone's smell? That was so weird, but damn my hormones.

It scared me. Being so addicted to him.

God, it scared me *shitless*.

And this was why...

"Maddox?"

He hummed. "What?"

"Can you promise me something?"

"Babe, I'm dick deep inside your soft pussy. You can ask me anything right now, and I'd say 'yes,' before you can finish your sentence."

I gave him an internal eyeroll. Of course, I should have known he'd spout some shit like that. Maddox had a one-track mind.

I breathed in a ragged breath, preparing myself for what I was about to say. There was a sudden, hard lump lodged in my throat.

His fingers smoothed down my back, as if he could sense my worry.

"What is it, Lila?"

I loved the way he said my name.

I loved the way he touched me.

I loved the way...

I loved...

Keeping my eyes closed and my face buried in his chest, I spoke, "If you ever get tired of this... *tell me*."

Maddox's hand paused on my back. "This?"

"Us," I whispered.

He was silent for far too long. My lungs squeezed, until I suddenly couldn't breathe. "Why are you so quiet?"

"I'm thinking..."

Did I just mess this up? "What are you thinking about?"

Maddox's head lowered, and his hot breath feathered across my cheek, sending another round of shivers down my spine. "I'm thinking... that maybe I didn't fuck you hard enough, just now, if you're doubting this... us..."

Oh, God.

His hand came up, and he gripped my jaw, lifting my head up. His teeth scraped along the column of my throat. I squeezed my eyes closed. "What do you want, Lila?"

That question again...

"You," I gasped.

His hand inched down to the base of my throat. My breath hitched when he wrapped his fingers around my dreamcatcher. The necklace I never took off. *Our* dreamcatcher.

"Ask me what I want." There was a hard command in his voice, thick and deep.

I swallowed, my tongue feeling heavy in my mouth, and I could barely push the words out. "What do you want?"

"You," Maddox murmured.

His thick length hardened inside me, twitching, and he gave me a slow thrust. "Look at me," he grunted. My eyes snapped open. Darkness casted a shadow on his face and oh my, the *look* in his eyes.

It was downright territorial and predatory. "Ask me again."

"What do you want, Maddox?"

"You," he said. "Never, ever doubt my feelings for you again, little dragon. Next time, I'll whip your ass."

I gasped, and my ass clenched at the threat. "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me," he challenged, with a dark look.

"I don't doubt you, Maddox. But I need you to promise me something."

Maddox waited patiently for me to continue. Damn him, for being so sweet... so understanding... so patient with my overthinking self.

"You'll never lie to me. You'll never keep secrets from me." I brought my hand up and showed him my pinky. "Promise?"

Maddox's face darkened, flashing with an unreadable expression, but it was gone too quickly for me to consider it. He wrapped his pinky around mine. "Promise."

I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his. His chest rumbled with a deep sound in response.

Maddox was the person my dad told me about. "Always choose the person who makes your heart beat a thousand miles an hour," he had said to me. I remembered telling Maddox that I didn't want to ever fall in love.

Because I wasn't strong enough to lose yet another person in my life.

That was four years ago.

And now...

Daddy, I found him. Wherever you are, if you're watching over me... I found my person like you found mom.

LILA

took the pumpkin pie out of the oven, fresh and hot, as Gran set the table. The pie, with its walnut crust, was Maddox's favorite, and I always made sure it was for dessert, as often as I could.

You'd think Gran was feeding an army with all the food, but there were only four of us. She placed her famous pulled pork, made in her newly acquire instant pot, in the middle of the table, as Pops and Maddox joined us. My chest filled with warmth at the sight of the two of them together.

The two most important men in my life. I was just glad they got along so well.

Maddox met my gaze, and the pit of my stomach fluttered. It was some cosmic reaction I couldn't explain because we didn't need words; we just looked at each other and smiled.

This was my favorite time of the year. Only because I got to go back home to visit my grandparents since it was Gran's birthday. It also happened to be Maddox's favorite too because of two things: food, and, even though he'd never admit it, he loved the feeling of being part of our little family.

Maddox took a seat beside me, and a smile hovered over my lips, when he grasped my hand under the table. After Pops said grace, and before we could dig into our food, Maddox cleared his throat. "Lila and I have something to say."

My head snapped up, and I dropped my fork onto my plate with a loud clank. The room went utterly silent as my grandparents watched us with wide, curious expressions.

This wasn't part of the plan! We had agreed to tell my grandparents after,

just so we could spend this night in peace. I squeezed Maddox's hand in warning, but it was too late.

Pops placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward, giving both of us his undivided attention. He was giving us his famous military look; hard, unflinching, and frighteningly serious. "Go on."

My knees bounced, and I was suddenly glad Maddox had waited until we were sitting down. My gaze flickered around the room, looking for my grandpa's hunting rifle that was on the wall next to the fireplace. Maybe I should have hid it when I got back home. *Oh God!*

Gran looked around nervously, as if sensing the growing tension around us.

"Maybe we should eat first," I stuttered. "We have all the time to talk after dinner, right?"

Pops barely spared me a glance. His hard gaze was fixated on the man beside me – my boyfriend. My soon-to-be-dead boyfriend.

My hands grew clammy, as coldness seeped through my bones. My stomach started cramping, and it was almost worse than period pains.

Maybe if Maddox and I made a run for it-

"Lila and I are dating, Sir."

Nope. Never mind, we don't have time to run for it.

"Oh. Is that true, Lila?" Pops asked, still staring Maddox down. *Could the ground open up and swallow me, please?*

I felt faint and ended up nodding silently, a small, shy nod. Gran came to my rescue. "That's wonderful news. You two complement each other very well." She cleared her throat, when Pops didn't back her up. "How long have you two been dating for?"

"About three months," Maddox confirmed, his voice steady. How was he not shitting his pants with my grandpa staring daggers into him?

"Lila?" Pops finally leveled me with a look, the same one he'd give me when I was little, and I did something bad, as he waited for me to confess.

But I wasn't a little girl anymore.

Although I still respected my grandpa, I was a grown woman who was happy with her boyfriend. I straightened my spine and swallowed past the lump in my throat.

He raised me to be confident and strong, whatever the situation was. Sure, my legs still felt weak, like mush, and my lungs were squeezing so tightly I wondered if I was really breathing, but I returned my grandpa's look with an

unflinching one of my own.

"What Maddox said is true. We've been dating for about three months," I said. "Pops, I'm really, very...happy."

His demeanor changed the moment the word spilled from my lips. He settled back in his chair, and the corner of his lips twitched. Pops gave Maddox and I both a look, one I couldn't exactly read, before he glanced at Gran. "Took them long enough, don't you think?"

"Shit," Maddox muttered under his breath, and he squeezed my hand so hard I thought he was going to break my bones. I grimaced, and it was then I realized he was just as nervous and scared as me.

Gran smiled. "I honestly thought you two were dating for a very long time. We were just waiting for you to tell us."

My breath expelled from my chest in a loud whoosh, and I went slack against my chair. The tension around the table eased up, and the air became less suffocating. "Wait, so you guys... knew?"

Pops shrugged. "It was a guess before. You confirmed it now."

"So, you're okay with this?" I questioned slowly.

"Are you asking for our blessing?" Pops cocked an eyebrow at me, but he was... *smiling*. "You have it. As long as you're happy." I sat there, slackmouthed. Holy shit, my grandpa, who was a very hard man to impress, was smiling at the fact that I was dating Maddox Coulter. Yeah, I must have fallen into another universe.

He turned to Maddox, his dark eyes hardening. "I don't have to warn you because you already know what will happen if you ever hurt my little girl. You might be young, healthy and probably stronger, but I can still whoop your ass, Son."

Maddox laced our fingers together and gave me a gentle squeeze. He returned my grandpa's stare with one of his own: confident and self-assured, so Maddox. If it wasn't for how sweaty and clammy his hand was, with a slight twitching in his fingers, I wouldn't have been able to tell if he was nervous or not.

"Sir, Lila's happiness means as much to me as it does to you. I know you know that. You raised her and took care of her when she needed you the most. Now, it's my turn," he said.

My chest fluttered, and my womb tingled with fuzzy warmth, as the same feeling spread throughout my whole body. I made a sound in the back of my throat, both happy and in warning. "Um, excuse me. I can take care of myself, thank you very much."

Pops let out a small laugh, and my chest expanded with emotions I couldn't place. "Good luck, Son. This one is very feisty, just like her grandma."

Gran blushed, and Maddox chuckled. "Don't worry. I can handle her."

The worry I felt before melted away, as we turned to our food. The rest of the dinner was just like any other Thanksgiving. If I had thought announcing our relationship would change anything, I was mistaken.

This was *my* family.

THREE HOURS LATER, Maddox and I found ourselves in my room. He was supposed to be sleeping on the couch, but we sneaked him upstairs, after my grandparents went to bed.

"I'm so full, I feel like I'm going to burst." I patted my stomach, feeling my food baby. I probably gained five pounds from tonight's dinner. And there was Maddox, still looking fresh and sinfully handsome, like he had just walked out of a Vogue magazine.

I settled on my bed, bouncing on the mattress, as I watched him pull off his shirt in one swift move. He dropped the shirt on the floor and stood there for a second, letting me enjoy the very distracting view.

I took my time to admire him, to truly look at him. His abs clenched as he sauntered over to me. His nipple piercings got my attention next, and I licked my lips, remembering how the silver rods felt on my tongue. My gaze moved up to his wide shoulders that were twice the size of mine and then his face. Sharp jawline that you could probably cut your finger with, full lips, a strong nose with a slight crook – he told me he broke it when he was thirteen years old. Hooded blue eyes, thick eyebrows, with a scar on the left one – he was injured two years ago during a football game.

When he grinned, his dimple popped in his right cheek, a deep indent. His smile was wolfish, looking hungry, as he stood in front of me.

He bent forward, placing his arms on either side of my thighs on the mattress. "Admiring the view, Babe?"

His hot breath caressed my cheek. I *had* been admiring the view, but I also came to a conclusion.

Maddox wasn't beautiful by definition. Sure, he was hot and sexy...but he was an imperfect canvas, riddled with invisible scars and flaws no one else

could see, except *me*.

That made him imperfectly beautiful.

My hand came up, and I traced a finger around his left pectoral. Maddox tensed as my touch brushed across his nipples. I knew all of his sensitive spots. He loved his throat – especially his prominent Adam's apple, to be kissed and sucked on. It got him rock hard when I'd scrape my teeth over his nipples.

"Careful, Garcia," he groaned. "I might be too hot for you to touch, you might end up with a nasty burn."

I rolled my eyes. "That was extremely cheesy, Coulter. It's almost nauseating."

Maddox pushed me onto my back and crawled over me. "What? You prefer my asshole side to my cheesy, romantic side?"

I liked all of his sides. The asshole Maddox; the furious and ugly side of him; the pretty cocky side; and especially, his romantic side. But I wasn't about to tell him that.

Maddox rolled over and took me with him. I settled against his side, burying my head in the crook of his neck. His thumb circled over the flesh of my hips, where my shirt had ridden up and around the waistband of my jeans. We cuddled for what felt like hours and hours. I listened to his breathing and watched his chest rise and fall with every breath.

"Are you ready for your driving test tomorrow?" Maddox finally broke the silence.

My chest squeezed, and it felt like the flesh around my scars had tightened. There was a dull, uncomfortable ache around them — the pain, a ghostly echo. I rubbed a hand over my chest, but my skin was on fire.

I took in a shuddering breath and closed my eyes. "I'm ready."

"Are you sure about this, Lila?" Maddox asked softly. I knew he was worried, but he was also the same person who stood by me as I struggled to get into the driver's seat for the last six months.

He was relentlessly patient with me, as I suffered panic attack after panic attack. It took me a month to finally get myself in the driver's seat and then another three months for Maddox to teach me how to drive.

I told myself I could do it. as long as he was beside me.

I wanted to conquer my fears, wanted to leave my past behind. Truly and fully move on...

My scars throbbed harder, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

His hands smoothed up and down my back, ever so supportive and gentle. "Yeah, I'm ready. I'm going to pass this test."

"I don't doubt that for a second, little dragon."

Little dragon...

Only Maddox could handle my fire... my scars... my pain... He was the mirror to my soul.

My lips twitched with a smile, and the fire burning in my chest slowly dissipated.

MADDOX

I never understood why they invited me for dinner when it was going to be like this. Icy cold silence... and they didn't even acknowledge their son was sitting right there.

Father Dearest sat at the head of the table, while Mommy Dearest and I sat across from each other. She could barely meet my eyes, her focus on her plate, as she very primly cut her steak into little bites.

Brad, my father, didn't even breathe in my direction. The only sound echoing around the frigid walls of the dining room was our cutlery against our fancy as fuck plates.

My throat closed, and it felt...suffocating.

The difference between my Thanksgiving dinner with Lila's family and tonight with my own was vast.

I didn't know why I still fucking tried. I hated this place. Loathed the idea of our 'perfect family' to the outside world, while it was anything but. I long gave up on the idea of us being even slightly happy.

My parents' marriage was probably anything but happy, too. I wouldn't be surprised if I found out they weren't even sleeping in the same room.

With a mansion as big as this one, the distance between us grew even bigger. When I used to live here, I was an outsider and a burden.

Now that I had left for Harvard, I was still an outsider. To my parents, I barely existed... except, I was their heir and their legacy to the Coulter's name and empire. That was probably the only reason why Brad hadn't disowned me yet.

Yeah, fuck them.

I shoveled my food in my mouth, barely chewing. Swallowing it down with water, I finished my plate, before they were even halfway through theirs.

I pushed my chair out and stood up without a word. My mother's head snapped up, and her eyes flared in surprise. "You're leaving?" she stuttered, looking warily between my father and I.

Oh, for fuck's sake, where was her goddamn backbone?

"Maddox," she started, but then trailed off. She was looking at me like a sad, lost puppy.

My jaw hardened, and I clenched my teeth. "What?"

"Why don't you stay for a little while longer? Your father and I—"

I cut in. "Don't waste your breath, *Mother*."

She opened her mouth, but was cut off, when my father started coughing. Her eyes widened, and there was a flash of fear in them, as she jumped to her feet and rushed to his side. He brought his pristine, white handkerchief to his mouth and continued coughing, his chest rattling with the harsh sounds.

"Brad," Savannah breathed quietly, looking slightly pained.

My fists clenched at my sides, and I fought the urge to run, to walk out of these iron gates and never come back. This place smelled nothing like comfort or joy – it was a death trap.

His coughing fit ceased, and he straightened his back. "Maddox, I want to speak with you. Come to my office," he said, in his usual hard voice. There was no familiarity or warmth in his words, like a father should speak to his son. He spoke to me like I was one of the people on his goddamn payroll.

He stood up and walked away, without waiting for me to follow. I was already taking a step back, refusing to follow his goddamn orders.

"Please," Mommy dearest mouthed.

My feet paused, and I cracked my neck, squeezing my lips together. The muscles in my chest tightened, and against my own accord, my legs took me toward my father's office.

I walked inside to find him sitting behind his desk. He nodded toward the whiskey bottle on the tray. "Have a drink?"

I let out a small, humorless laugh. Yeah, if I had to survive this *talk* with my father, I definitely needed a drink. I poured a glass full and downed it quickly, feeling the burn in my throat, and my eyes watered.

"I spoke with your coach last week," he started.

"Keeping tabs on me?" I snorted in amusement.

His eyes hardened. "He said you were one of his best players. That's

good to know."

Praise... from Brad Coulter? Hmm. I wasn't about to fall in that trap. I could barely remember the last time my father said something remotely nice to me. I had been... maybe five or six years old? That was almost two decades ago.

He cocked his head to the side. "I heard you're dating Lila," he deadpanned. "You didn't tell us."

I placed the empty glass on his desk, and my fists clenched. There was a reason why I never brought Lila here. I wanted to keep her far away from the toxicity that was my parents. They didn't deserve to breathe the same air as her. "Is this why we're here? To talk about my dating life? C'mon, Father. That's beneath you."

My father was silent for a moment. I didn't want to play his game, I really didn't.

I grasped the bottle of whiskey in my hand and took a step back, raising the bottle up in mock salute. "Nice talk, Brad."

His nostrils flared at the blatant disrespect, but I was already walking away, without waiting for his response. My heart hammered in my chest, my skin crawling and itching with the need to get away from him, from this suffocating place.

His next words halted me, my feet coming to a sudden stop.

"Don't hurt her."

My back snapped straight, and I swiveled around to face him, a low snarl on my lips. "I would *never*," I hissed. "I'm not you."

He stood up, calmly, and it grated my nerves. I hated the pacifying look on his face, like he actually FUCKING CARED.

"No, Maddox. You're not me," my father agreed, almost like he was relieved about that idea. "But you also don't realize you're on the path of self-destruction. You'll end up hurting Lila in the end, Son. And do you know who will hurt the most? *You*."

Fury burned through my veins like acid. My blood roared furiously in my ears; it was almost deafening. The sick feeling in my stomach was back, and I fought the urge to throw up. In the moment, I didn't even realize he called me son. I was too angry, filled with so much loathing at the person who was supposed to be my dad.

Lila was the one good thing in my life.

And he wanted me to give her up.

If, for one second, I thought my father cared... that brief notion was gone, before it even fully came to be.

"Thanks for the pep talk, *Dad*. I'll keep that in mind," I sneered, before stalking away.

My mother was outside the door, and I walked into her, practically slamming into her small frame. Her eyes blurred, and she reached for me, but I side-stepped her.

"Maddox," she called out.

I didn't stop, didn't pause, until I was out of the iron gates.

I was done listening.

Done trying to be the son they wanted.

I. Was. Fucking. Done.

LILA

addox had been... quiet. Which was unusual. His cocky, arrogant attitude had been replaced with a brooding, silent Maddox. He looked like he was lost in his thoughts, and it had been three days since we returned to school from our visit to my grandparents'. We were back to our regular schedule and classes, but the Maddox, who returned with me, was not the same who left for the long weekend a week ago.

"I've never seen you stare at a business textbook so hard," I said, placing my elbows on the table and leaning forward. We were sitting in a quiet corner in the library, and it was one of our late-night studying sessions. But I'd bet he wasn't even focusing on the text he was supposed to be reading. His eyes barely moved across the paragraphs, and he was still on the same page for the last thirty minutes.

I could be overthinking again, but...

Something wasn't right. Something was up with him.

I had been watching him carefully for the past three days, waiting to catch a glimpse of my Maddox behind the silent mask he now wore. He touched me, kissed and fucked me... but something was different.

Our love making was rough and quick. There wasn't much to complain about, since he still made me feel good, but I missed his tender touch, his sweet kisses, his soft words.

I missed him making love to me.

I missed my Maddox.

Dread washed through me as I started overthinking the situation. My head told me he was tired of me. Maddox wasn't the relationship type, and maybe,

he realized this was a mistake. My heart argued with that fact, refusing to believe Maddox would be so careless with my feelings.

Maddox blinked at me, then scowled. "Sorry, I don't understand shit," he muttered, shoving his textbook away and slamming his laptop closed.

That was definitely *not* Maddox. He wasn't a genius, but he was a smart student and on top of his classes. He worked relentlessly to keep both his football scholarship and his grades up where they needed to be.

"I'd help, but I'm more of a chemistry person," I teased, nodding toward my own textbook, which was filled with highlighted paragraphs and pages. My yellow highlighter laid next to my laptop.

My heart withered when Maddox barely cracked a smile. His muscular neck corded with tension, and he looked a little... *lost*. Maybe angry. Something was terribly wrong, and I didn't know what to do. "What is it?" I asked slowly.

His shoulders went rigid, and his jaw hardened. I could practically hear his grinding molars. His blue eyes, deep as an ocean that I could easily drown in, and I... *did*, were fixated on mine.

"Is there something you need to tell me?" The knot in my chest began to build, growing tighter and tighter around my lungs.

Talk to me, Baby.

Maddox shook his head. "There's nothing to tell. I'm just so fucking exhausted and stressed about the upcoming midterms."

Lies. He was lying...

And when he lied... he didn't meet my eyes.

"Maddox-"

"Maddox?" I turned to face the voice who cut me off.

Bianca.

What the hell was she doing here? The last time I saw her was at the club six months ago, where she threw a bitch tantrum after Maddox 'broke-up' with her. Not that they were ever dating, but she was slightly delusional.

Out of all his conquests, Maddox liked Bianca the most. Or I thought so...

She was the one who lasted the longest, and the only one who got away telling the whole university they were dating, and he never put a stop to it. Until he threw her to the curb after the bitch fit.

I looked for any bitchy signs, but her face was smooth, and she *actually* looked shocked at the sight of us. So, this wasn't a planned encounter.

This library on campus was open twenty-four hours, but, late as it was now, there was barely anyone here, except for a few students scattered around each study corner.

I waited for Bianca's sneers and drama, but she gave us none of that.

It was then I noticed, she looked completely different than her usual appearance. Bianca always looked like she had just walked out of *Vogue* magazine or she belonged on a billboard.

She had bare-minimum makeup on her face, her curly blonde hair, which was always perfectly styled, was in a messy bun, and she was wearing... a baggy sweater and yoga pants. Bianca looked pale, and it was a weird combination, since she always looked her best.

Her eyes bounced between Maddox and I, before she plastered a fake-ass smile on her face. "Long time no see." She was definitely *not* speaking to me. "You look... good. Um, did you get my text?"

Her text? She was texting him...? Bitter jealousy clawed its way to my throat, and my chest burned with it. Was this why he was so distracted the last few days? Like he had something else on his mind and barely... speaking to me.

I knew Maddox had a lot of fuck buddies; although none of them were his girlfriends, they still *had* him. Whether it was briefly or not.

I had decided to look past it... but I wasn't okay with them hanging around him or *texting* him. Maddox had told me he blocked most of them.

Bianca eyed my man, and I didn't like how she was acting like I wasn't even there.

I convinced myself I wasn't a jealous person.

But I felt... bitter and angry. The mere thought of Bianca texting Maddox, even though she knew he was taken and after they ended on such a bad term, had me wanting to claw her eyes out. The little dragon as Maddox liked to say, red and fierce, that lived inside my chest, rattled against my rib cage and wanted to be let out.

I was really trying to not let any negative thoughts get to me, but it was hard, as the little dragon grew bigger and bigger inside me, but she, thankfully, held her fire.

The only relief I got was that Maddox barely spared her a glance. He looked down at his textbook again, thumbing through the pages. "I got your text, and I didn't find a reason to reply. As you can see, Lila and I are busy right now."

Bianca's expression fell, and she finally glanced at me. "I think," she started, suddenly looking nervous, "I should apologize for how I acted last time."

I blinked, slack-mouthed. Was she on drugs? Or high? Bianca was *apologizing*, and she actually looked remorseful.

I cleared my throat. "You should. You were awful and extremely rude."

She gasped, as if she wasn't expecting me to agree. I gave her an internal eyeroll. If she was expecting me to sugarcoat things for her...

Yeah, right. Not. Going. To. Happen.

Her face flushed, and she chewed on her lower lip. Where was the high and mighty Bianca? This one was nothing like her.

"You're right," she admitted. "I'm sorry."

Maddox grunted in response, and I sat there, speechless. Bianca fidgeted with her hands, as she waited for me to give her some kind of reaction. I sat forward in my chair and leveled her with a hard look. "I don't do well with name-calling, and if I remember correctly, you called me a *bitch*, for no reason whatsoever," I told her bluntly.

Her face turned red, and she opened her mouth as if to speak, but I cut her off. "The last girl who called me a bitch, I broke her nose."

That was in high school, back when I had to defend myself against wealthy, filthy rich princesses who thought everyone had to bow down to them. Ha, right.

Bianca's throat bobbed with a hard swallow. Once I was sure she got my message, my lips widened with a smile. "Apology accepted. Have a good day," I dismissed her.

Maddox raised his head, gave her a final stare – his eyes darkened, and his face flashed with an unreadable expression. Like he wanted to say something, but he was too angry to. He was so confusing!

As soon as she stepped away from our little corner, my nerves eased up, but I was still strung tight with... strong, vivid emotions. *Jealousy*.

God, I loathed that word.

It made me feel insecure.

And... small.

Like, I wasn't good enough or... I didn't think I was good enough.

I hated, *hated* feeling like that. Especially after the way Maddox had been acting lately.

"She texted you?" I blurted out, but then winced. My annoyance had been

so evident in my tone that I flushed. I was acting unreasonable, I told myself.

"She did, a few times. I didn't reply," Maddox responded.

A few times? But why... why now? He and Bianca were long over, and she had moved on to the next available man.

My chest squeezed. "Oh."

Maddox made a sound at the back of his throat, a deep rumble coming from his chest. My head snapped up, as he pushed his chair backward and leaned back. His eyes explored me lazily, and his lips twitched with a cocky grin. His whole demeanor changed. Gone was brooding Maddox.

I was about to get a whiplash with all his mood changes.

"You're jealous," he deadpanned.

"Excuse... me?" I sputtered.

He grinned harder. "You were practically spitting fire."

Even though that might have been true, I was outraged he brought it up like this. Especially after acting so shitty the last few days. "I wasn't... *jealous*. I just don't like the fact that your ex is texting you."

"She's not my ex."

"Right, she was just a fuck buddy." As if that made it any better.

"So, that was you pissing all over your territory?" Maddox smiled crookedly, and my cheeks heated up.

God, did he have to be so blunt...?

"Don't be an asshole," I hissed.

"You look cute when you're pissed, Garcia." My teeth rattled at his teasing tone, but I chose to ignore the bait. Looking back down at my textbook, I thumbed through the pages.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Maddox moving. He dragged his chair closer and next to me. Great, *now* he wanted to talk.

First, he acted so strangely the last couple of days, making me question everything. Then, here he was... teasing and being cocky like nothing else mattered. Maddox Coulter was complicated, and I accepted that fact a long time ago.

I belatedly noticed that the subject had changed. He still hadn't told me what was wrong... I didn't know if he was going to admit to anything, before Bianca interrupted us. And now the moment was gone... and Maddox was in the mood to play.

I wanted to fall for it... his teasing, his charms, his dorky side. But I couldn't stop the nagging feeling in my chest. The prick of unease and

creeping worry burrowed itself under my skin.

I asked him not to keep secrets, but I knew he was hiding something. I just knew.

Maddox settled beside me, and my body twitched at how close he was. His scent and warmth wrapped around me, like a safe cocoon.

His leg pressed against mine, and my back straightened when his hand landed on my thigh. His hot breath skated on my neck, as he leaned close, putting his mouth right next to my ear. "Why are you so mad, little dragon?"

"Why are you lying to me?" I retorted.

Maddox tensed for a brief second, before his fingers started to inch upward, toward the apex of my thighs. "Why do you think I'm lying?"

"Something is wrong, I can tell." My eyes dared him to deny it, to lie to my face again.

Maddox didn't reply. He leaned in, and his lips skimmed over the column of my throat, his intention clear. His hand cupped my sex through my jeans. A breathy hiss escaped past my clenched teeth. "We're... in the library. Someone could see, Maddox!"

"Being in a public place never stopped you before," he grunted against my skin. His teeth scraped across my flesh, and I let out an involuntary shudder. "Spread your legs for me, Lila."

I really shouldn't; I really, really shouldn't have.

But I did. Because I needed him, because I wanted to feel like he was *mine*.

"That's a good girl," he praised. His lips and teeth dragged along my neck, suckling and biting on the soft, tender flesh. I let out a little whimper, as he unbuttoned my jeans and shoved his hand inside. I shivered almost violently, as my gaze swept around the quiet library.

His fingers teased my wet slit through my panties, before he nudged the thin fabric aside.

"Why are you doing this?" I breathed.

"You tell me."

"Because you love to torture me."

His tongue licked a tantalizing trail of desire up my neck and another shiver rolled down my spine. My toes curled in my shoes.

"No," Maddox said, his voice taking a deeper undertone. "Because you look so fucking cute when you're jealous, and I just want to eat you up and watch you come."

He shoved a finger inside me, and I *gasped*.

My back arched, and my eyes squeezed shut at the sudden penetration. I was wet and ready, as the single digit slid in and out of me. My sex tightened around the intrusion, as he slowly pushed a second finger into me. "And that's exactly what you're going to do for me. You're going to sit here, with your legs spread, and you're going to let me finger you because you *want* it. Because you *like* being my naughty, naughty girl."

In frantic need, I reached out for him, and my fingers dug into his thigh. He hissed and then chuckled. "Can you hear how wet you are?" he teased in my ear. "Feel how wet you are..."

Jesus Christ!

"You love being fucked in public, like the dirty little minx you are." Maddox taunting did nothing but heighten my arousal, causing a warm fuzziness in my stomach and a pool of desire gathering between my thighs. "Your pussy is practically begging for my cock. Feel how tight it is around my fingers, how hard it's clenching and seeking for something harder and bigger."

Soaked... needy... gasping... wanting...

His thumb circled around my clit, and he rubbed me, as I ground my core against his hand. I wanted to be reminded that I belonged to him, that he was mine.

Wanton need filled me, as I rode his fingers, shamelessly, in a public library where anyone could have caught us. Maddox made me lose control and all sense of decency. He made me want filthy things; he made me crave him in the most dangerous way. My core tightened, and I locked eyes with him.

My heart thudded.

Maddox's expression was hard with lust, his blue eyes flashing with molten desire. He looked at me like I was the most beautiful thing ever, and when his gaze lowered between my legs, I let out a small whimper.

His fingers curled inside me, hitting the sweet, sensitive spot that had my eyes rolling back in my head. Maddox let out a grunt, before his lips attacked mine. "Lila," he rasped into the kiss. "You." *Kiss.* "Drive." *Kiss.* "Me." *Kiss.* "Fucking." *Kiss.* "Crazy."

The feeling was mutual.

The buildup to my orgasm was quick, and I almost groaned in disappointment, because I had wanted it to last. I wanted him to keep his

hand between my legs, and his lips on mine.

A loud groan escaped past my full lips when he ground the heel of his palm against my clit. A storm brewed inside of me, hot and intense. My fingers wrapped around his wrist of the same hand he was using on me. My nails dug into his flesh so hard, I was sure I drew blood.

"Oh God, Maddox!" His mouth slammed against mine, swallowing my moans, before anyone could hear them. I almost bit his tongue, as I shuddered and writhed against the fullness of his fingers inside me. He strummed and played with every nerve in my body like he owned them.

"Come for me," Maddox said, his voice low. A hot wave of pleasure zinged through me, before crashing like a rough, violent tide.

His thrusts were brutal, relentless, as he brought me to the brink of orgasm.

I fell. *Hard*. I landed. *Harder*. I cried out and wept into his kiss, as I found my release, my whole body spasming. The intensity of my climax blinded me for mere seconds, before the world fell into balance again.

I came down from my high, my vision blurring and my heart hammering into my rib cage. My body was still twitching from the aftermath of my orgasm. Maddox groaned and pulled away from the kiss. My lips felt tender and swollen.

He pulled out of me and stroked my folds gently, before he brought his hand up to my mouth. His eyes were dark and daring; he waited. My lips parted and wrapped around his wet, glistening fingers. The taste of my own arousal took me by surprise; my clit swelled and pulsed. This was so... *dirty*, but I licked his fingers clean.

"Good girl," he praised in a low rasp. I hummed in response, as Maddox cupped the back of my head and *kissed* me. I forgot where he started and I began or whose air I was breathing. His or mine. My heart missed its beats.

This kiss was pure... raw... so intense, it bled through us, sinking under our flesh and into our bones. If *this* ever came to an end, I'd never forget the feel of his lips on mine. Strong, full, needy. *Mine*.

Mine.

Mine.

Maddox sucked out all the oxygen from my lungs, until I was gasping and breathless.

His kiss slowed, and my heart beat faster, thudding like a raging violin, screeching and loud. "I'm yours, Lila. Every part of me is yours," he

whispered.

I wanted to believe him... and I did. Maybe that was foolish of me...

I had a weakness for Maddox. "Do you promise to tell me if something is wrong?" I asked softly, my voice barely audible. He had my fragile heart in the palm of his hand, and he could crush it, so easily, with a simple squeeze.

"Lila." My name was a gentle whisper on his lips. "I'll never hurt you, not willingly, not intentionally."

When his mouth claimed mine again, I felt him breathe something on my lips. But I didn't catch it, and I was too lost in his kiss to care.

I believed him.

Maddox would never hurt me.

Not intentionally.

He was my best friend, after all.

And that was the exact reason why he had the power to destroy me.

MADDOX

ila Garcia was a minx, through and through.

A dirty, fucking minx who loved to torture me. Payback, she said. Payback for teasing her in the library, payback for daring her to come in public...

My little dragon was quite the vixen.

Lila loved every minute of it, was practically soaking through her panties at the mere thought of my fingers inside her.

And now she was playing hard to get.

I remembered the smirk on her face when she dared me three days ago. You can't touch me. Not until I tell you to. I dare you.

Lila had me chasing after her, practically begging for my cock to be relieved, but she wouldn't relent. She had me in a perpetual state of blue balls for three days.

She found every way to get me hard and aching for her. I'd been jacking off three times a day, just so I could handle all the goddamn teasing.

Doing her morning stretches, in her tight yoga pants that stretched over her ass like a second skin, she'd deliberately bend over, touch her toes and wiggle her juicy ass when I'd walked past her. Yeah, that *almost* made me snap.

Or the time she decided to clean the whole apartment only wearing a shirt and panties that barely covered her pink pussy and ass. Oh, and no bra. Her nipples had been poking through the thin layer of her shirt all damn day. I almost busted a nut in my sweatpants.

Lila was well-skilled in the art of torture, and fuck me, I lived for every

bit of it.

Loved her teasing smirk... and her gentle smile.

Loved her clawing at my back like a tigress when I fucked her... loved her soft lips on my chest and her sweet caress.

Loved her intelligent brain... loved her dangerous mind.

Her strong will, her unbroken determination. Like two weeks ago...

Lila Garcia was absolutely terrified of cars and driving. But my girl? My fucking girl got her own license. It was a way of getting over her fear, she said.

She did it. I remembered rather fondly. With a confident smile, a fierce attitude and a slight sway of her hips as she had walked over to me and announced she passed her driving test.

Lila was my good days. and the reason my cold heart wasn't so cold anymore. She was my better half, the perfect combination of angel and shedevil. A mess of gorgeous chaos and beautiful brown eyes, black hair and red lips.

Maybe God – if there really was one, created her just for me. My soulmate. My missing piece...

Oh damn, she was turning me into a cheesy romantic and trashy poet.

But fuck me, I was so goddamn weak at the knees for her.

For her... I'd risk it all.

I walked into our apartment and found all the lights off. "Lila?" I called out.

Taking off my shoes at the door, I left my shoulder bag there and walked farther into the apartment. Our bedroom door was slightly ajar, and the lights were on. I pushed the door open and practically stumbled at the sight in front of me.

I blinked, slack-mouthed, and then choked on my groan.

Lila, the minx, was spread eagle, on our bed, with a fucking wand vibrator between her legs. Her back arched off the bed, and she let out a soft moan. At the sound of my answering growl, her eyes fluttered open, and she gave me a hooded look. Her face was a mask of pleasure, on the brick of orgasm.

I stalked forward, my cock already rock hard. The musky scent of her pussy juices was heavy in the room, and I twitched in my jeans. Goddamn it, this woman was going to be the death of me.

Death by pussy. Yeah, it'd be a sweet death, that's for sure.

"What are you doing, Lila?" I asked, my voice gritty and rough to my own ears.

She smiled at me, coyly. "Coming."

I stopped by the edge of the bed, and my eyes lowered between her thighs. I almost growled at the sight of her red, swollen cunt. She kept the wand on her clit, moving it in a small circular motion. Her juices ran down and coated the bedsheet under her. "How many times have you come already?"

Her teeth caught her bottom lip, and she bit down, holding back another needy whimper. "Once... and... Oh, God, I'm about to... again."

Her legs were shaking, as she raised her hips, grinding against the wand like she would do to my cock. "Oh, oh... Maddox, Oh God... *Maddox*!"

My control snapped.

With a low snarl, I frantically stripped off my shirt and jeans and crawled on top of Lila. "This ends right fucking now."

Her brown eyes were laced with unadulterated lust, and she grinned wickedly. "You can't touch me," she said. "The dare."

"Fuck the dare," I hissed, slapping her hand away from her greedy cunt. I threw the wand on the floor and spread her thighs around my hips, hooking her ankles behind my ass.

Lila didn't fight me. She just... grinned.

Rubbing my hard length against her folds, my dick was coated with her sweet arousal, and my gaze lowered to the apex of her thighs. I watched as her swollen lips parted, and her opening was practically weeping with need.

She was so fucking primed and ready.

I clutched her waist, squeezing. That was the only warning she got, before I entered her, thrusting inside in one swift move, burying myself to the hilt.

Lila gasped. "Fuck."

Fuck, indeed.

My body tensed, the muscles of my back clenching, as I tried not to come from the first thrust. The tight sheath of her pussy was going to kill me. She was so goddamn soft and wet, I easily slid in and out.

"You. Drive. Me. Insane," I snarled, punctuating every word with a hard thrust.

Lila cried out, her eyes fluttering shut. "Open your eyes."

"Maddox."

"Open your eyes, Lila. Look at me." The threat was heavy and thick in

my voice.

Her eyes snapped open, and they were glassy with lust. My cock swelled, as I pounded inside her. She curled her arms around my neck and hung on for dear life, whimpering every time I pulled out and moaning with every deep thrust.

Her nails raked my back, clawing at my flesh. I bled for her. Fucking happily.

Our lips found each other, mad with passion. Crazed and desperate.

Her thighs squeezed my hips, and my fingers dug into her waist, so hard, I knew they'd leave my marks. Good. She needed to be reminded who the fuck she belonged to.

And who owned her goddamn orgasms.

My heart thudded in my chest, galloping like a horse in a race.

Lila breathed my name, moaning it over and over again. My balls tightened, and she had a death grip on me, as she twitched and spasmed under me.

She threw her head back, finding her release with a low moan. Lila never looked more beautiful than she did right now.

I came inside her, our eyes locked together. My cum dripped out of her pussy, running down between her quivering thighs and coating the bedsheet with our mixed essence.

Lila buried her face into the crook of my neck, and her teeth scraped the spot behind my ear. "I won," she breathed, with a small breathtaking laugh.

God, I loved her.

I fucking loved her.

"I don't want you to move," Lila confessed in my ear.

I didn't want to move either. My semi-hard dick was quite happy where it was. I rolled us over, and we laid on our sides, keeping us locked together. She pulsed around me, her sex still twitching with the aftermath of her release.

