

Faking it
WITH MY

ENEMY ALPHA

JACLYN HARTLEY

Faking It with My Enemy Alpha

Jaclyn Hartley

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Contents

1. Chapter 1
2. Chapter 2
3. Chapter 3
4. Chapter 4
5. Chapter 5
6. Chapter 6
7. Chapter 7
8. Chapter 8
9. Chapter 9
10. Chapter 10
11. Chapter 11
12. Chapter 12
13. Chapter 13
14. Chapter 14
15. Chapter 15

16. Chapter 16

17. Chapter 17

18. Chapter 18

19. Chapter 19

20. Chapter 20

21. Chapter 21

22. Chapter 22

23. Chapter 23

24. Chapter 24

25. Chapter 25

26. Chapter 26

27. Chapter 27

28. Chapter 28

29. Chapter 29

30. Chapter 30

31. Epilogue

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CHAPTER ONE

Freya

While I had been expecting the call to come any day now, the shrill ring from the phone on my desk caused me to jolt back into reality. This classroom has been my home for nearly three months now and counting. That phone call would either seal my fate or send me on my way, but the only way I could know would be to answer the phone, so I did.

“Hello?”

I could hear the sleep still lingering in my voice. Cringing, I made a mental note to chug the coffee I had brought, or else I might frighten the whole classroom.

“Miss Roberts, I’m glad I caught you before the students arrived. I just spoke with the board, and they have notified me that the full-time position is yours if you would like it. Mrs. Hubbard will not be returning due to some less-than-ideal situations in her life. There is no rush to decide right this second; I just wanted to reach out and let you know the offer is there.”

Relief flooded through me. Instead of thinking first, I jumped headfirst and had already signed the paperwork for a new house and all the fixings. If this job didn’t pan out, I would be well over screwed. Up-the-creek, as my dad said. Now that I knew I was in the safe zone, excitement replaced sleepiness.

“Yes, sir. Thank you!”

My voice sounded like a schoolgirl who had just spoken to her crush. Who could blame me? Technically, I was. Teaching is my love, and I’ve had this crush since middle school.

The phone line went dead after a matter of seconds, leaving me alone with my excitement. The brain is an extraordinary organ. Even when we are in a hyper-excited state, it makes you aware that you are hyper-fixated, and you know that you are too happy. Elated, I set about to make the most out of my day. There were projects to plan, papers to grade, and now that I had confirmation that I would be staying, I could finally add some life to these off-white walls.

The clock above the classroom door only read 7:15 in the morning, which meant I still had plenty of time before kids started to arrive and pile into the halls, grumpy from having to resort back to early morning wake-up calls. Manically, I began to skirt around the room, organizing long-forgotten books and rearranging the desks that had remained in stagnant rows since I arrived here. After what felt like hours, the desks looked good as new. Right on time, too, since I noticed cars line up from the windows, signaling that I needed to report to the drop-off location.

Halfway out of the door, a chime went through the room. It sounded like it was coming from my desk, so I quickly ran back to grab my phone. The lock screen showed messages from Nixon, causing my heart to drop. There is no way I

would be dealing with this right this second. My current euphoric high was much too deserved to deal with him.

Outside, the sky seemed gloomy, and rain was forecasted. Most of the students arrived in ponchos or brightly colored raincoats. Car doors slamming sounded like an off-kilter band banging on drums.

I stood waiting for the cars to turn into our semi-circle and began to help the kids to leave their parents for the day, always remembering to smile and say good morning to the parents. As per the school policy, it wasn't just me outside. It was a sea of multiple teachers, all rushing to swing open the passenger side doors. Squealing, parents would slam their car back into gear and make their way to whatever they needed to do with the rest of the day.

By the time I reached my door, kids had lined up against the classroom walls, staring at the desks that now grouped into seats of four. Most of them looked confused, searching high and low. Finally, I broke the silence.

“Good morning, kids! As you can tell, the seats have been rearranged. What we are going to do is when I call your name for attendance, announce you're here and then pick a seat.” I kept my voice elevated, signaling them to look my way and pay attention.

“Sophie Allan?” I began the roll, not looking away from my sheet, trusting they would respond accordingly.

“Here!” Sophie squealed in her high-pitched voice before skipping around to one of the desks, plopping herself down,

and straightening her skirt.

“Garret?”

“Yeah, here,” a voice mumbled back, shoving seats out of the way to reach the very back.

“Ellie Bracket?”

“Present.”

I heard her loud and clear as she quietly made her way to find a desk.

“Move; I’m saving this seat, so go somewhere else, weirdo.”

Garrett’s snarky comment cut through my thoughts like a knife. My eyes raised to see Ellie scowling while she pulled out a chair on the opposite side of the room.

“Garrett, that wasn’t very kind of you.”

Thankfully, my voice held firm. I knew that you couldn’t pretend that these kids bothered you, or else they would eat you alive.

“Don’t care—”

“It’s fine, Miss Freya. I wouldn’t want to sit next to him anyway.”

Ellie’s words caused a faint smile to erupt. As a teacher, I couldn’t condone the response, but I understood it. I let the words fade as if I didn’t hear anything at all and continued down my list. The only name left was “Lincoln?”

“I’m here,” a meek, mild voice gave way. I closed my book and watched him shuffle to another desk with nobody around

him. His seat was the only one of four occupied.

My heart hurt for the shy little boy in front of me. Even if he wasn't social, the kid was as bright as they came. He constantly aced his tests, finished homework, and even took on extra daily tasks. His dirty blonde hair was longer on top than the sides, letting his bangs slide into his face. Without another word, he cracked open his folders and lost himself in the spelling words.

The day seemed to drag on endlessly, so when it was lunchtime, I was happy to see most of my kids single-file out to the cafeteria, except for one.

Lincoln was still sitting when the last student exited. His little face looked tired, drawn, and, most of all, sad. When I made my way over to him, I crouched down beside his desk.

“Are you okay, bud?” He didn't respond right away. He just gave a nod. Pressuring him to talk wasn't going to do much, so I planned to send his dad an e-mail to see where we were with him when today was over. As a teacher, if something was wrong, I needed to know. I couldn't help him if I didn't understand.

Lincoln made his way to lunch when I turned towards my desk. The coffee was wearing off. I sat at my desk and decided that lunch today would just be a Diet Coke and some crackers. Nibbling, I pulled out my phone once more and saw the unopened messages from Nixon.

Hey Frey, I just wanted to see if you wanted to get drinks one night and catch up. I miss you, ttyl.

TTYL?

Was this a grown man or a middle schooler? Groaning, I quickly typed back.

Nixon, I've told you this. I don't have anything to say.

Once sent, I muted his notifications.

I already had to communicate with one man today whom I was not too pleased with. The e-mail to Lincoln's dad was still fresh in my memory. His father was an enigma, someone I couldn't pin down. I never met him officially; I just ran into him at a few school functions. The one time I vividly remember seeing him was at our local fall festival. In a school like this, we take our roles very seriously. Rides, games, and food stands all lined our front lawn. People who graduated ten years prior still showed up and pitched in. This time was no different. I was helping at the face painting station and stepped away for a few seconds to use the lady's room. It was then that I got a glimpse of who his father was.

They both stood there; Lincoln was throwing darts at balloons hanging on a wall. His father stood behind him. I wasn't even close, but I could hear the critiques being made, such as straighten your back, bend your elbow, or throw harder. Annoyed as I was, I kept walking. This school was private, but it was also borderline pretentious. Most of these kids have never had to struggle. Lincoln wasn't trying out to win an Olympic gold medal. Even the man's posture screamed jerk. He stood with his back to me, shoulders back, and a hand in his pocket.

The class had resumed, and by the time the kids were back seated, I had already drafted the e-mail and edited it twice. I wanted it to sound proper when I sent it, and I wanted it to get the point across without seeming too formal. I wanted a lot from that one e-mail. Ultimately, I kept my e-mail pulled up through the rest of the day.

As our day progressed, things returned to a mundane order. The routine was down to science now. The kids knew they would return after lunch, and we would go over history and science. Then, we would spend the last few minutes reading our class book. All eyes stared blankly at the clock until the bell started to startle them, then fled as if the building was on fire.

I took a deep breath and flipped back to that dreaded e-mail. After one more glance, I sent it. I cringed until the sent alert came through. Crossing my fingers, I pulled out my phone to text Evelyn, Evie for short. The car line was handled for the afternoon, so I was free earlier than usual.

Wine?

The text was simple, to the point, and something I knew she could not refuse. The wine was her love language. As suspected, ten seconds later, a thumbs-up emoji came through, and I headed out.

Elias

“All rise for the jury,” the older man that sat at the top of the bench bellowed out into the waiting audience.

I watched the jurors come in, heads down. I had been a district attorney long enough to know that you can tell a lot by a verdict by how the jury comes in. For example, the lady at the front looked sullen. She was somber because she had to take another man’s fate into her hands, which meant, in short, I likely would win. The man in the middle, who looked angry, was a good sign for me. Emotion is what wins trials. As a lawyer, my entire job was a storyteller. Which side tells the best story is the winner.

Once everyone was in the box, we were allowed to sit. Slowly, I lowered myself into the rolling desk chair. The judge ran through the usual questions of whether the jurors had reached a verdict and made sure they agreed on the loopholes the law must cover. Another thirty minutes passed until the judge began to dive into the nitty-gritty of the rulings. It was a habit to hold my breath, even if I knew the case was a slam dunk.

“In the charge of attempted murder with grievous bodily harm, we find the defendant, Anthony Lewis, guilty.”

I released my breath. I could hear his family crying in the crowd while the victim’s family was rejoicing. This is the part that bothers me the most. What if it was my son who did

something like this? Would I be able to be here knowing that they would be sending him away? The court was adjourned, saving me from going down that rabbit hole. My game face remained on even when the trial ended, smiling and nodding, shaking hands, and saving face. The smile remained all the way to my car until I was in the safety of my tinted windows. Just in time, the clock showed 2:00 P.M. The tie around my neck felt like it was choking me, and to relieve the pressure, I snatched it away. Undressing in my car after a trial was what I imagined heaven to be like. I tossed the tie to the passenger seat where my briefcase also remained; inside, it was my lifeline to the ordinary world—the link to the father’s world—my phone. With the weekend officially beginning, I powered it on. Within seconds, the vibrations were continuous. The messages were littered with female friends asking what I was doing this weekend or if I could get a drink. Honestly, none of them seemed interesting enough to leave Lincoln at home. The weekend was our father-son time. No women allowed. A ding signaled an e-mail on my personal account towards the end of the notifications. Intrigued, I opened the application and waited for it to load. The name on the e-mail read “Freya Roberts.”

“Good Afternoon, Mr. Fitz,

My name is Freya Roberts. I took over Lincoln’s class earlier this year and wanted to see if we could plan a time to meet. Don’t worry; it isn’t major. I just wanted to update you on how Lincoln was doing in class and maybe brainstorm ways to get

him more active. Please let me know if you're able to. I look forward to working together to make his time here more fun.

Regards,

Freya Roberts

Freya Roberts? The name sounded weird on my tongue. Lincoln had mentioned a new teacher, but when did he tell me that?

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath. The sun was still beating down outside, but I had the gnawing feeling of parental concern. This teacher barely knew my son, so what did she know about his life? The thought of this stranger thinking she knew more about my kid than me caused a flurry of bubbling anger. Through gritted teeth, I jammed my fingers onto the keyboard.

Miss Roberts,

Tuesday 3:45 P.M. We will meet then. I have a court trial that day, so it must be quick. I need to be prepared.

I backed out of the parking spot and turned towards the school. Being the first one in line had its perks. I started my weekend earlier than the people who showed up late. I don't like to lose at anything, even the car line. The crossing guard began to call student names through her intercom, motioning for us to pull around again. Thirty seconds later, Lincoln bobbed out of the doors, hopping into the passenger side door.

“Hey, kiddo, how was your day? Have fun? Ready for a fun weekend?”

This time with him makes my day job worth every ounce of work.

“It was good, Dad. We got new seating arrangements, and I got to help with passing out papers. We always have fun on the weekends; you know that.”

Shoving his bookbag into the floorboard, he was grinning ear to ear. I couldn't help but see his mom in his eyes, especially how his eyes crinkled at the side when he smiled widely.

“You're right; let's go home.”

The rest of the drive was a barrage of music mixes, dad jokes, and talks about what he wanted for dinner. McDonald's was mentioned more times than I would like to admit.

“Lincoln, you know my opinion on McDonald's. It is horrible for you. I can make burgers at home, and they won't clog your arteries.”

Lincoln simply huffed and continued to flip through stations, turning it up louder. I imagined the music was to drown me out, but I wasn't talking anymore. He was silent the rest of the way until we pulled into our garage. The car didn't even stop completely when he hopped out, tossing his bag in the corner.

“Is that where that goes?”

I pointed to his backpack in the corner.

He grabbed it as he walked in, putting the backpack on the hook hanging on the wall.

“Homework before games, remember!”

His footsteps had already become faint as he ascended to his bedroom before I could finish my sentence.

Kids these days...they had no idea how strict parents could have been. My mom would ground me for getting a B- in third grade. My dad would freak out over anything less than an A. Perfection was the goal, and anything else was a failure.

Freya

The conversation went back and forth between Evie and me for what felt like forever. It always started like this, we would start with plans to go out, and instead, one of us would arrive at the other's doorstep with alcohol and take-out in hand. Being a teacher is fulfilling in and of itself, but once the final bell rings, our social battery is usually depleted. Tonight was no different.

I heard the knock on my door just before eight, and when I looked through the shabby, lace-curtained window, I saw Evie with a weekender in tow.

"It's me! Open the door. My arms hurt!"

"Okay, okay! I had to make sure you weren't a homicidal maniac. This is still a new place for me, remember?"

Her smile remained a joker's grin until I let her inside to drop her heavy load, which told me this wasn't just for Friday night. She looked like she was packed for a whole European tour.

"There are no serial killers here, Frey. This isn't Oxygen Network."

True crime has remained an obsession since both of our early years. Awestruck, we watched re-runs of *Snapped* several times over when our parents retired for the night. Since then, we developed the phrase, "The husband always did it."

Evie had a persona that I could never achieve. Her long blonde hair remained perfectly styled, her wardrobe stayed flawless, and her makeup skills would impress the highest-ranking makeup artist in Washington. She was my total opposite; we balanced each other.

“You will never guess what I had a student do today....” her sentence became muffled by the sound of a wine cork unsealing, then a long slurping noise.

“If it is anything like what you did in high school, spare me.”

Her scowl caused a crease in her forehead, which on her looked adorable. On me? It would look like I had a botched Botox session. How life could be so cruel, I would never know. She marched her way inside the threshold and passed me the bottle. Without a second thought, I sipped.

“This kid tried to throw a chair at another student. I know it’s a public school, but I didn’t sign up to work for WWE.”

She imitated, tossing a chair across my threadbare living room, making a whooshing noise with her mouth.

“Well, private isn’t much better. I had to e-mail a parent today to set a conference to discuss why his son is so withdrawn.”

“That doesn’t sound awful.”

Confusion painted across her face, and I cut in. “His dad seems like a grade-A jerk. That is the bad part.”

Her mouth formed an ‘o’, and she gave a solemn nod, sipping more.

Our night continued with this progression, slow and steady. The bottle of wine began to dwindle, leaving only a tiny drop more. When she tried to drink and came back dry, she grabbed a beer instead. Clarity began to drift away from me more and more. What once seemed cut and dry became cloudy. Our conversations became less about work and more about the nonsense we used to do as teenagers. We fell right back into our adolescent years, going over the crushes we used to have and the secrets we kept. Eventually, the hazy surroundings faded until we were both fast asleep under a shared throw.

Elias

Sunday morning, I started like any other Sunday. I was up and at it well before I heard Lincoln even wake up from his slumber. With precision drilled into me since I was six years old, I got out of the covers and instantly moved to make the bed back up. I tossed the sheets up to the top, tucked the corners, and folded the top down into a perfectly straight line. By the time I was done, I could have bounced a nickel from the comforter. I made my way down the mental checklist that I never deviated from. First, the bed, then I brushed my teeth, got dressed, went downstairs, and had coffee while celebrating the start of another day with our dog, Walker. And then I started to make our breakfast.

When I finished the tasks, I realized I still heard nothing from upstairs. It might have been Sunday, but we were up at 7:30 in this house. There were things to do, places to see, and things to get into.

In concentrated effort, I clogged my shoes up the stairs, trying to rouse my son without blatantly rousing him. He still didn't grasp why I make the rules the way they are, but I hope he comes to appreciate the structure and routine one day. I have instilled in him that shortcuts won't get him to the top, but hard work will. Hard work requires the sacrifice of sleeping late. Besides, nobody wakes up at noon and then gets to have adventures.

Silently, I crept to the halfway-open door and peered into his dark blue room. The nightlight had since turned off, but the projector that painted his ceilings with the planets still twirled, only showing the earth in one dark corner. His unruly hair was the only piece of him that I could see; the rest remained in a blanket burrito of his design.

As if he could feel my eyes on him, he turned and gave me a sleepy, shy smile. “Good morning Dad.”

“Morning, kiddo. Breakfast will be ready soon. It’s time to wake up.”

Without any more prompting, he made his way out of his fort.

“Don’t forget to make that bed.”

I gave him an approving tongue clucking and turned on my heels to exit. The muffins I had placed in the oven had begun to waft a strawberry smell throughout our house. A rumble emitted from my stomach cut through the silence around me.

Lincoln joined me at the dining room table, wearing his khaki pants and burgundy collared polo shirt. His shirt was nice and sleek, not a wrinkle in sight. His pants were the same shape, with fresh creased lines down the sides. Inside, I felt pride swelling in my chest.

“Can we play outside today?”

His question came out with crumbs from the muffin he stuffed into his mouth, scattering on the table like sand from an hourglass.

“After we finish going over some schoolwork, then sure.”

It might not have been normal for other families, but it worked for us. In the back of my mind, I wondered if he resented me at any point for the time I spent with him on academics or when I told him he couldn't go out on weeknights. My intention is never to make him lead a boring life, but when you grow up with wealth, you realize that the friends you thought were friends just wanted someone to pay their way. I was born into this money but had far from an idyllic childhood. Money could never buy my happiness in childhood. I still struggled through the prepubescent woes of growing up.

We spent the first part of the morning filtering through math problems and running through spelling words in his school textbooks. The afternoon half was spent outside, where I grilled some burgers and hotdogs for our dinner. I watched him run in circles going up the rock wall and down the slide of our playset in the backyard. Time would slow down anytime I could watch him do this. At this moment, he was the only thing that mattered to me. He seemed so free and at ease. I could not imagine why this teacher needed me right now, but I would find out either way.

“Alright, time to head in and get ready for bed.”

The deck chair I planted in creaked when I removed my weight. Age was slowly gaining on me. Aches began growing in my knees or lower back when I spent too long in a cramped

position—the days when I looked just like my son were long over.

Steam billowed from the door when he stepped out, clad in pajamas. Hair still dripping, he cut out the light and went back to his room. My role was to tuck him in and ensure his lights were ready to go. Scared of the dark isn't a problem in this household. He claims he likes to watch the light show while he dozes because it makes him more comfortable.

From my line of sight, his room gave off a tranquil feeling. His silhouette slowly rose and fell as if tandem with the air surrounding him. Knowing this boy was fifty percent of me still amazed me. How my mistakes gave me this wonderful human was beyond me, but I made sure to thank whatever God existed anytime I could. Whether he knew it or not, he saved me from myself.



CHAPTER TWO

Freya

The blaring noise screamed from the opposite end of the room, causing my eyes to open. The darkness enveloped my room and told me it was still early, which was a relief; I wouldn't be late. My feet were nice and warm when I slipped them into the waiting slippers. Nothing was worse in the world than freezing feet on the hardwood floor.

“Another day in paradise,” I spoke out loud, mainly to myself.

I was pretty sure the saying is that everyone tells themselves, and you're only crazy if you start responding to yourself. That saying is one I still stand behind.

The weather application on my phone told me it wasn't a day to fix my hair. If I went out with the humidity like it was forecasted, I would look like a poodle within minutes. I settled for a messy bun with nice jeans and a blue blouse. Heels had never been in my school wardrobe, and I preferred flats since third graders still required a ton of movement.

Rush hour in Washington usually didn't get bad until 6:30. I monitored the traffic when I first got here to know the best time to leave out—getting to school when the students did make my day crazier than I cared to have it. If I got to work by 6:30, I had time to settle in for the morning. It gave me time to breathe and prepare, ensuring I could provide the kids with proper attentiveness.

The halls inside were still quiet, except for a few teachers with the same idea as me. Older teachers stood in the teacher's lounge, pouring diluted coffee into "World's Best Teacher" mugs. *Belvita* biscuit wrappers littered the tables. Bypassing all of that, I headed straight to the room. Death Cup Coffee was my savior from the stale restaurant coffee they had stocked. My body required at least double the caffeine to work.

Holding my coffee mug, I wiggled the key into the door and pushed in with my hip to slip inside. One foot in front of the other, I felt my way in the low light. Finally, I felt the hard edge of a metal desk. The coffee went next to my pencil holder; my tote bag went under the desk. Since my hands were free now, I could handle the light switch.

In one swift movement, light flooded in. I tucked my feet underneath the desk to sit cross-legged in the old computer chair. Almost instantly, I remembered that e-mail I sent Friday. It felt like stones settled in the pit of my stomach when I fired up the dinosaur that inhabited my desk.

The desktop showed one new message.

"Let's see what you have to say, Mister Fitz."

Clicking open the message, my blood began to boil.

"Tuesday at 3:45. You have to be kidding me," I said through gritted teeth.

Who does this man think he is? No, seeing if that works? No, "Is that okay?" The entitlement from this man was rancid.

Most people would at least say please. No wonder his son is so quiet. If I had to compete with that attitude in my house, I would be shy too. I also wouldn't want other people around him. It would be mortifying. Annoyance also bubbled. This was his son, so how could he possibly be inconvenienced? These parents spend thousands of dollars for their children to get the best care, so why throw a tantrum when that is what I am trying to do?

Before I could respond adequately, a familiar ring came from deep inside the canvas tote. Cellphone. Making a stabbing motion, I sifted my hands through the contents at the bottom of the abyss. Gum, sanitizing spray, pens, and last but not least, an iPhone's silicone drop case.

Rushing it to my ear, I slid the bottom bar across my brother's face.

“Woah, now, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed today. I just wanted to see if we still were on for tomorrow night. If not, I need to grab Ramen on my way home, or I might starve.”

The voice on the other end was Miles, the annoying older brother I wish I could return. Growing up, he would terrorize me with bugs of any kind and create boys-only clubs that I was never allowed into. When I was eight, he tried to convince me that I was adopted, and it worked until Mom and Dad threatened to ground him and actually adopt him out. He wasn't too happy with that option.

“Yeah, yeah. I guess. I have a parent-teacher meeting before, though. It should be over around 4:15; we can meet there. I have to go. The school will be in session soon, and you interrupted me.”

I clicked the end button before he could continue his conversation. Miles could talk to a brick wall for hours if you let him. With the time now, I couldn't let that happen.

Carefully, I kept an eye out for approaching cars, and shortly after that, they started to appear in the foggy outdoors. If I had a favorite day, Monday was not it. The kids came to class already annoyed to be back; most of them had attitude problems from being in trouble over the time off, or some just completely forgot how rules worked.

My classroom bickered with one another about who could use the pencil sharper or who could draw the best circle. Anything and everything would cause full-on meltdowns. Recess was my only reprieve. The bell told me I could let my class run their angst out. Kids nearly tripped over each other, trying to escape the hostility that came with Monday. Every so often, they did trip. On the first week here, one girl got her fingers stepped on when she fell victim to a human stampede. Imagine the scene from *The Lion King*, except with a little girl in a sparkly pink dress. For the next two weeks, she waited patiently until everyone was gone.

As suspected, most kids did flee, except for one. Lincoln sat stoically in his chair still, head down. When he looked up, we made eye contact before he instinctively looked down.

“Are you okay, Lincoln?”

I made sure to stay at my desk. I didn't want him to feel like I was crowding him.

“Yes, Miss Freya.” His voice was quiet, barely above a whisper.

“Are you sure? Do you want to go play outside?”

The questioning I had in mind selfishly played into my narrative. To understand how to help him better, I needed to know what he genuinely loved. Kids needed to be engaged while here.

“I can. I just got into my story.” He closed the book on his desktop, sliding it away from him.

“Do you like reading? Or maybe baseball?”

He had to like reading; that was usually what he spent his time doing. His response seemed weighted, like he was deciding if he could trust me.

“I guess. My dad says it's good to read. I haven't really done many sports, though.”

Of course—his dad. I don't know why I didn't suspect it. I didn't have time to respond before he shot out of the door like a bottle rocket. From the window, I could see he made it to the playground with our P.E. teacher, stopping briefly to likely apologize for being late. You couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for how he seemed to be under a rock-hard thumb; it was unfortunate. It reminded me of my life growing up. The house had love, but it also had a tough love prospect. We were made

to show respect at any point. That is likely why I am so close to my brother. We shared a mutual bond.

Thoughts of home stayed with me the rest of the day. The entire thing caused me to feel distant. The words I said sounded like they were coming from someone else. The melancholy caused me to float through the day, not paying attention to the things staring me in the face. I don't recall reading our class book. The open book on my lap when the bell rang was the only thing that told me I didn't completely skip that half.

Even assisting with the car line was a struggle. Cars kept rolling through the circle, and I almost walked into several vehicles at different times. Better yet, I almost slipped off the sidewalk into the middle of the circle. Before righting myself, the car abruptly stopped, and the passenger door swung open. I caught a glimpse of Lincoln breeze by and hop in. I stared straight at his father while he struggled for a stiff hug. As gorgeous as he was, the only sign of pleasure was that he smiled when he looked down at the small boy beside him. Side by side, the pair seemed like an odd match. The little boy didn't look like he would be able to grow up to emulate the man that sat next to him, hand on the gear shift. Unblinking, I quickly jumped to the side to avoid his father crushing me under his vehicle.

Irritation flooded through me. Seeing that man just made me want to slap him hard. The thought caused a slight panic because I wasn't violent. It wasn't normal for me to imagine

assaulting dads. For this dad, though, I might make an exception. His poor wife was probably just as miserable.

I took myself home and straight into a cold shower. Tonight was Monday, which meant I would curl up with a glass of Cabernet and watch new episodes of my favorite Netflix show. I had zero intention of deviating away from that idea.

Elias

Morning came too early for my liking. Last night, I replayed that little teacher nearly falling in front of my wheels. Graceful was not the word that came to mind. She was like a bull in a China shop, which made sense why she taught elementary school. It probably wouldn't take grace to wrangle a room full of rowdy kids. And yet I couldn't stop staring at her. I had to ensure I didn't actually look up in her direction so she wouldn't notice. The upcoming meeting hung loosely in the air. I know it couldn't be about grades seeing as I checked our portal last night, and they're holding steady at an A. I tried to push the thought as far away as possible while heading downstairs to make pancakes for us.

The pancakes went off without a hitch, Lincoln eating more than two of them. Of course, he wanted to add chocolate chips and bananas. I let it slide and tried to tell myself at least he was getting his fruit in some way.

I felt some form of peace as I arrived at the courthouse. The sky was calm, the birds sang a humble tune, and I managed a parking spot at the front. In line with how days like this usually went, it was on the up and up.

“Good morning, E!” A voice echoed through the parking deck, bouncing off the cement walls. It created a form of symphonic harmony, mixing with itself.

I scanned the perimeter briefly until I saw a grey suit flitting between a Tahoe and a Corolla. Subconsciously, I knew it was Miles. “E” was a nickname that only he had a claim to. It started in college when he got too drunk and could never remember my name. It’s been years, and I still didn’t know if he knew my real name; I never asked.

“Morning, Miles. Look at you, on time. Maybe the judge won’t hate everyone due to your absence.”

My briefcase grip started slipping, my hands clammy from the post-rain humidity. I fought to adjust my hand placement to avoid littering the ground with sensitive documents.

“Very funny. Not everyone wakes up ready to walk out of the door.”

His free hand clamped down on my shoulder, giving a gentle squeeze.

The rest of the way, we navigated in silence. Coworkers walked by, discussing their dinner last night or how the kids drove them and their wives up the walls. I was envious of them simply having a wife. Miles kept in step with me the entire way to Judge Jones’ courtroom. He’d been working for the courts for nearly three years, slowly moving through the ranks, now carefully resting as Assistant District Attorney. We only parted when I went to the front desk, leaving him to take the seat behind me.

Judge Jones leaned more toward the no-nonsense type of person. He had sentenced petty thieves to several years just to make sure it didn’t happen again. Today was no different. The

man we convicted last week was officially sentenced to five years plus five years of probation, and he also had to pay a small fortune in restitution. Overall, it was a win for the victim. The euphoria of the sentencing followed me as I navigated my way to a small corner office that held my name on the door. Inside, my best friend had already made himself at home here.

“What are you getting into today?” Miles tapped the gel pen in a drum roll while shaking his leg on the ground.

“Well, I’m about to go to a parent-teacher meeting. This teacher is trying to give me a run for my money on Linc.”

“That sounds awful. If that teacher thinks he’s a problem child, she is delusional. While you’re off making new friends, I’ll be at dinner with my sister. Gotta handle big brother duties, you know? We need to plan a day for a drink soon.”

The annoying tapping abruptly halted when he emerged from the chair, leaning as if to pop his back. Miles never even acknowledged if I replied about the beer, instead casually walking out of the office and closing the door behind him.

To avoid being sucked into more meaningless conversations with people I had no interest in, I grabbed my things and walked back to the deck, locking up behind me. The shiny black of my car hung out among two smaller cars now, making it easy to locate without worrying about using the car alarm. Managing to exit the winding lot was the easy part. The difficulty arose when I hit the freeway and saw brake lights lining the roadway.

“Damn it!”

I slammed my open palm onto the top of my steering wheel, careening my head side to side, trying to plot an exit strategy. The delay made me nervous. It took extreme planning to ensure I was at least ten minutes early for everything. Stuck in the middle lane, cars continued to the right-hand side, making it impossible to merge over and exit for backroads. The moment I tried, a semi-truck nearly rear-ended me. Impatience simmered just below the surface as I watched the clock tick away, knowing I would not be there by 3:45.

Freya

Lincoln sat motionless at his desk, watching outside, and muttered, “He will be here soon. He is never late.”

This kid’s faith in his father knew zero bounds, and even if I was upset, he seemed to be handling this in stride. It didn’t help that my heart hurt at how someone could care so little about their child’s well-being. How could you be late to a meeting you set the time for? It was completely disrespectful. What if I had things to handle?

“I’m sure that he’s got a good reason. Did you have a nice weekend?”

More prying.

“Not really. We played outside when I finished tutoring and cleaning up the house.”

Not only did this child seem distanced from his peers, but he was also forced to do tutoring on the weekends. The thought was appalling when we had tutoring classes here after school. If it were me, I’d let my kid do his tutoring during the week, and be a kid on his weekends; give him a break.

The clock’s ticking was loud, counting down until I lost my temper. When the snap was closed, the oak door flung open. Lincoln’s dad stood there with his tie missing, his top button undone, and nearly panting. He reminded me of a bull that was about to charge at a red flag. Except the red flag was me.

“Lincoln, go wait outside,” the man’s voice boomed throughout the classroom and caused the pencil in front of me to vibrate.

“Nice of you to make time, Mr. Fitz. I was just going to call. I thought I misunderstood your e-mail.” I stood up to straighten my posture. The urge to make myself taller became a top priority. My back became rod straight, chin up. He continued to stare me down, his eyes roaming up and down.

“I was on the way, but I got stuck in traffic. I didn’t have your number since you didn’t attach it to the e-mail. You should add it to your sign-off.”

Red flared behind my eyes. How dare he! The smug look that stayed plastered made every swear word ever heard want to land in between us. I swallowed those words and, through clenched teeth, muttered, “I’ll make a note.”

He didn’t reply to me. Instead, he leaned against a desk, trying to prop himself awkwardly. Images of him falling on his ass caused a glimmer of happiness.

“What are you doing in class causing Lincoln not to enjoy it here? He’s never had a problem before.”

“Me? What am I—”

I stopped when I heard a voice talking to Lincoln outside. The voice was muffled through the walls, but you could tell that they knew each other. Alarmed, I walked to the door, thinking it was a stranger inside the school. What I saw when I opened the door was the farthest thing from a threat—it was

my brother. Suddenly, the only thing that felt dangerous was that Miles seemed to know these two.

Elias

The lady in front of me looked like a boring teacher. She wore a simple outfit; the only missing thing was the apple earrings the older teachers wore religiously. The know-it-all attitude stood out right from the beginning, starting when she stood. I imagined she'd extend a hand, but no luck.

Her tone also caused my muscles to tighten. I watched her neck as the blue veins appeared just above her neckline. Calmness flew out of the window when her voice rose another octave, and I heard Lincoln in the hall.

A male voice was telling him hello. I readied my stance to attack whatever predator had locked in on my son, but then I heard it clearer, "Hey, Linc."

Two seconds felt like a century until my suspicion was confirmed, and the teacher opened the door revealing Miles.

His face showed ample amounts of concern. His eyes darted between the both of us without words. Pieces began to fall into place one right after the other. Miles Roberts. Scanning, I landed on her name, Miss Roberts, written in blue expo marker on the board. My son's teacher was my best friend's sister.

"We can follow up with this as needed."

I needed to leave this room as soon as I could. Everything I told Miles about Linc's teacher swirling in a tornado spin. I

trashed his own sister. I fled.

Freya

Systems in my brain started to short circuit, making it difficult for me to grasp what exactly just happened. Elias had fled before I could register the emotions on his face. In his place, my brother stood cautiously, waiting to see if I would say anything else on the matter.

“I figured I’d give you a ride since I’m already over here...”

Miles’ eyes were still darting to and from as if trying to conjure Elias back into the doorway.

“Fine. Fine. First thing though, how the hell do you know Elias Fitz?”

Question after question began to flow from my mouth like a waterspout. It wasn’t registering that I wasn’t giving my brother time to answer before continuing the interrogation.

“Or his son, for that matter? Do you know his wife, his whole freaking family, Miles?”

“Slow down, Frey. Breathe,” Miles said as his hands did a wave as if telling me to lower my voice.

“Talk now.” The words weren’t a question; it was a demand. There was a giant piece I was missing in this weird jigsaw.

“Frey, I know Elias Fitz because he’s been my best friend since college. I’ve spoken about him before. ‘E’ is short for Elias. Linc is what I call his son. You two have never met because I didn’t come home that much when I got out of that

house. He was always with his son, so he stayed with his kiddo when I was home. It isn't like he has a wife or girlfriend to help him. He's done the whole thing alone."

Stories that my brother had told me years ago began to run like a drive-in movie in my head. My brother and E going camping. The time they went to Vegas, they went white water rafting. I remember the whole time thinking how my brother was affording all of this, and that was when he told me that his friend was paying. That also meant that Elias had more money than I ever thought he did.

"You don't know who you're dealing with, do you? Freya, he's a district attorney for the state of Washington. His dad had one of the most successful law firms this state has ever seen. He's a big contender, and he never loses."

"He seems like an egotistical prick with no regard for other people's life if you ask me," I said; the words came out more like a snarl.

Driving to the tavern was filled with back-and-forth banter about how much of a jerk my brother's best friend was and how much my brother adored him. What was even more jolting was how they were two different stereotypical men. My brother was lean and manly, but he was voted class clown. Elias looked like a jock.

Inside the tavern, we took a seat in the back booth. The waitress brought over menus, and we each ordered a drink. Miles never changed his order, so *Guinness* it was. His can sat small in comparison to my *Miller*. Guinness was something

from my childhood that I couldn't stand to stomach now. It was too dark and sat too heavily on my stomach.

Pint after pint, can after can; I watched my brother put them away. Two hours passed until I began obsessively checking the time. Sleep was essential in my line of work, and I knew if I didn't call it soon, tomorrow would be the death of me.

"Miles, I have to go. I have work in the morning."

The words came out as a plea. Here I was, begging my brother to take me to my car.

"Okay, okay, but first, I might have some exciting information to pass along in a few days. Just keep your phone at hand."

His words started to run together within the last thirty minutes. The movements in his hands were no longer fluid, instead replaced by jerky, harsh gestures.

Driving back with him seemed less like a smart idea now more than ever, but if I said anything, I would hurt his pride. I did what any sister would do and bit my lip.

My side was molded into the door frame when we pulled back into the parking lot. My hands were cramped and red. Hand on the door handle, he managed one more question.

"How's Evie? Have you talked to her lately?"

A snort escaped. "Go home, Miles."

Elias

My son's face was still glowing as we made our way back outside.

“Dad! I missed Miles! Why was he at our school, though? Did you call him too?”

The dimple on his cheek became more prominent the more excited he became.

“No, Linc. I didn't. Did you know that Miss Roberts' brother is Miles? Pretty cool, huh? How about we discuss another important topic, like what's going on that caused this meeting? Your grades are perfect.”

Slowly, the gleam dissipated. His gaze returned to the floorboard, and his hands began to fidget.

“I know my grades are good, Dad. It was just because Miss Freya thought I should make more friends and that it would be more fun. It's just hard to make friends when I can only see them at school.”

Guilt. Guilt was what I felt that took a backseat in my vehicle. He wasn't entirely wrong. We kept a unique schedule. That wasn't his fault, though. Work kept me buried enough as it was.

“Linc, I know your teacher thinks it would be more fun, but that should be the final say if you're happy with how things are. You know my view on the topic. Friends come and go,

shoot; you can tell I have one friend. When you get my age, you realize that nothing comes easy in life, but you must work for it. These years matter, son, and education is forever.”

