

You have a family now, because you have me.

No matter what.



Family
LIKE THIS

Friends Like This Book Seven

From the author of *Freaking Love*

BETHANY MONACO SMITH

Family

LIKE THIS



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Bethany Monaco Smith

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About Family Like This

Family Like This is book seven of a ten book series following the lives and love stories of six best friends from late high school to early adulthood in the fictional small town of Ida, New York. Each book leads directly into the next, even when love stories and character POVs change.

Family Like This is the beginning of Miles's and Amelia's love story, though it is a direct continuation of book six (which featured some Miles POV). If you haven't read the first six books, go back to the beginning and jump on the roller coaster in book one, *Friends Like This*. *Family Like This* is a swoony, emotional romance featuring surprise pregnancy, an independent and afraid to love heroine, and a loyal and deeply loving hero.

**Please note, since the characters are in their twenties now, the intimate scenes contain stronger language and description than in past books.*

Family Like This picks up directly where the end of
Heartbreak Like This left off.

Are you ready to fall in love with Miles and Amelia?

Meet the Characters

The Main Six Besties

- Rae (McKinley) Cooper
- Aaron Cooper
- Sarah (McKinley) Wilkinson
- Joel Wilkinson
- Mackenzie Montoya
- Miles Hyun-Hansen

The Unicorn Girl

- Amelia Davis

Bonus Characters

- Dani Malone
- Jesse Wilkinson
- Trevor Matteny
- Hyla Montgomery
- Amanda Hamilton
- Chelsea Winters
- Nick Ardito
- Jamie Henderson
- Addie & Jameson Hyun-Hansen

The Parents

- Kara & Charlie McKinley (Rae & Sarah)
- Bob & Cathy Cooper (Aaron)
- Jeff & Janet Wilkinson (Joel & Jesse)
- Linda Kaley & Rick Montoya (Mackenzie)
- Andy & Katie Hyun-Hansen (Miles)

The Best Grandparents Ever

- Pete & Bea Abbott (Rae & Sarah)

Trigger Warnings

This book deals with realistic life issues, including subjects that may be triggering for some readers. By their nature, trigger warnings may include plot spoilers small or large. If you are concerned about possible triggers, you can view trigger warnings for this book [here](#).

*To those who have locked their hearts away... don't be afraid
to open the door and let in the love you deserve*

Chapter One

At Least a Turkey Baster

Miles

DEEP BREATH. IN AND out.

My chest is so tight I can barely do that.

In and out.

“Miles?” Amelia’s voice cuts through my internal panic.

I look down at her. She looks exhausted. Her skin is pale and gray. Her eyes are filled with uncertainty.

She needs me.

Get it together. *She. Needs. Me.*

The tightness in my chest lessens enough to get a deep breath, then another. Reaching down, I take her hands in mine. “Sorry. Tell me what happened. How did you find out?”

How the fucking hell did this happen? I know that is not the right thing to ask right now, though. Grow up in a house with more women than men, and a mother who is commanding but also a therapist? Yeah, you learn when to hold your tongue.

She sighs, maybe out of relief, and looks around.

“You need to sit,” I say before she answers me, grabbing her water and guiding her to the couch.

When we’re both sitting, I look at her again, and after a sip of water, she meets my gaze.

“I told you I was going to the doctor today. She was concerned when I told her I was feeling worse despite her not seeing any signs of a sinus infection. I was already worried about that because my sinus issues had been clearing up, but I just didn’t feel good. Headache, run down, fatigue. I brought up the pain I’d been having.”

“What pain? You mentioned it earlier, but didn’t explain.”

“Uterine pain. It comes and goes throughout the day, and it’s gotten worse over the last week.”

“But you said you’ve had that for months.”

“Yeah. It started about a month after I got my IUD. Conveniently, shortly after a period with really hard cramps. Apparently, that can cause an IUD to move out of place. A key symptom of that is uterine pain. And a side effect of having the IUD out of place? You can get pregnant.”

“Shit.” I reach for her, my hand resting over her stomach as the reality sets in. We’re going to have a baby. Well, maybe...

I meet her gaze and find she has tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. You had no idea. We both made the choice not to use other protection. You don’t get pregnant without help, Amelia. You need a penis. Or at the very least a turkey baster. Maybe, on occasion, an act of God.” I give her a small smile. “What are you thinking?”

“I want to keep it,” she blurts out. “I always wanted to be a mom one day. I didn’t think it would be now, or like this, but I

want to do it. You don't have to be involved—”

“Are you kidding me? This is my child. There is no world in which I would ever walk away from you or our baby. From this moment on, we're a team. We're in this together. I've still got a few weeks left of school, but after that, I'll be back here, and I'll be at your beck and call. Whatever you need. You have the hard job, but I'll be here to support you however I can—however you want me to be. No matter what, I'm in. All in.”

She sniffs, then blows out a shaky breath. “I never cry. Fucking hormones already.”

I run my hand up her thigh. “Have you told anyone else?”

She shakes her head. “No one else to tell.”

“What about Dani? Your mom? I thought you two were close.”

A look of pure anguish washes over her face. “I need to tell you something.”

“Anything.”

“My mom... she isn't really my mom anymore.” She sniffs again, but there's no stopping her tears. I move closer, wrapping an arm around her back.

“What do you mean?”

“A couple of years ago, my mom was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's and some other mental health conditions. She'd started acting strangely, forgetting where she was, and struggling with speech. It was the paranoia that pushed me to

get her checked out, though. She lives in a nursing home now. Some days she doesn't know who I am, some days she thinks I'm her dead mother haunting her, some days she thinks I'm out to get her, and occasionally, she has good days where she's almost like her normal self—but the mom who raised me is gone.”

She chokes back tears and my heart breaks for her.

“And you've been dealing with all of that alone?”

She shrugs. “My dad didn't have any siblings, and my mom had a rough upbringing, so she cut off contact with her two siblings before I was born. Her dad left when she was a kid and her mom's dead. My dad's parents are both gone. There is no one else. No other family. Just me.”

I shake my head, sliding my hand into her hair and looking into her eyes.

“You're not alone anymore. You have a family now, because you have me. No matter what.”

“Miles...”

“I mean it. It doesn't matter if anything ever happens with us romantically, we are and will always be a family. You're the mother of my child. We're in this together. You've got me. Always. And I'm a package deal. I come with two bratty little sisters, a chill dad, a complicated but loving mother, and an entire cult's worth of best friends. All of whom will take care of you, too.”

“You're sure this is what you want?”

I search her face, then, against my better judgment, pull her to me, kissing her deeply before letting her go again.

“I want you. I understand if you’re not ready for that yet, but none of this changes how I feel about you. Other than maybe making me a little crazier for you than I already was. This isn’t how I thought I’d become a dad, but I want to be one. Getting to do it with you is just icing on the cake.”

I kiss her forehead, and she wipes her eyes.

“Drink some more water,” I tell her, handing her the bottle.

A faint smile appears. “Ugh, you’re going to be a bossy baby daddy, aren’t you? Always telling me what to do.”

I smile at that. “Yep. Your job is to grow our baby. My job is to protect and take care of you both.”

I grab my phone, open the notes app, and start making a list of things to do and check on.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Making a list. I want to get your car in the shop and have it looked over, just to make sure everything is good. I want to make a separate bank account for baby stuff that we can both access. Oh, I need to make sure all the forms I submitted to my job get switched, so you’re the beneficiary.”

She grabs my hand. “Miles.”

“Hm?”

“Are you okay?”

I wish she wouldn't ask me that.

Pulling at the collar of my shirt because it suddenly feels tight, I force a deep breath. “I have anxiety. Taking control of things helps me feel better.”

“Oh. Okay. Whatever you need to do.”

I stare at her for a second. I’m not sure why her reaction surprises me, but it does. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For not... judging me or treating me like I’m fragile.”

“There’s nothing fragile about understanding how to handle your mental health.” Her brow furrows for a second. “Wait, where do you work? Or are you going to work? I can’t believe we never talked about that.”

A sly grin creeps onto my face at her words. “We were a little busy.”

She chuckles and I see a bit of that fire inside her again. “Yeah, we were. So... where are you going to be working?”

“Oh, it’s a newer place, JWAC and Associates Business Consulting and Services.”

Her eyes widen and her mouth drops. “Shit. That’s—that’s where I work.”

“Seriously? How did I not know that? I interned there all summer.”

“I didn’t start until the fall. I guess we still have a lot to learn about each other.”

“Yeah, we do.”

“Oh,” she says, quickly rising from the couch and walking into her bedroom. She returns and sits back down, then shoves something into my hand. Looking down, I realize they’re ultrasound pictures.

“Oh, shit. You had an ultrasound already? How far along are you?”

“I had the ultrasound because of my uterine pain. That’s how they figured out my IUD was out of place. A minute into it, the tech called my doctor in, then they had a whisper conversation and showed me the screen.” She sorts through the photos, pulling one out. “I’m about six weeks. My due date is December eighteenth.” I glance up at her for half a second, then my eyes drop back to the ultrasound photo in my hand. It looks like a peanut or grain of rice. Impossibly tiny, but that’s our baby. Amelia slides her pointer on to the picture. “See that blurry spot above it?” I nod. “That’s the flicker of the heartbeat.”

Tears fill my eyes, and I don’t bother trying to hold them back. Of the guys, I’m the least emotional, but I don’t overtly try to hide my emotions most of the time—minus my anxiety or when I need to be strong for someone else. But this? I’m overwhelmed.

Again, I rest my hand on her stomach. “This is beautiful.” I set the photo down, then pinch the bridge of my nose, sniffing back my tears. When I look back at Amelia again, she looks surprised. “What is it?” I ask.

“You,” she breathes. “I thought you were going to be angry or upset or... blame me. I didn’t expect you to be so easily on board or so... happy.”

“Your expectation that I’m going to have a bad reaction to things or won’t treat you right stops now. I’m not that guy. I swear to God, Amelia, from this moment on, I live for the two of you. Do you understand what I’m saying right now? It’s not just because it’s my responsibility, it’s because I want this. Am I terrified? Damn straight. But I’m not afraid of responsibility or stepping up, so let me be clear. If you need me, I’ll be here. No questions asked. I want this baby, like I want you. I know there’s a shit ton to figure out, and we will. I’m great at making lists and solving problems.”

She lets out a shaky breath. “Thank you. I’m really scared—and I’m not used to feeling that way. You’re making this much easier on me.”

“That’s my job.” I give her a little smile. “How’s your stomach? Morning sickness? I know that’s a shitty term for it since it can happen all day.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “How do you know that?”

“My little sisters are almost seven years younger than me. I remember my mother’s pregnancy with them. I also remember her stopping in the middle of eating and muttering how morning sickness was the most ridiculous name since it lasts all day.”

She laughs a little at that. “I’m just starting to get a taste. I’m queasy, but hungry.”

“Good. I’m going to get you some soup, then we can relax.” I stop and look at her hesitantly. “If you’re okay with me staying.”

She looks at me seriously and takes my hand. “I’d love that. Miles, I…” She blows out a breath. “I’m not ready to think about us getting into a relationship because it’s too much right now. I have to figure out how to be a mom—hell, how to deal with being pregnant—and anything more than that is more than I can handle. But that doesn’t mean I want anyone else. Or that I want you to be with anyone else,” she mutters, looking down.

“Ames, look at me.” I rest my hand on her cheek as I look at her.

She meets my gaze, words tumbling out of those perfect, sexy lips. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not fair, but—”

“I have no desire to be with anyone else. I meant it when I said I’m at your beck and call. We may not be in a relationship, but I’m committed to you and our child.”

She nods, then clears her throat. “Does that mean you’re on board with continuing our prior arrangement?” Her cheeks are flushed as she says it. Unlike her, but sexy in a different way.

“Hormones got you feeling a little wild?” I ask, trying to hold back a smirk.

“Maybe. Either way, I have needs. You’re the one I’d like to fulfill them.”

“Oh, so businesslike.”

“Do we have an agreement?”

I brush my lips over hers. “You know we do. I told you I’d take care of you. I meant that in every way.” I drop my hand down from her stomach, so it grazes between her legs. “But first, you need to have some soup. I’ll make toast to go with it.”

She groans. “Miles. I need—”

“You *need* to eat before you feel sicker. So, I’m going to warm up soup for us and make some toast, and if you eat all your food like a good girl, I’ll give you everything else you need. Got it?”

She stares me down for a second, but then relief washes over her face. “Yes. Thank you.”

I stand up, not taking my eyes off her, then lean down and kiss her cheek. “Stop thanking me. I’ve got you, okay?”

She bobs her head up and down. “Okay. I am hungry.”

“Good. I’ll be back in a minute.”

As I turn and walk toward the kitchen, my chest tightens again, my heart slamming against my ribs. I meant everything I said to her tonight, but that doesn’t change the fact that everything is about to change in ways I can’t control. I’m fucking terrified, and I have no idea how to deal with it, other than to focus all my energy on taking care of her. *And our baby.*



I'm a mess.

I held everything together last night. It was easier when I had Amelia to take care of. I focused on feeding her—and pleasing her—until we fell asleep, tangled up with my hand protectively wrapped around her stomach. Our baby. We're going to have a baby.

My blood runs cold again. I meant every word I said to Amelia last night. I'm happy. I want this, but I am unraveling. My mind is spinning with everything I have to do. Everything I want to do. Everything I can't control. And that there are a million more things I haven't thought of yet.

Amelia went into work this morning to catch up on what she missed yesterday, and now that I don't have her to focus on, my anxiety is spiking. I feel like a zombie as I walk toward the bakery. Amelia's apartment is only a couple of blocks away, so I walked rather than take her car. Her car is going to the shop to get checked out later today, so I sent her in my car—which just had an inspection done last week. She was vaguely annoyed, but I appreciate her letting me do this. There's too much I can't protect her from, but I'm going to keep her safe in every way I possibly can.

“Hey, Linda,” I say, putting on a calm, relaxed face as I walk into the bakery.

Mackie's mom looks over at me and smiles. “Morning, honey.”

“Morning. Mackie home?”

“Yep, she’s upstairs.”

I could’ve texted Mackie and asked her if she was home, but the truth is, I’m avoiding my phone. I have been since last night. I glanced at it this morning and saw a ridiculous amount in our group chat—something about Pete giving the farmhouse to Rae and Sarah. And then there were more in my group chat with the guys—asking how things went with Amelia and reminding me about the suit fitting and then the catering and cake testing later today. I ignored them all, though the thought that I have to see everyone later is rattling in my mind and making me more stressed.

“Perfect, thanks,” I say to Linda, swallowing against the lump in the back of my throat. “Could you grab a couple of bagels for us?”

“Sure thing.” I watch as she grabs a spinach bagel for Mackenzie and a sun-dried tomato and parmesan one for me. Our favorites. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

I take the bag, then throw my hand up in a wave as I head upstairs. Mackie’s family owns this building and the attached one next door. The upper three floors of this building are where her family lives and the building next door has apartments they rent out—one of which Rae and Aaron live in. Once upstairs, I head to the semi-private studio apartment Mackie lives in. It has a separate entrance from the three-level apartment her parents and two of her step siblings live in, but also has an entrance into their apartment. It gives her privacy

and space—two things Mackie needs—while still being close to her family. Her little studio only has a small bathroom and a mini kitchenette—basically a counter with a few cabinets, a sink, a coffeemaker, a toaster oven, a plug-in electric cooktop, and an apartment-sized refrigerator.

I give a quick knock on Mackie's door, then walk in before she answers.

“Hey,” she says, smiling over at me. “Perfect timing. I was just making coffee.”

“Great. I brought bagels.” The flatness of my voice instantly draws her attention. She presses a button on the coffeemaker, then crosses the room, looking up at me with her deep brown eyes. Though she's five-foot-eight, I'm a full seven inches taller than her. The curse of being six-foot-three. I'm always looking down to see everyone in my life. I'm damn near a foot taller than Sarah. Amelia is probably only five-five or five-six.

“Miles, what's wrong?”

My chest grows heavy and tears fill my eyes. I'm about to fall the fuck apart. *No better place to do it.*

“Amelia's pregnant.”

Her eyes go wide, but she doesn't miss a beat. She grabs my hand and pulls me to her couch. She sits down in the corner and puts a pillow in her lap, then pats it. Without a second thought, I curl up on the couch and rest my head on the pillow.

Mackie has been my best friend pretty much since we met. Sure, I bonded with the boys first over our shared love of

baseball, but after that, Mackenzie and I quickly realized we were platonic soulmates. We wouldn't have phrased it that way as kids, but we got each other. Though at the time I was an only child and she was from a big family, we both craved the same things. Peace and comfort, but also fun. Our friend group can be intense and Mackie and I always provided each other with solace and sanctuary.

When my anxiety got bad as a kid, Mackie was the only one I admitted it to. She didn't understand how to help me then, but over the years, she learned. She helps me control and hide it.

"I'm fucking scared, Macks," I choke out, fighting with the tightness in my chest and the tears in my eyes.

She rests her hand on my arm and gives it a little squeeze. "Close your eyes." I do as she says. "Take a deep breath. Tell me what you smell."

"Coffee."

"It's the perfect smell, right? It's shocking no one ever seems to be able to get a coffee-scented candle right. They always smell fake. I'm convinced there's something about coffee brewing or chocolate melting that triggers the relaxation parts of the brain. So keep inhaling that. Now tell me what you feel."

She purposely presses her finger tips more firmly into my arm.

"You squeezing my arm."

“Now tell me what you hear.”

“The coffee dripping. Cars outside.”

“At least there’s not a train going by,” she says soothingly. The tracks run right by the bakery so it’s loud as fuck when a train goes by. “Now,” she says softly, “open your eyes and tell me how you feel.”

I open my eyes and glance up at her. “My anxiety feels a little better, but I still feel like I’m going to break.”

“Then break,” she whispers, running her fingers through my hair. “You know you’re safe here. You’ve picked up my pieces more times than I can count. Let me pick up yours.”

I sniff as I nod, then give in to the sobs forming in my chest. I wrap my arm around her waist as she continues running her fingers through my hair.

“I don’t know how to do this, Macks. I want kids. I always have. But I’m scared and my anxiety is so high. I’m completely unprepared. And I’m not even with her. I want to be, but she’s... just as scared as me. How am I supposed to do this? Live separately from her? Only see my kid some days? How—how am I going to tell my mom?” I choke on my tears.

“With me right by your side. That’s the answer to all of it. I’ve got you. You know we all do.”

“I’m scared to tell everyone, too.”

“You’re scared because you aren’t in control.” I sniff and look up at her. She knows me too damn well. “You don’t have to be in control all the time. We’ll catch you when you aren’t. I

know it's hard for you, but there are things about this you'll never be able to control, so you're going to have to focus on different coping mechanisms. And I think you need to be more open with everyone else about your anxiety, too."

I wipe my eyes and sit up, feeling pathetic. Amelia is literally growing our baby while she's working right now, and I'm crying in my best friend's arms.

"I feel like my life became a list of all the things I have to do and face that I'm not ready for yet. And that makes me feel stupid and weak because by far I have the easier job."

Mackie grabs my hand and squeezes. "This is a lot for anyone to handle. Especially when it's a surprise and your relationship is complicated at best. You don't have to have all the answers." I frown at that, and she laughs lightly. "I know that's a challenge for you, so we're going to start tackling all the things we can do together. I'll help you make lists and only pick on you occasionally when you get super type A."

She smiles at me, and I let out a deep breath, squeezing her thigh. "Thanks, Macks."

"You're thanking me?" She cocks an eyebrow and shakes her head. "You've always been the one who holds me up when I want to fall to the ground and give up. Hell, you do that for all of us. Let us return the favor. Let me support you the way you've always supported me. You're a cocky, slightly grumpy, controlling pain in my ass sometimes, but you're also the best man I know, and I've got your back. Always."

I smack a kiss on her cheek. “My wingwoman always. Even if we are in uncharted territory.”

She shrugs. “All the more reason you need me. And I know what *we* need.” Leaning forward, she grabs the bag of bagels off the coffee table and stands up. “Bagels. And I know the coffee smells good, but none for you. It’ll only make you more anxious.”

Hoisting myself off the couch, I follow her to the kitchenette. “Whatever you say, Mom.”

She rolls her eyes. “Shush, you. Be useful and use your long arms to get some plates.”

I smile softly and grab the plates, setting them on the counter.

Sighing, I lean against the counter and run my hands over my face. “Hey, Macks?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re my best friend.”

She grins at me. “Duh. I’m awesome.” She winks at me and turns back to the bagels while I focus on the only task I can handle at the moment—taking one deep breath after the other.



My mask has been firmly in place all afternoon. I’m an excellent compartmentalizer, which allowed me to have fun with the guys while trying on suits, then I enjoyed sampling

food and cakes with everyone, but I still snuck away to check my phone and make sure Amelia had everything she needed. She's probably already annoyed by my constant checking in, but she'll have to get used to it. She hasn't had anyone to take care of her in years, and that all changes now. I will never let her face anything alone again, especially not the hard things.

Me: Do you want me to bring something for dinner?

Amelia: I don't know. What are you having?

Me: Sushi. So that's a no for you. Besides, I asked what you want. What do you want?

Amelia: You're going to pick on me.

Me: Doubtful. Tell me.

Amelia: Okay. I want two McDonald's cheeseburgers. Nothing fancy, just the basic cheeseburger, and then I need you to go to the grocery store and get a Caesar salad mix for me. Don't worry, you can get whatever pasteurized version of Caesar dressing there is. But that's what I want.

I smile at my phone. I'd think this was a pregnancy craving, but by the specificity, I have a feeling these are comfort foods for her.

Me: Done. I'll text you when I'm on my way back.

Amelia: I'm not used to this, but thank you.

Me: Get used to it. Like I said, I've got you.

A throat clears, and I look up from my phone.

After our afternoon of suit fittings and taste tests, we're back at Joel's parents' house eating sushi in the living room. It's just the six of us, which is rare these days.

Everyone's eyes are on me as I turn my phone screen off.

"Sorry," I say, looking around at everyone.

Aaron and Joel glance at each other.

"Hey, we get it," Aaron says. "It's your first time feeling something serious for a girl. It's easy to get caught up in it."

"We both still do sometimes, but tonight was supposed to be about the six of us," Joel says. "And your face has been buried in your phone the whole time."

Shit. Now I'm neglecting my friends. I can't even say it's just since I found out about the pregnancy. I was doing it the other morning, too. Though I think it's more justified now.

I glance over at Mackie, who gives me an encouraging smile.

"Fuck," I grumble, rubbing my hands over my face. "I'm sorry. I know I've been focused on Amelia. You're right, over the last few weeks, I haven't been as present with you guys when we've been together—"

"We understand," Sarah says softly. "You looked outside our friend group for your person." She gives me a smile.

"I did, and I admit, it felt good doing what we were doing, but that's not why I've been preoccupied today. I don't know if

I'm supposed to tell you all this yet or not, but I need your support. Amelia's pregnant. I'm going to be a dad."

Everyone looks at me in shock. Unsurprisingly, Rae is the first one to stand up and walk over to me. Our resident mama bear, she always takes care of everyone. She slides onto the couch next to me and wraps her arms around me. "Congratulations. You're going to be an amazing dad. And we're all here for you."

"Hell yes," Aaron says. "Whatever you need, you know we've got you. Amelia too."

"Didn't have you becoming a parent first on my bingo card, but you're going to be awesome." Joel grins at me.

"You've always been great with kids," Sarah says, coming to sit on my other side. "If you or Amelia have any questions, I'm a walking encyclopedia on this stuff. I may not know it from experience, but I know the clinical side, and I'm happy to help however I can."

"Told you," Mackie whispers, ruffling my hair.

"Thank you. I can't stop saying that lately, but I'm overwhelmed—with both terror and gratitude."

"You've always been a kid whisperer. In that respect, you don't have too much to worry about," Rae says with a laugh.

"I'm less familiar with babies," I say, laughing lightly.

Sarah rubs her hand down my back. "I know this is hard because you don't know what to expect—and that makes you more anxious—but we're all here to help you both through it."

“That’s good,” I say, emotion swelling in my chest again. “Because we’re both going to need it. I’m going to need it. This is making my anxiety spike even more.”

“I’m sure it is,” Rae says, squeezing my leg. “Especially since you find safety in plans and control.”

I glance at her, then at everyone else.

Joel smiles at me. “Don’t look so surprised. We’ve all known for a long time that you deal with anxiety. You prefer not to talk about it, so we don’t push.”

“You all know?” I ask, realizing I’m not nearly as good at hiding this as I thought I was.

“We figured it out,” Aaron says. “Why do you think we always let you drive and don’t question when you want to make all the plans for a trip? We know that’s what you need, so we let you do it. After more than fifteen years of friendship, I think we all know each other pretty damn well.”

I rub my eyes with the heels of my palms. *I’m an idiot.*

“You’ve all known and haven’t said anything. Wow. Here I was thinking I hid it all well.”

Rae nudges her arm against mine. “And I thought I hid it well when I was struggling after being sexually assaulted. We all know each other’s tells. I think we’ve just learned how to support each other, whether the needs are vocalized or not.”

I lean over and kiss the side of her head. “I love you guys. I’m sorry I haven’t been more open about my anxiety in the past. Consider it all out in the open now, though, because I’m a

wreck. I'll feel better when I have more of a plan. I feel better when I'm with Amelia—which, by the way, we aren't together. She's scared to get into that right now."

Aaron and Joel smile at each other.

"Been there," Aaron says.

"Done that," Joel adds, as they both smile at their girls. It gives me hope. I want something more with Amelia, and I hope she doesn't use this as an excuse to shut this down forever.

"Just be there for her," Sarah says, squeezing my hand as she locks eyes with Joel. "That's what she'll need the most. It's what will break down her walls."

"You'd know," I tease.

"We've faced our fair share of hard shit together, and we always get through it because we have each other." Sarah sniffs back tears as she looks at me.

"The six of us. Always in it together, right?" Rae whispers, eyes filled with as much emotion as Sarah's.

"Always." I hold out my fist and she bumps hers against mine.

I'm not used to this. Usually I'm the one giving support. It's new to be on the receiving end. Not because my friends don't give the same support, simply because I rarely ask for it. Although it seems they've been giving it in ways I didn't understand until now.

Amelia joked that the six of us are like a cult, and it's true, to anyone on the outside, we're abnormally close. For us, though? It's family pure and simple. A bond we've built so strong it's become unbreakable. I'm insanely grateful for it now, and I'm damn sure going to need it.

"If you need to go check on Amelia, do it. We're never going to hold it against you that you need to take care of your girl," Aaron says.

"We've all always got each other, but as we end up in serious relationships, the immediate priorities shift. No, we don't want you sexting all night when you're supposed to be hanging out with us." Joel smirks at me. "But needing to take care of your pregnant girlfriend—" I open my mouth to protest, but Joel holds up his hand. "I'm calling her that because that's basically what she is, whether it's official or not. You'll get there." *Fuck, I hope so.* "Needing to take care of her is more important than this. So do what you need to do."

I nod. "Thank you. I told her I'd get her some food."

"Then go," Sarah says. "Never keep a pregnant woman waiting."

"Need me to drive you?" Mackie asks.

"You should stay, but can I borrow your car? I'll leave it at the bakery."

"Borrow it, and I'll get it from Amelia's place tomorrow. Deal?"

“Deal.” Standing up, I pull Mackie into my arms and quickly kiss her head, then I let her go and look back at everyone else, emotion hitting me again. “I love you guys.”

“We love you too, bud,” Rae says. “Go take care of your girl. And let us know when we can text her congratulations.”

“Will do. Night.”

They all say goodbye, and as I walk out the front door, a realization hits me in the gut. It’ll always be the six of us, but my life is changing now to being the three of us. Amelia, me, and our baby. I’m going to have my own family now.

I wasn’t expecting my life to go this way, and it’s mind blowing how quickly it’s all changing, but I’m proud, too. Even if it’s not when or how I planned, I’m getting the things I wanted out of life, and that’s fucking exciting—even if it is terrifying, too.

Amelia

How is there absolutely nothing to watch on Netflix?

I mean, there are thousands of options and yet *nothing*.

Maybe I'm a cranky bitch.

Or a hormonal one.

For the thousandth time in the last twenty-four hours, I have the *holy shit I'm pregnant* realization all over again. The reality is still setting in. All the ways my life is changing...

I'm going to be a mom. It's something I always wanted to do, but I sort of thought I'd sow my wild oats, go to school, and become a lawyer, then use a sperm donor and have a baby in my thirties. No man required, just his tiny swimmers.

Now I'm twenty-four. I'm done fucking around—for multiple reasons. One because the idea of screwing a guy when I'm pregnant with another guy's baby is a massive turn off. The other because screwing a guy who isn't Miles makes my vagina—and possibly heart—cuss me out at the thought.

I was going to say yes. The woman who had categorically sworn off love—not just for a little while or for my twenties, but for life—was going to say yes to dating a guy who has utterly captivated me.

Ugh, Dani was right. She's the most amazing friend in the world, and I swear she just sees through people—and their bullshit. Although, based on what I know about her family, it's

somehow written into her genetic code. I gave her this whole speech over a year ago about how I'd never fall in love and my potential soulmate wouldn't want love either. She told me that sometimes it isn't our choice. It just happens. Damn it all, here I am a year later.

I'm not in love with Miles, but I think it could happen for us. Which is why I put the brakes on. I can't risk that now. I can't risk my pregnancy hormones letting me make the wrong decision, and I can't let my underlying feelings for Miles take over while I'm pregnant.

Sure, how I feel for him might not be a choice, but how I handle those feelings is. And for now, the way to handle them is to not. I need to settle into being pregnant before I can revisit my feelings for him and what we should be. Even though he's made it clear, he's not going anywhere.

We'll see.

People say a lot of shit they don't mean, then bail when life gets hard. In many ways, this is probably the best test we'll ever get if we're meant to have a serious relationship.

Either way, love isn't something I'm looking for right this second. I have a tiny person I need to focus on loving first. Everything else... we'll figure it out.

Until then, I'm trying to get used to Miles taking care of me, without learning to rely on it too heavily. He won't be here full time for another month, but beyond that, there's no guarantees he'll be here full time at all.

I grumble and violently toss the remote control on the table.

Fucking Netflix.

I need a distraction. Or some food.

The universe must be paying attention to my thoughts because the door swings open, and Miles walks in. Apparently, we're past the knocking phase. I suppose that's fair since we're in the *knocked-up* phase now.

"Hey, babe," he says in that deep voice of his, instantly pressing my *horny as fuck* button. The feeling is quickly overridden by hunger when I smell the burgers, though.

I enjoy a good smoothie and well-rounded meals most of the time. On occasion I've been known to have expensive taste—especially when it comes to seafood or steak. But there is nothing on this earth as comforting as a McDonald's cheeseburger when I'm stressed and starving. Which suddenly I am. Starving that is. Stressed is my base state these days, though I'm sure Miles will tell me to stop being stressed because it's unhealthy for the baby, then he'll book me a massage.

A rush of hurt hits my heart for a moment. *That's what Dad would've done for Mom.*

I push it away as fast as it came and take the bag from him.

"Hi. Thank you for this. It smells amazing." I don't wait to dig into the bag. Literally. I'm pawing through this shit like a rabid raccoon. "Fries?" I mutter, setting them on the table.

"I know you didn't ask for them, but they're my weakness."

“Fair enough,” I mumble as I take a massive bite of the cheeseburger.

“I may have gotten a couple of extra burgers, too. In case you’re extra hungry.”

“Thanks.” My mouth is still full, so it sounds more like “Franks” but whatever.

He kisses my cheek, then grabs the grocery bag. “I’ll make your salad. Do you have mixing bowls?”

“Bottom, next to the oven,” I mumble, shoving more cheeseburger in my face. I’m not sure if it’s hormones, hunger, or that it’s my favorite comfort food, but I swear nothing has ever tasted this good.

“I’ll take your barely discernible words as a sign you like the food.” He grins at me from the kitchen. He has a perfect smile. His teeth are impossibly straight. Even when he doesn’t show his teeth and does that smolder thing, he still looks unbelievably perfect. He seriously looks like he was crafted by the gods rather than being born.

Oh boy. I must be getting delusional in my ravenously hungry state. On to burger number two.

“It’s perfect. Thank you for getting it.” Then my brow furrows. “How did you get it? Your car is still here and mine’s at the shop.”

“I borrowed Mackie’s. She’ll pick it up tomorrow.”

“Oh.”

He looks at me out of the corner of his eye as he pours the dressing over the salad. Then he grabs two forks and walks over to the couch.

“I don’t want to piss you off, but I told Mackie and my friends. They know not to tell anyone else yet, though.”

I stare at him for a moment. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Mhm.” I reach for the salad, but he pulls it away.

“No. Say what’s on your mind. I watched Rae and Aaron refuse to communicate for fucking years. I have a therapist for a mother. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt how important communication is, so talk to me.”

I inhale sharply at that. People tell you to watch for red flags in a relationship. Well, Miles is over here throwing up green flag after green flag. Kind, attentive, respects his mother, has meaningful, long-lasting relationships with his friends, and wants to communicate openly.

Is he a unicorn?

I take another deep breath, then say the words I don’t want to think. “What if I miscarry?”

“Then we’ll have the best support system in the world.”

That’s it. Not a second fucking thought. Just we’ll be supported. It’s almost unfathomable for me. Until I met Dani last year, I’d been alone since my mom’s health went downhill. I spent almost two years with no one else to rely on.

Then I met Dani, and I knew I'd found my best friend. She gets me. I get her. We don't have to try. Our friendship is natural, and I'm grateful for it every day, but Miles and his friends? They're a whole different world. This insanely close-knit group of people who choose each other. It's incredible and a little intimidating if I'm honest.

“Okay.” It's a terrible one-word sentence, but I don't know what else to say. People like to say that going through an unexpected hard thing is like being thrown in the deep end, but that's pretty tame in comparison. It's like being thrown into the middle of a whitewater rafting adventure, but everyone else has a boat except for you.

“I'm sorry.” His deep voice drops impossibly low with the words as he looks at me tentatively.

“It's okay that you told them,” I clarify. “I'm just overwhelmed.”

He lets out a sigh of relief. “Same here.”

“But you've been so calm for me.”

He laughs at my words. “I've been thinking the same thing about you. You've been so strong and composed.”

“I stared at a blank computer screen for forty-five minutes this morning as my brain played a slideshow of everything bad that could happen and reminded me over and over that I don't know what I'm doing.”

He reaches over and squeezes my hand. “I cried in Mackenzie's lap this morning.”

At those words, I set my fork down and move closer to him.
“You did?”

He nods. “It’s the first place I went. I’m happy, but this is hitting every anxiety trigger I have.”

I pull open the drawer on the coffee table and grab a notebook and pencil. “Let’s make a plan, then. You said lists and plans help you, right?”

He looks at me in surprise, then smiles. “Yeah. It does. Will that help you, though?”

Tears well in my eyes because I’m afraid to admit this. To own up to the fact that I felt better the second he walked in. “You being here helps. So we’ll eat and make a plan together. If you’re staying.”

He gives me an adorable half-smile, and I feel like I just got a glimpse of childhood him. “I’m staying.”

“Good.”

We eat in a comfortable silence, splitting the salad, then Miles eats the last burger I’m too full for as I steal some of his fries.

I could get used to this.

Excuse me?

Don’t you dare, heart. Don’t you dare.

Once we’ve finished eating, he sits in the corner of the couch and props his feet up on the coffee table. Then he rests his arm

over the back of the couch and looks at me. Grabbing the notebook and pencil, I slide over and snuggle against him.

I'm a snuggler now.

Again, I feel annoyingly overwhelmed with emotion. My dad was my favorite person to snuggle with. I stopped ever trying to snuggle—or find someone to snuggle with—when he died. I shut down a lot of my affection in general, besides with my mother.

Miles runs his fingers down my arm. “Okay?”

I shake my head softly. I have no idea. “I thought I'd become a mom one day, but it would be when I was older, and I'd make the choice to do it alone.”

“And?” he asks, seeing through my words.

“I'm glad I'm not alone. I'm glad I'm doing this with you.”

“Me too.” He taps the pencil against the notebook. “Where should we start?”

“Let's make a page for each month of pregnancy. We're already done with month one and halfway through month two, so go us.”

He chuckles and writes down *Month 1*. Then underneath he scribbles *Make a baby*. He grins at me as he puts a checkmark next to it. “Nailed it.”

“Awesome,” I say with a laugh. “Now on to month two.”

He nods, then goes through and writes headings for each month, then for the first three after the baby is born. He

swallows hard as he turns back to month two.

“Amelia?”

“Yeah?” He looks at me hesitantly, so I wrap my hand around his. “Ask me anything.”

“I just need to know, so I can set my expectations correctly... are you saying no to us forever or for now?” His voice is raspy and his eyes are gleaming with emotion.

I swallow against the dryness in my throat and say what I hope is the truth. What I *want* to be the truth. “For now.”

His eyes light up and a smile grows on his face. How did he learn to smile so perfectly? Was he a child model or something?

He wraps his hand around the side of my neck, then dips his head down and gives me a soft but powerful kiss. The kind that tells me no matter what lines I’m trying to draw, they’re formed in wet sand, and soon enough they’ll be washed away. Just like my resolve.

Chapter Two

Love Gutter

Amelia

I'M POSSESSED BY A demon. At least if *The Exorcist* is any indication of vomit levels, that's what's happening.

Who knows? Maybe she wasn't possessed at all. Maybe she was pregnant and couldn't stop puking.

Wait, was she a kid? I haven't seen that movie in a long time. And I need to stop thinking about the puking scene now because...

I groan as I lean over the toilet again.

This sucks.

I was fine until last night. Conveniently, right when Miles was getting ready to leave, it hit me. He made sure I was stocked up on bland, easy to make foods, but here I am nonetheless. Already running late. This is great.

Feel better.

I close my eyes tight and take a deep breath, but apparently willpower can't overcome pregnancy because I puke again.

There can't be anything left.

Though I dry heave one more time, my stomach settles after that. Actually, I'm fucking hungry again. What even is pregnancy?

I rest my head against my bathroom wall and close my eyes, taking deep breaths in and out. Tears stream down my cheeks

as I wonder how the hell I'm going to manage this, and then think the words I hate. *I wish Miles was here.* I can't be relying on him like this already. This is insane.

“Amelia? Ames? Shit, what's wrong? Are you sick?”

I flash my eyes open to see Dani looking at me with concern.

Right, we're riding together today because we're both going to AB Construction. Though I work for JWAC Consulting, I'm technically an independent contractor, and I spend a day at AB every so often going through legal stuff and contracts for them. Dani works there as an interior designer.

I shake my head and she sits down next to me, confused.

“I'm pregnant.”

Her eyes get huge. “With Miles?” I nod. “Wow. Congratulations.” She wraps her arm around my back and rests her head against mine. “Now tell me how I can help.”

I sniff back tears. Great, crying is my new norm. Add that to the list of things I didn't realize I was signing up for. Of course, when I signed up for an IUD, I thought I was signing up for the opposite of this, so...

“I don't know. I feel awful. I'm exhausted. Panicking. I have no idea how the hell I'm going to manage all this. I wanted to go to law school.” Swallowing the lump in my throat, I look at her. “All I can think about is everything I have to give up. Which in turn makes me feel horrible. I want this, but—”

“Shh,” she whispers, rubbing my back. “You're allowed to feel all the things. Even people who try for months and are

overjoyed to see that positive test feel that way. My cousin Taylor wanted nothing more than to be a mom her whole life, and she really struggled to adjust. First to being pregnant, then to being a mom. She thought for sure she'd stay at home but ended up deciding to go back to work. You're going through a million physical and emotional changes right now. It's okay to feel overwhelmed and burned out. For the record, becoming a mom doesn't have to stop you from achieving your dreams. My mom had Wes right after she graduated from college. She took the rest of the summer off and went to grad school in the fall. You can still do all the things."

"I love you," I whisper. I seriously got so damn lucky with her. I can't imagine how much lonelier my life would be if she hadn't waltzed in and filled it with color and sunshine. That's what Dani does.

She kisses the side of my head. "I love you too. Is there anything I can do? Anything that helps?"

Before I can stop my traitorous mouth, something slips out. "Miles."

Her eyebrows shoot up, but then she smiles. "I take it he's being supportive?"

"Supportive is not nearly a strong enough word. It's honestly so overwhelming, and I'm afraid to trust the sincerity of it."

"As someone who once felt the same, I can tell you that you can find the truth in two places—your gut and his eyes. You have a good read on people, so if you think you can trust him,

you can. And you can't completely hide a lie. Look into his eyes. They'll tell you the truth."

"He comforts me," I admit.

"That's a good thing."

"Not when he isn't here."

She squeezes my hand. "A few more weeks and he'll be back for good, right?"

I nod, not liking the excitement I feel in my stomach at that—or the fact that I want him here with me every night. *Here*. Are we going to raise a baby here? Together? Will we have separate spaces? *What the hell are we doing?*

"Breathe." Dani's voice is calm and quiet. "Stressing out won't help you right now."

One step at a time.

"Can you grab the notebook off the coffee table?"

"Sure." She gets up and leaves the room, returning a second later with the notebook that has our plans in it. Somehow, we missed the whole *where we're going to live* thing.

I open it to this month and put that on the list in big letters.

"What's that?" Dani asks.

"Our planning notebook."

"That's adorable."

"Miles has anxiety. It helps him manage that, and it helps me take things one month at a time."

“That’s good.”

I groan. What’s not good? That my body feels like it’s on fire and I’m going to—

I dive forward and retch a few times. Nothing really comes out, but I start crying anyway. “How am I going to make it through work like this?” I whine.

And I am *not* a whiner.

“First, we’re going to make sure you eat some light foods. Second, worst case, I’ll cover for you. But if you’re okay telling Leo, you know he’ll be supportive. Maia was a teen mom, after all.”

I nod. “Okay. Water. And there’s mashed potatoes in the fridge.”

“I’ll get them and let Leo know we’ll be late.”

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Ames. I’ve always got your back.” She squeezes my leg, then leaves the room.

I sit for a minute, then slowly hoist myself off the floor.

I am strong enough to get through this.

Miles

“Are you sure you’re okay to have coffee?” Mackie asks me as we stand in line at one of the coffee shops on campus.

“Believe me, I’m sure. My anxiety is better and my need for caffeine is high.”

“Fair enough. My need for caffeine is always high. I think my blood is fifty percent caffeine at this point.”

“Seems dangerous,” I say with a grin.

She flashes me her trademark Mackie smile. One part innocence, one part sweetness, one part pure mischief. “Nah. I built up a resistance. Like iocane powder.”

I laugh out loud. “Think anyone else ever gets our old movie references?”

“How dare! *The Princess Bride* is a timeless classic.”

“Somehow, I doubt most of these people agree.” I gesture to the students all around us, all of whom seem to look fifteen. “Are you starting to feel old?”

She follows my gaze around the room. “Yeah. It’s becoming clearer by the day that it’s almost graduation.” She sighs.

“Can I help you?” the girl at the counter asks.

We step up and give her our orders. Despite me offering, Mackie pays, and we move down the counter to wait for our drinks.

“Why do you seem bummed about graduation?” I ask.

Her gaze drops, and she looks uncharacteristically sullen. “I don’t know. I’m starting to feel like everyone else has a plan for what’s next and I’m here treading water, no idea where I want to go or what I’m doing. Stuck. Stagnant. I hate it.”

A guy slides our drinks over to us, and we take them, then walk to a nearby table and sit down.

“You’re not stuck, Macks. You have a world of possibilities open to you.”

“The freedom is stifling. Everyone else is growing up and moving on. Rae and Aaron are married and moving into their first home. They’ll probably have kids soon. Sarah and Joel are getting married and moving into a house. Trevor and Chelsea will probably get married soon, too. Hyla is off living her best life. And you’re having a baby. I’m going back to work at my family bakery after spending four years in college studying random business and sociology stuff. It was a waste.”

I grab her arm. “It was not a waste. You learned a lot and you’ll find your place. Do you *want* to work at the bakery forever?”

“Hell, no. I always want it to be a part of my life, but I don’t want it to be my entire career. That’s the thing. I want to find my passion, but I have no idea what it is. I’m floundering.”

“You’re not floundering. Not everyone has the answers at twenty-two. Yes, I knew what I wanted to do for a job, but

let's face it, everything else in my life walked up and smacked me in the face.”

She presses her palms together and looks up at the ceiling. “Lord, I have seen what you’ve done for others. I can take or leave the baby, but give me a career I’m passionate about and a hot girl.” I nudge my leg against hers and we both laugh. “I don’t know. I thought I’d have discovered something that pulls me in by now. I’m a little disappointed I haven’t.”

I take a sip of my coffee and lean back in my chair. “Disappointment is fine. Resigning yourself to unhappiness is not. You’ve got a beautiful life in front of you, Macks. Live it.”

“Ah, it’s good to hear you back to your normal self. Dropping little nuggets of wisdom.”

I chuckle at that. “My mind is still in overdrive, but I feel a little better. Amelia and I spent the weekend making lists and plans. It’s the best control I can exert over the situation at the moment, so I’m taking it.”

“How’s Amelia doing?”

“She got pretty nauseous right as I was leaving last night. I hate leaving her.”

“Hey, Miles.” A blonde girl named Kacie strolls over. She had a class with Rae last year, and I might have hooked up with her before. Once. She’s definitely the type who hooks up with a guy even if he says it’s a one-time-thing, then keeps showing up, hoping to wear him down. She’s not stalker-ish,

but when she sees me, she makes it a point to come flirt. Maybe I flirted back here and there, but I'm over that shit now.

“Hey, Kacie.”

“Mackenzie,” she says, sitting on the arm of my chair. The lilt in her voice says that she doesn't like Mackie being here and sees her as a threat. Which is idiotic. If anything, she'd have better luck hitting on Mackie than me at this point.

But Macks doesn't care. She leans back in her chair, content to watch this play out.

“Do you need something, Kacie?” I keep my voice light. I don't want to be an asshole to her, but I'm not interested in anything she's offering—not even conversation.

“There's a party at Kappa tonight. Thought you might want to go with me.”

“Sounds fun, but I'm not interested in a party.”

“We could just hang out.”

Ugh. I hate when people do this shit. Read the room.

“Kacie, I know we had a fun night together, but—”

“You're not looking for anything serious. I know. This doesn't have to be.”

She touches my arm, and that's enough.

I quickly stand, crossing my arms over my chest. “I'm not looking for anything *at all*. I have a girlfriend and we're expecting a baby together.” The first part is sort of a lie. But Amelia said she wasn't saying no forever, so I'm going to

consider her my girlfriend. Though it's sexy to call her my baby mama at times, that's not nearly a strong enough description for what she is to me.

She laughs. "Wow. Some girl got her claws in you."

"No," I growl, making Mackie stifle a laugh. "Don't talk about her like that. Hell, don't talk about anyone like that. It's rude and assumes the worst. I appreciate that you're looking for something more than one night, but I'm not it. I never was."

Kacie sighs. "You really like this girl?"

"Yep."

"Did you like me?"

There's no good answer to this.

"You're fun and relaxed from what I remember, but I never considered you as more than someone fun to spend a night with. That doesn't mean you aren't. It means I wasn't looking for more. If you want more than that, find the guys who want that, too."

"You're an annoyingly good guy. Where can I find someone else like you?"

I chuckle at that. "Maybe skip the frat party. Or look for the quiet guy sitting off to the side when you're there."

She nods. "Well, take care."

"Bye, Kacie," Mackie calls cheerily as I sit back down.

Kacie walks away, and I let out a long breath. “Well, that was fun.”

“Super fun,” Mackie agrees, taking a sip of her coffee.

I kick her under the table. “Shut up.”

“I’m sorry. It’s funny. You used to be all about never being with the same girl twice. Now all you want is one girl for the rest of your life.” She laughs.

Her words hit hard, though. I hadn’t thought about it like that, but it’s true. That is what I want.

“Shit. How did my life change so much in two months?”

Mackie shrugs. “Amelia.”

“Yeah.” All I can do is agree because despite how rapidly everything is changing, Amelia is hands down the best thing that has ever happened to me.



“That’s all the time we have for today. We’ll pick up here on Wednesday. Reminder that next Monday is your last quiz before we move into review for the final,” my professor says as everyone makes a mad dash for the door. It’s a senior-level class, so everyone has mentally checked out. Just a few more weeks and we’ll be done. I was excited about the next step in my life before, but with everything happening now, I’m ready to get the fuck out of Old Lake Town—yeah, officially the dumbest name for a town ever. It’s an old town with a lake. How creative. Although technically the lake house is in West

Lake Village which sounds more high class but also lacks any creativity.

Then again, the name of the college is SUNY Finger Lakes, which is named after an entire region of New York. I guess that's what happens when you run out of ideas.

As I walk out of class, I pull my phone from my bag. I'm strict about not checking it during class unless it's a phone call.

The first thing I see are several texts from Nick Ardito. I open them as I walk out of the building into the crisp spring air.

Nick Ardito: Hey, man. I hear congratulations are in order.

Nick Ardito: I'm not actually sure if I'm supposed to say anything, but your girl is here today and she made a rather snarky announcement to the office that she's pregnant and would be taking no further questions.

Nick Ardito: Oh, she also mentioned you two are together. So anyway, congrats and welcome to the dad club. It's loud and messy but we usually have pizza and wings.

Together? Intriguing.

I'm sure it was just the most convenient way to phrase things. Like my friends refer to her as my girlfriend. Like I called her earlier.

Choosing not to get lost in those details, I text Nick back.

Me: Thanks. I will take all the pizza, wings, and dadvice you can give me.

Me: How nauseous is she? She likes to tell me she's fine when she's not.

Nick Ardito: LOL I have one of those too. She definitely seems nauseous and Dani was hovering over her which was equal parts endearing and pissing your girl off.

Nick Ardito: I will give the best dadvice I can. Maybe Braden and I should start a group chat. We can add Vince too. He's learned his fair share helping to raise Harper.

Me: Maybe I'll text Dani since Amelia keeps insisting she's fine. How the hell did you do this at eighteen? I'm a ball of anxiety.

Nick Ardito: And we have a winner. That's exactly how I did it. I was stressed and anxious. I also frequently ignored those things to take care of Leigh. I'm guessing you're doing the same?

Me: Yeah. It sucks that I'm not there every day.

Nick Ardito: Hey, you know if she needs anything to let us know.

Me: Thanks, man. I appreciate it. Feel free to be a spy for me.

Nick Ardito: I'll do my best. Seriously, congrats.

Me: Thanks. Later.

I quickly switch to my conversation with Amelia.

Me: Hey, how are you feeling?

Amelia: I'm okay. Focusing on work.

Me: Please let me know if you need anything, okay?

Amelia: I will. Talk tonight?

Me: Yeah, sounds good.

I stare at my phone. What else do I say? I want to be reassuring and comforting but that's hard to do over text. Especially when I don't know how she's actually feeling.

To my surprise, my phone rings a second later, and it's Dani.

"Hey," I answer. "Do you have psychic powers?"

"Not last I checked. Why?"

"I was just going to text you. I get the feeling Amelia isn't telling me the whole truth about how she's feeling."

Dani laughs. "Unless she mentioned she was puking her brains out this morning while crying—"

"She was crying?" I ask, heartbeat ticking up.

"Yes. Not a ton, but she's sick as hell and..."

"What?" I ask, stopping in place and causing the people behind me to almost run into me.

"This might be a slight betrayal of her confidence, but I think you should know she was saying she wished you were there. You clearly make her feel better, and she needs that now. I know you're three hours away, so just do what you can. I'm about to head back in with some soup for her, but I wanted to

call you first and let you know. I'd give you the *break her heart, I break your face* speech, but I know you don't need it. I'll be here to help however I can, but she wants you, Miles."

"Thanks for letting me know, Dani."

"No problem. Hopefully the chicken soup and mashed potatoes from Marion's settle okay. I'll let you know if anything else happens that she has to be strong and pretend she's fine about."

I let out a sigh at that. "Thank you."

"Of course."

"I'll let you go."

"Bye."

She hangs up as I grumble in frustration. I wish Amelia would've told me how she was feeling. I want to help her. Even if I'm not there, maybe talking on the phone would help. She has so much baggage I don't know about. I don't want to push her, but I need to understand why she's so afraid to let me in. She's had to be strong and handle everything alone for too long, now I need her to see she doesn't have to do that anymore. She doesn't *get* to. Because I'll be there for her in every way.

Fuck, I wish school was over. Being three hours away from her sucks.



I've just finished my last class of the day, and I'm going to meet the guys before practice. We have a game tomorrow night and Thursday, and I don't know how the hell I'm going to be focused enough to play while I'm worried about Amelia.

I got her on the phone for a few minutes after lunch, but despite her reassurances, she didn't sound good, and I'm fairly certain she rushed off the phone with me so she could go vomit.

I don't like this. I feel like I'm abandoning her. Logically, I know I'm not, but it doesn't change the sensation in my stomach. One day, I knew I wanted to get married and have kids, and when I did, I planned to wait on my girl hand and foot. I was never in a rush, but I knew when I got to that point, I'd be all in.

I want to be all in with Amelia, but I can't be.

"Hey, are you okay?" Joel asks as I get to the athletic center.

"Is everything okay with Amelia?" Aaron asks with concern.

"Yeah. No. Fuck, I don't know." I run my hand through my hair, pacing back and forth in front of them. "She's having horrible morning sickness and she feels like hell physically and emotionally. Dani called because Amelia was crying this morning and saying she wanted me. I feel like shit that I'm not there, but I can't drive three hours home every night and three hours back to school the next day. That's insanity. What the fuck am I supposed to do?" I look at Aaron. "What if it was Rae?" My gaze shifts to Joel. "Or Sarah?"

“It’s a different situation, so I don’t think my answer will help,” Aaron says.

“Tell me anyway.”

“There’s no situation where I’d let Rae be alone. Call me a possessive asshole, but I’d drag her with me kicking and screaming if I had to. Obviously, that’s not the right call with Amelia.”

I look at Joel, who might have a more realistic answer. But Aaron would go to the ends of the earth for Rae. I mean, I’d do it for Amelia, too, but she’s not the type to let someone burn the world for her. She wants to feel at least like an equal, if not the one in control.

“It’s not the same, but you know Sarah and I went through this earlier in the year. Being apart for a month was rough on us. It’s a big part of why she came back when she did. We needed each other. I know you’ll be there for Amelia every weekend, and no, you can’t go home every night. But there’s no reason you can’t go home *tonight*. You said this morning at breakfast that she started feeling sicker last night. She’s probably overwhelmed emotionally, and the sickness amplifies that. It might be good for you to be there for a night to help settle her, then come up with a plan for how you’ll talk throughout the week.”

I nod slowly, taking that in. “I need to talk to Coach. Thanks. I can’t wait to be finished with school so I can be there every night.”

“Are you going to live together?” Aaron asks.

“I don’t have a fucking clue, but at this point... that’s what I want. All right, I’m going to see Coach, then pack and get on the road.” I pause and look between them. “Thank you both for supporting me. I know it’s what we do for each other, but...”

“You’re finally on the receiving end?” Aaron asks.

“Yeah. It’s not easy for me, but it feels good.”

“Eh, it was about time we paid you back.” Joel winks at me, then tilts his head toward the building. “Go on.”

I give a quick nod, then head inside and up to Coach M’s office.

“Hey, Coach,” I say, walking through his open office door.

“Miles. What can I do for you?”

“I need to talk to you about a situation in my life that’s going to affect baseball for the rest of the season.”

He gestures to the chair in front of his desk. “Sit.”

I do, then I lay it all out. “My girlfriend is pregnant. We just found out this past weekend, and she lives back in my hometown. I’m doing my best to figure it all out and balance things, but I need to be there for her.”

Coach M nods. “That’s understandable.”

“If you want me to step back from the team—”

He holds up his hands. “It’s your senior year. I’m not going to take it away from you. Plus, it gives the younger guys more play time. Try to let me know ahead of time if you won’t make

a game. I'm less concerned about practice. You know your shit and you take care of yourself."

"Thank you for being understanding."

He gives me a small smile. "I know how you feel. My wife and I got quite the surprise for Christmas our senior year of college. Talk about a change of plans. It all worked out, though. This is college baseball. It's fun. For some of the boys on the team, it's their future. For you, it's a piece of the puzzle, and your real world problems are more important. Focus on what you need to focus on. Just keep me in the loop."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Coach. I plan to be there for the game tomorrow, but I need to head back home tonight."

"Drive safe. Keep me updated."

"Will do, Coach."

Thank fuck, Coach M is a reasonable man. It also helps that there are only a few more weeks left in the season, I'm not going pro, and this isn't a D1 school.

With that done, I make my way out of the building, aiming for my car so I can get back to the lake house, pack a change of clothes, and get to my girl.

She might not technically be my girlfriend, but she's mine. Mine to support, mine to protect, mine to take care of. Whether she likes it or not.

Amelia

Mini rice cakes are my salvation. Any flavor will do. They settle in my stomach and don't make me nauseous. Which might be why I have four different bags open on my coffee table right now and am reaching over from where I'm lying on the couch to rotate between them.