Lila looked at me with sleepy brown eyes and a tender smile. Her black hair was stuck to her sweaty forehead, and she blinked up at me tiredly. Lila still looked so beautiful. *Mine*.

"You kill me," I whispered, my lips brushing the tip of her nose.

"You kill me, too." My chest tightened at her breathy confession.

Our foreheads touched, and my gaze lowered to where her tits were pressed against my chest. Her scars looked red and angry against her glistening, sweaty skin. I traced a single finger over the jagged, harsh lines. She flinched but didn't stop me. Her scars called to me, and I felt the *need* to touch them. Feel them. I ran my fingers over her past, tracing the dents and rough edges of her soul.

Her heart *thudded* against my touch, and I *felt* it. Felt the echoing pain that still lingered in her heart.

"Does it hurt?" I asked, although I already knew the answer.

"Not anymore," Lila replied softly. "Sometimes, it feels like it hurts, not that it really does... but my therapist said that it's all in my head. It's kind of like a ghost pain. My body remembers it, even though my injuries are no longer painful."

Her fingers clasped around my wrist, but she didn't pull my hand away. Actually, she laid my palm over her chest, feeling her stuttering heartbeat. Her skin felt like velvet against my callous fingers, but I kept my touch tender.

"Do you know what hurts the most, Maddox?" She spoke quietly, her voice barely audible.

"Tell me," I rasped. Tell me everything, Lila. Tell me every bit of your pain and let me carry it for you.

She let out a small humorless laugh. The pain in her voice was so heavy, my chest tightened in response. "It's the fact that I will never be able to find justice. For myself. For my parents. I've long accepted that fact, but it still pains me."

My head lowered to her breasts, and my lips skimmed over the harsh, white and pink lines. "I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me."

Lila dragged her nails through my scalp. "Don't be silly."

"No, I should have found you sooner." I kissed down the length of her scars, brushing over every inch of raised and marked flesh. "If I knew you were out there, I would have come looking for you."

Lila let out a small cry and pulled my head up. Her lips found mine, and I tasted her salty tears through our kiss. *Don't cry*, *little dragon*. *Don't cry*.

Her tears were my undoing.

Her pain decimated me.

My heart withered, as she cried softly against my lips. She kissed me like I was the oxygen she needed to live, like I was the very air she breathed.

Our kiss, filled with torment and desperation, burned through my soul and branded me from the inside.

Hours later, I stayed awake, watching Lila sleep. My thumb caressed her bare hips, feeling her soft skin. I couldn't stop touching her, couldn't bring myself to pull away and disconnect our bodies.

My lips feathered across her cheek. "I know you don't need a knight," I said, listening to her slow, even breathing as she slept. "But I want to be your knight. There's a need inside me. A fierce need to protect you. To keep you safe. An intense need that seems to push me to be a better man. It's my driving force. You are not the damsel in distress, but I still want to be your knight, Lila."

I wanted to protect her... but by protecting her...

My Lila knew me too well. She could tell something was wrong, but I *couldn't* tell her.

Not now, not yet. Maybe not ever.

Some truths were better left unsaid; some lies were better told to protect, and some secrets were better meant to stay secrets.

I needed more time with her, to love her longer, *before everything would fall apart...*

Because if she ever found out the truth, Lila was going to hate me.

LILA

here was a sudden rapping on the door. I glanced up from my textbook, surprised at the interruption. Maddox was in class, and Riley had a test. I got off the couch and walked to the door, peeping through the tiny hole.

Savannah. Oh shit! Maddox's mom. What was *she* doing here? My heart felt like it was practically going to burst through my chest, as I patted my untamed hair down and opened the door. I was in no way presentable to accept guests, but I also couldn't keep his mom waiting at the door.

Savannah gave me a timid smile, and, as usual, she was dressed prim and proper, in an expensive suit and heels. Her hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, and she kept her makeup minimal. She looked absolutely gorgeous and ready to walk a runaway.

While I looked like a stressed-out college kid who hadn't showered and was wearing the same clothes for two days. I winced, expecting her judgmental stare, but she didn't give me one.

"Um, hi?" I said, pressing my shaky hands against my thighs. When I realized she was still at the door, and I hadn't invited her in yet, my eyes widened, and I flushed in embarrassment. Stepping away from the door, I motioned her inside. "Come in."

I closed the door behind her and noticed her looking around the apartment. "Maddox is not here right now."

Her blue eyes twinkled, the same eyes as Maddox. Maddox was a carbon copy of his father, but he got his eyes from his mother. "I'm here to see you," she said.

My breathing halted, and I felt a sense of panic well up inside me. "Me?" What could she ever want with me?

"Can I sit?" Savannah asked, giving me a small smile.

"Um, yeah. Sure." I motioned toward the couch. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Water is fine." I came back with a glass of water, and she mumbled a quick thank you, when I handed in to her. Savannah appeared a bit nervous, fidgeting with her dress, as she took a seat.

"We heard you moved in with Maddox," she started.

Ah, so his parents were keeping tabs on him. "Yes, about three months ago."

She looked around the apartment with a timid smile. "You have a nice place."

"Thank you." I couldn't tell if she was judging my décor or appreciating it. Everything felt so awkward, us sitting... trying to have a normal conversation, when we barely spoke more than a sentence to each other in the four years since I'd known Maddox.

"It's very... homey," she expressed.

"Is that a bad thing?" I blurted out, without thinking it through. Maddox loved it, our little apartment together. Sure, our taste was quite different, but he gave me free rein over the décor. I left a touch of Maddox — the curtains were black; our bedroom was all black... but I added a bit of Lila to it, too. Flower pots, paintings and pictures — he didn't have any frames on his walls before, but now, he did. Photos of us, Colton and his friends. He called it... home. Ours.

Savannah was shaking her head. "No, not at all. I'm sure Maddox likes it."

Her gaze landed on the huge Christmas tree we'd gone out and chosen together. She glanced down at the gifts under the tree that were slowly accumulating. It was only mid-October, but I was Christmas ready. I was a holiday person and wasn't ashamed of it.

"Maddox didn't like all the Christmas stuff," I confessed. "Because he doesn't really care for the holiday since you and Brad were never big on Christmas. But since this is my favorite time of the year, I know I went a bit overboard, but he lets me do whatever I want. He's starting to like the Christmassy stuff. He says he finally has a home."

Okay, maybe I was taking a dig at her. I was pissed with the way his

parents treated him. True, maybe I *was* trying to make Savannah feel shitty about being a shitty mother.

She swallowed and ducked behind her hair. I saw a flash of shame in her eyes, before she looked down at her knees. "I'm glad. You make him happy."

My heart swelled in my chest. "I do," I agreed.

She cleared her throat, and I watched as she pulled out an envelope from her purse. It looked like an invitation. "Brad's birthday is in two days. He thought it'd be the perfect time to throw an early winter gala. We're also holding a charity event."

Oh. I took the envelope from her. "Maddox didn't tell me."

He barely spoke about his parents. In fact, he *never* mentioned them anymore. "That's because he refused to attend the gala. I called him a few days and..."

His mother broke off, sounding dejected. If she called him... that meant Maddox ignored her calls and never got back to her. There was an enormous divide between Maddox and his parents, so much pain and hatred. They had failed him, over and over again. And Maddox? He was stubborn, and he hid his real feelings behind a carefully put together mask. There was a wedge, so deep between them, that I didn't know if they'd ever be able to cross it.

"Brad wants him there," Savannah said quietly. "It's his 50th birthday, and he wants his family present. And that also includes you."

"Does he?"

She blinked, looking shocked at my blatant response. "Excuse me?"

"Does he really want Maddox there?" I questioned, feeling the anger rise inside my chest, coursing through my veins. "Or does he only want us to show up, so we look like the picture-perfect family... since Brad is running for Senator."

I resented them for hurting Maddox the way they did... and if I had to keep him away from them, so they'd never hurt him again, I would.

Her eyes widened, and she was already shaking her head. "No, no. That's not true. Yes, Brad is running for Senator, but he truly does want you and Maddox to attend the gala. For his birthday. Nothing more."

Savannah actually looked sincere... and my lungs clenched. She was giving me a pleading look. I didn't understand it or her motives.

"Why didn't he ask Maddox himself?" My voice was barely restrained.

She gave me a pained smile, looking so different from the Savannah Coulter I knew. "You know him better than us. Do you think he'd let his

father get even a word out?"

No, she was right. Maddox barely spoke with his father, and whenever they did, they were fighting about something. I didn't think Maddox and Brad ever had a real conversation.

Savannah reached forward and clasped my hand, squeezing. Her eyes silently pleaded with me. "Please. Maddox needs to be there. It's very important for Brad. And me. Please bring him to the gala. It might be our last..."

What?

My back straightened. "Sorry?"

Her throat bobbed, as she swallowed hard. "I mean, Maddox never attends any dinners or parties that we invite him to. Maybe you can convince him to come to this one. *Please*."

I mulled her words over, chewing on my lip. She was asking me to do a hard task, and I worried I was about to cross over an invisible boundary between Maddox and I. "Maddox is stubborn. What makes you think I can convince him?"

Her eyebrows quirked up; a small smile painted on her pale face. "Because you're Lila."

Because you're Lila.

Because I was Maddox's Lila, she meant.



WITH MY HEART in my throat and sweaty palms, I waited for Maddox to come home. Things were good enough between us, after the time in the library. But I knew something was still wrong with the way his eyes would cloud over. Some days, he was quieter than usual.

But it wasn't the peaceful quiet, the type that soothed you.

It was the type of silence that waged war inside him. I could tell he was battling something fiercely, and he wasn't letting me stand next to him, to fight *with* him.

I told myself that maybe he really was worried about his exams.

But then I realized... Maddox was *distracted*. He was drinking more, smoking more cigarettes than usual. That was my first clue that something was terribly wrong. Most days, he walked around like he was carrying the

weight of the world on his shoulders. I couldn't wrap my finger around it, but I didn't push. I waited for him to come to me, waited for him to confess his secrets – whatever they were.

The new Maddox worried and scared me.

I inhaled a ragged breath, as the door opened and Maddox walked in, looking like a beautiful, avenging god.

Smoothing a hand down my olive tulle gown, I got to my feet and waited for him to notice me.

He did, slack-mouthed. His eyes widened and then they turned into dark slits. "Where are you going?" he questioned, carefully, pointing at my dress.

Savannah sent the gown this morning when I told her I wouldn't be able to get one of my own in such short notice. I tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear and gave him a tight smile. "Your mom invited us to the gala."

He *knew...* and he didn't need me to elaborate. Maddox threw his backpack on the couch and angrily pulled off his jacket. "You're not going." His voice brooked no argument.

My throat bobbed with a hard swallow, even though I had been expecting this response. "Why? Your mom personally came over to invite us yesterday, and she was sweet about it," I said, trying to pacify him.

His head snapped up, and he glared. God, that look was threatening. "You didn't tell me she came."

"I didn't have a chance. You were so busy, and we barely saw each other," I argued. With both our exams clashing together on the same days, we barely even saw each other in the last twenty-four hours.

I grasped his arm. "Maddox, please. Just this once. We have to go. In the last four years, your mom never—"

He cut me off with a low snarl. "I don't care what she said. *You*. Are. Not. Going."

You... Me? Wait, what?

My brows pulled together in a frown. "I don't understand."

"We're not going to the gala, Lila. Take off that damn dress."

I stood my ground. "I want to go."

His left eye was twitching, as he scowled. I had seen him give others this look, but it was never directed at me, until now. "Why?"

"Because your father wants you there and because your mother actually looked sincere when she asked me." My fingers curled around his bicep, and I squeezed. "I know they've hurt you, but just this once... maybe..."

I told myself that I wasn't going to push him. If Maddox refused to go now, after my attempt to convince him, I'd leave it be. I'd remove the dress, text Savannah and tell her we weren't coming. Then, I'd get in bed with Maddox.

Just because Savannah pleaded with me nicely, I wasn't going to force Maddox.

But then...

Maddox wrenched his arm away. and I stumbled back, almost falling on my ass. He raked his fingers through his hair and glowered at me. "It's not about me. I don't care about the gala! I'll go, for fuck's sake. But I don't want you there."

Something happened.

Something snapped in my chest.

"What?" I breathed. "Maddox, what are you talking about? Why can't I go?

His head lowered and fixed me with an intense, crazed look. "Because I don't want you anywhere near them! You don't belong there."

I flinched, and my heart dropped to my feet, laying there... cold. "Right. Because I'm not filthy rich."

His back snapped straight, and his whole body tensed. His face hardened, and his jaw twitched, as a flash of regret pooled in his blue eyes. "Lila," he groaned, as if he was in pain. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

No, I didn't know what he meant. He was so goddamn confusing. Every day I had to deal with his mood swings: his hot and cold attitude.

I was sick and tired of him, keeping me in the dark and treating me any differently than before, when I had been just his friend – his best friend.

Now that we were *more*, everything had changed.

Maddox had changed.

And I didn't know how to deal with it.

It *hurt*, watching him slowly pull away from me.

"Guess what, Maddox?" I stabbed a finger into his chest. "I don't care if I don't belong in your world. You are mine, and if I have to weather a storm for you, I will. Even if I go there and all I get are dirty looks, as these people stand there and judge me, I'll deal with it. Because you are mine, and I will stand by your side. For you."

Maddox stood there, like a goddamn statue. Fists clenching, jaw twitching, eyes dark and pained. Harsh realization dawned on me, and I

suddenly felt sick. The voices in his head and the demons he carried on his shoulders were winning. They were stealing my Maddox from me.

What is wrong with you? I wanted to scream but held back.

I grabbed my purse and stalked past him. "Your mom told us not to be late. We better get going."

I walked out, without waiting for his response. My heart hammered in my chest, as I counted the minutes.

One... Two... Three... Four....

Fifteen...

Fifteen minutes later, Maddox climbed into the car, dressed in the black tuxedo suit I had laid out for him. We didn't say a word to each other. Not for the length of the thirty-minute car ride.

Coldness seeped through me and acid ran through my veins, as the tension between us grew so thick, I could barely breathe.

As the car came to a stop, my stomach turned, nausea building in my throat. We got out, still not speaking to each other. An apology was on the tip of my tongue, for pushing him harder than I should have, but I never got a chance.

The moment we walked through the double, wooden doors of the venue... all eyes were on us. That was the thing about the Coulters. They were always the center of attention.

Maddox grasped my hand and brought it to his elbow. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft. "Don't leave my side, please."

What was he so worried about? Yes, this was out of my comfort zone, but it wasn't my first time attending one of these fancy parties. In fact, we attended a charity gala just about six months ago.

The same one that led us to skinny dipping in the ocean...

Maddox tensed as his father walked over to us. "You came," he simply said, with a nod of acknowledgment in my direction. If I wasn't mistaken, I saw a silent *thank you* in his eyes.

Tonight, Brad Coulter looked... different. Wary... tired, like he was carrying a heavy burden on his shoulders.

Too soon, we were surrounded by business partners and acquaintances. They were all interested in Maddox and what his plans were, meaning when he was joining the family business. We were approached left and right... and I was jostled and soon forgotten.

I slipped from Maddox's arms, and Savannah was by my side

immediately. I breathed a sigh of relief at the familiar face. She grasped my arm and pulled me to a quiet corner, handing me a glass of wine. "I was just like you when I was around your age. We rarely fit in places like this. I remember the first time I attended a gala; it was quite overwhelming." She patted my hand. "Don't worry, it'll be fine."

Huh? She didn't fit in? What the hell?

"I don't understand," I said, taking a slow sip of the white wine.

Savannah fixated on me. "Neither me nor Brad were born into a rich family," she started, and I blinked, my jaw slackened. "Brad didn't live with a silver spoon in his mouth, like you'd think. In fact, when he was a teenager, he lived several months on the street. He was *that* poor. Everything you see today, everything he has — his empire, his legacy, he built it with his bare hands. He didn't happen to inherit his wealth."

That was news. What the hell? I almost had whiplash from this new discovery.

My eyes found Maddox, and I saw the grimace on his face, as people hounded him. He said something, and they laughed, oblivious to his discomfort. "I didn't know that. Maddox..."

"Neither does Maddox," she confirmed. "He doesn't know a lot of things."

I was so... confused.

Savannah was acting unlike herself, talkative and sharing information I never thought she would. Brad acknowledged me for the first time today.

They were acting almost like they... *cared*.

Did they come to the sudden realization of just what kind of shit parents they were?

Savannah must have noticed the look on my face, because she gave me a tight smile. "I know how it looks. But, Lila, his father loves him."

Ha, that was the joke of the century. She could have almost fooled me if I, myself, hadn't seen the way Brad treated Maddox. He was neither a caring nor a loving father.

"Well, he has a shitty way of showing it." I speared her with a look that said I wasn't falling for her bullshit. "So do you. You're his mother. You should have done a better job."

"I know," she nodded solemnly, "but it's too late now, isn't it?"

"It's never too late."

"For Maddox, it is. I just wished—"

"What?" I asked, my heart tripping over itself, when she fell silent.

"I wished I could go back and change the past. But then..."

"Then?"

She smiled and patted my hand. "He probably wouldn't have met you then."

That was a strange way of putting it and an easy way out for her. I was about to tell her what exactly I thought of such a shitty excuse, when another voice joined us.

"Savannah," a sing-song voice called out. "There you are, Dear."

A woman joined us in the corner, looking just as prim and proper as Maddox's mother. Another elite wife.

She barely spared me a glance and completely ignored my existence. I internally rolled my eyes, but I was starting to get used to it. I didn't have a rich family last name attached to my first name, so I didn't matter in their world.

Fine by me. I didn't want to be friends with these stuck-up, trophy wives anyway.

When I tried to slither away unnoticed, Savannah grasped my elbow and pulled me back. Damn it, why was she being so attentive tonight?

"Lila, meet Anna Carmichael. A close friend of mine."

Carmichael.

Anna smiled a fake, plastic smile, but I didn't even notice... didn't breathe...

Carmichael.

"Oh, there are your boys," Savannah said. She waved them over, and my entire world suddenly became blurred.

My heart *stopped* and then it crashed against my rib cage.

Everything happened in slow motion. There was a flimsy barrier over my eyes, and I was watching everything through muddled lenses.

Two men joined us, standing in front of me.

Savannah was talking, but her voice faded away, like I was underwater, and she was screaming from above me.

My flesh crawled, and the urge to scratch and tear my skin off my bones was strong, so very strong.

"This is Anna's younger son, Rion. He's the same age as you and Maddox." She was pointing between the two of them, but I wasn't really paying attention.

Breathe,

Breathe.

Breathe, Lila. Breathe.

"And this is Christian Carmichael, the older brother. They are Maddox's childhood friends. The three of them were thick as thieves, back in the day."

Thud. Thud. Thud.

My chest ached. My scars... burned like someone was pouring gasoline over my torn, opened flesh.

I couldn't see anything. Everything was so dark... so empty...

I remembered the sound of crushing glass, mixed with the distinct crack of bones breaking. I remembered my mom screaming, and my dad... I remembered...

Pain came next.

My bones and fragile organs felt like they were being smashed and crumbled into a tiny, suffocating box. I couldn't breathe. It hurt so much. My torso hurt and burned, the pain almost unbelievable. There was a knife dug, painfully, into my chest... no, not a knife... I didn't know what... but it hurt. It felt like a knife or a hammer being pounded into my chest.

I blinked... forcing myself to breathe. I couldn't. My lungs contracted with such force that I was afraid they would fold into themselves. When I coughed, agony strummed through my body, and my cracked lips parted with a silent scream.

Mom... Dad...

I couldn't speak. The buzzing noise in my ears wouldn't stop.

The taste of coppery blood pooled in my mouth; it tasted bitter, and I could feel it soaking my tongue and the inside of my mouth. Blood...?

No...

How...

What...

I remember...

The fight...snow outside... in the car... mom... dad... me...

I remember the screams...

My bones felt like they had been mangled together, and my chest, it was being carved open. I lifted my head up a bit and looked down at my chest to see... blood. Everywhere. So much blood.

I sucked in cramped air and tried to scream, tried to breathe, but my lungs refused to work.

No. No. No. Please. No. Oh God, no.

MOM, I wanted to scream. DADDY.

The pain never ended. The darkness never faded away.

My world tilted, swaying back and forth, and then crashed.

Christian Carmichael.

Carmichael.

Carmichael.

My gaze found his, and I saw no recognition in his eyes, as he stared at me with avid interest. He didn't recognize me. Of course, he didn't.

I was a nobody. Just like... eight years ago.

Christian Carmichael...Maddox's childhood friend.

My past... my present... my life crumbled around me.

My heart bled at my feet... at Christian's feet.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Sourness rose in my throat, and I almost choked on it. Acid clogged my veins, and my body started shaking. Someone was saying my name.

I can't breathe.

I... can't... breathe.

The air felt, so thick, I couldn't inhale. The lump in my throat grew bigger and bigger, until it became too hard to swallow. I suffocated in plain sight.

Nobody noticed.

Nobody cared.

Christian Carmichael was still staring at me, and bile rose in my throat, tasting bitter on my tongue.

Did he see me?

Could he see who I was? Or did he... forget?

He did...

He forgot...

He didn't know... didn't remember...

Thud. Thud. Thud.

He forgot...

A shuddering breath escaped me, and my body felt too warm and then too cold. I swayed on my feet, and my head pounded, a searing pain in the back of my skull. My eyes twitched, and I took a slow step back.

"Lila."

It was *him*. He said my name. Maddox said my name.

I looked away from Christian, and my gaze found Maddox. The horror in his eyes told me everything I needed to know.

The world spun and spun, and I fell off my axis.

Breathe.

Breathe.

FUCKING BREATHE!

I gasped. Maddox took a step forward, reaching out for me. "Lila," he said my name again, begging me, pleading *for* me. He looked pained, his expression raw and panicked.

For the first time, I felt nothing for him. For his pain.

I felt... nothing.

It was too late.

My heart had withered and died.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I still couldn't breathe.

When Maddox touched my arm, my skin itched like thousands of tiny ants were crawling from underneath my flesh. I wrenched it away from his burning touch. My scars ached harder, not a ghostly echo, like I used to experience. No, the pain was so brutal, my body almost succumbed to it.

I ran.

From Maddox, from Christian Carmichael... from everyone... from *myself*.

I ran until my lungs gave out, and I stumbled out into the cold air.

I ran until my legs stopped working, and I slid to the ground, my knees digging into the muddy grass.

Breathe...

Breathe...

Breathe...

No... I didn't want to breathe...

I wanted to go to my parents.

I didn't want to breathe...

I wanted my mommy to hold me; I wanted my daddy to kiss my forehead and tell me everything was going to be okay.

"Lila."

He whispered my name.

"Lila."

His voice cracked.

"Lila."

He came closer, and my body tensed at his close proximity. Standing on my weak legs, I buried my shaky hands in my gown and turned to face him.

Maddox.

My love.

My protector.

My mistake.

"Your childhood friend is my parents' murderer," I said, my voice dead and empty.

Maddox stared at me, his blue eyes sparked with guilt and hopelessness. His shoulders dropped, and he looked like he was about to fall to his knees.

He reached out for me, but I stepped back. "Lila."

If it was Christian who killed my parents that night, then it was Maddox who smashed my heart to dust.

"You lied to me."

MADDOX

hey say lies always find a way to catch up to you. Lies never stay hidden for too long. Secrets are never truly buried.

Lies and secrets can protect...but they also can destroy...

My secrets obliterated us. My secrets burnt my love for Lila to the ground.

It wrecked us.

I was the only one to blame, and Lila was my victim.

I'd cut off my fucking arms and legs if I could just go back from this very moment and change the ending of this chapter.

But the black ink on the pages were permanent. I could rip off the pages, burn them to ashes, but then... that would change our story, *missing* pages... an *incomplete*... and *ruined* story.

The look of raw pain on Lila's face decimated me.

I tried to reach for her. There was a fierce need inside of me to comfort her, to take her pain away, even though I was the reason for it. My mouth went dry, and a heavy lump settled inside my throat, when Lila stumbled back, out of my reach.

Away from me.

Like she couldn't bear my touch.

As if I disgusted her.

The reaction sliced through me with the power of a sword. Too bad I wasn't wearing any armor. The sharp blade connected with flesh, and I fucking bled.

Lila faced the other direction, without saying a word, and started walking

away. I followed after her, a careful distance behind. "Lila, where are you going? It's so late."

She didn't answer.

She kept walking, walking... walking away from me. Far and out of my reach.

I quickened my steps and *followed*. I finally noticed the direction she took and realized she was *walking* back home. Shit!

"Let me drive you home, please. It's too late for us to be walking home, and we're too far away." She didn't speak. Didn't berate me. Didn't acknowledge me.

In fact, I thought she was barely even breathing.

Lost in her own world, in her head... drifting away from reality. My fingers circled around her bicep, and I tugged her back toward me. Lila wrenched away with a hiss. "Don't."

One single word. Said with so much venom and torment.

My heart hammered, a vicious beat in my rib cage. My chest echoed with a familiar ache.

"Please," I croaked, *pleaded*. I didn't recognize my own voice or its tone. I sounded so goddamn weak. Weak for Lila Garcia. "Let me drive you home. I know I'm the last person you want to see or hear right now. I *understand*, but it's complete madness to walk all the way back home, right now, at this hour," I tried to reason with her. "I won't touch you. I won't even say a word. Fucking hell, you don't even need to look at me or say anything to me. Just, let me drive you home."

"It's madness that you thought you could get away with this. It's madness that you swept my life right out from under my feet and watched it crumble like you had the right to destroy me," she whispered.

I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling the burn in the back of eyelids. My head pounded, a distant ache, as Lila resumed her walking. Her tulle, feathered dress was heavy, and she was practically dragging her feet behind her. She stumbled a few times. I reached for her, but she righted herself, before I could help. She continued walking. Stumbled again, then straightened her back and resumed the same insane pace.

It was maddening, watching her crumble before my very own eyes. Knowing full well who she fell victim to. Not Christian Carmichael and his family. *But me*.

Without even realizing it...

I became her enemy.

And she was my unwilling casualty.

My fingers curled in my hair, and I tugged, until my scalp burned. The pain kept me grounded. I *had* to stay grounded, for Lila.

It took us almost two hours to get home. By the time we reached our apartment, Lila could barely walk. She held onto the walls for support, as she waited for the elevator, in complete silence.

I peeked down at her face, behind the curtains of black hair. I didn't know what I expected. Maybe tears? Anger? Pain? Brows pinched, lips thinned, a hard expression?

But I hadn't expected *this*.

Her face was completely blank, devoid of any emotion. Lila was the image of an empty canvas. She showed no outward reaction or emotion to my presence or her reality.

I watched her get into the elevator, almost like she was on autopilot. Moving around without really knowing what she was doing.

So, this was what it felt like to die?

To crash and burn.

To wither away.

Because I *felt* it. Right in my bones, down to the marrow of me. I... died as the elevator closed and she was... gone.

I took the stairs two at a time and cursed my claustrophobia, my inability to stay in closed places. I couldn't even take the goddamn elevator with Lila.

When I reached our apartment, I found it...empty.

My heart dropped to my feet, and I went cold. My stomach seized up, and bile rose in my throat. Frantically, I knocked on the next door. She had to be in there. *She has to be*.

Riley opened the door, her face pale, her brows creased with worry. "Oh, Maddox. You're here! Something is wrong with Lila."

I pushed past her, not even waiting for her to finish her sentence. Lila had to give me a chance to explain, even though I didn't deserve it. Didn't deserve her forgiveness, but I'd beg for it for the rest of my miserable life.

If only she'd give me a chance to explain. If only...

Lila was standing in the middle of the living room, looking so sad... so lost...

She picked at the feathers in her olive tulle dress.

I had never gotten a chance to tell her just how beautiful she looked

tonight. Exquisite. Gorgeous. Beautiful. Stunning. Lovely. Angelic. Breathtaking. Ravishing. Elegant. Bewitching. Alluring. Heavenly. So. Fucking. Exquisite.

I wanted to tell her all of it, wrap my arms around her small frame and kiss her red lips. I never got a chance to kiss her before our world collapsed and shattered into fragmented pieces.

"How long have you known?" Her voice cut through the air and sucked all the oxygen out of my lungs. I knew the question was coming, but still hadn't been ready for it.

"Lila."

She raised her hand, cutting me off. "I asked a question, Maddox. I want an answer, not your excuses. How. Long. Have. You. Known?"

I couldn't meet her eyes any longer, couldn't look at her anymore. My head lowered, my eyes shuttered close, and I struggled to breathe, as my lungs squeezed.

Lila let out a warlike cry, and my head snapped up, just in time to catch her, as she flew at me. She gripped my collar and hissed in my face. "Answer me, goddamn it!" she screamed. "Stop standing there like a fool, like an emotionless statue. When did you find out about Christian? How long have you been lying to me? HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN LYING TO MY FACE?"

Her carefully layered walls came down, and I watched as she snapped, right in front of me. Her eyes blazed with fire and hurt.

My secrets had caught up with me, and I was drowning in the aftermath.

"Eight... months..." I croaked.

"Eight months," she repeated carefully. "Eight months."

My hand came up but stopped a hairsbreadth from her cheek. "I didn't lie."

Lila let out a humorless laugh. A dead, empty laugh. She laughed until her laughter turned into a loud sob.

"A lie by omission is still a lie, you fucking bastard." Her gaze shone with unshed tears, but she didn't let them spill.

My little dragon. She was breaking on the inside, but she refused to cry. "All this time...you knew," Lila said. "He is your friend. Your childhood friend," she gritted through her teeth. "Your friend is a killer. Your friend was drunk that night. Your friend got away with murder. Your friend scarred me for the rest of my miserable, fucking life. Your friend should be in jail. Your

friend KILLED my parents, and he got away with it! YOUR friend played god, tried to pay for my silence. He held my whole future in the palm of his dirty, filthy, rich hands, and he destroyed me. YOUR friend."

My stomach churned, and I felt sick. Bitter nausea built in my throat, and I worried I was going to throw up.

Lila slammed her fist into my chest. It didn't hurt. I almost wished it did. "Say something, Maddox!"

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, that's rich." She laughed, almost manically. "That's fucking rich. Go ahead, lie to my face, and then say you're sorry? Sorry for what, Maddox? Are you sorry for keeping this secret? Or are you sorry you got caught? Are you sorry because your friend murdered my parents that night? Or are you sorry that *you* destroyed *me* and trampled all over my heart."

She stabbed a finger into my chest, punctuating every word with a sharp stab. Again and again. Right over my beating heart. "What exactly are you sorry for, Maddox Coulter? For being a shitty boyfriend or for hiding the secrets of your dear childhood friend, Christian?"

If only you knew...

But the truth wasn't always easy or simple. The truth held hidden layers, like an onion. The more you peeled it, the harder it made you cry. The deeper you peeled it, the closer you got to its core. The truth. The reality of it.

Acidic. Sour. Bitter. Pungent.

But the layers... the fucking layers were there to make our life harder.

And so, my truth was just like that.

My hand came up again, before I could stop myself. My fingertips skimmed over her jaw. Lila flinched but didn't pull away. She allowed me this *one* touch. "I broke your trust, and I hurt you. I'm sorry for that," I rasped gravelly.

"Aren't you sorry for breaking your promises?" she whispered.

My heart stuttered. "I didn't..."

She smiled without humor, she smiled with cruelty. A smile of disgust.

I shook my head. "I promised to protect you. And I thought I was doing that."

She finally pulled away, and my hand fell to my side. Instantly, I missed the feel of her skin under my fingers. "Lila... just, listen to me. *Please*."

She stepped back, her dark eyes growing darker. Furious. Pained. "Keep your sorry excuses to yourself. I don't want to hear it. I've heard and seen

enough."

"No," I growled. Fear tightened around my lungs. If I let her walk away now, I was going to lose her. Forever. "You need to hear the rest. You don't know anything!"

I reached for her, desperate for a chance to explain. I didn't see it coming, although I should have expected it. The moment I clasped her wrist, tugging her back to me, Lila turned around with a vengeful cry.

She slapped me, right in the face.

I stumbled back, and she twisted out of my hold. There was so much... anger... so much *hate* in her dark eyes. "Don't touch me," Lila warned, her voice cracking over the words. She leaned closer, jerking her head back, so she could stare right into my eyes.

Her next words killed me.

Killed any hope I had for us.

"When you touch me, my skin crawls," she practically spat, with so much venom in her sweet voice. "When you touch me, my scars burn. When you touch me, I want to throw up."

"No. Stop," I croaked. I pleaded... begged. "Lila, no."

Her eyes were dull again. My Lila was... gone. "Don't you dare touch me, Maddox."

All the air had been sucked out of my lungs, and I was... suffocated.

"Get out." She pointed at the door. "Get. Out. You're no longer welcome here." My chest squeezed, like a heavy metal chain was being wrapped around my already tortured, bleeding heart.

If it hurt for me...

I wondered how much it hurt for her...

"I'm going to leave, and I'm going to wait for you. Tomorrow, you have to listen to me. Please, Lila. You have to let me explain *why*."

"I don't want to see your face," Lila sneered. "Tonight or tomorrow." She was never so vicious, but in this moment, her words were laced with enough acid to burn even the thickest layer. Me? I was just a mere mortal. My heart disintegrated.

"You should leave." Riley walked up behind me. I had forgotten she was even there, listening to us. "Do as she says, Maddox," she lamented.

Lila's face hardened, and she stalked away, into the room that *used* to belong to her. Her place was with me. *Not anymore...*

"What's going on?" I let my head fall back against my shoulders, staring

at the ceiling as another voice joined us.

I heard his steps, as Colton approached me. "I was at the gala. I saw Lila and you leave..."

Of course, he was. We ran in the same circles. Of course, he saw. Everyone watched it unfold, but no one knew *why*.

"What's going on?" he asked again, looking between Riley and I, waiting for one of us to answer.

"Ask Maddox." Riley sighed. "Lila is hurt and angry right now. You two better leave."

My chest hurt, and I rubbed the ache with my fist.

"Maddox?"

"I need to get out of here," I murmured, looking at her closed door. My presence was unwelcomed. And I knew I'd cause my Lila more pain, if I stayed.

"Okay," Colton said. "Where?"

I dragged my legs behind me and walked away. With each step that took me farther away from Lila, coldness seeped through my bones, and my body grew numb.

"The gym." It was that or I'd drink myself into oblivion. Maybe I'd do both. Take all my fuckedupness out on a punching bag and then drink until I forgot tonight ever happened.

Colton didn't ask any questions. He drove us to the gym, and everything was just a goddamn blurred mess to me. I couldn't think straight, couldn't even *breathe*.

The punching bag became my salvation.

The pain coursing through my body, as I pushed myself over, became my only solace. It felt good. I *needed* it. Needed the pain, so I could feel something.

Lila's face flashed through my mind, the image searing into my brain. The tormented look on her face. I could almost taste the saltiness of her tears on my tongue.

She hated me.

I hated myself. What a fucking pair, we were.

Two hours later, all my muscles were dead and numb. I could barely feel my arms or my legs. I sank to the ground, my body too weak to keep me upright any longer.

"Better now?" Colton asked, joining me on the ground. He laid on his

back beside me with a groan.

"No," I said.

He sighed. "Look, I don't wanna talk about your feelings. We can leave that pussy talk for some shrink, but you don't look good, man."

My eyes closed, and I breathed through my nose. Silence filled the gym for a long time before I finally spoke. "I fucked up."

He hmphed "Yeah, that's obvious."

"She hates me." I could barely get the words past my clogged throat.

"Nah. Lila can't hate you."

"Christian was driving the car that night... the night of Lila's accident, the night her parents..."

Colton paused, mulling over my words. "Christian Carmichael?"

I nodded.

He swore under his breath. "Shit. You knew?"

"I found out a couple of months ago, when I was digging into Lila's accident. It always bothered me, and I wanted to know, wanted to bring her justice. I found out it was Christian," I explained.

"Before you two started dating?" he questioned.

"Way before," I confessed quietly.

Colton swore again. "Lila found out? Oh shit, the gala! Christian!" Colton finally put two and two together.

My chest tightened with a vice grip. "He was there. Lila came face to face with the person who killed her parents, Colton. Do you realize what this means? I did everything to protect her from the truth," I croaked, my voice barely audible.

"Shit, Maddox. I don't know what to say."

"Lila hates me." Saying the word out loud caused me to almost double over in pain. I hadn't expected it to hurt this much, but it did. Everything fucking hurt.

"She doesn't."

"You weren't there. You didn't see the look in her eyes." The look of pain and disgust. Betrayal and broken trust.

"I should have fought harder, should have stopped her from going to the gala, but she was so goddamn stubborn. I thought I'd be by her side all night, keeping her safe, and away from Christian. I thought we'd be able to leave before anything... I thought..."

I rubbed a hand over my face, so exhausted, so mentally... done. I just

wanted to wrap myself around Lila and forget about this chapter. I wanted to turn the pages over and begin anew. "I thought a lot of things, but I still messed up."

And the worst part of it? Lila didn't even know half of it.

All my secrets...

If she knew the rest of it...

No. The mere thought of it made me sick.

I wasn't strong enough to love... and then *lose* her. Not like this.

Lila was a maze with no escape. Once I had entered the labyrinth that was her, I lost sight of the exit and never bothered to look for it again. I didn't want to leave the maze. I didn't want to escape her.

I wanted to stay and bleed at her feet. Because I found what I needed there.

My salvation.

LILA

t is said that pain comes in waves. Whether it's emotional or physical.

The first wave hits you unexpectedly. It's usually the most dangerous, the harshest wave.

The second wave, you're ready for it, but it still hurts.

By the third wave, you've grown accustomed to it. The pain starts to take shape, to build up inside of you. Under your skin, inside your flesh, buried in your bones, deep in the marrow of you.

And slowly, your body grows numb.

Your mind goes numb.

You live with the pain; it becomes part of you.

The wave came and went. The pain stayed, with an angry stubbornness. The wound festered, oozing puss. The agony grew.

I drowned. I floated. I sunk to the bottom.

My mom always told me to honor the anger, to give pain the space it needed to breathe, to never run away from my emotions... to live and breathe it. *This is how you learn to let go*, she'd tell me.

But I didn't know *how* to let go of the fury coursing inside of me, of the pain that chased me every waking hour and into my nightmares.

A dull throb spread across and around my scars, and I rubbed my chest, trying to alleviate the heavy pressure.

"Lila, you have to eat something." Riley pushed the plate of pasta in front of me. "Just a few bites."

