



making
their

VOWS

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MAKING THEIR VOWS

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ONE

Grace

People are always telling me I'm an old soul.

I've never really understood what they meant until right this very moment.

I'm walking with my friends at night. My fellow high school seniors who I've known since our first day of kindergarten at Bright Horizons Academy in Beacon Hill. There are five of us—and I'm the only one who isn't loaded. Collier weaves slightly beside me on the sidewalk, a brown paper bag containing a bottle of vodka tucked under his letterman-jacket-clad arm. He keeps trying to hold my hand, but I move away quickly toward the other girls, who are also staggering and mid-giggling fit.

Suddenly I'm looking at this entire situation as if I'm seeing it through the eyes of future Grace. Future Grace is wearing a wool cardigan, sipping tea and shaking her head at me. In her sternest voice, she's asking me why I continue to get into these situations with my friends when I inevitably end up wishing I was home. And the truth is—I don't know.

I don't know how they convinced me to venture to South Boston at night. We don't belong here. Not because we're somehow better than the people who live in this working-class neighborhood, so different from Beacon Hill. But because we're here to make trouble.

If I had to guess why I've tagged along, preparing to enter an underground fight club nicknamed the Hellmouth, it's because I'm expected to be here. I always do what I'm told. I'm a dutiful daughter, aren't I, with my four point six GPA and myriad after-school activities? That goes for my friendships, too. I go where they decide because...they're my friends. We've done everything together since kindergarten. If I didn't have them, I would be a loner.

Why does being alone suddenly sound infinitely more appealing than trekking along the broken sidewalk in high heels?

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I ask Collier over my shoulder.

The girls roll their eyes.

"Here we go again. Grace is here to ruin our fun," sings Bianca.

"I'm not," I say, eyeing the dark underpass up ahead. Apparently that is where the entrance to the Hellmouth is located. "I don't want to ruin anyone's night, but...I don't know if it's a good idea to simply walk into an unfamiliar fight club and start throwing around challenges. Why don't we just get an Uber back to Beacon?"

"Grace, Grace, Grace," Collier says, inserting himself into the space beside me and wrapping an arm around my neck, the alcohol on his breath making my stomach pitch. "I'm the regional boxing champion. There is no one in this piece of shit club I won't be able to take. I'm professionally trained."

"I know," I murmur in my most placating voice. "Can't you arrange something in advance instead of barging in and taking them by surprise?"

"Fuck that." With a loud roar, Collier drains the remainder of the vodka and smashes it on the ground, making the rest of our party laugh uncontrollably. "I'm in the mood to fight now."

That's the thing about my friends. When they want something, they get it.

When I want something, I get it, too. To be fair.

Our parents work in finance. Property development. Software investing. We summer in Cape Cod. It's understood that each of us will attend an Ivy League school and give our parents bragging rights.

My friends seem perfectly content with this. But the old soul inside of me never has been. I've always had a restless itch under my skin. Future Grace whispers in the back of my head, telling me to live for adventure, not

for duty. The problem is, I'm scared to break tradition. I wouldn't even know where to begin. My pattern has been set in stone from day one.

"Come on, Grace," Collier cajoles, still trying to pull me up against his side. "One or two rounds with some loser Southie and we'll go home. You'll be safe in your little bed before you know it." He leans in and whispers near my ear. "I can join you there, if you'd stop being so stubborn. Our parents would probably love it if I came downstairs for breakfast smelling like you, sweetie. They already have our wedding invitations picked out."

I barely stop myself from gagging.

Collier and I were boyfriend and girlfriend through middle school. Right up until I caught him making out with another girl at the Totally Eighties dance. "You won't put out," he complained when I broke up with him that very same night. "Did you think I was just going to wait around? I have needs!"

He's been trying to get back together with me ever since.

It's never going to happen.

Even if our parents do think we're the perfect pairing, I can't even imagine letting Collier paw me or kiss me. I couldn't imagine it back in middle school, either. Honestly, there hasn't been a single member of the opposite sex that has inspired me to a kissing mood. My friends seem to be in that mood constantly, trading boys like baseball cards. I'm happy for them. There's no shame in exploring. I've just never been able to coax myself into doing the same.

"No, Collier," I say firmly, pushing him off me. "Please don't ask again."

"You'll cave eventually," he laughs, but there's something ugly in his eyes. This boy doesn't like to be rejected. It doesn't happen to him very often—if ever. "Maybe once I beat the shit out of some poor asshole in this club, you'll get turned on for the first time in your life."

Everyone laughs at that.

Heat steals up the sides of my neck, making my ears throb.

It's no secret they think I'm a prude.

But there's nothing I can do about that image unless I start sowing my oats—and I can't seem to locate them. My oats are missing in action.

Darkness envelops us as we walk beneath the overpass, stopping outside of an unmarked, steel door. A passerby would walk right by without

acknowledging the beat-up entrance. The only thing to indicate there is something unique on the other side is the stark white and green arcs of paint splashed above the door.

Collier strides right up to it, yanking on the handle, cursing when it's locked.

He knocks loudly while our friends huddle together, giggling, drunk, this dangerous situation just another amusement to them. They believe we're untouchable. And in most cases, I would agree. Money makes us immune to almost anything negative.

But the Hellmouth is an unknown.

There are rumors that people have died in fights at this place, their bodies tossed unceremoniously into the river. Or found weeks later in the trunk of a car at the airport. It's a bloody, no rules, ruthless place that is a far cry from the gentleman's matches Collier is used to.

Maybe it'll do him good to get his nose broken.

Startled by that bloodthirsty thought, I wrap my arms around my middle, trying to keep warm. We went to dinner earlier tonight at the country club, so I'm wearing a silk, dove gray dress that brushes me mid-thigh. There are pearls in my ears. To say I'm going to be a fish out of water in this establishment is a major understatement.

The steel door groans open and a giant man with a newsboy cap fills the space, a lit cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. When he sees us, he immediately starts to laugh. "Well check out the cast of *Riverdale*," he drawls in a thick, South Boston accent. "Yous lost or something?"

"We know exactly where we are." Collier holds up a fist full of hundred-dollar bills. "I'm here to fight your best guy."

The doorman takes a long pull of his cigarette, the sound of raucous cheering bursting out of the doorway behind him. "That right, pretty boy?"

"Yeah. That's right," Collier sniffs, starting to look irritated with the man's lack of immediate respect. "You got anyone in there who wants to take on the regional champ?"

Slowly, the man's mouth pulls into a grin. "Oh yeah, I think we've got someone."

A few seconds later, we're walking down the dark, dripping stone hallway, following the doorman. Up ahead, the light grows brighter, the cheers louder. More distinct. And then the heart of the Hellmouth comes into view. It's a makeshift boxing ring. More like a slightly elevated

platform surrounded by actual rope. Bright spotlights are situated in the corners of the stone den, highlighting the faces of spectators in a harsh glow. Casting scary moving shadows on the walls. There are two men in the ring battling with bare fists wrapped in a few layers of tape, their bodies glistening with sweat.

One of those men stops me dead in my tracks.

Future Grace sets down her teacup and lowers her glasses.

Who...is that?

My attention whittles down to the brutal young man throwing punches to the sound of shouts and whistles. He's unlike anything I've ever seen in my life. There is nothing gentlemanly about him. With a cut bleeding under one eye and a savage smile on his face, he's not from my world. His muscles are cut and glistening, his eyes black with focus. Determination.

A little bullet of heat fires right into my belly and knocks me back a step, the warmth spreading to...everywhere. Suddenly I'm not just hugging myself for warmth, I'm hugging myself to hide my erect nipples. To hide the goosebumps popping up all over my arms.

The fighter throws a right cross, his back muscles flexing, that fist connecting with his opponent's face—and down goes the other man, lying motionless on the platform.

And without delay, the fighter's gaze zips straight to me, his sweaty, dark brown hair flopping down over one eye, a frown pulling his brows together.

He takes a slow step in my direction and I start to tremble. What is happening to me?

"Holy shit, look at Grace," laughs Bianca. "Mystery solved. She likes to slum it."

Without taking my attention off the fighter—I don't think I could if I tried—I feel Collier's gaze rake me head to toe. "Grace," he barks, yanking me closer by the elbow.

In a split second, the fighter has ducked between the ropes and started storming through the gathered audience, the men parting like the Red Sea to make way for a victorious warrior. His lips are peeled back from his teeth, his muscles shifting sleekly, eyes focused on Collier's hand where it grips me tightly. Too tightly.

Oh my God. He's so masculine up close, I can't think straight.

His eyes aren't black, I see. They're golden. And they cut right through me.

"Get your hands off that girl," rasps the fighter, sweat dripping down the sides of his face. "Unless you want your yuppie friends to carry you out of here on a fucking stretcher."

The craziest thing happens. Collier listens.

He lets me go on command, seeming shocked that he did so after the fact.

A muscle flinches in the fighter's cheek. "That your boyfriend, beauty?"

"No," I breathe. But at the same time Collier says, "Yes."

I don't know how to describe the way the fighter is looking at me. It's somehow predatory and reverent at the same time. Like he is having a hard time maintaining control. Like he's working overtime to hold himself back from getting closer to me. Those golden eyes trace over my hair, my face, my body, and his eyelids seem to grow twice as heavy. "Did you come here to fight?" he asks Collier, hitting him with a glance rife with malice.

Collier is already shrugging off his letterman, handing it to our friend. "Damn right I did."

He takes off his shirt next and I can't help but compare Collier's pale, unmarked body to the raw, roughhewn, corded physique belonging to the fighter. There is no comparison. One belongs to a boy, the other to a man. "The name is Collier Banks. You might have heard of me. I'm the regional champ."

The fighter's low chuckle ties my tummy in knots. "I'm North Whitlock," he says, his gaze brushing mine, holding for a moment before transferring back to Collier. "And who exactly did you have to fight to get that title? A bunch of other rich chumps? Because, uh..." He crosses his arms and glances around the room, laughing quietly. "You only earned that title because none of us got the sign-up form."

Collier bristles at the resulting laughs. "It's not my fault you can't compete at the highest level. That your only option is some filthy underpass in Southie. You're just jealous."

Again, North's focus drifts to me and lingers. "Maybe I am." He takes a step in my direction and my pulse flies into a sprint, knees trembling. It's everything I can do not to collapse into a quivering heap of hormones as North approaches, slowly circling around back of me, miring me in ungodly awareness. I've never wanted to be touched so bad in my life—and it's this

stranger making me want it. For the first time ever. “Here’s an idea, regional champ. Why don’t you keep your money? I’ll fight you for the girl.”

Outrage claps my ears like erasers, followed swiftly by disappointment.

Of course the fighter turns out to be a jerk.

Whatever chivalry I thought he displayed must have been an anomaly.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell North to go to hell, that I’m not a piece of property, when Collier holds out his hand toward North for a shake. “Done.”

I’m rendered speechless.

Did that just happen? I’m the prize? Absolutely not. I’m leaving. It’ll be a cold day in hell before I stick around to be fought over like some piece of meat.

North doesn’t shake Collier’s hand, though.

Instead, he says, “Nah, I don’t gamble with human beings.” He winks at me. “I just wanted her to know you’re the type of motherfucker who does.”

TWO

North

Dear God in heaven.

This girl tore me apart the second I saw her.

That was before I even got up close. With her cherry cola scent filling my head, I'm now marveling over a masterpiece. A priceless work of art. And I'm not a man who gets to a lot of museums, but hell, they'd have to make her a special one all her own.

I'd pay the admission every day of my fucking life.

I'd sleep out in the rain just to catch a glimpse through the window.

Is she made of silk? Her skin barely looks real, it's so soft and radiant. She has long, thick brown hair that spills down her back, a few lucky pieces curling near her tits. And yeah, I'm trying real hard not to stare at that perky little rack, because there would definitely be no hiding an erection in these sweatpants. I'm halfway stiff already and if she keeps flashing me those innocently curious looks, I'm going to beg for one stroke of my lips across those soft shoulders. Just one. I could try and live off the memory for the rest of my life.

She's short, but thanks to her high heels, the top of her head comes to my chin. I'd sell my soul to pick her up, get our eyes level and look my fill. Figure out the exact shade of her blue eyes. These hands, though...these

busted, bloody, broken hands aren't meant to touch a girl like her. Only trouble comes out from reaching across the tracks like that.

Trouble for me.

Trouble for her.

As if I'd have a shot.

That gray slip she's wearing probably costs more than my rent—and that rent is due tomorrow. It comes due every damn month. That's why I'm down here night after night, taking all comers. Fighting to keep a roof over my little sister's head. So am I going to take this rich punk Collier's money? Bet his ass I am. I'm going to enjoy kicking the shit out of him knowing he has a chance with this beautiful vision standing in front of me. All thanks to genetic luck.

God, this girl. What is she doing to me?

I'm only a senior in high school, but I've had my fair share of encounters with women. I'm big for my age. Strong as an ox. And I'm not an asshole. Apparently those are qualities women don't mind in a man, so sex isn't hard to come by when I feel like it. But no female has ever tripped me up, let alone made my heart rifle violently in my chest. My heart is never involved whatsoever. Right now, though? It's roaring like a chained beast. My surroundings are gray, inconsequential. There is nothing but her angelic face and some intuition that I was supposed to meet her tonight. That I've merely been existing until now. Until her.

I'm caught between the impulse to protect her like a precious treasure...

...and fuck her until she deafens me. Rips my back to shreds with her nails.

When I suggested we use her as the wager, she didn't like it. Her eyes turned into twin blue flames and now I want them focused on me from below, our bodies slapping together. Sweaty. Greedy. Desperate. How am I going to live without touching this girl when the impulse to do so is turning me inside out?

"What's your name, beauty?"

She wets her incredible lips. "Grace."

"Of course it is." It's the perfect name for her. She's so elegant and smooth and soft-spoken, there should be a crown perched on her head. Jesus help me, I can't help but step a little closer, watching her eyelashes flutter over our proximity. "You didn't really think I'd use you as a wager, did you, Gracie?"

“I-I...” Color rises in her cheeks. “I don’t know what kind of man you are,” she whispers.

“Would you like to?” I whisper back, recklessly. Stupidly.

But Christ, I have this vision of us wrapped around each other in my bed. The image is so strong, it’s almost like I’ve seen it before. So while I know it’s idiotic to think I’d ever have a real chance with this wealthy, uptown girl, my mouth—and heart—apparently have minds of their own. There’s more to this intuition I have, as well, when it comes to her. For instance, right now, I can tell she’s trying to gather enough courage to say something to me.

“Do I want to get to know you? W-well. That depends,” she says, moving closer to me this time, nearly bringing the toes of her fancy shoes up against my ancient sneakers. “I won’t be gambled with. Not unless it’s my decision. Unless I’m the one doing the gambling.” She seems to quietly pep talk herself, straightening her shoulders, and Jesus, Jesus I might already be in love. Fuck. “If you win the fight, maybe I’ll give you my number.” Blue eyes pull me under and I go to my death willingly. “That way I can find out what kind of a man you are.”

I drag in a shaky breath, my dick starting to pulse painfully. Did she just say she might give me—North Whitlock—her number? To call her? If she’s willing to do that for me, it could be a precursor to more. And I can’t even wrap my head around that. Can’t even imagine what it would be like to take this girl out. Have her all to myself. “Are you fucking with me?” I rasp.

“Am I...” She is genuinely confused. “N-no. No.” Her palms mold to her cheeks. “Oh my gosh, was I wrong about you being interested? I’m sorry—”

“Hell no, you weren’t wrong,” I bark, shock nearly splitting me in half.

“What the hell is going on over there?” Collier the Chump whines.

I lean sideways and point a finger past Grace, spearing him with a glare. “Keep your mouth shut until I’m ready to kick your ass.” The idiot says something back to me, but I don’t hear what it is, because I’m one hundred percent zoned in on Grace. “If you mean what you said—that if I win, I get that number—he doesn’t have a chance in hell.”

Her gaze dips to my torso, before she blushes and looks away. “Did he have a chance before?”

“Nah.”

She laughs.

And I almost propose.

It's the purest, sweetest sound I've ever heard. It belongs far, far from this life of mine. This gritty, grinding, day-to-day struggle that I've known since birth. Yet I find myself taking one last look at her and striding toward the ring, determined to win the best prize I've ever been offered. Grace's phone number.

Cheers start going up around me, men laying bets and throwing money around. Shouting encouragement. Slapping me on the back.

Before I reach the ring, I nod at one of my boys. "Make sure no one goes near her."

"On it, North."

Possessiveness toward Grace is already running wild inside of me, no hope of being penned in. That's a bad sign. She might be sweet and innocent, but she's still a rich girl looking for a thrill on her way to marrying an even richer man. I have to keep that in mind. I can't forget or start getting my hopes up that we could be together in the real world.

Whatever she is offering me, I'll take it. Even if it's just a phone call.

Even if it's just a stroke of that soft shoulder.

She's not for you. Not for keeps. I know that—but I don't have to like it. Hell, for the next few punches, I'm going to let that unfairness fester, let it stub my humanity out like a cigarette. I'm going to hate that I can't have her for good. That I don't have the money or stability or pedigree to win her—but this smug fucker does?

Once his hands are taped, Collier ducks beneath the ropes, shadowboxing, dancing in a circle. Waving to his fancy friends. When he turns to me, whatever he sees on my face makes the blood drain from his.

The bell dings.

I smile.

He's flat on his back in one punch.

The referee, who is basically there just to check pulses and declare winners, lifts my hand up into the air. But I'm not really interested in celebrating—I want that phone number. More than I've ever wanted anything. With the chump groaning and curling into himself on the mat, I exit the ring, nodding absently at the people calling my name, thanking me for their winnings. I cut through the crowd in the direction I left Grace, eager to see her again. To hear that voice. And finally I reach her, stopping a foot away, caught off guard once again by how fucking beautiful she is.

What the hell was Collier thinking bringing a girl like her to this place? I could climb back into the ring and knock him out all over again.

“I don’t see your phone...anywhere.” Her gaze skates over my chest, a blush erupting on her face. “How am I going to give you my number?”

“Are you kidding me? Your number, beauty?” I duck my head to bring us eye level. “Tell me once and I’ll remember it until my dying day.”

She breathes a laugh. “You have an impressive memory.”

“A man who’d forget a single thing about you isn’t worth a damn.”

A beat passes wherein we gravitate closer, our fingertips brushing together, the noise muffling around us. “Do you talk like this to other girls?”

I shake my head slowly. “What other girls?”

We’re so close now, there’s no air. I can’t breathe for being so close to all of her perfection up close. I’m sweaty and bloody and she’s a fucking angel. How is this happening?

She goes up on her toes and I brace for a kiss, positive I’m dreaming. No way this flawless masterpiece is putting that mouth on mine. And I’m right. At the last second, she goes past my mouth and whispers her phone number in my ear. Her breath on that sensitive part of my body turns my dick to stone and I have to clench my hands until they shake to keep from touching her. *Take what you can get.*

Suddenly I’m jerked back by the shoulder. Away from her.

Whoever is accosting me? That was their first mistake. Because taking me away from this girl is like waving a red flag in front of my face. I turn just in time to see Collier rear back with his fist—and I block it with a bellow, using the momentary opening to head butt him square in the nose, once again knocking him flat on his back. I don’t stop there. I pounce on top of him and lock a hand around his throat. “You could have hit her.” I tighten my grip until he starts to turn purple. “If your fist came any closer to her, you’d already be dead. Do you understand me? I should end your miserable life for bringing her here in the first place.”

“Stop talking about her like she’s yours,” he spits, blood oozing from his nose, eyes blazing. “She’s not.”

Collier is right. Grace isn’t mine. I met her fifteen minutes ago and I’m behaving as if I’ve got a permanent claim on the girl. When in truth, she probably wouldn’t want that in a million years. A long-term relationship

with a bare-knuckle boxer from Southie? Yeah, right. I'm a thrill. A flash in the pan. She's slumming it for the night.

So be it.

I open my mouth to say...what? I'm not sure. Maybe that she isn't mine, but she sure as hell can do better than this punk. But Grace speaks up from behind me.

"Stop talking about me like I'm a trading card, Collier." She steps into my periphery on the right, her long, smooth legs taking up my vision. "I'm nobody's until I say I am. But..." She pauses, shifting in her heels. "I'd like North to drive me home tonight. So I guess that makes me more his than yours, doesn't it?"

The place erupts in a series of hoots and ooohs, turning Collier's face red.

Christ. This girl is fucking dynamite. For some reason, she's giving me the gift of her time and attention. And I can't help it. A guy like me doesn't get many moments this good, so I have no choice but to savor it to the fullest. "And that was your third knockout for the night," I say to Collier. "Might want to stay down this time, regional champ."

Then I stand, watching in awe as Grace threads her clean, graceful fingers through my bloody, filthy taped ones and lets me walk her out of the Hellmouth.

THREE

Grace

Oh my God.

Holy moly.

What am I doing? I don't know! I don't know who I am anymore. This spontaneity is completely unlike me. Asking for rides home from strangers is not something I do. I know it's completely reckless to go somewhere with this young man I just met, but the idea of getting into a car with Collier after the way he behaved made my skin crawl.

My only defense is that North feels like the furthest thing from a stranger. There was a click inside of me when I first saw him in the Hellmouth. As the minutes passed, it was almost like being awakened. Being around North makes me feel tight and achy and winded, the sensation so overwhelming, it's a wonder I manage to remain upright in the face of the rush.

We're walking to his car now, sneaking looks at each other in the darkness. Both of us have expressions on our faces that suggest we don't know what hit us. Does he really feel the way I do? Like he's been struck by lightning?

Our footsteps echo beneath the underpass. We sort of gravitate toward each other, North lifting a still-wrapped hand and letting it hover just above the small of my back. As if he wants to protect me without sullyng my

dress. In truth, this is the first time in my life that I wouldn't mind my dress getting dirty. If it meant North touching me, I'd ruin a whole army of dresses. What is it about him that makes me ticklish and hot from the neck down?

Everywhere.

I've given up trying to hide my hard nipples and the cool night air makes them pucker all the more. North traces them with a hungry glance, then cuts his eyes to the side, letting out a shuddering breath. He's attracted to me. We're attracted to each other. He's still shirtless, since he literally stepped out of the ring and left, me at his side. But a moment later, we reach a vehicle that looks straight out of the past. It's black and chrome, low and sleek. A Chevy that looks lovingly cared for, right down to the white racing stripe down the center of the roof.