I have a water bottle with one of those big straws sitting on the floor so I can easily sip on some lemon water.

That's a trick I got from my mom. Whenever I was sick to my stomach as a kid, I had cold lemon water and straw to sip it through. I have no idea if it helped, but it felt like it did.

For a moment, I let my mind wander, imagining what it would be like if she were still her. How she'd have reacted to me being pregnant. How she'd laugh and tell me to lock Miles down because a man that's tall, dark, and handsome while still being a good guy doesn't come around often. I wouldn't be sitting here alone right now eating mini rice cakes. She'd be here whipping up something that would magically make me feel better. She'd rub my back and tell me how excited she was to be a grandma.

I haven't been to the nursing home to see her since I found out. Does that make me a shitty daughter? I adore my mother, but seeing her when I can't share the biggest news of my life with her is soul crushing.

I sniff back tears and violently shove another ranch flavored mini rice cake in my mouth. I'm exhausted physically and emotionally, and I've never felt lonelier.

What does one do when they're pregnant, lonely, and need to puke at regular intervals throughout the day?

This, apparently.

It's around seven, and I'm torn between wanting to give up and go to bed or considering getting up and making something to eat.

After munching on a few more rice cakes, I haven't decided anything. A key rattles in the lock of the door. Dani said she would come over and check on me, so I'm not concerned. Besides, what kind of murderer would have a key? But a moment later, the door swings open and it's not Dani who strolls into the apartment. It's Miles.

I push myself up to sitting and then do what a strong, capable woman shouldn't do. What I never used to do. I break down crying.

I don't need a man to save me. I never have. But as he crosses the room and wraps me in his arms, it's not about what I need anymore. It's about what I want. I want to be saved. Not because I can't take care of myself, but because holding everything together by myself is exhausting. Pure relief washes over me as he sets his bag down and walks over to the couch.

He sits down and pulls me into his arms. “Shh, baby. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

I curl against his large frame, letting him hold me tightly. “What are you doing here?” I mutter.

“Don’t be mad at her, but I talked to Dani, and she mentioned you weren’t doing so well. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it makes me feel weak,” I admit, though I refuse to look at him as I say it.

“The last thing I would ever think you are is weak. You’re strong, Amelia. One of the strongest people I know, but that doesn’t mean you always have to be. You’re going through insane changes right now that affect you both physically and mentally. Of course you’re going to struggle. I just wish you would’ve told me.”

“Did you come back here for me?”

He laughs. “Yeah. I wish I could be here every night with you. Dani said you were crying this morning. About what?”

I swallow hard. I’d be mad at her for telling him, but I’m too happy he’s here to care. I wish his arms didn’t comfort me so damn much because now I miss him more when he’s not here, and he’s not going to be here full time for several weeks. Even once he is, that doesn’t guarantee he’ll be *here*.

“I don’t know how I’m going to do everything. I wanted to go to school and become a lawyer. Right now, I can barely get

off my couch. I don't want to give up my entire life. Then I feel unbelievably guilty because I want this baby."

He grazes his fingers down my arm. "There's nothing wrong with any of that. And you don't have to give up on your dreams. I don't want you to. Maybe don't apply to law school right this second, but there's no reason you can't once the baby is here and you've recovered. We'll find a good daycare or nanny, and it'll be fine. You can have whatever future you want."

I sniff back tears. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being here."

"Don't thank me for that. I'm here for you, but I'm here for me too. I was going crazy worrying about you. If I could, I'd drag you back to the lake house with me and make sure you were taken care of in every way. That's all I want to do."

My stomach whirls, and I'm not sure if it's pregnancy-induced or because of the simplicity of his words. He just wants to take care of me.

"I think we should come up with a plan for these nights when we're apart," he continues. "If you're open to it."

"I am."

"Okay, good. So, I'll send you a list of when my games are, so you know. Those nights we can video chat beforehand, and if you're still awake, I'll text or call you after. On nights when I don't, we can video chat after my practice is over or after

dinner, whatever you prefer. I just have one request. Don't lie to me anymore. If you're having a bad day, tell me. I can't always be here, but I can talk you through it."

I stare up at him for a moment. I never know quite what to do with his sincerity. Maybe because I'm worried one day it'll fade. I feel like I've known him for years, but we don't know each other that well at all.

"Do you have the answer to everything?"

He chuckles. "Definitely not. I wish I did, though. It would make my life much easier."

"Miles, what happens when you move back?" I ask, forcing the words out. He never seems to hold anything back, and though there's a lot he doesn't know about me, I shouldn't be holding back, either.

"What do you mean?"

"Are we—going to live together?"

He shifts so he can get a good look at my face. "Do you want to? I—I'd love to be in the same place with you every night, but you're the one who put the brakes on this. I fully respect that, and I don't want to push you, but..." He sighs. "I might've been looking at bigger places during one of my more boring classes today."

"Bigger places?"

"I thought... since we haven't made any decisions about our relationship yet and we're still getting to know each other better, we might want separate bedrooms, plus one for the

baby. With my salary alone, we can afford something bigger and nicer. I know you love this apartment, but it's going to get cramped with a baby. I figured moving earlier on in your pregnancy would be easier, but all of that is up to you. Controlling things is what I do, but I don't ever want to control you or *us*. Whatever *us* means at any given time."

Where did he come from?

I thought he was a unicorn, but now I'm wondering if he's an alien. It's hard to believe guys like this actually exist.

"Ames?"

Right. He said things to me. *What do I want?*

I wanted him with me this morning. I feel better with him here tonight.

"I'd like to live together, but I do like the idea of separate spaces, so we can... grow into this." Tears fill my eyes again as I let out a heavy breath. "I want us to grow into something more, eventually. I just need time."

"I know, babe. I'll give you whatever time you need. Tomorrow, I'll send you some of the places I saw. Tell me what you like and I'll make some appointments for the next couple of weekends."

"Thank you," I whisper, trying to express my gratitude for so much in those two little words.

"Like I said, you don't need to thank me. I'm in, Amelia. No matter what our relationship status is or what we have to figure out, I'm in."

I laugh and his brow furrows.

“Sorry. Nothing you said was funny, but I wanted to say thank you again and I feel like it’s all I’ve been saying.”

He shakes his head, smiling. “Same here. I think we both need to stop saying that and start trying to get back to normal—or find a new one.”

“I like that idea.”

“Good. Now, have you eaten?” I open my mouth to answer, but he gives me a sharp look. “Besides mini rice cakes. They have like seventy calories per bag if you’re lucky. You’re growing a human. You need food.”

“You’re so bossy.”

A wicked smile grows on his face, and he leans forward, brushing his lips against my ear as he whispers, “You have no idea.” I openly shudder at that, which makes his smile grow. “I know what to make you.” He stands up and I pout as he walks toward the kitchen. I was really hoping he would make me cozy in bed. And by cozy, I mean... “Hey. You don’t get that until you eat. Remember the rules?”

He’s a mind reader, too. Noted.

Yep. He’s definitely an alien.

“I remember,” I say, trying to keep it cool. But I’m not. My body is a raging fire that only he knows how to calm.

I offer to help him in the kitchen, but he glares at me, mutters something in—I’m assuming—Korean, then tells me

to lay down on the couch or I'm not getting what I want later.

Another downside to pregnancy? Less sexual exploration. We'd actually been sending each other some BDSM info and both took a quiz to get a sense of what we were interested in. Bondage and Dom/sub play were at the top for both of us, but I don't think either of those are best explored while pregnant. Plus, I'm less in the mood for that stuff and more in the mood to be taken care of. Again, new for me. But damn, this man brings it out in me.



Miles made fried rice for dinner and it was delicious. It shouldn't be surprising since he mentioned his mom is a phenomenal cook, and he learned from her. Seriously, is there anything this man can't do?

He's a good cook, a great listener, kind, compassionate, a caretaker, thoughtful. Oh, and he knows how to touch me.

"Miles," I breathe.

He lifts his mouth from my nipple and gazes at me. "That's right, baby. Say my name. Tell me who owns your gorgeous body." He rolls my other nipple between his thumb and forefinger as he continues working my pussy and my clit with his other hand. He has two fingers inside me and his thumb on my clit. He kisses my neck. "Tell me who makes you come."

"You," I groan, fisting his hair as my eyes slip closed. I felt a little queasy after eating and was so exhausted the thought of

sex was off-putting, but Miles still wanted me to relax. Two strokes of my clit, and I was practically riding his hand. He stripped me naked and is now selflessly taking care of my needs. And wants. And oh... “Miles, yes. Right there. Please.”

“I’ll take care of you. Relax and show me how beautiful you are when you come.” I moan again as I clench around his fingers. “Just like that, baby. You’re doing so good. Come for me.”

If I have to.

A loud moan slips out as my body warms and wave after wave of pleasure pulses through me.

“God, yes.” He kisses my neck. “So fucking beautiful when you come for me. Good girl, baby. Such a good girl.”

He waits until I’m completely finished before he stops and lies down next to me.

“Thank you,” I breathe, and we both laugh.

“No thanks needed. I love watching you come. You really are so beautiful. I always think that.” And just like that, his sultry smile is replaced by a sweet, innocent one. Even though this man is *anything* but innocent.

I move slightly and his erection brushes against me. He fights back a groan.

“Strip down,” I whisper.

“Ames.”

“Shh.” I press my lips against his. “Get naked.”

After a moment of hesitation, he pulls his shirt off, followed by the rest of his clothes until I'm staring at his perfectly defined body and his rock-hard dick. Even that is sexy.

Alien, I remind myself. Has to be.

My mouth actually waters at the sight of it, but then my gag reflex says no fucking way, and I reach for the lube, enjoying every moment of him moaning and groaning as I get him off with my hands. His dirty talk continues, though not as often since he's too lost in his ecstasy—that's exactly what it is when he comes. Delicious ecstasy is written on his face as he shoots all over my stomach.

He kisses my neck and whispers, "You didn't have to."

"I like watching you come, too. The way the muscles of your neck tighten..." I lick his neck and he growls.

Groaning, I lay back against my bed. "I wish I felt better."

"You need sleep," he says, the mood shifting with his words as my sweet caretaker returns.

"Probably," I admit, fighting off a yawn.

"Not probably. Get ready for bed. I'm going to clean up the kitchen."

"Yes, sir." He inhales sharply at that. "Something for next time." I kiss his cheek, then climb out of bed, feeling better than I have all day. Orgasms really might be the answer to most of life's problems.

After cleaning up, I get cozy in bed, barely able to keep my eyes open. Miles joins me a few minutes later, his long body barely fitting in my queen-sized bed. A king will definitely be necessary. You know, whenever we share a bedroom. Which *will not* be right away.

Mind out of the love gutter, Amelia.

He kisses my forehead as I yawn, then he pulls the covers over us.

Sated and snuggled up to him with his large hand splayed over my stomach, I fall asleep, stupidly wishing I could have this every night.

Chapter Three

Riptide of Emotions

Miles

“ARE YOU SURE I shouldn’t come?” Amelia asks as I get ready to go to my parents’ house for brunch. It’s been just over a week since we found out, all the other important people in our lives know, and it’s time for them to know as well. I have no idea what to expect or how the fuck I’m going to say this. I’m trying hard not to enter an anxiety spiral, but my stomach hasn’t gotten that message.

I stop what I’m doing and walk over to her, looking into her seafoam green eyes. They captivate me every time. “You *can*. I think it’ll be overwhelming for you if you do. My mom is a therapist and understands boundaries, but she’s also wild and forceful and will tiptoe right to the edge of them. My sisters know no bounds, especially when it comes to giving me shit. They will ask a lot of questions, some of which we won’t have the answers to. They wouldn’t pressure you, but I’m worried it’ll be a lot for you to handle, and I don’t want to stress you out. My mom will probably want to come over here afterward, and I think that’s better. I can give her the details of our situation first so you don’t feel put on the spot.”

She nods. “That makes sense.”

Leaning down, I kiss her forehead. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want you there. I’m just trying to do what’s best for everyone.”

She gives me a tiny smile. “Coming up with a plan. As usual. That’s fine. Dani’s going to come over with the girls. Apparently, girl time is now mandatory for me.”

“You can say no,” I say simply. I bite back the concern I’m feeling. Amelia does not easily open up unless she feels a connection with someone—like she did with Dani or me. I’m not expecting it to happen overnight, but I need her to feel at ease with my friends.

Her eyes go wide. “No. I’m sorry. I don’t mean it like that. It’s just new to me. I want to get to know your friends better.”

I give a slight shrug. “They’re your friends now, too.”

She squints at me, then shakes her head. “You’re crazy. They don’t even know me.”

“They knew Amanda for two hours before she became one of us. When Rae McKinley—shit, Cooper—puts her mind to something or decides to add a new friend to the group, they’re going to become one of us whether they like it or not. Welcome to the cult.” I wink at her.

She laughs, then a wistful smile appears on her face. “I kind of like the sound of that.”

I pull her into my arms and hold her tightly, sensing an emotional whirlwind coming. Topics like family and loneliness bring them out the most. It’s not surprising, but I hate the pain she carries from all she’s been through. I wish I could take it away. I hope my arms wrapped around her eases some of it.

She sniffs and steps back, squeezing my hands. “You need to go.”

“Sure you’ll be okay?”

“I’ll have everything I need, and I’m sure the girls will be fawning over me. Don’t worry about it. Go tell your family.”

I kiss the side of her head and let go of her hands. “I’ll let you know if I’m bringing company back with me.”

“Thanks. Have fun and good luck.”

“Yeah. Thanks for that.”

With a deep breath, I head out the door, hoping the walk to my parents’ house will help me figure out how to say this.

It’s only a couple of blocks from Amelia’s apartment to their place, and I could walk it in my sleep. Most summers in middle and early high school were spent running around town with my friends, acting like idiots and having the best time doing it.

As I turn onto my parents’ street—technically still mine, I guess—I still have no idea what the fuck I’m going to say. I know my mom will be excited. She’s let us know in no uncertain terms that she wants grandbabies. Of course, she tells us we should only do it if we *really* want them, but one of us better want them. So hopefully, she won’t be pissed this is how she’s getting one.

My mother is a force to be reckoned with. She always has been. She was raised not to take anyone’s shit and to live an honest life with a kind heart. In turn, she raised us to be

fiercely good people—me especially. My little sisters got a bit more spoiled, but then I had my own spoiling for the years I was an only child. My dad, on the other hand, is one of the most relaxed people I've known in my life—for the most part. I'm almost positive I get my anxiety from him, and he's learned how to handle it well. The only times I've seen him at his worst was when his parents died. Particularly his dad. That was rough on him when it happened a few years ago. I know he won't be mad. I'm hoping he'll have some good advice for me because the anxiety is always there in the back of my mind. Amelia makes it easier. She sees my coping mechanisms and doesn't question them. When I'm not using them, she encourages them.

It's cheesy as fuck, and I'm not sure I ever thought these words would occur to me, but I'm pretty sure I've found my person. To some degree, I got it when Aaron and Rae would say that shit. Because I have Mackie. And Mackie is my person—to a point. Now that Amelia is in my life, though, I understand the difference.

I walk up the front steps, and as I get to the door, it swings open. Mackie grins at me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask with a laugh.

“Having brunch.” She looks at me for a beat, then shrugs. “You were with me when I came out to my parents. I know it's different, but... it's big. So, I'm here for you this time.”

“Thanks, Macks.” I pop a kiss on her forehead and stroll into the entryway. “Hello,” I call.

“Hi, honey,” my mother says, walking over and giving me a hug. She’s so much shorter than me, it’s ridiculous, and yet her hugs are all-encompassing.

“Hey, Ma.” I kiss her cheek as I let her go.

She looks me up and down. “You look tired. Do I want to know where you slept last night?”

She cocks an eyebrow. My mother is not stupid. She’s known for a long time that I liked to play the field. She doesn’t know that’s past tense, and I was up fucking my baby mama, then rubbing her back while she threw up. There was some sleep mixed in there, but not a lot.

I blink once, then smile. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to. Besides, I texted you before bed, Ma. You know I was safe.”

In high school, it was common for the six of us to spend the night at each other’s houses or go home late. The rule our parents developed was that we had to text them each night to make sure they knew where we were and that we were safe. Though texting where I was stopped when I got to college, I still text my mother every night to let her know I’m safe. It takes thirty seconds to do and gives her peace. Why wouldn’t I?

She nods slowly, letting out a long breath. “I know. I will always appreciate that. Taller than me and becoming a thoughtful young man, but you’re still my first baby.”

“I know.” Maybe I get it more now. Because the thought of not knowing where my kid is already makes me sick to my stomach. Or maybe that’s my base state these days. If I didn’t have anxiety, I might think it was sympathy nausea, but no. I’m just an anxious bastard. Even more so right now, because my mom is looking at me like she knows something is up.

I slide my shoes off, and as we walk into the house, my mother yells out in Korean, calling for my sisters, Addie and Jameson, to come downstairs.

While I know some Korean—at least enough for conversation—my mother is fluent. Her parents emigrated to the United States shortly after they got married. My mom and her little brother were born here. My grandparents chose to blend the American culture with their Korean culture, letting their kids have American clothes and music and cultural identity, while still maintaining a Korean cultural identity as a family unit. Because of this, my mother remains fluent in Korean, spoke it to us as kids, and taught me plenty of incredible Korean dishes. She also taught me how to make a perfect lemon meringue pie. She’s truly a jack-of-all-trades, and I’ve become a bit of one as well—at least in the kitchen.

We walk through the living room and then cut through the kitchen to the dining room. My dad is already there, setting orange juice on the table.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Miles,” he says warmly, pulling me in for a hug. “Mackenzie. I didn’t know you’d be joining us.” He gives her

a hug, too.

“Like I’d ever miss out on Katie’s homemade waffles.”

Sensing my anxiety, Mackie squeezes my hand, and I’m incredibly grateful she’s here.

As my sisters drag themselves into the room, a monstrous combination of teen sass and hormones, my mother instructs us all to sit.

Deep breath, in and out.

It’s impossible to calm my nerves or put on my mask. I know I don’t have to here. Sure, my sisters will probably make snarky comment after snarky comment, but I can handle that. I’ve been the butt of their jokes for a long time, including when it comes to having kids. Whenever my mother would not-so-subtly mention wanting grandkids one day, my sisters would laugh that my mom would have to wait until they were old enough because it wouldn’t be me settling down.

Now, here I am. Except I’m not exactly settled. There’s so much Amelia and I are still learning about each other. We’re doing things out of order and hoping it’ll still work. That’s what’s killing me right now. I don’t want to disappoint my mother.

“Miles.” Ma’s voice cuts through my thoughts, and I look up to see her leaning toward me, hand outstretched in front of Mackie’s place. She and my dad are at the far ends of the table, while Mackie and I are sitting next to each other, opposite my sisters. *What’s wrong?* she whispers in Korean.

I take her hand and meet her gaze, then look around the table. Mackie squeezes my thigh.

“I need to tell you something. It’s all kind of complicated, so I’m going to explain it the best way I can.”

“You can always tell us anything,” Dad says.

I nod and take one more deep breath before letting it all spill out as coherently as I can. “Back in March, at Sarah and Joel’s engagement party, I met a friend of Rae’s cousin and we hit it off. Though neither of us were looking for a relationship, we started... hooking up.” I clear my throat. “Anyway, we also started texting regularly and got to know each other a bit. We get along well and we have feelings for each other, but before we had a chance to fully discuss dating—” I shove my hand through my hair, feeling like I might break again. “She’s pregnant. We’re going to have a baby.”

“Oh. My. God!” Addie yells.

“You owe me,” Jameson whispers.

Addie glances at her. “No way I thought he’d ever have a kid before us.”

My dad sighs and rolls his eyes.

I look over at my mother. “Ma?”

“I’m going to be a grandma?”

“Yep.”

Tears spring to her eyes and she jumps from her chair, hurrying around the table. I push out of my chair and stand up,

letting her squeeze me tightly. Then she whispers in Korean, *it's going to be okay*. Those words fill me with relief.

“I love you, Ma.”

“I love you too.” She steps back and looks up at me, then my dad puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I blow out a breath. “Fuck, I was so nervous to tell you guys.”

“Language,” my mother says, shaking her head as she returns to her seat.

I sit back down, too, smiling now.

“Don’t act like you don’t cuss like a sailor when you get mad. Do you think I haven’t heard you on the phone venting to Kara?”

She shrugs. “My house, my rules. Speaking of which, I’m assuming this is why you haven’t been sleeping here when you’ve been home the last few weeks.”

“Uh, yeah. First, it was because I wanted to spend time with her.”

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” Jameson snickers.

I shoot her a glare. “And now it’s because I want to be there for her.”

“What’s her name?” my mother asks.

“Amelia Davis. She’s twenty-four, a paralegal.”

“But you’re not together?” my dad asks.

“That’s where it’s complicated. We were planning to make things official last Friday, but then she found out at her doctor’s appointment, and—”

“Aw, does she not love you?” Addie teases.

“Addison Marie,” my mother hisses.

Ignoring her, I continue. “She’s had a rough past few years, and now she’s going through something life changing. She needs a little more time and to settle into this first. I’ve told her how I feel about her—I want to be with her, but I’m not going to push her. I have been staying with her, though, because she wants me there and I’m doing my best to take care of her.”

“That’s good,” Dad says.

“I’m proud of you,” Ma adds, giving me a smile.

“I appreciate that, but a lot of it is due to how you raised me. Anyway, she knows I’m here this morning, but I didn’t want her to meet you all for the first time when we were dropping this news. You’re welcome to come to her place after this, though, if you want.”

“I’d love to meet her, as long as she won’t be overwhelmed.”

“No, I think she’ll be okay.” I clear my throat. “There is something you should know, though... family is new for Amelia. Her dad died when she was seventeen and her mom is in a nursing home with early-onset Alzheimer’s. She doesn’t have any other family.”

A look of determination crosses my mother's face. "She does now."

I let out a long breath as the last major weight lifts off my shoulders. Knowing my mother isn't upset and wants to be there for Amelia was the final piece of the puzzle for me. I know it'll take time for Amelia to settle into my world, but I want her here more than anything, and most of all, I want her to be comfortable and know she's supported.

Now that the heaviest part of the conversation is over, mom and dad ask more questions about Amelia and the pregnancy as we all dig into our food.

Amelia

“So Mackenzie is with Miles?” Amanda Hamilton asks from where she’s sitting on the floor next to my coffee table.

“Yep. Miles didn’t know, but she told me if I wasn’t going to be there, she was.”

“No judgment, but is there a reason you aren’t there?” Sarah asks.

“Miles didn’t want to overwhelm me. I would’ve gone if he wanted me to, but I’m kind of glad he didn’t. I’m still getting used to all this.”

“All what?” Rae asks.

“Having more than one or two people who care about her,” Dani answers for me.

“Well, you’re part of the tribe now. Don’t worry, we’ll break you in slowly,” Rae says with a smile.

“Yeah, not everyone can spend two hours eating brownies and pouring over life stories and magically become one of them,” Amanda says with a laugh. “Then again, I knew they were my people. If you haven’t been looking for that, or aren’t used to it, it can take some getting used to. They’re worth it, though.”

Amanda blows a kiss toward Rae and Sarah.

Sarah looks up at me seriously. “Hey, for the record, there’s no pressure. We just want you to know we’re all here for you. Not because you’re with Miles or having his baby, but because we’ve claimed you.”

“Like a vampire?” I ask with a laugh.

“Sookie,” Rae says in a hilariously deep voice, mocking Bill Compton—particularly the version of him from the TV show *True Blood*.

We all laugh at that.

“How are you feeling?” Sarah asks. “By the way, if you have any clinical-ish questions, feel free to text me.”

“I’m nauseous. I’m always fucking nauseous. I was up half the night puking.” And Miles was up with me. I truly don’t know what to do with him. He held my hair and rubbed my back. I’m positive if I asked for a foot massage, he’d give me one without a second thought. He makes me feel... cherished.

I don’t like that word.

It’s too much.

Too much pressure.

Too much perfection.

And perfection never lasts.

Perfect moments fade quickly because life is a series of imperfections. It can be beautiful at times, and the brief perfect moments should be celebrated, but they don’t last. I know

because I've had a lifetime of perfect moments eclipsed by sickness, heartbreak, and loss.

Enter my perfect alien man, trying to convince me that this can last.

“So, is he living here now?” Dani asks, trying and failing to hide a smirk.

“I—” I blink a couple of times. *Well, shit. Is he?* “Uh, no. He lives three hours away,” I tell her, giving her a little sass back.

“Bullshit,” Dani says in a cough. “He’s going to school there, but we both know every second he can be, he’s here with you.”

“That may be true.”

“So...” Amanda prods.

“I don’t know, okay? We haven’t really talked about that. We have... talked about moving in together, though. Which is so ridiculous. It’s even more ridiculous that I want it.”

“Why is it ridiculous?” Sarah asks.

I hold up my hand, then put up two fingers and wiggle them. “Two. We’ve known each other for not even two full months now. And I’m pregnant with his baby. We’re talking about moving in together. It’s crazy.”

“Or it’s right,” Rae says with a gentle smile.

I shake my head. “No. No way. I can’t go to that place yet. It’s too much. We’re going to live together and have separate bedrooms.”

Dani snorts at that. When I whip my head around to look at her, her eyes go wide. “Oh my god. You’re serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious,” I hiss. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because he’s hot, you’re obviously attracted to him, and *you’re having his baby.*”

“Again, I say, less than two months! We can’t go that fast. It’ll mess everything up.”

Dani’s demeanor changes, and she gives me a quick hug. “Ames, at some point, you need to trust that someone other than me is going to stick around.”

“I second that, since you’re stuck with us now,” Amanda says.

Sarah laughs. “We’re not known for giving up easily.”

When I look over at Rae, she has a surprisingly serious face on. “Miles is truly one of the best people I’ve ever known. He loves incredibly deeply, and he’s loyal. He played the field in the past, but he stopped in his tracks for you.” She reaches over and takes my hand. “Take the time you need, but don’t ever second-guess his intentions or his sincerity. He’ll do anything for the people he cares about.” She swallows hard. “I know because he’s done it for me.” Shaking off whatever intense emotion just hit her, she smiles big. “And don’t worry, he’ll be a great dad. We nannied together for a summer and all the kids listened to him better and loved him more than me.”

I stare at her for a moment. “Well, ten out of ten isn’t bad, I guess. It’s a little intimidating, though.”

“Don’t let it be,” Sarah says. “I used to feel like I didn’t deserve Joel’s love or like he had everything more together than I did, but the truth is, we all have our flaws and hardships. What matters is when you find the right person, you fight for what you have. We’re all rooting for you, but you have to feel comfortable and ready before you can take the next step. I know that all too well.”

I look around the room at them. “I think I like this,” I say quietly, pulling my knees up to my chest.

“Yes, we’re wearing her down already,” Amanda says with a laugh.

A timer goes off on Dani’s phone.

“What’s that for?” I ask.

“It’s time for you to eat something.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“Miles texted me and told me when you ate last and when you needed to eat again.”

I stare at her, mouth agape. I’m not sure if that’s sexy or irritating. He’s so damn bossy. But then I think about how he was bossy in bed last night while he talked me through an orgasm. Okay, fine. It’s sexy. I’m not telling him that, though.

“Fine,” I say with an exaggerated sigh. “There’s fried rice in the fridge.” Yes, Miles made it for me again last night. I’d been wanting it all week, and it settles well in my stomach.

“Sweet,” Rae says. “Miles makes the best fried rice. Of course, he learned it from his mom, who used that as a staple meal. She has tons of variations, and whenever any of us were over for dinner, we’d request that. It’s not even Korean specifically, but she made it her own. Thank God she taught Miles. He’s kept us eating homemade food instead of crappy pizza for the last four years.”

He takes care of everyone.

I hope he takes care of himself, too. If not, well... I can turn the tables and be the boss. We’ll see how he likes that.

Oh, who am I kidding? He’ll probably fucking love it.



“Is it okay if I give you a hug?” Miles’s mom asks me. She’s warm and endearing. I can tell she wants to wrap me in a massive hug and talk my ear off, but she’s holding herself back. Miles is standing across the room like a protective parent, watching to make sure I’m comfortable.

I flare my eyes at him because as much as I appreciate it, I’m not fragile. I can handle this.

“Of course,” I answer Katie, who instantly pulls me into her arms. *Ah, crap.* I’m not fragile, but I do have triggers. Weird triggers. Loving people trigger me because I miss the loving people in my own life. Especially my parents. “It’s so good to meet you,” Katie whispers. “If he ever gives you crap, let me

know. I'll keep him in line." She winks at me as she lets me go.

"Ma," Miles chastises. There's something adorable about the way he calls her "Ma."

She says something to him in Korean, then smirks as he rolls his eyes.

"Amelia," Miles's dad, Andy, says, stepping over to me. He gives me a questioning look and we laugh as I try to show that I'm open to a hug. "It's nice to meet you." He pulls me into his arms, and *oh no*. Tears flood my eyes as my throat clogs. It's been a long time since I've been hugged in a fatherly way by someone who gives off dad vibes. I've had nurses and coworkers and Dani's mom hug me like my mother might. When her grandmother died, I actively avoided hugging her father or grandfather. *Is this the first time a guy other than someone I've hooked up with has hugged me since my dad died?*

Fucking hell. I'm fully sobbing when he lets me go, and Miles flies to my side.

"I'm okay," I insist. *I miss my dad. He would've been thrilled to be a grandfather.* "I'm sorry for crying all over you," I say to Andy. "It's been a long time since someone hugged me... like a dad."

He nods in understanding. "For whatever it's worth, I lost my dad a few years back. I know how hard it is. I'm incredibly sorry you lost yours so young."

“Thank you,” I whisper, wiping my eyes. “I really didn’t plan on crying so much when I first met you both. I know this is a bit backward—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Katie says. “You have to do what works for the two of you. I’m just thrilled I get a grandbaby out of the deal.” I chuckle at that. Miles told me she’d be excited. “And you,” she continues. “There’s no pressure for you to form a relationship with me or anything like that, but I want you to know I’m here for you any time. I’ll make sure Miles gives you my number. Especially while he’s at school these next few weeks, please call me. Day or night. It doesn’t matter. I’ve always considered myself a bonus mom to his friends, and I want to give you that too.”

“I appreciate that. I would like to get to know you better. Both of you. It’s been a steep learning curve, suddenly having so many caring people in my life—but it’s a good problem to have.”

Really, it’s incredibly humbling. We had a community in the small town I grew up in, who rallied around my family when my dad was sick—and then promptly disappeared when the funeral was over. Even the person I thought I could count on for anything. To have people show up continuously simply because they want to support me? It takes some getting used to. And trust—something I don’t hand out much.

“We won’t hang around, but we wanted to introduce ourselves and let you know you’re welcome any time at our

house—and like I said, if you need anything, let us know,” Katie says.

“I—” *Whoa, mouth going rogue.* What am I doing?

“What, honey?” Katie asks.

I grumble to myself for being vulnerable.

Miles, whose arm is still wrapped protectively around me, pinches my butt.

I side-eye him, and he smiles innocently at me. Minus the eyes. The eyes give away his deviousness. And according to Dani, they’ll tell me anything else I want to know, too. Whatever. Topic at hand.

“I feel silly asking for this.”

“Ask away,” Katie says, and I can tell she’s *desperate* to know. She wants to help.

“Miles has been making me fried rice. It’s one of the few things that doesn’t make me sick. I was wondering if when he’s back at school—”

“I’ll make it whenever you need it. Just send me a text, okay?”

My cheeks heat, but I give a quick nod. “Thank you.”

“No problem at all. Feeding people is one of my love languages.” She smiles brightly, and I smile back, but inside, my heart clenches. My mother was the worst cook, but she was a fantastic baker. Ever since I was tiny, she’d have me in the kitchen with her. She was patient with me as I spilled flour

and made messes. *It's no fun if you don't get messy.* As I got older, I ended up in the kitchen more and more—with my dad. He was the cook in our family. Always making homemade pizza or the best cheeseburgers on the planet. That's the real reason McDonald's cheeseburgers are my favorite comfort food. Though the burger itself isn't as good as the ones my dad made, they're the same size and shape and have the same toppings we'd always put on. They remind me of him and all the time we spent in the kitchen together.

I realize I've zoned out of our conversation when Miles guides me forward. His parents are leaving and I've hardly said anything to them.

"Maybe we could have dinner together," I say suddenly, looking up at Miles. "Next weekend, when Miles is home?"

Katie's smile could light the whole town. "We'd love that."

"Absolutely," Andy agrees. "We'd be happy to have you or join you here, whatever you like."

"It was great to meet you both. I look forward to getting to know you more," I say genuinely. They seem wonderful. They're my baby's grandparents and Miles clearly has strong relationships with them. I want to build relationships with them, too. "Oh, wait," I say. Then I slip out Miles's arm and hurry over to the kitchen. I pull one of the ultrasound photos of our tiny peanut out of a folder and bring it over. "Take this." I hold it out to Katie. She takes it and looks at me with tears in her eyes.

“Thank you for this gift. For sharing this with us.” She forces out a breath. “Oh, I don’t want to start crying right here, but this means so much to me. Thank you, Amelia.” She gives me another hug.

As quietly as I can, I whisper in her ear, “Thank you for raising a good man.” I’m still figuring out how to trust him, but so far, he’s been better to me than I ever could’ve imagined. I would’ve done this on my own, but having him by my side makes this so much better.

She squeezes me tighter, then lets me go. “Next time, we’ll try for fewer tears and more laughter. Sound good?”

“Perfect,” I agree.

Miles quickly hugs his mom, and then his parents head out. As Miles closes the door behind them, I walk back to the living room, caught in a riptide of emotions, as one after the other pummels me and pulls me under until I can barely breathe.

Miles

Amelia stumbles toward the couch and I quickly cross the apartment to her and wrap an arm around her, then pull her onto the couch with me, holding her as she cries.

“I’m a mess,” she mutters.

Leaning down, I kiss her forehead. “You’re beautiful.”

“I meant emotionally,” she gestures to her tear-stained face.

“So did I. There’s nothing messy about feeling the way you feel. You’re facing the trauma of losing your father and I’m guessing in a different way, losing your mother, too. There’s nothing messy about that. It might feel raw and painful, but it’s beautiful, too. There’s healing in that pain.” I pull her tighter to me and she rests her head on my shoulder, wrapping her arm around my stomach.

“You can’t be real,” she huffs through her tears.

I chuckle at that. “We made a baby together, and as we already discussed, it was not immaculate. You know I’m plenty *real*.”

“I’m not used to it.”

“What?”

“Being taken care of.”

“You’ll get used to it because I’m not stopping.”

She doesn't answer right away, instead nestling even closer as I gently rub my fingers over her upper arm. "Good."

My chest feels lighter and my heart warms. She wants me to take care of her. When she told me she wasn't ready for more yet, I didn't know what to expect. I wasn't sure if she would put space between us or run from me. To my surprise—and delight—she's pulled me closer. I don't think it's that she's not ready yet. I think she wants to ease into it. That's fine by me. I'm already treating this like we're endgame because that's what I want us to be. I was already falling for her before this, but seeing the more vulnerable sides of her has only made me fall harder. It's also made me even more protective of her than I was before. I always want to protect the people I care about. The fact that she's carrying my baby kicks that up about a thousand notches. But it's more than that. As I learn more about her past and all the heartache she's endured, I would do anything to protect her heart. I can't heal it, but I'll do everything in my power to keep it from breaking anymore.

She stays in the same position for a long time, and I don't move either, other than my fingers still dancing up and down her arm. Eventually her tears subside, leaving her sniffing softly. A little while later she's grown so quiet, I assume she's fallen asleep, and I consider whether it's better to settle into the corner of the couch or move her to the bed, but then her grip on my waist tightens.

"I used to snuggle like this with my dad." Her voice is a haunting whisper, and she doesn't move a muscle as she speaks. "When I was little, I was all over him. As an only

child, I was close with both of my parents, but no question, I was my daddy's girl. As I got older, if I had a bad day or just needed to unwind, I'd snuggle on the couch with him while we watched TV or we'd just talk." She stops, her voice thickening with emotion again. "When he was going through chemo, he said that sitting with me like that was the only thing that made him feel better. My last memory of him was sitting like this in his bed when he could barely move. He died the next morning. I stopped seeking out any kind of physical touch from anyone after that—except my mom. Even with her, it was never the same level. But with you..." she trails off, and I shift slightly so I can see her face.

It's red and splotchy from crying. Her eyes have turned an insanely gorgeous aquamarine color. Her curly hair is frizzing at the edges of her face. She's stunning. Just like this, she's fucking perfect.

"I'll always hold you for as long as you want me to. I love having you in my arms." I rest my hand over her heart. "And if it helps you heal, I'll never stop."

She snuffles and wipes her eyes again, letting out a shaky breath. "I'm sorry I started crying when I met your parents. I haven't had a dad-hug in a long time."

"You don't have to be sorry. They understand, and they were just happy to meet you. Don't worry, next time you can meet my sisters and go toe to toe with them and their snarkiness."

She laughs at that. "That's my specialty."

"I know."

“I’m hungry,” she mumbles.

I glance at the clock. “You definitely need to eat. Come on.”
I try to stand, but she holds me in place.

“Just... a few more minutes.”

I relax against the couch, repositioning so we’re sitting how we were before. “Of course.”

I hold her close and hum a song my mom used to sing when I was little. It’s been popping into my head a lot lately. I graze my fingers up and down her arm, switching from humming to softly singing the song. If it makes her better and heals her hurting heart, I’ll stay here in the corner of this couch for the rest of my life with absolutely no complaints. How could I ever complain when I have this incredible woman wrapped in my arms?

Chapter Four

Dangerously Gentle

Miles

“WHAT I WANT TO know is if he edited those photos on his phone or if he has an app for that. Because I don’t care what angle or lighting he took them from, there is no situation where he could’ve made that shitty apartment look that good,” Amelia says, shaking her head.

“No shit. I’m sorry. I don’t like that you were even breathing the air in that place.” I start my car, pissed off that I was duped by that listing. I should’ve known something was up when the guy was open to me seeing it any time, like he had nothing better to do. There were dead flies everywhere, and it looked like a nuclear bomb went off in the bathroom. The *only* bathroom. Which was down a flight of stairs and across the apartment from the bedroom despite the fact that the listing said it had two bathrooms, one on the same floor as the bedroom. Which, I guess there was if you consider an empty room with sketchy plumbing but no sink, toilet, or shower installed a bathroom. Lesson learned, never trust an apartment listing on Facebook.

I’ve lived an extremely privileged life. I’ve never had to hunt for an apartment. I lived in the house I grew up in from age six on. I moved into a dorm room with two of my best friends and a relaxed guy on the baseball team. Then I moved into a swanky lake house my friend’s parents owned. Even now, I don’t have to worry about needing to rent an apartment like

the one we just saw because I'll be making a good income right out of college. Sure, I've earned this position by working hard in school and as an intern for my boss for years, but other people work hard and still get paid shit.

Great, why not fall into a guilt spiral?

Amelia's laughter pulls me back to reality, and I'm convinced I could live off that sound. I appreciate seeing the vulnerable pieces of her—that she shares them with me—but it fires me up when I see her sass or happiness break through.

“It was terrible, but at least it's a fun memory now. We should've taken a picture. *Our first apartment hunting experience.* Seriously, though. Not even close to the worst place I've ever been in. My mom and I slept in some *sketchy* hostels when we were traveling through Europe. Not all of them were, and we didn't always stay at hostels, but at a couple... let's just say the dead fly apartment would've been a five-star upgrade.”

I look over at her as I stop at a red light. “How much did you and your mom travel?”

“Oh gosh, we went so many places. My dad always wanted to see the world, but he never had the chance, so he made us promise we'd go. He had a really good life insurance policy because he wanted us taken care of, so we took some of that money and spent two years traveling the world. We spent Christmas in Germany and enjoyed the magic of Chinese New Year in Shanghai. We spent weeks in Scotland because we loved it so much we didn't want to leave. We didn't really

have a plan, just ideas of where we wanted to go. We'd try somewhere new, then go back to somewhere we loved. We went to Portugal four or five times. We met a local couple our first time there, and each time we went back, we stayed with them. I swear we explored every nook and cranny of Porto. It was incredible. We celebrated my twentieth birthday there, then came home and restarted life again."

"Wow. That sounds amazing." Amazing is a lame word for it, but I don't have anything better. We took vacations every year and regularly went to Charleston, but I've never explored the world like she has. She's only a couple of years older than me, but she's been through so much. Enough to make up another lifetime.

"Do you want to travel?"

"I'd love to. My mom would love to do a trip to South Korea when my sisters graduate from high school. She's only been there once when she was a kid, so she really wants to go back. I'd love to see it. Personally, I want to go to Australia. I know it's a long-ass flight, but I've always wanted to go."

"Well, I'm a seasoned traveler. We could go to Hawaii, then meet your family in South Korea, then continue on to Australia and New Zealand. Maybe Singapore. Singapore was one of my favorites. It might take a couple of months, but we could do it."

I pull into the parking lot of the apartment building we're looking at next. This one is an upscale complex, so hopefully it'll be better than the last.

I shut the car off and turn to Amelia. “Do you think we could do it with a kid?”

She shrugs. “It’ll take extra planning, but doing it in chunks will help make the flights doable. Honestly, the earlier you start flying with kids, the easier it is to travel as they get older. I know it might not be possible regularly, but I want to travel with...” She trails off, then clears her throat. “I want to travel with our kids, so they can see the world. It gave everything in my life a new filter. I want them to have that.”

I can’t stop the smile spreading across my face. “Our kids, huh? Already planning for the future?”

She slugs me in the arm. “Let’s see how we manage one.” She flings her door open and climbs out of the car, muttering, “And if we end up together.”

Knife, meet heart.

Logically, I know it’s not wrong for her to think about it like that. We haven’t known each other that long, but I’m certain this girl is it for me. I told myself when it was right, I’d know. And I do. There’s no question that Amelia, with her sass, strength, and guarded heart, is my forever girl. I hope she figures that out sooner rather than later.

“Well, this is very different from the last place,” she says as we walk into the lobby.

Very different. This is our third apartment today. The first was the former apartment of Rae’s cousin, Mark’s fiancée. Mark bought the building and renovated the top two floors

into a home for them. The other apartment is below theirs and only two bedrooms, but it also had an office that would work as a nursery, and it was more spacious than Amelia's current apartment. It's a decent option. It was middle of the road as far as price, though Mark probably would've knocked a bit off since he knows me. The second place—the *Lord of the Flies* apartment—was the cheapest of the three, but I was trying to consider a variety of options. It was one side of a duplex. Craplex is more like it.

Where we are now is the most expensive option, but still in our budget. *My* budget. I factored everything by what my salary could handle alone so Amelia can take as much time off as she needs to after the baby. Though our workplace offers a couple of months of paid maternity and paternity leave, knowing she wants to be a lawyer, I want to make sure she has the option to not work and focus on school.

What I wasn't sure was if this would be her style. It's an upscale apartment building. It comes with two parking spaces in the parking garage beneath it. The building is monitored by cameras and the parking spaces and the outside of each apartment have a camera for added safety. There's a small playground out back in the fenced-in recreation area, which also includes picnic tables and grills. It's like a mini park. For me, it's perfect, but I want her to love it, too. This is also the only building with an elevator, which is important to me with a baby involved. I don't want Amelia walking up and down tons of flights of stairs while pregnant—another reason I hated that

last house. And it'll make getting a stroller up and down easier, too.

One of the building managers greets me, and I introduce him to Amelia. He takes us up to the fourth floor—the top floor—and leads us to the apartment. 404. There are four apartments on this floor.

When he swings the door open, allowing us to walk inside, I'm hit with a surprising sensation. *I feel like I'm home.*

There's a small area to take off shoes and coats, but it all opens into the kitchen and living area. The kitchen is in front of us to the left. An island with six stools runs the length of the L-shaped kitchen. The counter top is a cream and gray marbled granite and the cabinets are a dark cherry.

“Oh, wow,” Amelia breathes, but her eyes aren't on the kitchen. To the right is the large living area, which features a wall of windows looking out over the edge of downtown.

I walk over and wrap an arm around Amelia as we look out the windows. This is more than I thought my first apartment would ever be, but when I think about a place to raise a family, I see a Christmas tree in the corner by the windows. I see a dining room table along the wall near the door where we can eat. I see big, plush couches and a round coffee table. A cozy rug for our baby to crawl around on. I see a future here.

The manager tells us to take our time looking through the apartment and hands me an information sheet.

As soon as he's gone, Amelia spins to face me, grabbing the information sheet out of my hand. It has the floor plan on it, the square footage, safety details, and the price of the rent.

She reads it over, then hands it back to me, looking pissed. "Are you kidding me?"

Breathe, I remind myself. Her emotional swings have been big, and I don't want to jump to conclusions about the reason for this one.

"About what?" I ask calmly.

"Why would you ever show me this place when we can't afford it?"

"We can afford it."

"*You* can afford it. I could never afford this alone."

My brow furrows, and I step closer. "You'll never need to afford this alone."

"It's easy for you to say that now. What happens when life gets hard? What happens if you leave? I won't have you or my home anymore." The words come out with vitriol, but her eyes are filled with hurt.

It did not, not for one single second, cross my mind that she might think that.

Wrapping my hand around her arm, I look into her eyes. "Who hurt you? I'm going to need a name and address so I can go kick their ass for making you think that anyone who cares for you is eventually going to abandon you."

She inhales and exhales heavily a few times as she stares at me. Then she rips her arm from my grasp. “You mean besides my parents? They didn’t abandon me, but they’re gone now. One way or another.”

“Maybe so, but I know that’s not where this is coming from.” I step forward again, looking down at her, the guarded look on her face. “So, I’m going to ask you again. Who hurt you, and what did they do?”

She stares up at me for a moment longer, still breathing heavily, then she turns and walks over to the couch set up in the apartment for staging. She sits down, her head dropping into her hands.

Cautiously, I walk over and sit down next to her. This woman could rip my balls off and feed them to me on a good day. I don’t want to push the wrong buttons right now, but I need to know where the fear and uncertainty are coming from.

“My high school boyfriend,” she finally says, her words muffled by her hands. A second later, her head shoots up, and she looks at me. “We started dating when I was fifteen. Freshman year. We were friends first, and he was my rock. My dad battled cancer on and off throughout my life. I was seven the first time, but they were able to remove the mass in his colon. He did some chemo that wasn’t too rough on him, and he got better. It came back again when I was eleven. They caught it early and did the same treatment plan. He was good for another few years, then it came back again when I was sixteen. They caught it in his lungs first, but that’s just where it

had spread to. He did harsh chemo and fought for as long as he could—you know the rest. My boyfriend was there for me for all of it. He was supportive. He listened to me vent. Held me while I cried. He wasn't scared by my dad's cancer and maintained a friendly relationship with him throughout it. I truly thought he was my person. We'd get through anything together because we were already handling this hard thing in stride, but it was all a lie."

"How so?" I ask, moving closer.

"I was at our house after the funeral—hosting everyone in town, it seemed like—with my mother. He'd been at the funeral with his parents and was supposed to be coming over separately. Instead, he called me and told me he wasn't coming because he was breaking up with me." My eyes go wide in horror. What an absolute fuckhead. "He said he'd fallen out of love with me a couple of months prior, but he still cared about me, so he stuck it out to support me, but he couldn't keep up the act because he'd been talking to another girl, who he wanted to make things official with. The day I said goodbye to my father, I lost the person I thought I could count on for anything."

I rise from the couch and start pacing, filled with a murderous rage.

Rae likes to say that when Aaron gets pissed, he starts acting like the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast*. I never fully understood it until right this second.

I want to tear this guy's head off for being such an utter asshole and hurting Amelia so deeply. I don't give a fuck that he was seventeen. There's such a thing as common decency. Jesus fucking Christ, who does something like that?

"What?" Amelia chokes out, and I realize I said that last sentence out loud.

I sit back down next to her. "That's why you don't let people in?"

She looks down. "It's a part."

"Amelia." I wrap my hand around hers. "Ames, look at me." Her eyes lift to meet mine. I cup my hand around her cheek. "I'm so sorry he hurt you like that. It was a shitty thing to do, no matter what his age or the situation. I appreciate you telling me what happened. It helps me understand why you're guarded. I don't blame you for that. My words may not mean much to you, but I will never ever do that to you. Even if a romantic relationship didn't work between us, we would still be a team. I will never abandon you or our child. I will reassure you of that as often as you need me to, and I'll keep showing you with my actions, too."

She stares at me for a moment, blinking a few times before looking down. I drop my hand from her cheek, letting it rest on her thigh instead.

"I'm sorry," she breathes. "You've done nothing but show me you'll be here for me, but it's hard for me to trust. If my ex had been a bad guy, it wouldn't have hurt so much. For so long, I could trust him—I *did*. Only for that trust to have been

misplaced. It makes it harder to believe you—or anyone else—won't do the same thing. Are you—”

“What?”

“Are you sure you still want more with me, knowing all the baggage I have?” Uncertainty flashes in her eyes. She needs to be sure of my commitment to her.

“Do you hold my anxiety against me?” I ask, hoping I won't regret it.

Her eyes flare and she grabs my hand. “No. Of course not.”

“Then why do you think I'd ever hold your past or your trauma against you? We all have our hardships. What matters is that we keep working through them.”

Her eyes roll over my face, begging for my words to be the truth. Something she sees must reassure her, because she leans up and presses a soft kiss to my lips.

“Your patience makes me feel safer.”

“*You* make me feel safer. Your hand around mine instantly calms my anxiety. You might not believe it yet, but we're better together.”

“Maybe I'm starting to.”

I rest my forehead against hers. “Does that mean you want to see the rest of the apartment?”

She nods, her head rolling against mine. “Yes, please.”

I squeeze her hand and stand up, pulling her up with me. “Come on. We need to finish looking so we can get you home

for lunch.”

She rolls her eyes but smiles. “Whatever you say. Lead the way, bossy man.”

A growl slips out at her words.

I’m going to be truly fucked if she doesn’t want more with me. I’m way past falling for her now. I’m utterly fucking obsessed.

Amelia

“I guess I need to start packing,” I say as we walk back into my apartment. I’m absolutely starving, and whether Miles knows or he’s just decided I need to eat, he goes directly to the kitchen and starts warming up food.

I sit down on a stool at the small kitchen counter. This apartment feels much smaller now after seeing the new apartment. *Our* new apartment. We’re moving in together. It should scare me, but outside of my trust issues, it doesn’t. And *that* does scare me. How did I end up here? It’s almost May. Three months ago, I didn’t even know this man. Now I’m carrying his baby, moving into an apartment with him, and... falling. Despite my instincts screaming at me to run from long-term commitment, I am falling hard for Miles.

He starts the microwave, then leans over the counter on his elbows. “You do need to start packing—if you’re sure about the apartment.”

“I put my name on the lease, so I better be.”

“Ames...”

I reach over and rest my hand over his. “I’m sure about it. It’s more gorgeous than I could’ve imagined and I love the modern but homey style. It’s perfect.”

I’m rewarded with a heart-melting smile. “I’m glad you feel that way. It’s my dream apartment.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Really?”

The microwave beeps, and he stands up straight again. “Yep. That kitchen—I can imagine cooking in there. Lots of fried rice.” He slides the bowl in front of me and grabs the gochujang hot sauce his mother gave me that I’m obsessed with. I pour some on and take a big bite.

“Mm,” I groan. It’s so damn good. Turns out this baby wants all the spicy food. Hot sauce and butter on popcorn? Yep. Buffalo wings and ranch? All day long. And the magic fried rice with this hot sauce.

“You kill me when you make noises like that,” he rumbles, pulling his bowl from the microwave and coming to sit next to me.

“Well, you better eat fast, then.”

He side-eyes me, then slides a glass of water in front of me. “Nice try. You need to eat slowly so you don’t get a stomachache. And drink lots of water. You weren’t hydrating much this morning.”

I glare at him, then stand up and strip off my shirt and pants.

His eyes narrow to slits. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I say innocently. “I’m just feeling a little *hot*.”

He grumbles as he looks back at his bowl and shoves another spoonful into his mouth.

I’m winning.

I take another big bite and let out a long, unladylike groan. It's partly to drive him crazy, partly because it tastes so damn good, and partly because I'm horny as hell. My horniness rarely lasts long these days, but I'm rabid when I am.

He cracks his neck, but doesn't look at me.

Okay, time to take things up a notch. I grab the water and take a long gulp, then fan myself. "So hot," I mumble before removing my bra.

Miles grumbles again, then sucks in a sharp inhale. He tries to eat another spoonful of rice, but misses his mouth.

I take another bite, then throw my head back and groan, wiggling on my stool. "I need..." I moan softly, and suddenly Miles isn't sitting anymore. He's standing behind me. Lips on my neck and hands roaming down my front.

"Keep eating." His voice is soft but his words are still an order.

"Yes, sir." I take another bite as he tweaks my nipples. Then one hand slides down my stomach, dipping inside my underwear. He swirls two fingers through the wetness he finds, then drags them back to my clit, circling it over and over as my head drops back against his shoulder.

"Keep eating, gorgeous." Forcing my head upright, I take another bite. "Good girl."

"Miles," I whimper.

"You're doing so good, baby. Three more bites."

I glance down at my bowl and see he's right. I take another bite and he pinches my nipple. With the next bite, he moves his fingers faster. I manage to get the last bite down, but my vision is going hazy.

“Good girl, baby. Now come for me so I can fuck that perfect pussy.”

“God, Miles.” My head drops back again as I wrap my hand around his neck. “Yes. Yes... Miles...” I let out a string of breathy moans as I come on his hand.

“So perfect,” he mutters, lips lightly pressed into my neck. “Now get in your room and spread your legs. I want to see you waiting for me.” I stand up and he swats my ass. “Go.”

He watches me hungrily, then grabs his bowl as I walk into my room. A few minutes later, he walks in, takes in my naked body, and crawls over the top of me. Then he's buried deep inside of me and praising me to another mind-blowing orgasm.



My phone ringing wakes me.

What time is it? Morning? Night? What the—

I force my eyes open and grab my phone, my brain slowly registering that it's the afternoon. I must've fallen asleep after Miles made me come so hard I could barely breathe.

“Hello?” I ask, shoving the phone to my ear.

“Hi, is this Amelia Davis?”

“Yes.”

“Hi, Amelia. This is Darlene from Sunrise Nursing Center.” My heartbeat skyrockets. “Nothing’s wrong.” *Thank God.* “I was calling to check in. Usually we see you here every couple of days or at least once a week. It’s been a little while since you’ve been in, though. We wanted to make sure everything is okay.”

Guilt trickles through me. I feel like a parent who has been kindly called out by a teacher for missing their kid’s school play.

My hand drops to my stomach. That will *never* happen.

Miles walks into the room wearing gray sweats slung low and a crisp white tee. His brows furrow as he takes me in. He sets a glass of water on the bedside table, then climbs into bed with me.

“I’m sorry. I—I’ve had some personal things going on. I lost track of how long it had been.” *Lie.* I know exactly how long it’s been. Sixteen days. I went the night before my doctor’s appointment when I found out I was pregnant. I haven’t been able to bring myself to go in since then. “I’ll, um, be up sometime this week.”

“There’s no rush, of course. We just like to check in with families when we notice big changes like that.”

“Of course,” I say, bitterly swallowing back my guilt. “Thank you for checking in.”

“No problem. Have a good day.”

“You too. Bye.”

I hang up and set my phone down, running my hands over my face.

“What’s wrong?” Miles asks, rubbing my back.

“That was the nursing home where my mom lives.”

“Is she okay?”

I nod. “Yeah. She’s fine. They were calling because I haven’t been there in over two weeks.”

“Two... oh. You haven’t been since you found out?”

I shake my head, unable to look at him. “I’m a shitty daughter.”

He wraps his arm around me and tugs me closer to him. “You are not a shitty daughter. This is a huge life change.”

“It is, but... that’s not why I haven’t gone. I mean, it is, but... it’s not because I’m overwhelmed or need time to process. It’s because...” I sniffle.

I am so sick of crying. Life was easier when I didn’t let anyone in. Every so often I cried myself to sleep, then I got up the next morning and moved on. Now I have to face my trauma head-on. It’s dumb.

“What?” Miles asks, his voice dangerously gentle. He’s smart and sexy, a great dirty talker, but his gentleness disarms and undoes me. It makes me want to spill every secret and give in and hand him my heart. *Dangerous.*

“I can’t tell her. I’ll say the words, but she won’t understand them. Or she won’t know who I am. I won’t be telling my mother. I’ll be telling whatever delusions she’s having that day. She won’t be able to hug me and celebrate with me, and it’s too much. It crushes me. I’d feel better talking to my dad’s ashes. At least I might believe he could hear me.” I swipe at my eyes with my wrist. “But none of that means that I shouldn’t be there with her. She deserves better from me.”