The names of so-called friends were mere blips in the rearview now. The high school fallouts wounded friendships like soldiers coming home from war. War-torn villages made the urge to keep Miles close. He was the only friend I had for more than a year. I had let him in on my life, brought my son close to him, and losing him could possibly cause a brief breathing hold.

I wanted to ask him why he never mentioned that information to me or why he still didn't say a word when he heard where Lincoln went to school.

Quickly, I whipped out my phone and went to our message thread. I typed and typed but deleted it every time. It was my selfishness that kept his secret behind a locked wall. I was so absorbed in my world that I never thought to ask any more questions of his own. He even told me she was younger, but he said she was serious, so in my eyes, it wasn't worth more questions. Serious hadn't been my type in years. It meant that she was boring and didn't matter what she was like.

I never thought to ask him how his life went outside the courtroom and our usual manly activities. Come to think about it, I didn't know much about his personal life either. Glumly, I replaced the phone. This was my error; I couldn't let that make our friendship off. I couldn't lose more friends. I resolved to

leave it alone. If he wanted to discuss it, we could; otherwise,
no.



CHAPTER THREE

Freya

The start of the week worked at a slow crawl. The mundane tasks began to cause boredom, making it hard to focus on anything in front of me. Thursday morning, I woke up and decided to do something about it.

In the classroom, I removed the nametags from the desks the students had assigned themselves. Carefully, I wrote down each name on a sheet of paper, cut them out, folded them, and tossed them into an unused bowl. One good shake and we were ready for whatever happened. Anticipation caused me to rock nervously on my toes, watching students skip toward me. One little girl had the security officer remove her from the backseat, which while uncommon, wasn't unheard of.

When the kids came into the room for the day, I made sure to stop them with a greeting and offered them to pull a name from the bucket I thrust toward them. The catch was they couldn't open it until roll call was done. Some kids tried to fold them a certain way to sneak a glance; others held them against the light. A line began to form along the back wall with kids leaning their backs against it, keeping them upright at attention.

At five minutes past eight, everyone seemed accounted for. Garrett was the last one to arrive, taking the last name left. They formed a circle around me all at once while I gave the final instructions. Truthfully, I would have let them pick their

groups again, but this made it fair for everyone. Beggars can't really be choosers.

“Lincoln, would you like to tell us your group?”

He unfolded the paper as if deconstructing a bomb and flipped it toward his classmates.

“Sara.”

She stepped forward and unwrapped her paper, “Dillon.”

With a huff that sounded like he would instead do anything else, Dillon came forward and opened his sheet.

“Garrett.”

My shock leaked through the poker face I usually kept on. Queasiness made me question this arrangement entirely. Concern didn't lie between Sara and Lincoln. It rested solely with the other two boys. Not even two minutes later, the shenanigans began, with the two boys being loud and trying to overrule the other group members. Sara was spunky, so I knew she would be okay, and graciously, she defended Lincoln too. Maybe this would be alright. To be careful, I would keep a lookout.

A hawk had nothing on the gaze that I kept plastered on the group of four in the corner. Every thirty minutes, I would find reasons to walk a lap to see if I could overhear any bullying. Even the kids knew what I was doing, and I could feel lasers being aimed at my back every time I circled. Without wearing tracks on our floor, I took a seat organizing the closest bookshelf. Fate wouldn't work like that, though, seeing as

soon as I sat, my e-mail dinged. Rubbing the bridge of my nose, I walked and opened it, seeing Elias Fritz come across the screen:

Miss Roberts,

I wanted to see how today went. E-mail back.

I didn't respond until later in the day.

Elias

I waited for her response damn near all day. I jumped anytime I felt my phone vibrate, trying to find reasons to have a look. Each time it wasn't her, my scowl deepened. This waiting was for people who didn't have things to do throughout the day. It wasn't like I was a homemaker. I also didn't have kids to contend with. The people I dealt with were usually lethal. I couldn't do the back and forth, tit for tat. On the latest notification, I shoved my phone back into my pocket a little too eagerly, alerting Eliza, a co-worker.

“Uh, are you alright, sir?”

She cautiously approached, gauging if I would maul her if she came closer; finally deciding I seemed docile enough, she inched her way to me.

“Yeah, just waiting for this teacher to e-mail over Lincoln. I told her to respond.”

“Oh. Well, then maybe monitor it closely. If it gets too much, then go above her?”

That was brilliant! Why had it never occurred to me before that there were people above her?

“Eliza, you're brilliant.”

New resolutions formed inside me. Determined not to be outdone by an elementary teacher, I would e-mail her daily if I had to. She would reply to me.

To keep from checking my phone during our meetings throughout, I kept my phone locked in my office. Judges hated dealing with cell phones. It set everyone up for an awful day, even the lawyers. The nagging thought stuck around, though, constantly wondering why she was taking her sweet time. Until whatever higher power showed mercy, and the Judge called it early for the day. Paperwork had been filed incorrectly, which meant the defense had to ask for a continuance until tomorrow, which was fine. On the way out of the doors, I passed Miles, who nearly ran me over, coming into them.

“Hey! I was coming to get you. Wanna get a bite?”

The mention of food made my stomach growl, showing that we were getting lunch despite my words. Either I went willingly, or Miles force-fed me. I preferred to go of my own accord.

“Okay. I need to go get my stuff from the office.”

Clarifying that “my stuff” meant I needed to get my phone to see if his asshole sister had e-mailed back yet seemed rude, so I omitted that part.

The diner sat nearly empty.

Sitting, we rattled off our orders and passed the menus back.

“Well, let’s clear the obvious. Your sister is my son’s teacher. Did you not think to mention it when you found out where I was sending Linc?”

Damn it. I said I wouldn't do this, but it's done now. I sucked my lower lip in, waiting for him to rip into me for being a jerk to her. Seconds passed, and nothing happened. He didn't raise his voice or even flinch. It was impressive.

“Well, E, it's not like you asked for specifics. You also never told me your son's teacher's name. I'm not just going to assume, out of nearly two hundred faculty members, that my sister is his teacher. The teacher that has been giving you migraines. Which.... makes sense now. I should have known.”

Chuckling, he tipped his sweet tea glass my way as a salute.

The rest of the lunch was uneventful. Miles discussed that he and his sister were close growing up, seeing as their house was also strict, just in a different way. Their home had Bibles in every room, church five times a week, and Bible Study.

If I grew up there, I'd leave and not look back, too. I let those facts ricochet in my head on the drive to the school. I tried to imagine Miss Roberts in a confessional. I should ask if they were Catholic, or else the confessional thought is null and void. Speak of the devil, I pulled to the shoulder and saw Miss Roberts talking to Linc in the corner by himself. Her body language was leaned in, but I couldn't tell if it was in reprimand or praise. My eyebrow arched, waiting to see them turn to me.

Miss Roberts placed a hand on his shoulder and walked to the door, holding his bag while he got situated.

“I e-mailed you.”

“I know.”

That was the only thing she said as she shut the door. Stunned, I blinked a couple of times and watched her walk away.

Did she know? That she acknowledged my e-mail tells me she was doing this purposefully. Lincoln’s teacher was purposely defying me and pushing my buttons. Miles said his sister was boring, but his sister was far from boring. The cat and mouse game stirred something I had ignored since our first meeting—the feeling I now recognized as wanting. Sweat formed on my neck, causing me to warm up rather quickly. Clearing my throat, I forced my eyes away from his teacher’s backside to my son. Lincoln looked none too pleased, making a faux gagging noise.

“Wanna tell me what she was talking to you about?”

Fingers crossed, he didn’t realize I was staring at Miss Roberts.

“Wanna tell me why you were looking at my teacher all weird?”

This kid didn’t miss anything.

“I was looking past her.”

The lie seemed simple enough. If all else fails, blame it on disassociation.

“We have a new group assignment. I pulled the group with Garrett and Dillon. I mean, Sara too. She’s nice, though. The other two just like to be mean to everyone.”

There went another message I'd have to send that she would probably ignore. The headache this woman caused reminded me why I didn't do the serious relationship thing. No way would this woman be fun to be with. Fun to look at, sure.

It took the entire evening to send that message. Most of the time was spent staring at the MacBook. On the tenth draft, I settled on the following:

Miss Roberts,

I noticed you talking to Lincoln today after school, and I spoke to him when he got into the car. He mentioned that he was having issues with some students with him. I was wondering if we could maybe switch groups. I'd prefer it if you replied to this message. Thanks.

Once the sent message flashed, I flipped the tab back to Facebook. A few more clicks took me to Miles, and a few more landed me on Freya Roberts. I spent a fair amount of time scrolling down her timeline, passing a few pictures here and there. My scrolling stopped when I saw a tagged photo of her from a photographer's page, not just of her but of all of her. Her radiant smile stood out at first, but then my eyes went straight to the rest of her body, gleaming in red bikinis. Her friends surrounded her, seeming to have the time of their life. Excitement ran down my body, landing directly in my groin. I quickly slammed the MacBook and moved it out of my lap, standing up to adjust my sweats. That was much more of Lincoln's teacher than I should have seen. The only thing that sneak preview did was make it even harder to focus when she

was in my vicinity. I now knew what was underneath those teacher blouses and wanted more.

Freya

A sleek shiny black rover rolled into the car line, music playing softly through the tinted windows. Trendy bass hits caused the door handle to quiver under my fingers, and I let Lincoln out into the morning air.

Elias' eyes locked mine, and for the first time, he had no eye roll or sneer. It had been replaced with curiosity. His eyes had a sparkle to them, and his complexion was deep and golden. His hand rested on the wheel, and I could see veins protruding from his hand as if he was hanging on for dear life.

Elias' face stayed in my thoughts. It wouldn't matter if I tried to teach my class French or watched a heartfelt movie; my attention would be on none of those things. The thoughts of a pupil's dad replaced my views on education. Ethically, it was questionable. Elias wasn't my type. He seemed macho, domineering, and tough. My type traveled toward the good-hearted, volunteering, soft man.

“He's been doing this alone... My dad just wants me to work for things I want....”

Possibilities that should never have crossed my mind began running wild. Stallions of desire raced in me, without the control to manage any of them. My brother's voice and Lincoln's voice encouraged me that he was single. The look he gave me this morning didn't seem like a hate-filled glance. His

eyes lingered as if undressing me slowly, marking my collarbones and the area below my earlobe.

PING.

E-MAIL.

PING.

E-MAIL.

My body temperature had caused my chest to become red and splotchy. The pings had come to my mailbox back-to-back, which told me it was likely someone on the school board. I didn't want to interrupt my daydream, so I opened the browser and checked the names. I saw Elias first and then Nixon. The preview from Elias' messages was the same as prior. Nixon's were also on par with him—talks about dinners, movies, drinks, or even church. I left them both unopened, sitting idle.

At one point, I texted Evie while the kids were on a bathroom break.

“This man has reached out again. I can't teach if he expects to stop anytime. He beckons. UGH.”

I speed-tapped at the keys, grinning. My fingers were in overdrive, causing the taps to not align with the keyboard noises.

When the last bell hit, I still had not replied to either. Nor had Evie texted back, but that was expected because she was a teacher. Maybe she should explain to Elias that you can't just drop life to send replies all day.

My body still buzzing with tension, I made a snap change of plans and decided on a run to end my night. Three miles later, the message I never responded to disappeared, replaced by sweat and tired legs.

Elias

When I got us home yesterday, I put as much distance between my phone and myself as I could manage. I set the volume to the highest setting to hear if anything happened. It beat the hell out of watching my phone like a damn lunatic. The night progressed without the slightest noise coming from the charging station. Each hour caused more anger to build. Miss Roberts, Freya, was getting underneath my skin like a parasite. Even if she wasn't replying, I still had her in my thoughts. If I didn't imagine her skin slick underneath me, I was still imagining punishing her for not giving in to what I asked her. The flat-out subordination was a revealing turn-on.

Thursday turned to Friday. The time from when I closed my eyes to opening seemed only a matter of minutes. A soft yawn fought its way out while I was wrestling with sheets to reach the phone. It sat in the same spot as the last name, face up with alarms on. I slid the notifications bar down and saw one from Netflix. That was it. The reigns of control I kept wrapped around my hands felt like they were being pulled away. Her fight just to try to dominate me caused admiration in my chest. Dad always told us that with our type of respect, people would do as we said, without question. For most of it, he was right. Freya, on the other hand, proved a challenge. Admiration and exhaustion caused the idea of sitting through bland oatmeal as too much. The bowls I had set out were promptly returned to their homes, and I went to wake up Linc. He was shocked to

see that we pulled into Jack's to get a sausage biscuit and hashbrowns. He stuffed it into his mouth, using a free hand to wipe the crumbs into his lap. On another day, I would suffer a heart attack at the sight, but he looked happy. I didn't want to ruin it.

However, I began searching for Freya at the school. The older lady looked my way first and tried to make her way over, but Freya stopped her with a hand on the shoulder. She nodded and went to the car behind me. Freya walked with a sway in her hips. The outfit today was shocking, unlike any others I have seen. I liked it. She wore it as if she owned me. The black top had a V-neck shape to it that stopped right before her cleavage would begin. A book pendant hung against the dip of her throat; matching earrings were in her ears. Her pants were what sold me. She wore tailored suit-type pants that sat just above her hips. A belt was in place that caused her curves to stand out with ease. Then, if you followed the pants to the bottom, you would see black heels. I couldn't see their tops, but I prayed they had straps around the ankles or were pumps. Visualizing her ass and legs while she was in pumps sent me over the edge.

“I tried to reach you again.”

Animosity had left my voice long ago. The only thing that my voice held now was raspy desire. I spoke while looking at her lips, watching them form words and her tongue sliding behind her teeth.

“I got busy. I don't reply to work after I leave here.”

Her mouth moved with purpose. The matte burgundy lipstick she wore had been applied with precision. She took Lincoln by the hand, and I have never felt so jealous. Her movement was such a small gesture, but I wanted her hands in an utterly unholy manner. I wanted her hands everywhere, not just in mine. Sucking my bottom lip as she turned, I floored it. The tires squealed as they lurched ahead, and I left the line.

Driving was difficult. I kept thinking of Freya's legs in heels. That thought trickled into Freya's legs in heels, wrapped around my waist. I was so turned on that when I reached the deck at 8:30, I had to sit in my car for a bit just to let the hardness in my pants disappear. It would be a horror movie if I had to explain to Miles why I was getting a hard-on before work. It started to work; sexual tension had begun to flow away until my phone lit up with her e-mail address.

Of - Fucking - Course.

Admitting defeat, I gave in and snatched the message up.

Mr. Fitz, I am monitoring the groups closely. If Lincoln decides he would like to move, I will be glad to assist. Right now, he seems okay.

Her message ended abruptly. She didn't leave fake words of thanks at the bottom. It was straight to the point, how I liked it.

Walking into the building was a bit of a struggle. I made sure to keep my briefcase in front of my groin. Sexual desires were gone by the time I reached my chair; the thoughts of what I could do with her changed to seeing rough and rugged men in orange outside the hallways. In this setting, sex wasn't the

only thing in play. I would also protect her. I would rip them apart slowly if anyone like these men approached her.

Each time a new face walked by me, I imagined what they could do to my secret conquest. It was reflexive when my phone rang at 10:58. It was a sheer miracle that I was in the bathroom when it pierced through. I answered on the second ring because I knew that only one call came through during work hours, and that was the school.

“Hello, Mr. Fitz, speaking.” I paused to hear a reply, but the voice on the other end wasn’t Freya. It was an older lady; she sounded like my grandmother. Her words were laced with residual Southern charm.

“Mr. Fitz, there’s been a problem at school. I think you should get down here soon. I have Lincoln with me, and he can stay until you arrive.”

“Is he okay?”

“We can talk when you get here.”

The Southern charm wasn’t evident in that line. I flew out of the bathroom into the hallway that diverged into two large rooms. Inside stood Miles, Eliza, and Nixon, all sat in the first two rows. I pushed through the rows of legs until I reached where Eliza sat. All sets of eyes had landed on me, equally waiting for me as if I was the pack’s leader.

“Can you handle this, Eliza? I have to go. Now. The school called.”

I began packing my files before she even responded. She was competent. When I checked the calendar this morning, it was a simple plea hearing. The case wasn't violent. It was a drug charge for marijuana, less than enough for distribution. We reached the deal of probation within thirty minutes. It helped that the defendant was barely eighteen and a first offender.

“Yeah, I got it. It's easy. I'll just tell the Judge privately that you had an emergency with your son. You've been here long enough. He knows it wasn't optional.”

I was halfway gone when I heard her last reply. Miles stood to follow, but she snatched him back down. The gesture made me want to gather her in a bear hug later, but I'd settle for a coffee since she hated touching.

Lincoln's advisor wouldn't disclose what was wrong on the phone. The unknown caused panic to take over. Fight or flight kicked in when I jumped into the driver's seat. I tried to diminish the worry of knowing they would call an ambulance if it were a medical emergency. I had permitted them to do that much, at least. The emergency flashers stayed on the entire drive to Saint Mary's. My speedometer remained diligently above 70, only slowing down when I saw the school crossing lines and speedbumps. I slammed the car in park when I reached a curb parking spot up front and briskly made my way to the administrator's office.

I saw Lincoln on the other side of the glass windows that lined the lobby. He was sitting closest to the desk, holding an

ice pack to his mouth. Two other kids occupied the opposite end of the area. They seemed to be snickering at each other in silence. I recognized one of the boys as Garrett Travers. He had been in Linc's class almost every year, and I always heard horror stories. The other boy with him held a familiar icepack to his eyebrow. Lincoln saw me only as I entered. His eyes looked like a frightened fawn. His head took a guilty downturn. I flashed glances to orientate myself in this setting. Lincoln had been attending three years of this school, and the only time I was here was only if I had to check him in or out; nothing that involved discipline.

In the back, a lilac skirt-suit danced between the slits in the window of the bulletproof door. She seemed to be talking to someone beyond my vision, but she grabbed a folder and opened the door.

“Come in.”

I made an arrow at Lincoln that told him to stay in his seat, to which he made no argument. He kept his feet crossed at the ankles, swinging below the hardback chair. I followed the lady, who I recognized as Mrs. Bice, the vice principal, into her office at the back of the hallway. The walls were plastered with kid's drawings, pictures of Bible verses, and pictures of grandchildren in pigtails. The walls were a bright white, which caused the images to appear dull in contrast.

“What happened to my son?”

I refused her gesture to sit by pushing the chair against her desk.

“Mr. Fitz, your son had an issue with two other students in class. I called because it turned physical. Miss Roberts managed to separate them before it got too bad.”

Heat flared out of my nostrils; spots formed in my periphery. If this woman had listened, we wouldn't even be here right now. I tried calming myself down before becoming a defendant instead of a prosecutor.

“I asked Miss Roberts to move my son from the group yesterday afternoon. She never took the time to reply until THIS morning, assuring she would if he asked her. She promised she was monitoring the situation closely. Mrs. Bice, no offense, but from where I'm standing, there was no monitoring at all. I want my son moved from her class effective now. He has had an outstanding record, which would damage him in the future. No college wants a delinquent.”

“Mr. Fitz, I understand you're upset. It is highly unusual for Lincoln to be involved in any disruption. I've discussed it with Miss Roberts and the boys. Since it is the first time, I'm prepared not to report it on paper. You need to take him home until Monday.”

“Look into moving him. Then we can talk.”

The anger sat heavily on me as I took Linc back to the house. His face remained drawn and distant, and sadness was etched into every corner I looked at. It felt like I was being suffocated with everything I couldn't fix.

“Wanna talk about it?”

I asked him when we pulled up at home. I tried to wait till we entered a safe space, but I needed to know. His face wasn't as bad as I imagined behind the icepack, but I still wanted to figure out how to help.

“They were making fun of me for not having a mom. They said she left because she didn't want me. Or love me. I asked them to stop, but they wouldn't. I hit Dillon, and I shouldn't have. I'm sorry.”

The words that were spoken felt like a dagger in my heart. I knew at some point that this would be mentioned. I had tried to prepare myself for this moment since he was a baby. The fact was his mom was not around because of her own decisions. She had not planned on having an infant at all. As soon as I knew of the baby, I was on board. I was going to step up, and she couldn't. When it came to the moment of delivery, she left because she knew she couldn't be what an infant would need. She didn't know how to be stable and rooted in one place. We tried the co-parenting route, but it ended in missed visits and broken promises.

Lincoln's eyes burned into mine. Guilt showed from his eyes to his feet. Being mad was impossible. I understood how he must feel. Nobody wants to know that their mom just left. Abandonment was a hard, bitter pill to swallow. It was a wound I couldn't kiss and make better, and I just prayed I could.

“Linc, I'm not mad. I could never be mad at that. You know, if I could fix it, I would. I love you, and I hate that you have to

deal with them.”

“I love you too. You aren’t Mom. I can’t hate you.”



CHAPTER FOUR

Freya

Saturday morning could not have gotten here any sooner. The week's twists and turns caused me enough chaos to be perfectly okay without any more surprises. Someone could come in with a memory-erasing contraption like *Men in Black*, and it would be the best day of my life up until now. Tension had caused my muscles to become tight, feeling like if I bent my legs anymore, they would snap like a rubber band. I tossed around ideas to get up and move since the thought of being indoors caused my skin to crawl. I needed to get out and put my body to work. I needed to sweat. I wanted to feel my lungs burn with the intensity only a good workout could bring or sex, but the exercise seemed more likely.

I dug through barely unpacked clothes to find my black sports bra and maroon leggings. When I thought of doing a quick yoga session, my thoughts instead focused on running. Running seemed to be the fastest way to escape. You could escape danger, boredom, or even perceived slights that aren't even there. When you ran, you were free.

Mind made up, I flittered to the hall closet and reached into the blank abyss beyond. The flashlight on my phone caused shadows of shoes to be cast on the wall. Between my heels and sandals sat a pair of black Nike running shoes, not nearly as loved as the other options, but just what the doctor ordered for right now. I snatched them out of their resting place and used

the wall to balance as I slipped them on. Left foot, tie. Right foot, tie.

The morning air felt chilly as I exited the warmth of my home. Sunrise still painted the sky a gorgeous shade of bright pink mixed with watercolor blues. I could even smell the dew on the grass, and I inhaled, trying to force the peacefulness inside myself.

Looking both ways at the end of my street, I had a decision to make. One way would take me to my regular running area; a circular, paved track. It was easy. There were no distractions; it was usually just older people doing their daily cardio. It was out of the way of prying eyes and people just stopping in for a visit. The other way would take me to a park, a more scenic view. The track was not rough terrain; it just allowed for more family-type functions. Maybe a birthday party or a small family, children giggling on slides. I let the thoughts slide from left to right, my eyes looking left and right as if pondering how my actions would impact the rest of the day.

Deciding in a split second, I turned my body towards the right and sprinted toward our local park. Taking the sky in again, I thought families would still be sleeping. It wasn't past eight just yet, meaning it wouldn't be packed. The thought of running through a tranquil park with bright, colorful pops of color brought an uplifting feel to me that I cherished. Using the watch on my wrist, I timed my runs. The park only sat maybe a mile from my home, so I paced myself. Running, I could feel the light mist from the night before assembling on my arms. Chill bumps traced their way up to my shoulders,

only abating when my body temperature climbed high enough to chase the chill away.

When I came into view of the park, it looked empty. The parking lot held only two cars. I could hear none of the usual park noises. The vicinity was clear of any squeaking chains from rusted swings or screams of kids as they threw themselves down the slides. No parents sat coaxing their children to come out of the sand pit or kids quarreling over whose turn it was to use the monkey bars. Inside the gate, things were just the same. No small children raced in front of me, like a squirrel trying to get to the other side of the road. I put my earbuds and phone into the slit, cut into the band of my leggings, and pressed play on the music library.

Rhythmic beats flowed through my ears, pulsating a tune that forced motivation. At first, watching my feet, I paced my strides as best as possible with the music I used as background noise. Only when I was at a comfortable pace did I look up at the trail in front of me. The messy bun I had tossed my hair into started falling apart, forming a sad ponytail that wasn't elegantly flowing behind me. It didn't look like I was on the runway with a fan blowing into my face like a scene from Sports Illustrated. Beads of sweat plastered baby hairs to my forehead and the back of my neck.

Toward the end of the song, I made it to the back of the park. Here it was much more shaded, breezy even. Swings that held smaller babies with a full back sat with the back facing a fence lined with dogwood trees. Miniature charcoal grills stood in a line alongside numbered pavilions. I glanced for a split second

to see them and returned my eyes to the trail. Startled, I nearly ran into a dog. Not just a dog, a big dog.

My run slowed to a jog, judging to see if this fluffy newcomer was a friend or foe. Its coat was soft and flowing, clean. I saw no signs of it living out in the streets. Once I safely felt it wouldn't maul me, I picked my pace back up and around it. The four-legged tag-a-long only stopped when a whistle came from further up the way, signaling the dog to sprint back.

On the last turn at the back of the trail, I saw the dog once again.

“Walker! Come here, boy!”

A small voice bounced between the trees. Another whistle followed close behind.

“WALKER!” Another voice, gruffer.

I glanced around to see if I could spot their runaway companion and direct him back to his owners. I saw Walker flit by me, holding a tennis ball that had seen better days. His head swung to the side, and he kept changing his grip, afraid he would drop it and never see it again. Around that time, a side stitch caught me by surprise. I halted, bending at the hips, head facing the ground below. I saw a yellow disc fly past my knees into the waiting grass. Walker ran, snatched it before it landed, and trotted back. Since I was at a standstill this time, I followed his steps.

I felt my breathing hitch when a boy came into view past a tree, peeking around the trunk. Most of his body stayed hidden, but I saw it was Lincoln. He was with his father, who was chasing him with a giddy look. Even from a distance, he looked relaxed and in his element. Even from a distance, you could see his face lit up from inside. He chased them both, scooping up his son in a fireman carry and spinning him. Fascinated, I continued the run, keeping at a distance, watching the family moment while they remained blissfully unaware. I ran three more laps, only slowing when I came near Walker. It took a little longer than usual, but I took it all in. Then, after the last lap, I cut out from the gate and silently headed back to the house.

Elias

Our time at the park reinvigorated me, the stress melting away. I felt more like a dad than I had in months. Finally able to connect to my son, I decided to try my luck and use the outdoor time to start more questions. In my mind, being already relaxed would likely make him more open to discussing what he thinks. We both collapsed onto a nearby pavilion bench when I noticed he seemed winded. I passed him a water bottle that I had kept in a smaller cooler that I had preemptively brought along.

“How are you feeling about going back to school?”

The thought had been invading my mind for the past day and a half. Hesitancy to let him walk into a lion’s den made me want to just whisk him away to homeschool until college, but I

know that isn't an option. He needed social time. We could afford it; I still had my family's money, but sitting at home wasn't something I dreamed of doing. I craved routine, the regular timeline of events I had to accomplish. If I had to just stay in my house, I would need to be sent to an institution.

"I'll be okay. It's just school, and I'll stay away like before."

He gave me a knowing look. Linc was an empath; he felt more things in a single day than I had felt in my entire life, more than likely. His empathy also caused his constant need to shield me from something he felt would hurt my feelings.

"Do you need me to do anything? Maybe talk to the school again?"

"No, Dad. I want you to not worry. I want you to take me to the park like this, and us just play."

The words took me by surprise, regret bringing tears to my eyes. I never realized how much my trying to shield him was hindering him. He just wants his dad, and I'm trying to fix everything for him, even when I'm home.

"I'm sorry, Linc. I guess I push too hard sometimes. It's what I do. I want you to understand the meaning of working hard. It isn't rewarding if you are just handed things. I could try to do better, though. For you. Okay? Starting today. How about we go for ice cream, and I'll put a tent up, and we can camp out?" With my head in my hands, I turned my face to him. Smiling eyes greeted me, shining with the reflection of the sun that was now brightly lit overhead. His head gave an

excited, jerky nod. He jumped up and stuck out a hand to help me up, tugging me back to the vehicle.

We made it back home with more sugar in us, ready to conquer the night. Lincoln ran around, grabbing our camping supplies. Bug spray, lantern, and sleeping bags in tow, he headed outside to place them in the yard beside the barely touched tent I drug out of our garage. Cross-legged, he watched me fight to get the poles staked in, and the tent opened into a perfect dome. I divided up tasks for him to take in the sleeping bags and set up the inside, which he did.

“Phone off!”

He took my phone from my hand and tried to shut the power off, confused that you had to hold two buttons simultaneously.

“You win! Let me go put it inside to charge then.”

It took some time to crawl out of the small opening, knees popping under the strain of my own body weight. My knees let out a loud crackle when I stood straight, signs that aging was not going as gracefully as I imagined. As I strolled inside the house, I pulled the phone out, checked the e-mail, and plugged it into the charge. I scrolled through a couple of subscription newsletters and saw one underneath the others.

Mr. Fitz,

After our conversation Friday, I investigated reports and class openings. Unfortunately, I can't move him to another class. The other rosters are at our state-limited capacity. Since it took place on a Friday, though, he is welcome back Monday.

To ensure that you can rest easy, I will not put this on paper as a disciplinary action. I understand this is a rare happening, and it isn't easy for your son due to circumstances.

Best wishes,

Mrs. Bice.

Accepting what was said, I let out a huff of hot air and locked the screen. I made my way back into the small tent, resting on my back while Lincoln began to yammer over the latest toys that were coming soon. I let my mind wander to unknown places. Between the toy talk, his voice faded into silence when he fell asleep. I stared at the top of the tent, which was now stifling. My mind raced with the idea that he wouldn't be leaving Freya's class. Aware that I asked for it, I silently thanked the school for not listening to me. I know that it wasn't great, and it's totally not right, but if Linc got moved, I'd never have an excuse to see her again. I again fell asleep to the image of her in that damn swim suit, imagining what her skin felt like underneath.

I woke up before the sun the following day. The humidity caused my T-shirt to cling to my stomach and back. Crickets created a symphony outside the zippered closure. It took a bit to shimmy my arm from underneath my son, trying not to wake him up. He flinched, but once he settled, I made my way out into the early morning. The stars lit up what was above me, lighting my way into the house once again. The light above the stove illuminated my way to my phone. Unlocking

it, I saw a text from Miles that came through at nearly nine last night.

Hey, man! I have some fun news. I'll see you in the morning.

Freya

Sunday morning, I woke up to a brief chime of a text. A groan moved through my body, and I stretched far enough to touch the top of my bedframe. I looked at the old school alarm clock that stood by my bed, the red lights blinking at 7:40. It was Sunday, and Evie would in no way be awake right now. Saturday nights were her nights to mingle, meaning she never rolled out of bed before noon. I didn't speak to anyone else, so curiosity made me go for the text.

Hey, sis! I have some big news. Let's meet this week. It can't wait till our next dinner!

Miles' text read with several exclamation points and a couple of emojis that signaled excitement and a smiling sunglasses face.

See you then.

He knew I would never tell him no. I can't even think of a time in adulthood I have ever told him no when he asks to meet. Growing up, he was there for me, so I swore to show up for him when I was older. It formed a give-and-take relationship. Next on my drop-down list was an e-mail from Mrs. Bice.

Freya,

Upon Mr. Fitz's request, I had to look into moving his son due to the circumstances. I checked the rosters, but it isn't possible at this time. Please be sure this stays monitored closely. You can't afford another incident like this.

Great, Elias had requested to have his son moved. I felt almost defeated. I hadn't meant for it to end in an altercation, but when it started, I had moved away to help another classmate cut out a craft shape. In a matter of seconds, I heard chairs being scraped across the floor. A cacophony of oohs and aahs started behind my back. If I let him know I knew, it would potentially make this situation more uncomfortable.

I didn't want to put Lincoln in the middle of his father's problem with me. It would run the risk of alienating him even more. If I did that, I likely would never make any more progress with him. I wanted him to thrive, but to do that, I would have to pretend that I was unaware he had requested his move.



CHAPTER FIVE

Elias

When Miles said he would be here early, he wasn't joking. Miles rarely woke up before the afternoon if he wasn't working. He was a certified bachelor, so his nights were spent with lady friends he had. In hand, he carried a bottle of champagne.

“Surprise! I wanted to tell you in person. I got the promotion! It goes into effect in two weeks. I wanted to tell you first and in person because Monday will be hell.”

Shock wormed its way into my face. I was a district attorney, but even I hadn't heard of a promotion being talked about. I'm also excited because he had done this independently since they didn't even ask me for a reference. It was like a proud dad moment but with a grown-ass man. Awkward, yes. Unheard of, no.

“Congrats, man!”

“That isn't all I wanted to ask if you wanted to go on a mini vacation this coming weekend. Please say yes. I already paid for the cabin.”

There it is. I knew there was something else coming besides good news. A minivacation did sound rather nice and was needed. Mentally, I ran through a photographic memory of the trial ahead. I had worked for months on this one. After this

week, I knew I would want some breathing room, so I looked at his pouting face.

“On the condition that I find a reliable sitter.”

When Miles left, I spent most of my evening phoning anyone who I trusted enough to watch Lincoln for a whole weekend. Once, I had to sit and think about who I trusted; the list wasn't all that long. I settled on my aunt on my mom's side, Annette.

Annette had been through most of my traumas with me, becoming the only guardian figure I had left. Breathing easier, she agreed that she would help. At the end of the day, she was just excited I would be out with adults my age.

The next order of business was sending Freya an e-mail about the class seating because if Lincoln couldn't move classes, she would need to move his seat.

Freya

Unease filled the inside of my classroom on Monday morning. It felt like I was dancing on eggshells even before the school opened its doors. I sat with a lump in my throat, feeling awful for even getting Lincoln into the situation. I should have listened to my intuition and swapped seats first thing. A frown was still stuck on my lips when I checked my e-mail this morning and saw Elias' e-mail. I wasn't even mad at him about the e-mail; I deserved it. I simply replied that I would make sure the seating arrangement was handled; that was all I could afford to say.

Sucking up my pride, I walked to the seats and pulled Sara and Lincoln's seats away from the other two boys. Garrett and Dillon were separated from that group and each other as a form of my punishment. It was harder to get in trouble if they were on opposite sides of the room.

Kids gingerly walked into the room, taking in the abrupt change. Lincoln showed up next to last and seemed to be in a better mood than the last time we saw each other. Feeling a quick release of stress, I kept my fingers crossed that this would last.

Elias

Part of me felt bad that I wasn't being such a dick to Miss Roberts, but the other half wanted to shake her and tell her that this could have been totally avoided if she had just listened to me. Her reply seemed lackluster, almost defeated in a way. I replied to update me later, per the usual response from me. It became less funny now, though.

Even my work couldn't put me in a happier state of mind. My movements were zombie-like, slow, and casual. The urgency I usually had seemed to be tapped out. Between the court cases, I excused myself to the office lounge on the fourth floor. A loveseat sat in one section of the rectangular area, with two lounging chairs separated by a small side table. The room also sported a microwave and a refrigerator. From the doorway, I could see Nixon and Miles engaged in a conversation standing by the microwave as it buzzed away.

“Listen, man, can you just put a few thoughts into her head for me? Tell her that I've been working on myself. That I'm better. She won't even respond to me most of the time...”

I couldn't hear the rest of the conversation due to the dinged that their lunch was served. A knot formed in my shoulders, fists involuntarily clenched shut. A fire began to sear its way through my veins slowly. Freya wasn't mine, so I knew this reaction was completely out of line on my behalf, but I couldn't stop myself. The thought of anyone, Nixon especially,

touching her and feeling her made me want to break his fingers. Nothing about Nixon screamed good person. A few women he's had relations with are friends with me, and they all agreed that he was awful towards them. I cleared my throat to warn them I was coming in, pretending to care if I interrupted and didn't just hear most of the conversation. Nixon grabbed his bento box and exited from the lounge, shoulder-bumping me on the way out.

I kept my hands in my pocket as I exaggerated my steps toward him. Miles just gave a subtle shrug, rolling his eyes around.

“What was that about?”

I tipped my head towards the door now behind me.

“Nixon dated Freya a while ago, but Frey ended it with him. Now she doesn't associate, and he is looking for any way to get back in with her.”

His mouth was full as he tried to explain what I just witnessed, causing the leftover grilled chicken to nearly fall out of his mouth. The entire sight was too primal for me. I handed him a napkin that was sitting alone on the counter.

Nixon seemed to be everywhere I went after I found that out. I was half expecting him to be in my car when I left for the day. I needed to escape him for now. His entire presence made me uncomfortable and sick to my stomach at the same time. I drove to the school silently, forcing images of them in bed out of my thoughts. When I saw Linc this time, he was walking

towards me alone. Freya was nowhere to be found, and I guessed that if I were her, I'd be mad at me, too.



Freya

The car line was already over when I ended my call with Nixon. Before I pressed the small green circle, I told myself I would keep my cool. I wouldn't lose my temper or give him more ammunition.

“Frey, please list—”

“Nixon, I told you a hundred times. The answer is no, and it will stay at no. I'm not interested.”

I refused to let this man waste any more of my time trying to change my mind, opting to cut him off before he even had a chance to finish his sentence. We had done the same old song and dance since we split up. It was old and played out now. I hung up before he could mutter anything else, muting his notifications completely.

In the time afterward, I replied to Elias. I never expected to be sad that I missed the car line today. He probably didn't notice, but the facial expressions I caused him to exhibit gave me a cocky rush of pleasure. Typing a reply, I told him all was well and there had been no other issues. I even added a smiley face at the end, with my number and signature at the bottom. Who cares if I never added it to anyone else except his messages? It isn't like he would know.

Elias

Testosterone flooded through my body, filling every artery and vein within reason. Sweat had begun its descent down my face, over the arches of my eyebrows, causing a sweet stinging sensation in my eyes. Music pounded through the iHome that I kept connected to in the home gym in the basement in a sad attempt to flood my thoughts. Each time I added more weight to the bars until my muscles eventually would give way under stress. Thoughts of tiny muscle tears pushed me onward. The music rapidly decreased in volume while another ping amplified throughout.