"I love this," I whisper, as he opens the passenger side door for me.

He searches my face. "Yeah?"

I nod, noting his relief. Was he worried I wouldn't like his car? Realizing I'm staring at his chiseled mouth like an eager beaver, I shake myself. In order to slip into the car, I have to brush past North and as I do so, the tips of my breasts drag across his bare chest, making his eyelids grow heavy. I'm trembling by the time I sit down, my knees pressed tightly together. There is a continuous tug at the juncture of my thighs, a slickness I've never experienced before. All because of this fighter. And my body's reaction to him excites me as much as it scares me. Sex is an unknown, as much as he is. But the throb in my nerve endings, the hunger for closeness to him has me racing there. Toward this mysterious land of intimacy I know nothing about. Maybe I should have listened more closely to my friends, instead of zoning out when they talked endlessly about hooking up.

North watches me cross my legs, our gazes connecting as he closes the door and skirts around back of the Chevy. He throws open the trunk and in the rearview, I watch as he tugs on a shirt, drags a hasty hand through his hair, unwraps his hands and tosses the used tape into the opening. Once he closes the trunk again, he braces his hands on the edge of it, taking a long breath and expelling it, leaving white, curling patterns in the night air. I'm not the only one who is nervous. Or trying to get a hold of themselves.

A moment later, he gets into the driver's side, his head brushing the roof of the car, his big fighter's body taking up all the air—or all of my air, for that matter. With a twist of his wrist, the engine rumbles to life and we pull

away from the curb. It's happening. It's really happening. This fighter from the Hellmouth is driving me home. It's risky. It would be a punishable offense in my father's book. And yet, I feel as safe as houses.

"Where are we going, Gracie?"

Where ahh we goin', Gracie.

His Southie accent tickles my erogenous zones like the tip of a feather and I curl my fingers into the edge of the leather seat, holding on for dear life against what this guy makes me feel. Like I'm on the highest point of a roller coaster about to drop straight down. "Beacon Hill. Chestnut Street. Do you...know it?"

Slowly, he shakes his head. "Nah, beauty. I don't know a thing about Beacon Hill."

My face heats over asking him such a dumb question. Of course he wouldn't know my neighborhood. The same way I don't know South Boston. "It's okay, I can give you directions." I scrub my hands up and down my thighs. "Thank you for doing this. Driving me home. My friends...their antics were worse than usual tonight. I wish I could blame a senior year power trip or the alcohol, but that's pretty much them on a regular basis."

"That's not you, though," he states. "You don't seem the type to be in Southie after dark stirring up trouble."

"You're right. I'm not." I rub my lips together. "Then again, this... taking a ride home from someone I don't know isn't typical behavior for me, either."

"What is typical behavior for you?"

Our gazes collide across the console and I can see he's genuinely interested, those golden eyes cutting through the darkness and tracing my features. The way he looks at me is so powerful, it almost feels like his hands are on me, dragging up and down my exposed skin. "Typical behavior for me?" I say unevenly, wracked by a warm shiver. "I'm...well, I'm the senior class president. I'm captain of the flag team. A founding member of the science club. I guess you could say I'm kind of...focused on making my college applications look good. That seems to be the entire focus of my life. And it always has been."

I expect him to roll his eyes over my goody two-shoes answer, but instead his brow is furrowed, as if he's focused on every word. "So your typical behavior is being an overachiever."

“Is that your polite way of calling me a nerd?” We share a chuckle. “Yeah, I guess you could say I’m an overachiever,” I say quietly, as he pulls onto the highway. “But it’s never felt like it’s for...me. A lot of it is trying to please my father.”

North hums in his throat. “What do you do to please yourself?”

Awareness ripples across my senses, the tiny muscles of my femininity pulling taut like a violin string. “I...I...”

“I didn’t mean that like it sounded, Gracie,” North says gruffly, dragging a hand down his open mouth. “I meant, what do you do for fun? Didn’t seem like you were having a good time with your friends.”

No. I wasn’t. In fact, it’s been a long time since I enjoyed myself with them.

But as far as answering his question? What do I do for fun?

I can’t formulate a response. There’s just...nothing.

“I don’t know,” I say, kind of hollowly. “Everything feels like a duty. Going from point A to point B without a thought as to why. I’m doing what I’m supposed to do. What’s expected of me. Hanging out with the kids of my parents’ friends. Joining the right committees. Not letting all of the balls drop, when sometimes...I’d just like to drop kick them into the harbor.”

North is silent for a long moment. And then, “Is that what this is?” He gestures between us. “Am I your way of rebelling?”

“What? No!” I turn to him in the seat, my hand automatically going to his thick bicep. He hisses a breath at the contact, his jaw slackening. Unsure if that response is good or bad, I draw my hand back and curl it in my lap. He stares after it, as if he wants to grab it back, but won’t. Or maybe isn’t sure if I’d like it. “I’m not spending time with you on some...some quest to make my father angry or buck the norm. I—”

“Hey. It’s okay if you are, beauty,” he reassures me in a rush, sitting up straighter in the driver’s seat. “I’m not complaining. You can rebel with me as much or as little as you want, all right? Make your father mad over getting a ride home from a Southie kid? That’s fine with me. I’m not stupid. I know when I’ve been given a gift.”

My pulse flutters in my neck, the smalls of my wrists. “You think driving me home is a gift?”

He looks at me like I’m crazy. “Are you kidding? I’m never opening these windows again so I can keep that cherry cola scent in here as long as possible.”

If he wasn't driving, I swear I might be crawling into his lap, fusing our mouths together. He's just given me the nicest compliment I've ever received in my life, made all the more special because he obviously meant it. There's no mistaking the sincerity in his tone—at all times. “You mean everything you say, don't you?” I murmur, giving in to the urge to lay a hand on his forearm, memorizing how it jumps, flexes. “You're an honest person.”

A line moves in his cheek, his gaze dropping to my hand where it touches him. “I don't have much, but I've got my word, you know?”

“What do you have, besides your word, North?”

“This car. A two-bedroom apartment right above the train. When it passes underneath my building, everything in the place rattles. I've got a little sister—Tulip. She's thirteen. It's just me and her now.” His Adam's apple slides up and down. “I've got a fucking angel in my passenger seat and she's touching me. I've got that, and Christ, it ain't nothing.”

Oh my God.

How am I supposed to breathe when he says things like that? I affect this fighter as much as he affects me. I actually have the power to move this young man who is apparently raising his thirteen-year-old sister alone. This man who I want to know everything—everything—about. And his gruff admission is making me bold for the first time in my life. Making me want to be equally as honest. Wetting my lips, I let my fingers travel up his arm, across his shoulder. Higher until I can slide them into his hair. Tugging lightly on the strands until he groans. “North?”

“Yeah, Gracie.”

“Will you kiss me when you drop me off?”

He starts to pant like he's out of breath. “Like a motherfucker, baby.”

The engine starts to roar and I realize he's flooring the gas. I continue to stroke his scalp lightly with my nails while giving soft directions near his ear. I'm liquid fire, throbbing in places I've never throbbed before, the scent of his sweat and spicy deodorant breathing life into parts of my femininity that were asleep until now. I've never even kissed a boy beyond a simple peck and yet, here I am, wanting to lick North's contoured shoulder. Wanting to straddle his lap and rub myself anywhere I can get friction. What has he done to me?

Giving in slightly to my body's urges, I lay my lips on North's shoulder and his big chest shudders, those scarred knuckles shifting on the wheel.

“God help me, I shouldn’t be telling you this. But...you don’t want to know what I’m going to do to that seat once you’re gone.”

Fire crawls in a hundred directions along my skin and I’m riveted, hypnotized by him. Innuendo and sex talk among my friends makes me cringe or grow uncomfortable, but I’m almost panting with the need for North to continue his confession. “I do want to know. What you’re going to do to the seat.”

Briefly, he closes his eyes before focusing them back on the road. “After I drop you off safely, after I get that kiss, I’m going to find somewhere dark. Recline it all the way back and pretend you’re still lying there. Maybe the next best thing to your body is the heat from it.”

My heart is jackhammering, the moisture gone from my mouth. “I still don’t understand.”

“Gracie,” he says on a pained laugh. “I’m going to pretend I’m between your thighs. And I’m going to hump the fucking seat. That’s as close as I’m going to get to the real thing.”

Through my suddenly sparking vision, I study his profile. “You’re so sure about that?”

His expression is hard when he glances at me. “You need to be sure about that, beauty. If I had you that way...”

“What?”

A low curse leaves him. “If I had you that way...if we had sex, I’d start having dangerous thoughts, all right? I wouldn’t be content to be your rebellious phase anymore. I’d want this to be permanent. I’d be jealous and protective and fuck...fuck, baby, maybe I already am. Maybe it’s too late. Maybe I knew you were mine from the second you walked into the Hellmouth.” He gives a hard headshake. “Am I scaring you?”

“No,” I whisper, trembling. Already unclicking my seat belt, my hormones totally in control now. I need him, I need him. I want to feel those words he just said out loud in the form of kisses and gropes of his hands. I want the embodiment of his threats to pin me down. “Take a right here, I’m the last house on the block.”

He nods, breathing hard. “Is anyone going to see us?”

I check the clock on his stereo. “No. My mother is on a spiritual retreat in Thailand. And my father has been asleep for hours. My curfew is one in the morning. He sets his alarm for one, then checks my bedroom to make

sure I'm there. That means we have...twenty minutes before I have to be inside."

North's strong jaw flexes and he nods, throwing the car into park at the end of the street, just outside the glow of a streetlamp. I think he's going to kiss me inside the car by leaning across the console. But instead, he throws open the driver's side door and climbs out, rounding the back bumper to my side. Yanking open the door and lifting me out by my waist. My feet haven't even touched the ground when my back lands against the side of the car and North's mouth is storming over mine. Changing the landscape of my life forever.

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FOUR

North

FUCK.

I can't believe I'm kissing this girl.

Grace.

She tastes like her name suggests. Innocent, delicious, like she could save me.

Can't get enough of her. I'm plastering her to the car, being too rough, but I can't help it. She made my cock so stiff with all of her sweet touches and whispers in my ear, it's a wonder I'm not banging her like a depraved criminal on the hood of my car. But no...no. Control yourself. Grace is classy. A good girl. Don't think about how tight she would be. Don't think about how her blue eyes lit up with aroused wonder when I told her I'd be stopping to hump the passenger seat on the way home tonight.

Because God knows, I'm not going to be humping her.

No fucking way.

I'm hanging by a thread where she's concerned. My sanity, my hunger. I don't know what the hell this girl is doing to me, but it feels irreversible. And if I sunk my dick between her gorgeous thighs and popped that cherry—I know damn well she's still got it—she wouldn't be able to keep my away with a restraining order. Hell, an army.

I lick into the warm cave of her mouth, groans issuing from our chests at the meeting of our tongues, the excited way they mate, my fingers plunging into her hair to hold her steady while I fuck that perfect little mouth. God. Goddamn. She's letting me go for broke, slanting my head and taking her lips roughly from an angle. All while her belly writhes against my rigid cock, hot whimpers making me want to feast all the more thoroughly. So I can taste those sounds. So I can absorb them into my fucking blood.

We kiss wet. Messy.

It's burning me alive.

How she doesn't care about anything but getting more, not shy about opening her mouth and inviting me deeper, her head falling back against the side of my car. She slaps my shoulders and breaks for air, eyes glazed with need, then starts to tug me back to continue making out. I'm not letting this opportunity pass, though. Perhaps my one and only opportunity to taste her everywhere. If she cuts me off after this, I need memories.

Kissing her hard on the mouth once, I rake my lips down to her neck and scrape my teeth there, tonguing the spot in apology, in worship, opening wide to lick and kiss as much of her softness as possible. It's impossible, beyond my capabilities, to keep from looking down the low neckline of her dress to those sexy tits. My mouth waters with the need to suck them, taste them, and as if she read my mind, she arches her back until those sweet mounds almost pop free.

Jesus. She is the sexiest girl on this planet. No question. Perfect, perfect angel who needs pleasure, needs treasuring. What if her pleasure could be my job? It's an insane notion, but...what if? I must be looking at her with that question on my face, because she responds. "Yes," is all the whispers—and then I'm groaning, sucking her nipples through the silky material of her dress, dragging my teeth over their peaks. "Oh m-my God," she heaves in a strangled whisper. "North."

"Can I suck them bare, beauty?" She nods frantically and my hands shake, peeling down the flimsy material until her rosy nipples are right there, straining, making my cock so hard, I have to squeeze my eyes closed and concentrate on not coming. "Jesus, you're so goddamn beautiful. Can't believe you're letting me touch you. Can't believe it."

With a growl, I latch on to one of her nipples, drawing on it hungrily. Lapping at it with dirty grunts, circling that pebbled bud over and over until

she's wiggling in frustration between me and the car. I mold the other one in my palm, licking left to give it equal attention, looking her in the eyes while lapping, lapping at it over and over again.

"More. I n-need more," she gasps, pulling at my hair, her body bowed against the side of the car, demanding I service her tits. Demanding my mouth. More. I know she wants more.

Know damn well she needs to be orgasmed.

Give her your cock.

I could do it. Pump it home nice and easy.

She's horny enough.

I was foolish to think we could stop at kissing. We're like kerosene and a match. She's the flame and I'm the accelerant, building her need higher with strokes of my tongue in her gorgeous mouth—and she's doing the same to me. Her whimpers are driving me out of my fucking mind. The only thing keeping me from yanking her legs up around my hips and driving into her virgin pussy is the fear that she'll drop me afterward for taking it too far when I know better. When she trusted me to get her home safe. I'm the experienced one.

Or she'll try to drop me—and there I'll be, pining for her like an obsessive maniac. Unable to stop. Fuck, I'm already there. Aren't I?

Can feel myself slipping, falling, into something that's going to gut me.

And I go eagerly.

"You want more, beauty?" I hum against her ear. "If you let me put my fingers down the front of your panties, I'll finger your tight, wet cunt. My baby want it?"

She sobs in response to my question—loudly—and I barely cover her mouth in time with mine before the sound echoes down the block. Her eyes are unfocused, but she nods, nods.

"Yes?" I say, taking my hand away slowly. "Yes, I want my cunt fingered?" Her nod is emphatic. And I watch in astonishment as she takes my hand from her tit and guides it down the front of her body, tucking it just beneath the hem of her dress. "You're going to be the death of me, Gracie."

I cup her pussy for the first time.

"Jesus Christ," I breathe.

She's full and soft and soaked. Straight through her little cotton panties.

Once that discovery is made, there's no stopping me from ripping the underwear down, needing to get to the precious flesh underneath, leaving the material bunched mid-thigh. Ahhh shit, and then I'm dragging my middle finger up and back, lightly, through the split of her velvet pussy, gathering moisture as I go. Grinding my back teeth to keep from shouting to the world how perfect she is. "Bet this is tight as a motherfucker, ain't it?"

And she might be innocent, but I bring something new out of her.

Something hot and excited and eager to explore.

"Find out," she whispers.

Oh yeah. I'm a goner. She's got me by the fucking stones.

Looking her right in the eye, I press my middle finger good and deep, her cool exhale bathing my face, those eyes growing even more unfocused. "I...N-North?"

I can barely respond I'm so overcome by the tight squeeze of her. She's tiny between her thighs. Narrow, hot, virginal. My cock would make her scream. "Yes, Gracie," I say thickly.

She makes a frustrated sound, her teeth sinking into the full bottom lip. "Why does it feel so good and so bad at the same time?"

If I needed any further proof that she's untouched, she just gave it to me. But I don't need it. I only need to give her pleasure. That becomes my driving force, right here on this street lined with multi-million-dollar townhomes. I can't give her a life like this, but I can make her pussy better. I can damn well do that.

"You need an orgasm, beauty. Keep your thighs open so I can give it to you."

Gritting my teeth, I add a second finger, her sex making a hot little suctioning sound as I pump them in and out, finding her clit with the heel of my hand, grinding on it lightly. And her eyes go wide, my name tripping over her lips in a whimper. "Don't stop. Don't stop."

"I won't." My breath is rasping in and out. I'm so horny for Grace, I'm almost dizzy, my dick pounding with excess blood flow in my pants. I'm never going to get enough of her. I thought sex would seal the deal and make me possessive, obsessive, but the deal is already done, isn't it? I never had a chance. "You need this pussy satisfied, you come down to Southie and get it from North. I'm open twenty-four hours for you, Gracie. Knock on my door and flash me these innocent, wet panties and I'll know just what to do, won't I?"

She makes a breathy sound, her bare tits heaving, and then the moaning starts. The hottest sound that has ever graced my ears. But out of fear of getting caught and separated from Grace, I drop my mouth over hers to capture the sounds, just as she comes in the palm of my hand. It's the filthiest little orgasm from the most innocent girl. It steals my remaining breath. The way she grabs my hand, grinding down on it, rocking her hips and continuing to bury her tongue in my mouth, over and over, until I'm dripping semen down the leg of my sweatpants, her moan flavoring my throat.

"Can I lick it up?" I ask raggedly, breaking for air, already dropping to my knees. "Please?"

When I shove my face up beneath her dress, catching the moisture as it drips from her cunt, she whimpers and twists her fingers in my hair. "Yes. Yes." She wraps one thigh around my head to give me better access and I worship her for it, worship her for letting me lap at her inner thighs like a thirsty animal—and maybe that's what I am. A poor man licking up drops of gold from the rich girl. Taking anything he can get.

Finally, I've tasted every last drop and I walk forward, wrapping my arms around her hips, burrowing my cheek against her stomach. My cock is so full and heavy, it's almost touching the ground, but I'm not burdening her with that. She's given me enough. I've got the memory of her taste, the sound of her moaning for me, the feel of her mouth on mine. It's more than a man like me could ever ask for.

A beep goes off somewhere inside the car and she whispers. "That's my alarm for one a.m." She slides down against the side of the car, so she's crouching in front of the fighter she brought to his knees, physically and emotionally and every other way imaginable. Her mouth finds mine in a kiss that leaves our eyelids heavy. "You'll still...call me?"

Stunned by my luck, I repeat her number back to her hoarsely.

She bites her lip to subdue a smile, collects her things from my car and disappears into what can only be described as a palace. Out of my reach in every way except for one.

Sex.

Is that going to be enough for me?

No.

Hell no it won't. But what choice do I have?

Look at where she lives, this senior class president. This angel.

I climb to my feet and prop my hands on top of my Chevy, watching as the light goes on upstairs and she appears in front of the window. She stands there, watching me for a moment, then lets her dress drop, leaving her topless, the top of her panties visible over the sill.

Jesus. Jesus. I've just seen her tits up close, but there's something about this that feels like permission. And I take it, blindly reclining the passenger seat, making as much room as I can in the footwell. Then I prop one foot outside the car, one inside, and fit my hips to the edge of the seat, sucking down her cherry cola scent and fucking the leather cushion violently. The car rocks and groans with every thrust of my hips, but I can't stop. I watch her play with her nipples through the rear window, my thrusts accelerating until I come with a choked noise, right where she sat, right where those ass cheeks parted and her pussy plumped. Drenching the front of my sweatpants.

When I open my eyes again, her light upstairs is out.

And I drive home slowly, the obsession taking deeper and deeper hold.

No bottom in sight.

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FIVE

Grace

I sleep late the next morning.

Normally on a Saturday, I would be up and out of bed by nine a.m., working on college applications or volunteering at our local animal rescue. But my body is boneless. So relaxed that I don't even shift to find comfortable spots. I'm just plopped face down in the center, arms curled under my favorite pillow, a dreamy smile tilting my lips.

North.

Thinking his name makes me sensitive. Everywhere.

My thighs rub sinuously on the sheets, my nipples tender from his mouth.

Last night was the first time I've ever hooked up with a member of the opposite sex. I don't know much about physical intimacy. But I know instinctively that none of the boys of my acquaintance could have done this to me. None of them could have talked to me like that, touched me with such precision and care...or been so animalistic afterward.

Can I lick it up?

I exhale roughly into my pillow remembering his face pressed between my thighs, his wet mouth reflecting the moonlight. Who knew I could be turned on by things like that?

No. No, it's only with North.

It's as though my body was waiting for him to arrive and turn the key in my ignition.

What am I going to do about this guy?

I would like to think I live in an open-minded world with non-judgmental people. But I don't. I've been born and raised in upper-crust Boston. Tradition is carved into every inch of my identity, along with everyone I know. Dating an underground fighter from Southie will not merely be frowned upon. People will try and stop it. My circle doesn't like change. They like the status quo and reject anything that threatens it.

There is no doubt in my mind that I'm the main topic of conversation among my friends right now. Word that I went home with North has probably already spread beyond my inner circle to the rest of the school. Collier will need to save face somehow—and I'm sure that means I'm going to be the victim.

In other words, school on Monday is going to be a real delight.

Stretching my arms above my head, I grab my phone on my bedside table to check the time—and see dozens of texts from my friends, including Collier. I ignore all of the ugly opinions about my behavior, focusing on their grudging concern and fire back quick messages to let them know I made it home fine. Then I leave my phone face down on the bed and pad downstairs for breakfast.

Halfway down the staircase, the sound of low, hushed male voices brings me up short.

One of those voices belongs to my father, but I don't recognize the other.

Brow pinched, I continue down the stairs and peek around the door into the dining room—and I have to slap a hand over my mouth to contain my gasp. Sitting at one end of our eighteen-seat banquet table is my father. And Boston's most notorious criminal.

Curtis Tennison.

My heart pumps in a wild rhythm in my chest. What is he doing in our house?

Ever since I was a little girl, I've read about Curtis Tennison in the news. He's been in prison once—for a long stretch—and he didn't clean up his act upon release. The consensus among the public is he only got smarter. Better at hiding his crimes in plain sight. What in the world is he doing meeting with my father?

Staying as quiet as possible, I remain out of sight and listen to their conversation.

“There are going to be a lot of eyes on this development, Foster. But only until you’ve awarded the contract. Then everyone goes home. Nothing to see here, right?” Curtis shifts some papers. “You pick one of the obvious firms for the job and once no one is looking, right before the contract is signed, you quietly switch to our company.”

Is he talking about one of my father’s developments?