He strokes one hand through my hair, the other dropping to my stomach. “You’re doing the best you can in a difficult situation.” He kisses my temple. “How about I go with you?”

I turn to stare at him. “You’d do that?”

To my surprise, he starts laughing. “I’m sorry. It’s completely inappropriate. It’s just...”

“What?” I ask, confused but also desperate to know why he’s laughing.

“Since we were kids, every single fucking time Rae says anything remotely like that to Aaron, he answers with ‘Don’t you know I’d do anything for you?’ It’s so unbelievably aggravating to me that I now want to say the exact same thing. Not because I don’t mean it or I don’t feel that way, but it almost seems cliché at this point.”

In spite of the situation, I laugh too. “So, what you’re saying is we’re becoming cheesy and ridiculous like them?”

He shrugs. “Apparently. Because I will do whatever you want me to do and be wherever you want me to be. I told you

I'm in, and I mean it. Whatever you want or need, I've got you. I promise."

I stare at him for a moment, then let out a slow breath before softly kissing his cheek. "For the record, that was a better answer." I take a few deep breaths, then squeeze his hand. "I'd love it if you came with me. Could we go tonight?"

"We can go right now if you want."

Thinking it over, I nod. "Yeah. Let's do that."

He smacks a kiss on my cheek, then climbs off the bed. "Drink your water and get dressed. I'm going to make you a snack to eat in the car."

"Can you make the—"

"Buffalo popcorn? I've got it covered, babe. Get dressed." He walks out of the room, but calls back, "Hydrate!"

Sometimes I'm not sure whether to swoon or smack him, but after years of doing everything on my own, it feels good to be taken care of again.



Miles's hand is wrapped tightly around mine as we get off the elevator on the lower level of the nursing home, where the locked dementia unit is. Three years ago, my mom was still my mom—though she was starting to show signs of forgetfulness and paranoia—now she's in a locked dementia unit. She's only sixty. Then again, my dad was only fifty-three. Age doesn't matter. Fate comes for you no matter what.

I stopped by the locked door, which I know the code for, and look up at Miles. “I don’t know what kind of day she’s having or if she’ll know who I am.”

“We’ll work with whatever version of her we get today. No matter what, I’m glad I get to meet her.”

I can’t even pretend that doesn’t turn me into a puddle.

After giving myself a second to melt over his sweetness, I key in the code and press the button that silences the alarm, then pull the door open.

I hate the smell of nursing homes and hospitals. They smell like cleaner and overcooked food, and if it’s that kind of day, they smell like shit, too. And yet, when we walk through the door, we’re greeted with smiling faces. Various staff members smile and say hello. One of my favorite nurses, Noelle, walks over.

“Hi, honey. How are you?”

“I’m doing okay,” I answer semi-honestly.

“Darlene mentioned she spoke to you today. I hope she didn’t make you feel guilty. Those of us that know you assumed there was something going on. I thought about texting you to see if you needed a drink or a shoulder to cry on.” She glances at Miles. “I can see that you don’t. But if you ever do, let me know.”

“Thanks, Noelle.” I swallow hard. I haven’t said this out loud to anyone besides Miles, Dani, and some coworkers. “I

found out I'm pregnant a few weeks ago, and the thought of coming to see her..."

She grabs my hand. "Aw, hon. I know it hurts. I lost my mom so young. Having a baby is an exciting time. It's also a great reminder of what we've lost. She's in a pretty good place today. She probably won't remember you telling her tomorrow, but she should recognize you today. It's not much, but it's the best case."

The thought that she might actually have a reaction to this—even if she doesn't remember it later—ignites a little hope in my heart.

"Thanks," I say, taking a deep breath. Miles still has his hand wrapped tightly around mine, so I give it a squeeze, then nod toward the dining room where Mom is sitting at a table doing a small puzzle with large pieces.

"Hi, Mom," I say, rubbing her back as I sit down next to her. Her light blue eyes drift up to mine and her face scrunches. "It's me. Amelia."

Her eyes widen. "Oh, of course. Hi, honey. How are you? How's your father?"

That's the worst part. When she remembers me, she rarely remembers Dad's gone. Though it's probably nicer for her not to have to relive that pain.

"I'm good. Dad is... the same as always."

Miles glances at me, so I gesture to the chair he's standing by and he sits, though I continue standing. It's too hard for me

to sit when I have so much nervous energy coursing through me. I do this every time and eventually Mom tells me to sit down because she hates me hovering over her.

Mom looks from me to Miles. “Who are you?”

Miles flashes his most charming grin. “I’m your new favorite person.”

“His name is Miles. Miles, this is my mother, Eileen.”

“A beautiful name for a beautiful woman,” Miles says, and I’d roll my eyes if he wasn’t so adorable.

Mom laughs and points at him. “I like you.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief and look at the puzzle. “Want any help with that?”

She waves a hand and shakes her head. “No. Tell me what’s new with you.” She looks up at me and the sick feeling I always get when I look into her eyes washes over me. It’s impossible to explain, but whether it’s dementia or someone severely mentally ill, there’s a look in their eyes that tells you something isn’t right. I’ll never forget when I first started noticing it. Right around the same time the extreme paranoia started. It was awful trying to figure it all out on my own.

“Are you going to talk to me or not?” she asks. My mother never used to be crass, but loss of inhibitions comes with Alzheimer’s and that includes any filters she once had.

“Sorry. I actually do have something to tell you. I’m going to have a baby.”

She stares at me, then blinks a couple of times. “But you’re just a girl.”

“I’m twenty-four, Mom.”

“Oh. Right.” She looks from me to Miles again, then says, “When did you get married? Did you elope? Get married without me?” She’s a combination of horrified, hurt, and mad. Mad is a place you don’t want people with dementia to go because they can get aggressive sometimes.

“Get married without you? No way. You were there,” Miles says.

I look at him with flared eyes, but he gives me the subtlest of winks, then pulls me onto his lap and begins regaling my mom with a story about a wedding we never had, but she loves every word, filling in her own details—some of which I think are from her wedding to my dad based on some of the pictures I’ve seen.

We chat for the better part of two hours before my mom gets visibly tired and more disoriented. As we get ready to leave, she gives me a hug and whispers, “I can’t wait to meet the baby, sweetheart.”

Tears fill my eyes, but I quickly wipe them away. “I’m excited, too, Mom.”

Her brow furrows. “I’m not your mother, Alice. I’m your sister. Lord knows I’d never be like her. Get some rest.” She points at Miles. “Take care of her.”

“I will,” Miles assures her. A nursing assistant walks with her down the hall, as Miles pulls me into his arms. “Okay?” he asks.

“I have no idea, but I never really do.”

He kisses the side of my head. “Let’s go home. We can stop for McDonald’s cheeseburgers on the way.”

I smile up at him. “I don’t know how my mom feels, but you’re definitely *my* new favorite person.”

He chuckles at that. “I’ll let that go straight to my head.” I smack his chest. “Seriously, ego boost of the century.”

I shake my head as we walk out of the unit, waving to a couple of the nurses as we go, then we make our way out of the building. Once we’re out in the fresh air, I look over at Miles.

“Thank you for coming with me. You made this easier on me. And the fake wedding you came up with was pretty great.”

He laughs as we walk toward the car. “That was a little bit of Rae and Aaron’s wedding combined with what I remember of the video from my parents’ wedding.”

“It was perfect. Not having to deal with all of this alone was even better.”

“I can go with you from now on. At least on the weekends when I’m in town. Once I’m back, we can go together as often as you want.”

“Thank you. I’d like that. Honestly, with being pregnant and all the feelings it has awakened surrounding this, I think a longer weekend visit with you there is better.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

We walk in silence for a moment, then I glance up at him. “I hope you know, if you need me—want me—for something, I’ll be there for you, too.”

“I always want you,” he says with a sultry smile, but there’s something in his eyes that tells me he’s holding back.

I take his hand and stop as we get to the car. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He shrugs. “It seems silly in comparison to this.”

“If it’s important to you, it’s not silly. Tell me.”

“My final game is on Friday, and there’s a ceremony for all the seniors. My parents will be there, but I also get to have someone stand up with me and wear my jersey. I know we aren’t officially together, but I’d like it to be you. If that’s too much, though, Mackie will do it—”

“I’d love to,” I say, squeezing his hand.

The smile I get from that takes my breath away. His green eyes turn so vibrant they shimmer like jewels. I’d do anything to see him smile like that every day.

What the hell am I doing?

I’ve been saying repeatedly that this isn’t official. That I need to take it slow, and I still do, but I’m kidding myself if I

think this isn't a real relationship. We have sex, we cuddle, we talk about everything, and we take care of each other. And I'm falling for him. Hard and fast. We're doing everything people in a relationship do except call each other girlfriend and boyfriend. As that smile grows and he pulls me to his lips for a passionate kiss, I think it's time to change the ridiculous rules I've implemented in this relationship.

Chapter Five

One Last Base

Miles

“FUCK, I NEEDED THAT.” I fall onto my back on my bed at the lake house, sweaty and panting. “I needed you.” I lean over and give Amelia a hard kiss, splaying my hand over her stomach as I do. She won’t admit it, but she has a tiny bump. I’m obsessed with it.

“I needed that, too,” she says, running her hand over my cheek as I pull away.

Sex. She needed sex, I remind myself. It takes a lot of reminding these days that we aren’t a couple. Partly because we act like a couple, but mostly because I want us to be one. I also do not want to push her, so here I am, acting like it’s normal that I just fucked the woman carrying my baby who I’m not actually with but am falling harder for every single day.

It’s fine.

Or something like that.

I pull her closer. Why not blur the lines a little more?

Fuck, that’s so Aaron and Rae.

Whatever.

I push the thoughts out of my mind and focus back on the gorgeous woman lying in bed with me. Pulling her closer, I run my fingers up her ribs, letting them dance across her chest, right where her tattoo is.

The uncertainty of life is magic.

“Is this a quote?”

She shifts slightly, turning to look at me. Then she nods. “Yeah. My dad used to say ‘the uncertainty of life is where magic is found.’ When I was little, I asked him what it meant. He told me that the most magical parts of life come from uncertainty or the unexpected because if we know exactly what’s going to happen and how to handle it, where’s the excitement? Where’s the *magic*? I grew to love that sentiment, so when he died, I got the tattoo. Now I have his words close to my heart.”

“That’s beautiful.” I lie flat on my back again and close my eyes. I wish I could make uncertainty feel like magic instead of terror.

She reaches down and twines her fingers with mine. “Maybe it can help you.”

I flash my eyes open and smile at her. “Can you read my mind?”

She laughs out loud. “Not quite. But I figured with anxiety... that probably isn’t so easy for you.”

“Not so much.”

“Well,” she says softly, grabbing my hand and putting it on her stomach again. “There’s a whole lot of uncertainty in here, but there’s magic, too.”

I roll onto my side, moving my hand from her stomach to her cheek as I stare into her intoxicating eyes.

The desire I feel for her is so intense it's hard to breathe. It's not sexual desire, though. I want *her*. And as she stares back at me, it seems like she wants me, too.

"Miles," she breathes, then I steal that breath, capturing her lips in a rough, passionate kiss.

I'm so unbelievably fucked. I think I might be falling in love with her. Actually, there's no question about it. Especially when she pulls me closer, her swollen lips pushing harder against mine. She makes a noise that's a cross between a whimper and a moan and shimmies her body even tighter to mine, like she can't get enough of me—of this.

Her tongue dances with mine, swirling over it in long, hard strokes, asking for more with each movement. I want to give her more. I want to give her everything.

I tangle my hand in her hair as I deepen the kiss more, pouring my heart out to her without words. Letting her take what she wants and giving her everything she needs.

I'm so utterly lost in her I can't think. I can barely breathe. The apocalypse could be happening outside, zombies could be beating down the door, and I wouldn't know. A kiss has never fucked me up so much. Then again, I never cared about kissing before her. I did it because I knew it was important, but it never meant anything to me. Now I'd be hard-pressed to choose between this kind of kiss and sex.

What is happening to me?

A pounding on my bedroom door makes us both jump.

The zombies must be here.

That's fine. I'll die happy.

"Yeah?" I yell, not letting Amelia go.

"Almost time to go," Aaron yells.

I whip my head around to look at the clock. *Shit*. I was supposed to be ready by now so we can ride to campus together. Yet again, I suck as a friend. Maybe it's a good thing I never found anyone worthwhile in high school. I would've been too hung up on them to focus.

Or maybe it's just the woman carrying my baby.

"Sorry. Be there in a minute," I call.

"Okay," Aaron says, then his footsteps depart.

I give Amelia another quick, firm kiss, then sigh. "Guess I need to get ready."

I roll over and she slaps my ass. "Yep. Can't wait to see that ass in some tight baseball pants."

I stand up, stark naked, and flex a little as she laughs.

Spinning around, I kiss her again. I can't get enough. "Thank you for being here tonight. It means a lot to me."

She gives me a sultry smile, though her eyes are light. "I'm excited to be here." She pushes herself up, so she's sitting. "Guess it's time for me to get ready with the girls." Climbing out of bed, she walks around and gives me a hug. "I guess I'll see you later tonight."

“No guessing. You will. I can’t wait to see you in this.” I set my white jersey with purple lettering on the bed. We’re wearing our gray ones tonight, and whoever wears our jerseys for the ceremony after will be wearing our white ones.

She runs her hand over it, then leans up and whispers. “I can’t wait to wear it. Especially later tonight, without anything else.” She kisses my neck, then turns to get dressed.

She’s going to kill me.

Assuming the zombies don’t get me first.



“Boys,” Coach says, commanding our attention as we stand in the clubhouse. “We’ve had a hell of a season. Third overall in the division. More importantly, you’ve come together and played well. I’ve seen lots of individual and team growth. For those of you returning next season, keep it up. For our graduating seniors, enjoy your night on the field. Let’s make this final game as good as we can. Now, I have someone else here to hype you all up or whatever the kids say these days.”

We all laugh at that, but I stop abruptly when Trevor takes Coach’s spot on the floor.

“Hey y’all. So, I think you all know me at this point.” Trevor has been actively involved with the team since he’s majoring in sports management. He wanted to learn about how the team is run from every angle. “A few of you know me better than others.”

“Too well,” I say.

“Hey, shut up. I’m trying to be profound. Anyway, I was lucky enough to play baseball for many years. Even after an injury, I couldn’t give it up. That’s why we’re all here today. We love the game. So go out and play your hearts out tonight. Make the crazy play, run harder, play the best damn game you ever have. And to the seniors—a few of whom I’ve had the joy of playing with in the past—enjoy every second tonight. This is the last time you get to play on a field like this. Have a kickass game. And don’t do anything stupid, or I’ll roast you for it.” He winks and steps to the side.

Coach claps his hands. “Well, you heard him. Play smart and play hard. Get your asses out there.”

The clubhouse slowly empties, but Coach gives us a nod, and we take a moment with Trevor before walking out.

“I’m glad you’re commentating tonight, but I wish you could be out there with us,” Aaron says.

Trev shrugs. “Sometimes I do too. Honestly, though, it’s fun as hell watching and picking it all apart. I’m glad I still get to be a part of it.”

“Well, whenever we get bored and make an old man baseball team, we’ll all get to play together again,” Joel says with a laugh.

“Fuck yeah. I’m in for that,” Trev says. “Tonight, live it up for me.”

I clap a hand on his shoulder. “You know we will. Tonight is the bookend of fifteen years of playing baseball together, it deserves nothing but the best.” I point at Trevor. “Make us sound good.”

“Don’t play like shit then,” he says with a wink. Then he shakes his head. “I know it should be *Go, Sea Dogs*, but right now, all I see are three Ida Warriors ready to kick some ass.”

“We still bleed Warrior red,” Aaron says.

“Always will,” Trev agrees. We stand together for a moment until Trevor claps his hands. “Get out there.”

Trev turns and walks out of the room, and Joel, Aaron, and I walk out of the clubhouse to the dugout one last time.

Amelia

“Are games always this intense?” I ask Mackenzie as we stand in line for the bathroom. This is my third time going and I’ve only been sipping on water. Pregnancy bladder can suck it. At least one of the girls has come with me each time I needed to go. I’m thankful for how they’ve welcomed me into their little tribe, even if I don’t totally feel like I fit yet. I got ready with them before the game and it was a lot of fun. Lots of laughter and giving each other shit. Even if it’s hard to keep up with at times. I was surprised to see Rae so emotional, but when she gave me the backstory on Aaron breaking his hand, my heart hurt for both of them.

I don’t consider myself judgmental necessarily, but I admit, I had the girls pegged as being more cheerleader-ish and popular girls—maybe even spoiled. Privileged, I guess. Sure, in some ways they are, but the more I hang out with them, it’s clear they’ve all been through it one way or another. It’s comforting, like I’ve found my home in a group of messy women who don’t have it all together but are trying their best.

“It depends on the game,” Mackie answers as we move forward in line. “The team they’re playing isn’t their biggest rival, but they’re good, which means the Sea Dogs have to put in the work to win this one. I hope they pull it off. Honestly, I think a lot of the guys would prefer this type of game over a guaranteed win. It’s harder, but it means more.”

“I guess that makes sense.” I got into the game a lot quicker than I was expecting to, especially considering my last sports ball event of any kind was homecoming my sophomore year of high school. Who knows? Maybe my game has secretly been baseball all this time. Though, I think of all the sports, it’s one of the easier ones to follow.

“How does it feel cheering Miles on?” she asks with a coy smile.

I’ve come to believe that Mackenzie has telepathic powers. Like no matter what you tell her—or yourself—she knows the truth you’re hiding inside. She definitely knows the truth I’m feeling—that I’m not cheering on Miles as his hook-up, friend, or the woman carrying his baby.

Miles wants more. I’ve known that from the start. I want more too. I’m getting closer to being ready for it now.

“When I watched him run for third on that... double?” I’m still working on the terminology.

Mackie smiles. “Yeah, double. That was their first baseman, Ricky.”

“Right. I seriously could not take my eyes off Miles, and I don’t think I’ve ever cheered louder in my life.”

“You’re so cute,” Mackie says. “Over here acting like you’re not head over heels for him.”

Seeing into the depths of my soul, party of one.

How does she do that?

“It’s all over your face.”

My mouth drops. “Can you teach me how to read minds? It seems like a cool party trick.”

I get what I’m learning is the signature Mackie grin. “Useful in lots of other ways, too.”

I elbow her in the ribs and she laughs. After a moment, I say, “This might sound silly, but thanks for letting me wear his jersey. I know that’s what he wanted, but I also know how much he means to you.”

She smiles softly. “He’ll always be my guy, and I’ll still be cheering him on.” She points to his number on her face—forty-one. “There’s no way seeing me in his jersey would make him as happy as seeing *you* in his jersey. And I want him to be happy.” She stares at me for a moment, as if she’s trying to see if I can read her mind. I guess I sort of can, because I have a feeling I know what she’s going to say.

I roll my eyes. “Go ahead. Say it.”

To my surprise, though, she doesn’t make it a joke. “Please don’t hurt him. He’s never done this before because no one else has ever made him *feel* before. He cares for you and puts you first. Even above us, and that speaks volumes. Don’t take that for granted.”

Nodding, I say the truth. “I won’t.” I don’t take a second of how Miles treats me for granted, and I never will. I spent so much time with no one to care for me, that the way he does touches my soul, and I want to give him the same in return.

“Good,” Mackie says as the stall door in front of us flies open. “You’re up, preggers.” She gestures to the stall door, and as I walk past, she smacks my butt. I look over my shoulder at her and laugh. It’s easy to see why she and Miles are perfect best friends. I’m glad he has her, and I’m grateful she’s welcomed me into her world as well.



“Deep breath, in and out. Stress isn’t healthy for the baby,” Dani says, somewhere between serious and teasing as she rubs my back. It’s the bottom of the seventh and the score is tied. Miles just came up to bat, and I am a ball of nerves. I know Miles wants a win tonight. He wants to go out on a high. What I wasn’t expecting was how much it means to their entire friend group. Baseball is rooted in the early days of their friendship, and tensions are high tonight.

I rub my hands together as the first pitch is thrown. “Come on, baby,” I whisper under my breath. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dani lift an eyebrow, but I barely notice because I’m too focused on Miles. Though the ball seems to fly down the middle of the plate, he stands back and doesn’t swing. “Why didn’t he swing?” I growl.

Jesse leans over from the other side of Dani. “It’s his thing. It helps disarm the pitcher. I’m surprised he didn’t do it earlier in the game, but he might’ve wanted to make more of an impact.”

I let out a rough sigh. I don't understand any of it. All I know is I want him to hit the ball far, so maybe the person on second can score and he can get to base. On base? I don't know what the right wordage is.

“That's strike one for Miles Hyun-Hansen. With a .474 batting average, Miles leads the division.” Trevor's voice booms through the small stadium. It's clear he loves announcing.

The pitcher gears up again and Miles watches closely. He throws, and again Miles doesn't swing, but this time because it's low.

“Seriously, breathe,” Katie instructs from behind me. “I know you're new at this, but trust me, he's making the right calls. He wants to get a hit.” She rubs her hand over my back and leans closer to whisper, “Especially with you here.”

I turn around to look at her, and she smiles. It's similar to Miles's cocky smile—not too surprising he got it from his mom.

I turn back around and stare at Miles, only to see him looking in my direction. His eyes lock with mine, and even from a distance, I can see his cocky smile. My stomach does a little flip, and somehow, I know he's going to hit this one. Still, I watch with bated breath as the pitcher throws. Miles's stance shifts ever so slightly, and then there's a loud crack as he slams his bat into the ball with so much force it easily tears across the stadium, flying into far left field, and then over the fence.

I jump to my feet, screaming and cheering.

“And that’s number twenty-four this season for Hyun-Hansen!” Trevor yells through the speakers as the crowd goes wild.

My man just hit a home run. *My man?* There’s less and less question about that every day. I’m scared I’m not ready. Terrified I don’t know how to do this after years of doing everything alone. As my hand comes to rest on my stomach, I know the truth. One I can’t hide from anymore. I don’t just want this baby. I don’t just want Miles. I want the life the three of us could have together. And that scares the shit out of me, but again, I feel that whirl in my stomach, one that pushes me to believe I’m on the right path, and this is where I’m supposed to be.

Where *we’re* supposed to be.

As he crosses home plate, he looks into the stands again, pointing toward us—me—and I suddenly get the urge to scream, *that’s right, I’m having his baby*, to all the thirsty girls drinking him in.

Okay, that’s it. These pregnancy hormones have made me crazy.

That or else I’m falling head over heels for Miles Hyun-Hansen.

Miles

Every hit is for her. Every perfect catch and ball whipped back to Aaron's glove. Every inning closed out is to make her proud. It might be stupid or completely fruitless, but I want to make her proud. I want to see her eyes light up when she walks up to me after the game. I want her to know that it's all been for her. My baby mama. My girl. Whether she likes it or not, that's what she is, and tonight, she has my name on her back for all the world to see.

She's having my baby.

I never thought that would be so fucking hot, but it is. It makes me feel primal, like I'm hopped up on steroids. One home run wasn't enough. I want more.

In actuality, it really wasn't enough because the score is tied again. They got another run in the top of the eighth, and since then, it's been a shut-out. It's the bottom of the ninth, and we've got to get our shit together or this will go to extra innings. Not that I wouldn't mind an extra inning or two out here, but people tire out, and things get sloppy. It's better to win it now than not at all.

Joel's on second, and our outfielder, a sophomore, is up. I've been working with him all season on reading pitches because he's got good power, but last year, on the rare occasion he played, he'd swing at damn near anything. There's an advantage to being choosy. Not everyone can throw a pitcher

off like me. I've honed that skill over years of baseball, but you can learn to read pitchers.

I hold my breath as I watch. There are no outs, and I know Joel can get to third with damn near any hit because he's fast as fuck, but if it flies to just the wrong spot, it could be a double play that would put us two outs closer to extra innings. Our hitter needs to get deep into the outfield.

The first pitch runs low. Ball one. *Come on.* One more batter after him, and I'm up. Then Ricky, then Aaron. We've got a powerhouse set here, we just need to get there.

The second pitch flies toward the plate and he swings. He doesn't get as much of it as I wish he would, but it's enough to get Joel to third and our hitter to first. The next batter steps up. He gets in a shitty groove of fouling off until finally he gets a solid hit, but it's a pop fly. One out.

Fine. We've been in worse spots. With Joel on third, any hit away from third base could get Joel in.

I stretch my neck a couple of times, then step into the box. Here we go. I watch the pitcher, the way his fingers sit on the ball. Slider. I watch and wait, but ultimately don't swing. The ump calls it a strike, but it was on the edge of being too low. I take another breath and wait. Next pitch. I can tell from the release it'll be high—and it is. *Breathe.* I quickly glance toward the section of the stands where our group is sitting. All of our friends, a bunch of the parents, Rae's grandfather, Jesse and Dani, and my girl. Her eyes find mine for half a second, then my eyes are back on the pitcher. He takes his position,

and I know this is my hit. Unfortunately, the ball dips as I swing and I don't catch as much of it as I want. It goes right down the third base line. Joel doesn't run, but our guy on first moves to second and I safely get to first.

Ricky is up next, but unfortunately, he's our second out. Bases loaded, and Aaron freaking Cooper is stepping into the batter's box. Aaron isn't a powerhouse hitter, but he's consistent, and that's what we need right now. Something to get Joel across home plate.

He looks at Joel, who winks at him, then at me. I nod. Then, of course, his eyes drift to Rae. And he might just knock this fucker out of the park, because there's not a damn thing he wouldn't do to win this game for his girl. After all they've been through, I know exactly how much this means to him.

Aaron is a methodical hitter. He doesn't skip a pitch for the hell of it like me. He watches. He waits. And he swings at just the right time. Tonight? That's the first pitch. It fouls off, but Aaron stays calm. I lean off the bag, ready to run as fast as possible. The second pitch flies, and this is it. I can see it in his eyes.

It's right in his sweet spot, and he nails it. It soars into right field and we all take off running. Joel crosses home plate before the ball gets to the infield. Our sophomore crosses next, and I don't bother trying to run over home plate one last time. Trev is already announcing that we've won, and the rest of the team is swarming the field, but I turn and run toward the mound. Joel and Aaron meet me a few feet before I get there,

and we throw our arms around each other, sharing a quick group hug before our girls come barreling across the field. We turn and wait for them, and I have to say, I wish I could've had this for a little longer. As much as I love Mackie running to congratulate me, it's different as Amelia walks through the crowd toward me. Rae dashes by me and leaps into Aaron's arms.

"Nice hitting, Ace," she says, emotion thick in her voice. My heart swells. I'm so fucking happy for them that they get to have this night. After the hell Aaron went through with his hand and how rough senior night was in high school, they deserve this.

Sarah jumps into Joel's arms and he spins her around. I'm equally as happy that they get to celebrate tonight after everything they went through this year.

Amelia trots over to me, and I wrap her in my arms, being careful not to squeeze too tight as I spin her around and set her down. She looks up at me in awe, and I could live in this feeling forever. "You were amazing."

I brush my thumb over her cheek, then lean down and kiss her. "Well, I had my good luck charms here. How could I not be?"

Her smile grows, and she throws her arms around my neck, giving me a tight hug. Then, to my surprise and delight, she lifts her legs up and wraps them around my waist. "Congratulations on kicking ass in your last game," she whispers in my ear. "I wish I could've been around for more."

I kiss her again because I can't hold back anymore. Goddamn, I want this woman. Give her my heart, my life, any fucking thing she asks for. She can have my damn kidney if she wants. I just want her.

I slowly set her down, then sweep my hand through her hair. "Seriously, thank you for being here. It means everything to me."

"I wouldn't have missed it."

We stare at each other for a moment longer before everyone else surrounds us, congratulating us on our win.



The stadium has cleared out with only family members, friends, and some college faculty and students remaining for the senior night ceremony. I'm one of only six seniors on the team, but it's cool that they take the time to acknowledge us. A couple of the guys will be escorted by their moms, another by his girlfriend, and of course, Sarah and Rae will be escorting Joel and Aaron.

Amelia's arm is tucked through mine as we wait for them to call my name. For simplicity's sake, I listed her as my girlfriend, but I warned her ahead of time that was only because baby-mama-who-I'm-still-hooking-up-with is a mouthful. Even if my girlfriend is what I want her to be, I'm not going to rush her.

“Now, number forty-one, Miles Hyun-Hansen, escorted by girlfriend, Amelia Davis.”

We walk onto the field, passing two of the other guys.

“Miles has played catcher for the Sea Dogs since his junior year and has been the team’s strongest hitter as well as a mentor to younger members of the team. Miles will be working for JWAC Business Consulting in Ida, New York, after graduation.”

Coach M walks over and shakes my hand. He puts a pin on my shirt, then gives me a baseball signed by the coaches and staff. “Good luck. Keep in touch.”

“Getting soft, Coach?”

He chuckles. “The truth is, I’ve always been a big softie. You just don’t get to see it until you graduate.”

We both laugh, then he pats me on the shoulder before walking back to his place.

They call the next guy, and then it’s Joel’s turn.

“Number twenty-seven, Joel Wilkinson, escorted by fiancée, Sarah McKinley. Joel has played second base for the Sea Dogs since freshman year. Fast and quick-thinking, Joel is in the top five of the division for steals and led the team to a record-breaking number of double plays this season. He will be pursuing an athletic training master’s degree through Binghamton University.”

The audience cheers, and Coach walks over, also giving him a pin and a ball.

Finally, it's Aaron's turn and the guys on the team get a little wild. It's no surprise they came to love Aaron. It's his personality. He riles people up but also connects with them. He's great at bringing out the best in them.

“And finally, number three, your favorite closer and assistant pitching coach, Aaron Cooper. He is escorted by his wife, Rae Cooper. Aaron has been a coach for the team since his freshman year, and a pitcher for the team since his junior year. Aaron has elevated the pitching skill of the team while also breaking the Sea Dog's record for saves. After graduation, Aaron will be working as a guidance counselor and baseball coach in Ida, New York, while pursuing his master's degree.”

Again, everyone cheers, and Coach gives Aaron his pin and his ball—which I happen to know was signed by the players rather than the coaches. For Aaron, I know that will mean more.

Once Coach steps back, the audience gives a standing ovation.

“Give it up for your Sea Dogs graduating seniors!”

Amelia squeezes my hand and I look down at her. Her eyes are shimmering with pride, and it makes my heart beat harder. Pride rolls through me as I squeeze her hand back, then look out at the stands. As much as graduation will feel good, this is the moment for me. The moment of transition to the next stage of my life. Even though it scares the shit out of me, I'm excited, too.



“So, I see you’re rocking more of a beard now,” Trev says with a laugh. “Is it the daddy thing?” he teases.

I smack his stomach. “Shut up. You just don’t want anyone else to compete with besides Aaron.”

I look over at Joel, who is clean shaven again now. He can’t decide. Jesse looks better with a shaved face, in my opinion, which is good because the beard he attempted was patchy at best.

“The boys are becoming men,” Jesse jokes.

“I’m already a man,” Aaron says, puffing out his chest. “I’ve got the beard, I’ve got a full-time job lined up, and I’m married.”

“Hey, I’m on my way there,” Joel says.

“Bet I can lap you,” Trevor teases.

“What does that even mean in this context?” Jesse asks.

I hold up my hand. “I’m having a kid first. I automatically win.”

“In that case, I think Nick and Braden won back in high school,” Trev says, and we all share a laugh at their expense.

Whatever the case, we’re all growing up. I’m not usually the nostalgic one. Leave it to Rae or Joel, but right now, it’s on my mind. The official days of baseball coming to end feels like

it's signifying the end of our youth. It's crazy that I've had them all in my life for sixteen years.

The girls walk over, joining us on the field where a mini-party has broken out with pizza and drinks. The guys from the team are all here and some alumni and faculty, plus all our family and friends.

"You look good in the baseball pants," Amelia says, checking out my butt.

"Thank you. You look good in my jersey."

She smiles up at me, then looks around. She leans in closer, and opens her mouth, but before she can say anything, Aaron smacks my arm.

"Hey, can we borrow you for a second?"

I look down at Amelia and over at the guys.

"Go ahead," Amelia says sweetly.

I kiss her cheek, then follow Aaron and Joel as they walk toward the pitcher's mound. To my surprise, though, they don't stop. They keep going until we're all standing around home plate.

"Baseball is where it all started," Aaron says, as we look out at the stadium. "The love three kids had for the game grew into a lifelong friendship. Even though regularly playing baseball ends here, our love of the game doesn't. And our friendship never will."

“Did you ever think we’d end up here, as close as we are now?” Joel asks.

I laugh at that. “Honestly? Not for a second. I love you guys, but I assumed once I went to elementary school, I’d see you guys at recess and on the weekends. Thank God I was wrong.”

“We’re weird, aren’t we?” Joel asks with a laugh.

“Awesome is more like it,” Aaron says. He holds his fist out and we both bump it, then take another moment to stare out at the stadium.



The party on the field is thinning out, and I can tell Amelia is getting tired. The parents, Jesse, and Dani all left about a half hour ago, as well as most of the faculty and alumni. A few coaches and other players are still here along with our friend group. I walk over to Amelia and wrap my arms around her.

“Thanks for being here with me. We can head back to the lake house now.”

She looks up at me. “I hate being so tired all the time.”

“Supposedly, it’ll get a little better in the second trimester.”

She laughs. “I think I might need to get used to not getting enough sleep... ever again. Anyway, I have a sort of cheesy request.”

“Hit me with it.”

“I’ve never been on a baseball field—or any sports field—before. At least not outside of gym class. Can we walk around?”

I wrap my hand around hers. “Absolutely.”

We stroll down the first base line to the outfield and walk across. When we get to center field, Amelia pauses and looks around. “I feel inordinately small standing here.”

“It’s pretty cool, right?”

“It is. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

“Thank you for being interested. Being here. I know this is a more relationship type of thing, but...” I sigh, running a hand through my hair. It’s so hard not to cross this line with her. “It means a lot to me.”

She inhales deeply, then reaches up and presses a soft kiss to my lips. It’s unlike her. Normally she has something snarky, funny, or profound to say.

“Miles,” she whispers as she drops back onto flat feet.

“Hm?”

She bites her lip, then shakes her head at herself, much like she did before she told me she’s pregnant. She takes both of my hands and looks up at me. “I’m ready.”

“Ready?”

“I’m still scared and figuring things out. I’ve spent so much time alone, and I’m still getting used to having someone else be a big part of my life. I’m going to need to go at a snail’s

pace, but I want to be a snail with you. If you're still interested in me being your girlfriend." Her eyes dance and she gives me a sassy little smile.

Holy fuck.

I let out a laugh of disbelief. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

A smile grows on my face. "Fuck yes, I want you to be my girlfriend." I give her a quick kiss. "You just made my whole damn day."

She laughs and looks at me like I'm crazy. "All the celebration and *this* is the best part of your day?"

I slide my hand under the jersey she's wearing and rest it over her stomach. "You're always the best part of my day. Both of you." Then I dip my head down and press my lips into hers as the sun setting over the field bathes us in warmth. There's nothing dirty about this kiss. It's tender and sweet. The kind of kiss that says more than words can. Or words I can't say yet. I'm always two steps ahead with her, and I can't rush and risk scaring her. I meant it when I said she's everything. Her and our baby... I had no idea how profoundly she or this pregnancy would change my life, but it's a change I've been aching for, even if I was afraid to admit that to myself. Now that I have this, I'll do anything to keep it.

She throws her arms around my neck and deepens our kiss. Sucking me in and pulling me into her world. When she

finally breaks the kiss and looks up at me, I tell her, “No taking it back.”

She laughs. “I don’t want to.”

“Good.” I squeeze her hand and lead her across the field. “Now, if we’re going to go at a snail’s pace, we better get walking.”

“Very funny.”

“Hey, I’m serious. This snail’s pace thing can have its benefits.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yep. Like when I have you stripped down to nothing but that jersey and my face is buried between your legs and I take things nice and slow.”

Without missing a beat, she casually says, “Or when I’m riding you, going as slow as possible to keep you at the edge all night.”

I grin at her. “Or until you fall asleep.”

She tries to glare at me, but starts laughing. “Yeah, that’s probably about right.”

“Whatever pace you want to go, sweetness. I’m here for it. As long as you’re mine.”

“We’re yours,” she whispers. And *fuck*. That’s it. I’m done for. Lost to this girl and the baby growing inside her. Our baby. Our future.

I don't know how I got so damn lucky. I look down at her again. Maybe because I finally found my unicorn. All I know is I'm lucky as fuck, and I will never take a second of this for granted.

Chapter Six

Sexy Boss

Amelia

DON'T THROW UP. DON'T throw up. I wiggle in my chair as I fan my face with my program. *Why is it suddenly so hot?*

A package of Ritz crackers drops into my lap. “Eat.” I glance next to me at Katie, who gives me a knowing look. “I know it seems counterintuitive, but it will help. The same thing used to happen to me. I’d get queasy, then I’d feel insanely overheated. The nausea would kick into overdrive. It wasn’t until the tenth time it happened that I ate something and realized it helped. Eat.”

I stare down at the package of crackers. It’s worth a shot, especially since I don’t want to puke in the middle of Miles’s graduation ceremony. Thankfully, it’s outdoors so I don’t have to worry about the crinkling of the package as I open it.

Apparently, this is the first year they’ve held it in the baseball stadium, but it seems like the right call, seeing as the place is nearly filled.

I pull a cracker out, hoping it’ll help, even though the blandness of Ritz sounds awful right now. I have wanted all the spicy things through this pregnancy. That’s not abnormal for me, but this baby has kicked it up a notch. Before I put the cracker to my mouth, Katie slides me a tiny bottle of the gochujang hot sauce I’ve fallen in love with.

I glance at her and she smiles.

She had these in her purse for me.

A strange urge to cry hits. Miles has been beyond thoughtful and caring, but this is different. This is the love of a mother, and... I don't know what to do with it. It feels so good but it also makes my heart ache.

Nausea quickly overpowers every other sensation in my body, though, so I squirt some hot sauce onto the cracker and shove it in my mouth.

Nauseous. Nauseous. Spicy. Nauseous. Shit, I think I might throw up. Spicy. Oh, that's good.

I take another cracker and do the same. A few crackers in, I don't feel quite as warm anymore, and my nausea has subsided. Well, this is good information to have.

"Thank you," I whisper to Katie, handing back the hot sauce and crackers.

She takes them and slips them into her purse.

"I'm glad it helped."

I lean back in the seat, grateful they have a legit stadium here and not uncomfortable bleachers. I'm not even in my second trimester yet, and I already feel the urge to bring a pillow to sit on with me everywhere I go.

Pregnancy is somehow simultaneously the sexiest and most unsexy thing ever. I mean, it's sexy in that I am horny as fuck and everything is extra swollen and Miles knows how to work that. And it's unsexy in the sense of throwing up, crying, and needing things like butt pillows.

“How long does this go on?” I ask, leaning next to me and whispering to Sarah, who I was surprised to learn has already graduated.

She chuckles. “Oh, a while. I mean, I tuned most of it out. There’s all this talking. Then they go through the individual departments that are part of this ceremony.”

Thankfully, Miles and his friends are all in the same ceremony, so we don’t have to do this twice. My butt couldn’t take it.

“Is it weird to watch everyone else graduate and not be up there with them?”

“A little, but it’s cool, too. It was weirder last year to be the only one graduating. Even though I’m partway through my graduate program, I feel the finality of today, too. We’ll finish packing up the lake house tonight and tomorrow morning, then we’re heading back to Ida, and that feels like the end of this chapter of our lives. I’m excited about celebrating today. My graduation day was not nearly as happy.”

My brow furrows. “No?”

She laughs and shakes her head, then leans in and gives me the cliff notes version of what happened on her graduation day slash birthday last year and the chaos it led to.

Every time I’m with one of the girls I learn a little more about them and their strength.

“Well, no wonder you’re ready to celebrate today.”

She laughs. “Yeah, for me, this kinda feels like a do-over.”

“Fair enough.”

Everyone starts politely clapping for the boring speech that just happened, and thankfully, it’s time to get to the actual graduating students.

Business is up first, so we sit tight, waiting for Miles’s name to be called.

I rest my hand on my stomach. Never did I think I’d be pregnant sitting at my boyfriend’s college graduation, but here I am. And I’m insanely proud of Miles. I never did the college graduation thing. I was interested in becoming a lawyer eventually, so I did a pre-law degree. Like Sarah, I graduated in only three years. My mom was already showing signs of Alzheimer’s, so rather than jump into law school, I got a good job as a paralegal and moved my mom with me. College graduation was the least of my concerns. I had to grow up and figure out my life.

For completely different reasons, I think Miles feels similarly. I’ve been his primary focus lately. Well, me and our baby. *Our baby*. We’ve done everything upside down and backward. We’ve known each other barely two months, I’m pregnant, and we’ve been dating for only a week—officially. Unofficially, I suppose it’s been longer. We’ve barely gotten to enjoy being a couple since I was back at work all week. It all changes now, though. Tomorrow we’ll finish moving into our apartment *together*. It still feels insane when I think of how all this has happened, but I’m cautiously happy.

Cautious because after all I've been through, it seems like the big, beautiful things in life are too good to be true. Or at least too good to last for long.

Miles

Six more people in front of me before I walk across the stage and accept my diploma. A few months ago, today would've felt like one of the biggest achievements of my life. Now it's not even the biggest achievement of the weekend. Tomorrow, Amelia and I officially start living together. And as for big achievements, becoming a dad is much bigger.

Four people left. I look over my shoulder at the area where Amelia, my parents, and my friends' parents are sitting. This is it. The end of college. And in some ways, it feels like the end of doing everything with my best friends. I have no doubt they will all still be a daily part of my life, but after sixteen years of spending most of our time together and living two minutes from each other—the last four of which we lived in the same place—it's going to be different. We're all growing and focusing on new parts of our lives. For the first time ever, I'll be more than two minutes from them all. It's a strange feeling, but my priorities have already shifted to Amelia and our baby.

One more person. I rub my hands together, then take a calming breath, putting my mask on. One foot in front of the other. I move toward the stage and wait.

“Miles Hyun-Hansen.”

There's polite applause scattered through the stadium with a pocket of whoops and cheers from the humanities section of the graduating students where Rae, Aaron, Mackie, and

Chelsea are, and extra loud cheers and applause from the section of stadium where Amelia and my parents are.

I shake my department head's hand, then the dean's as I take my diploma, walk to the other end of the stage, and flip my tassel. As I do, I look up into the stands, eyes locking with Amelia's. She's clapping and smiling. Then my eyes drift back to my friends, still waiting to graduate. They whistle and cheer, and I walk down the stairs, smiling.

The rest of the ceremony drags on and on. Aaron, Rae, Mackie, and Chelsea are in the next group of graduates, Amanda is in the middle, but Joel and Trevor are in the last, and by the time they've made it through all the departments in this graduation session, everyone is burned out and wilting in the sun.

I'm out of my seat the second I can be. Amelia's been in the sun as long as I have. I hope she brought water with her. And a snack. I should've packed something for her this morning. I glance around the stadium and see coolers with water and go straight for them. Grabbing a bottle for me and one for her, I look toward the entrance to the field, trying to spot Amelia, my parents, or my sisters.

"Hey," Joel says, clapping me on the shoulder. "Trying to escape already?"

He's standing there, eyebrows raised, with Aaron, Rae, and Mackie next to him.

"Oh. No. Shit, I'm just trying to make sure Amelia has water. That ceremony took a lot longer than I was expecting."

“Tell me about it,” Rae says. “Oh, I see them.” She waves as our families walk toward us, Amelia and Sarah leading the way.

“Hey,” Amelia says with a smile. “Gray polyester looks great on you.”

I lean down and give her a quick kiss. “Thanks. I’m drenched in sweat.”

“Sexy.”

“Here.” I hand her the water bottle. “Were you overheated? I should’ve gotten you one of those sun umbrellas.”

She stifles a laugh. “A parasol? I’m good. And I had my water bottle. I was hydrating. Luckily, there were plenty of opportunities to pee.” When I don’t say anything, she rolls her eyes, then opens the bottle of water and takes a nice long drink. “There, see? I’m hydrated. Now you get to be the one to walk me to the bathroom for my fifth pee of the morning.”

“Gladly,” I say, kissing her again.

“Ahem,” my mother says, clearing her throat.

Amelia laughs and steps back, letting my mother give me a big hug.

“Congratulations, honey. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Ma.”

I exchange a hug with my dad, then look at my little sisters, who each wrap an arm around me at the same time.

“Good job not failing at life,” Addie says.

“There’s still time, though,” Jameson adds.

I roll my eyes as Amelia attempts and fails at stifling a laugh.

Wrapping my arm around Amelia’s back, I look at all my friends with their parents and family members. Joel’s parents are here, which is good to see. After the hell he went through at the beginning of the school year, I’m glad they’ve found a stronger relationship.

Mackenzie walks over with her dad, Rick. He lives down in Pennsylvania, but they’re still close.

“Miles,” he says, extending a hand. Even at six-foot-three, I have to look up a touch to meet his gaze.

“Mr. Montoya. It’s been a while. How are you?”

“It’s Rick. I think I’ve told you that a thousand times.” I grin at him and he shakes his head. Though Mackie got her athletic build from her mom, in every other way, she’s her father. “I’m doing well.” He wraps his arm around Mackie, who smiles like a kid on Christmas. “Thanks for taking care of my girl when I’m not around.”

“No problem. Well, besides Mackie always causing trouble,” I tease.

She sticks her tongue out at me. “Please, I’m the least trouble of this entire friend group.” Normally, I’d argue with that, but seeing as my arm is wrapped around my pregnant girlfriend, I’m not sure I can anymore. But then Mackie squeaks. “Oh my god.”

She steps forward, and I look over my shoulder, only to see Hyla running across the field toward us. An interesting turn of events, seeing as she told us she wouldn't be able to make it. Trevor, especially, was bummed, but Trevor isn't who Hyla is running to.

No, she's running straight for Mackie, who is jogging toward her. They collide in a huge hug.

Mackie's girlfriend Mari was supposed to come today but canceled at the last minute because of work stuff. Mackie was upset about that. Now, Hyla's here squeezing the life out of Mackie after telling us she couldn't come... so she could surprise us?

And Mackie says she's not the source of drama. I feel like somehow we've lapped ourselves and now we're back to the Aaron and Rae, friends-who-kiss, denying feelings type of drama but with Mackie and Hyla.

Whatever. I just want Macks to be happy, but I'm worried she doesn't know what will bring her happiness at this point.

"Hy, what are you doing here?" Trev asks excitedly as Mackie and Hyla finally pull apart.

She bounces over and jumps into his arms. "I couldn't miss this. I wanted to come, but I wasn't sure how the flights would work out. Thankfully, I made it and snagged last-minute tickets."

"Way better surprise visitor than last year," Sarah says with a smile.

“Oh god. Don’t even joke,” her mom says, shaking her head.

“Well, now that Hyla’s here, I think it’s picture time,” Mackie’s mom says.

Though there are a handful of backdrops to pose in front of, being the baseball kids, we head over to the empty pitcher’s mound to get some shots.

We take a ton as a group, then take turns with different combinations of friends and parents.

Amelia snaps a few of me with my parents and then my sisters join in. The second we’re done, my mom whips out her phone and shoves Amelia onto the mound.

“Smile,” my mother instructs, but we’re both laughing at her forcefulness. Amelia steps over to me and we both smile. “Wrap your arm around her, act like you like her,” Ma teases.

I do one better and lean down and kiss Amelia on the cheek, rumbling in her ear, “I do like you. And I like how gorgeous you look in that dress.”

“Kiss her on the lips,” my mother calls. Amelia laughs and plays along with my mother’s directorial demands. “Now, both of you look at me and smile. Miles, put your hand on her stomach. My grandbaby’s first picture.”

“Still want to be my girlfriend after all this?” I ask through a picture-perfect smile.

“It’s sweet,” Amelia insists.

I glance down at her. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Jumping into my wild group of family and friends.”

She looks up at me. “They’re definitely wild. A little crazy. I’m grateful I get to be a part of it.”

Not thinking about the pictures anymore, I lean down and press a kiss to her lips, my hand still resting on her stomach. It isn’t until I hear hooting and whistling that I remember where we are and pull away.

“Ah, the perfect picture,” my mother fawns.

It’s a good thing I never dated anyone in high school. She’d have been the one to insist on a thousand pictures for every tiny occasion, whether the girl would’ve been around for more than that night or not.

“Hold up,” Rae says, looking around at everyone. “We’re missing something.”

She grabs Aaron’s hand and walks over to the mound, and a moment later, Mackie, Sarah, and Joel follow her. Somehow, in all the friend combinations, we forgot the most important one. We snap a couple of pictures, and then Rae steps away and looks at the six of us.

“Mom, can I have my phone?”

Kara runs it over, and Rae swipes through it until she finds what she’s looking for and shows us.

Laughing, we rearrange. Mackenzie stands and holds her arm out. I step up next to her, wrapping my arm around her

back. Aaron stands next to me, and I sling my arm over his shoulders. Rae lines up next to him and he wraps his arm around her back. Sarah loops her arm around Rae's back, and Joel comes to stand at the end of the group as we recreate a photo of us from when we were six years old.

Sixteen years and all kinds of craziness later, and here we are.

I look over at Amelia, who is smiling as she takes a picture.

Six-year-old me—hell, sixteen-year-old me—couldn't have imagined my life going the way it has, but now that I'm living it, I know it's far better than any dreams I ever had for myself.

Amelia

I wish I could climb onto the counter. It would make unpacking in the kitchen much easier. Instead, I'm settling for a tiny step stool. I guess I'll just do the first two shelves of every cabinet and let Mr. Six-foot-three do the rest later.

As I pull another plate from the box on the counter and stack it in the cabinet, the apartment door swings open.

"Hey, I've got—what the hell do you think you're doing?" Miles's voice booms.

I turn to look at him, only to see him striding toward me, a fierce look on his face.

"Putting things away?"

"No," he says sternly, sweeping me off the stool and over to the couch. He sets me down. "Sit down. You can't be climbing on stools."

"Oh my god. It's a seven-inch stool. Seven inches. That's all."

"And you could still easily lose your footing. You can't be doing that stuff while you're pregnant. I will take care of it. I'll set up a chair for you and you can tell me where everything goes."

I glare at him. Is he fucking kidding me?

“I’m not an invalid, Miles. I can still do things. I still *want* to do things.”

While I usually like Miles’s bossiness, I do not like this controlling edge. I know it’s how he likes to deal with things, but I’m a human being. And a damn strong one at that. Do I need to be more cautious while pregnant? Of course. But I’m not some fragile damsel in distress. The last thing I want is to be babied.

“Your job is to take care of yourself and our baby. That’s all.”

I shove off the couch, standing and staring up at him. Damn him for being so much taller than me.

“No way. Absolutely not. You don’t get to make all the decisions. I know you like being all bossy, but I’m a boss, too, and you don’t get to make sweeping decisions about my life or my body or how I handle any of it.”

An eyebrow lifts and I see a hint of smirk.

Does he think this is funny?

He steps forward and wraps his hand around my waist, letting his hand slide over my butt. He leans down, rumbling in my ear. “It’s adorable that you think that. Maybe I need to turn you over my knee and spank that gorgeous ass until you remember you’re supposed to be sitting on it and resting.”

Seriously? He’s trying to turn this into something sexual? I cross my arms over my chest, still unbelievably pissed. Even as my traitorous vagina reacts to his threat. She’s just going to

have to live without because he's not getting anywhere near it right now.

I push him back and step away. "You can't diffuse this with sex. I'm serious right now, Miles. What do you expect me to do? Sit with my feet up all pregnancy? Let you lift everything, hold everything for me? Carry me around? Drive me everywhere like I'm Miss Daisy?"

"You'd probably would be a backseat driver," he mutters, to which my eyes widen.

"Miles! You can't do every single thing for me. I'm still a person. And what about work? Are you going to do my job for me?"

He shrugs. "No. But I'll make sure you have the best office chair and a mini-fridge stocked with snacks and water. And you'll ride to and from work with me, so—"

"Miles!" I snap. He stops talking and stares at me. "No."

"No? No what?"

"No, you can't do all of that for me. It's too much. And riding to work together?"

"Why not? We work at the same place."

"Yes. But I work different hours than you or work later some days."

"Then I'll go in early or come back and get you."

My mouth drops open. "This is insane."

“Me taking care of you is insane?” he says, anger rising in his voice.

I don't think so, buddy. You are not the one who gets to be pissed right now.

“You forcing me to do things the way you want them done. I'm my own person, and I get to make my own decisions. You can't do everything for me. I need to have some fucking autonomy over my life, not live in this perfect sterile world where you control everything. That is not a life. That's insanity, and it's not how I want to live!” I yell, unbelievably frustrated that he can't get it through his thick skull that he's not in charge of me.

“It's my job to take care of you!” he yells back, looking utterly frustrated.

“Take care of, not make insignificant.”

He rears back at my words. “I'm not trying to make you insignificant.”

“Could have fooled me.” I huff out a sigh. “You know what? I need some space.”

“Don't we need to keep talking about this?” he asks, looking confused, pissed, and a little hurt.

“Probably, but I'm not going to say anything nice right now.” I turn to walk away, but he follows me.

“Where are you going?”

“To my room to lay down if that's okay with your highness.”

He lets out an annoyed sigh. “You don’t have to ask my permission,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Right, if it’s laying down or resting, I can do that any time.”

“Amelia!” he calls after me, but I storm down the hallway, into the master bedroom and slam the door behind me, flopping onto the bed.

Thank God we decided to have separate bedrooms.

Lying on my back, I stare up at the ceiling. I feel like a teenager again. More like a preteen. Didn’t get what I wanted? Storm to my room and lie on the bed, cursing everyone else.

Rolling onto my side, I crawl up the bed so I can rest my head on the pillow. I flip the covers up and shimmy underneath them. These sheets are buttery soft. The bed is perfectly made.

Why?

Because of Miles.

A pang of guilt hits me. I know I’m not totally wrong. He can’t walk around controlling my life, but I also know it’s not coming from a malicious place.

I’m still mad, though. Even if I’m not sure it’s just at him.

I pull the sheets up farther, wishing I could hide. If I close my eyes, maybe I’ll be somewhere else. Except I don’t know where that somewhere would be. My old apartment? I don’t know. I don’t know what my safe space is anymore. I’m not even sure it was my last apartment. That was just all I had.

That's probably part of the problem. Everything is changing, and I'm so overwhelmed I can't think straight. Nothing feels wrong exactly, but I'm not settled in my life right now, either.

I'm clinging to the things I've always relied on, especially my independence, more than usual. Though I know it's not his intent to strip those things away, it's how I feel and that makes me defensive and want to close off.

I don't know how to do this.

The last relationship I had was in high school, and I was not the same person then.

I relied on my high school boyfriend. I trusted him and wanted him to take weight off me. Sure, I was still strong, but I hadn't learned how to be fully independent. Losing my dad and said boyfriend dumping me in the same week definitely urged that lesson on, but once everything happened with my mom, that's when I really learned my own strength and what I was capable of enduring. I'm strong and resilient, but I'm not just me anymore.

I have a baby to think about, and a... partner. Boyfriend seems like the wrong word because he's more than that. We're more than that. I'm carrying his baby. And I'm falling for him. But we've known each other for such a short amount of time, and there are plenty of things we *don't* know about each other. *Like how to communicate with each other.* Or what the other needs when we disagree or fight.

And I'm not sure I know how to apologize—not that it was all my fault. I had some valid points, but we have to find some

common ground.

I glance over at the door, but I can't go back out there right now.

I'm mad at myself and I'm mad at him. And I'm tired. So tired of parsing through a thousand emotions every single day and still not knowing how I feel. Everything is exhausting and too much, and I feel like I'm bobbing around in the ocean on a raft, then waves come and twist me around, pull me under, and spit me out again. I don't know where I'm going or what I'm supposed to do next.

Resting my hand over my stomach, I close my eyes. I never want my child to feel this way. Maybe I can't control that, but...

Oh god.

Now I'm the one trying to control things.

That's it. I need to take a break from thinking about this.

Can't stop overthinking? Rest your brain.

Snuggling into the sheets, I breathe deeply, and eventually my brain shuts up and lets me get some rest.

Miles

“We should get tattoos,” Sarah says with a glint of mischief in her eyes.

“Yes,” Mackenzie agrees, water splashing as she lifts her hand to high-five Sarah.

“Something to commemorate college graduation and the new phase in our life, but also our friendship,” Rae says.

“Hell yes,” Aaron says.

We’re all at Joel’s parents’ house in the hot tub. One last time, as we all move forward. Rae and Aaron are moving into the farmhouse next weekend. Sarah and Joel will be slowly moving into the log cabin and living there officially after their wedding. Mackie is taking over Rae and Aaron’s current apartment.

And I’m living with my girlfriend. Even if it’s not going exactly as planned.

I examine my fingernails through the warm water of the hot tub. If I look up, everyone else will see my inner turmoil. Normally, I can put my mask on and be here with my friends, but Amelia broke that mask today when she started in on me about being controlling.