Mentally, I braced myself to ignore the message tone and finish the task that I was in the middle of working on. I had never been the type to drop my plans for women, and the thought that my son's teacher, of all people, made me want to run and respond before she had a chance to close her laptop flabbergasted me. That was it, though; my concentration was gone. I had been completely crushed by the realization that I was too invested in this woman, and I wanted to turn off any emotion I had left.

The barbells slammed to the floor as I stepped out from underneath them. Chuckling, I thought back to when I attended Planet Fitness, and they would ring this god-awful bell for "misconduct." I snatched up my phone, nearly losing it from the sweat that had gathered in the crevices of my hand. I

clenched my fingers around its shape and jogged up the steps into the main level of the house, knee to chest.

Once upstairs, I tossed the sweat towel into a waiting hamper after wiping it across my forehead. Inside the kitchen lay scattered remnants of Linc's homework and bookbag, tossed haphazardly underneath our table. I shook my head and leaned onto the counter, making a pros and cons list of if I wanted to reply to the unread message.

My mind was made up; I opened it, read her words, and closed the application again. I wasn't replying tonight, especially when she made it obvious how she felt. She didn't even come outside to the car line, which was part of her job. She wouldn't reply off work time, and neither would I. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.

I muted the notifications on my phone for the rest of the evening, deciding that if it wasn't heard, then I couldn't check. My dad always used to say, 'out of sight, out of mind.'" I wandered through the house for the rest of the evening, picking random bits and bobs out of their home. It was a tactic to keep my mind busy. I needed to keep it busy because anytime I stopped, I pictured Nixon kissing Freya, and I wanted to punch anything close by.

Once there was nothing left to disperse, I collapsed onto the section with a glass of Cabernet and scrolled on my social once again, except this time I looked up Nixon's page. His smug smile filled every single selfie that he posted. He had pictures of him hiking, shirtless photos of him on a beach, and

graduation images, all of which screamed false advertising. I made it back to the end, and not shockingly, Freya was never mentioned once. The weight of the unknown pressed down on me, leading me to reply to a message from a woman I had seen for fun. She said she'd be here in thirty; I drained my glass and waited.

Freya

While sitting on the beige sofa that took up a small portion of the living room, a familiar face appeared on the television in front of me. The camera panned into Elias' rugged, sharp jawline. He had a five o'clock shadow that made my attraction to him only grow. The courthouse stood in the background, people scattering behind him and shoving each other onto the front steps. His voice never wavered; he showed no trepidation for being in front of the camera. The words that ran across the bottom of the screen detailed a case that was close to the approach of a ruthless crime. I watched, mouth agape. I couldn't help myself. I wrestled the lock screen on my phone and sent Evie a text outlining exactly how big of a prominent figure Elias really was. The news called him the most important figure in the law practice. I was amazed at how well he seemed to blend in.

I waited impatiently for her to reply. The urge to talk through my innermost thoughts caused me to become restless. Suddenly, a force that was too strong to ignore suddenly pulled at me. I fished out the laptop and pulled up Google. With the phone on my lap, I began searching for any trials he had participated in. The list seemed endless. I read articles from years ago, reports from his beginning in office. I stayed on my deep dive for a while, only stopping when my eyes became heavy and finally closed for the night, still holding my phone and the laptop close by.



CHAPTER SIX

Elias

I had the response to Freya typed and ready to send by 7:45 this morning. However, I stared at the clock as it painstakingly counted down until 8, when my day started. I ached with the need to send it early. Hell, I wanted to send it last night. My pride wasn't going to allow it. Once I hit send, eventually, I walked away from the desk and into the hallway, where I saw Nixon leaning into an open door and conversing casually. I could hear his voice from where I was standing, and it grated on my nerves like nails on a chalkboard. I stood as silent as a mouse, trying to hear anything I could.

“Yeah, I have a date tonight. Some girl from the bar...”

I felt my nostrils flare. I wanted to walk right up to him and smack the smirk off his stupid-looking face. The rest of his words were drowned out by my noisy breathing, which now came in ragged rasps. I kept my eyes locked onto him until he turned on his heels and made his way back towards me, and I stepped out into the middle, slapping a friendly hand onto his shoulder.

“Well, well, well! I guess Miles managed to pull some strings. Taking out the little sister again, huh?”

I played coy, working up the sleazy bachelor angle. Nixon, like everyone else, assumed that I ran through women like I changed clothes, but the reality wasn't so. I was hoping he would indulge me.

“Nah, man. No luck yet. This is just a girl from the local bar I met last night. Still waiting on that one, though! She’ll come around, and I will be there when she does.”

He winked. The knowledge that he could play Freya like a fiddle if he wanted to make my eye physically twitch. I watched him stroll away, hands in his pocket, letting out a playful whistle.

Freya

Lincoln seemed happier today. He came into class earlier than usual, taking a seat at 7:15.

“Good morning, Lincoln!” I said, turning my teacher’s voice on. His grin this morning seemed vibrant, like he woke up and won a gold medal just for that alone. It was contagious. I couldn’t help but grin back at him. I must have looked insane because he just started giggling.

“I’m sorry about the incident last week. I hope your dad is okay now. I didn’t mean to get you in trouble, Lincoln.”

My apology was genuine; I did feel a partial responsibility for their scuffle.

“It’s alright, Miss Roberts. It’s just my dad. He’s a good dad, but he’s also very serious. Since Mom left, he doesn’t really see anyone else except me. He doesn’t have a lot of adult people.”

He loved his father very much. His concern started to seep through the smile he had been wearing a few minutes ago. I left the subject alone after that. I didn’t want to cause him a bad day or let his peers see him upset. I returned to my work and noticed a new message from Elias in my inbox. The childishness of it all struck a chord with me. It was evident that friendship wasn’t a common language with him.

The fact he tried to tell me how to conduct myself as a teacher made me angry. I went to school for this. I got a bachelor's degree in education. I busted my ass to ensure I knew how to handle children. The thought of someone assuming I didn't know what I was doing caused me to grind my teeth down, nearly taking a chunk of the inside of my cheek off.

Fine. He wants to see how I could conduct myself? I can show him.

It should bother me that the rest of my day was spent plotting how to get under a grown man's skin, but it didn't. I was excited. He thought he could try to overpower me, but that isn't how I operate. I swapped my tactics several times, finally settling on just being a peach at the car line.

I waited at the front of the curb, with my hands clasped in front of my waist. I made careful steps to open the car door, help a child in, and walk back to the starting point seemed fluid. Finally, I saw him pull in. He had his top button undone, his tie was askew, and he looked nervous for once.

I flashed a toothy grin and stepped forward, holding the car door.

“Afternoon, Mr. Fitz! Lincoln was a pleasure all day. There were no more issues, and he's already finished the homework for tonight. I will keep you updated per your requests. I'll see you tomorrow, Lincoln!”

The fact that he almost looked perturbed was not lost on me. It gave me a ripple of satisfaction to see him squirm.

Elias

The lady who stood at the car couldn't have been Freya. This one seemed to mime a 1950's homemaker at best.

“Thank you for that. He'll see you tomorrow. Bright and early.”

I put the car in gear, hoping she would get the message and close it. Normally, I would have been thrilled to converse with her, but this was unsettling. It felt too closely related to Annabelle. Even Annabelle wasn't this creepy. I would take a sleepover with a demonic doll over a 1950s homemaker who could potentially poison my dinner.

Lincoln seemed just as taken back by the show. He looked from me to her and then back. If it were a cartoon, you would have seen question marks form in the middle of his eyes. After two seconds of taking us both in, she eased the door shut and pranced away.

“Dad? What was that?”

“I have... no idea. She said homework was done. So how about we go get some food and have a day.”

I didn't care if he agreed. I needed a day after that. I also needed an exorcism. Whatever she just did caused me an uneasy feeling. Once Linc was officially buckled, we grabbed some early dinner and went to the park. Once we were both running in the open area, I felt normal again.

Freya

I couldn't help but feel an irrational thrill of accomplishment. It made the drive to meet my brother rather enjoyable. I even shuffled through music to keep my mood upbeat. The music was loud enough that my brother could hear the words outside the rolled-up windows. He turned my way, giving me a quizzical expression. I stuck my tongue out at him in true sibling rivalry and parked.

“Someone seems happy.”

“I am, actually. It's been a rewarding day.”

He helped me out of the car, slamming the door shut behind me. He seemed chipper tonight. You could tell he wasn't bogged down with his job or problems. He seemed to want my company for the first time in a while. The walk into the restaurant was filled with typical chatter and jabs at each other. His pace kept step with mine, stopping only to hold the door briefly. When we reached the host stand, I was shocked to learn he had made reservations. It was refreshing not to wait very long; I was famished.

I sat down first, then waited to let him situate himself.

“Is there a special occasion?”

I gave him a look over the water glass, waiting for him to explain why we came out tonight instead of next week. Miles

was always a stickler for timing and plans; he had never known the word maybe.

“It’s a celebration. Your brother is now a prosecutor.”

Dumbfounded, I waited to see if it was a prank. Miles was a damn good lawyer, but the change was quick. I had no idea he was even pursuing a promotion. Still, I swelled with pride.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so happy for you. We are celebrating!”

I brought my hands together in a loud clap, causing the couple beside us to nearly jump out of their seat.

“Since it’s a celebration, I wanted to see if you would come with me to the old cabin we visited as kids. It’s only three days.”

“Yes! When?”

A promise of a brief getaway was music to my ears. I started mentally preparing a checklist of what I needed to take care of—or figuring out if I needed to use vacation time.

“Funny you should ask.... we leave Friday.”

I stared at him without blinking. The notice for this trip was nonexistent. I tried to decide if I could even go that soon.

“Don’t blame me. You’d never have agreed if I were to ask for too far away. And before I forget... would you want to reach out to Evie and see if she is free? She grew up with us, too.”

I tried to keep my eye contact with him steady, but it was hard. Mindlessly, I kept trying to arrange the words he was

saying in a sentence that made sense to me. They didn't seem to register right away.

“Uh... Okay...?” I couldn't think of other words to say. He had known Evie for years, but something about this request made me question his invitation. It seemed ludicrous to think he would harbor anything sexual since she felt like a sister. She had always been like a sister to both of us.

I called Evie as soon as I got out of dinner with the proposal. As I suspected, she heard about the free vacation and jumped on board. Excitement to spend time with my friend filled me, but so did a sneaking suspicion about why he wanted her there. I buried both in an extra glass of wine when I arrived home.



Elias

Something inside me felt a coil unraveled when Miles mentioned going away. I knew I would miss my son, but I also had enough stress in the last week that a few days in the wild felt like heaven... Even if I did have to tell him I would miss half of the day on Friday. The court case that was coming up would be a circus, so I decided to go down early Saturday morning instead, just to reset my social battery.

Linc seemed to be perfectly fine with me going rogue for the weekend. I hadn't heard a single question about my absence. Instead, he was thrilled to see his aunt. She would let him get away with murder if he asked her politely enough. This morning, a slight hop was sprinkled into his walk. He came down the stairs and met me at the table, shifting his weight from foot to foot in tandem.

“Dad, I have a question...”

The last word was drawn out in an exaggerated draw that indicated his wanting something.

“Yes?”

“Can I maybe try a sport?”

The question caught me off guard, causing me to lose my thoughts. I cleared my throat out of habit, casting my look his way. The little boy I raised from an infant now stood before me, taller and slowly filling his frame. The arms that were

stick thin have started to develop a little mass underneath. My heartbeat quickened at the thought of me attending Friday night games again.

“Well... I don't see why not, but what about the outings we do on Saturday? Or afternoons at the park? Or tutoring? There's a lot to figure out.”

“Dad, I won't be gone for weeks on end. It's just practice and games. I would still live here and promise to keep my grades up. Plus, it would be nice to have friends my age, and you could even make new friends your age. I'm not an adult. You can't do adult things with me.”

His maturity came as a shock to me. I knew he was lightyears above most, but it was still wild to witness it. Relenting, I gave a single nod. It left a trace of sadness that he wouldn't always be here, but I knew I had to let him grow up.

He ran into me and squished me in a childlike bear hug. I feigned not being able to breathe and gave his hair a quick ruffle. I heard his footsteps patter back to his nook upstairs, and I sighed, returning to the case file.

The trial tomorrow held a ton of brutality, making me sick to see the evidence photos. A man beat his partner nearly to death and assaulted her while her kids were home. The kids were very reasonably traumatized, and knowing I had to have them testify broke me. I pushed the file across the desk and stood up. I made my vow right then that this monster wouldn't walk; I was getting the verdict. I built an invisible armor

around my emotions and went to bed, turning on a comedy to erase the previous images.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Freya

The air was chilled Wednesday morning, making my commute a struggle. Shit, it made getting out of bed a battle. The travel mug of coffee became an angel. It was emptied before I even turned into the lot, causing a brief caffeine high. Once I managed to get inside the school, I made a quick pitstop to refill that same travel mug, just in case it was one of those mornings.

I sat in the rolling chair and let my neck roll from side to side, releasing any tight muscles accumulated overnight. Mid-roll, I heard a simple knock on the door. No cars had lined up yet, so I assumed it was another teacher. Imagine the surprise when I opened the door and had to drop my eyes down. Lincoln stood there, giving me a sheepish grin.

“Good morning, Miss Roberts. Dad had to go in extra early... so is it okay if I help you here?”

“Absolutely!”

I opened the door wider, letting him slide in underneath my arm. He flitted around the room, helping set out papers and getting up any loose pieces of trash the janitor missed. He didn't need extra direction; he saw what needed to happen and went right to it.

About fifteen minutes later, Sara also came in early, already hearing the commotion from the room. Lincoln rushed to

usher her inside, begging her to let him show her the new notebook he got from his dad last night. It was a relief to see him finally opening up with other students after what felt like months of silence. The talkative person in him this morning stayed with him the whole day. Part of me stayed excited, typing an e-mail to Elias explaining that whatever talk they had worked amazingly.

Elias

I was hesitant to drop Linc off early this morning, but the sad fact was that I had to be in that courtroom early. I couldn't risk traffic or people rubber-necking a wreck. The judge presiding over this case was one of the toughest to please. He had held his seat for several years and had a strong sense of entitlement. I even watched him sentence a nonviolent offender to twenty-five years.

By a miracle, I arrived ten minutes before the judge walked into the room. We all stood, allowing him to enter and give us further instructions to sit once more. In the corner of the room sat the defendant, a gruff, angry-looking man. His suit jacket hugged his shoulders tightly, almost disconcertingly so. The bulldog's face showed no remorse for the actions he committed. The brown eyes looked almost black, empty. It made me think of the saying that the eyes are the window to the soul. It took at least an hour for the typical idle lawyer talk.

The judge's name was Harrison, but he would rather be called Your Honor. Your Honor instructed the jury of twelve that our opening statements were not to be taken as evidence. It was just a layout for what we were trying to prove.

Close to ten in the morning, we commenced. Since I was the prosecutor, I had the liberty to speak first. I stood up and faced the jury, clearing my throat before starting.

“On March 23, 2020, a woman was found brutally beaten and left for dead. From what hospital doctors have explained, her injuries would have ultimately proved fatal if she weren’t found when she was. The man in this courtroom was her partner of seven years, and when she mentioned wanting to leave, he snapped. He beat her in the skull with his bare fists...”

I turned to face the defendant and made direct eye contact. His face stayed flat, showing nothing. The only thing I managed to catch was a slight eye roll. I felt my veins pop in my neck, suppressing a growl. I looked back to the jury to try to quell the rage that his presence evoked. I made the motions appropriate to show our photographs once I was done.

Once the slides began to go across the screen, my stomach lurched nearly up my throat. It took a few seconds to push the breakfast I had hours earlier. Even then, the urge to vomit stayed close. I felt my mouth begin to salivate; my vision started to become more spotted. Somewhere behind me, I heard a distorted voice approaching the bench. Miles shot me a cautious glance before going in front of the judge. I couldn’t hear the conversation, but both sets of eyes would look at me before turning to each other again. Both men spoke in hushed tones before the judge nodded and dismissed Miles back to his seat shortly after he called a recess.

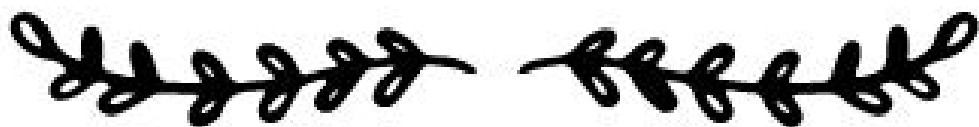
Miles told me to sit once everyone cleared the room. He left the room for a few seconds before returning with a soda.

“What’s up, E? You’ve worked cases like this all the time. Why is this causing this reaction? Are you just sick?”

His ass sat on the edge of the rectangular desk. The only thing I could hear was the drumming of his fingers and static.

“Just don’t feel too great, dude. That’s all.”

When the judge and defense returned, the defense asked to approach. The defendant had glassy eyes that were newly wet. The defense requested a continuance until the following day due to his client being in emotional distress from the photos that had been shown. Internally, I willed the judge to laugh in this man’s face, but to my horror, it was granted. I could barely sit still until the court emptied once again. I forced deep breaths, making sure the defendant was safely behind his bars before I even moved. Miles was the only one left, but even then, I heaved myself up and forward, knocking the double doors wide open. People tried to catch my attention, but I pretended they didn’t exist. At that moment, they weren’t coworkers. They were simply blockades between me and freedom. I wasn’t even in the mindset to return to my office. I opted to haul ass to check Lincoln out of class because I just wanted to see my son right now.



Freya

That evening I decided on one more quick run in the park. Was I secretly wanting to see the father and son duo? Sure, kind of. I also just wanted to clear my head. That's what I did; I ran. I wasn't let down this time when a familiar shaggy dog ran too close to me. I followed his trot back the way he came after he retrieved the slick-looking tennis ball.

I had to do a quick study to ensure I saw things correctly.

“Oh...” The word hung somewhere between a gasp and a sigh.

Up the way, I saw Linc soaring through the air, being held up under his armpits. His father was spinning him in a circle. The laughs floated to me, echoing briefly before fading away. The sight caused me to feel brave, so I ran a tad bit closer. Even if Elias was still a dick, I loved how he was with his son. I set off on the trail again, ensuring the cap was pulled down enough to obscure my looks. The whole time I ran, they never stopped laughing. I would get far enough away that I couldn't hear anymore, but within a few strides, it was back. I counted my laps based on how many times the pair came into sight, and by the time my two miles ended, I took one last glance and turned to head home.

Elias

I only looked over because I saw a brief flash of a teal hat bobbing down the trail. I noticed the hat because it looked like someone tried to hide a head of dark blonde hair underneath the ballcap, and it failed horribly. It took a few seconds until the person turned along a curve for me to recognize that it was Freya. Her attire caught me off guard. The running shorts clung tightly to her thighs and hips, revealing toned and lean legs. The top she sported wasn't a top at all; it was a sports bra that landed at the base of her ribcage, showing a sneak peek of her abdomen.

“Linc, let's go over here! There's more shade.”

I redirected my son's attention further back up the park. I didn't know if it was shadier or cooler, but I didn't want him to see his teacher and blow my surveillance. I was enjoying it from a safe distance. I kept track of how many laps she made and how she carried herself each time. She never seemed to lose her pace. The only thing that looked out of place was her hair which began to peek out more. We played outside the whole time, only leaving after she completed her run. The park had become barren by the time we went, seeming eerie and a void of silence.

When Linc and I finally made it home, we were both worn out from our romp in the park. The tension my arms still held from swinging him around left a sweet ache. Linc seemed

even more worn out, opting to shower and head to his room without a backward glance.

No matter how hard I seemed to try, I couldn't shut my brain off to allow myself to follow in his footsteps. In the downtime, I picked up the living room and made sure Walker had enough food and water to sustain him overnight. Ideas I had heard from other people trying to help them sleep failed me. Giving up, I opened my trial notes and wanted to study them again.

When I woke up, my arms and neck were stiff. My clothes from the park remained on, and the case file had folded itself onto the floor.

My morning began in a blur of motion. Linc refused to wake up, so I was stressed over not making it to court on time. I walked in, already frazzled. Miles sat in the chair to the right of mine, and his head was looking at the file in front of him. The defense wasn't present yet, but we shared briefly before Your Honor interrupted us, and it was time to get the show on the road.

Halfway through the day of this trial, we were already off to a bad start. The judge came in with an already unpleasant mood. The defendant seemed just as annoyed to have to appear. I wasn't quite sure what the defense was trying to do. Most of the time, he appeared zoned out to some other planet. When the judge called to dismiss us, we had wrapped up both sides of the trial. State and defense had shown all the evidence; now, the only thing left was for the closing

statements and allowing time for deliberation. Drained, I left the room and walked towards the front doors.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Freya

The bag of clothes I had organized Thursday night occupied my passenger seat. The only thing that motivated me throughout the day was that I was getting a reprieve right after this. I started the day with my students being happy and ready to take whatever the day had in store, but I wasn't prepared for the empty seat that Lincoln usually occupied. His desk stayed unused for the entirety of the day. A growing sense of unease snaked up my back until I reached out to his father to ensure everything was okay.

Relentlessly, I checked and rechecked the inbox. It became clear after 1:00 PM that a reply wouldn't happen today. I felt a sadness approaching, and before it could sink its claws in, I forced my way into my car and pointed it toward the cabin.

Elias

Friday started in one of the worst ways possible. Linc woke up at three in the morning, throwing up. Panicking, I rushed and called his aunt. It was improbable for me to be home today. The trial was coming to an end, and I couldn't stay home with him. I needed my aunt to answer and make it to my house by 6:30 this morning. I held my breath on the third call until she groggily picked up.

“Elias? What's wrong? Are you okay?” Her voice sounded sleepy yet frantic. I could imagine why. Anytime my phone rang after it was dark, it was an assumption that something terrible had happened.

“Yes, auntie, well, sort of. Linc is sick, and I can't miss the courtroom today. It's the end of the trial. Could you maybe start the day early and watch him at home? I'm desperate.”

I had already started to think about the repercussions if I wasn't there when she said to let her get clothes, and she'd be right over. My parents might not have been fantastic, but my auntie had made up for their actions tenfold.

True to her word, she barged into the house at 6:15. Her hands were piled with bags of clothes and even some breakfast bags from our local Jack's. She dropped the weekender bags of clothes down right inside the door.

“Oh my God, you’re a lifesaver. Medicine is on top of the fridge, and there’s some cash in case he wants pizza this weekend. My cell will be on except while in court. Call me if there’s an emergency.”

My voice was coming across as frantic and breathless. Auntie just told me to hush and ushered me out of my own house.

“This isn’t my first rodeo, Elias. Go to work.”

The breath I had been holding finally exhaled when I was safely on the road. One good thing about Linc being out today was that I could leave earlier and ensure I was there on time.

Inside, tensions between everyone in the building began to thrum throughout. Lawyers gave each other knowing looks. The family in the audience’s eyes were no longer wet with tears but filled with a fiery lust for their revenge. Nobody even looked at me when I arrived, which felt nice today.

The closing statements left everyone on edge. More pictures were displayed as I talked to the crowd of twelve. The need for justice had utterly enraptured me. It took two hours for both parties to give closings and another thirty minutes for jury instructions, then they promptly left the room. Lawyers mingled in groups talking over their plans. Closest to the door stood Nixon, holding a paper cup of water. The thirst crept out of thin air, and I pushed to the water cooler.

“Yeah, it’s nice. After this, I’m headed out to the wilderness, and it’s just me and the friends for three days.”

I paused long enough to chew on what I had just overheard. The likelihood of someone else going to the woods with friends for three days this afternoon seemed zero. I strolled up to the group that was slowly retreating until only me and Nixon remained.

“Just you and the wild, huh? Bet you and your buds will have a field day with that one.”

I sent a sideways grin his way, raising my eyebrows to mimic a suggestive undertone. I couldn't help myself.

“Oh, you mean my bud. It's just me and Miles and his sister. Maybe her friend? That's all I gathered. Didn't ask anything else after I heard that.”

“Hmm. It sounds like it will be a total blast, then. Have fun.”

He gave me a passive wave when he left me. I realized that I should have told him I was going, but I was going to live for the moment when I showed up and saw his face. I rotated between the hallway and my office for nearly three hours until my phone rang, letting me know that a verdict was in. Shit. I looked at the time on my computer and grew aware that it was only three hours since they left, and that meant it was a slam dunk, or I tanked the case.

I was afraid to find out how this would turn out. I matched my steps with Miles and the other legal members who had also begun to make their way back. It was a solemn sight; nobody tried to engage with anyone else. We all looked like the undead from a horror film, mindlessly walking toward a common goal.

The room that held everyone at the start now felt stifled. It was almost like the humidity clung to me now. I went to the main desk that was located to the left and stood behind the chair, glancing around the room periodically. Probably the most obvious fact was that the defendant had no family there for him. He hadn't for the entire time. The victim, however, had family everywhere. Some even made shirts for justice. People held tissues and sporadically blew into them or wiped their eyes. It was too uncomfortable to keep eye contact for too long, so I looked like I was searching for anything else except them. I understood their feelings, though, as a prosecutor, I had to be intimately aware of how they wanted things to turn out. Things like if they want a plea deal to be offered or not even a chance.

If it felt like time moved in slow-motion between the judge coming in and the jury, it was a freeze-frame for the jury to rise and pass the little manila folder back into the judge's hand. All eyes followed the envelope that contained all our answers and the hard work of every person involved in this case. The judge read off the charges one by one, and I started holding my breath in the last word. Time stopped when the verdict came out of his mouth.

“Not guilty.”

A collective gasp erupted from the crowd. I felt the floor fall from beneath my feet. In the back, a scream burst into sobs. My face felt like it was on fire. I hadn't deciphered whether it was rage or shame yet. The defense lawyer hugged his client, and the judge dismissed the court. I watched everyone go and

held myself back until the coast became clear. My eyes began to water; I fought with emotion and willed myself to practice the breathing exercises. How could this happen? It seemed to clear cut; a slam dunk. This wasn't right. I punched my hand into the cedar desk, letting the pain bring me back to the present. I finally pinpointed the feeling. It was rage.

I ripped the suit jacket off along with the tie before I made it out into the open. It was just as hot outside as I was on the inside. It was hard not to throw my lunch onto the sidewalk. I ran to the car and yanked my phone out, calling my aunt.

“Change of plans. I'm going tonight. I need to get away from here.”

“Okay. Let me know you're safe, please.”

I nodded and silently ended the call. I turned out of the parking deck and headed towards my destination nowhere.



CHAPTER NINE

Freya

“Hello? Miles? It’s me!” My voice echoed in the log cabin. Miles’ car was parked in front of the driveway, so I knew he was already here. I poked my head around the corner, seeing an empty kitchen.

“Up here! I’m just putting my stuff down.”

Miles’ voice came from above me somewhere. I backtracked to the steps and peered up, seeing him half hanging out of the doorway. His work clothes have been disposed of, and now he stands wearing grey sweatpants and a Nike top, sporting simple sneakers. He looked much more relaxed in this setting, and it’s refreshing, to say the least.

I trudged my duffel bag up the stairs, trying not to pay attention to the beating it gave me back from the movements. Down the hall, I found a room towards the end with a view of the woods, and the bed was larger than the rest. I tossed my stuff onto the center of the plaid sheets and flung myself down next, landing on my back with an oomph.

The next time I opened my eyes was when a slamming door shook the whole damn house. I figured it was just my brother, but after several seconds of listening, it sounded like more than one set of footsteps. I remembered Evie and ran down the stairs, excited to see her for over three hours.

“What the hell is this?”

I stopped at the bottom of the steps; the giggly grin turned to a sharp scowl. Evie was nowhere to be found, but I found another male in the house with my brother. Both backs were turned to me, staring into the front sitting space. Nixon turned around and flashed his teeth at me.

“Surprise! Now, it’s a party. We get to spend a whole weekend together, Frey.”

“Miles, what the fuck is going on?”

Miles stared at me in a mix of panic and horror. It resembled a kid getting in trouble after being found with his hand in the cookie jar. I waited for him to answer me or even notice the question. He reached his hand towards my elbow and pulled me towards another room.

“I was going to tell you before this, but I got so busy that I forgot. I wanted everyone together and made him promise he would lay low. I knew you wouldn’t come if he did...”

“You are 100% fucking right. I wouldn’t have. I can’t believe you would think this is even remotely close to a good idea, Miles!”

I was full-on yelling now. My voice cracked under the stress of it all. I felt hot; angry tears slip down my cheek. The residue left a salty tang on my lip.

Elias

I pulled into the driveway behind three more cars. Two I noticed as Miles and Nixon, and the other one, I'm assuming, remained to Freya. Nixon's car was last. I saw him sitting on the porch, Miller Lite in hand. When he saw me, the light faded from his eyes. I relished every second that he was processing what he was seeing. I walked up the steps, looking down at him.

“Surprise.”

That one word was enough to leave him reeling and speechless. A loud yell nearly caused me to stumble backward off the porch. I watched the door to see if someone was about to charge out of it in case I needed to move to the other side for a second. Around the thirty-second mark, I was reasonably sure that it was safe. I let my hand sit on the doorknob for another second until I pushed the door open and stepped over the threshold.

There were no warm greetings or words of encouragement for the case lost. A very, very angry Freya met me. Her face was so red that it looked like she was sweating. The exposed top part of her chest had started to reveal hives of some sort, probably due to stress. The yelling match stopped with her finger still shoved into her brother's chest.

Miles turned his head my way, and his posture sunk more into himself than he was previously. Freya dropped her hand

down and spat out, “fuck you.’ She stormed back up the stairs, and another door rattled the whole house, including the railing. Miles looked like a war veteran that just came back from a battle.

“What the hell was that?”

“I didn’t tell her you two were coming.”

I choked on my own spit when he told me. It made sense why she was so pissed off now. She hated both of our guts. Now, she’s trapped for a weekend unless she leaves now. I thought of her packing up and walking out between me and her brother.

“Uh. You should probably go talk to her.”

I motioned up above us and rocked back and forth on my heels, trying to de-escalate the awkward moment that just happened.

Miles threw his head back in exasperation and headed up the steps.

Freya

There was no knock at my door. There was no announcement of who was there. Miles came in like he shared this room with me and held up his hands in surrender.

“I’m sorry, okay? It was shitty of me not to tell you.”

I made no moves to stand up to greet him, instead staring through him. I allowed my eyes to focus on an imperfection that stayed on the wall. My phone sat face up on the bed, showing the most recent text to Evie, begging her to hurry her ass up to get here.

“I should have told you. I know that. I swear, I just got so busy with the case and forgot. I just wanted you to be here to celebrate. I love you. I wanted to celebrate with the people that I’m close with...”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I let my body relax at his words.

Of course, I wanted to be here for him. His success was more important than my comfort, and this was important for him. Yes, I was pissed. Yes, I wanted to strangle him with my bare hands. Even so, I loved him and couldn’t blame him for not telling me.

“Yeah, you should have told me. You know how I feel about both of them. We don’t mix well. I’m still utterly pissed off at

you, but I will try to ignore it. I will also try to ignore them; I will leave if you don't like that. I'm here for you only."

"Deal. Oh my god. Thank you, Frey. Love you."

"Love you too, asshole."

I watched him puff his chest back out and gather his composure before leaving me to my own devices again. This weekend had just become more problematic than ever before. My bed vibrated with Evie's new text.

Be there early tomorrow. Needed to finish some stuff here. What a douche move, though. I'm sorry.

I tried not to reply and grovel for her to come to my aid because I knew if I replied right now, I would beg her just to get here as soon as possible.

My next option was the safest; I locked myself inside my room until I fell asleep. I didn't want more empty discussions or to deal with Nixon's antagonizing antics today.

Elias

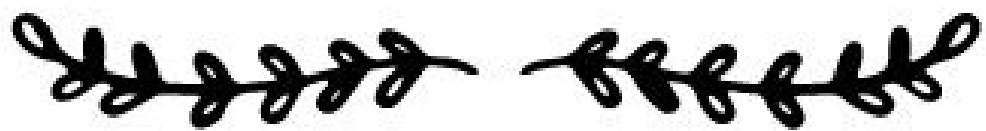
When Miles made his way back down, he didn't seem as desperate. His walk had more pep in it. Nixon was still outside doing God only knows what, and I remained at the kitchen bar, silently sipping my beer.

"Don't even say it," Miles said as he pulled out a bottle of whiskey instead of beer. That alone told me he was not having a good time.

"I'm not going to lecture you. I'm just saying you probably should've told her that her ex would be here. Or that the parent of her teacher she hates would be here, for that matter."

It wasn't until eight that night that things settled down. I noticed Freya never returned from her room the entire night. Nixon retired by seven. Being the only one remaining, I grabbed one more beer and went to my bedroom. Through the walls, I could discern that Freya was in the next room. Her voice spoke in a low tone, asking someone to get to the house. I made sure to tiptoe around the room, not wanting to let her know I was there. This was the closest I would get to being inside her thoughts.

Along with her voice, I could hear the shuffle of her feet pacing back and forth. Her distress made me want to swoop in and fix the whole problem, but I couldn't. I couldn't get a conviction and definitely couldn't help heal this woman. The thought was the last thing that lulled me to sleep.



Freya

I scolded myself for being a weakling. After an hour of not being able to fall asleep, I called Evie. After a volleying chat, she reassured me that she would be there bright and early, and I had to trust her.

It was music to my ears when I heard my bedroom door slam. A weight landed on the edge of my bed before completely falling on top of my body.

“I’m here, Freya. Wake up.”

Her body stayed on top of mine, her words muffling into the comforter wrapped around me. I could feel the heat of her breath seeping through, causing a damp feeling. I fought my arm free and patted her back.

“Glad you could join us, but I can’t breathe.”

Evie quickly rolled off to one side, allowing me to take a big breath to refill my lungs.

“I need coffee. Do you want coffee?”

“Please. The Dunkin’ has worn off.”

I slid my shorts on and braced myself to return to the house. I wasn’t ready to talk, so I scanned the best way to get what I needed without dealing with others. The route that would make the most sense was straight through the living room into the kitchen, but the couches were occupied. It meant I had to go through the dining room, hallway and eventually land in the

kitchen. Thankfully, someone had already made a pot of coffee that had not yet turned to lukewarm sludge. Grabbing two mugs, I filled them with the liquid and a dab of creamer before stalking back the way I came. I walked as quickly as I could without sloshing the lava temp fluid onto my skin. Even if this weekend started shitty, I would prefer not to have third-degree burns. Through my door, I handed Evie one mug that was lighter in color. She pursed her lips and blew into the mug, looking over the rim of her cup at me.

“You know, it might not be all that bad. It’s just two days now. You’re in nature, and it’s quiet, so let’s just enjoy it, okay?”

“You’re right.”

“I know.”

I had known she was right all along. I knew that it was the right thing to do to celebrate Miles’ success. This is what he’s been striving for since he went to college. I had to suck it up for the next two days, drown everything out, and focus on the main thing at hand.

“I guess I should be nice to them then,” I let out a low groan into my coffee.

Elias

I was in the kitchen when the girls finally returned downstairs again. Freya seemed to be calmer now. She didn’t try to avoid everyone on this trip, so it was a small victory.

“Miles knows Evie, but everyone else, meet Evie.”

She pointed to the girl that stood beside her, who was childishly waving at the rest of us. They looked nothing alike. Evie showed up looking like she was ready to walk a runway, and Freya sported yoga shorts and a crop top combination.

“Hello, Evie. I’m Elias. Nice to meet you.”

I stuck my hand out for a friendly shake which she returned. Her grip was tighter than expected, and she didn’t blink once.

“I know who you are.”

The honesty of her statement was shocking. It meant that Freya had mentioned me at one point. I wanted to know if it was a good or bad mention, but I filed the thought away to delve into it when alone.

She only released my hand when Miles came into sight wearing an awful bucket hat.

“I thought we would go hike to the falls today.”

The rest of us exchanged passing glances, trying to gauge the responses to mimic accurately. Nixon finally joined the group, and everything seemed so neatly pressed on his body that I accidentally wanted to spill my coffee on that white polo.

“Sure! I love waterfalls.”

Evie was the only one who broke the silence, adamantly agreeing to the hike. We quickly discovered that he meant to start the hike right then. Everyone scattered ways and rushed to gather the correct clothing to manage the outdoor trek. My outfit was pretty much done, as I wore gym shorts and a sweat-absorbing shirt. My shoes weren’t hiking gear but the

best I had brought. I'd have to be careful if things were slippery.

While the group trickled to the porch slowly, I felt for my phone and sent a quick text to Linc, saying good morning and that I loved him. I wasn't expecting it to ring as I would lock the screen again, so I accepted the call without seeing who was behind the phone.

"Elias, so glad to reach you. You're tough to get a hold of lately. Did you want to get dinner soon?"

The feminine voice belonged to Marie, a casual fling I often grabbed drinks or dinner with once or twice a month. We bonded over how much our jobs consumed our lives. She was a nurse at a local hospital, so she usually worked three twelve-hour shifts.

"Marie, I'm actually out of town this weekend. Raincheck, we can try next weekend?"

"Sure thing, handsome."

She ended the call first, which was not unusual of her. She wasn't a typical woman. She was the one who insisted on 'friends that occasionally had sex' relationship. Her work schedule made maintaining a partnership difficult for her. She explained that her job emotionally drained her, so she couldn't emotionally connect to another human by the time she was off of work. I understood what she was saying and related to some level. Who was I to judge? Everyone was waiting and looking my way when I turned my phone off.

“Sorry, I had to take that.”

The hike started pretty simple. The path was well-worn, and there wasn't much overgrowth that hung into everyone's face. I took up a spot in the very back with Evie in front of me and then Freya in front of her. Instead of walking in front of Freya, Nixon walked right beside her. They were touching from what I could see, and I kept staring, trying to see any indication that she was trying to escape. In a humorous turn of events, I watched Evie step on her friend's shoelace, causing it to come untied. Freya looked down and took the chance to step out of the path and rotate her way to the back with me.