Simmons Foster, my father, works in finance, but for the last five years has started getting into developing. Investing at first, then leading projects himself. Mainly, he likes the idea of having our family name on buildings and shopping centers around Boston and is willing to spend a lot of money to make it happen.

“So this construction company of yours...Ludlow Builders,” my father says, consideringly. “Is there any way to connect you to it on paper?”

“No,” responds Curtis. “There’s no trail leading to me. You can rest assured of that.”

My father drums his fingers on the table, a sign he’s thinking something over.

“I’ll remind you again of the reason you’re awarding the contract to Ludlow. We have a lot of friends in this city who can cut through red tape. You’re not going to get tied up with constant inspections and delayed permits.” A long pause. “Although if you go with someone else, I can’t guarantee those delays won’t happen. Could be even more than you expect.”

“Is that a threat?” Simmons blusters.

“Take it how you want,” Curtis responds with a smile in his voice. “Look, you’ve already got me in your house. You know you’re going to agree to this. Let’s not waste time.”

My father sighs. “All right. We have a deal.”

Is what I’m hearing for real?

My father is working with a criminal? The notorious patriarch of the Boston mob?

I’m in such shock that I don’t realize I’m slipping off the step until it’s too late. One second I’m hidden behind the wall, the next I’m stumbling into view. And staring straight into the shrewd eyes of Curtis Tennison. The

man who has his fingers in every illegal activity in this city from gambling to real estate—apparently.

“Who is this?” Curtis drawls, his gray eyebrows lifting, looking me over in my nightshirt with blatant interest. “Your kid?”

My father has gone pale as a ghost.

“Sure hope she didn’t hear anything,” Curtis continues, though there is a dangerous glint in his eyes now. “Loose lips sink ships, little girl. You know that, right?”

Skin clammy, pulse racing, I have no choice but to nod. “Yes.”

“Good.” The gangster stands abruptly, buttoning his suit jacket. “You’ll make sure she stays quiet, won’t you, Foster? I’d hate to have to do it myself.”

My throat closes up as the man swaggers past me, leering at my breasts when he draws close, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. A moment later, he goes out the back door which exits onto a more private end of the street and I’m left gaping at my father.

I expect him to make sense of everything I’ve just heard. Instead he pounds a fist on the table and shouts, “What the hell are you doing home?”

“I...slept in,” I sputter. “Is that really what we should be talking about?”

His jaw ticks. “You think I need to explain myself to you?”

Simmons and I don’t have a close relationship. At all. He’s more like a mentor. But that has never struck me as odd. My father is a person I have to make proud in return for this easy life he’s provided. That’s the unspoken understanding. My mother lives her own life, “finding herself” with a new method every year. Far too busy for me. It’s the same for all of my friends. They don’t have popcorn movie nights with their parents or matching Christmas pajamas. It’s all very formal. Strict. We lead very separate lives and as long as I’m doing what’s expected of me, there’s no cause for conversation.

“No, you don’t have to explain,” I say quietly. “But...I wish you would.”

For long moments, he sits there glaring past me. “Maybe this is a good lesson. You take shortcuts, people find out and use them against you. My last development ran into some snags and I bought a way out. Now I have no choice but to use Tennison’s shell company, Grace. Or I could be brought up on charges.” His upper lip curls. “Then who would pay for Harvard, hmm?”

A sharp object digs into my chest. I've caught my father in a weak moment and now he's lashing out. It's not unusual. He's never been a kind person. He expects perfection. Demands it. Anything less turns him mean. "I haven't gotten into Harvard yet."

"Oh no?" He pounces all over that. "Well what are you doing to guarantee you do? At this very moment, daughter, what are you doing? Are you volunteering? Doing extra credit for your AP classes? Or are you just fucking standing there questioning me, the one who put this ten-million-dollar roof over your head?"

"I'm not questioning you," I murmur, trying to hold my ground. "I just want you to be careful."

"Me? You just made yourself a witness, you brainless child." He laughs bitterly, then starts gathering the paperwork with hasty movements. "Goddammit, Grace. Why didn't you just stay upstairs?"

Is he right? Did I put myself in danger by accidentally revealing my presence?

Is the information I have now so important that telling anyone could get me...killed?

"Well I see you've realized the severity of the situation," my father snaps. "You'll spend the day upstairs working on applications. Writing essays. I want to see copies of everything you've done by tonight. Then we're going to dinner at the club. I'm meeting with some associates and you'll be on your best behavior. Make me look good, since you appear to be incapable of anything else. Don't even think about leaving your room until then."

Until my father banishes me to my room for the day, I don't realize how much I was looking forward to seeing North. Whether or not I'd acknowledged it to myself, my plan was to get dressed and hope he calls, so we could make plans. I want to kiss him again so badly, my lips are already tingling. And now...after the conversation I overheard, there is a layer of ice on my skin and only his arms around me is going to make it better. How crazy is that after only knowing him one night? It's just a fact, though. There is something...magical about North. About me and North together. It can't be denied or explained.

My father dismisses me with a wave and I quickly retrieve coffee and a muffin from the kitchen, bringing both up to my room. I eat and guzzle coffee while reluctantly firing up my laptop, pulling up an application for

one of my fall-back schools. I work on it for a few hours, then decide to take a shower. I'm halfway through undressing when a text message comes through on my phone. It's probably one of my friends, but I check anyway, my entire body flaming when I see the text is from North.

You free to talk, Gracie?

My nipples turn into tight pebbles over those five digital words. I can hear them in his rough accent. Can hear that adoring way he says my name. With my heart ticking madly, my fingers are unusually clumsy when I reply.

Yes.

The phone rings literally one second later.

I answer out of breath, even though I'm sitting on my bed. "Hi."

"Hey, beauty."

His voice wraps around me like the warm hug I'm craving. "Took you long enough."

He laughs. "I've been pacing with my phone in my hand for hours. Been wanting to call you since last night, but I...shit, Grace, I don't want to come across too eager and scare you."

"You couldn't. You won't."

North blows out a long, unsteady breath. "What are you doing?"

"Working on an application," I say, wrinkling my nose at the offending laptop. "It's not how I wanted to spend my Saturday, but my father didn't give me a choice."

"How would you normally spend it?"

"There's a shelter for animals where I volunteer sometimes." A smile curves my lips. "I get to play with puppies. Sometimes I read or go swimming at the club or see friends."

A beat passes. "You're not seeing any friends today?"

There's a hard note in his tone and it takes me a second to read between the lines. "I'm not seeing Collier, if that's what you're asking, North. I told you, he's not my boyfriend and he never will be. I can barely stand him."

North's breath caresses my ear. "You don't...God, Gracie, I shouldn't be demanding explanations from you like that."

My hand tightens around the phone. "But you can't help it?"

"No," he says, hoarsely. "I can't."

Slowly, I lie back on my bed, looking up the ceiling but seeing only his face. His golden eyes. "What if you could demand explanations from me? What if you..."

“What if I was your boyfriend?” He half-laughs, half-groans. “You should probably know this whole conversation is making me hard as a motherfucker.”

“Oh,” I breathe, my toes curling into my comforter. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, you sound real sorry,” he teases, releasing a long exhale. “You really want to hear this?”

“Yes.”

His exhale bathes my ear. A few seconds tick by in silence. Then, “If I was your boyfriend, you’d walk around looking so dazed and satisfied from being fucked, no other guy would bother trying to run game on you. They’d know I have it locked down tight. They’d smell me all over you. They’d see the suck marks on your neck and your swollen-ass lips—and they’d know it’s no use trying to compete.”

Lord. Tingles cascade from my head down to my toes. I have to roll onto my stomach momentarily to whimper into my comforter, before bringing the phone back to my mouth. “You don’t talk like an eighteen-year-old boy.”

“I had to become a man a lot faster than most.”

“Why, North?”

He clears his throat. “That’s a conversation for another day. I called to talk about you. All these applications you’re filling out for college...you know exactly what you want to be someday?”

My lips twist. “Well, it’s a little complicated. My father already has an internship lined up for me at one of his friends’ funds. I’m expected to go into finance.” Curling up on my side, I lower my voice. “But secretly, I’ve always wanted to be a teacher. For little kids. I was super shy as a kid—and awkward. With these glasses that made my eyes look magnified and a substantial lisp. But I had this great kindergarten teacher named Miss Griffin and she made me love school. She had glasses, too, and she called me her twin.” My smile blooms at the memory. “I want to make the different kids feel less alone. Like Miss Griffin.”

“I can see you doing that. Easy. You know...” He hesitates before continuing. “We talk a big game in the Hellmouth. Especially me. I might not seem intimidated on the surface when a bunch of rich guys show up throwing around more money than I’ve seen in a year, but it stings. And you picked me. Right in front of them. I still can’t believe it. You’re already like Miss Griffin in a way, Gracie. You’d make a great teacher.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, touched. Shaken. North pays attention. He feels a lot. He says what he’s thinking without worrying about being too honest. Too real. And it makes me want to do the same. Makes me need to share that kind of intimacy with him on a constant basis. “I wish you were here. So I could kiss you for saying that. And so I could tell you that I don’t care how much money you have. I don’t care.”

“That’s easy to say when you’re used to having it. When it’s never been an issue.” I hear him swallow hard. “But it would be an issue for us. It just would.”

“If we were together?”

“Yeah. If we were together, beauty.”

“I already feel like we are,” I whisper. “Don’t you?”

“Yes,” he rasps. “God. You already feel like mine. Felt like mine the second I saw you.” We’re both panting and my free hand is roaming up and down my hip, playing with the side band of my panties, goosebumps shivering hotly on my skin. If he was here, I would give myself to him, no question. I would surrender everything. Just let him take and take and take his fill. “Gracie...if it means anything to you, I’m trying to go legit. There are ways I can make money fighting. Maybe even a lot more than I am now. There’s a manager that has been sniffing around, trying to sign me for a while. I called him last night when I got home. I don’t know if it could lead to anything. I’ve always just fought because it’s all I know how to do and it puts cash in my pocket, but I do love it. I love it...and now? I’ve got a reason to try and make something happen.”

My chest crowds with pressure. “You called the manager for...me?”

“Would it scare you if I did?”

“No.”

“Then hell yes I did it for you. I’d sell my soul for a real shot at making you mine.” I hear a soft thud and imagine his forehead hitting a wall. “But even if I can make money boxing, beauty...I’m still from the wrong side of town. That’s never going to change.”

“I wouldn’t change a single thing about you.”

“Pretty sure your father will feel differently.”

“I don’t care.”

“You do care,” he says in a burst. “You just got finished telling me you want to be a teacher, but you’re going into finance, instead. Because he wants it. You’re home on a Saturday because he demanded it.”

I recoil like I've been slapped.

Not because of North's words.

No. It's the realization that he's right. I've known for a long time that I'm behaving like a puppet on a string. When my father says jump, I ask, "how high?" I'm working toward a life I don't even want because Simmons Foster has decreed that's the way it will be. I'm eighteen now. An adult. And yet I obey without question. Like a child without a will of her own.

"Fuck, Gracie. I'm sorry. That came out wrong—"

"No. No, you're right. If he knew you drove me home last night...or that we're talking on the phone, he'd lose it. He wouldn't consider how you make me feel. He disregards anything that isn't part of our glitzy little world. It's wrong. But you're right, North...I do care too much what he thinks. What he wants from me."

"I have some balls telling you you're wrong in any way. Look at you. Good grades, senior class president...I'm in awe of you. Forget what I said, okay? You're doing everything right—"

"I'm not doing what I want to do, though."

He's quiet for several seconds. "What do you want?"

I sit up in the center of my bed, rubbing at the crushing sensation just below my collarbone. "Right now, I want to see you again."

"Then come to me, Gracie. Now. I'm waiting."

My eyes fly to the clock and I wince inwardly. "I'm stuck here all afternoon, by order of my father. After that, there's a dinner with some of his associates. I have to be here. Maybe after?"

"I'm fighting tonight..." He curses. "I don't want you in the Hellmouth again. I won't be able to concentrate for worrying about you."

Disappointment almost collapses me. My God, how am I already in so deep with this man? It's like my continued existence is hinging on the next time we see each other. There's a desperate clawing in my throat, my body on edge, needy. Am I addicted to him already? In such a short time? "What about tomorrow?"

"Yes. Tomorrow," he says thickly, as if he's having the same withdrawals. "I have to help my sister in the afternoon with her science project. Then we could meet—"

"Wait, whoa. Science club geek right here. Remember?" I tuck some hair behind my ear, worried I'm being too eager. "I could...help? With the project?"

North doesn't answer right away. "You'd do that?"

Relief sails through me. Of course I wasn't overstepping. This is North. "Of course I would. Just text me your address and I'll...see you tomorrow?"

"Fuck, Gracie." Three soft thuds in the background, as if he's rapping his forehead off the wall now. "How am I going to survive until then?"

I'm not sure where the wicked idea comes from. Maybe because his voice in my ear has made my entire body feel touchable and delicate. I look down at myself, clad only in panties since I was getting ready for a shower when he called. "Maybe a picture of me would help?"

His exhale is rocky. "God yes. Please."

I slide off the bed and enter my en suite bathroom, flipping on the light. I've never done this before. I've always kind of rolled my eyes at friends who send nudes to their boyfriends. But I'll never eye roll them again, because oh my God, it's thrilling. I'm almost shaking from the anticipation and the illicitness of the whole act. "Are you going to send me one back?" I ask.

"I'll do anything you want."

Staring at my reflection in the giant bathroom mirror, I watch my teeth sink into my bottom lip. Watch the rosy flush appear on my cheeks. And I hardly recognize myself. "I want one of you. Not...I-I'm not asking for everything to come off. Just, um..."

"You want my shirt off, beauty?"

I swallow, but it gets stuck. "Yes."

There's a rustle of fabric in the background. "You like my body, Gracie?"

"I love it," I whisper.

"You want to know why?" His voice is getting thicker. More sensual. So masculine that every one of my stomach muscles coils in response. "You might be a virgin, but your pussy knows what a workhorse looks like. I'll go round after round on that tight, little thing without busting. You'll be exhausted and dripping with sweat by the time I come. That's why you like my body. Your pussy knows what's up, even if you don't yet."

A whimper escapes me. My thighs are shaking by the time he's finished speaking. I can barely find the wherewithal to say, "Yet?"

His low growl sends a fresh dose of lust through me. "I'm going to go to hell for taking what can never really belong to a poor man like me. But

you come to Southie tomorrow, beauty? See if I can fucking stop myself from getting on top of you.”

“I’ll be there,” I manage, hanging up, before I do something pitiful like moan into the receiver. Oh my God. This guy...he makes me feel like someone else. Someone better. With more agency. More excitement. And I don’t want the feeling to end.

I need North Whitlock with every ounce of my being.

Turning around so my backside is reflected in the mirror, I drop my panties. Taking a deep breath for courage, I shake out my hair, arch my spine and snap a picture of me naked from behind, just a hint of side boob peeking out on the left.

A text comes in from North immediately.

Jesus Christ. Can’t believe you sent me this. You’re so fucking hot. Just wait until I get my tongue between those buns.

My mouth drops open.

Is that a thing? I text back.

And then a picture comes in and my jaw drops even lower.

North. No shirt. A white towel wrapped around his waist. Eyes hooded. Muscles on full display. The picture of male prowess and confidence. He’s more than just hot. He’s a man. He’s a...workhorse. Is that why my private flesh and inner thighs are turning wet and pliant?

My gaze tracks lower then and I see the thick protrusion against the front of his towel. His erection. It’s enormous. Did I give him that?

My question is answered a moment later when he texts me again. *Look what you do to me.*

Pretty sure I’ll be looking until I see you tomorrow, I reply back.

Jesus...same. Please be safe for me until then, Gracie, North says. *Until I can protect my beauty myself.*

I will, I reply. And then I collapse onto the floor in a fit of squeals, willing time to move faster. More eager for tomorrow to arrive than I’ve ever been for anything in my entire life.

“North Whitlock, I’m yours,” I say in a heartfelt whisper to the empty bathroom.

SIX

North

I tell myself she's not really coming. That this is all a dream.

I'm worried if I get my hopes up too high, they'll speed down from the sky and crush me.

After waking up early to clean the entire apartment, I'm standing at the kitchen window waiting for an expensive car to pull up and park on my block. I have no idea what she drives, I just know it's probably new—and it's probably going to stick out like a sore thumb. Honestly, I don't care. Like I told Grace, money is going to be an issue between us. Pretending it won't be is just foolish and shortsighted. But right now, I don't care about who has more spending cash, I just want to see her. I just want to touch her.

Living in this cramped apartment with my sister, I don't get a lot of alone time. But ever since Grace sent me that picture of her tight ass, I've locked myself in my bedroom and crammed my cock into my fist three times, panting into my pillow when I come. Christ. I'm half hard again right now remembering the taste of come on her thighs. How she kisses sweetly once second, dirty the next, keeping me on my toes. If she actually shows up here, it means something. It's important. This won't just be a one-time thing where I drive her home, hook up, and leave. It's the start of something.

My gut tells me it's something big.

Bigger than me or her or zeroes in a bank account.

A silver Porsche stops in front of my building and all I can do is shake my head. That thing is going to get keyed to hell. Unless I let everyone know the owner of the Porsche is with me. With that in mind, I stride out of the building, down the flight of stairs and out into the muted Sunday sunlight. And that's when she steps out of the car.

My step falters, heart smashing helplessly into my jugular.

Oh fuck.

Oh fuck, I'm gone for this girl.

And she's looking at me the same way over the roof of her low sports car. A car I wouldn't be able to give her in a million years. She's flushed, outrageously gorgeous, her blue eyes naked with yearning. I've got to be reflecting it right back at her. There is no way to hide something this strong. I'm already moving in her direction, faster than before, starved for the sight of her up close. When I round the hood and see she's wearing a short, white skirt and a black, tucked-in top that molds to her tits, all of the blood in my brain travels south.

"Hi," she breathes, taking a single step in my direction.

Whatever expression she sees on my face makes Grace drop her purse. She throws her arms around my neck and I catch her up in a bear hug, lifting her straight off the ground. I can't help it—I groan brokenly at the feel of her body, the cherry cola scent that rushes straight to my head. My groin. I haven't felt whole since Friday night when I drove away from her house, I realize. This is whole. When she's in my arms.

"God, Gracie. How did I miss you so much?"

She rolls her forehead against mine, her breath coming out in a stuttered pattern. "I missed you, too. I don't know how I made it through yesterday."

Her honesty is the knockout blow to my self-control and I kiss her hungrily, tasting that initial gasp on her tongue, memorizing the way she gathers the collar of my one nice shirt in her hands, slanting right and opening her lips for me. Letting my tongue slide in deep, deep, everything moving in slow motion, the earth allowing me to get a hit of my drug. Our tongues wind together and pull, a sense of possessiveness powering through me. Oh yeah. Mine. We start easy, taking our time, but soon we're messy and frantic, my right hand molded to her ass through that short fucking skirt, holding her tight to my lap.

The kiss has a lot to do with sex. There's no doubt of that.

Before the day is over, we're going to end up naked.

Grace isn't leaving Southie a virgin. There's just no way an attraction like this can go unsatisfied. It's not typical. It's not normal. It's demanding and raw and vital and vicious.

This attraction hurts.

There's more than sex inspiring the desperate movements of our mouths, though. It's almost like this is our new method of breathing. I'm not sure how life was possible before now. How I got up out of bed every day without being able to kiss Grace. And the way her heart slams up against mine? Those broken sounds coming from her throat? They tell me that by some miracle, she feels this way, too. Jesus, it's a miracle.

I have no idea what we're going to do about it.

We're from different worlds.

But for today, I just want to forget all about the differences in our economic statuses and be with her. Soak up every blissful second I'm given.

I back Grace against the car and she moans, starting to wrap her legs around my hips—and that's when I know I have to break the kiss or risk plowing her in broad daylight, right here up against this fancy Porsche. Calling on every ounce of my will, I take my tongue out of her perfect mouth and press her face into my neck, stroking a hand down the back of her hair. "Damn, Gracie." I gather her up to me as tightly as possible. "How long do I have you for?"

"Until tonight." She lays her cheek on my chest. "I usually have an early dinner with my father at the club on Sundays, but I told him I needed to do some research at the library for an extra-credit assignment. He gets home around eight and I should try and be home by then."

"Eight," I repeat, unable to believe my luck. "That's almost the whole day."

She stiffens slightly. "I...I mean, I don't have to stay the whole time. I just thought—"

"I want every second." I tip her chin up, surprised to find her looking a little self-conscious. How the hell is that even possible? "Hey. Whoa. There are no doubts here between us. If you can give me time, please give me the time. I want it so fucking bad. Every minute you can spare me. You doubt that?"

After a minute, she shakes her head. "No."

"Good." I kiss her forehead. "We don't doubt. Say it."

“We don’t doubt,” she whispers, her breath bathing my neck.

She lifts her eyes to mine and I’m rocked with a sense of purpose. This girl—this angel—is in my care for the entire day. It’s barely started and this is already the greatest day of my life.

“Your car should be safe out here, now that I’ve mauled you in front of the entire neighborhood.”

“Why is that?”

“Oh you didn’t know?” I duck my head, sliding my open mouth up and down the side of her neck, making her shiver. My hands curl into fists at the small of her back, stopping just short of clutching that ass. Later. “Your boyfriend has a reputation for fighting. And winning.”

Our gazes light on one another at the term *boyfriend*—and when she doesn’t question it, my blood pumps faster, hotter. With purpose. With fucking joy. “No one messes with you,” she whispers. “And so no one messes with me?”

“That’s right.” I slide my right hand up her back, fisting the long fall of her hair, tugging back her head to expose her throat. Holding her there. Holding her by the hair in plain view of my block like a fucking caveman—and she loves it. Her fingers twist in my shirt, her hips restless, unconsciously rubbing against my stiff cock. “Mine.”

She wets her lips, eyelashes fluttering. “Yes.”

I can’t stop myself from licking my tongue up the smooth contour of her throat. “I want to spend the day playing house with you,” I confess in a voice thick with possessiveness, emotion. This cocktail of new feelings she’s mixed inside of me. “Want to pretend this is never going to end.”

Grace turns her head and catches my mouth in a hard kiss. “Who says it has to?”

With that, she pulls away and I follow her, hypnotized, toward my building, dangerous hope spreading in the center of my chest. Could this be forever, despite the odds against us?