I keep turning everything she said over and over in my mind. Yes, I’m trying to control certain things to help keep her safe, but most of it is me genuinely wanting to take care of her. I

don't want her to have to be on her feet or climbing on stools. That's not just me. I think if I Googled it, the search results would say pregnant women shouldn't be climbing on stools.

This isn't how I wanted our first day living together to go. It's bad enough that I'm not there tonight, but this was planned long before our official move-in date was, so Amelia encouraged me to still come. Tonight, I'm sure she was grateful for it, since she didn't come out of her room all afternoon. Before I left, I asked if she needed anything. She told me no. Then I mentioned I left food in the fridge and she reminded me yet again she could handle feeding herself.

A couple of weeks ago, she was begging me to make her dinner and crying in my arms. Now she's pushing me away and getting pissed when I'm trying to take care of her.

I know she's pregnant, but it's more than that. This is something bigger, and it makes me nervous. We charged ahead. We're finally together. She doesn't seem happy though, and I'm not sure what to do about that. If I can do anything. Every cell in my body screams for me to fix it. To comfort her. I don't know how to do that, and it makes me feel like a failure. Weak. Which heightens my anxiety, so I try to control shit, and now she's pissed at me for being controlling, and there's my shattered mask lying on the floor.

"Maybe you should paint your fingernails," Rae says, poking me in the leg with her toes.

I pop my head up. *Shit*. I zoned out for way too long. I look around the hot tub at everyone. Another thing I'm fucking up.

I should be present tonight. One last hot tub night to celebrate the end of college and the beginning of the next chapter of our lives. Yet, here I am, being a big downer and not being in the moment.

“Do you want to tell us what’s going on?” Mackie asks.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Wow. You must really be feeling shitty if your poker face is that bad. Normally you’re the smoothest liar of all of us. It’s why you win at bullshit so much,” Aaron says.

“Fuck,” I groan, dropping my head back. “I don’t want to ruin tonight.”

“You know, talking about whatever’s bothering you isn’t going to ruin anything,” Joel says.

“I know. I’d just rather be here with you guys. Fighting with my girlfriend isn’t a group activity.”

Sarah laughs. “Funny. I thought that about healing from trauma—and it’s not. But supporting you is a group activity. One we’re all happy to participate in.”

With a sigh, I give in and tell them about our fight—mostly because I know they won’t let it go unless I do. I love them, but there’s a bit of mob mentality here.

“Aw, Miles is finally growing up,” Aaron teases when I’m finished. “I’m going to tell you what you always told me.” He clears his throat and puts on a deeper voice. “Dude, just fucking talking to her.”

“Thank you for that. Super helpful,” I tell him, even though I find myself smiling. “I know that’s what I need to do, but we also have to figure out the bigger issues, and that feels daunting. This is new for me.”

“We all get it. I think the important thing to remember is you’re never as right as you think you are,” Rae says. I open my mouth to respond, but she shakes her head. “Not even you. There’s always a compromise. It just takes time to find it.”

Well, there it is. Rae McKinley casually schooling me on a healthy relationship after how many years of her and Aaron being absolute shit at communicating. I guess they learned the hard way, which is a mistake I don’t want to repeat.

Mackie reaches over and squeezes my hand. “She’ll get there. Be gentle. Whatever confusion you’re feeling about this, I’m guessing it’s worse for her. She’s in uncharted territory.”

“We both are,” I say lamely.

“Yeah, but most of your life is still the same. You still have all of us and your family supporting you. Sure, you have to adjust to something new, but not like she does. She’s gained a boyfriend and entire extended family’s worth of people all while being pregnant. Now she’s in a new space, trying to figure it all out. It’s a lot.”

I groan. *And me telling her what to do is making it worse.*

“Figure something out?” Sarah asks with a soft smile.

“Yeah. I think I did.”

“You look a little better now, at least,” Aaron says.

“You guys are helpful sometimes.” I smile, then lean over and kiss Mackie on the forehead. “Mostly Macks.”

She shrugs. “Told ya, I’m the wise one.” She smiles mischievously, and just like that, we’re back to normal.

“My, how far we’ve come,” Joel says with a smile. “Wasn’t that long ago that we were sitting in the hot tub, and Rae and Aaron were pretending they were just friends. I was trying not to look at Sarah’s boobs, and you thought you’d never be tied down. Now here we are.”

“Here’s to growing up, someone hopefully getting a new hot tub for us to chill in, and to all the things that change but always stay the same,” Mackie says, raising her hand like she has a glass of champagne in it even though none of us have drinks nearby.

Laughing, we all do the same and “clink” our imaginary glasses together.

As everything else in my life gets more complicated, these are the things I hope never change.



It’s after eleven when I get back to the apartment. All the lights are off, so I’m assuming Amelia is asleep. I hope she is because she needs rest.

Don’t force it on her, though. Or tell her that.

Fuck, being in a relationship with her is harder than I thought it would be.

I glance over at the sink and see some dirty dishes, and I get a jolt of relief knowing she ate something.

I stand in the kitchen for a moment before walking down the hallway toward the bedrooms, not sure what I'm waiting for.

I've always heard the phrase *never go to bed angry*. I'm not mad, but I hate going to sleep with that fight hanging over me. Leaving things unsaid is not who I am. It preys on my anxiety when I don't know where I stand with someone, and that's especially true with Amelia. A part of me doesn't feel certain of our relationship yet, and I'm worried she'll run from me if it gets hard.

Shaking my head, I force my feet to move. My bedroom is almost directly across from hers but the doorway is a few feet farther down the hallway. Her bedroom is dark as I walk by, but surprisingly the door is open. Letting out a sigh, I walk to my room, but before I step inside, I hear her voice.

“Miles?”

I turn on a dime and stride quickly into her room. “Hey. Everything okay?”

“Can we talk?” she whispers.

I climb onto the bed and lie down next to her. She's on her side, facing away from me.

“I'm here, babe.” She reaches behind her and grabs my hand, bringing it to rest on her stomach. I scooch closer, wrapping my body around hers. “I'm sorry, Ames. I'm not trying to take your independence. That's the last thing I want to do. It's part

of what drew me to you, and I never want you to lose that. But I can't apologize for wanting to take care of you. It's woven into me now. I need to make sure you're cared for and protected. I'm sorry if I'm going about it the wrong way or that's hurting you. I want to find what works for us both."

She taps her lamp on the lowest setting, then slowly, she rolls over and looks at me, a soft smile on her face. She places her hand on top of mine. "I'm sorry I got mad and shut down. I didn't know how to say the right words. I wasn't sure what they were."

"Do you know now?" I ask, sweeping some hair out of her face.

"Some of it."

"Tell me. I always want you to be able to tell me anything. Even if it's hard or painful."

"I'm not used to this. Not used to having someone else take care of me or someone else I need to think about. I've barely gotten used to the fact that I'm currently a vessel for another human being. My worth feels outside of *me* right now. Which makes me feel less like myself." She blows out a breath. "None of this makes sense, does it?"

"It makes sense," I reassure her, flipping my hand over and wrapping it around hers.

"I'm used to doing what I want, when I want, and not worrying about anyone else. Or having you worry about me. To me, climbing on that stool made perfect sense. Things

needed to be put away. I wasn't consistently stepping up and down on it. I had my hand on the counter. I was being careful. There was so much to be done and I wanted to do it. I didn't want to sit or wait around. That makes me feel useless, and I hate feeling useless. If I was tired, I'd rest."

"I didn't mean to make you feel useless. I'd never see you as that. From my perspective, you're already working hard every day growing our baby. That work is hard enough. I don't want you to have to do more. Based on what you said a few minutes ago, I understand now that your worth in any way being equated with being pregnant is hurtful to you. I'm sorry, that wasn't my intent. I don't want to stifle you, but I do want you to take it easy and rest more—before you feel tired. Resting is okay. It doesn't make you weak. I need you to learn that."

I look at her tentatively.

"Thank you for trying to understand. I'm sure that's not easy, seeing as I don't understand most of it myself."

"You're allowed to feel things, Ames. And those feelings are allowed to be complicated."

"I'm not used to them," she huffs.

Can't help but smile. Even angry, she's adorable. I'm a smart enough man not to tell her that, though. Especially with her knee so close to my balls.

"That's okay, too."

"I appreciate you wanting to protect me and take care of me. It feels... good to be able to rely on someone like that again,

but I'm still learning. I need you to learn, too. You can't control everything." I frown at that, and she runs her hand up my arm. "I'm not just talking about me. In life, you will never be able to control everything, no matter how badly you want to. I need you to focus on what you can control—which is not me. If you have concerns, you can voice them, and we can talk about them together."

My brow furrows. "Does that mean I should start asking you before assuming you're thirsty? Should I be asking about everything?"

It goes against my nature. Yes, some of how I've been with her has been more about trying to prevent negative outcomes by controlling things, but other things—like getting her water or food or telling her to lie down—are truly me trying to anticipate her needs and care for her.

She opens her mouth, then closes it again. "I... no." Her cheeks heat, and I quirk an eyebrow, lifting her chin so I can brush my lips over hers.

"Are you saying you like that? Maybe you like a little more *control* than you think."

Meeting my gaze, she says, "I like when the bossy side of you comes out. When you tell me to eat and even though I complain, I usually am hungry. I like that. I won't complain if you keep doing that. But deciding you're going to drive me to and from work every day is too much."

"Okay." I can see that. "Can we at least ride together on days when we have similar hours?"

“Sometimes I don’t know if I’ll need to work late until I’m there.”

I nod. I don’t want her driving. I know it’s fucking insane, but the passenger seat is the safer seat for her to be in. She says I can’t control everything, but I can mitigate how much danger she’s in. But I get it, that makes me seem a little crazy. Pregnant people all over the world drive every day. Some are on their feet for hours at a job. It’s stupid to think I can somehow drive her everywhere she needs to go, but I want to anyway. Although I also don’t want to rip away her independence.

“I said I’d come back and get you because I don’t mind doing it. I know statistically, we’re probably both just as likely to get into a car accident, but when you’re driving, there’s a steering wheel right there that could hit you in the wrong spot. And to be clear, I’m not just worried about the baby, I’m worried about you. You could hemorrhage or have placental abruption in that situation. Maybe some people don’t think twice about that or don’t worry about those things, but I do. I can’t drive you everywhere, but I’d like to drive you as often as I can, and I’d like to revisit this once your belly gets bigger so we can make sure you’re safe.”

She stares at me for a moment. “Okay. I understand where you’re coming from. You can drive me when it makes sense, and we’ll keep doing what we need to do to make sure I’m safe in the car if I am driving. If it makes you feel better, we can talk to my doctor, too.”

I let out a long breath. “Thank you. Now, don’t get mad at me...”

“What?”

“I asked Sarah. She said you really shouldn’t be on stools. She also knows which OB you use and she said he’d probably give you a lecture. So, please. If you want to sit on the floor and put stuff away, I’ll get you a cushion. You can organize things on the counter. We have books and DVDs that need to be shelved. All kinds of stuff you can do while staying safe.”

“Really? Even that tiny stool?” She sighs. “I’m really not used to this.”

I sweep my hand through her hair. “That’s okay. There’s a learning curve, right? That’s why we made our monthly lists.”

“By the way, I added something to it. Well, changed something.”

“Can I see?”

She pulls the notebook from her drawer and opens it. On each month we have a note for ongoing items. Underneath, she added *set up and decorate nursery*.

Though the baby will likely sleep in the master with Amelia for the first couple of months, our third bedroom, which borders mine, will be the nursery. It’ll be a calm, safe space for the baby to nap and play and grow.

“Can’t wait. We’ll need to start a nursery list. Things we want and need.”

“Tomorrow,” she says softly, setting the notebook on her nightstand.

“Tired?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “You mentioned something earlier, and even though we’ve talked things through...”

“You were still a bad girl,” I say roughly. “Sit up.”

We haven’t explored much more about BDSM. While some things are safe during pregnancy, others carry more risk. Choking—something Amelia enjoys—is not recommended. Spanking, though, as long as we’re careful with positioning, is fine.

“Hands and knees,” I command, as I sit up on the bed. I wrap my arm under her armpits as she gets on her hands and knees so I can hold her steady. We’re in the middle of the bed, so she’s not at a risk of falling.

Relishing getting to have some fun while still keeping her safe, I push her T-shirt up and yank her underwear down.

“When did you eat last?” I whisper.

“I had a snack about an hour ago.”

Good. Don’t need to worry about that.

I rub my hand over her supple ass.

“You were a bad girl today. Climbing on that stool, arguing with me.” I smack my hand across her ass. “Good girls listen.” Another spank. “Good girls follow directions.” Spank. “Good girls don’t talk back.” Another firm smack. She lets out a low

whimper and I fight back a groan. My dick hardens, which is obvious through my sweats. “Good girls don’t do things they shouldn’t do.” She bites her lip and cries out as I slap her butt again.

I grab her hair and pull her head up.

“What do good girls do?”

“Obey.”

Fuck. I steady my breathing. “Are you going to behave?” She nods, and I slap her ass one final time. “Words,” I hiss.

“Yes.”

“Then show me what a good fucking girl you are.” Fisting her hair again, I shove her head down toward my crotch. She shimmies backward and sits back on her knees, then shoves my sweats and boxer briefs down, freeing my hard-on. She strokes me a few times before diving forward and licking my crown. Then she takes me deeper. She must be feeling good if her gag reflex isn’t stopping her. Before she was pregnant, she deep throated me. God, it was fucking hot. I have dreams of her hands tied behind her back, her naked on her knees as I fuck her mouth.

Things that will have to wait until after she’s had the baby.

She sucks hard as she takes me deeper, gagging. I almost pull back, but I let her keep control of what she’s comfortable with here.

“You’re perfect,” I rumble. I tangle my hand in her hair, tugging at the strands as she licks and sucks, making the

sexiest fucking noises.

She moans around my cock, and that's all I can take. I pull her off me, commanding, "Lie down on your side." She does and I lie behind her, pulling her against my chest as I position myself. I drag my fingers up her center, then pull them out, holding them up. "Look how wet you are for me. So fucking good." I bite her shoulder, and she moans, wiggling her ass against me.

"Please," she murmurs.

"You need me to fill your pussy with my cock?"

"Yes," she whines.

"Good." Softly stroking my fingers over her clit, I push into her. Her wet warmth surrounds me and I can barely breathe.

"Yes. Miles. Please..."

"Be patient, baby. I'll give you what you need."

I thrust into her, rubbing my fingers over her swollen clit as I do. I'm still on the edge after the way she sucked my cock. I keep a steady pace, plunging into her and rubbing her, occasionally moving my fingers faster or pumping harder, until my abs are taut from holding back and she's tightening around me.

"Tell me what you need, baby."

"I need to come. Please let me come."

"Such a good girl, using your manners. And good girls get what they want."

I stroke her faster, thrusting harder, until her walls clench around me. Her back arches, and she reaches up around my neck, clawing her fingers through my hair.

“Miles,” she cries out, moaning and whimpering as she comes. She tugs my hair again and I fall apart.

“Ames, yes, baby. Milk my cock. Let me fill that perfect pussy.” I kiss her shoulder, holding back the words *I love you*.

I shudder as I finish, panting. I kiss her back, her shoulder, then across her cheek. She turns, lips parted, aching for a deeper kiss, which I give her without holding back. I can't say the words I'm feeling yet, but I can pour them into this kiss. My tongue tangles with hers as we both come down from our highs.

We lie together in silence, wrapped in each other's arms.

“Well, we survived our first fight,” I say.

“We did. We've got a lot to learn, but I want to learn with you.” She gives me a soft kiss.

“Me too.” I kiss her forehead and pull her close, holding her tightly for a moment before letting her go. “You should go clean up.” She arches a brow. “I mean...” *She needs to go clean up, damn it.*

Then she rolls her eyes and smiles. “Yeah. I don't want a UTI.”

She quickly kisses me, then climbs out of bed.

While she's using the master bath, I run down the hall to the other one. By the time I get back, she's cozy in bed with only the lamp on. She's facing the far wall like she was when I first got home. *Home*. My first place of my own. *Our* own.

I sit down on the bed and run my fingers through her curls. "Do you want me to go back to my room?"

There's a long silence before she whispers, "No."

I smile, the tension in my body dissipating as I slip under the covers with her.

She flips her light off and rolls back over, wrapping her body around mine. I rest my hand on her side, my thumb brushing her stomach.

"Miles..." She snakes her hand around the back of my neck and pulls my lips to hers. "Goodnight."

"Night, baby," I rumble. Then I drag my hand across her stomach. "And goodnight, baby." *I love you both*. That's the part I wish I could say but don't. Because I am in love with her. After tonight, I'm sure of that. There would be a hole in my heart without her or our baby in it, but my girl needs time and to take things at her own pace, so that's what I'm going to let her do.

I pull her closer, our bodies flush, and focus on how grateful I am that I'm falling asleep with her in my arms on our first night in our own apartment. Even if nothing else has gone to plan, this is exactly how I hoped our first night living together would go.

Chapter Seven

Everything Changes

Miles

“I NEED YOU TO stop talking about this,” I grit out as we walk toward the entrance of the hospital for her ten-week ultrasound.

“Why? It was the best part of my weekend.”

Sure. Not the three orgasms I gave her last night. Nope, the best part of her weekend was finding out my mother knows how to pole dance. That was one of the activities for Sarah’s bachelorette party, and who showed up there? Rae’s mom and my mother, who have apparently taken pole dancing classes together for some time now. Bile rises in my throat and I hold back a gag. I need some mental bleach so I can get that image out of my head.

Amelia’s smile is giant. She knows what she’s doing.

I stop walking, squeezing her hand and yanking her toward me. “Baby mama, what happens when you don’t behave?”

She cocks an eyebrow at me and smiles. *Great, of course she’s going to be a brat right now.*

“I don’t know. What will happen? Will you spank me?” She pauses as someone walks by us, then continues torturing me. “Edge me until I’m begging? Force me onto my knees and then—”

I crush my mouth into hers, using the only tactic I can think of—that I can do here—to shut her up.

She fists my shirt and leans into me, kissing me back as forcefully as I'm kissing her.

Her phone dings with the noise for her calendar notifications and she pulls back, landing on flat feet. "We're going to be late if we keep doing that."

"Then stop causing trouble."

She shrugs. "Sorry."

"No. You're not. You're feisty and spicy."

"Maybe." She laughs, and the sound goes straight to my cock, in case the semi I was sporting from her sass and that kiss wasn't enough. She looks around, then brushes her hand over my crotch. "And you're horny."

"Because of you."

"Don't worry. I can help with that." She leans up and kisses my cheek, then whispers in my ear, "Your mom loves pole dancing." She steps away, then spins around and sways toward the entrance of the hospital.

Well, at least my boner is dead now.

She looks over her shoulder at me, and I jog toward her, smacking her ass when I finally catch up. *I'm going to do a hell of a lot more than that later.*



I wasn't prepared for this. Amelia purposely didn't tell me there was an ultrasound at this appointment because she

wanted to surprise me.

My heart is in my throat as the ultrasound tech hands Amelia the wand so she can shove it—well, you know. *What if something's wrong?*

Breathe.

I move the stool I'm sitting on closer to Amelia, and take her hand, lifting it to my lips and kissing it.

“Okay,” the tech says. “Here we go.” She spins the wand around, and a second later, I see our baby. Unlike the ultrasound from a month ago, it actually looks like a baby.

My eyes are glued to the screen, looking at our baby from every angle as the tech takes measurements.

I kiss Amelia's hand again. “That's our baby.”

She looks up at me with a smile. “All ours.”

We share an emotional look, then the tech hits a couple of buttons and says, “And this is your baby's heartbeat.” A moment later, a whooshing sound echoes through the room. I stare at the screen, listening to every thump as tears fill my eyes, then fall down my cheeks.

“Babe,” Amelia whispers, pulling her hand from mine and reaching up to wipe my cheeks. I dip my head down, burying my face in her shoulder as I absolutely lose it. That's our baby's heartbeat. Amelia runs her hand through my hair as I try to make sense of what I'm feeling. My life changed when Amelia told me she was pregnant, but this is different. More. I didn't know how my heart could change until right now. I

didn't know how deeply I could love another person until I heard this sound. A heartbeat that isn't just our baby's, but mine and Amelia's too. The weight of it all makes it hard to breathe as the infinite love for our baby clouds my thoughts and fills my heart. From this moment, I will never be the same again.

The whooshing stops, and I lift my head, glancing at the screen for half a second before turning back to Amelia and kissing her.

I wish I could say what I'm feeling. The three not-so-simple words that are lodged in my heart, but for the moment, this kiss will have to do. Until I'm sure she's ready, I'm not going to say anything more.

The tech continues with the ultrasound and I get lost in the images again, enamored by the beautiful sight of our baby.

Amelia

Miles has been doting on me all night. Which is saying something since the man is a king in a world of jokers. He treats me like a queen on a regular basis, but tonight he kicked it up a notch. He keeps kissing me and touching me. He massaged my shoulders and rubbed my feet and lower legs. Every time I finish a glass of water, he gets me another. He fed me strawberries. Just fed them to me. He made me a milkshake. Anything I could possibly dream of, I have. He'd probably carry me to the bathroom if I asked him to.

And he keeps touching and kissing my stomach. He'll rest his warm palm there, then slowly rub it. More than once, he's knelt in front of me or laid in my lap and kissed all over my stomach while talking to the baby.

I swear, I don't know what lottery I won, but this man... *swoon*. I am not a girl who takes swooning lightly, but Miles? He may be the swooniest man who ever existed. I'm talking swoonier than Tom Hanks in a 90s romcom or Mr. Darcy and his hand flex.

The ultrasound today had an effect on him I was not expecting. When he broke down crying... well, another one of the walls I put around my heart came crumbling down. I don't think there's any way around it now. I'm falling in love with him. Actually, I think I'm *in* love with him, but I am not ready to admit that yet.

We've already eaten dinner, but I only nibbled at it because I was queasy. I didn't actually throw up, and now I'm starving.

"Will you make fried rice?" I ask.

"Of course." He stands up without a second thought, but I grab his arm and pull him toward me. "Kiss me, baby daddy."

"Mm. If you insist." He splays his hand over my stomach as he leans down and gives me a slow, decadent kiss that sends sparks shooting through my body.

He lifts his lips off mine a millimeter at a time, then he kisses my forehead before walking into the kitchen. I glance at the TV, then turn it off and join him, sitting down at the kitchen counter.

He smiles when he sees me, then slides me a glass of water. As he takes the ingredients out of the fridge, he hums to himself. I smile when I realize it's the same song he used to comfort me months ago when I first met his parents and broke down on the couch after. I've noticed him humming or singing it on occasion since.

"What song is that?"

He stops humming and smiles over his shoulder at me. "It's called *Songbird* by Fleetwood Mac. My mom is obsessed with them, and that was the lullaby she sang to my sisters and me when we were little. It's comforting. My mom always says she wished I could record a version of it for her because she loves hearing me sing it in my deep voice. It's sung by a female and has some higher notes."

“It’s a beautiful song. I like hearing you sing it, too.” Without thinking, I hop off the stool and walk over to him, wrapping my arms around his waist.

He sets the knife down and spins around, pulling me into a hug. Then he starts singing the song again from the beginning and dances with me to the slow tempo. My heart runs wild as his voice echoes around the apartment. The song is so beautiful, the lyrics meaningful, and it draws me in. I’m completely lost in the moment, immersed in the sound of his voice and the warmth of his arms. I could live like this forever. But all too soon, the song is over, and while I want to ask him to sing it again, I can’t get any words out. Instead, I twirl my fingers through his hair and capture his lips in a raw, passionate kiss. I don’t care about food or anything else. All I need is him, and he knows it.

He lifts me up and carries me down the hall, never breaking our kiss. I twist my tongue with his, searching his mouth, deepening our kiss, needy and begging for more. Except I don’t need to beg because he knows how to take care of me. While I love being bratty and giving him shit like I did earlier—and I love being dominated—sometimes I need this. Slow. Controlled. Him owning my body the way no one else ever has. I never wanted anyone else to, but with him, I gladly hand myself over, letting him take control to please me and meld our bodies together.

He strips me down quickly, but goes a little slower pulling his own clothes off, flexing his muscles and giving me a show.

His cock is rock hard as he drops his boxer briefs to the floor. I'm watching raptly, lost in the god-like man in front of me. His perfectly defined abs. And those shoulders... he looks like he was sculpted out of clay.

A lazy half-smile appears on his lips, but then his hazy eyes narrow to slits and those full lips part as he wraps his hand around his length and strokes himself, moaning at the friction.

I slip my hand between my legs, touching the aching spots and moaning loudly as I do.

A second later, he's on the bed, removing my hand and replacing it with his mouth. His top lip brushes my clit as he swirls his tongue around my opening. It darts inside for a second, then tantalizingly slowly he licks up, up, up, until his tongue is swirling around my clit and my ass is lifting off the bed. He grips my thighs and pulls me back down, holding me in place with one hand, then dipping the other between my legs. He lifts his lips from my clit as he slowly fingers me, watching my reaction to see exactly where I need his long fingers to be. When he finds the spot, he leans back down, working his fingers right where I want him as his lips and tongue own my clit.

I throw my head back, moaning loudly as I fist the sheets. I wrap my legs around him, my heels digging into his back as he works me, bringing me slowly to the precipice. He holds me there for a moment before finally letting me have the sweetness of release. My orgasm hits all at once, the euphoria overwhelming me as I scream his name, then it fades, coming

in waves for more than a minute as I come back down to earth. He sits back on his heels and fists his cock again as he stares at me.

“So fucking beautiful when you shatter for me. I love watching you fall apart.” He crushes his mouth against mine in a bruising kiss before shifting his weight and changing position, lining up at my center. I don’t care that I just came. I’m aching for him again. I need to feel him pulse inside me.

Looking into my eyes, he thrusts into me. We moan at the same time, the unrelenting pleasure of him buried deep inside me driving us wild. He pulls one nipple into his mouth, tweaking the other between his fingers as I rake my hands through his hair. With each thrust, I lose myself in him. The rapture on his face as he moves in and out of me.

“You like when I fill this pussy?” he rumbles, sitting up and brushing his thumb over my clit as he plunges in and pulls out again. Over and over, somehow hitting all the right spots. My body shudders when his thumb grazes my clit again.

“Yes.”

“Do you know how stunning you are? You’re carrying our baby. Protecting them, nourishing them, caring for them. All with your perfect body. You’re more than a good girl. You’re my perfect angel.” *Holy shit.* An angel I am not, but I like being praised as one. “You deserve the best, baby. Are you ready to come for me?”

“Yes,” I whimper.

“You’re going to come all over this cock. Show me who I belong to.”

“Please,” I beg. *Fucking beg.*

He moves his fingers faster over my clit as he grips my hip with his other hand, lifting my ass slightly and changing the position of his hips. His tip hits my inner wall, rubbing my G-spot over and over until...

I grab his arms as my body goes rigid and my walls pulse around him.

“Oh, fuck,” he groans, filling me up, the ecstasy on his face intoxicating as I ride my high along with him. We crash back down together, sweaty bodies tangled together.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, trying to catch my breath.

He laughs and rolls over, quickly kissing me before dropping onto his back again. “I hope you know you’ve ruined me for anyone else. You’re stuck with me now.”

His big hand comes to my stomach yet again, and I rest mine over his. “I think I’m okay with that.”

I turn my head and find him already looking at me, his eyes boring into me. “Good.” He kisses me again, then pulls me against him. “Thank you for today. For everything. For wanting this with me.”

“How could I not? You’re kind, caring, incredible in bed, and you make me fried rice whenever I want. Win-win... all the wins.”

He kisses my cheek, then my stomach growls. “Speaking of fried rice. You worked up an appetite. Go clean up while I make the rice.”

I nod but make no effort to move even after he gets up. He comes back and kisses my forehead. “Clean up and pick something to watch. I’ll bring dinner to bed.”

“Perfect,” I whisper, pushing myself upright.

He winks at me and turns to leave, but I call after him. “Miles.”

“Hm?”

“Thank *you* for today. I’m glad you want this too, and that I have you by my side. You make every day better.”

He smiles widely, his perfect teeth showing. “Back at you, baby.”

I watch as he leaves, feeling utterly full of joy. Maybe the universe is finally trying to make up for all the years of pain I’ve experienced. I’m not naive enough to believe it’ll stay this way forever, but I’m going to enjoy it for as long as it lasts.

Chapter Eight

Find the Sun

Amelia

“THANK YOU FOR COMING with me tonight.”

Katie smiles at me from the driver’s seat before we get out of the car. Did I catch Miles pulling her aside and whispering something to her—probably about me riding in the passenger seat? Yes.

I’m trying to remind myself it’s not worth being annoyed about. He does it because he cares. I like that he cares. I feel safe with him, and even though that sometimes still scares me, I like it.

“Thank you for letting me come with you.”

“I want us to spend more time together.” I swallow hard and look down. “This is the most complicated part of my world, and you’ve been so supportive. Plus...” *Don’t cry.* “I want you to meet my mom.”

Katie takes my hand in both of hers. “That means a lot to me.”

Really, do not cry.

I quickly squeeze her hand then suck in a big breath. If I don’t get out of the car now, I’ll break down, and here is not the place for that. Over the last year-and-a-half that my mother’s been living here, I’ve learned to keep it together until I’m at home. I can break later. Me being upset only agitates her.

“Ready?” I ask.

“Of course. Lead the way.”

The walk from the parking lot to the building is always mental preparation. Unless I call ahead, I never know what kind of state she'll be in. I usually don't call ahead because I don't want it to influence my decision to come. Since Miles has been home, I've been coming two to three times per week again, and he's by my side every time. He couldn't come tonight because he's with Mackenzie, Rae, and Aaron setting up a surprise at Sarah and Joel's house for after the wedding tomorrow. They're staying there for the first time tomorrow night, and their friends wanted to make it extra special.

Miles didn't want me to skip my visit tonight, and suggested I invite his mom to join me. Though I felt a little strange asking, I always intended to have her meet my mom, so it seemed like the right decision.

As she rubs my shoulder in the elevator, I know it was. She has the same calming presence Miles has, though both his parents seem to have that. They're kind, thoughtful people, and it makes it easier to let them in. Admittedly, I have a harder time with Andy. He reminds me of my dad in many ways. Tall with brown hair and a goofy side. My dad was introspective and thoughtful. He always had words of wisdom to share, but he also knew exactly when to throw seriousness to the wayside and be goofy. He loved to have fun, and above all, he loved to make me laugh. My mom would roll her eyes

as she watched us laughing over nothing at all, but then she'd smile like she was the luckiest person alive.

Katie and I walk off the elevator and I lead the way to the locked unit, key in the code, and open the door.

The smell turns my stomach more than usual. I'll always hate hospital and nursing home smells, but it's worse being pregnant. Old overcooked food mixed with cleaning chemicals and shit.

Don't focus on that.

"Hi, Amelia," one of the nurses says, getting up from her chair behind the nurses' station and walking over to me.

"Hi. How are you?"

"I'm good. How are you? Another new face tonight?" she smiles brightly.

"Yes, this is Katie, Miles's mother."

"It's good to meet you," the nurse says.

"You too," Katie says.

"How has she been today?"

The nurse tips her head from side to side. "She's been all over the place. I'm not sure exactly what you'll be getting. She's in her room, but we can have someone bring her out."

"No, that's fine. We'll head down. I have a new blanket and puzzle books for her, plus some pictures to add to her wall."

"Sure thing, hon. Let us know if you need anything."

“Will do.”

I pick up the bag of stuff I got her and nod down the hall where her room is.

My mom always loved blankets. When I got our stuff out of storage after traveling, I counted forty-seven throw blankets. We ended up donating a bunch of them to a homeless shelter. We both picked a few favorites to keep. Mom has most of them, but I have three, plus one more in a box in my closet. It's the one my dad used during chemo, and all these years later, it still smells like him. When I need that comfort, I pull the blanket out and hold it for a little while.

I knock on the door, then walk into the semi-private room my mom is in. This is a newer nursing home, and Mom was on the waitlist here for months. I was grateful when she finally got in, though. The rooms are bigger and nicer than many other nursing homes I toured. The semi-private rooms are *actually* semi-private instead of having a curtain dividing them. There's a shared open space at the entrance to the room with hooks for visitor bags and coats. This is also where the bathroom is. Then it splits off and a curtain closes off each mini room with a wall between them. The other woman in here is as close as my mother has to a friend. I'm not sure they remember each other day-to-day, but they get along fine and enjoy doing things together.

Mom's curtain is half-drawn, so I knock on the wall, then stick my head in. She's sitting in a chair by the window.

“Hi, Mom,” I call, walking into her small area, followed by Katie.

I set the bag down and walk over as my mother looks up at me. Her gray-green eyes that match mine fill with horror.

It's going to be that kind of visit. Okay.

“What are you doing here?” she demands. “I told you never to visit me again. Now you’re here with what—your housekeeper?”

I turn to Katie with an apologetic look. Unfortunately, part of any kind of dementia means dealing with unfiltered and downright mean comments. The assumption that Katie is a housekeeper because of her ethnicity makes my stomach twist, but I’ve learned that arguing isn’t effective.

Instead, I try to redirect things and give a shot at orienting her to what is actually going on. It rarely works, and I don’t push, but if I can get her to a more pleasant place, it’ll be better.

“She’s not my housekeeper, she’s my friend. Her name is Katie.”

Mom narrows her eyes and shakes her head. “If you say so.”

I lean down and take my mother’s hand, looking into her eyes. “It’s me, Mom. Amelia.”

She squints, then pulls her hand away. “Don’t lie to me. You’re trying to make me think I’m crazy. You always did that to me!” she yells.

I suck in a breath and step back. “You’re right,” I whisper. “I’m sorry. That’s why I’m here now. I want to take care of you like I couldn’t then.”

The days when she thinks I’m her mother are the worst. She never told me all the details of what happened to her, but a hefty dose of abuse and neglect were a part of it.

Mom’s bottom lip trembles, and I push down the bubble of emotion rising in my chest. I have to keep it together.

“Why didn’t you love me?” she cries.

I take a deep breath. “I didn’t know how. I’m sorry. I’m here now. Can we visit for a little while? I brought you some things.”

Mom looks out the window again, but then nods. I let out a sigh of relief and pull the chair in the corner over. “There’s a folding chair in that closet,” I say to Katie. She pulls it out and joins us.

“I know how much you like blankets, so I got this one for you.” I pull it out of the bag and hand it to her. It’s a soft chunky-weave light gray blanket.

Mom’s eyes light up. “Oh, it’s so soft and pretty. Can I use it now?”

“Of course.” I unfold it and lay it over her.

“Thank you, honey.” She looks at me tenderly, and for a moment, I think she knows it’s me. “Who’s your friend?” she asks. The nurse was right. She’s all over the place today.

“Her name is Katie. She’s Miles’s mother.”

Her brow furrows. “Miles?”

I grab a picture from the bedside table and show her. Since Miles is a big part of my life now, I wanted her to have photos of us, so she might have a shot at recognizing him. “My husband. Remember?”

“Oh, that tall fella. He’s quite handsome.” She pats Katie’s leg. “Good job, honey.”

Katie smiles and laughs at that. “Thank you. He’s a sweetheart.”

“So, what else is in that bag?” she asks, tapping it with her foot and smiling. She always loved getting presents.

I pull out the rest of her goodies and she settles in, the rest of the visit going smoother than the start, but it’s not easy. It’s never easy, and it’ll only get harder. My mantra is to make it through one visit at a time. Mom tires out after about an hour and a half, so we head out, and I’ve made it through one more visit.

We end up back at the apartment, and Katie makes me some tea.

“Thank you for allowing me to come with you today,” she says, sitting down on the couch with me.

“I’m glad you could come with me. You’re very calming, and I need all the calm I can get when I’m there.”

“You handled yourself incredibly well. I did some training with elderly populations when I was in school. It wasn’t the area I wanted to build a career in, but there’s always been a special place in my heart for those suffering from dementia and all the people helping them. One of the first things Miles told me about you is how strong you are. That is evident. Just know you don’t always have to be. You have a whole team of people to support you now.”

All the emotions I’ve fought back today wells in me again. “Thank you,” I whisper.

“Of course, honey. I was actually wondering if you’d mind if I visited your mom alone sometimes. I could be a friend for her. Even if she doesn’t remember that each time.” Katie laughs lightly.

I fight back tears as I look at her. How did I get this lucky? I went from having no one, then just Dani, to having this entire family. “That would be wonderful,” I choke out, tears streaming down my cheeks. Then, without thinking, I launch forward and wrap my arms around her. She doesn’t miss a beat, holding me tightly. “Thank you,” I mutter again.

“You’re so welcome, honey. I’m here for you, whatever you need.” Then she whispers the three words I don’t know how to return yet. “I love you.”

Before I can stop myself, I mutter them back to her. “I love you too.” When I say them, some of the weight on my heart lifts away.

It turns out I wanted a family more than I ever could have admitted.



When Miles gets home, I'm curled up in the corner of the couch watching *Sweet Magnolias*. Though no one would probably guess, I'm a closet romantic. Plus it's one of those shows that embodies what I don't have—or haven't had until recently. Friendship and family. People who would do anything for you. Even the sense of community here in Ida is strong. Much stronger than the small town I grew up in.

He smiles when he sees me, and after taking off his shoes, he walks over and sits down on the coffee table, setting a bag next to him.

“Hey, baby. I brought some food from McDonald's. Plenty of cheeseburgers for you.”

“Thank you.” Emotion creeps into my voice.

He strokes some hair away from my face, palming my cheek and looking into my eyes. “How was the visit?”

“It was okay. Glad your mom was with me.”

“And how was your mom?”

“She thought I was her mother for part of it.”

He winces. He got a firsthand experience with that a couple of weeks ago. It was much worse during that visit and she was so combative we ended up needing to leave.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

“It’s okay. I gave her the blanket, and she came back around to recognizing it was me, even though she was still all over the place. She liked your mom and had fun talking with her.”

He rubs his thumb over my cheek, wiping a tear away. “Why are you crying?”

I sniff, wishing I weren’t crying, but that’s not my life anymore. I’m an emotional, hormonal mess now. “Your mom was—she was so sweet. And she wants to keep visiting my mom without me. It just—it means so much.”

He leans over and softly kisses me. “I told you, you have a family now. You couldn’t shake us if you tried.”

I chuckle at that. “Speaking of your family slash friends, how did decorating go?”

He smiles big. “It was great.” He shifts so he’s sitting on the floor next to the couch, then holds up his phone and shows me pictures of all the photos and homey decorations they hung on the walls of Sarah and Joel’s gorgeous log cabin home. I got to see it a couple of weeks ago when they moved the new furniture in. The whole property is beautiful, as is the farmhouse Rae and Aaron live in on the same property. It’s cool to see how close Rae and Sarah and their entire family are. It’s obvious that extends to the friend group. After getting a taste of it, I almost feel bad for calling it a cult. *Almost*. Because they’re still a little crazy.

Miles also shows me pictures of the new bedroom set that Joel is surprising Sarah with.

“They’re going to be so happy when they walk in and see all that.” I look around. “We need more pictures on the walls.”

“Well, my mother has a thousand from growing up. Rae has tons, too. We can take some from the photo albums you have.”

“We need some of us,” I whisper. Other than a couple from his graduation, we don’t have many together that aren’t selfies.

He sits up on his knees, resting his hand on my stomach. “Well, we’ll have maternity photos soon. God, I can’t wait to see you with a big belly.”

He lifts my T-shirt and kisses the bump he swears I have.

I run my fingers through his silky hair as he does, fire running through my veins from these small but emotional touches.

“Tell me the truth. Did you always want this?”

He lifts his lips from my stomach and looks at me, one eyebrow cocked. “Did I always want to knock you up? Maybe a lot further down the line.”

I laugh at the mischievous look on his face. “*That’s* what I mean. You told me the night we met that you only did one night, too. Did you lie to me? Because you seem pretty happy with the overall turn of events.”

He stares at me for a moment. “We’ve never done this.”

“What do you mean?”

“We went from hooking up, to becoming friends while doing that, to having a baby and something more serious. We’ve never talked about our futures or made silly plans or...” He laughs and shakes his head.

“What?”

“Will you be my date to the wedding tomorrow?”

“Uh, I thought I already was.”

“I never officially asked you. And more importantly, I didn’t approach it as a *date*. That’s what it’s going to be, though. It’s going to be the start of us dating. I never got to take you out for a first date. We didn’t get to sit at a table and discuss all the little things we wanted from our lives and where we wanted to go. We’ve talked about some of it now, but more out of necessity. We skipped the fun parts of dating, and I don’t want to keep doing that. Starting now, we’re going on regular dates, so you better clear your schedule.”

“Like flowers and small talk and dinner dates?”

“Holding hands and walking through a park. Getting ice cream on Sunday. Saturday morning breakfast dates. I’m going to date you and woo you and make you feel like the most spoiled woman on the planet.”

My heart does a little flip. I didn’t know I wanted that, but I do. Maybe I’m like my mom and like getting presents. Not because I want more things, but there’s something special about someone doing something thoughtful or picking something out just for you.

“I like the sound of that, as long as you feel spoiled, too.”

He kisses me again. “As long as I’m with you, I will.” He gives me a grin that would make me weak in the knees if I was standing and not sitting on the couch in grubby sweats. His eyes dance as he stares at me like I’m the only person in the world.

“This brings us back to my question. Did you want a one-night stand or more?”

He brushes his fingers over mine before slowly trailing them up my arm. “At some point in my life, I wanted this. I wanted to find the right person for me and have a family. With the rate at which my friends have found those things, occasionally I longed for it, but I wasn’t actively seeking it. I trusted that when I met the right person, I’d know I wanted something more—and I did. It’s why I walked back to your apartment that morning. I knew you had to be more than one incredible night.” His hand returns to my stomach again. “Turns out I was right.”

Wrapping my hand around the back of his neck, I pull his lips to mine, absolutely ravenous for the warmth of his touch, the intensity of his kiss.

He kisses me back with passion, his tongue curling around mine as I fist his hair, pulling him closer.

I pull away only long enough to ask, “So, if we’re dating now, are we still having sex?”

He lifts an eyebrow and smiles. “I could never deny my gorgeous baby mama the fulfillment of any of her needs.” He brushes his lips over mine. “What do you need?”

“You,” I breathe. “I just need you.” The words slip easily from my lips.

He slants his mouth over mine again in a hard kiss. “You’ve got me.” He turns and grabs the McDonald’s bag, then lifts me into his arms, stands, and carries me into my bedroom. The bedroom he’s slept in every night since we moved in because I haven’t wanted him to sleep anywhere else. He tucks me under the covers, then slides in with me, pulling my legs over his lap and wrapping one arm around my back as he feeds me hamburgers and fries with the other.

It’s so simple, but it makes me feel cherished. He’s not just content to do this, he’s thrilled. Even though this time in my life is hard for many reasons, I’m happier than I’ve been in a long time. I’ve fallen harder than I thought possible for Miles. And while it’s terrifying, it’s freeing to allow myself to be loved and cared for in a way I’d forgotten I could be.

Miles

Why is picking flowers so complicated? I'm waiting anxiously at the florist counter at Briar Lane Gardens. I looked at bouquets for the last ten minutes, then the florist asked me a bunch of questions, half of which I didn't know the answer to. I also have no idea what Amelia's favorite flowers are. Hence this whole dating thing because we skipped the get-to-know-you phase and went straight into having a kid and living together and serious relationship things.

The florist returns, smiling proudly. I truly wish I had her confidence. Though the bouquet does look beautiful.

"Don't look so worried. Most women are appreciative that you thought of them. Worst case, she'll tell you the flowers she likes so you know for next time. Either way, I think she'll enjoy this, even if these aren't her favorites."

I nod. "I'm probably overthinking this. Thank you."

"Of course. Enjoy the wedding," she says with a smile after I pay.

"Thanks." I take the bouquet and walk across the gravel parking lot, waiting for Amelia to arrive. I did not turn into a panic-stricken asshole at the idea of her driving here alone. That's a win for me. Even if I still wish I could hire a car to drive her around for the rest of her pregnancy. Pretty sure she'd kick my ass if I did that, though.

The girls left Rae's parents' house a few minutes ago, but Amelia left before them since she was driving my car over. I rode in the limo with the guys, so we need a car here to get home tonight.

I glance over at the road, but don't see my car among those turning into the parking lot.

"What are you doing over here?" Joel asks, strolling over to me.

I turn to face him, probably looking like an idiot with my face half hidden by the flowers. "Waiting for my date."

"You mean your girlfriend?"

"Yes," I sigh. I'm so gone for this girl it's ridiculous. But that's probably a good thing seeing as she's having my baby. "But we skipped the dating phase, so I'm starting from scratch on that front. Do you think—nevermind."

The classic Joel lopsided smile crosses his face. "Do I think what?"

Ugh. When did I become this guy? "Are the flowers good enough?" I mumble.

He laughs for a second, then mashes his lips together, trying to hold back further laughter at my expense. "They look great. She'll love them."

I breathe out a sigh of relief. "I hope so." With my brain functioning at full capacity again, I turn back to him. "Wait a second. What are *you* doing over here?"

He looks around like he got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Me? I’m uh... well, I just wanted to um—”

“You’re trying to sneak a look at Sarah, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Joel says, rocking back and forth on his heels and not bothering to hide his grin.

“Uh huh. Get out of here.”

“Just one more minute.”

“Now. Or I’m calling for backup.” I fish my phone out of my pocket, ready to fire off a group text to Aaron, Jesse, and Trevor to get his ass away from here.

“There he is,” Aaron calls.

I turn to see Aaron and Jesse jogging over with Joel’s oldest brother, Jared.

“Dude, I will chuck you over my shoulder,” Jared says. “Get out of here. Let’s go.”

He gives him a shove.

“Fine,” Joel says with a huff, letting his brothers lead him away.

Aaron steps up next to me. “Nice bouquet.”

“Thanks,” I say quickly. This feels weird.

He chuckles. “First time giving a girl flowers?”

“Fuck off.”

“You kiss your baby mama with that mouth?”

I turn to him, smiling like an idiot. “Yep. And she loves it.” He laughs and looks over at the parking lot. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“Waiting for my girl. This time I don’t have to wait to see her in a gorgeous dress.” He winks at me, then smacks me on the back. “Speaking of which, there’s yours.” He nods toward my car pulling in, and I take off at a fast walk across the parking lot.

I’m jogging by the time I get to the car. She’s just shut it off, so I hurry over and open her door for her. Her eyes dance as she climbs out. “What’s this?”

“For you. I told you I wanted this to be a date. That means flowers.”

She shuts the door and takes the bouquet from me, looking them over as I hold my breath. Then she smiles. It’s big and vibrant. “How did you know I like sunflowers?”

I shrug. “I didn’t. I guess the florist must’ve figured it out from the crappy answers I gave to her questions.”

Amelia laughs, turning the bouquet so she can look at it from all sides. It has two sunflowers, some dark pink roses, and some pink and purple wildflowers. “They’re perfect. Sunflowers were my dad’s favorite. He said no matter what, they find the sun, and when there isn’t any, they persist through the rain.” She swallows and looks up at me. “That’s how he always wanted me to be. These are beautiful. Thank you.”

Leaning down, I kiss her cheek. “You’re welcome.”

“Think they’ll be okay in the car?”

“The florist said it’s cool enough today that with the windows cracked, they’ll be fine.”

“Perfect.” She leans in and quickly cracks the windows, then sets the flowers on the passenger seat. Then she shuts the car door and loops her arm around my elbow. “Interesting choice for a first date.”

“Doing the best I can with what I have. But I figure there’ll be delicious food, dancing, love songs, and we’ll be surrounded by romance. That has to make for a good first date, right?”

She smiles up at me. “That sounds excellent.”

“Good. Now, I’ve been skipping out on my groomsman duties, so allow me to walk you to your seat.”

“I’d love that.”

We walk across the gravel path toward the gardens, chatting and laughing the whole way. When we get there, I lead Amelia to a seat on the end of the row, a few from the front, so if she needs to sneak off to use the bathroom, she can. Luckily the ceremony should be fairly short.

As soon as she’s seated, things move quickly, and before I know it, I’m positioned at the end of the aisle, waiting to walk to the altar with Amanda, who is coordinating the timing of everything until the very last moment.

I wait at the altar next to Trevor as Aaron and Mackie walk down the aisle. Mackie winks at me and takes her place next to Amanda and Hyla as Aaron comes to stand next to me. Aaron's eyes lock on Rae as she walks with Jesse. She gives him the slightest wink as she takes her place next to Mackenzie.

“Jealous I got to walk down the aisle with your girl?” Jesse teases.

“Nah, I got a hell of a view from here,” Aaron says, eyes still on his wife.

Joel is ignoring us as he looks down the aisle where Sarah's little sisters, Cady and Cassidy, are preparing to do their flower girl duties.

Trev leans in and whispers, “Who do you think will do this next?”

My eyes drift to Jesse. But frankly, I could see it being Trev, too.

“I think I need to focus on the baby thing first,” I say.

Trev's eyes light up, and he stares at Chelsea, sitting next to Amelia. Dani is sitting in front of them with her sister, Olivia. “Does it make you want to marry her? Knowing she's carrying your baby?”

I swallow thickly at that, but before I can answer, the song Sarah is walking down the aisle to starts playing and we all turn our attention to her. She looks gorgeous in her dress, and her blue eyes are bright with joy. After all she's been through

in the last year, that fills me with happiness. She and Joel deserve their happy ending, even if I think that's a terrible term. It makes it sound like you get married, and suddenly, everything will be perfect. I have a feeling some things will get harder. Life sends you twists and turns no matter what your relationship status. When you get lucky enough to find the right person to weather it all with, that's the ultimate happy ending. Except it's never the end. It's the next chapter, and I'm excited to see where Sarah and Joel's will lead them.

As they take each other's hands and the ceremony begins, my eyes drift back to Amelia, Trevor's words playing in my mind. Because the answer is yes. I want her to be my wife. I want to build a life with her. Not out of necessity, but out of desire. And that's the thing. We're just getting started. We're finally slowing down getting to know each other. I want to marry her, but I don't want to do it now. It'll happen *someday*. As long as it's her I'm marrying, it doesn't matter when. It only matters that it's a happy new chapter for both of us.



It's been a hell of a wedding so far. Perfectly Sarah and Joel. Not quite as boisterous as Aaron's and Rae's was, but it's cozy and decadent. The amount of fondue involved is crazy—and also delicious. I've spent most of the reception feeding my girl. I love when she asks me to fill her plate over and over. She's nourishing her body and growing our baby with that food, and there is nothing sexier.

She and Dani just went for a girls' run to the bathroom, so when I spot Sarah on the dance floor right as a slower song starts, I stroll over to her.

“Can I steal a dance?”

She smiles brightly. “I’d love that.” She wraps one arm around my back, and with her other hand, she takes mine.

“Enjoying your day?” I ask as we move to the music.

“So much. It’s all the little pieces of me and Joel pulled together into a perfect whole. I will remember this day forever. Not just the big stuff. The little things.”

“Like lobster rolls and fondue?”

She laughs. “Definitely those. I rarely forget good food.”

“Same.”

“What’s sticking with me more than I expected is the happiness I see in everyone else. Watching my parents smile and whisper to each other as they slow dance fills me with joy. Seeing Rae and Aaron wrapped in each other’s arms looking deliriously happy adds to my happiness.” She looks up at me. “I like seeing you happy, too. You’re in love with her, huh?”

I nod. “Yeah. I haven’t told her yet—”

“Because she needs time.” Sarah lets out a little laugh, then looks across the dance floor at Joel, who is chatting with Aaron. “Been there. Whether or not she can say it, going at her pace means a lot to her. Coming from a girl who knows what that’s like.”

“I’m doing my best. It’s not always easy. I realized last night I never got a first date with her. We’ve done things in a strange order, and I can’t fix that, but I want to make sure we make time for those things now.”

“So you’re dating your girlfriend?”

I laugh. “Yep.”

“Good. I think you should always date your significant other. It helps keep you connected and keeps the love alive. When I wasn’t making time for that with Joel, it hurt us even more. Now we’ve prioritized at least one date night alone each week, even if it’s just cooking dinner together. Those little moments mean just as much as the big ones.”

“I’m trying to do it all right,” I say softly.

“You don’t have to get it right all the time. As long as you’re trying and communicating, that’s what really matters. I have a feeling Amelia sees that too. The way she looks at you makes her feelings clear. I knew her before she met you, and she was much more closed off. She hung out with us, but I could see her walls. With you, she’s open. That’s a special thing. It means you’ve found your person.”

“I hope so. I know I used to pick on you guys for being idiots, but I get it now. This shit is scary.”

“The fall is always scary. That’s why it’s so exciting.” She gives me a wily Sarah smile.

“I’m proud of you and glad to see you so happy.”

“Thanks, Miles. I’m enjoying where I am right now. There’s pain in growth, but it leads to some beautiful places.”

I give her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Don’t cry when I say this, but you sounded like your grandmother just now.”

She stops moving for a moment and looks up at me. Emotion fills her eyes, but she holds her tears back. “She taught me well.”

As the song comes to an end, I pull her in for a hug. “I love you, Sarbear.”

“Love you too, Miles.” She kisses my cheek, then spins me around. “Go get your girl. I have it on good authority there are a bunch more slow songs coming up.”

She squeezes my arm as she walks away, and I stare across the dance floor at Amelia. She’s wearing a black floral dress with pops of green, burgundy, and deep purple. It’s stunning on her. Then again, I always think she’s stunning. Last night when I walked into the apartment, I thought no one had ever looked sexier in a T-shirt and sweats.

I’m hopeless.

She scrunches up her nose as she looks at me, her nose ring shimmering as it catches the glint of the twinkle lights lining the tent. As I walk toward her, she smiles and saunters over.

“Can I have this dance?” she asks.

“How about a whole bunch?” I lean down and kiss her.

“I like the sound of that,” she says, wrapping her arms around my neck. “Pretty good first date.” She smirks at me. “Next time, I might like something quieter.”

“Good. That’s exactly what I have planned. Cozy dinner at a nice restaurant. Low lighting, soft conversations, you running your toes up my leg under the table.”

“Oh, you like it when I do that, huh?”

“I like it when your skin is on mine. The slightest touch from you sets me on fire.”

“God,” she says breathlessly. “How do you do that? My touch sets you on fire? Your words light me up. The way you look at me from across the room could melt me into a puddle.”

“It’s not me, Ames. It’s us. We light up for each other because of the sparks between us.” Dropping my lips to her neck, I rumble, “That’s why when we collide, we always catch fire.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re kinda sexy?”

I chuckle at that. “Honestly? Lots of girls. You’re the only one I’ve ever cared about hearing it from though.”

“Good to know I’m one of many.” She throws her head back, laughing, but I don’t. I stop moving and look into her eyes.

“You’re not one of many. You’re one and only. The only woman I want. The only woman I *ever* want. I don’t know how I got so damn lucky with you.”

She purses her lips like she's thinking. "Well, you're smart, handsome, know how to work the bedroom, not to mention how kindhearted, thoughtful, and caring you are. Honestly, I feel like the lucky one. I met you and my world changed." She looks down at her stomach—the bump she insists she doesn't see. "In the best ways."

She looks into my eyes, and I see my future in hers. Then again, I think I always have.

"Since we're on our first date, I think we're supposed to talk about the future. What we want out of life. And love."

She swallows hard at that word, but doesn't question it, which fills me with hope. Hope that she's getting closer to being ready for those words.

"What do you want?" she breathes.

"From life? I'm still figuring some of that out, but I know I want a life well lived. I don't want to look back filled with regrets and what-ifs. Sometimes taking chances is hard for me, but I don't want to let that hold me back."

"And from... love?"

I smile, knowing *exactly* what I want. "I want to build a strong relationship and a beautiful life with my partner. I want to know we'll always fight for our relationship, even through the hard things. Life is short and imperfect, but when you find someone you can walk through it with, it's fuller and more vibrant. That is what I want." I lean down and graze my lips

over her cheek. “And in case I wasn’t clear, I want all of that with you.”

She lets out a soft noise that’s almost a whimper. “Miles,” she whispers, tilting her head to meet my gaze. We stare at each other for a long moment, then she says, “I want that, too. With you.”

Curling my fingers in her hair, I crush my mouth against hers, claiming her. Because this girl is mine. All fucking mine. We’ve stopped moving now, and my other hand is on her stomach. They’re both mine. Mine to care for, mine to love, mine to protect. Forever. It’s hard to believe that six months ago this kind of life seemed a millennium away, but now that I’m living it, I know it’s right where I’m supposed to be.

Love is complicated and mischievous. It works in mysterious ways. When it picks you up and sweeps you away in its mighty current, there’s nothing more exhilarating, even if it’s terrifying, too.

Chapter Nine

Stole My Heart

Miles

“I’D BE HAPPY TO help with that if you decide to do it,” Amelia says to Rae and Chelsea, who are talking about starting a nonprofit like Promise Advocacy at some point. They both still have more education they need to do, but with the closing of Hope and Healing, they’re both motivated.