“If I would have let him tie my shoe for me, he would have.”

I felt a little chortle at the base of my throat, making me need to clear my throat. She stayed between me and Evie for the rest of the walk. I was guessing that she knew that between us was the safest bet. Still, Nixon was relentless. He tried to pry into Evie and Freya's conversations which earned him bitchy remarks from both women. I watched the scene before me and was glad to say that she had a personality if she wasn't in a classroom. She wasn't such a buzzkill after all. She was serious about her job, sure. I enjoyed that, though, because I was the same way. She also could adapt to whatever situation she was in, and watching it happen in front of me caused me to grow fonder.

Freya

Miles had the bright idea of taking us all on a last-minute hike to the waterfall. My body didn't particularly want to hike, but I went along with it to avoid causing a fuss. I weighed my outfit options and settled on my shorts and a longer top, basking in bug spray. The chemical smell wafted from me, and I couldn't help but giggle at the thought of it repelling the men on the hike with us.

Down the stairs on the porch, I walked into the blinding sun and saw that everyone's eyes averted to the edge of the porch. Elias stood on the phone, bobbing his head to whatever the other person said. Trying to respect privacy, I looked out at the trial, but I did hear him make plans for next weekend, and I felt my confidence deflate. Elias was good-looking; thinking he wasn't off the market was ridiculous.

My feelings were a tad wounded, so I tried to stay with Evie initially, but Nixon somehow made his way to my side. His voice was grating, and the fact that I could smell the Gucci cologne made me prickle. To the best of my ability, I tuned out the conversation, only answering in one-word replies.

“Maybe we could talk later tonight. I need to get some stuff off of my chest.”

I cleared my throat twice, provoking Evie into rescuing me. This was a thing back in high school when we frequently went

on double dates. Some dates were so unbearable that we had to create an escape plan.

As loyal as a best friend, she stuck her foot onto the shoelace. I wasn't prepared for that to happen, though. It nearly caused me to fall flat onto my face and almost tripped over her shoe in mid-stride. Once I saw the ground below, however, I saw what she did and offered a thank you. This was my chance, and I stepped to the side, allowing Nixon to keep walking. It wasn't until he was well up the way that I rushed my shoe-tying and nuzzled in between Evie and Elias. This was my best option.

I didn't mind Elias at the end of the day. It was just how he carried himself that irked me. He didn't seem to know how to have fun like an average person would. Yet, I was captivated by how he demanded your attention and respect. It aroused a side of me that I was not aware existed. It was painfully evident that he was capable of affection just by how he interacted with Lincoln when nobody was around. His low laugh gave me goosebumps on my arms and legs. Even his walk made me tingle. He carried himself as if he was invincible. While sandwiched in between them, I felt his breath slightly hitting the back of my neck. I could hear his stride and knew he was watching me. I could feel his presence even without words. My heart was thumping, and I was worried he would be able to hear it from where he stood. I focused on the trail again, ignoring the heat that had begun to boil in my core.

I was massively relieved when we reached the falls. I made it my duty to stay by Elias the rest of the time and made the safe call to also remain by him on the way back. Once we arrived, everyone plopped down and soaked up the sun. I yanked my top over my head that was covering my bikini top. The black fabric glittered in the light and reflected like a small disco ball. I ran over several thoughts and decided I wanted to play a little hardball today. I walked with a purpose to stand right in front of Elias and bent over, shimmying out of my shorts, showing a matching cheeky black bikini bottom. As much as I wanted to, I didn't turn my head to try to see his reaction. I straightened up, heard him make a noise that sounded like a moan and smiled. I took off in the way of the small pond that gathered at the fall's basin.

We managed to stay there splashing for the majority of the day. We decided to head back to the cabin when it grew dark. Miles had mentioned dinner, so we all needed to set out so we could freshen up beforehand. Nobody wanted to walk into a place to eat smelling like pond water, after all.



CHAPTER TEN

Elias

I couldn't stop imagining Freya in that little bikini the entire walk back. I wasn't sure if she walked in front of me for protection anymore, though. She kept herself far enough in front of me that my eyes naturally landed on her ass the entire time. I was practically foaming at the mouth by the time we made it back. Before anyone else could claim it, I hauled myself into one of the showers, mainly to douse myself in freezing water after her torture.

Once I stepped out, I felt cool air wrap around me. I gently shook my head and wrapped the towel around my waist. Remembering her stunt, I casually opened the bathroom door and walked to my room, walking directly past her open door. I even looked at her and gave her a finger wave.

We all made it to dinner by nightfall which was a miracle in itself. The men would likely not have struggled, but taking two women meant we had to spend an hour extra on them. The hostess sat us at a back corner table where we could hear each other talk. It was also because they didn't want our antics to disrupt others. Which one was more prevalent? I wasn't sure yet. Drinks were the first things that were ordered. Creature of habit, I dialed back my drinking because we would have to get home somehow. Following my train of thought, Freya also ended up nursing her beverages, and the other members of our group did not.

I watched other patrons finish and pay their tabs; some had even arrived after us. Nixon was the one in the lead of how much alcohol he consumed. I watched as each drink caused him to grow more disheveled. His face slowly grew redder, and his speech faltered. Evie and Miles looked better, but not by much. They could at least speak properly. Nixon was babbling on over the “great times” he and Freya had.

Meanwhile, she had the look of kill me on her face. It took about three stories until Freya raised her voice, indicating it was time to go. By my calculations, go time was well over two hours ago would have been two hours ago, but hey, who was counting? Spoiler alert, it was only me and Freya. She took her brother’s card and hastily paid the bill, effortlessly switching to the role of mother goose. I guess leading drunk adults is close enough to third graders. The problem arose when Nixon stood up to leave and nearly collapsed sideways. Evie got to him first, shoving him upright. This dance continued for the whole way home. Nixon bounced in the backseat between two bodies as if he had no bones.

Back in the sanctity of our cabin, more drinks were opened. Even Freya began to partake, making vodka and soda. Evie was well on her way to being totally gone and rallied for truth or dare. Shocking enough, everyone jumped right in.



Freya

The alcohol had begun to cloud my thoughts, making truth or dare sound like a grand idea. In a distorted circle, things started as innocent truths. Soon enough, Nixon's turn came, and Evie dared to kiss Miles. What took me by surprise was how readily they agreed. I didn't notice any awkward looks at any point. It was enough to spark my interest as to why not? Had it been the opposite, I'd have been slightly weirded out. There were no glances, and it wasn't a simple peck. I saw Evie's tongue graze my brother's lip. I shivered at how uncomfortable I became. They separated, and Evie turned to me finally. It was a mistake to say dare.

“Kiss Elias.”

I did a double-take to make sure I heard her correctly. Surely, she was kidding.

“I don't kiss men that have girlfriends.”

The excuse seemed like the most reasonable answer. It was one that nobody would argue with. It was a letdown when Elias looked at me with his jaw clenched.

“I don't have a girlfriend, though.”

The words seemed to be a statement, but his face seemed like he was asking me a question. I let his voice trail off before piping up. “Let's just get this over with. We are adults, after all.”

I scooted over his way on my butt like an inchworm. Once I reached a reasonable distance closer to him, I turned towards him. Unlike the last kiss that transpired, we hesitated. I scanned his features before meeting his eyes once more. I saw in my peripheral vision his hand coming up and felt his hand on the bottom of my chin, tilting it up to him. It slowly snaked onto my cheek, and he leaned into me. The first thing that stood out was that it wasn't quick. He moved as if I was a deer that he didn't want to spook. He might have been a lawyer, but his hands felt blue-collar. When his lips met mine, I tasted whiskey and oranges like the old fashion at dinner. His kiss wasn't aggressive; it was tender. The way he cradled my face made my body get weak. I was melting.

Elias

Her kiss tasted of lemons with a hint of mint. I was enjoying this too much. To break the tension, I pulled away quickly. Clearing my throat, I painted a solemn look on my mouth. I didn't want her to realize how much I enjoyed tasting her in my mouth. Her face lingered in place for several seconds longer before she wiped her mouth and looked back at her friends. As I feared, they were all watching, wide-eyed. I wasn't sure if she was turned on or dying from the sudden stage fright. I know which one I hoped it was. Shakily, she rubbed her temples. She looked like she might have drunk too much.

“I need to get some water. I'm not used to these many drinks. I'm not twenty-one anymore.”

It took her a few seconds to get to her feet, having to pause for equilibrium. Once on her land legs again, she went to the kitchen, disappearing around the corner. Not even two seconds later, Nixon headed his drunk ass the same way. Something in the way he moved set me on edge. Maybe it was how he waited until she was out of his view. Or perhaps it was because he was pushy sober as it is. It didn't matter what the reason was; I wasn't comfortable. I tuned everyone else out in the room, struggling to hear what was happening in the other room. Words were not easy to hear, but what was

unmistakable was a glass toppling onto the floor. I was up and walking that way before he even noticed my absence.

As I rounded the corner, what I saw made me halt mid-stride. I saw a beer bottle on the floor and Nixon's back to me. Freya was hidden behind him; the only thing that showed her presence was her hand on the countertop. My heart sank until I heard her voice.

“Nixon, move out of my way. I said stop.”

I could hear the fear soaking her voice.

I didn't need to be asked to help. She might hate me, but I wasn't going to ignore this. I closed the gap between me and Nixon in four large strides. I didn't say anything except shove my body between both of them. Freya was nestled snugly into my back. I could feel her palms between my shoulder blades; they were so small against me.

“She said no. It's time you go to bed before this gets worse.”

I didn't move until Nixon started to walk away. He only looked back once, to which I growled, “*Bed.*”

He made no other attempts to say anything. He sulked to his room for the rest of the night. Once I felt her pushing against me, I stepped forward and went for the fridge. I could tell she was shaken up, so I leaned down and grabbed two beers, handing one to her.

“We don't need a driver.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Freya

Elias' beer didn't seem bad after watching Nixon stroll away. The drink of water I came for was to sober me up, but now, I didn't want to be sober. Both beverages were finished within minutes, and I grabbed us another round. With fresh beers, we started to walk around, going outside. The night air was balmy. It caused the beer bottle to drip condensation onto my hands, leaving a tingling trail down the sides of my wrist. This version of Elias was friendly. I walked a few steps ahead of him, trying to navigate towards the lake off in the distance. I would have remained in the lighted areas at any other time, but I saw how he handled Nixon. I knew I was secure. His footsteps ceased when I was almost at the banks.

“What made you think I had a girlfriend?”

“I overheard you talking to her.”

The question was something I wasn't prepared for. Not from Elias, this overly reclusive man who seemed to find me incompetent. I stared out toward the black abyss that stood looming ahead of us. The moon reflected perfectly enough to see the ripples from the insects landing on the surface. The view was something out of a movie, it seemed. I waited in the silence that stood between us.

“If it makes you feel better, I don't have a girlfriend. She is—was—just a casual friend, and I'm not really the relationship

kind...”

I felt my pulse turn tachycardic at his words. I let the multiple meanings of those words run laps around my brain. How much he was sharing broke something in my reserve. I wanted to spill the innermost secrets I kept. I wanted to lay them at his feet as a peace offering. I lowered myself until I sat cross-legged on the rocky shore.

Timidly, I patted the space beside me. He must have mentally weighed his options before deciding it would be alright. His hulking size made his trying to get on the ground look ridiculous. The skin of his legs pulled tight against the muscles showing off this chiseled body he carried.

“I understand not being the relationship kind. I’m here with an ex. That relationship was one giant dumpster fire. Nixon was and still is very condescending. We don’t get along well, if you can’t tell. He was still on dating apps four months in. He ghosted plans several times. I haven’t dated anyone since.”

Why I was telling him this was beyond me, but he sat as if drinking my words in. The moon caused dancing shadows on his cheek, and his smirk caused me a slight giggle.

“I would not have pictured you two together... I will say that much.”

“There is a lot that people don’t picture about me. It isn’t my place, and you can ignore me if you want to, but Lincoln is a great kid. He might just want to be a kid sometimes, though.”

Elias

My admiration for this woman just kept growing. She tried to keep everyone happy, even if it was weird. She paid attention to the small details. She understood what being genuine meant. The way she spoke about her past and Lincoln seemed nothing short of honest. I wanted to take back every harsh thing I had ever said about her.

“I know that. I want to let him, but it’s just been me and him since his mom-”

The vibration in my pocket caused a similar reaction to a jump scare; a standard iPhone ringtone followed it. Her eyes twinkled as she watched me pull it from my pocket. The screen showed my aunt’s face.

“I’m so sorry. I need to take this. It’s my aunt; she has Linc. Gimme one sec.”

I sent her an apologetic smile as I stepped a few yards away, bracing to answer. I took a few calming breaths, and all the prep work was useless as soon as I started talking.

“Hey! It’s late; is Linc alright? Are you okay? Do I need to come home?”

I had started walking in circles, running tracks in the dusty earth. The call seemed strange; nobody was talking.

“Hey, Dad. Everything is fine. Couldn’t sleep. I just wanted to tell you goodnight, sweet dreams, and I hope you have a

good weekend.”

Linc’s voice came across as pillow soft. He sounded like he was in between being asleep and awake.

“Hey, bud. I love you, and sweet dreams. I’m having fun, but I miss you. I’ll see you tomorrow. You need to get some sleep. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. Love you, Dad.”

I pressed the phone between my ear and neck until he disconnected the call. I let his words hang in the ether, enjoying the emotions they caused. Being a dad was hard. Being a single dad was even more challenging, but these moments made up for everything. Remembering Freya, who I left at the bank, I darted back that way. The night was back to solid darkness; only the moon and I were here now. She had returned to the cabin on silent steps. When I returned to the banks, I wished that moment could have lasted all night.



Freya

Hearing Elias talk so openly about things left me feeling floods of different emotions. His face went from serene to frantic in the time it took to receive the phone call. Mere seconds later, I heard his voice shift. Things were alright, or else he would have been gone already. I didn't mean to, but I overheard him telling Lincoln he loved him. It felt like eavesdropping; I tiptoed back into the cabin as quietly as possible. The windows no longer held light. It was silent beyond the wooden door; nothing stirred. It was like the house itself was sleeping, or worse, watching us sleep. Trying not to be too creeped out, I felt my way to my room and locked myself inside.

Elias was a whole puzzle of a person. It felt like he just carried multiple personalities with him. He pulled them out of his briefcase whenever he wanted to throw people off, bad enough. Tired, I removed the clothes from dinner and donned an oversized tee. Climbing into bed, Elias' eyes twinkled every time I closed mine.

Elias

Bright, warm light washed over me the following day. The warmth was enough to cause me to rouse out of deep sleep. The pillow was still damp from drool that fell out of my mouth, collecting over the hours. Outside of my door, everything remained just as still as last night. No laughter emanated from the other rooms. Footsteps were also absent. No breakfast smells wafting through the vents. Once freed from the tangle of sheets, I went straight for the coffee. Due to the raging hangover, I felt gnawing at my head; I would have mainlined the coffee if I could. I selected the largest pot option the contraption had and let it work its magic. It wouldn't be wasted if everyone else felt the same way. The whirring of the dripping was a lovely melody. The aroma danced around me. I grabbed a mug and poured the fresh coffee into it, skipping the creamer. I held it underneath my nose and inhaled deeply, followed by a blissful exhale. I stood in the center of the kitchen until I heard muffled sounds on the deck.

While the words were not easily understood, I could tell it wasn't a happy chat. I could make out Nixon's shrill voice from my spot. I meandered my way outside to him. There was no denying that I wanted to see how he would act after his antics last night.

"I know I told you I'd be back by then, Emily! I can't just bail—"

I slid back behind the door, taking in what I had just heard. The fact that he had other women while messing with Freya was awful. It took some convincing myself to continue with him. I feigned a neutral look.

“Morning, thought I heard someone else awake. There’s coffee brewed. Sounds like you might need it, judging by the ending of that call.”

I sipped the coffee slowly while staring into the lake where Freya and I sat last night.

“Women. Never can seem to keep them happy. She says it is my fault I can’t make it to brunch tomorrow.”

“She? Aren’t you trying to woo your ex again? Judging by what happened last night. You seemed pretty interested in her.”

The words were out before I could stop them. His friendly banter dropped. The expression he had turned dark. What I said rubbed him the wrong way entirely.

“Hm. It isn’t just her. I could have her if I wanted to. But what is that I smell? Jealousy? What, are you two fucking? Dating? Madly in love? Give me a damn break. We know that you’re no better than me.”

“Yeah, we are seeing each other, actually. Just didn’t want to make a spectacle. Not that it’s your business. Word of advice, if you pull that shit again, we’ll exchange more than words.”

The sound of my teeth grinding was the only thing I could hear until another door slam rang out. I turned only to see the

back of Freya stampeding back up the stairs. Her hair swished violently back and forth. Not long after, Nixon followed along and slammed the door again. I don't know how much these doors can handle, but I want them in my home.

Freya

If murder weren't a crime, I'd have killed them both right there on that porch. Not only would I have killed them, but my best friend and brother snuggling on a couch would be a close second. I only saw that my storming away woke up the sleeping lovebirds. So much was happening that processing it in one go wasn't feasible. Miles and Evie could and would have to wait. Elias and Nixon, however, were more pressing. How dare he!

Engrossed in my fury, I almost missed the beating on my door. My body was locked in place. I had no desire to see who was on the other side of the door. The knocking didn't cease. In fact, it grew more erratic.

"Let me in, Freya. Please! I can explain."

Elias was shouting right outside my door. The beating made the whole thing seem like a musical. I was torn. I wanted to stay mad at him, but he sounded so upset. The side attracted to him just needed to open the door and hug him.

"Freya! Open up!"

I watched as my door finally opened. It wasn't forceful. He just stepped right in.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Elias

I didn't want to just waltz into her space, but I ran out of options. She wouldn't open the door. I didn't want to leave the conversation open-ended. I never meant to agree that we were seeing each other. I just let it slip out. Nixon's squeaky rat voice sent me through the roof. How he was talking about her caused red flags to pop up. I meant it as a protection mechanism. It wasn't meant to trap her.

I stepped into her room and remained still until I could read her. She looked right at me, eyes rimmed.

"Freya, would you just listen to me? I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it to come out how it did. Nixon was saying some things, and I reacted. I thought that if he thought we were together that he might leave you alone. It was stupid. I should have asked you first."

She didn't look like she was going to reply. Her face was slack. I felt like a colossal asshole, and I was begging for her to just lay into me. I needed her to yell or scream or kick me out. Anything was better than this dead look she gave me.

"Yeah. You should have asked me first."

Her expression was stuck between hurt and rage; it made it difficult to decide my next words. The only thing I felt was appropriate was leaving.

"I'm sorry, Freya."

The apology stuck to my tongue as I made my way out.

“Wait. Elias.”

I turned around and waited, figuring this was the screaming match I wanted, but the twist that came was something I had never imagined.

“What if you are right about this?”

Freya

It felt odd to say those words out loud. Gaping, he blinked away at the shock. Hell, I was shocked too. Downstairs you could finally hear signs of life.

“He wouldn’t get near you if we were...”

“I’m not making this easy on you. If we want it convincing, it will be.”

Increasingly nervous, I started to chew on my lower lip. I wanted to think it was solely for presentation, but it wasn’t. I wanted to see how he acted for this experiment, just as I wanted to show him that he wasn’t the only person who wore the pants.

“Nothing about you is easy. Then it’s no fun.”

“Oh.”

This wasn’t exactly how I planned to play badass, but oh well. Gawking, I busied myself with tidying up my space. I felt his body heat coming my way, closing the distance between us. Still tuning into anything but this, I could hear Miles talking downstairs, laughing with Evie. Man, this would be hard to explain.

“Fine, okay. You’re right. Now, get out so I can think before I come to my senses.”

I pulled the door open and motioned as if scooting him outside of it, firmly closing it behind him.

“Okay, this is okay. It’s just a day or so. No harm. If Nixon thinks we’re together, I must convince everyone else too. I’m a genius; this will work. Failure isn’t an option. We can survive this and go on back to normal after. Fake it until you make it. Faking it is fine; I’ve faked endless orgasms with Nixon, and he never knew. I can do this.”

The monologue that I was speaking was strictly to myself. I viewed it as a manifestation. If I told myself it would work enough, it had to, right?



Elias

Energy shot up my arms, causing an involuntary shiver. I don't know what I have just done, but I'm excited. Inside I was jumping for joy. I plotted ways to make this convincing. It had to be believable, or else they wouldn't buy it. We are all lawyers; we smell bullshit for a living. Briskly walking, I went and snagged my bag from the room I had been in, placed them in front of her door, and waited. No sooner than I heard her door click open, I shoulder-nudged it the rest of the way and set my bags on the inside of her door. Pleased with myself, I winked at her.

“Got to make it believable, right? How could we be seeing each other if we don't occupy the same room? We're not celibate after all.”

“Oh, hell no. You're not getting in bed with me. You can take the recliner in the corner.”

Funny enough, she pointed at the recliner, but her eyes stayed on the bed. The wheels were turning in her head, running her own calculations. I could see it on her face. I felt pleasure growing in knowing she was just as curious about me.

“Fine, I'll take the recliner.”

She was basically squirming where she stood. How much I enjoyed myself was probably not normal, but it's mutual. Pressure to see how this would turn out was mounting, and I

could tease, too. I hadn't forgotten her bending over in front of me yesterday. It was all I could replay the whole night. Even now, it was all I could picture her doing.

Coyly, I began to undress where I stood. Shirt first. I wanted to make this slow. Her reactions were what I was begging for. It would tell me all I needed to know. When I lifted my shirt, I caught her face from the sliver of light revealed by the stretched head opening. Her mouth sat partially open, eyes not moving from my abdomen. Satisfied, I yanked it the rest of the way off and disposed of it by the bed. She caught on that I saw her watching, and I saw something flash on her features. She seemed adventurous. I reached for my pajama bottoms and hooked my fingers into the waistband, inching those down too. I smiled and dug in my bag for clean clothes. Still searching, I froze when a shirt landed on my hands. Not my shirt, the shirt she wore when I came here.

My brain hit a lag all at once. It ceased to function at all. I didn't even move to remove the shirt from me. I simply moved my head and eyes up to Freya. She stood there, unabashed. Her body was leaner than I had imagined. She met my eyes and traced her hands to her pants, tugging the drawstring. Her pants were around her ankles in seconds, and she stood in black lace-trimmed boy shorts. Her legs were tan, and I felt my heart thumping in my stomach. I gulped in the air and fought my self-control not to go after her.

Freya

Elias' face caused me to feel a coil tighten in my core. His eyes were locked but lust filled. He looked at me up and down, not moving his head. Only his eyes scanned me. I physically saw his pupils dilate from my action. He rushed his clothes back on, mainly his pants this time.

He cleared his throat.

“We should go back out there.”

“Yes, we should.”

I tugged on the yoga leggings and sports bra, brushing by him to lead the way.

In the living room, everyone turned to us in sync. Evie and Miles were still sitting together.

“Either of you want to explain what's going on?”

Miles looked at me first; then he looked at his best friend.

“I can explain, Miles. Neither of us wanted to make it about us. We wanted to keep it quiet here. We hit it off once we spoke at the school and realized we were just in the middle of a misunderstanding. I wasn't aware Elias was 'E' until after my little crush.”

“How did you two even manage to keep this secret?”

Miles not being pissed was a good start.

“We are just both private, I guess?”

Evie snorted from beside him. Her eyes told me she wasn't buying any of this.

“So you two are on the same trip but don't share rooms or sneak to see each other? I don't believe it.”

“Like you were on the couch with Miles?”

That stopped her questioning in its tracks.

“I actually just moved my stuff to our shared room since the cat is out of the bag.”

Elias spoke up in reply to Evie. My mouth had become dry since this whole intervention started. I hoped it would end soon because I was running out of excuses for the secret. I heard a snort that sounded oddly like an angry bull. As I guessed, Nixon stood in the corner like a pouting baby. Even his lip was jutting out at the bottom. I hoped to myself it would start quivering soon.

“Might as well make the most of the day then, all surprises considered.”

Miles quickly tried to detract from the unfolding situation in the room. Nixon still looked crestfallen. I could feel the room becoming uneasy at the overstimulation that was going on.

“I'm not hiking again, Miles. My feet still hurt.”

Evie sat and dramatically rubbed her feet. My actions might confuse her, but I wanted to hug her right now. Hiking sounded like purgatory today. My skin was still pink from our time outdoors yesterday.

“We have kayaks on site?”

Elias shrugged at his suggestion. Water sports were always welcome to me. Water had always been a haven for me. Miles and I spent summers in the nearby lake from sunup to sundown. Kayaking was something known to me. Upper body-wise, I was stronger than most. It might not show, but I could pull my weight.

“Kayaks it is!”

“I’ll pass. I didn’t sign up to third wheel today.”

Ironically, nobody protested Nixon staying behind. We all secretly enjoyed the quiet. He wasn’t wrong, though. We had pairs already; he was the lone wolf. Me and Elias grabbed the green kayak that hung on the wall.



Elias

Kayaking was a hobby I loved. The water was peaceful this morning. Freya, on the other hand, was not. She found something wrong with everything I did once we lowered our butts into the boat.

“Can you stop rocking the kayak?”

“I wouldn’t be rocking it if you would stop leaning.”

The arguments continued like this. Pain throbbed between my eyes and on my temples. A migraine was creeping in. The octaves of her voice were a massive trigger at the moment, but being in a boat, there was no escaping. The thought of tossing her overboard was there, though; it was tempting. Seeing her wet was tempting too. It didn’t seem like a major loss. The nagging might be worth it in the end. The sun glinted off of the sunglasses she wore.

It didn’t seem to matter what I did; she still wanted to argue. It took until dinner time on the kayak before I began worrying that she might actually kill me out here. Hangry was the only thing I could think of. Mosquitos had started to feast on me, so I prayed silently when she grumbled about her arms hurting.

“Can’t keep up?”

“Shh.”

As if to prove her point, she stopped rowing. The kayak turned in ridiculous circles instead of heading toward the

cabin.

“If we don’t get back soon, I’m going to get West Nile, and you can deal with your ex alone.”

“At least something wants you.”

“It isn’t the only thing judging by your look earlier.”

Juvenile. How incredibly juvenile this conversation was. I felt the cold before it was too late. I thought she was returning to rowing, but she dipped the paddle and lifted it out quickly. The result was splashing me with water, cold water. The shock it caused to my system didn’t cause me to become angrier with her; it elicited a chortle to both of our bewilderment. Our way back was filled with spontaneous laughter and shrewd looks. Pink appeared redder on her skin, and her sinewy limbs looked taut from the exertion. However, even after her complaint, she didn’t complain again.

Freya

Aches filled my arms from the constant rowing. The burning sensation was welcomed, though; I could still do this. I could get out and be active, and I hadn't lost this skill. Bugs were buzzing around our faces and landing on the water's surface, causing a ripple effect as far as our eyes could see. Elias mentioned becoming mosquito food, but I wasn't going to cave and tell him I was also being eaten. The ride back to our lodging wasn't filled with the bickering we just went through. It was likely the sun that had drained both of our reserves. Grumbling from our stomachs was the only consistent noise the whole time.

The arrival was rough as the bottom of the lake was rough on my feet, even with water shoes. I had never adapted to the gritty, slime-like feeling that would graze my legs when I was in it. It gave me the creeps even now.

When we trudged back to the shore, we were met with music playing loud enough that I could make out every word. Miles and Evie's cars were parked catty-cornered to how they had been before we left. One car was gone. Nixon's car was not around; the only thing left was tire marks where it had sat since yesterday. Nobody even mentioned texting him to see if he was okay.

“He'll be back.”

Those were the only words that Miles had uttered on the topic.

“That’s unfortunate.” Elias and I spoke together, exchanging a look. He blushed before gaining speed and moving to walk ahead of me.

“I need to shower more than anything.”

Lake water had left me smelling of mildew. The sunscreen left a toxic smell on my whole body.

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea.”

I shot a warning glance at Elias, who looked proud of his comment. If we were trying to be convincing, he was nailing it. Even I was confused as to if we were pretending anymore. I breezed by him and quickly whispered, “Not a chance.”

My legs ran up the stairs and into the bathroom, closing myself in. In the mirror, my reflection looked haggard. My skin was flushed, and my shoulders would start peeling by Monday. Double-checking that a robe was still present, I peeled the musty clothes off me. Sweat caused them to stick to my skin, leaving a line of sweat on the bands of my bottoms.

Balancing on one foot, the bathroom door opened and knocked on my ass. Foot still stuck in the bottoms, I fell forward, saving my face by jarring my hands in front of me onto the counter.

“What the hell, Elias?”

My ankle was throbbing from the twist. This man had seen me change multiple times now, but the embarrassment made

me want to shield myself from him.

“Whoopsies. I just wanted to clarify that I wasn’t asking to shower with you. I agree that you smelled.”

I felt my jaw fall open. It would have landed at my feet if it wasn’t attached. I slammed the door in his face, missing his nose by centimeters. This man was a walking aneurysm. If I had to deal with him for more than a weekend, I’d end up on Snapped. Since I felt sticky and my skin was already on fire from melting sunscreen, I turned the shower to a colder temperature. The spray caused a gasp of shock, but once that was over, it felt glorious. I let the water pour over me. Before I washed my hair, I let the water fall over my face, water drops clinging to my eyelashes, before running the rest of the way. I stretched my body as far as I could, trying to work out the kinks that would surely form before too long. Satisfied that my stretches were done, I turned up the heat and washed myself. My shampoo smelled of vetiver and patchouli. The smell worked to relax any mental tension that remained. The mini scalp massage I gave myself also aided. Five songs later, I emerged a new woman.

I ran a towel through my hair and wrapped it around my head. The robe fit me like a glove. I skipped the skin care since I would end up back outside anyway and opened the door. Standing there, the smell of cooked meat stood to greet me. My stomach growled its greeting.

Once I got dressed, my nose carried me down the stairs into the open air again.

“Better?”

Evie sat on a bench nearby, feet picked up from the ground. She wore the same clothes as earlier and watched the men handle the grill. Scanning, Nixon’s car was back, and he took his spot with the other two guys. I watched them finesse the grill like it was a woman. Evie and I took the initiative to get other things set up. Rummaging inside, we found a speaker and brought it outside to play old-school country music. Evie ran to her vehicle and brought out a sage green Yeti cooler that we worked to fill with ice. After an hour and a half, things were ready to go. Elias even found citronella candles lest he contract a disease.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Elias

By seven that night, dinner was served. While Nixon's presence was not on my highlight reel, I was immensely grateful for the food to grill. Burgers dripped grease; sauces covered our faces. Drinks started to be handed out and guzzled down quicker than the food was. Our beverages ranged from whiskey to beer.

Mid-bite, I saw Nixon nearly trip over his own feet while making a line to Freya. The burger stayed in my mouth as I watched to see how this would work out. The next bite was a toddler size bite. I needed something to keep me busy; it was all it was meant for. Nixon was still walking with a drunk tilt when Freya looked his way and put her burger back down on her paper plate. I was placing bets on myself on what would happen next. It wasn't grand by my standards. Freya was lovely at being passive-aggressive, so she simply looked at him straight and walked away. Nixon stood there in his drunken stupor, being left to watch.

Freya walked with a knowing step. She hadn't drunk much, but I saw her falter and fall out of sight as she faded. I shoved the last bite of food into my face and headed to where I saw her last. I stretched my legs to take strides reserved for Olympic runners. My hamstrings were yelling under my weight. She wasn't far away, but the walk was bumpy and grassy, meaning there were holes hidden just under blades of

grass and daisies. I toggled from looking at the ground to straight ahead, avoiding breaking my ankle.

A weight on my chest lifted when I saw Freya sitting at the shoreline, staring ahead. I went to join her, ensuring I stepped loud enough not to startle her. She looked over her shoulder when I stepped the second time. The color of the steak sauce still stained her mouth, and she looked back ahead silently. Once I was next to her, I crouched where I was as level with her as possible.

“Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Prickly conversations were normal between us now, but she seemed let down. Or just genuinely sad. I rocked by and fell onto my butt, wrapping my arms around my knees.

“I saw you stumble when you were fleeing.” I attempted to lighten the mood, but it seemed to fall on deaf ears.

“Why did you offer to help me keep Nixon at bay, really?”

I went back and forth for a few seconds before answering. I weighed the outcomes if I was honest or bullshit with her, and honesty won.

“You seem miserable around him, and he’s a shit of a human?”

I heard a snort escape from her, and she shook her head back and forth.

“Is that it?”

“I think you deserve better.” I waited before saying anything else. I wanted to see how she digested the words I just said out loud.

“To be fair, you’re not wrong. He is a shit person. Dating him was up there with the worst mistakes. He used to get so angry if I didn’t make my plans with him. He would show up at girl’s night. Now... he’s here. He’s like a cancerous tumor that keeps coming back.”

She let on no hint of emotion with her words. I didn’t suspect she would. I closed my mouth, letting her get whatever was off her chest. Worry started to trickle in that if I interrupted her, she wouldn’t open up to me ever again.

“Now, here I am. In the back half of my twenties, single and stuck in a cabin with my ex and a man pretending to date me. I’m on the right path, aren’t I?”

So, she was worried about her future. It tugged at my heart because I knew the feeling too well.

“You know, I understand where you are coming from. I often question if I’m where I’m supposed to be. I’ve gotten better at it lately, but it still happens. Especially when you grow up how I did. I grew up with money, and thanks to my family, I still have money now. It doesn’t make me any less lonely, though. It didn’t make me successful or fulfilled. You talk about me being hard on my son, but I’m hard on him so he doesn’t take for granted what he has. I’ve raised him alone since he was six months old. His mom left after realizing being a mom wasn’t for her. Being a single dad makes it hard to have relationships

already. Imagine being a single dad that's a lawyer. I don't get attached, so nobody gets hurt. That's just me now."

"Yeah, but you seem pretty well off."

"On the outside."

My own realization was staggering. I had spent years piecing together my façade perfectly. I worked to keep people out. Here I was, four beers in, with a woman on a shoreline, confessing my sins. I was substantially better off than most, but I wasn't kidding. It gets lonely. It is tiring to decide who is a friend because they want to be, or they want the perks that can happen with you around.

I felt more empathy towards this woman than I had in months, not just for other women but anyone in general. She wore her concern on every inch of her body. The sadness burned into her expression. The typically vivacious spitfire of a woman was now soft-spoken and meek. I wanted to do nothing more than to put her spark back. I wanted her to have that spark for the entirety of her life. I might not know much about her, but I know she deserves that much.

Freya

I couldn't help but be sucked into his words. He spoke so openly about his life that I wanted to kiss away all his doubts about himself. It was ridiculous to think I could manage that, but it was valiant to believe it.

“Has my brother mentioned our family?”

“Not a peep.”

Miles, not mentioning our family, wasn't abnormal. We tried to avoid the topic with all we had. It wasn't that we didn't love them. It was that we loved them so much that it physically hurt to be reminded. We only talked on rare occasions now. Besides Evie, my brother was the only thing I had left of back then.

“We were the opposite. We didn't have money to excess. My parents wanted to rely on God to provide every need. My mom didn't work because my dad said it wasn't correct for women to have a job. When I wanted to go to college, he threw a tantrum. I remember when Miles was sick, like, extremely sick, they had to be forced to get medical help so he didn't die. It was horrible. Instead of having a family dinner, we were force-fed scripture. When my brother went to college, that was it. I was stuck until it was my turn. We haven't spoken to them in years.”

My voice was cracking now. I felt the constriction begin. The water in my eyes threatened to overflow like a dam that

had reached capacity. I twisted my fingers around each other trying to calm my anxiety by aimlessly fidgeting. Even at work, I keep a fidget gadget on my desk. Comparing war stories wasn't something I reveled in, but unlike others, Elias didn't seem like he was pitying me.

He sat in the night air with me, listening to the bugs chirp around us. This man was mystifying in ways I couldn't wrap my mind around. I just told him how my family was religious fanatics, and he's stoic; he seems so put together and in control of his emotions. The conversation we were in did not have a rich man's flair. He seemed pure with his words. It scared me when he moved to get up because I didn't want him to leave yet, but he simply looked down on me.

“Want a beer? I feel like we need one after this chat.”

“How about a double whiskey and ginger ale?”

“Go big or go home.”

I stayed where I had been, except wiggling my toes to regain the feeling. It wasn't cold out, but they had just been still for so long that it felt like a million ants on my legs. As Miles would say, my legs have TV static in them.

I laughed childishly when Elias returned, hauling the rest of a bottle of Gentleman Jack and a two-liter of Schweppes Ginger Ale.

“This seemed smarter.”

We returned to how we were sitting prior and passed the bottle back and forth between us several times. Whatever was

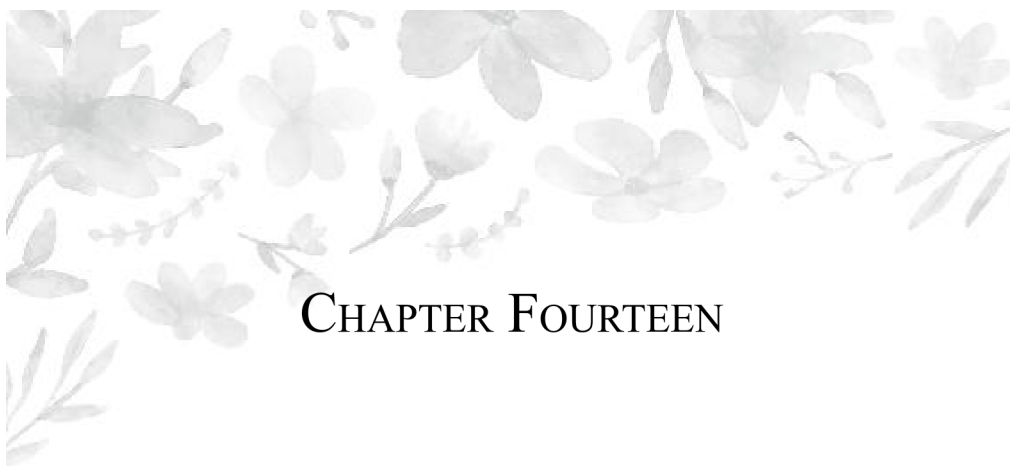
in this bottle was a lot more than double. Within thirty minutes, I felt the alcohol take over. Warmth spread over me like an electric blanket. Elias had become more animated after each sip. We talked about anything from politics to his wild court cases to my awful craft experiences. I felt more at home here than I had anywhere.