Could I...keep her forever?

WHEN I LET flawless Grace into my apartment, it looks twice as old. Twice as worn.

The cabinets look crooked, the floorboards look extra rotted.

My television is dated. The curtains on the window are left over from the previous tenant, because what the hell do I know about hanging curtains? I've cleaned and scrubbed the place to the best of my ability, but in comparison to her glowing skin and expensive clothes, it's an indoor junkyard.

Grace never loses her smile, though. She sets down her designer purse on my wobbly kitchen table and turns in a circle, surveying the space. "I love the colors you painted the walls."

"Thanks," I say, rubbing the back of my neck. "My sister...I was just trying to brighten the place up for her a little. We don't get a lot of sunlight in here."

"You did a great job," she murmurs. "My entire house is tastefully gray and white. There isn't a vase out of place. I'm afraid to walk through it sometimes, in case I knock something over." She shifts in her leather sandals. "I like your place. A lot. It's comfortable."

"Some might say it's a little too comfortable." I laugh, trying to hide my embarrassment over her seeing my old-ass apartment. "It looks a lot better with you in it."

Her nipples turn stiff against the front of her shirt and she blushes, dragging her palms down the front of her skirt—and yeah. Christ. We're not going to make it very long without fucking, are we? I'm barely restraining myself from carrying her to the back bedroom and testing out the warranty on my mattress. We're only separated by a few feet in my kitchen and all I can do is count the surfaces. The kitchen table, the counter, the wall. Places I can set Grace down and give us the orgasms we're both obviously in dire need of. Maybe if I come inside of her once, I'll be able to relax a little?

Yeah right. This is your life now. Walking around with a stiff dick for this girl.

Grace Foster. She called herself mine. What will I get her to say in the dark when she's jammed full of me, naked, on the edge of coming?

Jesus, I'm an animal.

I've got this beautiful, classy girl in my apartment and all I can do is lust after her?

Pull your act together.

"Do you want something to drink?"

"Sure. Anything."

Nodding, I pour us a couple of sodas, handing one to Grace and watching her lips touch the edge of my glass, memorizing which one it is. We move to the living room and sit down on my couch, watching each other for a few seconds, before giving in. She kicks her shoes off and comes to sit on my lap. I position her sideways, her legs stretched out, head resting on my chest—and I'm positive heaven can't be any better than this. Holding Grace in my lap. In the silence. The entire day in front of us.

"What happened to working on your sister's science project?" she asks, her fingers toying with the top button on my polo shirt.

"She'll be here in a while and we'll have to get started. I gave her the money to go buy the supplies. But knowing Tulip, she's probably looking for a poker game to try and double the cash." My laugh shifts her hair. "My sister is a character."

"With a name like Tulip, how could she not be?" says Grace, shifting her attention up. "And you're raising her alone. How did that happen?"

I swallow the knot that forms in my throat. "Gracie, I want you to think the best of me, you know? But the more you find out. About my family, how I live..." I pull her closer, as if to keep her from running. "I'm just worried I'm making it less likely for you to stick around."

She tilts her head, studying my face.

No judgment. Just purity, honesty. A conduit right to my soul.

"We don't doubt, remember?" she whispers.

My goddamn heart. It jumps all in. "Right," I rasp, looking into her blue eyes and falling deeply, irrevocably, obsessively in love with Grace Foster. I'd die for her. I'd kill for her. Those facts write themselves in stone, never to be worn away. "My mother and father were dealers. They dealt right out of this apartment. Drugs, Grace." Her eyes remain steady on mine, but I can see the shock in their depths. "One afternoon, I came home from school and there was a bunch of strangers in here. My parents were out somewhere, probably making a delivery. And when I walked in, I...someone was trying to convince Tulip to do a line of coke. She was eleven." My head throbs at the memory. "I knew I had to do something or she'd end up dead. Or abused. I just knew. So I started fighting for cash."

I can see her doing the math. "You told me Tulip is thirteen now. That means you started fighting when you were...sixteen?"

My nod is brief. "I didn't want to uproot her completely. She was already going to lose her parents. So I put down a security deposit and first

month's rent for them on the other side of town." I blow out a breath. "We've spent two years dodging social workers. Maybe I should let them help. But I can do it, Gracie. I can get her through high school with a sort of normal life. I won't let her get pulled into some system."

"Oh my God, North," she breathes, cradling the side of my face. "You weren't exaggerating when you said you had to grow up fast."

"I know I can't give her much. I can't give you much—"

She sits up in my lap, sparks pluming in her eyes. "Look, I can tell...I could tell the second I walked in here that you're worried about how I'll see this apartment. You're worried about money. But look at your selflessness. Your courage. Don't you realize that character has so much more value than dollars and cents? Your character."

"I know you believe that, beauty." I slide my fingers into her hair, tugging her close so I can speak against her temple. "I know you want to believe that. But it gets old, not having options. Living hand to mouth. Character only takes a man so far."

"Well it takes him all the way with me," she whispers, slowly picking up one of my hands and placing it on her breast—and the surprise move makes my balls squeeze painfully. Robs me of breath. "And if you don't think I value character over money, I'll just have to prove it to you."

"You don't have to prove anything to me, Gracie." I thumb her nipple, gritting my teeth when it quickens into a little bud. "Especially not on your back."

"I know that," she says shakily when I tug her top down slightly, just so I can the start of her areolas. "I'm going to get on my back for you of my own free will."

"Keep talking like that and you're going to lose your virginity on this couch."

"When you touch me, it doesn't matter where I am."

"Fuck, baby," I growl, overcome. Head spinning. I turn and throw her down on the cushions, coming down hard on top of her, moaning into her neck when she opens her knees, welcoming my hips into the cradle of her thighs. "You can't wait, either. You need it."

She tugs on the hem of my polo, pulling the garment over my head and rendering me shirtless. "This is you. Don't wear nice shirts for me."

My lips twitch. "Yes, Gracie."

Before I can devour her hot fucking mouth, she stops me with a hand on my chest. “I was thinking of something on the drive over.” My need to get inside of this girl is momentarily eclipsed by the need to know everything happening in her head. Every goddamn thing. “You go to school with girls. Don’t you?”

Where is she going with this? “Yeah...it’s co-ed. Public school.”

Her blue eyes cloud over. “Well I don’t like that.”

A disbelieving breath puffs out of me. “Gracie, you’re...you can’t be jealous.”

She pouts at me.

And my dick gets so hard, I worry if I fuck her now, I won’t last two pumps.

This girl is possessive. Of me. I can’t believe it.

I love her putting a claim on me. But I don’t want her jealous. God, no. It burns me alive, her having the slightest bit of that green emotion swimming around in her beautiful head. Obviously I’m never going to stop being jealous over her. Every time a man glances in her direction, I’ll want to rip out his throat with my bare hands. But Gracie isn’t dealing with that shitty feeling on my watch. Not happening.

I lean down and kiss her long and hard. Then I tear myself away, standing and striding to the kitchen, taking a Sharpie out of the drawer and returning to where she now sits up on the couch, all mussed up and horny. “What is that for?”

“Write on me. Write all over me.” I lay down on my back, slapping a hand to my stomach and chest. “Sign your name on everything you own—and beauty, that’s every square inch. That marker won’t wash off. Not for days. And you can trace over it, make it dark again the next time I see you.”

“Really? A-are you sure?”

“Dead sure. Let everyone know.”

She’s already straddling my hips, the warmth of her pussy snuggling down on my cock. When she leans forward to start writing, a smile curling her lips, those tits are halfway out of her tank top, swaying with her every movement. And God, God, if she’s going to be the death of me, I’m going to go so fucking happy.

Before she puts the Sharpie to skin, I cup the back of her head and force her to meet my eyes. “Gracie. You will be the last female I ever touch. You’re the only girl who will ever exist for me. Done deal. Done. It was

like that the second I saw you in the Hellmouth. I was yours and you were mine.”

“It was the same for me,” she breathes, writing the word *Gracie* across my abdomen, then moving to the cuts on my hips, writing *mine, don’t touch*. With every stroke of the pen, my cock grows harder until I’m stiffer than steel. “Do you want to sign me, too?”

I squeeze her hips, rocking her on my dick and watching her eyes glaze over. “I’m going to leave more than enough marks on you.”

She leans down and whispers against my lips. “Inside and out.”

“Gracie,” I groan, lifting her with a thrust. “It’s time to put it in.”

Her nod is frantic, her fingers clumsy on the fly of my jeans—

The front door of my apartment busts open, smacking off the wall. I go to spring forward to protect Grace, until my brain begins functioning again and I realize there’s no danger. So instead, I drag a hand down my face, cursing the gods of timing.

“Zip your pants up, please,” Tulip calls from the kitchen, plastic bags rustling as she sets them down on the counter. “I don’t need to be scarred for life.”

Grace dives off of me, scurrying to the far end of the couch.

I watch her go like a man who just had his lottery winnings snatched away.

“Oh my God,” she mouths at me, fixing her hair.

“Sorry,” I whisper back, my heart booming over the fact that she obviously wants to make a good impression on my sister.

A moment later, in walks Tulip, sizing up Grace with a sniff. “Are you going to help me get an A on my science project or spend the whole day making out with my brother?”

Grace shoots to her feet, nervously smoothing her skirt. “Science. Let’s, um...” She sticks out her hand for a formal shake. “Nice to meet you. I’m Grace.”

Tulip stares at the offered hand like it’s a freshly fallen moon rock, shaking it slowly, peering at Grace a little more closely than before. “You were right. She is beautiful.” She lets go of Grace’s hand and clomps back toward the kitchen. “Let’s hope she can make a homemade battery, too.”

And right there before my eyes, my sex kitten girlfriend goes full nerd, gasping with excitement, smiling at me as she follows me sister into the

kitchen, both of them rifling through the supplies and already chatting happily. “I know the exact variables to use,” I hear her say.

Christ, this girl. She’s a goddamn wonder.

I’ll be in love with Grace Foster until the day I die.

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SEVEN

Grace

Tulip's face lights up when the lightbulb blinks on and off in a glowing pattern.

"Holy hell, North," laughs the girl. "Your girlfriend's a genius."

I'm still flushing from her use of the word *girlfriend* when he leans down and gives my neck a quick kiss. "Among other things."

Tulip is asking me questions about battery life and electrical conduits, but I can't help watching North move around the kitchen out of the corner of my eye, this rough and tumble fighter who is in the act of making dinner. Cooking an actual meal. His shirt is back on, a tragedy, but I console myself by cataloguing his other parts. His forearms flex as he grinds pepper into a bowl of ground meat. His brow furrows in concentration when measuring out the right amount of pasta, snapping it over the bubbling water.

I've never been more comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time.

I'm relaxed in this apartment. Doing a science project while the scent of tomato and meat and oregano teases my senses. It's warm here. Welcoming. It's nothing like my sterile and oftentimes hostile home in Beacon Hill. It's the people that make a home, obviously. And North has turned this into a functional, happy space for his sister. I feel lucky to be here. Happy. Like I've stepped into a bear hug.

There is also the great discomfort that comes from being anywhere near North.

He's so much more mature than any boy I've been around. He's not a boy—he's a man. There's an air of capability and strength and confidence to him that makes my body feverish. What he said to me on the phone Saturday morning is making more and more sense. My female parts know something my brain doesn't quite comprehend yet. I'm sensitive between my thighs, my every movement seems to set off a series of tingles. Down my spine, in my nipples, along the line of my neck. My thoughts are kind of fuzzy because all I can think about is his voice saying "it's time to put it in."

Tulip commands my attention and we work on her research paper, our heads bent together. She tells me funny stories about her science teacher and I return the favor with some of my own. North's little sister has a depth of knowledge in her eyes I'm positive I didn't have at thirteen, but she's also silly and outspoken and honest. I like her a lot.

I don't realize how much time has passed until North sets down a bowl of pasta in front of me and I glance up from the textbook, noticing the glow of an orange sunset through the kitchen window. "Thank you," I murmur, almost biting off my tongue when he takes a seat to my left and squeezes my thigh under the table. "Do you cook every night?"

"Mostly, yeah," North says, twirling his fork in the pungent pasta. "Sometimes we grab sandwiches from the deli if I can't make it to the store."

"Those are my favorite nights," Tulip sighs. "No chance of food poisoning."

North throws a wadded-up napkin across the table and it bounces off his sister's forehead. "You love my cooking."

"Ah, it's decent, I guess."

They smile at each other and my heart almost plonks onto the floor.

"Do you cook?" Tulip asks me.

"D-do I cook?" I repeat, the back of my neck prickling with heat. "Um...no. I've never cooked anything, actually. We go to the club. Or... there's always just food in the refrigerator."

As soon as those ignorant-sounding words come out of my mouth, I want to take them back. Tulip pauses in the middle of chewing. "Who makes the food?"

I'm suddenly a fish out of water, flopping around on the dock. "Our chef," I admit quietly, digging into my pasta. "She comes three times a week. Makes fresh meals on those nights and leaves easy heat-up ones for the others."

"Wow," breathes Tulip. "Your parents must have stupid money. That's what North calls it, because too much money makes people forget how to do basic things for themselves."

"Tulip," he growls, setting down his fork. "I didn't say that about your family," he rushes to explain, his hand back on my thigh under the table. "I probably said that years ago. Never about you, Gracie."

"It's okay," I say, laughing to break the sudden tension. "There's some truth to the phrase *stupid money*. I don't think the Fosters would win any survival competitions. They'd drop us off on the desert island and we'd ask for directions to the spa."

Tulip giggles around her bite of spaghetti.

North gives me a look heavy with apology and I shake my head to let him know I'm not offended. "Maybe your brother can teach me how to cook."

A smile tilts his lips on one side.

His hand moves higher on my thigh. "I've got a lot of teaching to do, don't I?"

The question seems innocent or related to cooking, but the two of us know it isn't. And I eat the rest of my meal highly aware of North's big massaging hand on my thigh. I can't help but think this is the beginning of what we're going to do together later. Almost like he's preparing me. Turning my legs limber and moistening me in that private place. Foreplay.

"This was amazing," I say unevenly, after taking my last bite.

He winks at me, his thumb digging gently into my inner thigh. "Thanks."

"My night to clean up," Tulip sing-songs, collecting the dishes from the table. "I have to hurry. Naya is going to FaceTime me in like five minutes."

"Naya is one of her friends," North explains to me, before addressing his sister again. "I'm going to take Grace out for a walk. You good here for a while?"

Tulip is already sailing from the room, calling, "I'm good," over her shoulder.

"A walk?"

North pulls me to my feet, planting a kiss on my forehead. “Uh-huh. Come on.”

Excitement dances in my belly as we leave the apartment, North locking it behind us. But we don't go down the stairs, we go up three more flights, then out onto the roof. The cool night air does nothing to cool my flushed skin, still so warm from North's attention at dinner. And it doesn't help when he threads our fingers together, pulling me close for a long, promissory kiss, his mouth slanting hungrily over mine.

“Goddamn, I love you sitting at my table. Eating food I made myself.”

Speaking of spaghetti, my knees suddenly have the consistency of wet noodles. “I love it, too,” I manage. “Kind of like...the grown-up version of playing house.”

“A lot more grown up, if you want, beauty,” His eyes are hot on mine, glittering and dark. Hungry. “I'm going to take you somewhere we can be alone. You good with that?”

I've barely nodded before North is pulling me along, to the edge of the roof.

“Watch your step, Gracie,” he says, holding me by the waist and helping me step across the slight gap between buildings. And then we're simply walking across rooftops in the fading orange light of sunset. It's magical. Holding the hand of this young man I'm rapidly falling in love with, allowing him to lead me on an adventure in this unfamiliar place, so far from my upper-crust zip code and all the expectations that comes along with it.

We're walking for about five minutes when North stops outside of a steel door located on one of the roofs. He lets go of my hand and produces something metal from his pocket, using it to jimmy the lock. It pops open, groaning on its hinges, and North guides me into the near darkness, smirking back over his shoulder. “Having second thoughts?”

“No,” I admit quietly. “Is that crazy?”

“If you were with someone else, yeah. Letting them take you into a strange building at night would be crazy. But you're with me.” He squeezes my hand. “And you're not going places with other guys anymore. Not even as friends. Are you?”

His possessive tone causes a lustful twist beneath my belly button. There's a part of me that knows I should pump the brakes on his ownership of me. I'm not like this. I don't let anyone treat me like property. Collier

tried to do that very thing before and I refused to allow it. In fact, it outraged me. With North, though...I like the way he claims me. I want to be claimed by him. To be unquestionably his. Is it okay to be possessed by someone as long as you're choosing to be? Yes, I think so. And thank God for that, because I'm not sure I could deny what's happening between us even if it was wrong.

"No," I say to his back. "I'm not going anywhere with other guys anymore."

"Say the rest."

My nipples turn to spikes. "Not even as friends."

"Good girl," North says, stopping abruptly, turning and pulling me up against him. I expect to be kissed and I'm dying—dying for his mouth. So I'm surprised when he touches something behind me on the wall and the lights come on.

A gasp turns into a laugh as I register our surroundings.

We're in a giant, windowless space.

There's a pool. Several of them. Steam rises from their surfaces.

There are big, oversized lounge chairs around the perimeter of the room. Stacks of fluffy white towels on racks. The gentle hum of jets releasing bubbles beneath the water.

"What is this place? A...bath house?"

"More like a fancy club. I found it by accident. There isn't even a sign downstairs to mark the entrance." He looks around with a raised eyebrow. "I think it's in Southie for a reason—whoever comes here wants to be off the radar."

"Oooh. You think a lot of clandestine meetings take place in these heated pools?"

He shrugs. "You can't wear a wire if you're naked."

I laugh, letting him pull me along slowly. "Do you come here a lot?"

"Only when I've had a particularly bad fight and I need to soothe a muscle or something." We stop at the edge of a small, ornately tiled pool, steam rolling off the surface to curl around us. "Or if, say, I meet the girl of my dreams and want to impress her."

"Who me?" I say, acting surprised.

"Yeah," he rasps, brushing back my hair. "You, Grace Foster. Only you."

I lean into his palm when he cups my cheek. “Well you’ve already succeeded. This is the best date I’ve ever been on. Eating spaghetti, meeting your sister. Doing science? The whole day, everything about it, has been perfect.”

He hums, tracing the line of my mouth with his thumb. “We haven’t even gotten to the best part yet.”

My breath runs short. “Are we? Going to get to it?”

“If we don’t, I’m pretty sure I’m going to die, so yeah. We’re getting to it. I just...” He blows out a breath that stirs my hair. “This is important. You’re...God, you’re so important. I’m making sure I do this right. I’m making sure you’re locked down before we go any further.”

A breathy laugh puffs out of me. “How much more locked down can I get?”

North’s eyes track over my face, his gaze taking on even more intensity—and I didn’t think that was even possible. But now? His energy is...adult. Male. Dominant. A little dark. And it excites me. Beyond my wildest imagination. “I’m going to undress you while we talk, Gracie.”

Oh my God.

What is coming?

My knees are trembling, but I nod.

Jaw clenched, North crouches down and unstraps my sandals, the delicate leather looking extra dainty in his scarred hands, and he removes them. Then he drags his fingertips up my legs from ankle to the hem of my skirt, slowly tugging the garment down to the floor. My tank top has been tucked in all day and I stupidly try and smooth out the wrinkles, but North catches my wrist, kissing my firing pulse and holding it away, his golden eyes captivated by my sheer, sapphire blue panties.

“Bet those were expensive.” He leans in, his hot breath feathering my stomach. Lower to my mound, his lips nudging me there. “Good. Only the best for this pussy.”

Letting go of my wrist, he hooks a finger into the waistband of the underwear and slowly, slowly, tugs the blue material down to mid-thigh, stopping to exhale shakily at the sight of my bare sex, before continuing. I can barely breathe while stepping out of the panties, and that’s before he stands, so tall I have to tip my head back, his hands gathering the hem of my tank top and peeling it upward, over my breasts. His eyes never leave

mine as he strips off my top, those thick fingers going to work on the front clasp of my bra.

And then I'm naked.

Totally exposed, while North is still dressed, shoes and all. I'm vulnerable and achy and shaking, but not because I'm cold. No, it's warm and humid in this place. It's...I think it's my body's awareness of what's coming.

North captures my chin and tilts it up, golden eyes boring into mine. "Give me permission to touch you—any part of your body—at any time. I want that trust. I need it." Before I can answer, he lays a kiss on me that is so sexual, I whimper around his seeking tongue, my head growing dizzy from lack of oxygen before he pulls away, rolling his forehead against mine. "I want you to trust me—completely—to know when we need to fuck. When it's been a hard day or you get wet out in public, if I pull you behind a parked car and unzip my pants to service you, I don't want you to question me. I want you to trust that I've weighed the risk and that I'm going to keep you safe. That I would die for your safety. If you're sad or stressed out, I want you to trust me to hold you and care for you, without sex. To know when it's time to be between your legs—and when it's not. I just want absolute fucking trust from you, Gracie, and I don't know...I don't know." His fingertips dig into my hips, his forehead grinding on mine. "I've never felt like this before. It's new. I don't even know if it's bad."

Goosebumps occupy every inch of my skin. My head is spinning from his words. His confession. Our bodies crowd closer automatically and I feel his erection against my stomach, hard and long. There's a voice in the back of my head whispering, *you're not a girl anymore*. Not after tonight. And I know that to be true. Something is happening here. Maybe it's premature, maybe we're inspiring complicated, adult-level emotions in each other, but it's too late to turn back now. We're in the thick of it. "It's not bad," I gasp against his mouth, trying to recall every single detail of what he said. "I want to give you that trust, too. Making the decision once and then having it out of my hands...it's exciting. It's a relief. And I do trust you enough to give you that. To give you...control. Of what we do and when. Oh my God. It sounds crazy saying it out loud. It feels like I'm not supposed to, but I want it so bad."

"I know you're not supposed to." His palms slide down over the cheeks of my backside and clutch roughly, making me whimper. "I'd knock a

man's teeth out if I heard him asking a girl for this...total permission. But it's me and you, Gracie. I can't stop. I look at you and I'm just honest." His exhale is jagged. "I want no barriers between me and your body. It's mine."

God help me. I want that, too. I can't explain how right it feels.

There's just nothing but this. There's no denying we both want the same thing.

"It's yours."