The smell of the pasta had bile rising in my throat, and I choked on the sourness. My stomach churned with nausea. Maddox loved pasta. Actually,

he loved the pasta *I* made, and I'd always make it for him, whenever he was feeling down.

I pushed the plate away and stood up. "I'm not hungry."

"You barely ate anything in the last few days! You've already lost weight, babe. Just a few bites, at least," she tried to reason with me. "You're going to make yourself sick."

Riley didn't understand; she couldn't. I didn't want to eat, drink... or sleep.

I just wanted to fade away, to cease to exist.

The gala was four days ago. My world fell apart four days ago, and I still haven't accepted that fact. How? Why? WHY? I wanted to scream at him.

But I refused to see him, to look into his beautiful face and let him hold me. To feed me his sorry excuses. I knew I'd let him win. I knew I was weak for Maddox.

He'd tell me he was sorry... and I was going to forgive him. He had that kind of power over me, and he proved to be my downfall.

Maddox Coulter was my damnation.

He was a mistake I shouldn't have made four years ago. I should have never asked him to make that first pinky promise. It was the beginning of the end, as far as I was concerned. *That* was my mistake. That stupid pinky promise.

Friends?

Friends.

My phone rang, for the fifth time, in the last ten minutes. I glanced at it, even though I already knew who it was going to be. He had been calling me every day.

But today, he seemed especially persistent.

Maddox's name flashed on the screen, as the call went to voicemail. With an angry wail that sounded like a broken record to my own ears, I tossed the phone at the wall. It bounced and slammed onto the floor, the screen cracking and going black.

The call ended.

The wave came again. It crashed into me, and even though my body had long grown numb to me, it still... *hurt*. I still drowned, gasping for air, gasping to stay alive.

Riley let out a soft sigh. "You have to talk to him. Just once, Lila. Not for his sake. But for your own. You're hurting, and you need closure."

"I don't want anything from him," I spat. "There's no better closure than not seeing his face or hearing his voice."

Riley walked to where my broken phone laid. She picked it up and handed it to me. "How is *this* closure?" she asked softly.

My fingers brushed over the fractured screen, and my skin caught on one of the cracks. A tiny prick: a sharp sting, like a paper cut. Blood gathered around the littlest cut. *Bleeding*.

I fisted my hand, hiding the wound. Oh, how ironic.

Riley grasped my wrist and slowly uncurled my fingers. Her gentle touch skimmed over the cut. "*This* is not closure, Lila."

My heart stuttered, and I blinked back the tears. "I can't hate him. I tried, and I *can't*. But I also don't want to forgive him. I *can't* forgive him."

Maddox's betrayal cut deep, so deep... there was no way for me to reach it and wrap a bandage on it. I couldn't stop the bleeding, couldn't stop the wound festering into something nastier, something more agonizing.

How does a wound heal when it can't be bandaged or stitched?

The answer was... it can't.

I flinched, as the silence suddenly filled with Riley's ringtone. She padded away to it and then grimaced. "It's Maddox."

I turned and walked away. Back into my room. My sanctuary.

Curling into my bed and sinking into my soft mattress, I tucked my blankets around me. A safe cocoon. Not safer than Maddox's arm... but at least, my bed wasn't the reason for my suffering.

My eyes closed, and I had to remind myself to breathe.

The sound of crushing glass filled my ears. The echo so loud, it was deafening. My world tilted, swayed and turned over. My head slammed into something, and I remembered feeling like it would explode.

The distinct sound of cracking bones came next.

Then my screams. My parents'.

Pain came next.

Darkness soon followed.

The buzzing sound in my ears didn't stop, and my lips parted to speak, but I couldn't. My voice was gone. I tried to scream, but I couldn't.

The taste of coppery blood pooled in my mouth; it tasted bitter, and I could feel it soaking my tongue and the inside of my mouth. Blood...

I remembered...

The blood. So much blood. I remembered the feeling of death.

I remembered passing out and waking up again, in the same position, with the same agony coursing through my body.

I sucked in cramped air and tried to scream, tried to breathe, but my lungs refused to work.

"Lila? Lila!" Someone was calling out my name and shaking me awake.

My eyes popped open, and I let out a gasp, feeling the oxygen burn my lungs, as I took in a deep breath. The nightmares faded away, but the echoes of my screams still lingered.

Riley came into my line of vision, and she looked worried, her brow creased with tension, and her lips were pressed into a thin line.

"What is it?" I sat up, keeping my blankets around my shoulders.

"It's Maddox."

I frowned and hissed, grinding my molars. My jaw tightened. "I don't care."

Riley shook her head. "The stairs are blocked. Out of service. Maintenance is working on them right now."

My heart dropped. No, please. Oh God, no.

"Maddox needs to take the elevator," Riley said softly.

I remembered the time when Maddox and I were locked in the closet, back when we went to Berkshire Academy.

That was the first time I witnessed his mask fall apart. The first time I saw that Maddox had many layers, many cracks in his soul. He was a king with a crooked crown.

I shouldn't have cared... I really shouldn't have...

But I was out of bed before I thought it through. I ran out of my apartment before I could stop myself. My brain argued with me, telling me that he didn't deserve my help.

My heart screamed and called out to Maddox. I belatedly realized the repercussions of my actions... what it meant for me to run to him when he was in such a vulnerable state. I realized the fallout could be worse than the original pain I went through, when I realized Maddox's betrayal.

If I went to him now... if I let myself *feel* for him now...

But it was too late. I was already in the elevator before I could overthink.

He needed me.

He needed me.

He needed *me*.

It happened in slow motion. I took the elevator down to the lobby and

found him there. Pacing the length of it. His body was tensed and locked tight. His fingers tugging on his hair, like a mad man. He let out a small sound in the back of his throat, an angry growl, as he began to hit the side of his skull. "Fuck, fuck... FUCK!"

He crumbled before me.

"Maddox," I said his name, before I realized what I was doing.

His head snapped up, and he stared at me, blue eyes so raw, so deep... deep as the ocean that I could easily drown in them and I... *did*. Drowned and sunk to the bottom.

His face contorted in pain. I wasn't wearing any life jacket when he caught me in his powerful, violent tides and pulled me below the surface, dragging me into the deep end.

"Lila," Maddox said hoarsely. He looked at me, as if I was his saving grace, his lifeline.

His chest rattled with ragged breaths, and I could see the panic setting in. "The elevator," he croaked.

The look he gave me, it *eviscerated* my heart. Destroyed my already broken heart, further fracturing it into little pieces that could not be glued together again.

I walked to him, stepping a hairsbreadth away from his shaking form. "The…elevator… I can't… *Lila*." His deep, broken timbre vibrated through my bones and slid down my spine. I trembled, feeling his pain as if it were my own.

"Do you trust me?" I asked, grasping his hand in mine.

Maddox laced our fingers together, holding on tightly. So tight I almost lost the feeling in my hand.

Moving onto my tiptoes, I brought our faces closer. "Do you trust me?"

Maddox gave me a heartbroken nod. His eyes flashed with darkness and fear.

He trusted me.

Like I had trusted him.

The only difference between us was that I didn't, and would never, betray his trust.

I thought Maddox and I were alike. He'd never hurt me, just like I'd never hurt him. Not willingly. Not intentionally.

It turned out... I was wrong.

Wrong about Maddox. Wrong about us.

"Hold my hand," I told him. He did, grasping my hand like he was afraid I'd let go. "*Trust me*."

It took me a few seconds to register what was happening, to realize what I was about to do. But it was too late. I didn't pause to think.

He needs me.

My lips met his, as I pushed the button on the elevator. It pinged open, and I tugged Maddox toward me, curling my arms around his neck, as I dragged us backward into the elevator.

The moment my lips met his, Maddox went rigid. His wide shoulders stiffened, and his neck corded with tension. He groaned into the kiss - a groan of pain, fear... shock... and so much anguish.

"Lila," Maddox whispered against my lips, his voice gritty with emotions.

"Kiss me." I pulled his attention back to me, when he started to understand *what* was happening and *where* he was. In the elevator. A choked gasp echoed on his full lips, and he started pulling away from me, his eyes wide with terror.

"*Kiss me*," I breathed. My lips parted, and I traced the seams of his lips with the tip of my tongue.

His breath quickened, and I felt his inner struggle, the pain I knew that plagued his mind. His worst nightmare. The moment he opened for me, I shoved my tongue in his mouth. Maddox grunted against my lips, and his hands went to my ass.

He hoisted me up, and I wrapped my legs around his hips, hooking my ankles behind him. His fingers dug into my ass, and he slammed my back into the elevator wall.

It's okay, I got you. Feel me.

Our kiss was a battle cry, a crazed desperation, so thick I almost cried out as his lips brutalized mine. I inhaled him; yet, he stole the air from my lungs.

He took my soul in the palm of his hand, and I gave him my life.

The kiss consumed us. We lost all sense of time and place.

Maddox pushed both hands into my hair and wrapped his fingers around the long strands. He jerked my head back, kissing me harder.

Kiss. He was greedy. *Kiss.* I was angry. *Kiss.* He was desperate. *Kiss.* I had been ravenous. *Kiss.* Brutal. *Kiss.* Frantic.

I hate you, I exhaled into the kiss.

Maddox groaned, and he clutched the back of my neck, his fingers flexing, as he gripped me hard. *I don't hate you*, I breathed into his lips.

Feel me, he said.

My heart beat savagely against my rib cage. The elevator pinged, and the doors slid open, as we reached our floor. Maddox dropped his forehead to mine, and our lips parted. His chest heaved, and he inhaled a ragged breath. My nails dragged across the nape of his neck. "It's okay. We're here."

He took a slow step out of the elevator with me still wrapped around him. Maddox turned his back to the wall, as the doors slid closed once again. His knees weakened, and he slid to the ground. I was practically straddling him, as we sat in the empty hallway of the third floor.

His demons had been silenced.

Mine were still wide awake.

"Lila," he rasped. "Fuck, baby."

I wrenched away from him and stood on shaky legs. "Don't. I was only helping."

My lips tingled, and my skin turned cold, already missing his touch. My lungs squeezed and burned, as I silently gasped for air.

"Why?" Maddox kept his gaze on me. "Why did you help?"

"Because I had to," I said through clenched teeth, "because even though I can't stand to look at you, it was the right thing to do."

Maddox got to his feet, his jaw hardening. "Why?"

My fists clenched at my sides. "I pitied you. That's why."

His face clouded over, and I knew I hit the mark. Maddox Coulter hated to be pitied.

"Your sympathy is misplaced," he snarled, taking a threatening step toward me. "Do you why I did it? Why I kept that fucking secret? Because. I. Wanted. To. Protect. You. Because I didn't want you to relive your past."

He continued advancing toward me, forcing me to step back. "I wasn't protecting Christian like you seem to think. In fact, I want nothing more than to throw him behind bars and watch him rot in fucking hell. He. Is. Nothing. To. Me. Except the person who hurt you." He thumped his fist over his chest. "My Lila. He hurt you, and I want to hurt him."

My hands shook, and my core trembled. The lump in my throat grew bigger and bigger, forcing me to choke on it.

Maddox grasped my elbow and tugged me to him. I fell against his chest, and he lowered his head, practically snarling into my face. "You are my everything, and the last thing I wanted to do was betray you. But I had to, Lila. I had to, so I could protect you."

I slammed my fist into his chest and pushed away from him. *Stop*, I silently begged. *Just... stop*.

He didn't stop. "Remember what you said to me the first time we visited your parents?" he asked, but didn't wait for me to answer. "You told me that you hated me before, because I was a reminder of the boy who ruined you and stole your life from you."

Yes, I did say that.

I did hate him because the 'Maddox Coulter,' I met four years ago, reminded me too much of Christian.

"Tell me, Lila," he growled, his voice strained. His gaze flitted back and forth, searching my face. "How could I tell you the truth? How fucking could I? The person who killed your parents was the same boy I grew up with. You would have looked at me the same way you're looking at me *now*."

It was a sick twist of truth and our reality. Everything he was saying made sense. But I couldn't accept it. I needed a reason to blame him, to hate him.

"Stop," I said, my voice shaking. Tremors ran down my body, and I felt so... cold.

Maddox manhandled me. He grasped my jaw and forced me look at him, into his manic eyes. "Why did you help me, Lila?"

Shut up. Please.

His fingers dug into my cheeks. It wasn't painful, but it wasn't gentle either. "Why?" He breathed; his lips so close to mine.

BECAUSE I LOVE YOU.

My heart stuttered. I felt dizzied...as realization dawned on me.

I stumbled back, away from him. My gut twisted, a fiery inferno from deep within me.

His arms fell to his sides, and he squeezed his eyes shut against my rejection. His lips parted, and he whispered my name... but I was already running away. From him.

From my truth.

From our reality.

From... everything.

I ran into my apartment and slammed the door closed behind me, sinking to the hardwood floor. A loud, choked sob spilled past my lips.

I felt Maddox, on the other side. He didn't knock... but I *felt* him. Standing there, right outside the door. Slapping my hand over my mouth, I muffled the broken sounds that were spilling from my throat.

Kismet was a demented bitch.

Funny how, four years ago, I loathed Maddox...and would have hated him, if I found out about his connection with Christian.

And now that I knew the truth... I still loved him with every fiber of my being.

I loved him hard.

I loved him without restraint.

I loved him, as much as I hated Christian.

Maddox Coulter.

My best friend.

My lover.

My protector.

My downfall.

LILA

spent two days agonizing over Maddox and our fallout.

Two days and two nights...

It was a battle with my brain and my heart. Anxiety got the best of me. My emotions were in turmoil, and I didn't know what to do... what to think... what to believe in anymore. I told myself it was okay to be hurt, to feel betrayed. Then, I told myself I was being unreasonable.

It wasn't Maddox driving the car that night. It wasn't Maddox who killed my parents. So, why was I punishing *him*? Punishing us?

Two days and two nights...

My overthinking had always been my biggest flaw.

Once I had calmed down, I started to see things clearly. It became easier to reason with myself. If there was someone who deserved the full lash of my hatred and my fury... it was the Carmichaels. *Not* Maddox.

His betrayal had cut deep, but now that I had the time to think about it, I *understood* why he did it. It was still a harsh truth to grasp, to swallow and to accept.

In my head, Maddox took the shape of Christian. I needed someone to be angry at, I needed someone to feel the brunt of my fury, and I directed it all toward Maddox.

I had needed someone to blame for the way my life had seemed to crumble under my feet.

Maddox was there... and I blamed him.

Now that I had the time to *really* think about it, I realized that the gala was a blurred mess in my brain. I had gone into shock, and I was surviving

on it. I hadn't given myself time to grieve, to come to terms with seeing Christian again, coming face-to-face with my parents' killer.

I had been reliving my past, too overwhelmed to really process what was happening. My therapist used to say that emotional shock is a shutdown mechanism that is supposed to buy a person time to process their trauma.

Hurting Maddox... pushing Maddox further from me was my way of dealing with it. I had been vulnerable... powerless, and it was my weak attempt at shutting down and protecting myself.

I wanted to believe that Maddox would never intentionally hurt me. I wanted to believe *in* him. After everything we had been through, his feelings for me were honest. I knew that with as much surety that I knew my own love for him.

After coming to terms with my own anger and my sense of feeling betrayed, I finally decided to meet up with Maddox. It was time for us to talk.

I wasn't ready to put all of this behind us. The trust between us was fragile, a thin thread that could easily snap.

But I was willing to try.

Because I wanted Maddox. Needed him. Because our pasts should no longer have any control over our present... or *our* future.

I wanted to give us another chance. Forgiveness was the first step. I was willing to forgive him for keeping that secret. My mom never taught me to give up so easily, and Maddox was worth it.

He was worth the pain.

He was worth my love.

I walked out of class with a renewed determination. My gaze flickered to my, now, fixed phone, but there was no new messages or incoming calls. I texted Maddox an hour ago and had asked him to meet me at his place.

His class ended before mine. But there was no response from him, except radio silence.

It's okay, I told myself. I can wait.

I walked down the path that led me off campus and toward the school residence. I counted the steps in my head, feeling my hands tremble in nervousness.

I told Maddox I would never give up on him, and I was willing to keep that yow. For him. For *us*.

Tugging my jacket closer to my body, I shielded myself from the cold. My gaze found the couples around me. Some were walking hand in hand. I caught one couple kissing. There was another one hugging by the bus stop, laughing... *happy*...

It was a cruel reminder of what I threw away... what I had lost. My pace quickened, as I tried to get away from all the loving couples.

I almost reached my apartment building... when something else caught my attention. A flash of familiar dirty blond hair. My feet slowed, and then came to a halt. I turned toward the coffee shop to my left.

Numbness took over, and my body froze on the spot.

When life hits you in the face, it hits you hard enough to give you goddamn whiplash.

My breath caught in my throat. Maddox occupied a table near the window. He wasn't... alone. Bianca sat across from him. I blinked, as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing. My eyes lowered to her midriff. The sight of it was glaring back at me.

No, God. Please no. Please don't be so cruel to me. No, please. No. No. NO.

The last time I had seen Bianca, she was wearing a baggy sweater. Today, she had a simple black camisole on. It molded around her curves and... her very round, very pregnant belly.

I started shaking, my whole body growing cold... and colder.

I felt the sting of tears in my nose, as I blinked, wishing this was all an illusion. But no matter how many times I blinked, the reality glared back at me.

His truth.

His secrets.

His lies.

Maddox and Bianca looked to be arguing. Her expression was heartbroken, as Maddox shook his head. She cupped her pregnant belly, and she was full on crying now. Bianca tried to reach for him, but he pulled away, like the mere idea of her touch would burn him.

I watched, as he pulled something from the pocket of his jacket. The world slowed down, and the colors faded away. I watched the scene in front of me, like a black and white movie with no sound.

I was still in the same spot when Maddox got up to leave.

He turned... his eyes locked with mine... Bianca gasped...

Maddox paled, and he rushed forward.

I took a step back...



I PRESSED a hand over my face, as Maddox walked through the door, barging inside of his bedroom. I didn't even realize I had found my way in here.

I missed this room. Missed sleeping in this bed, wrapped in his embrace. Missed his scent that lingered on our pillows and the mattress.

Maddox was out of breath, as he rushed toward me. I looked up into his wide, terrified eyes. "Lila, let me explain," he said. This had become his signature phrase. Why did he keep messing up so much that I had to give him a chance to explain. Every. Single. Time?

I swallowed back the cry that threatened to spill from my throat. "The last few weeks, I had been so worried," I confessed, my voice thick with emotion. "So scared. You were drifting away from me. Something was wrong, I could tell. I gave you a chance to tell me, but you didn't. I asked you, but you evaded my questions. The distance between us grew, as I watched helplessly. It was only a matter of days, before everything fell apart."

I got off the bed, away from the musky, masculine scent that kept assaulting my senses. I now realized the reason Maddox had been acting so different, why he had been so aloof.

"Is it yours?" I still asked, even though I already knew the answer. "Is this why she was texting you?"

Maddox gave me a single nod.

"How far along is she?"

Bianca didn't look to be in her third trimester. Her pregnant belly was round and firm but petite. "Almost six months."

Six... months.

My hand came up, and I rubbed my forehead, trying to chase away the pounding headache. My chin wobbled, and my lips trembled. I felt the sting of fresh tears in the back of my eyes. If I did my math correctly...

She and Maddox slept together about five weeks before Paris.

He said he had been celibate for... *months*. Five weeks was definitely *not* months. It was barely even one.

"You said you didn't sleep with anyone for a long time. I didn't know five weeks is considered a long time," I said, almost mocking him. "It must

have been torture for you to be *celibate* for *five* weeks."

Maddox shook his head. "I don't remember much of that night. I didn't even know I slept with her, Lila. I hadn't been with anyone for months, but that night... It was the party... the spring reunion party for the football team."

The one I didn't attend with Maddox because I had been sick and on my period.

He rubbed a hand over his face, tiredly, looking more haggard than ever. "God, I was drunk. So fucking drunk, the whole night is a blur."

I swallowed and tried to push the ball of emotion down my throat. "How are you sure you slept with her?"

Guilt flashed in his blue eyes, and he grimaced. "I didn't think about it before, because I didn't remember much of that night. But when Bianca approached me and told me about it... I saw a flash of us together. I remembered going into the room with her," Maddox croaked, the rest of his words barely audible. "When I told you I hadn't slept with anyone in months, I wasn't lying. I *didn't* lie because, honest to God, I didn't remember that night."

I didn't know what to believe in anymore.

An hour ago, I had been ready to forgive Maddox about Christian.

I had been willing to look past the fact that he kept such a secret from me. Had been willing to move on... and forgive... to accept... to love again.

And now?

We were back to square one.

"I don't understand." I shook my head, bringing my trembling fingers to my temple, rubbing the throbbing ache. "Why didn't she tell you before? Why wait so long?"

His throat bobbed, as he swallowed. "She didn't know... if she wanted to keep the baby."

"And you? What are you going to do?" I asked quietly.

His head snapped up; fear was an apparent mask on his face. I had my answer, without him even having to say the words. My heart crash landed at my feet.

Maddox tried to reach for me, but I pushed away. "You lied to me about her. The moment you found out she was pregnant with your baby, why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know how," he breathed. "I didn't want to lose you."

"It was simple. You just had to tell me the truth, that's all I've ever asked from you."

His legs gave out, and he sat on the bed, his head in his hands, a choked sound coming from him.

"You're the best unplanned thing that has ever happened to me, Maddox. And I can't lose you. But you're doing everything to push... me away from you," I whispered, my voice breaking at the end. "You've been telling lies, keeping secrets. Since when have you started lying to me, Maddox?"

I already had the answer to that question. Months... and months of secrets.

After everything we had been through... he tainted everything that we were with his lies.

"You said you didn't want to lose me. But you already have," I whispered, my voice faltering, as I spoke the hardest words in my life.

His head snapped up, and his eyes flared with torment. He was decadently handsome, a little bit broken and a mistake from the beginning.

"I'm sorry," he choked out.

"Is that all you have to say?"

There was tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

If it hurts you so much, what kind of love is this?

I knew Maddox would break my heart, but a part of me hoped he wouldn't.

My heart wept, and a lone tear slid down my cheek. "They said you were trouble. I didn't listen. I took a chance on you. And now I regret it."

"Don't leave me." His hoarse voice cracked. "Please."

I took a step back. Maddox looked wounded, and my soul bled to see *him* hurt.

I had to leave. For me. For him.

"Lila," he breathed my name. "Please."

I slowly shook my head. "Maddox." It pained me to say his name. "You broke your promises."

My feet took me another step back.

"No," he pleaded. "Lila, no."

I turned and walked away, leaving my broken heart at his feet.

Pausing at the door, I gave him a final glance over my shoulder. "You're going to be a father, Maddox," I whispered, my voice thick with unshed tears. "Congratulations."

He shook his head in denial. "You already broke us, but for once in your life... do the *right* thing, Maddox. Bianca needs you. And that baby deserves a father."

Like I needed him.

But she needed him... more.

MADDOX

I fucked up.

I knew I'd eventually mess up. I knew I'd end up destroying the one good thing in my entire life. *Lila*.

Because that was the only thing I was capable of.

Destroying lives.

Ruining her.

Wrecking us.

I tried to protect her, since the day I made that stupid goddamn pinky swear. I made sure she was always happy, always taken care of, by eliminating anything that would cause her pain...but I forgot to protect her from *myself*.

My lungs seized in my chest, and my throat closed. A choked sound came from my throat, as I held my head in my hands, feeling the burn in the back of my eyes.

"You're the best unplanned thing that has ever happened to me, Maddox. Ever. And I can't lose you. But you're doing everything to push... me away from you," she whispered, her sweet voice breaking at the end. "You've been telling lies, keeping secrets from me. Since when have you started lying to me, Maddox?"

My head snapped up at her words, but I didn't have an answer. I fucking wished I did.

Lies, no matter how big or small, were the quickest way to ruin something beautiful -us.

Lies and secrets...

Everything I'd ever done, every decision I ever made, was to protect Lila.

But no band-aids would ever be enough to stop the open, festering wounds I'd left behind.

"I'm sorry," I choked.

The torment on her face decimated me. "Is that all you have to say?"

My vision blurred – fuck – I had to remind myself not to lose my shit. My emotions were in turmoil, and I fought to keep myself sane. "I'm sorry."

A lone tear slid down her cheek. "They said you were trouble. I didn't listen. I took a chance on you. And now I regret it."

"Don't leave me." My hoarse voice cracked. "Please."

Lila took a step back. My wounded heart lurched, and bile crawled up the back of my throat, bitter and acidic, at the thought of losing her.

"Lila," I breathed her name. "Please."

She slowly shook her head, another silent tear, leaving a wet trail on her cheek. "Maddox." She looked pained, and her lips wobbled. "You broke your promises."

And now she was breaking *hers*.

Her feet took her another step back.

"No," I pleaded. "Lila, no."

My voice caught in my throat, as she turned and walked away, taking my bleeding heart in the palm of her hand and leaving me... lifeless.

I sank to my knees, unable to stop myself, choking on the heavy taste of bitterness on my tongue. This couldn't be the end... it *couldn't*.

The door closed, even as I called out her name. Pathetically. Because for her... I was a fucking *weak* man.

For her.

For only her. *My* Lila.

Love makes you weak.

Love destroys lives.

Love ruined us.

She left. The one thing she promised not to do... She vowed to never leave me, to never leave my side... but there she was. Walking away.

My Lila left, as the pain piercing through my chest became more than unbearable.

All my truths, all my lies collided together – my future with Lila was now cracked open, shattered and bleeding, as I knelt in the wreckage of it all.

Once again...alone.

Once again... lost.

She lied, too.

She broke her promises, too.

You won't lose me, ever.

Pinky promise?

Pinky promise.

All the promises we made to each other, in the end... none of it mattered. In the end, we lost our way, and our happy ending faded away.

LILA

ot all right decisions feel like they are *right*. Sometimes, they gut you from within and tear you apart. Right decisions should be easy to make, but they rarely are.

I had a choice, and I wanted to believe I made the right one.

The good choice, the right decision.

Walking away from Maddox was the hardest thing I had ever done in my life, but I had to...

Not for me. But for him.

Maddox was my boyfriend, but first and foremost... he was my best friend. I knew him better than he knew himself. I could see inside him, so clearly, and Maddox, my God, he was so lost in that moment, and I needed him to see things clearly.

I waited for the wave of regret that had been crashing through me, since I walked away from him. It came and went, similar to the wave of pain. Always there, always constant. But still, I told myself I made the right decision.

For the last three weeks, Maddox tried calling. He knocked on our door multiple times a day. He talked to Riley, tried to convince her to let him inside... to let him talk to me. But Riley was loyal to a fault. She didn't know why I had to walk away, but she knew how much it hurt me.

I never ran away from my problems, but I had to run away from Maddox. He was my one weakness, and I knew the moment I took a look at his broken stare, his wounded blue eyes – I'd fall back into his arms. It would turn into a vicious, never-ending cycle.

"Hey, Lila!" I flinched away from my thoughts and turned toward the sound of my name.

My co-worker snapped her fingers in my face and gave me a questioning look. "Stop day-dreaming. No time for that."

I wiped my wet hands on my apron. "I'll serve the next table." I went to take the tray from her hand, but she held it out of my way.

Amanda fished for something from the front pocket of her apron. She placed a blue post-it note, folded in half, in my open palm. "He told me to give you this."

My heart thudded. "He?"

Amanda shrugged and walked away. I unfolded the note, and my heart cracked, my chest burning with misery.

You didn't even give me a chance to kiss you goodbye.

I looked up and caught Maddox's eyes through the window of the restaurant. His tortured eyes held mine for a single second, a throbbing moment, a painful heartbeat, before he blinked and walked away. Maddox disappeared in the crowd, with only his note, as a reminder that he had been here.

We were strangers, once again.

This was more than a note about our last goodbye. He was letting me know he had given up. Maddox wasn't going to fight for us anymore. It almost killed me where I stood, for a second, my heart ceased to beat.

I should have been happy about this – it was what I wanted, after all. I had been avoiding him for over three weeks, waiting for the moment, when he would stop calling and stop trying to see me.

But it still... hurt.

Goddamn it.

Giving Maddox Coulter my heart had been a mistake. But this time... I had been the one to walk away from him.



"I FORGOT, WHEN ARE YOUR EXAMS?" Riley settled beside me on the couch, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. I sunk into her embrace and curled my feet under me.

"I have two back to back in two days, and another, the day after next."

We were now exactly twenty days from Christmas. My life fell apart at a shitty time. Exams period were upon us, and life got even crazier. I could barely study, barely focus on my revisions for my exams. My mind was a mess, and my heart just wasn't in it. I constantly worried about Maddox. He was never next door. From what I heard, he was staying with Colton at his townhouse. The apartment that we made into our home – it was now empty. Forgotten. Abandoned.

"How are you feeling?" Riley asked cautiously.

"I feel like shit," I said, shocking myself with my honesty. "How's Maddox?"

Her brows creased. "I don't understand you. He hurt you, you left him. There's so much bitterness and heartache there. Yet, you still ask me about him every day. Keeping tabs on him. I don't understand you, Babe."

Fresh tears stung the back of my eyes, but I blinked them away. "I still love him."

"Then why did you leave?"

"Because sometimes love isn't enough."

She squeezed my shoulders, and I knew what was coming. "He didn't cheat on you. Yes, he lied. He should have told you about Bianca the moment he found out, but is it really that bad? This whole situation is just a big ball of mess, but maybe... I don't know. I just think that Maddox would never intentionally hurt you. I think he was just trying to protect you, in his own messed up way."

"You won't understand." Because she hadn't looked into Maddox's eyes and didn't see his struggles... his truth...

"Help me understand." She scrunched her nose, as she tried so hard to break down my walls. Riley was a good friend, my only friend. My little bundle of light.

"I can't," I whispered.

She let out a soft sigh, and her head dropped back against the couch. "Maddox still hasn't returned. He's staying with Colton, and he hasn't attended any classes since…"

My eyes shuttered close, and I breathed through the stinging in my nose. "He's going to be okay. Maddox is strong and capable of taking care of himself."

"I hope you're right," Riley whispered.

She didn't believe me.

And... as much as I wanted my words to be true, I didn't believe myself either.

My phone vibrated between my legs, and I peeked at the screen, looking at an unfamiliar number. I ignored the call and closed my eyes.

"Someone's calling again," Riley said, next to me.

"I don't recognize the number."

Five consecutive calls later, I started to grow uneasy. Anxiety tugged at the muscles in my chest, and a heavy weight settled there. At the sixth call, from the same number, I finally picked up.

"Hello?"

"Oh, Lila. Finally." A familiar voice came through, and I frowned.

"Savannah?" Why was Maddox's mother calling me?

Maddox. Oh God. Maddox!

I bounced off the couch, my heart feeling constricted, as if something heavy had wrapped itself around the fragile organ, squeezing the life out of me. "Is he okay? What happened? What's wrong? Is it Maddox?"

"What? No – I mean, I've been trying to reach him for the last five days, but he won't pick up my calls anymore."

Okay, that wasn't alarming. Maddox never picked up his mother's calls or his father's, for that matter. He rarely wanted to listen to what they had to say.

"I don't understand. You sound worried," I said, still frowning.

"The last time I spoke to him, he hung up on me," she whispered, and then, I heard sniffling.

I rubbed my forehead, feeling another headache quickly approaching. "Savannah, what are you trying to say? If you're calling me this many time, then it must be important. Is this about another gala or dinner party? I'm not coming, and neither is Maddox. Save it. Don't even bother asking."

Savannah was silent for a second, before she burst into tears and choked out her words, half mumbling and half not making any sense. "No. Not... another... gala. This... Brad... Maddox... won't pick up my... call. His... father..."

I paced the floor, feeling so confused, so lost. Savannah Coulter was crying to me on the phone. For the four years that I have known her, she's never lost her cool, maintaining her calm, plastic façade.

She was...crying. CRYING! The world was officially ending, this was proof enough. "What about Brad?"

"He's in the hospital." She hiccupped back a sob.

My feet came to a halt, and I paused, my breathing stuttering. "What?"

"He's sick, Lila. Very sick," Savannah whispered, barely audible. "Maddox needs to be here... but he won't pick up my calls."

Oh God. No! "Did you tell him?"

"I did, but he didn't say anything and then hung up on me. This was five days ago. Brad is... He wants to see his son."

His son – the same one he didn't give a shit about before. But now that he was bedridden in a hospital bed, he needed to see his… *son*.

"I don't know, Savannah. I haven't seen Maddox in weeks. We broke up."

"Please," she begged, her voice cracking. "Please. He needs to be here. You don't understand. Brad... I don't know how long he has. Please, Lila."

I glanced at Riley, and she gave me a questioning look. "I'm sorry, Savannah. I'll see what I can do, but I can't guarantee he'll listen to me. If you want Maddox there and I can't bring him to you, you'll need to find another way."

Savannah inhaled a shaky breath. "Okay. Thank you, Lila."

We hung up, and I fell on the couch beside Riley. "What's up? What did Savannah want?"

"Brad is... sick."

Her mouth rounded with a shocked 'o'. "She wants you to convince Maddox to go see his dad?"

"Bingo."

"How sick is he?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It sounded serious, because she was crying."

Riley nodded slowly. "I was on Colton's Instagram two hours ago. They apparently have a party going on at his house, right now. I saw Maddox in one of the videos in his story."

"Another party?" During Exams? What the hell?

"Last I heard, it was Maddox who decided to throw the party. Again. Which, by the way, the last one ended with a fight."

This reminded me of four years ago. Back in high school, when Maddox didn't give a shit about anything or... anyone. He was all about partying, drugs and alcohol... and letting his fists do the talking.

He was spiraling. Once again. Oh God.

My head fell into my hands, and I took a deep breath. Maybe it was my

fault... An overwhelming sense of guilt filled my chest, and I almost choked on the taste of bitterness on my tongue.

"Do you want to wait until tomorrow?" Riley questioned, rubbing my back.

"No. I have to do this tonight. Maddox might be stubborn, but I am more stubborn than he could ever be."

LILA

iley and I parked three houses away and stared at Colton's corner townhouse. After a few minutes of silence, we walked up to his porch and blinked. "Holy shit," Riley breathed.

The party was loud and crowded. I cringed, as a couple stumbled out, practically mauling each other. He pushed her against the house, and they were practically humping over their clothes, too drunk to care that they had an audience.

It was in that moment when I realized how bad this situation was. I shouldn't have come here tonight. If I found Maddox's in the arms of another woman...

Oh my God.

I almost doubled over, because the pain of that was unbearable. This was the wrong decision. I should have waited until tomorrow morning, when everything would have been calmed.

But what if...

What if he still had a woman by his side in the morning...?

What would I have done then?

Shit. SHIT! I couldn't even bring myself to think of it. I stalked forward, climbing up the stairs, into Colton's fancy townhouse and weaving my way through the sweaty bodies.

I spotted him instantly. Through a crowd, many feet away. It was like my eyes knew where to look, my heart knew where he was, an invisible string tugging my body toward him.

Maddox.

He sat on a couch; his long legs spread out in front of him. He wore black jeans and a black shirt, with holes in it. It looked like he hadn't bothered to shave for many weeks, and his hair was just as messy. Maddox looked completely out of it. High and drunk.

The two girls, one on each side of him, giggled. They were practically salivating for his attention, but his stares were empty, glazed over. Maddox tipped his head back and took a long pull from his joint, inhaling that shit and breathing out a thin layer of smoke. I took a step closer, my body moving on its own accord.

The blonde girl on his right stuck her face into his neck and her hand moved to his crotch. My heart was about to fall right out of my chest, when his fingers circled around her wrist, stopping her movement. He placed her hand on his thigh, a safe distance away from his dick.

My hand went to my throat, and I clenched our dreamcatcher. I exhaled the breath I didn't know I had been holding.

He lifted his head, looking in my direction.

Our gaze met.

I halted.

He paused.

Time just fucking stopped.

My body twitched under his gaze.

He stared.

I breathed.

The dreamcatcher dug into my palm, as my hold tightened around it. Maddox's lips curled, and there was nothing warm about it.

Maddox slowly got off the couch and stalked toward me. His eyes were angry, crazed. He still had a bottle in his hand, and he was half drunk. I could tell by the way he stumbled toward me. I never got a word out, as he grasped me by the elbow, and started pulling me up the stairs. His fingers were digging roughly into my skin, but I didn't care in the moment.

Maddox pulled me into a room and slammed me against the wall, as he kicked the door closed. His body pinned me to the wall. "Mad—"

His lips slammed against mine, before I could breathe out his name.

The world shut off.

Time stopped ticking.

Everything just halted, and I was stuck in this moment, on a loop.

The colors faded away.

I stopped thinking... only *feeling*. This. Him. His lips.

His lips feasted on me, like he had been craving for my taste all along. It was all-consuming, and with a desperation so crazed, it lingered on my skin, and I could taste it on my lips, on my tongue. He took possession of my mouth, like he owned it. Like he owned me.

And goddamn it. He did. In this very moment, he *owned* me.

My skin hummed under his touch. His arm circled around my hips, and he pulled me up, my toes leaving the ground, as he kept me between the wall and his body. My hands landed on his shoulders, and his muscles clenched under my fingers. His body jolted, at my touch, and he bit me. Bit me hard enough that I tasted the metallic taste of my blood on my tongue.

This was no sweet reunion.

It was a battle cry. So much anger, so much hatred, so much... passion.

I bit him back, feeling his lip swell under my teeth. Maddox groaned, low and deep, and his body shuddered. Almost violently. I didn't know where he started, and I ended. Our blood mixed on our tongues, but we didn't stop kissing. Didn't stop battling for dominance. Didn't stop... touching each other.

This kiss.

This moment.

This... *feeling*. Torment. Love. Fury. Passion. Resentment. Longing. Pain. So much fucking pain.

The kiss slowed, and I wondered if Maddox could feel how much I didn't want this moment to end.

"You taste like mine... and lies. You're a fucking liar, Lila," he rasped against my lips.

Furious, I tore away from him and slammed my fists into his chest. He was hurting, I told myself. He didn't mean it; I whispered in my head.

But the anger was overwhelming and the final thin thread of my sanity snapped. I stabbed my finger into his chest, hard enough that he drunkenly stumbled back. "Me? ME? I'm a liar?" I screamed into his face. "You lived with me for months and lied to MY FACE, EVERY SINGLE DAY! You started our relationship with a lie. You. Kept. Secrets. From. Me."

His eyes darkened, and his face turned red with rage, as he bellowed back, "I never lied to you!"