“We’re calling it!”

I heard Evie’s voice ring out from a distance, followed by the music shutting off mid-song.

“Guess that means it’s bedtime.”

“Guess so. Probably smart, or else we’d pass out drunk in the lake.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Elias

In a strange turn of events, we used each other to prop up as we headed back. Well, she used me to prop herself up technically. I had resorted to using the flashlight on my phone to make sure there were no more tumbles for either of us. The house was dark as well. The only light that remained was the bedroom we were sharing.

As if we were high school kids sneaking into bedrooms, she turned and put a finger to her lips and shushed me. Then, she began to step slowly onto the stairs trying not to alert the others that we were back. The drunken bliss I was in made this whole thing ten times funnier than it probably was.

“You know we are adults, right?”

I poked fun at her. We had no reason to sneak around. Everyone thought we were dating. She took off her clothes inside the room and quickly scurried under the covers. In the brief glimpse of what I saw, I knew she wasn't naked. I saw the boy shorts she had on. The bralette was sheer, but there. That was what mattered. I walked to the side of the bed my bag had rested on and started to remove my clothes, stuffing them haphazardly. Once clad in boxers, I turned to walk to the recliner but felt a small hand grip mine.

“That recliner looks awful. You can come here. It's fine.”

Blinking, I hesitated. We were both intoxicated. Mental war be damned, I crawled beside her. Aware of the circumstances, I kept a distance and let her decide how close she did or did not want to be.

“How unfortunate that one of the most considerate men I’ve dated isn’t truly dating me at all.”

Her words caused a swell of pride in me.

“How unfortunate that one of the most genuine women I’ve dated is my son’s teacher.”

Her drunken laugh followed my words. In the next few moments, though, she got quiet. I didn’t speak and instead listened to her breathe.

“Freya?”

The only response I was given came as a garbled grunt. Alcohol finally did the trick, and she was sound asleep. Her breath was deep and comforting, and as I tried to let myself drift off, I felt a tickle of hair dance on my chest. She had rolled her body towards me and placed her head on me.

Casually, I scooted myself a tad over. It was pointless because as soon as I moved, she moved. Her arms clutched around me tighter. A leg drifted over in between mine. She wound herself around me like a vine on a cryptic castle. Giving up, I let what remained of her body wash be the last thing I smelled before sleep. I lifted my head and tilted it down, placing my lips on the crown of her head.

The next morning, I was amazed that we were still entangled. It wasn't in the same manner, but close enough. Somehow in the middle of the night, we had rolled into a very intimate spooning stance. Her head rested on my bicep while my head rested on the nape of her neck. I waved my fingers, feeling the trim of those boy shorts; I noted that my free arm draped over her midsection. Male instincts taking over, I groaned. Her ass was pressed directly into my lap, causing a pressure that felt way too nice for this to last much longer. At any other moment, this would have been an answer to a prayer, but knowing that I had no right to touch her made this hell. Before I got too many ideas, I pulled my arm from underneath her in a quick motion to avoid waking her.

Taking in the sight of the room, I grabbed my stuff that had been tossed about and folded them tightly enough to fit in one bag. My stay here was only a singular night, making it a cakewalk. Something heavy was in the air now, though. It was my own conflicted thoughts. After last night, I wasn't sure I could remain friends with this woman. I didn't want to stay just friends; that was the whole problem. Serious wasn't on the cards, and I didn't want to hurt her. Plus, what would I tell Lincoln? Quickly and quietly as I could manage, I snagged the few remaining items from the bathroom and made my way out of the cabin and back towards my life at home—with my son.

Freya

The first thing I noticed when I regained consciousness was the lack of weight on the queen bed. I was warm when I fell asleep last night, and Elias' body weight kept me comfortable the entire time. Now it was empty, and I felt the grip of loneliness. I reached my arm out and swept it back and forth on the bed, looking for any sign of the other body to no avail. Once I sat up and could get a better look, there was nothing to show he was ever in my bed. Something inside of me cracked. If I didn't know any better, I would think anyone in my area would have heard my heartbreak. Thankfully for them, they couldn't. Once again, I was the only one that felt the heartbreak. Not wanting to be in the cabin a second longer, I unceremoniously threw my shit in a bag.

I wasn't sure why opening myself up to him was so easy, but it wasn't smart. I knew that now. My mind was racing at the reality that I looked like an idiot telling him my life story. It was even worse that I believed he cared to a degree. His view on not having anything serious should have warded me off right then, but I figured he could feel what I felt. The emotions I tried to bury began to resurface one by one. My thoughts become suffocating to me. Bags packed, I tried to force myself to calm down while I walked down the steps. *Remember, Elias is a parent of your student. Don't let him fool you into thinking maybe you're attracted to him.*

I heard my brother and Evie talking secretively in the next room. Peeking around the corner, I saw them nearly nose to nose. This felt like a strange betrayal considering my morning so far. The words quit forming, and Miles looked back and spotted me before I could hide again.

“Freya, good morning; just who I needed to see.”

“Morning, sunshine.”

Miles approached me, and I noticed Evie standing there, just taking it all in.

“I wanted to run something by you.”

“Oh yeah? What’s up?”

“Well, we both wanted to run something by you...”

Evie had broken her stance while I was distracted by my brother. It hit full force what was going on then. Confirmation came in the form of Evie snaking her hand down and interlocking her fingers with my brother. Stunned. Motionless.

“We wanted to talk to you about us officially going out on a date. We aren’t an item yet. We started talking only a few weeks ago and realized we share many things in common besides you. And I enjoy your brother’s company. I won’t take it further if you aren’t okay with it. You come first. Miles and I talked it over, and he agrees with me.”

Both of them stood in silence, on a breath hold. I could see the tension in my brother’s body, starting at the veins that popped out of his neck. Evie was chewing on her bottom lip, a nervous habit she’s had forever. The problem that I was now

involved with was a strange one. Of anyone I thought would end up with Miles, my best friend wasn't on the player board. After thinking about it, I guess it did make sense. They had both been around each other when things were terrible. Miles acted like a protector for Evie. Evie acted as a buffer for Miles. They both collectively served as a backbone for me. It didn't matter what I thought as long as they were happy.

“Of course, I don't mind! I love you both! It's a tad weird, but I'll get used to it sooner or later.”

The fact that I had to force myself to be happy for them was tough to swallow. It wasn't that I was mad at them, no. I was only angry at myself. Evie ran and bear-hugged me so hard that I thought she would cause me to faint. Sensing her turn was over, Miles repeated her process, except this time, he picked my feet up off the ground and swung me side to side. Last night's alcohol began to make its way to the base of my throat before he could set me back down.

“I love you!”

Miles looked at me with a sideways smile, and Evie was beaming in her own way. Excusing myself, I headed towards my car only to see them exchange a simple peck on the lips in the background.

I played only the most heart-wrenching music on the way home. I needed to get my tears out before I had to go back to my ordinary world. Third graders didn't understand it when adults cried. I couldn't escape the memory of him on that bank, though. I couldn't push away how truthful he seemed.

The hurt in his voice was something that nobody could fake. No matter how badly I wanted to cry, I refused. I might have listened to a heartbreak playlist, but there was no way I would cry over someone who was never mine.

Evie and Miles flitted throughout in intervals as well. They looked so happy, and I was jealous. I dissected what he told me could be true or what he just said. Falling asleep on his chest felt like a dagger. My emotions swung like a pendulum. I hated him; I cared for him. He wanted me. He doesn't care. I had swung enough that by the time I was home, I decided that even if I was hurt, I would never tell him. I would never get that close. I would treat his son with typical attention and care. Still, unless it involved Lincoln, I was fine to never speak to Elias again.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Elias

I swore I would never be THAT guy, but I feel like that guy right now. I also felt like a major hypocrite. I let this woman talk to me about her failed relationships. I held her last night. Then, being a moron, I left before she even opened her eyes. I didn't stay because I didn't care. I left because I had the capability of caring too much. Driving back home, I was weighed down by the fact that I could have ruined any chance I ever stood.

The only thing that broke my reverie was a little boy and a dog whose tail was wagging fifty miles an hour. That was exactly what was waiting for me too. My headlights lit up Linc's face from a distance, both sitting at the edge of the driveway. My aunt's trunk was open as she loaded her things into it. When I passed the two of them standing at the edge, Walker started yapping and chasing the car, nipping at the tires. Even after I killed the ignition, his barks kept on. I stepped back onto my property and was met with Linc grabbing onto me for dear life.

"Dad! I missed you so much!"

He wasn't loosening his grip by an inch. Walker ran figure eights between his legs, which was his sign of welcome.

"I missed you too, kid!"

"I see I'm chopped liver."

My aunt came walking up from her car, slapping a hand between my shoulder blades. I felt Lincoln laugh against me.

Once he let go of me, I turned to her and embraced her.

“Of course, I missed you too, Auntie.”

I planted an exaggerated smooch on her cheek. Lincoln grabbed us both and started tugging us back toward the house.

“Dad! Look what I learned!”

“Lincoln, I love you, but I need to get back to my house. I left some slabs out back for you and your dad. Go show him what you got.”

“Slabs?”

I didn't know what my aunt was talking about, but I put my bets on some weird and obscure talent she showed my kid. She leaned down to kiss his head and waved us off. We waited politely until she could get her car backed out and waved until she was gone from sight. Lincoln never forgot the mission, and soon enough, I was being pulled to look at random slabs of separate tiles.

“You smash them, and then you fit the pieces together in a picture!”

“A mosaic?”

“That's the word! Come one, let's do one!”

That was our night, then. I left my bags at the door and scrambled for an extra pair of safety goggles. The look was not my most flattering, and the earpieces were too tight, but I

could suffer through it for Linc's sake. I handed him the hammer as if it belonged to Thor.

Pieces of ceramic started to fly left and right. I heard clinks coming from every angle. Ceramic dust clouded the air that was around us. Each whack given with the hammer caused an eruption of laughter from both of us.

“Did my teacher go with you?”

I took a couple of seconds away from swinging while I answered him.

“She did.”

He nodded in an innocent child-like manner.

“Do you like her now?”

He meant his question as harmless, but it still felt like a vice grip. I couldn't just say that I pretended to date his teacher, and now since your dad is stupid, I likely fucked it all up. That was too far above his head. Instead, I tried to simplify things.

“Yes, Linc, we are alright. We like each other just fine.”

I should say we liked each other just fine twenty-four hours ago. Now though, she probably hates my guts. I would hate my guts if the roles were flipped. The bottom line was that Linc liked Freya as a teacher. After spending time together, I understood her better now. She loves her job, her kids, and takes her work seriously. If my son was content and taken care of, I wouldn't make her life more difficult. I already caused her issues with me being selfish. I wasn't going to bring chaos to her job, too.

Freya

I spent the majority of yesterday disconnected from everything. I finally got home and turned everything off for the rest of the day instead of checking in with anyone. I tried to clean up some and wash my clothes, but my focus prevented me from finishing a single task. I had a glass of wine by four in the afternoon. That glass turned into me falling asleep with a journal next to me, still open, and the pen still lying on top.

I only knew that the pen was still on top because I had marks on my cheek from rolling around in my sleep. It was the only thing I could see this morning through bleary eyes. Allergies from the weekend finally caught up with me to top it off. My eyes were red and itchy. I couldn't stop sneezing. My return home was just a nightmare. I took an allergy pill with my morning coffee and somehow made it to the classroom early enough to run over today's plans in the car. Despite my excitement to return to my zone, I asked a new teacher to swap carline today. I blamed it on the allergies being too much for the moment. I would have offered to pay her for her services if she had declined. I was not above it. It wasn't just allergies, though. The carline meant I would have to see Elias drop Lincoln off, and I wasn't ready to face him yet. The picture of his face in my head made me freeze. I had so much I wanted to tell him, but an elementary school wasn't the place for it. Inside, I even close my blinds in my room. The act alone made

me feel better. I was hidden from him. He wouldn't know if I was even here today until after Lincoln got home. Part of that thought gave me a flicker of relief. I wanted him to wonder where I was. I wanted him to fear that I was so enraged that I hated him. I only knew I didn't hate him, which was the problem. It would always be the problem.

I made myself busy with the day's lesson plans while parents dropped their kids off outside. My door began to open at least once every five minutes as my class seats began to fill up for the day. Unlike any other day, Lincoln came in next to last. He seemed like his chipper self.

“Good morning, class. I hope everyone had a good weekend.”

Most of the kids grumbled, but Lincoln spoke loud and clear.

“I hope you did, too.” I was sure his father had told him I had joined the trip. I gave him a brief nod, and we went through the usual motions. I tried to deflect his questions on the trip as he asked, not wanting to make things weird for him here.

My e-mail pinged several times while I was teaching, and I let it go each time. I needed to focus on what was at hand. I needed to finish this class and move on with the day. I could reply to those when the bell rang. That bell ring could not have come at a more opportune time. Kids were starting to get restless. Two of my students were throwing airplanes. I was overstimulated and felt like I would scream if something didn't help.

My help was the dismissal of class. The new teacher even took my afternoon carline spot too. I would give her a kidney to save me from facing Elias today.

At the desk finishing up some grades, I remembered my inbox. Clicking it open, I saw several e-mails from the board. One stuck out, though. The very first ping I received this morning was from Elias. The subject was simply “Hey.” Hesitant to open it, my cursor hovered for a millisecond before opening. It was short and direct, just like I needed it.

Freya,

I wanted to make sure you were okay after yesterday. I'm sorry I didn't tell you goodbye. Please let me know how Lincoln does today.

Was he, though? Or was he sorry that I was giving him the cold shoulder now? Doubt was filling every good thing I thought about him before yesterday.

Elias

Sleeping was a good idea in theory, but it never materialized. I was worn and sleepy when I started my day. I figured I would be asleep instantly once I put my head down, but that wasn't the case. My mind focused on my actions, and I tossed and turned throughout. I even let my finger go to Freya's contact information at one this morning. She might hate me now, but I figured a Facebook message caused her to block me on my social media that she didn't know I was watching her. By the time Lincoln was loaded into the car and dropped off, I was on coffee number three.

Even my heart rate knew I was over the caffeine limit. I didn't know what exactly was causing my queasiness at his school. It could be the high caffeine or that she wasn't even in the carline today.

I slipped into the relative safety of my office before I let my mind continue on its spiral. When I saw my e-mail account, I couldn't fight it off. I broke down and typed her a message six times before just sending one on a whim. Was it a shot below the belt to ask about my kid in the message? Yes. Was I particularly worried about doing it? Not really. I needed her to reply. I needed to know that she could still respond to me. I needed the reassurance that if I reached out, she would reply, and there was a chance to fix what I messed up.

I begged for that alert all day. If I had a court case on the docket today, I would be forced to stay focused, but right now, I was free. I only had leftover paperwork that I was barely registering. I had to retype a plea agreement three times. An hour task turned into three and a half hours. The wait became unbearable. In a move of utter frustration, I muted every notification that my phone allowed except for hers. The constant pings were giving me whiplash from her.

This morning turned into lunch without a trace. I resigned to getting a cheap deli meal from the local café and trying not to cry into my Americano. My sulking would have worked perfectly if I didn't hear Nixon's voice from behind me in the cashier's line.

“How're you and the girlfriend?”

I knew I should have packed my damn lunch today. I stood holding a turkey and cheddar in one hand and my wallet in the other. I would have sacrificed the sandwich for a good show if I wasn't starving. This could go two ways: Option one was I could tell him to go to hell and move on. Option two was to continue the ruse on my own, hoping it would still keep him away from her.

“Who let you out of your cage?” I said. I was in no mood to tolerate him today or ever come to think about it.

“The judge. Got a case happening; we're just on a recess for lunch. Someone's bitchy.”

“That's unfortunate for us, then. It's nicer if you're caged. Since you're curious, me and my girlfriend are great. Not that

it's your business, though.”

Girlfriend sounded like such a high school term, and I guess it made sense, considering who was using it. Once I used the word, though, his muscles clenched.

“How's *your* girlfriend?” I snarked back as I paid for my lunch and left him fuming.

My phone stayed in the office while I went for lunch, but once I returned, it was the first thing I went to. I even bypassed my lunch to check my emails. Still blank. I tossed it back into the drawer for the rest of the day.

I drove seventy miles per hour the entire way to the school. I was the first car that was waiting in the line today. I was itching to see if she would come out this afternoon. I tried to think of reasons why she wasn't out this morning—any reason except that she didn't want to see me. Thirty minutes passed until they started releasing students, but still no Freya. Lincoln was walked to the car by an older lady who I had never seen before today. He looked concerned. When he climbed in, no words were exchanged. She simply shut the door when his butt hit the seat. Taking full advantage of Lincoln's concerned look, I delved in.

“How was your teacher today?”

“She seemed sad. She didn't talk very much.” Lincoln rubbed his head for a second until responding.

It justified my feeling of being an awful person. I tried to make myself believe that she would be fine, but it was clear

that wasn't how it went down. Linc never spoke to me again the entire time. I offered fast food, which he turned down. I offered the park, which he claimed was homework.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Five things you can see, four things you can hear... or at least I think that is what I've heard somewhere. I started brainstorming ideas. She never replied that much is obvious. Everyone still thinks we are together unless she clarified. Judging by Nixon today, I don't think that was the case. Everyone thought we were dating made it impossible to ask anyone we knew. Strike that idea. Think. Think. Think—light bulb.

Rushing inside, I ran to a barely used armoire in the study. It was dusty. Not to mention, I only opened this thing maybe once or twice every six months. It held nothing significant and mostly random papers I hadn't tossed yet. During my brainstorming session, I remembered. What do schools do? They send out syllabi and tons of announcements via paper. I vaguely remember being given a form with Freya's information on it. I started snatching papers out left and right. After a pile of papers later, I had it in my hands. I saw her contact information that listed an e-mail, fax number, and what looked like a phone number. With trembling hands, I dialed it. I didn't know if it was her cell or school, but I wanted her to answer.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Freya

As I was getting in and unwinding, my cellphone started ringing its default tone. That alone told me it wasn't Evie or Miles, as they had personalized rings. I also knew my phone would only ring if someone called twice in do not disturb mode. I debated answering, but it could be an emergency if someone called twice. I should at least respond and tell them that it's the wrong number, or they might continue this. Checking the number one last time, I answered it.

“Freya, thank God. It's me. Please don't hang up. I need to talk to you.”

“Elias?”

My stomach fell out of my ass. Any rage I held was gone when he said my name. I was cursing myself for being such a hopeless romantic. In my high school life, this would have made my day. Having a man calling begging to talk? Sign me up.

“I need to apologize. What I did wasn't right, and I panicked. It isn't an excuse; it is just what happened.”

Before jumping down his throat, I paced my response. I needed to organize my thoughts. I didn't want to be mean, but I needed him to know it bothered me. The goal was to explain to him that his actions hurt my feelings. I felt stupid for telling

him my family history, and it felt like I had been played like a fiddle. Taking a deep breath in, I set off on my monologue.

“Elias, what you did was far from right. I told you a lot of stuff, and you shared with me as well, and I let myself be open. Then, I invited you into a shared bed, and you kissed my head. I woke up, and you were gone.”

Swallowing, I realized my mistake. He didn't know that I was awake when he kissed my head. It was meant to be my secret. His moment of affection was sweet, but I worried he would never do it again if I mentioned it to him.

“You might have decided to pretend to date me, but if it is pretend, you need to keep a distance and stop trying to invade my space. I wanted you there with me. Then I woke up and felt so stupid for letting you in. You hurt my feelings. Now I'm left wondering if it was all a game to you. What was real? Any of it?”

I was proud of myself for not crying on the phone with him. I figured I'd be blubbering right now. He remained silent on the other end. His breathing was the only thing that told me he was still even connected. I began to pick and chew on my nails to self-soothe myself. Every second he was silent was another inch that I fell.

“I'm so sorry, Freya. I woke up, and I was confused over the whole night. I started off talking to you, and you opened up. I realized that by the end of it, my feelings shifted. I had just told you I didn't do serious, and then you wrapped yourself around me when you slept. I felt like I was meant to be there at

that moment. I knew I had Linc at home, but I was content with you at that moment. I woke up before you, and the thought of leaving and having to tell you bye face to face was too much. I didn't know if I could without saying something stupid like I'm doing now."

His words were magical. They made my whole body tingle. I knew that it was an odd situation. I also knew that he struggled with seriousness. It still gave me hope that I wasn't imagining anything. I felt like my heart was fluttering.

"You could have always invited me to breakfast."

Take the bait. Take the bait, please.

I let my offer settle between us and pinched the bridge of my nose. I was out of my depth here. I didn't openly ask men on dates. I didn't have complicated feelings about parents of students either, but it's a new dawn right now. He broke the silence with a laugh. A split second passed until I understood that he wasn't laughing at the offer but at me.

"How about I do you one better?"

"Oh really? How do you plan to do that?"

"Are you free tomorrow night?"

Was he asking me on a date?

"If you are, what do you say to going and getting a bite to eat and a few drinks? It's a school night, so I can make sure you are home on time."

"Only if you can make my curfew."

“See you tomorrow, Freya.”

When I was back by myself, the alarm bells sounded. I was going on a date with him. Not a pretend date; an actual date like an adult. However, unlike an adult, I headed towards the closet and began to rifle for an appropriate outfit. When I realized he never told me where our date would be, things were ten times more complicated. Planning outfits was complicated when you didn't know the dress code.

The closet held various clothing options, from skinny jeans to bodycon dresses I hadn't worn in years. I can't even remember when I bought a dress for a specific date. The closet was a land version of the Bermuda Triangle. I let it suck me in and confuse me. My OCD was raging as I tried to organize as I went, ultimately giving up and tossing clothes that were the same color in a specific pile to deal with later.

I pulled out three different options. One option was a wine-colored sundress that was belted at the waist. The next one was a pair of dark ripped skinny jeans and a purple blouse with a plunging neckline. The last option was a navy-blue bodysuit, dark skinny jeans, and a blazer jacket. I ran a finger over each of them, assessing the pros and cons of each choice. If it was a fancy dinner, the jeans were not appropriate. If it was a bar, the sundress might be too much. I sat in the middle of the tornado of my creation. Blouses of rainbow colors fanned out on the ground around me. Shoes were another problem. The sundress could manage with sandals. The bodysuit and skinny jeans options would require more work.

Tired of looking at the collage, the next step was to the bathroom.

The goal was to set out everything I would need for tomorrow morning and afternoon. If I woke up early enough, I could do my hair before work and knock out some dressing time after school. I pulled several nude-colored palettes out of the drawer—my Sephora-bought foundation instead of a drugstore. The adrenaline had worn off after all that, and I double-checked that my alarm was set thirty minutes earlier before I tucked myself into bed. I stared at the ceiling while I let the fan's whirring lull me into deep relaxation.

I planned the conversation topics as I drifted off. I gauged whether I wanted to play hard to get or hard to forgive him. Mentally it pleased me, but I knew it was pointless to attempt. I just spent time planning an outfit. The last thing I remembered thinking before I fell asleep was if the chance arose, would I go home with him if he offered? Or, if he didn't offer, would I bring him home with me?

Elias

My sleep was fitful at best. Whenever I closed my eyes, my imagination would go in five different directions. The result was usually dreaming of something far from innocent that I should probably not hang my hat on just yet. When we spoke, I was not above groveling. If she had asked me to get on my knees, I would have. It was a blessing that she agreed to go out with me tonight.

I woke up this morning far more refreshed than I have been in weeks. Besides irregular sleeping, I didn't feel exhausted. I woke up in time to get Linc fed and ushered to school right on time. I pepped myself up for drop off, thinking I could get a sneak peek of her wardrobe tonight. When she wasn't outside, I started to gaslight myself if she even agreed or what a dream after all. Scanning from left to right, I couldn't spot her at all. The tantrum of a toddler was bubbling. I couldn't work out why I was even mad, though, which was bothersome. It was a first date, not a wedding. Other dates that I had been on were nothing like this. They could stand me up, and I would end up fine and getting a drink by myself. This one, though; if she canceled, I might be hurt. It would take some time to get over. It wasn't until a lady in a Porsche behind me laid on her horn that I saw that I had been holding the lineup with my internal dialogue. The longhorn threw my patience out of the car window.

I pulled away from the curb and swooped into a nearby parking spot. I pulled my phone out of the clip stand and found Freya's number, which I gladly added to my contact list. It was her workday, so remembering my manners, I texted her to double-check our plans. Once the message dinged to notify me that my message was sent, I made my way to work. I cruised the posted speed limit the entire way, window down. I pulled into the deck. I checked once for a reply before I walked inside with no luck. The notifications were completely empty. The only difference was that this shit would have never happened in high school.

The courthouse I worked in was massive, but due to me consistently checking my phone and willing it into existence, I felt claustrophobic. The patrons continued with their daily routines. I watched defense attorneys pull clients into the small conference rooms on the side. Audience members of the court trials came out with puffy eyes. Everybody else was able to move through their day unobstructed, except for me. Lunchtime still held no answers. The papers on my desk had words that melted together if I stared at them too long.

After waiting nearly all day, I spun my phone in circles on my desk like a game of spinning the bottle. If I had a daisy, I would imagine picking the petals off one by one. Swallowing any inch of self-respect or dignity I had, I sent another text. This one bypassed the question of whether we still had plans and informed her that I would pick her up for dinner and send me her address. I locked the screen back and set it back onto the desk.

I fluctuated between the text screen and obscure YouTube videos on cave diving accidents. Morbid as it is, the stories always stuck with me. When I decided to give up on work, a text came through. Pulling up her chat thread and fetching the address took two seconds. That was my cue. I stood and began to get my things ready to head out. The first person asked to keep Linc was my aunt, but she couldn't. She had her bridge meeting. I settled for a sixteen-year-old girl from the neighborhood named Sara. Sara was supposed to be at my house at 6:45 tonight. It would give me fifteen minutes to run through any important information she will need for Lincoln while I'm out. Leaving Linc with anyone other than my aunt left me suffering from bouts of separation anxiety. I had a strict schedule for when I would be home tonight.

Picking up Linc was relatively easy today. I was home by 3:45. Linc hung outside my door, watching me flit around.

"Dad, are you okay?" Linc asked as his eyes followed my movements around the room.

This was probably highly unsettling for him since he's never witnessed me this nervous or self-aware about my looks. After how big of an asshole I'd been to her, I needed to make a good impression.

"Yep. Just looking for something to wear."

He cut his eyes to the closet that stood open. I felt like I was dumpster diving when digging into the piles that gathered from me, failing to hang up anything except my suits. I saw a burgundy piece of fabric sticking up from the bottom of the

pile and snatched it upward, hoping for the best. It was just what I needed. I put on a burgundy button-down, black suit pants, grabbed a black blazer from the closet, and hung it by the door. It was dinner, so a tie was too much. I would leave the first few buttons open. This was my attempt at being casual. Standing in my room, I heard a whistle coming from Linc.

“Looking good, Dad,” He said, giving me an over-enthusiastic thumbs up.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Freya

The only control I could exert over Elias was when I replied to his messages. I knew that he would think himself into a tizzy when I wasn't responding. It wasn't just that I wanted to be a nuisance. But, I also had to keep my mind on the classroom, or else we would all be in for a rough day. I was already getting an upset stomach from the nerves. The outfit I picked out was still thrown across the back of my couch, waiting on my return. I couldn't help but think back through and question if I really wanted to wear that. I was aware of how stupid I was acting. It was compounded by the fact that I couldn't text my best friend about this date because she thought I'd been dating him. When his message came to pick me up earlier this morning, I sent him a ping of the address and moved on with my school day.

If it weren't inappropriate for me to leave before my kids when the bell sounded, I would have been out the door in the front of the line, but I had to wait until the last student was gone. I wanted to put Garrett in the computer chair and physically roll him out of the room. I wasn't in the mood to deal with lollygagging. I mentally had to run through the checklist of everything I had to do before going out. It started with a quick shower, and my outfit would come last. I was in such a hurry that I was nearly out of the main doors before running back to lock the classroom. There wasn't much to

steal, but never say never. Then I had to turn around and sprint to my car.

Trying not to stress because I had more than enough time, I inhaled and tried to pace myself until I reached the door. I noticed my hands were even shaking as I unlocked the door.

I headed directly to the shower, tossing my clothes off as I walked. I saw my shirt land on a doorknob. I had already placed all my good shower essentials here the night before. It made sense that since this was a first date, I should pamper myself. I was smart enough to remember to use a tiny dab of self-tanner last night, which helped me a little. The shampoo and conditioner sat on the shower rack. I dug out a bergamot and cedar exfoliation scrub and broke out a new razor. I paced myself through the self-care routine.

Stepping out of the shower, I toweled myself off the best I could. I put hair oil in, put on after-shave oil, and body lotion. My bathroom counter was littered with bottles and tubes. The one thing that was easy for me was my hair being naturally wavy. All I had to do was put in some wave spray, and that would solve the hair issue. I was over putting makeup on within five minutes of starting it. I never did more than the basics, but tried to leave an impression.

When I thought I was on the home stretch, I saw the outfit lying out. I was mad at myself for picking it out. It seemed juvenile. I felt mortified just looking at it. I threw it in the dirty clothes hamper simply because it was closer.

Back to the closet, I went. I started digging through my closet. I reached the back, under the hanging dresses, and found a silky-smooth number. I held a black satin dress with a slit going up each thigh. The slit stopped right before where my panty line would sit. Slipping it over my head, it cascaded down like a waterfall. The slits ended up being very provocative. I dressed it up with a pair of moonstone earrings and a simple ring on my index finger. The necklace that I always wore hung right above my cleavage.

This dress is the reason why boob tape was invented. It was open-backed and dipped right below the small of my back. Stepping in front of the mirror, I let my eyes take myself in. I hadn't seen myself like this in forever. I felt beautiful. I felt sexy. Now, I waited. I perched on the couch and allowed myself time to relax before my date arrived.

Elias

By the time the babysitter showed up, Linc was shoving me out of the door. He had seen me pace and talk to myself enough for his entire life. I expected him to walk the sitter through things just to make it end. When I walked out of the door, he quickly closed it behind me without a hug. He knew I was taking his teacher out, which would be unheard of in my day. He's handling it better than most kids his age would.

When I put Freya's address in, the arrival time was a meager twenty minutes. Whereas my home was in an urban area, from the looks of the route, her place seemed more suburban and family-friendly. I had seen the streets in passing a few times on my drives. I factored in traffic, but the roads were quiet.

I slowed my car down and took extra turns to avoid showing up too early to seem normal. The term that Linc lovingly called sight-seeing. I called it the "I can't be this early, or she'll think I'm a killer" route. I had thought about where to take her since we got off the phone last night. It was a toss-up between casual or should I make a mark to remember me by.

By my train of thought, I looked like I was trying too hard if I took her to somewhere too high class. If I settled for somewhere casual, I risked her thinking I didn't take this seriously. The show of dating at my age made me glad that I didn't do it too often, if ever. Then, a light bulb went off. Downtown, they were opening a new restaurant called Peats.

The new eatery had been confusing among a lot of people. Everyone assumed the owner's last names were Peat, but that wasn't it.

The name actually came from common peat bogs where they grew up. Peat bogs sent everyone on the internet deep dives for days. It seemed an odd, morbid name and not something necessarily inviting to eat dinner over. One image showed what looked like a mummy that had been preserved due to the climate in the bogs. Overall, it was gruesome but interesting from the science aspect. I called them late last night, and luckily the host was still on shift. She heard my name and managed to snag us a table for two in the back. I would never get tired of that trick.

My eyes back on the road, I heard my GPS direct me to make a left, and my destination would be on my right. Doing as told, I turned down my radio to see better. The logic made no sense, but it worked. Had it not been for my headlights hitting her car, I would have driven right by. I turned my wheel and took up the area right behind her car. I took the sight of her house in. It was exactly like I imagined. It was refined and simple, not showy. After I breath check, I fixed the blazer and walked to the door. I inhaled and quickly let out three brief knocks before stepping back. When the door opened, I was glad it was only a step, or I would have fallen off the steps.

She was silhouetted by the shadows from the light in her foyer. Once she switched the light from inside off and the porch light on, I got a better view of what she was wearing. Dinner was going to be difficult with this.

Her dress was simple and black. It looked like it was made of silk or satin. I never understood the difference. The neckline plunged deviously between her breasts. I watched as she turned to lock her door behind her and tried to convince myself dinner was still necessary. I was hungry without a doubt, but not for food. The back of the dress was open, revealing smooth skin. Fabric picked back up right below where her waist started. I struggled to say words. It was rude not to compliment her, and it would seem like I didn't like her, but that wasn't it. I had imagined things like this, but it's better in real life.

“Wow, you look... wow.”

I was still stumbling against my efforts.

“You don't look too shabby either.”

She gave me an up and down once over and headed to the car. I had to jog slightly to even open the door for her. Damn, the independent streak. While it was admirable, it also showed that she had to be overly independent due to someone else's lacking. I opened the car door quickly when she walked up and extended my hand. Her hand was soft feeling in mine, dainty. She effortlessly stepped in, showing the dress had slits on each side. To finish her look, she wore black heels strapped around her ankles. I readjusted my pants when I closed the door to survive the drive ahead.

Behind the wheel, I took in her mannerisms. I took notice of the songs she played through Spotify. They were everywhere, like how she was. It went from rock to country to jazz. The slit

of her dress fell to the side while she was sitting, and I had to pull my eyes back to the road. I wanted to keep where we were having dinner a secret for as long as possible, so I stayed primarily silent the drive over. I let the music fill the void. If it made her uncomfortable, she didn't reveal it to me.

I picked this place because it was eclectic. She was a teacher at heart, and the one thing that teachers love is weird educational-type things. What drew me in was its décor. It was based on a peat bog which was located across the pond. From my studies, peat bogs were treasure chests of artifacts and a window into the past. These brilliant minds had turned an oddity into a classy yet one-of-a-kind business. When we pulled up to the valet, she looked starstruck. This wouldn't be my usual haunt, but her reaction told me I nailed it. The guy who took my car didn't look much older than sixteen, so he had to offer me extra reassurance.

During those reassurances, Freya snuck off. That moment solidified what my coworkers told me about losing their book-loving wives in a bookstore. I feared she was lost and prepped to take a seat and wait for her to find her way back to me. The glass doors left her in perfect view, which nullified that decision. Good. I was starving, and I didn't want to wait. Her back was to me as she leaned over onto the host stand, making small talk to the manager. How very like her to make friends with anyone. I began to think she didn't know the meaning of a stranger. She must have heard the doors open because she twirled back to me and waved me over as if she had made the reservations. Even the host addressed her by her name, not

mine. The walls were lined with skulls with moss and flowers and paint arranged to make gorgeous wall mounts; they stood out among the darkly lit dining area.

We sat in the back dining area in the corner of the room. A giant ox skull hung mounted behind us. I saw that it was painted matte black. The horns had glitter coating them, and wildflowers spiraled all over them. It was gorgeous enough that we both took a picture of it. Despite how everything in the area around us was dead, I felt very much alive.

The conversation started the minute I sat down. She grilled me like I was a filet mignon.

“Good choice of restaurants.”

“I figured you’d enjoy it since you have the mind of a teacher.”

Her head stayed swiveling to make sure that she wasn’t going to miss anything.

She admitted that she had never been here, which I knew already since it was new. Yet, she ordered with precision. A salmon salad with fresh strawberries, goat cheese, and vinaigrette. When she skipped the appetizers, I shared a look with the waiter. I had browsed the menu online, so I also knew what I wanted. In short, we ordered our dinner and our beverages in one go. I treated myself to a prime rib and an order of mashed potatoes. Before the waiter could leave, I quickly added a drink order.

“We will also take a bottle of Bella Glos with the meal.”

“We will also have two extra dry, dirty martinis with blue cheese olives.”

The waiter was busy writing and ensuring he had the sequences in order. He was still peering down when he asked into his serving booklet, “*How dirty would you like?*”

“Make it filthy, please.”

The way she kept eye contact with me when she said it made my breathing hitch in my chest. I felt a lump grow in my throat that I had to swallow. That wasn’t the only thing that started to rise from the minuscule play of words she had fed me.

“A lady that knows what she likes.”

I tipped my water glass playfully at her when she gave me an approving clink back.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Freya

I watched him through the entire trip here. The way the muscles in his jaw flexed when I commented about a filthy martini told me that I wasn't the only one with a mind in the gutter.

“You're a difficult person to understand, Mr. Fitz.”

Her manner changed back to calm and formal. She sipped the water and set the glass back down, crossing her hands in front of her.

“I don't like easy things.”

Oh, how well I know that fact.

“I don't think you'll have to worry.”

As soon as the words from my mouth stopped, he looked at me with a new expression. Bewilderment. One moment he was still, and the next, he burst out in laughter. It took me a second to regain my footing after the quick swift. My first thought was that I had misjudged all this and was only here as a courtesy. If that happened, I would have to move. He must have realized I was worried about the gesture, and he tried to backpedal.

“Are you trying to seduce me, ma'am?”