North makes a hoarse sound and jerks me off the ground, up against his fully clothed form, my legs encircling his hips involuntarily. Our mouths merge into one, licking deep and groaning wildly at the slippery contact. His hands are everywhere, petting my backside, smoothing up my back, tangling in my hair—and then I'm being laid down on one of the wide lounge chairs, cool leather kissing my spine. North presses down on top of me, ravenous, heavy with muscle and need and passion.

I'm at the fighter's mercy.

I've just given him permission to do whatever he wants to me, whenever he wants. Somehow, at the tender age of eighteen, I've tossed the reins of my sexuality to this man and it feels incredible. Exhilaration. Like I was just waiting for this moment to arrive all along.

"I stayed innocent for you," I whimper between kisses, need gripping me when he groans loudly into my neck at that statement. "I waited, I waited, I—"

His mouth cuts me off with a turbulent kiss, raking his tongue against mine until my sex begins to squeeze, signaling the approach of an orgasm. Already? Lord, oh Lord. I can't think straight. I can't concentrate or fill my emptying lungs. I'm tied up in a rope and he's holding the other end. "Fuck yes. I'm your first man, Gracie. I'm your last man. I'm all you know now. I'm fucking it. You dress and undress for me. You breathe for me, like I breathe for you." His mouth is moving directly on top of mine, teeth bared. "You're the only female who'll ever make my dick hard. And I'm the only man who makes this pussy drip. We. Are. Each other's. Period."

A hot tear escapes my eye and rolls down my temple. My vision is unclear.

All I can do is chant "yes, yes, yes" as North's mouth travels down my body, licking and sucking my nipples, molding my breasts in his calloused hands, squeezing, holding them in tight fists one second and treating them to featherlight touches the next. My sex is so wet, I can feel beads of

feminine moisture slipping through my folds, onto my thighs and into the valley of my bottom. It should be embarrassing, but it's not. It's not. Especially when he drags his tongue down to my belly and lower, fitting his mouth to my cleft and moaning.

"Ah Jesus Christ, you wet little virgin." He pushes my thighs apart and parts my sex with a long, thorough lick. "I'm going to do bad, bad things to you."

His tongue barely grazes my clit before the orgasm snaps and I scream, the throaty sound echoing in the bath house, pleasure roaring through me at an alarming speed. I can't keep up and I don't try. I just ride it out, grinding my flesh against the only friction it knows or needs—North's stiff tongue. My naked body is shaking violently, his dark head buried between my legs, those golden eyes peeking up at me over my mound. And I can't seem to come down from the crest. It twists undiscovered muscles and shatters me, leaving North to pick up the pieces and he does. Oh my God, he moves on top of me again, grounding me with his big body, his presence, his reassuring mouth. He surrounds me and owns me with his confidence, his ownership, his reverence of me. He's the turbulent ocean and the life raft. I'm treading water and clinging at the same time.

"You're getting my cock now," he pants against my lips, unfastening his jeans with one hand. "Because I'm telling you it's time. And that's all you need to know. Isn't it?"

"Yes, Daddy."

Those two words pop out unfamiliar and unplanned.

I'm mortified. I can't believe I just said that. I can't believe I called him that. He's going to think I'm sick or demented or crazy—

"Again." He seems to be holding his breath, a new, darker awareness transforming his expression. "Goddamn, Gracie. Call me that again."

I close my eyes and whisper it. "Daddy."

"Fuck. Oh fuck." Those words rush out of him—and then I'm being entered. Roughly. I'm being filled by North's thick shaft, my slippery sex stretching to allow him inside. "That's it. That's exactly what I need to be to you. God, Grace. I'm your Daddy." He rolls his hips on a guttural sound, pressing open my thighs as he sinks deeper, deeper, all the way inside me until his balls meet the lips of my femininity. Grinding in a slow circle. "And you. You're my tight..." He hisses, shuddering on top of me. "Tight little virgin. Does it hurt, baby? Please say no."

Hurt is a funny word. It's a way to describe pain. But I'm hurting in two ways now. With the discomfort of being breached for the first time—and now...now I'm also hurting with the need for another release. Because he's so huge and spectacularly male on top of me, throat muscles flexed, his handsome face already so beloved by me. "I hurt in a good way. I hurt for you. For more." I let my legs open wider and he makes a rough sound, sinking in slightly deeper. "Take off your shirt. Please."

"Anything you want. Anything." He whips off his top, throwing it aside, messing up his dark hair in the process. Uncovering that incredible wall of muscle, all cut and sinewy, shadow and light playing off the rippling indents on his shoulders, arms. "See, I might be in control of when we fuck, but I'm here to orgasm my little beauty. Aren't I? That's my goddamn job and I want to be so good at it that your pussy gets wet when I snap my fingers. Going to find out what you need and give it to you. Fucking constantly. Constantly. You want me to walk around shirtless for you, baby, I'll burn every shirt I own. What else do you like?" He snaps his hips back and thrusts forward—hard. One two three. "You like that? You want more of that?"

"Yes!" I scream, my nails embedding in his shoulders, my core beginning to pulse once again with renewed lust. Need. A buildup of hunger. "More. M-more."

North's mouth ticks up with a darkly satisfied smile and he pushes my knees up and out, creating more room for his big body to press down into mine, his weight pinning me, his lower body starting to move in a fast pattern. Scooping and riding, powering into me in hard succession, testing me, watching my face, finding out what makes me tense up and gasp. What makes me squirm. What rolls my eyes back in my head.

"Ahh shit, Gracie. You're wrecking me. You're fucking me up so bad. So tight and hot, baby. Can't believe you're mine."

"I'm yours. Yours."

And then he finds this spot. Oh God, it makes me whine and thrash my head side to side on the leather cushion. Whatever way his hips are angled brings the length of his shaft purring along my clit, continuing deep where it butts up against the spot. *The spot*. I claw at him and bite down on my lip and he remains right there, in that perfect position, but he ups the tempo until I can't—I can't stand it. The pressure culminating inside of me is too

great. I slap at his shoulders and face, but he only growls and fucks me harder. Harder and faster.

“Go on. Slap me. Bite me. Scream the fucking walls down. You just better come on this fat dick afterwards.” His jaw bunches up tight enough to snap, his head falling forward, that fighter’s body continuing to work, work, work. “Go on, girl. Wet me up. Make me drip. I’m starved for it. My baby’s come. Need it all over me.”

I can’t last another second after that. Not with him growling those words at me. Those filthy words that I’ll never be able to live without again. They make me feel coveted and objectified and filthy and feminine. I love them. I hate them. They tear my body in two directions before colliding those halves back together in a velvet explosion and I wrap my legs tight around North’s bucking hips, whimpering brokenly into his kiss, my body jolting and spasming beneath him, the anchor of his weight the only thing keeping me on this earth.

“North.” I hiccup, my loins pulsing and releasing. “Daddy.”

A shudder passes through him at my whine of his title. “Ahhh, Gracie. You might be an uptown girl, but you don’t come like a lady, huh? Nah, you grind for it, don’t you? Been hiding this kinky, wet, horny little cunt under your skirt until I could come and find it? Satisfy it?” North sits back into a kneel, bringing me upright, leaving me impaled on his impossible large erection, squirming on it, trying to find relief from the pressure but there is none. My thighs are restless on either side of his hips. I’m full and aching and wonderfully miserable all over again. How long can this go on for? I’m a shaking, dewy mess and all I can do is chant his name in disbelief. In worship. “What did I tell you on the phone? I’m a what?”

“A workhorse,” I sob, immediately knowing what he refers to. That word has been living in my head since he said it, just waiting to be brought out into the open.

“That’s right, beauty.” He starts to bounce me on his lap. Fast. Our flesh slapping together hurriedly, wetly. “What do you do with a horse?”

“Ride it,” I pant.

“Good girl. Do it.” He slaps my backside with an open palm, the cracking sound exciting a part of me I never knew existed. It’s deep down and it’s wild. It’s all for North. “Ride your workhorse, Gracie. Ride until you come again. We don’t stop until you’re limp.”

“I can’t. I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” he grunts, gripping my butt and riding me up and back on his kneeling thighs, filling me to capacity over and over again. “Where did I touch last time that made you feel good? Which parts of your pussy?”

“Deep inside,” I manage, sweat rolling down my spine, our sexes meeting loudly. Slapping together crudely, beautifully. “Deep.”

“Fuck yes, I got deep. I’ll get it deep on the fucking regular. That’s what I do for you now,” he rasps, his eyes starting to glaze, muscles tensing and holding. “Where else, Gracie? Where else felt so good and made you come, baby?”

“M-my clit.”

“Good girl. Rub it on Daddy. We can get you there again.” He lurches forward and gnashes his teeth against my ear. “I’m going to take such good care of you. Going to provide and fuck and fight and torch my sanity for you. Give you so much pleasure, you can’t walk straight. Tell me you need that.”

“I need it. I need you,” I moan, barely recognizing my voice. Or my actions. I’m frantic, tilting my hips and squirming until my clit is flush to North’s shaft, rubbing shamelessly. Rubbing until I’m a mindless servant to my own pleasure, sobbing, grinding my hips down into North’s lap, his hands clutching my bottom and helping me, pushing me down as he thrusts upward with loud grunts, his eyes blazing into mine.

Another climax ripples through me, pulling my sore tummy muscles and making me cry out loudly, my thighs trembling around his hips, a sensual earthquake passing through me. Our mouths lock and kiss desperately, my heart pounding wildly in my ears. changed forever. I’m his, utterly, completely. No going back. There’s nothing but this. But him. I’m obsessed. I’m one half of a whole now. That truth engraves itself on every inch of my soul.

North twists, throws me down on the leather.

Pins me and thrusts once, twice, nostril flared. Muscles flexed. “I hope you’re on the pill or something, Gracie. I can’t pull out. You’re so tight and wet from comin’ fah me.” His Boston accent is thicker than I’ve ever heard it. It endears him to me so completely, I can’t help but pull him down for a kiss—and our tongues entwine desperately, eagerly, his body pumping faster and faster into mine. On the verge of an obvious precipice. Riding me for broke, our sexes smacking wetly. “I’ll care for my kid if you get pregnant. Same as I’ll care for my beauty. You know that, don’t you?”

“My mother made me go on the pill,” I gasp. “N-never needed it until now. Until you.”

His eyes flash with possession. “Until your man. Until your Daddy.”

I cry out. “Yes.”

North punches high and deep one last time, burying his mouth in my neck and making choked sounds, his incomparably strong body weak on mine for the moment, lost in sensation, shaking, harsh grunts leaving his throat, moisture filling me in warm, heavy spurts. His hips flex, his back muscles rippling beneath my soothing palms, my inner thighs running up and down his heaving ribcage. “Mine,” he growls, his teeth raking my neck. “Mine.”

Yes. Forever.

Somehow I know that for sure. At our age, there isn't a lot that feels certain. Our futures are an abstract thing that we're moving toward because it's the only next step. The next thing. But I've never been more positive of anything as I am about North Whitlock being part of my future. And as he lifts his head and looks down at me with unabashed idolatry, I know he's thinking the exact same thing. Our fates have been sealed.

Lurking in the back of his golden eyes, however, is also the knowledge that we'll eventually have to fight to keep each other. To maintain a relationship between a rich girl with Harvard on the horizon and an underground boxer raising his little sister in Southie. But I vow then and there to do whatever it takes to keep this.

To keep us from being pulled in two directions.

Ignoring the sense of foreboding in my stomach, I snuggle into North's side and let him stroke and kiss me back until it's time to walk home.

EIGHT

North

School has never seemed all that important to me. I show up every day because I want Tulip to follow my lead. Get her diploma without dropping out, like our parents did at my age. For the last week, though, since I met Grace, I've been paying more attention. Wondering if she's learning the same things as me. Wanting to be book smart like her. I'm sitting in English Lit right now and God, I can't stop thinking about her. I never stop, not for a second.

Every day since Sunday, she's come to my place after school. Tulip is usually at a friend's house studying or at basketball practice, giving me time alone with my girlfriend. And goddamn, I take advantage. As soon as she walks in the door, looking so fresh and perfect and sweet and beautiful, I'm ripping her panties down. I've tried, I've fucking tried to wait. To talk or watch television or bring her out for food, but every single time, we end up in my bed. Immediately. Straining, clutching, panting, biting, fucking. The things I've done to my girl in that bed should be criminal, considering she was a virgin less than a week ago.

Daddy.

It's the magic word.

As soon as she says it, I'm an animal.

I've heard of people with this kind of relationship before, but it seemed to belong with older couples. Or men and their mistresses. With us, it's different. It's like we stumbled upon something we weren't supposed to know about ourselves and it's too late to turn back now. Now that I've heard her whimper "Daddy" while I rake my tongue all over her tight asshole, I can't live without it. Can't live without the responsibility the title gives me. The ownership of this girl who is my flat-out obsession. One that will stay with me every second of my life.

After we scratch that initial itch, the time we spend together in my room is dreamlike, stroking fingers along each other's skin and talking about everything from our childhoods to secret talents to phobias and fears. We tell secrets. We weave imaginary futures in which we live in a house together. In our imaginations, she leaves every morning to teach kindergarten and I train for my next fight. And we're happy because we're together.

Before she leaves my bed and goes back to Beacon Hill, I take her a second time, slower, savoring her, but we have to be quiet, because my sister is home by then. I have to time Grace's orgasms with the train passing below, so her moans are camouflaged by the loud rattling of the walls.

Daytime is long and unacceptable, because I'm without her. I'm constantly tempted to ditch classes and go pick her up at that fancy prep school, but that's risky. There's no way I'm going to mess this up. And if her father finds out about us, if he finds out she's been coming to Southie every day after school to be with me, he would put a stop to it. No doubt in either of our minds. After everything Grace has told me about her father, I know he expects perfection from her—and I don't fit that image.

He would see me as a threat to her success.

Girls attending prep schools don't date amateur boxers from South Boston. They are supposed to date future financiers with more zeroes in their trust funds than I can even fathom.

It makes me insane to even think about it. My Gracie dating someone else.

Marrying someone that isn't me.

Some prick who can give her everything in the world.

I'd go fucking berserk. I'd die from a broken heart. And yet, who the hell am I to prevent her from having a comfortable life? Because right now, she can't have that with me.

Not yet, anyway.

I'm going to change that.

I will provide for her. I'll be her man in every single way she needs.

I just need one chance in the ring with the right opportunity. No one will be able to beat me if a future with Grace is on the line. Not even God himself.

For the tenth time today, I check my phone to see if the boxing manager called, but there's nothing. Taking a deep breath for patience, I try to pay attention to what the teacher is saying. A couple more hours and I'll be home with my girlfriend, her slick little pussy wrapped around my dick, milking and squeezing, her gorgeous face flushed from pleasure beneath me. Her nails raking down my back.

Feeling eyes on me, I glance to my right and some girl waves her pinkie at me. I almost laugh. Seriously? Grace's name is written in Sharpie on my forearms, my neck, my hands. I don't even bother acknowledging this other person. Not now and not when I'm walking out of class and she calls my name. I just keep walking, visions of Grace flashing in my head like a slideshow. She is the only one for me, forever. Period. I'm actually annoyed that someone tried to catch my attention, because I know Grace wouldn't like it—and I don't do shit she doesn't like. Ever.

On my way to Physics, my phone shakes in my pocket and I whip it out, my chest cinching tight when I see the manager is calling. Please let this be something. I hit talk and press the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Whitlock, it's Silvio. How's it going?"

That's a complication question. On one hand, I'm happier than I ever thought possible. On the other, I'm waiting for that happiness to be compromised, worrying about it every second of the fucking day. Grace's father finding out where she's been and forbidding her from seeing me. Or her getting accepted at some other Ivy League school that sends her out of Boston. Away from me. "It's going, man," I manage around the knot in my throat. "You got someone for me to fight?"

"You have no idea. I'm about to be your favorite person."

"No thanks, I've already got one. Just tell me the news."

Silvio laughs and I can hear him rubbing his hands together in the background. "How would you like to fight at TD Garden?"

Suddenly depleted of breath, I sit down on one of the benches in the quad area. "The Garden?" I've never even set foot into the arena where the

Celtics play. “Are you serious? Who? When?”

“A week from today. Next Friday night. Arturo Colleti needs a new opponent to step in. The other guy broke his wrist. I spun it to the promoters in a way that was appealing. Amateur kid from Southie stepping in to fight the pro. Hometown hero. Yada yada. They ate it up.”

“Arturo Colleti?” The wind is knocked out of me. “Jesus. I’ve been watching him fight since middle school. He’s...fuck, I don’t have his kind of training.”

“You don’t want in?”

“Of course I want in,” I scoff. “I just have to find a creative way to knock his ass out.”

Silvio’s laughter fills my ear. “Now there’s the badass I recruited straight out of the Hellmouth. I’ll be in touch about gear and logistics. Just be ready to brawl.” He pauses. “Hey, North. You win this fight, it’ll mean big things for you, all right? The payout alone from taking on Colleti is a game changer. So show up and take care of business, huh?”

“How much money will I make if I win?” I rasp.

He tells me the number and a shudder passes through me.

Holy shit.

It’s enough for a down payment on a house. Enough to get Tulip through her first year of college, at the very least. But will it be enough to make me acceptable in the eyes of Grace’s father? More than anything, more than my next fucking breath, I want to be with her out in the open. I want to ring her doorbell in Beacon Hill and not worry about people seeing me there. An outsider. I want to be able to offer her a future that isn’t all about scraping by, paycheck to paycheck.

This is my chance.

I’m off the bench and moving toward the school parking lot before I know it, desperate to see Grace. Needing to tell her this news, face to face. Now. There isn’t too much traffic in the middle of the day, so I can be at her school in twenty-five minutes. It’s a risk, showing up like this in broad daylight, but there’s no way I can wait until after school to tell her I’ll be fighting in the Garden next week. No way I can wait to ask if she’ll come and support me.

A few minutes later, I peel out of the parking lot, anticipation thrumming in my veins. Excitement to see her. Nerves about the upcoming fight. A week ago, I was content to fight in the Hellmouth on weekends for

rent and food money, but not anymore. Now I have a future with Grace on the line and there's no way I'm letting it slip through my fingers.

Maybe an underground fighter isn't supposed to date an Ivy League girl, but a legit fighter? Is that another story? Over the last week, Grace has been saying more and more how she doesn't even want to go to Harvard, if she gets accepted. Or any other prestigious institution for that matter. I don't want her to give up that chance for me, but I also don't want her to do anything that doesn't make her happy. Either way, we'll have more options if I win this fight—and I will.

I hit a little more traffic than expected, so about forty minutes later, I pull up across the street from Grace's prep school. And damn, it is a lot nicer than my public one. Prominent is the word that comes to mind. Green vines climb the outside of a sweeping, historical stone building, complete with two lion statues guarding the entrance.

Stepping out of my car, I hear the faint sound of a bell ringing and a few seconds later, uniformed students file down the front steps, some of them chatting with others, most of them looking at their phones. No one plays loud music, there are no fights breaking out, like there would be at my school. Just the calm, cool, collected future millionaires of America.

I shake off the cloying sense that I don't belong here and search for Grace among the crowd. First I see Collier and another guy I recognize from that night at the Hellmouth. They're laughing with some girls, taking pictures on their phones. I'm pleased to see Collier is still sporting purple rings around his eyes, but my attention is dragged quickly in another direction when Grace walks out of the building and the organ in my chest starts to pound wildly.

She's alone.

Books cradled to her chest.

Oh Jesus, that school uniform.

That little plaid skirt and knee socks.

I can't believe she changes out of it before coming to my house every day. Maybe she doesn't want to remind me of our economic differences? It would have been worth it. My cock is stiff as a brick watching that hem tease the middle of her thighs. Jesus. I'm so hot for her, I'm almost dizzy. But I'm not so aroused that I can't be concerned about what I'm seeing.

Part of me likes that she's alone.

A huge part of me wants her to talk to no one but me. I'm her everything.

Apparently that part of me is a possessive asshole.

Grace casts her friends a self-conscious glance and walks the opposite direction. They openly ignore her. Because of me? Is she a loner now because I took her home that night? Are they cutting her out of their lives because she's dating me?

That possibility causes a pang in my throat.

I'm bad for her in a lot of ways, aren't I?

She's lost her social circle. No matter how many fights I win, I'll probably never be able to afford a yacht or summers in the Maldives or a townhouse in Beacon Hill.

I fuck her like an animal. Leave marks on her body, her voice hoarse from screaming.

We've got this twisted little dynamic that I don't know how to stop—and probably couldn't if I tried. Don't know if it's healthy for her, the way I cast my obsession over her like a net, day in and day out. Trapping her. Consuming her.

I want to do those things right now.

Want her writhing and whimpering and focused one thousand percent on me.

It's like my thoughts traveled across the road and whispered themselves in her ear, because suddenly Grace looks up, her entire face brightening. Her mouth moving to form my name silently. And shit, if my heart was pounding before, it's slamming in a frenzy now in the face of her pure joy. Joy from seeing me.

As if carried on the wind, she starts toward me, but I shake my head, pointing at an upscale apartment building across the street. While circling the block to find a spot for my car, I noticed the small park around back of the structure. I head there now, watching Grace do the same, slipping out of the sea of uniforms and crossing the road. She gets there first and I jerk my chin toward the rear of the building, where we'll be out of sight of the school. No way I'm running the risk of getting her into trouble. I have this chance in my back pocket now, this fight against Colleti, and I'm especially not compromising my relationship with Grace when there's a shot at offering her some security. A future.

As soon as we're behind the building and out of view of the street, Grace drops her books and turns, throwing her arms around my neck. My arms encircle her, too, lifting her off the ground and twirling her in a circle. "Oh God, beauty. Baby. I missed you," I groan, dropping kisses all over her beautiful face. On her forehead, lips and cheeks. "Every fucking second away from you is torture."

"I know," she whimpers, snuggling closer, sucking at my neck, rubbing her tight body on mine, swelling my cock to full mast. "I know. I know. The day is too long. I just stare at the clock waiting until I can come see you." Her breath catches. "I thought I was dreaming when I saw you across the street."

"You're not, Gracie," I rasp, slanting my mouth over hers, tasting, savoring. "I'm here. I had to come tell you something. I couldn't wait."

She leans back, face flushed. Curious. "What is it?"

