



FRESHMAN!

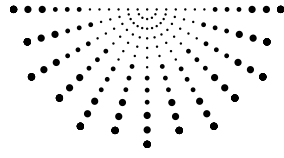
Lessons in

LOVE

BACK IN THE DAY SERIES

AVA MONROE

LESSONS IN LOVE



AVA MONROE


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Ready For Your Next Reunion?

The Back In The Day Series

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Also by Ava Monroe

INTRODUCTION

My Monster Became My Hero.

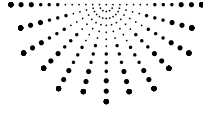
Delaney:

Ten years ago, the boy I loved took my virginity, then vanished without a trace the next morning. It destroyed me. Now he's back, demanding another chance.

Lachlan:

Ten years ago, I walked away from the girl who owned my heart to keep her safe—from me and the life I was destined for. Now that she's dating a bigger monster than me, nothing will stop me from making her mine. Forever.

PROLOGUE



LACHLAN

Ten Years Ago

“*F*uck.”

My voice rings out in the darkness, the still air alight with fireflies dancing around us. The warm, summer evening was the perfect backdrop to our first date—a picnic in the meadow behind her house. When I arrived, with a basket full of food I bribed the housekeeper to make for us, I never imagined the evening would turn out this way.

I mean, sure, I’d hoped it might end with me getting a taste of her tight little cunt, or maybe with her on her knees, my throbbing cock between her lips. I’m a guy, after all. But this...this is beyond my wildest dreams.

Delaney Hawthorne.

An enigma of shy innocence and feisty challenges—and no one is good enough for her. Not even me—*especially* me. But that doesn’t stop me from wanting everything from her.

Tonight, after we ate the cold fried chicken, she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek we’d spread across the ground. It was a fumbling kiss and we laughed about it afterward. I know she’s inexperienced, because I’ve watched her in the halls and after school. She’s gone on a few first dates, but she’s never made it to a second date, thanks to yours truly. A quick little chat and a mention of my family quickly fixes the problem and keeps her safe.

We lay back on the blanket—barely touching—looking at the stars and talking softly about our plans for the future. Graduation is tomorrow and Delaney’s planning to stay local. She wants the dorm experience—who can blame her—but she doesn’t want to leave her parents.

“What about you?” she whispers, moving her head to nudge my shoulder. “Where is the great Lachlan Romero going to learn to take over the world?”

I chuckle darkly, not wanting to admit to just how close to the truth her words hit. “I’m staying here, too. Family business will become my full-time gig, so no college for me. At least not for right now.”

“Well then,” she murmurs, moving to straddle me, her hot pussy grinding down onto my hard dick. “I’ll be here... you’ll be here... Might as well make the most of...!” Her lips descend on mine, devouring me hungrily, her tongue lapping awkwardly at my mouth, but there’s no sense of hesitation as she writhes above me, her heat seeping through our clothing and stoking my desire.

“Wait, Delaney... wait,” I pant, pushing back on her gently, when all I really want to do is grab her, strip her, and hold her open for me. “Slow down, baby. This is a marathon—not a sprint. I want to take my time with you.”

She groans, running her sexy red nails over my heaving chest.

“That’s fine—whatever. But I want you, Lachlan. I *need* you. Don’t make me wait.”

One of my hands skims over her side, down to her hip, holding her in place above me, loving the feel of her solid, curvy body on my own, but desperate to feel her beneath me. The other cups her jaw, bringing her toward my hungry mouth, instructing her on how to kiss me properly, our tongues slowly, sensually, dancing together.

My hips slowly thrust up into her, the pressure making us both groan in pleasure. When I can’t take it anymore, I flip us, supporting my weight on one elbow, giving myself some room

to thrust. Her legs open automatically, moving to wrap around my waist, pulling me into her, torturing me with the promise of what's to come.

Her teeth nip my bottom lip and she chuckles when I moan, enjoying the line of pleasure and pain more than I thought I would. Her hands roam my shoulders, pulling at the t-shirt I'm wearing. "Off," she mutters against my lips, pulling harder and groaning in frustration.

I pull back just enough to give me room to remove my shirt, chuckling when she growls in frustration, leaning up to chase my lips. "Patience, Laney," I say, gripping the fabric at the back of my neck and tugging it from my body with one hand, then throwing it blindly to the side.

Before I can say anything, she lifts her shirt off, tossing it over her head, leaving her in shorts and a delicate pink lace bra that just barely contains her pillowy breasts. I suck in a breath, admiring her curves before lowering my head to her cleavage, inhaling deeply, and kissing each glorious breast. Flicking the clasp open and groaning as her tits spill out, the dusty-pink nipples pebbled and ready for my tongue, I mutter a prayer, thanking every deity I can think of for the perfection of Delaney Hawthorne.

I give each nipple attention, alternating between tonguing and blowing cool breath on them, committing each moan and whimper Delaney makes to memory. I kiss my way down her body, enjoying her trembling muscles as my lips slowly skate across each one. "This is enough for me, sweetheart," I whisper when I come to the waistband of her shorts. "If you're not ready..."

"I am!" she whisper-yells, lifting her hips as her hands open the button that separates me from the thing I desire more than my next breath. She pushes them down, wiggling her hips to help peel the tight fabric from her body. I use one hand to help her, impatience getting the better of me. Finally, she's in sheer panties the same pink lace as her bra. *She wanted something to happen tonight.*

I lean forward, settling myself between her splayed thighs, breathing deeply, inhaling her musky sweet scent. I can't bite back the groan—she's going to be fucking delicious, an addiction just for me. I kiss up her thigh, nipping gently when I reach the apex, needing to mark her, but unwilling to taint her perfect skin.

Unable to resist any longer, I reach up, ripping the side of her panties, unwilling to have anything separating us now that I know what awaits me. She gasps. I reach over, grab the other side and rip it, too. "I'll buy you another pair—ten pairs—a hundred!" I dive down, my tongue dipping into her dripping entrance, her flavor exploding in my mouth, and I see stars.

"God, you're delicious," I groan against her folds, needing everything she'll give me. Dragging my tongue up to her clit, I circle it. Her hips buck against my face with innocent, uncoordinated movements. Wrapping my arms around her hips, I pull her tighter to me, keeping her movements restrained so I can torture her with pleasure.

"Lachlan!" Her delirious moans echo around the meadow, the husky sound music to my ears.

I quicken my pace, flicking my tongue around her clit, over it with just the tiniest bit of pressure, before circling it again. Her hips fight my hold for control, but her small body is no match for my hard-earned muscles.

I look up at her, savoring her taste on my tongue, watching her back arch, her hands kneading her breasts, her fingers rolling her nipples. I know she's ready, but she's waiting for something. For my command. "Come for me, Delaney," I growl against her core. A wave of delicious slick coats my tongue, but I know she's got more to give me. "I said—*come* for me. *Now.*" I push my middle finger into her tight pussy, groaning as I feel it clench and pulsate around me at my demand.

I find her G-spot, massaging it as my lips lock around her clit, sucking hard. She cries out, coating my hand in her release, finally giving me what I need. I withdraw my finger,

lapping at her, cleaning her up, giving her a moment to recover before the real fun begins.

I get to my knees, leaning back, grinning as she looks up at me, her pupils blown from lust. “That—that was...” she laughs, covering her eyes with her forearm. “Oh my god, I can’t believe we just did that!”

I watch her, as I’ve done so many times, but I’ve never seen her as carefree—happy—as she is right now. I’d give anything to see that look on her face every day for the rest of my life.

“Can I see you?” she asks, sitting up, leaning over and wrapping her arms around her knees to inspect my jeans.

My cock is straining against the zipper, so fucking hard for her I’d be surprised if there’s not a permanent pattern in my skin.

Her eyes never leave me as I stand, slowly dragging the zipper down before pulling them down my legs along with my boxers, drawing out our torture despite my desperation to be skin to skin with the woman of my dreams. The heat in her gaze is intoxicating, calling me back down to her. I kick my clothes away, falling back to the blanket and trapping her beneath my body.

Her legs open, cradling me between her thighs, holding me to her as she pulls me down for another kiss. The head of my cock brushes her wet folds, sliding between them easily, nudging her clit.

“Condom,” I murmur against her lips, pulling back, ready to find my jeans and the condom I always carry in my wallet.

“I’m on the pill,” she says, pulling me back to her.

My indecision makes me hesitate briefly. I can’t afford to mess up—my life is too dangerous for a wife, let alone a child.

“Lachlan,” she moans, thrusting up into me as her lips ravage mine.

Unable to deny myself her sweet, innocent heat any longer, I move into position.

“This is going to hurt for just a minute, baby,” I say, capturing her lips with mine.

Sinking the first inch into Delaney’s tight, wet heat is heaven—possessing her is the only thing I’ve dreamt about for the past year. Now that it’s finally happening, I’m afraid that I’m not going to last long.

I deepen the kiss, stilling my movements, letting her get accustomed to my size, and praying it gives me a minute to compose myself. She’s not my first, but she’s the first one that counts as far as I’m concerned—the first one who matters.

Pulling back, I look down into her dark-brown eyes, getting lost in the love I see there, because that’s what it is—love—and I know I’m in trouble. A tear escapes from the corner, running down her delicate cheek and I lean forward, licking it.

“I’m gonna move now, okay, sweetheart?”

She nods, moving her hips slightly to adjust the angle.

“If you need me to stop... *shit*,” I mutter, hoping it doesn’t come to that, because I don’t know if I’ll be able to once I’m moving inside her. “If you need me to stop, I’ll stop.” She nods again. “I need the words, Delaney.” My own words sound like a grimace, the torture taking all of my concentration.

“Yes, Lachlan. I need you. Now. *Please*.” She’s practically begging now, and my woman will never have to beg me for anything. Not tonight.

I withdraw until just the tip is inside her, punching my hips forward quickly and plunging inside her to the hilt. She gasps, biting my lip, her limbs tightening around me, but she doesn’t cry out. I withdraw again, moving shallowly, teaching her the rhythm, deepening my thrusts little by little until she’s screaming my name, arching her back and driving her hips up to meet me.

I've managed to keep myself from falling over the edge only by reciting the names of saints I can remember from primary school and reminding myself that it's her first time and I'd rather die than not make it good for her.

I feel her pussy fluttering around my shaft, squeezing me tightly until I can't breathe. "Fuck, baby, I'm so fucking close," I groan, kissing her again, unable to deny myself the pleasure of her tongue.

"Fuck me, Lachlan," she moans, tightening her arms around my neck, keeping me close. "I need to come." The knowledge that my girl needs something from me is all it takes for me to thrust harder, putting all my weight on one forearm to snake the other hand between our bodies, rubbing her clit furiously, catapulting us both over the edge.