I paused, my heart hammered in my rib cage, so hard, I thought it'd burst out of my chest. "You still think you're right? You still think whatever you

did... was the right decision?"

"I never lied to you."

I shook my head, laughing, but there was no humor in it. My laugh sounded as dead as my heart felt. "You did. You broke me, Maddox. You broke me... more than Christian and his dad ever did. You had the power to do so, and you used it."

"I never lied to you," he said again, in that same lifeless tone. Like he was trying so hard to convince himself.

"What was it then, if not a lie?"

Maddox lunged forward and pushed me back. His chest slammed against mine, and he pinned me against the wall again. "I was protecting you. It wasn't a lie. Yes, I kept secrets... but I didn't lie, Lila. I didn't. All I ever wanted to do was protect you. Keep you safe. Keep you happy," he croaked. "I vowed, damn it. I VOWED IT. I loved you and that was not a lie," Maddox snarled in my face, his eyes deranged, and oh God, I never wanted to see that wounded expression on his face, ever again.

He... loved... me.

I remembered thinking about the moment we'd confess our love to each other.

I thought it would be romantic... I dreamed it would be magical. Little did I know... Our love turned out to be a war zone.

His hands slammed against the wall on either side of my head, so close, I flinched. "But you're a liar, Lila. You promised me you wouldn't leave me, but you did. I needed you... and you weren't there. I fucking needed you, and the only person I ever FUCKING LOVED WAS NOT THERE FOR ME! So, tell me, Lila. Who's the liar?"

"You," I whispered. I'm sorry, I cried.

His chest heaved.

My heart stuttered.

Maddox stepped back. My knees weakened.

"You kill me, Lila."

I squeezed my eyes closed and choked back a sob. I killed him...

No, I had been trying to save him... to protect him... to make the right decision.

Maddox grabbed the bottle again and downed the rest of it, barely a grimace on his face. *I killed him...*

Maddox Coulter was a god amongst mortals. He was enraged, a bitter and

wounded god. And I wondered if I made a mistake by falling in love with a man like him.

I watched, as he finished the bottle and started rummaging through the mini fridge, taking out another one. God, he was going to drink himself to oblivion. He was going to drink himself to a slow... death.

I swallowed back a cry and rubbed a hand over my face. My tongue felt heavy in my mouth, but I licked my dry lips and tried again. "I didn't come here to fight, Maddox."

"You came here to fuck," he deadpanned, with no emotions whatsoever.

"No," I breathed through the pain. "I found out... about your father. That he's... sick."

"Oh, you *pity* me?" Maddox threw my words back at me. "How sweet. Lila Garcia needed to make herself look like a little angel, coming to my rescue."

I flinched but pressed forward. "I broke up with you, but I'm still your best friend. We used to have each other's back, and I came here... because I thought I could offer you my friendship."

He didn't respond. Barely even acknowledged my words, except for a small twitch in his granite jaw. My hands trembled, so badly, that I had to press them against my thighs, trying to stop the shaking. "Have you... talked to your... father?"

Silence.

"You mom called me."

Utter broken... silence.

"Please, I'm trying. I want to be here for you, right now. I might have broken up with you, walked away... But I'm not giving up on you or bailing on our friendship. If you need me, I'll be here. *I'm trying*."

Finally, he gave me a response.

Maddox's face darkened. He stepped closer, crowding into my space and pushing me back against the wall.

"Maddox—" I started, but he cut me off with a low snarl, his chest vibrating with the cruel sound.

My chest cracked, wide-open, and the fissures of my broken heart scattered on the ground at our feet.

His eyes blazed with rage and... raw pain. "I'm self-destructing every time I look at you, every time my eyes seek you out when we're in the same room. You make destruction and melancholy taste like sweet, sweet fucking

poison."

His hands came up, landing on either side of my head. His minty breath whispered across my lips, a tempting touch, but our lips didn't meet. His mouth curled on the side, a sardonic smile.

"It hurts because you're not mine. It hurts because we could have been good together, but you decided to give up on us."

No. No. No.

His voice was rough and stiff, as he spoke, his words slicing through the air and through me like a sharp sword. He left me bleeding on the spot, and his eyes told me he didn't care. "So spare me the speech and get the fuck out."

My heart lurched and bled, the organ so fragile, it couldn't bear the assault of his words. His dark gaze went to my throat, and we both stopped breathing for a mere second.

There was an unreadable expression on his face. A flash of pain echoed in his eyes, before it was gone. I whimpered, as he curled a finger around my necklace.

Our dreamcatcher.

Snap.

My eyes widened, and I choked back a gasp. A single tear slid down my cheek, as he snapped the necklace away from my neck, holding it up between us.

"I'll be taking this back," Maddox said, his voice raw and sharp, laced with enough heartbreak that my knees weakened, and I slid to the ground.

He... took... my necklace. Snatched it right from my neck...and...

My lungs seized, and a wounded sob tore through my throat.

Holding our dreamcatcher in the palm of his hand, he walked away.

MADDOX

ate is a strong word. But I hated my father. I loathed my mother.

And Lila? I *hated* her as much as I *loved* her.

It ate at me, that all-consuming feeling. Like little bugs eating at my flesh, cutting me open, as my blood poured out. No fucking mercy.

I wondered if I'd ever stop feeling numb. The alcohol helped, most of the time. But when I was sober again, I just felt shittier. So I'd drink again. And again. Until I was drunk, day and night. Numb to everything, everyone, every fucked-up emotion brewing inside of me.

Except, the taste of betrayal lingered. Heavy and bitter.

Lila fucked with my head, and I let her in, gave her the power to do *this* to me. Turned me into the 17-year-old Maddox, who was bitter and enraged. She promised she'd be there when I needed her. But she wasn't. And that – *that* betrayal cut me worse than my father's disappointment or my mother's lack of care.

A pounding headache woke me up, and I glanced around the bare room. The clock said it was past one in the afternoon. Shit, I slept the whole morning away. My head hurt; my body ached. I needed a drink, again. To forget. To go back to being numb.

There was a commotion outside, before the bedroom door slammed open. I groaned, pulling a pillow over my head. "Get the fuck out, Colton."

"No."

My muscles tensed, and my heart skipped.

That stubborn voice.

That beautiful, stubborn voice.

Goddamn it. What was she doing here?

The memories of last night came back to me, flashing behind my closed lids, like black and white polaroid photos. Lila was here last night.

The kiss.

The fucking kiss that I could still taste on my lips.

Her dreamcatcher.

The pounding in my temples grew worse.

"Get up," she said, in her sweet, sing-song voice. A voice that haunted me in my dreams and in my reality.

I kept the pillow over my face, refusing to look at her. She was my one weakness, and I couldn't afford to look at her and... *feel*. "And you can fuck right off, Garcia."

There was a small growl, a kitten growl. "Don't test me, Coulter."

Oh, so we were back to being Garcia and Coulter.

Lila was silent for a minute. I heard her footsteps moving away, and I breathed out. She was leaving? Giving up already? My ears perked up, when I heard the water running from the bathroom. What…?

Seconds later, her footsteps approached my bed again. I didn't have time to react, before I was hit with the unexpected.

Freezing cold water. I gasped, threw the pillow off my face, only to have more water dumped over my head.

"Holy fucking shit!" I sat up on the wet mattress and wiped the cold water off my chest and face. "What is wrong with you? Jesus Christ, you're such a fucking bitch."

Lila dropped the pitcher on the floor, her eyes blazing with fury. "Listen to me, Coulter. Call me a bitch again, and I will make you eat that word."

"Bitch," I hissed under my breath.

Her eyes narrowed on me and then she smiled. A sweet smile that should have warned me of what was coming, but I fell for it. Fell for that beautiful smile that owned me.

I didn't see it coming. And when I did, it was too late.

Lila marched to the closet, rummaged inside, looking for something. Thirty seconds later, she came back out with a... baseball bat.

Woah. Woah, hold-the-fuck-up.

Her eyes glistened with something unrecognizable. There was anger and frustration there. And more. Lila stalked to my window, raised the bat and...

BAM!

My heart jumped to my throat. I scrambled off the bed, gaping at my window. Lila lifted the bat again and brought it against the window in one hard swing, shattering whatever was left of it, after her first hit.

"I'm nobody's bitch. Good luck sleeping without a window, Coulter."

I gaped at Lila. Her Latina side was obviously showing. I looked at the shattered window and then back at her grinning face — although there was nothing warm about her smile. "You're a psycho."

But was I surprised? No, I wasn't. Lila Garcia might be midget-sized, but she was a dragon. A little, red dragon who was capable of doing the most damage.

She dropped the bat and stared, waiting. My eyes ran over her figure, taking in the tempting sight of her. Today, she wore faded blue jeans, ripped across her knees, a black long-sleeve shirt tucked inside her waistband and black combat boots. Her hair was in a messy braid and her throat...

It was bare.

No necklace. No dreamcatcher.

"Put your dick away, Maddox."

"You are in my room," I retorted, but still grabbed my boxers off the floor. "And if I remember correctly, you like my dick. A few weeks ago, you were choking on it."

Lila narrowed her eyes on my face; she avoided looking below my waist, as I pulled my boxers on. "Do you have to be so crass?"

My lips curled. "That's my charm, Garcia."

I sauntered over to the nightstand and grabbed the joint I had left there. The necklace on the surface caught my attention. Lila's gaze, as if she could read my mind, followed mine. Her hand came up to her bare throat, as if to grab her dreamcatcher, but it wasn't there.

I lit the end of the joint, rolling it in my fingers, before taking a long drag. I held it in, for as long as I could, before I slowly breathed the smoke back out.

I held it out to Lila. "Don't be shy. It's not like we haven't shared one before, *Sweet Cheeks*."

She crossed her arms, her lips thinning into a tight line. "What are you doing, Maddox? Just look at yourself."

I took another drag, running my fingers through my hair. "Oh, I do. I look in the mirror and I see the effect of Lila Garcia."

Her cheeks reddened, and she stalked toward me, until we stood a mere

breath away. Her chest brushed against mine. "I don't *want* to be here," she hissed in my face. "But I am, because I care—"

I scoffed, exhaling a cloud of smoke into her face. She blinked, her nose wrinkling. "Believe what you want, Maddox, but our friendship didn't end with our relationship."

"You want to act like an asshole, go right ahead." Lila poked me in the chest, pushing me back a step. "But I'm here because I know you need your best friend, right now. Not a girlfriend."

"I needed you before. I don't need you now," I barked in her face.

Her neck flushed pink, and Lila looked at me with such heartbreaking eyes... Fuck.

Her fingers circled my wrist, and she brought my hand up. Her thumb brushed over my swollen, bruised knuckles. "You promised that you wouldn't ever stop being my friend, and I vowed that no matter what, we wouldn't let our fuckedupness get in the way of our friendship. I'm not here as your ex. I'm here as your friend. So, either you shower, get dressed and eat breakfast like a normal person, or I will drag you. Got it?"

Lila let my hand go, and she stalked away, only pausing at the door. She cocked her head to the side, looking at me over her shoulders. "And trust me, I can, and I will. You might be a hundred pounds heavier than me, but, remember, *you* trained me in how to use my weight against someone heavier than me."

Goddamn it.



An hour later, I found myself shoveling breakfast in my mouth. Colton tapped his fingers over the countertop, looking everywhere but my face. "Why did you let her in?" I said, around a mouthful.

Colton cleared his throat. "I didn't. I tried to close the door, but she kicked it open."

I dropped the fork on my plate. He was kidding, he had to be. "You're telling me, that you couldn't stop a hundred-pound woman from entering your home?"

"She threatened my dick, man." His voice lowered to a whisper. "She's legit a psychopath. No wonder you two suited each other so well."

Fuck that. I shoved another forkful in my mouth.

"Your mom called me again," Colton said, slowly.

"Same shit?"

"Your father is sick, Maddox."

"Yeah. So? This is probably another trick of his to get me more involved in his business. Not that I have any plans to take over."

"I don't think-"

I kept my face blank. "If he dies, thank fuck. Good riddance." My chest tightened, even as I said those words. Real, fucking pain sliced through me, and I clenched my jaw.

Colton winced at my choice of words. "You know Lila is not going to give up, until you go see your father in the hospital."

I knew that and to stop her from bothering me again, I was going to play along. Go to the hospital, visit my father, listen to what they had to say and walk away.

"Where is she?"

Colton nodded toward the door. "Outside."

"Let's get this over with."

MADDOX

parked outside of the hospital but didn't get out of the car. "Now, what?" I drawled, drumming my thumbs over the steering wheel.
"I can't force you to talk to your parents, Maddox. I already did

what I set out to do."

"And what is that?"

Her lips twitched. "Get you out of bed. Take a shower. Have breakfast. Stop drinking for a few hours. Mission accomplished."

"You're such a bi-"

"Finish that sentence, I dare you," she grinned, almost mockingly.

"Biscuit."

Lila rolled her eyes. God, she was messing with my head. With us like this, I could almost forget the last month. It reminded me so much of the old times.

I could almost forget that I was... going to be a father... and that Lila had walked out on me when I needed her the most. But I didn't forget. And the reminder sliced through me with a rusty blade that cut open my already painful wound.

I got out of the car and slammed the door. Lila followed me inside the hospital. I was instantly hit with the smell of sickness and death. I went to the help desk, and they redirected me to where Brad Coulter was staying. A private room in the upper floor. Lila and I took the stairs, and when we walked into the corridor, my mother was there.

Leaning against the wall, waiting. "Maddox," she breathed, in what seemed like relief.

"I'm here. Now what?" I said in a bored voice.

My mother flinched and then sniffled. "Your father wants to speak to you."

Lila touched my back, and her touch seared me through my shirt. Even as her hand fell away, I could still *feel* her on my skin. "I'll wait here."

I stuffed my fists in the pocket of my jeans and stalked forward, into the private hospital room. My feet paused at the door, and I came to a halt at the sight that greeted me. My whole body froze, and my heart jumped to my throat. Shit. Goddamn it.

I didn't know what I expected when I walked into the hospital. Hell, I didn't know what to think when my mother called me, weeping over the phone, as she told me my father was in the hospital and sick.

I didn't think.

I didn't react.

Not until now.

I didn't know what I expected, but this wasn't it.

My father, looking thin and frail, in a hospital bed that made him appear even smaller. Multiple machines beeping and attached to him. The Brad Coulter I knew was strong and confident, with arrogance that matched my own. He was always well-dressed, always spoke like he owned the room and everyone in it, always stood tall.

This was not Brad Coulter.

I didn't know what to do, what to say... so, I stood frozen at the door and stared at the man, who was my father. A stranger. My lungs clenched, a reaction I hadn't expect.

I didn't care, I told myself.

But the brief ache in my chest told me that I was still capable of feeling emotions for my shit dad.

My mother grasped my hand, shocking me even more, as she pulled me farther into the room. She let go, once we were standing next to the bed, and sat down on the chair. Taking my father's hand in hers, she squeezed, and his eyes opened.

Dark circles, tired and hollow. There was barely life in those eyes that used to hold so much power. He blinked at her and then smiled, as much as he could. It was a small twitch of his lips.

My mother returned the smile, a wobbly one of her own. "He's here," she whispered. "He came to see you. I told you, he would come. Didn't I?"

Who the fuck were these people? Because they weren't my parents, for fuck's sake.

When did this happen... how did this happen?

He looked at me, and his dry, cracked lips parted, as if to speak, but there were no words. His throat moved, but my father, for once, was silent.

My mother swallowed, making a choked sound at the back of her throat. "He tires easily and can't really speak much." She grabbed the pitcher of water and poured a glass full, before helping her husband drink it.

I rubbed a hand over my face and squeezed my eyes shut. This wasn't... real. It was a fucking nightmare; it had to be.

"How sick are you?" I asked, through gritted teeth.

"Cancer," my mother replied, so quietly, I almost missed it.

"Cancer?" I parroted. "When? You were healthy the last time I saw you."

"He wasn't, but he didn't want anyone to see it."

"When?" I barked.

"We found out about four months ago," she said, looking away from me.

Four months. Four goddamn months and they were telling me *now*.

"You didn't think I deserved to know before?" My mother winced, and she had the audacity to look ashamed.

I speared Brad Coulter with a look. "Why now? Why tell me now?"

"Because..." he started, only to end up coughing. My mother jumped and helped lift his head from the pillow. He coughed and coughed, the dry sound rattling from his chest and echoing through my ears. At the sight of blood dribbling past his lips, my hands started to shake.

My fists clenched, and I had to look away. This man wasn't my father.

After a moment, the coughing fit ceased, and I started to pace the hospital room. "Finish your sentence," I demanded. Cold, yes. But I didn't know how else to react, how else to speak to them.

"Because... I want... to fix... this... I want a... chance."

"So you don't die with the guilt that you were a shitty father?"

"Maddox!" My mother hissed. I swiveled around and matched her glare with one of my own.

"What? The truth is not something you want to hear?"

"I deserve that," my father admitted tiredly.

Fuck. This. "I'm out of here."

Before I reached the door, my mother's voice stopped me. "I want to tell you a story."

"I'm not here for some fairy-tale retelling, *Mom*," I seethed.

"Nothing about this story is a fairy tale, Maddox."

If you asked me why I didn't leave, why I stayed by the door and listened to her, I wouldn't have an answer to that question.

I simply didn't know.

Maybe it was something in her voice. The pain, the sorrow, the guilt. Maybe because it all sounded so real to my ears. I *felt* things I shouldn't have.

Turning around to face them, I leaned against the door and crossed my arms over my chest. "Speak." One word. It was all she needed.

She gripped my father's hand, her eyes glassy. "When I met your father, he didn't have any food to eat."

Wh – what the fuck?

She kept talking, before I could say anything, as if she was scared, she'd lose whatever courage she had to speak. "I remember that day very clearly. We were neighbors, and he came knocking at my door. He asked my parents if he could have a plate of food, or even a loaf of bread, to feed his younger brother."

Younger brother? My father has a brother? I have an uncle? How the hell did I not know this? My mind spun, and I blinked several times.

"You see, we came from a shitty neighborhood. From the slums. You could easily describe it as a slum part of New York City. We barely even had electricity or warm water, because we couldn't pay for it. We'd eat canned food that we could get from the community church or the food banks. That night, my family barely even had food to feed ourselves. My mother turned Brad away. After my parents went to sleep, I sneaked out of my room and went over to his house. I brought him two slices of bread. He broke down and cried. He was fourteen, I was eleven. He quickly fed his brother and only took two bites himself. I learned that they hadn't had any food for two whole days."

My mother paused, as I sunk to the floor, my legs suddenly feeling weak. I wanted to call her a liar, but I could hear the truth in her words, the rawness in her voice. This was real. My parents were poor... and I never knew. They never told me anything about their pasts or their childhoods. We never... *talked*.

I sat on my ass and stared at my parents, finally realizing that they were truly strangers to me.

My mother made a choking sound. "For four years, I'd sneak food to him.

We were both poor, but I had parents who were still trying to get food on our table. Brad didn't. His mother was a drug addict and alcoholic. The little money Brad saved up from working part-time at the church, his mother would steal for drugs. When he was eighteen, he left home with his little brother."

"We were homeless," my father broke in, with a whisper, his voice cracking. "For months, we lived on the streets, under a bridge with other homeless people. We were...starving. I was ...desperate. I stole a man's wallet... and I was...caught. Was thrown in jail for a night. It rained that night. My brother...was... alone under the bridge. He walked in the rain for hours, looking for me."

He took a deep breath and paused with a cough. I was glad I was sitting down when my mother continued. "Your father's brother... your uncle... he caught pneumonia."

"He didn't... make it," I whispered, already knowing where this was going. If I had an uncle and my father never spoke of him, then it only meant one thing.

She nodded. "I used to sneak away from home to go meet your father. You see, we had a dream. We wanted a future together. We worked the cheapest job we could get. I waitressed. Brad worked at a mechanic shop. At twenty, he finally finished his high school diploma. Then came university. We could barely afford it." My mother paused, sniffling. "Those days were the hardest, but it paid off."

Her head fell into her hands, and she cried. "Savannah..." I heard him whisper.

My father picked up, in his weak voice. "We were finally able to buy an apartment, the cheapest one we could... afford, but it was ours. Life... got... better. We were no longer homeless or starving. I got a job, one that paid the rent and put enough food on the table. We lived paycheck to paycheck, but everything was...okay. Life... was good. When your mother found out she was pregnant with you..."

"That was the happiest day of our lives, Maddox," my mother whimpered. "The *happiest*. Truly, the happiest. The best day."

I wanted to call her a liar. All my life, they made me feel unwanted. I had been a mistake... yet, here they were, telling me that I was loved, before I was even born.

Bullshit.

But I stayed silent and listened. Because it was all I could do. I was stuck in this moment, their voices echoing in my ears, their past flashing in front of my eyes. I was... numb and then I was... feeling too much.

"For six years, we had everything we wanted. Sure, we weren't rich. We still struggled. But whatever we had, it was enough. Then, life... it... knocked us down... again."

"What?" My voice deepened, a ball of emotions settling itself at the base of my throat. "What happened?"

"You were five when I was diagnosed with colon cancer," my father said.

I covered my mouth, then rubbed a palm over my face. Fuck. No. This isn't... this couldn't be real.

"I'm out of here," I growled, pushing to my feet.

"Please," she whispered, so brokenly, I... just... couldn't. Walk. Away.

"Colon cancer is one of the easiest diseases to detect, and since we discovered it, at the earliest stage, it was curable," my father offered. "But that was a reality check for us, son."

He coughed in his fist once and then rubbed his chest, as if it pained him. The expression of his face was one of sorrow. And shame. "It was then I realized that if something were to ever happen to me... I would leave a wife and son, without any savings. A mortgage, student loans and nothing else. Your mother, she never finished high school. She worked to put me in university. She worked, so I could have a degree, and if I had died... your mother and you would have been left with nothing."

"When we left the slums behind... we promised to never go back to it," my mother cut in. "Never go back to being that poor."

Brad Coulter closed his eyes with a heavy sigh. "I became obsessed, Maddox. So... fucking... obsessed."

"Brad kept saying he wanted what was best for us. And so, he worked. He never stopped working. Never stopped to even take a deep breath. And he climbed up the ladder," she took a shuddering breath, "he went from an office clerk, to a lawyer, to a senior associate, to a business partner, then a law partner, a business owner... he kept climbing that ladder, like an obsessed man."

I shivered, feeling too hot and then too cold. My skin burned, my head ached, my chest... goddamn it, it was being carved open. That shit didn't just hurt. It fucking killed me.

My father... he opened his eyes, and there were tears in them. Real

fucking tears. Tears I never saw before. "Years passed, I didn't notice. Years passed, I went from a man who lived from paycheck to paycheck, to a man who could have anything he wanted with a snap of his fingers. I had everything, but it was too late when I realized that, in chasing financial security, in becoming obsessed with being wealthy, I forgot... about you. Even though, *you* were the reason I had done everything I did."

"Am I supposed to pity you?" I finally growled, cutting into their little story. "Am I supposed to feel bad?"

They both flinched at my cruel words. Yeah, good. Fuck this. Fuck them.

"While Father Dearest was chasing after wealth, what were you were doing, *Mom*?" I spat out, turning toward Savannah Coulter. "Chasing after your husband?"

She had the audacity to look ashamed. "I feared losing him. After his experience with cancer... it was the one thing that *haunted* me. I couldn't... I didn't know how to cope."

"Does that excuse make you sleep better at night?"

"No." She shook her head. "It doesn't."

"Do you regret it?" I hissed, anger churning in the pit of my stomach. "If you could go back and change things, would you do it?"

My mother's tears-strained cheeks flushed even more, and she looked away, but not before I caught the flash of pain and guilt on her face. "If I could... I would have changed how things were. I was a good wife, but I couldn't be a good mother."

So, *now*, she cared. But too little, too late.

I got to my feet and straightened up. "Are you done?"

Silence. They both looked as if they had aged ten years since I had last seen them. Tired. Frail. *Weak*.

Their story explained their pasts, but it wasn't enough. I still didn't understand a lot of things. None of it made sense in my head, and the hospital room swayed back and forth in front of me.

"It's too late," I said out loud, the words were more for me than for them.

It was too late... Eighteen years too late.

There was no fixing *this*.

MADDOX

walked out, closing the door behind me. My gaze immediately went to Lila. She was slumped in a chair, her head in her hands. She must have heard me approaching, because her head snapped up, and she straightened.

"Are you okay?" she whispered; her eyes wide. Frightened. Worried.

"He's... sick. Cancer." The moment I said those words, my knees weakened, and I sunk into the chair beside her. It suddenly felt... *real*.

This wasn't a nightmare.

This was real.

My father *had* cancer... *has* cancer. Shit. Shit. SHIT! I felt a tick in my eyelid, my vein pulsed in my throat, throbbing. I felt... sick. The bitter taste of bile made its way to my mouth. God, I was going to throw up.

"Maddox."

Her voice.

My name.

Her sweet, sweet voice.

"Breathe through your nose, Baby," she whispered, running her hand over my arm.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and I did as I was told. Breathed through my nose, like Lila taught me. Like her therapist had taught her.

Once my lungs stopped feeling like they were getting crushed under a pile of rocks, I opened my eyes and stared into Lila's brown ones. Lila Garcia was the anchor; I was the whole goddamn ocean.

"You're thinking about it, aren't you?" she questioned softly.

"Thinking about what?"

"What it would be like if your father is dead? You're wondering why you care and why your chest aches." She nodded at where I was rubbing my chest – doing so, unconsciously, until she pointed it out. Lila knew me too well. She knew me better than I knew myself. To her, I was an open book. I let my hand drop to my thigh.

"Do you know what I regret the most about my accident?"

I didn't respond. She took my hand in hers and slid her fingers between mine, squeezing. "I never got a chance to tell my parents how much I loved them. Our last moment was us fighting... and me calling them bad parents. That's what hurts the most, Maddox. If I could go back in time, I'd shout how much I love them. If I could go back in time, I'd beg to just spend one more *second* with them. Just to see their faces, to see their smiles and hear their voices."

"It's not your fault. The accident," I murmured, looking down at our entwined hands. Her smaller, paler one, in my much bigger and rougher hand. We were perfect together. Had been perfect together... until we weren't anymore.

"I know. But I still feel guilt over our argument and our last moments together."

I frowned and looked up at her face. "My relationship with my parents is not the same as yours, Lila. It's a different situation."

"I know, Maddox. But trust me, when I tell you... you hate your father so much, but deep inside, you just want to be loved by him. Ten years from now, you're going to wonder... What if? What if I gave my parents a chance? What if... I had spent those last moments with him? What if, Maddox? Those last moments won't erase twenty or so years of a bad relationship, but it could be a beginning of something better. Who knows? Who the fuck knows... but what if?"

She rubbed her thumb over my knuckles. I was transfixed by the movement, the gentle glide of her fingertips. "I constantly live in regret and guilt, Maddox. I know what it feels like. That burden on your shoulders, the pain – nothing physical, but sometimes that ache in your heart is the worst. I don't want that for you. One of us living through it is enough. You deserve better than that," she said, wrenching my chest open and squeezing my bloody heart with her bare hands.

Lila reached up and touched the side of my face, cupping my cheek. "You

are worthy of love, Maddox Coulter. And you deserve everything you want."

I want you.

All I ever wanted was her. She was everything I needed.

Yet...

A throat cleared behind me, and I snapped away from Lila, as if someone had pulled my strings and I were a puppet. I looked at the intruder and found a tall man, with greyed hair, wearing a white coat. A doctor. Must be my father's, because he was looking at me with a familiarity that I didn't respond to.

"Maddox Coulter?" he asked, with a raised eyebrow.

I rose to my feet. "Yes. You are?"

"Dr. Fitzpatrick. Devin Fitzpatrick. A very old friend of your father's and his doctor."

"Is he dying?" I asked, before I could swallow the words. My voice cracked, showing the first sign of emotion, since I walked into the hospital.

Devin Fitzpatrick gave me a look of pity, and I fucking hated it. He nodded his head slowly. "Your father has a history of polyps and Chron's disease. Colon cancer is the second most deadly cancer. And this time, we weren't able to detect it at an early stage, like before. The cancer tissues have spread. The small tumors have made their way all over his intestines, and the cancer cells keep developing and growing at a rate that's nearly impossible for us to keep track, hence it's spreading faster. Your father has fought a long battle. He doesn't have long, Maddox. I'd suggest you spend his last moments with him."

I felt Lila coming closer behind me, her heat burning into me. She placed a hand on my lower back, a simple touch, as if to remind me she was *here*. "How long?"

"Two months, max. He refused any form of medical help. Your father wants his final days to be in peace." His voice lowered; his expression pained. "Without all the constant pain, chemo, drugs and surgeries. He went through it once. He knows how bad it can get."

"So, you're saying... he's just awaiting his death. Without even putting up a fight or trying to survive?"

"It's inevitable," he said gently, as if to soothe a wounded animal. "At this point, even if we go through chemo, it will only extend his lifespan by a few months. At most, barely even a year. But he'll suffer even worse."

I shook my head. "The Brad Coulter never gives up."

He smiled a bitter smile. "All men have a breaking point. We're not as invincible as we like to believe."

Devin clasped my shoulder, as if to comfort me. "I'm sorry."

He walked away, and I was left with his words and empty condolences.

My fingers slid through my hair, and I pulled at the strands, feeling the burn in my scalp. The world became blurred, and the hospital spun.

FUCK.

LILA

I splashed cold water on my face and... breathed.

My reflection in the mirror reminded me of a wilted flower. Weary. Frightened. Lost. I hated hospitals. Loathed it with every fiber of my being. It reminded me too much of the past. And I was stuck in a loop. Having to relive my past and forcing myself to stay focused on Maddox.

I closed my eyes and thought of what the doctor said. Brad Coulter was dying, and there was nothing we could do.

It didn't matter how much Maddox hated his father... I saw it in his eyes. He cared. He was worried. He... *felt*.

It was a strange way of connecting all the dots. Who would have thought that the big and mighty Brad Coulter would one day fall so hard? He had been a god amongst us mortals, and now, he was... dying. That was some reality check.

I shut off the tap and leaned against the sink, rubbing a hand over my wet face. The door slammed behind me, and I jumped, swiveling around to see Maddox stalking inside. He closed it behind me. "You're in the girl's bath—"

My mouth snapped closed, when I saw the expression on his face. His furious eyes. Hurt. Scared. Need. Vulnerable. Hunger. So much raw pain.

"Maddox," I breathed, feeling my heart swell in my chest.

At the sound of his name, he rushed forward and slammed into me. My hips knocked against the sink, and I cried out, only to have his mouth capture mine.

He kissed me brutally. So needy. So greedy.

A cruel, deep kiss. Frantic and agonizing. "I need you," he fed the words

into my mouth, forcing his tongue inside.

He was so ruthless in his act, I forgot to breathe for a second. Maddox cupped my face with one hand, squeezing my cheeks. I gasped into his mouth, and his tongue swept along mine, forcing me to accept his sweet, vicious kiss.

I wrapped my arms around his head, my fingers delving into his curly, blond hair. His kiss never stopped, as he lifted me up, setting me on the surface of the sink. He roughly pushed my legs apart and forced himself in between, where he belonged.

I deepened the kiss, just as crazed as Maddox. He intoxicated me. I lost all thoughts of time and place.

Fire burned under my flesh. My stomach tightened.

Maddox groaned into my lips, and his hips jerked against mine. He swore and broke the kiss, his fist curling around my hair, to tug my head back, before he attacked my throat. He bit into my skin and suckled the pain away.

He hurt me.

He soothed me.

His palm cupped my breast, squeezing the heavy weight. There was a riot of emotions, brewing inside of me. So loud, so insane, so reckless.

I cried out, as his teeth sank deeper into my throat. It hurt. He kissed the pain away, whispering against my skin. "Lila. Lila. Lila. Lila."

Oh God, it hurt so good.

My nails dug hard into his scalp, and he grunted, a rough sound that had my core pooling with warmth.

The distant sound of the knob turning pulled me out of this insanity. My eyes snapped open, and I saw the bathroom door opening. I gasped, pushing Maddox away and gulping for air.

He stumbled back, his eyes wide and glassy. So blue... deep like the ocean. Burning with so much need. A lust so fiery, it *scared* me.

I jumped off the counter and brought a shaky hand to my lips. Two elderly women joined us in the bathroom, and Maddox pushed past them, walking away without a word, without another glance.

My skin tingled with the aftermath of our kisses, even as coldness seeped through my pores. The two women gave me a knowing look, but I quickly averted my gaze and left the bathroom.

Maddox was pacing the corridor. He didn't meet my eyes, when I settled in the chair, wringing my hands in my lap.

That... would have destroyed me.

That kiss, if it had gone any further, would have killed me.

I wasn't strong enough to stop Maddox, because I was just as greedy for him, as he was for me. Such passion was too dangerous to be tested, to be played with.

There was no way we could dangle such temptation in front of ourselves and not snap. Neither of us was strong enough to resist it. In a single heartbeat, we'd be devouring each other.

Hours later, I still hadn't moved from the chair. Maddox and I hadn't spoken a word to each other. Though, we were, both, hyperaware of each other's attention and closeness.

Savannah walked out of the room, looking completely exhausted. "Should I order dinner? You two must be hungry."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. It hurt. God, it hurt so much. Shaking, I stood up and avoided looking at Maddox. "I should leave. It's late..."

Savannah gave me a small smile and mouthed, *thank you*.

She walked back inside, but left the door open, this time. For Maddox. A silent invitation.

The back of my eyes burned. It was time for me to leave. I took a step away, my heart dropping to my feet, as I did.

Maddox's hand snaked out, and he clasped my wrist. Our eyes met. There was a heartbreaking silence between us, as if he could tell what I was thinking. He begged me with his eyes. I pleaded to him, silently.

Such foolish love it was.

"Stay," he breathed.

"I can't," I whispered.

This second lasted longer. It lasted a lifetime. This second was the beginning, the middle and the end of our love. It was the first sentence, the paragraph, the page of our incomplete story.

The blue in his eyes darkened, and I memorized every speck in them. Eyes that I could drown in, and I guess... I did. Blue eyes that were the first thing I noticed when I bumped into him in that coffee shop, almost five years ago. It was his... eyes. Always.

A second.

Maddox let go.

I walked away.

LILA

iley put her textbook away, when I walked inside our apartment, and gave me an expectant look. It must have been the expression on my face or the tear-stained marks on my cheeks, but Riley, wordlessly, opened her arms for me.

I slumped into her embrace and choked back a sob that threatened to escape. "God, it's so hard. Walking away from him hurts, and every time I do it, it chips off another piece of my heart."

She rubbed my arms, soothingly. "Why did you walk away, this time?"

"I thought we could be just friends again." My voice leaked my pain, and I shuddered, holding back another cry. "I even gave myself a little pep talk. I said I won't fall for his charms, won't succumb to his touches. But the moment he kissed me, I forgot all of it and kissed him back."

I wiped away the tears and lifted my head up, staring at Riley's face. Her brows were pinched, and she gave me a sympathetic look. "We almost had sex in the hospital's bathroom, Riley. If those two women didn't walk in on us, he would have fucked me right against that sink, while his father laid dying a few feet away."

"Well, shit."

"Exactly," I grumbled, so pitifully. "Maddox and I can't be friends anymore. Not when we can't keep our hands off each other. Especially not when he *needs* me *physically*. See, Maddox doesn't do well with emotional support. That's not how his brain works. He feels through touches and sex. Angry sex. Hate sex. Revenge sex. That's how he deals with his emotions. I...can't...do... it."

"He needs you right now, Lila."

"I know. But I can't be his friend in the morning and then his therapy sex at night. That's toxic, Riley. And we *can't* go back to having a relationship..."

Riley was quick to pick apart my words. "Why not?"

"I have my reasons." Painful reasons. But I was doing it for Maddox. I didn't walk away to protect myself. I walked away *for* Maddox. "Maddox needs a wake-up call, even amidst all the shitty things that are happening, I can't be there for him all the time. We can't be so co-dependent on each other. That's not a healthy relationship. There are some things that we have to deal with on... our own."

"And you think this is the right moment to test this? Lila, his father is dying!"

I settled down next to Riley, removing myself from her hug. "You think I'm being a bitch and inconsiderate."

She gave me a sharp nod. "Yes."

There was a pang, an ache in my chest. "Sheesh, thanks for the honesty."

"I'll call you out when I think you deserve it. But I think there's something else in your head that you're not telling me." Riley's eyes hardened and her lips thinned. "What happened that day, when you found out Bianca was pregnant?"

"I left Maddox," I croaked.

"What happened before you left him?"

I saw the look in his eyes...

"I'm tired. This was a long day, and I need some sleep."

Riley let out a deep, exhausted breath and threw her arms in the air -I *give up*.

She was letting it go for now, but I knew I couldn't run away from this conversation for long.



One week later

THE DOORBELL PINGED BEHIND ME, as I was cleaning the last table. I threw a

look over my shoulder, calling out to the late customer. "We are closed!"

The sign clearly said we were closed, why did people still walk in? I never understood that. At least twice a week, we'd get customers, past closing, who would guilt us into serving them.

"Hi, Lila."

My back shot up straight at the sound of *her* voice. I squeezed my eyes shut and took a deep breath. Bianca was the last person I wanted to see after the shit week I had.

It's hard to watch your soulmate walk away. But it's even harder to walk away from them.

I never thought leaving Maddox would be easy, but I definitely didn't think I'd suffer *this* much. Our relationship had never been all sweetness. It was pretty roses with sharp, ugly thorns.

Yeah – that was the side effect of falling in love with my best friend.

The last week was pure agony. Maddox was always on my mind. I worried tirelessly for him. Every day, about twenty times, I'd almost give in. The urge to run back to him was strong.

Sometimes, I'd call him late at night, when I knew he was sleeping and wouldn't pick up his phone. I'd hide my caller ID and let the call go to voicemail. Just so I could hear his deep, baritone voice.

I did it once. I did twice.

And then it became a habit.

I couldn't sleep without hearing his voice.

This obsessive need for Maddox grew every day. How could I say goodbye to him when my heart was still so desperately trying to hold on to him?

I faced Bianca, and the moment my eyes fell on her, I felt a sharp pang in my chest. Damn, that hurt. Her belly was swollen and bigger than the last time I had seen her. I could even see the swell over her baggy sweater. She cupped her pregnant belly, and I fought back a flinch.

This was the reminder I didn't want. Maddox was going to be a... dad. But not the father of *my* kids. The heat rose to my face, and my heart catapulted in my chest. The first wave that hit me was anger. Then envy. Resentment. Finally, it was longing. A surge of emotions brewed inside of me, threatening to spill over. For the first time, since I found out Bianca was pregnant with Maddox's child, I felt an overwhelming sense of... jealousy.