"Remember that manager I mentioned? He got me a fight." I take a moment to savor the anticipation. If I do this right, if I give this fight everything I've got, this will be the first of many times I tell Grace something to make her proud of me. I fucking crave that chance. "Next Friday. At the Garden."

"At the..." She sobs a sound. "At the Garden? Oh my God, North. Is that...I mean, that has to be huge."

"If I win, yeah. And I will win." I back her against the building, my mouth locked with hers, our foreheads pressed tightly together. "I've got you to fight for."

"North..."

"Will you be there? Will you come and sit in the front row?"

"Of course I will. But you don't have to fight for me," she whispers. "You have me."

"Yeah. I have you, don't I, beauty?" I slide my hands up beneath the back of her plaid skirt, cupping her smooth ass cheeks in my hands, lifting her between me and the wall. "Now I have to keep you. Protect you. Make you happy and safe and wanting for nothing. That's what a Daddy does for his girl, isn't it, Gracie?"

I have to catch her resulting moan with my mouth.

She gets so goddamn hot when we play like this.

It's horny and twisted, but she creams the hardest when we give in to our roles, so I can't stop bringing it here. I don't want to. It makes me come

like I'm dying. "This skirt of yours is too fucking short," I growl against her mouth. "You might as well be ringing a dinner bell."

"It's regulation length," she breathes, heavy-lidded. Excited.

"Is that right, little girl? Well feel what the length of your skirt did to the length of my cock." I yank her knees up around my hips, grinding her against the side of the building, bulge against panties, watching her mouth open in a silent scream. "I'm starting to think you enjoy the way I punish you." I drag my tongue from her neck to her ear. "Do you like the way it feels now when we do bad things, baby? Is that why this skirt is short enough to see your sweet little asshole if you bend over?"

She can't stay still now.

She's squirming between me and the wall, trying to get some friction on my dick. "Please. Please."

"Please what?" I mash my mouth against her ear. "Please put your come in me, Daddy?"

"Yes."

My hands mold her backside roughly, the pad of my index fingers finding her puckered back entrance and pressing. "Is that what you thought of this morning when you rolled up your dirty little skirt? Did you know I'd end up making the insides of your thighs sticky?"

"Oh God, oh God," she breathes, nodding vigorously, her tits beginning to jiggle from the way I'm thrusting between her legs, my distended fly against her sexy mound. "I w-wore it short to m-make you mad. I like when Daddy's mad."

"That's when I fuck the hardest, isn't it?" Taking my right hand off the globe of her butt cheek, I reach down and unfasten my pants. "That's when you get a secret punishment."

Her thighs are already shaking.

As soon as I shove this dripping cock home, she's going to orgasm.

It's wild. It burns me alive, how easily she comes. How sensitive her pussy is after a little dirty talking. Our brand of dirty. Dirty we barely understand yet, but can't stop venturing into, eager. Desperately. Hungry to learn and experience and roll around in every syllable. Every forbidden taunt. There's a good chance I'm delivering the kind of affection lacking in her relationship with her father, weaving it together with our intense attraction. Maybe that's messed up or something that needs to be addressed more closely. But all my body and mind and heart understands is giving

Grace what she needs, whether it's wrong or right. I'm her provider in all things. I'm where she comes to have her needs handled—and I'll do my job well. I'll do it no matter why or how her specific needs exist. I simply fulfill and reach my own heaven in the process. Our heaven.

Now, I watch her face closely, obsessively, as I tug her panties to one side and sink deep, deep into her little cunt, pumping once and feeling her warmth gush down all over me. She sobs and trembles and claws at my shoulders—and I just have to stand there, my jaw slack, balls harder than steel as she milks my shaft, her spasms going on and on and on.

“My precious girl,” I groan into her ear. “My tight little girl.”

Her cunt flexes and she whimpers, giving me more, more, her pleasure dripping off my balls now onto the concrete—and I can't wait any longer to fuck. I cradle her ass with my right forearm and prop my left hand on the wall, pumping in the pace of a gallop. And this hot, horny, perfect girl knows exactly what I like, what I need, undoing the button of her white schoolgirl blouse so I can watch her yummy little tits bounce around inside her white bra while I get my nut.

“You wear that innocent white lace to make me fucking crazy, don't you? God,” I growl, thrusting *upupup* harder, faster. “You don't spread your legs like a virgin anymore, though, huh, Gracie? You open them wide for me. You want me to see that pretty clit so I'll lick it wet and ride all over it.”

“I love when you do. I love it,” she hiccups, her pussy slapping up and down on my lap.

“After school. After school, I'm going to maul that sexy little thing. Going to send it back to Beacon Hill sore and satisfied and dripping North's come. You're going to walk right past your father with it all swollen and well fucked in your white schoolgirl panties. Same way you do every day, huh, baby?”

Her head pitches back on a sob. “Yes, Daddy.”

That pussy locks up around me again and I bust, slamming her ass up against the building and letting the climax rock me, so powerful because of who I'm with.

My life, my girl, my obsession. My world.

We cling to each other to keep from breaking into a thousand pieces, my lips on hers, swallowing her cries, driving my tongue into her mouth,

anything to have more of her. More more more. I can't get enough. I'll never get enough.

"I love you," I say brokenly into her neck when I'm coming down, replete, satisfied. Lost over this angel in my arms. How did I get this lucky? How is this real? "I love you, Grace. I love you. I'll love you forever. Until they put me into the ground, baby."

Her tear-filled eyes meet mine and I swear I can hear her heart pounding. "North, I—"

"Grace!"

One second her body is all warmth, the next it's ice cold. She shakes her head rapidly, like she can't believe what's happening. "My father. Oh God. That's m-my father."

No.

No, this isn't happening.

My cock is still locked up inside of her. I'm halfway to hard again.

The times I've pictured myself meeting Grace's father, I'm shaking his hand and telling him, with confidence, that I can give his daughter a good life. I'm not there yet, though. I'm a week away. Longer. Because I won't be satisfied with one payday. Not if I want to give her the world—and I do.

Already my chances of gaining the respect of Mr. Foster were slim. But if he walks around the corner and finds me fucking his daughter against a wall in her school uniform, there isn't a chance in hell of gaining his admiration.

Grace wiggles frantically between me and the wall, planting her feet on the ground and fixing her panties and skirt, while I zip up as fast as possible, run agitated fingers through my hair. There is no way to make it less obvious what we were doing back here. Grace is flushed bright pink and I'm sweating. And that's how Simmons Foster finds us when he strides around the corner, his face a mask of fury.

A few other people come into view behind him. In their school uniforms.

One of them is Collier.

He winks, holds up his phone. "Payback's a bitch," he mouths at me.

NINE

Grace

I can't believe this is happening.

This boy that has become the center of my universe just told me he loves me.

I was on the verge of saying it back to him. Telling him I can barely breathe unless he's standing right in front of me. Now, right in front of my eyes, I can see it all being ripped away. The fear of him being taken from me causes me to stumble, dizzy, but North catches me up against his side, his arms and presence and scent reassuring.

Even in the face of my father's wrath.

And oh God, he's so mad. I've never seen his face that deep shade of red, spittle escaping from the corners of his mouth. What is he going to do?

The best I can hope for is that he kicks me out.

Please kick me out.

Cut me off.

Just don't take away North. Please, please, don't take away North.

I'm sinking to the bottom of this obsession with him and I have no wish to kick for the surface. My body aches and suffers unless he's touching it. I'm restless and sad and anxious without him. I'm not stupid. I know the depth of my devotion to him is more than a little crazy. We're like two chemicals that aren't supposed to mix, because once we do, there are

explosions and changes to the atmosphere. But we did meet—and so be it. I need him and he needs me. There’s no way out of that or around it.

I look up into North’s face to try and communicate this to him, but he’s staring down Collier, a vein throbbing in his temple. That’s when I realize that my friends betrayed me. They’ve been aloof with me since last weekend, since I went home with North. And I knew, I’ve always known, that my circle rejects anything unfamiliar. I feared some kind of social punishment from them. But I’ve been so wrapped up in North that I missed the signs that they were planning to rat me out to Simmons. Imminently. Just waiting for the right moment.

Well if their plan was to wreck my chance at happiness, they couldn’t have picked a better moment. My father looks me over with pure disgust, obviously aware of what me and North were doing before he arrived. When he turns that sneer on North, I automatically step closer to my boyfriend, wanting to deflect the hatred from this perfect, wonderful boy who treats me like I’m crafted from gold. This boy who understands me and encourages me and gives me dark, indescribable pleasure beyond my wildest imagination.

“Get over here immediately, Grace Foster,” my father snaps off.

“No,” I whisper.

Slowly, my father cocks his head. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I said, no. I’m not leaving North. You have to let us explain—”

My father reaches out and grabs my wrist, yanking me hard in his direction.

Pain shoots up my arm. “You’re hurting me,” I whimper.

Before I can get far, North releases a strangled growl and inserts himself between me and my father, chest heaving. Their similar heights allow him to look Simmons square in the eye. “All due respect, sir, if you don’t let go of her wrist, I’ll make you let it go.”

My father sniffs dismissively, but I can see the new awareness in his eyes. The realization that he’s not the physically strongest man present. And he lets go of my wrist, allowing me to cradle it to my chest.

“Be careful, Mr. Foster,” Collier calls, his expression smug. “Whitlock isn’t house-trained. The rules of polite society don’t apply to him.”

“Be quiet, Collier,” I say through my teeth. “You’re just bitter because you couldn’t last a single round with him.”

His upper lip curls. “I won in the end, though, didn’t I?”

I shake my head. “If this is what you call winning, you’re emptier than I always thought.”

Collier shoots forward and North moves like lightning, getting right in his face, daring him to take a step closer to me. Before one of them can throw a blow, my father inserts an arm between them, cursing impatiently. “Collier, thank you for calling me. Now take your friends and go back to class.”

A few strained seconds tick by before Collier does what he’s told, spitting on the ground near North’s feet while departing. When my friends—ex-friends now—disappear around the edge of the building, I’m far from relieved, however, because my father’s eyes are still launching daggers at me and North. His anger hasn’t cooled a single degree.

“This—whatever this is—is over,” he grits out. “You want to rebel a little, Grace, fine. I don’t expect you to be a saint. But for the love of God, don’t waste your time with someone this far beneath you—”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the blood drain from North’s face and it’s like being punched square in the stomach. “He is not beneath me. Don’t say things like that. You don’t even know him.”

Simmons scoffs. “I’m to understand he’s an illegal street fighter from Southie? My God, daughter. I thought you had more common sense than this. You’ve been going to see him every night, haven’t you? Not the library. Not to your friends’ houses. This kind of...person will have you pregnant so fast your head will spin. You’re nothing but a payday to him. A one-way ticket to a cushy life.”

North steps forward. “That’s not true, Mr. Foster. I would never take advantage of Grace. Never.” North’s voice vibrates with honesty. Will my father hear it? Hear how genuine he is? Will he even care? “I’m sorry this is how we’re meeting. I meant no disrespect. I respect her more than anyone I’ve ever met.” He glances back at me over his shoulder, affection spilling from his golden eyes. “I’m in love with your daughter. I want to be the one to give her everything. I’ll break my back making her happy. I’ll never take her for granted.”

That impassioned speech gives my father momentary pause, but in no time, the ugliness is back on his face. “Assuming that making her happy is even possible, considering the life she’s accustomed to, how do you think this little relationship is going to work?” My father’s face is rife with skepticism. Ugliness. It’s shrewd, too—and that’s what scares me the most.

“I’m not paying for her to attend an Ivy League school, just so she can turn around and go pump out some brats in South Boston. You think this love affair is going to last while she attends a prestigious school? Alongside peers with the same stellar upbringing? All while you bash your fists into faces in some underground sewer? Does that sound realistic?”

I’m ready to scream with frustration by the time he turns his attention to me. I’m ready to scream and tell him I don’t want his Ivy League school. I don’t want the pressure and expectations and cookie-cutter career in finance. That’s not my path to happiness and I’ve been doing it this whole time for him. Not me. But he speaks before I can.

“If you continue this abomination, Grace, I will not pay for college. All your hard work will be down the drain. Your future ruined.”

“Oh Jesus. Please, don’t do that because of me, Mr. Foster.” North sounds like he’s struggling to catch his breath, misery etched into every line of his beautiful face. “She’s so smart. She needs to go to the best school. The way she helped my sister with her science project…” He trails off, turning to lock his tortured eyes with mine. “Even if I win the fight next week, Gracie, it won’t cover tuition at a place like that. I’d need more time. I could do it, I just need more time—”

“North,” I breathe, framing his face in my hands. “No. No, I would never expect you to pay for me to go to college. Of course I wouldn’t.” I wet my lips. “Remember what I told you about wanting to teach? I don’t need a Harvard or Yale education to do that and do it well.”

“Grace,” my father interrupts tightly. “I’d like a private word with you.”

I swallow hard. “Anything you need to say to me, you can say it in front of North.”

At that, North and I just melt together, his forehead pressing into mine. Sharing oxygen. His hands coming up to cradle my face, the way I’m doing with his. Like we’re the only two people in the world. That’s how it always feels and I need this, I need our connection to survive. I’m not being a dramatic teenager. This is not going away. He’s the gravity I’ve been missing my entire life. This isn’t an adolescent infatuation that can be gotten over.

“Go talk to him, beauty. It’s okay. I’ll be right here.”

“No,” I whisper.

“You have to face him sooner or later.”

I sniff. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” There’s an odd look in his eye as he strokes my hair. Almost like he knows something that I don’t. “Sure as anything.”

Despite the sense of foreboding in my belly, I nod. I let go of North and walk to my father, following him around the side of the building. I lift my chin. I order myself to stay firm. I’m not going to have my education held over my head like a threat so I’ll fall in line. Just because he’s mapped out the life I want to live.

I recoil when my father’s eyes meet mine.

They’re even colder than before. Remote. Foreign.

Between this and the meeting I interrupted last weekend, I’m beginning to wonder if I know my father at all. Who is this man really? “Yes?” I ask, hesitantly, my nerves snapping.

He strokes his jaw a moment, his voice hollow when he speaks. “You will end this now. You will say goodbye and you will not see him again.”

I’m already shaking my head. “I’m not doing that. I love him, too. I love him.”

My father continues as if I’ve said nothing. “Did I hear him say he has a sister?” The question is delivered lightly, but it sends a waft of icy air down my spine. “It would be a shame if her brother didn’t come home one day.”

Invisible hands close around my throat, tightening to the point that I can barely speak. “What...what does that even mean?”

His eye ticks. “It means, you know very well now that I have friends in extremely low places, Grace. Unscrupulous friends. I’m not above asking for a favor to keep you from dragging our family’s reputation through the mud. My associates would laugh at me behind closed doors. There isn’t a spiritual retreat in the world that could cure your mother of the shame.” His voice is like an ice pick, cutting through the center of my sternum. “End it now. Or I have him ended. Do I make myself clear?”

“You wouldn’t...you wouldn’t.”

“I would. Tomorrow. Without batting an eyelash.”

I almost double over from the pain in my midsection.

No. No no no. This is a battle I can’t win.

I can’t put North’s life in danger. I love him too much. I’ve come to love Tulip, as well, and who would raise her if something happened to North? How could I even live in this world if he didn’t exist? How could I live with myself if I was the reason he ended up dead?

“Please, don’t do this,” I whisper to my father. “Please.”

Now he only looks bored. “You have a minute to say goodbye. Make it convincing. Because if he comes sniffing around again, I’ll make the phone call. Don’t test me.”

I’m numb, head to toe, as I turn around and walk back toward the boy who owns my heart. He’s so substantial and strong and handsome and capable standing there in the sunlight, a sob tries to wing its way up my throat. But I swallow it down. His life is hanging in the balance now—and I put it there. This is the only way to save him.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, unable to meet his eyes, my heart rupturing inside my ribcage. Agony cascading inside of me like a treacherous waterfall. “I’m sorry, but...he’s right. It wouldn’t work. You couldn’t support me, North. Not the way I’m used to. Not the way I need. It’s better if we end this now. I...want to end this now.” I think of Curtis Tennison holding a gun to North’s head. Or worse, North’s body lifeless at the bottom of the river—and it pushes me to say the rest. “Please. Please don’t contact me again. Goodbye.”

North stands frozen like a statue as I say the words, but his eyes are wild. Tortured.

He chokes out my name as I walk away, the shadow he casts telling me he’s dropped down to his knees. With tears streaming down my face, all I can do is keep walking, telling myself I’m saving his life. I’m making the only decision possible. But those assurances do nothing to stop my heart from splintering into a million pieces.

TEN

North

If it wasn't for my sister, I'd already be dead.

There would be nothing to live for.

As it is, I'm hanging on by a thread.

The only way to deal with the pain of losing Grace is to seek more pain.

I've been in the Hellmouth every night for the last four days, since she broke up with me, taking on anyone and everyone. Searching for someone who can beat me unconscious. Please. I just don't want to be awake anymore.

Please. I just want someone to come bury their fist between my eyes and shut my brain down so I can't think of Grace telling me not to contact her again.

I need the punishment of being knocked out. I deserve it for not being everything she needs. If I'd known she existed sooner, I would have been more prepared. But I didn't. I didn't know my beauty was out there, so I had nothing to offer when the time came. And it all happened so fast. It happened so fucking fast. One second, I had the world in the palm of my hand and the next, I'm looking for a way to darken that world. A way to make everything dark around me. Shut off my mind. Shut off everything.

I'm in the ring now at the Hellmouth fighting this guy I've beaten before. It's not a challenge. But I want two seconds of peace from the

tortured screams in my head, so I let one of his punches slip through, the crack and spray of blood from my nose doing nothing to satisfy me. This isn't working. I'm the sum of the pain in my heart. I can't even register anything on the outside anymore. I can't do this. I really don't think I can get out of bed every day and pretend like I don't want to die. If it wasn't for Tulip, I'm not sure what I would have done by now.

I'm not what Grace needs.

I can't make her happy.

Obviously her father said something that made her realize that.

And honestly, why would she want someone who her father looks at with such derision? That's her family. The people she'll be spending holidays and milestones with for the rest of her life. If I'm by her side, she won't have them. Did I expect her to give them up for me? To trade her own flesh and blood for a brawler with a walk-up apartment and no hope of an education like hers? The only currency I have are my fists—and I don't even want to use them.

There's no fire in me to fight anymore. Fight for what? What is there? I can feed Tulip and keep a roof over her head with money I earn at the Hellmouth, but I'm not fighting at the Garden. I can't find the fucking motivation. I don't even think I'd make it to the arena without collapsing into the gutter and expiring from the razor-clawed agony that ravages my insides, never stopping, the intensity never lessening. It's constant. A man can't survive like this.

A memory of Grace running up the stairs of my building and launching herself, laughing, into my arms sets off a bomb in my throat and I roar, throwing a right cross at my opponent, sending him stumbling back several feet. "Come on," I beg him, my voice guttural. "Hit me. Hit me! Knock me out. Please."

Slowly, the guy lowers his fists. "You need to go home, man."

The rushing in my ears slows down momentarily and I realize the entire Hellmouth is silent. Watching me. There's no money exchanging hands or shouting or revving up the fighters. It's the stillest and quietest I've ever seen this place. They have sympathy for me—it's obvious. Right there on their faces. And that pity is like lighting a match and dropping it into a bucket of kerosene, blistering my skin. "Find me a fucking challenge for tomorrow," I bellow, ducking out of the ring. "Find me a killer. Someone better than me. Do it."

I snatch up my bag on the way out, blood still dripping from my nose. Layer upon layer of sweat running down my bare torso and soaking into my shorts. I don't bother putting on clothes or wiping myself down on the way to the car. It's parked beneath the overpass as usual, traffic rumbling by overhead. I move for the driver's side, then hesitate, memories of Grace bombarding me. Memories of that first night when she rode home in my passenger seat, so angelic and wholesome and pure and trusting. Of me.

She did trust me once, didn't she?

That wasn't a dream?

Instead of climbing into the driver's side, I find myself stumbling to the opposite side. Opening the passenger door and falling on my knees, half inside the car and half out, burying my face in the center of the seat, begging it hoarsely for the scent of her pussy. "Please. Give it to me. Give me something. Please."

Maybe I imagine it, maybe it's wishful thinking, but I swear I catch a hint of her cherry cola scent and my cock starts to harden, a harsh sound falling from my mouth, muffled by the leather seat. For the first time since she walked away. I lunge for the chance to be with her in some small way, even if it's just the memory of her in my car, the barest hint of her beloved scent haunting my nose. My brain.

I fumble for my phone and pull up the picture she sent me the first time we spoke on the phone. "Jesus, Gracie," I breathe, devouring the high globes of her ass, that supple curve of her breast, the flirty little glance she's giving me over her shoulder. "Goddamn. Look at you, beauty. Look how sweet and hot."

Panting now, I grind my cock up against the edge of the passenger seat and start to rock, closing my eyes and imagining she's sitting there with her legs spread open, gasping every time I give her the full length of me, in that way she always does. Her cunt is moist and welcoming and tight as a motherfucker, her graceful fingers buried in my hair, blue eyes leaden with lust. That beautiful ass of hers lifts off the seat to meet my pumps and we start to get frantic. We always do. Can't help it. I fall on her and it becomes about getting my dick as deep as I can—and that's what she wants, too. It's why she's wailing for her Daddy, her hands yanking on my ass, thighs opening wider. Wider.

But I open my eyes and I shouldn't have.

I shouldn't have because she's not really there.

With a bellow of misery, I pitch forward onto the seat, slamming my forehead into the cushion over and over again, the picture of her on my phone having gone dark. My cock is still stiff and aching, but I don't deserve to come. I lost her. I lost the right. So after a moment, I gather myself up as much as possible and shove my erection back into my shorts, vowing then and there never to touch myself again. Never to allow myself pleasure in any form. My punishment for failing to be everything she needs. For failing her. I'll suffer now. I'll suffer for her if that's all she'll allow me.

With blood drying on my face, I drive home numb on the outside, while on the inside, my mind roasts over an open flame in hell.

And somewhere deep down, I know it's impossible to go on like this.

Grace

I REACH DOWN and test the knob of my bedroom door, unsurprised to find it locked. Over the weekend, I was forbidden from leaving this room. Then for the last three days, I was sent upstairs right after school, armed with extra-credit work my father arranged through my teachers.

I'm in hell.