“We’d love that,” Rae says. “The idea is daunting but exciting.”

“It’s something we can hopefully work toward,” Chelsea says.

“You know, I bet my dad would be willing to donate and help out financially. He’s the perfect chairman of the board kind of guy,” Jesse says.

“Joel said he might be willing to donate, but that’s a great point,” Rae says, dipping a chip in some homemade queso and popping it in her mouth.

We’re having taco Tuesday at the farmhouse tonight. Everyone is here minus Sarah and Joel, who are off on a well-deserved two-week honeymoon in Bar Harbor, Maine. I texted with Joel a bit this morning, and they seem to be having a great time, but I don’t want to bug them too much. After the hell they’ve gone through in the last year, they deserve a quiet two weeks to just be with each other and be in love.

“I’m definitely more driven to get my master’s degree now. Luckily, Kristen is doing us a solid and giving us the Promise Advocacy umbrella to do outreach under,” Rae says, popping another chip loaded with queso in her mouth. The girl could eat her weight in queso.

“How does that work?” Mackie asks.

Rae’s still stuffing her face, so Chelsea answers. “She very graciously offered to come down here one morning per week to ‘oversee’ us, and connected us with a therapist in the area who we can refer people to. The therapist works on a sliding scale, so she’ll be affordable for anyone who needs her. She’s specialized in this area and women’s health in general, so she’s a perfect fit.”

“It doesn’t quite fill the gap of Hope and Healing, but the women who run the local support group opened up another session in Lacy Creek so we can reach more people,” Rae says. “I’m grateful, but it’s definitely not how I saw this career field going for me to start. But that’s okay. I’m going to make the most of it. I’ll do some nannyng while I find the right online master’s program and do outreach.”

“This is really cool,” Amelia says. “Let me know however I can help because I fully support this. There aren’t enough resources for women in general, but especially going through all that.”

“Thank you. I’m sure we’ll need it.” Rae swipes another chip through the queso and lifts it to her mouth when Jesse walks by and snatches it out of her hand before she can eat it.

He pops it into his mouth as she stares at him wide-eyed. I watch in amusement as she shoves him. “Jerk. I hate you.”

He gives her his signature charming smile. “No, you don’t.”

Rae rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

Amelia laughs. “It’s kind of shocking you still like him.”

“Wow. Rude, Ames,” Jesse says, fake sniffing. “I thought you liked me.”

“I like you, but after all the bullshit between you two, I’m surprised you still like each other.” Amelia gives him a sweet-as-pie smile.

My eyebrows shoot up at that.

Dani snickers.

“Moments when I wish our entire friend group didn’t know about that,” Rae mutters.

“Or that he hadn’t stuck his—”

“Baby, behave,” I say sternly, as Amelia fights back a grin.

She lifts an eyebrow in challenge but doesn’t say anything.

“Damn,” Mackie says. “You’re savage sometimes.”

Amelia shrugs. “I call it like I see it. Plus, giving shit seems to be a love language here, no?”

“Ah, she’s catching on,” Amanda says with a laugh.

“She’s not supposed to beat us at our own game yet,” Rae says in mock irritation.

Amelia slides her arm around Dani's waist. "What can I say? I know she's your cousin, but I've claimed her and I'm protective—and will give people shit on her behalf."

Dani leans her head against Amelia's and says, "That's why I love you."

I chuckle at that. I like seeing them together. Amelia's been through so much, and I know how hard it is for her to open up to people, but seeing her with Dani is a reminder of all the love she has inside her—love I think will only grow within this group of friends and family.

Jesse smacks my arm. "You ever get the feeling they like each other better than they like us?"

"If Sarah was here, she'd wrap her arm around my back right now and say that's exactly how it should be," Rae says. "You two aren't related, but you give off that sister vibe."

Amelia throws her head back laughing as Dani points at Rae. "Don't you dare tell Olivia that. She'll throw a fit. Even if it's true," she mumbles under her breath.

We're all laughing when Aaron walks in the back door with Trevor, both of them carrying sheet trays of grilled meat. "And the meat is ready," Aaron says.

Rae claps her hands. "Which means it's time to eat. Hallelujah. I need tacos."

"You always need tacos," Amanda says with a laugh.

"Because tacos are a food of the gods. Change my mind."

“Like we’d ever bother trying to convince you of that,” Mackie says. “But I’m down with eating because the sooner we eat dinner, the sooner we get dessert, and I know you made Oreo cheesecake brownies.”

I whip my head around to look at Rae, my eyes lighting up. “Really?”

“Mhm. But you can’t eat the whole tray like you used to in college.” She gives me a pointed look.

“Fine. I’ll only have two... or three.”

“You have a problem.”

She shoves me toward a chair and I smile. A lot has changed in the last few months, but moments like this are a nice reminder that some things *never* change, and I’d never want them to.



“Miles Hyun-Hansen!”

I shove the rest of the brownie I’m eating into my mouth, chewing as fast as I can as Rae strolls across the back deck toward me, hands on her hips. I lost count of how many brownies I’ve eaten, but this is at least number six. I’d apologize, but I swear Rae laces her brownies with crack. She’s always been a great baker, and even though I’m done growing, I’m still a bottomless pit most days.

She stops in front of me, and when I don’t say anything, she says, “Open your mouth.” I give her a big close-mouthed

smile, but she smacks me and says, “I will call your mother. Open your mouth.”

My eyes flare. She’s not messing around. I swallow as much as I can, then open my mouth, revealing what I’m sure is a gross mess of chocolate.

She slowly shakes her head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“It’s not my fault you make such good brownies,” I protest, once I’ve swallowed.

She leans against the railing of the deck next to me. “What are you doing out here anyway?”

“I was going to help Aaron set up the fire, but then he and Trevor started arguing about the best way to do it”—I gesture over my shoulder—“and I didn’t have the energy for that.”

She looks over at the firepit, where Aaron and Trevor are overengineering the fire, and laughs. “They’re also ridiculous. For the record, if you want brownies, just text me. I’ll make them. I don’t have anything else to do most afternoons these days. I take all the morning outreach stuff, and Chelsea does the afternoons, so for now I’m free to make you endless brownies. Which really would be endless with you.”

“Hey,” I say seriously, “I’m proud of you.”

“And my brownie-making skills?” she asks with a laugh.

“No. Of what you and Chelsea are doing. Your passion and the big dreams you have—it’s beautiful to watch. You took something horrible and you let it fuel your passion and drive you to help others. What you’re doing is amazing, Rae.”

She looks down at her toes for a moment. “Thank you. That means a lot. For the record, I’m proud of you too. What you’re doing with Amelia, the way you’ve opened your heart to her, that’s something special.”

“It is. She is.”

“How are you doing with the pregnancy?”

“Pretty good. I mean, I’m still me. Anxious as fuck about what I can’t control—which is pretty much everything. But at the same time, I’m learning what I can control and help with, and those things make me more excited. Finding the right apartment for us, and now the little things to get ready for the baby, are exciting.” I shrug, shoving my hands in my pockets.

She tilts her head. “You’re really happy about this, aren’t you?”

I can’t hide my smile. “Yeah, I am. I wouldn’t have chosen for it to go in this order because it’s made building a relationship more complicated, but I’ve always wanted to be a dad. Falling for Amelia and getting to do this with her is even better.”

“I’m happy for you. After all the shit about how you were afraid to risk your heart for love, now here you are.”

“I didn’t say I was in love with her.” My words come out flat and unbelievable because they are. I’m stupidly in love with her. *Fucking gone* for her.

“And I wasn’t in love with Aaron. Sarah wasn’t in love with Joel. Whatever you need to believe.”

I roll my eyes. “Really? You’re just going to lump me in with you idiots? Yes, I know I was afraid to risk my heart, but I’m learning with the right person, it’s worth it. Love is fucking scary, but it’s worth it.”

She almost squeals at that, clapping her hands happily. Then she throws her arms around me. “You deserve this. You’ve been our protector and caretaker for so many years, you deserve to have the right person to do that for—and to have someone else do it for you. I hope she does.”

I smile as Rae lets me go, thinking of all the tiny ways I’ve felt completely understood and cared for by Amelia. Whether it’s her calming reaction to my anxiety or the way she plays with my hair when we lie in bed together, I feel an ease with her unlike anything I’ve felt before—and that’s saying something given this friend group.

“She does. But we’re also still learning. It’s crazy how backward this has all been, but I’m finally doing what I should’ve done months ago and dating her.”

Rae’s face lights up with a huge smile. “That’s adorable.”

“You’re still the same romantic you’ve always been.”

“I love love, and I always will. There’s nothing better than seeing the people you love find their person and live out their love story.”

“Speaking of love stories, you still happy with yours?” It’s a silly question in some respects, but I’m genuinely curious to know if she and Aaron are still as happy as they seem.

“Unbelievably so. There are hard moments and rough days, but at the end of them, I crawl into bed with Aaron and we deal with it. We talk it through, then we fall asleep in each other’s arms. We went through hell, but we learned so much. Sometimes I wish I could take things back—like the stuff with Jesse—but at the same time, it helped us learn. I love the relationship we’ve built and even when things aren’t perfect—which is a lot—our relationship is our safe place, the shelter from life’s storms, and I’m incredibly grateful for that. Humbled. Not everyone gets this or learns how to work with the person they love to create a healthy relationship. I’m proud of that.”

“As you should be. I might not want to take lessons from your early days, but I think everyone could learn something from where you two are now.”

“Thanks, Miles. Maybe you’ll get to set that example for all of us with parenting.”

I drop my head to my chest, laughing. “Yeah, I don’t know. We’ll see how that goes.”

“A new adventure.”

She smiles big and it reminds me of the girl who stood at her mom’s side on the day we met, then confidently introduced herself. Full of joy and life and always wanting to see the people around her happy.

“...only if you want to catch the house on fire,” Aaron is saying to Trevor as they step onto the deck.

“You worry too much,” Trev says with a laugh.

Aaron just shakes his head and walks over to Rae. “Hey, Beautiful.” They share a standard—gross, PDA-heavy—kiss, then he wraps an arm around her. “Ready for the fire?”

“Mm. Yes, please. Let’s get everyone else.”

They head for the back door, and Rae looks over her shoulder and winks at me.

A jolt of excitement rolls up my spine as I imagine a similar future. My arm around my girl, a house full of family and friends and all our kids as we gather around a fire in the backyard. It took me a long time to admit and accept the dream, but now that I have, it keeps growing into the beautiful future I want for myself. One I’m excited to build with Amelia, starting with our date tomorrow night.

Amelia

It shouldn't be a surprise that Miles Hyun-Hansen knows how to plan a date. From him "picking me up" by knocking on my bedroom door, to the beautiful bouquet on the kitchen counter, to hiring a car to drive us, and now enjoying our meal in a private room at a swanky restaurant. I know better than to ask him how much this cost, but I know it's a lot.

"You know, watching you house four McDonald's cheeseburgers in less than ten minutes is hot, but watching you eat a steak is even sexier." He grins at me as I take another bite.

"Good to know me eating turns you on because I'm going to be doing a lot more of that now that I'm in my second trimester."

"I'm good with that. I love watching you eat."

I scrunch up my nose. "I think that's weird."

"Nah. You're nourishing your gorgeous body and our baby. Nothing more attractive than that."

"You're a smooth talker."

He shrugs. "I'm not trying to be smooth. It's the truth. Speaking of talking, we haven't done much of that yet."

"When the food is this good, there are better things to do with my mouth than talk."

A huge smile grows on his face, then he bursts out laughing. “Some people would argue there’s always better things to do with your mouth than talk.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re such a guy. For that, you get to be in the hot seat first.”

“Hot seat, huh? Okay, hit me with it.” He wipes his mouth and leans back in his chair, waiting for me to come up with something good.

I sit back as well, trying to come up with a good question.

What do I want to know about him?

He seems like an open book. Everything I’ve asked about, he’s given me an answer to. But is there anything he hasn’t told me? *There it is.*

“Tell me something you’ve never told anyone else before.”

His eyes widen a little, then he smiles. “Good question. I don’t hold much back, but there is one thing I’ve never really talked about with anyone. I sort of mentioned it to Mackie at one point when she came out. I started researching sexuality and what all the letters and the plus sign in LGBTQ mean, and it got me thinking about my own sexuality. I’ve always solidly considered myself straight. I’m firmly attracted to women and I’ve only ever been with women, but I’m pretty confident I’m pansexual. If I’d met someone and connected with them the way I have with you and they were a man or nonbinary, I’d have been just as attracted to them, and I would’ve been open to pursuing a relationship with them.”

I rest my hand over his, warmth blooming in my chest at his unfiltered honesty. “Thank you for sharing that with me. Can I ask... is there a reason you never told your friends?”

“Not really. It’s never come up, I guess, except for with Mackie, but her coming out was well in the past by the time I figured this out about myself. There was never much more discussion about sexuality within the group, and since I wasn’t interested in actively pursuing hooking up or a relationship with a guy, it didn’t feel like a big deal to me. I’d never hide it if anyone asked me, though.”

“You seem to know yourself well. I mean that as a compliment because so few people do. I’m not sure I do.”

“Everyone has their own journey. I was lucky enough to have a therapist for a mom and parents who valued open and honest communication. It helped shape me, but so did my anxiety. When you have panic attacks as a kid, you have to learn a lot about yourself pretty quickly. That said, I did still try to hide my anxiety from my friends.”

“Why?”

“It makes me feel weak.” His voice is even, but I can sense his discomfort.

I brush my thumb over the top of his hand. “There’s nothing weak about anxiety, and I know I’ve told you that before. I see your strength in recognizing a mental health struggle and continuing to learn how to work with it.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. Now, tell me something about you. Actually, not something. I want to know about law school. You mentioned before that you wanted to go. Tell me more about that. What kind of lawyer would you want to be? Do you already have a program in mind? What inspired you to go down that path?”

My cheeks heat slightly. There’s something about him remembering that detail and wanting to know more that makes me run hot for him.

His mouth lifts up on one side. Even his half-smiles are sexy. He gives my hand a gentle squeeze, encouraging me.

“Um, I don’t know where to start.”

“What made you want to be a lawyer?”

“My dad. Both my parents, but especially my dad. They hated injustice and were activists for human rights, women’s rights, racial equality—anything like that. I grew up learning about those things and it fired me up too. When I originally thought of being a lawyer, that was the type of lawyer I wanted to be—fighting for those things. Maybe working at a nonprofit. Something like that. The reason I became a paralegal is sort of two-fold. When I started my three-year pre-law degree, I was considering doing law school part time and working on the side. We didn’t have a ton of money growing up, and though after my dad died, my college was paid for out of his life insurance, I hadn’t been planning on that. I wanted to be sure I’d have a reliable job to lean on if I needed it. When everything happened with my mom, I decided to put

law school on hold and find a job as a paralegal. I ended up doing contracts and business law because it was reliable and paid well. I love JWAC and they've offered to let me work part time and do tuition reimbursement if I decide to go to law school, but I'm torn if I would do it that way because I'm not sure if I'd want to stay in the business area if I became a lawyer. I love the idea of helping new startup businesses, but I'm not sure yet."

He squeezes my hand. "You have time to figure it out. But if you want to go to law school, I don't want you to put it on the back burner. It's not going to be a *maybe someday* thing. You're going to do it because you deserve that. You've lost and sacrificed more than anyone should have to. I don't want you to sacrifice your dreams."

Damn.

How is he so... swoonworthy. Right. Unicorn. Alien unicorn.

And apparently, I'm turned on by alien unicorns because *oh my god*. I am about to rip my clothes off and beg him to fuck me on this table.

"I have two things to say right now. First, thank you. That means a lot to me. I want to be a lawyer. I just need to work out the timing with this." I nod toward my stomach.

"And we will. We'll figure it out together, but whenever you're ready, I'm in. My income can support us and the baby, it'll just be a matter of covering tuition."

I blow out a breath. “Okay, that leads me to my second thing. You said watching me eat is sexy to you, well this is sexy to me. Your endless desire to fill my cup and make sure I’m getting what I need. It’s ridiculously sexy, and it makes me want to jump you.” He laughs in that deep vibrato of his and it hits deep in my core. “Miles,” I groan.

“Oh, do you need something?” His eyes fire up and he looks over at the door leading back into the rest of the restaurant.

He stands and walks over to me, pulling me into his arms.

“I need you,” I mutter as he moves slowly to the soft music playing, dancing in the small space next to our table.

He gently massages my back with one hand. “When we get home, I’m going to take you back to the bedroom and massage every inch of you.” He drops his hand down and grazes it up my thigh. “Every inch.”

“Very presumptuous of you to think I put out on the first date.”

“Oh really? Playing hard to get?” He grazes his hand up farther, brushing the crotch of my underwear.

I bite my lip. There’s no more playing. That slight touch is about to send me over the edge.

“No. Please. I need...”

“I know. Come here.”

He leads me over to the wall and presses me against it. Shoving his hand under my dress, he pushes my underwear to

the side and slips two fingers inside me, rubbing his thumb over my clit as he does.

I fight off a moan as I claw at his back.

“So wet for me, baby.”

“I—I need—”

“Tell me.”

“You inside me.”

“Fuck,” he groans, then he glances at the door. “Okay, but it’ll have to be fast.”

“I don’t care. I just need to feel you.”

“I’ll take care of you, sweetheart. Don’t worry.” He unzips his pants and frees his cock from his boxers, pushing my dress up and my underwear to the side as he kisses me. “But when we get home, I’m going to eat your perfect pussy until you can’t think or breathe anymore.”

He holds my hips in place and drives into me. The sensation of him hitting my deepest spot and filling me up makes it impossible to hold back my moan. He stops moving and looks into my eyes. “I need you to be a good girl and be quiet for me. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” I whimper. I’ve never needed sex as badly in my life as I do now. Between him and my crazy pregnancy hormones, I’m desperate.

He starts moving again, slanting his mouth over mine as he pumps into me hard and fast.

I come faster than ever now that I'm pregnant, and it only takes a couple of minutes of him thrusting into me and rubbing my clit before I'm clenching around him, moaning into his mouth.

"Fuck," he grumbles, his chest shaking as he comes too.

He rests his head against mine and kisses me deeply.

"That was exactly what I needed," I whisper as he pulls out of me.

He grins. "That was just the appetizer."

I smile at that. "The perfect thing to hold me over."

"So, good enough first date?" he asks as he zips his pants.

"Perfect. And perfectly us. I love—" My eyes widen as the word I was about to say catches in my throat. "It. I love it."

Miles's lips curve up into a smile. Maybe he knows what I was about to say while lost in the haziness of my post-orgasm high.

"I love it too."

He gives me a raw, sloppy kiss, then smacks my butt. "Go clean up. I'll order dessert."

"Okay."

I straighten out my dress, then walk out the door as he sits back down at the table. I've been going on about wanting the vanilla bean custard since we got here, so he knows what I want.

As I walk to the bathroom, my mind is on the words I almost said, and I know it wasn't just that post-orgasm high. Miles is right. We've done this all backward, but it doesn't matter. Somewhere along this twisted path, he stole my heart, and I know between him and our baby I'm never getting it back again.

Chapter Ten

Not Letting Go

Miles

“YOU’LL FIND YOUR PASSION, babe,” Mari says to Mackie as she twists her fingers through Mackie’s hair.

“Easy for you to say when you’ve known yours since you were a kid,” Mackie counters.

We’re sitting around our small dining room table, just the four of us. Rae and Aaron were also supposed to join us for dinner, but Rae wasn’t feeling well. Aaron felt bad when he called me earlier, but Rae’s having a rough period this month and it’s taken a toll on her with bad cramps, headache, and nausea. Rae’s always had a tough time with her period for as far back as I can remember. She was afraid to talk about it in front of us at first, but as time went on, the girls got a lot more NSFW about their periods and letting us know how they felt. It never bothered me, but growing up in a house with two younger sisters and having three female best friends meant getting over being squeamish about that stuff pretty quickly.

I don’t think twice about running to the store to grab pads or tampons and have done it plenty of times, especially for Mackie. I was shopping with Rae once and she needed a new menstrual cup, so I stood in the aisle with her helping compare products. Maybe this is where Amelia is right about us being like a cult, but honestly, I prefer the openness. It’s silly to hide things that are hurting you.

“You’ve known since you were young what you wanted to do?” Amelia asks Mari.

“Oh yeah. Ever since I was little, I’ve been environmentally focused. I was the five-year-old who’d get so upset about finding litter on the ground. My dad encouraged me to use my voice, and I got involved in Environmental Club in middle school. It grew from there. My biggest focus is on sustainable energy and renewable resources. I’m especially fascinated with ways third world countries are utilizing those things to bring clean water, electricity, or internet access to outlying communities. There’s so much to learn and ways to grow our knowledge, which is really cool. When my dad encouraged me to use my voice, I don’t think he was expecting it to lead me here.”

“Is he not supportive of you?” Amelia asks.

“No, both my parents are very supportive. I mean, it was hard for them. I’m a liberal activist who is also a lesbian, and my parents are—or were—pretty conservative. But one of my younger siblings is trans, so they had to get on board pretty fast or risk losing us, and my parents are not the type to let their kids go.”

My eyes dart to Mackie, who is looking down. I know she’s thinking about Hyla and probably what could have been if Hyla’s parents had chosen her over money and status. Based on the way Mari casually said all that, I’m assuming she doesn’t know much about Hyla’s situation. Then again, if I

had an ex-girlfriend, I wouldn't be jumping to explain all the dirty details of their life to Amelia.

"That's wonderful," Amelia says, reading the situation, but before she can change the subject, Mari smiles warmly.

"It is." She looks over Amelia's shoulder at the clock. "Oh my gosh. Speaking of the things I'm passionate about, I need to get going. I have to meet with my advisor and a couple of other people about a project we're working on." She stands, and we all quickly do the same. "Thank you so much for having me."

"Of course," I say. "It's good to get to know you better."

"You guys as well. Have a good night."

"I'll walk you out," Mackie says.

Mari kisses her cheek. "Walk me to the door. You should spend some time with your friends."

"Hey," Amelia says, wrapping her hand around my arm.

"What's up, baby?"

"I just got a text from work about some kind of emergency." She rolls her eyes. "I doubt it is. It's probably someone who waited until the last minute and thinks that means I need to work overtime for them. I'm going to go check and see."

"Sure thing." I pop a kiss on her cheek, and she pinches my butt before she walks away. The second trimester agrees with my girl. She's got more energy, she's sick less often, she's ravenously hungry, and she's horny all the damn time. I know

this is probably the peak of how good she'll feel during pregnancy, so I'm taking advantage of it, but mostly, it's good to see her feeling better.

I grab two beers from the fridge, then head for the living room, watching as Mackie and Mari share a very PDA-filled kiss. Not that I mind. I like seeing her happy, even if I'm wondering how happy she is. Mari talked openly about a lot of things tonight, but I could see times when Mackie held back. If anything came up remotely related to Hyla or their relationship, I could see the conflict in Mackie's eyes. I like Mari, and I've never been one to "ship" certain relationships for my friends. At least not until it was obvious they'd be together. Still, a part of me wonders if Mari is someone to pass the time with.

Mackie walks over, looking happy if a bit wistful. I hold out the beer I got for her and she happily takes it and opens it, sitting down in the opposite corner of the couch.

"How are things going with Mari?" I ask.

"Good," Mackie says, taking a long swig of her beer.

"Just good?" I ask.

She smirks at me. "Looking for drama?"

I chuckle. "Believe me, I am *never* looking for drama. I was just curious. You two have been together a while now. I'm wondering how it's all going. You haven't told me much since the beginning."

She shrugs. “It’s good. I’m happy. It’s an easy relationship, so I feel like there’s not much to tell.”

“But...”

She sighs. “*But* sometimes I’m not sure exactly how she feels about me. She’s hard to read. Plus, she’s so easygoing about most things. I sometimes wonder if it’s because she doesn’t care enough.”

“She seems passionate about her job.”

“She is. Which is cool. And she’s very supportive of me trying different things and finding my passion.”

“Are you in love with her?”

She shrugs. “I love her, but I’m not *in* love with her. Not yet. I’m getting there. I think.”

“Wow. Convincing.”

She reaches over and smacks my stomach. “Shut up. Honestly, I like that we’re taking things slow. There’s less pressure. Falling hard can be fun. Until you hit the ground.” She scrunches up her face. “Sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” I ask with a laugh.

“Because I know you’ve fallen hard for Amelia.”

I smile over the rim of my beer bottle. “Yeah. I have.”

She elbows me in the side. “So why haven’t you told her?”

Great question.

I look down the hallway, seeing her bedroom door still closed. I lean in closer to Mackie, whispering, “Because I am a massive chicken shit. Initially, I didn’t think she was ready to hear it. The longer I go without telling her, the more anxious I get about it. We’ve done everything in a weird order, and it makes saying these words feel more dramatic than it should. Then I think about the fact that she hasn’t said it to me and I get scared all over again that she’s not ready to hear it.” I run my hand through my hair. “I watched everyone else have these love stories, and I thought mine would go the same way. It would follow a specific trajectory at least. I wouldn’t be scared to tell her I love her.”

Mackie laughs out loud. “I’m sorry, are you confused about how the love stories in our friend group have gone? Rae and Aaron waited literal years to admit they loved each other and even then, they talked around it and got in a huge fight before saying it out loud. Sarah and Joel pretended they weren’t dating or in love for an entire year before saying it and making things official. Hyla and me—” She stops short and looks down. “Anyway, I think you’re par for the course, honestly. If not a little ahead of the curve. Maybe some of it has gone a little out of order, but you’re happy and with the person you love. That’s what matters.”

I take a slow drink of my beer. “Are you with the person you love? Are you happy, Macks?”

She opens her mouth, then closes it again. “I’m still finding my overall happiness, but I’m content in my relationship with Mari.”

“And love?”

“Like I said, I think I’m... getting there.”

I slide closer and squeeze her thigh. “I know you don’t need me to lecture you, so I’m only going to say this once. It’s okay if you want to take things slow with Mari and build the relationship you want. But don’t use that relationship to hide from what you want because you’re afraid to take a risk.” Leaning over, I kiss the side of her head and whisper, “If you still love Hyla, that’s okay too.”

She looks up at me but doesn’t say anything for a moment. “Noted.”

“Hey, sorry about that. It was *not* an emergency. I was trying to convince the law intern of that, but he didn’t believe me. Eventually I hung up on him.” She shrugs. “I’ll let the lawyer he’s working with explain why he shouldn’t be calling me at home because he was too inefficient to get his work done before I left.” She grins at me, and goddamn my girl is hot. I love when she goes all badass like that. “Anyway, what did I miss?”

Mackie and I look at each other, neither of us wanting to own up to the details of our conversation.

Amelia looks between us, then nods knowingly. “Ah. Super secret cult stuff?” she asks with a troublemaking smile.

“Exactly,” Mackie and I agree at the same time.

I pull Amelia closer as she laughs. *God, I love this girl.*

Now I really need to find the balls to tell her.

Aaron

Morning light streams through the window near our bed. I still can't believe we're living in the farmhouse together. It's gorgeous, and growing into our future here feels incredible. Like I do every morning, I snuggle closer to my gorgeous wife. We drift apart as we sleep, though we're usually still touching in some way. Wrapping my arm around her waist, I rest my hand over her low stomach. She says the heat of my touch and a little pressure there helps her feel better when she has these horrible cramps. This is day three and they haven't let up.

I slide one leg over, moving to rest it between hers, but when I do, I jolt upright feeling a wet sticky spot hit my skin. I yank the covers off and all I see is blood. So much fucking blood. Way more blood than even a hard period. It's covering her legs, the mattress, and the sheets.

My gaze moves upward, and I notice her face is pale.

Oh, shit.

My heart pounds as I shake her.

“Rae. Babe, I need you to wake up. Beautiful, please. Wake up!”

She takes a sharp breath in as her eyes fly open. She looks at me in confusion, then winces. Her eyes dart down her body,

then widen in horror. “Oh my god.” She looks back at me. “What—what—”

I kiss her forehead, then climb over her. “I don’t know. We’re going to go to the hospital. I’m going to get you a pad and some clean pants.” I hold her arm and adjust her pillows so she’s propped up. Then I grab her water and push it into her hands. “Drink. I’ll be right back.”

I turn to go, but she reaches for me. “Ace...”

I lean down and press a firm kiss to her lips. “You’re going to be okay. Be back in second.”

She’s going to be okay. Because she has to be. There are no other options.

I yank my phone off the bedside table and run down the hall to the linen closet where Rae keeps some super thick period underwear, calling Sarah as I do.

“Aaron, what’s wrong?”

“How did you—”

“She’s my sister. I’ve been sick all morning. What’s wrong?”

“I woke up to her covered in blood. She changed her pad in the middle of the night, but it’s everywhere.”

“Is she conscious?” Sarah yells.

“Yes, but she’s pale.”

“Joel, wake up,” she says away from the phone. “Get her to the hospital. Call them when you’re on the way and tell them

you're coming. We'll meet you there. I'll call my parents. Just focus on her."

"I will." I grab a pair of the underwear and turn to shut the door, but my hand freezes on the side of it before I do. "Sarah, what do you think is wrong?"

She's quiet for a moment before finally saying, "I'm not sure."

I'm pretty confident that's a lie, but I don't have time to debate it right now or think of anything else. I need to get Rae to the hospital.

"Aaron, go."

"Talk to you soon."

I hang up and shove my phone in my pocket, then hurry back to our bedroom. On the way back to the bed, I stop at my dresser, grabbing a T-shirt for myself and a pair of shorts. I pull out one of my undershirts and a pair of sweats for Rae, then walk back over to the bed. Rae's leaning against her pillows, eyes closed and tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Beautiful?"

Her eyes flash open. "I'm scared." I lean over and wrap my arms around her. "I know. But I'm going to take care of you. We're going to the hospital, and they'll help you." I say the same words I keep repeating in my head because I am fucking terrified, but there is no time for that. "Do you think you can sit up?"

She nods. "I think."

“I’ll help you.”

Wrapping my arm around her back, I adjust her so she’s sitting up, but she almost instantly grabs my arm.

“Oh crap. I’m so dizzy.”

“Okay, um...” I look around. “Lay back against the pillows.”

I run into the attached bath and grab a towel and a wet washcloth. Running back into the room, I pull the covers all the way off, lift her up, and slide the towel underneath her butt. I clean as much of her legs as I can, then pull the underwear with the pad she was wearing off. There’s so much blood it gets all over my hands, but I can’t think about that now. I put the padded underwear on her, then change her shirt. Once that’s done, I climb onto the edge of the bed, then position her between my legs, holding her in place as I put the pants on her. I move her over to my side of the bed, then quickly get changed. I grab another towel for the car ride, then scoop her into my arms, leaving the messy, bloody bed behind us. I have no idea how I’m going to clean that, but I can’t worry about it now.

Get her to the hospital.

I grab my wallet and chuck it in her purse, then grab hoodies for both of us with one hand, never setting her down. She leans against me, clutching my shirt and burrowing into my chest.

“So dizzy,” she mutters.

“I know, babe. I know. You can close your eyes in the car.”

I don't bother locking the door or anything else, I just quickly and carefully carry her over to my truck. This is officially the second-worst reason I've ever carried her like this.

Once she's in the truck, I grab the garbage can and shove it between her legs, just in case. Then I climb into the driver's side. I take one deep breath before starting it, reminding myself I have to stay calm now.

Focus. Drive safe. Get her to the hospital.

She's going to be okay.

She has to be.

Amelia

There's something about the sound of hot water being poured over a tea bag that's comforting to me. I've never been a coffee drinker. My parents both drank tea growing up, so I did too. We had an entire cabinet of teas, including a bunch of fruity herbal ones I was obsessed with as a kid. Now I like stronger, darker flavors most of the time. Right now, it's decaf—not that I drink a ton of caffeine anyway. Outside of caffeine water, it often bothers my stomach. Right now, I'm obsessed with a decaf black tea with vanilla in it. It smells like dessert, and it's warm and comforting.

Footsteps pad down the hall and I turn, glimpsing Miles stretching and yawning. I take in the way his biceps flex and the hint of his ab muscles peeking out from under the hem of his shirt. He's adorable. And so damn sexy. He catches me staring and strolls over, pushing some black hair out of his face. Even his mussed morning hair is gorgeous.

“Hey, baby,” he rumbles, giving me a hard kiss and slipping his hand inside my robe to run it over my stomach. He pulls away and leans back, then undoes the ties of my robe. He gets a huge smile on his face when he takes in my bump. Because there *is* a bump now. “You popped.” Before I can say anything, he grabs me and kisses me again. “That is so fucking sexy,” he mutters against my lips.

He lifts me onto the counter and steps between my legs, deepening our kiss as his tongue twists with mine. We're still learning how to live together and generally be in a relationship together, but this is easy. This has *always* been easy.

His phone vibrates in his pocket, buzzing against the counter, and he groans. "Ugh. Hold that thought." He pulls his phone out and his brows immediately dip in.

"Who is it?"

"Sarah," he says, voice shaky. "She rarely calls me."

I take his hand as he answers. "Sarah, what's going on?" He listens for a moment, his breaths growing shorter and faster. "Which hospital? Yeah, okay. I'm on my way. Love you too. Bye."

When he hangs up, he's panting.

"What's wrong?"

"Rae—" He stops and forces out a few breaths, knuckles pressing into the kitchen counter. "Aaron woke up to Rae covered in blood. They don't know what's happening. They're on their way to the hospital. We need to go." His words are choppy as he finishes his sentence. He turns to walk out of the room, but I grab his arm.

"Are you having a panic attack?"

He swallows and shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. We need to go. I need to be there for them."

"Miles." I yank on his arm.

“Ames, please.”

“No. You’re having a panic attack and you can’t just will it away.”

“I’ve done it before. This is more important.”

“What’s important is dealing with this.”

“I can deal with it later.”

“No. You can’t. You can try to push it away, but it’ll fester and get worse. Face this now, and let me help you.” I step forward and run my hand over his cheek. “Let me help.”

His breathing grows heavier, his breaths choppy. “When I give in—it gets worse.”

I take his hands in mine and hold them tightly. “Close your eyes.”

“Ames,” he pleads, but I won’t let him try to muscle through this. It’ll only hurt him more in the long run. He’s gotten used to going it alone—or trying to—but if I’ve had to learn to let him in, he has to learn to do the same.

“Close them. Listen to my voice, babe. I’m right here. I’ve got you. You’re safe. Tell me where you are right now.”

“Our apartment.”

“What do you feel?”

“The hard floor.” He breathes out. “Your hands wrapped around mine.”

“Hope you like that feeling because I’m not letting you go. Now tell me what you hear.”

“Traffic in the distance, the air conditioner.”

“What do you smell?”

“That tea you love.” He takes a long, deep breath. “You. Your shampoo...” He rips his hands from mine and pulls me against him, resting his head against mine as he inhales deeply.

“You can’t control this situation, but tell me something you can control.”

“How I support my friends.”

“Good.” I step back and brush my thumb over his cheek, watching as his breaths come slower and more evenly now. “Let’s get ready to go.”

He nods and turns down the hall, then he spins around and kisses me again. “Thank you.”

“You don’t ever have to thank me for taking care of you.”

I love you. I think the words that have been growing in my brain but I haven’t been able to say. I’m certain he feels them, too, but I’ve been too scared to let them come out of my mouth.

He squeezes my hand and heads down the hall. I quickly pour our tea into travel mugs, then change into leggings and a comfy shirt. I walk out of the room and into the hallway where Miles meets me and hands me one of his sweatshirts. I’ve been obsessed with them lately. We keep it pretty cool in here because I get sick to my stomach when I’m overheated, so I keep cozy in his sweats.

I grab our travel mugs as we walk to the door, then I sling my purse over my shoulder and shove my feet into my favorite slip-on Converse.

“Do you want to drive, or do you want me to?” I ask.

Miles pauses at the door and stares at me, thinking it through. I know he usually prefers to drive—not just with me, but with everyone. “I’ll drive. I’m calmer when I’m focused, but thank you for asking.” He kisses my head and takes my hand.

“Let’s go.”

I hold his hand tightly as we walk out of the apartment, hoping I’m able to comfort him as much as he always comforts me.

Aaron

Sarah's advice about calling the hospital was helpful. They had a wheelchair and a room waiting for us. The nurse did vitals on Rae and they're keeping a close eye on her because she's dizzy and her blood pressure was low. She's in a hospital bed wearing a gown, and I hate it. Hate seeing her suffer. Hate not knowing what's going on. Every so often, she pulls her knees up to her chest and writhes in pain. She drifts in and out of sleep and I wish a doctor would just get the fuck in here already.

There's a quick knock on the door, and I spin in my chair, but it's not a doctor that walks in, it's Sarah and Joel. While I wish it had been the doctor, I'm relieved they're here. Rae's awake, though her eyes are closed. I know she's still awake because my hands are wrapped around one of hers and she keeps rubbing her thumb over my knuckles.

"Rae baby," Sarah whispers, and Rae's eyes flash open. They're red and puffy from crying, and it's more obvious than normal because her skin is pale. Sarah sits down on the edge of the bed and wraps an arm around Rae as Joel walks over and puts a hand on my shoulder.

"How'd you get back here?" Rae asks weakly. "I thought they said only one person."

Sarah flashes a smile and shrugs. "Sister privilege."

Rae lifts one eyebrow as much as she can muster. “Really?”

“More like I know a handful of the nurses who work here privilege, and since I’m technically a hospital employee, they let me in. Then pretended they didn’t see Joel.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Rae whispers, taking Sarah’s hand. “You too, Joelskies.”

“You know I wouldn’t dream of missing a party like this,” he jokes.

I lean down and kiss Rae’s hand, resting my forehead on my hands wrapped around her hand. I’m trying not to lose it. She needs me to be strong for her. That is my only job right now. I can break when I’m alone.

There’s another knock on the door, and this time, a doctor walks in with two nurses. They ask for Rae’s full name and date of birth. They then ask Sarah and Joel to wait outside while they go over what happened. I kind of wish Sarah was still in here, since she knows more about medical things. The doctor nods and types a few notes on the computer as he listens. Then he asks Rae a few more questions, mostly about her periods normally and this current one, and I get a funny feeling of déjà vu. Then I realize why. Minus the bleeding, most of this is like when Rae had that cyst on her fallopian tube. I think back to the nurse and doctor thinking she was pregnant.

Pregnant.

My heart seizes in my chest, and I suddenly realize why Sarah lied to me on the phone.

Rae isn't just having a hard period. It was also two weeks late.

Fuck.

My heart is pounding in my ears, but I push everything away. If this is what I think it is, she'll need me more than ever.

"Okay, we need to do a pelvic exam and get some labs," the doctor says to the nurses. Then he turns to me. "Mr. Cooper, I'm going to have you wait in the hall."

"What?" Rae squeaks, as I growl, "Why?"

The doctor looks at me calmly. I want to punch his stupid, calm face. "Because we need room to conduct the exam. It's best for you to wait in the hall. It'll only take a few minutes, and you can come back in as soon as we're finished." He walks over and puts a hand on my shoulder. "I know this is difficult, but it'll just be a few minutes. A quick pelvic exam and a blood draw."

"Fine," I grumble. Then I turn back to Rae. Her cheeks are stained with tears and I'm about to—as she likes to say—sew my skin to hers so I don't have to leave, but I'm sure making a scene would only make this worse. Leaning down, I rest my forehead against hers. "You've got this, babe. Lay back, put your feet in those fun little stirrup things, and take a quick rest. I'll be back in here with you before you know it."

“I love you,” she mutters.

“I love you too, Beautiful.” I quickly kiss her lips, then reluctantly walk out of the room.

Sarah and Joel are standing in the hallway outside her room when I step out. I walk over and lean against the wall, standing between them. Joel puts his hand on my shoulder.

“How is she?”

“She’s scared. They’re doing a pelvic exam and a blood draw.” I swallow hard and rest my head against the wall. Reaching over, I wrap my hand around Sarah’s. “You think she’s having a miscarriage, don’t you?”

She doesn’t say anything for a moment, but she squeezes my hand. Her voice breaks when she speaks. “Yeah. I think she might be.”

A sob quakes through my chest, and I close my eyes tighter.

This isn’t how it’s supposed to go.

“We weren’t even trying...” I mutter, barely loud enough to hear. “I don’t know what to do now.”

“Be there for her, and we’ll all support you through it,” Joel says.

I nod, still not opening my eyes.

Miscarriage.

It wasn’t supposed to go like this. We were going to start trying in October. We didn’t even know. There was no joy. No moment of celebration. Just finding out she was pregnant

while figuring out she's losing the baby. I don't know how to take that.

Some people let this shit roll off their backs. It wasn't meant to be. It wouldn't be a healthy pregnancy. That might be true. But this is—or was, I don't even know—our first baby. The first baby with the girl I've loved my whole damn life. An inkling of the future we talk about having together. We didn't even get a second to enjoy it before it was ripped away.

A tear streams down my cheek, but then I suck in a breath and force the pain back. I need to support her now. That's what matters.

A few minutes later, the latch clicks on her door and my eyes fly open. I step forward, as the doctor and a nurse and the person who was drawing her blood walk out.

The doctor walks over to me. "You can go back in now."

"Is she okay?" I ask, shaking like an addict in need of a fix. What I *need* is to get to Rae.

"She's resting. There's a nurse in there finishing up some notes. I'll be back in a few minutes to talk with you both."

I don't say anything. I barely nod as I tear past him, needing nothing more than to get back to my girl.

Chapter Eleven

Holding Back

Rae

I HATE THIS FEELING. It's been a while since I've felt it, but the familiarity is undeniable. It's like I'm being ripped apart from the inside out. It was somewhere between the doctor asking a bunch of questions about the timing of my last period and him ordering a pelvic exam that I realized what was happening. He hasn't said it yet, but I know.

I'm having a miscarriage. I didn't even know I was pregnant. Other than my period being late, I didn't have any symptoms. At least, I didn't think I did. I'm still on birth control. It never even occurred to me, and now...

I pull my knees up to my chest, crying into them as a nurse types away in the corner.

The door swings open, and I know without looking that it's Aaron. I don't know how to look at him—tell him.

He slides onto the side of the bed, leaning back and running his thumb down my arm.

“Beautiful...” he whispers.

I wipe my eyes and look over at him, heart breaking all over again when I see the pain in his eyes. “I think...” My chest heaves and I wrap my arms around my stomach. “I think I'm ___”

“I know,” he whispers, not making me say it. “I know.”

He pulls me against him, wrapping both arms around me.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter against his chest, wishing I could burrow into him and escape this pain.

“Don’t you dare.” His firm, insistent voice makes me lift my head from his chest. “You have nothing to be sorry for. This is *not* your fault.”

“But...” my bottom lip pops out, trembling as I fight back more tears.

“No buts.” He brushes his thumb over my lip. “Put that away.” He sniffs and shakes his head. “You can hurt all you want, but you will not take on any blame. Do you understand me?”

I nod against his chest, crying again. He holds me tighter. Of course, this is the moment the door opens again. I snap my head up, and meet the doctor’s gaze, waiting to hear the words I already know.

Knowing them doesn’t stop his words from feeling like a punch to the gut. They knock the wind out of me, breaking me down more as he tells us I’m experiencing a mild to moderate hemorrhage from the miscarriage, and I’ll need to have a procedure called dilation and curettage done to stop it.

“I’m sorry,” he says genuinely. “Anesthesiology will be in to talk with you in a little while. Until then... take some time together.”

He gives a quick nod, then he and the nurse walk out of the room. The second they’re gone, I shatter.

Aaron rubs my back and kisses my head. “It’s going to be okay. Do you need anything? Water? Can you have water? More pillows?”

I lean away from him and stare at him. He’s stone-faced, and I know what he’s doing. He’s burying his own feelings to support me, and that is *not* what I need. I need him.

“Stop,” I cry as he messes with my pillow. He stops moving and stares at me. “Just stop. I know you’re trying to keep it together for me, but that’s not what I need right now.” I choke on my words as they slip out between sobs. “We’re losing a baby. Our baby. Please don’t make me go through this alone. Be here with me.”

When he doesn’t say anything, I look up at him, but then I realize he didn’t say anything because he’s crying.

“Ace...” I run my hand through his beard and up the side of his cheek. He leans into my touch, tears flowing down his cheeks.

I curl against him, my arm around his waist as he rests his hand on my stomach. My heart aches, and even though nothing fixes it, at least I’m wrapped in Aaron’s arms. If I have to suffer through this, at least I have him by my side.



“Whenever you’re ready, we can bring Sky over for some doggy snuggles,” Sarah says, resting her head against mine. “They don’t fix everything, but they really help.”

“Mm. Yes, please. I love that you have a dog. Mostly because I want the fun parts of having a dog, but none of the effort of having one.”

“You’re so Mom,” Sarah says with a smile.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“Love you too, Rae baby.”

Anesthesiology and two more nurses have been in to talk with me to get things ready for my procedure. Sarah and Joel are in here now doing their best to distract me. Mom texted a little while ago that they’re here and they love me and will see me later. Technically, Sarah and Joel aren’t supposed to be back here, but we’ve had a few kind nurses who have looked the other way.

I’m still miserable, but I’m trying not to focus on my heartache right now. Aaron and I held each other and cried until the anesthesiologist came in. I swear, all anesthesiologists are angels. They’re always cracking jokes and trying to take your mind off things. I know I’m going to break again once I’m home, but I’d rather do it while cuddled in bed with my husband, tacos, and my sick movie—*The Great Race*.

“Just remember, if you need to replace any lost blood, I’ve got you covered,” Joel says with a smile.

Aaron side-eyes him then looks at me. “You sure you want a piece of Joel inside you forever?”

“Ew. No. Don’t say things like that,” I say.

Sarah and Aaron laugh as Joel makes a retching noise.

And I'm crying again.

Maybe I'm not keeping it together all that well.

"I love you guys," I whisper.

"You know. We love you too, Rae Rae."

I breathe out a sigh and squeeze my legs to my chest again. This fucking hurts. There's a quick knock on the door and the anesthesiologist walks in again, followed by a nurse.

"Okay, anyone who is not the husband needs to leave now. Don't worry, we'll take good care of her," the anesthesiologist says.

"Love you, Rae baby." Sarah smacks a kiss on my cheek and climbs out of bed as Joel leans over and kisses my forehead.

"You got this." He winks at me, then he and Sarah walk out of the room.

I let out a shaky breath. I'm getting nervous again. Aaron, always my knight in shining armor, kisses my head. "It's going to be okay. I promise."

He gives me a soft kiss as the nurse checks my IV. When Aaron stands up and adjusts his baseball cap, the nurse pauses and tilts her head to the side. "Y'all are so familiar to me, but I can't place you."

I stare at her for a moment, then it clicks, and I start laughing. "You might remember us better if he had a shaved face, and he used my nickname."

"Nickname?" the nurse asks in amusement.

Aaron looks at me, so I nod. “Beautiful,” he says in that sultry way that sets me on fire. I force myself not to clutch my stomach again. I want to have babies with him. I hope we’ll still be able to.

The nurse snaps her fingers. “You were in here years ago. Surgery—”

“A cyst on my fallopian tube. You were talking to me as we walked to the operating room and asked if he was my boyfriend.”

She smiles. “And you swore he was just your best friend.”

Aaron laughs out loud. “Wait, she’s the one who...”

“Who what?” the nurse asks, eyes wide.

“Who made me have a dream that he was my boyfriend.”

She claps her hands together. “Tell me I’m the one who set it all in motion.”

“Oh, it was already in motion. We were just too stupid to see it,” Aaron says. He swallows hard, eyes glassy as he looks at me. “Now here we are.”

Emotion fills the room again. He leans down and kisses me. “I love you, Beautiful.”

“Love you too, Ace.”

The nurse reaches over and squeezes my arm. “I’m so sorry you’re going through this, but if it helps, I’ve been there, and now I have three beautiful babies.”

“It does,” I choke out. “And thank you.”

“Not to interrupt the reunion,” the anesthesiologist says, “but it’s time to get this show on the road.” He looks at Aaron. “Grab her stuff. She’ll go to a recovery area after this. There are chairs in the hallway down toward the operating room, and a little waiting room in the opposite direction.”

“Okay, thanks.” Aaron sweeps his hand through my hair and rests his head against mine. “You are strong and amazing. I love you, and I’ll be right here waiting when you’re done.”

“Make sure you take care of yourself. Eat something. Love you.”

He gives me a soft kiss, then the nurse and the anesthesiologist wheel me out of the room. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. Six years ago, he was right by my side when I had surgery. Not because he had to be, but because he chose to be. We’ve made it through all kinds of things since then, and I know we’ll get through this, but it hurts. In every way, it hurts. I’m almost glad I’ll be in surgery and won’t have to think about it for a little while, but mostly I’m grateful that when I come out and have to face it all again, I’ll have the best support system in the world while I do.

Miles

Parking near the hospital was a living hell. If my mother saw me cussing over the old lady who cut me off for a parking space, I'd be on the receiving end of a withering glare and brutal lecture. I don't care, though. She cut me off, and I was about to jump out of the car and fight her for it.

Road work plus all the renovations they've been doing on the hospital mean we had to park three blocks away and we're here much later than I wanted to be. Sarah was just getting to the hospital when she called me. I haven't heard anything from her except to tell me where they are, and I'm going insane.

Amelia digs her fingers into my arm. "Miles."

"What?" I ask, turning to look at her. She's panting.

"I need you to slow down. I know you're worried, but... I can't go that fast. I'm sorry."

I run my hands down her arms. "Fuck, I'm sorry. Do you need to sit or rest? I'll go slower. I don't want you to trip or fall." I put my hand on her stomach. "Are you okay?"

She rests her hand on my cheek. "I'm fine. I know you want to get to your friends, but you have to take a breath. I can feel your panic. Lean on me." She holds her hand up, still catching her breath. "Not literally." I laugh in spite of the darkness I feel. "I'm here for you. Let me in."

I press a kiss to her forehead. “I know. I’m sorry. This shit... this is the kind of stuff that makes me panic. When the people I love are sick or hurt or in danger and I can’t do anything.” I shove my hand through my hair and admit the truth I didn’t realize until this morning. “It’s worse with Rae.”

Amelia tips her head to the side, looking at me in surprise. “Why Rae?”

I bite down hard on my cheek. I miss my mask. I miss being able to put it on and get through things. With Amelia, it’s nonexistent. She sees right through it, and she makes me so vulnerable everyone else does too.

These memories are painful, and they still haunt me at times. Today? It’s triggering one of the moments where I felt the most out of control.

“Rae was assaulted junior year at a party.”

“She’s mentioned that before. Some guy dragged her away or something?”

“I saw. I watched him drag her off the dance floor, and I was about to go beat his ass, but then I realized he was leading her right to a room guarded by two other huge football players. One was taller than me. I couldn’t take all three, and I was worried she’d get hurt in the process, or worse, that I wouldn’t be able to stop them and she would have...” *Fuck. I hate remembering this.* I’ve never felt weaker or more useless in my life. Amelia squeezes my hand. “I had to make a choice, and leaving her with him so I could go get the guys was the

most helpless I've ever felt in my life. Knowing I was leaving her alone with him..."

"You were doing the best you could in an impossible situation."

"I know. But that's the thing. Feeling helpless always bothered me. It made my anxiety worse. Since then, it's been a horrible trigger for me. When Aaron broke through the door of that room, the guy had Rae by the hair. I kept thinking there must have been some other solution and wondering why I couldn't have done something more. It was one of the worst moments of my life. I had nightmares about it for months, and every so often, I still do. Knowing she's in the hospital and something's wrong—I feel helpless all over again. Because it's Rae, I feel like I did that night."

I'm acutely aware how ridiculous and crazy I sound, but it's the truth. Standing here staring at a hospital when I have no idea what's happening with Rae feels like I'm staring at her from across the room watching her get dragged away. I can't help. I can't make sure she's safe.

"Look at me," Amelia says softly. I pull my gaze from the hospital and look at her. "You are so wonderfully kind. Your love for the people in your life knows no bounds, and it's a beautiful thing that you want to protect them, but life won't always allow that. I know better than most people do, you can't stop the painful things from happening. All you can do is face them. Well, you can run from them, but they always catch up to you. I can't take your fears or anxiety from you, just like

you can't take this pain and struggle from your friends, but you can stand by them while they face it. Just like I'll be holding your hand while *you* face this." She squeezes my hands. "Let's go deal with it. Together."

I stare at her for a moment more, then look back at the hospital. Nodding, I take her hand and start walking again, forcing myself to go at a reasonable pace this time. When we get to the hospital, we head for the waiting room Sarah said they were in—the only update she gave me.

When we get there, we find Sarah, Joel, Mackenzie, Rae's parents, and Aaron's parents there waiting. Sarah and Mackie both get up and walk over to us.

"What's happening? How is she?" I ask, heart in my throat.

"She's going to be okay," Sarah says calmly. I recognize this calm. It's her nurse calm. The stay-cool-in-a-shitty-situation calm. Sarah doesn't panic. She handles things. Weirdly, this reaction makes me more worried. Sarah bites her lip and looks at Mackie, who nods. "I didn't want to tell you this over text, especially because..." She trails off, looking at Amelia, and I don't understand. It's taking everything inside me not to yell because I need to know what's going on.

"Sarah, please, just tell us."

"Sorry. Rae's bleeding isn't from her period."

Amelia inhales sharply. "Oh..."

What the fuck am I missing?

"She's having a miscarriage."

My stomach drops, and I squeeze Amelia's hand. My chest feels tight, but I ignore it, looking at Sarah. "I—when did they —"

"They didn't know." Her solemn words cut through me.

All I want right now is to grab Amelia and hold her, touch her growing stomach. Miscarriage crossed my mind in her early pregnancy, mostly as something to prevent by keeping her less stressed and off her feet, but I realize now how precarious it all is. Amelia's right. There's no controlling it. You can reduce risk, but you can't prevent the twists and turns of life.

"Where are they now?"

"The reason Rae was bleeding so much is because she was hemorrhaging." *Insert heart attack here.*

"Hemorrhaging?" I gasp.

Mackie grabs my hand and flares her eyes, subtly reminding me to take a deep breath.

"She's having a procedure done now to stop it. It's an easy procedure and she'll be home tonight."

I let out a breath. "Okay. What can we do? Where's Aaron?"

"There are some chairs down the hall closer to the operating room. I think he needed some time away from everyone," Mackie says.

"I'll go check on him."

Sarah nods, then hugs me. "I think that's a good idea."

Sarah steps away and Amelia pulls her into a hug as Mackie steps up to me and throws her arms around my neck. “Just fucking breathe,” she whispers, and I smile at the way she always reminds us all to take it one minute at a time.

“Yeah. I’ll do my best.” I squeeze Mackie’s hand, then nod toward everyone else sitting across the room. Before I go find Aaron, I pull Amelia into the hallway with me.

“I’m okay,” she whispers as I rest my hand on her stomach. “*We’re* okay.”

“I need you to stay that way,” I breathe, wrapping her in my arms.

When I let her go, she doesn’t say anything, she just stares into my eyes while holding onto my arms, and I know what she’s not saying. *She can’t promise me that.* Because life is fucking cruel and twisted and rips people away from you. I haven’t had to endure anything close to what she has, and I almost think it scares me more that I haven’t. I have no frame of reference for dealing with that level of trauma or grief, so whenever it inevitably happens, I’m scared it will break me. If it’s Amelia or our baby... break is far too simple a word for what would happen to my heart.

I ache to say the words I’ve been holding back, but now isn’t the time. Or maybe I’m still afraid of getting hurt when I do. Either way, it’s time for me to focus.

Aaron and Rae need me, and I’m going to be there for them.

The familiar calming strength runs through me. It doesn't get rid of my anxiety, but it overpowers it. With one last kiss to Amelia's temple, I turn and walk down the hall, looking for Aaron.

It's not long before I find him in a quiet part of the hallway. He's sitting alone, head in his hands.

My heart breaks for him. Amelia and I might not have planned this pregnancy, but losing it now would crush me. Knowing how badly Aaron wants a family with Rae, he must be devastated.

I drop into the empty chair next to him and put my hand on his shoulder.

"Hey." It sounds dumb, but there's not really anything better to say.

He rubs his face and sits up a little, sniffing as he turns to look at me. His eyes are red and glassy.

I rub my hand across his back. "I'm sorry." Also sounds lame, but most things do in situations like this. It's not about the words, anyway. It's about showing up and supporting each other.

"Thanks," he murmurs, clearing his throat. "I don't even know how long I've been sitting here. Why does time always move slowest in the hardest moments but the beautiful ones pass in seconds?"

"Because we're never aware of time in the good moments, yet we're acutely aware of it in the bad ones."

He fights back a sob, and I grab his shoulder, pulling him into a hug. I'm grateful for how I was raised—how we all were raised—to not fear emotion or having deep relationships with each other. Too many guys draw lines in the sand about where their emotions should stop, or at least where any display of those emotions should end. They're afraid of vulnerability, and though the level at which I've been vulnerable with Amelia is somewhat new to me, being vulnerable with my friends isn't. In our worst moments, we've picked each other up off the floor, and I don't care if society makes it weird for two guys to share an emotional hug. Aaron is my brother, and he needs me.