I crossed my arms over my chest. As if to barricade my heart against her

presence and her words. The last thing I wanted to do tonight was talk to my ex's baby mama.

"I didn't expect you to seek me out on your own," I said, a bitter smile on my face. It seemed I couldn't control my emotions lately.

"I'm sorry," she spilled out, looking quite flustered.

I cocked an eyebrow. "Are you scared of me, Bianca?"

She swallowed and looked around the empty restaurant, nervously. It was only the two of us in the dining area. The other two employees were in the back, cleaning up for the night. "No. Yes. Maybe. You're a... little intimidating. Sometimes. Especially right now."

"Just say what you have to say. I don't have time to play games. And please, don't give me that *I'm innocent* bullshit look. Save that for someone who'll fall for it."

Bianca started rubbing her swollen stomach, as if to soothe the baby. I had to remind myself that she was pregnant, and I had to rein in my psychotic side.

"I didn't want to come between you and Maddox. That wasn't my intention," she murmured, biting on her lips.

But she did. Except, I couldn't fault her, really.

I rolled my eyes, looking indifferent. But every cell inside me was raging, hurting, breaking. "Why didn't you tell Maddox when you found out you were pregnant? Why wait until you were six months along?"

"I was... worried and scared. I didn't know..."

"But you had to tell him the moment our relationship became public," I seethed.

"No," she stuttered. What a fucking liar. "I talked to Maddox. I told him you guys didn't have to break up. We can make it work..."

I raised my hand, halting her words. "I don't need you to speak to Maddox for me. Maddox and I have been friends, way longer than you've known him. I know him better than anyone else, and he knows me better than he knows himself. If we want to figure this out, we will. We don't need you to play mediator."

Bianca nodded, looking teary eyed.

"Anything else?"

Her gaze flitted past my head, and she avoided looking at my face. She chewed on her lip, before whispering, "Maddox and his parents are going back to Manhattan. Brad wants to be in the comfort of his own home."

What...?

Oh my God.

I stumbled back against the table, my knees growing weak. He was leaving. Maddox was leaving, and I didn't know...

My lips parted with a silent cry, and my fists clenched.

Bianca put the last nail in the coffin when she confessed her next secret. "He asked me to come with him. He said... he wanted to be there for the rest of my pregnancy and when I give birth."

"What about... his exams?"

"He dropped out for the rest of the academic year."

My emotions throttled me, and barb wires twisted around my lungs. I couldn't... breathe. Oh God. This was hell. Pure, absolute hell.

How... how did it come to this?

Oh, right. I left him.

And now *he* was leaving, going far away, and out of my reach. My lungs caved in, my stomach dropped... and the butterflies? They just died. The emptiness left a hollow ache inside of me. The silence that came with the aftermath; it was louder than any sound.

I swallowed back a cry and turned away from Bianca.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. I heard her feet shuffling away. The door opened, the bell pinged again, cold air washed inside the empty restaurant, and then she was gone. As if she was never here.

As if she hadn't just trampled over my already broken, bleeding heart.

This had been my doing; yet, it still fucking *hurt*.

It hadn't been an easy decision, but this was what I wanted for Maddox.

For him to grow up, for him to accept responsibility...

For this unborn baby to have a decent father.

I walked away for Maddox...

And, as much as it pained me, I didn't regret it.

MADDOX

wo weeks later

I FED him another small spoonful. He accepted it weakly, chewing as if it took all his strength to do such a small act. He lost all his hair in three weeks. Lost all his weight, until he was skin and bones. Ghastly pale and wrinkled. His cheeks were drawn in, and his eyes had lost their vibrant colors — a hollow look in them.

Brad Coulter was frail, almost too weak, to even sit up straight and have his own meal. In three weeks, his health deteriorated, until he needed a wheelchair to move around, and one of us to feed him, help him in and out of bed. Taking his bath, alone, became out of the question, when he passed out in the tub a week ago.

Frail. Sick. Dying.

My mother refused to bring a nurse home. She was adamant about taking care of her husband herself, but she grew weary, as the days passed, so I was forced to jump in and help.

If you asked me why I dropped out of this academic year and moved in with my parents, awaiting my father's death – I didn't have an answer.

I didn't want anything to do with my father or my mother – but here I was.

Taking care of them, as a dutiful son. That was what Lila wanted, after all. She told me I'd regret it later, if I didn't spend these last days with my

father. Maybe she was right, I didn't know.

I didn't know shit.

All I knew was that the thought of my father dying left a heavy, hollow ache in my chest. I didn't like it one bit, but it was what drove me *here*.

Back into the very mansion that I spent my childhood in, lonely, scared... unloved.

My father coughed, and I quickly dabbed the corner of his mouth. He accepted another spoonful, before he shook his head, indicating that he had enough. I placed the half full bowl on the table. He was eating less and less every day.

My mother stood up with a weary sigh. She rubbed her forehead, and I noticed the dark circles under her eyes. "Do you mind helping your father to bed? There are a few documents I have to read."

"Yeah," I said.

Brad gave me a small, tired smile. "You don't have to do this."

"You're right, I don't." Except, Lila was going to look at me with disappointment in her eyes, if I didn't.

And maybe I was doing it for... *myself*.

"C'mon, old man. Time for your beauty sleep." I pushed his wheelchair into the guest bedroom downstairs. I helped him out of his wheelchair and into the bed, tucking the comforter around his shoulders.

"Maddox," he said, his voice small and breathy. "I know I never said it before, but I am... I am... proud of you, Son."

I froze, and my stomach twisted, shock coursing through my veins. My fists started to shake, and the thick vein in my neck pulsed. My heartbeat echoed in my ears, almost too loud.

I shook my head once. "Too late," I said, smiling acidly.

Brad nodded, as if he knew that would be my response. He knew he fucked up. "Your high school graduation... your mother and I were there."

"No," I hissed. "You weren't."

His smile was forlorn. "We were. We saw you with Lila and her family and your friends."

Fuck that. He was messing with my head now.

"Why didn't approach me?"

"And ruin your special day?"

He had a point. I just didn't understand him... why?

"You were so stubborn, Maddox. Still are. We lost so many years. You

were eighteen, and I didn't know to approach my son. How to talk to you, how to be a father again. I didn't know... *how*. My relationship with you was beyond repair, and I didn't know where to start."

I seethed, even when my lungs clenched and refused to let me breathe. "And so you took the easy way out, instead of trying?"

"My way of trying was to make sure you never give up... I know I was hard on you. Too hard. But I was pushing you, because I worried, you'd either drop out of school or you'd ruin your life. One way or another."

He sighed, and his chest rattled. Breathing – a simple act, something that is second nature to humans – he struggled with it. "Remember the last time you walked out of my office. I had warned you not to hurt Lila... because you'd hurt yourself. I said you were on the path of self-destruction because I *knew*. I knew about the Carmichaels. I knew you were keeping it secret, and I... warned... you."

My back shot up straight, and I glared down at my father. "How did you know?"

His lips crooked on the side, a grin that reminded me of my own. A signature Coulter's smirk. "You were digging into her past, and you weren't as careful as you thought you were. Maddox, you forget, I have eyes and ears everywhere. Of course, I knew."

Goddamn it.

His eyes closed, and he sighed again. "I'm sorry I never said I was proud of you." His voice grew weaker, until he was whispering those words.

"Too late," I said. But this time, there was less anger, less heat.

There had been too much toxicity between us. Too much hatred, too much frustration and a whole lot of negativity. Our misunderstandings grew every year, and it pulled us apart, further and further away from each other.

It took my father to be on his deathbed for us to try and fix *this*, whatever was left of this father and son relationship. And trust me, there wasn't much left.

After making sure he was tucked in comfortably, I turned off the lights. "Good night."

He mumbled something incorrigible in return.

Numb and mentally exhausted, I stumbled into my bedroom. Turning my neck left and right, I tried to release the tension there. My skin prickled with something fierce, too many emotions, rattling inside of me.

I tugged my shirt over my head and discarded the rest of my clothes on

my bathroom's floor, before stepping into the shower.

I stood under the spray for a long minute, and with my forehead against the shower wall, I squeezed my eyes shut. What the hell was I really doing? Here, in this sterile place, that reminded me of nothing but how ugly my relationship with my parents was.

They have been trying, slowly opening up to me. We've had all meals together, had a movie night every night - *fuck* - my mother even baked my favorite carrot cake. The last time I had my mother's carrot cake was on my seventh birthday.

Shit. Fixing our relationship wasn't an easy task, when we had a time limit. If only Lila was here...

No. No. Fuck, NO!

My hand landed beside my head, and I slapped the wall. She was the last person I wanted to think about, right now, but damn it, she was everywhere. In my head, in my every thought, in my dreams.

I tried burning that stupid dreamcatcher, but it felt like I had torn out a piece of my heart. My left hand was still sore from the burn it took, when I saved that damn necklace from the fire.

The mere thought of her drove me crazy, an insane desperation for her. I quickly soaped up my body, angrily rubbing my skin, until it itched and burned. Now that Lila had made her way back into my head, I couldn't stop thinking of her.

Her voice.

Her brown eyes.

Her sweet fucking smile. Her mischievous smirk.

Her slim throat. Her scars...

Her juicy ass. Damn it. And now, I was hard.

My hand drifted down to my dick. I gripped the base and squeezed my length, before stroking myself once, twice, and then my dick jerked, as I added more pressure. My hand glided around my dick, easily, and I hissed, as the pressure grew, my hardness growing thicker in my palm. I fisted my cock tightly.

I was assaulted with every image of Lila. Her sexy grin, as she laid on the bed and legs spread open for me. I imagined Lila on all fours, ass in the air. That was the thing about imagination. You could turn it into anything you wanted.

In my head, I cupped her ass and squeezed. Slid my thumb between those

two pale, juicy globes and caressed her tight, little hole. My balls grew tight and heavier between my legs. I pumped my throbbing dick harder, as I conjured up the filthiest scene in my head.

She fights me.

Because she knows I want it.

She moans, louder. Her hips jerking, as I pinch her clit between my thumb and forefinger. She whimpers, as I drag her wetness between her ass cheeks, coating that hole with her own juices, using it as lubrication. She already came once, squirted all over my arms and chest, before she started crying and begging for my cock.

"Such a filthy girl," I growl in her ear. "Tell me, Baby. Where do you want my fat cock? Do you want to swallow my cum? Or do you want it in your cunt... or maybe you want it dripping out of your little, tight asshole."

"Please!" Lila cries out louder. Her body starts shaking, as she pushes her ass back against me. "Take me. I'm yours."

"Fuck yeah. You're mine. Always have been. Always will be."

Her asshole clenches, as I spread her cheeks apart, spitting for lubrication. Her breathing becomes harsh, and she pushes her face into the mattress, muffling her moans.

Slowly, I push forward, forcing my thick, hard length inside.

Lila cries out. "Maddox! Oh God!"

She pulses around me, clenching tighter. "It hurts. But oh, oh... please, don't stop."

"Good. Because I'm not stopping, until you're so fucking sore, you can't walk tomorrow," I growl. My hard length throbs and aches with the need to fuck her hard and deep, but I remind myself to go gently... slowly...

I thrust forward with gritted teeth and mold my body against hers. I wrap around her, my cock seated fully inside her asshole. She's stretched to capacity, bearing my thick length inside her. She's so fucking tight, I can't breathe. We're both shaking, sweating... and I'm so fucking destroyed.

Lila Garcia is everything I ever wanted, and she's mine. Every inch of her.

The fantasy broke apart, as I spurted cum all over my palm, but it quickly washed away. I came with a hiss, and I kept fisting and squeezing my cock, until every last drop was spent.

God, Lila was going to be the death of me. She killed me then and... *she still kills me now*.

I quickly washed off and walked out, drying myself and wrapping a towel around my waist. I must have passed out, without realizing, because my phone ringing roused me. The digital clock read 11:30PM. Blindly, I reached for my phone.

Bianca. Why was she calling me, instead of knocking on my door? We were literally two rooms apart. Panic flashed through me, and I grew cold. I sat up straight and answered the call. "What is it?"

"The baby is craving mint-chocolate chip ice cream."

Oh.

Her midnight cravings. "Ice cream?"

She hummed. "Mint-chocolate chip, specifically."

Mint-chocolate chip...

Lila's favorite...

I rubbed a hand over my face. "Dairy Queen is probably still open. I'll see if they have that flavor."

"Thank you." I could hear the smile in her voice. I sure as hell didn't know pregnant chicks were this much work. I hadn't been prepared for it. The cravings, mood swings, the extra emotional drama.

"Okay," I said.

She was silent for a second, and I was about to hang up, when she softly called out, "Hey, Maddox."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you," she whispered, like we were sharing a secret.

I growled and hung up.

LILA

t's strange to celebrate Christmas without Maddox," Gran said. She handed me a cup of hot chocolate, and I reluctantly took it. The moment she started speaking of Maddox, I wanted to run upstairs and hide. They didn't know that we had broken up... yet.

They knew about Maddox's father. And so, I let them believe that Maddox was with his parents... hence why he hasn't visited us... and I haven't gone to him. *Yet*.

I only came back to my grandparents' yesterday. Tonight was Christmas Eve. Maddox used to always spend the night with my family. He'd sleep on the couch (sometimes he'd sneak into my room) and we'd wake up, early in the morning, to open our presents. We'd have breakfast together.

Spending Christmas *without* him was another reminder of how quickly our relationship went from one hundred to zero.

This would have been our first Christmas as a couple. I grinded my teeth, feeling so hopeless... so helpless...

I remained silent, giving the TV all my attention. The movie ended. My grandparents said their goodnights and went upstairs to their room. The digital clock read 8PM, but they had a habit of going to bed early. Old age, they'd argue.

My eyes landed on the bowl of mixed party chips and loneliness clawed at me. Maddox would always separate my favorite kind from the rest and feed them to me. *It's the little things...*

That was what I missed the most.

The little things.

A knock on the door snapped me out of my thoughts. When another knock came, I got up to answer the door. I didn't know what I expecting, but it was definitely not *him*.

Agape, I sputtered, "Grayson?"

He looked different. Older, wiser... and a tad more handsome. He now had a beard, was still wearing glasses, and appeared to have gained more muscles. "Hey, can I come in?"

"Um, yeah, sure!" My voice came out squeaky. I haven't seen him in years. After he broke up with Riley, we lost all contact.

Grayson came inside but stayed by the door. It was then I noticed the file he was holding. "I've tried calling Maddox, but he isn't picking up. This is important and couldn't be delayed."

"What is?"

He squinted at me. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Well, shit," he muttered under his breath. "This is awkward. I thought he told you already."

"I haven't talked to Maddox in weeks."

His eyes rounded big, and he stared at me, agape. "You're shitting me, right?"

I put my hands on my hips, glaring up at him. "Do I look like I'm joking?" I hissed.

Grayson raised his hands up, in mock defense. I rolled my eyes and waited for him to continue. He shifted on his feet, suddenly looking less serious and more nervous.

"What is it?"

"I don't know exactly where to start..."

"Start at the beginning?" I prompted.

Grayson swallowed and nodded. "You might want to sit down."

He followed me into the dining room, and we settled at the table. Courteously, I offered him a glass of water. I watched, as he rubbed his chin, looking everywhere but at me. He took a slow sip of water, and I waited patiently, as he licked his lips and finally made eye contact with me. "About eight months ago, Maddox approached Simon."

Simon Manchester. Grayson's adopted father, who also happened to be a well-respected judge. What would he see Simon for?

"Maddox has been digging into your accident. He's been trying to reopen

your case."

My heart skipped, and my breath caught in my throat. My stomach dropped, and the world... ceased to exist.

The colors faded away.

Black and white... and then, I was violently thrown into the darkness.

"Lila? Lila! Hey, Lila!"

Grayson snapped his fingers in front of my face. I choked on my breath, and goosebumps peppered my flesh, as I stared at him, too stunned to move or to speak.

"Shit," Grayson swore. "I shouldn't have been the one to tell you this."

"Why?" I croaked.

"What do you mean why?"

I blinked at Grayson. No, this wasn't possible. "Why would he try to reopen my...case... Christian is his childhood friend."

"That's a question you should be asking him, not me. Because, I don't have an answer for you. I can tell you what I know, though." He patted my hand, a comforting gesture. "The Carmichaels are rich and protected by the law, in a way. They have way too much money and way too much power in their hands. Christian's father is a well-known, albeit, corrupt lawyer. He knows how to go around the law and how to get it in his and his son's favor. That's what he did before. The judge that handled your case? That was his best friend. These people, they run in the same circle, Lila. There was no way you would have won your case."

"I know," I whispered. "But then, what's the point in trying to reopen the case? We'd just lose. Again. Maddox wasted his time."

Grayson shook his head, giving me a smile full of secrets. "What do you think he has been doing the last eight months?"

I opened my mouth, but found myself wordless. I didn't know what to do with this news. Maddox hadn't told me anything about this.

When I found out about Christian... he never said anything about reopening my case.

He never said anything about fighting for... *me*.

"Maddox spent two months, trying to convince my father to work with him on this case. Then, he spent another three weeks, trying to find the best and most trustworthy lawyer. After all that? We needed proof. We needed a reason to reopen the case. Rolland Carmichael covered his tracks very well. It was almost impossible to gather the proof we needed. It took us months... and months of carefully extracting all the information. And now, we have a solid case."

Grayson nudged the file in front of me. "This is everything. The driver who took the blame? He's ready to speak in court. The cops that were on scene... Christian's friends who saw him drunk that night and getting into the driver's seat. Oh, and the security camera. You can do a lot when you have lots of money at your disposal. Maddox threw some cash at some people... and the job was done."

I didn't dare touch the file, too scared it'd burn me alive.

The world spun and grew blurry, dots scurrying across my vision. "Maddox didn't tell me..."

"I spoke with him last week. I told him I'd have everything by today, but he isn't picking up my calls."

"Last week? You mean, he was still working on this with you? All this time?" I felt faint and cold... so, so cold.

Grayson looked confused. "Yeah? Why is that surprising?"

"We broke up almost two months ago," I confessed, breathlessly. My ears were ringing, and my lungs squeezed.

His mouth rounded with an 'o,' and he nodded, slowly. "I don't know your reasons for breaking up, but Maddox has been very adamant about bringing you the justice you deserve."

And that...

That statement... decimated me.

Killed me. Ripped me apart.

Maddox wanted to bring me justice, to give me the closure I needed. All along, he was on *my* side.

All this time, he had been trying to protect *me*.

Oh God, how foolish I was. How stupid I had been. How careless I was with his heart.

My gaze landed on the brown file, and I swallowed back a cry. "Thank you, Grayson."

He cleared his throat. "You're welcome. I'll see myself out."

I closed my eyes and brought my head down to the table, resting my forehead on the surface. Grayson got up to leave, but my voice stopped him. "Riley is back in town for Christmas."

He coughed and thumped his chest. "I didn't need to know that."

Without lifting my head up, I waved him away. "Well, now you know.

Do what you want with it," I said.

Long after Grayson had left, I found myself in bed, with my phone in my hand. I debated calling Maddox. It wasn't late at night, and I knew he'd still be awake, right now. If I called him, it wouldn't go to voicemail, like it always did.

If I called him... he might pick up.

And maybe that was why I wanted to do it.

I wanted to hear his voice — not a recording. I wanted to speak with him, ask him *why*. Why he didn't tell me? *Why* he kept it a secret — another secret? *Why* he let me believe the worst... and *why* he kept working on the case, even after we broke up?

I had so many questions and absolutely no answers.

The pain burned deep into my core. Maddox was secretly taking care of me... when I left him behind, especially when he needed me the most. Now all my reasons for doing so, appeared moot.

My lungs denied me breath, and tears burned the back of my eyelids.

Maddox and I were foolishly in love...

And now? Look at us.

My thumb pressed the call button, before I could overthink it. I brought the phone to my ear, and, after two rings, Maddox answered the call.

"Hello?"

His voice. Lord, have sweet mercy on me. That gruff, deep baritone, husky voice. I missed it so much. I didn't know how much I had needed to hear his voice until now.

I tried to clear my throat, because I suddenly forgot how to speak.

"Hello?" he said again, curt and irritated. My lips twitched. He was always so impatient, just as I remembered. Some things never change.

My heart thundered. My lips parted to speak.

"Oh my God!" There was a happy giggle and then, "The baby kicked again. He's literally playing football in there. Maddox! Here, feel it."

My chest caved.

My pulse beat heavy in my throat.

My fingers twitched around my phone, tightening as I was assaulted with a wave of anguish.

Maddox sucked in a deep breath, and I imagined his big hand on Bianca's swollen belly. "Damn," he muttered. I imagined the look of awe on their faces, as they felt their baby kicking.

Tormented, I squeezed my eyes shut. "Merry Christmas," I whispered brokenly, before hanging up.

Rolling over in bed, I pushed my face in my pillow and *finally*... for the first time, since we broke up...

I let the tears fall.

I screamed.

I cried.

I raged.

And I cried some more.

I sobbed, until I didn't have any more tears.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

MADDOX

e spent Christmas morning opening presents, most of which were for the baby. Ironically, it was the first Christmas I celebrated with my family, in over eighteen years... and it would be my last.

"Oh! Look at this cute onesie." Bianca cooed and dug into more presents. Her mom had sent her two dozen parcels for Christmas. I pressed my thumbs into the back of my neck and massaged the tensed muscles there. I was bored out of my mind.

My mother sipped her tea slowly, eyeing Bianca with distrust. That look, *again*. To say my mother didn't like Bianca, one bit, was an understatement. In fact, she didn't hide it. She openly scorned Bianca, gave her the dirty looks, was quick to shut her down, if Bianca ever said anything concerning our family.

My mother barely tolerated her presence and did everything to show Bianca that she was an outsider and wasn't welcomed in our home. I kinda felt bad. *Well*, *not really*.

I never thought Savannah Coulter had the capacity to... hate. She had always been so mellow. But Bianca, apparently, brought out that side of her. The *don't-fuck-with-me-and-I-think-you're-pure-bullshit* side.

"So, have you spoken to Lila?" my mother asked, trying to sound innocent. Bianca flinched, and Mother Dearest hid her smile behind her teacup. *Here we go again*.

"No, I haven't," I grunted. "We broke up. The end. Stop asking about Lila."

Last night, I fell asleep with Lila on my thoughts.

I woke up in the middle of the night, jerked off *again* with her on my mind.

In the morning, I woke up with the memory of her taste on my lips.

Bianca cleared her throat, trying to divert the conversation, but my mother ignored her.

"She didn't even give you a call on Christmas?"

"No."

"What about-"

"No," I barked.

She gave me that fake lip quivering shit she did, every time she asked about Lila, and I'd been forced to shut her up. Who was this woman? Definitely not my mother! "I was just asking... You always get so tense whenever I mention her."

She quirked up a mocking eyebrow at me and took another sip of her tea. "It looks like the thought of her still makes you restless. She's always on your mind, it seems."

I rubbed a hand over my face, tired of this same shit every day. "Mom, stop!"

Her teacup paused halfway to her lips, and her jaw dropped. Her hand started to shake. She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again, looking like a gaping fish out of water. Her eyes turned glassy, and it was then I realized...

"You called me, Mom," she murmured, her voice breaking.

My stomach twisted, and I felt... something in my chest. A tightening sensation.

I did. I called her mom, without mocking her. For the first time since...

I swallowed past the ball of emotions stuck in my throat. "Yeah, I did," I said, before adding, "Mom."

Savannah Coulter gave me the prettiest, most real smile I had ever seen on her face.

And I finally understood what Lila had been trying to tell me.

She was right. Like always.

LILA

I stood in front of the Coulter's mansion. Security let me in through the gates, but now, I debated if this was a good idea. Randomly dropping in...

Before, I'd do it all the time.

Now? Well, things had changed.

New Year's had come and gone, a few days ago. I haven't spoken to Maddox in over six weeks. I shouldn't be here, but I wanted my necklace back. I'd fight Maddox, if I had to... but I wasn't leaving, without my dreamcatcher. Two months was more than enough time for him to calm down. That necklace was mine, and he had no right to rip it away from my throat.

I let him off before... because I knew he was angry... hurting.

But not anymore.

Before I could lose, whatever courage I had mustered up to come here, I rang the doorbell. The butler, Mr. Hokinson, opened the door, and his eyes widened at the sight of me. "Miss Garcia," he sputtered, "it's been a long time."

I nodded, smiling softly at the older man. He had to be in his late fifties or early sixties. "Is Maddox home?"

"Everyone is home," he said, gesturing for me to come inside. I could guess he wasn't aware that Maddox and I had broken up. The butler led me through the house, stopping at the dining room.

My heart galloped at the sight in front of me, before withering.

Maddox was there. He still looked the same...

I wasn't sure what I had expected. For him to be mourning our lost

relationship? To be heartbroken? Maybe I thought he'd be missing me... enough that he'd be suffering...

Like I had been. Sleepless nights, loneliness that clawed at me, every waking hour, hollow dreams. Hell, even my orgasms felt empty.

But Maddox looked just as handsome as always. He was clean shaven, and if I wasn't mistaken, his muscles looked even bulkier. I guessed he was working out more, with all the free time he had now. His hair was longer, though, and curled by his ears.

Poodle.

Maddox wasn't alone, though. Bianca stood next to him. She smiled and said something to him, too soft for me to hear. He didn't smile back – he looked anything but interested, at whatever she was saying. That shouldn't have made me feel better, but it did. I didn't want him to smile at her... Oh God, I sounded petty and jealous.

Maddox turned, and his eyes fell on me. His gaze narrowed, and I loved that I could still steal his attention, even without a word. Just a single look, and I got him.

He got me, too.

Bianca followed his line of sight, and she gasped, almost dramatically.

"Garcia," he greeted coldly.

"Coulter," I returned, with the same tone. Bianca looked back and forth between us, before quickly taking a step back. "Um, I'll leave you to it. I'm going to take a nap." She scurried away, leaving Maddox and I alone.

We were both quiet for a long moment. Arm crossed over our chests, a silent staring battle, neither of us ready to lose. The silence prolonged, until I couldn't take it anymore. My lips parted, and the first thing out of my mouth was, "I want my dreamcatcher back."

Maddox smiled acidly, his eyes gleaming, with a cruelty I had never seen before. "I threw it away."

My heart thundered. "No," I thundered. "How dare you? It was mine!"

His face darkened, and he came forward, pushing into my personal space. His fingers wrapped around my bicep, and he pulled me closer. I stumbled into him, our chests brushing lightly, and goosebumps peppered across my skin with that simple touch. His head dipped low, his breath feathered across my jaw, before he whispered in my ear, "And *you* were mine."

I still am, goddamn it!

I wrenched my arm away. "How could you?" I hissed darkly. "That

necklace..."

"Oh, Lila!" Savannah's voice pulled us apart. "I didn't know you were here! What a lovely surprise."

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the brewing anger inside me. I faced Savannah and gave her a genuine smile. It wasn't exactly her fault her son was acting like an asshole right now. "I wanted to see how Brad was doing. I worried about his health. I'm sorry if I'm intruding. I'll come back another time."

She was already shaking her head. "Oh. No, no. You're always welcome. It's been weird. Having Maddox here, but not you. You've been missed. Now that you're here, stay for dinner."

Maddox made a displeased sound under his breath, and I grinned harder. "Oh, I would *love* to. Thank you, Savannah."

He glared.

I winked.

He couldn't kick me out now.

Dinner was awkward, and that was an understatement. Bianca appeared to be intimidated by my presence. She avoided my eyes and rarely spoke. Maddox's face was cold and stony, and he stayed stubbornly quiet. Savannah and Brad tried to break the tension with a bit of small talk, here and there, but those conversations ended just as dry.

Once our plates were cleared, desserts were served. I only had one spoon of the double-layered custard and chocolate mousse when Maddox, pushed his chair away, the wooden legs screeching and he stood up. His face remained impassive, and his gaze locked with mine. Blue that burned with a ferocity that left me breathless. The muscles ticked in his jaw, and his eyes flared with *something*...

Wordlessly, he turned around and stalked away. I watched him, until he disappeared upstairs. I slowly licked my spoon, appreciating my first...and last bite of the chocolate mousse. "Excuse me, please," I said, getting up and pushing away from the table, too. "Please tell your chef, this was the best custard I've ever had."

With a small smile, I followed after Maddox. Because I knew that was what he wanted.

I found him in his old bedroom. The door was ajar, a silent invitation. I walked inside, and there he was, standing in the middle of the dimly lit room.

His back was to me, and he stood so still. Not even a slight twitch. Barely breathing. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was a statue.

I closed the door behind me and took a step forward, farther into his room. More into his space. He knew I was here. Could feel me. I knew, because his hands clenched into fists.

Sharing one space with Maddox was overwhelming. My body was hyperaware of his presence, his closeness. His scent. The room smelled like him. A heavy musky scent and his cologne. I missed his smell. It used to comfort me on cold nights and make me sigh on warm ones.

"Maddox," I breathed.

In response, he swiveled around. His face was dark and cold. *But his eyes...*

"Do you hate me?" There was a manic look in his eyes, a kind of desperation I had never seen before. Stormy. Angry. Crazed. *Anguished*.

I shook my head, my lips quivering. "I hate you... because I *can't* hate you."

His chest rattled with a sharp breath. "Get out, Garcia."

"Why?"

"Because *I hate you*." His lips spoke the cruel words, his gleaming blue eyes screamed something else.

"Lies," I whispered. "Lying has become common in our relationship now, hasn't it?"

He took a step forward, as if he couldn't stop himself, from wanting to be closer to me. Maddox paused, and his chest rumbled with a growl. "There is no relationship. There is no us, anymore."

"You're a terrible liar, Coulter." I called him out on his bullshit and smiled, because I knew I was right.

"Get. Out. Lila."

I nudged my chin up, stubbornly. "Make me."

Maddox stalked forward; his face twisted with fury. He grasped my arm and dragged me out of his room, pushing me out of the door. His grip tightened on me, and his head lowered, our eyes leveled. "You are what killed me slowly... without any mercy, Lila. You used to be my cure. Now, you're the plague. And I'm dying. *You kill me, Lila*. Your deceitful eyes. Your wicked smile. Your treacherous voice. So get out and spare me this sweet, torturous death."

One look.

One second.

One breath.

Our heart broke in unison.

He slammed the door in my face and that was it. He left me with his cruel words, wrenching my heart out of my chest, and carelessly throwing it at my feet.

LILA

ne week later

I PICKED UP THE CALL, without looking at the caller ID, practically stabbing the green button. I already knew who it was. I had been waiting for her call for hours, sitting gingerly on my bed and trying not to break down from overthinking *everything*.

Riley's breathy voice came through. "You were right," she screeched. "Jesus Christ, you were so right!"

Shock rippled through my whole body, and I forgot how to breathe. Chaotic feelings gripped the center of my chest. "You got it?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna email it to you, right now." There was some rustling sound in the background, before Riley came back on the call. "Done."

I opened my email on my laptop, and there it was. Everything I needed. All the proof.

"You did it." Holy shit. "Is there anything you can't do, Babe?"

She giggled. "Well, I have lots of contacts."

"You're a genius."

Riley let out a happy squeal, and a laugh bubbled from my chest. "Wait, are you still dropping out this semester?"

There was only one semester left. My last one. Four more months and I'd be done. Have a Harvard degree in my hand, proof that I had accomplished what I had set out to do.

Four years ago, Harvard was my dream.

Now?

Maddox was the destination I longed for. "He needs me here," I said.

A week ago, Maddox practically threw me out of his life. Granted, yes, I walked away first. But now? Well, I had come to my senses.

I was done with all the lies. And the secrets. I was tired of hiding and walking away from the man I promised to never give up on. It was time to put an end to it.

Maddox had been silently fighting for me... and I had been doing the same. Except, we were too stubborn to admit it. Too prideful.

All this time, he had been protecting me.

And I thought I was protecting him.

But we both fucked up...

"Riley, you always ask me why I left Maddox. The reason why I was so adamant about staying away from him..."

She sighed. "Yes?"

"I saw it in his eyes that day," I confessed quietly, my grip on the phone growing tighter. "That look. Maddox never thought about having children. I knew he always thought he'd be a bad father. He was going to walk away from Bianca and the baby. I found out he was going to pay Bianca off. He didn't want anything to do with the pregnancy or the baby. He didn't think he could be a father, and I needed him to realize that he was capable of being one. On his own. Without being dependent on me to show him the way, to teach him how to do it."

Maddox Coulter had so much love to give, and I didn't want to be selfish to take all that love for myself.

"You know what made me walk away? I didn't want Maddox to choose me over the baby. I was always his number one. His only choice. No matter what, I will always be his only one. I saw it in his eyes, Riley. So, I made the choice for him. I *dared* him to be the dad, his father couldn't be."

I knew Maddox better than he knew himself. He was scared of losing me, scared of having Bianca come between us. He panicked... and so, he was going to take the easy way out.

I didn't want to be the reason this child didn't have a father.

The more I pushed him away, the closer it got him to Bianca.

Riley was silent for a long minute. She let out a sharp breath, her tongue making a clucking sound. "I don't know what to say, Lila. You have a messy

way of thinking over things."

I let out a humorless laugh. "I fucked up, I know. I thought I was doing the right thing. *For* Maddox."

"You know what your problem is, the both of you?" Riley questioned, although she didn't wait for an answer.

"Maddox will do anything to protect you. He will fight for you, even if it means losing himself in the process. And you will do the same. The two of you are so in love, so stubborn, that you'd risk your own happiness, for each other. I saw how it killed you to walk away from Maddox, yet, you did it... because you thought it was the right thing to do. And Maddox? All this time, he was caring for you in his own messy ways. All the lies, all the secrets... it was all because..."

"Because he loved me and he wanted to spare me any more pain."

"Yup."

I pressed the print button and watched, as the documents Riley had sent me, printed out. "So foolishly in love, doing foolish things, and protecting each other like a fool."

"What a pair!"

I grabbed the freshly printed papers in my hand. It was time to put an end to *all* of this, and these papers were everything I needed to do it.

"What are you going to do now?" Riley muttered. I could sense the smile on her face, even though I couldn't see it.

What am I going to do now? Well, that was simple.

With certainty and a firm determination, I closed my laptop and grinned. "Fight for my man."



I FOUND myself in front of Maddox's house again. Unlike last time, I wasn't nervous or second guessing my decision. I stood on the stairs outside the main door and called him – this time, I didn't bother hiding my caller ID.

His phone rang twice, before he picked up. "What do you want?"

"Always so cheery, I see," I taunted.

"Lila," he warned.

"I need to talk to you. Come outside." I killed the call, without waiting for his response. I didn't want to give him a chance to say no.

But I guess, I forgot how stubborn Maddox could be.

I waited ten minutes in the cold.

Thirty minutes later, I sat on the stairs... waiting. Tugging my jacket closer to my neck, I wrapped my shawl over my mouth and nose.

I called him again. He didn't pick up. I paced the driveaway, up and down, left and right.

Forty-five minutes had gone by and still no Maddox. After the fourteenth call, he finally picked up, only to bark out a single word. "*Leave*."

I stared blankly at my phone, when he hung up. Well... okay, then. Time for plan B (because I already knew Maddox was going to make this difficult).

I got the blankets and snacks from my car and parked my ass on his porch. I used a blanket as a cushion, since the stairs were rock hard and rough. An hour later, all my snacks were gone. The sun had disappeared behind heavy clouds, and I could hear the thunder from far away.

I unlocked my phone and sent Maddox one last message. *It's going to rain...I'm still outside. I'm not going to leave until we talk.*

Tucking my phone away, I cuddled up under the blankets. It was getting colder now, even with my heavy winter coat, boots and gloves. *I'm waiting*. *Come to me*, *Maddox*.

The wind picked up, and my teeth started chattering. Thunder rolled through the sky. The sky was completely clouded over, growing darker. The drizzle started next.

I grinned.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Sev-

"For fuck's sake, Garcia!"

I didn't even get to ten. I peeked over my shoulder, with a stupid grin on my face. "Couldn't bear the thought of me sitting here, cold and in the rain?"

Maddox stalked outside and slammed the door closed behind him. "What. Do. You. Want?"

"Tell me... the... truth," I said, through chattering teeth.

He stopped beside me; his shoes next to my thighs. Maddox glowered down at me and crossed his arms over his wide chest. I could see his muscles bulging through the sweater, and I suddenly forgot what I came here for.

"What truth?" he snapped.

"Grayson told me..."

His expression was thunderous. "Yeah. *So?*" he seethed. "What do you want to know?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked quietly.

"You never gave me a chance to."

"You could have yelled it in my face," I shot back, leaving the comfort of the blankets and standing up.

Maddox and I were toe to toe. His jaw clenched, and his shoulders tightened. A strong wind blew over us, and I shivered, feeling the winter coldness seeping through the layers of clothes I had on.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked again. "Why did you let me believe the worst?"

His blue eyes flared, but his lips clammed shut. He stood stubbornly quiet. I stabbed a gloved finger into his chest. "Tell me! I want to know!"

"Because," Maddox barked. His arm snaked out sharply, and he gripped my bicep, shaking me. His head dipped low, his cold breath fanning over my frozen lips. "Because I'd rather you believe the worst in *me* than give you hope, only to have it snatched away from you!"

He released me abruptly, and I stumbled back. Maddox made a wounded sound in the back of his throat, as he ran his hand over his head, his fingers tugging on his hair. "I didn't know if I'd be able to gather all the proof I needed. I didn't know if we could reopen and win this case! I didn't fucking know, and I needed to be prepared. I didn't want to see that hope in your eyes, only for it to wither away, if we couldn't… if we couldn't… fuck, Lila! WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?"

"I want you," I barely breathed through my cold, freezing lips. "Just you."

"Stop," he croaked.

"Thank you," I whispered. "For finally telling me the truth. That's what I wanted to hear."

His lips curled with a sneer. "Leave now."

"Not until you see this." I grabbed the papers I had brought with me, pushing them toward him.

Maddox snatched the papers from my hand and glowered at the documents. "What is this?"

"Bianca... she's lying."

His brows furrowed. For a long time, I had a nagging feeling in my chest about Bianca and her pregnancy. At first, I told myself I was distrustful of her because I had been jealous.

But then the feeling grew, until I couldn't deny it any longer.

So, Riley and I did some digging. Hospital records, phone calls... text messages...

Maddox stiffened. "Bianca gave birth last night."

Oh, well...