My cock pulses, releasing my pent-up seed deep inside her. A small part of me wishes she wasn't on the pill—that my child could already be growing inside her as she walks across the stage tomorrow. I quickly dismiss the fantasy, knowing if anything happens to her because of me, I'll never forgive myself.

We lie like that—a tangled pile of limbs—panting and enjoying the afterglow until the night breeze turns cool and she begins to shiver in my arms. I clean her up as best I can, before kissing her goodnight and walking her to her back door.

"Stay with me?" she asks shyly, looking up at me from under her thick lashes.

"I would love to, baby, but I have to get back. I've been gone too long already," I say, taking her in my arms and pulling her against my body, needing to feel her for just another moment. Kissing her briefly—afraid I'll get carried away and take her up on her offer and never leave—I force myself to step back, letting the cool air wash over me, restoring my common sense.

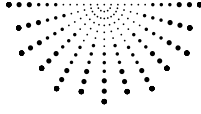
I walk away, feeling her eyes tracking my every movement as I make it to my car. I relive the best night of my life as I drive away, bitter at the way things have to be. If it wasn't for

certain circumstances beyond my control—namely *my family*—Delaney Hawthorne would be mine. Forever.

As I lie in bed, fighting sleep, I wonder if it'd be worth it to give it all up—for her. Could I walk away from the only home I've ever known? The people who love me unconditionally, but whose very love endangers the future I crave?

It may make me a monster, doing what I did, knowing that we could only ever have tonight, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat—damning myself to hell—for one more night in her arms.

ONE



DELANEY

Present Day

*M*y phone rings as I'm rushing out the door to my car and I groan in defeat. I know the ringtone and I'm well aware of the consequences for not answering—I've experienced them enough to know what my night holds—anniversary be damned.

The song starts again just as I make it to the car, hastily digging through my unorganized purse for my keys, mashing the stubborn unlock button with my thumb as I juggle everything in my arms. As the most recently appointed junior partner at Tyson, Stillwater, & Burke, I often work long hours at the office, and, more nights than not, I take home rolls of blueprints.

After graduation, with a collection of majors and minors, I moved from job to job, never quite fitting in. When my parents remodeled their house, they asked for my help since I was between jobs. One of my mom's friends stopped by and was impressed. After a long discussion, she offered me an entry-level position with her interior design firm, providing I pursued a formal education in the field.

I graduated summa cum laude with a masters in interior design three years ago and I haven't looked back. During college and grad school, I was too busy to bother with relationships. As far as I was concerned, guys only wanted one

thing, and it was one of the things I wasn't willing to give them.

The tubes spill out of my arms as I reach for the door handle, and I curse as they bounce and roll across the wet parking lot. Opening the door, I dump my purse out, quickly locating my ringing phone. I scoop it up and answer.

"Hi, honey," I say placatingly, hearing the frustrated sigh through the line. "Sorry, my phone was at the bottom of my purse and my arms were full." I wince. Myles doesn't like it when I bring work home with me—he says it takes my attention away from him, where it should be, even though I never glance at work until he's fast asleep.

"Get home now," he demands, forgoing any greeting. "Jonas and his wife are coming over for dinner. You've got less than an hour to throw something *presentable* together," he sneers, hanging up with no further discussion.

Great. Jonas and Sarah—*such a hard name to remember, Myles*—are the last thing I need to deal with tonight. The firm just got hired for a new construction, hence the blueprints, and I've been assigned to head one of the teams working on it.

I pick up the rolls from the ground, glad I took the time to put them back into the plastic sleeves, and toss them gently into the back seat of my car. Slamming the door in frustration, hard enough to rock the car on its tires, I open the driver's door and sit behind the wheel, laying my head on it and trying to figure out where my life took a wrong turn.

Most days with Myles are great, but when he has a rough day, his mood swings are more noticeable. His law firm hired my firm for a remodel a year ago and I was his point of contact, and the connection was undeniable. The day we finished, he whisked me away for a date in New York City. I'd never dated a sophisticated man—or any man, really—and I was immediately swept off my feet and under his spell.

My parents loved him, of course. Everyone loves Myles Drake. He's got that easy charm that reduces women between the ages of eighteen and ninety-nine to giggling schoolgirls. He won me over, made me feel like I was the only one in the

room, no matter where we were. I let myself get swept up in the magic of an older, successful man who wanted nothing but to spoil me.

Before we'd been together for three months I was moved into his penthouse, wanting nothing more than his happiness. He takes good care of me—I want for nothing, and he ensures I have the latest top-of-the-line everything. Which would be great...if I gave a shit about material things.

Putting the car in drive, I head home, not looking forward to an exhausting evening of entertaining Sarah while Myles and Jonas talk business in his *man cave*.

When I arrive, the elevator carries me quickly to the top floor. The door opens as I step out and Myles stands there, watching me wrestle with the tubes. *At least I won't have to figure out how to unlock the door without dropping everything again.*

“They'll be here in thirty-seven minutes.”

I wait to roll my eyes until I've walked past him, because Myles doesn't tolerate disrespect.

“I wasn't sure when you'd get here, so I went ahead and ordered in.”

“Thank you, honey,” I say meekly, already trying to figure out what this gesture of his will cost me. “How was your day?” I move the blueprints onto my desk in the corner, making sure they're out of the way. “You had to go to court, right?”

“Yes,” he grits out. “Fucking mistrial. Judge Franklin said something about jury tampering.” He walks over to the bar, pouring himself a glass of scotch before continuing. “I have it on good authority my guy would've walked. So this just fucked up my case and we'll have to do it all over again.”

I nod. Honestly, I couldn't care less about his cases. There's a reason I didn't go to law school. I move into the kitchen, grabbing plates and flatware, moving them to the table. Myles follows me, telling me all about his case, winding himself up for a fight.

A knock on the door distracts him and he strides over to answer it, throwing cash at the timid delivery boy and slamming the door in his face.

“What did you order?” I ask, opening the bags he sets on the table, pulling the dishes out to serve when company arrives.

“Montoya’s,” he says distractedly, moving to pour himself another drink. He knows it’s my favorite restaurant, and we always go there for special occasions. *Maybe he’s got something planned?* “I got you the shrimp fajitas, as usual.”

“Sounds delicious. Thank you.” I feel his presence behind me, the warm press of him against my back. He leans into me, drawing my dark hair over one shoulder, his nose running up the column of my neck as he kisses me gently in the spot that always makes me wild for him. “Do we have time?” I ask, turning and winding my arms around his neck to pull him down for a kiss.

Just as he pulls me against him, there’s another knock at the door and it opens. “Get a room, you two!” Jonas is a loud, obnoxious meathead who would be more at home on frat row than the downtown Miami law office he and Myles own, but despite his appearance and attitude, he’s one of the top lawyers in the city.

“Hey, guys,” I greet, pulling away from Myles, yelping when he slaps my ass playfully. Sarah and I sit across from each other, eating silently, exchanging a few silent smiles, as the guys bicker good-naturedly across the table until everything is gone.

“Dominican Republic?” Jonas whistles. “Those beaches are top notch, man. Enjoy.”

I look at Myles, my eyebrows drawn together, wondering what they’re talking about.

“Are you going for a case?” I ask, trying to seem interested.

Jonas snickers.

“No. We’re going. One month from tomorrow. I’ve already cleared it with your boss. Happy anniversary, baby.”

“Seriously?” I squeal, jumping up from my seat and moving around the table to hug him. Myles pulls me down into his lap, kissing me deeply, not giving two fucks that we have company.

“Seriously. I couldn’t make the time until then, so it’ll be a little late, but better late than never, right?” He grins and it makes him look far younger than his thirty-six years. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jonas stand, motioning for Sarah.

“Well, buddy, we’re gonna get out of your hair. Looks like you have some celebrating to do. Don’t throw your back out. No calling in sick—we have lots of work to do tomorrow.” Without another word, they walk to the door, leaving Myles and me to celebrate one year together.

After celebrating for several hours, I leave Myles snoring loudly in our bedroom, moving to my cluttered desk in the small alcove of the living room. The blueprints sit there, calling for my attention, but I can’t focus right now. I grab my laptop, taking it with me to the couch, and settling in to skim social media.

Looking at trending interior designs—shuddering internally at the dizzying color and pattern combinations that influencers are raving about this season—I hear a ding. Opening Facebook in a new tab, I grin when I see my best friend’s name highlighted with an unread message.

Aria left for college in England after we graduated high school. Though we always kept in touch—she’d come home to visit her parents and I even visited her once during my spring break—we didn’t have a lot of time together until she moved back home to accept a professorship three years ago.

Aria: OMG girl, you’ll never guess who I just saw!

Delaney: Tom Cruise?

Delaney: David Harbour?

Delaney: No, wait... Colin Farrell. No way you get *that* excited over someone who isn't a sexy Irishman.

Aria: Better. Or worse, depending on how you take it, I guess.

Delaney: That's not ominous at all, Ari.

Aria: Lachlan Romero!

My heart sinks reading his name, and it takes me a minute to respond.

Aria: Dells? You there?

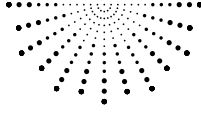
Delaney: Yeah. I'm here. Wow. I haven't thought about him in...

Aria: Yeah...

Aria: I wonder what he's doing back in town.

I don't respond—can't—and we silently agree to let it drop, changing the subject to her woefully unprepared students and my upcoming trip to the Dominican Republic, all the while, memories of that night run through my head.

TWO



DELANEY

The Ericson building is in an up-and-coming part of Miami, down by the docks. Until a few years ago, it was dodgy, but gentrification has revitalized the area and made it a desirable location. Todd Ericson, the man responsible for the majority of the restoration, has decided to leave his mark on the docks—now known as New Hope Wharf—by erecting a towering office complex that will forever change the city skyline.

I've been down here several times over the last few months, still always on guard as I weave between dilapidated buildings undergoing renovation and new construction, to make my way to the site.

There are a few old dock buildings that still receive cargo from time to time, the owner refusing to sell to developers. The family who owns those buildings has long held power in the seedy underbelly of the city, operating with questionable morals and actions, their exploits used as a cautionary tale to keep the local children in line.

My heart rate spikes for a different reason when I think of that family—heartbreak. The Romeros—Lachlan's family—have been here for years, and I knew all the stories surrounding them before I even met Lachlan. Despite knowing what I did about his family, I couldn't stay away. I wanted him. He was that bad boy with a sweet spot. He walked me quietly from class to class, but never tried to take it too far.