“I wish I wouldn't have wasted so much time,” he mutters as he leans back and wipes his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“When I woke up and saw her covered in blood—” His voice trembles. “She was so pale. I thought...” He shakes his head. “This procedure is simple enough, but there are no guarantees, and as much as I like to say we'll die together, that might not be possible. Today put it all into perspective. If her bleeding had been worse or I'd woken up a little later...” He chokes up again. “The thought that I could've lost a baby *and* my wife? Well, you might as well throw me in the ground, too. I'm sitting here now so aware of every moment I should've been with her but wasn't. We wasted so much time. So much. Years where we could've been fully loving each other if we hadn't been so afraid. Learn from that,” he says to me. “Pete told us not to waste our minutes, and we shouldn't. No one

should. Life is too short and uncertain to waste a second not living the life you want or being honest with the people you love. When Rae and I do get to have kids one day, I want them to know that. It's one mistake I don't want anyone to repeat."

His words are sobering. I've been holding back from Amelia. Holding back admitting what I want us to be and how deeply I love her, all out of fear. If I were in Aaron's situation right now, I'd hate myself for not telling her I love her. I never want to lose her, but I can't control that, and I want her to know how I feel in case something happens to either of us.

Fuck, I need to make a will.

What a lovely, morbid thought for a twenty-two-year-old. But I need to make sure Ames and the baby are taken care of if anything happens to me.

Knowing this train of thought could send me on a dark anxiety spiral, I focus back on Aaron.

"It's true, you didn't admit the depth of your feelings to each other, and sure, maybe you could've been kissing more, but you both knew the amount of love that you have for each other. You had a beautiful friendship, and even though you brought a little more drama than necessary, you always had each other. That never changed."

I get a tiny smile for that. "I suppose that's true. Maybe I'm regretting the first half of senior year more than anything."

"Yeah, you two were pretty dumb, but you got through it. You both grew a lot, and now you have a beautiful, strong

foundation that will carry you through all the hard things. Like this. And when you need a little more support, you have all of us.”

He looks at me and nods. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Now, have you eaten anything? Had anything to drink?”

He looks down. “No.”

“Rae told you to, didn’t she?”

He laughs. “Yep.”

I smack his shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go down to the waiting room. I’ll get you some food and water. And she”—I point to the door—“is going to be okay. We’ll all make sure of it.”

Again, he nods, then stands up, and silently, we walk down the hall together.



“Do you need anything?” I ask Amelia, grazing my thumb down her arm as we sit in the waiting room. Rae got out of surgery a half hour ago and everyone has been taking turns going in to see her. Aaron hasn’t left her side except when her parents went back so she could have a few minutes with both of them.

“I’m okay. I need to pee, though.”

I smile at that. “Good. You’ve been drinking enough water.”

She sighs and laughs. “Yes.” Then she leans in and whispers. “I’ve learned the benefit of being a good girl.”

“Ames...” I love when this side of her pops out. I’ve seen it more often in the second trimester.

“Sorry. Totally inappropriate, but the bossy side of you brings it out.”

“I like it,” I whisper, squeezing her thigh.

Aaron and Mackie walk into the waiting room. “She’s good to go home. They’re getting the paperwork together, and then we’ll be heading out. I appreciate you all being here to support us.” He clears his throat. “From here, we’ll let you know what we need. I’m going to run to the bathroom and grab a coffee before we leave.”

“I’ll keep Rae company,” Sarah says.

“Do you mind if I go back instead?” I ask.

Sarah smiles. “No. Go ahead.”

I turn to Amelia. “Want to come with me?”

She takes a breath and glances around, then shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Her eyes drop to her stomach.

“Right.” I kiss her forehead. “Go pee. I’ll see you soon.”

She squeezes my hand, then we walk in opposite directions. When I get to the recovery area, the nurse points me to where Rae is, and I wiggle the curtain.

“This is the best version of knocking I can do.”

“It’s fine. You can come in. I’m not naked.” I walk around the curtain and take her in. She looks rough but not quite as bad as the time she had food poisoning and I had to carry her out of the dorm. She scrunches her face. “It actually wouldn’t freak me out if you saw me naked. That’s a Joel thing.”

I chuckle at that as I drop into the chair next to her bed. “I mean, it would be fair. You’ve seen me naked multiple times.”

She laughs. “Yeah, I don’t know about *fair* seeing as your nudity was a choice each of those times.”

“Uh, not the time you dared me to run into the ocean naked in Charleston.”

She shrugs. “You could’ve backed down.”

“From a dare? Never.” I reach over and take her hand. “How are you doing?”

“Okay.” She looks down, suddenly fascinated with a string on Aaron’s sweatshirt. Of course she’s wearing his hoodie.

“You don’t have to be.”

She looks over at me, tears shimmering in her eyes. “I really want to have a baby with him. I know it’s stupid, but now I’m terrified I won’t be able to.”

“I don’t know a ton about this stuff, but I don’t think one miscarriage means you won’t ever be able to have a baby.”

“My mom said the same thing. I’m just scared. And hurting. God, everything hurts.”

“Is there anything you need? Aaron said you two would let us know, but is there anything you can think of tonight?”

“I don’t know. Sarah and Joel are going to get takeout for us, and all I really want is to curl up in bed with Aaron, and—bed. Oh my god.” Her hand flies to her mouth.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“The bed—I bled all over it. It was soaked into the sheets.”

I stand up and lean over, kissing her head. “Mackie and I will take care of that. We’ll go right now.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Shut up. Right now.” I playfully tousle her hair. “What would you do if it were me?”

Her eyes widen. “Anything.”

“Ha, you’re starting to sound like Aaron now.”

“Thank you, Miles.”

“No problem. You focus on healing. We’ve got everything else. I love you, Rae McKinley.”

She laughs. “Excuse me, I’m Rae Cooper now.” She holds up her hand, then laughs again when she realizes she isn’t wearing her rings. “Well, you get the idea.”

“Don’t worry. I know you’re Rae Cooper. I think you always have been.”

“Love you, Miles.”

“You too, kid. Later.”

I squeeze her hand, then head out to the waiting room. Rae's parents and Aaron's parents have left—apparently along with my mom they'll be cooking some meals to take up tomorrow.

“How's my girl?” Aaron asks.

“She's good. Ready to go home. Which is why we”—I gesture to Mackie and Amelia—“are going to head back and clean things up there.”

Aaron's eyes widen. “Shit. Thank you.” He swallows, eyes glassy.

“No problem.” I give him a hug. “Let us know if you need anything else.”

“Will do.”

He hugs both Mackie and Amelia, then we start the long journey back to our cars.

Amelia takes my hand. “I think you should go with Mackie and clean. I can't help with that, but I can go to the store and pick up groceries. I know the parents are making food, but having easy snacks and staples and comfort food is important, too. Plus, they might need a few essentials, like toilet paper or paper towels.” She sighs. “I know how it is when you don't want to leave your house because you're hurting and need time, but then you have to run to the store for random things. Casseroles are great and they keep you fed, but they don't take the place of necessities. I can take your car.”

“I'll give you two a minute,” Mackie says, stepping a few feet away.

I sweep my hands around Amelia's cheeks and into her hair.
"That's sweet and thoughtful."

"But?"

"I don't want you driving. And I know I'm being controlling, but..." One hand drops to her stomach. "Today has reminded me how fleeting this all is. I want you to be safe."

"You driving won't magically keep me safe. We've talked about this and discussed it with my doctor. I know your anxiety is in overdrive right now, but I need you to take a breath and think about what you can control. I will drive carefully and safely. That is what I can control. What about you?"

I let out a breath. "I can clean the bedroom and make sure everything is ready for them."

"Do that." She presses onto her toes and kisses me. "Go with Mackie. I'll meet you there later."

I nod. "Okay. But I'm walking you to the car."

She chuckles. "That I can live with." She takes my hand and we make the long walk back to the car. Since Mackie's parked much closer, she's going to drive around and pick me up.

When we get to the car, I take Amelia's bag off her shoulder, then lean in and give her a kiss, pressing her against the passenger side door as I do. As I pull away, I look into her eyes, and I can't hold back anymore. After that conversation with Aaron, I never want to hold anything back again. I rest

my head against hers, those seafoam eyes drawing me in like always.

“This is the wrong time to say it, for so many reasons, but I don’t want to keep it in anymore. I don’t need you to say anything back, I just need you to hear this and know it. I love you, Ames.”

Then I slant my mouth over hers, not letting her answer. I don’t need to know right now whether she’s ready to say it back.

She wraps her arms around my neck, one hand fisting my hair as her tongue wrestles with mine.

When I pull back, we’re both gasping for breath.

“Miles,” she whispers. Then she smiles. “To be continued at home.”

“Perfect.” The sound of a car coming up the side street pulls my attention away. “That’s Mackie.” She kisses my cheek and walks around to the driver’s side.

I wait until she’s pulled away before walking over and climbing into Mackie’s car. As soon as I’m buckled, I let out a sigh.

“It’s been a crazy day.”

“Yeah, it has. Still more to do,” I say, pulling my phone out so I can research ways to clean a mattress and dry it in a short amount of time.



“Holy shit,” I say, staring at the bloody sheets in front of me.

“Yeah...” Mackie breathes out forcefully. “Okay, I’ll take care of the sheets. I’m just going to take them home to wash. If they aren’t salvageable, we’ll get them more. I’ll strip the bed. You find more sheets.”

“On it.”

I head down the hallway to the large linen closet, where I find several other sheet sets. I opt for flannel, even though it’s late June, because flannel is always cozier. I grab another comforter, too. Even if the other one is okay, it’s better to have a full set of new bedding.

“Good news,” Mackie says as I walk back into the room. “They have a mattress cover and it did its job. There should just be some spot cleaning to do. Bad news, I don’t think the mattress cover is salvageable.”

“Okay, can I see the tag on it?”

She holds it out to me and I snap a photo, then look it up. Thankfully, they have similar ones in stock at Target, so I text Amelia and ask her to pick one up, then Mackie and I get to cleaning the mattress.

I hunt down some hydrogen peroxide while Mackie finds a hairdryer, then I lug the vacuum upstairs. The best way to quick-dry the mattress is to use a towel to blot dry where you’ve cleaned, then use the attachment on the vacuum to go

over the same spots, then run a hairdryer over them. It's a lot, but since the mattress stains are minimal, it should go quick.

By the time we've finished all the steps, the mattress looks pretty good and is dry to the touch.

"I cranked the AC down a couple degrees," Mackie says. "That way, they can get cozy in bed, plus it will help keep the humidity down. Good for the mattress."

I look over at the two garbage bags. One with the unsavable mattress cover, and the other with the sheets Mackie is taking to wash.

"She could have died," I say solemnly. "If it had been worse or she'd been alone."

"Yeah. I know." Mackie sniffs and waves her hands in front of her. "Enough of that, though. We're all alive and mostly healthy. No one is dying any time soon. I forbid it. I think I might take up witchcraft to see if I can cast some spells to ensure that." She gives me her classic Mackie smile.

"Hello?" Amelia calls.

"In here. Need any help?"

"Nope," she says, walking into the room with a couple of reusable shopping bags. "I left the heavy stuff in the car."

"Good. I'll unload after we make the bed."

"Speaking of which, I might've gone a little crazy. I got some extra throw pillows, some trays for eating in bed, and a

cozy blanket.” She smiles softly. Blankets are her love language.

“Thanks, baby.”

“And here’s the mattress cover.”

“Perfect,” Mackie says.

“What can I do?” Amelia asks.

“Sit.” I point to a chair in the corner.

“I’m not a dog,” she pouts.

“No, you are my beautiful, pregnant girlfriend who needs to sit her sexy ass down and rest.”

“Still a command, but a much better one. I’ll take it.”

Mackie and I make quick work of the bed, then we find Rae’s sick movie and a few other favorites, and put them on the dresser by the television.

“You two head home,” Mackie says, once I’ve unloaded the car. “I’m going to leave a quick note for them, then get out of their hair. Sarah said they’ll be back soon.”

“Okay. Love ya, Macks.”

“You too. Night.”

“Goodnight,” Amelia says, then I wrap my arm around her and guide her out the door of the farmhouse, ready to get in the car and get the hell home because I am holding on by a thread.

Amelia

The car ride home from the farmhouse was steeped in silence, and Miles was gripping the steering wheel like we were driving through a foot of snow. As soon as we get inside the apartment, Miles kicks his shoes off and walks straight for the bedrooms, turning and walking into the master. I haven't let him sleep in "his" bedroom once since we moved in. I like the feeling of safety and comfort I get from having him in my bed.

Tonight, he's the one who needs that.

I follow him and watch as he collapses on the bed, rubbing his hands over his face. I climb on and lie next to him, gently running my hand down his chest. He drops his hands from his face and turns to look at me.

He brushes his thumb over my cheek as tears fill his eyes.

"There was so much blood. Aaron was scared he could've lost her." He runs his hand down my side, resting it half on my waist and half on my little bump. "And I get that fear now because the thought of losing you—either of you. It would tear me to shreds."

Tears flow from his eyes, and I move closer, wrapping my body around his and holding him close.

"I know," I whisper, playing with his soft hair. "I'm terrified of losing you too." Looking into his eyes, I say the words I've

been holding on to. “Because I love you, Miles. And even though it’s new and we’re still figuring it all out, you and this baby have become my everything, and that scares the shit out of me since I already lost the *everything* I had once. I don’t ever want you to wonder how I feel. I love you.”

He pulls me to his lips and kisses me hard. “I love you so fucking much. I would do anything for you and our baby. Anything to protect you and keep you safe. You two have become the center of my goddamn world, and it would feel like I was spinning off my axis without you. I love you.” He kisses me again. “I love you.”

He slides his hand between us and rests it on my stomach as I hold him close, playing with his hair and looking into those bright green eyes. The eyes of the man I love. I swore I’d never fall in love again, not because some douchey seventeen-year-old boy hurt me, but because of all the loss I’ve endured. I didn’t want to set myself up to lose again. But life had other plans for me. Dani told me more than a year ago that it doesn’t matter what promises you make yourself. At some point, it stops being a choice. The love I feel for Miles and our baby—the family we’re creating—it’s not a choice, and it never has been.

Now I’m praying it doesn’t get ripped away from me like all the other love I’ve experienced in my life has.

Chapter Twelve

Just Like You

Miles

“DO YOU WANT TO do any kind of gender reveal? My mom was asking earlier. I don’t think she cares, but she was curious how we plan on telling people.”

Amelia glances at me from across the kitchen and shrugs. “Text message? In person? A phone call? I don’t need anything fancy. Plus, that would be way too much to pull off on such short notice.”

I tilt my head, trying to figure out what emotion I’m getting from what she just said. There’s something in the subtext, but I’m not sure what it is. I get up from my stool and cross the room to her. “If you wanted to do something for it, even just pictures, we have a family—well, friend group—friend, who is a photographer. I’m sure he’d help us out.”

She shakes her head a little and focuses on putting a bowl in the dishwasher. “I’m fine.”

She steps away from me, but I grab her arm. “Ames...”

She pushes me away, holding her hands up. “I don’t want a gender reveal.” There’s a bite to her voice I don’t fully understand.

“Okay,” I say softly, walking over to her. “Come with me.”

“Miles...”

“Now, baby mama.” At my commanding tone, she meets my gaze and finally relents, letting me lead her over to the couch.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I don’t want to have a gender reveal. It’s a silly thing to celebrate. It’s not like it’s something we control or an achievement. Sure, it means we made it this far in the pregnancy, but as we’ve learned, there’s a lot about that we don’t control.”

“Do you not want to do this because of what happened with Rae and Aaron?”

I’d completely understand that. Hell, I’d understand any reason. I don’t care one way or another. The only traditional thing I want to do is maternity photos.

“No. Not—whatever, if you want to do it, we’ll do it.”

“Ames, look at me please.”

She’s staring past me at the white walls of the apartment. Technically, they’re light cream or some such nonsense but bland is bland, and one day, I hope to have a home filled with warmth. I like the modern style, but dislike the coldness that often comes with it.

Reluctantly, Amelia shifts her gaze to me. Her eyes are glassy, and it makes me move closer to her without a second thought. “Baby, please tell me the truth.”

“I’m tired of crying,” she mutters.

That’s a common theme with her. She often tells me she never cried like this and it must be the pregnancy hormones and emotional changes, but really I think it’s because she spent years burying her most complicated feelings.

“I know, but preventing yourself from crying and pretending everything is okay doesn’t solve the problem. Letting out the hard stuff isn’t easy for either of us, but it’s important. You reminded me of that. Now I’m reminding you. Talk to me.”

She looks away again and sighs, sniffing as she does. “I don’t want to do a gender reveal because it’s one more thing for my mom to miss out on. It’s going to be hard enough to go there and tell whatever version of her about it. This just... sucks. I’d finally hit a point where it was easier to go and visit her. I knew how to frame it in my mind, and just focused on spending time with her, even if she wasn’t the mom I remembered. Now all I can see is what she’s missing out on. What *I’m* missing out on.”

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her to me. “I’m sorry. I know this is difficult for you. If you don’t want to find out the gender or want to come up with a different way to do the baby shower, we can.”

She shakes her head. “No. I’ll go nuts if I don’t find out. And I don’t want to miss out on things, either. I want to have a baby shower and celebrate with our friends, and—” She laughs, seeing the huge smile on my face. “What?”

“You said *our*. Our friends. Not my friends. Does that mean we’re finally indoctrinating you into the cult?”

“Maybe,” she says with a smile. “I’m slowly getting used to this. It helps that the girls have me in a group text with them whether I like it or not. It’s fun. Having this many people around who truly seem to care is still new to me, but I like it.”

“Good,” I say, pressing my lips to her cheek. “Because I want you to know how loved you are. Not only by me. My friends adore you. My mom has already branded you another daughter.”

She laughs and climbs onto my lap, happier now. “I already know your mom loves me. She told me before you did.”

I throw my head back against the couch. “Wow, she stole my thunder, huh?”

“By like a month.” My mouth drops, and she runs her finger over my bottom lip. “Apparently I’m very loveable.”

“Of course you are.” Leaning forward, I kiss her neck. “Tell me what I can do to make this easier on you, and I’ll do it.” I’d do anything for her, give her anything. My heart, my life, my kidney. Whatever. If it makes her happy, that’s all that matters to me.

“You make it easier.” She rakes her fingers through my hair and kisses my jaw. “There are so many things you can do to help me.” She lightly rolls her hips against mine, and I fight back a groan. “Right now, though,” she says, climbing off my lap and standing up, “there’s only one thing I need. To enjoy one final pee before I start filling my bladder for the ultrasound.” She smirks and heads for the hall.

“Mean,” I say, hanging my head as she walks away.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she calls as she goes.

I look down at the semi visible under my sweats. She's going to give me blue balls, but I don't care. She's happier now, and that's all I want, to ease her pain as often as I can.



“Before we get started, do you want to know what you're having?” the ultrasound tech asks.

I glance at Amelia, letting her decide. “Definitely,” she says, not missing a beat.

“Dad?”

“Absolutely,” I say, squeezing Amelia's hand.

“Okay, then. Let's get started. I'll be taking measurements and looking at the anatomy. I'll point things out as we go.” She squirts some gel on Amelia's exposed stomach.

“Oh, warm,” Amelia says with a laugh.

“Much better than cold,” the tech says, then she presses the wand onto Amelia's stomach, and a second later, we get a glimpse of our baby. “Feisty,” she jokes as the baby swipes an arm across the screen.

“I felt that,” Amelia says.

I take her hand and watch raptly. This scan is so much different from the one she had at ten weeks. This time, it really looks like a baby. A miniature version, but a baby. I'm trying to stay cool, but there's a swell of emotions building inside me. We're halfway through. A few more months and that baby

will be in my arms. I don't know how to process that. I take another deep breath, but it's futile because she moves the wand and hits a button, then the sound of our baby's heartbeat fills the room.

There is nothing like the sound of hearing your baby's heartbeat. The first time we heard it, I was blubbering. Now? I'm not doing much better.

Amelia reaches over and sweeps her hand over the side of my face.

"146 beats per minute. Absolutely perfect."

She hits a button and the whooshing sound is gone. She moves the wand around, then smiles. "Well, that's quite a show," she says as the baby moves again. "And I think..." She adjusts the wand. "Yep. There it is. Or isn't. Congratulations, you're having a baby girl."

"A girl?" Amelia breathes, then she looks at me, but I can't speak. We're going to have a baby girl. It's official. My heart now lives outside my body in the hands of my girl and my daughter. *Daughter.* "Babe," Amelia whispers, pulling on my arm.

I wipe my eyes and lean down to kiss her. "I love you."

"Love you too," she says, then hands tightly clasped, our eyes drift back to the screen as we take in every image of our perfect baby girl.

Amelia

I hope you have a daughter just like you one day.

My mother said those words to me throughout my life and under many different circumstances.

When I was eight, I helped her bake various treats for a bake sale to raise money for the homeless shelter. I asked question after question about why people were homeless and how we could help. She smiled proudly and said, “I hope you have a daughter just like you one day.”

The same words were yelled through my bedroom door at age thirteen when I’d butted heads with her and stomped up to my room, slamming the door and turning on loud punk rock music. In exasperation she’d screamed those words at my door, hoping I’d one day have a daughter who drove me as crazy as I drove her.

When I held her hand as the last person left our house after my father’s funeral, she leaned against me and whispered out of thankfulness, “I hope you have a daughter just like you one day.”

As I sit in the car staring at these ultrasound photos, the words haunt me, not because I worry about having a daughter like me. Because I’m terrified my daughter will have a mother like mine. That one day she’ll suffer the same agony I have as

I slip away from her into the recesses of my own mind, lost and confused. I wouldn't wish either fate on anyone.

“Ready?” Miles asks, and I suddenly realize we're parked out front of his parents' house.

“Yes. Yeah. Can't wait to tell them,” I say, forcing a smile.

The likelihood that Miles knows something is wrong is high, but he won't push me about it until we get home. He knows I like to feel safe when I talk things through.

Instead, he wraps his hand around mine, infusing me with strength and calm. Though my heart aches over not being able to truly share this news with my own mother, I'm excited to see Katie's reaction. She's had fun telling me about all the old wives' tales used to predict gender. She said every time they predicted Miles would be a girl. They got that very wrong. Miles is pure alpha man, even if he doesn't exude that to everyone. I have no doubt he'd kill for the people he loves, then shrug it off because the person got what they deserved.

Katie and I did a few of the different predictions together, and it was split fifty-fifty between boy and girl. I didn't think I cared one way or another. I still don't, but something about having a girl is triggering for me in a way I don't think it would if it was a boy.

Katie swings the door open as we walk onto the porch. Miles's father works four ten-hour days each week, so he's off on Fridays. Since Katie makes her own schedule, she works half days on Fridays so she can spend more time with Andy.

“They’re here,” she calls to Andy. Then to us, she waves a hand. “Get inside.”

We walk in, slip our shoes off, then end up seated in the living room as we wait for Addie and Jameson to come downstairs.

Katie looks at the clock then walks over to the stairs and yells something in Korean.

Miles leans in close and whispers, “Loosely translated, that means ‘get down here or I’ll cut you.’”

Mental note, don’t piss Katie off.

Addie and Jameson come down the stairs side by side, looking unenthused.

“Girls, at least pretend to be excited. You’re the baby’s aunts,” Andy says as they walk into the room and plop down on the couch.

“Should we even be labeling the gender of the baby these days?” Jameson asks. “Should we really be classifying them as one thing or another before they’re even old enough to know who they are?”

Katie leans forward off the couch, taking Jameson’s hands in hers. “Sweetie, while your caring for the mental and emotional health of your niece or nephew is wonderful, and I appreciate the point that we shouldn’t put children in a box based on their gender, nor should we hold them to that as they grow... shut up.” I hold back a laugh as Katie spins back to face us. “Well?”

Miles looks at me. “Want to do the honors?”

I pull the envelope of pictures from my bag and set them on the coffee table. “It’s a girl.”

Katie claps her hands together. “I knew it.” She holds her hand out to Andy. “Pay up.”

My mouth falls open and Miles rubs a hand across his forehead. “Seriously, Ma? You bet on the gender of the baby?”

Katie takes a twenty from Andy and smiles big. “Yes, I did. It’s just silly. And fun. And I won.”

“This is why we weren’t excited to come down,” Addie says. “But I am excited to buy all the pink, glittery things.” She sticks her tongue out at Jameson, who gives her a shove.

“I’m buying all black,” Jameson says, standing up. Then she looks at us sincerely for half a second. “Congratulations.” She gives us each a hug and heads for the stairs as Addie hops up and follows her.

“You know, pink and black go pretty well together...”

I laugh as their voices trail off. “They remind me of Sarah and Rae.”

Miles laughs. “Yeah, but with *way* more drama. And believe me, that’s saying something.”

We all share a laugh at that, then Andy and Katie squeeze in close to go through the ultrasound photos.



“Are you excited or did you want a boy? Or are you team Jameson and we shouldn’t define the gender yet? There’s no wrong way to do it,” Katie says as we stand in the kitchen making tea.

I laugh at that. “Well, I think Jameson wants a goth baby, but I’m not against some black in the wardrobe. I don’t...” I trail off. It’s hard to admit my complicated emotions when I don’t fully understand them all.

“Come here.” She leads me over to the dining room table, and I sit down. She sits kitty corner from me at the head of the table and scooches her chair over, taking my hand. “What is it?”

“Going through all of this without my mother is hard enough. Something about having a girl makes it hurt worse.”

She rests her hand on mine. Her skin is baby soft. I don’t know how she does it. Some magical lotion probably. Or genetics. Miles has soft skin, too. When you look at him, you’d think his hands would be rough and calloused, but they’re not. They’re soft and well-manicured. That’s Miles, though. Meticulous in all things.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I know... it’s not the same, and I’d never want it to be, but I’m here for you. If you need a mom hug or advice, you can always come to me. I’m good at lectures, too.” She winks at me. “And if you just need to talk, I’m always here to listen.”

“I appreciate that,” I sniff. “Some days...” I blow out a breath. “It’s so hard grieving for someone who’s still alive.”

She nods. “You’re allowed to feel the complexities of that. You’ve been through a lot in your life, and it breaks my heart that you’ve had to go it alone, but now that you have this support system, it’s okay to go back and work on healing the pieces of you that you had to triage in the past. We’ll all be here to support you.” She clears her throat. “It’s not the same, but you might consider going to talk with Kara. She lost her mom last year. They were incredibly close, and she’s still dealing with a lot of the pain from that. It might help you to have someone who can at least somewhat relate to talk to.”

“Thank you. For everything. I can’t imagine going through this on my own—actually, I can. I would’ve compartmentalized and eventually that would’ve come back to haunt me.” I rest my hand on my stomach. “I don’t want that to happen now.” Or hurt my daughter because of it.

She squeezes my hand. “Then don’t let it.” The tea kettle whistles, so I follow her back into the kitchen. “When are you planning to go see your mother? I can come if you’d like.”

“Tomorrow evening. I was going to ask if maybe you’d go on Sunday and talk with her about it, too. The more opportunities to be excited about it... I think she’d want that.” It’s what I’d want. If it were me. If it ends up being me.

I quickly pull my phone out and open the notes app, then type out a reminder for myself. *Start writing letters for the baby now. Figure out good intervals to write/give them.*

I’d kill for more of her handwriting or one last piece of advice. If I can give my daughter that one day or give her a

reprieve from this pain, I want to do that.

Katie turns and hands me a mug of my favorite tea. She started keeping it on hand after I mentioned I love it. Such a mom thing to do.

“I would be happy to go over on Sunday.”

“Thank you. I’m going to frame one of the ultrasound pictures for her tonight so I can add it to her wall.”

“That’ll make her happy. She loves those pictures. Even the ‘wedding’ one of you and Miles.”

Miles photoshopped our faces onto a stock wedding photo. My mother was thrilled. He’s still her favorite person. Mine too. I feel a sudden jab against my bladder. Yeah, okay, he has some competition from this spicy little girl.

“Yes. Miles tells her a different fictional wedding story every time she mentions it.”

“That’s sweet.”

“You raised a good man,” I tell her, my voice breaking.

“Oh, honey. I appreciate that. Come here.” She pulls me into her arms, and I melt into the hug. There’s something about a mom hug that’s irreplaceable. Warmth, safety, and calm all rolled into one.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you too.” She pulls away and kisses my cheek, then says, “What do you say we go bust out Miles’s baby pictures?”

I laugh at that. “You’ve been waiting to embarrass him with those for a long time, haven’t you?”

She loops her arm through mine. “Way too long.”

Laughing, we make our way to the living room.



“Oh my gosh! A girl...” Dani shakes her head as she looks at the ultrasound pictures. “Can you imagine Miles as a girl dad? She’s going to have him wrapped around her finger.”

“Completely,” I say with a smile as I munch on some—fully cooked and safe to eat—sushi while snuggled in the corner of Dani’s massive, insanely comfortable couch. The one we have is nice, but this is next level. Spicy crab sushi is food of the gods and I will hear no arguments. “Honestly, picturing Miles being obsessed with her—which I already know he will be—is the one thing making me truly happy about this right now.”

She reaches over and squeezes my hand. “Sorry, babe.”

“It’s fine. Ish. I don’t know. I want to be excited. I feel guilty that I’m not. It’s the same feeling I’ve had since the beginning of the pregnancy. I want this baby. I love her already, but that excitement I want to feel isn’t there most of the time. This is my first pregnancy—it might be my only one. I feel like I’m squandering it. Then I think maybe the baby will know, and I’ll never be able to connect with her properly because I’m damaging her in some way.”

“Okay, slow down. You aren’t damaging your baby by having conflicting emotions. The connection you want will build in time, especially as you heal more.” *If I can heal from all this. How do you heal when the wound keeps getting ripped open?* “Remember that list you told me about when I found you puking and crying in the bathroom?”

“A lovely memory. But yes.”

“Follow your plan. Take it a day at a time. Nothing happens like magic. Everything important grows over time.”

I squint at her. “You’re not too bad at the advice thing.”

She glances over toward the fireplace at a picture of her with her grandmother. “I learned from the best.”

Loss is lonely, but it is not solitary. Everyone experiences it at some point, and while I wish that somehow made it easier to bear, it doesn’t really, it just makes it more normal to live through.

Miles

“Hello?” I call, walking in the back door of the farmhouse. I’m instantly hit with the smell of melted chocolate and something sugary baking.

“Kitchen,” Rae calls, not that I needed the direction. I’m following my nose.

I walk in and see an array of mixing bowls and cooling cookies, along with a half-empty dishwasher. Rae is leaning against the counter licking brownie batter off a spatula.

“It smells incredible in here.”

“Thank you.”

“My mouth is watering,” I say, stepping closer and looking to see if there’s any more brownie batter in that bowl. She holds up a spatula, and I reach for it, but she yanks it back before I can take it.

“This is payment for your silence. You’re not going to text my husband and tell him I’m on my feet and baking up a storm. I’ll ask for forgiveness later while giving him treats. And maybe a blowjob.” She mutters that last part under her breath.

I let out a deep laugh and take the spatula. “Your secret is safe with me.” I snag the bowl off the counter and run the spatula around the edges, getting as much of the leftover batter as I can. “So, Aaron is still waiting on you hand and foot?”

She sighs and nods. “And requiring me to stay in bed as often as possible. It’s been almost a month. I’m fully recovered now—physically. He’s treating me like I’m fragile, though. He’s only letting me go do outreach and the support group if he or Chelsea drives me.”

I shrug and lick the last bit of batter off the spatula. “Can’t say I blame him.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, Amelia has mentioned your protectiveness as well. How’s she doing, by the way? Other than in the group text, I haven’t talked to her lately.”

I look down. “Uh, yeah. She was worried about...”

Rae steps forward and rests her hand on my arm. “I’m okay. Yes, seeing her the first couple of days after it happened would’ve been rough, but now? It’s fine. In fact, seeing a healthy pregnancy is a positive thing. So, feel free to talk about her and the pregnancy and please tell her not to avoid me.”

“Will do.”

“So...”

We were going to tell everyone when we get together for dinner next week, but I might as well tell her now. “Amelia is good. Both my girls are.”

She smiles. Then her eyes widen. She points at me. “Oh my god! You’re having a girl?” I nod and she pulls me into her arms. “Congratulations.” Then she laughs. “Oh, you are so screwed.”

I laugh too. “Yeah, I know. But I’m so fucking excited.”

“And everything’s good?”

“Yep. Perfect. Amelia is feeling a lot better.” I pause. “Maybe not perfect. Emotionally, she’s struggling.”

“Not surprising with all she’s been through.”

“I’m trying to support her, but she’s still working through a lot of it herself. New things pop up all the time. She pushes me away sometimes when that happens and that makes my anxiety go haywire. I want to control more things. Fix things. I don’t know. It’s a work in progress. *We* are a work in progress.”

“As you should be,” Rae says with a soft smile. “It takes time to build a relationship, and often a lot of reworking as you grow and learn more about yourselves. In both senses, you two are going through a crash course. I have faith you can handle it, though. You’ve watched us all fuck up along the way. You’re bound to have learned something.”

I laugh at that as the timer on the oven beeps. Rae pulls the brownies out of the oven and sets them on the stove, then she gestures around the kitchen. “Want anything?”

“Yes, please.” We each load up a plate and sit down at the counter. “What inspired the baking extravaganza?”

Rae dunks a piece of sugar cookie into her glass of milk. “I needed to fill the house with some warmth today. I was thinking of Gram, so I got out a few of her favorite dessert recipes. Sugar cookies, lemon bars, pecan cookies, and of

course, her perfect brownies. I figured it was a good time since Aaron is off doing coaching things today. He's working hard to learn from Coach Ellis during the summer program, so he's ready when the season starts."

"He'll be great. And all of this is great."

"What brings you over here?"

I shrug. "Amelia is with Dani this morning, and I hadn't seen you in a bit, so I figured I'd come see you."

She squints at me. "Aaron asked you to come check on me."

I hang my head. *Busted*. "He kinda likes you."

"So I've figured out. He's lucky he's super hot." We share a laugh at that. "But remember, all this stays between us."

I hold up three fingers. "Scout's honor."

She gives me a shove and says the same thing she always says whenever any of the guys say that. "Like you were ever a scout."

"Yeah, Boy Scouts was not our thing. Baseball. Always baseball."

"So, when are you starting the old man's league?"

"Wow." I throw a wadded up napkin at her. "I don't know. I thought we'd wait at least until our midtwenties." She throws her head back, laughing. That's the girl I've known since I was six. Her playful side is always my favorite. Her laugh lightens everyone else's mood when she's like this. "It's good to see you happier again."

“It’s good to feel it. Don’t get me wrong, it still comes and goes. When I think too much about it, I can get lost in the pain, but I also recognize it wouldn’t have been a healthy pregnancy. It hurts, and I think it’ll probably affect me more again when we do start trying, but for now, I’m trying to stay positive. I am glad I never found a nannying job this summer though, even if I’m starting to go a little stir crazy.”

“Want me to bust you out? We can go get some lunch.”

She lifts an eyebrow and looks at my empty plate. “How do you possibly have room for lunch?” I shrug, giving her a wide grin. “Oh, right. I forgot you’re a bottomless pit.” She glances around the room. “I think I better clean up first.”

“I’ll help.”

She’s just climbed off the stool when the back door swings open. Rae freezes, eyes wide as Aaron strolls into the room.

“What smells so good in... here?” He looks around, then pins Rae with a glare. “What have you been doing?”

“Nothing. It was all Miles. I swear.”

Aaron whips his head around to look at me, so I nod. “Yep. All me.”

“He texted that he was leaving to come here less than an hour ago, so unless there’s a time machine...” He stalks over to Rae and wraps an arm around her. “You’re in trouble.”

It still blows my mind how they can go from zero to horny in two seconds or less.

I clear my throat. “On that note, I’m going to get out of here. Maybe let you do that other thing you mentioned.”

Rae stifles a laugh, then flares her eyes. “Okay, thanks. Take some food. Quickly.”

“What other thing?” Aaron asks as I grab a container and fill it with treats to take home.

“I’ll tell you in a minute.”

I walk over and kiss Rae on the cheek, then smack Aaron on the shoulder. “Have fun.”

Then I walk quickly to the back door, assuming they’ll be half-naked before I’m out of the driveway.

They went through hell to get there, but I hope my relationship will be as strong as theirs is one day.

Amelia

“Are you ready?” Miles asks me, squeezing my hand as we walk in the entrance to the nursing home.

“As I ever am.”

My throat feels tight and I want to plant my feet right here, rooting me to the ground. It didn't used to be this hard. I hated seeing my mother trapped in her own body, lost and confused, but I'd learned to live with it. Now every time I see her, my heart hurts more. It makes me not want to come. How shitty of a daughter am I? She's living in a constant state of confusion or delirium. It's too hard for me? Would I want my daughter to stop visiting me? Or Miles?

I grip his hand a little tighter as the elevator doors close, that thought sinking in. Is this his future too? One where he'll come and see me every day and I won't know who he is? He'd do it, no question, but what kind of life is that for him?

“Baby,” Miles says, his deep voice piercing through me. His arm is blocking the elevator doors so I can walk out.

“Sorry,” I mutter, then walk off the elevator. He follows and takes my hand again.

“Are you okay?”

Nope.

“Just nervous.” I swallow hard. “I want to get a version of her that's excited about this.”

He stops and turns to face me, wrapping one large hand around the side of my neck. “I know, but if for some reason we don’t, we can always try again. At some point, she’ll be excited, especially based on how excited she gets talking about our ‘wedding.’ Imagine how happy she’ll be the first time she gets to hold her granddaughter. Even if she doesn’t fully understand, she’ll be thrilled.”

His words are meant to be comforting, but they aren’t because I hadn’t thought of that. Not for a second. I haven’t been able to think past the current moment to imagine her seeing our baby for the first time—holding her. Tears crest in my eyes, but I use all my willpower to hold them back. Compartmentalize and breathe. I have to do that. If I don’t, I won’t be able to go in there and see her without thinking about all she’ll miss with our baby growing up and our daughter won’t get to know the funny, kind, caring, mischievous woman I grew up with. She’ll never hear my mother read her stories or know the warmth of her hug.

Compartmentalize right now.

“Ames, if this is too much, we don’t have to do it tonight.”

“Yes, we do.” I shove it all into the dark corner in the back of my mind and close the door. I will be present as her daughter and share this with her. Then I will take whatever version of her I get tonight and do the best I can with it.

Deep breath and go.

Without another word, I squeeze Miles’s hand and lead the way down the hall to the unit.

When we get inside, the nurse on tonight, Michele, greets us. “Hello! Ah, I love that sweet bump of yours. I have good news. Your mom is having a great day today. She’s probably only got about an hour left before she’ll be getting ready for bed, but she’s had a good day.”

A brief flutter of hope dances in my heart. “Great. Thank you.”

“Of course. She’s over in the sitting area. Let us know if you need anything.”

“We will. Thank you,” Miles says, wrapping his arm around me and guiding me over to the sitting area. He’s in make-everything-better mode right now, even though there’s not much he can do at this point besides roll with the punches.

“Amelia,” my mom says, smiling as we walk over. She’s fussing with the fraying edge of the blanket on her lap. “If I just had my sewing kit. Do you think one of those sweet girls would let me borrow theirs?”

I lean down and kiss her cheek. “I’m not sure if they have any, Mom. But maybe you could tell them about it before you go to bed.”

She nods, but keeps playing with the loose strings.

Reaching over, I squeeze her hand. “So, Mom... we have something to tell you.”

“Oh?” she asks, looking up. She squints at Miles. “Do I know you?”

“Of course,” he says with a grin. “I’m Miles, your favorite person. Actually, I might be your second-favorite after this.”

“After what?” Mom asks, eyes lighting up.

I move my chair closer and bring her hand to my stomach. “Miles and I are having a baby.”

“Well of course you are, dear. You were never one to carry weight in your stomach.” Oof. That lack of filter kills me sometimes.

“Would you like to know what we’re having?” I ask, moving past that sentence.

“Tell me right now.”

The door in the back of my mind slips open, and all the painful, ugly thoughts try to escape. She sounded like her. My mom. Who she used to be.

Nope. Not right now. I push that door closed again and lock it this time.

“It’s a girl.”

She clasps her hands together in happiness. “Oh, a little girl. Just like you.” She squeezes my hand, then looks at Miles and says something to him. I don’t hear what it is, though, because her words are on loop in my mind again.

I hope you have a daughter just like you one day.

Those words form a crack in my heart, one that’s been growing with each tiny break over the last year and a half.

That door in the back of my mind is busted off the hinges now, and all I can do is hold back the tempest of emotions as I focus on this visit with my mother—the closest version I'll get to her former self.



As he often does after our weekend visits with Mom, Miles stopped at McDonald's on the way home. I ate my cheeseburgers while watching *Sweet Magnolias*. We started back at the beginning because Miles wanted to know what it was all about. It's adorable and sweet, and I cuddled up against him while we watched. He stroked his hand down my arm and asked me more than once if I was okay, but I kept telling him I was tired. Maybe I'm a good liar, or maybe he didn't want to push it. All I know is I encouraged our binge watch so he wouldn't ask me questions. Questions I don't want to answer—if I even have the answer at all.

I know he wants to fix things for me. He has ideas or advice, but I don't need that. I don't want it. I don't want to talk and parse through every single feeling I have. I'm exhausted from the emotional toll of this pregnancy and how it's brought so much of my past trauma to the front of my mind.

Haven't I suffered enough?

The last thing I want is to bring it all out in the open while Miles tries to find the answers to make it all better. It's too much. Right now, everything is too much.

After our fourth episode of the night, I tell Miles I'm ready for bed, and like we do every night, we get ready, then snuggle in bed together. Usually I'm so exhausted I fall asleep the minute my head hits the pillow and Miles wraps me in his arms. Tonight, though, I don't. I close my eyes and breathe deep, pretending to be asleep. I'm convinced Miles wouldn't allow himself to go to sleep if I was actively awake.

Thankfully, he's tired enough that once he thinks I'm asleep, he quickly drifts off. I wait until he's breathing heavily and snoring softly before climbing out of bed.

I quietly walk into the closet, flick the light on, then close the door. I pull out two small totes and open them, taking a blanket from each. Closing the totes again, I wrap the items in my arms and hold them close, breathing in the familiar scents. My father's chemo blanket and one of my mother's old reading blankets. Together it's them. My childhood. Safety. Mornings cooking breakfast together. Evenings snuggled on the couch. Everything I miss. What I wish I could have for one more day. I hold them tightly as I sob alone in the closet, finally allowing myself to break in a way I haven't in a long time. As if this baby somehow knows, soft kicks pepper my stomach like she's trying to soothe me. I rest my hand on my stomach and cry harder, wishing she could've known them, that they could've known her.

When I've cried my eyes dry, I take one last inhale, then carefully put the blankets back in their totes and close them again, pushing the totes back into place. I wipe my eyes and walk out of the closet, turning the light off and heading for the

bathroom. After splashing some cold water on my face, and of course, peeing, I climb back into bed. Snuggling against Miles, I drape his hand over my stomach again, and breathe deeply, trying to pretend I'm okay and maybe somehow tomorrow will be better, even though I know nothing can fix the growing cracks in my heart.

Chapter Thirteen

Hairbrush Confessions

Miles

“ARE YOU SURE YOU don’t want me to drive you?” I ask, leaning down to kiss Amelia before I leave for guys’ night.

She softly kisses me, then runs her hand over my cheek. “I told you, I’ll be fine. Dani’s going to stop here first and pick me up.”

I kiss her again because, like usual, I can’t get enough, but I also feel like there’s something off with her. Ever since we told her mom about the gender of the baby a couple of weeks ago, she’s been quieter than normal. She’s still her quippy, sarcastic self, but when there are no other distractions, it’s like she folds inside herself or walls off her emotions. I’ve been trying not to push her about it because she says she’s fine, but I’m not so sure about that.

“Are you okay?” I ask, sitting down next to her.

“I’m fine. Why?”

I narrow my eyes. Mom. Two sisters. Three female best friends and then a fourth in college. When they say they’re fine in that tight, slightly too high way, it’s evident everything is not fine.

I’m not trying to generalize. Guys do the same thing, but it’s more of a grumble.

“That wasn’t convincing. And you seem off. Distant.”

“Well, I’m going through a lot of changes and processing lots of things right now, and it’s not always easy.”

I hate when she talks like that. She gets this almost robotic tone with a hint of sass.

“You know you can talk to me, right? I’m here for you, whatever you need.” I hoped we were past this point in our relationship—holding back—but it seems like we keep circling back to it.

She nods. “I know. If—when I’m ready to talk, I will.” She looks over at the TV, which is playing an episode of *Sweet Magnolias* that I know for a fact she’s seen several times.

I take her chin between my thumb and pointer and guide her head back so her eyes meet mine. “Don’t put up walls, Ames. I’ll just have to climb over them and that’s more work for everyone. I appreciate that you’re going through a lot, but please don’t shut me out. I love you.”

Her eyes get glassy for a second, but she blinks it away, then nods again. “I love you too.” She gives me a gentle kiss, running her finger over my jawline as she does. “Have fun with the boys. I’ll see you later.” She quickly teases the skin of my neck between her teeth, then lets me go.

I’m still not convinced she’s doing okay, but I can tell pushing her right now will only make it worse.

I give her one last kiss, tangling my fingers in her blonde curls as I do. When I pull away, I rest my forehead against hers, twirling one of her curls around my finger while resting

my other hand on her beautiful growing bump. “Don’t get into too much trouble with the girls.” My brow furrows and I look down.

“Seems like she’s ready to cause some trouble.”

Holy shit.

I press my hand more firmly against her stomach, feeling the thumps of our baby girl. Amelia has tried several times to get me to feel the baby kick, but each time she’d move or stop or it wasn’t hard enough for me to feel.

“That’s incredible.” I sink to my knees and lift Amelia’s shirt, kissing across her stomach, still feeling those subtle thumps. “Daddy loves you, sweetheart. Be good for Mommy.” Amelia runs her fingers through my hair, and after one more moment, I stand up. “See you later, my incredible girl. Superwoman. Love you.”

She smiles softly and waves as I walk out of the apartment high on life.

I just felt my baby girl move for the first time.



“I thought this was guys’ night, not beard check in time,” Jesse says.

“It’s always beard check in time,” Trevor says with a laugh.

“You just want to beat Aaron,” Joel says.

They could easily go on about beards for an hour and I wouldn't care. I'm in my own world remembering how it felt when my daughter kicked. It's all I can think about. Well, that and how I want to get back to my girl so I can feel it again. Though things have been a little off with Amelia lately, for that moment, everything was perfect.

"Dude, where did you go? Are you having a nice dirty dream?" Jesse says, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

"No dirty dream." Fuck, I cannot hide my smile right now. Not that I want to, but I also don't want to be insensitive to Aaron. Though he and Rae are healing, and Rae says she wants to hear about this stuff, I'm sure it still hurts.

"What then?" Joel asks. "Because you can't wipe that stupid smile off your face."

I glance at Aaron for half a second, and he reads me like a book. "Hey. It's okay to talk about Amelia and the baby. I'm okay. Promise."

I nod slowly. "Okay. I got to feel the baby kick for the first time tonight."

"Dude, that's awesome," Jesse says.

"I'm sure that felt amazing," Aaron says. Though there's some wistfulness in his eyes, he seems genuinely happy otherwise.

Trev glances at Aaron for a second, then smiles. "Damn. I can't wait to feel that for the first time."

My mouth drops, then I laugh as Jesse and Joel whip their heads to look at him.

“Is Chelsea pregnant?” I ask.

He smirks over his beer and shrugs. “Yeah, if you don’t want your girls pregnant, maybe don’t drink the water.”

“Wow. Congrats,” Joel says.

“Were you planning it?” Jesse asks.

Trev chuckles. “Uh... not exactly. It wasn’t an accident, though.”

“I’m confused,” I say.

“Not to get too into the, uh, specifics... but Chels hasn’t been on birth control because she kept trying different ones and none made her feel good. Anyway, we usually use condoms or I pull out—not the safest method, I know, but we weren’t being anal about preventing. Obviously. We sort of decided to purposely not try and prevent it about halfway through sex one time. Probably not the best time to make the decision, but I do not regret it. I’m really fucking excited.”

He looks over at Aaron again, who seems to have already known.

“We’re good, man. I told you that last week,” Aaron says, extending his fist to Trevor.

Trev nods and bumps his fist back. “I know. I just... my heart still breaks for you guys. How are you doing? And don’t

just say you're okay. We've been through enough shit together now that there's no place for lying about that."

Aaron laughs. "Yeah, no kidding. I don't know. I really am okay, and I mean that in the truest sense of the word. I'm not good—at least not about what happened—but I'm not in a bad place either. We've dealt with a lot of the heavy emotions around it, and while it sucks, we're trying to be both realistic and optimistic about trying again—which we're still waiting to do until October. I'm sure it'll bring up more complex feelings again when we do, but for now, I'm okay. We're okay. We've been through so much worse, and I think that's why we can handle this. And it brings us both a lot of joy to see you guys happy. At least I'm assuming you are since neither of you can stop smiling."

"I'm fucking thrilled," Trev says. "Like I loved the hell out of her before, but this is next level. Can't fucking wait to see her with a giant bump."

"How far along is she?" I ask.

"Almost twelve weeks. We're in the telling everyone stage right now. She's telling the rest of the girls tonight. Amelia's how far along?"

"Almost twenty-four weeks. We're getting to the fun but also *oh shit* stage." I pause for a moment, laughing. "Well, I guess the second *oh shit* stage. First is oh shit we're going to have a baby. Second is oh shit the baby's almost here."

"How's Amelia doing?" Jesse asks. Since she and Dani are so close, he's gotten to know Amelia pretty well.

That might be the one topic of conversation that can steal a bit of my joy, but it might help to talk about it.

“I’m not completely sure. She’s been in *I’m fine* mode a lot lately and hasn’t wanted to talk. I’m trying to balance encouraging her to talk to me with giving her space, but I keep second-guessing myself.”

“Communication is by far the hardest part of a relationship,” Aaron says. “Obviously. It’s this weird thing where it takes communication to learn how to communicate, but if you don’t know how to communicate, then what do you do? In my case? Fuck up a lot.”

Joel raises his hand. “Same. I had to learn how to say things instead of keeping them inside and pretending I was fine.” Aaron looks at Joel, holding back a laugh. “Yeah, I know. I’m Rae. Shut up.”

“I think the point they’re making,” Jesse says, “is that we’ve been there, and in some ways still are. Dani and I make an active point to sit down once a month and just talk about our relationship. No judgment, just honest feelings said calmly. We actually went to couples’ therapy for a few months last summer to learn effective ways to communicate and about each other’s love languages. It helped us, and our therapist led us through the first few monthly talks. It made a big difference for us.”

“I hadn’t thought about love languages. I remember my mom mentioning it on occasion, but sometimes I tuned out the therapy talk. Maybe I should’ve been listening.”

“Teenagers are great at that,” Trev says with a laugh.

“Never too late to learn,” Aaron says. “They’re not a science, but when you understand your partner’s love language, it’s easier to understand them.”

“Makes sense,” I say, even though this seems like another thing I have to learn that only complicates things more. I blow out a hard breath. “I’m ready to not pass the Bechdel test anymore.”

“You mean... talk about unimportant shit?” Jesse asks with a laugh.

“Exactly.”

Though it’s not unimportant, we switch topics to careers as Trevor goes on a tangent about announcing. Joel’s been enjoying his master’s program, and Aaron is excited for the school year to begin.

I let them talk, happy for their success. My job comes naturally, so it’s a place of low stress in my life. Which is good because even though I love Amelia and I’m happy and excited about the baby and our future together... love is fucking complicated.

Amelia

“Thanks for agreeing to start the night here,” I say to Dani as she sits down on the couch with me.

“No problem.” We sit in silence for a minute, then she asks, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“What?”

“Whatever it is that’s making you shut down.”

I turn to her, tears welling in my eyes. I’ve been trying so hard not to break, but from the first time we met, Dani has been able to see through my bullshit.

She crawls over to me and wraps an arm around my back as she reaches for my hand with her other. I rest my head on her shoulder as I cry.

“I miss my mom. Going through all this without her kills me. The worst part is that I can’t even grieve her. I have to go to a nursing home and see her—but it’s also not her. It’s confusing and gut wrenching. I thought losing my dad at seventeen prepared me for pretty much anything—but it didn’t prepare me for this. This hurts. Everything hurts.” Dani wraps her arm tighter around me. “Now that I know I’m having a girl, all I can think about is what if history repeats itself? What if I leave my little girl with a fate like this someday? What if one day I don’t recognize her or... Miles?”

“Have you talked to Miles about any of this?”

I lift my head and look at her for a moment, then shake my head. “He always wants to fix things or heal me, and he can’t. He’s kind and wonderful, but he will try to control my healing and force it to happen, and I can’t handle that right now. It’s too much.” *He’s too much. Sometimes.* How fucking selfish am I? He gives me everything I could want and more. Most women would kill for a partner like him, and I’m here thinking he’s too much? “I’m a mess,” I mutter.

“You’re not a mess,” Dani whispers. Again I look up at her, and she laughs lightly. “Okay, maybe you’re a mess, but you’re *allowed* to be one. You’ve been through a lot, and...”

“What?”

She bites her lip, then meets my gaze. “I don’t think you’ve dealt with a lot of it.”

I swallow at her words, my instincts scream at me to argue and deny that, but I think she might be right. “I thought I had,” I say instead. I thought I had healed from my dad’s death, at least. Now it feels raw, like it just happened or I’m living it again. I’ve missed him more in the last few months than I have in years. The memories of him and who my mother used to be twist with the emptiness I feel now, the fear of loving so deeply again and having it all ripped away. Then my hand drops to my stomach, and I recognize yet again that I don’t have a choice. I already love this baby unconditionally. “I’m sorry,” I mumble. “I’m a wreck.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Ames.”

“It’s supposed to be girls’ night. Having fun.”

“You’re right, it is girls’ night, but that doesn’t mean it always has to be fun.” She picks up her phone and types out a text.

“What are you doing?”

“Bringing girls’ night here,” she whispers, then she wraps her other arm around me and pulls me into a hug.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“You don’t have to thank me. This is what real friendship is, and I want you to know you don’t only have this with me.”

I sniff again, overwhelmed as usual by the amount of support I’m being given. It’s like the universe decided to make up for years of hardly any or no support system all at once. As nice as it is, it scares me, too. Because what will I do if it’s ripped away as suddenly as I got it?



“Thanks for bringing everything down here,” I say, feeling more than a little ridiculous—and still kind of awful.

“It’s no problem,” Mackenzie says with a gentle smile.

“Yeah, we were just a couple of blocks away, but even if we weren’t, we still would’ve done it,” Rae adds.

In addition to them, Sarah, Amanda, Chelsea, and Hyla are all here. It’s the first time Hyla’s been here for a girls’ night in a while, which is part of why we’re doing it.

“I appreciate it, even if I feel a little ridiculous.”

“Why do you feel ridiculous?” Sarah asks.

“Because I’m a mess, and the rest of you... aren’t.”

A hush falls over the room as the girls all look at each other, and then there’s a tiny laugh that breaks the dam, and suddenly they’re all laughing.

My cheeks heat, and I feel even more ridiculous until Hyla grabs my hand and says, “I’m sorry. We’re not laughing at you. It’s just... maybe we need to have sharing time if you think you’re the only messy girl in this room. Our stories aren’t the same, but we all have our struggles, and just because we may not actively be battling them, it doesn’t mean they aren’t there.”

“Oh, I have an idea,” Dani says. She gets up and runs over to her purse. She comes back with a hairbrush. “We are going to pass this around. Whoever holds the hairbrush shares something they’ve been through. I’ll start. My fiancé decided he didn’t actually want to be with me and I closed off my heart and almost let my insecurities ruin my chances with an amazing man. Who’s next?”

Rae holds out her hand. “I was sexually assaulted at a party during my junior year of high school. I closed off and refused to let anyone in. And there’s a whole lot more messiness solely from the early days of my relationship with Aaron—how I’d push him away and not communicate. Messy is a great word for who I’ve been—and who I can still be sometimes.”

She hands the hairbrush to Sarah. “My biological mother neglected me as a child and left me with so much trauma I

never really healed from it. When she and my biological father tried to come back into my life, everything blew up and I overdosed because I couldn't cope. That was less than a year ago. Hot mess express and still healing.”

I watch as Amanda takes the hairbrush next. “I've been insecure my whole life. My upbeat personality and outgoing nature hide that, but I always have been. Though it's gotten better the last few years, they came out swinging when Jamie and I hit a rough patch last year. I still deal with them daily—and with impostor syndrome. Some part of me always thinks I'm not measuring up to everyone else around me.”