"The baby would have been premature, right?" I slowly questioned, watching for his reaction.

"He wasn't." It was a boy. This baby would have been Maddox's son...

Maddox confirmed what I already knew. It wasn't surprising, since Bianca was officially a week overdue. She was farther along than what she had told us.

"You're not the father," I said.

Maddox handed me back the papers. His face was impassive, for a mere second, before he pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He put one between his lips, without lighting up the end. Maddox leaned against the wall, rubbing his thumb across his jaw.

I watched him... finally noticing his lack of reaction to the news.

"You knew," I accused, my voice hardening.

He let out a dry, humorless laugh. "Bingo, Sweet Cheeks."

My eyes fell on the papers in my hands, before finally meeting his again. "I don't understand."

"*Lila*," he said my name like a taunt, "I found out a week after you walked out on me. I'm not stupid. I did my own digging, because I didn't trust Bianca. If you had chosen to stay... you would have known."

"All this time... you knew?!"

He nodded, the smile on his face pure acid.

"Then why did you bring Bianca here? What was all of this?"

Maddox kept the cigarette between his teeth, chuckling. "Bianca needed a place to hide, while she was pregnant. Oh, by the way... the father of her baby is her boyfriend. The son of her father's driver. She fell in love... but Daddy Dearest refused to accept the relationship. He was the guy on the wrong side of town, and there was no way, the big and mighty Jonathan, was going to accept him, as the father of his grandchild. He threatened to disown Bianca, so she lied. She said the baby was mine. She needed time. To give birth, to wait until she was twenty-one, so she could have full access to her trust fund."

Holy shit.

I blinked at Maddox, too shocked to formulate any other words. "She told

you all of this?"

"Yes."

"When?"

Maddox spit the cigarette out. "Before I found out my father was dying."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I didn't know if I was just angry or too overwhelmed to feel anything else.

"I was going to tell you... but then," Maddox broke off, shaking his head. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

The muscles in his jaw tightened. The barrier fell away from his eyes, and Maddox showed me what he was hiding. The pain. The chaos in his heart. *Everything*.

"You didn't leave me once, Lila. You walked away from me three times."

I opened my mouth to argue, but then I saw the mask of fury on his face, and I wisely shut up and let him continue. "Once, when you found out about Christian. You never gave me a chance to explain. You needed me, but you pushed me away. You robbed me of the chance to be your knight. To take care of you, while you were hurting. The second time you walked away, you wrenched my heart out of my chest and took it with you. And the third time?"

He paused, giving me a pained smile. "The third time was the worst. My father was dying, and I needed you. But you walked away, without a second glance."

I finally understood... why.

My heart dipped to my empty stomach, where there used to be butterflies, leaving my chest hollow... and *aching*.

My scars itched, a phantom echo of the real pain. My scars burned fiercely, a reminder that Maddox used to soothe the hurt away... but not anymore.

I clenched my chest over my winter coat, the tears burning my eyes. "You were angry at me. For leaving. *This* was you punishing me. This prolonged separation was my punishment for leaving you."

"For breaking your promises," he rasped darkly.

The sky opened up, and the rain came down on us, drenching us. Maddox barely flinched, as the storm raged on us.

I was so cold, frozen down to my bones... but I couldn't find myself to care. I drowned in his blue eyes and prayed he'd save me.

"I'm still falling for you, Maddox," I whispered. Falling. Drowning. The rain washed my tears away.

"Liar," he growled, his brows furrowing. His expression was stormy. Pained. Thunderous.

My lips twitched with a bittersweet smile. "What else do you want me to do? I tried. Maddox. I'm trying..."

For you. For us.

My hand went to my neck, to grab onto my necklace, like I always did. My anchor. My fingers brushed against my bare throat, and my breath hitched at the bitter reminder.

No dreamcatcher.

His eyes darkened, almost furiously. His jaw tightened, and I could hear his molars grinding. "Nothing," he said. "Just like you did nothing when I begged you to stay. The gates are behind you, Lila. You can leave now. You're not needed anymore."

LILA

said I'd fight for Maddox, but I couldn't fight for him, if I were bedridden with pneumonia. So, against my own accord, and because I knew I wouldn't win a fight in the rain, I drove home, after Maddox slammed the door in my face. Again.

I spent thirty minutes in the tub, as I tried to warm up my body. Then, I spent another two hours in front of the fireplace, and after four cups of hot cocoa, I was finally warm again.

My gran mumbled under her breath, as she packed blankets around me, but she didn't ask any questions. Maybe it was the look in my eyes, but I truly didn't have the energy to give her an explanation tonight.

Hours later and late at night... I was finally in bed, thinking of my next step. Was I pissed that Maddox played me? Yes. I was rightfully angry, frustrated and... *hurt*. The Maddox I knew would never purposefully be so... vindictive.

But then I realized, it was because of *me*.

I made him snap. I turned him into this furious, ugly beast.

Walking away from him... breaking my promises... turning my back on him when he *needed* me the most, I *tainted* our friendship.

I just wanted us to go back to the old Maddox and Lila. Team MALA – invincible and untouchable. Without all the misunderstandings, hurt and miscommunications.

My mission to go back to being Team MALA would start tomorrow. How long could Maddox stay angry at me? Another week? Another month...?

We'll see...

Because I was fighting *for* him, this time.

I was just drifting off to sleep, when I heard it. The scratching sound outside my window. A thump. A louder sound. More scratching.

Was someone trying to break in? Shit! I frantically looked around my room, searching for some kind of weapon. Where the hell was my baseball bat?

A knock on my window made me pause.

I clenched the bedsheet closer to my body and eyed the window.

More scratches. Another knock, louder this time. More desperation in it.

And then...

His voice.

"Lila."

Oh my God!

"Lila," he called out louder.

I scrambled off the bed and rushed to my window, practically ripping away the curtains in my haste. There he was. Maddox.

Looking utterly handsome and breathtaking under the moonlight.

He balanced himself on the roof and gripped the edge of the window, staring at me with a look I have never seen before.

Maddox was here. Outside my window. Demanding for me to open up and let him in... hours after kicking me out of his house. Oh, the irony. Why were we such a mess together?

Wordlessly, I cracked the window open, and sidestepped, to let him in. Maddox stumbled inside and then straightened to his full height.

I forgot how small he made my room feel, whenever he was in here.

His presence was imposing, like a storm crashing through. Maddox towered over me, and I looked down at my bare arms. My skin was full of goosebumps.

His gaze slid over me, taking everything in. I was wearing a tank top and my sleeping shorts. This was the most skin he was seeing, since our breakup.

"What are you doing here?" I finally asked.

He cocked his head to the side. "I'm asking myself the same question."

When a cold air gushed through, I closed the window and leaned against the sill. He inspected my room, his attention falling on a photo of us on my nightstand. Our graduation picture. The day he gave me our dreamcatcher. We were both silent for a very long time, the tension in the room growing thicker.

I wasn't cold anymore. My skin flushed under his rapt attention, and I couldn't look away from his face. Thick eyebrows. Blue eyes. A strong nose. Full lips. Squared jaw and what appeared to be three-days' worth of stubble. His handsome, rugged face.

Our eyes met again.

My heart thudded.

And then I felt it... the *butterflies* in my stomach. The butterflies I thought I had lost before. They were never gone. Just silent. Waiting for me to finally snap out of it. Waiting for *him.*..

He slid closer, taking one step toward me. I gripped the windowsill, so I wouldn't do something stupid, like reach out to him, begging him to kiss me.

He leaned forward, his chest brushing lightly against mine. My nipples pebbled through my tank top, and my breasts felt tighter and heavier.

"Lila."

I shuddered, as my name rolled off his tongue, like he was tasting molasses. He didn't speak out my name with a taunt. No, it was a plea. My name on his tongue was a whisper, a sacred prayer.

His hands came up, and I waited, with bated breath, before he cupped my face in his much bigger palms. His thumb brushed across my jaw.

"Tell me a lie," Maddox rasped, caging me in with his eyes. There was nowhere to run.

"I hate you."

His eyes darkened with pain, before his lips slammed into mine, stealing my words and my breath away.

My arms curled around his head. Our lips clashed together, fighting, breaking apart and meeting again, like a wild, angry wave across the shore. The kiss deepened, turning desperate. Furious. There was nothing sweet about this kiss, but it was maddening.

The heat between us scorched our skin, as I clung to him, kissing him back, with just as much frustration and frenzy.

The kiss lasted long, until we lost our breath. The world spun and swayed under my feet, but I didn't care. I didn't want my lips to separate from his. I didn't want this to end.

This kiss.

His mad, mad kiss.

This touch.

His mad, mad touch.

These lips.

His mad, mad lips.

I knew Maddox Coulter was my destination, and *this* reaffirmed it. This feeling in my chest that no longer felt hollow.

Our pent-up anger, weeks of frustration, and months of misunderstandings bled through this kiss. "I'm so angry with you," he growled, into my lips.

My fingers curled into his hair, and I tugged it, hard, bringing out a hiss from him. "Good. Be angry."

That was all the affirmation he needed.

He shoved his tongue into my mouth, tasting every inch of me, forcing me to submit to his assault. Maddox attacked my mouth, and this kiss was purely animalistic.

Hurt me.

Heal me.

Hurt me.

Save me.

Maddox wrapped an arm around my waist, and he dragged us back. We tumbled onto my bed, and he crawled over my body. Without breaking the kiss, he ripped off my tank top. I bit his lip, tasting his blood, and a snarl tore from his mouth, pouring down my throat.

He cupped my breast, squeezing and making me gasp into his bleeding lips. His fingers twisted and tugged my nipples, hurting me with his torturous touch. The pleasure came with the pain. I cried out; I kissed him harder.

Clothes disappeared, naked skin met each other, our bodies clashed together. We were fighting; we were kissing. This was utter madness, and everything I had craved. Maddox finally forced his mouth away from mine, and we both gasped, breathless.

He shocked me by straddling my chest. Lust masked his face, while his eyes matched the storm raging between us. His cock sprung forward, thick and long. He gripped his hard length and rubbed the tip across my lips. Precum covered the engorged head, and I licked my lips, tasting his slick essence.

Maddox groaned. He fisted his cock, and I parted my lips. His eyes flared darker, and he forced his length into the wet heat of my mouth and down my throat. I gagged, tears burning the back of my eyes. My nose tingled, as I

tried to breathe and take *all* of him.

This position was different. I was completely vulnerable to Maddox, and it seemed to feed that thunderous beast in him.

I couldn't breathe.

He couldn't breathe.

Maddox grunted, as the tip of his cock hit the back of my throat. I closed my lips around his length. He throbbed inside my mouth. I clenched my thighs tighter, feeling the insistent pulse between them. My cheeks hollowed, as I sucked him.

He shuddered, the veins in his neck bulged, and I felt incredibly... powerful. Even though *he* was dominating *me*.

His hot shaft jerked in my mouth, as I used my tongue on his thick, hard length.

There was need in his eyes.

A frantic look on his face.

His hand curled around my neck, and his fingers brushed along my throat, feeling his hard cock, as I deepthroated him. I gagged when he pushed deeper and then gasped when he pulled out, without warning. He fisted his hardness, and with a grunt, he released all over my neck, my mouth and my chest.

I licked my lips, tasting him.

He swore. "Fuck."

I grinned, lost in this euphoria. Drunk and addicted to him. Long ago, I plummeted head first into love and lust with Maddox. Tonight was proof of how much I craved him.

"I made you dirty," he growled, his voice rusty and gruff.

This was everything depraved. This was carnage. This was our mad, mad love. Ugly and beautiful. Desperate and passionate.

I reached out, curled my arms around his shoulders, and pulled him down to my lips. I kissed him with a violence of my own. I spread my thighs, and Maddox settled between them. I could feel *him*, rubbing his tip over my wet folds. My hips raised, chasing more of his teasing touch.

When I pulled away a little, our lips still lingered against each other. His minty breath mingled with mine, and I found myself smiling at the familiarity. My lips feathered over his jaw, before I licked a small path down his neck. His weakness, I knew that.

Maddox released a hiss, and his body tightened at the same time I licked his prominent Adam's apple. His throat moved, as he swallowed hard.

"Lila..."

I reached between us and wrapped my fingers around his dick, pushing him inside of me. Where I wanted him. Where I needed him. My heated core clenched, and I whimpered, as he slowly filled me.

His nose flared.

His jaw twitched.

His body shuddered.

I moaned.

He grunted.

I whimpered.

He growled.

I dug my fingers into his chest, right over his pounding heart. "Maddox—"

His hips jerked against mine, and I didn't finish my sentence. My mind went blank, and a desperate moan slipped from me.

Maddox bit down on my lip, leaving a painful sting behind, as his hand circled around my throat. He thrust hard inside, stretching me with every thick inch of him. "Take it like a good girl," he said, in a low and guttural voice. I clenched around him in response.

"Fuck," he grunted in my ear. "Just like that, Baby. Squeeze me good and let me fuck you like I need to. Like you want me to. Your pussy is goddamn therapeutic, Lila."

My eyes fluttered shut, as he pulled out and thrust back in, just as hard. There was nothing gentle or sweet about this. Maddox was using me, desperately chasing his release through my body, ridding himself of that pent-up anger inside of him... through me.

Maddox Coulter was my hell and my haven.

He killed me.

I killed him.

We were the cure and the plague.

The poison and the antidote.

Maddox's hands slid behind me, cupping my ass, as he raised my hips into the air. He found his stride, and, in this position, his shaft hit every sweet spot inside me. My eyes rolled in the back of my head. My nails dug deeper into his chest, permanently marking myself into his flesh.

His lips smashed into mine, when I came with a cry. Maddox muffled any sounds I made, and he groaned into my mouth, as he found his own release.

He collapsed onto me, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. Our

breaths came out harsh, and we fought to regain our equilibrium. His heart thundered against mine, and I wanted to weep. For all the days we had lost. Because we had been so stupid.

"Maddox."

"Shh, Lila."

"Don't leave," I whispered, still trying to catch my breath. "Please."

His hips flexed, and I felt his semi-hardness inside me. "I'm not. Not yet."

Maddox buried his head into my neck, and I felt his lips on my throat. A brief kiss. A whisper of his lips. He rubbed his nose against my throat, with such tenderness, it brought tears to my eyes.

I love you.

My eyes fluttered close. Our breathing evened out, but our bodies stayed connected. I must have drifted off to sleep, because the next time I was blinking my eyes open, I felt a warm cloth rubbing my skin.

I smiled, stupid and sleepy, at Maddox. He was cleaning off the mess he left on me. I curled on my side, as he tugged the blankets around me. His thumb brushed across my jaw, and his face was devoid of all the anger I had experienced before.

He looked at me like my Maddox used to. The same tender expression on his face. That soft look in his blue eyes. For me. Always for me.

His gaze lingered on my throat, and unconsciously, I brought my hand to it. My fingers slid over something cool...

My eyes widened, and I gasped, sitting up.

Our dreamcatcher.

My heart thudded. I clenched the necklace in my hand and choked back a sob. Maddox forced my fingers opened, and he slid his thumb over the dreamcatcher.

"Don't lose it. Don't break it. Because if I ever take it again, there won't be another second chance. I'll burn it. I'll burn *us*."

Maddox wasn't talking about the dreamcatcher. He was talking about... himself.

I gripped his wrist, when he tried to step back. "Don't leave."

He shook his head slowly. "Go to sleep, Lila. I don't want your Pops to catch me here in the morning. Since I just dicked down his granddaughter, hard, while he peacefully slept down the hall."

Oh. Yeah. Shit. We just did... that.

A small giggle escaped past my lips.

He cocked his head to the side. "Damn. My dick must be *that* good. I just made you giggle."

I watched, as he climbed out of my window, and closed it behind him. Falling back into bed, I closed my eyes and finally... breathed.

We hadn't solved all our issues yet. There were many things that were still very much problematic, and we still needed to talk.

But, for the first time in months, I fell asleep with a smile and hope, flaring my chest.

MADDOX

wo months later

IF FIVE MONTHS AGO, someone had asked me if this would be my life, I probably would have laughed in their faces. I didn't exactly know where life would take me when I dropped out of Harvard, almost four months ago. Lila and I broke up, and I came back to Manhattan with my parents and low expectations.

And now?

Well... my relationship with my parents was not perfect, but we were cordial and respectful. We, somehow, found a middle ground. All the years of misunderstandings and miscommunication, all the hurt... it somehow blended together, and we realized that the only way to break through that cycle was to address it.

So, once a week, we did family therapy.

My parents and I spent our time, fixing that broken thread between us.

My mother became my mom.

My father? Well... he was still dying.

And Lila?

My little dragon. Fierce and beautiful. Brave and passionate.

Lila didn't give up this time. Oh no, she fought me, teeth and claws, until I had no choice but to let her into my life again. She fought *for* me.

She had been right. Again.

We turned something beautiful into something ugly, without even realizing *we* were the reason for all the hurt. Not her past or mine. Not Christian or Bianca. It was all... *us*.

Our stubbornness. Our pride. Our need to protect each other in our own messy ways. There was an angry beast inside of me, ugly and vindictive. I was feeding it, unconsciously. And Lila? She had a fucked-up way of rationalizing things.

I regretted all of what I'd done. Ripping that dreamcatcher away? That was our breaking point. Hurting her deliberately over Bianca? That was where I fucked up.

I was going to tell her the truth in the hospital... but when she left *again*, walked away, without a second glance... something snapped in me. The echo was loud, the sound harsh in my own ears, as she ripped my heart from my chest and took it with her.

I hurt her.

I hurt me.

Giving her back our dreamcatcher was the beginning of fixing whatever we had broken between us. That night, I came to her with all my frustration, all the chaotic feelings inside of me. Lila embraced them... she held me, while I took from her. Again and again.

When she fell asleep with me still inside her, I stayed awake for hours. Just looking at her sleeping face. So beautiful. So trusting.

I hated what I had done to her...

So that night, I wrapped my pinky around hers and made another promise.

A solemn vow.

I pinky promise that....

"Hey, Baby." She wrapped her arm around my waist, and her lips pressed against my shoulder blades.

"Garcia."

She bit me through my shirt. "Coulter."

"Chihuahua."

"Poodle."

Lila walked around and faced me. There was a tender smile on her face. The black circles under her eyes were gone. She looked healthier again... happier. Whole. Slaying like my favorite dragon. My only, little dragon.

God, how I fucked up.

"Your father wants to go down to the lake."

I scowled at that. "It's a bit cold today. I told him we'd go for a walk down by the lake tomorrow."

Lila scooped my hands in hers and squeezed. "Yeah. But he wants to go *today*."

There it was. *That* look I had been waiting for, but wasn't ready for. I scrubbed a hand over my face. "Do you think...?"

Lila slowly shook her head. "I don't know. I woke up in your arms today, and I didn't want to think about *it*. But then I saw him in that wheelchair, skin and bones, grimacing every time he swallowed and barely able to form a sentence..."

I swore under my breath. Wild emotions clogged my throat. "I'm not ready, Lila."

"I know. But I'll be here, Maddox. I'll be right here." She showed me her pinky and gave me a wobbly smile.

I wrapped my pinky around hers. "Promise," she whispered.

"Maddox." My father's sickly voice broke us apart. I turned around and saw my mom wheeling him toward us. He was dressed comfortably to go out. Spring was upon us, early this year, but it was still quite windy and a bit chilly out.

I cleared my throat. "Ready?"

He nodded, and I took the handles of his wheelchair and pushed him outside. The lake was on our property, only a seven-minute walk away. Lila and my mom followed behind us, from a safe distance away.

After a short walk, we reached the bench that overlooked the lake. I settled his wheelchair beside the bench and took a seat.

"Did you want to talk to me?" I knew there was something... I could tell by his tensed silence. And the fact that my mom and Lila stayed a few feet away and didn't join us. That meant, whatever my father had to say to me, it was between the two of us.

"Always so perceptive," he chuckled, only to end up in a coughing fit. I patiently patted his back and gave him a minute to gather himself again. My eyes fell on the blood in the corner of his mouth, and I quickly swiped it away with his handkerchief.

His hand shook, as he gave the back of mine a gentle pat. I stared down at our hands. His, wrinkled, bony and frail. Mine, big, strong and healthy. The sight of our hands touching made me realize how far our relationship had come.

Time didn't erase the past.

But it did heal some of the hurt.

He took a shaky breath. "My biggest mistake was letting you think I wasn't proud of you, Maddox."

I flinched, not expecting this conversation. My hand dropped from his, clenching into a fist.

He didn't pause. "Despite everything, you became the man I always wanted you to become. You are capable of many great things, Son. You're not unworthy."

Ah fuck.

I opened my mouth to stop him, but he spoke over me in his sickly, trembling voice. "You are worth so much, and I was a shitty father, for never telling you that."

My father clumsily grasped for my hand again, and he tugged me forward. I left the bench and squatted down in front of him, where he wanted me. We were eye level now. His weak hands squeezed mine.

I closed my eyes, feeling the burn behind my lids. "I just wish we had more time together," he said.

Spending the last four months with my father made me realize that I wanted that too. I wanted all the lost time, and I wanted more. I wanted tomorrow, next week, next month and next year.

"I'm sorry," he breathed, his voice cracking.

I bowed my head over our hands. We stayed like this for a long minute. The more time I spent like this, the harder it became for me to... *breathe*.

The ache in my chest intensified. "I'm sorry," he said again, as if last time wasn't enough.

"Dad," I murmured, the wind carrying my voice.

His chest rattled with a choked sound. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," I said tightly, "Dad."

We stayed like this for a long time. Maybe thirty minutes. Maybe an hour. Maybe more.

Mom and Lila eventually joined us. I finally lifted my head up, to see my mom standing behind my dad, her hands on his shoulders. Lila came to stand beside me. After a silent second, she reached for me, that invisible thread tugging her closer. Lila placed her hand on my shoulder.

My chest expanded, as I finally took a real breath, without my lungs

feeling like they were being crushed under a weight.

My father gave me a weak smile. He nudged his chin toward Lila and gave me a nod of approval. I chuckled, feeling the tension dissipating from my neck.

This was the beginning of the end.

LILA

rad Coulter passed away a day later, surrounded by his small family. I held Maddox's and Savannah's hand, as he took his last breath, in his own bed.

The funeral took place the next day, a cloudy and windy day. The place was crowded. Brad Coulter, after all, was a respected and loved man to the world. The service was all a blur to me, and the ceremony wrapped up quickly. Many people approached Maddox, sharing their condolences.

He stood stoic beside me, his fingers wrapped around mine. He never let go, and I didn't either.

Savannah stepped up to the podium. She cleared her throat, grabbed the mic and addressed the crowd. They had been waiting for her eulogy.

She stared at the crowd for a long moment, shifting from foot to foot. Maddox's hand tightened around mine.

Savannah swiped away her tears and took a shuddering breath. When she finally started speaking, her voice was choked with tears. "I don't even know what I'm supposed to say. I just lost my husband, and I'm expected to say a few words about love, family... death... when my wounds are still very much fresh. The Brad Coulter everyone knew, he is... was vastly different from the Brad I knew. You see, he came from nothing. Twenty-eight years ago, we barely even had a dollar to spare. Brad was a self-made man, and till the very end, he never lost sight of what was important to him."

Savannah eyed Maddox, and they shared a silent conversation.

"I fell in love with Brad when I was eleven. He was my first love, my first kiss... I remember the first time I saw him. It wasn't anything romantic.

Actually, if you heard the real story behind our first meeting, you'd think I was lying. I remember..."

She broke off, choking on her cries.

"Brad and I got married at a court house. We exchanged the cheapest rings. Rings that we had bought from the gas/convenience store. It was the simplest wedding, but it was the best day of my life, second to the day I gave birth to our son. Brad taught me to be strong, to always chase what I want in life. He loved unconditionally. He wasn't always good at showing it, but he *loved*. Hard. He'd whisper his accomplishments to me, and he'd whisper his regrets."

Her eyes clung to Maddox, desperate for him to listen, to *hear* her unsaid words. "His last words to me were that he wished he had more time with *us*."

Maddox sucked in a sharp breath, and he held my hand in a death grip. "He wasn't a perfect human, or the perfect husband or the perfect father, but as long as he was alive, he *tried*. And that was all that mattered. If there's one thing my life with Brad taught me was that love…"

Her eyes searched ours, and she held onto us in the moment, holding us still with her gaze. "Love is messy... love is ugly. Love is roses and thorns. Love is... unconditional. You don't give up on love. You fight and fight... and fight for it, because it is worth every tear, every ache... every smile, every laugh."

She smiled through her tears. "This isn't the movies. Or a romance book. It's real, and it's going to hurt. You see, love will become boring, after you've been together for years. Every relationship will hit that phase, where the 'spark' is gone for a brief moment in time. And that's where most love stories perish, or where few love stories flourish. It's exactly, in that moment, where you're supposed to fight harder. Love isn't just a feeling. It's a commitment. You don't quit when it's no longer fun. You don't turn your back on it when it gets ugly. No, love is everything messy and everything beautiful. You *fight*. You *love*. You *live*. And that's exactly what Brad showed me," Savannah finished, her attention never leaving Maddox and I.

She wasn't speaking to the crowd.

Savannah was speaking to us.

I brought our clasped hands to my mouth and placed the gentlest kiss on the back of Maddox's knuckles. *I love you*, I mouthed.

He probably didn't feel it, but I wasn't going to confess my love to him at his father's funeral. For now, I was going to let him grieve.

HOURS LATER, Maddox and I were finally alone. I stood beside him, as he knelt down next to his father's grave, placing a single white rose on it. "Goodbye... *Dad*."

Maddox's voice cracked. This was *his* moment. When his father took his last breath, Maddox didn't even flinch. He didn't cry. He showed absolutely no emotion. He got up and called the people who were supposed to handle the funeral.

Maddox closed his eyes and bowed his head.

Thunder bellowed loud, and the sky opened up, pouring down on us.

I *felt* it, more than heard his roar. A pained cry left his chest, and I watched, as the man I loved, crumbled, as the storm raged around us.

I let him have this moment.

I let him... feel.

His pain bled into me, and I closed my eyes. The tears fell anyway, only to be washed away by the thundering rain.

Maddox didn't move from his father's fresh grave for a long time. When he finally stood up again, he stumbled, and I reached for him.

He wrapped around me, and I held him. He buried his face in my neck, and he shuddered in my arms. We were both drenched, both shivering, but I didn't care.

I didn't how we made it back home, but we did. Everything was a blur, the world swaying, back and forth, in front of my vision.

I helped Maddox out of his wet clothes and joined him in bed, both of us desperately chasing for warmth under the blankets.

His cold lips found mine, and I let him take this kiss. Soft. Tender. Sweet.

It wasn't desperate or crazed. Maddox kissed me like he wanted to taste me forever. My lips fused with his, and my arms curled around the back of his head, as he rolled over, pinning me under him.

Maddox settled between my thighs.

Kiss. I love you.

Kiss. I'm never going to leave you.

Kiss. *I promise*.

Kiss. Pinky swear.

Kiss. Forever, baby.

I wordlessly whispered all my promises to him, through our kisses.

Maddox tenderly traced my scars, before he cupped my breast and caressed my nipple. I gasped into his mouth and pushed my knees up, wrapping my thighs around his hips, so that we were aligned, right where I wanted him. Our lips parted, our eyes met – his pupils dark and dilated – and Maddox slowly filled me.

It was exquisitely slow and painfully passionate.

I *ached* at the tenderness in his eyes. I *hurt* at the adoration on his face.

He was bare and transparent. Maddox tore me into tatters and shreds, before putting me back together.

His fingers curled around mine, before he pinned my hands on either side of my head. He started thrusting in and out. His thick length stretched me, and my moans spilled from my lips, as he filled me with slow, deep strokes, our gasp and moans filling the room.

My body flushed, and fire spread through my veins. Maddox twitched and jerked, as he grew closer to his release. My muscles tensed, until I was tight as a bowstring, hanging on the precipice of my orgasm.

His forehead touched mine, and my eyes fluttered close, as we found our release. He filled me to the brim, as my muscles slowly eased, and I grew lax in his embrace.

Maddox rolled us over, so I was laying on his chest, but our bodies stayed connected. I loved the feel of him inside of me.

His head thudded against my ear, and I smiled, feeling at peace. This was... home. Maddox kept me anchored to him with a firm arm around my hips. We fit perfectly together; the top of my head under his chin and my smaller body over his much larger one.

My fingers feathered across his chest. "I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me."

Maddox hummed under his breath, his hand drawing circles along my back. "You were."

Brows furrowing, I peeked up at him. "Huh?"

His lips quirked with a smile. "You were always with me."

Maddox brushed his finger over our dreamcatcher across my neck. "I had this in my pocket all the time, so you were always with me, Lila. Whenever it all felt too much, I'd reach inside my pocket and feel the necklace. Even though I had been so angry with you, this dreamcatcher still brough me... peace."

"I never left you," I whispered.

"No," he agreed. "You never did. You were always right fucking here."

My lips brushed across his chest, over his beating heart. "I love you."

This was my first time saying it out loud. But Maddox already knew that... without me having to say those words.

He chuckled. "I know."

I tweaked his nipple. "Say it back."

"I love you, my beautiful, absolutely insane, little dragon."

Oh, these butterflies.

"My Lila," he rasped in my ear.

Always his.

Forever his.

LILA

ne year later

"We did it!" I ran to Maddox. I jumped in his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist. We laughed, as he dipped me and planted a loud, wet kiss on my lips.

"You're messing up my lipstick!"

"Fuck it," he growled, kissing me deeper.

While all our friends graduated a year before us, Maddox and I were now – *finally* – graduates.

"Sweet Jesus! You guys need to stop with all this PDA," Riley hollered.

"At least let them today," Grayson said.

"I've seen Maddox and Lila do worse," Colton laughed, referring to the time he walked in on us fucking two weeks ago.

I rolled my eyes and wiggled, letting Maddox know I wanted to be let down. He reluctantly let go, and I settled on my feet again. Our friends and family were all here, and I just couldn't be any happier...

Savannah had been taking our pictures non-stop. Pops and Gran had shed a few tears.

A year ago, our lives changed. For the better, I'd like to add. Maddox and I worked on strengthening our relationship, while Savannah and her son grew even closer.

Bianca was officially out of our lives, when she cashed out her trust fund,

packed up her newborn baby and boyfriend turned fiancé, and left her father's ironclad hold. She left the state, and we never heard from her again.

Except, every now and then, I took a peek at her social media. She was thriving and... happy.

And Christian Carmichael?

Half a year ago, we re-opened the case. With all the proof Maddox and Grayson had been able to gather, the trial was quick. This time, we had the law and the judge on our side.

Christian was found guilty of felony – driving under the influence which resulted in the death of the victims of the accident – and was sentenced to six years in prison.

After almost eight years, my parents finally got the justice they deserved. *I* finally found peace.

I always joked that I didn't need a knight. But Maddox? Even though I wasn't looking for one, he turned out to be mine.

My Maddox.

My best friend.

My first love.

My last love.

My knight.

Maddox and I officially moved back into our apartment six months ago. Life went back to normal, as we attended our last semester at Harvard.

And here we were...

Graduating. At last!

We took a few more pictures, until Maddox was done. Surrounded by our family and friends, Maddox cupped my face and smashed his lips down on mine. Tongue and all, as his mom clicked a last picture of us.

He pulled away, long enough to grin devilishly at me, before he bent down and shoved his shoulders into my stomach. I gasped and then giggled, as he threw me over his shoulder and marched away.

"Maddox! What are you doing?"

He gave my ass a love tap. "Stealing you away. You promised me a graduation fuck."

Oh God. Maddox and his insatiable needs.

"Anyway, you have a wedding to plan."

Wait... what.

Hold up.

WHAT?

I struggled, thumping his back with my chest. "Put me down. Now! Coulter!"

Maddox chuckled and brought me down to my feet. I stabbed a finger into his chest, glowering. He just... smirked. Ugh, typical Maddox. "What was that?"

"A wedding," he said.

"Maddox Coulter!"

He grasped my left hand in his and brought it to his lips, placing a tender kiss on the back of my knuckles. And that was when I saw it.

"Oh," I breathed.

"Oh," he mouthed.

"Holy shit."

Maddox Coulter, aka my best friend, aka my boyfriend, *grinned*. "I dare you to be my wife, Lila."

I couldn't even formulate an answer. My eyes went back to my left hand. When did he slip a ring onto my finger?

"When I kissed you," he said, without me having to ask the question out loud.

"You didn't ask!"

"I just did."

"Oh my God! Maddox!"

He winked. "I dare you."

The ring was a simple, princess-cut diamond. Nothing too heavy, nothing too fancy. Just... *perfect*.

"Say yes, little dragon," Maddox rasped.

I stuck my tongue out at him. "You didn't ask, so I can't say yes."

"You want me on my knees for you, Babe?"

I raised an eyebrow, waiting. Maddox chuckled and slowly lowered himself to one knee. He spread out his arms. "Lila Garcia... I dare you to be my wife. I dare you to spend the rest of your life with me. I dare you to make me the happiest man by saying yes."

I was laughing... and crying, at his proposal – Maddox style.

"Yes," I screeched. "You silly, silly man."

"You love me," he said.

"I do," I murmured, falling to my knees in front of him.

The world ceased to exist, as we fell into each other, kissing and gasping

into each other's mouths.

My heart kept missing beats.

My stomach twisted and tugged as those butterflies went wild.

My lips were swollen and burning from his kisses.

Forever, baby. Forever.



"So, where do you want to go first?" I settled next to him on the hood of his car and opened the map on my lap.

Maddox and I decided to take a trip around the world, before we both settled down for a busy life.

Now that we were done with school, I had to start applying for jobs. Last month, Maddox had 'officially' taken over his father's position. Brad Coulter left a huge legacy behind, and Maddox was responsible for continuing it.

But first... we needed a little vacation.

"I'm thinking Bali, you?" I asked, swiping through my phone to look at the bookmark, where I had saved all the places I wanted to visit.

"Nah, little dragon. I'm not taking your ass anywhere with me until you're Mrs. Coulter."

I rolled my eyes. He just *proposed* yesterday. "You wanna wife me up? Now?" I joked.

His blue eyes lit with mischief, and he licked his lips slowly. "Now."

"Hmm. Let me think about this. I want a wedding dress. I want to walk down the aisle. I want a first dance." I glanced down at my watch, giving it a thoughtful look. "So, if you can manage to make all of that happen in less than twelve hours, I'll marry you today. Before the clock strikes midnight. And if you can make it happen, I'll let you take my ass on our wedding night, as a reward."

"Done," he said way too quickly.

"What?" I screeched. Maddox jumped off the hood of his car and sauntered backward, giving me a wicked grin.

"Never underestimate a man who wants anal on his wedding night."

"Oh my God! Come back here, Maddox! I was joking!"

He tsked. "Nah. The moment you started talking about your ass, I wasn't joking anymore."

I gaped at him, not moving. "Get in the car, little dragon. By the end of today, you're going to be my wife... and yes, I'm fucking your ass. Done deal."

A laugh bubbled from my chest. I jumped off the hood, grabbed the now useless map and got in the car with him.

Life was never boring with Maddox Coulter.

MADDOX

made it happen.

Six hours later, we had the Coulter's backyard decorated, fit for a small wedding.

Lila had her dress. And the aisle she wanted. Our families and friends were here. Everything was just as she had dreamed this day to be.

I swore my mother was going to beat me when I told her she had less than five hours to prepare for my wedding. Savannah Coulter glared, huffed, puffed... and then whipped out her magic wand (her cellphone), cast some spells (made some arrangements with the people she knew) and made it happen. Magic.

Colton slapped me on the back. He was my best man, of course. "Nervous?"

I shook my head. Not one bit.

The piano began to play. I sucked in a deep breath and tugged at my tie. Riley walked down the aisle first, in a purple dress. She was Lila's maid of honor. She winked at me and sent a sheepish smile at Colton.

But then I forgot how to breathe when Lila appeared at the end of the aisle, holding onto her grandfather's arm. Her sleeveless wedding dress molded her every curve. Silk and pretty. Simple and elegant. I knew the dress was backless, because she teased me with it fifteen minutes before our wedding.

Yes, I sneaked into her room, while she was waiting. And the things we did... well, there was nothing holy about it.

Our eyes met.

Time stilled.

A second lasted longer.

She walked down the aisle, and we shared a secret smile.

My heart thudded against my rib cage, when her pops put her hand in mine. "Cherish her," he muttered, tears in his eyes.

"I will," I vowed.

I gripped her hand in mine, and Lila gifted me with a smile that completely stole my breath away.

The minister began the ceremony, but all I could focus on was...

Her brown eyes.

Her full, smiling lips.

Our dreamcatcher, settled perfectly in the middle of her chest.

And the fact that, right now, hidden under her dress, my cum had probably drenched her panties and was leaking down her thighs.

Lila winked, as if she could read my mind.

And I was thrown back six years ago.

This was the girl I bumped into at the coffee shop of Berkshire's Academy.

She spilled her cold latte on me and then mouthed off to me. Fierce and sassy.

The beginning.

And the end.

EPILOGUE

LILA

Seven years later

I woke up with a cramp in my lower back. Rolling over onto my side, I tried to find a comfortable position, but it was almost impossible. My arm stretched out, seeking Maddox's warmth, only to find it missing. Oh, so he was awake then.

I closed my eyes, wishing I'd fall back asleep quickly. *Ten more minutes*, I silently begged, Just ten more minutes. But a loud crash had me completely awake. Well, shit. It looked like no more sleep for me.

With a groan, I got off the bed. After brushing my teeth and relieving myself, I went downstairs to hunt for my husband.

I found him in our kitchen.

He wasn't alone.

And my kitchen? Well, it was an absolute mess.

He faced me, as I walked into the kitchen, *grinning*. "Good morning, Mrs. Coulter."

Something small and rowdy crashed into my legs. "Good morning, Mommy!"

Our son. The exact replica of his father. I ran my fingers through his curly, blond hair. He perked up and grinned with his signature Coulter grin. Four years ago, Logan Coulter made me a mother. He was everything that his father was. Stubborn. Bold. Strong And that Coulter attitude? Oh, yeah.

The moment the nurse put him in my arms, he opened his eyes, blinking at me with blues that were so familiar, I knew he was going to be a problem.

And I was right.

Logan was Maddox 2.0.

"Hi, Mommy," another sweet voice joined the first.

I looked up toward the table, where my other baby was sitting on the kitchen counter. He smiled at me; his face covered in flour. He was my sweet boy. The much calmer version of Logan. Quiet and perceptive, unlike his older brother. Brad stuffed his tiny fist into his mouth and licked whatever was on his hand. Chocolate, probably. Brad Coulter had a sweet tooth, and, ironically, like his namesake, his grandfather had had one, too.