After a bad date or two, he was the shoulder I cried on. I'd say we were friends, but according to *everyone*, Lachlan

Romero didn't *do* friends. Especially *girl* friends.

Senior year, I was prepared for anything but Lachlan Romero coming into my life full force. I felt eyes on me—protective rather than threatening. He'd drive me home from school, leaving me at the end of the sidewalk, but never walk me up to the house.

Then something changed. I went to the prom with Chad Wilson—the Chad Wilson—the guy everyone loved. I loved him too—right up until he got drunk on the spiked punch, threw up on my dress, and tried to get me to leave, with him behind the wheel.

Thankfully, Lachlan was there to intervene. He escorted me to his car, opening the door and helping me in, before he rounded the hood, got behind the wheel, and took me to his place to clean up so my parents wouldn't smell alcohol on me—even though I hadn't had a drop.

We talked all night. His t-shirt and sweatpants were way too big for me, but I felt safe in them, cocooned in his woodsy scent. Again he tucked me into his car, drove me slowly across town to my house, and this time, came around the front of the car to open my door and actually walked me up to the front porch.

"I had a good time tonight," I said softly. "You know, after you... saved me."

He just nodded, standing in front of me, almost as if he was waiting for something.

Without thinking about it, I moved toward him, rising on my tiptoes and kissing his cheek delicately. "Well, goodnight."

With that, I turned around and dashed into the house.

The following Monday, everyone at school knew about what happened, and things shifted for me. Lachlan wasn't just my silent bodyguard—he actually spoke to me, teased me, *touched* me. I quickly grew to depend on this new type of interaction. I had friends, but something about what was developing with Lachlan was...*more*.

Then he asked me out. And my world was transformed. Before he shattered my heart and left me alone and bleeding. Left me trying to pick up the pieces and move on.

Wolf whistles from the construction crew nearby chase away the painful nostalgia gripping my heart. I turn, giving them a saucy smile and calling “you wish” over my shoulder as I walk into the newly renovated office suite we’re using as a base of operations.

I spend most of the day walking members of my design team through each aspect of the project. We’ve gotten final approval and allocations, so now the fun part begins. We’ll be working on spaces as the new construction and renovations are completed, so I’ll be spending most of my time down here rather than in the stuffy—but perfectly decorated—office.

I’ve been working down at the wharf for a full week and the changes are already staggering. My team is a well-oiled machine, moving between projects seamlessly. We’ve only had one small snafu, for which I’m eternally grateful. One of the design assistants tripped over a hammer that was left lying around when the construction crew left for lunch. Thankfully, an apology and some ibuprofen got us back on track quickly.

Leaving from the wharf instead of the office at the end of the day is an entirely different experience. There’s no parking near the site—only construction and delivery vehicles are allowed—so my Lexus, my six month anniversary gift from Myles, is in a small parking garage at the edge of the neighborhood.

Thunder rumbles in the sky, reverberating off the buildings as I make my way to the garage, hoping I make it inside before the forecasted rain arrives. Walking faster, grateful for the boots I’m required to wear to the site rather than the heels I wear at the office, I feel fat drops hit my head just as I see the stairwell door up ahead.

My phone dings with a notification and I can’t stifle the groan that escapes. *Myles always has the worst timing.* The sky opens up just as I open the door, dashing inside, narrowly

avoiding the deluge. I grab my phone from my purse as I start walking up the three flights of stairs, cursing the broken elevator as my quads burn.

Myles: We need milk.

I roll my eyes, locking my phone before I respond with what I *really* want to say.

It dings again. And again.

Myles: And coffee.

Myles: And bananas.

I bite back a bitter curse. *Has he forgotten he pays someone for this shit?*

Delaney: Okay. I'll stop by the store on my way home.

Myles: You haven't left yet?

Myles: Where are you, Delaney?

Myles: Who are you with?

Not for the first time, his barrage of questions seems slightly controlling. The first time this issue arose, I confronted him. He swore he just wanted to make sure I was safe. His explanation made me feel safe and protected—cherished. But the more it happens, the less I feel that way—now it just feels stifling.

Delaney: No one. I'm just leaving the site. I'll be home soon. Love you.

Myles: See you in twenty minutes.

I wince, starting my car. There it is again, that feeling of being kept. Plugging my phone into the sound system, I crank up the volume and sing at the top of my lungs to my nineties playlist, laughing when I merge into the busy after-work traffic and people give me odd looks. Myles hates my music, preferring the stuffy tunes one would find on a call center hold line.

The first time he rode with me and I turned on my music, he was appalled—his eyes wide, mouth dropped open, and he

actually ducked in embarrassment when I started dancing behind the wheel. Since then, anytime we go somewhere, he drives.

Horns blare as I change lanes and pull into the parking lot. I wave politely, receiving a middle finger in return, despite having properly indicated my intention with my blinker. Every time it rains, people act like they've never driven a vehicle.

Putting the incident out of my mind, I fumble behind the seat for the umbrella Myles put there for me. I get ahead of myself, pressing the button before I open the door and sputter curses as I fight with it. The rain has let up, slightly, and I make a mad dash for the sliding door, shaking the droplets off the umbrella and folding it up.

Deciding it's not worth grabbing a cart since I'm only here for a few items, I start in the bakery, my nose going into overdrive with all of the delicious aromas. I pass the deli, impulsively grabbing a rotisserie chicken, before doubling back to get a cart in case anything else calls to me.

After picking up the items Myles needs I text him just to make sure he doesn't want anything else.

Delaney: I've got the stuff you want. Need anything else before I head home?

I wait for a few minutes to see if he responds, browsing the greeting cards and laughing at some of the cheekier birthday messages. When I haven't heard anything from him after several minutes, I move to stand in line, loading my—more than a few—items onto the conveyor. The cashier makes small talk and I flounce off with a smile, excited to head home and make dinner.

I just close the trunk when my phone dings. *Fuck*. I briefly contemplate pretending I didn't hear it until I'm home, but I groan, knowing it'll be easier to just deal with it now.

Myles: Consuela got the wrong Shampoo. The only store that has it is the one on Bradley.

My teeth clench, grinding in frustration. His office is less than three blocks from the store he's talking about, but at least

twenty minutes—forty with traffic—from the penthouse.

Delaney: Do you need it today?

Myles: ...

Breathing deeply, I get back into my car, preparing to drive across town for a bottle of freaking shampoo. Every store has the brand he uses, but apparently only one store carries the right scent. *And they call us high maintenance? Ha!*

It took me forty-five minutes to get to the right store and another ten once I was inside to locate the right fragrance, at the very back of the lowest shelf. *Of course.* I check out, giving the cashier a tight smile, wishing her a good night, and grab the bag.

The automatic doors part slowly, and I'm just ready for the day to be over. When they're finally open enough for me to walk through, I move forward, coming to a sudden stop when I slam into a wall of hard muscle.

Hands come up to hold onto my arms, steadying me, but I drop the bag I was holding, cursing as the contents spill onto the floor.

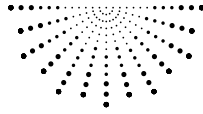
"Ma'am, are you alright?" an employee asks, coming to check on us.

I'm still dazed, but look up to answer, catching a familiar face out of the corner of my eye.

"You!" I hiss, pulling out of his grasp. "Don't touch me." I step back and his hands fall to his sides.

"Hey, Delaney." That voice—it hasn't changed at all.

THREE



LACHLAN

The last thing I expected at the end of the day was to run into Delaney Hawthorne. Of course, I know she's in town, and there's always a possibility I'll see her around, but I've perfected the art of staying away from her.

Regret cuts me like a knife. It's been ten years. I made a choice—the only one I could make—and it's haunted me every day since. I've been gone, but I haven't been far from her, and she's never out of my mind.

Staying hidden in the seedy underbelly of the city is second nature when your family's history is woven into its tapestry. My grandfather, Alejandro, escaped Cuba in the sixties before everything went to shit. He stowed away on a cargo ship transporting cars to Miami.

According to legend, he hid inside one for the entire journey. When the ship reached Fascell Port, he waited until nightfall to sneak off undetected. Noticing the minimal security, he hatched a plan. To avoid suspicion, he got a job on the security team and, using his charm, won them to his side. To this day, his security business has allowed our family to operate in the shadows, avoiding law enforcement.

“Lachlan,” she spits, glaring at me and taking another step back, crossing her arms over her chest defensively. It's not the reaction I'd hoped for when we finally saw each other again, but I also can't say that I'm surprised. Delaney has every right to be pissed at me—and it seems she's still holding onto that anger.

“I’ll just clean this up and grab you another bottle of...” I wave the kid away.

“We’ll be over at the coffee shop,” I say dismissively, holding an arm out to usher Delaney ahead of me.

She closes her eyes, breathing deeply before moving. “Oh, fine.”

I grin, relishing the challenge she’s just set.

She places her order, grabbing cash from her wallet to pay. I tack on my order, handing my card over with a charming smile no woman yet has been able to deny. *Except, apparently, Delaney Hawthorne.* She glares up at me, tossing the large bill into the tip jar, to the delight of the flustered barista.

She marches off, grabbing a small table on the periphery of the cafe section. She’s watching the shoppers milling around, looking anywhere but at me as I sit down across from her.

I give her a moment, just sitting and watching her. It kills me to think of how I broke her heart ten years ago. What she doesn’t know—couldn’t know—is that I broke my own heart that night, too. It’s just another in a long line of sacrifices my family has made to survive. I couldn’t involve Delaney in the danger and questionable activities that follow us, though I have no doubt she would’ve come willingly, despite everything.

“So...” I start, waiting for her to look at me. I see her jaw clench, but finally she looks up, locking eyes with me. Fire burns inside of her as she watches me, waiting to see what I’ll say.

“How have you been, Laney?” I wince when I use her nickname.

“Don’t you *dare*,” she hisses quietly. “You don’t get to call me that. Not anymore.”

I nod. I’ll take every ounce of vitriol she has for me. To her, I was a coward who took her virginity and just disappeared without a trace.

“I’m sorry.”

“Too little, too late, Lachlan. Ten. Fucking. Years.” She snorts sarcastically. Even now she’s stunning—she’s aged, but it only enhances her appearance.

“You have every right to hate me,” I start, ready to beg for her to give me a chance to plead my case, explain my actions from that night.

“You’re right. And I...” her pause gives me hope. “I... Lachlan.”

“I shouldn’t have left like that, Delaney. Believe me, I *know*, I shouldn’t have left the way I did. But I—I did it for you.”

She gapes at me, only breaking eye contact to thank the barista when she sets our drinks in front of us.