My eyes drift to Chelsea, who takes a big breath. “I was raped at a party in college. For a long time, I didn't even want to go back to that town. I still feel like I have cracks in my soul because of it, and it took time for me to trust anyone enough to let them truly help me heal. That's still a work in progress.” She takes another big breath and a slight smile forms. “Especially now that I'm pregnant.”

“Oh my god!” Hyla squeals. “Yes! The news is finally out!”

“Really?” Amanda yells.

Chelsea nods. “Yeah. We sort of just decided one night, and it happened...”

She looks at Rae, who reaches over and squeezes her hand. “Still unbelievably happy for you,” she says, though there are tears in her eyes. She clears her throat. “See? I'm still a little messy.”

“Me too,” Chelsea says. “I’ll take any tips you want to give me or if you just want to bitch about hormones and nausea, I’m in for that, too.”

“It’s a wild ride,” I say, “but it can be amazing, too. Miles got to feel her kick for the first time tonight.”

Chelsea’s hands drop to her stomach. “I can’t wait for that. Hopefully soon.”

“Wait, how far along are you?” Mackenzie asks.

“Almost twelve weeks. We waited a bit. I’m just happy you guys know now. It was killing me to keep it a secret.”

“I am still so insanely happy for you two. I’m going to be an aunt!” Hyla says.

“Well, damn. All kinds of revelations tonight,” Dani says.

“On that note...” Sarah nods toward Mackenzie, who grabs the hairbrush from Chelsea.

“Right. My turn. Okay... I have watched and supported all these incredible women through the hard times they’ve faced. For me, my biggest hardship is how lost I feel right now. While everyone else moves forward in their lives, I feel stuck, like I’m standing still as the world spins on around me. I don’t always show it, but self-doubt has really crept in lately, and it’s left me feeling pretty messy on the inside.”

She swallows, then turns to Hyla. There’s a moment of pained silence between them, their eyes locked as Mackie hands Hyla the brush. She quickly grabs Hyla’s free hand and squeezes tightly.

“I tried to kill myself.” Her voice is cracked, wrenched with emotion, and her words hang in the air, slowly permeating each of us. “I was lost and broken and felt unwanted and unloved.” She laughs lightly through her tears and looks around the room. “Crazy, right? All this love, and yet I couldn’t feel it. My mental health was in such a horrible place, I couldn’t feel this wealth of endless love. It took a lot of work to be where I am, and I keep working every single day to stay healthy.” Her voice breaks. “I would not be here without this tribe of women to support me, encourage me, and love me through it.” She sniffs and looks at me. Tears trickle down my cheeks as the weight of these shared heartbreaks, struggles, and losses settles on the room. “I hope you know we’re not telling you all this to make you feel like your pain isn’t important. We want you to know it is. It’s okay to struggle. Mental health is fickle, and it can change quickly. Honoring it and working through our struggles is how we heal.” She looks at Sarah and smiles. “How we spiral up. Because that’s what we do here. With a lot of mistakes, grace, and support from each other, we always spiral up.”

She hands me the hairbrush, and I take it, letting out a shaky breath. “My dad died when I was seventeen. My mom has Alzheimer’s and doesn’t understand who I am or what’s going on a lot of the time. I have a whole host of trust and love issues, and I’m still trying to figure out what’s wrong and how to heal it. Some days I don’t want to. I want to hide, even though I know I shouldn’t.” Letting out a sigh, I hand the brush back to Dani, who sets it on the couch.

Hyla takes my hand, and all the girls scooch closer until we're in a circle—some on the floor and some on the couch—holding hands.

“Let us help you while you figure it all out. We're your team, your tribe, your support system. And when we tell you we've got you, know that it's because we're *never* letting you go.”

With a long sigh, I nod. “Thank you.”

Our circle gets smaller as everyone crowds around me in a group hug. For the first time, I don't feel overwhelmed. I'm supremely thankful and deeply honored to have this safe space full of messy women who help each other rise from the depths.

Miles

I'm exhausted when I get home from the cabin, which is where we all were tonight. It's close to midnight, and I'm stripping as I walk down the hall, ready to fall into bed with my girl. Mackie messaged me earlier and mentioned that they were moving girls' night to our place because Amelia was having a rough night. I was both surprised and not. It's easy to see she's been struggling, but I'm surprised she was open about it since she hasn't been with me. I'm trying not to read too much into that.

The master is dark as I walk in, and I toss my dirty clothes toward the hamper, then climb into bed, barefoot in only my boxers. I'll probably hate myself when I get up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night since the air conditioner is set to arctic temperatures, but that's future me's problem.

Sliding under the covers, I curl my body around Amelia's and kiss her neck.

"Hey, baby daddy," she whispers, her voice clear and not like she just woke up for a moment. She rolls over and looks up at me.

"Hey." I softly kiss her lips. "What are you doing awake?"

She shrugs. "Couldn't sleep." She rolls against me, resting her head on my shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, trailing my fingers down her arm. “I heard you moved girls’ night here.”

“Oh. I’m fine. Just lots of hormones and emotions lately. Fun pregnancy stuff.”

I sweep some hair off her neck, twisting my fingers through the strands. “I’m always here if you want to talk.”

“It’s nothing.” She runs her hand up my thigh, then over my hips, her fingers tugging at the waistband of my boxer briefs before her hand darts inside. My cock stirs instantly. One touch from her is all I need. Except that my mind is not nearly as eager as the rest of me is.

Reaching down, I grab her hand, stopping her. “Ames, stop.”

Her brow furrows. “What? You don’t like sex anymore?” She kisses my chest, up to my neck, then murmurs. “I thought it was one of your favorite things...”

My cock aches at her touch. *She’s killing me.*

Breathe. Keep some blood in your brain.

Grabbing her hand again, I thread my fingers through hers and turn the tables, quickly kissing her neck before looking into her eyes. The pain she’s holding back cuts me like a razor. I don’t understand why she won’t let me in.

“I love the way you taste and the feel of your skin on mine, how your eyes roll back when I hit the deepest spot in your pussy, the way you clench around me and how beautiful you are when you come, the way you scrape your fingernails down my back while you milk my cock. Sex with you is like

entering another plane of existence. I love everything about it. What I don't like is you using it as a distraction when something else is obviously wrong.”

Though my voice is smooth and calm, my heart is racing. When she drops my gaze, my heart seizes in my chest. I hate this feeling. My anxiety takes over and goes right to the worst-case scenario—my worst case. What if she's not talking to me because our connection is fading? What if she doesn't want as much with me as I want with her? What if I convinced myself this is love because I wanted it to be, but it's actually wrong? Thousands of what-ifs flood my brain at once, and I have to close my eyes and take a breath to remain calm.

Her hand on my arm jolts me out of my panic, relief flooding me as I feel that unmistakable electricity between us. The reminder that I didn't make this up or twist it into what I want to be. But on the heels of that relief are new sparks of fear threatening to catch fire. If she's my girl—the right person for me—why is she pushing me away? What else is she holding back from me? What if the things she's keeping inside rip us apart? Losing her would destroy me. Not having my daughter in my daily life would break my heart. The family we're building means everything to me, and I don't want to lose it.

“Miles?” My eyes dart to hers. She hesitates for a moment before saying, “There are a lot of things I'm trying to figure out right now, but I'm not ready to talk about them yet. I'm asking for a different kind of comfort tonight. If that's okay with you.”

She looks at me uncertain, her hand on my hip, thumb flicking at the edge of my waistband.

I stare at her for a moment, then wrap my hand around her neck and kiss her deeply, trying to give her as much of my love as I can. It doesn't matter if she wants to talk or not, I still need her to know how I feel, to know the depth of my love. "I'm okay with it," I mutter against her lips. If this is what she wants, I'll give it to her. I'll always give her anything she wants. And though it doesn't change my fears or concerns, I feel the connection we share flowing through us. If this is the way she needs to have it tonight, I'll enjoy every second, because I'd rather feel our connection this way than not feel it at all.

Chapter Fourteen

Never Lasts

Amelia

MY BRAIN FOG IS unreal. I switch tabs again and reread a sentence I've read at least five times, repeating it to myself as I translate the gist in to legal wording for this contract. I read the legal wording back, then double check it against the other tab. *Finally.*

I finish the rest of the contract, only getting distracted by random things a few times. When it's done, I reread it, then send it over to our editor to read through for any errors.

Leaning back in my chair, I rub my eyes. I need a nap. I look longingly at the couch behind me, then turn to check the time, but before I can, the door to my office swings open, and my tall, dark, and handsome baby daddy strolls in, looking like sex on a stick.

Horny mode engaged.

“Hey, sexy mama,” he rumbles, smiling at me. Then he tilts his head and cocks an eyebrow. That ridiculously perfect smile of his grows, and he looks around, quickly shutting the office door behind him. He stalks over to my desk and grabs my arm, pulling me up and wrapping his hand around the back of my neck as he kisses me. “Mm, you're lucky we're at work and anyone could walk in, otherwise I'd lay you on that desk and eat your soaking pussy.”

I whimper as his lips trail up my neck. “How do you know ___”

“How wet you are? I can tell when you need me, baby. Lucky for you, we have to leave now for your appointment.”

“Why is that lucky?” I ask, voice shaking. He’s right. I *need* him.

He takes half a step back but drops his lips to my ear. “Because if you hurry, I’ll have time to take care of you.”

My eyes flare. Thank God I’m wearing a skirt today.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’ve never been as hard-up as I have been lately. Except I know what’s wrong with me—pregnancy. Not that it’s wrong, but my body and emotions are still a big bag of crazy. I never know what’s going to happen next.

I’ll take sudden ravenous horniness for five hundred.

I shut my computer down, then grab my bag and stand up. “I’m ready.”

He grins at me and grabs a handful of my ass, guiding me to my door. “Good girl.”

I fight back a whimper and take a breath. I just need to make it out of the office.

He wraps his large hand around mine and leads me to the door, pulling it open and flicking off the lights as we leave. At this point, everyone in the office knows we’re together and obviously having a baby. I’m grateful to work for a company

supportive of that. Not only are our coworkers happy for us, we both get paid leave. Miles gets a couple months of paid paternity leave, and I get four months of paid maternity leave. Since I'm an independent contractor and my hours vary from week to week, it's only about seventy-five percent of what my salary would probably work out to be normally, but that's still amazing compared to what a lot of women get. Plus, I'll likely still continue working on contracts for AB Construction and a couple of other small businesses I work with while on maternity leave.

A couple of people say hi as we make our way out of the building, briefly distracting me from the heat coursing through my body. My vagina, however, is not distracted, and the second I'm seated in the car, I look pleadingly at Miles.

He lets out a deep laugh, then squeezes my thigh. *Not helping.*

"Easy, baby. Give me a few minutes." When I don't say anything or move, he reaches over and buckles my seatbelt for me, tucking it under my bump. "To get what you want, be a good girl."

Well, I'm horny and want to be a brat, so I cross my arms over my chest and look out the window. Again, he laughs. *Asshole.*

He pulls out of the parking lot and drives down the road, taking a few turns I'm not expecting until we get to the end of a quiet, empty street. It's a nice enough neighborhood, but there are no houses at the far end of the street. He parks the car

and undoes his seatbelt, then mine. Leaning over, he kisses my neck, then drags his lips up to my ear, kissing the spot just below it as his hand comes to my thigh. “Still mad at me?”

I make some kind of noise that’s supposed to tell him I’m not. As long as he’s touching me, I’m perfect. Almost. His fingers have a bit farther to go.

He must get the message because he shoves my skirt up and yanks my underwear down to my knees.

I choke on a moan, my brain finally jumping in.

“Wait. Stop.”

His eyes widen and he stops moving, his fingers perilously close to my clit.

“Why? Are you okay?”

“What if I get there for the appointment and they know? Or I smell like sex?”

He chuckles. “Baby, it’ll be better if we do this and then you clean up because you already smell like sex.” He kisses my neck again. “I could tell as soon as I walked into the office.”

Oh god.

I groan, melting into the seat. “Touch me. Now. Please.”

“Finally.” He drags his fingers up my wet center and I whimper at the feeling. He swirls his fingers over my clit, then he pushes one finger inside me and another, rubbing my clit with his thumb. I fumble for the button and recline my seat a bit, giving him a better angle.

I am loud and unashamed as he ravages my pussy and my clit, giving me everything I need and more.

“That’s right. Say my name. Tell me who owns this pussy.”

“You do. Miles. Oh...”

I dig my fingers into his arm as I ride his hand, taking everything he gives me and begging for more.

“You’re beautiful, Ames. My perfect, good girl. Come all over my hand.”

He adjusts the position of his fingers inside me, and a second later, I lose it, shuddering and clenching around his fingers as I come, no doubt making a mess of my clothes and his seat, but I don’t care. I needed that so badly.

When I’m finished, he pulls his fingers away and makes a point of licking them off. My heart pounds as I watch him, already coming up with a plan to repay the favor later. I truly love getting him off as much as I love getting off.

He grabs a package of baby wipes from the backseat and pulls a couple out, carefully cleaning me up before pulling my underwear back up, fixing my skirt, and buckling me up again.

He starts the car, then kisses my cheek and takes my hand.

I smile as I melt into the seat and close my eyes, more relaxed than I’ve been all day.



Twenty-six weeks. That's how long I've known Miles, and that's how pregnant I am with his baby. Half a year and my life has changed so much. I'm still struggling with a lot of it, but it's become easier to compartmentalize again. Which is what I need to do. I have my whole life to unpack my trauma. Right now I want to focus on my pregnancy. And Miles. It's much easier to focus on him when my baggage isn't overwhelming me. I want to focus on him. Especially after how he took care of me in the car today.

My eyes drift over to the kitchen. He's standing by the oven, looking at his phone. He's making chicken parm tonight, which sounds delicious, but not as mouthwatering as he is.

There are a flutter of kicks as I stand up, and I smile. I wasn't sure how I'd feel about having a tiny human beating me up, but I love it. It helps the connection grow between us. Though it is *slightly* weird when I'm walking into the kitchen ready to pounce on Miles, but I ignore that thought and go straight to him.

He looks up from his phone. "Need something, baby?"

I run my hands down his chest and brush my lips over his. "No, but you do."

He chuckles. "What do I need?" The last word comes out strangled as I slide my fingers under the waistband of his sweats, tugging them and his boxers down as I drop to my knees. He inhales sharply. "Ames, what are you doing?" he groans.

I look up at him innocently. “You took care of me. Let me take care of you.”

I stroke his slowly hardening cock, then lick my lips and suck the tip. He goes from semi to rock hard in seconds.

“Fuck, Ames.” His hand tangles in my hair as I take him deep. I can’t quite deep throat him like I used to, but I’m close. Using my hand, I work the base of his shaft, and with my other, I massage his balls.

He grabs onto the counter for stability as his legs shake, his hips thrusting forward into my mouth. I lean back slightly so I can let him fuck my hand and my mouth together without it gagging me too much. He pulls on my hair, using it to control the pace. I make sloppy sucking noises, going a little over the top because I know how much he likes it.

His whimpering moan at the sound of me gagging sends fire rolling through my body. He always tells me how beautiful I am when I come, but there’s nothing like the feel of his body and the sounds of his moans as he loses all control. I love giving him that freedom, even if only for a few minutes. I hope I give it to him in other ways, too, but I know he feels it like this.

He grips my hair tighter, thrusting faster and holding me steady as his body shakes.

“Fuck, Ames...” He grunts and shudders, holding me in place as he fills my mouth.

I swirl my tongue around his tip as I swallow and he moans again, trembling and gasping as he pulls out of my mouth.

I run my hands up his body as I stand, then lean in to kiss him. He groans again as his tongue twists through my mouth, tasting himself.

“Fuck, you’re sexy when you do that. So goddamn sexy.” He brushes his thumb over my bottom lip. “And this is even sexier. I love seeing you smile.” He runs a hand through my tangled curls. “How are you doing? You seem happier lately.”

“I am. I’m doing better. I don’t feel as weighed down by... everything.”

“That’s good. Just know it’s okay when you feel that way, and I’m always here if you need to talk.”

“I know,” I say softly, but the idea is tiresome. I know he’s here for me, but I’m tired of talking about and dredging up the past. All it does is hurt. *Focus on the present.* “I’m excited for tomorrow.”

His face lights up, his gorgeous eyes dancing. “Me too. Of all the traditional shit, this is the one thing I wanted. I get to hold you, kiss you, and worship that bump all morning. Sounds like the perfect day to me.”

When Miles first talked about maternity pictures, I wasn’t sure how I’d feel about them. So many things have felt emptier without parents. I’d have done them no matter what and faked all the excitement purely because it’s important to Miles, but I’m actually really excited about tomorrow. It’s

something beautiful not just for us, but for our daughter. These are as much a celebration of her as they are our relationship.

“It really does.” I tug on his shirt. “Dani and I picked a gorgeous dress. I can’t wait for you to see it.”

“Mm, I can’t wait to see that. Hopefully, it doesn’t get me too excited. I don’t think my dick has a place in those photos,” he says with a laugh.

I look down at it stuck against his leg and laugh. “Uh, no. That would be a very different type of photo.”

“Well, I suppose I should put him away before he gets any ideas.” I step back, laughing as he pulls his pants up, then he kisses me again. “Spaghetti or gnocchi?”

I raise my eyebrows in disbelief. “How dare you ask me that?”

He puts his hands up. “Hey, I’m just double checking. Who knows what baby girl wants tonight.”

I rest my hand on my stomach. “She’s my daughter. When the choice between spaghetti and gnocchi comes up, the answer is *always* gnocchi.”

“Noted. Now go lay down and rest while I finish cooking.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Just for that I’m going to shred some cheese.”

He pins me with a glare. “Fine. But only if you sit. And go very slowly. I don’t want any fingertips mixed in with the cheese.”

I roll my eyes but smile, smacking his butt as I walk away with the cheese grater. “Whatever you say, baby daddy. Whatever you say.”

I smile as I sit down at the counter, ignoring the pang in my heart. That conversation reminds me of how my parents always were in the kitchen together.

Shaking my head, I push past it.

Focus on where you are now.

Right now that means focusing on not slicing my fingertips off while I shred the cheese.

Miles

“So you haven’t seen the dress yet?” Micah Dawson asks me as we wait outside his family’s farmhouse for Amelia to come out.

Micah is a friend of our friend group. He’s Maia’s stepbrother, but they were raised together so they’re more like full siblings. His dad and stepmother—Maia’s mom—run a farm focused primarily on produce, goat products, and eggs. Micah helps out there while also running his own photography business. Maia’s mom, Veronica, lets his clients use the farmhouse for makeup and getting dressed, and he often does outdoor shoots on the farm. There’s a hill behind the farmhouse and on the other side are rolling fields. We’ll hop in Micah’s pickup truck and drive over there as soon as Amelia comes out.

“Nope. She and Dani picked it out and she’s surprising me with it.”

He smiles at me as I wipe my palms against my pants. I’m acting like I’m about to see her in a wedding dress. I hope I get to one day, but damn. This is not *that* big of a deal. Except it kind of is. Taking these photos makes our relationship feel a little more solid—especially to me. She wants these photos to hang on our wall and to pass on to our daughter. They’re a pillar of the life we’re building together. Maybe that’s stupid, but the ground beneath us has been shifting for our entire

relationship. A little more solidity is something I've been aching for. Especially since I can still feel her closing a piece of herself off. I don't understand why and she tenses when I bring it up, so I haven't. All those lectures I gave Aaron and Rae about not communicating. Look at me now.

Actually, forget the fuck about me.

Look at her.

I watch, enraptured, as Amelia walks across the deck and down the stairs. She's wearing a light coral pink dress. It's stretchy and goes down to her feet, but it still shows off her gorgeous figure. It has cap sleeves but a V neckline that plunges low, and the stretchy fabric hugs her bump tightly, making it look even bigger than usual. She is stunning, and she fucking knows it as she sashays over to me and wraps her arms around my neck.

"Hi." She gives me a quick kiss.

"You are ethereal. Seriously, I could stare at you all day. You are that magnificent. But this dress..." I drag my hands down her sides. "It makes me want to run my hands all over you. You are absolutely perfect."

Dipping my head down, I capture her lips in another kiss, but it doesn't last long as Micah calls, "Save something for the shoot."

When I reluctantly lift my lips off hers, he's grinning at us. He nods to the truck and I help Amelia climb inside before getting in myself.

The rolling fields beyond us are the perfect backdrop for our photos. The golden and green hues are striking in the morning sun, creating an ambiance of warmth and comfort.

Micah is snapping pictures from the moment we stop, catching candid photos of me helping Amelia out of the truck to us getting into position and me sweeping some windblown hair out of Amelia's face.

Then we get to the poses. We start standing in various positions. Me behind her with my hands on her stomach, me lifting her up in a bridal carry, us side by side, me behind her again as we make an overlapping heart with our hands on her stomach. Then there's my favorite one. The one I already know will hang in our bedroom and that I'll have a copy of on my desk at work. One hand is wrapped around the back of her neck, my fingers threading her golden curls as my other hand rests on the side of her stomach and we share a gentle but fervent kiss. It's a pose I could stay in for hours if Micah weren't here to direct us otherwise.

We take a break after that for water and snacks before moving on to sitting poses and then I lean against the truck and take in my radiant girl as Micah snaps pictures of just her looking free and happy as she cradles her bump. *Love*. That's all I see in front of me. The love I have for her and my daughter. The love she has for our baby girl. The fierce protectiveness rooted inside her for not just our baby, but our future.

Our relationship has been harder than I was expecting. I thought I learned from all my friends' mistakes and would be able to have a smooth, simple relationship from the start, but as I've learned, it's not nearly that easy. Relationships take work because it involves two imperfect people coming together and choosing each other while still learning about the other person and often themselves. It takes a lot of strength and grace. Though my anxiety loves to prey on the fact that Amelia still seems distant and uncertain at times, I'm trying to trust that it's part of her process growing into this new version of herself and our relationship at the same time. That's a lot for anyone.

Before the session ends, we take a few more pictures as a couple, and I take advantage of every second I get to kiss my girl and hold her perfect growing bump.

Today has been perfect so far, and I can't wait to see the photos that I know I'll look back on forever as one of the greatest memories of my life.

Amelia

Beauty is fleeting.

My mother used to say that when I'd fawn over some hot guy or grumble and throw a magazine with a gorgeous girl on the cover because I felt so unpretty. *It never lasts.*

And while she was right, I've come to believe those words more about life in general.

Beauty is fleeting. Beautiful, wonderful moments don't last. They always come to an end, often abruptly, as life takes a sharp turn.

That's today.

While I basked in the warm, wonderful moments of our photo shoot this morning, life was warming up to bitch slap me in the afternoon.

"What exactly did they say?" Miles says as we get out of the car at the nursing home.

I sigh and stop at the hood, taking a deep breath.

We'd just finished a delicious lunch of leftover chicken parm that Miles made into sandwiches on garlic toast when the head nurse of my mother's floor, Noelle, called. She said not to worry too much, but she wanted to chat with me and give me a heads up before our next visit that they've noticed my mother declining over the last few weeks—and especially the last several days.

About a month ago, I'd noticed her having a little more confusion and struggling to find the right words more often than her previous normal. I didn't think too much of it since Alzheimer's comes with good days and bad ones. I had also noticed her seeming a little less coordinated than usual, but since I watched her and saw no signs of stroke—which there is a higher risk of with dementia—I tried not to worry too much about that either. At the time, the nurses didn't mention anything to me, but it turns out they were just waiting so as not to stress me out over nothing.

But this is something.

Something I've been fearing. A decline.

The life expectancy after diagnosis with Alzheimer's can be as long as twenty years, but that's rare. Eight is the more reasonable long end of the spectrum. Four years is typical for someone diagnosed when my mother was. It's been nearly two now, and I'd let myself get comfortable, situating those fears about her decline in a comfy chair in the back of my mind. It's rare that they come out, but here they are, front and center. Because it's not fear anymore. It's reality. The reality is that my mother could die within the next year or two.

I thought I'd made my peace with it, but that was before this. Before I was pregnant. Before I was desperate to have even an ounce of my mother to cling on to. Now the shreds of her I have are being ripped away.

"Ames," Miles whispers, running his hands down my arms. He pulls me into a hug, holding me as tightly as he can

without squishing my bump. Our little girl kicks hard, like she knows her daddy is close, and my heart aches all over. *Is this the future our daughter is going to have?* I've gone back and forth for a long time about whether I wanted to know if my mother's Alzheimer's is genetic—something likely to pass on to me too. Supposedly, there are tests we can do to find out. I didn't used to want to know, but now... I'm wondering if I should. I want to be prepared so I can prepare our daughter and make the most of every second with her.

I look up at Miles as tears well in my eyes. The gentleness in his expression and the way he cups my cheek make me feel like I'm going to come apart at the seams. I can't hold it all back or keep it together. It's like I'm a fraying piece of cloth and he's holding one end of the string, tugging just enough to slowly unravel me.

I can't fall apart now.

I need to see my mom, talk to the staff, and find out what's next.

I force another breath and find that cozy room in the back of my brain, stuffing all the fear and uncertainty and pain into it and barring the door.

I squeeze Miles's hands and look toward the building. "I'll explain while we walk."

He looks at me for a moment, then nods, kissing the side of my head before walking with me toward the building.



“We don’t know anything for sure,” Noelle says gently as we talk in the social worker’s office.

The social worker, Leann, agrees. “We’ll do some evaluations and see what they tell us. Either way, we’re going to keep taking great care of your mom so you can focus on taking care of you.” Then she slides me a folder with resources for counseling and support groups for families of loved ones with dementia. “Did you have any questions for me?”

“No, I don’t think so. Thank you for meeting with us,” I say quietly, as Miles takes my hand under the table.

A few minutes later, we’re walking down the hall with Noelle.

“I’m sorry for such a heavy conversation, especially when you have so many other things going on.” She looks at my stomach.

“It’s okay. I’d rather know.”

She nods. “Go on and see her. All the medical terms can make things sound worse than they are. Maybe a visit with her will help.”

Miles wraps an arm around me, pulling me tight to his side, but not saying a word. I’m relieved about that because I couldn’t stand to hear stupid platitudes about how it’s all going to be okay and how I shouldn’t worry.

Worrying is all I've got right now. I rest my hand on my bump, trying to stay calm for her sake. It's not healthy for me to stress about things, but trying to control stress just makes me *more* stressed.

We walk into her room, and the curtain to her area is open. There's no noise, which is unsettling because my mother is usually humming or talking to herself.

Tonight she's propped up in bed. Her hair is a mess and she's wearing a nightgown. There's a Disney movie playing on the television and she's staring absently at it.

"Mom?" She doesn't look at me. I sit down in the chair next to her bed and take her hand. "Mom?"

She looks this time, her brow furrowing in confusion. Then there's a soft smile. "Amelia..." the end of my name is garbled. "When did you get so big?" She blinks a couple of times, then opens her mouth, but nothing comes out.

"I don't know," I say, emotions bubbling over inside me. There aren't any walls strong enough to hold them back anymore.

"Did you—are—" She stops and blinks again, and though I try to fight it, a sob creeps into my chest. Miles moves his chair closer and wraps an arm around me.

I squeeze my mother's hand, then stand up and dig out her hairbrush. Talking is too hard, so this is something else I can do. All my life my mom would brush my hair and maybe pull it back into a braid or just twist it around a bit. Then we'd

switch and she'd let me do her hair. When I was little, that meant yanking it into an ugly ponytail. As a teen, it meant experimenting with every type of braid or hairdo I could. Now I'm an adult trying to tame the wild, frizzy rat's nest her hair has become.

Carefully, I part her hair, then gently brush it, trying to get the knots out. It takes some time, but she smiles up at me and the familiar sound of her humming fills my ears.

This is helping.

We continue like this, her watching TV and humming while I brush her hair. The mood lightens a little, and I lose myself in the simple act of brushing her fine strands. When they're smoothed out and softer again, she reaches up and grabs my hand, looking blissfully happy as she says, "Thank you."

The flood of emotions inside me shoots up like lava and tears cloud my vision as I lean down and hug her tightly. "Of course. I love you, Mom."

She pats my arm. "I love you too."

I sit back down and she reaches for my hand as I let out a shaky breath. Miles meets my gaze and gives me a soft, encouraging smile as if to remind me of what Noelle said earlier. That I just needed to see her, but seeing her hasn't made me feel better. Her decline is clear, and though she's still in there, this is yet another reminder I'm losing her bit by bit.



After the emotional visit at the nursing home, Miles got me cheeseburgers and tucked me into bed while I ate them. The TV is on in the bedroom and though I'm snuggled against him, he's drifting off. I'm thankful he didn't push me to talk. He simply reminded me we'd get through this together, but I don't want to think about getting through it. I don't want to think about what I'll have to get through. There's a wicked storm of emotions swirling inside me. Everything I've been through, how much I've lost, how much I still have to lose.

I close my eyes and breathe deep, repeating the mantra I've lived by for the past few weeks.

Focus on where I am. On the good things.

The problem is, I don't know how to focus on the joy of life when every time I do, something else gets ripped away. My father. My mother. What comes next? The two other people I love the most in this world are Miles and our baby. What happens if I lose them too?

Everyone always says I'm strong, but what choice did I have in the face of what I went through? How do I face losing my mother now? I don't feel like I have an ounce of strength left in me. I've used it all up and now I'm crawling along, praying for a miracle that won't come and hoping that I find a way to survive this pain.

Chapter Fifteen

Magic Fix

Amelia

“THE EVALUATIONS WE’VE DONE have shown a cognitive decline and progression of your mom’s Alzheimer’s,” the nurse practitioner says as we sit in the social worker’s office with Noelle, Leann, a speech therapist, and a dietitian.

I swallow hard, wringing my hands beneath the table in the social worker’s office. It took a little over three weeks for all the evaluations to be done, and now we’re having a meeting about my mother’s prognosis and continuing care.

“What does that mean for her going forward? Will it be a more rapid decline?”

“We can’t know that for sure, but based on what we’ve seen the last few weeks, she’s staying steady right now. She could stay like this for another couple of years.”

Or she could decline until she’s nonfunctional, and it’s only a matter of time until she dies.

“Okay.” What a stupid word to say. I can’t come up with anything better, though. What am I supposed to say to information like that? “How will this change her level of care?”

“We’ll increase her aide support. She needs more assistance with dressing and bathing, and we’ll be watching to see if she

needs more help with toileting,” Noelle says. She goes through a couple more things, then turns to the speech therapist.

The speech therapist is calm with a kind smile. You have to be a special sort of person to work with people at the end of life. How they remain upbeat when they stare death in the eyes daily, I don’t understand.

“So your mom is still eating well. She does need her food cut up, but so far, we haven’t noticed any major issues with swallowing. She has a little trouble with tougher meats, so we’ll watch that, and we can switch her to ground meats as needed. We’ll continue quarterly evaluations unless there’s a need for more.”

“Thank you.”

The speech therapist smiles and an uncomfortable silence settles over the room.

“Do you have any other questions for us?” the nurse practitioner asks.

“I had been wondering about what genetic testing options are available for me to find out if this... might be my future.”

“Right,” the nurse practitioner says. “I’ll speak with her doctor when he gets back from vacation, and see what he suggests, but you’ll likely need to look into genetic testing on your end. For that, I would recommend speaking with your doctor or a genetic counselor.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“That’s all we have. If you have any other questions, you can call us,” Noelle says.

“Thank you all,” I say, rising from my chair.

I exit the social worker’s office—which is located inside the unit my mother is in—desperate for some fresh air. Of course there’s none to be found, just the stifling nursing home smell that makes me nauseous.

I pause for a moment, leaning against the wall, my hand resting on my bump.

I don’t know how to make sense of the emotions swirling inside me. They’re too much. Everything is too much.

I suck in a breath, then push off the wall, heading for my mother’s room. For now, I will focus on visiting with her because there’s nothing else I can do.

When I walk into her room, she’s happily visiting with Miles and Katie.

“There’s my girl,” she says. Her speech is clear today, but some days are worse than others. Based on the meeting I just had, it seems she’s forgetting certain words or struggling to find them some days. When she’s doing better like this, my heart tries to hope. Then I have to grab a fly swatter and beat that hope to death because she isn’t going to get better. I have to take these moments and enjoy them before they slip away.

“Hey, Mom.” I walk over and kiss her forehead.

“These are my... friends. Uh...” She squints, and Miles leans forward, smiling at her the way he always does.

“Miles. Your favorite person. And my mom. Katie.”

“Right.” She looks up at me. “You two know each other?”

“Pretty well,” I say, looking down at him.

“Of course,” Mom says, absentmindedly. Then she looks around. “Where’s your father? I thought he was with you?”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “Oh, he couldn’t make it today.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I guess you’re stuck with us,” Katie says with a smile.

“There’s worse company,” Mom says.

I muster a weak smile. I need to focus on enjoying my time with her, but I can’t. My mind is a whirlwind of twisted emotions, each one bleeding into the next and overwhelming my thoughts. I wonder if this is what it feels like to go insane. Or maybe a lighter version of what my mother’s brain feels like. The desperate desire to piece all the information together and make it make sense, but it’s a near impossible task. For me, it’s trying to make sense of all the emotions, but I can’t hold on to any of them long enough to figure out what they are.

Miles pulls me onto his lap, and I try to focus on my mother and be present for our visit, but that room I tuck all the complicated things away in is slowly collapsing and the door doesn’t shut right anymore, so all those thoughts keep sneaking out and wreaking havoc on my mind.



I can't get this stupid belt to sit right. I swear this dress fit me a week ago when I bought it for the baby shower. Now the damn belt keeps folding up at the bottom. Did my bump get that much bigger in a freaking week? I know I'm in the third trimester now, but it can't be growing that fast, can it?

I growl as I unbuckle it and try again. It. Still. Folds. Up.

"Stupid fucking belt. Why can't you just—" I forcefully unbuckle it as Miles appears behind me.

"Whoa. What did that belt do to you?"

"It's a piece of shit." My voice is snarky at best and he notices.

"Then maybe you should skip it." He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls the belt off. It's a blue and white vertically striped linen dress. The belt is chunky and light brown. *And demonic.*

"Doesn't it look dumb without the belt?" I ask.

"It looks perfect. You look perfect." He kisses my neck and wraps his arms around my waist, resting his hands on my bump.

"How did you do that?" I ask, meeting his gaze in the mirror.
"You just walked in and fixed it."

He spins me around, then dips his head down to look into my eyes. "Is it possible the belt isn't the real problem? You told

me what happened in the meeting about your mom in the car yesterday, but you barely talked to me once we got home.”

My face falls. I wish he'd let it go. I didn't want to talk about it because I didn't want to rehash problems that can't be fixed. “It is what it is. There's nothing more to tell.”

“Except how you feel about it.”

I spin back around, fussing with my hair, even though it looks fine. “It sucks, and it just... hurts. I don't know what else there is to say.”

He runs his hands from his shoulders down my arms. “We don't have to do this today if it's too much.”

I turn to him, scoffing loudly. “Uh, yeah we do. I didn't spend weeks with your mom, Dani, and Amanda, planning our baby shower with all our friends and family so we could cancel it at the last minute. Not to mention we have the entertaining space at The Rooftop rented out. We're not canceling. Our daughter deserves to be celebrated.” I sigh and drop my hands from my hair, then turn back to him. To my surprise, he's smiling.

“What?”

“I hate that you're hurting, but I love the way you said ‘our friends and family.’”

A tiny smile tugs at my lips. “Maybe I'm finally starting to believe that. And I want them to feel that way in return.” I give him a sheepish smile.

“They do. I’m sure of that. And they all love you. Us.” He rests his hand on my stomach. “This might be the most loved kid in the world already.”

I wrap my arms around his neck. “*That* is why I want to celebrate.”

He pulls me close and kisses me deeply. “Sounds perfect. Let’s go.”



“I can’t thank you enough for this. It’s beautiful,” I say to Katie and Dani as we stand to the side watching all the laughter and love at this party. I was adamant I didn’t want to do a girls-only shower. I wanted to have everyone important in our lives here, and I’m so glad that’s how it turned out.

“It was my honor to help plan this,” Katie says. “Thank you for letting me into your life and being my bonus daughter.”

“Don’t make her cry,” Dani says with a laugh, elbowing Katie.

“I’m okay,” I say quietly, though I’m fighting back tears. I have been all day. Happy tears, sad tears, wistful tears. All the tears.

I take a steadying breath, then look back out at everyone. There are games and contests set up for people to play. We made all the games silent, and you can put your completed papers in a basket for a chance to win a prize. There are also baby boards which feature collages of photos of Miles and me

as babies. Katie borrowed some of my photo albums and made digital copies of pictures of baby me. Then she put all our photos in black and white and numbered them, so people can go through and guess who is who. It's cute, especially because there are a few action shots where it's impossible to tell. Otherwise, it's pretty obvious since Miles has dark hair and a warmer skin tone. It makes me wonder what our daughter will look like. If she'll take after one of us or be a perfect mix of us both.

I wander over to the picture boards, trying to conjure a mental image of what she might look like. I'm sort of hoping it'll help with the name aspect because that's one place Miles and I have not come up with any ideas. I know we still have time, but I'd like to know her name before we go to the hospital.

"This is the best baby shower I've ever been to," Rae says, coming to stand beside me.

"Probably because you helped plan it," I tease.

"Maybe, but it's not just that. It's warm and sweet and not tacky." She laughs and points at the board. "This is my favorite baby picture of Miles." She's pointing to one where he's in the bath, smacking the water and making a crazy face. It's one of the photos where it's harder to tell which of us it is, but of course Rae knows. She's told me before she's a picture fanatic. "You were a pretty cute kid, too. Means you're obviously going to have an adorable baby."

"Aren't all babies adorable?" I ask.

She squints at me. “Oh my god, you’re serious. I wish I could say yes, but some babies are not so adorable. I mean, I think the baby cuteness is there just because they’re warm and snuggly and have that perfect baby smell, but based on looks alone, they aren’t always cute.” She grabs my arm. “I’d *never* tell anyone their baby isn’t cute, though. That’s just mean.”

I laugh at that. “Then how will I know?”

She shrugs. “As a mom, I don’t think you need to.”

I rest my hand over my stomach. It’s crazy how soon she’ll be here. How soon I’ll officially be a mom. A wave of sadness hits again, but I push it down because I am *not* going to that place right now. I am going to enjoy this baby shower.

Rae wanders away, and I continue looking at the pictures, my eyes stopping on one of me wearing a onesie that reads *Daddy’s Girl*. I still have that one locked away in my memory tote. One I haven’t touched in a long time.

Nope.

Package up those feelings and save them for another day.

Katie and Dani find me again and suggest we open presents. Miles and I are seated at the front of the room with Dani next to me handing presents and letting us know who they’re from as Katie, on the other side of Miles, writes it down.

“Ready for this?” Miles asks.

I truly don’t know what to expect. The last time I opened presents in front of people, I was seven, I think.

“I guess we’ll see.”

Dani hands me the first present, and we get started. There are books, clothes, keepsake items, and more diapers than I could’ve imagined. Lots of sweet cards with little notes in them. I’m honored and humbled by the number of people here—not just for Miles or our baby, but for me.

Dani hands me another present, and I open the wrapping paper, finding a handful of onesies. They have all sorts of cute phrases on them including, *One Cool Kid* and *Mommy’s Rockstar*. But then I see one that says *Daddy’s Girl* and tears flood my eyes.

Crap. I don’t want to cry here. Not now.

When my mother and I were going through our storage unit after we got back from our time traveling, we found a tote of my old baby clothes. I didn’t bother keeping most things, but when I pulled out the *Daddy’s Girl* onesie, my mom said I should keep it. *Who knows, maybe one day you’ll have a daughter who loves her daddy almost as much as you loved yours.* Did I sob when she said that? Yep. Exactly what I’m trying not to do now.

“Are you okay?” Miles asks.

I swallow back the lump in my throat, nodding. “Yes. I’m fine. I used to have a onesie like that one. Got lost in a memory, that’s all.”

He looks at me like he doesn’t believe me, but since the entire room is staring at us, he lets it go.

We finish opening presents, and though I desperately need to take a moment to collect myself, Katie and Dani whisk Miles and me away again to one of the tables where Rae, Sarah, Mackenzie, and their mothers are waiting.

“We have one last gift for you,” Katie says, “but we wanted to give it to you privately. Many of the women here contributed, but we put it together for you.”

Kara sets a beautifully wrapped box on the table. “When Rae got married, we started a tradition of asking the women in her life to write out special notes or letters full of advice and love. We did the same for Sarah, and we wanted to put a twist on it for you today.” She nods to the box. “Go ahead.”

With shaking hands, I reach for the box, carefully unwrapping the paper. I pull the top off the box, revealing a beautiful photo album or memory book. Lifting it out, I set it on the table and open the cover. The first page has one of my maternity pictures on it. It’s a side profile of me alone, looking away from the camera with my hands draped on my stomach. Beneath the photo, it reads:

To Amelia

A book full of funny stories, words of advice, and an abundance of love.

Emotion clogs my throat, but I try to control myself.

“This is beautiful,” I say, as I flip to the first page. Though I don’t read through what everyone wrote, I flip through the pages to see who contributed to this beautiful gift. Each person

has a full spread with their name and a baby photo of them on one side and what they've written on the other. Varying emotions roll through me as I look at these pages, all filled with a full page's worth of words for me. Many from people I'm still getting to know. Love overflows from the pages of this book, and after the weight of yesterday, it's enough to do me in. Just when I'm starting to think I'm in the clear, I flip to the last page and see a baby photo I instantly recognize. It's my mother.

Locks crack inside me and walls come crumbling down as tears slide down my cheeks. I look to the side where her words of advice should be. What I see is Katie's handwriting with bullet-pointed lines. I turn to her with questioning eyes.

"I know you can't have words of wisdom from your mother the way you want to, but you deserve to have something, so on her best days, I asked her questions and got the advice she'd give."

I run my hand over the page, tears blurring my vision so much I almost miss the most important thing. At the bottom of the page is a small piece of paper with her handwriting.

I love you, Amelia. -Mom

I go from crying to sobbing as I stare at the words. I never thought I'd see her handwriting again. Miles rubs his hand down my back as I lift my gaze from the book.

"Thank you," I mutter, the words barely understandable. "This means so much to me." I do my best to get my tears

under control, then look at the wonderful group of women surrounding me. “Sorry I’m crying so much.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Kara says, rubbing my arm. “It’s an emotional time.”

She doesn’t know how accurate that statement is or how it’s only fifty percent pregnancy making me an emotional trainwreck.

Suddenly aware that I’m in a large room surrounded by many people who are watching this little breakdown in real time, I excuse myself and hurry to the bathroom, mumbling something about how I’m okay and just need a minute. Miles comes after me, but I shut the bathroom door and lock it first.

It’s an awkward space, seeing as it’s a single bathroom and not a bigger one with stalls, but it’s better than being out there with everyone else.

I lean against the wall and wrap my arms around myself, trying to find some calm in the tempest of emotions, but I can’t. My tears come hard and fast, drenching the top of my dress. *I hate feeling like this.*

A knock at the door makes me jump.

“Ames?” Dani calls.

I look around, then reluctantly go open the door, mostly because I’m worried someone will break it open if I don’t.

Dani walks in, followed by Katie.

Dani wraps me in a hug that I only half return. I'm too frayed emotionally to function.

When she lets me go, Katie squeezes my arm before hugging me. "I'm sorry if that was too much," she whispers. She steps back and looks at me.

I don't want her to feel bad. She *shouldn't* feel bad. So much love went into it, and I'm glad they did it.

I sniff back my tears, shaking my head. "No. I'm so grateful to have it." Even if it feels like someone is twisting a knife around inside my heart. I will cherish those scraps of her for the rest of my life, even if they destroy me, too. "Things like this overwhelm me sometimes, that's all." And I'm breaking from the inside out, shattering into jagged little pieces that rip my soul to shreds.

It's all too much. But it can't be too much. I have to get a grip. This is my baby shower, and I can't spend it melting down. I take a breath and force everything back, and the familiar numbness washes over me. That's fine, I can do numb. I cannot keep falling apart, though. Not here. Not at all. I'm exhausted. I need a break from the constant barrage of emotions. It's too much. It's all too much.

"Do you need anything, honey?" Katie asks.

"I'll be okay," I say a little too robotically, then I force a smile. "We should get back out there." If Katie and Dani aren't buying my bullshit, they don't call me on it, so I wipe my eyes and go to the sink to splash some cool water on my face. I

avoid the mirror, not wanting to see the look on my face or the hollow emptiness inside me reflected in my eyes.

After patting my face dry, I take one more breath, settling into the numbness.

When we step out of the bathroom, Miles is pacing back and forth down the small hallway. When he hears the door shut behind us, his head snaps up, and he walks straight to me, wrapping me in his arms. The numbness wavers, my emotions fighting to get out, but I do my best to hold it all back.

It's next to impossible in his arms. His presence is enough to undo me, and I can't deal with that here. I can't do it all.

"I'm here, baby. Tell me what you need."

I shake my head and push out of his arms. "I'm fine. All I need is some water and to get back out there."

Miles looks over my shoulder at Dani and Katie, who both squeeze my hand before walking back out to the party.

Miles's gaze drops to me. His eyes are dark and his lips are pulled flat. "You're not fine."

"I'll be fine."

"Ames—"

"Miles," I say sternly, then lower my voice. "It's our baby shower. Let's go enjoy it."

He stares at me for a moment more, then his face softens and he kisses my head. "Okay." He takes my hand and leads me back to the party, but despite wanting to enjoy it, I know I

won't. At this point, I'll have to settle for making it through without falling apart all over again.

Miles

Talk about a fucking day.

In some ways, today was beautiful. We celebrated our daughter with our closest family and friends, and if I could put a period at the end of that sentence, it would've been perfect. But I can't. Because in the same moments of celebration, I was watching Amelia slowly unravel. She keeps saying she's fine or she doesn't want to talk because it won't help, but that's all bullshit. I watched Rae and Joel hide shit. I watched Aaron and Sarah not deal with shit. I know what she's doing, and it's fucking killing me because I would do anything, *anything*, to help her.

What do I do now?

It's been utter silence since we left the baby shower. Thankfully, my mom and the girls packed up all of our stuff and are taking it to my mom's house, so I don't have to worry about unloading shit right now.

The agonizing quiet continues as we take the elevator up. Amelia won't look at me, and my anxiety thinks that's a tasty snack to feast on. I can't stand this in between space. I've never liked leaving things unsaid. It makes everything worse when you're wondering what's going on in someone else's head. It's better to know.

An internal war is raging right now between begging her to talk and screaming not to push her. But why the fuck do I need to tiptoe around this? The only way to deal with problems is by facing them head-on. She told me that. We can't keep going like this or we're going to spin out of control. And everyone knows how much I love that feeling.

When we get into the apartment and take our shoes off, Amelia heads for the bedroom, but I follow her and grab her arm before she gets there.

“Ames, we need to talk.”

She looks up at me, eyes hollow. “No, we don't. Not tonight.”

“Then when? Because you've been saying ‘not now’ and telling me you're fine for months, when we both know that's a lie. I've done my best not to push you, but this is getting ridiculous now. I know you're struggling, so let me in. I'm here for you.” I run my hands down her arms. “I'm always here, babe.”

She blinks a couple of times. “Yeah. I know.” She turns to walk away, but I grab her arm again. “What do you want from me, Miles?” Her voice is sharp and filled with pain.

“You. I want you to let me in. Let me see the parts of you that are hurting.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because I care about you. I want to help you.”

“You can’t help me. There’s nothing to help. It’s the reality of my life that I have to learn how to deal with. You can’t control my pain.”

What the hell? This is so much worse than I realized. “I’m not trying to control your pain.” Though I’m getting pissed, I keep my voice soft and calm.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. You’re trying to control how I deal with it. You want to force me to talk as if that will magically fix things because you can’t handle it when things aren’t perfect or don’t fit into a neat little box. Well, guess what? My life is messy. And it’s not fucking fixable!” An angry sob heaves in her chest, but it doesn’t stop her. “How are you going to fix my dad being gone? How are you going to fix my mother slowly slipping into the recesses of her own mind until she’s gone too? Do you have a magic fix for that?” She covers her mouth, trying to hold back her sobs.

Adrenaline rushes through me as I watch her. Fear and uncertainty ravage my mind. I don’t know what to do or say. I don’t know how to help her. I don’t want to fix it. I want to be there for her while she works through it.

“I’m not trying to fix anything, Ames. I only want—”

“I need space.” She steps back, holding up her hand, and my heart seizes. I close my eyes for a second, trying to take a calming breath, but there’s no calm here. The air is charged with hurt and anger.

“What does that mean?” I ask. My throat is dry and scratchy, like it’s lined with sand. I swallow a couple of times trying to

push past this sensation, but my anxiety is winning this war, beating down everything else in its path as a panic attack looms beyond it.

“It means space. From you. From... us. I can’t think or breathe or process anything with you here hovering over me.”

Anger courses through me again. And confusion because I don’t understand. I just don’t understand what I’m doing wrong or what I’m supposed to do differently. “I’m not trying to hover. I’m trying to talk to you. I’m trying to support you. I thought this is how a relationship was supposed to be! You’re supposed to rely on me. Lean on me. Let me help you through this.”

“I don’t need help!” She inhales sharply, panting as she tries to hold back her tears. “I need time and space to figure out my own feelings.”

“Then I’ll sleep in my bedroom. I’ll give you space.”

“No. I won’t—” She stops and takes a deep breath, looking frantic. I hate it. “That won’t work. I need more than a room’s separation or sleeping in different beds. I need time apart.” Her breath shakes, and tears fill my eyes. There it is. The knife to my heart. “I’m going to get a hotel room or go stay with Dani for a little while.”

I stare at her for a moment, my mind running at warp speed, trying desperately to find a way out of this. The right words. *Something*. But I’m not that lucky.

There's nothing. She's right. I can't magically fix things. I hate this. I want to scream and fight and find a fucking solution, but I can't force her. My anxiety rips through me and that desire to control everything overwhelms me, but I can't control her.

“No.” It's barely a whisper, but this is the one thing I can still do to take care of her, even if she won't let me in any other way.

Her eyes widen, pain filling them like this is gutting her as much as it is me. “Miles, don't—”

“You should stay here. I'll go. You're pregnant. You shouldn't have to leave your home. If you need space, I'll go.” The words gut me as they come out of my mouth, but since the beginning, I'd do anything for her. This is what she wants, so I'm doing it. Even if it hurts so badly, I feel it in my bones.

She stares at me for a second. “Oh.” There's a long pause, like she's trying to figure out if it's some kind of trick. I wish. I wish it was some sort of reverse psychology that would change everything, but it's just me still trying to take care of her, even as she rips my heart from my chest. Who the fuck am I kidding? I handed it to her a long time ago. “Thank you,” she whispers.

I nod sharply, unable to take my eyes off her. “I'll go pack some things.” My skin crawls as every cell in my body screams this is wrong. I shouldn't be leaving. I swore I wouldn't. I take a step, but pause. She needs to know I'm not. Moving a step closer, I look into her ocean eyes. The

unrelenting pain in them kills me. “This isn’t me leaving. I told you when we looked at this apartment that I was never walking out on you or our child, and I’m not. I’m only doing this because you’re asking me to. Don’t think this is forever because I’m not letting you go. I’m not giving up on our future or our family.” I hold her gaze for a moment longer, then walk down the hall to my bedroom. A bedroom I’ve never slept in. My clothes are the only things living in this room.

I dig out my duffel bag, and as I open my top drawer, tightness creeps into my chest. This is the last thing I want. The crushing pain in my heart mixes with the feeling of helplessness I can’t shake, and it’s hard to breathe. Closing my eyes, I count backward from ten, gripping the edge of the dresser and moving my fingers over the smooth wood. I stand there breathing slowly even after I’ve finished counting, and for some reason the song my mother always sang me pops into my head. *Songbird*. I never realized how much it comforts me until lately, like it’s a safe space inside my brain.

It plays on repeat as I pack my things. Only a week’s worth. We have a baby appointment on Friday, so I can come back then to get more stuff. I slam my last drawer shut. Jesus, this is ridiculous. And the last fucking thing I want.

You can’t control everything.

Well, that’s fucking stupid.

I close my eyes again. Another few breaths, then I walk out to the living room. Panic surges through me again when I see Amelia in the kitchen.

Is this our future? Is this the beginning of the end? That thought is too fucking much and my chest tightens again. Tears try to creep into my eyes, but I shut them tight again, holding the tears back.

“Miles...” I open my eyes at the sound of her voice. She’s looking up at me, uncertain and concerned. She rests her hands on my arms as she looks into my eyes. “Are you having a panic attack?”

I stare at her for a beat. How the fuck can she care about that when she wants space? I don’t fucking get it, and standing here like this is killing me.

I quickly step back, then move around her. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not—”

“Neither are you,” I bite back. “That’s why you need space, right?”

She looks down. “Right.”

“Please take care of yourself. Keep eating. Drinking. And if you need anything...” Emotion clogs my throat and the tears I fought back are relentless now. “Call me. Any time. No matter what, I’ll be here.”

She nods. “I know. Um, take care of yourself, too.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Then I turn and walk out the door because if I stay another second, I’ll fall apart. The second I’m alone in the hallway, the weight of this settles over me. I never wanted this. I thought

I'd be the one to get it right. I was terrified to even consider a serious relationship for so long because I knew the risk of putting my heart out there. I wasn't ready. I didn't want to face this misery.

Misery is not what I'm looking for.

I remember saying that to Rae back when she and Aaron were broken up and she asked me if I wanted to fall in love one day.

Then she said, "*The thing is, when it's not misery, it's the best thing in the whole damn world.*"

She might've been right about that, but when misery is all you can feel, it's hard to believe you can make your way out of it to something better again.

I'm numb as I ride down in the elevator, tuning out the rest of the world. I walk through the underground parking garage toward my car on autopilot, working hard to keep all my pieces together until I'm in a safe place to break.

When I get to my car, I stop, bracing my hand against the driver's side door and taking a few breaths. *I need to get somewhere safe.*

Climbing into my car, I chuck my duffel in the passenger seat, then quickly pull out of the parking garage. Once I'm on the road, I realize I don't know where the hell to go. I don't want to go to my parents' house because I want Amelia to feel safe going there. I could go to Mackie's, but even though she has her own apartment now, it's only one bedroom. I don't

think I could fit on her couch if I tried. That leaves Rae and Aaron or Sarah and Joel. I don't want to think or figure this out. Making decisions is overwhelming right now, so on autopilot I drive around town. Down little side streets, to the edge of town and back again as rain drizzles against my windshield. I hate this. I want to go home. I want to wrap my arms around my girl and—

A loud pop pulls me out of my thoughts. Then there's grinding and clunking and—fuck me.

I slam my blinker on and pull over, then climb out of the car and walk around to the passenger side as rain drizzles down on me. The front passenger tire is obviously flat. I squat down and run my finger over it, finding a massive rusty screw sticking out.

Amazing.

Grumbling, I stalk around to the driver's side of the car again, pop the lever for the trunk, then go grab the spare, jack, and tire iron.

As I rest the spare tire against the passenger side door, the sky opens up.

Fucking perfect.

I stare up at the sky, then look down at the deflated tire.

The girl I love crushed my heart. Now I'm stranded in the middle of a rainstorm until I fix this goddamn tire.

As the cold October rain soaks me to the bone, I look down at the tire iron in my hand and consider bludgeoning myself

with it.

Love fucking sucks.

Chapter Sixteen

The Mucky Gray

Miles

WATER SOAKS THROUGH THE knees of my pants as I kneel on the wet ground, jacking up my car. I'm reaching up to wipe more rain from my face when headlights shine around me.

Great, maybe it's a murderer here to add more fun to my night.

"Miles?" I turn and see Aaron and Joel walking toward me, and God help me, I almost break down crying. Forcing my emotions back, I stand and look at them.

"What are you doing here?" I know we always joke about how we're a hive mind, but actual mind reading is a new level.

They glance at each other, then Aaron says, "Uh, well, we didn't get the details, but I guess Amelia called Dani upset about whatever happened. Dani texted Rae, and when none of us had heard from you and you weren't at Mackenzie's, we used the location tracker app. Figured we'd come see if you were okay."

A few years back, we all installed a location tracker app on our phones with the promise that we'd only use it to find the others in an emergency. This isn't exactly an emergency, but I'm thankful as fuck that they're here.

"Okay is relative."

They stop next to me. “We don’t need the details now,” Joel says. “Let’s fix the tire, then we can go back to the farmhouse. Okay?”

I nod. “Thanks, guys.”

Aaron squeezes my shoulder. “We’ve got you.”

With three of us working on it, we replace the tire quickly, then make the drive up to the farmhouse. With the adrenaline rush from the flat tire dying down, my anxiety is ramping back up as I replay the fight with Amelia, trying to figure out what I could’ve done differently. I still don’t know, other than to not have said anything at all, but that wasn’t really an option. Eventually I would have had to, which means we would’ve ended up here regardless. Here in the mucky, gray in between. I hate here.