Two martinis were then placed in between us. I caught on then that he was laughing at the absurdity of it all. I had to laugh, too, when I caught the childish grin over my glass.

“I don’t know yet. It depends. Is it working?”

I couldn’t wipe the small off my face now. I continued to drink the gin I ordered, and every sip made this night seem even more unreal.

“Tell me. How the hell did you end up here?”

“I followed Miles for the most part. I felt like I was stuck in my old place, and I just wanted something new—a different adventure. I saw the posting for a teaching position and said even if it wasn’t permanent, it would give me a foot in the door. Now, here we are.”

I waved the martini glass in a circle around me. I didn’t mention that my parents wanted me out if I didn’t attend church with them on Sundays after turning eighteen. I was absorbing the happiness from being in his presence, and I didn’t want it to darken that now. I would save that for later.

“Why are you still here? You have the means. You could be anywhere.”

“Ah. That’s where you are wrong. I grew up here. This is my home. My dad’s legacy is here, and I wanted to continue the family traditions. The easiest way is to stay and pick up where we left off. Lincoln has only ever known here anyways.”

His words seemed melancholic. There wasn’t an outright sadness, but just mainly a distant look in his eyes. Between the two of us, it was such a stark contrast. A guy who has it all and a woman who had to build everything herself. What a lovely

pair. The way the conversation flowed, it wasn't long until our drinks had emptied.

“Do you harass all of your son's teachers?”

“Nope. Just you.”

The admission wasn't what I expected him to say, and he seemed dead serious.

“When I told you I don't date, I meant that. Until right now.”

He clasped his hands before him and leaned closer to me.

“We're dating now?”

“What? Wait, that wasn't what I meant. I meant what we are on right now is a date.”

“Uh-huh.”

His cheeks were rosy now. I had caused him to fumble his words. It was a very significant moment for me. If you compared Elias to Nixon, I upgraded. This god-like man thought I was attractive enough to cause him to stutter. A flush of excitement began to unfurl when our entrees reached the table. Another waitress followed behind with our wine. The plates were set in front of us, and I watched to make sure I followed Elias' etiquette. I didn't want to make a move to my food first. The waitress proceeded to pour a sample of wine for me, and I swirled it like they did in the fancy movies. The wine was rich and aromatic. There was no bitter alcoholic taste with it. You couldn't even taste the tannin. Once I approved, they poured us each a glass.

The rest of the dinner I spent focused on the food in front of me. Each bite was full of flavor. I could not have a decent conversation when this plate was still full. Across the table, Elias didn't seem to mind and was in the same mood. Food first. We both continued to eat until everything was completely finished. We both polished off the wine right after. I leaned back into the chair to try to relieve the pressure that was now present from the giant portions I just ate.

“Alright. Glad I didn't wear pants. Now, it's bedtime.”

“I have a better idea.”

He left me sitting there waiting for him to finish his sentence, but he just walked towards the front of the restaurant.

“Come on.”

He snuck back up behind me within a minute. I imagined doing a dine-and-ditch type situation and wanted to scold him if that was the case right now. The alcohol had made any trepidation towards each other fade to black. He walked beside me instead of walking ahead of me or in front of me. I felt his warm hand slip around mine. His fingers weaved their way between mine as if he was made of water. I didn't try to fight it this time. I let him hold onto me and walk, slightly tugging to lead the way.

“Fancy a walk?”

“But your car?”

“Valet said I could leave it.”

I forgot that he was important. This was acceptable. His pace was slow and relaxed, and the fact that we both had to work tomorrow didn't matter anymore. He was zoned in on wherever he was taking me. I felt his pulse beating through his hand. Or was it mine?

“Where are we going?”

“It's a surprise. It isn't far.”

He never looked at me. Instead, we kept heading toward an unknown location. We turned onto a little side road that I never knew existed. It wasn't paved, just a gravel and dirt mixture. If I had common sense, I should have been concerned that he was taking me out here and I'd never be seen again. I took longer strides to try to keep up with him. All at one time, the clearing opened up; it held what looked like an old park. It had one light and a ramshackle swing set.

“What is this place?” I asked as I inched closer to him, using him as a partial shield in case something produced a stereotypical jump scare. My hands were now clasped tightly around his bicep.

“I used to bring Lincoln here when he was a baby. They built a new park, and this one became vacant. I come back here sometimes when life feels too much.”

“It's so quiet.”

He looked much younger in this setting. He was smiling with eyes now. I could imagine him holding Linc and running around with him as a toddler. The thought of it was pleasing to

me. I knew he was a good father now, but seeing him with a small child seemed adorable. I loosened my grip enough to walk towards the swings, slowly blowing in the breeze. I let my fingers slowly graze on his arm, pulling him toward me.

When I sat down, I pulled my feet up a tiny bit so my heels wouldn't drag on the ground. Elias rounded behind me and began to give me gentle pushes.

“It is always nice to come back here and remember when things were easier. I could make decisions for him when he was small, but he's getting older. I have to loosen my grip, but I don't want to.”

“I can imagine. You've been doing this by yourself, and Linc has been your number one.”

I let the inconsistent pressure on my back continue to give me light pushes forward while I continued talking.

“I'm used to being by myself. I'm used to taking care of myself. Well, except for my brother. I dated Nixon because, at first, I was interested. I learned very quickly that he loved himself more than he could love anybody else. He wanted me to stay at home and clean up his mess. I broke it off, and I haven't tried again since.”

He stopped pushing me while I was talking.

“I'm enjoying this, but it's getting dark. We should probably head back.”

Elias

I wanted to stay and keep her talking for much longer than I wanted to go to bed, but she was a teacher. I didn't want to make her miserable tomorrow, so I ended our romantic evening. We walked back to my car in tandem with each other. Her arms were wrapped around mine, arm and arm. It was a comfort to have her so near to me. Her body heat was radiating through my shirt. I saw her bend over and yank her heels off when she stopped walking. Seeing how freely she gave in to her desires was enticing. She didn't care that I was there watching her. She didn't care that the walkway wasn't paved and her feet would get dirty.

How slowly we walked didn't matter; we made it to the car too soon. I didn't want to make a move to open her door. I wanted to pause time where we were. Refusing to drop the gentleman's demeanor, I finally opened the door when she made a move for the handle first. She sat and looked back at me, smiling as I shut her in. Opposite my drive here, we never touched traffic or red light. I was furious with the universe for this spite. I cut the lights as we turned into her driveway once more. Her porch light was still on. I put my car in park while I repeated the process of getting her door, despite her protests that she could do it herself.

"I had fun tonight, Freya. Thank you."

I closed the door when she stepped out and turned to face her. I wasn't lying to her. I did have fun with her. It helped that she was brilliant. I could converse with her and not feel like I was losing brain cells.

“We should do it again sometime—”

“Do you want to come in for a nightcap?”

She cut me off mid-sentence. I looked around and then back at her.

“Right now? Isn't it late? I don't want to keep you up too late.”

I was crossing my fingers that she argued because I would go for it if she did.

“I've got time. I don't go to bed for a little while longer.”

“Okay then, if I'm not going to bother your sleep schedule.”

She stood in her spot for a few seconds, digging for her keys, pulling them out, and fishing for her house key. I tried not to tap my foot from being so nervous. I didn't want her to mistake it for me being impatient or rushing her. I let her lead the way, walking up the steps with my hands in my pockets. She was fumbling, trying to get the door open, and I watched her grow more frustrated until it finally gave way for us. I let her go in and get the light before following.

While setting her bag down, I turned to shut and lock her front door behind me.

“Elias.”

I only heard one word—my name. She kissed me. It wasn't a gentle kiss, either. It was fevered. Her arms went around my neck so she could balance herself better.

I put up no arguments. I didn't even pull away from her. I pulled her into me, putting one hand on the small of her back and the other into her hair, still in beach waves hanging loosely around her face. My hands gripped the satin of her dress while she was clawing her way closer. That would have been the next step if she could have climbed me. Her nails scraped up the back of my neck and into my hair, giving a light tug. In return, I nipped her lower lip. The noise that she made caused me to lose my reasoning momentarily. I slipped both hands below her ass and bent and lifted her. She squeaked when her feet were off the ground entirely. I felt her freeze as if I was going to drop her, but I whispered against her ear.

“I got you.”

She didn't verbally respond. She continued on my neck and nodded. Her kisses were trailing an erratic line. It went everywhere until it landed on the spot behind my ear and let her lips brush against my ear. The flutter caused a tickling sensation. I didn't want her to stay tense and think I would drop her, so I carried her to the couch and turned. I sat down and kept her facing me. From our angle now, I could kiss my way up her throat. I used one hand in her hair to tilt her head to the side, biting where her shoulder met her neck. With trembling hands, her lips connected back to mine. Her mouth tasted of wine. I licked her lower lip and waited for her invitation to dive deeper. Once her lips parted, I jumped into it.

I felt her hands slip under my shirt, causing a few buttons to slip. The sensations felt like static electricity running down my veins. Our kissing was a push and pull of dominance. Once I felt like I was losing my ground, I let my hands travel underneath that satin number and grabbed her hips, pulling her down onto me. The seam on my pants caused me to grunt and wiggle underneath her to readjust, which caused her to rotate herself further against me. The rush of the connection between us all began to take full effect, and we were both starting to sweat.

“Freya”

“Stop talking.”

I bit down on her lip harder at the demand. Instead of the recoil, she moaned into my mouth. The night had turned ravenous. I continued to grip her and rock my hips up into her. Both of us were making noises by now.

From my pants pocket, an extended vibration started up. The phone was pressed right near where her inner thigh was resting on me and right next to my crotch. The movement caused her to nearly cry out, and the only thing that kept her seated was that I was still holding onto her.

“Damn it. Damn it. Damn it.”

I rooted around in my pockets, vaguely aware I could feel my knuckles brushing against her since she didn't move away. I finally reached it and saw the clock.

“Son of a... of course.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, just in the heat of the moment, I didn’t realize the time. I have a sitter.”

Let it be on record that this was the one time I wasn’t vying to get home. I had a hard-on that was painful enough that the thought of just leaving it alone was painful in itself.

“Oh god. Oh no. Go, go. It’s okay. I get it. We can talk later.”

In a swift hop, she was out of my lap. The release of pressure made me catch a chill, and it felt empty now. Had she not been sitting in my lap and feeling my erection on her body, I might have been in a flummox to hide the situation. There was no use in it now. She gave me a hand to help pull me off the couch, and I got to my feet, pulling my shirt down and trying to put my clothes back on. It was in total disarray. Her hair was all sorts of messy due to my hands. She stood trying to pull her dress down over her panties. We stopped and looked at each other once we covered ourselves back up.

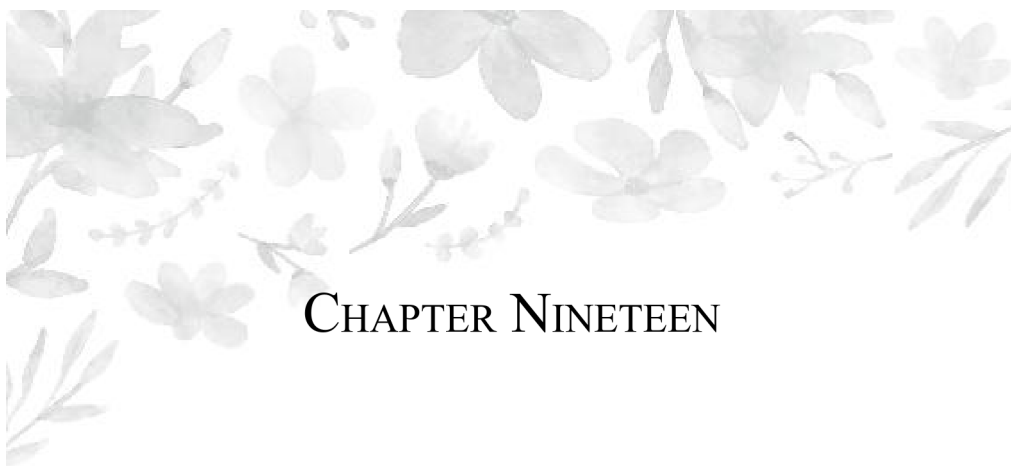
“Uhm. I had fun... and sorry about all of this.”

She motioned to her clothes and hair, referring to our brief fooling around.

“I’m not.”

I don’t regret saying that out loud. I stood there until she managed to make eye contact again, and when she did, I took the opportunity to lean down and kiss her again. This time slower, like I was savoring how she tasted. When I pulled

away, she kept her hand on my shirt until I stepped back away from her for the night.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Freya

When Elias left, I'm almost positive he took my breath with him. I replayed the last little bit of our night on repeat in my head for a solid five minutes after he left. The fact that I came onto him was striking. I didn't mean to. I definitely didn't plan it. We just got clicked, and after the conversation, I felt comfortable, and he looked too good just not to kiss. So, I did it. I might have let it get a little too handsy, but we are all adults here.

It happens sometimes. I swear it was like the touch of his hands left a brand on me. The touch lingered long after he had left me. Before I sat down, I looked at my reflection in the hallway mirror and moved my hair around on each side, checking for any marks to show tonight's evidence. I couldn't go to work, looking like I had gotten attacked by leeches. For tonight, it all looked okay. I couldn't see any major damage that had been left over. I took a few steps away from the windows and let the dress fall off me, landing in a black pool at my feet. It was shocking for me to understand how badly I wanted Elias to still be here to witness the dress falling to the floor. He even said he didn't like easy during dinner, and I threw myself at him like a fool.

I walked right by the bathroom without even stopping. I didn't want to erase his handprints just yet. It could be my secret way of still taking him to bed with me. I also didn't

bother with pajamas; they seemed ridiculous, considering I was willing to bear it all. My bedroom seemed like a mausoleum now, hollow enough for me to stay inside without anyone else seeing me laid out for everyone to see. I couldn't help but question if I ruined any shot I had because of my lack of impulse control. I could blame it on the lack of physical affection since Nixon, sure. It might be true.

Between my thoughts and the slow-motion replays of what exactly just happened, I had to do something. I pulled my phone out of the nightstand and started to text him. I pecked away at the letters slowly. I would get two words in and erase them in one click. Nothing seemed to make enough sense or not come off as needy. I typed something generic when I got fed up with hashing it out. *Hey, I still wanted to say sorry about tonight. I should have been less impulsive. Hope it didn't turn you off.* I cringed when I re-read the message out loud. The little blue box appeared instantly with the word "delivered" underneath. The waiting game started. It took four minutes for three little dots to show up below the sent message. I should remember that for next time if there is a next time. They would appear and blink out within two seconds, telling me he was doing the same thing I did. Type, erase, repeat.

Frey, really. It's ok. Why would I like you less? Just shows that you know what you want. Tell you what, my leaving obviously left some confusion, so how about we go out tomorrow night to make up for it?

I squeaked when I read the last part. He wanted to go back out tomorrow.

Look forward to it. Same arrangement as tonight?

Roger that.

While falling asleep, I humored myself with more ideas to spontaneously seduce him again. Friday made it to where neither of us had to go to work, but I knew that it would probably be almost like tonight with his son around. We would go out, whatever happens next, and then he would leave for the night. There was no way he would not wake up with his son. It was okay, though; I was grateful for what I could get by now. I could take my time on some things.

Elias

I should have tried to explain my departure better, I guess. It had nothing to do with her; I lost track of time. The babysitter was supposed to be gone by 9:30. When she called, I had just enough time to get home and pay her.

Still, though, Freya's text upset some balance with me. The fact that I hurt her feelings caused me to question if I actually was a jerk or if she was right all along. After I sent that text, I realized I had no childcare lined up. Nothing. I couldn't make plans and then cancel plans within an hour; that would definitely hurt her feelings. I started to sweat, worrying that I messed up in a big manner. I haven't known her as long as some people, but she doesn't take shit from anyone. That includes me.

Then, I saw my aunt's text thread. The last time she texted me was at around the same time as now. I quickly called her.

"Please, please, please. Come on..."

I jiggled my knee while listening to the ringing on the line. Right before I thought the voicemail would come on, I heard her sing-song voice instead.

"Thank heavens, Jesus."

My gratuitous thanks must have been a lot for her since she went quiet as a mouse.

“Well, yes. Jesus was involved with the heavens. What’s going on?”

“I was wondering; I might have accidentally offered to do something tomorrow evening and realized after the fact that I hadn’t planned for a sitter...”

“The teacher girl Lincoln was telling me about?”

“Yeah, we went out last night, but I had to leave to get home in time for the sitter to leave. I think it might have sent the wrong idea, and I wanted to.”

“Go on then. If you’re worried you hurt her feelings, it’s important enough for me too. Fair warning though, he can come here, and we’ll go to the art museum Saturday. I had already planned it for myself.”

Huh. So Lincoln had been talking about this situation and didn’t seem angry, which was on the brighter side of things.

“You are a miracle worker and a guardian angel all in one. I love you. Have I told you that lately?”

“When you get your way sometimes. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight.”

Her voice never gave way to any form of contention related to anything in her life. With that handled, I could fall asleep and be giddy about the upcoming evening.



Waking up, I heard clambering coming from downstairs. I let my eyes adjust to my surroundings while listening to the commotion. Outside, the sun was just coming up, so it wasn't like I overslept. My phone was still in the same spot, so my alarm hadn't even gone off yet.

“What the hell?”

I opened my bedroom door and looked both ways as if I was crossing a street, but nothing; I didn't even see the light on. I carefully approached the stairs and noticed Lincoln's door was wide open. A chill gripped me, and I picked up my pace. I know he wasn't an early riser.

Without wasting more time, fearing that my kid was down here, I took off down the steps. I entered our kitchen and saw two legs clad in pajama pants. Lincoln. The crash from adrenaline was quick. Walking toward him, I knocked on the wall to grab his attention.

“Whatcha doing?”

I looked around the room and saw muffin tins laid out, dry mix on the countertops, and spatulas amiss. It looked like my drawers threw up, or I had a poltergeist with the munchies. If I had to choose, I think the poltergeist would be the winner. I would never be bored.

“Good morning, Dad! I made breakfast!”

I gave him a grin and went to inspect the damage done, and I was shocked to see that he managed to make muffins. They

were out on the stove, in one piece. Sure, they were a little soggy, but they were still edible.

“Okay, chef, look at you.”

I jammed a strawberry muffin into my mouth and felt crumbs falling when I spoke to him. The compliment caused him to shy away and look down.

“It’s not *THAT* good, Dad.”

“Sure it is!”

I wasn’t going to tell him otherwise; if he wanted to be a chef, I wouldn’t be why he changed his mind.

“I meant to tell you last night, but it slipped my mind. Your aunt will pick you up from school today, and you’ll spend the night with her. Tomorrow she was taking you to the art museum.”

I watched him start to gleam and vibrate with excitement.

“I can go there? Really?! You’re not kidding?”

This was huge for him. I can’t recall when he spent the night away last. It isn’t often that is obvious. I need to fix that.

“Really. Now get ready for school and get a bag together. She will swing by here and grab it before picking you up.”

He shoved one more muffin into his mouth and zoomed out of sight. The sounds faded as he made it into his room, and it was replaced by what sounded like things crashing and falling. It wasn’t concerning; I figured it was a fishing expedition in his closet. He spent the rest of the morning upstairs gathering

his toys and clothes to take with him. When I called him down, he placed a rolling bag by the front door and hooked his bookbag on his shoulders.

Friday morning traffic wasn't awful today. I zipped and slipped through the lanes from our home, school, and even to work. It was a breath of fresh air to know that I only had to be here today to pick up a few files. Our case was continued once more, which meant I had no reason to be in the office. I slipped past everyone in between, only giving a passing smirk to Nixon and a friendship greeting to Miles.

The files were on my desk, so I didn't even shut my door when I got in. I grabbed them and retreated outside. I had plans for today. I needed to clean the house before tonight. It wasn't disgusting, but I still wanted it to be presentable. I didn't want the company to think I was a slob.

Back at my abode, I turned up the music and set a playlist for cleaning. Since I wasn't working, I was still in comfortable cleaning attire. I fetched the supplies from the closet and made mental notes on where to start—the logical place was in the bedroom.

I tossed clothes into baskets. Shoes went into the closet. I stripped the sheets and took them to the washing machine. I needed to give them time to dry by tonight. All potentially life-ruining items were stowed away neatly. Lincoln's room was easy enough to close, knowing she wouldn't go in his room. The rest of the house was spit-shined, to put it bluntly. My living room was spotless after a couple of hours of non-

stop cleaning. I tossed my head back like a bag of bricks into the sofa. I decided to take a quick nap, so tonight, I wasn't ready to collapse by nine. I set the alarm and closed my eyes, letting sleep take over.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Freya

It was an odd thing to see somebody else pick Lincoln up after school today. A simple Subaru came rolling through, and he bounded out of the doors right into the passenger side seat. I laughed as his backpack jostled him around. I waited while he gave me a quick wave, and off they went. The woman seemed too old to be his mom, so I guessed it was a family member.

The difference with tonight's date is that Elias texted me that he would pick me up at five o'clock this afternoon because he took the only reservation left open. We needed to be there by five-thirty. I took the hint that with a reservation, it was somewhere nice. At home, I had already started to plan the outfit. Makeup-wise, I wanted classy yet sexy. I set the scene with a natural finished foundation, a touch of liquid bronzer that doubled as contour, a dab of blush, and a finish of highlighter that I tapped onto the end of my nose. Seeing myself in the mirror, I knew what would make this look perfect. I took out the makeup bag I kept stashed and pulled out a tube of liquid eyeliner and red lipstick. They both applied like a dream, leaving me looking like a different woman.

My hair took a bit longer, but it fell nicely around my face once it was done and draped a few inches below my shoulders.

I saved my favorite part for last; my outfit. I wanted to go completely out tonight.

Luckily, I had just the thing. On my bed sat a strapless, black fitted mini dress. The top was cut in an A-line, making it to where I could wear a bra that offered some lift. Considering what happened last night, I opted for a black bra and a lacy black thong with straps above the hips to give an hourglass look. Shoes-wise was nothing too major. I stuck with strappy heels that were a shade of red to match the lip. Looking at the clock, I finished right on time. I had just a few moments to put body oil on and spritz *Dior* behind my ears before I heard a knock on the door. I checked my phone and realized he didn't text me that he was on his way, which in today's age felt old school. I liked it. Taking the time for one more glance at myself, I twirled.

As I opened the door, I pictured our faces looking the same.

“Holy shit, you're gorgeous.”

“You are too.”

When I saw his face, I realized what I had done and corrected myself, smoothing my dress. I was suddenly self-conscious of the dress's length, so I fought to keep it pulled down.

“Leave it.”

The authority he used made me stop. To avoid the nervous tick, I clasped them in front of me.

“Ready?”

To answer me, he held out his hand and took one of mine; he led me the entire way to his car. He only let my hand drop to open the door and close me in. The whole drive to dinner, that same hand was on my thigh. Not on my dress, on the skin. I could feel the rough yet soft callouses that had started to form on his palms. He never moved except to trace tiny circles with his thumb. It brought back the familiar urge for him to slip his hand higher. I could live without dinner.

Pulling up, the first thing I saw was the line of people.

“Are you sure we can get in here? Do you see this line?”

“We’ll get in. I’m the actual district attorney here. They want to be on my good side, Freya. I can offer them deals when the servers get busted with a joint. I have some form of power in this world.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of some unfortunate server being brought before him with only a joint. The noise earned us a few less-than-favorable glances from other patrons. Us getting to go in as soon as we checked in also earned a few more of the same looks. Even the inside was crowded with people. The décor was very modern compared to last night’s spot. It was all white and silver. They already had two martinis sitting at our table when we sat down. They were fresh, seeing as the glasses hadn’t even started to sweat yet.

“You like it filthy, right?”

“That’s the only way.”

I took the skewer from the glass and slipped an olive into my mouth. It made an accidental slurping noise that was exciting, even if it was unexpected.

“We’ll see.”

There it was. The whole reason that dinner could be skipped. The way he just assumed he was the best at everything made me want to try it out. I wanted to see if he was all talk or not. Part of me hoped he wasn’t. I already knew that kinky was the last thing I was, but I could play it off.

Throughout dinner, the sexual tension was palpable. We talked back and forth over everything from what our day looked like, what we did for fun, weird stories, and even how we acted as kids. Innuendos were sprinkled everywhere within the conversations. We realized neither had eaten much when our main course hit the table. If anything, we were pushing our food around to make it seem like things were being ingested. The ruse didn’t work for either of us.

“Is something wrong?”

He stopped moving his fork around long enough to look at me when he asked his question. In his mind, I imagined him thinking I didn’t like how my steak was prepared and fighting to send it back. It wasn’t that, though. The food was out of this world, but I had more pressing things in my head.

“Actually, yes.”

“Oh. Well, what is wrong? I can try to help.”

His eagerness to help was endearing. His willingness to stop our fun chat if I was upset was chivalrous. My answer wasn't anything to do with our meal or even my life. It was the fact that I wasn't alone with him.

“We're still in this restaurant. That's the issue.”

His face went flat while he registered what I was talking about. Initially, his expression read that he thought I wanted to leave separately. To make it more obvious, I rested my hand on his. “Wait here.”

I did as instructed as he went to talk to a gentleman at the front desk. I only focused on flagging down our server and asking for a go box. It was my way of ensuring a late-night snack. The food was great now, and it would be better later. He and the server made it back at the same time, greeting each other with pleasant smiles. My stomach was fluttering, and my palms started to sweat. I was ready.

This time there was no question about whether someone was going home with someone. I had already asked the questions, knew the answer, and was on our way. It took a couple of turns until I saw we weren't heading toward my house this time.

“Hey, Elias, I don't mean to be a passenger driver, but you know my house is the other way, right?”

I intended to take him back to my place to avoid awkward scenarios with a kid being around, but I don't know what we are doing now.

“I know. We're not going to yours. We're going to mine.”

“Oh. Well, alright.”

This was a sudden turn of events. I looked out of the window at passing streetlights and watched as the houses on the streets slowly got bigger and bigger until he turned into a driveway so long that you couldn't spot a house. When he turned in, I felt my eyes dilate. The drive was lined with little trees and lamps, but about halfway down, a house beyond big enough for two loomed ahead. I stared at it with a gawking expression.

“You live here...?”

“Welcome to my humble abode, Freya.”

“I don't think this is what humble means.”

When he parked his car and we got out, the house made me feel like a flea. It stood towering above us both, with the top windows seemingly staring down at us.

It wasn't overdone. It was simple yet elegant. It reminded me of an original type of farmhouse. He let me assess the situation for a few seconds before taking me by the elbow and leading me inside.

Elias

I thought about telling her we would go to my house instead, but I wanted to see her reaction. I also ushered my son away for a reason; I might as well enjoy it for the night. She stood right inside the doorway, leering from left to right.

“I have a request.”

“Yes?”

“I enjoyed the macho man last night, but that’s a lot of stairs. I want to get you undressed before plummeting to my death. Can I walk up these?”

Words were stuck in my throat. The forthcomingness this woman gave me was a high point for me. Most women make you guess, or they want to be the one who takes orders, but not her. She was telling me what she wanted right now.

“Ladies first.”

I let her take the steps first as I gave her directions on where to go once she reached the top of them. Then at the last second, I changed my mind. I was directly behind her, and that dress was too tight to ignore. I waited all through dinner, and I was done waiting.

I never gave her a chance to make any turns at the top. I followed close enough that when her foot touched down on the floor runner, I wrapped my arms around her midsection and brought my lips to the nape of her neck, planting soft fluttering

kisses. I could toy with her from this position, and I planned to do just that.

At my touch, she stopped walking, tilting her head into me more.

“Keep walking.”

“I can’t help you’re distracting me.”

She might talk back a little, but she did what was asked of her. I continued whispering directions with my hands still on her hips, steering her slightly until she entered my bedroom. The thrill was electrifying since I knew this was my domain. While she was taking the sights in, I spun her to face me and put my hand against the back of her neck, pulling her flush with me. She was much smaller than me, so my hand easily fit entirely around her neck. We stood there for a few seconds while I let her relax and warm up to what was happening. I was looking for signs that she was okay with this or if she was questioning, but she remained zoned in on my lips, running her tongue along my lower lip and sucking it between her teeth. I let a deep exhale escape and felt her smile at herself. I let my mouth travel to her jawline and down to her collarbone, keeping my hand firmly on her skin. I could tell she was getting aggravated at my teasing, so I walked her backward to the bed and pushed her down onto it. I let my body lower with my arm partially until I could slip myself between her legs and rest comfortably while hovering over her. I was enjoying the scene and her; I didn’t want to give too much right now.

Still in control, I took both of her wrists in one of my hands and pinned them above her head. Something flashed in her eyes, and I briefly paused to discern whether it was fear or pleasure.

“Do you want me to stop?”

I was talking to her in between kisses behind her ear.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

I felt her hips lift towards mine before I shifted in a way that forced them back down.

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

I took my free hand and ran it down the length of her body, stopping where the dress ended. Her thigh was silky smooth and warm. I could feel her muscles tense throughout. Painstakingly, I slipped a hand underneath the dress to run my knuckles against her underwear. I felt the familiar feeling of lace. I continued to use a finger to trace the outline of her panties, learning very quickly that she was wearing a thong. Happy with that information, I slid my hand out and back up, grabbing the top portion of the dress. When I got my hands on it well enough, I realized just how tight this thing was. I slid one hand beneath her lower back to avoid ripping it. I let the grip on her wrists go and, in one move, flipped her onto her stomach. She gasped at the sudden movement, and her unpreparedness caused a less-than-graceful flop. I waited for her to raise a few centimeters from the bed and tugged the zipper down, loosening it enough that I could easily slip it off with one hand. I waited until most of it was off of her legs and

flung it somewhere on the floor behind us. I followed it up with the bra being tossed as well. I didn't need them anymore.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Freya

The breeze from his air conditioner rushed across my back, causing me to shiver. Being flipped onto my back wasn't exactly in the plans seeing as I couldn't do much from this position, but I let him take the lead for now. He was still leaning over my back, kissing my neck and collarbone, and trailed kisses down my spine for good measure. I felt his mouth drop lower and lower, rounding my hip and biting down just enough for it to feel a bit sore. I didn't have time to process the sensation before I let out a low moan.

There were so many sensations that he was causing that I couldn't focus on one. When he heard me, he paused. Taking the opportunity, I shimmied back onto my back below him. Feeling exposed, I started undoing the buttons on his shirt. I only had two left before he physically pulled his shirt away from his body, potentially ripping the buttons along the way.

I saw his chest in the low light and ran my hands down, grabbing the waist of his pants and tugging him further against me so I could grind myself against him. If he wanted to play dirty, then I would too. The sexual build-up was hell on both of us, seeing as to tease him, I was teasing the shit out of myself too. I could feel him getting harder between my legs, and the urge to just go for it was mounting. I couldn't do it again, though. I wanted this to be something that hung around for a while. His kisses became feverish and rough as he felt the

pressure of me pushing against him. His tongue was fighting to be in control.

I moved my hands around his neck to better keep myself stable, and I felt his hand grab my breast and gently squeeze. I let my head fall back into the mattress as he continued to knead, his hands gentle but still dominating every inch of me. I tried to keep any noise I made stifled, but it wasn't working. It took two seconds of me readjusting for him to have both of my wrists back above my head again, and the look he gave me from above was a devilish grin. It caused the heat between my legs to flame. Moving anywhere with my arms above me was futile.

I was pinned. He knew I was pinned. I waited to see his next move or if he would return his lips to me, but he didn't. He moved his lips down between my breasts and over, taking my nipple into his mouth. I gasped. There was something in the way he was moving his tongue and the pressure he was using; it was driving me insane. I couldn't get close enough to make him do it faster. When his mouth moved to the other breast, I felt his free hand go down between my legs again. His knuckles traced over the edges of my panties, inching the pads of his finger in as a tease. Wiggling my hips, I tried to get his hands closer, but he was stronger.

"Please, Elias," I was still writhing my hips closer, and my words came out as more of a pathetic pant, but it got his attention.

"Please, what?"

The thought of verbalizing what I wanted him to do made me retreat a few steps. I wasn't used to telling someone what I wanted them to do. I felt the heat from my core rise to my cheeks. I was struggling over what I was supposed to do until, all at once, he ceased everything except kissing my neck.

“Tell me what you want.”

No longer concerned about how I would sound since the loss of contact was jarring, I whimpered.

“Touch me.”

In unison, all of the sensations came flooding back. He continued kissing my chest while his hand slipped back between my legs. This time though, I felt his finger push inside of me. My back arched involuntarily from his mattress. Pain seared in my wrists from straining against his hand. He let himself take a few seconds to find a rhythm and watch my reactions before moving his lips back to mine. His hand began to work in a quicker motion before slipping one more finger inside of me. When I moaned again, he released his grip on my wrists and slid that hand under my neck, propping himself above me on his elbow.

“Fuck, Freya.”

I hitched my leg around his hip and put a hand into his hair, clutching his hair with a fist. I let my hips move freely as I needed them to. I chased his hands in a tempo. He finally swapped the motion again when he slid his fingers inside me, resting his palm on my clit. The movements were no longer quick; they became slow and strung out. I felt the bends of his

fingers as he made a ‘come here’ motion. With a fist still in his hair, I lifted my hips and rode his fingers till I reached a point where I would finish. I wasn’t going to be able to stop myself.

As if on cue, he withdrew his hand and dropped to his knees, pulling my body down the bed to him. I didn’t have time to wrap my head around the sudden loss of pleasure before being introduced to a new pleasure. I felt his mouth on me now, swirling his tongue in circles. The shift was intense, and I grabbed hold of his bed sheets. He was too preoccupied to notice, considering he kept going. The feeling of pleasure was high already. My breathing was no longer relaxed; it was ragged. I searched for things to hold on to when the sheets were no longer working for me. Just like before, I put a hand on the back of his hand and took hold of his hair. When I tugged, I felt him groan while he pressed against me, and my legs quivered.

“Ah-ah-”

On instinct, my body tried to pull away from him. He gripped onto me harder and pulled back, replacing his fingers inside of me with his mouth also. The same come here movements ensued, and I had to bite my knuckle to avoid crying out. I felt the coil inside my stomach curl tight enough that every muscle in my leg was flexed. Even my foot was shaking.

“Fuck. Elias. Fuck. I’m close. Please, don’t stop.”

Desperate attempts to reach the peak paid off when the coil finally snapped. I kept my hand clenched in his hair and lifted

my hips to ride out my orgasm on his lips. The ripple effect was still coursing through me. I was pulsating. I was also dripping wet. It took time to regain my breathing, and I began to think about the fact that I had just come, and he hadn't yet. I was working out if he was going to or if he felt that this was all I wanted.

Elias

This had almost a supernatural pull out of every encounter with a passion I have ever had. I thought about teasing her before I let her finish, but once she started moaning, I couldn't help myself. She tasted sweet, and the way she moved her hips against me made stopping myself not possible. As she was coming down from her orgasm, I was taking off my pants and boxers. I was so hard that they were physically painful now. She kept her eyes on mine, watching my every move.

Now wearing nothing, matching her, I reached over into the nightstand and pulled a condom out. She sat up and kissed me on the neck and chest while I put it on. I enjoyed how she took the time to pay attention, even during this mundane portion. When it was finally on, I grabbed her legs again and tossed her onto her stomach. Even from behind, her body was perfect. I pulled her up onto all fours, kissed her shoulderblade neck, and lightly nibbled a pathway between the two. With one hand, I slid it around her body and brought my hand between her breasts to hold the base of her throat.

On the other hand, I used to dip my fingers back inside her to make sure she was still wet. The thought of her doing any form of foreplay on me was gone. I didn't want the foreplay anymore. I wanted her.

When her hips jerked at my fingers, I placed myself at her entrance and pushed myself inside of her slowly. Not even

worried, I groaned against the back of her neck. I used the hand at the base of her throat to pull her back towards me as I continued to move within her. I could feel her tensing up with each thrust. I needed to play this out carefully with how worked up I was to begin with. It wasn't going to take long for me to finish. I wasn't going to finish without her either. That wasn't going to happen. I ran through several ideas before settling on one.

I kept pushing into her at the pace I was already on, slow and steady. I wrapped the other hand around her waist and rubbed circles on her clit. As I moved my hand faster, I picked up my pace. My movement worked like a charm. I felt her tensing up around me, and her moans became more feral. I tightened my grip around her body, and as she finished, her muscles clenched around me, which caused me to finish right behind her. I held her in place for a few seconds before letting go of her, and we both collapsed into the covers. We were both covered in sweat and out of breath. Her legs trembled against me, and I playfully reached down to stop them. She quickly covered her face while slapping my hand.

I stood up to go to the bathroom and removed the condom, flushing it down the toilet. When I returned to bed, she was already under the covers and asleep. I could see her chest rising and falling slowly under the comforter. I couldn't help but smile at the sight.

“Goodnight, Freya.”

I leaned over and kissed her forehead before crawling under the sheets beside her.



When I opened my eyes again, it was daylight. It felt like I had only slept a few hours, but it was nice not to have an alarm blaring. When I rolled over, I saw that Freya was still asleep and had the blankets tucked around her. I briefly wondered about waking her up for round two, but if I had my way, there would be plenty of rounds. Quietly, I got up and got dressed.

I dug around in the refrigerator for eggs and butter. Really, I needed any form of everyday staples to make a pretty woman's breakfast. With items in hand, I set them down on the kitchen island before looking for more. My pantry held muffin mix, and I grabbed the box, too. I wasn't a chef, but breakfast was something that I'd known how to cook for a long time. I set the timer to preheat the oven and began to dump ingredients for muffins. In the time that it took the oven to preheat, my muffins were mixed and ready to go in as soon as the timer dinged. With them on the rack, I turned back to the eggs and started mixing them with cheese to make scrambled eggs. To avoid them getting cold while the muffins were baking, I set the coffee and got a cup down before I had to start working on those. Despite not getting to sleep at a reasonable time, I felt terrific. I hadn't made breakfast for anyone except Linc in such a long time that this was fun. I enjoyed the positive action.