“You...did it...for *me*?” Her voice is pitched so high on the last word that it’s nearly inaudible. Her mouth snaps shut and she narrows her glare at me. “Uh, no. That wasn’t for me. You were a coward, Lachlan Romero.”

“There were things—things beyond my control. I’ve always regretted the way things...”

She stands up suddenly. “I can’t stay here and listen to this. Have a nice life, Lachlan.” With that, she walks toward the exit, doubling back to grab whatever it was she dropped, getting back in line, and paying. This time when she walks through the doors, she watches where she’s going.

I watch her until she disappears into the busy parking lot. Finishing my coffee, I watch shoppers dashing around. I smile when I see a mother with a little girl sitting in the cart, chatting animatedly with a stuffed animal in her arms.

A pang of regret washes over me at the future I walked away from ten years ago. While I know why I walked away—and I wouldn’t change the outcome, because I never want to put her in danger—I’d give anything to go back and find a way to leave without breaking our hearts.

When my coffee is gone, I throw my cup away, grabbing Delaney’s from where she left it on the table, and tossing it, too. Walking around the store, trying to remember what I came

here for before my past and future collided, I imagine doing normal, everyday things with Delaney by my side. She'd make even the most mundane tasks enjoyable with her effervescent feistiness.

I can imagine her as a mother—and *fuck*, I want her to be the mother of my children. Between the two of us, there would be no shortage of love, joy, and protection. I'd give my last breath to keep her out of harm's way. I very nearly did.

Even though I had to leave to keep Delaney safe, I've managed to use my influence and resources to—well, some may call it *manipulate*—her life, to ensure her happiness. I've kept tabs on her, opening doors to make things easier, and anytime someone new enters her life, I have a background check run immediately.

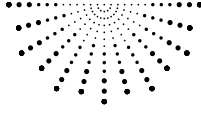
Now, though, everything has changed. The man she's dating slipped through the cracks, and if anything happens to her because of it, I'll never forgive myself.

Myles Martin is an attorney, which is enough of a mark against him. Everything I've read about him indicates he's a perfectionist—nothing hinting that their relationship was anything but happy. It breaks my heart to think about her with him, but her happiness is the only thing that matters to me.

That is until he brought home a new, unsavory element. Delaney is no longer safe with him. His newest client is a dangerous criminal who maximizes collateral damage to get his way.

This time, the only way I can protect her is to win my way back into her life. Now that I've spent time in her presence, I'll stop at nothing to win her back.

FOUR



DELANEY

Shaking off the unexpected run-in with Lachlan, I get in my car, and head home. When I park in my reserved spot, I'm not entirely sure how I got here.

I take the shampoo and head to the elevator, blindly pushing buttons, trying to figure out what the fuck just happened. It's surreal. For years, I've dreamt about running into him again—what I'd say to him if given the chance. How I'd eviscerate him, make him pay for breaking my heart all those years ago.

Lachlan Romero is directly responsible for my relationship issues—at least, until Myles came along. Nothing ever worked out because not one man could scale the wall of betrayal that I'd built to protect myself from being hurt like that again. *He* did that.

I've spent nearly a decade perfecting the tirade I'd deliver upon our reunion. And there I was—stammering, acting as if the past ten years never happened, thrown right back into the pain I'd experienced at his hands. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to run into him—literally—out of nowhere.

The elevator stops and I get off, not paying attention to the floor, walking blindly, still lost in my thoughts.

“Miss Hawthorne,” someone says, cupping my elbow. “Are you alright, dear?”

I blink away my confusion, seeing Mrs. Sutcliffe standing in front of me. “I—I think so, ma'am,” I say, looking around.

A door opens and I smell something spicy on the air. “Oh my god! My chicken!” I turn quickly, heading back to the elevator.

“Can I call someone for you?” Mrs. Sutcliffe asks with a frown.

“No, thank you. I’m fine. Just forgot something in my car.” I smile as the door closes, taking me back down to the garage without another stop. I walk quickly to my car, opening the trunk and grabbing my original purchases.

I make it to the penthouse without further delay, putting things away and changing out of my work clothes. Myles isn’t home yet—no surprise there—so I take my time getting things together to make dinner. When I spot the bottle of chardonnay in the refrigerator, I take it out, pop the cork, and pour myself a large glass.

I sigh appreciatively after my first long sip of the oaky wine, deciding on the spot to scrap the pretentious scallops I’d been planning, instead choosing the comforting flavors of fettuccine alfredo with the rotisserie chicken I brought home.

I keep drinking as the sauce simmers, the aromas wafting through the apartment, letting my mind wander as I prepare everything to be ready when Myles arrives home. I refill my glass, careful not to drink too much, despite how much I might need the liquid courage later.

Things have been...*off*... lately with Myles. He’s never done anything unforgivable, but all these little things over the past year have been adding up and making me question our future. I’ve been so immersed in work lately that I haven’t had the energy to really examine our relationship. Now that I’m finally taking a moment to realize I’m not as happy as I thought I was, I have to push myself to begin the conversation I know we need to have.

When we first got together, Myles was attentive. I was attracted to him physically—he’s the all-American boy next door type, so who isn’t?—but as we’ve settled into domestic bliss, I feel less like a partner and more like an object to him. He doesn’t talk to me about work anymore. His phone rings and he takes the call in his office, no matter what we’re in the

middle of. I've never pressed him for details—confidentiality is important, after all—but he's never been secretive. Until the last few months.

The door opens as I'm setting the table. Myles disappears into his office to drop off his briefcase before coming into the kitchen, kissing the top of my head gently, and loosening his tie. "Something smells good," he offers, pouring himself a drink and downing it in one sip.

"Thanks. It's just a simple alfredo with chicken. It'll be ready in three minutes."

He hums noncommittally, moving to sit in his usual seat at the head of the table, waiting for me to bring his plate.

When I first moved in, I loved taking care of him. It felt like a small thing that made him happy. My mother always had dinner on the table for my father when he got home from work, so I grew up not realizing it was something I needed to be cautious of. Now, however, he expects me to cater to him, and I don't know how to change our dynamic.

When I sit down, Myles picks up his fork and knife, looking around the table for something. "Where's the pepper?" he asks, setting his flatware on his plate, and grabbing his napkin from his lap, setting it on top of the table, watching me expectantly.

I hop up, moving quickly into the kitchen to find the pepper mill. I take it into the dining room, setting it before him. He pulls me down onto his lap, his usual move, his arms banding around me and holds me close for a moment.

I take a deep breath, unable to delay the uncomfortable conversation any longer. "Is there anything you need to tell me, Myles?" My voice is barely over a whisper, and I hear a faint tremble at the end.

He looks at me, his arms loosening but still holding me to him.

I move to stand, and he holds me for a few beats before finally letting me go. I turn and look at him, noticing that his

gray eyes, once vibrant and full of charm, are now dull and unamused.

“What are you going on about?” The way he says it is defensive, almost accusatory.

I move away, sitting in my seat once again, close enough to see his hands clench and relax repeatedly.

Sighing, I look him in the eye. “Is there anything important I should know about? Anything you haven’t told me?” His nostrils flare, and I know that he’s holding something back from me. If we have any chance of making this relationship last, I have to know.

“Myles, I told you when we first started dating. I can’t be with someone who doesn’t value truth and transparency. You promised you’d always tell me the truth, even when it was difficult. I believed you, but I’ve felt for a while now that you’ve been keeping something from me.”

He shifts uncomfortably in his chair, his gaze falling to his plate before rising to catch mine again, blazing with—is that *anger*?

“Clearly you’ve got some crazy idea in your head. So just ask, already. I’m not a fucking mind reader, Delaney!” His outburst is uncharacteristic—he’s usually quite even-keeled—and I jump in my seat at his tone.

“I—well, I was wondering. What is the nature of your relationship with Roberto Diaz?”

Myles hesitates for a moment, watching me with a calculating glint in his eye. “I’m his defense attorney. He hired me a few months ago. Why do you care?” His tone is indifferent, a complete change from the man I’ve known him to be.

“Why do I care?” I ask, incredulous. “I want to know how the man I lo—have known for over a year—is capable of helping someone like that walk free.”

He leans back from the table, crossing his arms over his chest, eyeing me wearily. “Sometimes I forget how naive you can be. This is America, baby. Everyone has the right to a trial

—even people you don't like. And I have the right to profit from it." He grabs his glass and holds it up. "God bless America." With that, he downs the remaining scotch and gets up from the table, leaving me to clean up the mess.

After everything is put away and spotless, I make my way into the living room, planning to focus on some work I need to finalize before next week. I stop in my tracks when I see Myles sitting in my desk chair, holding the invitation for my tenth high school reunion in one hand, looking contemplative, yet another glass of scotch in the other.

I sit on the couch, silently waiting, and after a moment he moves to join me. When I planned this conversation in my head, I thought I'd considered every angle—every possible outcome—but I was wrong.

We talk for a while, and with every question he evades or answers vaguely, my doubts and curiosity intensify, leaving me with more questions. When we run out of topics—or maybe it's patience—I sit in silence, parsing every syllable he offered me—until I reach a painful conclusion.

How much do we actually have in common beyond the surface?

FIVE



DELANEY

I spend the next week overthinking everything—nothing is too small to escape my obsessive musings.

Delaney: I saw him.

Aria: Him who?

Aria: Wait. HIM him?! OMG!

My phone rings a few seconds later. “Hello?”

“What the...how? Tell me everything!” she squeals. Her pitch is high enough to hurt my ears, so I pull the phone away, laughing at her antics, until she settles down.

“I ran into him. Literally.”

“When? Where? Wait, are you okay? How was it seeing him again?” I hear a cork pop through the line and decide she’s got the right idea. Strolling into the kitchen, I grab a glass and open the fridge, determined to enjoy the remnants of the expensive chardonnay Myles bought.

The last few drops splash into the glass, and I rinse it before depositing it in the recycling bin. Myles is fastidious in his tidiness—or rather the housekeeper and I are, to comply with his standards.

I take the glass and move to the couch, tucking my legs under me and ready to get my best friend’s perspective. Normally, I’d have called her first thing, but with the issues with Myles, I’ve been too lost in my thoughts, wanting to sort

them before talking to her so that I didn't sound completely unhinged.

"It was last week..." I start, running through the events that led to the resurfacing of every ounce of pain and heartbreak I'd endured at Lachlan's hands. "I just got up and walked away."

"And?"

"And he didn't follow me."

"Did you want him to? You chastised him for disappearing—*completely* warranted I might add. Ugh—what a fucktard—by the way! So, what, then you left without a word? What would you have done if he'd followed you?" she asks.