"Mo-mmy." With my heart full, I turned toward Maddox, who had our hiccupping baby on his hips.

Levi Coulter, Brad's twin. The prankster. Out of the three boys, Levi definitely had more me in him than his father. He liked reading, loved Disney and was the bubbly one out of all three boys. Although he loved to tease, he was quick to be serious. Oh, and he was obsessed with mint-chocolate chip muffins.

"Good morning, babies. Are you making mommy pancakes?"

God, they were all a mess. Flour. Chocolate. Whip cream.

Brad nodded, shoving more chocolate in his mouth. Oh sweet Jesus. Sugar rush, I could see it coming. I shot Maddox a glare, before scooping up Brad and putting him in his booster seat, away from the mess and the chocolate.

"Pancakes," Levi agreed.

"Uhuh. How come you decided to make me pancakes today?"

Logan gave me a dead serious look. "Because we love you, Mommy!" Oh dear.

Oh no.

Oh shit.

My nose tingled, and the back of my eyes burned.

"Yeah, love you," Levi and Brad agreed, at the same time.

Maddox smirked. "Love you, little dragon," he mouthed.

And so... Lila Coulter promptly burst into tears.

"Oh no."

"We made Mommy cry. Again."

"Daddy, Mommy is crying!"

Maddox safely tucked Levi into his booster seat and reached for me. He wrapped me in his embrace, and I hiccupped back another cry. "Why are you

crying?"

"Because... I'm just... so happy. Shut up, okay!"

This was my family. My crazy, sweet family.

Maddox laughed, before his hands lowered to my stomach. He cupped my heavy, swollen belly, and his lips feathered over my forehead with a chaste kiss. "I know. Now, let's go eat. The boys worked hard to make you edible pancakes."

I gave him a quick peck on the lips, before kissing all three of my boys. They loved mommy kisses, and I wanted to give them as much as I could, before they grew tired of it.

My boys. The exact replicas of their father.

Funny how, more than a decade ago, in the halls of Berkshire Academy...

"Remember how you once told me there was only *one* of you?" I asked Maddox.

His eyebrows shot up, and he gave me his panty-melting smirk.

"Now look at me! I'm stuck with four Coulter boys!"

As soon as I said the words, my stomach tightened, and the baby kicked. I palmed my pregnant belly, and my eyes widened in realization...

"Maddox," I whispered. "If this is another boy, I'm going to lose my mind."

He chuckled, but I was utterly serious.

"No... I can't... I need a girl, Maddox!"

He was laughing, and I was *this* close to crying again. He must have felt it coming, because he quickly cupped my face and smashed his lips on mine, giving me one long, searing kiss, until I stopped freaking out.

"It's okay, if it's not a girl. We can keep trying, until we get a girl for you."

He smirked.

I glared. "Are you trying to make me give birth to a whole football team."

"I want at least seven," Maddox replied innocently.

"And I'm going to kill you."

He just winked, not at all scared by my threat.

"Mommy, hurry. We hungry."

With a laugh, we sat around the table and ate our too soft, too sweet pancakes. Maddox had his big palm over my pregnant belly, and the baby was hyperactive, as if he – or she – knew his – or her – daddy was there.

I loved my babies, truly.

But I was also about done with being pregnant.

Logan was four.

Brad and Levi were two.

And I was seven months pregnant.

I literally had been pregnant for four years.

As much as I loved being a stay-at-home mom, the last few years, I really wanted to go back to work. I enjoyed being a Chemist. After this baby, I was ready to go back to the world of science and research. My four years absence wasn't really an issue, since my manager's boss's boss was my husband. (Yes, he bought the research laboratory I worked at)

Maddox wanted more kids, and I wasn't opposed to the idea. But I needed a break in between.

I ate my pancake and watched, as Maddox fed Levi a few bites, wiped Brad's messy face and flicked some whip cream at Logan's head. They laughed and Logan flicked a spoonful of whip cream back at his father. It smacked Maddox right in the middle of the chest.

He was the perfect dad I always knew he'd be.

Three years ago, Maddox sold half of the Coulter empire. He didn't want it... never wanted to be what his father was. Never wanted *that* life. I had never seen such a relieved look on his mom's face when he told her. She was expecting it, and she supported Maddox in his decision.

And so, he lessened his burden and made sure he had people doing his work for him. He only ever went to the office, when he really needed to. Which was, like, once a week.

As a part-time hobby, he coached our local high school's football team.

And the rest of his time? He spent it with *us*. Maddox was a family man, through and through. He was a hands-on dad. When I was pregnant with Logan, he vowed that he wouldn't miss a day in our kids' lives.

And he didn't.

He was here for our babies' first laughs, first crawls, first words, first steps.

First everything.

"I love you," I whispered.

Those eyes.

This smile.

That face.

My little finger curled around his, over my big belly. "Pinky promise?

One last time?"

His pinky tightened around mine. "There's no *one last* time. We're forever, Baby."

MADDOX + LILA

CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

LYLAH JAMES

LILA

he loud, piercing cries of a baby woke me up. Next to me, Maddox startled awake and then groaned. I grabbed my phone from the nightstand, checking the time, and saw that it was just after four in the morning. We only slept for an hour – *barely*.

The wailing continued, sounding both angry and impatient.

Iris Catalina Coulter came into this world with a loud, fierce cry and she hasn't stopped telling the world how displeased she was with being born.

My stomach cramped at the thought of going into the nursery to try and calm her down. I thought the boys were a handful as babies, but compared to her, they were laid-back and even-tempered. Iris has been a little beast since we came home from the hospital. She barely slept. She was grumpy and wanted to be held *all* the time. She cried twenty-four-seven. At first, we were worried something was wrong, but after countless phone calls and visits to her pediatrician, we were told Iris was perfectly healthy, meaning she was just a grumpy baby.

But it was more than that.

I knew it. I could feel it.

I was her mother, after all.

"I'll get her," I said, already getting out the bed.

"No," Maddox said. He rubbed a hand over his face and then sat up. "It's okay, I got her. She'll be easier to handle if I go."

I barely hid my flinch but he didn't notice, or maybe he didn't want to address *that* right now.

I watched as my husband walked to the adjacent room, the nursery all our

five babies had stayed in. He left the door open and I saw him bending over the white crib and lifting Iris into his arms. Maddox held her against his chest and cooed quietly in her ears.

She instantly stopped crying. The only sound that could be heard were little hiccups as she settled into her daddy's arms and fell asleep once again. Just like that. Three minutes flat. Magic.

My chest burned and I rubbed the ache, feeling both *guilty* and *jealous*. But it was silly, I told myself. Who could be jealous of their husband for being the perfect father to their kids?

"Mommy," a little voice called out. My gaze snapped toward the door to find Brad standing there. He had his favorite stuffie under his arms and his eyes were red. I was instantly on alert and off the bed. "Baby, what's wrong?"

He wrapped his little arms around my neck as I lifted him up in my arms and settled him on my hips. He was a big boy, but he still loved his mommy's cuddles. "I had a nightmare," he whispered in my neck.

"Did Logan tell you scary stories again before bed?"

Brad nodded without a word. "Him and Levi."

Logan and Levi were always ganging up on Brad. While the two brothers loved anything horror, Brad was the complete opposite. So, they found every opportunity to tease him. I kissed my sweet boy on the head. "It's okay. Let's read your Spider-man comic."

Fifteen minutes later, Brad was asleep again. I took a peek at the second bed in the room. Levi, Brad's twin, barely twitched when we came into the room and while I read Brad his comic. I closed their door behind me and went back to my own bedroom to find Maddox still in the nursery.

He was still holding Iris, rocking her back and forth. My chest squeezed at the sight of them together. *Warmth*. There was just something about a big, muscled man holding a tiny baby against his bare chest. When he noticed me at the entrance of the nursery, he gave me a tired smile.

Maddox placed Iris back into her crib and we both held our breath. When she didn't instantly start wailing, he made his way to me. Maddox cupped my face and placed a tender kiss on my forehead. "Let's go to bed. You look wrecked, babe."

We both got in bed without another word. The moment his head hit the pillow, Maddox was sound asleep and snoring.

But I didn't sleep.

I stared up at the ceiling until the sun rose, the boys woke up and Iris started crying again.

~

Maddox was gone early this morning. He was busy with the new Taekwondo facility him and Colton had opened a year before. It started off as a shared hobby between the two friends but three months ago, it had become so popular that they now had over three hundred students and counting.

I knew Maddox enjoyed the time with his students.

I knew he loved knowing that he was helping these kids find something they liked doing. He taught them with patience and understanding.

But I missed my husband.

Maybe I was spoiled. Since we married, Maddox dedicated all his time to me and our kids. In fact, I was the one with the full-time job while he was more of a stay-at-home dad. After selling half of the businesses his father owned, he only went to his office once a week while he volunteered at our local school as a football coach during his free time.

We had enough money to last three generations. I didn't have to work either, but I loved what I did at the Pharmaceutical company. I enjoyed my time in the lab.

I missed my husband.

I missed working.

I missed... being *me*.

"Mommy, can I have one more pancake?" Levi tugged on my sleeve.

"Me too!" Logan practically screamed. He was always the most hyper. Levi was following in his older brother's footstep. Brad was the quietest, with Noah, the youngest of the boys, being the most calm.

"Logan," I hissed. "Your sister is sleeping."

His eyes widened and he mouthed a quick 'sorry' but it was too late.

The boys groaned as Iris began howling. My breakfast churned in my stomach and I could taste the acidic bile on my tongue.

Oh God, there was no way I was going to get her to calm down without Maddox being here.

Iris screamed louder when I grabbed her wiggling little body from her bassinet. I popped her pacifier in her mouth, but that barely helped.

I had just fed her a bottle and changed her diaper. All her needs were taken care of. She was absolutely *fine*.

Except...

I rocked her back and forth as the boys watched me struggle to calm their baby sister. I cooed and sang to Iris. I did everything that Maddox would do, but nothing seemed to please her.

Iris cried... and cried until she fell into a fitful sleep.

"Momma, crying," Noah said quietly. My cheeks were wet with tears and I hadn't even realized I was crying.

"I'm fine," I barely choked out, trying to convince my boys.

But it was a lie and even they could sense that.

Iris made a hiccup sound and her forehead furrowed as if she was uncomfortable in my arms. I placed her back into her bassinet and prayed she wouldn't wake up again.

Quickly wiping away my tears, I fed the boys more pancakes and cleaned the kitchen while they finished their breakfast. Afterward, they quietly sat on the couch and watched TV without any argument or screaming matches.

Maybe they sensed that I was at my wit's end. Because they were never *this* calm.

My legs shook as I sat down next to the bassinet. After being a little grump, Iris was now sleeping peacefully. Black curly hair. A tiny button nose and a pouty mouth. The cutest little thing ever. Even at six weeks old, she was the smallest of my babies. Everyone said she looked so much like me, and I wanted to believe that.

The back of my eyes burned and the lump in my throat swelled larger with emotions.

After Noah, I thought I was done with kids. Being surrounded with four boys and their father, that was enough testosterone for me. I was outnumbered and deep inside, I always wanted a girl.

When Noah turned two, I told Maddox I wanted to try for another baby. Of course, I barely even got the words out before he was on me and trying his luck to impregnate me.

As Maddox would joke endlessly about his super sperm, it turned out that I got pregnant that same night.

But it wasn't meant to be.

Thinking about it still made me want to vomit.

Maddox held me in his arms as I lost our baby in our shower. We grieved

together and three months later, I told Maddox I was ready again. He was reluctant but eventually gave in.

I grew desperate while I still mourned.

It took us seven months to get pregnant. Everything seemed to have fallen into place once again. At fourteen weeks, we found out we were having a girl.

I still remembered the look in Maddox's eyes. The awe and unmistakable adoration. The kiss he had placed onto my lips, like he had been desperate to taste me and to breathe his love down my throat.

At our eighteen weeks' ultrasound, we found no heartbeat.

After two miscarriages, Iris Catalina Coulter was my rainbow baby.

I had so much love to give her, buried inside of me. I wanted to hold her and tell her stories of how her father and I met and our stupid dares. I wanted to tell my little girl how long I waited for her arrival.

Except...

My daughter *hated* me.

LILA

fter the boys had settled down for a nap – all thanks to our two Golden Retrievers, Simba and Nala, keeping them active and tiring them out – I also put Iris down for a nap. That was after thirty minutes of wailing while I bathed and dressed her.

Once the house was quiet, I practically crawled into the bathroom. My head hurt, my body ached and I was just so... *tired*.

I looked at myself in the mirror and saw that I looked exactly how I felt.

Maddox hadn't changed a bit since we got married. Fit and handsome as ever. He barely even aged. But me?

God, I was an absolute mess.

I cringed at the woman staring back at me in the reflection. The dark circles. The vomit in my hair. When was the last time I showered? Two days ago? Maybe three?

I hastily ripped Maddox's shirt off but then ended up choking back a cry when I saw my naked body. I had barely even looked at myself in the mirror since Iris was born.

It was a rough pregnancy and it took a toll on my body.

My flat stomach was gone since the twins but now more stretch marks covered the loose, flabby skin and as much as I loved that this belly carried my five precious babies, I hated the sight of it. The surgical scar I got from my last pregnancy glared back at me.

My boobs leaked and I realized that I only had about fifteen minutes before Iris needed another round of milk.

Fuck.

My knees weakened and I crouched down, letting out another muffled sob.

"Lila," Maddox called through the door. "You okay in there?"

When did he come home? I was glad he came back early, but I didn't want him to see me like this. The last thing I wanted to do was break down in front of Maddox. He didn't need to see me so... weak. A terrible ache spread across my chest.

"Yeah," I said, trying to sound strong, but my voice only came out as a whimper.

Maddox was silent for a mere second before he knocked again, this time more urgently. "Lila, I'll give you ten seconds to open this door before I break it down."

I angrily swiped the tears away and yelled back, "I'm fine. Just give me a minute."

"No," my husband growled. "You're not, Little Dragon. Let me in."

Goddamn it. Maddox and his intuition. He always knew when I needed him, always by my side even without me asking for his help.

"Don't you dare break—"

My sentence was cut off when the door slammed open and there was Maddox. Face hard and eyes soft as he strode toward me. "For fuck's sake," I hissed.

"You never, *ever* lock me out, Lila," he said, his voice deep and angry. Maddox crouched down beside me and I tried to swat his hands away, but he was already cradling me in his arms and lifting my body off the cold tiles.

He settled me on the vanity, next to the sink, and caged me with his arms. I pushed against his chest. "Is there no privacy? I just needed some time alone, Maddox."

His eyes glinted with something dark. "No privacy. Not when you're like this."

"Like what?" I asked defensively.

"You're stuck in your head again, Lila. I'm not leaving my wife alone when she needs me."

"What I need is to be alone."

"What you need is to cry it out while I hold you."

"I–"

"She doesn't hate you, Little Dragon," Maddox said gently.

I choked on my own saliva, fighting back tears. "She does!"

He cupped my cheeks, bringing our faces closer. His lips whispered over mine. "How can she hate you? How can she possibly hate you when you gave her life? When you have so much love to give her? Iris is six weeks old. She doesn't know anything about hate."

Maddox kissed me and I let out a sob. "But... she does... hate me. She cries every time I touch her... Iris never cries when you hold her. She won't even let me breastfeed her!"

"You're an amazing mother, Lila."

"I don't feel like it."

"Look at me, Little Dragon," Maddox said with urgency. Our gazes locked together, mine filled with tears and his – blue eyes like the deep ocean, brimming with adoration.

"When Logan was born, I didn't know how to be a father. You taught me how to love, you taught me how be a father because I had no fucking idea where to start. I want to say we both gave our best, but Lila, we wouldn't be the family we are now without you holding us together. You're the glue and I couldn't have asked for a better mother for my kids. These boys and Iris will never have someone who loves them as much as you do."

I curled into Maddox's arms, pushing my face into his neck as I let out a loud sob. It was the first time I allowed myself to cry like this since Iris came into the world, with one powerful set of lungs.

"What do I do?" I hiccupped.

Maddox stroked my back, running his fingers through my messy hair. "You do what you always do, Lila. You love us and let me handle the rest."

"But-"

"And stop hiding from me. You want to cry? Fine, cry. But do it while I hold you. You want to rage? Go ahead. Scream at me. But don't hide from me because I want every piece of you. The good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly."

He caressed the curve of my hips before his hands went under me, cupping my ass. Maddox lifted me in his arms and I wrapped my legs around his waist. "I smell like puke."

"Yeah, so?"

I wiggled a bit until the juncture of my thighs was perfectly settled onto his hardness. "Then, why are you hard?"

"My wife is naked. Her gorgeous tits were just in my face and she currently has her legs around my hips, of course I'm hard."

"I haven't showered in three days."

He chuckled. "I still want to fuck you."

When was the last time we had a private moment together? Actually, when was the last time we had sex? Way before Iris was born, since I was put on bed rest for the last six weeks of my pregnancy.

So, the last time we had sex was approximately three months ago. That was the longest we had gone without doing anything dirty.

Maddox carried us the shower, while I was still wrapped in his embrace. We stood under the showerheads, letting the water rain down on us as the steam clouded the glass doors. I slid down Maddox's body but he kept me close while he got rid of his now wet clothes. I admired his naked body, his strong thighs, wide shoulders and chest, abs that were still as droolworthy as the day I met him.

Maddox was sinfully gorgeous and he was all mine.

He lathered my hair with my shampoo, running his fingers through the wet, tangly strands.

His thumbs gently dug into my scalp, massaging it. "That feels good. By the way, you broke the door. *Again*."

"I'll fix it."

I rolled my eyes. "How about you stop breaking it?"

"Stop locking me out," he shot back.

I rubbed my hands across his wide chest and down his abs, feeling his muscles tighten under my touch. I nibbled on my lower lip as my fingers travelled south, stroking his pelvis, just above his thick length that was standing up for attention.

"Don't tease me if you're not ready for the consequences," Maddox threatened.

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "Who said I wasn't ready for the consequences?"

"You want my cock?" His eyes darkened with need.

I wrapped my hand around his length, but he was so thick my fingers barely even touched. "Depends. Are you offering?"

He pushed us against the wall of the shower, away from the cascading water. Maddox gave me a slow thrust when I fisted him. He was fully aroused now. His chest rumbled with a low groan. "Depends where you want it."

To be wanted by this beautiful man was something exhilarating. But to be

needed by Maddox Coulter was... more than I could describe in words.

"My fist?" I teased.

"Not good enough," Maddox grunted as I squeezed him and rubbed my thumb over the slit.

I let him go and brought my thumb to my mouth, spreading his pre-cum over my lips before licking them. "My mouth then? Apparently, I'm good at sucking dick."

"Get on your knees," he ordered, his voice now rough and husky. I missed it – the need and urgency in his voice when he lusted for me. My core clenched in response and I slowly lowered myself to my knees. Maddox spread his legs, wide enough for me to reach for his thick, bobbing length. The tip was swollen and red.

He fisted my hair and pulled my face closer to his cock. "Suck, Lila. Don't make me tell you again."

I licked the shaft to the tip, teasing him. "Lila," he warned.

I looked up at him, watching his face grow hard with hunger and longing. I saw what I needed to see. Maddox missed me as much as I missed him. Our eyes locked together as I opened my mouth, accepting him. He didn't waste any time, thrusting into my mouth as I closed my lips around his thickness. The *scent* of him... the *feel* of him... the *taste* of him...

He barely even touched the back of my throat when I heard a scream, followed by the wail of Iris.

I almost choked on Maddox's dick as our bedroom door slammed open and then...

Maddox pulled out with a curse and we both scrambled away from each other.

"Fuck," he hissed. "Fuuuck."

"I got it." I was already out of the shower, grabbing a towel off the rack.

"Mommy! Levi won't give me back my Spider-man toy," Brad cried.

"Liar!" Levi bellowed. "I didn't take it. Logan did!"

"No, I didn't!"

"I saw you take it," Noah added, calmly. "Levi took it."

Iris continued to scream at the top of her lungs.

Maddox and I gave each other a look filled with longing. "You can finish up here." I nodded toward his still very much hardened dick. Maddox glared down at it, hands on his hips.

"Goddamn it," he cursed.

I gave my husband's nakedness one final appreciative look before walking out of the bathroom to handle our rowdy boys.

~

RILEY TOOK a slow sip of her smoothie. "When was the last time you had dick?"

Aurora choked on her own drink, sputtering and coughing. "Could... you have said that any louder." She took a peek around the restaurant but everyone was minding their own business.

Not that Riley cared if anyone heard us.

For the longest time, it was only Riley and me. Until Aurora joined our little girl group about ten years ago. Even though she was Colton's little sister, she was his complete opposite.

"Anal," Charlotte— Riley's stepsister — said, all nonchalantly while Aurora flushed.

"You're all bitches. I hate you."

While Aurora was shy and innocent, Riley and Charlotte were brash and sarcastic. I missed these girls. Riley came over a lot but I missed going out, even if it was just for an hour to have lunch with my friends. The last time I did this, I was heavily pregnant with Iris and that was before I was put on bed rest.

"Please, you're no virgin and we all know that the shy ones are always the dirtiest. Tell us your secrets," Riley wiggled her eyebrows.

Aurora's eyes swung to me, looking for an escape. "When was the last time you had dick?" she whispered.

Charlotte and Riley let out a giggle.

"No, but seriously," Riley started. "Have you and Maddox had any time alone together since you gave birth to Iris? I keep telling you to drop the kids over at my place. I'll babysit!"

"I can help too," Aurora said, taking a bite of her chicken sandwich.

I chewed on my fries, shrugging, but deep inside, the feeling of helplessness clawed at my chest. "I can't remember the last time Maddox and I went on a date."

"You need some time with your husband, alone... to recuperate." Riley's eyes met mine. She understood me best. "You look like you're at the end of

your rope and barely hanging on, babe."

"I can't imagine handling twins, let alone five kids. You're Superwoman, Lila. But even Superwoman needs some time off," Charlotte added.

I didn't know how to respond, because I didn't know *how* to take a break. The last thing on my mind was vacation or going on a date with Maddox when my daughter couldn't even stand me holding her.

I took a bite of my burger, stuffing my face with food instead of answering, or worse, breaking down in front of the girls. Riley squinted at me, giving me a knowing look, but she wisely turned the conversation away from me.

"How's your boyfriend?"

Charlotte rolled her eyes. "We're not on speaking terms right now."

"You guys were not on speaking terms last week either," Aurora noted.

"That's because asshole number two came between us."

"I don't understand how you agreed on this arrangement," Riley said, although there was no judgment in her tone. Just mild curiosity. "How can you share your man with another one? I can't imagine doing that."

"That's because Brody shares me too."

Aurora's eyes widened and even I perked up with interest. "Say what now?"

"Um, yeah. It kinda just happened, but it's complicated."

"A three way?" innocent Aurora gasped. "Was it just once or...?"

Charlotte's eyes darted between the three of us, looking only slightly uncomfortable before she blurted out, "I like Lucas too."

"Oh shit," Riley muttered.

I only blinked. Why was I not surprised? She had been complaining about Lucas for a very long time, but there was just something in her eyes every time she said his name or he came up in our conversations.

"So, I'm a little stuck between asshole number one and asshole number two," Charlotte explained.

My lips curled up, grinning. "Why choose when you can have both?"

"Exactly." Charlotte winked. Riley nodded in agreement while Aurora appeared scandalized.

The conversation drifted from Charlotte to Riley and then Aurora, who was shy and innocent, but secretly obsessed with her father's best friend. Oh, the drama.

Lunch was quickly devoured and we were on our desserts when my

phone vibrated with a call. Maddox's name flashed on my screen and I was instantly on alert. Maybe it was mom intuition or maybe it was because at this point, with five kids, I was always ready for something bad to happen.

"Lila," Maddox's voice came through, sounding breathless and a little... worried. "Don't freak out."

I gripped the phone tighter. "I'm already freaking out, Maddox. Spit it out."

"So..." he let out a small, forced laugh. "I'm at the hospital with the kids."

I must have heard him wrong because that didn't make any sense or maybe I just refused to believe what I just heard.

My blood ran cold and I was frozen in my seat.

"Say that again," I breathed.

"Please don't freak out," Maddox pleaded.

My heart galloped in my chest and it felt like my lungs were closing in. I couldn't breathe. "Maddox, just tell me what the hell is going on?"

There was another familiar voice in the background and then Maddox let out a tired sigh. "The boys were playing and there was a little incident where Noah got hurt. He needs stitches on his forehead but it's nothing to worry about. It's a small cut, nothing too serious."

I was already grabbing for my bag and sprinting out of the restaurant before he even finished his sentence. I barely noticed the girls following after me. "I'm coming," I wheezed in a rush.

"He's okay. Noah is dealing with this better than I thought," Maddox said slowly, trying to placate me. "He's not crying, just a little shocked, but everyone is okay, I promise you."

I swallowed back the tears. My child was hurt and here I was having lunch and laughing with my friends. I should have been with them. My whole body shook and I felt *sick*. The food sitting in my stomach churned and I fought the urge to throw up.

"I'm on my way," I said, my voice thick with unshed tears. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

I hung up and got in the car. Riley climbed in next to me. "Colton texted me, I'll come with you. Charlotte and Aurora will follow."

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, I found Colton in the hospital's waiting room. He

was with Logan, Brad and Levi. My boys looked pale and in shock. The moment they saw me, they rushed to my side. Brad, my sweet boy, had tears in his eyes.

"It was my fault but I didn't mean to push him so hard," Logan admitted guilty. He looked like he about to cry too.

"It was no one's fault. It was purely an accident," Colton jumped in. He grasped Logan by the shoulders. "Not your fault, buddy. You guys were just playing."

Colton nodded toward the end of the corridor. "He's in room four."

I left the boys with Colton and rushed to room four. The first thing I saw when I entered the much smaller room was Maddox with a sleeping Iris strapped to his chest. When he moved to the side, my gaze finally landed on Noah.

My poor injured boy had the biggest smile on his face as he sucked on a lollipop. He had a bandage around his head.

"This must be mommy," the doctor said as a greeting. "Noah is a big boy. He barely even flinched when I stitched him, right?"

My legs were shaking so hard I could barely stand up straight. Blood roared between my ears and adrenaline coursed through my veins. My skin prickled with anxiety and the room grew blurry, the voices distant.

Noah eyed the doctor, giving her his best puppy eyes and the charming smile that he got from his father. "Can I have another candy?"

Maddox chuckled. "He's using that look."

The doctor handed Noah another lollipop. "You're going to break hearts, aren't you?"

My knees weakened and I lowered myself onto the chair next to the door. The doctor patted me on the shoulder. "He's fine. I'll leave you three alone for a moment."

Shame and guilt gnawed at me, digging its deadly claws under my skin. The whispers were back again. Echoing in my ears. Taunting me. Telling me how horrible a mother I was.

Maddox grasped Noah under his arms and pulled him off the hospital bed. Still grinning, he waddled his way to me and wrapped his little arms around my waist. "Mkay, mommy. I'm okay," he said in his sweet voice.

And that was the moment I burst into tears, choking on my cries as I held my boy.

I was spiralling without anything keeping me grounded.

I felt so out of control. So *helpless*.

MADDOX

week later

I WALKED into the house to five screaming kids. I grimaced, already knowing what would greet me. This was a daily routine. The boys were already hard enough to handle, but Iris was even worse. I toed off my winter boots and shook off the snow from my hair and my heavy coat.

I walked further into the house to find the boys running around with the dogs and Lila sitting on the couch, with Iris in her arms, screaming bloody murder. The house was a mess but I didn't care. None of it mattered, except the look on Lila's face.

The tears streaming down her cheeks.

The fragility of her posture and the look of complete *defeat* in her pretty brown eyes.

She didn't even notice I was home. In fact, she wasn't *here*. My Lila was lost.

Without saying a word, I grabbed Logan by the back of his shirt as he sprinted past me. "Get your brothers and take them to the TV room. I want complete silence while I put Iris to sleep. Understood?"

Logan must have noticed the severity in my voice because he nodded without any complaint. He was the oldest at eight years old. He was trouble – *Maddox 2.0* – but mature for his age. After the boys left and the house quieted down, except for Iris's cries, I walked up to my wife and daughter.

Lila finally noticed me. She looked up and there it was... the silent *pleading* in her eyes. The hopelessness and misery.

"I got her," I said, taking Iris from her.

Our daughter instantly stopped crying, burying her tiny face into my chest as if searching for my warmth. My Lila flinched and I saw the moment her heart broke.

Fuck. There she went, breaking *my* heart.

"I'll be back," I told her before taking Iris away.

After quickly giving her a bath and swaddling her up for the night, I fed her a bottle of warm milk before putting her in her into the crib. I prayed she wouldn't wake up, not until after I had taken care of my wife.

My kids needed me.

But my wife needed me more right now.

I caressed her chubby cheeks. "Your mommy loves you so much. You're our little rainbow... I don't know what's wrong but I'll fix this. I promise. I'll fix this so your mommy doesn't hurt anymore."

After turning on the baby monitor, I went on the hunt for the boys. They were still in the TV room, where I had left them. One by one, they all got ready for bed.

Once the house was completely quiet and all the kids were asleep, I sought out my wife. I found her exactly where I knew she'd be.

Fixing the boxes under our huge Christmas tree.

It was already that time of year. Two weeks until Christmas.

It would have been an exciting time if Lila and I were not so exhausted. Lila more than me. She was having a harder time than usual with Iris, I knew that. But she was stubborn.

Lila hated asking for help.

And worse, she hid from me. Her real feelings, what she was struggling with and all the messy things in her head. She tried to act tough and strong, as if she had everything under control.

But I knew my Little Dragon was *losing* control.

My wife was a warrior and she fixed her own crown without needing me to, but some days she was a broken mess. And I was there, to hold her. To keep her grounded while she fought whatever battle she was fighting in her head.

But it wasn't just a battle anymore.

It was a whole goddamn war in her head right now. And my Lila? She

was a bloody soldier who was slowly losing her grip on reality.

I let her pile up the presents again; I had lost count how many times she re-organized the presents under the tree. Lila did that every time she was lost in her head, kind of like something she did unknowingly.

"Lila," I called out gently.

She jumped in response, but otherwise chose to ignore me. But I've had enough. Striding over to her crouched form, I lifted her up in my arms. She went willingly, her body going slack in my embrace.

Lila buried her face into my neck and let out a loud sob. "I don't know what to do! What am I doing wrong?"

"You're not doing anything wrong." I stroked her back as her body trembled with every wretched sob that escaped her throat. She was hurting and my heart was bleeding at her feet.

"Then why does it feel like I am?"

I didn't know how to explain this to her. I didn't have the response she needed to hear.

I settled on the couch and turned Lila around in my arms so that she was straddling me. Her face was blotchy, her brown eyes glassy with tears. Her lips were red and swollen and I knew she must had been chewing on them for a long time.

I grasped her jaw between my fingers, holding her still so she could look into my eyes. "Tell me what you need, Little Dragon. Tell me what you *really* need. Don't lie to me. Don't hide from me."

I watched as Lila struggled to find her words. She was so consumed by being the perfect wife and mother, she forgot all about *her* needs. She forgot to put herself first.

Her face crumpled. "I miss... you."

My lips met hers with a tender kiss. "I know."

"I miss me," she breathed into our kiss. "I miss... us."

"Me too, Little Dragon."

Lila whispered her secrets against my lips. Even though I had known them all without her having to tell me, I let her rant. I let her spill whatever she was holding inside her for the last six weeks.

She told me how hopeless she felt.

Lila explained how confused she was...

I don't feel worthy.

I thought I was the perfect mother to our kids, but now I don't feel like it.

Say whatever you want but Iris hates me.

I can't sleep at night.

I can't eat.

I feel sick.

My heart hurts.

Some days... I don't want to wake up. I can't stand to hear Iris cry anymore. It hurts.

I don't know what to do.

I don't know how to be the mother Iris needs.

What if the boys start to hate me too?

I'm worried the boys will feel left out or unwanted because I'm so focused on Iris.

I feel ugly and fat. My body is not the same anymore. I can't stand to look at myself in the mirror.

I want to go out with the girls. I want to go shopping, wear makeup, get my hair done... I want to go on a date with you, but then every time I think about it, I'm filled with so much guilt and shame, yet I have no idea why.

Then I get angry at myself. Why am I so upset about such trivial things? I should be stronger. I should be better. But why am I so weak?

You won't understand. No one will understand. Even I don't understand what I'm feeling.

Some times, I'm angry at you. I'm jealous of you. How is that normal? How can I be jealous of my own husband because he's the perfect father to our kids?

We're drifting further apart. I can feel it. Don't lie to me. There is a distance between us that wasn't there before and I know it's all my fault.

The clock just ticks and ticks, the days fly by, time never stops but everything just feels so repetitive. Sometimes it feels like I'm stuck in a loop, in a separate alternate reality.

And that was how Lila fell asleep. In my arms, her sobs turning into little wounded whispers. The more she spoke of her feelings, the more I finally understood what I needed to do.

Her fingers clutched at my shirt even in her sleep.

"I got you, Little Dragon."

LILA

or the first time in years, I woke up to peace. And by peace, I meant... absolute *silence*.

Which was definitely not something normal and it would be worrisome to any mother. I practically bolted off the bed and ran down the

worrisome to any mother. I practically bolted off the bed and ran down the stairs, almost tripping on my own feet. "Maddox!" I called out, panic rising in my chest.

I came to a halt at the kitchen's entrance to find my husband setting up the table with two plates and... flowers?

What the fuck?

I looked around and found no one else. "Where are the kids?"

"Gone," he deadpanned.

I blinked. "What do you mean gone?"

His lips twitched and he gave me that sexy smirk that I fell hard for. "I dropped them off at my mom's. Where they will be staying for the next 6 days."

"I don't understand," I said slowly, eyeing him suspiciously.

"We need some time alone," he explained, coming to stand in front of me. He grasped my jaw and planted a wet kiss on my lips, before going lower, nibbling at the sensitive spot on my throat. Maddox knew exactly where I liked to be kissed; he knew all the spots to drive me crazy.

"For a week?" I breathed and then gasped when his hand came up to my tender breast. He palmed me roughly, kneading the flesh before pinching my sensitive nipple. Milk leaked but he didn't seem to care while he plucked and played with my nipple until I was sore and *aching*.

Holy shit. Why did that feel so good? Had I gone that long without sex that I was horny enough to orgasm with only nipple play?

Just when I was about to throw Maddox on the floor and climb him like a tree, he pulled away with a wicked grin. "Time for lunch, Sweet Cheeks."

Wait, what?

I stared at him in a daze. My husband was a fucking tease. I glowered until his words finally registered to my slow, mommy brain.

"Lunch?" My eyes darted to the clock and I saw that it was past one in the afternoon.

My jaw when slack. "How did I sleep for that long? How did I sleep through the kids waking up and you getting them ready?"

"Magic," Maddox winked. "Don't worry about it. I took care of everything."

I was still a little lost, so I only stared at him. Trying to comprehend how I went from an emotional break down yesterday to sleeping through the night and the morning and waking up to no kids.

"Maddox-"

He cut me off. "Stop overthinking, Lila. Not today." His voice hardened, his tone telling me that there was no place for argument. "Just let me take care of you, okay?"

"Okay," I mumbled. "I need to wash my face."

The corner of his lips curled up. "Good girl. Now, hurry up. I've got to tell you our plans."

I looked him up and down. Maddox stood with his hands on his hips, cocking his head to the side. It was then I realized that he was bare chest and wearing his grey sweatpants, hanging loose around his hips. I could see the outline of his bulge. "Why are you dressed like a hoe?" I pouted.

Maddox chuckled. "Why are you over-dressed?"

"Good point," I said, finally smiling. "I'll be back."

Giving my husband a final appreciative glance, I left him in the kitchen and went up to our en-suite bathroom. After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I took an impromptu decision to take a quick shower. The kids were not home; no one was screaming for attention and Iris wasn't crying for milk – so I had all the time to take some mommy alone time.

Sure, Maddox was waiting.

But he could wait an extra ten minutes while I showered in peace.

Twenty-minutes later, I felt much better and refreshed as I joined Maddox

in the kitchen once again. He had the table set for two people, with fresh roses in the vase.

How long had it been since Maddox and I had been alone, truly alone in the house? Just the two of us?

Holy shit, it had been a very long time, way before Iris came into our lives. I had been so busy with work, handling the boys and then my rough pregnancy with Iris.

Our lives had become a routine. There was no... *us* anymore. Our married life had become stagnant and the spark was gone. Sure, we still enjoyed sex. Of course, we were still very much in love. In fact, our love for each other only flourished over the years as I watched him go from young and wild Maddox to a responsible father and a mature man.

But when was the last time I flirted with my husband? When was the last time we went on a date without worrying about the kids? I couldn't even remember.

Maddox was right. We needed some time alone.

"So, what did you get for lunch?" I asked.

Maddox quirked up an eyebrow at me. "I didn't get anything. I cooked."

I blinked at my husband – who was, by the way, a *horrible* cook.

"Excuse me?"

"I tried my mother's chicken casserole recipe."

"Are you trying to poison m—" He shoved a piece of chicken in my mouth before I could finish the sentence.

"Oh." I muttered around the piece of chicken.

Juicy. Tangy. Delicious.

My eyes widened. "Um, liar. You didn't make this."

Maddox swatted me on the ass and I jumped, letting out a small laugh. "Don't be a brat. Sit down and let's eat."

"Bossy much." Nonetheless, I sat down at my usual spot.

He towered over me and I had to crane my neck up. Mischief danced in his blue eyes. "You like it when I'm bossy."

I rolled my eyes but he wasn't ready to let this drop. Maddox bent forward, bringing his face closer to mine and he caged me back against my chair. "You like it when I tell you what to do. Don't lie, Sweet Cheeks. You like when I boss you around in the bedroom. You love it when I tell you what to do with your pussy, how to touch it, how to make yourself come while I watch... you love it when I hold your hair and force my cock down your

throat and tell you to suck it like a good girl."

I sputtered. "Maddox-"

He grinned, before straightening to his full height as if he didn't just whisper filthy words in my ears and got me all hot and bothered... and achy. He really was taking advantage of being kids-free today.

It was the way his lips twitched that told me Maddox was in a teasing mood today. He joined me at the table and we had lunch, while he told me how him and Colton were thinking of expanding the Taekwondo facility area. They now had more kids than space.