I was finishing the scrambles when I heard a pitter-patter from above me. I quit moving long enough to trace them. Once I heard them stop, I knew she made it to the floor runner. I rushed to pour a cup of coffee that made it to where I could meet her at the bottom of the steps. I wasn't looking when I was walking that way, so when I saw what stood before me, I almost choked on my own coffee. Freya stood there wearing an oversized t-shirt of mine that I wore underneath my button-down last night. The way it fit her body was heavenly. One side was hanging off her bare shoulder, and the hem of the shirt barely covered mid-thigh. The hair styled so effortlessly last night was messy and was what you imagine from someone who had sex the night before. It wasn't exactly a bad hair day; it was just messy. I handed her the mug that was still steaming.

“I didn't know if you liked cream and sugar.”

“Oh, I like cream.”

From trying to hold back a laugh, it resulted in a snort. I shook my head at my own dirty mind.

“Classy. I swear, boys never grow out of the dirty-mindedness.”

“Never.”

She only shook her head at me and flashed a smile. She still enjoyed it if she didn't want to admit it. She couldn't hide that smile if she wanted to. She slowly walked with me towards the kitchen, holding the mug with both hands in front of her. It reminded me of when I got cold and needed it close to me just to heat up again.

“Is that all for me?”

She asked playfully as she set down her coffee to reach for the creamer. I gave her a smile and watched as she bent over, a million other dirty thoughts reeling.

“Linc’s going to see an art museum. I can think of a few things we can do, though.”

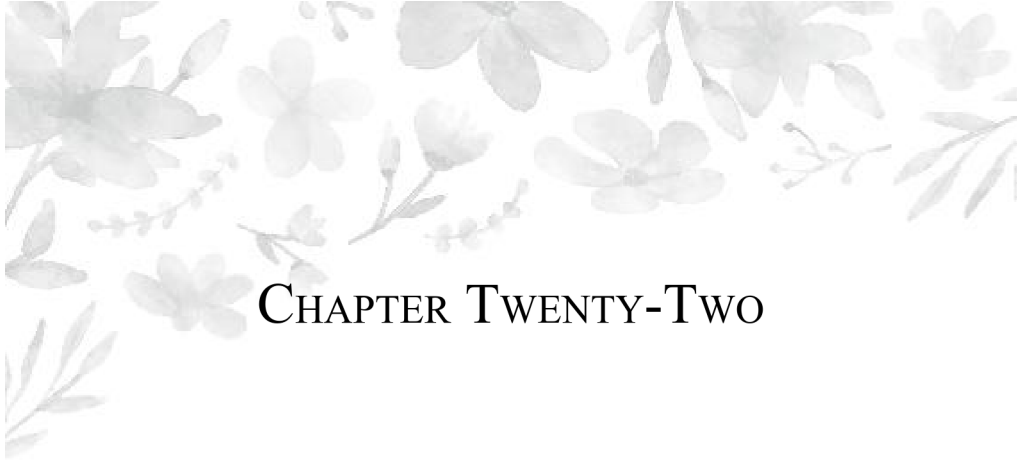
Her hand stopped mid-extension as she turned to face me.

“Oh?”

I set my coffee down and nodded as I walked her way, standing before her. I reached around her to close the refrigerator and kissed her forehead.

“Yep.”

When I grabbed her hand, we left both cups of coffee on the island. They’d be cold, but that’s why we have microwaves.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Freya

Naturally, when I first woke up, the first thing that my senses took in was the smell of strawberries. The next was that Elias wasn't in bed anymore. Not thinking, it was a pleasant surprise when I set off down the steps and saw that he was making breakfast, complete with coffee. I can't remember the last time someone else made breakfast. What really got my attention was the flirty way he managed to steal me back to his sheets. Within the room, it was like nothing outside of these walls mattered. All of the nonsense could wait.

When we were back under the blankets, I straddled him before he could stop me. His hands came to rest on the tops of my thighs, running up and down beneath his shirt. Reaching the bottom of the shirt, I pulled it over my head and let it slip onto the bed beside us. Underneath his shirt was nothing. I wiggled my hips to get comfortable and leaned over him, kissing his lips and neck. My hair hung around my face causing an odd sort of frame. I stayed over him until I felt him getting hard again. Below me, his eyes closed as I kissed my way down his body, his hands tracing along my shoulders as I slid down him. I saw recognition only when I slid my hand into his pajama pants waistband just to slide them down. We made eye contact briefly before I took him into my mouth. His knee reflexively jerked as he groaned and propped himself up on both elbows so he could watch what I was doing. Knowing

that he was watching was hotter than I expected, I looked back up at him, never breaking my gaze.

While I moved my head and up hand up and down in sync with one another, I used his facial expressions to judge what he was enjoying the most. He bit down on his lip as his head was thrown back in a show of ecstasy; shortly after, I felt his fist close in a fist of my hair. Whatever he was doing, I never broke stride. I could hear him moaning quietly as if he didn't want me to hear.

“Freya. God.”

“Mm hum.”

I hummed while I still had him in my mouth and slowly took him further into my mouth until he touched the back portion of my throat. It took some effort not to gag, but once I figured out a good position, it was fine from then. His hand, lost in my hair, began to pull tighter, causing me to moan alongside him. Not wanting to push too far, I let my tongue slip up his length until he came out of my mouth with a slight popping noise. The way his face looked told me he was close to losing his composure, which was what I wanted. I crawled back up until I was back in the straddling position again. Balancing on my knees, I reached underneath me and wrapped my hand around him. His eyes followed my hand, and he watched as if anticipating my next move. Moving my hand up and down, I leaned toward his face and kissed his lips again, biting his lower lip. The distraction was what I needed to dip him inside of me. Not completely. I barely managed to get the tip the first

time. I played it off as a more fun teasing game. His hands slid up my bare back, resting the pads of his fingers on my shoulder blades as I repeatedly dipped him into me. Sometimes he would try to raise his hips, and I would simply lift myself.

“Relax, let me.”

I whispered right against his ear so he could feel my breath. I sat back on my haunches and studied his face. It was focused on nothing except my face. His fingers ran from the back to the front of my body, down my breasts, and came to rest on my hips. I should have felt shy that he was still watching me, but before I could, his eyes went back down to where I was straddling him. Sick of teasing myself, I let one hand grip the headboard behind him, and in a split second that he looked back at me, I slid down on him fully. Elias’ arms flew back to encase me the same as before, and one hand cradled the back of my head.

“Jesus Christ, you can’t do that. I’ll cum right now. Wait, oh shit. Condom. Hang on, hang on.”

He started to get antsy that I wasn’t flinging myself off him, and I leaned back to see his face.

“It’s okay, Elias. I have an IUD. I’ve had one for years now. I wouldn’t have done that otherwise.”

There was no reply, just him grabbing my face and pulling me back into his orbit. I talked myself through several different ideas that I could work him through that would keep me in control. I let my hips continue to roll into his while I

pulled his face down towards my breast. Each time I moved back into him, I felt my willpower slip further down the drain. One move would send me over the edge. As the grip tightened on my waist, I picked up the tempo using the applied pressure as a gauge. When the grip was to the point of I imagined there to be nail marks, I slid back up until I was completely off him and then right back down in slow motion, watching his eyes close and head fall back. Then, I decided it was safe for me to finish myself. I wanted to do this for him this time. Moving my hand from the headboard, I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him, begging him to let me explore his mouth. My hip movements were sloppy, and I had my face hidden in the crook of his neck. I had no issue watching him get off, but his watching me seemed strange. I wouldn't think it would be all that wonderful.

“Elias, I'm about to cum.”

The word had just left my mouth when his put wrapped me in what was akin to a bear hug and pushed himself up into me as far as he could manage without hurting either of us. His legs underneath me were locked, and his body jerked as he finished; the feeling of him inside me sent me toppling down Mt. Everest. As my orgasm rippled down my body, he never let go of me. He pulled me closer to him and let me ride the wave until I was spent. Opening my eyes, I felt sweat sticking my cheek to his shoulder. My legs began to shake while draped around him and he laughed into my hair.

“You need help there?”

I bit my lip and stifled myself. I wasn't used to this, especially something confronting me over it.

My head was still down, and my phone rapidly went off, one right after the other. The tone wasn't a ring; it was a text tone. I lifted my leg over his and rolled over to the side, picking the phone off the table. The feeling of him sliding out caused a slight gasp, and I struggled to focus on whoever was blowing my notifications up.

I set the passcode in and swiped until I found the message bubble at the bottom. The little red badge was showing four new messages. I scanned down further and landed on Nixon's number.

Elias

Whatever I expected this rebel of a woman to bring to the table was not it. I hadn't had a woman tell me to just sit there and enjoy myself my entire life. She was set on my pleasure for the entire duration, which turned me on even more. I felt my whole body go numb when I came underneath her. The euphoria was still ever so present. Her phone going off every two seconds was a buzzkill in the end. I wanted to throw that bitch against the wall. I felt her leg twitch even before she slid off me, and the lack of her warmth was gut-wrenching. I wanted her back. I could do this all day if I wanted to.

I scooted right behind her when she sat up, making it to where she was sitting in between my legs. It wasn't intentional, but her texts were visible over her shoulder. I stayed silent while she clicked open the thread and made quick work of reading behind her. I did my best to keep my body neutral, but inside I was raging. I wanted to throw this man through a window.

I don't know what u think you're doing with him, but u know I'm better for u. You've always been a whore Freya. That won't ever change. I don't know what I even saw in u.

That was the only message I was able to skim fully before she clicked it off and silenced the phone entirely. Her mood shifted enough that I could feel her emotions in the air around her. The easygoing, post-sex aura had faded. There was no

way I would let him speak to her like that and then get away with it. He even thought we were still together; the audacity was disturbing. Not only did he come off as extremely rude, but he also ruined my pleasant morning. We were doing grand until that message. I craned my neck and kissed her cheek to avoid trying to tip her off that I had seen her message. From her side profile, I could tell her eyes were now blank and sightless. Whatever thoughts were there, thunderstorms rolled over them.

Even my kiss on her cheek caused no response. She remained distant and rigid from that point on. In silent distress, she leaned over to grab her clothes and walked to the bathroom; seconds later, I heard the water. Solemnly, I dressed in a simple pair of track pants while I waited for her to finish in the bathroom. While left alone with my thoughts, I began questioning my entire outlook on this ordeal. I told her I didn't want anything serious, and those words were now ricocheting. I played back the stories of how Nixon had treated her, her family life, and how she was genuinely trying to be happy. I knew that if I didn't want to hurt her, I would need to figure out what I wanted from this. I needed to see if this was even plausible. Still chewing on my thoughts, fog rolled out from under the doors as she walked out. Her hair was tied up, and she wore the same shirt and oversized sweatpants.

“Hey, I need to get home. I need to clean the house and work on lesson plans. It's time for me to work on holiday ideas for the kids.”

“Sure, are you sure you're okay?”

“Yeah. I just need to get home. I’m also just worn out from the late nights. It’ll be okay.”

Not convinced, I walked with her down the steps and picked up my keys from the foyer counter. It wasn’t hard to spot that she remained out of reach.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Freya

When Elias took me home, I wasn't outright lying. I did have chores to do. Until yesterday morning, I completely forgot that the holiday break was starting next week. It didn't even seem like it yet. It was like bouncing between a social life, work, and reality. Holidays are not really of importance right now.

Today, however, I made a pact with myself to try to have a better week. I didn't want Nixon to ruin what I had right now. I knew he was a dick. I didn't understand why his words knocked the wind out of me, which upset me. It took more than a glass of wine and a shower to calm down. Elias and I texted the rest of the weekend as if nothing was wrong, but I could tell he sensed something. In a sad attempt to make up for being such a sad sack of flesh for the past day and a half, this morning, before I got dressed, I sent him a couple of snapshots of myself in nothing but a sheet.

*Had fun this weekend. Hope we can have more like it soon.
Have a good day!*

I sent the text right behind the pictures so that it wasn't just nearly naked pictures of myself. It made me feel better about sending pictures since I never excelled at it. Realizing that my sheets didn't help to keep me warm when I was completely nude underneath them, I shuffled around for clothes with sleep

still in my eyes. The day was early, and I couldn't stare at my phone all morning. I had to get dressed for work.

The school looked like it was still asleep on the inside when I parked and headed in. Aside from the custodian's truck, it seemed to me that I was here first. The room was even colder now that the weather was changing, and it reminded me of a morgue. The thought was not comforting with me being alone. With the week-long break ahead of us, I needed to focus on that. We had to plan Thanksgiving activities and meals. That was on top of the regular stuff. Getting distracted by seeing if Elias had replied would derail my entire plan to get this taken care of. I sat in my rolling chair, frantically flipping through tests, and red ink began to bleed over my fingers. The result made it to where I had ink smears on every surface I touched. I whined and prayed that this wasn't going to be a prediction for the rest of my day.

Braced against what challenges today would bring, I steeled my nerves and held my head up high as people filed into their respective classes and desk. The text yesterday had left me irritable all day today. I eventually gave up and let the class do crafts for the morning half and wheeled in a TV for the last portion. They were all excited, giving me a chance to try and recenter myself. I was easy to anger today, and everything was annoying. Even kids asking too many questions was driving me up the wall. While they were engrossed in the movie, I was too busy wondering why, when I powered up my phone that I had a party invite but no reply to my pictures.

Elias

I headed to Nixon's office first thing this morning. I didn't even stop by mine first to drop off my briefcase. I followed the hallways until I arrived at his office door. I sucked a deep breath in and stuck my hand up to knock, but at the last minute just walked in. He sat behind his desk, holding a phone to his ear.

I could tell he was unnerved by me suddenly being in his presence. He told whoever was on the line that he would have to call them back and hung it up quietly.

"You're going to leave her alone."

"Or?"

"Or you won't have a job when I'm done with you."

The threat caused him to retreat, knowing it was possible. He was staring at me, unblinking. The look he gave was filled with hatred and maybe a hint of jealousy.

"Keep her. She's not my type."

"You're right. She's definitely out of your league. I mean it; stay away."

I walked out of the office and slammed his door. He yelled something behind me, but the door had already muffled him. I couldn't hear anything from him, which was likely for the best. My detour this morning almost caused me to miss an important meeting, so I quickly returned to the conference

room, grabbing the items out of my box before entering and taking a seat. People were talking amongst themselves, killing time, until the boss man showed up. I took the time-lapse to take a picture of an invitation sitting in my box for days.

The office was hosting something close to a Thanksgiving dinner on Friday. Snapping the picture, I found Freya's messages and opened them to send the invite. The first thing that popped up was a photo of her bra and panties laid out on the bed.

I flipped my phone over quickly, trying to make sure nobody saw what I was looking at. Everyone was still engrossed in their own world. I took one more glance before the boss walked in. Shutting the phone off, I put it on the desk before me. The images made the meeting seem mundane. I kept willing the pictures back into my brain. The words everyone was speaking sounded like a *Charlie Brown* cartoon. I didn't even bother taking notes on whatever we discussed today. I just zoned out. In my head, I was planning on ways to spend my evening. Being in this proximity to Nixon all day made my blood pressure skyrocket. While I was letting them talk, I excused myself to go to the restroom, where I reached out to a babysitter for tonight. I knew what my plans were for tonight. I needed to get out of my own head and release whatever stress I was in after today. The sitter being a typical teen, replied instantly with a thumbs up.

At the end of the workday, I called Freya.

"I need to see you."

I didn't even let her say hello before I started pestering her. I just wanted to put my eyes on her. I didn't need the sex. I needed the company. Thankfully, I let the sitter pick up Linc, which freed me up to go directly to her place. I drove faster than the speed limit permitted, but I didn't care. It felt like I was in a withdrawal. I took a right turn whenever I was about to be stopped at a red light. I didn't feel like wasting my time sitting there. I pulled up to her place and hit the brakes, stumbling out of my vehicle. She was already outside like she was waiting for me.

“Is everything alright? You sound weird.”

“Just a bad day. I wanted to see you.”

The words flowed so naturally as if I said them every day. Her laid-back stance on life was refreshing. However, I wasn't going to open my mouth about the confrontation with Nixon, which was on a need-to-know basis only, and right now, she didn't need to know. When she was satisfied with my answer, we went inside.

“Did you get my invite to our party?”

I didn't have a chance to see her reply since the meeting started shortly after hitting send.

“I did. Of course, I'll go. I couldn't see the day, though?”

“Oh. Yeah. I forgot the small print. It's Friday.”

“Friday? As in this Friday?”

“Yep.”

I would have given her a better heads-up if I hadn't forgotten myself. Her mouth was stuck in a funny, gaping look, and I couldn't help but shake my head at the sheer ridiculousness of it. Without saying another word, I pulled her closer to me and kissed her. The kiss was gentle and more playful than our previous kisses. Her body was relaxed beneath my hands. Her hands delicately explored my chest, leaving little kisses on my jawline here and there. I ended one of our kisses and pulled back to look at her.

“What do you want to do?”

She stopped and tilted her head in a mock thoughtful look, then laughed.

“Do you wanna watch a scary movie?”

She started making these weird ghost noises while still in my lap, and I tossed her beside me and laughed.

“I'll get the popcorn.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Freya

The rest of the week flew by since I had things to keep me busy and something to look forward to. It was filled with Thanksgiving crafts and prepping for their break, and I was excited to have a week away from the typical day-to-day routine. I even treated myself to a gorgeous emerald green dress to wear with Elias.

Now that Friday was here, I was elated. The class was made simple because not many kids showed up. I was done with the day without breaking a sweat.

Within hours, I was home and getting ready. Instead of rushing, this time, I took careful care to make sure I looked perfect. I didn't want to show up to his party and look cheap or like I didn't put enough consideration into how I looked. Seeing a glimpse of his life made me feel incorporated into it. I loved it. The green dress didn't make me appear too pale and hugged the right parts of me. Silver stilettos with straps above my ankle were the simple statement I sought. I kept my hair pulled back in an elegant, slicked-back ponytail. Waiting for Elias to get here was torture. I was ready to be out there with him. I busied myself in the house and triple-checked my makeup in the foyer mirror. Not a minute later, three raps hit my door. I smiled.

When I opened the door, Elias stood there holding a bouquet. The purples, oranges, and whites all coordinated perfectly

together. I took them, leaning my face in to gather the smell. I liked his ingenuity in bringing them in a simple glass vase filled with water so that I could sit them down and walk out into the night air.

The weather wasn't super cold yet, but it was getting there. I was thankful that we weren't walking too far, or I risked being a popsicle by the time we arrived. My leg was shaking in his car from the nerves of it all.

“You'll do fine. Don't worry.”

His smile was reassuring. It wasn't that I didn't think I looked the part; it was the fear that I wouldn't fit into his world and others would see. When we arrived and parked, it was as if he could sense my concern and wrapped his arm around mine. The look he shot me over his shoulder was handsome and warming; it felt like a safety net.

In the haste of preparing for a date like this on such short notice, I failed to realize we wouldn't have this party at his office. Instead, we pulled up to a luxurious hotel and were directed to a ballroom. The room was filled to the brim with people milling about and chattering. Tables with white table clothes and crystal glasses were placed uniformly apart. There were people holding silver trays making rounds. Seeing some of these women made me glad that I bought a new dress. They looked impeccable.

As we entered, several people approached us and started conversations. I listened intently as they discussed everyday life in this world. Most of them had had their sense of humor

dulled by the nature of things they saw, and it showed. The talk ranged from golf to the next court trial. I let the talk carry me wherever I needed to go mentally. During their conversation, I looked around and studied everything nearby.

In the corner, I saw a gorgeous woman with brunette hair. The black dress she wore looked made for her. Then I saw Nixon walk up from somewhere and place his hand on the small of her back. I felt bile in the back of my throat.

“She’s going to chew him up and spit him out, don’t worry.”

Elias whispered into my ear and gave my cheek a quick peck. I stayed by his side as if my life depended on it. I could handle kids, but adults caused massive social anxiety.

“I’m going to get another drink. Want one?”

“Yes, thank you, babe.”

I paused to make sure I had heard the pet name correctly. It wasn’t something he had done yet. It didn’t even look like he recognized he did it. Leaving it alone, I sauntered to the bar and waited as the line dwindled.

“Look what the cat dragged in.”

Nixon’s voice was nails on a chalkboard behind me. I kept facing forward, waiting my turn, trying to block him out. This situation made me wish that Miles and Evie had been able to make the party tonight. Still, Evie had a previous engagement, and Miles just stayed home. There was safety in numbers, and I was utterly alone right now.

“Did the cat take your tongue too?”

I kept looking straight ahead, hoping the line would move quicker.

“It’s rude to ignore people, Freya.”

I was starting to worry that I was going to have to abandon my trip for drinks when I felt another presence arrive.

“Didn’t I tell you to leave her the hell alone?”

Suddenly, alarmed at the potential issue that this could become, I spun around so fast that I almost tumbled. Elias stood behind Nixon, his face red. The veins in his forehead were pulsing, and he was seeing red. The sleeves of the button-down had been rolled up even. I was afraid to ask if he got too hot or if it was because he wanted to beat the hell out of my ex. Nixon stood facing me still, his face suddenly as pale as a corpse. The confidence there had all been washed away and replaced by fear. I don’t even think I saw him breathe.

“What was it that you were saying, Nixon? Something about a cat getting your tongue?”

I couldn’t help myself. I had to turn his words back onto him now that I was protected to do so. Elias was having a hard time containing his excitement behind Nixon. Meanwhile, Nixon was looking for the nearest escape route.

“I think it’s best to leave her presence, or I will make you. I don’t give three chances, Nixon. Don’t test me.”

Elias walked to my side and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, kissing the top of my head. A look of disgust

appeared on Nixon's face, and he stomped off, shoving his way through the crowd. Elias and I exchanged glances and burst out into hyena laughter in unison. People looked at us like we were a circus sideshow, and we didn't care.

Elias

I had clocked his presence as soon as we arrived. I knew that he would be here because, knowing that prick, he never missed parties. He needed the attention of everyone in the room, so this was perfect. I didn't expect he would be on a date with Lauren, a bulldog of a prosecutor. I wanted him to secretly step on her toes so that I could watch her annihilate him.

I tried to let Freya have as much freedom tonight as I could manage, but it was challenging since I could sense Nixon's presence. I didn't want her out of my sight. I was engrossed in a heated debate when she mentioned getting us drinks, so I wasn't paying attention as she walked away. It wasn't until I looked up from my conversation and discovered he had moved from his previous location. I placed a bet with myself that if I could find Freya's green dress, I would see him. Just like I expected, he was right there.

"I'm so sorry if you'll excuse me. I should help her with our drinks. It was nice talking."

I shook the man's hand and made a beeline for the bar area, twisting and contorting to squeeze through the other partygoers. I was preparing myself for him to try to make a scene, but to my relief, he did none of that. He kept his mouth shut. I was sure he'd break his teeth in half if he clenched his jaw much more. When he stormed off, I went and got us those

drinks that we had initially gone to the bar for in the first place. Freya, on the other hand, seemed almost as if she was gathering enjoyment in what played out; her dimples were showing. Drinks in hand, I made my way back to her.

Now that I had seen what played out, I knew we were being watched. It wasn't really an issue; it was just in the back of my head. I wanted to spend time with her and keep her to myself, but since she came with me and everyone knew I didn't date, they were curious about her. I couldn't blame them. Even I was interested to know her. Now that I know her, I don't feel like sharing. Almost out of instinct, I kept my hand on some part of her body every minute we were there.

When I saw that Nixon was still eyeballing her in front of his date, I made a show of pulling her around a corner and stealing more kisses. It threw her off, but she didn't seem to mind. In fact, she was the one who held the kiss going longer. From the corner of my eye, I saw Nixon walk by us with anger radiating from him. Freya gently squeezed my arm to let me know she saw too. At the same time, we pulled apart and watched to see what he was going to do. Freya even pointed out that his date was now talking to another public defender inside the ballroom.

“He got snubbed twice within four hours. I'd be pretty pissed about it too.”

“Poor little Nixon. I'll grab my violin and pretend to care.”

It shouldn't have been so funny to me since that was harsh, but coming from someone as dainty as her seemed so out of

place. I won't say that I didn't think the same thing, so I said nothing for fear of being hypocritical. I introduced her to multiple people introducing her, attempting to stave off other people approaching us later.

People who spoke to her warmed up instantly in her presence. I watched the shift in her happen from quiet and introverted to glowing in the company of people she barely knew. This social anxiety she spoke of was nowhere to be found. She flitted around most of the night, conversing politely with people in passing and even contemplating women's attire. It seemed so natural to her now that I was in awe watching it play out.

Finally, the party began to wind down to a halt. While telling others goodbye, I watched Nixon come back around the corner and stand closer to the bar. From across the room, he stared at both of us. He didn't try to hide that he watched my hand on Freya. Feeling spite, I whispered in her ear that we should go and slid my hand to her lower back, effectively ushering her towards the front door. Before I led her out of the doors, I looked back over one shoulder and gave Nixon a wink. I didn't watch long enough to see a reaction, but the act alone gave me a thrill.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Freya

When we got into the waiting car, I peeked at the clock on the dash. I felt like I had been in these heels for days, but we had only been inside with the party for almost five hours. Those hours flew by with how many conversations flowed freely between us. It was hard to be bored when you were always meeting someone new. I couldn't help myself, but I let my hand wander to his thigh during the drive. I used my fingertips to draw small circles on his pants leg. He kept his eyes locked on the road if the motion did anything to him. The only thing showing he felt was his knuckles were turning white on the wheel.

One thing I loved about spending time with this man was that it was always good fun. I would tease, and he would tease back. It felt like this weird competition to see who could drive the other one up the wall first, and I loved it.

Back at his house, we both strolled through the doors a little after midnight. We both had drunk quite a bit, so everything was causing us to giggle like schoolgirls. I thought he would start crying from the laughter when I tripped over my heel. He stopped in his kitchen before we went upstairs, where he fetched water and aspirin.

“For tomorrow.”

I popped two into my mouth and swallowed them down. Even if he was a dick sometimes, you couldn't say he didn't

care about people. Unlike the other times in this place, the house wasn't immaculate. Lincoln's backpack was tossed haphazardly around the living room. A few dishes were in the sink still. The laundry sat in a basket on the couch. Seeing that he was a real human with typical mundane tasks was reassuring.

“You looked fantastic tonight. Everyone took notice.”

I felt his arms around my back as he whispered into my neck, letting his lips brush across my jugular vein. I felt it throb in response. His hands unfolded against my hips.

“Good thing I wasn't paying attention to anybody else's reactions.”

I spun around to face him, standing on my tiptoes the best I could manage in these heels. I started kissing him gently, fingers clasped around his neck. Having him this close never failed to make my hormones go haywire. It was enough to make rational thought difficult. I toyed with him more, backing my body into the kitchen island. I shrieked when he picked me up and sat me on top of it, simultaneously knocking things out of the way. It was quite a feat, straight out of a movie.

“Stop teasing me, or we won't make it upstairs.”

I shivered at the excitement his words brought forth.

“Well, if that's the case, we better get up there then.”

I put the tip of my nose against his and grinned. Not bothering to reply, he hoisted me over his shoulder, smacking

me on the ass as he walked towards the stairs.

“What the? Elias put me down. Elias! I’m too heavy for this!”

I slapped him on the shoulder blade and wiggled my legs in a sad attempt to get loose.

“Don’t ever say that again; you are not too heavy. I happen to like your size a lot. If you keep wiggling, though, I might drop you. Keep that in mind.”

I looked towards the ground below my head and stayed still the rest of the way. I didn’t let my whole body go limp, however, or my head would bounce off his back as he took the stairs. His arm remained tight against the back of my legs, keeping me up across his shoulder. Occasionally, I would feel his other hand come around and rub against me underneath my dress. Trying not to move, I put my mouth against his back to avoid making any noise.

Elias

Carrying her up the stairs was a decision on the spur of the moment. I would have been perfectly fine having my way with her on the counter, but the number of windows in my house made me feel like I was giving a free peepshow. I didn't want people looking at her clothes, let alone completely bare. Letting my hand drift under her dress was strictly so I could watch her squirm.

Now that we broke the ice on sex, I knew she wasn't entirely innocent, yet she wasn't a freak in the sheets either. I had been with some wild women, and while it was fun, it was only physical. I wanted to see how far I could push her if it weren't only sexual. I felt connected and wanted her to step out of her shell. I wanted to see parts of her that nobody knew existed, not even herself.

Getting her into the bedroom, I set her down on her feet. She cleared her throat, trying to avoid making eye contact. She said she felt heavy, which was a good one. She was far from heavy. I could tell her weight was a sore spot, and I figured it was best to leave her alone. I stood before her, taking her appearance in before completely undressing her. I grabbed her hand and pulled her closer, shifting her back to me again. The dress had a zipper that I unzipped while I held her hair up. Her pulse point was visible on her throat; it told me she was just as excited or nervous as I was. Still behind her, I pulled her arm

gently to have her step out of the circle of the fallen fabric. She complied, pushing it away with her foot.

I let go of her hair and let it fall, the scent of her floral shampoo still evident. She was still standing in front, arms at her side, when I placed my hands on her breasts, encapsulating her between my arms. Slowly, I began to knead and massage. Her head began to loll from one spot to the next, eventually landing where the crown of her head was perpendicular to my body. Her eyes were closed, and her bottom lip was trapped between her teeth. This angle of her was intoxicating. I wanted to keep her bra and panties intact in case she tried to get carried away. I wasn't ready to give in to her just yet. My fingers found their way to her nipples, applying just enough pressure to make her noises audible. Her back was lightly arched, trying to find a way of relief, but none was present. I was stronger, so her pulling my hands away wasn't viable. After a few seconds of her trying to escape my grasp, I walked around her and sat on the bed with my back to the headboard.

“Come here.”

Her eyes showed apprehension at the request, but she obliged. She tried to strip before climbing on the bed with me, and I stopped her. She looked at me curiously and crawled up towards me. I diverted her from straddling me and instead situated her to where she was between my legs, back to me as if I was the back of a chair. I let her lean back into me, relaxing fully. In this position, I could freely move and touch what I wanted, making it impossible for her to touch me.

That was the plan, after all. My hands and fingers traced a straight line from her neck down to her thighs and back, crossing my fingers over her breasts. Her heart was pounding so much that I could feel it against me. Her breathing was shallow. Satisfied with how she was seated, I put my mouth against her ear and began to talk in a low, raspy voice.

“Touch yourself.”

Her body went rigid as if rigor mortis hit within a matter of milliseconds.

“Elias, I don’t know about all of that. I haven’t shown anyone that. I might look weird. I don’t know.”

Her innocence made me crave her more right then. Not in an “I want to fuck you senseless” way, but in an “I want to be the first person to see you in this setting” way. Seeing parts of her that nobody had or likely ever would was sexier than the actual sex.

“You overthink too much, you know that?”

“I’m a teacher, for God’s sake.”

“Let me see your hand.”

I was already reaching for it when I said it. I held it in mine for a moment and kissed her neck. I wanted her to think about something else until she was comfortable.

“Tell me to stop if you don’t want to do this.”

I was trying to be sensual, not force her.

“Do you understand?”

Gulping the fear down, she nodded. With her hand on top of mine, I slid them both under the waistband of the black lace boy shorts. I fiddled around with our hands until her fingers were on mine, and she could hold my hand if needed.

“Show me how you do it.”

I nuzzled into the crook of her neck, biting down lightly. It caused her to moan as she pressed further back into me. Her hand guided mine in small circles around her clit, and she began to flinch away involuntarily. I kept going, curious to see how this was going to go.

Freya

This was an entirely new ballgame right now. Hell, it was a whole new sport. Typically, this was private for me. Growing up in a household with religious zealots, we were taught masturbation sent you to hell. After a minute or so, I relaxed to the idea. Seeing that he wouldn't make fun of me or judge me for this made it easier to go along with.

“Okay. I'll try it.”

Once I said this, he quietly slipped his hand away from mine. It was strange to feel my hand touching myself while his hands cupped my breasts. I let my hand go steadily, slowly pulling that rubbed band coil tighter in my stomach. When I increased my speed, he kneaded harder. I struggled to concentrate on what I was doing, distracted by the sensations around me. Looking at me, trying to focus enough to get myself off, he stepped in to offer assistance. Not by doing it himself, but he took his leg, slid his foot under my ankle, and pulled one leg further out to one side. Moving my leg proved to be efficient in what I was doing. With my hand going even quicker, I felt myself arching into my hand and fighting for air. Ever present, Elias witnessed that I was close and put one hand on the inside of my thigh, pulling my knee up and holding it. The other hand ran up my spine and gripped my hair, pulling my head back so he could easily access my neck.

“Cum for me.”

Shocked at how direct the command was, I couldn't stop myself. His words caused an electrical shock to roll through my entire body. The one hand that I had free was digging my nails into his thigh. When I came back to my body, I was sweating and still pulled against him. I wasn't sure what his next plan was since I had just finished and had done nothing to him yet. Then, Elias crawled in front of me, gently nudging me onto my back. I let him lead the way once more. When I was lying down, he sat up briefly to remove his shirt. Smiling, he propped up on his arms above me and smiled down. I returned the gesture, pulling him closer against me by his exposed belt loop.

Elias

Seeing her make herself cum was enough to unravel even the most trained of bachelors. I didn't care about foreplay anymore. I wanted to indulge myself. Her smile below me was relaxed. I felt a great deal of appreciation seeing that she trusted me with these vulnerable aspects of her. I kissed her once and trailed them over the side of her cheek, down to her collarbone and the inside of her thigh. I nibbled lightly before placing a kiss where her panties were becoming wetter by the second.

“What do you want?”

The thought of her speaking what she wanted was playing repetitively. She hesitated, and I gripped her thigh, pushing it further away. When I saw her looking down, I kept watching her as I ran my tongue down her slit.

“Fuck.”

“What was that?”

I took her clit in between my lips and worked a slight suction against her. Her head flew back as she bucked her hips towards my face.

“I want you to fuck me.”

The sensations and pleasure made her voice sound like a whimper as she buckled her hips towards me, looking to erase the tension. Now that I had heard her say, I had to stop teasing.

Without getting off the bed, I unzipped my pants and slipped my dick from in between the zipper and boxers.

She was now watching, wide-eyed. I positioned myself right at her entrance and pushed myself inside of her. Both of us let out a groan from the sensation. I had to pause, or else I wasn't lasting long. I took her leg and held it around my hip while I pulled myself completely out and slid right back in, making it to where she was touching my pubic bone when I was all the way inside of her. The pleasure that the movement caused us to moan louder. Her head looked down, watching as if she was willing me to speed up, to get us out of our misery. Without hesitation, I pulled back out, and instead of speeding up, I compromised and went harder. Her nails dug into the skin of my back.

Knowing I was about to finish whether I wanted to, I put my hand on her throat.

“Do you trust me?”

She said yes, and I put pressure on the sides of her throat. The idea was to give the sensation of choking but not actually choking. With my hand now in position, I thrust into her harder and faster. Her moans were muffled, coming out as raspy whimpers. I kept going until I felt her pulsing around me. When I knew that she was about to cum, I released my grip and slammed into her one more time, burying myself completely inside of her while I came. As I expected, she came with me. Removing my hand made it possible that her moans were no longer moans; she screamed out as she pulled

closer, trying to absorb that sensation. Both of us were now spent; I lowered myself and pulled her beside me, snuggling her against me. Within twenty minutes, I heard her breathing become shallow as she fell asleep.



Freya

I only woke up when I rolled over, and my hand touched an empty bed space. I was suddenly alone in Elias' bed. Steadily, I sat up in the bed and let my eyes adjust to the light. The bathroom was still dark, so he was unlikely to be there. Suddenly worried, I got out of bed and slipped my panties and one of his shirts on. I cracked the door and stepped lightly into the hallway. As I walked down the steps trying to dodge the places I knew would creak, I heard a muffled voice from the kitchen area. I kept going until I was right behind the wall and peeped around the corner, seeing him sitting on a barstool.

“It's nothing, I told you. We're just friends.”

I jerked back behind the wall to avoid him potentially seeing me. I felt hot, and fresh tears begin to well up in my eyes despite my attempts to stave them off. Tears freely flowing now, I raced upstairs, not caring if Elias heard me anymore. Shuttiwass futile, and it felt like a hot poker had been stabbed through my chest. ng the door behind me, I ransacked his room and found pajama bottoms. They were two miles too long, but I rolled them up at the waistband and grabbed my dress, draping them over my arm. I don't know what was more painful, what he said or the fact that he had to have heard me down there, and yet he didn't come up here to check on me. Before walking down those steps for what felt like the last time, I wiped my eyes and took a deep breath. I opened the

door and started to speed walk to the steps, almost running into Elias coming from the opposite direction.

“I need you to take me home.”

“Freya, it’s almost one in the morning. I can take you home early if you want—”

“I need you to take me home now.”

Confused and reluctant to say much else, he resigned himself to do as I wished. He fetched his keys from the foyer trinket dish. Once I saw that he unlocked the car, I walked out and sat in his passenger seat.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yep. Just want to go home.”

I kept my voice steely. He looked at me from the driver’s seat, and I turned my head so I didn’t have to see his eyes. I didn’t want to see his face and have to remember everything we just did. I would rather get home and cry it out there.

As we pulled into my drive, I unbuckled. The car couldn’t stop soon enough before I got out.

“Call me later?”

His question caused me to reel back. I couldn’t hold myself back anymore. It was like he lit a fuse underneath me.