"That could be interpreted as harassment. And Lachlan Romero may be a lot of things, but he's respectful." It galls me to admit it, but it's true.

I can't deny the truth of her words. Even in high school, despite his bad boy appeal, Lachlan was respectful to everyone—especially me. But right now, I need him to be the villain. It's the only way I can protect myself.

"Laney, I think you owe it to yourself, if not to him, to hear him out. I'm not saying what he did was right—you know I'm on your side. But maybe listening to his explanation, inadequate though it will be for all the pain he put you through, will help you gain some closure. Clear the air and help you move on."

I nod. "When did you become so wise, Ari?" She chuckles, and I hear her pouring another glass of wine. I cast a glance at my own empty glass, wishing we had another bottle of the obscenely expensive wine in the apartment.

"I've always been this wise, babe. You just usually have your shit together, so I can't shine. Plus, *in vino veritas* or whatever."

We talk for a little bit longer, until I hear the door open and turn to see Myles standing there, hands on his hips, watching me, a scowl marring his handsome face. I say a quick goodbye and hang up the phone, giving him my undivided attention.

He's home earlier than usual. It's Friday, and normally after he gets home from work, we'd go out to some restaurant he wants to try, or end up at a get-together with the partners and their families. It's the one night a week he reserves to let himself relax before he's back in work mode for the rest of the weekend.

"You're home early," I say, giving him a small smile as I pick up my wine glass and take it to the kitchen. I pass him, stopping to give him a peck on the cheek. He still hasn't moved and his continued staring is unnerving, making me feel like a wayward child about to receive a lecture.

"Clearly." He strides toward his office, stowing his briefcase as usual, before pulling the door firmly shut. "I ordered Thai. It'll be here in forty-five minutes."

I nod.

"I was going to have a drink with Jonas after work, but since we'll be gone tomorrow evening for your... *reunion*... I'll be in my office, preparing for a trial since I won't have time to do so after we get home."

"Oh—okay," I say, not realizing he'd been so displeased about my upcoming reunion. "You don't have to come with me... if you don't have time," I hedge, hoping he's willing to make a small sacrifice for me.

"No. It's fine, Delaney," he sighs, rubbing the bridge of his patrician nose and closing his eyes. "I said I'd go and I will. I just have a lot of work to do tonight."

"I'll bring dinner to your office when it arrives," I offer, hoping to mollify him and keep the tentative peace we're living in right now.

"Thank you." His terse response floats through the air as he turns on his heel, stalking to his office, the *click* of the door an ironic symbolism for the emotional divide between us.

I gather the cleaning supplies from under the kitchen sink, diligently scrubbing every gleaming surface, just to have something to keep my hands and mind occupied until dinner

arrives. I get lost in the motions, startled by the sharp knock on the front door sometime later.

Opening the door, I smile as the girl hands me a receipt to sign before handing over the large bag of fragrant food. “Thank you,” she calls, turning to head back downstairs. I hope the tip I gave her makes her night and, secretly, I hope it makes Myles wince.

“Come in,” he calls tersely when I knock on his office door, holding the steaming plate in front of me in one hand, a frosty mug with his favorite beer in the other.

“Can you open the door, please, Myles? My hands are full,” I say, listening for the sounds of movement on the other side. Finally, he grunts and I hear the creak of his desk chair as he stands and walks to open the door for me.

“Dinner is served,” I say with a wide smile, pushing past him to place the dishes on his crowded, but fastidiously tidy, desk. “Enjoy.”

I turn to leave and he pulls me into his arms, kissing me gently. “Thank you,” he says, releasing me. “Please close the door on your way out.” And just like that, I’m dismissed. *At least he said thank you, I guess.*

I sit on the couch, turning on trashy reality TV that Myles would certainly admonish me for, and pick at my food, my appetite gone. Setting my plate on the coffee table, I pick up my phone, startling when it dings in my hand. Resting a hand over my racing heart, I laugh at my jumpy reaction and unlock it with my thumb.

Aria: Hey, you okay? You kinda disappeared on me there.

Delaney: Yeah, sorry. M came home early.

Aria: Gotcha. Just checking. Love you.

Delaney: Love you, too. See you tomorrow?

I wait for a response, hoping Aria has decided to come to the reunion. She and Myles aren’t close, but she can act as a buffer for me when he gets snippy, ready to head home.

Aria: About that...

Delaney: Nooooo.

It's a bit melodramatic, I know, but I need my best friend there when I'm confronted by this blast from the past.

Aria: I can't, Dells. I just don't have the time. I got tagged for a thesis committee and with the classes I'm teaching, I just can't.

Aria: Plus you know I didn't like anyone but you in high school. And I can see your beautiful face whenever I want. So why put myself through that torture?

Aria: I know my acting skills... they aren't up to snuff for that.

Aria: I can see it now...drinking cheap wine, pasting a smile on my face, pretending that the ugliest children I've ever seen resemble children, not barnyard animals. *shudder* No thanks!

Aria: But I know you'll have fun! *kiss*

I can't help the snort of laughter that escapes me as I read her ridiculously dramatic musings—she's always been able to cheer me up quickly.

Delaney: Well with that glowing synopsis, how could I not have a blast?!

With that, and determined to have fun tomorrow despite her absence, I take my plate into the kitchen, dump everything unceremoniously into a container and pop it into the fridge. Rinsing my plate and wine glass, I put them in the dishwasher, turning off the kitchen light and going to my room.

The office door is still closed, yellow light shining from under the door, illuminating a small arc. I briefly debate knocking, trying to talk Myles into finishing what he's working on in the morning and coming to bed with me, but decide against it in favor of taking a long bath.

I soak in the hot, fragrant water until my fingers are pruney, dragging myself out and into a warm towel. As I go about my bedtime routine, I listen for any indication that Myles might be coming to bed with me.

My fingers glide over the silky crimson teddy I'd gotten recently to surprise Myles with on our trip. Plucking it out of the drawer, I quickly pull it over my legs, drawing the straps over my shoulders and shuffling my breasts into the cups.

I don't often wear lingerie, but looking at myself in the mirror, I'm shocked. Even without my usual minimal makeup, my hair piled high on my head in a messy bun, and my skin flushed from the hot water of my bath, I look different—sexy.

Adjusting the bedside lamps for mood lighting, knowing Myles won't appreciate the fire hazard of candles scattered around the room, I hop onto the bed, settling myself in the middle, reclining against a throne of plush pillows.

I fidget several times, waiting in silence for him to arrive. Glancing at the clock, realizing I've been here for nearly an hour, I huff, moving to my side of the bed, reaching to turn off my lamp and pulling the comforter over my hips.

My heavy eyes close, holding back tears of frustration that I refuse to shed. My mind wanders to Lachlan. His callous actions nearly destroyed me and it took me years to get to a point where I could even entertain the idea of a date, let alone a relationship.

I internalized Lachlan's disappearance, wondering if I'd done something to make him leave without a word. He never said he loved me—not with those words—but his actions made me believe his feelings for me were serious.

Now he says he didn't mean to hurt me? That he did it *for* me? I scoff, tossing. The plush mattress envelops me, making me wish it was the arms of a man who loves me, and one traitorous tear slips down my cheek. Cursing quietly, I dash it away with the back of my hand.

How would my life be different if Lachlan had stayed? Would we have gotten married? Had kids? I can't stop the shudder at the idea of having a family of my own. My parents are still happily married, and I've always dreamt of finding a man who will treat me like my dad treats my mom. *Could Lachlan have been that man?*

I know Lachlan's family is well-off, but they don't live lavishly like Myles. I toss and turn, mentally comparing the two men, coming to the conclusion that they couldn't be more different if they tried. I've just closed my eyes again when I hear the door open and Myles walk in.

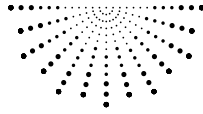
He doesn't try to keep his movements quiet, despite the appearance that I'm asleep. When he's ready for bed, he throws the comforter back, sending cool air over my flushed skin. My eyes open, staring up into his shadowed gaze.

He scoffs. "Red lingerie? How original." Turning to turn off the light without another word, he settles onto the mattress, finding his spot, and is sound asleep, snoring quietly, within two minutes.

"Goodnight, *darling*," I whisper snarkily, knowing he doesn't hear me.

As I drift to sleep, I wonder if Lachlan is sleeping alone tonight.

SIX



DELANEY

Myles' side of the bed is cold when I wake up, reaching over to say good morning. He's often already been up for several hours before I'm awake on the weekends, so I'm not surprised—just disappointed. I really wanted to seduce him, though when I think about it now, I realize it's a desperate attempt to patch something irrevocably broken.

Throwing the blanket back with a sigh, I strip out of the teddy, cursing the tight strap marks now lacing my skin. Quickly making the bed and getting dressed, I make my way in the kitchen. As I pass the office, I hear raised voices. Tempted to listen at the door, I think better of it, realizing I don't want to know what Myles is keeping from me—not really.

Cutting up fresh fruit to put on top of the crepes I'm making, I think about the fruit Lachlan brought that night, and my heart whelms with longing. I allow myself to feel that happiness for a moment before locking it away with the pain of longing when he left.

Unable to stomach the memory, I dump the fruit—cutting board and all—into the trash, pulling eggs out of the fridge instead. Myles emerges sometime later, grabbing a premade smoothie and downing it as if he's just spent hours in the gym rather than sitting in his leather chair plotting ways to get heinous criminals back onto the street.

I smile, watching him, waiting for him to address me. When he tosses the bottle into the trash, turning without a

word to return to his office, I know I'm in for a long, silent afternoon before the reunion tonight.

The reunion is in full swing by the time Myles and I arrive, excitement and nostalgia enveloping me as I walk the decorated halls of Miami Killian High for the first time in a decade. When the doors to the gymnasium open, flanked by balloons in the school colors—black, silver, and forest green—the dim lights spill from beyond. Music plays in the background, loud enough to hear, but not enough to drown out the excited chatter as people get reacquainted. I laugh when I realize, as the song changes, that they're playing popular tracks from 2013. *God, I feel old.*

I take the arm that Myles offers, walking around the room, introducing him to my old friends. Some are easy to recognize, having changed little in the intervening years, but some require prompting or surreptitious glances at their name tags. Myles is among the oldest in attendance and I can see him getting annoyed as I introduce him to people he won't remember tomorrow.

His eyebrows pinch together, weariness evident in the grimace he tries to disguise as I chat with my old lab partner and her husband, fake-gushing over photos of their two children—who kinda *do* resemble barnyard animals.