My heart is racing as we pull into the driveway of the farmhouse, and I don’t say a word as I grab my bag and robotically make my way to the front door, leaving Aaron and Joel to trail behind me.

Waves of nausea roll through my stomach, and I want to scream and throw things and tear my fucking skin off to escape this feeling. This is more than an anxiety spiral. It’s a never-ending freefall. I can’t even see the ground to know when I’m going to slam into it.

I don’t even realize I’m inside the farmhouse until Mackie is pushing me onto the couch.

“Miles?”

Her voice sounds far away, like I'm stuck underwater.

That's how breathing feels right now, too. As in, I can't.

I close my eyes, desperate for a deep breath, but sharp, shallow ones are all that come.

I pull my knees up to my chest, tears pouring from my eyes. How did everything get so out of control? How do I fix it? How do I... breathe? I need to breathe. I feel like I'm going to pass out.

"Miles, I need you to listen to me." *Mackenzie*. "You're safe. I'm right here." She wraps her hands around my arms. "We're all right here. I need you to focus. Focus on just one thing right now. A sound, a smell, something you can feel. Find one thing. Focus." Her fingers wrap tighter around my arms. "Tell me what it is. Describe it."

I've got nothing.

"I don't know," I mutter against my knees.

"Focus," she says again.

I close my eyes tighter. I need one thing, just one thing to hold on to. Doing my best to clear my mind, I try to tune into the world around me. What do I hear? The rain on the roof, but the sound comes and goes. I feel Mackenzie's fingers digging into my arms. I smell... I smile and the tightness in my chest eases for half a second. *Rae's brownies.*

"Brownies. I smell brownies."

“Always thinking with your stomach,” comes Rae’s soothing voice, and I realize she’s right next to me.

My shoulders soften and I keep breathing. Slower now. Deeper breaths. I grab Mackie’s arms, holding them like she’s holding mine, though not as tightly. Another few breaths. I lift my head, resting it against the back of the couch, and peel my eyes open.

I’m surrounded by love.

There’s no other way to describe it. Pure, unyielding love.

Rae sits on one side of me. Mackie is on the coffee table in front of me. Sarah, Joel, and Aaron are standing at the edges of the coffee table.

I look around at them, feeling relieved and extremely embarrassed. I’m not sure I’ve ever had a panic attack that bad before, and I’ve certainly never had one in front of all my friends.

Numbness washes over me, replacing the panic I felt.

“I’m sorry,” I say, straightening up and letting go of Mackenzie’s arms.

She lets go of mine, too, but doesn’t stop staring at me.

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry for,” Rae says gently. “You can’t control a panic attack.”

Except usually I can. Or I can control enough to prevent them.

I shake my head and stand. “I’m sorry I worried you all. I’m fine. I think I need to go lie down—”

Aaron steps in my path, arms folded over his chest. “Sit your ass back down.”

I meet his gaze. He’s the closest to me in height, but of the two of us, seems more formidable given his bulkiness.

“I told you, I’m fine. I—”

“You’re not fine.” He steps in closer and shoves my shoulder. “You just had a mini breakdown on my couch, so sit your ass back down. We need to talk. I know you like to think you can use willpower to push through shit, but it does not work like that, so *sit*. Or I’ll make you.”

I stare at him for another beat. Anger swells in my stomach, but I push it away. It has no place here. It’s a defense mechanism, and though I want to lean into it, it’s not what I need to do. So I sit my ass back down.

I rub my hands over my face and sigh as Aaron sits down next to me and puts a hand on my back.

“When I was struggling freshman year of college, you regularly encouraged me to do better while still supporting me. You were there for me unconditionally, even when I made things messier than they needed to be,” Aaron says.

“And when my depression was at its worst last year, you threatened to throw me over your shoulder and carry me to the counseling center,” Joel says, sitting down next to Mackie on the coffee table.

“You picked up every single one of my pieces whenever I needed you to, but you always encouraged me to put those pieces back together even stronger than they had been before,” Mackie says, gently taking my hand.

“You never let me hide,” Rae says, her voice filled with emotion. “You called me on my shit as much as you hugged me through it. You took me on drives through the back roads, talking it all out with me. You never let me stay in the darkness.”

“You’re always here for all of us. You take care of us, show up for us, and balance telling us when we need to do better and loving us through it. You’ve had my back through the worst moments. All of our backs. Always. Now it’s our turn. We love you, but you need help,” Sarah says, sitting on Mackenzie’s other side. “The kind of panic attack you just had—the anxiety you’ve been experiencing—it’s beyond manageable for you now, which means you need to get help. Talk therapy, even medications—”

“Medications didn’t help you,” I say.

“Because childhood trauma was causing my mental health issues. I needed to work through a lot of things. I still am. Your situation is different. You are the exact kind of person who they might really help. But that’s for a doctor—a psychiatrist, preferably—to decide. Everything is rough with Amelia right now, but no matter what, you’re going to have a baby, and before you can take care of an infant, you have to take care of you.” Sarah’s voice is calm but insistent. I don’t

have to give it much thought to know she's right. I'm not managing anything effectively anymore, and I don't want to be this way for my daughter.

I look around at my best friends. I truly believe the six of us were meant to find each other because I don't think any of us would've made it through the rockiest times without each other. This level of friendship is more than I ever could've imagined getting, but I'm grateful I did.

"Okay." The word is hoarse and raw coming out of my mouth, and I realize all at once how hungry and thirsty I am. Rae dashes into the kitchen and comes back with a glass of water and a plate stacked high with brownies.

"Eat as many as you want," she whispers.

I nod, but take the glass, downing most of the water without stopping.

"I'm going to message Dr. Jim and see if he has any good recommendations for you," Sarah says, typing away on her phone.

"Thank you." I lean back on the couch and wrap my arm around Rae. "I'm sorry if I scared you guys or I've worried you by not taking this seriously. I need to take it seriously. I don't want to be this guy."

Aaron puts a hand on my shoulder. "We all struggle. You don't have to feel bad or guilty about that. What's important is that you recognize it and do what you need to do to get help. I wish we would've known more about this stuff in high school

and college. Therapy seemed so big and overwhelming and like something other people did. I always felt like my struggles weren't severe enough. Until I actually went to therapy and realized how much I needed it. I wish it was a part of high school health curriculum. I wish insurance covered monthly therapy appointments for everyone. We all need it."

I glance over at him and smile. "You must be killing it as a guidance counselor."

He laughs. "I don't know about killing it, but I hope I'm helping."

Letting out a long breath, I pick a brownie up from the plate on my lap. I eat almost the whole thing in one bite and groan. "Fuck, that's so good. I'm starving."

Aaron smacks Joel on the arm. "Come on. Let's find some food for dinner."

Joel nods, and they head for the kitchen. Mackie takes Aaron's seat beside me and cuddles against me.

"Oh, Dr. Jim is calling," Sarah says, standing and answering her phone as she walks out of the room.

I wrap my other arm around Mackie and pop a kiss on her forehead. "Thank you guys for being here for me."

Mackie scrunches up her face. "Why are you thanking us? Do you not know us? This is kinda what we do."

"Truth," Rae says. "Remember when Aaron and I broke up and you walked back to the dorm with me? You had me laughing when I didn't think laughter was possible."

I laugh at that. “Oh man. What did you say to me that got me laughing? Something about—”

“The vagina’s always wetter in the next girl,” she says with a huge smile.

“What?” Mackie says, laughing loudly.

Rae shrugs. “He asked why I thought he never went for a serious relationship. And I gave him an answer.”

“Oh my god, that’s great,” Mackie says with a laugh. But I’m stuck on the question I asked Rae to get that answer. I told her I wasn’t ready. We talked about it several times when she and Aaron were apart. Why I held myself back. I said I wasn’t ready for a relationship, but I think the truth is I wasn’t ready for *this*.

“Does every relationship have to go like this?” I ask, then take another massive bite of a brownie.

“What happened?” Rae asks.

I give the simplest rundown of events. Realistically, it comes down to her not wanting to let me in and me pushing her. Even though I still don’t feel like I was in the wrong.

“Did I completely fuck it up?” I ask.

“No,” Rae answers instantly. “Neither of you did. You’re both learning how to be in a relationship. Aaron and I broke up because we had so much to learn and overcome. I don’t think that’ll be the case for you two, but she has to learn how to open up to you.”

“And what about me?”

“You have to deal with your anxiety and your need to have everything figured out. Unfortunately, life doesn’t always go that way, and learning to cope with that is going to be important going forward. Especially once you have a kid. She’s not going to be able to tell you what’s wrong for at least the first few years of her life. You’re heading into uncharted territory, and you have to learn how to be okay with that.”

“And I have a great recommendation for someone who can help you with that,” Sarah says, walking back into the room. “Dr. Jim had someone he thought would be a great fit for you. I just texted you the info.”

“Thanks, Sarbear.”

She leans over and kisses my cheek. “No problem.” She looks at the three of us snuggled on the couch. “I feel like I’m missing out on this Miles sandwich. Maybe I can lay on top.”

“No way,” Mackie says, scooching closer to me. “Sit next to me. Miles is the meat. I’m the cheese. You two are the bread that holds us together.”

Sarah laughs and sits down next to Mackie. “The bread. I like that.”

“Uh, excuse me. *You* are not the bread,” Joel says, setting a tray of bread, crackers, and dressings on the coffee table, then squeezing onto the couch next to Sarah. “That would be Rae and me.” He extends his fist toward her. “The OGs.”

“The OGs,” she whispers, bumping his fist.

Aaron sets a tray of deli meat, cheese, and fruit on the coffee table and sits down next to Rae, pulling her halfway onto his lap. “I don’t think it matters who the bread is. The sandwich wouldn’t be whole without all of us.”

“Agreed,” I say. “Love you guys.”

“We love you too, buddy,” Rae says, kissing my cheek. “Now, let’s eat.”

With that, we all climb off the couch to sit around the coffee table and eat.

Today has been emotional whiplash, but I’m thankful that amid the chaos, I have this safe space, even if it’s not the one I’m aching for right now.

Amelia

“Tea for the ladies,” Jesse says, setting two mugs on the coffee table for Dani and me.

I almost chased Miles when he left, but my pride wouldn't let me. Instead, I sank onto the couch and called Dani. She showed up a few minutes later with Jesse. He gave me a big hug, and I cried on his shoulder like the hot mess I am. He took it all in stride. Now I'm snuggled on the couch with Dani, feeling an array of ugly emotions and still trying to hold back more.

Jesse's phone pings and he says, “I'm going to pick up the food. Be back soon.” He kisses Dani's temple and squeezes my arm, then heads for the door.

My phone vibrates against the coffee table, and I glance at it. Wondering if it's Miles. Wondering what the hell to say if it is. Part of me regrets what I said, but another piece stands by it. I'm a jumbled mess of conflicting feelings I don't want to feel in the first place.

Dani grabs my phone and looks at it. “It's from Rae. She just wanted to let you know Miles is there.”

“Oh. Okay. Good.”

“You know, it's okay to talk about it. It doesn't have to make sense. It doesn't even have to be English. It can be random syllables. Getting it out helps.”

I told her the gist of what happened with Miles but didn't get into the question behind it all, the word I hate. *Why?*

"I don't know what to say."

She inhales deeply, looking at me seriously. "Ames, I love you. I always want to support you, but I'd be a pretty crappy best friend if I wasn't honest with you. What you're doing, closing off, it's not helping you. It's hurting you every single time you choose to do it. I don't know what's going on in your head, but I know that holding everything in and trying to power through it doesn't work. If you're struggling so much that you're pushing people you love away, you need to get help. I know there's a stigma attached to that. I know it's scary, but you don't have to handle everything on your own, and with the amount of trauma you've been through, I don't think you should. There are great online companies now that match you with therapists and you don't even have to leave the house. Or the couch." She gives me a soft smile. "I won't lecture you, but I had to say my piece. Because if you can't let Miles in, how are you going to let her in?" She rests her hand on my stomach.

Tears rush to my eyes. I rest my head against Dani's. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Everything hurts."

"It's not going to magically stop. I hate that. I wish it could because you don't deserve all the pain you've been through,

but you get a choice on what happens now and how you handle it.”

I let out a shaky breath. “You might be right about therapy.”

“Of course I am.” She smiles at me, then pulls me into her arms.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been a sucky friend to you lately. We’ve hardly even talked about your wedding, and it’s in three months.”

“You’re not a sucky friend. You have a lot going on. I’m the crazy one who picked a wedding date just a few weeks after you’re due.”

“You wanted to get married on the anniversary of when you started dating. That’s adorable. And you should have the best celebration. I’m sorry I haven’t been a bigger part of it.”

“You’ve done plenty. My mom, Olivia, Amanda, and Jesse’s mom have done a lot of the big planning. You help me whenever I have to decide what I truly want. I’ve needed that.”

“I’ve kept Olivia on course with your bachelorette party too.”

“Much appreciated. If I could, I’d have you both be maids of honor, but I think Olivia might cut you if I did that.”

I laugh. “She deserves the role. I’m happy I get to be a part of it. I never thought I’d have this.”

“You’re stuck with it now.”

“Thank God. I’d be an even bigger wreck without you.”

There's a knock on the door and we both look over at it. Jesse wouldn't be back already.

"I'll get it," Dani says. I spin on the couch, watching as she walks through the door. The first voice I hear is Hyla's, then there's a train of people walking into the room. Amanda, Chelsea, and Trevor all follow Hyla in.

"What are you doing here?" I sputter in surprise as Dani takes her place on the couch next to me.

Hyla sits down and wraps her arm around me. "We heard... something happened. We didn't need the details, but we figured we'd divide and conquer. We're here to take care of you." She leans in close and whispers. "And to make sure you spiral up."

I look at her with teary eyes. "Thank you."

Trevor drops onto the coffee table in front of me and squeezes my arm. "We told you you're one of us now. That means you've always got people in your corner."

"Everyone else sends their love too," Amanda says. "And you better clear your schedule for Tuesday night, because we're having a girls' night."

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," Hyla says. "Just know we've got you."

I nod because I can't get out any words.

"Guess we should've ordered more food," Dani says.

“It’s fine,” Trevor says. “I already texted Jesse. I put in an extra order and he’s picking that one up, too.”

“You guys, this is...” I sniff back tears. “More than I could’ve asked for.”

They all said it. Said they’d be here for me. That I was one of them now. I started seeing them as my friends, too, but I wasn’t expecting this. I wasn’t expecting them to drop everything and show up here, especially when Miles is hurting, too. I assumed they’d choose him if something happened between us. I knew Dani would be here for me no matter what, but this...

“I hope it helps you trust that you have a whole support system now. As someone who has needed to rely on every ounce of that support, I know how much of a difference it makes,” Hyla says. “You don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to talk about, but we’re all going to be here, filling this place with so much love and support you won’t know what to do with it.” She gives a determined nod.

I don’t know what to do with it, but I’m grateful to have it nonetheless.

“I’m not... ready to talk.”

“That’s fine,” Amanda says, snatching the remote control off the coffee table and then handing me my tea. “What’s your favorite comfort show?”

“*Sweet Magnolias*, but I’ve watched it all the way through over the last month.”

“That’s okay. I know what we need.” Amanda navigates through the options until she finds *Gilmore Girls*. “There are very few things in life that good food, good company, and *Gilmore Girls* can’t help with.”

She starts the first episode, and I smile. I used to watch this with my mom. It is a perfect comfort show.

Dani grabs a blanket and pulls it over us as everyone else gets settled. I sip on my tea, humbled by this group of people surrounding me—the family I never expected to have.

Chapter Seventeen

Big Fat Chicken

Miles

“MORNING,” I SAY, WALKING into Rae and Aaron’s kitchen. The farmhouse was always warm and inviting, but somehow, they’ve cranked it up a notch.

“Hey,” Rae says, turning to me with a smile.

“Where’s A?”

“Work. He tries to be in his office by seven at the latest, so students have time to see him before school starts.”

I smile at that, leaning against the kitchen counter. “He was made for that job.”

Rae’s face lights up. “Yeah. He was. I’m crazy proud of him. Still feels a little strange to not be working full time like I thought I would be, but it means I’m doing the fast track through my master’s program, which is nice. I do have outreach stuff later this morning, though.” She turns to me. “How are you doing?”

“I don’t know. Okay, I guess.” She raises her eyebrows at me. “Fine, I feel like crap, but I’m not breaking down, either, so it could be worse.”

“Fair enough. Have you talked to her at all?”

“I texted her briefly last night to make sure she didn’t need anything, but I’m trying to respect her wanting space. God, I hate that word. The more it plays in my mind, the more it feels

like space to find a new apartment or space to figure out a custody arrangement.”

Rae grabs a mug from the cabinet. “You know that’s not what it is. She wouldn’t have asked for space if she didn’t want to be with you.”

“That makes no sense.”

“It makes sense because we often have the hardest time opening up to the people we care about the most. Vulnerability is difficult for most people. That’s why it’s easier to open up to a stranger you’ll never see again or a therapist who you’re paying than it is to open up to someone you love. When you’re with someone who knows you well, being vulnerable not only means being raw and open with them, but with yourself. It’s scary based on how they’ll react, but also what you’ll have to face. I’ve been there. It takes a lot to overcome those fears.”

“I thought we had or I thought we were stronger than this.”

She pours some coffee into the mug, then reaches around me to get creamer out of the fridge.

“You mean you thought you wouldn’t end up with someone like me or Sarah or Aaron who struggled to open up.”

“I didn’t say that.”

She gives me a knowing smile. “You didn’t have to. You thought you had all the secrets because you watched us suffer. People and relationships are complicated. You don’t magically get a good one. You have to work at it.”

“I’m open with her.”

“Okay, assuming that’s true, take a look at *why*. You like to be in control and don’t like leaving things unsaid. If you could’ve hid your anxiety from her, would you?”

I stare at her, hating that she’s right.

“How do you do that?”

“See through your shit?” She shrugs. “I don’t know, but you always see through mine, too.” She swirls a spoon through the mug of coffee, then pulls it out and puts the mug in my hand. “Drink.”

I take a long sip and groan. “Fuck, I forgot how good A’s coffee is. It’s barely been six months since we were all living together, but it feels so much longer.”

“A lot has changed for all of us. But for the most part it’s been good change.”

“Yeah, it has.” She puts the creamer back in the fridge and stands against the counter across from me. “No coffee for you?”

She shakes her head, a small but hopeful smile on her face. “Aaron and I are officially trying. I’m not expecting anything to happen this month, but it’s best to be off caffeine just in case, so I’m trying to adjust now. Which is why Aaron got me the espresso maker, and tons of decaf pods for it, so I can still have a coffee drink in the morning, even if it’s not his.”

“He gives every single one of us a bad name with the way he dotes on you.”

She laughs out loud. “Bullshit. Have you not met Joel? If Sarah didn’t want to walk through a puddle, he’d lay down so she could use him as a bridge.” She pokes me in the chest. “Have you not met yourself? I love our friends and family, but no one protects like you do. That’s us. I know it’s more with Amelia. She’ll come around, give her time. And we’ll all be checking in on her. I won’t spy for you, but I will let you know how she is after girls’ night tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

“No big deal.”

“It is. You didn’t have to claim her as one of us. It means everything to me that you did.”

“We all love her. Speaking of which, have you talked to your mom?”

“Yeah, I called yesterday morning. She was quiet about it. Eerily quiet.”

“Because she knows it’s not a breakup and that there are no teams.”

“No teams?”

“Teams to root for. Well, actually there is, but there’s only one. You, Amelia, and baby. Your family. That’s the team, and we’re all rooting for you.”

“Thanks, Rae.”

“God knows you’ve done it for me. Now, want to help me make breakfast?”

“Hell yeah. Just like the old days.”

“Ew. Let’s not refer to college as ‘the old days’ yet.”

I can’t help but laugh. “But I’m about to be a dad and you’re trying for a baby.”

“And Nick had a kid in high school. Let’s just not.”

I smile as I pull eggs from the fridge. Breakfast sandwiches have always been our thing. It sucks being apart from Amelia, but at least I have the comfort of my friends while we figure our shit out.

I hope we figure it out.

Amelia

I am exhausted. It turns out spending a weekend in emotional turmoil, sleeping like crap, working all day, and generally being pregnant, makes you tired as hell.

I yawn as I walk into the apartment, torn between going straight to bed and eating dinner. I know I should eat, but the call of my cozy bed is strong. Setting my bags down and slipping off my shoes, I resign myself to changing into comfortable clothes and then making the decision.

After changing into sweats, I've accepted the fact that I need to eat before I do anything else. If I go right to sleep, I'll wake up in the middle of the night nauseous and hungry.

Apparently, I'm bad at listening to my body because I'm already hungry. It's been six hours since I ate lunch, and the snack I had between that time was not enough. I keep forgetting I don't eat as lightly as I did before.

This is why Miles always tells me when to eat.

Well, he's not here right now and that's my own fault.

No. I am a capable woman who can take care of herself. I've just gotten too used to being spoiled. I may have been an only child, but my parents did not spoil me. Then again, when your father battles cancer multiple times throughout your life, it's hard to be spoiled.

As I make my way back to the kitchen, there's a knock at the door. When I open it, I see Katie standing there, two grocery bags at her sides.

My heart clenches. "Do you hate me?" The thought of losing another mother kills me.

Her eyes widen and she steps inside, throwing her arms around me.

"I'd hoped you'd know the answer to that by now. You're my bonus daughter, and I'm so grateful for that. Whatever happens between you and Miles is not for me to get involved with. I love him and support him always, but I love and support you too."

"Thank you," I choke out.

She steps back and wipes a tear from my cheek. "Don't thank me, honey. Just let yourself be loved." She turns and grabs the bags from the hall, then shuts the door and slips off her shoes. "I come bearing food. And company if you want it."

"I'd love both."

"Good." She marches into the kitchen and flings the refrigerator door open, cocking an eyebrow at its emptiness. "Good thing I came prepared." Then she's unloading container after container in all shapes and sizes filled with food. "Kara and I got together last night and decided to cook up a few things for you. Then Mackenzie's mother, Linda, stopped by and added to our growing pile. We may have gone overboard, but there's no such thing as too much food. There's chicken

parm, several casseroles including a spicy Mexican one, there's banana bread and bagels, Kara's sugar cookies, which are a recipe of her mother's. They are to die for. There's also some fresh fruits and vegetables, and of course..." She pulls out a round container and sets it on the counter. "Fried rice."

Tears well in my eyes. Just the fried rice would've been more than enough.

"Did Miles ask you—"

"No. This is from our hearts to yours. There's a note in there from Kara. We wanted to make sure you had everything you needed and didn't have anything extra to worry about."

"Thank you. This is... overwhelming. In a good way, if that makes sense."

She laughs. "It does. Don't worry. Anything you can't eat in the next few days can go in the freezer. What would you like tonight?"

"Fried rice," I say without a thought.

"Perfect, it's still warm. Go sit down on the couch, and I'll bring some out."

"Thank you."

She waves her hand. "Go on."

I make my way to the living room, still in shock and humbled. It seems like every day there's something new to be humbled by.

Katie dishes up the fried rice and sits down on the couch with me. “Don’t worry, I won’t press you about talking or anything else. Know I’m here if you want to, though.”

“I appreciate that. Both things. I’m not really ready to talk—not about everything, at least.”

“That’s fine.”

“Is it? Because I feel like I’m screwing up by not talking about things.”

She sets her bowl down and looks at me seriously. “Not talking about things in general is not the best plan, but I also know all too well that you can’t make anyone do something they don’t want to do.”

“Am I hurting Miles? Should I let him be here even though I feel like I need space?”

“Only you can answer the second part of that. As for the first thing, you’d have to ask him, but I imagine the hurt goes both ways. Him pushing you to talk probably hurts you.”

“Is it wrong that he wants me to?”

“No.”

“So I should be talking to him?”

She laughs. “Honey, there are no black and white answers. We live in shades of gray. My son doesn’t do terribly well with that. It’s not my job to tell you what works for your relationship. It’s your job. All you can do is the best you can with the tools you have.”

“Dani suggested therapy.”

“It’s not a bad idea. And unless you’re in love with your therapist and trying to stalk them, therapy is literally never a bad idea.” My eyebrows shoot up. “Trust me. It’s happened. Not to me, thankfully, but as a therapist, you get all kinds.”

“Wow.”

She picks up her bowl again and eats a few bites before saying, “No relationship is perfect, though I’m sure it seems that way at times. Andy and I have had rough patches, but what matters is that we worked through them. It’s hard to find common ground, but it’s important. Life doesn’t get easier. Learning about your own mental health, trauma, and triggers and how to work with your partner is essential to making it as a couple. You and Miles are still learning, and I don’t doubt your love for my son. With time, effort, trust, and plenty of grace, you’ll get through it.”

“You make it sound simple.”

“The words are simple. It’s the action that’s tough.”

“Well said.”

She nods toward my bowl. “Eat up. There are plenty of goodies for dessert.” She grabs the remote and turns up the volume on the rom-com I picked, and we focus on our food.

Well, I try to, but really I’m eating robotically as I think through everything Katie said. In the past, I’ve always tried to face things head-on. I remember telling Miles that not dealing with things makes them fester and get worse. Yet here I am.

The second the pain became too scary to face, I couldn't take my own advice, and I still can't.

I don't know how to climb out of this hole I've dug myself into, but if I don't try, I probably never will.

Dani's right. I need therapy. If only that didn't sound so daunting. And terrifying.

It's probably not terrifying, actually. I'm just a chicken, too afraid to face my own feelings.

I down another spoonful of fried rice like it'll fix my problems.

Yep. A big, fat chicken.



“When the moms get started, they don't really know how to stop,” Mackie says as she stares at the refrigerator.

Rae looks down at the bag of takeout they brought. “I guess we really didn't need to bring food. Clearly, we underestimated. I should've known. My mom said she helped.”

“She also wrote me a sweet note.”

“That's Mom. She's a lot like our grandma was,” Sarah says.

“So are both of you,” Mackie adds. “Caretakers.”

I feel their eyes drift to me. “No. You can feed me, but that is the only caretaking happening tonight. I need a break from thinking about things and to focus on something else.”

“It’s unlikely that will happen,” Amanda says with a smile.
“We always circle around to the hard stuff.”

“Fine, but I need food first. I’m about to go straight for the ice cream cake.”

Dani and Jesse’s friend, Garrett, who owns a local ice cream and dessert shop, sent an ice cream cake along with Dani tonight. There was a note with it that said *I know how hard it is to let down your walls, but I’ve learned no matter what, ice cream helps*. So, apparently everyone knows about this.

Small towns. Cult-like friend groups.

I smile to myself. They’re *my* cult.

We end up eating family style, sitting around the coffee table in the living room. To my surprise, the conversation stays lighter. This is mostly due to Hyla regaling us with hilarious flight attendant stories. I’m still getting to know her, but it’s cool to see her living her passion.

I haven’t even thought much about law school lately. But if I can’t handle living my life as is, I probably don’t need to add a law program into the mix.

When I get up to make tea, something that has become a comforting ritual each night, Rae and Sarah join me in the kitchen.

“Are you going to hit me if I ask how you’re doing?” Rae asks with a smile.

“Hit? No. Glare at? Probably.” I smirk back at her. “The honest answer is, I don’t know.”

“That’s fair,” Sarah says.

I sigh as I look at her. “I know you want to say something.”

Her eyes are gentle as she looks at me, but when she speaks, her voice is strong. “I ended up in a pretty horrible place because I tried to face things on my own. Or not face them at all. There were multiple reasons for my mental health being in such a bad place, but the biggest was a whole lot of unresolved trauma. Trauma is complicated. It eats away at you, and then it twists your reality. It clouds your judgment and makes everything seem worse and lonelier. It toys with your mental health until you don’t know which way is up. I’m not going to ask if that’s how you feel. I simply want you to know that if you feel that way, you are not alone. The only way to heal from trauma is to deal with it. Usually that takes a lot of help. I guess what I’m saying is, take your time and the space you need, but don’t push it all away for so long that you end up like I did.”

“Noted. I’m still trying to figure out how to handle everything. Add in being pregnant, and it’s hard to breathe sometimes. Having someone else trying to help me through it, giving suggestions, anything... it’s too much. Worrying about someone else’s feelings when I can barely handle my own is too much. That probably sounds ridiculous.”

I look at them and notice Sarah staring at Rae.

“Not ridiculous at all. For as happy as Aaron and I are, it took a long time to get there. I always wanted to run from him—and everyone—when I struggled. I was so afraid that

anyone else's feelings would overwhelm me that I didn't want to talk about it. Eventually, I realized I was hurting myself and the people I love more by doing that. When I finally opened up to Aaron and let all my walls down in a rough moment, it changed my perspective because afterward all I felt was relief. It took a lot of time for me to get there, though. I wasn't the only one who struggled. Aaron was having a rough time at the start of our freshman year of college and he completely shut down. Refused to let me in. It's part of what led to our breakup. We were apart for almost a year, and it was rough, but it took time for us to learn enough about ourselves and each other to push through all the walls we built. I'm not saying that's what will happen with you and Miles. He's very different from Aaron and me. I guess I just want you to know there's no judgment here, and you're not alone in how you're feeling."

I nod slowly. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

"Ah, excuse me! What is happening over there? No subparties!" Hyla yells from the living room.

I quickly pour my tea as Rae and Sarah make their way back to the living room.

"Sorry. Coming," I call as I finish pouring my tea and head for the couch.

I remember the first time Dani dragged me to a girls' night with all of them. It was overwhelming, and I thought they were a little crazy. I also felt like a fraud among fierce women who would talk so openly about their pain and struggles.

A lot has changed since then, but the love and support that flows through the group has not. I'm glad I've learned to accept it now, even if I still feel like the fraud of the group because I'm not being transparent with them and breaking down my walls. They all say they understand, but this isn't who I want to be. I want to be as open with them as they are with me.

I have to figure out what I'm doing.

And I need to figure out things with Miles. I don't want to end up apart from him long term. I don't even want to be apart from him for a month, but I have to figure out what I'm doing and how to handle my shit before I talk to him about any of it because I want to fix what I've done wrong and get this right with him.

I deserve to have the future I want—the future I see with him. Now I just need to be strong enough to get it.

Miles

“Hello?” I call as I walk into my parents’ house and slip my shoes off.

I’m exhausted physically and mentally. I haven’t been sleeping well—not that it’s much of a surprise—and I can’t stop thinking. Thinking through my relationship with Amelia, my anxiety, my life in general.

“Hey, Miles,” Dad says, walking into the living room. “What’s going on?”

“I wanted to talk to you about something.” I purposely chose this evening because I knew my mother would be at my sisters’ gymnastic practice. She might be the only parent who sticks around for the practice still at their age, but that’s Ma.

“Of course. Come sit.” I follow him to the living room and sit down, rubbing my sweaty palms on my jeans. “Is this about what’s happening with you and Amelia? Your mom went to see her the other night.”

“Yeah, I know. And sort of.” I let out a rough sigh. “Dad, do you have anxiety?”

His eyes widen, then he smiles softly. “Yes. I do.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, frustration swelling inside me. “Especially knowing I have it too. Didn’t you think maybe you could help me?”

He nods. “Your mother suggested on more than one occasion that I tell you, but she always left it up to me. I wasn’t trying to hurt you by not sharing it with you—the opposite, actually. My mother suffered from severe anxiety, and she never got any help for it. I know you probably saw bits and pieces of that when she’d come to visit when you were young, but that was the tiny tip of a massive iceberg. All my life, when something difficult happened—even if it happened to me—I’d have to hold my mother’s hand and calm her down through it. It made it impossible for me to go to her with my problems, because I’d end up comforting her. It wasn’t fair to me that I often had to be the parent to my own mother. It was even worse when I started struggling with anxiety, too. It was your mom who ended up supporting me through it and encouraging me to get help. I found a good therapist, medication that worked well, and I got it under control. The reason I never told you or your sisters is because I never wanted to burden you the way my mother did me. If that wasn’t the right choice, I’m sorry.” He chuckles. “As you parent, you’ll learn you often try not to repeat the same mistakes your parents made. Instead, you screw your kids up in your own unique way.”

I laugh and shake my head. “I don’t think you and mom screwed me up. I’m struggling right now, though. My anxiety is out of check, and I don’t know how to handle it. I made an appointment with a local therapist, but it’s going to be a couple of weeks before I get in. I’m nervous about that, too. How do you handle it? Because it feels like an impossibly high mountain that I couldn’t climb if I wanted to.”

“My anxiety peaked around the same time in my life. Your mom and I had just gotten married, and I was extremely overwhelmed by my first job. It wasn’t the right fit for me. Then your mom found out she was pregnant with you. We’d talked about trying, but hadn’t officially decided yet. I felt like I was on a train that was running off the rails and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I was lashing out at your mom, and you know her level of tolerance for bullshit.”

“None at all.”

“Precisely.” He smiles and leans back in his chair. “She sat me down and told me in no uncertain terms that if I wanted our marriage to remain intact, I needed to do the work on myself. It took a couple of tries to find the right therapist for me, but once I did, it made all the difference. If I’ve learned anything, the mountain isn’t nearly as steep or high as you think it is, and a good therapist will give you a better perspective and the tools to climb said mountain, but you have to want to. So it sounds like you’re already moving in the right direction.”

“I hope so. I’m tired of feeling like I’m coming apart at the seams.” I drop my head into my hands. This week has been a test of my strength and my mental and emotional states—neither of which are faring well.

Dad sits down next to me and wraps his arm around my back. “You don’t have to face it alone. When you feel like you’re coming apart at the seams, we’ll all be here to sew you back up.”

“I think Addie and Jameson might pull some stuffing out first.”

He laughs at that. “Their love language is sarcasm and being little hellions. They’re miniature versions of your mother, but with more sass. It’s terrifying being the only man in the house these days. Then others they curl up next to me and call me ‘Daddy’ still. Being a girl dad is an adventure.”

“I want to be strong enough for her,” I whisper. Because the thought of failing my little girl kills me and she’s not even here yet.

“You will be,” he reassures me. “You have a big, loving heart, but you don’t take people’s shit. Kind of like your mother.”

“And you. I understand why you didn’t want to tell us about your anxiety. I appreciate I could always talk to you. I never questioned that for a second.” Tears fill my eyes because I’m an utter fucking mess this week.

“It’s going to be okay. I know everyone always says that, but it’s usually the truth. One way or another, things usually work out okay, even if there’s some pain along the way. I’m proud of you for recognizing the ways you need to heal—and for the man you are right now. *You* are going to be okay. We’ll all help make sure of that.”

“Thanks, Dad. I love you.”

“I love you too. Now, what do you say we order some chicken wings and meat lover’s pizza and see how much it

annoys your mother?”

I laugh at that. She'd always give us shit when we were left to our own devices because we can both cook but chose not to. And there was “never a vegetable in sight” as she'd say.

“Sounds good.”

The last six months have tested my foundation and everything I thought I knew about myself. Maybe it was ego, but I thought I was somehow more evolved than my friends had been as they got into serious relationships. I'm realizing now how much work I have to do to be the best version of myself, the best father for my daughter, and the best partner for Amelia. Assuming she still wants that. I'm trying to accept that I can't know the answer to everything, but after our appointment on Friday, we will figure out the answer to that question because what we're doing right now isn't healthy for either of us or our relationship. If we're going to be in one, we've got to work together, not slip apart. I don't need perfection. Give me all the messy moments and hard things as long as I have her, too. She's what I need. Her and our daughter—our little family—and I'm not giving up on them for a second.

Amelia

Screw you, Netflix.

Why are there only a handful of decent things to watch on here and I've seen them all?

That's it. I know when to call it.

Hoisting myself off the couch, I walk over to the bookcase filled with DVDs and run my hand over the stack of *Friends* season sets. Though I consider watching the season where Rachel is pregnant, that might be too close to real life for me, and I need a distraction. I grab season one and take it over to the entertainment center, quickly putting the first disc in the DVD player.

Once it's playing, I make my way to the kitchen and open the refrigerator door. I immediately close it again. Too many choices. It overwhelms me. I took almost an hour to decide what I wanted for lunch and by then I was cranky and hangry.

Luckily, I worked from home today, so no one else had to witness my food rage.

Of course, when I didn't come in to work this morning, Miles texted me, asking if I was okay. I assured him I was. I had a dentist appointment midmorning, and I didn't feel like going to the office for a few hours then leaving and going back again. Plus working from home was a nice reprieve. Those three little dots appeared and disappeared multiple times

before Miles finally said okay and reminded me to let him know if I needed anything. I sensed his desire to say something more—about how he would have driven me—but I’m grateful he didn’t. I also can’t shake the guilt I feel over him still trying to take care of me when I’m being such a closed-off bitch.

I’m allowed to work through things on my own, I remind myself.

Am I really working through anything, though?

I know the answer, but I don’t particularly want to admit to it. I plop down on a stool at the kitchen counter and pick up my phone. For probably the fiftieth time this week, I open my browser and go to the website of what I think is the best online therapy service. It gives off better vibes. Not that I’ve acted on them. I read through the basics and the FAQs again, then turn my phone screen off and set it down. Every time I think about pushing the happy little button that reads “let’s get started” I chicken out. Something holds me back.

I hold myself back.

It’s the same reason I couldn’t tell Dani or the girls about my pain. Why I’m pushing Miles away. Fear. Fear of what I will unearth. Fear I’ll find out I’m just like my mother and destined for the future she has. Fear of living in unrelenting pain I won’t be able to recover from. Fear of bringing everyone else down with me.

I’ll fly across the world to a country I’ve never been to. Bungee jump, leap out of a plane. I’d do it all, but the minute

my heart and emotions get involved, I'm so paralyzed with fear I'm afraid I won't be able to move again.

I pick up my phone again and flick the screen back on.

Tap the button. Fill out the form. Do the damn thing.

My thumb hovers over the button, but before I can click it, there's a knock on the door.

That's totally a sign, right?

I turn my screen off and set my phone back on the counter, then slide off the stool and walk over to the door.

When I swing it open, I'm surprised to find Aaron standing there, a bag from Marion's in his hand.

"Hi," I say, trying to seem happily surprised and not what-the-fuck-are-you-doing-here surprised. Mostly because I'm not. Aaron and I haven't gotten to know each other all that well, but after what Rae said about their relationship during girls' night, he's been on my mind. I thought about reaching out, but again, I was a chickenshit. I guess the universe decided for me. "What are you doing here?"

He flashes a warm smile. "I thought you might need some comfort food."

Something about the food, the random visit, and the look on his face makes me arch a brow. "Did Miles send you?"

He laughs a little and shrugs. "One possessive asshole doing a favor for another."

I shake my head. “Neither of you are assholes.” I wave my hand. “Come on in.”

He follows me into the room, closing the door behind him and slipping off his shoes. I smile at that. The rule at Katie and Andy’s is that you take your shoes off in the entryway. They even have slippers you can wear around the house if you like. It’s something Miles wanted to do in our house as well, and it’s sweet that Aaron knows that.

“Every time I’m here, that view catches me,” he says, gazing out the wall of windows at the far side of the living room.

“Really? Even with your gorgeous country property?”

He walks over to the kitchen, setting the bag on the counter. “It’s different. Seeing the view of the town is nice. I’ve grown to love the quieter country life—mostly from living at the lake house at school—but that’s where I grew up.” He nods toward the window. “The amount of time I spent running around downtown with everyone. That’s what summer break was. We got to have an ’80s sort of childhood. As long as several of us were together and we stayed within a few blocks of home, we could be out until the streetlights came on. I loved that.”

“Sounds like a pretty great way to grow up.”

“What about you? Country, small town, or city?”

“Definitely no city. Fun to visit, not so fun to live in. Small town is nice, but I wouldn’t mind a house in the country one day.”

The words feel strange coming off my tongue. *One day*. Off in the future when I have my shit together. And I fix things with Miles. Because he's in that picture, too. Maybe another kid.

I realize I'm standing in the center of the kitchen and snap out of it.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" I ask, then I shake my head. "I don't know why I asked that. I'm sure you need to get home to Rae."

He smiles gently. "Rae and Sarah are having sister time tonight, which I'm fairly certain means they're sitting in bed eating sushi and cookie dough."

"Sounds right."

"I'd love to stay, but I don't want to take all your food." I laugh and throw the door to the refrigerator open. "Oh, wow."

"Yeah... Katie went a little overboard."

He walks over to me. "I can see that. I guess I didn't need to bring you food."

"If there's spicy chicken chowder and grilled cheese in that bag, you absolutely did."

He chuckles. "You'll find them both in there. Anything from here you want to go with it?"

I tilt my head, mentally going through everything in the fridge. "There's Caesar salad and maybe some chicken parm wouldn't hurt, either."

“Perfect. You sit down, I’ll warm things up.”

“I invited you to stay, not cater to me.”

He side-eyes me. “Too bad. Sit down at the counter and point out plates and bowls.”

“Only if you get two glasses and let me fill them with water first.” I nod toward the cabinet they’re in.

He pulls them out and hands them to me. I quickly fill them, then sit down at the kitchen counter while directing him to plates and bowls.

Once the food is warmed, he sits down as well, and I let out a happy moan when the soup hits my mouth. “So good,” I mumble.

“Marion’s is classic comfort food.”

“Food to heal the soul, right?” I need that about now.

“How are you doing?”

I lift one shoulder in a shrug. “I don’t know. Messy is my favorite word for it at the moment.”

“Been there.” He takes a bite of his chicken parm, and I open my mouth to speak but hesitate. I don’t want to overstep. “If you have something to say or ask me, go for it.”

“This might sound weird, but I’m glad you’re here. I wanted to talk to you, but I felt weird texting you, and since Miles is staying with you, I didn’t want to just show up—”

He puts his hand over mine, stopping my string of nonsense. “You can always text me. I’m here to help however I can.”

I swallow another bite of soup, then spin on my stool. “At girls’ night, Rae was talking about the hard times you two went through and your breakup. She mentioned you had a hard time letting her in when you were struggling.”

He sets his fork down and nods. “Yeah. You said messy was your favorite word. Well, I’ve been there. I was lost and hurting and didn’t know how to fix myself—or maybe didn’t want to figure it out. I pushed everyone I loved away because I was afraid of hurting them and thought they couldn’t help me. Or that I didn’t deserve their help. The worst of it was with Rae. I shut down with her and refused to talk to her about what was hurting me. Which ended up hurting us. I was angry, using drinking to cope. Not my proudest moments.”

“Yet here you are now. Married to Rae, and you two seem to have a strong, healthy relationship.”

“We do, but it took—and continues to take—work. We had to learn to trust each other. She had to stop running from me, and I had to let her in.”

“How did you do that?”

“I hit my personal rock bottom. I got blackout drunk at a party before midnight. Rae took me back to the dorm even though we weren’t together and sat with me while I threw up. I decided I couldn’t keep going like that. She asked me to talk to her about everything. To let her in—not for her, but for me. I almost said no, but in that moment, I had a choice. Keep going down that dark path and lose the people I loved along the way, or be brave enough to let her in. I thought it would hurt or

break me to finally face it all—and don't get me wrong, it was a hard conversation—but it helped. It brought more relief than I was expecting and gave me the courage to move forward. It's not easy. It takes a lot of humility and grace for yourself, but I'm grateful I did it. And I wish I would've found the strength to do it sooner.”

“Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“Of course. If I can use my mistakes to help someone else, I'm happy to do that. You're not alone in how you're feeling. The reason for your pain is personal, but the pain itself never is. We're all here for you, but only you can decide when you're ready to accept that help.”

I nod slowly, unsure of what to say. I'm not sure there's anything to say.

We both turn back to our food and eat in a comfortable silence until I feel a sharp, sudden pain.

“Ow,” I say, holding my stomach.

Aaron's eyes go wide and he leaps off his stool. “What is it? What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” I grumble. “Ah.”

“Whoa.” His eyes go wide as he watches a heel or maybe an elbow jab into the wall of my stomach and trails down a few inches before she spins away again, sending a ripple over that part of my stomach. “That's crazy.”

“Yeah. It feels... weird. But cool. And occasionally painful. Some extremity was right in my bladder. Oof. She's really

rolling in there. Do you want to feel?”

“Is that okay?”

“Yeah, here.” I take his hand and put it on my stomach where she’s doing somersaults.

“Wow. That’s crazy. So cool.”

He’s got a massive smile, and it’s clear how much he wants to have this with Rae.

He pulls his hand back and shakes his head.

“So, Rae says you two are officially trying now?”

“About to start, yeah. I’m nervous, but excited.”

“Well, I lucked into this one, but I’ll be sending good baby-making vibes your way,” I say with a laugh.

“Thanks.”

We finish our meal in a comfortable silence, and after indulging in some ice cream cake, he gets ready to go home.

“This was nice,” I say, feeling a little awkward now. It’s my first time hanging out one-on-one with any of the guys.

“It was. Like I said, let me know if you need anything. And I promise the only details I will report back to Miles are that you ate and drank.”

“I appreciate that, and the advice,” I say as he opens the front door.

He turns and wraps me in a hug. “No problem. Happy to help however I can.”

I smile as he lets me go. “Thanks, A.”

He laughs. “You called me ‘A.’ You’re officially one of us now.”

“Yeah, I think I am.”

He throws his hand up in a wave as he leaves, then I shut the door behind him and make my way into the living room, dropping onto the couch.

Now I have to find the strength to let them—more importantly, Miles—in.

I grab my phone and stare at the “let’s get started” button again.

Easier said than done.

Chapter Eighteen

Grace

Amelia

I PRESS THE NUMBER 1 on my phone, confirming my therapy appointment tomorrow night. I was hoping I'd get to have one before I see Miles for our baby appointment tomorrow, but I'm lucky I even got this appointment, given I only signed up late last night. I stared at my phone for a good ten minutes after Aaron left, then I finally picked the damn thing up and forced myself to fill out the form.

I got matched quickly, and the therapist happened to have a cancellation for tomorrow night, so I took it. I've been pandering in this space for too long and it's time to rip the bandage off instead of going at a snail's pace and pulling out one tiny hair at a time.

I don't know exactly what I'm going to say to Miles tomorrow, but I don't want things to go on how they've been. It's hard for me, and I've realized that some part of me sees being loved and cared for as weak. Which is ridiculous. There's no weakness in any of that, and if the advice I've been getting is truthful, it takes a hell of a lot of strength to recognize your walls and break them down. I'd gotten so used to having to be strong that I built a narrative for myself that handling things on my own was better. It meant I was fierce and capable.

As I sit alone on the floor of my closet, I know that's far from the truth. For the first time, I'm trying to handle things

alone and I feel weaker than ever. Maybe because I'm not handling it at all. Which is *why* I'm sitting on the floor of my closet. There are things I need to stare in the face, and I'm not waiting for a therapy appointment to do it. So I pull out the tote I've been avoiding for years. At least since my mother's diagnosis. While I occasionally pull out the totes with things that smell like them, this one is filled with memories. Pictures and other pieces of the life I had with them—one that feels so long ago now.

Popping the top off, I reach inside without looking, feeling around instead. The first thing I find is a trophy. It's from fifth grade when I won the statewide spelling bee. My dad spent weeks quizzing me on words. He'd pick random pages from the dictionary and have me spell words I'd never heard of that I've long since forgotten. Every night, he'd end with the funniest sounding word he could find and we'd end up in a fit of laughter. His laugh was pure joy. I rest my hand on my stomach. Maybe she'll have his laugh. I have my mother's shrill one. I wish I had his. That I could hear it one more time.

My stomach whirls at that thought. Maybe I can. Somewhere in this box is a USB with videos I took of him during his final months. I'd snuggle up on the couch with him and record videos of me asking him random questions. He'd smile for the camera and give me answers that ranged from funny to profound. On a few, my mother stuck her head in as well.

I'm not sure I'm ready to watch them yet, but I want to get there because I want to share them with my daughter, too. And

Miles. I think he and my dad would've gotten along well. He probably would've converted my dad into a baseball fan.

Would I have met Miles if I hadn't been through all this? Would I have ended up here? I don't like to think about life like that. As if there's some master plan and in order for me to meet the man I love, I had to lose so much. Any higher power that would do something like that is cruel.

I reach into the tote again, this time pulling out a photo album. It's from a trip we took to Gettysburg when I was fifteen. I'm a bit of a history nerd, and I found it absolutely fascinating. We even did a ghost walk while we were there. It was insanely fun. Smiling, I flip through the album, some tiny cracks in my heart healing rather than fracturing further.

I set it aside and pull out something else. Tears fill my eyes when I see it. The *Daddy's Girl* onesie like the one that made me sob at the baby shower. How was that less than a week ago? It was a beautiful day, but it was heart wrenching, too, and I'm mad about that. I feel like I missed out on so much joy. I don't want to miss out on more. I run my hand over the onesie then set it aside. I can't wait to dress our baby girl in that.

Leaning back against the wall, I close my eyes and rest my hands on my stomach. I want to be stronger for her. I want to be kind and loving and walk the delicate balance of being her best friend but still being her mom. I want to be her safe place. Like my mom was for me. Like Katie is.

I wipe away a couple of tears, then pull out something else. My breath catches when I realize what it is. A black velvet box. I flip it open and take a moment to look at their rings together. After my dad died, Mom kept his ring and wore it on a chain around her neck. When her behavior started changing, I took it and set it aside. When she got more forgetful and disoriented, I took her wedding ring and switched out for an anniversary ring my father had given her. She asked about it a couple of times, then forgot and accepted the anniversary ring as a wedding ring.

I kept it, thinking I might give it to my child one day. Before all this, I never really believed I'd fall for someone. I thought I could close my heart off and never form that kind of relationship. When love is involved, though, you can't truly close off your heart. I'm finally learning that.

I slip the beautiful white gold, diamond, and sapphire ring out and put it on my finger.

Now that I've found love, I don't want to keep this ring tucked away in a box. I've made mistakes, but I hope I get to wear it one day. To see Miles put it on my finger. He'd probably come up with an incredible proposal.

I want that. I want him. Us. This family we're starting. I'm filled with fear and pain, but I want him. All the beautiful pieces of me and all the ugly broken ones want him. I want to share this life with him—which I know means sharing my heart.

I still don't know what to say to him. I don't know how to apologize or explain or what I need, but I want to figure it out, and I think that's the most important thing.

Put in the work—that's what Katie said. Effort. Trust. Grace.

The grace is the hardest part. I don't have much of it for myself. I guess that's another thing to add to my therapy list.

Tomorrow, Miles and I can spend some time together after the appointment. I don't want to get into everything, but I want him to know how I'm feeling and what I want for our future, even if I'm still working out how to get there.

Miles

I cannot focus worth a shit today.

Probably because I can't stop thinking about Amelia. I saw her from a distance this morning and the desire to run over, kiss her, and beg her to let me in was so strong I almost made an idiot of myself in the middle of the lobby. Thankfully, my logic kicked in, but my brain has not stopped the Amelia thought train since.

We've barely talked this week, but she texted me last night to confirm I was coming to the appointment and she said she couldn't wait. I said I couldn't either. Then she said goodnight. It was simple, and I'm probably reading too much into it.

I'm probably reading it too much as well, since this is at least the tenth time today I've reread our exchange as if some new information will appear.

Sighing, I almost turn my phone screen off before realizing we hadn't discussed if we'd be going together or separately.

Me: Hey, we didn't talk about this last night, but is it okay if I drive you to the appointment?

The three little dots appear for a moment, then I get a reply.

My Girl: I was planning to drive myself. We'd just have to come back here so I could get my car afterward anyway.

Me: Yes, but that's still less wasted gas.

My Girl: So your concerns are purely environmental?

I stare at my phone for a moment. I don't know how the fuck to respond to that. Mostly because I'm not sure if she's flirting or being sassy or completely detached. Fuck texting. I push out of my chair and walk out of my office, down and around a couple of hallways until I get to hers. Reaching for the door, I force a deep breath, not wanting to walk in there unhinged or acting like a needy asshole. I don't know what the fuck I am at this point, so I'm trying to temper every emotion and be calm, which is not fucking easy with her holding my heart in her hands and squeezing it whenever she feels like it.

I knock quickly, then stick my head in. "Hey."

"Hi," she says, eyebrows going up.

I stare at her for a moment and she tilts her head.

Say something, jackass.

"I hate texting. I can't read your tone."

She taps her thumb on her desk, then looks down. "I'm not sure what my tone was, honestly. But if you want to drive me, that's fine."

"Okay. We can pick up your car after, then we can grab takeout if you want."

She swallows and looks away from me again. "Yeah. That would be... good."

"Great," I say, voice way too tight. I hate this. Feeling uncomfortable with her makes me want to rip my skin off.

“Well, I need to get a bit more work done before we go. I’ll meet you at your office when it’s time?”

“Sure. See you then.” The sound of my voice makes me want to punch myself in the face.

She nods and turns to her computer, and I spin around and stalk out the door, probably looking as much like a psycho as I feel. I don’t know how to do this shit. I don’t like drama. I don’t like uncertainty. Clear communication is how I was raised and this in-between zone is driving me nuts. It’s also playing with my anxiety. The inability to fix this is eating away at me. I wish my appointment with the psychiatrist was sooner. Now that I’ve finally accepted the fact that I can’t manage this on my own, I feel like I’m treading water, waiting for the lifeboat to come, and hoping I can keep my head up and not drown before it does.

Fuck.

I walk back into my office, shutting the door behind me, and drop into my office chair. After rubbing my face a few times, I unlock my computer and get back to the project I was working on, focusing my thoughts on something I can actually fix.



I’m knee deep in creating a new business plan for a small business that hasn’t seen the growth they’d like. I won’t be meeting with them for another couple of weeks, but when I get focused on something, I like to stay in it for as long as I can. It keeps me productive. It’s the only thing that’s kept me going.

Kept my mind off Amelia. Except not really because she's always there in the back of my mind. I'm always worrying about her. Wondering if she needs anything, if she's drinking enough, if she's eaten. *Has she eaten?*

I lift my phone to call her office like the crazy person I am, but before I can, the door to my office flies open. Looking up, I see Amelia. Her eyes meet mine, then she breaks down sobbing.

I leap out of my chair and cross the room to her in two huge steps, wrapping my arms around her.

“What's wrong?”

“The nursing home called. My mom... they think she—she had a stroke.”

Holy shit.

**Miles and Amelia's story continues in
Book Eight, [*Future Like This*](#)**

A Note from Bethany

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you loved the beginning of Miles's and Amelia's love story. I can't wait for you to see what's in store for them as they make their way to a happily ever after in [Future Like This](#) (and you might just get a peek at Mackenzie's love story too!).

Need more Miles and Amelia? Grab some sweet and sexy bonus scenes from their story [here](#) (or on my website).

Want to know about Dani and Jesse's frenemies to lovers love story? Check out [The Forever Fight](#) on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

P.S. If you need more from Ida, check out the [Freaking Love](#) and [Ida Romance](#) series.

P.P.S. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review. Reviews, especially on Amazon, help indie authors like me get more readers.

Thanks again for reading!

XO

Bethany

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The Music of Family Like This

YOU CAN FIND THE FAMILY LIKE THIS PLAYLIST ON [SPOTIFY](#)

- Catch- Brett Young
- cowboy like me- Taylor Swift
- All In- Lifehouse
- Travelling Alone- Passenger
- arms- Christina Perri
- Made That Way- Jordan Davis
- Spin You Around- Morgan Wallen
- Colorblind- Rachel Grae
- Leave You Alone- Kane Brown
- Mess Is Mine- Vance Joy
- Be Like That- 3 Doors Down
- 1000 reasons- Caleb Hearn
- Somebody Like That- Tenille Arts
- Tell You I Love You- BANNERS
- Forever Young- Rhiannon Giddens, Iron & Wine

- Kids- Ben Rector
- Before You- David J
- Make You Feel My Love- Adele
- My Person (Wedding Version)- Spencer Crandall
- Dance With Me- Phillip Phillips
- Songbird (2004 Remaster)- Fleetwood Mac
- Walking The Wire- Imagine Dragons
- ocean eyes- Billie Eilish
- human- Christina Perri
- My Life- Imagine Dragons
- right where you left me- Taylor Swift
- I'll Be Waiting-Cian Ducrot
- The Night We Met- Colin & Caroline, Hope Morgan
- The Good Ones (Wedding Version)- Gabby Barrett
- peace- Taylor Swift
- Water Under the Bridge- Adele
- I Shall Believe- Sheryl Crow

About the Author

Bethany Monaco Smith is a writer-mom. When she's not busy hanging with her boys, she's writing beautifully messy love stories.

She loves happily-ever-afters and cries at every emotional moment, whether reading, writing, or watching. When she's not mom-ing or writing, you can find her binge-reading on Kindle Unlimited, supporting fellow indie authors, and having sushi dates with her SIL. Bethany survives on coffee, rewatching the same TV shows over and over, and her KU subscription. She lives in the Southern Tier of NY with her husband and two sons.

For more about Bethany and what she's working on, follow along on [Instagram](#) or on her website, bethanymonacosmith.com. Stay in touch by joining Bethany's exclusive Facebook group, [Bethany's Book Besties](#) & signing up for her [newsletter](#).

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