I want to tear off my skin. It's hot and cloying and doesn't feel like mine anymore. Not without North to touch and kiss it. Why have it at all?

My father took my phone. I have nothing. Nothing. And what would I even do if I had a way to call North? I can't. I'd be putting his life in jeopardy.

With a stuttering breath, I pace back and forth in front of my window, the sunset making me think of him. Making me think of holding his hand and walking across rooftops in South Boston. Did that magical night really happen? Did any of them? I want to go back. I would go back and live those nights over and over for the rest of my life, rather than live one more day like this. I'm dying. I'm dying, right?

I find myself kneeling on the floor and I have no idea how I got here.

My arms are wrapped around my middle and I'm rocking, saying words that don't even make sense. I can't go on like this. I can't breathe. Even at school, I can barely make it between classes, my legs weighed down by cement, my heart gasping for air in my chest. I want to curse and rail at my so-called friends for what they've done. Can't they see they've murdered my soul? But I can't locate the energy. All I can do is stare straight ahead and try not to shatter.

Where is North?

What is he doing?

I crave the taste of salt on his skin. I crave his huge body on mine, above, inside and behind me. His growls in my ear. The way he cradles me after I have an orgasm, telling me I'm beautiful and we'll always be together. What happened? What happened? I feel like someone has taken a chainsaw and cut me straight down the middle. I can't do this.

Losing power over my muscles, I crash forward and bawl into the rug surrounding my bed, my ribs throbbing from the amount of crying I've done since Friday. My eyes are swollen, my chest desolate. If it's possible to die from a broken heart, I need to be taken to the emergency room. I wouldn't go, though. I wouldn't. I'd refuse treatment.

Just let me die.

At first, when I hear a faint rapping on my window, I think it's raining. Or maybe my bereaved mind is playing tricks on me. But it continues long enough that I realize it's real. North? Is it North? Is he outside?

A sob saws inside my throat and I crawl over, disoriented, clawing my way up onto the windowsill, searching for his perfect face in the darkness. My love. The man I'll love until the end of time. Is he here?

My feverish thoughts screech to a halt when I spy Tulip instead.

Down below my window, holding a handful of stones.

Exasperated, she signals at me to open my window.

At first, I'm relieved to see her. She's a part of North. This is the closest I've come to seeing him in five days. Five hellish days. And she is proof he's real.

But then I start to panic. Oh God, oh God, what if something happened to him? What if my father sent Curtis Tennison after him, even though I complied with his wishes?

"Please no, please no," I hiccup, throwing open the window. "Tulip..." I manage.

“It’s about time,” she complains, tossing aside her handful of pebbles. “You know how long I’ve been out here, waiting for your father to leave?”

“I...” I’m dizzy. Delirious. Can’t string a thought together. How long since I’ve slept or eaten? “I didn’t even know he was gone,” I say, my voice hollow. “I’m...locked in here.”

A flash of sympathy crosses her young face. “Dang. You’re almost in worse shape than my brother—and that’s saying something.”

That statement cuts through my numbness, setting off alarm bells in my head. “What’s wrong with him? What’s wrong with North?”

Tulip looks at me like I’m a moron, which is no less than I deserve for asking such a stupid question. What’s wrong with him? He’s without me. I’m without him. We’re not supposed to be apart. We’re both suffering. That’s a given. “He’s trying to get himself killed,” Tulip says in a pained whisper, tears filling her eyes. “Every night he comes home with more bruises, more blood. You have to come stop him before someone throws the punch that knocks him out forever. He’s not even trying to win, Grace. He’s not North anymore.”

Blistering hot tears roll down my cheeks, dripping off of my chin.

Helplessness pounds its fists against the inside of my skull. “I can’t...I can’t. You don’t understand. Being with him...it’s putting him in danger.”

“He’s in danger now!” Tulip calls back. “He’s getting beat up on purpose and you’re locked in a room. It can’t get any worse.”

“Yes, it can,” I rasp.

But even as I say those three words, the urgency is kicking in. I have to reach North. Now. Before something irreversible happens. My goal is to keep him alive, isn’t it? That’s the reason I left him, ripping both of our hearts out in the process. Well his life isn’t just in danger from my father and Curtis Tennison. It’s in danger from North. And there is no way I can sit here while he puts himself in harm’s way. On purpose, no less. I have to go to him.

ELEVEN

North

They found someone who might be able to take me.

I'm staring across the ring at the six-foot-three brick shithouse from Jersey through hollow eyes, not assessing him as an opponent. Not strategizing about how to beat him. Nah, I'm merely trying to deduce whether or not he could deliver a death blow. It's getting worse. Day five without my Gracie. I want to be six feet under. Life is agony. Every fucking second of it is more unbearable than the last. I dig my teeth into my rubber mouthpiece, trying to slice through it. And then I just spit it out altogether, because who gives a fuck if I lose some teeth or bust my jaw? Do it, I chant in my head, though the other fighter can't hear me. Do it.

I can't die.

I know that. I've come to terms with it.

I have to stay alive for my sister. She's the only reason I'm bothering.

But I can get some blessed relief from being awake. After not sleeping for five days, endless memories of Grace revolving in my head, I'm willing to take a blow from a sledgehammer. I'm hurting. I'm hurting so bad from the lack of her and the only escape is unconsciousness. Bring it on.

The referee steps into the center of the ring and the other fighter powers forward, punching himself in the head to psyche himself up. I stare back mutely, the sounds of the Hellmouth tinny and cartoonish in my ears. I'm

not even here. I'm in bed with Grace on one of those perfect afternoons, kissing her shoulders, cupping her soft knees in my hands, listening to her secrets. Her likes and dislikes. Telling her my own while her eyes sparkle up at me.

If this guy is going to knock me out, that's the image I want in my head when I go.

Please, for the love of God, let him knock me out.

The fight begins and my fists come up, purely out of muscle memory. Guarding my face, moving in a circle around the other fighter. Anger wells up inside of me, unexpected. Anger at myself for being so naïve. Grace Foster? With a guy like me? Forever? What a goddamn moron I am. "Hit me," I growl. Then louder, "Come on."

He seems confused by my demand for oblivion. Can't really blame him. Maybe he needs some encouragement.

I feint left, then come in with the uppercut, snapping his head back, causing him to stumble. Cheers go up on every side of the ring, but I'm just focused on my opponent. Hoping I've given him the motivation he needs to come back swinging.

And he does. Thank God.

Nostrils flaring, he comes roaring back with a jab straight to my left cheek, followed by a right cross that normally I could handle, no problem, but I haven't slept or eaten in days, so this time it spins me around, static crackling in my brain, ears ringing. I need to turn around fast, regroup, but only if I want to win—and I don't. I just want to wait here for another punch.

But then I hear her voice.

It's not in my head. I know the difference.

In my head, her tone sounds distant, like remnants of a dream.

This? It's Grace. In the flesh. Right here and now.

And it's like being electrified.

I turn around just in time to see her climbing into the ring.

Climbing into the ring.

Running toward me.

No.

No no no.

She has almost reached me when my opponent rears back with the death blow. This is it. The one I've been waiting for. The one that will put me out.

Blessedly into the black. And it's coming just as Grace tries to insert herself between me and the behemoth fighter from Jersey. It's a nightmare that happens in slow motion.

"Grace! Stop!" I howl at the top of my lungs, propelling myself forward, determined to block the blow. And thank God, thank God, the other fighter's confusion lessens some of the momentum in his punch, because I don't get there in time. There's no physical way to make it. To stop the horror from taking place. The fighter's taped fist glances off the side of her head and she recoils, stumbling, my roar echoing off the walls of the Hellmouth.

I cold cock the other man, eliminating the threat to Grace on instinct, and still manage to catch her before she hits the mat. I cradle her in my arms, baying like a broken beast, nothing making sense, the world in a sickening blur around me.

God oh God oh God this isn't happening.

"Gracie!" I drop down on my knees, rocking her, staring at the angry red knot forming on her temple in terror. "No, baby. No. Why?"

Miracle of miracles, her eyes flutter open and I hold my breath, praying I'm not just in denial. Praying I'm not just imagining her being conscious. With my entire existence suspended in time, I watch as she turns and presses her lips into my chest, reaching a hand up to cradle my cheek. "Because I love you," she whispers, starting to cry. "I love you so much."

Her image blurs, my throat closing up so tight that I can't speak.

Can't do anything but reel in the disbelief.

I stumble to my feet with Grace in my arms, easing us through the ropes, carrying her through the mass of people who have gone silent. Horrified. "I have to get you to the hospital." I'm slurring, hoarse. Dizzy. She loves me. She's dying. She loves me. She's dying. "You need a doctor. You're not...you aren't made to be hit like that, Gracie. Jesus Christ. Does it hurt too bad?"

"Nothing hurts right now. I'm with you." Tears course down her cheeks, her palm stroking up and down my chest. "I don't need to go to the hospital."

"Please. Please. I need someone to look and tell me you're okay. Please."

After a moment, she nods, snuggling into my chest. "Okay."

Expelling a relieved breath, I pick up my pace, her health and safety consuming my focus. After I'm assured she's not seriously injured, I'll process the fact that she loves me. That she came back. That I'm holding her again. Right now, though, all I can do is imagine the worst. A concussion. Something bleeding in her brain. All I can do is see the punch connecting with her beautiful head, over and over again, and my entire body is shaking and sweating.

"I'm okay," she says, levering herself up to kiss my face. "I-I shouldn't have done that, but you weren't hearing me. It was too loud. I knew...I knew the next punch was going to be bad. I couldn't let it happen, North. I couldn't. Your sister came to get me. She told me you've been getting hurt on purpose." She makes a choked sound and bursts into tears. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

We're on the sidewalk now, moving toward my car at a fast clip and I'm not stopping for any reason. Doctor. Hospital. But the sight of her misery almost breaks me. "What do you have to be sorry about, Gracie? You were just doing what's best for yourself. I...it was selfish of me to expect you to trade that nice life for this one. Look at what my world does to you."

"You don't understand. My father...he..." She has to stop for breath, visibly trying to calm herself down and I can't help it, I slow my stride and kiss her forehead, cheeks, the crown of her head, holding her tighter in my arms to comfort her. "North, my father isn't a good person," she whispers. "He's in league with a really dangerous man. And h-he threatened to have you killed if I didn't break things off." Her chest starts to heave. "Oh God, I could be putting you in danger right now."

I'm too overcome with fear that she's been gravely hurt to fully process this news. But I hear it all the same. I hear the most important part and my heart starts to beat again for the first time in five days. "You didn't...want to leave me?"

"No!" she cries out. "I'm dying without you."

Her words wind me, knock my breath right out of my lungs. "This is real. This is real? I know I'm not having a fantasy, because I'd never daydream of you getting hit."

"It's real. I'm here." We reach my car then and I sit her on the hood while I unlock the door, then pick her back up and gently place her in the passenger seat, buckling her seatbelt. Before I can close the door, she snags

my wrist. “I don’t know what to do, North. I’m scared. I can’t stay away from you, but I could get you killed.”

“Listen to me, Gracie, we’re going to figure this out. Together. Knowing you want me? That’s all I need. No one is keeping me from you again. I fucking bleed with love for you,” I say thickly, hands shaking violently. “Let them come for me.”

“I love you,” she whispers, laying her head back against the seat, the affection on her face slaying me where I stand. “I’d bleed for you, too.”

“You are bleeding for me,” I rasp, throat on fire. “Please let me make sure you’re all right, beauty.”

She nods and I exhale jaggedly, closing the door and running for the driver’s side.

GRACE IS OKAY.

She’s okay.

She’s okay.

I repeat those words to myself on a loop while leaning against the hallway wall outside of her hospital room, still shirtless, eyes bloodshot. The nurses made me leave Grace’s room in the ER so they could ask her some questions. I know they’re asking my girlfriend if I’m the one who gave her that knot on her head—and I’m glad. I’m glad there are people in place to protect her, even if the very suggestion that I’d hit her makes me sick to my stomach.

They want to keep Grace overnight as a precaution only and I’m not going to leave her side for a goddamn second. I’ve already called Tulip, who is safe at home, letting her know where I’ll be. She cried and apologized when I told her Grace got in the middle of my fight, blaming herself, but I wouldn’t allow it. There’s no one to blame here. Grace and I were born on the opposite side of the tracks. Money and status and public perception are the culprit. They’re what kept us apart.

But I’m not allowing that to happen anymore.

Grace could never look anything less than beautiful, but one look at her face and I can see the toll it took. To be separated from me. We share one heart, one soul. Being away from each other isn’t an option. Five days

without us has stolen her healthy glow, surrounded her eyes with purplish shadows. I can't stand to imagine what she's gone through. If she experienced half of my pain, I don't know how she's even breathing right now.

The nurse comes out of the room holding a clipboard and nods at me. "Well," she laughs. "Someone certainly loves you." Her eyes skate down my chest, in a practical, motherly way. "I'm going to check and see if we have scrubs in your size. I doubt you're going to leave your girlfriend—"

"You've got that right."

Again, she laughs. "And you can't sit here half-dressed all night."

I nod once. "Thanks, that would be great."

"Stay here."

Pacing, eager to get back into the room with Grace, I watch the nurse disappear into a supply closet and step out a moment later with a blue garment. It's a little tight, but I manage to get it over my head and down my chest, arms and torso. With one more nod of gratitude for the nurse, I reenter the dark room, my heart pounding out of control at the way Grace smiles at me, reaching out her hand.

I cross the floor and take it, holding her palm to my cheek.

Can't believe I'm touching her. Can't believe she came back.

"They're not going to call my parents. I'm eighteen, so I have the option," she murmurs. "But when I don't come home tonight...I don't know what's going to happen."

"You just rest, beauty," I say, kissing the small of her wrist, keeping my lips there until her pulse stops rollicking. "Nothing is happening tonight. I'm right here. I'm standing guard while you get the sleep you need."

Her brow wrinkles with concern. "What about the sleep you need?"

"Gracie, you came back to me," I manage, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "I can run at least another few years on that alone."

I'm about to pull back when she turns her head, bringing her mouth flush with mine. "We could both get some sleep. Together." Her tongue skates along the seam of my mouth, sending every ounce of blood in my body rushing south. "There's enough room in this bed for both of us. If we cram in really tight."

A hoarse sound scrapes out of me. "No. No, baby. You got hit in the head tonight. I'm not making love to you. I can't. What if I hurt you or made it worse?"

“I’m fine. They’re only keeping me as a formality.” She drags a knuckle down the front of my chest, stopping just above my bulging erection, then slowly tracing the thick line of it, rubbing side to side when she reaches the head, saying in a whisper, “I can tell you missed me.”

“Missed you?” My laugh is broken, humorless, pained. “My world went black.”

“Mine too,” she says haltingly.

She peels back the covers and my eyes trail down the hospital gown to where it has bunched up around her hips, exposing her sheer white panties. Her eyes are innocent and imploring and I’m fucking toast. “Let’s not miss each other anymore.”

There’s a permanent notch in my throat as I slide into the bed with her, her cherry cola scent dragging me closer until we’re face to face on our sides. She wiggles the remaining distance, pressing the fronts of our thighs together, her tits chafing my pecs. Immediately we’re breathing hard, our mouths seeking the home they’ve been deprived of for five days. I catch her hip in my hand and tug her lap tight to mine, desperate to lose myself in her soft femininity, desperate to be healed. Panting for it. And finally, finally, our lips reunite.

We’ve barely started and we’re already overcome. One swipe of my tongue into her sweet mouth and she whimpers, trembling, the weight of what we’ve been through obviously catching up with her. So I wrap my arm around her as tight as I can, drawing her hard and tight to my body, urging her upper thigh around my hip, and I kiss her in the name of comfort and relief and our undefeatable love.

“It’s okay, beauty. It’s okay.” The perfect taste of her makes me lightheaded. “I’ve got you. North’s got you now.”

“Promise we’ll never be apart again.”

“I promise. I swear to God.”

Our kiss is fervent and cherishing, our hands roaming everywhere. I learned early that Grace has a serious appreciation for my body and she shows it now, dragging up the hospital shirt and scrubbing her palms up and down my muscle, occasionally trailing her fingertips down to the waistband of my shorts, lower, teasing my dick with light strokes.

Jesus, it’s a challenge—it’s always one—not to try and eat her whole. Possessiveness and obsession and this incessant craving for Grace are a constant monkey on my back. They make everything urgent. Fuck her now.

Fuck her hard. But even though I'm more eager than ever to get inside of my girl, I force myself to maintain control. She's worth every ounce of it. She's my very own gift from God and I'm not going to be selfish with her.

That being said, my Gracie is a horny little thing.

Everything she does is designed to snap my restraint.

Every whimper, every writhe of her pussy against my erection, every brush of her fingertips over my nipples, down my happy trail. Every meeting of our frantic mouths.

And when she pulls down her own panties, kicking them off somewhere into the hospital bed, her tongue skating along my lower lip, enticing me, I begin to lose the battle to wait. "I need inside, Gracie, baby. Need to get up inside all that softness."

Already shoving down the waistband of my shorts, I start to roll her over, onto her back.

But she slows my actions with a hand to my chest.

"Can I ride you?" Her breath pelts my mouth. "I want to work for your come."

My groan is broken, strangled, my hunger so intense, I have to concentrate on not ejaculating right then and there. And then, Jesus, she's pushing at my shoulder, begging me to lie on my back, as if I would deny her fucking anything. Anything I have the power to give her from now until the end of time is hers. Especially this cock. It's stiff and pulsing with pain and it's all hers. She knows it, too, her hand finding me, pulling on me lovingly, jacking me, the movements causing my balls to slap lightly against my inner thighs.

With every stroke of her hand, my sanity slips a little further out of my reach. It brings the honesty pouring out of my mouth. To Gracie. My confessor, my confidant, my other half. "I didn't want to come without you. I couldn't," I rasp through my teeth. "I hated my cock without you there to take my fuck. You're the only reason I have a cock, Gracie. It gets hard and comes for you. That's what it does. That's all it does." My lips peel back in a snarl against her mouth. "Tell me no one touches your cunt but me. Tell me I'm the only man who'll ever get to lick and bang and guard it. Reminds me it's mine."

She guides my hand between her thighs, molding my palm to her warm, wet sex, making me groan. "It's yours, North. It was yours before I even met you. It was yours from the day I was born." She beats me off roughly

for a few pumps, robbing me of breath. Of sanity. Her words ring in my head. “There’s a lock on that part of me when you’re not around. You’re the only one with the combination. You’re the only one who fills me up so tight. It’ll only ever be you.”

“Yes,” I growl into a kiss. A violently possessive one. “Yes. Mine.”

“Completely. Yours.”

Slowly, sinuously, she gives me one final ride of her fist, then climbs on top of me, our chests flush, mouths mating in an eager rhythm, her wet pussy grinding down on my bare dick. Slowly, so slowly. Torturously. My hands slap down on her naked backside, kneading, urging her to go faster, but she maintains her slow, teasing tempo until I’m panting, out of my mind with lust. “Gracie, I’m in pain, baby.”

With our mouths interlocked, she reaches back and circles her hand around my dick, dragging my hardness through her ass cheeks, lower, to the entrance of her sopping wet pussy. And she works herself down on it, looking me right in the eye as she wiggles side to side, her tits dragging around on my chest, forcing me once again to lock my muscles up tight to keep from busting.

“Enough teasing. Get it in or I’ll put it in,” I growl, my fingers punishing on her backside. “Maybe that’s what you want. Me to flip you over and pound that juicy little gash?”

Her body grows slicker at my words and down she slips, filling herself full of me with a slap of flesh on flesh, gasping against my mouth, her body shaking on top of mine. “I missed you, I missed you, I missed you,” she whimpers, her hips beginning to move. To ride up and down on my throbbing shaft, her tits raking up and down on my chest, our mouths still engaged in a battle of tongue and lips and teeth. Christ. She’s so fucking tight. Those tiny muscles between her legs lock around me and milk, milk, stroke. I’m never far from coming. It’s just a matter of hanging on, waiting until she gets off. And that’s what I do now. Endure the pleasure/pain of being balls deep in utter goddamn perfection. I let her rub her addictive pussy on me, her breath coming faster and faster, the sound of our flesh smacking together growing quicker, filling the quiet hospital room, along with my grunts.

She breaks our frantic kiss and sinks her teeth into that full lower lip, her eyes glazing over. “Oh Daddy.” Her hips whip faster, her pussy clamping down, and I suck in a breath at the sexual agony, reaching for the

rails of the hospital bed and gripping them in my hands. *Don't come, don't come, don't come.* But my hips are thrusting upward viciously, speeding me closer to the edge, my dick cramming in and out of her quickening heat. "It hurt to be without this," she whispers, gasping, panting, our foreheads pressed together. "I don't want to be alive without you fucking me. Every day. Every day. You fuck me so good."

My Grace has never used those terms with me before.

Fucking. Fuck.

It's a signal that she's lost in the lust. Lust for me. And it's such a heady turn-on, this ladylike angel from Beacon Hill riding me for broke, telling me she needs to get dicked every day of the week. She's better than any fantasy—and somehow she's mine. Somehow this beautiful girl is having a bone-rattling orgasm on top of me, grinding herself down like she needs every inch of me to achieve it, her sobs of my name filling my ears.

God. God, I'm the luckiest man on earth. How is this real? I wrap my arms and rock my hips, guiding her through the storm. Anchoring her. Rejoicing in the privilege. When she stops trembling and I'm assured she's coming down the other side of her climax, my urgency takes over again. Digging its claws into my belly, my loins, my balls.

"You want my fuck every day, huh?" I growl, trading our places, covering her mouth with my hand for that first pump with me on top, because yeah, it's deeper. It's deep as hell and she screams into my palm, the sound growing breathier as I thrust. Fast. Hard. Shaking the hospital bed around us. "You better mean that, Gracie. Because every day means every day. Means I ride this hot piece even if we're having a little fight and you're giving me the silent treatment. Hard days, easy ones. Even when you're bleeding. I get it no matter what. Every day means we're never apart."

"That's what I want," she says choppily, her nails buried in my shoulders, breaking the flesh, her hips working, writhing beneath mine. "That's what I need."

"That's what you're going to get," I grit out, dipping my mouth to her neck and sucking the flesh just below her ear. "I've got a five-day load, baby. Open your pretty thighs and take it for me. Look me in the eyes when I bust and tell me you love your Daddy."