Myles excuses himself, returning a while later with a beer and a glass of wine for me. I thank him, smiling up at him, worried by the look in his cold eyes. This is the first time I can remember him being so unfriendly toward me in public—usually he reserves the cold shoulder as retaliation when we're home, with no witnesses.

We take our leave, milling about the periphery of the room, smiling politely as people greet us. I take a small sip of the acidic wine, wincing and determined to carry it around with me throughout the evening as a barrier. Butterflies flutter wildly in my stomach as I wonder if Lachlan is planning to come tonight and how I'll handle seeing him again. *Oh shit. How will I handle being in the same room as him and Myles?*

A video loop starts playing on a large projection screen hanging on one wall and I grin, watching as the years melt away and I'm transported back to my senior year. It's weird seeing myself and Aria as teenagers, working on the stage crew for the theater department.

Interspersed with the photos are headlines from the year, just to remind us that an entire decade has passed and we're now closer to thirty than eighteen. The mainstream horror of twerking—and its subsequent addition to the dictionary—*way to fail, America*—inspires several brave individuals to try it on the dance floor, much to Myles's shock and my horrified amusement.

When it switches back to school activities, including a long tribute to the school's football championship—the only one in recent history—I turn to Myles. “Do you want to dance?” I ask, hopefully, wanting something normal to do rather than looking like we're here to chaperone the reunion, tasked with keeping the nefarious youth six inches apart.

“No,” he says tersely, walking toward the bar without a glance in my direction. *Well then.*

Someone taps me on my shoulder and I spin, praying it's not Lachlan, while secretly hoping it is. A smile quickly blooms across my face when I see an old friend pulling me into a hug. “Daisy!” My arms go around her waist and I squeal. “How are you? *Where* are you? How have you—” My attention is drawn to the tall, handsome guy behind her. “Chad?” I stammer. I look between them as he steps up and pulls her back into his body, his arm around her waist. My eyes are drawn down at the movement and I see him gently caressing her belly. *A baby bump.*

My heart aches for just a moment. “Wait. You. A-and *you*? Wow. I might need another drink for this story!” I laugh, but I can't help but wonder how a theater nerd—*the* theater nerd—managed to snag the all-American quarterback. They certainly didn't run in the same circles back at school.

Chad smiles at me, brushing a kiss over Daisy's cheek. “I'll go get you ladies a drink. Delaney, what would you

like?”

“Club soda with lime, please.”

He nods, walking toward the bar.

“So how did *that* happen?” I ask, waving a finger between her and her husband’s retreating form.

“Oh, you know. Same old story. Same schools. Jock and drama nerd. He and his buddies came to the production opening night, prepared to mock, and next thing I know, we’re feeding each other sushi on a swing at the local playground under the stars.”

I can’t stifle the laugh that bubbles out of me. It’s so ridiculous it’s cute.

“So...” she starts, looking around. “Are you here with anyone?”

I sigh, wishing Myles could just pretend to be happy to be here—for me. After all the parties I’ve attended with him—and hosted on his behalf—it should be the very least he could do to not scowl.

“I, um... yes. My boyfriend, Myles, is around here somewhere. I’m sure you’ll see him. Six foot, gray eyes, a little older. Oh, and scowling.” I immediately regret mentioning it—my relationship drama isn’t appropriate small talk for this evening of fun. I turn, looking for him, prepared to point him out, when a throat clears behind me.

“Delaney, we need to talk,” Myles says quietly.

My spine straightens and I turn around to face my stern-faced boyfriend, disbelieving that he’s demanding this discussion here of all places, after being distant, rude, and unpleasant all evening. He leads me farther from the fray, near a dark corner of the room.

I look around quickly, grateful that we’re not close enough for people to overhear, but our quiet, tense conversation is attracting curious looks. I lean forward, standing on my tiptoes, placing my hand on his chest, making it look like I’m

about to kiss Myles. Instead, I whisper in his ear, “Can’t this wait? This is supposed to be a fun night.”

“No, Delaney. It can’t wait. I’ve been patient, but I can’t do it anymore,” he says gruffly, running his hand through his hair in frustration.

Before I can respond, plead with him to have this conversation at home, he launches into a scathing indictment of my place—and inadequacies—in our relationship. According to Myles, I fail to give him the attention he needs and deserves, instead spending my time on work and frivolous pursuits. I wince, but let him continue, hiding the hurt of his words deep down where he can’t see them.

When I’ve had enough, I turn to leave, to find a ride home, and I gasp when his hand grabs my wrist, squeezing tightly, holding me in place.

“We’re not finished, Delaney,” he hisses, bending down to bring his eyes level with mine. His face is red, flushed with anger, and I can see his eyes are glazed over with bloodlust—he scents my pain and discomfort and it stokes him into a frenzy.

I’ve never seen this side of him—at least not directed at me—and I’m starting to fear that he may not be in control of his actions for much longer. As panic settles around me, and I try to free my wrist from his painful grasp, I’m about to call for help when I hear a familiar voice come from behind me.

“Is everything okay here?”

My heart skips a beat as I turn my head, relief flooding me as I see Lachlan Romero standing there, watching us. His presence is painful but comforting, because I know that he would never hurt me—at least not physically.

I feel him move closer, heat radiating from his body and giving me unexpected comfort. Moving to the side, he growls when he sees Myles holding my wrist tightly.

“We’re fine. Our discussion is none of your concern. Get lost,” Myles grits out, glaring at Lachlan, fury burning in his eyes.

“Myles,” I say, trying to calm him down. “This is Lachlan, an old friend from high school. Lachlan, my boyfriend, Myles.” Neither man acknowledges me as they continue to glare at each other.

“Sorry to interrupt, Delaney. I overheard part of your conversation and wanted to make sure you’re alright.” Lachlan’s tone is concerned, but friendly, further inciting Myles.

Myles steps closer, nearly pushing me into Lachlan’s chest. The air grows thick as I stand between them, breathing shallowly as I watch them size each other up. They’re of similar builds, though Lachlan has a couple of inches on Myles.

“It’s nothing that requires your interference, buddy.” Myles pokes a finger of his free hand in Lachlan’s direction, nearly bumping him. I suck in a gasp, praying Lachlan remains calm, knowing Myles is being purposefully antagonistic.

“I just want to ensure that my friend is safe,” Lachlan says, shrugging his tight shoulders nonchalantly.

Myles scoffs. “Not that it’s any of your business, but since I don’t see another way to get you to leave us to our discussion in private, here goes.” He throws my hand from his grasp with such force that I have to take a step backward. Once I right myself, with Lachlan’s gentle hands on my back and waist, I cradle it against my chest gently.

“Your...*old friend*...is under the impression that her job is more important than our relationship.” He spits the accusation at Lachlan before glaring down at me. “I refuse to take second place to anything. I’ve let it go, biding my time until you either grew bored in your silly little *career*, or were let go for incompetence,” he sneers, glancing between Lachlan and me, noticing that Lachlan’s hands are still on me, offering support.

“This is neither the time nor the place for that discussion,” Lachlan says calmly, his eyes locked on Myles’ seething face. “And it’s the twenty-first century. Women are free to do and be what they choose.”

Lachlan's lackadaisical attitude infuriates Myles. "Screw you," he shouts, his face flushing bright red with rage. He turns to face me, leaning down to look me in the eyes. "And screw you, bitch. I could've given you everything. All I asked was to be the most important thing in your life. You just lost the best thing that's ever happened to you. I can replace you like—" he snaps his fingers, "that." He brushes past me, his arm hitting my shoulder roughly, before he strides through the door and, presumably, out of the school.

I feel tears pricking at the back of my eyes, desperate to escape. I manage to hold them at bay until Lachlan turns me to face him, using a finger beneath my chin to bring my gaze up to his. "Are you okay, Delaney?" he asks softly, concern lacing his tone. It's the last straw and I melt into his arms, sobbing.

After a moment, I pull back and he wipes the tear tracks from my cheeks, grinning when I look up at him with shimmering eyes. "Your shirt," I lament, seeing the wet spots from my outburst.

"It's okay, Laney," he croons, and I overlook his use of the nickname I used to love hearing on his lips. "It's just a shirt. I couldn't care less. But I *do* care about you. What can I do?"

"I—I'm okay. I think. Thanks for coming to my rescue... yet again, Lachlan. I—I don't know what I'd do without you." The truth is painful, but I can't deny it.

He gives me a beautiful, reassuring smile. For a moment, the noise and frivolity of the reunion around us fades away, and we're left at an unexpected crossroad of our past and present.

SEVEN



LACHLAN

I knew Delaney was going to be at the reunion. That's why, until she ran into me, I was debating if I'd come. I've managed to stay away from her for ten years—not without having my moments of weakness. Yet, somehow, after only a few seconds in her radiant presence, my determination vanished and I was unable to stay away any longer.

After that, I knew I had to do everything in my power to win her back—no matter the cost. Things are safe now—well, *safer*—and it's time to bring her home. It's finally time to make her mine.

I noticed her the moment I walked through the doors, her radiance like a beacon, drawing and keeping my attention. I watched as she and her boyfriend mingled, making their way through the crowd of people. In high school, she was always that girl that was between groups and loved by everyone.

She's no longer the girl I knew. Now she's a woman with alluring confidence and curves in all the right places. The royal-blue dress she chose for tonight looks tailor-made, perfectly accentuating her beauty.

Beneath the happy façade, I sense a sadness—pain that she's trying to hide from the world. Her eyes occasionally drift to the man beside her, but she's unable to completely mask her hurt and disappointment when he ignores her.

I've watched them interact since they arrived and I can't help but notice that he's aloof, oblivious to her feelings. My research doesn't indicate abuse, but he clearly doesn't treat her

with the care and respect she deserves. His disregard infuriates me, filling me with regret and jealousy. *It should be me here by her side—me taking care of her.*

As I'm about to make my way over to them, I'm intercepted by people I barely recognize. I make polite small talk for a moment, scanning the crowd searching for her. I excuse myself quickly when I see her being towed like a wayward child into a dark corner of the room.

I approach slowly, watching their heated exchange, catching bits of their one-sided conversation, but it's enough to tell me that I need to intervene. The need to protect her rides me hard, closing the distance between us quickly. Realization washes over me—two thoughts at once. One, I want her to be happy more than I want my next breath. And two, I'm still in love with her—it never really went away, despite my distance.

I try to calmly reason with him, but her boyfriend—Myles—puffs his chest out, full of aggressive toxic masculinity—trying to incite an altercation. I know he's an attorney—a good one—and I refuse to engage in any behavior that could send me away, keeping me from Delaney for another moment.

My control nearly snaps when he hurts her wrist. Instinct has me reaching for her, needing to touch her to keep from reaching for him. When he leaves, fury radiating through him, I pull her into my arms, offering her comfort, but also needing to reassure myself that she's okay.