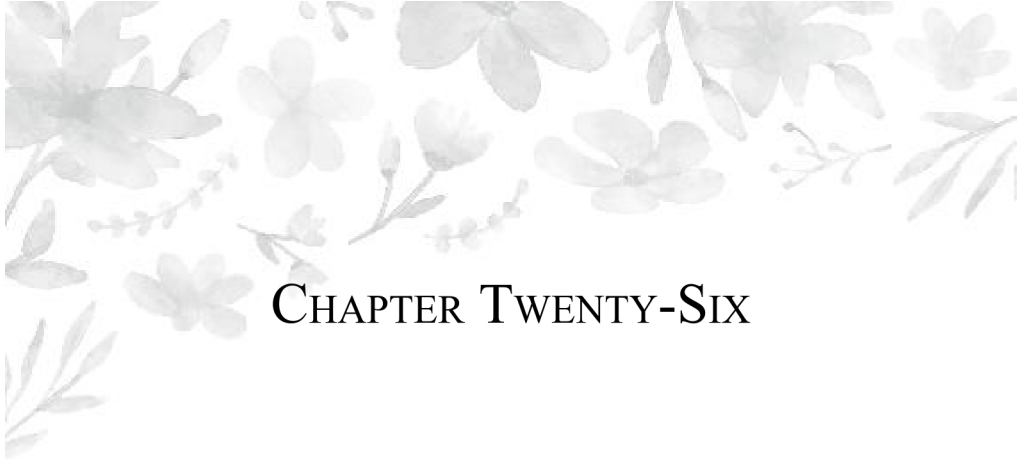
“What if I don’t? Would it matter? We’re just friends, right?”

I slammed the car door while he was formulating a response and rushed to get inside, locking my door behind me. I put my

back to the front door and slid down, crying. The door started to vibrate on my back from his pounding on it.

“Frey! Open up, please; I can explain.”

I didn't open up. I picked myself up off my floor and went to bed, putting in headphones to drown out the noise.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Elias

I stood outside her house and beat her door for at least fifteen minutes. I tried to figure out when she heard me on the phone. I hit the door one last time, harder than before, remembering the noises I heard. I figured it was something stupid like my house settling. If I would have known it was her, I would have chased after her right then.

The phone call she heard was taken out of context, but I didn't expect her to believe me. My aunt had called to check on how the party went, and I told her we were just friends to avoid playing twenty questions. I loved my aunt dearly, but sometimes she can come off a tad too strong. I wasn't expecting her to overhear me.

When I got home, I tried to call her repeatedly, hoping she would answer. I even tried to block my number to see if it worked. It was dumb, but it was all I could think of. As I suspected, it didn't work. I spent hours pacing, trying to figure out ways to get my point across to her and explain the situation, but I kept drawing blanks.

After I ran out of options to try, I had to suck up my pride and do what I was trying to avoid. I had to reach out to Evie and Miles. It wasn't even morning yet, so I knew it would be hours until they replied, but I needed to try. Maybe then I could sleep and wake up to some news. Miles was easy

enough to get ahold of. I went to his contact list, typed a text, and sent it without thinking.

Hey, man, I need to know if you talked to your sister. I need to see if she's okay. I made her mad, and it was a huge misunderstanding. Please call me in the morning.

After I sent the text, I pulled up Facebook and searched for Evie on the search bar. Her profile picture was the third one down. I clicked on it and hoped she didn't have to be friends with you to have the option to send her a message. I frantically looked, and when I saw the message, I clicked on it. I was indecisive about what to say, but I had to try. Being her best friend, I was prepared for her to tear my ass to shreds.

Evie, I know you don't know me well yet, but is Freya okay? I messed up and said some stupid shit, and it was taken out of context. Please let me know.

I hit send before I could change my mind. I navigated back to my bed and laid back on the pillow. I knew I wasn't going to sleep, but I couldn't pace all night. It must have been after four A.M. when I finally dozed off. I woke up to my phone ringing early the next morning. Remembering what happened, I rushed to see what was happening. I hoped it was her, but I knew it probably wasn't. Miles finally got the message, and I answered it on the fourth ring. As suspected, he laid into me as soon as he saw the call connect.

“What the hell did you do, man? I had to talk my sister down last night while she was in tears. Something about how she felt stupid for falling for it, falling for you. She was devastated.

She heard what you said, E. She heard you telling someone you were just friends while she was in your bed! Regardless of being my best friend, she's still my sister."

He yelled into the phone, and I deserved every bit. I let him finish his rant before I tried to say anything.

"Miles, listen. I fucked up, dude. I know that. My aunt called me to see how the party went, and I didn't want her to butt in because she can be invasive. I would never intentionally use your sister. I care about your sister, and I need to explain what happened. I don't want to lose her, and I will be honest. I care about your sister more than I've cared about a woman in a long time..."

I heard him sigh, and I imagined the look of exasperation that he was probably wearing.

"Listen. You messed up big time. She called me venting about what happened, and I told her either you would come around or someone else would. I can't tell you when she will come around. It's Freya; when she's hurt, she needs space. Just give her time, and she will come around when she's ready. Now, I'm getting brunch with Evie, and if she hears me talking to you, she will murder me."

He hung up before I could say bye. Evie more than likely walked in, and he had to make an exit quickly. Speaking of Evie, I pulled up Messenger and saw that she read my message but offered no reply. I should have seen that coming because that was her best friend.

Freya

When Elias dropped me off at home, I went inside and called my brother. Despite being rather annoying sometimes, he was the only man who hadn't let me down. He listened while I cried and vented to him, not interrupting, just listening. When he thought I was done, he reminded me it would be alright. I mean, he was right. It would be. I didn't know if my being okay entailed ever seeing Elias again. When we got off the phone, I powered it down entirely. I didn't want to talk to anyone or have to see my phone light up. I don't remember how I fell asleep, just that I did. I woke up with my sadness replaced by rage. If I compared the two, this feeling was more welcome.

“Fuck this.”

More than likely, Elias had figured it out and was giving me space or just didn't care. I didn't know which hurt more. When I picked up the phone, I recognized Nixon's number. I wanted to ignore it, but the other half wanted to get even, and against better judgment, I answered. Nixon seemed just as shocked at the gesture. Granted, I was also shocked.

“Freya! Hey, I caught you. Is there any way we could maybe talk?”

“What do you want?”

“I'm just outside. Can we talk?”

I remembered why I never answered his calls now. Doing so opened a whole other can of worms. I was upset at Elias but didn't want to give him an aneurysm.

“It's to do with Elias...”

My ears perked up at his name. I was being fueled by curiosity. I wanted to know if he was alright, but I was mad at myself for even caring.

“What about him?”

I didn't really want to discuss the topic with him right this second, but I wanted to hear what he had to say. Apparently, there was a lot I didn't know about Elias. I reluctantly opened my door but only partially stepped out so my body ensured the door would remain open.

“Just so we're clear if you do this ever again, I'm definitely calling the cops.”

“Freya, there's something you should know. About what he's been saying.”

“Spit it out.”

“Well, he's been telling anyone who has asked about you that you're just someone he sleeps with sometimes. He's been talking to another coworker really close, and it just seems odd. We aren't together, but I don't want to see you screwed over or made to look stupid...”

I felt a wave of nausea hit. I didn't want to believe what he told me, but after hearing his words when he thought I wasn't around, I wasn't so sure anymore.

“First of all, it’s none of your business. So get the fuck out of here. I think it’s over anyway.”

I didn’t have to say that in front of Nixon, but the words just came out. It hurt to say that out loud.

“I’m sorry, Freya...”

“Again, none of your fucking business. Leave.”

Unprovoked, without any hint prior, he leans in and kisses me. Taking a couple of seconds, I lifted my hands to push him back, but he took my hands in his and held them. I felt his mouth on mine grow progressively more aggressive. His grip tightened again, causing my fingers to hurt.

I pulled harder, fighting the fear rapidly ascending my body.

“Stop!”

I yelled once I managed to pull my face away.

“Leave now, or I’ll call the cops, you son of a bitch!”

He was now red in the face, spit flying. His breath was hot on my face. I braced myself to avoid showing him any sign of fear. He left without saying another word. I slammed the door, locking it behind me. I stayed in that spot until I heard the gravel fly as he peeled out. My heart was pounding, and the adrenaline caused me to shake. Suddenly, I felt extremely anxious to be alone.

To avoid hyperventilating, I called Miles.

He answered, and when I went to speak, my voice cracked.

“Frey, is everything okay?”

“NO. No, it’s not.”

“Slow down and tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nixon told me everything Elias has said about me.”

“Nixon was there?”

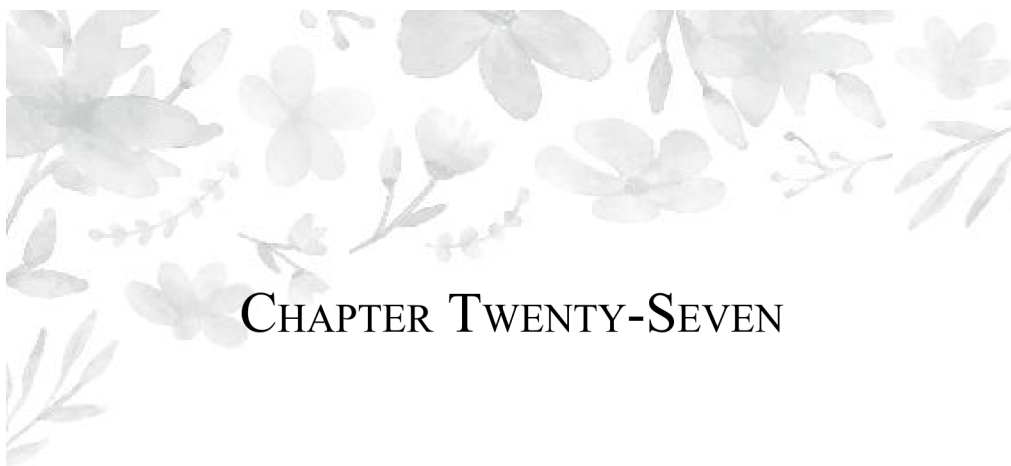
“He called, and I don’t know why I decided to answer. You never told me what Elias was saying. Why?”

“He called you?”

How typical of him to check out when I mention Nixon.

“It’s nothing. It’s handled.”

I hung up and threw my phone onto the couch. I lost the urge to talk to anyone; I just wanted to pretend it wasn’t happening around me.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Elias

Leaving Freya's classroom was one of the toughest calls I've had to make besides relating to my son. In my court trials, it was different. I had to remove myself from the problem and hold my bias to myself, but I couldn't do that when this was my life I was talking about. Deep down, I knew she would never run into her ex's arms of her volition, but it didn't stop me from beating the hell out of my steering wheel when I returned to the driver's seat. I couldn't afford to stay in the school and let my temper flare. It wouldn't do anything except get me escorted off the premises. Also, I couldn't put my son's education at risk like that.

Lincoln was now safely at home, but I still felt restless. I berated myself for going off on Freya without giving her a chance to explain her side. It was when I was kicking my own ass that my doorbell rang. I wasn't expecting anyone, so the house wasn't nearly clean enough. I set off to the door before Linc could get there, looking out the side window. I felt a surge of hope when I saw her standing on my doorstep.

"Lincoln, go upstairs for a bit. I need to talk to Miss Freya."

There were no questions or talking back for once in his entire life. He simply moved his stuff back upstairs to his room. Hearing his door close, I opened the door and allowed her to walk in before me. Apologies began to fall from my lips before I could lock the door back.

“I shouldn’t have come to your job, that was not very professional, and I’m sorry. When I got to work today, Miles laid into me about something I allegedly said to Nixon. In the same breath, he told me about Nixon kissing you. Regardless, I should have respected that you didn’t want anything to do with me.”

Her expression remained neutral. I didn’t know if she was mad at me or just let down. Secretly, I hoped for anger. I could sort through that.

“I heard what you said on the phone, Elias. Why do you care what I do? You said yourself, we’re just friends.”

Hearing her words hurt me all over again. I know it was stupid to say; I just didn’t want to deal with my aunt’s badgering right then. I wanted to just enjoy the time.

“You don’t have to believe me, Freya. I understand if you don’t. I can try to explain what you heard, though. What you heard was a call from my aunt. I love her dearly, but sometimes, she can be a lot. She knew that you existed and we were going on dates, but I wasn’t ready to tell her that we were an item because I just wanted us to enjoy each other before all of that. I didn’t think we were just friends. I could likely never be just friends with you. It was stupid, and I will have to live with it if you don’t believe me. I didn’t mean any of it how it sounded. Just tell me what you need from me to prove that to you, and I will do it. Whatever it is.”

“I can’t just fuck you, Elias. It’s deeper than any of that. I can’t just come to your bed anymore when my feelings are

involved. Before you said all that, I thought I could actually love you. I didn't know that was how I felt until I saw what it felt like to lose you. I need you to do the long term, and if you can't, then it's time for us to stop whatever the hell this is before we hurt each other more. I can't do this anymore. I can't just be a trophy for you."

"You will never be a trophy for me, Freya. Ever. I wouldn't have continued this as long as I have if I didn't care about you deeply. I can do whatever needs to be done to prove that to you. I want you, and I want Lincoln to be around us together. I want all of us together. Maybe not right now, but someday. I just want you to understand that it might not always be easy. My job requires a lot, and I can be a lot."

She nodded, and after I stopped babbling, she looked at her feet.

"Regarding the Nixon thing, it's not what you think. He said he needed to talk to me about you. He told me that you had been telling him everything we do in the bedroom and that it was just fun for you, that was all. When he noticed I was upset, he kissed me. When I tried to stop him, it got more aggressive until I managed to kick him out, or I would call the police."

"Fuck. I'll—"

"You will do nothing except stay out of his way. I don't want revenge."

"Let me make it up to you—all of it. I want to take you somewhere. A surprise, if you will. I'll handle everything."

Just... Please, let me?"

Freya

His offer stunned me. I didn't doubt his words when he said them, but the surprise offer was a bit extra. I looked at his expression, and who was I kidding? I couldn't tell him no, even if I tried.

“I guess that's—”

I was shut up by him grabbing me by the waist and kissing me. Hard. I felt the weight of him back me into the wall that was just out of view of the stairs. I guess the dad thing didn't ever go away, even if the sexual tension was out of this world. I let him kiss me. I had no urge to fight him on this one. I was grateful if it mattered. Losing him for even a few days was like losing the one bright light I had right now. Despite what I thought would happen, the kiss wasn't stopping. It might have gotten less aggressive, but it wasn't losing any spark of the desire behind it.

“Elias, your son is upstairs.”

I was mumbling against his mouth and into it. The way I imagined it looked made me laugh. He stopped briefly enough to open a closet door against the side of the stairs and backed me into the hidden space. I looked around the area and back to him. His eyes had a devilish twinkle that was still there.

“Have you lost your mind? Your son is right upstairs!”

He left the lights out in the closet, so I had to guess where he was only by where his hands were moving on my body. The lack of one sense heightened the other ones. Before I could adjust to where he was for one second, I felt his touch lift away from me completely. I felt a hot whisp of air in the middle of this closet and smelled his minty toothpaste. He was in front of me, close enough to lean into my air without effort.

“Then I guess you better be quiet, huh?”

I didn't want to argue with his logic. I had a rush of excitement that started between my legs and ran through every nerve ending I had. In the darkness, I heard the faint click of a locked door. I wasn't afraid of what he had planned. I welcomed it. I wanted it. I wanted him. Anxiously, I waited. It started off slow. He was teasing me, and I loved it. I didn't feel anything except the tips of his fingers pushing my shirt up; once I felt the draft hit below where my bra sat, I felt his lips brush below my navel. I took a sharp inhale, trying to slow my breathing back to a normal pace, which was a lot harder than I planned. I imagined how he must look to do this right now, on his knees before me. No longer just his fingertips; his hands met at the button of my pants and slowly unclasped them. I was torn between stopping him and wanting him to continue shamelessly. Pants undone, he trailed his lips to my hip bone and bit down lightly, causing my hips to jerk. Hands still on my pants, he yanked them down to where they were around my ankles, taking my panties with them.

“Elias, what are you doing?”

Before questioning anymore, I felt his mouth lapping against the wetness between my legs. He emitted a low growl in response. My body jerked forward as I gasped, the sensation shocking the system. Not deterred by the motion, he continued slowly and made every flick of his tongue torture.

Elias

While this was certainly unprecedented, I wasn't going to complain. I had been craving her since I saw her last. This was long-awaited, and I wouldn't let this opportunity pass me by. On my knees, I started lapping at her core. She was soaking before I even took her pants down. Keeping my pace slow, I alternated between the tip of my tongue and the flat surface of my tongue. I put one of her legs over my shoulder and then ran a hand up the inside of her thigh, pushing my index and middle finger inside her. She moaned, and I paused both motions.

“Shh, baby. Quiet, remember?”

I placed my mouth against her clit and lightly suckled while making a forward-flicked motion with my fingers.

“Oh fuck.”

Her words came out as a pained whimper, her hips fighting to buck toward me. I kept moving my fingers in a motion that she visibly enjoyed. Her noises intensified, and I could hear her fighting to catch her breath. When I felt her clench around my fingers and her legs tremble, I stopped both again.

“Elias. No, please.”

“Oh, don't worry. I'm not done.”

Eager to hurry the process, she reached into my pants and tried to undo them in a frenzy. I couldn't help but smile into

the darkness. I let her frantically try until I grabbed her arms and spun her, putting her chest against the wall, facing away from me. Using one foot, I spread her legs shoulder length apart. I pulled my dick out of my pants and pressed against her opening, running it against her slit. As I suspected, she pushed herself back against me.

“Who’s the only person that can do this, Freya?”

Dirty talking wasn’t my kink, but I couldn’t help myself.

“You. Elias, you. Please.”

Happy with the response, I grasped one hand on her hip and snaked the other one around to the front of her. As I slammed into her, I clasped my hand over her mouth to stifle her. I felt her clench around me as she climaxed. I continued to pump myself into her through her orgasm until I couldn’t restrain myself anymore. In the last thrust, I released inside of her. The feeling of it caused another orgasm to ripple through her. We stayed still until we could compose ourselves enough to leave the closet. I let her fix her pants and tucked myself back into my boxers. Before walking out, I kissed her on her forehead.

Freya

As I walked out of the storage closet, I looked both ways to avoid accidentally bumping into Lincoln. That would cause questions I didn't want to answer right now, nor would I even know how to begin. That would be a conversation for his father. Walking into the hallway again, I could feel the redness still sitting on my chest, causing a sunburned, flushing look. Elias' face was still shaded red as well. I couldn't help but stare at his posture right now. He walked as if he was the king of his own castle. His face read that he knew what he had just done and was soaking it all up. From above, footsteps came bounding down the steps, and I gave a silent prayer that we finished when we did.

“Miss Roberts!”

Lincoln came drifting around the staircase.

The force of his body slamming into my waist almost knocked me onto the floor.

“Hey, Lincoln. It's good to see you too. I'm actually just headed out. I'll see you tomorrow?”

“No, she isn't Lincoln. I invited her to stay for dinner. Freya?”

I looked between the father and son duo, with their faces looking like it was impossible to turn down.

“Alright, I guess so.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Elias

I spent the weekend in my own purgatory. Most of my calls and texts went unanswered. Even Miles went rogue. It's like I was exiled. Walking into work, I looked for Miles. He wasn't in any of the usual spots, so I detoured to his office. We never had a knocking rule, so I let myself in. He was still at his desk working on papers.

"I don't feel like dealing with you right now, E. It's not a good time."

"I'm sorry. What? I'm genuinely lost. Deal with me?"

I rubbed my temples with one hand and rested the other on my hip. I didn't have to pretend I was lost when I really was. I knew I messed up with his sister, but I talked to him since then. He seemed to understand then. So, what happened?

"Yeah, deal with you. I had to talk to my sister while she was hyperventilating because Nixon told her everything you told him about her. Then, he thought it was an invitation to make a move on her. I had to talk to her until she could calm down enough to sleep. Yes, deal with you. I don't have much to say right now."

I was trying to wrap my mind around what he said. Anytime I thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. I could understand her being mad at me. What I wasn't going to be able to tolerate was hearing Nixon try to take advantage of the situation. I saw

what he did on our trip. Rage mixed with concern about if she was okay. I couldn't even speak to Miles anymore. I was too focused on what was happening with the Nixon situation. The anger was seeping out of my pores. I dodged everyone because they would fly into the floor if I slammed into them full force. I marched past the break room and looked in as I was storming by. He wasn't there. Still going, I was checking the windows of the courtrooms to no avail. Finally, the last place he could be. I walked up to his office door as he was walking out of it, and I put my hands onto his shoulders, shoving him back inside and slamming the door behind me.

“Must be done for real if she's admitted it, right?”

“I'm not concerned if she admitted anything. I'm concerned with you going over and pulling some shit.”

I still had my back to the door, blocking him inside. I locked my knees in place because if he tried to escape, he would have to go through me, and that wouldn't be easy.

“Pulling something on her? Is that what you heard? I went over, and we kissed and had a bit of a fun night. No harm in that since you two aren't together anymore. Am I right? You can't really be mad about that. She's free.”

I didn't comprehend what he was saying at the time. I felt myself frozen at that moment, not blinking, not even breathing. I looked through him for an instant and reeled back on my heels, fleeing the room before I lost my job. Still holding my suitcase, I passed the receptionist, who looked up at me briefly.

“I’m sick. If someone calls, take a message.”

I was gone before she could respond. The walk to my car was spent trying to decide if it was worth driving to the school and talking to her. I wasn’t even sure if she would see me or if she’d call the police. At the last second, I took a sharp right instead of the left to go home. I wouldn’t forgive myself if I didn’t try. I had to at least try; I needed to see with my own eyes that she was okay.

I parked in the lot after seeing the kids heading to the playground. I scanned the lot until I saw Lincoln at the front of the line. The line ensured she was probably inside the classroom during a down period. Inside the school, I stopped for a visitor pass and took the halls in stride, stopping outside her door.

Freya

I could feel a presence before I saw one. I stopped filing the papers and looked up towards the door. My heart sped up, seeing what was there. Elias was standing in the doorway—the look he had chiseled away at my spirit.

“Nixon? You went with Nixon? After all of that, you run right to Nixon to vent. So I have to hear about it at work? What’s worse is you think I would actually say any of what he’s said? I don’t have to know what he’s said to know it’s bullshit. I cared about you, Freya. I still care about you. What do you think I am?”

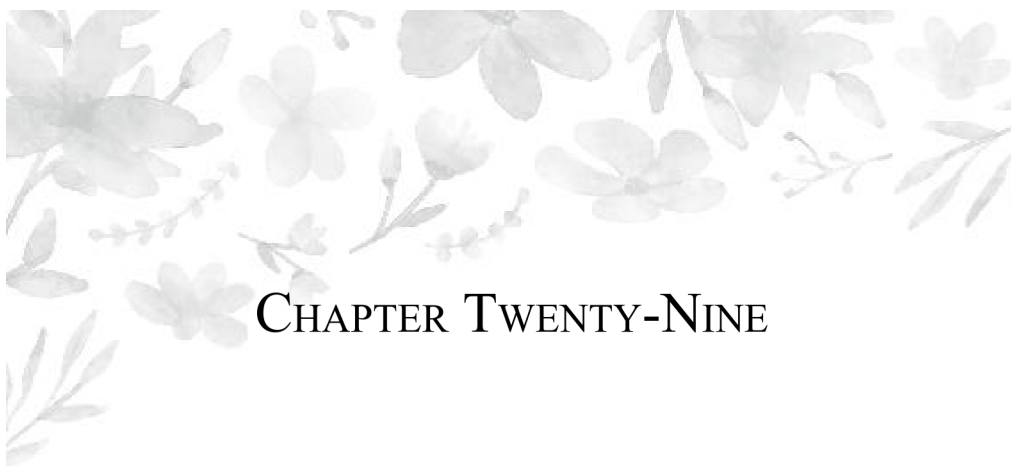
I couldn’t even get a word in edgewise. He just kept going. I would try to stop him; it just never phased him. I wanted to believe he cared. I wanted to trust that he was telling me the truth right now. His eyes were welling up by the time he finished his speech. Standing up, I opened my mouth to give a rebuttal, but he just turned and left me standing there. With the kids coming back soon, I didn’t have a chance to chase after him. Doing the next best thing, I texted the asshole himself.

Nixon, what the fuck did you tell Elias? What did you do? Why does he think I ran to you for comfort? What the hell?

Dots formed within seconds. When he replied, I had to lock my phone away to avoid losing my shit on him, and I couldn’t do that here and now.

I told him I went to your house to talk and kissed you. We had a typical night in, like adults.

I wanted to scream that he kissed me and not vice versa. I kicked him out, and it wasn't welcome. I wanted to shake him until his head slapped back and forth. I could feel my blood pressure rising while sitting at the desk. Kids were coming back in, and as if they could feel my emotions, they were all apprehensive the rest of the day. I couldn't think of anything else for the rest of my workday. I knew what I needed to do by the time it was over. Once the last kid was out of class, I grabbed my purse and locked my room. I checked the GPS to see how long it would take me to get to Elias' house with traffic and floored it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Elias

The next few weeks flew by seamlessly. Freya and I worked out a routine where she had dinner with Lincoln and me on Monday and Friday nights. On these days, Linc spent hours begging both of us to let her bring him home. I didn't mind when it came down to it. I just didn't want her to be weirded out by it.

We fell into a step that seemed nothing less than normal. The days kept counting down until it was time. The surprise I had planned had remained a surprise, and Linc didn't even know where we were going. It was time to implement my plans on the last day of school. I had been packing stealthily for the last several days to focus on Lincoln getting his things together. When he woke up on the last day of school, it wasn't until after 9:00 A.M. He came down the steps with a bewildered look and stared at the suitcases on the floor.

“Dad?”

“Alright. It's showtime. I got your essentials. Grab whatever you think you will need for two weeks. We leave the house at 2:30 this afternoon. Go!”

He wasted a few seconds trying to decipher what I was saying to him. Once it clicked, though, he was off. I watched him grab several books, his Switch, an old cellphone he used for games, and pillows. My bags had already been placed neatly in the back of the car. Inside one of those bags were

three tickets to Orlando and an itinerary for two weeks' worth of fun and Disney World. Linc had been begging to go for two years, and Freya, being a teacher, would love it.

Speaking of Freya, I needed to check my phone. I texted her last night telling her to pack clothes for two weeks suitable for warmer weather. That was all I told her. I never told her when we were leaving or where we were going. I was going to let her go into this completely clueless. My phone still didn't have a reply. It meant two things: 1. She hadn't seen it yet. Or 2. She was finally learning not to argue with me every time.

We hopped into the car at 2:30 on the dot and headed to the school. I found her car in the lot and pulled beside it, staring at the clock. Lincoln played on his Switch for the remainder of the time until the bell finally rang for summer. Not many kids were there today; Freya walked through the doors at 3:00.

I saw the confusion on her face as she approached the cars. Smiling, I made my way towards her.

Freya

When Lincoln didn't show up to school today after dinner last night, I figured he probably caught a bug, so I wasn't too concerned. Regarding the surprise, the only thing mentioned was to pack clothes for the warm weather for two weeks. I didn't expect his absence and the two to correlate, however. Seeing them both outside the school was a welcome surprise, even if I had no idea why. Both had grins that stretched for miles.

“What are you two doing?”

“We're going on vacation!” Lincoln spat it out before Elias could. He was vibrating from pure excitement.

“Elias, it's the end of school, and I have to clean the classroom out.”

“Handled. Money talks.”

“Okay, well, I still have to take my stuff home and grab my bags.”

From behind us, I heard someone lay on a horn. Instead of slowing down, it was heading in our direction. The noise caused a slight throb in my temple; I turned to see who oversaw the nuisance. The truck was growing closer, and I could see two familiar faces as it closed the distance. I stood there stunned when it parked, and both doors popped open.

“Miles. Evie. What are you two doing here?”

They all four exchanged glances, and Lincoln started cackling.

“To summarize, Evie has a key to your place. We have your bags in the truck. We are gonna plop them in E’s car. Then, I will take the truck, and Evie’s taking your car back to yours, where we will meet and leave your car parked.”

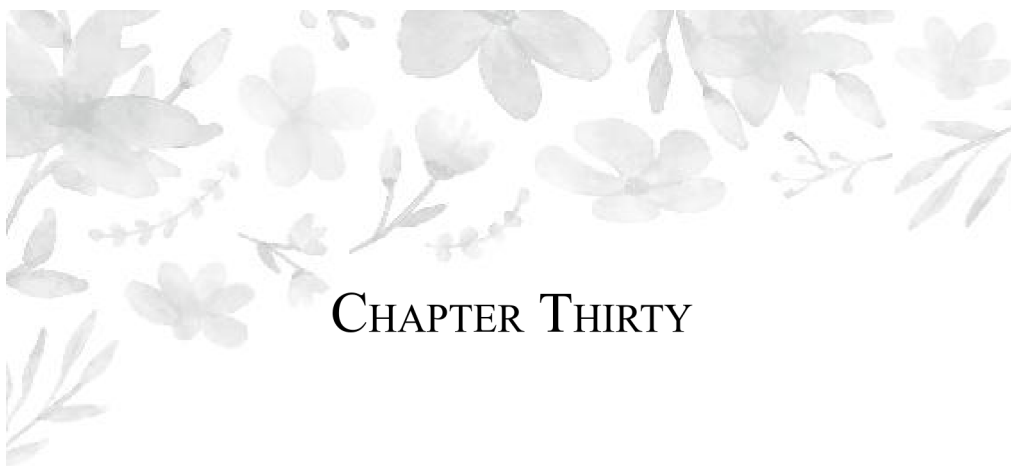
The three adults all looked so proud of themselves.

“Uh, okay. When do we leave?”

Elias leaned over and kissed my cheek lightly.

“As soon as you get your pretty ass in my car.”

Without any more chatter, Elias shuffled me forward into his car. Lincoln let himself into the backseat. I watched my best friend and brother split up, and both turned towards my house. I sat in the passenger seat, looking at the trees and road signs as they flew by my window. The cab of the car was silent except for the hum of Lincoln’s game.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Elias

Freya peppered me with questions the entire drive to the airport. If it wasn't where we were actually going, it was hints about where we were going. Getting onto the flight, they finally realized we were going to Florida. Both had a puzzled look but said nothing about it. When we sat, I noticed Freya gripped her armrest at lift off, and I took her hand in mine.

“Both of you, close your eyes.”

They looked at each other as if trying to decide if it was worth it. Linc gave in first, which led Freya to give in. I reached into a carry-on I was traveling with, pulled out three matching Disney ears, and set them in their laps.

“Open up.”

“We have matching ears!”

Lincoln knew exactly what it was. He threw his arms around my neck and squeezed to the point of losing air for a few seconds. Freya, still trying to catch up, was still quiet.

“We’re going to Disney. I booked a suite with adjoining rooms in the Animal Kingdom.”

“Animal Kingdom? As in, I’m waking up to giraffes?”

“If you’re lucky.”

Her energy quickly matched my son’s, and I was thrilled that everyone seemed pleased. The entire plane ride, we all

bantered back and forth about what we had watched in advertisements and seen online from other people's pictures posted on social media. Our plane was thousands of feet above the ground; looking down, we could see clouds drifting peacefully below us. Outlines of the states created a collage of different colors. The last leg of the journey was when Linc's adrenaline had worn down, and finally, he dozed off into a peaceful nap. Freya held onto my hand and mumbled a quiet thank you with her head back on the headrest. Soon after, she, too, was asleep with her hand in mine and head on my shoulder. Her hair tickled the side of my cheek, so I planted a soft kiss and smoothed the flyaways with a single hand.

They both came back to life when we landed. Outside of the plane, our rental was waiting for us. The sun warmed us in a matter of seconds, which caused a mood shift in everyone. We were energized and ready to go.

Freya

Inside our room, it was breathtaking. Lincoln's room had an adjoining door, which left us with an oversized bedroom and a master bath to ourselves. Our room had a one-of-a-kind view of giraffes leisurely strolling through their home. All of them seemed too majestic even to be real.

The bed held four solid oak posts with a red velvet comforter. The decorations throughout the room mimicked a jungle safari. Lincoln's room was nearly identical, except it held a single queen bed and a gaming console. I noticed the difference that our room didn't even have a TV. After picking up on the difference, Elias pulled me by my waist back into our room and kissed the side of my jaw.

"We won't need a television, ma'am."

I couldn't help but smile at him and nod.

"You're right."

Thinking he was extending an invitation, I backed him up to where his knees hit the bed, causing him to sit down. I stood in front of him, hands on his shoulders, grinning like an idiot. I wanted to repay him for his surprise in a way I saw fit. Eventually, I kneeled before him and reached for the button on his jeans.

It was a twist when he reached a hand out and pulled my face back to his.

“There’s plenty of time for that later. Right now, we have plans.”

It was dark outside since the trip was a fair distance. I was unaware of what plans we could possibly have tonight, except maybe dinner. Still in the clothes I arrived in, Elias rushed me and his son out of our door and the lobby. In the night air, we took a shuttle to the park, where we saw a looming castle. Lights illuminated everything around it. Pinks, purples, blues, and everything in between. Lincoln stood in front of us with eyes filled with wonder. Elias stood behind me, arms holding me against his body. I noticed everyone started counting down, and when it reached one, the sky lit up in sparks, and bursts happened in every corner. Fireworks. Lincoln began to jump in place, completely unaware we were still there.

As I stood watching the show above us, I saw something drop in front of my face. It wasn’t a bug or confetti. It was silver and had a funny shape. It was a key.

“Since you’re not my son’s teacher anymore, I figured giving this to you now was more appropriate.”

“Elias, I really don’t know what to say.”

“Yes, is always acceptable.”

Turning, I leaped onto him. Nodding, I planted a firm kiss on his mouth and then gave exaggerated small kisses. I finished by wrapping my legs around his waist and hugging him as tightly as possible.

“Of course.”

“Get a room!”

Lincoln had turned to look on with a grimace of disgust.

Both of us, still holding onto each other, smirked.

“We have one.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Epilogue

The rest of the dream lived up to Disney expectations. It was magical, from the animals to the two weeks of sheer relaxation. We had no plans except for the park, and once we explored all of that, we were free to do as we wished. Elias had even taken the time to put Lincoln in a day camp for some of the time. He claimed it was to keep him busy; I claimed it was to give us time to stay active. Neither was necessarily wrong.

Coming home was bittersweet. We returned sunburnt and all smiles. The vacation left us refreshed but also exhausted. Once back on our turf, we loaded back up to return to my house. Or so I thought.

“Hey, I still need to go to my house. I need to straighten up and make sure things are okay.”

“You didn’t think we took a two-week vacation just for fun, did you? Your stuff is now in our house. Movers came the day we left.”

I stared at him with my mouth partly open. The gesture itself was enough to cause me to sniffle. I ran the back of my hand across my eyes. Not saying another word, we pulled up to our house. Instead of seeing an empty home, it was teeming with cars. They had balloons on the mailbox. Confused, I got out and looked at Elias.

“Go on, see if your key works.”

I took slow, cautious steps to the door and slid the key in. With a click, it opened. Inside, the rooms were dark. Feeling along the wall for the switch, I found it and flicked it upwards.

As the lights came on, it illuminated a giant banner reading *Welcome home* and a spread of party foods. Miles and Evie stood from in the center and popped a bottle of champagne, bubbles hitting the tile.

I ran to hug them both.

Turning back to the door, Elias and Lincoln stood in the doorway and high-fived. The gesture from them both caused actual tears to fall without a care.

Lincoln, shortly after, ran and grabbed around my waist. Elias, never the one to miss a moment, walked behind him and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, and pulled me closer.

“Welcome home, babe.”



Also By

[Baby for My Silver Fox CEO]

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When his daughter steals my boyfriend, he offers me time off from work at his vacation home.

The power outage clouds any sense of judgment.

The next thing I know our lips collide and I'm grinding on top of him.

I try to remain professional back at work.

But my struggle continues with provocation from his bratty daughter and my ex.

Just before things go dire, Mr. Evans comes to the rescue.

He not only protects me from all the emotional harassment,

But also fulfills our growing lust for each other.

Just when I thought I have room to breathe I discover I'm pregnant.

I don't know if Mr. Evans can rescue me this time from the threat of exposing what we've been up to.

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Each book is a **standalone**, promising **HEA** and a **fast-burning** romance.

Explore the world of mature, magnetic billionaires who’ll set your heart on fire, one captivating tale at a time.

Book 1 Blurb

I’ve been sleeping with my best friend’s billionaire dad.

I waitress at a prestigious gentlemen’s club while pursuing my Broadway career.

When I spill a cocktail on my shirt, a member gives me access to new uniforms in the storage closet.

I notice his striking salt-and-pepper hair, broad shoulders...

And incredibly handsome face.

I glimpse his smoldering gaze as I unbutton my shirt.

He turns away like a perfect gentleman, but I pull him closer.

He brushes my cheek and says I make him want to do bad, *bad* things.

His touch sends waves of intense pleasure, making me purr for more.

But then the shocking truth is revealed.

He's my best friend's dad.

We should stop, but instead, we sneak around.

Every secret rendezvous pulls us deeper.

I'm falling for him, hard.

And now my heart is at stake...

Because if our affair ever touches the light of day, I could lose my best friend *forever*.

Coming Soon!



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BILLIONAIRE BABY” FOR FREE!

My heart races at the sight of the sexy Billionaire I never knew existed - my best friend's brother.

He's 18 years older, but I wish he notices me in the tight-fitting dress at the rehearsal dinner.

Although his cold-eyed stare keeps rejecting me, I notice his warm smile towards his sister... making me wonder if he *does* have a heart to spare.

When a freak accident traps everyone in the resort, there's no hiding from each other now.

His secret desires finally unveil in front of me...

Drenched in his own sweat, he proves himself irresistible... and I give in completely.

The invisible wall between us crumbles down to nothing as I hold onto him tight.

Is he my dreams come true or just a fling that will end when the party's over?

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