She does even better.

She clamps her little muscles around my cock—squeezing—and gives me a bratty pout. "I love you, Daddy."

And the seed is ripped straight out of my balls. I pound her roughly, eight, nine times, the sloppy, hot seed finally spurting free into her tightness. My eyes go blind and I drop my mouth into her neck, panting, groaning, my hips straining between her thighs, trying to get the full relief, purging the pressure that's built for the last five days.

Grace. My Gracie. She's an addiction. I know it in that moment, with my blood rushing wildly and everything inside of me expanding, exulting, feeling wracking me like never before. I know deep in my bones that we're co-dependent junkies and there's no being apart. Ever. There's no life without this. Without her. Without us. And she feels the same. I can see it now with our love-stoned gazes boring into each other, tears coursing down her temples, that this is a lifelong obsession for us both and I'm not holding back. I'm going full throttle.

I let her know it with one final, hard thrust, my mouth stamping down over hers.

My tongue ravaging her mouth. Claiming her for good.

God help anyone who tries to separate me from my Grace again.

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TWELVE

Grace

When I wake up in the hospital room, North's strong, reassuring arms wrapped around me from behind, I know exactly what needs to be done. Morning light is beginning to fill the space, sunshine turning his dark arm hair to gold, and that tiniest detail is enough to make my heart ripple and squeeze with love. Love so wild and boundless, it scares me a little. Not enough to be cautious, though. Oh no, I'm running toward him without hesitation.

North Whitlock is it for me. Forever.

Until now, until I experienced real, unconditional love, I didn't realize how much it has been lacking in my life. I've grown up in a sterile, affectionless environment. Not only that, but I think maybe I've been abused without realizing it. Locked in my room, controlled, manipulated, criticized. Over the years, I became so conditioned to please my father that I never stopped to think what I wanted.

Oh, I had a dream of teaching, but it was never realistic.

It feels realistic now. Anything does.

With this man holding me, I feel like I could fly.

Holding someone down, locking them up, forcing them into subservience isn't love. It's bad parenting. It's terror. And if I let it continue, it won't stop for my whole life. I'll just keep running on this hamster wheel

trying to make Simmons happy—and he doesn't even have the ability to feel an emotion like happiness. It will all be for nothing.

I'm not going to an Ivy League college. Especially for finance.

Not because it will take me away from North—although that is a huge consideration, being that I can't breathe without him—but mainly because I don't want to. I don't want to take that prestigious education away from someone who truly dreams of it. What I want is a lot more simple, though. I want to teach children. I want a place to belong.

I've found it with North.

Now I have to keep it.

And there's only one way I can see that happening without his life being jeopardized.

Anger and protectiveness crowd into my throat. I've never experienced either of these emotions so deeply, so profoundly. No one—no one—is going to lay a finger on this man sharing my hospital bed. How dare my father even suggest it? I think of the way North carried me into the emergency room last night, hoarsely calling for a doctor, his arms shaking around me, and I decide it's my turn to save him. To make the hard decision to leave my life behind the only way possible and start over. Start fresh with the love of my life.

There is a lot of guilt associated with what I have to do. A daughter's guilt. But knowing my father will never feel a hint of guilt over what he's done to me—or what he wanted to do to North—makes me twice as determined to do the hard thing.

North's lips press to the nape of my neck. "You're all tensed up. What are you thinking about, beauty?" His hand travels through the valley of my hip and waist, sending a warm shiver down my spine. "Talk to me."

I wet my lips and snuggle back, laying my head on his big shoulder. "Remember last night when I told you my father is working with a really dangerous man?"

"Yeah."

"It's Curtin Tennison," I whisper, as if the man himself might be listening in the hallway.

North stiffens behind me, the temperature of his body dropping slightly. "Your father threatened to have Curtin Tennison bump me off if we continue to see each other?"

“That about sums it up.” I take a deep breath, pressure pushing down on my collarbone. “Does that...change things? Now that you know the threat is real?”

“Change things how?”

He seems genuinely perplexed. “With us. Being with me could get you killed—”

“Gracie. Jesus.” He lifts his head and looks down at me, brows drawn together, incredulous. “When are you going to understand that I’m in for life, baby? Let them kill me. It’s better than living five more minutes without you. Don’t ask me...please, don’t ask me again if I’m sure. I’m well past sure. I’m sure enough to go to the grave.”

I exhale unsteadily, making room for my fluttering heart to expand. “That’s not going to happen. I won’t let that happen.”

“We won’t.” His arms tighten around me. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking...we have to go to the police.” Saying the words out loud makes my heart pound loudly in my ears, the room spinning slightly around me. “Once I take this step, though, I can never go home.”

North makes a halting sound. “You’re really going to give it all up...for me?”

“I’m gaining so much more than I’m giving up. So much more. You.”

He holds me tighter. “Then your home is with me now, Gracie,” he whispers into my hair. “I’m going to win that fight on Friday, baby. I’m going to take care of you. Buy us a house where we can wake up together every morning. We’ll have a Christmas tree in the window in December. A wreath on the door. Our last name on the mailbox. I can paint the walls any color you want. And one day, we’ll make one of the rooms into a nursery.”

His manhood is growing thicker against my bottom and that languid, delirious, lovesick feeling wraps around me, my body moving unconsciously, teasing his erection to make it even stiffer, bigger. All this talk of having children, having our own house, is intoxicating. Like a lungful of oxygen after being submerged in a lake. I want it. I want what he’s offering me with every fiber of my being. Because my heart tells me it’s what I need. Tells me it’s right. That anything and everything is right with this man by my side.

“Before any of that, I’m going to put a ring on your finger,” he rasps, his touch traveling over my hip and down, testing the wetness between my

legs, plunging a thick finger into my sex, making me sob as he draws it in and out. “Grace Whitlock,” he murmurs in my ear, adding a second finger. “Don’t look at North Whitlock’s wife or he’ll break your fucking jaw. You want people to say that when you walk this fine ass down the street, don’t you?”

I nod, tilting my head for his mouth, moaning when he slicks his tongue up the curve of my neck. “Yes. I want that.”

“I’ll give it to you. Trust me to give everything to you.” My breath catches a moment later when he replaces his fingers with his long, thick shaft, rolling me face down in the hospital bed, shoving the pillow beneath my hips and taking me roughly. “Love my Gracie.”

“Love my North,” I choke out, my teeth beginning to rattle.

That’s my truth. This man is my truth.

Keeping him, keeping what we have, is going to mean betraying everything I know. Everything I’ve grown up with. It’s going to mean setting a bomb and watching it go off. But as my heart swells along with my pleasure, I know there’s nothing that can stop me.

Not when our life together is on the line.

I WALK into my house in Beacon Hill and close the door.

I creep toward the staircase, freezing when I hear the rapid approach of footsteps.

My father appears around the corner, phone in hand. “Where the fuck have you been?” He emphasizes every word through clenched teeth. “If you tell me you’ve been with that piece of shit from Southie, I’ll put you in boarding school for the rest of your senior year. Right up until day one of college—so fast your head will spin. Do you understand me?” I don’t respond. I can’t. My legs are trembling and my tongue feels like sandpaper. Even now, even with him red-faced and hurling threats at me, I can’t help feeling the guilt, but it’s a lot lighter than my fear of being without North forever. “I will protect my investment,” he finishes.

“I’m not an investment, I’m your daughter.”

Those words don’t seem to penetrate whatsoever. “You were with him, weren’t you?” He looks me over with disgust. “Who knew you’d turn out to

be such a whore? Your mother is going to be devastated when she returns.”

That is true. But not for the reason he thinks.

Hot moisture crowds my eyes, but I raise my chin, resolved. Scared but ready to do what’s necessary. And it gives me strength to know I’m not alone. That North is nearby. Waiting. Probably going insane. But waiting for me nonetheless. “I’m not going to boarding school, father. And I’m not going to the college of your choosing.”

“Oh, yes you are,” he grates, taking a step closer. “But just out of curiosity, what would you do instead? Without my tuition money and influence. Without my name? What would you do besides end up in the gutter like your little boyfriend?”

“I’d be happy,” I say, my voice gaining more strength. “I’d make my own decisions. I’d plan my own future, instead of living the one you’ve decided is most respectable.”

He laughs. “Well you definitely don’t care about being respectable. Sneaking in here in broad daylight, wearing the same clothes as yesterday. You’re an embarrassment.” A vein begins to tick in his temple. “Do I have to remind you what I’ll do if you don’t fall in line and stay the hell away from the fighter?”

“You wouldn’t really do that,” I whisper, my earlier anger once again taking hold. “You wouldn’t have him killed.”

“I assure you, I would. It would only take one phone call.” He holds up his phone. “I tracked down his address right before you walked in. Took a while, because his deadbeat parents’ names are on the lease.” His mouth spreads into a sinister smile. “You don’t think Curtis Tennison knows how to hide a body? Maybe we’ll put your little boyfriend in the concrete when we break ground on our development. It’ll be a reminder to you what happens when you rebel and besmirch the Foster name.”

“It sounds like that’s what you’re doing. Not me.”

My father rears back his hand to slap me and I close my eyes, begging him not to. Or if he does, I pray that North can control himself just a little bit longer. Just wait. I’ll be okay.

Thankfully, my father shoves his fingers through his hair instead, but his eyes are still meting out violence. I let out a slow breath of relief, saying, “Father, you shouldn’t be working with Tennison on the Foster development. I know he’s blackmailing you into using Ludlow Builders,

but there has to be a way out. Once you give in to someone like him, you'll have to give in every single time."

He gets in my face. "Money is money, whether I make it with Tennison or elsewhere. And our partnership is already proving its advantage. I know every politician he's got in his pocket and I'm using them for my own gain now, too. Blackmail can be a beautiful thing. So can power. I have no qualms using it to put a bullet between North Whitlock's eyes."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I whisper, pulling up my shirt so he can see the wire.

Behind me, the front door of the house bursts open, cops filling the foyer, guns drawn.

North runs in behind them, wild-eyed, searching for me among the sudden pandemonium. When he sees me, he charges forward, picking me up and wrapping me in his arms. We back away as the police officers slap handcuffs on my stunned father, his shock slowly giving way to outrage. He demands to see a warrant, which they present him wordlessly.

"We're picking up your buddy Curtis right now on the other side of town," one of the cops we spent the morning with says, matter-of-factly. "Along with everyone who knowingly defrauded the city through Ludlow Builders. We knew he had his hand in the pot somewhere. And if you want a decent sentence on your conspiracy to commit murder charge, you're going to let us know every politician Tennison has been shaking down." The cop slaps my father on the shoulder. "The reckoning has arrived."

"Gracie. Gracie." North rocks me, drawing my attention, his pulse going a million miles an hour at the base of his neck. I kiss him there soothingly and he makes a rough sound. "It's over. Christ, thank God it's over. I haven't taken a fucking breath in ten minutes. You were so brave, baby. I didn't want you to have to do this for me. Not just for me..."

"Just for you?" I ask, looking up into his tortured golden eyes, framing his jaw in my hand. "Just for the other half of my soul? There's nothing I wouldn't sacrifice. There's nothing I wouldn't do for us."

"I love you so much," he breathes, kissing my mouth tenderly, then with more and more passion, until we're forced to pull away or ignite something we can't finish. "Now it's my turn to sacrifice for you. Every day of my life. Every second is about my Gracie. And that's not a sacrifice at all, is it? No, it's a goddamn privilege." As my father is led out in handcuffs, North turns

his back to block me from view. Holding me protectively to his chest. “I’ll take good care of her, Mr. Foster. I’ll prove it to you. You’ll see.”

My father says nothing back, simply throwing us a final glance of hatred. Disgust.

Until that moment, I don’t realize how badly North wanted my father’s approval. Man to man. Even after my father wanted North killed, didn’t believe him worthy of me. After all of that, he wants to feel that pride of having Simmons accept him. To believe him the right man for his daughter. “North,” I say, bringing his attention back to me, holding his eyes with every ounce of love and trust and confidence I have in him. “You don’t have to prove anything. You don’t have to prove what I know—that you’re a great man. The only man I’ll ever need or love. The best one I’ve ever known.” I draw his mouth down to mine, gently prodding his tongue with mine and listening to his breath stutter. “But on Friday, you’re going to step into that ring and become a god. And then you’re going to bring me home, to our bed, and rule over me. Any way you want. You’re going to be everything we already know you are. Everything I already love with my whole heart. A man that any loving and caring father would be proud to call his son-in-law. A man I’ll spend my life loving.”

And he does become that god on Friday.

To the roar of thousands.

The local boy from Southie knocks out the champ in two rounds.

When the referee raises North’s gloved hand up over his head, those golden eyes are zeroed in on me, as if the crowd doesn’t even exist. I love you, he mouths at me, emotion clouding his face. I love you, Gracie.

Then he takes me home and proceeds to show me how much. Every single day.

EPILOGUE

North

Five Years Later

I pick out the best bunch of flowers at the market on my way to get Gracie. At the register, I place the bouquet on the counter and realize I forgot to unwrap the tape from my hands after training, but I leave it there, knowing it turns on my wife. Not that either one of us needs assistance in that department. And not that I need an excuse to buy her roses, but today is special. Today is...perfect. In my wildest dreams, I never could have imagined this life. I'm married to the girl who makes my heart beat. Plain and simple. It doesn't function without her. Thank God it doesn't have to.

The public school in Southie where she's worked as a kindergarten teacher for the last year comes into view up ahead, speeding up the rhythm of my heart. I would have moved anywhere once she finished school, but she wanted to stay in South Boston. This is where we fell in love, she says. This is the place that brought us together.

My stomach twists into eight kinds of knots on the way into the school. The receptionist at the front desk waves me in without a pass, because she knows my face well at this point. I walk Grace home from work every

single day. Most of the time, I wait in the hallway so I don't interrupt the education of young minds, but I can't help venturing all the way to her classroom door today, needing to see her in action.

Needing to see her in one of those teaching outfits that drives me crazy.

Stopping in the doorway of her classroom, I brace my forearm high on the jamb, the flowers down at my side in the opposite hand. And I just take her in. Breathe easy for the first time since I dropped her off here this morning. There's my wife. My heart.

She's crouched down beside an art table, encouraging a little boy to trace the shape of a letter A, coaxing a smile out of him in the process. When she stands, I almost growl, because it takes a split second for her pleated skirt to fall into place, showing off the tops of her thigh-high stockings. The soft skin between them and her panties.

Ah Jesus, she's going to get it hard tonight.

Who am I kidding? She gets it hard every fucking night.

As if I spoke out loud, Grace turns and spies me in the doorway, her face brightening, the heel of her hand flying up to her chest, pressing down on the heart I know is pounding in a frenzy. This is the way it is between us. Overwhelming. Heavy. Addictive. Life affirming. We hate being apart. If we didn't have jobs, sometimes I think we'd sink into the oblivion of each other and never come out. Part of me wants that, even though I know we have to work. I have to get up every day and train for my next amateur fight. Grace has to teach. Our jobs make us happy and we're good at them, but this, this reuniting at the end of the day is what we live for.

"Hi," she says breathily, tucking some dark hair behind her ear.

Every young head in the room swivels in my direction. "Hi," I return.

"Class, you remember Mr. Whitlock, don't you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Whitlock," they say in unison.

"He brought you flowers!" one of them calls out, kicking off a chorus of ooooohs.

Grace bites her lip and laughs. "So he did. Wonder what the occasion is?"

I don't get a chance to answer, because the bells ring and everyone moves at once, collecting their backpacks from the row of wall hooks and filing out into the hallway. Me and Grace stare at each other through the commotion, anticipating the moment we'll be alone. Swear to God, my

heart is trying to beat its way out of my goddamn chest. There are so many emotions flinging themselves around inside of me at once.

Hunger for my wife.

Love. Affection.

Pride in her for becoming the teacher she wanted to be.

Between student loans and the money I made fighting, we put her through school. Not an Ivy League college, but a damn good one. At twenty-three, I'm right there on the precipice of going professional. I'm about to make it happen—maybe even as soon as next week. The loans will be wiped clean and we'll be able to take vacations. Fix up the house. Every second of the struggle in my career has been worth it.

There were tough nights during Grace's college years where I walked in the door bloody and bruised, making her cry, making her want to quit school so I wouldn't get hurt anymore. I wouldn't let her. It was a fucking honor sacrificing my body for cash so she could succeed. And after all, my girl gave up her family for me. Financial comfort.

I won't let her be sorry. I'll never let her be sorry.

The way she's looking at me now, she's far from it.

"Walk you home, Mrs. Whitlock?" I manage around the lump in my throat.

"That would be lovely, Mr. Whitlock."

She collects her purse, locks up the classroom and we walk hand in hand down the street, stealing glances at each other every few steps until we're standing in front of the three-story brick house we bought with the money from my first fight. Grace turned it into a home, putting out a bright welcoming mat, curtains in the windows, flower boxes on every sill that riot with different colored blooms. My chest hurts with pride every time we walk up the front steps...but today, I'm going to carry her.

Without giving my wife a warning, I scoop her up, making her squeal. I carry her up the steps to the front door, content to hold her while she fishes the key out of her purse and unlocks the door. I toe it open and carry her over the threshold into our big, old-fashioned kitchen, breakfast dishes still in the sink, her pink slippers still beneath the table. We both sigh, because it's home. It's ours. And we're so fucking happy here, it defies explanation.

"Tulip called me during my lunch break," Grace says now, her head resting on my shoulder. "She's going to fly home from Michigan after finals."

Throat tugging, I drop the flowers onto the big, oval table. “Good. I miss having her around. How long is she staying?”

“A week. Maybe we’ll take her to the beach in Rye, if the weather is nice.”

“That sounds perfect.” I settle Grace onto her feet, keeping her close, pulling her up against me so I can breathe her in, mouth to mouth. “Everything is so damn perfect, beauty.”

“Yes, it is,” she whispers, winding her arms around my neck, pressing her sweet body up against my hungry one, rubbing her hips side to side and making us both groan.

And yeah, everything is perfect.

For a long time, there was a thorn under my skin in regards to Simmons. Grace’s father. I hated the fact that she sent him to prison. For me. That she had to give up everything she knew just to have me in her life. I’m breathing a little easier now that Simmons is no longer behind bars. Curtis Tennison still has some years left on his term, but at least Grace’s father isn’t locked in the penitentiary, thanks to him cooperating with detectives, giving information about Tennison, which is ultimately what they wanted.

Grace is the one who smoothed my concerns out most of all, though. There isn’t a day that goes by that she doesn’t tell me she would choose me all over again, every single time, no questions asked. That there wasn’t really a choice at all, because she can’t live without me. That she can’t breathe without me. And she says those words now against my mouth. She whispers them as I back her toward the kitchen table, boosting her up onto the edge and slipping my hands up her skirt, inside her panties to grip her bare hips.

“Christ, I can’t breathe without you, either, Gracie,” I say, my voice unraveling like thread, our foreheads rolling together, breath coming in short bursts. “My fucking blood flows for you. Just need my wife. My wife.”

“You’ve got me forever,” she whispers, taking off my shirt, her eyes glazing at the sight of my chest, my stomach. I inhale her reaction to my body. I crave it in an unholy way. Obsessively. I hone myself day and night for her. Just so she’ll look at me like this. Just so she’ll get wet that much faster. “You were gorgeous at eighteen. A man among boys,” she says unevenly, running her palms up the cut muscles of my abdomen. “But now...you’re so...thick.”

With a hoarse sound, I yank her to the edge of the table by her ass cheeks, pressing my hard on to the tiny white strip of her panties. “I’ve got your thick right here.”

Her head falls back, allowing me to attack her neck. Raking my teeth up and down the side, before latching onto that sensitive patch under her ear. Sucking it roughly. “I want it,” she moans, opening her thighs wider on the table. The hottest possible fantasy come to life—and somehow she’s mine. Somehow I got to marry her. Somehow she loves me.

“You know what today is, Gracie?” I rasp, humping her pussy through the white panties helplessly, making the table groan. Aching. Desperate. Always so desperate for her. To the point of pain and restlessness and withdrawals.

“Today?” She unbuttons her blouse, opening the sides to reveal the high globes of her beautiful tits, pushed up in a white, see-through bra. “I think I might have some idea...”

I study her face through a haze of lust. Love. Hope. “That right, baby?”

She hums. “Five years ago today, you drove me home from the Hellmouth,” she says, a light sheen coating her eyes. “You think I would ever forget? I wouldn’t. I’ll never forget. I got you something, too.” Her mouth moves over mine with a slow, seductive kiss, her hands pushing down the sides of my sweats to free my cock. “I stopped taking my pill this morning,” she whispers against my lips, taking me in her hand and stoking me hard. “You’re already my Daddy. Now you’re going to be a father.”

My heart, my breath, my blood is firing on all cylinders as she guides me between her legs, using my stiffness to push aside the material of her panties. Is this happening? Is this real? We were waiting for the right time and I realize slowly...this is the right time. We made it. We have a home, jobs, money in the bank, so much love that it overflows from us.

“Gracie,” I choke out, plunging my cock to the hilt, bucking furiously, with so much force that the kitchen table moves across the floor several feet, finally coming to a stop against the counter—and I don’t quit. With her tearing at my hair, I fuck her so hard, so filthy, she screams, my come boiling in my balls, as if well aware of its purpose. Get her pregnant. Give us a child.

It’s like I’ve dropped through the floor of my obsession with my wife and found a whole palace beneath—and there’s no end to it. No exits—as if I’d look for one. I grip her perfect face, tilt it up and look her in the eye,

letting her see that I'm crazed now. This final permission to get her pregnant has done it. I can't even imagine what I'm going to be like when my seed takes hold and her belly swells. God help us all.

"I love you," I chant between kisses, groaning like a wild animal when she locks her ankles behind my neck, the fever in her eyes telling me she wants this as bad as I do. "I'd die for you, Grace. I'd kill. I'd do anything. Just love you so much. So fucking much, it burns."

"I love you the same way. Look at me. You know I do."

And she's right. It's a two-way street, thank God.

This love, this obsession is a stick of dynamite with a fuse on both ends.

Anchored by the love of my life, I keep right on looking into her blue, beloved, reassuring eyes and I see our future, feel part of it leave me and enter her in waves, already taking root. I welcome every second of that future. Every second of her. Us. Always.

THE END

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