It's not lost on me that this is the second time that someone has walked out on Delaney, and I curse myself for being responsible for the first time. It was the worst decision I could've made—despite making it for the right reasons—and I know I'll never get that time back with her. Someday, Myles will recognize the stupidity of his actions, but it'll be too late for him. *She's mine now.*

When she's no longer crying and her face is dry and smiling, I step back, just enough to look down at her. A new song starts to play and I take advantage of it to offer us both a distraction from the tension hanging in the air.

“Delaney, may I have this dance?” My tone is hopeful and I need to have her back in my arms.

Her eyes widen in surprise and she hesitates briefly before giving me a small nod. I hold out a hand for her and a small smile twists playfully on her luscious lips as she places her delicate hand in mine, my skin burning at the contact. We walk to the center of the dance floor and move to the beat, our connection intensifying as we gaze at each other.

We keep swaying when the music changes, unwilling to break the spell of our connection. A slow song starts and I pull her closer, relishing in the feel of her pillowy breasts brushing against my chest through the fabric between us. My cock hardens and I take a moment to focus on sad things, not wanting to scare her away with my ardent desire so soon after getting her back in my arms.

She stands on her tiptoes, tilting her head up and nuzzling my neck as she whispers, “Why did you leave, Lachlan?” She drops back down, laying her cheek on my chest, awaiting my response.

My heart seizes in my chest. I’ve dreaded the possibility of this question for ten years, wondering if I’d ever get the chance to answer it—if I’d ever have the right words to offer her.

“I—it’s not a simple story, Delaney,” I say, giving myself a moment to come up with a way to explain my actions. I pull back, looking down into her eyes, needing her to see my sincerity. “Back then, it seemed like my only option. I never wanted to leave you—please believe that. But I had to in order to keep you safe.”

She nods, moving one hand from my chest to brush away a stray tear, and I take it as my cue to continue. “I knew if I told you my plan you’d either try to talk me out of it, or you’d try to follow me.” I shake my head. “You could’ve talked me out of leaving in a heartbeat—you had that much power over me, even back then.”

She gasps, her eyes wide as the true meaning of what I’m confessing dawns on her.

I nod, flashing her a small, sad smile. “I couldn’t stay, Dells. It wasn’t safe for you. And I couldn’t let you throw your future away to follow me. I’ve only ever needed one thing—your happiness. I knew after graduation that I was expected to fully join the family business. And I truly believed the only way to protect you from all of that was to leave.”

She moves her cheek back to my chest, placing her ear over my heart. “I wish you would’ve told me, Lachlan. We could’ve figured it out together.”

“I know that now, Delaney. And I’m so fucking sorry that my actions hurt you—hurt both of us. I was young and scared and didn’t want you involved in my mess.”

“You didn’t have to do it alone, Lachlan,” she says, pulling away from me in exasperation, crossing her arms over her chest. “We could’ve faced anything together.”

I lean in, wrapping my arms around her, wishing we were somewhere private so I could show her just how sorry I am.

“Hindsight is a cruel mistress, Delaney—it taunts you with wisdom and the inability to change the past.” I kiss the crown of her head. “But I’m here now, and I want to make amends. I’ve changed—spent years working hard to leave that life behind. I’m no longer the boy who ran. Tell me what it’ll take to make it right.”

“I—I’m glad you’re back, Lachlan. I—I missed you.” Tears slip down her cheeks as she nods, leaning her forehead into my chest, breathing deeply.

“I missed you too, Laney. Every second of every day was agony without you.” My heart aches at the time we’ve lost. “I hope you can forgive me and allow me to make it up to you.”

She tips her head up and I lean down, our lips meeting in a gentle kiss. Emotions have been in overdrive tonight, between the confrontation with Myles and the rehashing of our past. Clearly, we still have a lot to work through, but knowing there’s hope for us brings me peace.

Delaney

“Delaney.” Lachlan’s voice breaks through the hum of activity around us, focusing my attention back on him. “Can we go somewhere private to talk?” His intense hazel eyes search mine, and I see a plea in them that I can’t deny.

“About what?” I ask, my curiosity piqued.

He gulps. “About us.” It’s just two words, but they shake me to my core. All I can do is nod, my heart rate increasing as we slip through the crowd, making our way outside.

The cool air settles around us as I take a seat on the weathered wooden bench that overlooks the football field. The moon is peeking out from behind a cloud, and it reflects in Lachlan’s determined eyes as he closes in on me.

My breath catches as he sits beside me, and my thoughts spiral out of control. *Can I trust him? Should I? Can I handle it if he’s just playing me?*

His leg bounces nervously and then moves more as his foot begins to trace random patterns into the short grass. “There’s something I need you to know, Delaney—something I should’ve told you a long time ago.”

I’m immediately on edge, wondering if I can handle this newest revelation after so much emotional upheaval tonight. I swallow hard. “What is it, Lachlan?”

His leg stops moving and he turns to look at me, his hand cupping my cheek gently, sending shivers of pleasure down my spine. His eyes bore into mine with an intensity I’ve never experienced, and I cannot look away.

“I held back out of cowardice—I realize that now. And I’m done playing it safe. I love you, Delaney. I am knocked-on-my-ass, you jump, I jump, batshit crazy in love with you.”

I watch him silently for a moment, searching his eyes for any signs of deception, but all I can see there is hope and sincerity.

“You—you *love* me?” My heart swells, and I know I can’t hold myself back from him any longer. I’ve waited ten years to hear those words from him, and I truly never thought I would.

“Yes. I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember. I was afraid, back then, of so many things. But I’m not now.”

I feel my defenses crumbling and hopeful tears fall down my face. “Why now?” It’s the final question I need answered before I can accept the man beside me.

He pulls me closer into him, answering my question softly. “Because I can’t bear to see you in danger anymore. Everything I’ve done has been to protect you, but I can’t do that from afar anymore. I want to be the one to keep you safe—even from my own misplaced fears. I... I want to be with you, Delaney, more than anything. No matter what.”

I pull back, using both hands to dash away tears as I realize I’d never be able to turn him away. I need him. Without him, a piece of me was missing. I lean into his touch, needing his lips on mine, sharing the promise that we can overcome any obstacles in our path.

“I love you, too, Lachlan,” I whisper, pulling him closer, with both hands fisted in his shirt. Just as his lips seal over mine, stealing my breath and breathing life back into me, a loud clap of thunder echoes around us, followed by fat raindrops.

We part, laughing, already soaked to the bone. Lachlan grabs my hand, pulling me toward the parking lot and opens the door to his car, helping me in. I watch him jog around to the driver’s side and slide behind the wheel, grinning at me. “Where to?”

“Wherever you are,” I say, looking toward our future with a happy and full heart.

EPILOGUE



LACHLAN

Two years later

I made it one full day before proposing to Delaney. Emotions and connection came flooding back as soon as we were together, almost making it feel as if the time apart had never happened. I took her out on our first date as adults, strolling along the beach under a moonlit Miami sky. It felt so natural to be there with her, and I couldn't hold back any longer. When I dropped to one knee and she said yes with tearstained eyes, it was the perfect moment.

We were married the following weekend and spent the first month bouncing between each other's apartments, but we never really felt settled. After a wine-fueled discussion over takeout one night, we decided to find a place that was just *ours*. We started looking, disappointed each time the listing didn't feel right. A few months later, we found a charming condo near the bay that needed Delaney's magical touch to make it our home.

She took the opportunity to turn our condo into her masterpiece, breathing fresh life into the walls. She quit her job soon after we got married to focus on our home and open her own design firm. She started small, choosing clients she was excited to work with instead of accepting every opportunity that presented itself just for a paycheck.

Her talent is undeniable, and our shared passion for work has brought us even closer together. I endeavor to find ways to support and foster her creativity, and together we've forged a thriving partnership.

She was recently offered the chance of a lifetime to spearhead the redesign of the Cosmos Hotel. Her trendy designs caught the attention of Haute Décor Magazine. They're here today doing an interview with her, and I'm standing back, watching her shine like the star she was born to be.

The photographer has been giving her directions for a few minutes, and I make a mental note to ask her to forward copies to me so I can print them and hang them in the condo and at the firm office. My favorite—and it's hard to pick a favorite—is Delaney leaning against black double doors with gold studs. It's framed perfectly to showcase the newly redesigned lobby, but nobody will care with Delaney stealing the spotlight.

Between shots, Delaney has been interviewed about her process, inspiration, and experience. Maria has been kind, asking questions in a way that puts Delaney at ease. As I'm watching the photographer give my wife some directions, Maria comes to stand beside me, observing everything with keen eyes.

"It would be fabulous if you could join us for a few questions," she says, turning her friendly smile my way. Somehow it feels more like a command than a suggestion, but her friendly air makes me want to comply.

"My pleasure," I say, grinning. I move toward Delaney as the photographer wraps the shoot. It's been too long since I held her.

She spots me moving toward her and runs at me, leaping into my arms from several feet away, knowing I'd never let her fall. She kisses me, exhilaration running through her, shining in her bright eyes.

I carry her to the table where snacks and drinks are laid out, bending down low enough for her to snag us each a bottle of water. I hear the camera shutter as I stand, content holding her, until we're called over to the interview area—the vibrantly tufted, lip-shaped sofa is surprisingly comfortable. Maria sits across from us in an ivory chair.

Maria looks into the camera with a blinding smile before turning it on us. “I’m here with the design team that brought a chic, sexy spin to the classic art deco motif of the Cosmos Hotel. Delaney and Lachlan Romero just celebrated their second wedding anniversary in September.” She smiles again, and I feel a wave of happiness spread through me. “So tell me, how do you both balance marriage and working together?”

Delaney squeezes my thigh gently.

“Well, Maria, seeing Laney’s passion and designs inspired me. I couldn’t help but convince her to marry me so I could share her love for art, architecture, and design.”

Maria giggles, placing her hand over her heart.

“We make a pretty good team,” Delaney adds, smiling sweetly into the camera.

“I can see that,” Maria says kindly. “How, exactly, did the two of you become a team? Surely it wasn’t all roses?”

“He was my high school sweetheart,” Delaney answers immediately. “It took us some time to find each other again, but we reconnected at our ten year reunion, and we’ve never been apart since.”

Maria has moved to the edge of her seat, engrossed in Delaney’s tale.

I place my hand over hers on my thigh, giving it three tender squeezes before weaving our fingers together.

“Well, I for one, look forward to seeing the two of you put your mark on the Miami art scene. We’ll be watching!” Maria concludes the interview, standing and offering her hand to each of us.