What started out as purely a hobby and they hadn't expected more than fifty students had now turned out to be a somewhat a full-time job for both of them. I saw the pride and delight on his face as he spoke of his students.

After lunch, Maddox grabbed us the mint-chocolate cake I had been saving for myself from the fridge. The first bite into the cake and I moaned. Holy shit, if I thought dick was good... this cake was orgasmic.

"Don't make that face, Lila," Maddox warned.

"What?" I peeked at him with one eye open. "The mint-chocolate cake is *sooo* good. Better than di—"

"I dare you to finish that sentence." He dropped his fork on his plate with a clank, eyeing me with hardened blue eyes. "You won't like the consequences."

I squeezed my lips together, fighting back a laugh.

Maddox glowered. "My dick can make you moan louder. It's a fact."

"Maybe I need a reminder, huh?"

The words barely left my mouth when he was on me. Maddox lifted me off the chair and sat me on the edge of the table, simultaneously pushing our plates away with one hand.

His warmth surrounded me, cocooning me and it was so fucking perfect I wanted to cry. My legs parted and Maddox settled between them, looking quite at home there. His *happy* place.

He slid his black shirt up to my hips, his gaze smoldering. While I was at home, I was always more comfortable in his over-sized shirts. His eyes went to the juncture of my thighs, glancing at my red, satin panties before locking his gaze with mine once again.

There was just something in the way he looked at me. As if I was still the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on. Like I was the only thing he could see. His fingers stroke up my inner thighs before his thumb pressed

over my core. Maddox rubbed me there over the fabric, causing me to squirm in his arms.

"Stop teasing, Maddox."

He tsked. "We have all the time, Sweet Cheeks."

His touch was soft, almost feather like. Teasing and playful; making me *whimper*.

I was a woman who was very confident in her sexuality, always had been – and I was not ashamed to confess that I terribly missed sex and my husband's dick. Our bedroom life was never far from explosive and exciting...and utterly filthy. Well, that was *before*.

And now I wanted it back.

I wanted all the nasty thing my husband would do to my body.

As if Maddox could tell I was going crazy, he tilted my hips up and quickly got rid of my panties, carelessly throwing it somewhere on the floor.

He slowly lowered himself to his knees, so that he was eye-level with my mound. For some reason, I felt more naked than I had ever been before. I was never a self-conscious person, but a lot had changed about my body since I had become a mother. It was finally hitting me after Iris's birth.

Maddox brought his face closer to where I was aching and so fucking sensitive. His breath feathered across my bare pussy and I clenched, hot liquid pooling in my belly and I could feel my wetness coating my lower lips. Desire burned through my veins and my hands dug into his scalp, tugging at his dirty blond hair.

He pressed a kiss on the inside of my thigh, before biting gently into the soft flesh. I hissed and then moaned when his fingers parted my folds, his thumb grazing my hardened nub.

I shamelessly tugged his head harder and more into me, pressing his nose into my pussy now. I felt him inhale, a long deep breath and I shivered, my body shaking with silent tremors.

A whimper left me when he traced my wet lips with his knowing fingers. He knew all the spot to touch me that drove me insane and had me squirming and begging in his arms.

I let out the loudest moan when he finally replaced his fingers with his skillful tongue. The pulse between my legs was almost unbearable at this point. He'd always do that. Tease me, leave me on edge, make me ache and burn for him.

"Time for dessert and baby, you smell so fucking delicious. I'm about to

feast because I've been wanting to eat his pussy for so fucking long." Maddox spread me open, throwing my legs over his wide shoulders. "And I've waited long enough."

I practically growled with impatience. "You're wasting your time. Just shut up and get to work!"

Maddox flicked my clit and gave me a love tap. It stung because I was so primed and ready, my flesh soaked and hypersensitive. "Bratty girls need to be taught a lesson, don't they?"

"Maaaaybeee," I choked out, moaning when he *finally* wrapped his lips around my clit and sucked.

"Oh fuck!" I twitched and cried out, my hips bucking up as I ground my pussy into his face. But he was having none of that. Maddox gripped my hips hard, holding me in place. He continued to suck and lick, taking what he wants. Drinking me up like he was starving for water and air.

"Maddox," I whimpered. "Oh shit... fuck, right there, oh my God! Maddox!"

I let my head drop back and my eyes squeezed shut when it got too much, too fast. The first thrust of his tongue inside of me had me calling out his name and I *almost* orgasmed. I jerked in arms, moaning and begging for mercy... for *more*.

Maddox Coulter was really good with his dick. But fuck, he knew how to use his tongue to drive me utterly insane.

Soon, I was rocking against his mouth, chasing my own release because I was *that* horny and *that* desperate. Maddox suckled on my clit, before tracing my pussy with his tongue. I pulsated, my body strung tight like a bow.

When he bit on my little nub, not enough to cause me pain, but enough to sting and probably make me sore later – I gasped and then screamed. My eyes snapped open as my orgasm shot through me like fire burning through my veins.

I sagged onto the table and melted into his arms. Maddox kissed and nuzzled my thighs. He kissed me sweetly on my pussy. "Just because," he muttered, before pulling away. He gathered me into his arms and pulled me onto his lap.

"Holy shit," I breathed.

His lips brushed along the length of my jaw and I felt his chuckle vibrating through my bones. "So, even my tongue can make you moan louder than the goddamn mint-chocolate cake."

When our lips finally met, he groaned and I thanked God for putting this man in my path so many years ago. We bumped into each other, *literally* and it was the most perfect coincidence in my life.

The kiss was deep, desperate and needy and I could taste the remnant of my juices from his lips and tongue. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I held onto him. Maddox pulled away from the kiss and buried his face in my neck.

"Fuck, I missed you."

"Yeah..." I whispered.

"The plan is to take you away from here," Maddox explained. "We're going somewhere else, where it's just the two of us."

The haze was gone and the pleasure of being in Maddox's arms disappeared. My heart dropped to my stomach. "But the kids—"

"We need a vacation, Little Dragon and I'm not taking no for an answer."

"Iris needs me. She's barely two months old," I argued. "The boys need me. I can't just leave them alone for some days. That's not okay, Maddox!"

"What's not okay? For a mother to take a break?" Maddox growled. Our eyes locked and the intensity in his gaze almost made me look away but I held his stare. "It's just four days. Do you not deserve a vacation? You've been going non-stop for a long time. You're crumbling, Lila and you'll do these kids no good when you're like this. You're at the end of your rope and they need you at your best."

"So, you think I'm not a good mother to our kids?" I cried, pushing at his shoulders so he'd release me but Maddox held me fast. "Let me go!"

"I didn't say that," he snapped.

"That's what you just said!"

"No." Maddox grasped my jaw and held me still. There was a stubborn glint in his blue eyes that I hadn't seen in a very long time. "What I said was that you're slowly losing yourself and I can't let that happen. These kids need you more than they need me. You are the perfect mother to our babies, Lila and I will repeat that for a thousand times and more if I have to, until I take my last fucking breath. But I can't let you hurt yourself like this. You don't see it but I can. Everyone can. You need to let go and *breathe*. For one goddamn day at least!"

"But-"

I snapped my mouth shut because I didn't know what else to say, how to argue with Maddox because really, I had nothing to argue about. I had not

valid responses and they would have lacked truth in them.

Because as much as I hated to admit it, Maddox was *right*.

My eyes tingled and my throat closed, the lump in there growing bigger.

Maddox cupped my cheeks, his big hands practically covering my whole face. "Please, let me do this. Let me take care of you the only way I know how. The kids will be fine for a few days. They absolutely love their grandma and mom will take care of them. She'll spoil them rotten. Riley and Aurora also volunteered to babysit. And you know how much the kids adore their aunts. You've got a whole village behind you. You're not alone, Little Dragon. It's okay to ask for help. It's okay to take a break."

It finally hit me.

When the realization struck, I was left weightless and beyond fragile.

All this time, I had been surrounded by my loved ones. Iris was my rainbow baby, my precious bundle of joy. I had everything I ever wanted. A loving husband, kids I would die for, family and friends I adored... yet the feeling of loneliness had been overwhelming.

I was angry because I worried I wasn't doing the right thing.

I was terrified because I felt out of control.

I was lost because my life had taken a completely different route from my perfect and careful planning.

"I'm sorry," I wheezed, my whole body shaking. The shame crawled under my flesh and the guilt was heavy on my chest.

Maddox stroke my back and his lips met mine, over and over again with the most tender kisses. "Don't be sorry because you did nothing wrong. It's okay to break down, it's okay when life gets messy and don't pretend that you're okay. I got you, Little Dragon."

He kissed me, inhaling my cries down his throat.

I let go and Maddox wrapped me in his arms.

He took me at my worst, a broken mess of imperfections.

MADDOX

t was hard to convince Lila to let me take her on a mini-vacation. But it was harder to watch her kiss the kids goodbye before I stole my wife away.

I was excited to have Lila alone for the next five days. But most importantly, we needed to have a *talk*.

Two hours later, I finally dragged Lila away from the kids. She complained, she cried and worst of all, I knew she was filled with mommy guilt at leaving her babies. But I couldn't have any of that.

The whole reason of taking Lila away was so that she could focus on herself. So that we could be *us* again. She was riddled with so much overwhelming emotions and after being stuck in her head for so long... Lila needed to heal.

The kids would be fine without us for a few days, I wasn't worrying.

Right now, my wife needed me.

The moment our private plane was in the air, I had her seatbelt off and straddling me. I flicked her nose and she pouted. "That pout will get you in trouble one day."

Lila squirmed on my lap and I hardened in my pants. Yeah, the fucker was excited too. My dick had only known my hand for the last three months and had been pussy deprived.

"Where are we going?" she finally questioned.

"Switzerland."

Excitement danced in her eyes and oh, how I fucking missed that look. "To our favorite place?"

I nodded and her smile widened. "Holy shit!"

"It's going to be a long flight," I said.

"I'm already bored." Her voice was soft, but there was something in it. Something teasing and playful. Her lips quirked up.

"How shall we pass time?" I played along, my hands going to the curve of her ass and I kneaded the soft globes.

Lila leaned forward, so she could whisper in my ear. "I might have an idea." She took my earlobe between her teeth, giving me the smallest nip. *Fuck*.

Her mouth went lower and she suckled on my throat, before her lips brushed against my Adam's apple and she licked me. She knew that drove me crazy. "Goddamn it, Lila."

"You're hard," she teased against my skin, slowly moving her hips over my lap, rocking back and forth. "Let me take care of that. There won't be any interruption today."

Before I could say anything in response – not that I was going to stop her, anyway – Lila had already left my arms and she lowered herself to her knees in front of me.

"You're being cheeky today." I fisted her hair and dragged her head closer to my crotch. "What if the flight attendants walk in on us?"

She smirked. "Let's see if I can make you come before she walks in."

"Do you really dare?" I was already unbuckling my jeans. Lila drew the zipper down and took my dick out, her little hands wrapping around my length.

"I dare," she breathed, her eyes filled with mischief.

A growl escaped my throat when she wrapped her lips around my cock without wasting any time. Lila was a mad woman on a mission. I pushed deeper into her mouth, until the tip of me hit the back of her throat. Lila made a small gagging sound, before she started sucking. Like a goddamn pro.

Her cheeks hollowed every time she suckled me. Her eyes grew glassy with tears as she deep-throat me and if I hadn't already been so madly in love with this woman, this would have been the moment I'd fallen for her.

Her tongue traced the thick vein along the underside of my length, before she circled the tip with her tongue, tracing the slit and licking my pre-cum. "Lila," I warned. My voice had grown deeper and even I could hear the roughness in them.

When I couldn't have it anymore with her endless teasing, I wrapped her

hair twice around my fist, until my knuckles were digging into her scalp and shoved my cock deep into her wet mouth.

"Don't be a brat," I grunted.

She moaned around my length and I felt the vibration all the way to my balls. My thighs clenched and my abs tightened as I grew closer to my orgasm. Lila's hands were on my thighs and her nails dug through the fabric of my jeans, pricking my flesh with their sharpness. The tinge of pain mixed with the way she sucked me as she doubled her effort to make me come – *fuck* –

My hips bucked up and I groaned, shooting my release down her throat. She swallowed fast but my cum still spilled past her lips, dripping down her chin. Lila was still choking my dick when—

"Mr. and Mrs. Coulter, would you like something to dri— *Oh my!* Oh, I'm so sorry!"

The flight attendant gasped and the horror on her face would have been peak comedy if my wife wasn't still sucking me like her life depended on it. I watched as the flight attendant rushed away, letting the curtains fall back down to give us privacy. Lila gave me one, last lazy lick before she pulled away. Her cheeks were flush and I noticed the hint of embarrassment in her gaze, but she was grinning. "I won."

My thumb brushed against the corner of her mouth. Lila wrapped her lips around my finger, sucking the remnant of my seed that I had gathered. She was a beautiful fucking mess. Swollen lips, ruined lipstick, my cum on her chin, flushed cheeks and messy hair.

"No, you didn't. She walked in on us," I said.

Her teeth grazed my thumb before she pulled away. "I said I will make you come *before* she walks in. And I did."

I pushed my dick back into my jeans while Lila climbed back onto my lap. Such a devious minx, but I wasn't fooled. "Why did you do that?"

She blinked at me innocently. "Do what?"

"You crazy woman." I chuckled when she slowly grinned, not once looking guilty. "Let me guess, she was looking at me for longer than five seconds."

"She looked at your ass longer than ten seconds. I counted."

When she pouted, I lost it. Throwing my head back, I let out a laugh. "Fuck. You're insane."

Lila nudged her chin up, giving me her best haughty look. "As if you

wouldn't have done the same if it was a man eyeing my ass. The last time a man showed even a slight interest in me, you finger-fucked me in the hallway for him to see. Practically defiled me in front of a stranger and all you said was *whoops*."

My laughter died down as I remembered asshole Lucien.

Lila smirked. "That's a scary expression, Coulter."

"You're threading on a dangerous line, Mrs. Coulter," I threatened, my fingers digging into her hips in warning. "You might just end up with a sore pussy before we even land in Switzerland."

"I dare you," she breathed.

Challenged accepted.



WHEN WE LANDED IN SWITZERLAND, Lila was both yawning and walking side to side. She had a constant glower on her face and when I reached for her ass, she swatted my hand away, emitting a kitten growl in response.

"Too sore to walk straight, Sweet Cheeks?"

She snatched her suitcase from my hand. "You know what, shut up."

"Don't worry," I drawled. "The hot tub might soothe your pussy, before I have you sore all over again."

Without a word, she strutted away to where a car was already waiting for us. I pressed my lips together, holding back my laugh.

Lila crossed her arms over my chest but I could see the twitch in her lips. My girl wasn't ready to accept that I won this dare, without any foul play. I dicked her down good enough that she was probably going to be sore until tomorrow or the day after.

Plus, that was three months of sexual frustration. And I wasn't even close to being done with my wife.

The moment we got to our hotel; Lila jumped into the shower. I didn't join her, specifically because I knew my dick would want inside her the moment she was naked, but she needed a break after hours of vigorous fucking.

Thirty minutes later, my wife came out with wet hair and a black silk robe. Lila smiled, a breathtaking smile and fuck, even after eleven years of marriage, she still had my heart in the palms of her little hands.

The way her pretty brown eyes always got me; the way her smiles always had my heart beating in my chest like a teenage boy on his first date.

Lila Coulter was so goddamn beautiful and she was mine. How the fuck did I get so lucky?

"Go shower," she ordered, all sassily. And because I was completely pussy whipped, I did as I was told.

By the time I was done and got out of the shower, I found Lila sprawled on the bed and passed out. She was snoring lightly and I grinned.

I knew she had been sleep-deprived for months. It was nice to see her relaxed enough that she fell asleep so quickly – or maybe I had just exhausted her *that* much.

I joined my wife in bed and wrapped her in my arms while she snuggled up against me, even in her sleep.

There was nothing else I wanted.

LILA

slept through the morning and when I woke up, Maddox wasn't in bed. But he had left me a note and a... *dead* rose. I couldn't help but smile because it was a tradition. A little weird and abnormal if someone were to ask, but dead roses were our thing.

Join me in the hot tub. Wear the white bikini – the note said.

White was his favorite color on me, I knew that. But it was the bikini part that had me pausing. I chewed on my lips, suddenly feeling *odd*.

My cramps were back and my stomach hollowed. For a long minute, I fidgeted with my hands and the bedsheet, before I finally drew the courage to get out of bed and get ready. I washed my face, brushed my teeth and combed my hair five times, until I was satisfied.

I opened the suitcase Maddox had packed for me – he didn't even let me see what was in it. And right on top, I found the white bikini. It was a halter top with adjustable neck tie that could be worn in different ways and the bottom was practically a thong.

I didn't let myself overthink this, even when all I wanted to do was throw that gorgeous bikini away. After putting on the bikini, I glanced at the mirror.

I was never shy about my body and I was no prude.

But...

My palms grew clammy and the room swayed. I had been naked in front of Maddox numerous times since I gave birth to Iris. Why was I so anxious about a freaking bikini? This was nothing, yet...

I felt more self-conscious than when I was naked.

A bikini was meant to make me feel *sexy*, except I felt anything but.

Fuck this!

I took a deep breath, looked away from my reflection and strode past the glass doors, where Maddox was waiting for me.

We had our own outdoor thermal pool, which was just basically a huge hot tub. Our room overlooked the blue skies and snowy peaks of the mountains.

Maddox had his back to me as he enjoyed the view so I cleared my throat, bringing his attention to me. The moment his eyes were on me, he slowly grinned.

"Fuck," he swore.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other as I dug my nails into my thighs. My anxiety was shooting up to the skies and my blood slowly ran cold.

Maddox eyed me up and down, almost like he was *appreciating* the sight of me. Taking the time to drink me in.

What was there to appreciate though?

My stomach knotted up. I could feel the soft panic building in my veins, like poison.

Maddox must have noticed my stiff posture, before he put out his arm, palm up, inviting me in. "Come here, you gorgeous woman."

My body moved on its own, listening to Maddox's demand before I could even *think*.

I got into the pool, the water bubbling and warm, my whole body went soft the moment I was shoulders deep. Maddox grasped me by the waist and I instinctively wrapped my legs around his hips. He pushed my back against the edge.

"What's with that look, Little Dragon?" he questioned softly.

"Nothing." But I was too quick to answer, which only made him more aware of how uncomfortable I was.

Maddox kissed the corner of my lips. "Tell me."

His kisses were tender but insistent. His lips whispered over my cheeks, my jaw... my throat and the collarbone before dipping lower. "Tell me," he urged again.

"I'm just... I feel so... *not* sexy..." I practically choked on the words.

Speaking of my insecurities out loud felt like I had a knife dug in my chest, the blade twisting deeper into my flesh. "How can you still want me?"

Maddox growled, almost angrily. He pulled back, his eyes hard and his

jaw clenched tight. I could see the muscles ticking in his left cheek. He wrapped one arm around my waist and lifted me out of the water, sitting my ass on the edge.

His gaze traveled from the top of my head, my eyes, my lips... my throat, down to my chest and stomach, my hips, the juncture between my thighs and then my legs. The scars between my breasts tingled, like they always did whenever I was under scrutiny.

There was just something in those blatant blue eyes that made me trembled. He stared at me, so leisurely, slow and deliberate. Maddox took his time and goosebumps peppered my skin and my nipples tightened.

"Lila," he rasped.

My heart thudded.

His head lowered toward my stomach and his lips brushed against my stretch marks. He traced every single indent and imperfection with his tongue before placing the most tender kiss on my c-section scar. "You're so fucking beautiful; I don't just want you – I *crave* you."

I've never felt more naked and more desired than this moment, right here, with Maddox's gaze on my body like he had never seen something more beautiful than me.

He stared at me like I was his newfound obsession, a yet we had been married for many years and after giving birth to five babies, my body wasn't the same as ten years ago.

"I want you, as recklessly as I wanted you since I first laid eyes on you in that coffee shop. Needing you is just as normal as breathing," Maddox said in that rough, gravelly voice of his.

I lowered myself into the water once again, wrapping my arms and legs around him. "Make love to me," I whispered, tears sliding down my cheeks. "Make love to me, Maddox. Right now, Right here."

And he did.

Maddox pushed my bikini bottom to the side and slid right in, pushing his thick length into me. I cried out, burying my face into his neck. I was still sore from yesterday and still very much hypersensitive, but I *needed* this.

I needed to feel close to him, with nothing else separating us.

His strokes were painfully slow but I didn't rush him. Maddox took his sweet time, giving me gentle, shallow thrust. He palmed my ass, squeezing and pinching the soft cheeks.

His groans vibrated through my body.

He swallowed my whimpers down his throat. I was wrapped around him, safe in his embrace while he worked my body, pushing me until I was on the precipice of my orgasm. Maddox was everywhere, inside me, in my veins, in my heart, stuck in my soul.

His lips wrapped around my nipple over my bikini. He suckled and bit on the hardened tips until I was writhing in his arms.

"Easy, Little Dragon. Sweet and slow."

"I love you," I whispered.

"I love you too," he grunted.

Maddox made love to me tenderly, like I was someone to be treasured. Like I was fragile and he was scared I would slide through his fingers.

And when we found our release, it was just as beautiful as it was explosive.

He held me afterward, while I cried.

We didn't speak a word, because there was no need to. We understood each other, through our silence and our touch.



FOUR DAYS LATER, our time in Switzerland was coming to an end. We had spent five blissful days together, practically honeymooning again. We were lazy in bed, went on romantic dates that overlooked gorgeous views of the snowy mountains, had crazy amounts of sex... and we finally had a chance to speak.

It was a relief to finally open up about all my troubles, the insecurities and my helplessness about the situation. Maddox had slowly coaxed me out of my shell. It was hard at first, but Maddox – he knew me better than I did myself.

And that was exactly how this conversation came up. We were wrapped in each other arms, after another lazy afternoon of making love. We were talking about Iris and how worried I was...

"I've been reading a lot, surfing the internet and reading countless of articles," Maddox said, slowly. "I'm no expert, but do you think you're going through postpartum depression?"

There it was. The conversation I was trying my hardest my avoid. But I knew it was coming, because as always, to Maddox, I was an open book.

I swallowed down the heavy emotions in my throat and gave one small, sharp nob. "I think so too," I breathed, my voice shaky and filled with uncertainty. "I didn't want to believe it at first, but over the last few days, I had come to the same conclusion too."

His fingers gently brushed against my arm and he caressed me. Maddox placed a tender kiss on my temple. "You had a rough pregnancy, Lila... and after two miscarriages. That's a lot of stress, tension and emotions to deal with. You never gave yourself a chance to mourn properly because you were *scared* but you need time to heal."

I was finally realizing that. A lot had happened over the last two years since we decided to try for another baby. The miscarriages had hit me the hardest. There were a lot of confusion and numbness, but I never gave myself a chance to go through those emotions. Instead, I had tucked those feelings away and tried for another baby... until Iris came to be.

But the complication that came with my pregnancy had hit me so unexpectedly. Once again, I had shoved everything in the dark corner of my heart without letting myself truly *feel*.

I ran my fingers across Maddox's abs, feeling the need to touch him. He kept me grounded. "But why does Iris behave this way with me? I know she doesn't hate me. She's just a baby, but... I'm worried, Maddox."

"Iris didn't bond with you right away after she was born. You were in the hospital for more than a week after you had those complications with your surgery. The first week of a baby's life is very important to bond with the mother but you and Iris never got that chance. She got used to me," he muttered, thoughtfully.

What Maddox said was making sense. I had thought of that too, but I still *hated* it.

"Babies can feel when a person is stressed and feeling negative. They react accordingly to it," he explained. "They can sense when you're tensed or frustrated. I'm not saying it's your fault she cries when you hold her. She's a grumpy baby, over all. I'm not a professional, but I guess she can *feel* you."

"You're making a lot of sense, and I don't like it," I grumbled.

I could feel his smile against my forehead. "Infants are mysterious in many ways, Lila. We've learned that with five kids. Don't be so hard on yourself, Miss Perfectionist."

"Maybe... I need to talk to a therapist?" I laid my head on his chest, listening to his soothing rhythm of his heartbeats. "I just want... I want to be

the best version of myself for our kids, Maddox. You're right. I need time to heal and I struggle with my feelings. This mini-vacation helped, but I know the moment we go home, I'll fall back into my bad habits. It'll be a routine; I don't know how to pause and I'll eventually succumb to the stress again."

"Whatever you want, Little Dragon. If you want to speak with someone, we'll do that."

My phone rang and we both startled. Maddox chuckled and leaning over me to grab my phone. "It's mom. Probably the kids again."

It was an incoming video chat and I accepted the request. Noah's perfect face was the first thing I saw. His ice cream covered face.

"Hi mommy," he said with the biggest smile, as if we didn't just speak an hour ago.

"Hi, baby," I said. My heart was practically bursting with love. The other boys joined, coming in front of the camera.

"Grandma said we could eat ice cream twice today," Logan whisperyelled. Savannah, Maddox's mother, laughed. She was holding Iris in her arms. My precious babies all in one frame.

"Oh yeah, and Grandma got me a new stuffie," Brad added.

He already told me that three times since yesterday but I only nodded, as if this was the biggest new ever. "Oh my God! Really? I can't wait to see it!"

"When are you coming, mommy?" Levi asked.

I smiled. "Tomorrow. Did you miss me and daddy?"

"Yes," they all practically screamed.

And that was it. Logan went back to watch the TV. Brad and Noah were arguing about more stuffies. Levi was asking Savannah if he could hold Iris.

That was how short their attention span was.

Smiling, I waved at mother-in-law and cut the call. "God, I miss these little monsters."

"Ready to go home tomorrow?"

"Honestly?" Our eyes locked. "Yeah, I am."

Maddox grinned.

And I just fell more in love with my husband.

MADDOX

hristmas Day

EXACTLY A WEEK after we came back from Switzerland, it was Christmas Eve. And it couldn't have been any more louder than this. I stepped through the door and I was hit with the smell of cookies and a lot of other delicious food – and easy laughter, with Christmas carols in the background.

It looked like Christmas exploded in my house, with all the decorations and the overly fancy tree with way too many ornaments. My house bustled with people and the kids were running around, *everywhere*.

I found Riley, Aurora and Charlotte in the kitchen with my mom. But Lila was missing. "Where's my wife?" I asked, putting down the plastic bags on the kitchen counter.

"You got it?" Riley demanded, shifting freshly baked cookies onto plates.

"Yes, I got the icing you asked for. You were so fucking specific but I got it. Jesus, how does he deal with your crazy ass?"

Riley rolled her eyes, showing me her shiny diamond ring. "He married me. So, he *has* to deal with my crazy ass."

Charlotte clucked her tongue at me. "As if you don't deal with Lila's *insane* ass. You're more pussy whipped than Colton and Grayson combined."

"Language," my mom scolded.

"Sorry!"

"It was time for Iris's next bottle. Lila went to feed her," Aurora

explained, softly.

I nodded. "See? You're my favorite. Have fun, ladies. I need to find my wife."

"Pussy whipped," Charlotte mouthed.

I waited until my mother's back was turned before practically shoving my middle finger in Charlotte's face. She crackled like a maniac and I strode away.

I went upstairs and walked down the hall to the master bedroom but when I didn't hear Iris crying, I slowly creeped into the nursery, without making a sound.

There, I found my wife and daughter.

And it was a sight to behold.

Lila was holding a cooing Iris to her chest, rocking her back and forth. She was singing the lullaby she sang to me once... and to our boys when they were babies. She didn't notice my presence and I stood there, arms braced against the door, watching my wife hold our daughter.

Iris wasn't screaming bloody murder while Lila held her. In fact, this was the first time our daughter was smiling and cooing at her mother.

My chest squeezed with an indescribable pressure. I watched as Iris fell asleep in her mother's arm, snuggled tight against her chest. Lila finally turned toward me and I saw the silent tears streaming down her cheeks.

I love you, I mouthed.

She smiled through the tears before gently placing Iris in her crib. I opened my arms for her and Lila walked straight into her, melting into my embrace. She choked back a sob. "She didn't cry."

"I know."

"She was smiling up at me," Lila whispered in awe.

I kissed her hair. "I saw."

"Iris fell asleep in my arms."

"She loves you, Little Dragon. Never doubt that." I'd say it a thousand time if I had to, until Lila believed me.

"Maddox?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you for believing in me."

Always, my Lila.

WE JOINED the others downstairs just as Grayson was walking through the door. He greeted everyone and then went straight to Riley, placing a quick kiss on her forehead. I wasn't surprised that she was the first person he went to. She smiled up at him and he whispered something to her, looking quite intimate with each other. Her eyes widened and then she threw her head back and laughed.

Lila let go of my hand to help my mom with the presents under the Christmas tree.

I sat down next to Lila's grandpa, keeping the old man company. He was watching an old re-run of a football match and soon enough, we were both engrossed in it until Colton interrupted.

"Yoh," he said, handing each of us a beer. "When are we finalizing the extension plans for the building?"

I shrugged, taking a sip of my drink. "After New Years."

Colton nodded. "Works for me." I didn't miss the way his eyes kept going to Riley and Grayson. There was no bitterness or jealousy in his gaze, just... *protectiveness*.

A few minutes later, he joined us on the couch. "They kicked you out of the kitchen?"

Grayson grabbed a beer from the table, stretching out his long legs in front of him. "I didn't even try to argue."

"There's no arguing with these women," Colton agreed.

Truer words had never been spoken. Cheers to that.

Food was served quickly after that and after we wrangled the kids to the table, it was a pretty perfect dinner.

Every time I found myself looking at my wife, her eyes were already on me. She'd smile and then bite on her lips, as if we were sharing some secrets.

Fuck, I loved this woman. Madly.

Once the table was cleared out, the boys and I went to the living room, leaving the girls to gossip among themselves but it was soon after, when Riley came forward to announce something.

"So, I have some news. I can't keep it in any longer," she started slowly. All attention was on her. Riley grinned and her hand went to her stomach, cupping her belly tenderly. "I'm pregnant!"

All the girls squealed, running over to Riley to congratulate her. Aurora rubbed Riley's belly, almost longingly. Lila was crying and Charlotte hugged Riley – well, practically strangling her. "Oh my God, I'm going to be an aunt.

Again!"

"Congratulation is in order," I said to the father of the baby, raising my beer in a toast.

Colton smiled, looking so at ease while he kept his gaze on Riley. While there was unmistakeable delight in Grayson's eyes.

The kids went back to running around, all the adrenaline about the opening their presents soon enough, pumping through their veins.

Christmas Eve was always chaos for us. But it was nothing short of perfect.

None of us were blood related, but damn it, this was *family*.



Lila

AFTER DESSERTS, Maddox and Colton disappeared. And I knew exactly why.

"Boys! Who's ready for Santa?" I called out. A chorus of 'me' were shouted and they all waited, eyes big with anticipation.

"Can we open our presents now?" Noah asked, practically dancing on his toes.

"Well, you have to wait for Santa to give them to you," I explained.

"But they are already under the trees," Logan complained. "Can't we just take them?"

With my hands on my hips, I shook my head. "Nope. Gotta wait for Santa. I want all four of you to sit down, quietly while we wait for San—"

I barely even finished my sentence when the entrance door slammed open and two huge figured walked in, bringing in a cold wind and snow as they did.

Santa Claus and his Elf.

"Ho - ho - ho."

I had to press my lips together, holding back a laugh at how ridiculous both Maddox and Colton looked. It was a tradition since Logan was born, but it never got less hysterical to see them in their costumes.

Savannah took pictures while the Elf handed everyone their presents. Santa had the boys on his lap, one by one as they whispered their secrets in his ears and he granted them their wishes.

Was it possible to fall even more in love? Because I did. Every time I saw Maddox with our kids and how easily he handled them... I probably fell deeper in love, but I didn't think that was even possible anymore.

Once the presents were distributed and the kids were practically ripping through the wrapping, I went into the kitchen to grab another plate of cookies. The boys were going to be demanding for more cookies soon enough.

"Did I get to tell you how fucking beautiful you look in this red dress?"

I shivered as his deep voice rolled down my spine and goosebumps peppered across my bare arms. He crowded into my back, his warmth surrounding me.

"No, you didn't tell me yet," I said, with all the sassiness I could muster. Maddox grabbed my ass, squeezing. My breath hitched.

"Delectable," he rasped in my ear.

I turned around in his arms, so that I was facing him. He had gotten rid of the fake white beard but he was still in his Santa costume.

"You're being inappropriate, Mr. Santa," I said even as I reached out, grabbing his bulge through his red pants.

He groaned. "You're on the naughty list, Mrs. Coulter."

"Oh really? What are you going to do about that?" I taunted. "Are you going to punish me, *Santa Claus*?"

I chewed on my lips, hiding my grin. His eyes glinted with something dark and mischievous. "You're about to find out what happens to bad girls like you," he threatened. "Tonight."

I caressed his dick through his layers of clothing, feeling him grow thick and hard. "I can't wait," I breathed.

"Lila, the boys want cookies." Savannah walked in the kitchen and Maddox coughed, practically choking on his saliva. I still had his dick in my hand, but his body was big enough to hide me and what I was up to.

"Sure, I'll bring the plate over!" I said, in an overly cheerful voice.

Maddox pulled away from me. "You're dangerous, woman," he growled.

"And I happened to hear that you *love* danger." I winked, before sashaying away.

Maddox swore under his breath and I grinned.

Walking back into the living room, where everyone was present, I watched as my family talked and laughed between themselves. My babies

were well loved and I had everything I could ask for.

Savannah came to me, with a sweet smile. We swapped between the plates and Iris, and suddenly, I found myself holding my daughter while Savannah walked away with the cookies.

My body froze and I held my breath, expecting Iris to burst out crying.

My heart thundered in my chest and I swore, my lungs caved inside my rib-cage, I could *barely* breathe.

Please don't cry, please don't cry, I begged.

Her eyes, blue like her father's, blinked up at me. Her lips pursed into the cutest pout and then she did the most unexpected thing.

Her tiny fingers wrapped around my dreamcatcher necklace and my daughter smiled, cooing.

In that very moment, my world tilted on its own axis, the room swayed and I felt both dizzy in relief and breathless with happy.

"You know, this necklace is special to your daddy and me. It was his very first gift to me," I whispered to my daughter.

I felt Maddox's presence before I saw him. His arm came around my shoulders and we both looked down at Iris. "This is our dreamcatcher, little one," he said.

My heart was so full, I could burst.

He pressed his lips against my temple, giving me a chaste kiss. "Do you believe in Christmas magic, Little Dragon?"

I looked down at my precious bundle of joy as she shoved a fistful of my hair into her mouth. She giggled.

"Maybe I do. A little bit."

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Coulter," Maddox whispered in my ear.

LILA

hree years later

I WALKED into my house and it was surprisingly quiet. I wasn't going to complain though, since today had been a long day at work and I was completely wrecked.

I dropped my bag and coat at the door, toed off my heels and walked barefoot into my living room. Maddox was sprawled on the couch, legs stretched out in front of him. Bare chest and grey sweatpants. Oh, yum.

"You're dressed like a hoe again."

"And you're severely over-dressed, Mrs. Coulter," he drawled.

I looked around but found no kids. "Where are the monsters?"

"At my mom's."

I paused, quirking up an eyebrow at my husband. "So, you're saying we got the house to ourselves for tonight?"

Maddox rubbed a hand down his abs, his lower lip tugged between his teeth as he gave me one long appreciative look. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

Oh damn. I slowly grinned, before settling into my husband's embrace. He took my lips in a long, leisured kiss until we were both breathless.

I tucked my face into my throat, inhaling his spicy scent. "God, I'm exhausted."

After my maternity leave for Iris, I went back to work. I missed the kids

terribly but I also loved my job. It wasn't exactly easy at first, but I had learned how to cope with it. Being a working mother – while not being riddled with so much shame and guilt.

It took me a year of talking with a therapist for me to finally... *heal*, as Maddox would put it. Opening up about my insecurities and fear to a stranger wasn't easy, but it had been exactly what I needed.

When things got too hard, Maddox was there for me. But it was also nice to have a therapist who would put everything in perspective for me. She was patient and understanding. And in her, I found both a confident and a friend.

A lot of time, I was still stuck in my head, in the dark corner where I'd pile everything up until I burst. But over the years, I had gotten better at talking about my feelings and asking for help when I needed it.

Maddox was my comfort.

He was home and exactly what I needed when I felt the urge to let go. I knew he'd be there to catch me and he always did. Every. Single. Time.

"What's that sound?" I asked. It was very soft before, barely noticeable when I walked into the house but now the noise had grown insistent.

Maddox looked guilty and he pulled away, coming to stand in front of me.

I crossed my arms over my chest, slowly growing suspicious. He took a step back, hands up as a mock surrender. "Okay, listen. Don't freak out."

My eyes widened. "What did you do now?"

"Wait-"

"Maddox, answer the question!"

His eyes darted left and right as if someone would pop up to save his ass. Maddox gave me a sheepish look. "I got Iris the baby goat she wanted. Early Christmas present."

"You did what?" I gasped.

Iris was an animal lover. My little girl had a pure soul, but that meant my house turning into a zoo. She brought home all the injured animals. Birds, lost cats and dogs, squirrels...

Two months ago, she asked her daddy to get her two white rabbits. And what did her daddy do? He got her two pet rabbits, of course.

"You got her a baby goat?" I repeated slowly. Oh my God! Maybe today was the day I ended up in prison. On the possible charges of murdering my husband.

"She pouted and I couldn't say no. You know I'm weak for her pouts," he

tried to defend himself as if that explained why he bought a freaking goat.

I took a deep breath, to calm myself down. But yeah, that wasn't happening. When he opened his mouth to justify himself again, I was done.

"MADDOX COULTER, GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!"

"Yes, ma'am. Of course, ma'am," he said quickly.

Maddox backpedaled, hands still up in defense. When he was a good distance away from me, he finally chuckled.

"I'm not even sorry, Little Dragon. But I love you."

And then he was gone. Practically running away from me and the *goat* he brought home.

Who thought marrying this insane man was a good idea? Oh right, me.

Fuck.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lylah James uses all her spare time to write. If she is not studying, sleeping, writing or working—she can be found with her nose buried in a good romance book, preferably with a hot alpha male. Writing is her passion. The voices in her head won't stop, and she believes they deserve to be heard and read. Lylah James writes about drool worthy and total alpha males and strong and sweet heroines. She makes her readers cry—sob their eyes out, swoon, curse, rage, and fall in love. Mostly known as the Queen of Cliffhangers and the #evilauthorwithablacksoul, she likes to break her readers' hearts and then mend them.

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