My eyes widen when Delaney leans forward, whispering something into Maria’s ear.

She nods enthusiastically and reclaims her seat, gesturing for us to do the same.

“Delaney,” she starts. “One more question. You mentioned earlier that you make a pretty good team. Would you care to elaborate?”

I look over at my wife, watching her closely. She's chewing on her bottom lip, an adorable habit she has when she's nervous. I quirk an eyebrow, waiting for her to answer.

"Well, Maria, we make a great team. But in a few months, we're going to be welcoming a new team member."

It takes me a moment to process what she's really saying. *Holy shit.* I jump up, pulling Delaney into a gentle hug, holding her to my body. "You're pregnant?"

I pull back, looking into her glistening eyes.

"Yeah. We're going to have a baby."

As soon as the words leave her lips, my mouth descends, devouring hers.

I barely notice as the crew packs up quickly and efficiently, moving everything to its original placement before they head out.

Maria clears her throat, and we turn to her with sheepish grins. She thanks us, letting us know that she'll forward us a copy of the interview and photos after they're edited. We thank her and wave as she leaves.

Realizing we're finally alone, I place Delaney gently on the ground, striding quickly over to the door and locking it. Turning back to my wife, I slowly stalk over to her, my cock bulging in my pants. Delaney recognizes the feral intensity in my eyes and backs away from me slowly, playing one of my favorite games.

I catch her quickly, because she's as desperate for me as I am for her, and we fall to the ground, stretching across the velvet texture of the floral area rug beneath us. Delaney chose this rug with painstaking care to fit the vibe the hotel was going for. The blush hortensia petals make it feel alive when the candlelight flickers across it from the dome fireplace suspended from the ceiling.

My lips descend into the valley of her neck, devouring her skin with deep kisses as my fingers roam her luscious body. She cries out, sinking her teeth into my shoulder as I grip her pussy, caressing it with my palm.

She pulls back, moving over to straddle my hips, crossing her arms over her chest to slowly pull off her little black dress, baring her silky black bra and panties to me. I slide my hands around her back, releasing her gorgeous breasts to my ravenous mouth.

I take my time savoring them, pleasuring and worshiping them until Delaney is drenched and begging for more. I roll her onto her side, sliding behind her. I rip off her panties, biting her shoulder as she huffs that they're her favorite, quickly distracting her.

I slide into her with one, long stroke, loving the moans that escape her as she takes all of me. I grab her leg, her thigh on my forearm, and bring it over my legs, giving me better access to her pussy. My other arm is under her, giving my hand perfect access to her breast.

Her arm reaches back to circle my neck, her fingers threading into my hair, using it as leverage as we rock back and forth. My other hand snakes down, my fingers finding her clit, rubbing her gently, teasing her until she demands more.

Her ass rocks back against me, circling, as she moans for me to give her more. I pump harder, deeper, needing her to come before I combust.

Finally, I feel her clench on my pounding cock, her pussy milking me. Unable to hold back, I release into her hard, coming for longer than ever before. We lay there for several moments, trying to catch our breath.

When I'm able to breathe normally, I sit up, pulling Delaney up with me, wrapping her in a hug, my hands resting on her still-flat stomach.

We stand, dressing quickly, moving around the room, ensuring everything is in place. Linking hands, we walk to the parking lot to head home.

I lean Delaney against the car door, caging her in between my arms, leaning down to kiss her. I can never get enough of her, and I know I never will. "Thank you," I whisper, breaking the kiss.

I watch her for a moment, the sun casting an ethereal glow around her as it sinks slowly toward the horizon. “Thank you for giving me everything I never thought I deserved.”

READY FOR YOUR NEXT REUNION?

[Fresh Chemistry](#) by Haley Travis is up next!

My high school crush. No, my only crush.

Ten years later, will we have the same chemistry?

Nicola was two years younger, which seemed like a big deal at the time. She was hotter than a Bunsen burner. Dreamier than a cloud chamber. But then I was the one who evaporated when I was shipped off to university without a chance to tell her how I felt.

I've spent a decade dreaming about her. When we meet up at our high school reunion, our chemistry is just as fresh as the first time I stared into her dazzling blue eyes. Nicola is all grown up – blonder, curvier, and even more brilliant.

She taught me all about reactions, but now they are physical, breathless, and make me crave every atom of her seductive figure. Our chemistry instantly becomes fiery – every touch teasing, begging for more.

Will our brand new relationship combust when our careers both pressurize?

THE BACK IN THE DAY SERIES

It's time to go back to school, but not to take tests or leave apples on the teacher's desk—it's reunion time! No matter how long it's been since graduation, love will be found surrounded by lockers, streamers, and memories of the glory days.

This September, join some of your favorite Instalove authors as they revisit those hallowed high school halls from Back In The Day to find out if love can be found in the past and how much everyone has changed.

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[Old Thing Back](#) by Jade Royal

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ava Monroe is the writing team of Magnolia Montgomery and Alana Winters. They became good friends when they met at an author convention. Soon they were talking every day and working together. We hope you love our collaborations because we have so much fun bringing them to you.

ALSO BY AVA MONROE

Bred By A Daddy Series:

Bred By Dad's Boss

Daddy's Hungry.

Every day I bring my sick father's lunch to his office.

It's also a convenient excuse to catch a glimpse of the sexy boss.

Darius Slater is the ultimate forbidden fruit.

But he's all I can think about.

On my nineteenth birthday, he tells me I have a choice to make.

I can either call him Daddy and be his babygirl, or I can walk away, denying us both the pleasure we long for.

"You brought your father his lunch, but what did you bring your Daddy to eat?" I ask as my hands go under her @ss and I pick her up.

Bred By My BFF'S Dad

Daddy Paints His Muse Inside And Out.

I just found the key to my heart; my daughter's new best friend.

She is incredible. She is one of a kind.

My masterpiece. My muse. My mortality.

If I claim her, my daughter could hate me. I could lose everything.

She could break me.

One look in her round, amber eyes, and I've lost my mind and heart.

Forgive me for I can't help myself.

It's over for me if I don't make her mine.

An Age-Gap Daddy Insta-Obsessed Romance Safe Read with a HEA.

Bred By Dad's Platoon Commander

Alpha. Bravo. Commander. Daddy.

Lily:

I'm a certified military brat.

My dad's been deployed for the last six months.

There's going to be a homecoming party for his platoon.

I've been so excited to see my dad.

I'm even more excited to finally meet his Platoon Commander.

Dominic Stone is a legend.

A celebrated hero.

A grumpy Hercules in need of a little sunshine.

I've loved growing up around the world.

But now that I'm grown, I want a home with the man of my dreams.

Dominic:

I saved my comrades' life.
Now he's saving mine, without knowing it.
Years of PTSD led to isolation.
Now I'm wide awake. Invigorated.
All because of his young daughter.
One look is all it took for her to become my babygirl and I knew I was her daddy.
One touch stole my heart and gave my life a new purpose.
One smile and I was alive again.
One night is all it will take for me to claim her cherry and put a baby in her ripe
womb.

*This Alpha daddy serves his country and his babygirl with a safe, HEA and lots and
lots of possessive loving.*

Mated To The Mafia Series:

[Claimed By My Guardian](#)

**Sinners And Saints Go Hand In Hand,
But When They Fight, Only One Will Stand.**

Mika:

My parents kept me safe from the monsters lurking in the shadows.
I was their princess, given anything my heart desired.
But nothing they taught me could have prepared me to face this loss alone.
Until a handsome stranger knocks on my door and pulls me into a confusing, but
comforting hug.
A savior at my door who promises to take care of me.
I'm absolutely terrified to leave the only home I've ever known.
He takes me away, hysterically kicking and screaming.
Leaving me to wonder if I'm really being saved after all.

Arman:

I'm a sinner, too damned for redemption.
My soul is wicked, tarnished.
I have a dangerous mind, and I don't suffer fools.
Ruthlessness courses through my DNA.
I've used my wit and brutal strength to take down my rivals, to decimate them
without mercy.
Obsession rules my heart, so intense and consuming it leaves me weak, begging for
more.
Unexpectedly, my innocent, youthful dove flew into a storm, and crashed into my
lonely life.
She's been sheltered, left innocent, vulnerable, and untouched.

Now, Mika is mine to protect, to cherish and to possess completely.

Whether she wants to be or not.

Author's Note: Claimed by my Guardian is a dark mafia romance. It contains some dark themes, graphic violence, possible triggers and a possessive anti-hero who doesn't follow the rules.

Claimed By My Stepbrother

I was born to be bad, but I'd die to be good for her.

Knox:

In Vegas, everything is a game.

I've been playing a game of war with my father my whole life.

Every move I make is designed to make his life harder.

Stress from this game has taken years off his life, but it'll never be enough.

He's a charming, sadistic monster, spreading his misery for fun.

Now, he's marrying another woman ignorant of his maniacal abuse.

I won't stand for it, and I intend to put an end to it.

Ever since I met my new stepsister, the ante has never been higher.

Now, I'll risk everything for the jackpot - winning her heart.

Sirena:

My mother is blissfully ignorant, planning her wedding to the man of her dreams. But, I sense there is something wrong with my new stepfather, something dark and sinister.

As soon as I meet his son, I know that the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

Knox is a demanding, controlling, and possessive madman.

I'm in over my head with this new family, but there's no escaping.

The handsome devil wants to dance with me, and he always gets what he wants.

But, I'm his stepsister - the one thing he can't have. Right?

What if I give in to this new life? Give in to him? What will become of us?

Warning: Claimed by my Stepbrother contains graphic violence and some dark themes that may be uncomfortable for some. If you like an alpha, mafia anti-hero with a filthy mouth who wants nothing more than to breed his step sister, this is the book for you.

Claimed By My Step-Uncle

Viva Las Baby Bump. That's What I Get For Gambling My Heart Away In Sin City.

Fiona:

They say that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, and I really hope that's true.

I'm here to celebrate my twenty-first birthday, and I plan to leave my virginity behind.

I don't have time for a relationship, and my middle name is *trust issues*.

My life has been a series of responsibilities since my mother abandoned my sister
and me.

Now it's just the two of us.

That is, until the mysterious man I shared a magical night with tracks me down.

He's irresistible, and he's decided that I'm his.

I'm not sure how long I can resist him — he's relentless and *very* persuasive.

Letting him get close to me isn't an option, no matter how much I want to give in.

I'm terrified that he'll discover my secret.

That can't happen. It's a matter of life or death.

**This book is a Mafia Romance with a forbidden age-gap relationship. The
anti-hero is OTT and has a breeding k!nk for the v!rigin heroine.**